







# To Sway a Bard (Tempting Thieves #2)

**Author:** *Angela J. Ford*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** This standalone adult romantasy novella is a must read for fans looking for a fast-paced romantasy with heart-pounding adventure, enemies to lovers tension, forced proximity and forbidden attraction.

An uncatchable thief. A relentless sheriff. The chase was inevitable... but falling for each other was not. . .

Zula, the notorious Blue-Feathered Bard, lives for the thrill of her heists, heedless of the consequences. Her latest job—pilfering priceless treasures from a peaceful troll village—could spark a kingdom-wide conflict, making it her riskiest venture yet. Brimming with confidence, she anticipates nothing but success. What she doesn't expect is Neo.

Neo, the kingdom's sheriff, is determined to bring Zula—an uncatchable thief armed with a magical ukulele—to justice. With a secret weapon at his disposal and a growing infatuation with the cunning thief, his duty has never been more challenging.

When a chance encounter brings them together, stirring unexpected emotions, a thrilling chase begins. Both determined to achieve their goals, neither expects their hearts to be caught in the crossfire. Will Zula execute one final, daring escape, or will Neo's love prove to be the ultimate snare?

To Sway A Bard is Book Two in the Tempting Thieves Collection.

Tempting Thieves is a diverse multi-author romantasy collection featuring cunning thieves who outsmart relentless hunters, steal forbidden treasures, and find love along the way. With enemies-to-lovers tension, slow-burn longing, forced proximity, secret identities, only one bed, and grumpy/sunshine dynamics, every story delivers an irresistible fantasy escape. Perfect for fans of forbidden romance, morally gray heroes, daring rogues, and clean yet sizzling chemistry. Each book in the collection is a standalone. Read in any order.

**Total Pages (Source):** 28

1

NEO

“Neo, it’s time to bring in the Blue-Feathered Bard,” Mother announced, waving a sealed envelope.

Neo shielded his eyes against the summer sun and swallowed down a groan as he watched his mother—a formidable woman who did not understand the word no—stride through the golden flower gardens. “What happened?” he called, turning back from the path that led down to the lagoon.

The ruffles of Mother’s bright yellow dress danced in the breeze as she approached. Even though she was a foot shorter than him, she invariably made him feel like a bumbling idiot. “There’s been a development.”

Neo frowned as he eyed the letter, his official summons to capture the notorious thief. For the past three years, he’d been tracking her location and studying her habits so that when the order came to capture her, he’d be ready. Unfortunately, all his spy work had also resulted in him developing fond feelings for the thief known as the Blue-Feathered Bard. He liked to think of her as simply Zula. “What kind of development?”

“Our informants have come through with news. Rumor is she’s stealing from the trolls, and you know what that means for us.”

Neo went all tingly inside, the way he always felt when on the hunt. That first buzz of

excitement, followed by a fierce tenacity to capture his prey. “Stealing from the trolls will violate the peace accords. There will be trouble?—”

“It could mean war,” Mother interrupted, opening her fan. “This is a delicate matter. I trust you will handle it with all due respect, and once you’ve caught her, I’d like to meet her.”

Neo could not keep the horror from his tone. “Why? ”

She shrugged, but her eyes went shifty, warning him there was something she wasn’t telling him. “It might be useful to have a thief on the payroll.”

Neo narrowed his eyes, but held out his hand for the letter. “I’ll see to this matter immediately.”

“Of course you will.” Mother spun around, skirts swishing, and called over her shoulder, “You are the only one who can catch her.”

For anyone else, the words would have been high praise, but they were only the truth. So he put out of his mind the fact that he was hopelessly, foolishly in love with the kingdom’s most uncatchable thief. Besides, she’d never see him as more than a tall, awkward redhead. He’d bumped into her two or three times, listened to her play and sing at a tavern—she was a bard, after all—even shared a mug of ale with her, yet failed to make an impression.

Squeezing the paper until it crumpled, he sighed. Not that he was upset with the order; quite the opposite. He relished the opportunity to hunt down Zula and get close to her again. Although capturing her would ensure that she’d not only ignore him, she’d loathe him for eternity .

No, what bothered him was the glimmer of interest in Mother’s eyes.

When she set her mind to something, she never failed. A trait he'd inherited.

"Neeeeeeyooo," came the sing-song voice of his five-year-old niece.

He held out his arms just in time for her to hurl herself like a whirlwind into him. "Doris, what mischief are you up to?"

"Nothing!" She beamed, her face smudged with chocolate and honey, a telltale sign of what she'd been up to. "Papa said to give you this."

She opened her little fist, a leather cord hanging from it.

"Me?" Neo laughed. His older brother, Hans, wasn't particularly generous, and his younger sister, Diana, was more likely to give gifts.

"Look, it dances," Doris said, waving the cord.

Sure enough, on the end of it was a charm, swinging and twirling, even though there was no breeze in the gardens. Neo sobered as he stared at the wooden token carved into the shape of a parrot, symbolic of protection against evil. A sudden chill went down his spine.

"It's a good luck charm," Hans called, his deep voice sending ripples through the air as though he could be the wind, should he choose. He might, given the uncommon magic that ran through their bloodline.

Neo tied the leather around his neck as his brother approached. Like their mother, Hans was dressed to perfection with every hair in place. Thick, reasonable black hair with a slight wave to it, compared to Neo's thatch of bright red hair; a filled-out body with muscles in all the right places instead of Neo's boyish lankiness that made him appear younger than his age. Personally, Neo couldn't claim wisdom, strength, or

general attractiveness, but Hans was everything Neo wasn't.

"Heard you were chasing the Blue-Feathered Bard. You'll need all the luck you can get."

Neo scowled. "It's me. I'll catch her."

"Don't be insulted. No one ever has. Besides, Mother wants you to bring her here?"

Even Hans' tone was incredulous, which made Neo feel better about the situation. Hans was Mother's golden boy who could do no wrong. Usually, the two of them were in agreement on every decision. The fact that Hans was questioning Mother's motive was a chink in the armor.

"You disagree?"

"A thief? Here? It's like inviting a cat into the kitchen, a mouse into the cellar, a fish into the water. If I were you, I wouldn't take the risk unless you have her fully and utterly under your control." Hans' eyes drifted to his daughter.

Neo followed his gaze, disliking the sudden heaviness that lingered in the air. He punched Hans' shoulder. "It's me, remember?"

"Wear the charm," Hans ordered, and chased Doris down the garden path. She ran from him, shouting and giggling, the picture of health and happiness.

Neo watched them, a sinking sensation in the pit of his belly. He'd capture the thief and prevent a war, but what would happen if he brought her home? Shaking his head, he headed toward his rooms to pack, sensing nothing but trouble in his future.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:18 am*

2

ZULA

“ T here’s another wanted poster of you, right in the village center this time.” Issa leaned close, whispering the words as if the warm summer breeze would snatch them away.

“Is that all?” Zula asked, using a rag to polish the wood of her ukulele.

Issa took an orange out of her pocket and sat down, tossing it from hand to hand. “It looked just like you, Zula, complete with the blue-feathered hat and the ukulele. Maybe you shouldn’t wear the hat today and go with a disguise. They know who you are.”

Zula shrugged, determined to remain nonchalant as she tuned her instrument. “It was bound to happen eventually, but don’t worry, Issa. No one will catch me.”

Issa hummed and started to peel the orange.

The two sat on the rooftop of the local tavern, which offered a coveted view of the village, easy to watch who was coming and going. It was also where the tavern owner kept his garden, although the nearby palm trees waving in the summer breeze did little to protect anyone from the sun’s vengeance.

“Yes, you’ve never been caught, and yes, your magical ukulele will help you avoid the law, but doesn’t this job feel wrong?”



“Issa, your job is to scout, not worry about what might happen,” Zula said sharply. “Why don’t you head back to camp and leave the worrying to me?”

“That came off wrong. I’m not doubting your skills, I just want you to be careful. More of those wanted posters keep appearing, and you’re so reckless.”

“Reckless?” Zula laughed and strummed the ukulele. Music rang out, the perfect chord sending a shiver through the air. “I appreciate your concern, Issa, but nothing about thieving is safe.”

Issa nudged her. “You know what I mean. I also don’t like that the request for this job came from Scarred Joe and his rival gang. Why aren’t they taking on the danger of this heist?”

There it was again, that warning in her soul. Zula pushed away the dark thoughts that danced at the edges of her mind. It was too late to find her confidence wavering, too late to turn away from the path that was now set. “The danger is why they delegated the task to me, but Issa, you should get a head start. Scarred Joe’s gang is tricky and I’m sure they have an unpleasant surprise waiting for us. I need your keen eyes. Scout ahead and send me a message should you suspect anything.”

“What will you do if they double-cross us?”

Zula grinned. “They will feel the wrath of my magic. Now stop worrying.”

Issa smiled, visibly relaxing as she ate a slice of orange.

Zula turned her attention back to the streets of the village, trying to shake off her annoyance. While she liked Issa and appreciated her scouting ability, Zula preferred to work alone, and she had done so successfully until the wanted posters had started appearing.

Despite her legendary reputation, Zula had suddenly become aware that she had enemies. There had been a few attempts—laughably unsuccessful—that made her see the wisdom of working with a gang of thieves. They'd offered her scouts, protection, and weapons in exchange for a portion of the loot. Zula had only taken them up on scouting, and Issa had proven herself reliable in the past year.

Still, it unsettled Zula to be unpopular, especially when she was about to conduct the biggest heist of her thieving career.

Issa wasn't aware, but there was much more on the line than a fat purse of money.

A dog barked, and a moment later, a tall young man strode down the street. Thick red hair sprung from his head, and he was dressed sharply in a white shirt and tan waistcoat. He had his hands in his pockets, his gait relaxed as he whistled, paying no heed to his surroundings.

An easy target to pilfer, if Zula was on the hunt .

Still, there was something about the man that intrigued her, but she wasn't sure if it was the calmness with which he carried himself or the fact that he looked familiar. She racked her memory. Had she stolen from a lanky redheaded man?

She thought not, but she might have, or he could have been a patron at one of her familiar spots, although he didn't look the type to hang out with thieves. Too soft. Too gullible.

She poked Issa. "See that man down there? Does he look familiar?"

"The redheaded one?" Issa stood, almost leaning over the railing for a better look. "I don't recognize him, do you?"

Pressing her lips together, Zula shook her head. “No, I thought . . . never mind.”

Nevertheless, the thought nagged at her, and she remained still, watching as he rounded the corner and disappeared deeper into the village.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:18 am*

3

NEO

Three days of travel and two days of gathering information found Neo hidden in the bulrushes of a riverbank, scrubbing dishes.

On the opposite bank, a raccoon hunched over the water, washing an orange Neo was pretty sure it had stolen from him. To add insult to injury, the raccoon gave him a reproachful glare as though Neo were the fruit thief.

With a sigh, Neo dipped the dirty plate in the babbling river and half-heartedly slid it back and forth. Ignoring the raccoon, he flicked his vision beyond the river to the swell of the hill where the bridge arched over the water. He had a perfect view down there .

Most people crossed the bridge without glancing down. They were in too much of a hurry to get to where they were going to enjoy the lush rolling hills or the song of the river, or to notice an incredibly long-legged young man washing a basket of dishes, being judged by a thieving raccoon.

Just for good measure, Neo took his eyes off the bridge to stick out his tongue at the raccoon—horribly immature—and a moment later, the air shifted.

The only way he could describe it was that it felt like a rush of sugar or the hazy-headed anticipation of a festival. His pulse quickened. There she was, in the flesh.

She strode across the bridge, shoulders high, footsteps ringing out as she walked. There was no mistaking her identity from the broad hat on her head, the blue feathers that sprung from it, the wide-legged trousers, the long braid that hung over one shoulder, and the tight vest that showed a little more of her curves than deemed appropriate.

But the best way to identify her was by the ukulele slung over her back .

Zula, the Blue-Feathered Bard.

Neo's fingertips tingled, and he dropped the plate.

It fell with a splash, causing Zula to pause mid-step. Moving to one side of the bridge, she peered over, squinting at the water.

The raccoon finished washing the orange and fled, making the bulrushes weave and bounce in its wake. Her eyes lingered there, then shifted to the other side of the river, directly at Neo's hiding place.

With a curse, he squatted further down, keeping his gaze on the dishes as though staring at them would keep her from seeing him.

Would she recognize him?

It had been months ago that he sat in the tavern, listening to her play and sing a bawdy tale. She'd played fast, rousing the patrons to feet-stamping, knee-knocking, and palm-slapping. The beer had flowed freely and the tips were generous. Even so, she was light with her fingers and tucked away quite a few extra sacks of silver. He'd even left a small pouch out, just to see what she'd do .

And that was the problem with Zula. She was a legendary thief, but people liked her.

She was welcome in the villages, given free room and board and protected from the law, because when she played that ukulele, money flowed freely.

Neo suspected thieving was a game to her.

After a heist she'd disappear, sometimes for months, then suddenly reappear, blue-feathered hat on her head and ukulele in hand. It was almost like she wanted her name on everyone's lips. But no one could catch her, and she was well respected among the citizens of the crown because she usually stole from the wealthy. A point that stoked Neo's ire, because stealing was a crime no matter who one stole from, wealthy or poor. It was wrong, and thieves belonged behind bars.

He was determined to catch her, to prove that there was no longevity in seeking to outwit the crown. Besides, the merchants and wealthy land owners of the kingdom needed a guarantee that they could live without the fear that one day a blue feather would appear in their barns and they'd find themselves with nothing .

Neo opened one eye, just in time to see Zula's shadow move. His shoulders sagged with relief as he watched her feathered hat disappear over the bridge. He stood tall and glanced balefully at the stack of dishes, then considered returning to camp for his men.

They'd be annoyed if he chased after Zula by himself, but he had concerns. It was broad daylight and she was already headed toward troll territory. Was she going to steal from them or simply scout out the location? He needed to catch her before the heist, not after, because then she'd disappear again and his efforts would be all for naught.

Weighing the consequences, he abandoned the dishes and sprinted over the bridge, slowing down so he could keep the blue feathers on the edges of his vision. She wandered down the path in no particular hurry. It was nothing more than a dirt trail,

wide enough for a horse and carriage. There were ruts where it had rained and horse hooves had churned through the dirt. Not a pleasant road to walk on.

But Neo diligently followed, hanging back even more as the road straightened, then hurrying to catch up as it curved and dipped. Despite the muddy road, it was a beautiful walk with trees on either side, thick foliage that turned into a dense jungle. That afternoon it was alive with sound, bright parrots flying across the path, eyeing him. Monkeys shouting at each other, sometimes swinging above him. The sounds of jungle creatures bled into a chorus.

Neo tugged at his shirt as sweat beaded his brow. After a while, he realized there was no sign of Zula. How long since he'd last seen the blue feathers bobbing ahead of him? He took a deep breath, trying not to panic. He knew where the trolls lived and he needed to get a message to his men.

He spun around to retrace his steps—oh, how he wished he had a horse—only to collide with a small woman.

She fell with a cry and, tripping over his own two feet, he sprawled on top of her.

A thousand apologies rose to his tongue and then lay trapped in his mouth as he stared down at the woman. She wore simple clothes—pants, a vest, dark hair covered with a scarf—but he'd know that heart-shaped face, those bronze eyes anywhere .

Somehow, Zula had disguised herself, no doubt to prepare for the heist, and now Neo was lying on top of her.

ZULA

It was him, the lanky redheaded man she'd seen in town. Up close, she noticed the spray of freckles across the bridge of his nose, the clearness of his deep green eyes, and the slant of his mouth. Why was she looking at his mouth?

Slowly, the stunning man peeled himself off her. "I sincerely apologize. I wasn't watching where I was going, and I ran you over. Are you hurt? Mother always tells me I need to watch where I'm going. Normally, I trip over my own two feet, and now I've tangled you up in my tomfoolery."

Zula gawked at him, and to her annoyance, a giggle bubbled at the back of her throat. A giggle! Normally, she would have reacted fast and punched whoever had run her down in the throat, but she couldn't help the slight nigger. He looked familiar. Why?

He held out his hand to help her up, and she stared at his long, slim fingers—not rough, so he didn't do hard labor. Bright red hair stuck up from his head, rather damp from sweat, but it was a good look on him.

She gave herself a shake, determined not to be enchanted by his odd mannerisms. Too much was at stake for her to be distracted. With a frown, she took his hand.

His skin was warm, his grip stronger than expected, and when they touched, she felt a flutter in her lower belly. Despite the heat of the day, a shiver of awareness went down her spine as he helped her up, pulling so hard she almost fell into his chest. She



snatched her hand away, embarrassed by her odd reaction and eager to put some distance between them.

“No, I’m not hurt,” she said, picking up the sack she’d dropped. “But you should really watch where you’re going. ”

He ran his fingers through his hair, peering at her with those large eyes. “I know. I’m terribly sorry. I got turned around out here—the road’s a bit longer than I expected.”

“Ah.” Zula peered at him again, then wished she hadn’t. Her heart was doing funny things. She pointed down the path. “Keep heading that way. You’ll find a bridge and then the village. If you get lost, I’m sure someone will happen along to give you directions.”

He pressed a hand to his heart, an action that would have appeared like mockery on anyone else, but he had the most sincere expression on his freckled face. “My thanks are with you. And what about you?” His gaze lingered on her burlap sack. “What brings you to the jungle this beautiful afternoon?”

Zula wrinkled her nose, caught off guard by the question. “You’re a bit bold for asking, a complete stranger who ran into me when I was minding my own business.”

He stepped back as though she’d slapped him. “I see I’ve offended you. My deepest apologies. I’ll be on my way. I just wanted to ensure you aren’t as lost as me. ”

She gave him a deadpan look. Was he flirting with her, trying to impress her? If so, he was doing a terrible job.

Pivoting on her heel, she strode away in the opposite direction of the village. Part of her wanted to break into a run, while another part wanted to go back and discover why the man looked so familiar.

A worrisome thought gnawed at her as she walked. He claimed to be lost, but as far as she was aware, only trolls lived in the jungle, because they were on the border of the kingdom.

Long ago, a peace treaty had been struck with the trolls. They kept their land on the edges of the kingdom and did not attack it, and the kingdom ensured the citizens did not bother them. So what was the redheaded man doing so close to the border?

Ever since she'd left the tavern, she'd had the sensation that she was being watched. By whom?

Thieves operated by word of mouth, relying on the loyalties of those they'd worked with before. She'd never worked with Scarred Joe's gang, but it made sense that he'd send someone to spy on her. Had she been too hasty in sending Issa away so quickly?

After walking through the jungle, she'd decided to take Issa's advice and change into a disguise. After stealing from the trolls, she would put on her blue-feathered hat again, to be sure everyone knew she was the thief. Her window of opportunity for completing the heist was closing fast. She had the rest of the afternoon to find the jewel, steal it, and return to the river, where a boat would be waiting. No one would expect a water escape, and she was rather proud of the ingenuity of the plan.

Shaking off the unsettling feelings from her encounter with the redhead, she shifted her focus back to the task at hand and snuck off the road into troll territory.

The troll village was easy to find. It lay atop a swell of land where a babbling waterfall flowed down into the same river she planned to escape on. A nest of trees swayed heavy with bananas, papayas, coconuts, and other fruit that grew in the jungle. At the scent of coconuts, Zula's rush of adrenaline faded into bittersweet nostalgia with memories of scavenging the jungle with her father .

But that had been before her life transformed, and she was grateful for the shift, glad not to be stuck living a lonely life of survival in the thick of the jungle. Now she had a good life living on the outskirts of the law, adventure always at her fingertips and a popularity that lingered. Except she intended this heist to be her last.

Tucking the sack under her shirt, she climbed a vine and, imitating the mannerisms of the monkeys, swung from tree to tree, bringing herself closer to the ledge that overlooked the village. The stone-and-moss colors of the trolls moved into view and Zula perched on a tree branch, watching them through the foliage.

Trolls.

She should have felt bad, but that was the thing about stealing—she never considered the fallout of her thievery, only the rush of excitement, the thrill that consumed her as she plotted out the ideal way to pull off a heist and left her calling card: a peacock-blue feather.

Zula always arrived early on location to spend a few hours watching and blending in. Unsurprisingly, the trolls used magic as a barrier around their village, which was why Zula had taken to the trees to enter instead of strolling in. If they sensed a break in the magic, they'd be wary, and she wanted to ensure they were completely unaware of her presence.

The trolls were civilized and peaceful. They lived in buildings made of logs with thatched roofs, cultivated crops and kept fruit orchards, the bounty used as trade with the kingdom. Aside from harvest days two times a year, they kept to themselves, and the citizens who lived in the vicinity were ordered not to disturb them.

A baby troll tripped over a pile of hay, giggling as it stumbled upright, only to fall again. A group of young trolls emerged from the jungle, nets filled with fish. They shouted and bragged, proud of their catch. A group of female trolls returned from

foraging, laying out the plants they'd found on stones, grinding some and setting others aside. Everywhere Zula looked, she saw harmony, peace, friendship, and love. Their lives were peaceful, idyllic, and a twinge of jealousy poked at her.

She stole treasure, but the trolls had something intangible that no one could steal. They had each other .

Ripping her focus away from the families, she spied a structure overlooking the waterfall, a crisscross of branches that made out a tower, an altar, a place to worship. The jewel would be kept there. She didn't even need to see it. The gang that hired her had described it: the size of her head, a heavy egg-shaped jewel encrusted with gold, silver, sapphires, diamonds, rubies. The trolls believed the priceless jewel protected their village, brought them luck and good fortune. Zula wondered if it was the source of their magic.

She knew little about enchantments, particularly those woven by trolls, but all kingdoms relied on some kind of spells or wards to protect themselves from others. Stealing treasure upset the delicate balance of magic, Zula only knew that truth because of her magical ukulele.

Briefly, she wondered what the thieves would do with the jeweled egg. It would bring her immeasurable wealth and the kind of freedom she'd only dreamed about. She could retire from her lifestyle, lie by a river and fish, try her hand at baking delectable cinnamon buns, and go play at any tavern she pleased. The only problem was the fact that she didn't know what she wanted. She lived for the thrill of the heist, and despite the danger, she still burned for adventure.

The sun was sinking in the sky when Zula opened the sack and unwrapped her ukulele. She swung her numb limbs and pressed her fingers against the strings. Warmth filled her as she closed her eyes and played. Not one of the fast-paced songs she sang in the taverns, but a slower, poetic song intended to lull the listeners to

sleep. Tiny golden motes of magic hovered above her fingers as she played, and her confidence bloomed. As the light faded, she made out the shape of the trolls, stopping, sitting, sleeping. It wasn't until she heard the rumble of a snore that she allowed the music to fade.

Zula swung down from the tree and jammed her feathered hat on her head. Tucking her knife into her belt, she dashed to the tower and climbed to the top, where the egg perched in a nest of silk. It was caged by wood, likely spelled by magic, but the music of the ukulele was potent, dispelling all magical traps for a matter of moments after the music played. Using her knife, Zula picked the lock. It came free with a satisfying whisper. Her fingers itched as she looked at the naked egg.

A rainbow of light skittered across the encrusted jewels as it glowed with its own inner light. A lustful ache pinched at her and her eyes watered. For the space of a moment, she wanted it for herself: the beauty, the jewels, the glistening magic of it all. What would it be like if she kept one of the priceless relics she stole? She had a den without treasures, but this was the ultimate prize.

With a defeated sigh, she dropped the sack over the egg. It took her a few tries to move it, straining as the heavy egg rolled into the sack. She tied the sack shut, realizing she wouldn't be able to swing through the trees with it. Gritting her teeth, she bore the weight with one hand while she slipped a feather free, and placed it on the empty silk nest.

Gingerly, she made her way down the tower. By the time she walked out the door, she'd adjusted and was ready to run. She headed back toward the grove of trees as the glow of a crimson sunset settled around her. A lightness came over her, as it often did in the aftermath of a heist. Reaching for the rope she'd left by the tree, she started to swing up when two meaty hands closed around her waist.

The sack was snatched from her hands, and the next moment, she was airborne.

Only by sheer willpower did she keep a bloodcurdling scream from escaping her lips. Instead, she tucked her body into a ball, preparing for impact.

It came, hard.

A wall of mud rushing around her, a billow of dust engulfing her throat, and a sickening crack followed by a bloom of pain shooting up her leg. A shadow loomed over her, and she reached for her knife, ready to fight off the thieves who had tricked her.

Instead, she found herself looking at the impossible.

She'd played her ukulele. The magic should have put everyone in the vicinity to sleep, yet Zula found herself staring into the scowling face of a horned, red-spotted troll.

5

NEO

Neo was having a good day. A delightful day, in fact. After running into Zula—shockingly, without her hat or ukulele—he decided time was of the essence. Instead of returning to the village to warn his men, he took drastic action and did the unthinkable: strode right into the troll village and officially introduced himself.

One conversation led to another, but the trolls did not believe that the Blue-Feathered Bard was going to steal from them, which was how Neo found himself tied up and locked inside a tiny hut. Which was no bother. Give it time. The trolls would see that he was right. However, when he heard the music of the ukulele, he discovered the door was locked with troll magic. Try as he might, there was no way to escape. What was more embarrassing was that he should have known spells to combat troll magic, but had neglected his studies because of the peace treaty.

Suddenly, the door to the hut burst open and a body was hurled inside. The door slammed, the individual grunted, and Neo straightened up, heart thudding as he took in the prone form of the Blue-Feathered Bard. He quickly swallowed down the grin that threatened to fill his face. His plan had worked. The trolls had listened, and Zula was his prisoner to bring in.

She sat up with another grunt, peering around the hut. When those fierce brown eyes landed on him, he tried to keep his heart from stuttering out. She was furiously beautiful. Her hair had come undone and waved around her shoulders, her feathered hat was askew, and her mouth contorted as she glared at him. Most glaringly, her

ukulele was missing.

“What are you doing here?” Zula demanded.

Ah. That. He shrugged, wishing he’d thought of an answer earlier. “I got lost again, wandered into troll territory, and they put me here until morning. What about you?”

She snorted, yanking at the rope that bound her wrists and ankles. “I’ll be off in a moment once I get these ropes undone. Tell me, what’s a farm boy like you doing getting on the bad side of trolls? They don’t lock people up for just any reason.”

Neo stiffened, insulted that she considered him a farm boy and troubled by the fact that his story was quickly unraveling.

“You tripped the magical barriers, didn’t you? How long have you been here?” Zula pointed at his bonds. “I left you hours ago. Tell me you’ve come up with a way to escape.”

“The door is locked with troll magic,” he sputtered.

She was interrogating him, ever so easily, with those dark eyes and the way she moved, fingers slipping into her boot, wiggling free a blade, then slicing ever so easily through the ropes, as though she’d done it before. All the attention was on him, and he needed to turn it back to her.

“You’re the Blue-Feathered Bard,” he said at last .

She paused just long enough to scrunch up her nose, lips turned down. “What gave it away?”

“Did you come to steal from the trolls? What did you take?”



Now he had her full attention. Zula stood and marched over to him, holding the knife dangerously close to his neck. She dropped her voice. “There’s something odd about you. I thought so when we bumped into each other in the jungle, and you’re uncannily familiar. I think I know why—you’re from a rival thief gang, aren’t you? After what I’m after, although I see you’re taking the easy route out, trying to steal directly from me instead of from the trolls. It’s happened before, you know, but I’m the best, the very best. No one steals from me, and no one captures me. So whoever you are, stay out of my way.”

He stared at her, slack-jawed. The story she assumed about him was much better than anything he could have put together. But it was also time to play his hand. He slipped his fingers out of the rope and snatched at the knife.

“Ha!” she yelled, skillfully rolling out of the way, but she let out a small whimper as her body weight landed on her left leg.

Escaping the last of his bonds, Neo took advantage of her pain to lunge at her. Knocking her flat on her back, he straddled her, pinning her down with his weight. “I can’t let you escape now,” he announced, stretching out the rope. No one escaped from his knots. “Where is the jeweled egg?”

Her eyes went wide, and suddenly Neo couldn’t breathe.

She’d punched him in the throat!

His body went slack as he wheezed for air. The world tilted as he slid off her and his ears burned as his head smashed against the floor. He had the presence of mind to kick out his feet and heard a thump, followed by a wail as she fell. Neo willed himself to move, his long arms flailing, fingernails catching bits of skin and fabric.

He felt bad, clawing at her like that, but repeated the words in his mind like a mantra.

She's a thief. A terrible thief. She deserves this .

The knife he'd forgotten about snagged his shirt, ripping it. His vision cleared as his sheriff badge fell out and clattered on the dirt floor.

It looked like a jewel, lying there.

Neo lunged for it, but Zula was faster. Snatching it up, she flipped it over, and her expression changed.

Neo's heart sank as a slow awareness came over her face—surprise, pain, fear, and then anger. Her brown eyes blazed as she glanced from the badge to him, and he felt like she'd punched him in the throat all over again.

Odd as it was, he wanted to apologize. Apologize to a thief, when he was the law and he was doing the right thing. Yet the haunted look on her face said otherwise.

He cleared his throat. "I'm Neo, the sheriff, and you, Zula, also known as the Blue-Feathered Bard, are under arrest for multiple crimes related to the crown—first and foremost, thievery."

The badge came hurling at his face, followed by a handful of dirt that momentarily blinded him. By the time he finished spitting and swearing and clearing his vision, the Blue-Feathered Bard was gone.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:18 am*

6

ZULA

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Zula fumed to herself, hobbling on her sprained foot as she snuck through the trolls' village. Why hadn't she paid more attention? She'd felt like she was being watched, and she was—by the sheriff himself!

He was much younger than she expected, long-limbed and stupidly attractive with those bright emerald eyes and that thatch of red hair. Nothing about him even hinted at the fact that he was the kingdom's appointed sheriff. He was innocent-looking and easygoing, with a relaxed attitude that didn't indicate he hunted outlaws. But now she knew the truth: he was the reason her heist had gone awry. How long had he been watching her ?

Leaning against the solid wall of a hut to regain her balance, she pondered her next move. First, she had to find her ukulele, but obviously it hadn't worked on all the trolls. The sheriff—Neo—would escape from the hut soon and she expected him to chase her down. Him, she could handle. It was the trolls she was worried about, as well as how to find the egg again.

Snores haunted her steps as she moved. The pain in her ankle made her eyes water and the scuffle with Neo hadn't done her any favors. Still, she pushed forward, pausing when she heard voices. Ducking behind a hut, she peered around the corner, making out two shapes: trolls, talking.

“—has to be done. This is an invasion, a call to arms.”

“We don’t know that it is intentional. The sheriff came to warn us?—”

“Unless he’s in on it, part of the plot. To take our most precious relic, our symbol of protection, of luck. Our magic calls for action. We must be swift and firm, let anyone know that if they steal from us, wrath and punishment will be fast and unrelenting. ”

“Then we punish the thief as an example.”

“We punish both of them.”

“I’d like a word with the sheriff. Remember, we were the ones who didn’t listen to him, and our entire village lies under the spell of that demon.”

What would they do to Neo? No, it wasn’t her concern. She would not go back, nor could she help him. Taking a deep breath, Zula steeled herself to sneak past the trolls when she saw her burlap sack. They hadn’t put the egg back!

Even though she didn’t have the ukulele to spell them with, Zula crept toward the sack while the trolls argued. They didn’t notice when she hefted the sack and slipped back into the shadows, headed uphill to where her ukulele lay.

The egg was heavier this time around and Zula wondered if she’d broken a bone as she hobbled as fast as she dared, pain shooting up her leg. All was silent as she found the ukulele, the glow of magic leading her straight to it. Tying it to her back, she moved through the jungle, a hope and a prayer on her lips. If Scarred Joe and his gang had a nasty surprise for her, she didn’t know if she’d make it .

Fortunately, Zula reached the river without incident and almost wept tears of relief as she set down the sack. Her leg screamed for relief and she was ready to lie down and float downriver to the meeting spot. Moving through the thick grass by the bank, she pushed it aside to reveal the boat she’d hidden earlier. It was still there, but it had

been smashed. The sides were broken in and there were two gaping holes in the bottom.

Her heart sank. Was this the work of the sheriff, or someone else?

NEO

The egg had vanished, and so had Zula.

The trolls set Neo free with the bad news that this time, the egg had been stolen. He'd promised to catch her and return their treasure, but now he stood in the clearing at a loss. Which direction had she fled?

This was the closest he'd ever been to capturing her, and he'd botched it. He wanted to find her, and heavens, he also wanted to apologize—not for being the sheriff and doing his job, but for the crestfallen look on her face when she picked up his badge. Of course, he'd meant to trick her, to treat her the way she treated those she stole from. But it didn't feel good at all.

He plunged headlong into the jungle, headed back toward the road, wishing he'd done a better job of plotting out the area. That was why he was supposed to return to camp after he caught sight of her, but instead of working with his men, he'd run off by himself to play the hero. His mistake would cost him the bounty, and she'd get away. Why, oh why, hadn't he stuck to the plan?

Neo ran a bit, branches slapping him in the face, nettles stinging his legs and poking under his trousers. Nightfall didn't ease the humid heat and, exhausted at last, he paused by the river to splash water on his face and search for tracks. As he cupped cool water between his palms, he reminded himself that Zula was wounded and wouldn't be able to get far on a bum leg. Not without a ride.

A flash of silver caught his eye. Neo lifted his head. There, across the bank, sat a raccoon, washing a silver spoon. “Bah, you little thief,” he grumbled.

He’d bet his left shoe it was the same raccoon who’d stolen an orange from him. Its little black nose twitched, and then it scampered off into the forest, leaving Neo scowling behind it.

A silver spoon .

Trolls didn’t use silver, so unless the raccoon had lugged the stolen silver from the village, someone else might live nearby. Which meant there might be a horse he could borrow to catch up with Zula. Once he found her trail, that is.

Splashing water across his face, he leaped to his feet and waded across the river, in the same direction the raccoon had gone.

It didn’t take long for him to find a footpath. He followed it up a swell of land, out of the jungle, into an open meadow. Pale lights hovered in the distance and Neo smiled in relief when he saw the field of chameleon beans, the shadows of the vines stretching long into the darkness. It was midsummer and the bean vines were already above his waist, but what encouraged him more was the fact that he knew whose farmland he stood on. Staying on the outskirts of the field, he ran toward the lights, sending the jungle hares scampering into the forest.

The farm belonged to a lord responsible for breeding horses who could handle the wild, unexplored sections of the jungle. He’d borrow the horse first and explain his actions later.

The barn appeared and Neo eased the sliding door open to the sound of hooves. Not what he expected. Before he had a moment to regain his composure, he caught a flurry of color, a muted curse, and then Zula herself charged out of the barn on

horseback.

Glee seized Neo. He dashed into the barn, tossed open the first stable door, and eased the horse out. There was no time for a saddle or reins. He swung onto its back and eased it forward, grateful for his mandatory riding lessons that had taught him how to ride so effortlessly, bareback or saddled.

A shout rang out behind him as he galloped out of the barn and he glanced back, catching sight of lights, the red face of an angry man, and in the distance . . . were those more horses? Fear leaped into his throat, but he turned his attention back to Zula, who was headed toward the flat outcropping of a road that led away from troll territory and back to the kingdom.

Neo leaned low over the horse, urging it on as a thunder of hooves swelled behind him. His actions had become reckless in his desperation to catch Zula. Before he'd become the sheriff, he'd been warned against going off on his own and conducting wild chases that caused chaos and damage across the land.

Instead of stopping to regroup and think through a new strategy, he continued the chaos that Zula left in her wake. When this was over, there would be hell to pay. First, though, he intended to catch her.



### ZULA

Teeth clenched, Zula leaned low over the horse. It was barely a relief to be off her throbbing foot—the jarring gallop of the horse still rattled it. She should have taken some time to wrap it up while she was in the jungle, but it was too late now. Far too many pursuers were behind her.

She hadn't quite figured out how Neo— that dratted sheriff— had caught up with her so quickly. But there he was, a beautiful red blur on the edge of her vision. She hadn't been able to figure him out, especially because she'd played the ukulele and he hadn't fallen asleep. Why not?

A chorus of furious shouts exploded behind her, calling for her to stop in the name of the law and return the stolen horse. The latter she fully intended to do once she lost her pursuers, although she wasn't sure who was chasing her. Neo's people?

Which led her to her next dilemma. Where to go? It would be no use to head toward Scarred Joe's den of thieves. Legendary reputation aside, while the thieves wouldn't slit her throat, they'd make her life hell under the assumption that she meant to lead the law directly to their doorstep.

But if Neo caught her, it would be much worse. Zula's fingers brushed her neck. She enjoyed her freedom, and the idea of it being taken away made her chest tighten. Everything was a challenge, a fight, and her talent usually allowed her to escape unscathed. She was resourceful and quick-witted. Her skills had gotten her this far, so

she needed to rely on them to carry her through to a satisfactory ending.

Gripping the saddle with her thighs, she slowed the breakneck pace of the horse. She'd assumed it would have been grateful for a reprieve, but it slowed reluctantly, likely because of the thunder of pursuers behind her, egging it on. Swinging her ukulele around, she checked her balance, then strummed a few notes.

Music flowed through her fingertips, slowing her heartbeat. She leaned into the lulling effect, plucking a few more notes, calming the beast beneath her thighs. Music soared from the ukulele, the notes coming easier and faster. Her fingers flitted up and down the neck of the instrument, and her picking grew bolder. The roar of horse hooves no longer echoed behind her, and the sounds of pursuit faded away.

The horse slowed to a stop, but she dared not look behind her. Instead, she gave the music her all, letting magic flow from her fingers, filling her will, her being. No one would follow. No one needed to follow. She was invisible, insignificant, like a grain of sand on the shores of the beach, indistinguishable from any other.

The skill had come to her by accident, the instrument gifted to her by her father, who believed she needed something else to do with her hands and the relentless energy that poured from her. They had lived in the jungle and she was like the monkeys, always chattering and swinging from tree to tree and landing herself in a heap of trouble.

Playing the instrument had initially kept her out of trouble, but then, one night, she'd been swept away with emotion and played her heart out, sending the jungle to sleep. Not a monkey moved, her father snored louder than ever, and she was alone.

That was only the beginning, but she had found ways to control her newfound skill. A knee-slapping, feet-stomping ballad in a tavern would rouse the crowd instead of sending them to sleep, but a low, emotional song played in a minor key would lull her

audience to sleep, making them easy pickings for thievery.

Becoming a thief hadn't been her goal in life. She and her father had lived a simple life deep in the jungle, less than a day's walk to the kingdom's border. They had no title and lived off the land, navigating the more treacherous areas of the jungle with skill. In fact, her father's reluctance to leave the jungle had made her suspicious. What was he afraid of?

In contrast, Zula was bold. She wasn't afraid to walk into a tavern, to have all eyes on her as she played and sang. She enjoyed hearing her name on the lips of strangers, and when they titled her the Blue-Feathered Bard, she made a hat and continued to spread the legend further. It was comforting to know that if she changed her appearance she could hide, but being known as the Blue-Feathered Bard made her feel invincible, and it was a feeling she didn't want to lose.

But she would if she were caught. There was more, much more that she'd lose, and she couldn't let that happen. So she calmed herself, controlled her emotions, and released the magic of the ukulele.

Silence reigned behind her as she strummed the last note.

Taking a deep breath, she twisted on the horse, willing herself to see what the magic had done. Sure enough, behind her was what looked like a row of statues. Horses with their heads down, riders slumped over their backs. Asleep.

Zula grinned and straightened up as though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. This was why her legend preceded her. She was free to escape, to deliver the treasure and win the largest payout of her career. Even the pain in her ankle had faded.

She lifted the reins, only to groan as she realized her mistake. The magic of the

ukulele had sent her mount to sleep, and it would be at least an hour before it woke. From experience, she knew her song induced the sleep of the dead. There would be no awakening anytime soon.

Which meant she had to walk.

With a scowl, she dismounted, grimacing as her sprained foot hit the ground. She hopped on one foot as she reached for the sack with the egg.

A blur of color bowled her over. There was a sickening crack as she landed on her ukulele and a sharp pain went up her back.

“I arrest you in the name of the crown!”

Zula meant to throw out an elbow, but Neo had caught her by surprise. He maneuvered her down on her belly and yanked her hands behind her back. A mewl of pain and anger escaped her lips as rope tightened around her wrists .

Then his mouth was near her ear, and he whispered, “I caught you, Zula. No more games. No more running away. It’s time to face the consequences.”

### NEO

The nearby prison was no more than a hole in the ground for the more notorious prisoners and stocks for more minor incidents. Disliking the idea of leaving Zula in a hole, Neo set up operations at Lord Dodger's horse breeding and bean farm, in one of the smaller barns for the newly caught horses who were too wild to keep in the barn with the others.

He'd had to leave her alone for a couple of days while he went to deliver the stolen egg to the trolls and beg forgiveness. His younger sister, Diana, accompanied him, because she had excellent skills of persuasion. It might have been better if Hans had been able to come instead and give the trolls more assurances, but Neo did his best with what he had.

It was only after he and Diana parted ways that he made it back to the barn, where Zula was imprisoned in one of the stalls. She lay on her back on a bed of hay, which had to be itchy. Her swollen foot was propped up, her hat over her head.

"I've come to bandage your ankle," Neo announced as the guards closed the iron grate behind him.

Zula briefly lifted the hat off her face, then replaced it. Her stillness bothered Neo. He hated how guilty he felt when he was in the right. Although there were kinder ways he might have gone about his duty, bringing in a thief was never easy. Especially one he was fond of.

Gingerly, he approached, sat down on the itchy hay—how did she handle it?—and lifted her swollen foot into his lap. Other than a hiss of pain, she remained silent.

“This will hurt,” Neo explained as he eased off her boot. “Actually, soaking your ankle in cold water would be best. I’m not a physician, but from the looks of it, it’s badly sprained. Maybe even broken. When we get to the palace, I can have a physician examine it.”

The hat came off Zula’s face and she propped herself up on an elbow. “The palace?”

Her voice was rough from lack of water. Neo had noticed the full water skins and deduced that in her stubbornness, Zula had likely decided not to eat or drink. It was stupid and wouldn’t do anything other than punish herself.

“Yes, we’re going to the palace. The royal guards will arrive to escort us in a couple of days. It would be wise to eat and drink, prepare yourself.”

“Why?” Zula demanded.

He had her full attention now. Instead of answering, Neo pulled off her sock, tossed it aside, and held up the jar of salve. “My sister gave me a willow bark potion. It will help reduce the swelling and the pain.”

“I know what willow bark is,” Zula said. “I grew up in the jungle.”

Ah, that was a new piece of information he didn’t know about her. Pausing his work, Neo leaned over and handed her a water skin. Their fingers grazed as she took it, a spark of energy igniting between them. Neo felt his pulse quicken and wondered if she felt it too.

Zula took a sip of water, her tone softening. “Why are we going to the palace?”

Neo frowned. "I . . . I'm not sure."

"But you're the sheriff. Surely you'd know why you're summoned to the palace."

Neo shrugged. "Orders are expected to be obeyed, regardless of explanation."

Zula shook her head. "Don't you tire of following orders?"

Neo dipped his fingers into the salve and studied her. Despite how tired she looked, and the pain that caused a tightening across her face, she was still beautiful with her dark skin, the halo of hair around her shoulders, and that fire in her dark amber eyes. Gently, he rubbed the salve around her swollen ankle, watching as she closed her eyes, tilted back her head, and pressed her lips together. Her fingers held onto the straw, tight, and he knew his work pained her, although she was too proud to admit it and would not cry out. He worked slowly, thoroughly, letting the silence stretch between them as he weighed his words. Finally, he picked up the bandage and started wrapping her ankle.

"You and I have different perspectives on orders and what they mean. I'm the sheriff, which means I uphold the laws of the kingdom. I protect it, and orders are only a way to ensure that not only myself, but all people retain their freedom. Take stealing, for example. If everyone were allowed to steal from everyone, think about the society that would lead to. One of mistrust, of frequent battles—nothing would get done because everyone would watch their back, waiting for a friend, a neighbor, a family member to stab them in the back and take what was earned, found, or treasured. For example, stealing from the trolls caused mistrust, anger, and they live on the borders of the kingdom. Should they decide to take up weapons and retaliate, the citizens of the peaceful village will be the ones to suffer first. Whether through fear, famine, or death, families will be torn apart, people displaced from their homes and their livelihoods. I know what it was like to lose my father, so if I can prevent others from experiencing that anguish, I will do so. Besides, oftentimes the queen knows much

more than I do, so no, I don't tire of following orders."

He finished wrapping Zula's foot and glanced over at her, surprised to see her eyes were wet, but whether from pain or because of his words, he couldn't tell. Wincing, she pulled her foot away. Tucking her arm behind her head, she studied him. "Well then, sheriff who doesn't mind following orders, tell me this: why don't you fall asleep when I play my ukulele? Are you immune to magic?"

For just a moment, Neo's fingers went to the parrot charm tucked underneath his shirt. He wondered if it had protected him in any way. "That's my secret," he grinned. "Zula, I've been following you for a long time, learning your habits, your mannerisms. Do you know we once had a mug of ale together? It was a year ago or so, in the village of Cloude. It has the kingdom's most beautiful beaches, and you played one evening at the tavern by the water. The villagers could hear your song for miles, and they danced out there under the moonlight. Later, after another band started to play, I found you by the bar and offered to buy you an ale. You agreed and we talked for a long time. That's the night I realized you had a soul, that there's much more to you than stealing relics, or lulling people to sleep with your music to make them easy pickings for robbery. I followed you to your next heist, and that's when I learned your magical ukulele doesn't work on me."

She looked away, her jaw working, and he hoped it was enough. Even though he knew why the ukulele's magic didn't work on him, he was loath to share it, and sad to know he hadn't made an impression on her at all. He'd been one of the many, lost in the sea of sameness when it came to her adventures.

"I thought you looked familiar," Zula said at last. "I remember that night. I'd had many drinks, but I do recall talking to a man with gilded words, and eyes that shone like emeralds."

Neo's palms went sweaty. "Then you do remember me."



Zula still wouldn't look at him. "Makes sense now. You kept following me, tracking me. I'd seen you from time to time, just couldn't place you. I saw you in the village too, before I headed out to . . . visit the trolls. I thought I saw you by the river when I crossed the bridge." Eyes flashing, she faced him. "Did you destroy my boat? "

Neo shook his head. "No, I didn't see a boat. Was that your escape route?"

Zula's brows knit together. "Someone smashed it. One of your men, perhaps?"

"Perhaps I'll speak with them, although it is wasteful to destroy a perfectly good fishing boat. Tell me, Zula, I've noticed your habits. Why do you only steal ancient relics?"

Biting her lip, Zula turned her face away. "You've already caught me. Must I bare my soul too?"

Neo couldn't help the longing in his tone. "As I said earlier, I have a great interest in getting to know you."

"Why?" Zula's voice turned hard, as though she were physically trying to push him away.

"You intrigue me. Most thieves I've caught are tricky, but they aren't exactly intellectual. They just want the money, and they'll make a deal or give up anyone to earn more coin or save their own neck. There's no honor. But with you, I get the sense that you're after something bigger. Each heist of yours is more dangerous than the last, and you like being the center of attention, yet the moment you take off your hat you're in disguise, hiding in plain sight. Then there's the matter of your reputation. You almost have a need to be known, to have your name, your praise on everyone's lips, yet tease us all by appearing and disappearing only when it suits your purposes. Except I can't figure out what your purpose is, and your soul shines

brightly when you play. You have some kind of magic, yet there's much more to you than meets the eye. I think thieving isn't what you are meant to do, it's simply the only job you've had, and you keep stealing bigger treasures, hoping to get caught, because you don't know what you want, but you've found that treasure and fame are hollow."

Zula sat straight up, and there was such fury on her face, Neo thought she'd never looked more beautiful. He wanted to reach across the void between them and thaw her icy exterior with heated kisses, to feel her melt in his arms, under the onslaught of his touch. All wishful thinking, for Zula pointed a finger at the iron bars.

"Please, get out and leave me in peace!"

### ZULA

Neo's words struck Zula to the core, because they were true. She was searching for meaning, purpose. Thieving left her with a high, a rush of feeling, a sense of invincibility, but it wasn't enough, nor would it ever be enough. It was attractive, addictive, but gold coin was hollow, having to always watch her back was exhausting, and the fact that he'd picked up on her unhappiness with her chosen profession was unnerving. What did a mere sheriff know? Neo was smarter than she anticipated, and he saw her soul. It almost sounded like he wanted to help, and, left alone with her thoughts, she wondered if the sheriff was infatuated with her .

Zula recalled more of the moonlit night in Cloude than she pretended to remember. It had been dark, but she recalled the freckles, the way his eyes shone, how it felt when he bumped up against her, and how, for one fleeting moment, she'd thought he might lean in and kiss her—and instead of slapping him across the face for his impudence, she'd let him. But he hadn't, and she'd pushed the soft thoughts out of her mind. In the world of thieves, there was no time for love, for stolen kisses behind closed doors or fumbling fingers upon heated skin in the velvet seduction of the night. To act on attraction was to give the other thieves an edge, an ability to exploit a weakness, and Zula preferred to stay away from relationships that would cause harm. She even counted her friendship with Issa, the scout, one of necessity, not a true friendship.

Closing her eyes against the heat, she nodded off, only waking when she heard shouts. She waited, hearing muffled conversation. The voices died away, and she was alone, listening, hating that she was caged. What if it was the royal guards, come to

escort her to the palace? She felt hot, flushed, but there was no means of escape in the stall. If she wanted to run for it, she'd need to do so before the guards forced her into the carriage. Or perhaps along the road. It was unfortunate that her ukulele was broken.

She raked her mind for options. Her foot made it impossible to run, and stealing a horse would be more difficult without a head start. Would they dare to fire a crossbow at her? At the horse? Her fingers trembled as footsteps moved toward the stall, and she snatched up a water skin as the key turned in the lock. She readied herself, aiming for the guard's head, but three of them poured in. Three guards she couldn't hope to overpower.

They were dressed in the colors of the kingdom, yellow and green. Their uniforms looked uncomfortably hot in the heat. One cleared his throat while the other two approached. "We are to escort you to the palace for your sentencing."

"Where's the sheriff?" Zula asked. She felt lightheaded and faint. Was this about to happen?

"He will join you in the carriage," one guard said. "Tie her up," he ordered the other men.

Zula had no cards to play. One guard blocked the only means of escape while the others tied her hands together. They even put a rope around her ankles, although it was loose and she'd easily be able to take it off. She allowed them to escort her from the barn, blinking in the brilliance of daylight. Her vision went fuzzy as she made out the palm trees in the distance, the thick foliage of the jungle, the bright feathers of the birds, the distant thunder of a waterfall. The farmer's crop of beans danced in the breeze, thick vines almost as tall as trees. Horses roamed in the pasture and by a larger barn was a royal carriage accompanied by a group of guards on horses. Zula counted ten of them before her panic intensified.

The guards all but carried her to the carriage and shut her inside. She sat on the velvet seat, frantically trying to work out a plan. Rumor had it that criminals were given brutal executions, but she wasn't sure how much was truth or how much the stories had been embellished. How would the crown punish her? Make her swing from a tree? Chop her head off? Or take turns filling her body with crossbow bolts? She wished she'd paid more attention, but it was easy to dance on the outskirts of the kingdom, visiting villages by the water, staying far away from the center where the palace sprung from the thick of the jungle .

She knew of the royal family. All citizens did, because those who had magic in their veins ruled the kingdom. They were untouchable and no thief dared get near the palace, for to steal from the kingdom meant certain death. It would be the one heist Zula was sure she'd never escape from, and now she was headed there. It was a two-day journey, but no one could keep watch the entire time. She'd be on her best behavior, and when they least expected it, she'd vanish into the night.

The door opened and Neo joined her, sitting across from her in the small carriage. There was just enough space that if Zula kept herself small, she wouldn't bump into Neo's knees. He was so tall his presence seemed to take up more of the carriage than it should. Carefully turning her face away, she stared out the window as the carriage set off.

She fully expected Neo to say something witty or ask a question, but he held his silence. She snuck glances at him from time to time, but he, too, looked lost in thought, staring out the window as though he'd never seen the world before.

Then he turned and caught her staring at him. A slight smile came to his lips and she felt that familiar flutter in her lower belly.

"Nervous?" he asked.

A challenge. “Just about as nervous as you are,” Zula quipped, realizing, too late, that battling words with him wouldn’t give her any information.

Neo ran his fingers through his hair, making it stand on end. “Oh, Zula, I’m not nervous. I go to the palace often.”

“Oh.” Zula forced herself to keep talking. “Then you know the habits of the royal family.”

Neo gave her an odd look, as though he didn’t quite understand what she meant.

“I mean, the laws the royal family adheres to. What happens to . . . criminals?”

Neo leaned forward, lowering his voice. “Are you worried, Zula? Worried about what will happen to you when we arrive? What your sentence will be?”

Resisting the sudden, desperate urge to fall on her knees and beg, Zula firmly reminded herself she was the Blue-Feathered Bard. She did not beg or cry or make deals. She would not apologize for what she’d done because she wasn’t sorry. Given the chance to do it again, she’d ensure that she didn’t get caught. She tried to keep the steel in her tone as she touched her neck. “Wouldn’t you be curious if you were me?”

“I’m surprised you didn’t give the guards trouble when they came to collect you.”

“Three against one isn’t very fair.”

“I’m glad you realize it’s time to stop running. As for what to expect when we reach the palace? I assume the queen will offer you something that will allow you to escape certain death. If she does, ask for some time to consider her offer.”

Zula raised an eyebrow. “Why? It’s not like I’ll have any other attractive choices.”

Neo grinned at her. That boyish grin that completely disarmed her. “Trust me.”

His knee bumped against hers, making Zula very aware of how alone they were in a tight space. She hugged her bound wrists to herself tightly as if to keep all her anxiety inside. “You’ve done nothing to earn my trust.”

Neo’s grin grew wider and he pressed a hand against his chest in mock pain. “You wound me with your words. I’m nothing if not the epitome of trustworthiness.”

Zula pursed her lips. “I recall running into you in the jungle, and you claimed you were lost.”

Neo’s face went red.

“If that’s not trickery, I don’t know what is. You speak of trust when you were tied up in troll territory, but you were the one who went to warn them about me.”

Neo moved closer, his leg against hers, mischief dancing in those intoxicating eyes, shades of green shifting. Zula was suddenly aware of how hot it was in the carriage. They swayed back and forth, and when Neo spoke, she almost missed it.

“You’re quite beautiful when you’re angry.”

Her heart hammered in her chest. “Are you flirting with me?”

She meant the words to act like a dagger, to make him lean back, move away from her, and reconsider his actions. It had the opposite effect. Neo didn’t move. The grin slipped from his face, revealing glimmers of raw desire.

“What if I am?” he said, low.

Zula desperately wished she had her ukulele to play a song to send him to sleep. Except that wouldn't work either. Licking her dry lips, she narrowed her eyes at him. "You shouldn't."

"Does it make you uncomfortable?"

"It does."

"But you like it."

"I don't . . ." Her voice cracked. "It's . . . you're the sheriff."

The implications of what that might mean did not seem to resonate with him, although swift disappointment crossed his face. "That's all you see, isn't it? All you'll ever see."

Unsure how to respond, Zula turned her attention to the window, where palm trees waved in the breeze as her heart squeezed.

A shout came and the road dipped, jostling her roughly. She lost her seating and was unable to catch herself with her wrists bound. Her foot jarred against the side of the carriage and she let out a cry.

Neo was there in a moment, arms around her waist, pulling her securely against him. Concern covered his face, concern she didn't think he should have for her when he was taking her to the palace for her sentencing. But just for a moment, she saw something else flicker behind his eyes, and she recalled that moonlit night, the people dancing on the beach, the taste of ale in her mouth, the feeling that she was invincible, and the almost-kiss.

Her life was over anyway. Would it be so bad to find out if the sheriff was a good



kisser? His breath was hot against her cheek. He smelled like coconuts. She should hate him. She should shove him out the carriage door while he was distracted. Instead she was lost, and it was Neo who pulled away first, his voice an urgent whisper of yearning.

“Damn it, Zula, why did you have to steal from the trolls?”

11

NEO

Neo could not get out of the carriage fast enough. The two days with Zula had been nothing but pure torture, especially because her upcoming sentencing had made her mellow. There was still that fire that so compelled him, but there was also a softer side to her he'd never seen.

As soon as they arrived at the palace grounds, he excused himself from the carriage before he did something truly disgraceful and kissed her while his men looked on.

The palace rose above the jungle. Built on a hilltop, it had beautiful views of the fauna and flora, the flower gardens and the smaller waterfalls that fed the streams that passed through. It was lush with vegetation, an idyllic paradise. Unlike other structures, the palace had been built around the jungle. Vines hung off balconies, trees grew inside, and it was impossible to tell whether the bamboo walls belonged to the palace or the jungle. Even the marble columns and thick stone walls blended in with the vibrant colors of the jungle. It was like stumbling upon a hidden relic and discovering it was a place where people dwelled.

Neo relaxed as he walked toward the columns. Putting his hands in his pockets, he took a deep breath of the lotus-scented air, instantly feeling better.

"You're back!" Thune, one of the guards, stepped away from his post and saluted Neo.

Neo grinned. “I am, and I was successful. When does the queen want to see her?”

“About that.” Thune sobered. “Her Majesty gave specific orders that you are not to attend.”

Neo froze. “I’m not to attend?”

“I’m sure she has her reasons.”

Neo nodded, letting his shoulder relax again .

Thune nudged him. “Well? How did the chase go? You have to be proud of yourself. I heard the trolls were appeased.”

“They were, but the chase was rough. My own fault—I violated my own rules of engagement. I caught her, but I don’t think it’s over. She sprained her ankle, maybe broke it, which gives us a small reprieve, but I expect she’ll try to escape from the palace. With all the balconies and vines, it will be too easy. Be on guard.”

“I will. I’ll let the others know, although I’m curious why she wasn’t immediately taken to the dungeons.”

Neo shrugged. “I intend to find out. For now, I’m going to finish my report and find something to eat. Shout if you need me, will you?”

“I’ll do one better. I’ll escort the Blue-Feathered Bard to meet with Her Majesty myself and report to you later.”

Neo clapped his old friend on the shoulder. “I appreciate that.”

12

ZULA

Every inch of Zula's body felt as though it belonged to a most dishonorable thief. Four guards marched her inside the royal palace, where light streamed in from every angle, greenery and flowers trailed along the columns and railings, and the scent of lotus and honey made her throat ache. Walkways bathed with warm sunshine allowed a perfumed breeze to blow into the palace. In the distance was the sound of harp music and the gentle murmur of voices. It was peaceful, pleasant, not at all what Zula had expected the palace to be like.

She wished she'd had the chance to comb her frizzy hair and pick the hay out of her clothes, or at least attempt to press the wrinkles flat. Most of all, she wished she'd had a moment to bathe, to meet her judgment on her own terms instead of this way, brought in like a common thief. Her thoughts went to Neo and the rather cryptic words he'd shared with her:

I assume the queen will offer you something that will allow you to escape certain death. If she does, ask for some time to consider her offer.

Why? And why wasn't he with her? He was the sheriff, and even regarding matters of the crown, shouldn't he be part of the judgment? She hated that she thought of him as safe rather than an enemy, but she had to admit a begrudging respect because he'd actually captured her.

"Her Majesty, Queen Iydella."

Zula swallowed hard, all of her confidence sinking to her toes. Without her freedom, ukulele, and blue-feathered hat, she was nothing but an ordinary woman on the wrong side of the law. Whereas the queen was illustrious.

She was an impressive woman, with waves of copper hair piled on top of her head and dark green eyes that missed nothing. While not particularly tall, she had a presence that filled up the entire room. Instead of sitting primly on a throne—as Zula imagined all members of the royal family did—the queen stood over a table, dressed in layers of ruffles, a petal-soft silk. A string of pearls hung around her neck, offset by a beautiful ruby the size of Zula’s nose.

When they entered, the queen nodded at the guards, looking each of them in the eye. “Thank you, Thune, Peter, Idan, Ethan.”

She knew their names. That was something.

The queen approached, waving a fan, and Zula wished she knew a magical spell that would make her sink into the floor.

“I’ve always wanted to meet you,” Queen Iydella began. “No need for bowing. Let’s be clear here. You’re a criminal who’s been disrespecting the laws of the land and having a laugh with it. Trust me, I’m aware of the chatter of my people. I’m sure you have a reason for why you do what we do—after all, don’t we all? But my responsibility is to keep the peace, and stealing from trolls was going too far. I will not have war on my doorstep. Do you have any idea what kind of financial crisis it would put the kingdom in? There would be soldiers to pay, food to raise, supplies to send, not to mention the havoc it would wreak on our trade routes. I’m sure you never think of the long-term effects of your thievery, but it’s the kingdom that ends up dealing with the consequences that make you famous. Which is why I have a proposal for you.”

Zula took a deep breath, her tongue tied up in her mouth. True, she hadn't considered the long-term consequences of her actions, at least not for those she stole from, nor had she stopped to think twice about how they would affect the kingdom. But the queen was wealthy, with countless guards and personnel at her disposal. Zula doubted there was even one day that the royal family had gone hungry. Royalty could fix any problem that arose. Because the queen lived in the lap of luxury, the least she could do was give back to those who served her.

However, the retort never left Zula's lips, because she could also imagine her head being lopped off, and she very much wanted to save her neck.

"You're very good at what you do," the queen continued .

Those words on anyone else's lips would have made Zula swell up with pride, but in front of the queen, she wished she could turn into dust.

"Yes, I have paid attention. You only steal priceless relics, items seeped in ancient magic from long ago. I've often wondered if it's because that's what you collect, or if someone else is directing you."

The queen held up her hand, so Zula swallowed down her response, mouth dry.

"You have skill with the ukulele, another magical item, or so my sources tell me. Which is why I have an offer for you. Find and steal back all the magical relics you've stolen over the years. Six, if I'm not mistaken. Return them here and I will be lenient with your sentencing."

Zula stared at the queen's shoes, willing herself to respond. "What does lenient mean? What incentive do I have to return instead of hiding?"

The queen laughed. Laughed! Zula backed away in surprise at her sudden mirth.

“I thought you might ask that very question,” the queen said .

Zula lifted her head, studying the queen’s face, a niggles of familiarity poking at her.

No. It can’t be!

Realization dawned on her half a beat before the queen started to explain.

“My son, Neo, was born a hunter. He always finds his prey, and he will always find you, no matter where you go, no matter what you do. Also helps that he’s in love with you, although let’s keep that knowledge our secret.”

A loud humming began in Zula’s mind as though she’d been struck on the head. Her ears rang, and the queen’s voice was drowned out by her own thoughts.

Neo.

Prince Neo.

That was why he looked so familiar, not because she’d seen him at a tavern or passed him on the street or knew him from a rival thief gang. No, because of course she’d seen the royal family from afar, when the crown prince was named. And it was tradition in the kingdom for the royal family to take on roles of governance. They weren’t afraid to walk among the people, to get their hands dirty, because strange magic flowed through their blood.

Out of the three royal children, each one had a specialty. One would rule, one would hunt, and one would persuade.

Neo, the sheriff, was a prince.

Zula started to shake. “He’s not in love with me,” she whispered.

“He’s my son,” the queen said matter-of-factly. “I know him better than anyone else. That’s why I’m not demanding your execution immediately. I’d hoped to meet you, wondering if you might be a young woman who was led astray a long time ago. This is your opportunity to change your ways, to choose another path. I’m not suggesting that you’d ever be good enough for my son, but I’d rather prevent heartbreak, and it is in my nature to give second chances rather than calling for death, deserved or undeserved.”

Zula pressed her lips together, throat dry. “May I have some time to consider your proposal? ”

“You have until the night of the masquerade in two days. In fact, I invite you to attend the masquerade dressed as yourself; it will be astonishing. However, know that you are not free to roam. You will be closely guarded, and if you attempt anything at all, I will revoke this proposal and consider locking you in a deep hole where you’ll never see the sunshine, even if you dig for five hundred years.”

Zula shuddered. “I will take your words under close consideration.”

“Dismissed. Guards, please escort her back.”



13

NEO

The keys of the piano moved under Neo's long fingers, the melodic sounds ringing out, calming his jittery impatience. He'd taken a bath, eaten, and now he was attempting to keep his thoughts off the offer his mother was making Zula. Most importantly, he was trying to figure out why he wasn't invited. Truth was, the queen had her reasons, and if she decided not to share with him, there was nothing he could do. His heart sank and his fingers slipped off the keys just as footsteps approached.

"Sire?"

Neo stood, pushing his hair off his forehead with a sigh. "Don't call me that. It's too formal. "

Thune shrugged good-naturedly. "It comes natural."

"How did it go in there?"

"The Blue-Feathered Bard looked quite disturbed. I'd hate to be in her place."

"And? What did my mother offer her?"

Thune's face reddened. "She did that trick of hers. We could see their mouths moving, but couldn't hear any of the discussion."

“Ah. The bard is locked up, then?”

“In the adjoining room.”

“I’ll go to her. Thank you, Thune.”

Somehow he felt hot, palms sweaty, so he shoved them into his pockets as he made his way through the palace. He’d had her moved off the first floor into private chambers where he could keep an eye on her and stay comfortable himself, but far enough away from the royal wing where his family wouldn’t feel threatened. Zula would likely loathe her prison, for despite it being comfortable, it was a closet with no windows. He doubted she cared much for luxury, but he could be wrong .

The guard at the door gave Neo a nod. “She hasn’t tried anything yet.”

Dismissing the guard, Neo moved into the room, which had a bamboo bed, a large green plant growing beside it, a series of woven mats on the floor, two low chairs sitting beside a round table, and sheer curtains, which displayed the balcony when pulled aside. There was also a door in addition to the curtains, for security and privacy, but Neo noticed they were wide open. Tempting. The balcony offered a view of the hanging gardens, and even from inside Neo could make out the vibrant oranges and pinks of the bright flowers.

Slowly, he turned his attention to the inner room. It was nothing more than a closet, a place where he and his siblings used to play hide and seek. It was overlarge, meant for storing treasure—not clothes—since his mother thought the very idea of a treasury was nonsensical. Why keep all the treasures of the palace in one place? She’d spread them out among the floors, hidden in nooks and crannies and closets. Once, Neo had found an ornate jewelry box hidden in a hole under a potted plant. His mother had made him put it back, but he was certain there were many lost treasures hiding in the palace.

Zula sat on the floor in the closet, back against the narrow bed—just large enough for one. Her arms were curled around her legs, chin resting on her knees as she faced the door. She'd been tied up, but just by her good ankle. Neo followed the rope, which ended around the bed. He disliked the way Zula sat there, like a bird with clipped wings.

She looked up at him, and her face went tight.

Neo meant to untie the rope, to assure her there was no need for it, granted that she promised not to run away, but when their eyes met, there was something in them he'd never seen before. Shame? Awareness? He wasn't sure, but she saved him the trouble by speaking first, voice flat. "You're the prince."

It was an accusation, and suddenly he recalled her asking about the royal family in the carriage, and what he knew of them. He'd thought it odd then. Why would she ask a prince about his own family? "I thought you knew," he protested. "I'm the sheriff. I assumed?—"

"You could have said so."

"It doesn't matter," Neo shrugged. "I'm not the crown prince; I won't inherit the kingdom. The crown belongs to my older brother."

Zula narrowed her eyes. "Of course it matters. You. . . you're of royal blood, and . . . " She trailed off and wiped at her nose.

It struck Neo that she was upset with him for withholding the knowledge of his title. First she'd been furious he was the sheriff, now this. He couldn't fix it, nor should he try. He was a prince. She was a thief. "My mother . . . " He cleared his throat and tried again. "The queen wanted a word with you in private. I came to ask what she offered you."

Zula's brown eyes bored into his. "You don't know?"

"I'm sure she had her reasons for excluding me."

There—he saw a gleam in her eye again, the thrill of excitement. She enjoyed having the upper hand. "I haven't decided whether to accept, decline, or counter the proposal. Before I share with you, though, I have a question."

He crossed his arms. "Ask."

"Do you intend to keep me chained up here? Or is a bath, a hot meal, and fresh clothes an option? I was also invited to the masquerade, and I have nothing to wear."

Neo suddenly felt hot all over at the idea of Zula in a bath. He managed to stay calm. "It is an option."

"Good." Zula stood, as though she were the one in charge. "Let's negotiate over a meal."

14

ZULA

Z ula scrubbed the dirt from her skin as the steam from the hot water made her black hair curl into ringlets. The shame and embarrassment she'd initially felt upon entering the palace was washed away just like the dirt. But her thoughts turned to the queen's proposal, Neo's reaction, and most of all, escape.

Servants hovered around her as she washed. At least, Zula was under the assumption they were servants. Her life had never involved paying much attention to royalty and the habits of those who dwelled in the palace. Although she'd heard somewhere that it was possible to work for the kingdom and earn good money, they also conducted rigorous interviews and dug deep into an individual's past and family. All of it was none of her concern.

The plush ivory towel she dried off with was made of the softest cotton she'd ever touched and large enough to wrap herself in twice. The water had been perfumed, and she was aware of a pleasant scent emanating from her body. Had she stunk that badly before? The tension in her shoulders faded, but her jaw worked when she saw the dress laid out for her.

Dresses were the clothing of well-behaved women who never had a need for a sudden escape. This one wrapped around her body, hugging her curves, and she tied the strings that held it up tight, lest it fall off. After a few experimental steps, she discovered the material moved with her, the dress flowing around her legs, soft as silk.

If she was about to sell her soul—or die—she might as well be comfortable and feel attractive while doing so.

The servants tittered behind their hands, speaking in hushed voices accented by soft laughter. Zula ignored them, although her ears burned at the idea that they might be talking about her. More often than not, she found herself the source of every conversation. Usually people admiring her skill as a thief or retelling her latest heist.

In the eyes of the common people, she was a legend.

In the palace, she was a prisoner, a common thief. Ironic.

A young woman waved at her, beckoning her to follow, and Zula did, trying not to openly stare at the beauty of the palace. Wide windows sent a floral-scented breeze to her nose, and palm trees pushed their leaves through every opening, letting in a stream of golden-green light. The palace opened up into a patio, a courtyard balcony overlooking a set of hanging gardens. Vines twirled around the railing, grapes budding, some already nearly ripe. Pots of banana trees—some no taller than her waist—dotted the patio. There were benches, tables—and then, she spotted Neo.

He leaned against one of the tables, elbows on it, hands gesturing as he talked animatedly. He laughed, his head tilting to the side, those green eyes catching hers.

Zula's breath caught as his eyes widened and the mirth deepened into a smolder as his gaze trailed down her body. The man he was talking to turned, then stood and touched Neo's shoulder. Neo nodded, but his gaze never left Zula.

She couldn't look away either. It was like she was caught on a hook and Neo reeled her in with the power of his gaze. Her feet automatically moved toward him, and when he grinned, her heart flipped. The words of the queen— his mother —danced back to her.

“Hungry, Zula?” Neo asked, pushing a bowl of food toward her.

Stomach rumbling, Zula sat down at the wood table, mouth wet at the bounty of cinnamon-sprinkled fruits, nuts, cheeses, and some kind of dried meat.

Opening her mouth to thank him, Zula caught Neo’s expression, one of deep satisfaction and hopeful curiosity. Her heart hammered as she recalled the way he’d flirted with her in the carriage. No words had been said, but she’d allowed herself to daydream ever so briefly, and there had been yet another incident where she thought he might have kissed her. Now she understood his restraint. He was the prince, and if, indeed, he thought himself in love with her, she couldn’t give him hope of winning her admiration, respect, or confidence.

The words were out of her mouth before she could stop her tongue. “It’s the ukulele. It stirs up feelings, making emotions stronger. Whatever you think you feel for me isn’t real. You’ve been besotted by the music.”

A crimson blush spread across his cheeks. “Excuse me, but I believe I missed part of this conversation. What do you speak of?”

Zula rolled a plump date between her fingers. The words came out in a rush. “The queen claimed you’re in love with me.”

Neo’s face turned redder, almost the color of his hair. Impressive. So it must be true.

“Why did she say that ? Is that the reason she didn’t want me to be part of the audience with you?”

Zula shrugged, chewed and swallowed, then gave him a cheeky grin. “Your infatuation saved me from certain death, so I suppose I should thank you.”

Neo's shoulders sagged, the edges of misery hovering around his face. "Are you going to tell me what happened or keep me in suspense?"

Zula popped a grape into her mouth. "I'm rather enjoying this, finally having the upper hand on you. Is this where you grew up? In this half-garden, half-palace? It's beautiful."

Neo crossed his arms. "Zula," he warned.

Even the sound of her name in his mouth sent shivers down her spine. Why did her body have such a reaction to him? Reluctantly, she admitted to herself, it would make her life more interesting if a prince, who also happened to be a sheriff, were in love with her. But it was only a silly infatuation. Had to be.

"I was offered another heist, in exchange for my life."

"I knew it," Neo groaned, putting his head in his hands.

"Oh?" Zula prompted, suddenly not feeling so hungry anymore. "Do you know why, then? I was asked to steal back six of the magical treasures I've stolen over the years and bring them here. Why?"

Neo went still, blinking at Zula. "That's what she asked you to steal? Did you agree?"

Shrugging, Zula lowered her voice. "I will give her my answer after the masquerade, but I don't have a choice, do I? If I say no, I will be sentenced to some kind of punishment." She rubbed her neck. "If I run away, you'll just hunt me down again. If I say yes, I buy myself some time, but I'll never be able to go back to my life the way it was before you caught me."



“Stealing is wrong,” Neo quipped, his face no longer red with embarrassment. “Besides, I’m glad I caught you.”

“Does that mean you are the recipient of the bounty on my head? Can I persuade you to share it with me?”

Neo laughed, his entire body relaxing. The sound was intoxicating, and Zula had to bite her cheek to keep from joining him.

“Unfortunately, I am ineligible for such funds, nor do I need the money.” He rested his elbows on the table again and dropped his voice. “We should discuss these heists. Do you know where these treasures are? Who they were sold to? Did you keep any of them?”

Zula’s heart pounded in her chest, accompanied by a lightheaded sensation, and she wasn’t sure whether to blame the intensity of Neo’s presence or the seriousness of their conversation. Trying to appear nonchalant, she focused her attention on a nearby banana tree. “No, the requests all came from different people. Some weren’t even from thieves, but that’s not unusual. A price was offered, I accepted, but I don’t know where to begin searching for these relics.”

“What about the individuals who hired you?” Neo pressed. “Do you have any inkling of where they might be?”

Zula shrugged. “Some, but it’s a futile quest, especially because, now that you’ve caught me, the gangs of thieves won’t trust me with information. Although, I suppose that’s where you come in, isn’t it? Are you supposed to come along on this heist of heists to keep me from escaping?”

Neo’s face lit up, as though he hadn’t considered the idea .

Zula smiled at him before she could stop herself. Neo's presence was exuberant, enticing, and she liked the way he looked at her. Liked it more now that she knew she'd caught the eye of a prince.

"I will investigate further, but Zula, if we are to work together, I have to be able to trust you."

"You don't?" she quipped, trying to keep the mood light before he looked at her with his soul in his eyes and she lost all control.

Neo drummed his fingertips on the table. "What do you want, Zula?"

No one ever asked her what she wanted. They made deals, struck a bargain, or passed on demands from others. Neo didn't get to know the desires of her heart, just because they were having a decent conversation. "You're my captor and I'm your prisoner. Let's not pretend to be friends."

His jaw went tight.

Now she'd gotten a reaction out of him.

"I didn't ask to be friends. I asked what you want."

"My freedom. My ukulele. "

"But why steal? What's in it for you?"

He was too close, dangerously close to the truth. She looked away. "For the thrill of it, the danger. There's a euphoria after each heist and I like to hear my name on everyone's lips, to feel their awe, their shock at the great feats I was able to accomplish. I should stop because . . . you're right about me. It's hollow and I want a

purpose, but the mundane life that people live feels dull.”

Neo’s fingers brushed the back of her hand, his voice surprisingly gentle. “I feel the same way about hunting. That’s why I’m the sheriff. I have an idea?—”

He broke off abruptly, staring at something past her shoulder. His face changed, closed, and he pulled back.

“There are discussions that need to be had. I will meet you later.”

15

NEO

“What do you mean this isn’t over?” Neo demanded, trying to keep the frustration out of his tone as he faced his mother.

Hans had come to collect him for an emergency meeting and now all three of them sat at a round table, one empty chair waiting for his younger sister, Diana. It wasn’t customary for them to discuss things as a family, but matters that involved the security of the kingdom usually involved Neo.

“Don’t be shocked. Of course it’s not over. Why do you think I demanded you bring in the thief? This is a plot that has been in process for years, and she’s at the heart of it. But we’ll get to that in a moment, Neo. We need to discuss who hired her.”

Neo sat back, foot tapping against the floor. He shifted his gaze from Hans to the vacant seat, then back to his mother, who sat forward, waiting expectantly. This was another moment when he felt like an absolute fool. “I don’t have any information about who hired her,” he admitted weakly. “I didn’t find anyone unusual in the village. The thief admitted to having a boat. She intended to take it downriver, but it had been destroyed. None of my men confessed to it, and I believe them. It’s not like us to destroy property.”

“Interesting. You need to trace the river, find out where she was going and who she was going to meet. We believe this individual, or group of individuals, is responsible for attempting to start a war with the trolls. War is the answer, the treasure from the

trolls is a moot point, and whoever wants war will act, and quickly. The masquerade is tomorrow night. Neo, I want you to attend, along with the Blue-Feathered Bard. Everyone will be masked, but it's an opportunity. It is likely she will try to escape, and the person who hired her might attend the masquerade. They might be high up in the kingdom, eager to start a feud with us. We need to use her as a decoy to ensure the kingdom's security. "

"I disagree," Hans spoke up. "I dislike having a dishonorable thief in court, let alone asking said thief to assist us in confidential matters. She should be imprisoned, punished for all the chaos she's caused."

Mother's face gave nothing away. "Neo, what is your opinion?"

"Hans has a point, but I'm not sure what the best plan of action is," Neo admitted.

"Make her work," a new voice added.

Neo lifted his head as his younger sister, Diana, strode into the room. She shut the door behind her, layers of billowing sheer fabric covering her willowy form. A golden circlet set with emeralds rested on her head. Her shoulder-length hair was the same color as Neo's, with ringlets and beautiful bouncy curls. She was the most tanned out of all of them, perfect skin, no freckles. Once, a group of men had gossiped about her, calling her a temptress. Hans had had them publicly whipped.

Diana took a seat at the table, twirling a dagger between her fingers. "Criminals deserve a chance to reform, wouldn't you agree? Offer her two choices: work for us and pay off her debt to the kingdom, or we can behead her. Once her debt is worked off, say in five, ten, or twenty years, she must never steal again, or we will find reason to take off her head. It's fair."

"Except for the fact that she's the best." Hans shook his head.

“Neo is better,” Diana countered. “And what is this thief without her magical ukulele? She may be smart and cunning, but if she crosses us in any way, she will feel the wrath of my blade.”

Even Neo shuddered at the threat. “What is the work she must do to pay off her debt?”

Diana held up three fingers. “First, find this warmonger who hired her to steal from the trolls. Second, work with us to rid the jungle of the gangs of thieves. Perhaps she will not give up her comrades so easily, but rival gangs I believe she will. Third, pay back every cent of the damage she’s caused. Neo, I hear you find her attractive.”

Neo’s cheeks burned. Did everyone know?

Mother spoke up. “Neo might be in love with her, but he has shown that he puts his duty first. He captured her and brought her here as requested. Matters of the heart do not trump duty and we will all work to ensure that will not change.”

Neo considered her words and decided they were untrue. He was certain Hans would ruin a kingdom if his five-year-old daughter were ever in danger.

“A sheriff will never develop a relationship with a prisoner, nor will a prince align himself with a common thief. Neo, you will ensure this never happens,” Mother said firmly.

“Is it not folly, then, to force him to work with her?” Diana challenged, holding up her blade. “I ask because that is the only possibility, seeing as he’s the only one who can hold her.”

Hans snorted. “You speak of second chances, then question your own wisdom?”

Diana glowered at him. “I’m not the crown prince. I will always question my judgment. You’re supposed to be the wise one.”

Mother held up her hand. “There’s a reason I called us all together. The masquerade ball grows near and I suspect danger, perhaps treason, within the walls of this palace. We must be vigilant, question everything, and not dismiss any suspicions. And there is something else.”

Neo waited, his mind racing, wondering if Zula was part of an elaborate trap. What if she wanted to be in the palace? Why hadn’t she tried harder to escape? He could think of a thousand treasures here that she could steal for herself, or sell to someone else.

“Recently I’ve noticed a growing build-up of magic on the edges of the jungle, close enough to the border to make me believe it was the trolls. As you know, their jeweled egg wards their borders, protecting them from magic and warning them should anyone with nefarious intent walk into their territory. However, upon further scrying, I discovered that the mass of magic isn’t associated with the trolls—it’s something else attempting to use the trolls as a mask. For the past five years, the Blue-Feathered Bard has risen to acclaim, and she’s known for stealing treasure, specifically ancient relics that have magical properties. Neo, you followed her and discovered that before each heist, she plays her magical ukulele, which we now have the opportunity to study.”

Neo should have felt proud of being able to deliver the ukulele to his mother to study, but her words brought nothing but dread to his heart. How had he missed so much?

Hans rested his hands on the table and steeped his fingers. “I know where you are going with this story,” he said slowly. “The magical relics are being delivered to one individual, someone with power who knows how to draw the magic out of the relics and use it for themselves. They are planning something foul, but our interference has

delayed them, for now.”

“Why do you say that?” Diana asked, brow furrowed.

Mother held up seven fingers. “There is a total of seven magical relics, but only six have been stolen. Seven is the number of completion; it’s symbolic. The theft of the seventh relic was to ignite something—a war, yes—while the individual who has been collecting these relics steps into their full power.”

“Oh.” Diana shivered. “That is disturbing. Who do you think this person is? ”

Neo felt every eye on him. “You don’t think it’s Zula? Do you?”

Mother laughed. “Heavens, no, but she’s at the heart of it all. She’s conducted every heist.”

Neo frowned. “I asked her who she worked for. She claimed it’s a new person each time, sometimes thieves, sometimes well-to-do merchants or lords. She did not have specifics . . . ”

“Then we need to press her for them,” Diana said. “I have ways of persuasion.”

Mother patted Diana’s arm. “Yes, my dear, you do, and I appreciate your zeal, but that is not the way right now. Neo, stay close to her and get as much information out of her as you can. If she runs, we follow. She’ll inadvertently lead us to this treacherous individual.”

Neo rested his head in his hands, disliking his position. He had to woo Zula and then turn on her. His mother could not have picked a more perfect conquest for him. Either Zula was part of the elaborate scheme or she was being used.



Suddenly, he realized the irony of his situation. He'd just brought in the kingdom's most notorious thief, his mother had told her he was in love with her, and all this time he'd been restraining himself, holding back, when a well-timed kiss would be the turning point. Either she'd run or she'd tell him the truth. She was tricky, but he could be too. He just needed to bury his conscience.

16

ZULA

As a prisoner, Zula expected to be taken back to the windowless room with the bed and locked up. But, as she was quickly learning, nothing in the palace quite matched her expectations. Instead of being placed in isolation, she was taken to the kitchens, where they were preparing for the masquerade, and from there, she was passed from group to group, always helping, because more hands meant light work. No one gave her a second glance or appeared to know who she was, which was both relieving and irksome.

Time passed quickly, and when evening fell she collapsed into bed, too worn out to hatch a plan. In fact, she'd been looking forward to time alone to think through the queen's proposal and Neo's reaction, and figure out how to free herself from the mess she'd gotten tangled up in.

It wasn't until the next evening that she saw Neo again. She'd been taken back to the windowless room before supper and lay on her back on the bed, finally, for a moment to think. Again, she was surprised at the lack of chains, even though she hadn't tried to escape. Last night she'd tried the door, but it had not given, not that she expected it to. Creativity was required to slip under the nose of the crown.

A soft knock came, then the door swung open silently. Neo's lanky form filled the doorway. He leaned against it nonchalantly, as though he hadn't left in the middle of a conversation and disappeared for a day and a half. "Will you dine with me?" he asked.

Zula stood, grimacing as her ankle wobbled under her weight. “I thought you’d left me to become a working prisoner.”

Neo gave her an impish grin. “Did you miss me? ”

Zula lifted her chin. “No, but I didn’t expect prisoners to work so hard.”

A cough of laughter burst from his throat. “Where did they put you? The kitchens? The mending? Surely not the stables with your lame foot.”

Zula reached him and hesitated. Instead of standing back to give her room to pass, he continued to look down at her. Did he have to be so tall and tower over her? He must have recently bathed, for he smelled clean with a hint of coconut.

“Not the stables,” she explained. “Does there have to be so much preparation for a masquerade?”

“It is tradition—an annual masquerade to celebrate the peace we’ve achieved with our neighbors. Peace that was threatened when you attempted to steal from the trolls. Even though the treasure has been returned, the relationship between the kingdom and the trolls now has an unexpected level of tension.”

Zula sucked her tongue, aware the tension was her fault. She hadn’t considered the fallout of her actions, only the shiny purse that awaited her. So she said nothing .

Neo stepped toward her. “I’d like to know who hired you to steal the egg, because I believe whoever did this had a much bigger plan.”

“I can’t give you that information.”

“Can’t, or won’t?”

Neo's voice carried a menacing note, allowing Zula to see there was more to him than the slightly awkward, lanky prince. How had she never seen it before?

The way he walked spoke of comfort because of his elevated title. He was used to strolling through the world, having people at his beck and call. Had she fallen under his spell and considered him soft-hearted and slightly gullible? He might have caught her, but he was still the sheriff. Even the queen had complete trust in his ability to hunt, to capture those on the wrong side of the law. She thought she'd besotted him with her ukulele, but what if he had some magical effect over her, too? After all, he was a royal. Magic flowed through his veins, but what kind of magic?

"Both," she countered, stepping closer to prove to him she wasn't intimidated. "It was a new contract, someone I've never worked with before. I was on my way to meet them with the egg when you interrupted. I assume this individual or group of thieves is long gone."

"Anything you can remember about your interactions with this group will be helpful. I may only be the sheriff, but I also work to secure the kingdom."

For the first time, she felt bad about her actions, and her ankle started to throb. "You're not just the sheriff, you're a prince. It's natural to want to protect your family."

"It is." He held her gaze. "And my family also protects me."

She didn't want to be the first to look away, to admit defeat. She'd already lost so much. Tamping down the beginnings of regret and shame, she boldly returned his gaze.

The Neo of today was much calmer and more in control than the Neo of a day and a half ago, leaving her wondering who he'd talked to. There was more of the confident

prince in him and less of the awkward man she'd met in troll territory .

Neo cleared his throat. "Just so we're clear, I'm not besotted by your ukulele. It doesn't affect me. I like you, Zula. You. Your life choices have been unfortunate, but this is the time to turn it around. Let me help."

NEO

The enchanting sound of the orchestra tuning their strings filled the courtyard along with the soft evening breeze, the tantalizing scent of lotus flowers, the hum of the night creatures. Neo adjusted the collar of his shirt. He'd never grown accustomed to the finery. As a man of action, he preferred clothing that would not limit him should the night turn devastating.

Ambient sounds of the party hummed in his thoughts, and with a practiced eye he watched the guests gather in gilded masks and feathered finery, noticing every detail: quiet touches, furtive looks. Each guest was recognized; there were no intruders, at least not yet. A crowd would gather, indulging in delectable foods and dazzling drinks. It was the ideal night to slip away into the shadows. Would she take the bait?

Neo strode with surety up to the room where she was preparing and knocked on the door. "Are you ready?"

A sigh, followed by a reluctant response. "If I must be."

His heart squeezed, and for a moment the shape of his sister flashed before him, holding a dagger and threatening what might happen should he give in to his emotions. Pushing the uneasy thought away, he let the door swing open.

Zula stood on the other side, fully transformed into a beautiful woman worthy of the kingdom. Each day he'd noticed the change in her, the rogue thief fading under the

spell the palace wrought. She'd been given a simple gown made of silk, dyed peacock blue, the one color that hinted at her profession. Although it wasn't custom-made for her, it clung to her curves, accentuating her womanly form .

Noticing his gaze, she held up a gold mask and twirled it. "I've never been to a masquerade. Isn't there dancing? I can't dance with my sprain, and I'm not sure what shoes to wear."

"Slippers," Neo murmured, feeling momentarily lightheaded. Curling his hands together, he pinched his wrist, forcing himself to stay in control.

"Slippers," Zula repeated, giving him a wry smile. "Is that the fashion of the palace?"

Neo shrugged and held out his hand for her mask. "I wouldn't know. Will you allow me?"

Zula handed him the mask and turned. "Where is yours?" she asked as he fitted it around her face and began tying it gently.

Her hair was enchanting, and he wanted to bury his face in it, take her in his arms and taste her. It took him three tries to finish tying the knot with his trembling fingers.

She turned, touching the edges of the mask that lay against her sloped cheekbones. "Who am I now?" she asked playfully .

Neo's voice went hoarse. "Zula. I'd recognize you anywhere."

"Will others?" Concern laced her tone, even though she attempted to sound nonchalant. She slid past him, out of the room.

Neo held out his arm. "Trust me."

He moved slowly to accommodate her limp. While there were many fine healers in the palace, his mother had advised against treating her. She believed Zula would attempt to escape during the masquerade. Why heal her and make it any easier?

The upper and lower balconies were filled with guests, the patio given over to the dancers. Blue hues of darkness washed over the palace. Torches flared, palm trees danced, and far above them, the twinkle of white stars paid homage to the night.

Taking advantage of the moment, Neo pulled Zula close, into a dance. Not like the dancers on the patio, but with her hands resting on his arms, swaying from side to side, letting the ethereal rhythm of the remarkable evening fill them.

“Why am I here?” Zula asked .

Firelight flickered, highlighting her golden-brown skin, her bare lips full and kissable. Neo realized he was afraid of himself, afraid of what he might do with the woman of his dreams willingly in his arms.

“Because you’re my prisoner,” he teased.

She squeezed his arm. “Aside from that. I expected to be imprisoned, yet here I am being treated like a guest.”

“Perhaps you are. In all honesty, this wasn’t my idea, but I’m glad that you’re here. You look beautiful tonight, different, and by being here, I hope you get a glimpse of what life could be like on the right side of the law.”

Zula laughed, but there was a slight bitterness to it. “You’re offering me a masked life of dancing in the dark. It would become rather dull, wouldn’t it?”

“Do you not enjoy the music?”



“I do. The musicians are very skilled, but you’re avoiding my question.”

“Admittedly, I’m concerned about how you’ll react. I know a bit about you, your past, and we’re not so different. There’s one thing that compels both of us and it’s a drive to achieve. You do so by stealing and I do so by bringing people to justice. What if we joined forces? What if we worked together to experience the thrill of the chase?”

A sudden stillness came over her, and he paused, hating that he couldn’t see her eyes clearly enough to gauge her reaction.

“You’re asking me to give up who I am to become the version you want me to be? A partner? There can be no partnership with you. You’re a prince, a sheriff, everything I’m not.”

“Those are just titles, don’t you see? You’re good at hunting, at finding, at evading capture. Those are skills. Why not use them to benefit yourself and the kingdom?”

“Because I don’t work for anyone other than myself. I decide what heists I want to do, who to work with. Besides, this is all for nothing, because I need my ukulele. It’s the magic within it that makes everything possible.”

“Whether you work for thieves or for the crown, you’re still working for someone. Does it have to be on the wrong side of the law? Is it the danger you find most attractive?”

“The crown would never pay me what thieves can.”

“Then what do you want, Zula? You admitted you want a purpose, that money, wealth, treasure are hollow. What is it you’re so desperate for?”

“To live life on my own terms, to have the freedom to come and go without looking over my shoulder.”

“If that’s what you want, you’re in the wrong career. You always have to look over your shoulder because of the bounty on your head.”

Zula pulled back. “This was my last heist. At least for a while. With you and your men closing in, and that ridiculous bounty, I thought it best that I lie low for a time.”

Neo stared at her in surprise, at a loss for words.

She crossed her arms. “My share of the purse was enough to last me for a long time, but if I entertain any thought where you and I are forced to work together, there’s no rest. I’m at the beck and call of the crown, and that’s its own kind of prison, being told what to do and when to do it. So no, you and I aren’t alike, because at least I have the luxury to choose, while you’re a prince, a sheriff. You can’t choose.”

Neo stepped forward, backing her against the bamboo wall. “I have a choice,” he countered, keeping his voice low.

His heart pounded in his chest, but for once his hands were steady as he rested one on her hip. Sliding his other hand up her throat, he cupped her cheek, the tips of his fingers stroking the base of her neck, feeling the soft wisps of hair. It was like something came over him, and all his longing, his pent-up emotions spilled out of himself as he kissed her.

She tasted like a rush of sugar, sweet and enticing, addictive. Her fists tightened on his shirt; her mouth moved under his.

He was so surprised he almost broke the kiss.

She was kissing him back, furiously, deeply, her breaths short, fast. An unexpected hunger lay there, and just minutes before, they'd been arguing. It was still unresolved, but he didn't care, couldn't have cared if he tried. He couldn't think of anything else, just the desire rolling through him, like a wave breaking free of a dam.

18

ZULA

Lips burning, Zula ran into the jungle. The dirt gave way under her slippered feet, palm leaves slapped her in the face, and vines snatched at her as though warning her it was futile to run. Great sobs tore from her throat, but she kept running, despite the jarring pain shooting up her leg.

Neo. The prince, tasked with keeping the kingdom secure, had kissed her. A nobody. A legendary thief whose punishment should have been death. She hadn't deserved that kiss, shouldn't have leaned into it, opened her mouth, inhaled him, enjoyed it with every fiber of her being.

Her heart said yes while her head still tried to fight it. What Neo argued made sense. How long would she last in hiding without a job to do, without a task, a heist to keep her busy? Realistically, leaving the business of thieving and lying low was wise, but she couldn't do it. All her life, she'd run from the norm, from the shabby hut where she'd lived with her father, foraging the jungle, hunting dangerous animals, and making a living out of the hard, unforgiving ground.

She'd found moments of happiness playing her ukulele and watching the merchants navigate the jungle. Then, it had started ever so innocently. A small sack fell off the back of a wagon. She snatched it up and ducked back into the forest before anyone noticed, her heart pounding from the thrill. When no one came after her, she opened the sack, finding it filled with sweet cherries, the most delicious she'd ever had.

She still recalled bringing them home and sharing her findings with her father, the awe on his face, and the wonder at what she'd accomplished. Euphoria ran hot through her body, a swell of pride, and then she was hooked, unable to stop. Next came the ukulele, and she discovered that when she willed it, those in opposition to her would fall asleep. Their magical slumber allowed her to take on bigger tasks—sneaking into pirate lairs, filching treasure from unsuspecting lords, creeping into treasuries and finding her way out before the guards awoke.

Stealing made her feel strong, leaving her calling card—the blue peacock feather—brash and bold. But the higher she ascended, the more fame she claimed, and the more complex the heists, the emptier it felt. Something was missing, and she didn't know what.

Then along came Neo.

She'd bumped into him before—three times, she now clearly remembered. But why her?

The pain in her ankle rose to an excruciating level, and she sank down, wrapping her arms around herself and rocking back and forth. The tears were gone, but her foot throbbed. She'd damaged it deeply, impeding her own escape.

Was escape what she wanted, or a moment to clear her mind? To sort out the next steps of her life, determine what to do about the queen's request, Neo's offer, and her own heart. What did she want? Because right now, she was having a difficult time distinguishing between high, strong emotions and sound reason.

Regardless, she recognized one truth: Neo had power—true power and influence. She was nothing without her ukulele. She had to return for it, and she would not get far with a lame foot. Going back was the wisest option. But first, she had to figure out what to say to Neo.

Wiping the evidence of her tears off her face with the back of her hand, she rose, balancing on one foot as she squinted into the darkness. All challenges could be overcome, and out in the jungle, all she needed was a sturdy branch and a vine to fashion herself a crutch. If Neo wondered why she was gone so long, she had an excellent excuse.

A cocky grin split her lips, immediately dropped when rough hands grabbed her and jerked her backward. Zula slammed against the bark of a tree, banging the back of her head against it. Her vision went blurry, and as she blinked, she saw a slender man, no taller than herself, standing far too close. She smelled the smoke on his breath, a hint of sea air, and because of the light he was carrying, made out the bandanna wrapped around his face, his crooked teeth, and the scar that ran from his eye to his chin.

A shudder went down her spine.

“Not so brave without your ukulele, are you?” the man leered.

She cringed, his name heightening her discomfort. Scarred Joe.

“You’re the one who asked me to steal from trolls,” she wheezed. “What are you doing here, so close to the palace?”

“You did not fulfill your end of the deal.”

Zula bristled. “I was set up by the sheriff.”

“So the rumors have spread. The sheriff is immune to your charms, and the legendary Blue-Feathered Bard has had her wings clipped at last.”

Bile rose in the back of her throat. This was one of her biggest fears, that if caught, her reputation would be tarnished. She’d be alone again, just like she had been when

she'd lived with her father, deep in the jungle. Just the two of them. Scarred Joe was baiting her with fear. It wasn't new knowledge; she'd always known what would happen if she failed. "What do you want? Why are you here?"

He grinned, showing off those rotten teeth. "I came to spring you from the trap, set you free so you can finish the job you started."

Odd . "Why? It's incredibly risky for you to be here tonight. Besides, if you're so keen on the jeweled egg, why don't you steal it yourself?"

Scarred Joe studied his fingernails, lower lip out as he considered her words. "I could, but it's much better if the Blue-Feathered Bard finishes the job and ignites a war across borders. I have other places to be, chaos to brew. You do your job and I'll do mine, or you know who will pay the price."

The price. The words echoed in Zula's mind. She'd thought no one knew about that, the price she'd been paying ever since she became a thief. It hadn't started as innocently as it sounded, and she'd worked hard to rise to the top. Sure, she'd gotten a little careless and thought herself invincible because of the ukulele. But Scarred Joe's words insinuated something deeper, darker, and more frightening than anything she'd ever known. So she said the only thing she could. "I don't know what you mean. "

"Sure you do," he sneered. "But I don't need to explain to you. You already know the result of your failure. Do whatever it takes to finish the job. You have three days, or your share of the treasure will be forfeit. You know what else will be forfeit."

He backed away, disappearing into the jungle as quickly as he'd come.

Zula didn't let herself think, didn't let herself wilt under the weight of what he'd said, what he knew about her past. Hands out, she blindly groped for rope and stick.

Finding both took a matter of moments, and then she was limping back to the masquerade, the music guiding her, drawing her onward.

Her gut wrenched as she moved, the pain in her ankle replaced with dread. She wanted to warn the crown, warn Neo, without damning herself. She didn't know what Scarred Joe had planned, but if he knew about her past, he might know where the other six relics were stored.



19

NEO

Z ula was gone.

Neo clenched and unclenched his fists, recalling Diana's warning about her. It was his fault she'd run away. He shouldn't have kissed her, shouldn't have let the overflow of his heart seep into his actions. He was the sheriff, after all, a prince. He couldn't let his emotions get the best of him. Yet he had.

Either way, Zula wouldn't have gotten far, not with that foot. He made one more sweep of the masquerade, the laughter and music a hollow echo in his mind. His mother loved throwing parties and she excelled at it. She also had a knack for ensuring they didn't devolve into drunken disasters, although there were always a few who got carried away. Never Hans, though, the crown prince that he was. Despite the women who threw themselves at him for his looks and position, he never once stooped. Diana was a different story; she often gave in, yet as the crown's persuader, she usually had a political maneuver and blackmail to hold over the individual.

Power—they all had it, but how they handled their power made all the difference.

Something stirred in his chest, a familiar scent. Her. That was new, perhaps because he'd kissed her.

Neo's magic was simple. When he focused on one singular goal, he could accomplish it, no matter what. Often it was to find those on the wrong side of the law, not petty

thieves whose actions would bring about long-term consequences that affected his family. His family that he loved dearly.

Footsteps quickening, he found his way down into the underbelly of the palace. It wasn't a nice place, all dark and cold, pale lamps lighting the way. But it led to tunnels, where escape could be made if needed. It also led to one of the larger treasuries. A small treasury was kept on each floor, but the largest one was near the escape route. He wanted to believe Zula could change, but her actions proved otherwise. Diana was right.

He found her in one of the caverns, leaning on a stick. A pool of torchlight lit her from behind. She glanced over her shoulder. There was something peculiar about her, and Neo wondered where she'd gotten the stick. The torchlight revealed little, but he thought her face might be smudged with tears. Her gown smelled faintly of the jungle, of mud and dirt. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he leaned against the door frame, watching her. Afraid.

Zula stood still, her back to him, a raw undertone in her voice when she spoke. "I came down here looking for my ukulele. It's broken, but it's all I have. If you want me to find the stolen relics, you have to fix it. I know you're immune to it. I don't know why, but perhaps I would have understood if I'd fully listened back when I made the deal."

His chest went tight. "What kind of deal did you make?"

"It was some witch who lived deep in the jungle. That's where I grew up, not far from troll territory. Back then it was a bigger trade route, the merchants ferrying goods back and forth. That's how I started, and I left the peacock feathers so that no one would blame the theft on trolls. Young as I was, I had an inkling of the political chaos it would create, and I wanted peace. I wanted my home. And then I got caught."

Neo drew in a deep breath. She was confiding in him. Was it a trick to make him relax? Or was it something else? He waited, not saying anything.

Zula let out a sigh, then continued. “I was blindfolded, gagged, and when they released me I was in the home of a witch. She wore rags, had black fingertips, and from the rafters hung plants and . . .” Zula shuddered. “Body parts of animals, not the kind that anyone would eat, but hearts, livers, lungs, that sort of thing. She spent a long time talking about her collection. I thought she was lonely until she revealed she was angry with me for stealing from the merchants. Because I always stole from the same spot, the same road, my actions would draw attention to the hidden part of the jungle, and she didn’t want that. She’d lived in secret for a long time, and she was so old, I could understand not wanting to be found. I often felt the same way. Since I had my ukulele, she offered me a gift, claiming the magic would work until I found my heart’s desire. At least, I believe that’s what she said, but I can’t be sure, because the next words I’ll never forget. She cursed me. Said that stealing was what I wanted to do and so steal I would. With the magical ukulele, I’d set forth on my purpose. I’d have everything I never had: fame, wealth, riches, and no need to worry about my future.”

“Why did you agree to work for her?” Neo asked.

“Because she threatened to kill my father, to take everything I cherished and turn it to dust. If I said no, I’d become her slave in that horrible, horrible place. She’d even found my father and tortured him a bit to make me say yes. I did everything she asked of me, and I enjoyed it. I got good at it, and lax because of the ukulele. People treated me like royalty. This was my last heist. I suspect because when my father dies, she’ll have nothing to hold over me, and I want him to pass in peace. He never liked what I became, even though I tried to keep it from him. But I didn’t complete the heist. The trolls have their treasure and I’ve been caught. I have to make it right in three days or my father will suffer.”

Neo was quiet. Listening. It sounded like a far-fetched tale, but it also sounded like the truth, especially with the pain he heard in Zula's voice. The answer felt clear. Find her father and bring him under the protection of the crown, but the other knowledge was frightening. A witch's curse was full of dark magic, strong and powerful, magic that could not easily be destroyed.

Revelation coursed through Neo's mind like a lightning bolt. His mother's tale was true. The mass of magic she'd felt was the witch, collecting all the relics, one by one. Was it possible for her to take the magic and make it her own? Zula was a pawn in the game, after all, which meant Neo had to find her father before he paid the price.

He closed his eyes and thought of his niece, and the rage that filled his soul at the very idea of anything happening to her. He wondered if that was how Zula felt.

"You're telling me this because you want my help," he confirmed.

"Yes, and because you care."

There was a tremor in her voice, ever so slight, but it encouraged him. He placed a hand on her shoulder, turning her to face him. "Does this mean you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Zula," he sighed. "Why didn't you tell me this earlier? We're in deep trouble now."

Zula brushed her lips with her fingers. "Earlier I thought I could still win. And that was before you kissed me."

Incredulous, Neo drank in her expression, her words. It was true: one kiss had changed everything.

20

ZULA

The horse cantered in time with Zula's heartbeat, a frantic hope, a pulsing need to hurry, to arrive before anything terrible happened.

It was night. Dark. But the road was open enough, moonlight displaying their path.

Zula sat astride the horse with Neo—notably behind, not in front of him—wondering how much of her story he believed. Telling him had proven difficult. More than once, she swallowed down tears, blaming the emotional upheaval on the last week and her injury. She'd expected to hear pity in his tone, but he'd asked questions calmly, then offered to help .

However, she noticed that he didn't give her a horse—which meant he didn't trust her yet —nor did he tell her where they were going, leaving Zula to speculate. Were they seeking the six relics, returning to troll territory, or going in search of the witch, hidden in the jungle?

If it were the witch, it was unlikely anyone could find her. But Neo had taken action. That was enough. Zula was free of the palace, her ukulele was somewhere in one of the saddlebags—or at least he'd promised it was—and soon enough, his vigilance would fade and she'd escape. Ignoring the twinge of regret in her heart, she centered her thoughts on her father. As long as he was safe from harm and proud of her, it didn't matter what happened. Or at least that was the lie she tried to tell herself, all the while denying her softening heart for Prince Neo.

Others rode behind them, mostly guards from the palace, but Zula thought she spotted the princess, a woman who was privy to almost every secret. Hope rose thick in her throat. Was it possible that the royal family could defeat a witch who practiced dark magic? She pushed the hope away, because even if they did, three days was far too short of a time to enact anything. She only hoped they were galloping in the direction of troll territory and not away.

“We rest here,” Neo announced, words flung over his shoulder.

Zula released him as the horse slowed to a walk, realizing just how much she’d pressed her body up against him. She slid off first, jarring her foot. A curse rose to her lips, and then Neo was beside her, a steady hand on her hip. His face close, studying hers.

“Zula?”

The way he said her name sent a ripple through her. Her gaze dropped to his lips, and she wondered if he would kiss her again, then reprimanded herself for the thought. They were on a mission. There was no time for stolen kisses that would send her fleeing into the night again.

“We rest for one hour while we wait for fresh horses,” Neo explained. “Then we’re off again.”

His arm closed around her waist, drawing her against his chest .

Zula searching his face, trying not to be distracted by her own growing lust. “Where are we going? You haven’t said.”

“To fix all of this in three days is almost impossible. We need more time, so we’re going to find your father.”

Zula's grip on him tightened. "No, you can't. Promise you won't."

Neo's brow furrowed and his eyes darted across the dusky land. "Why not?" he whispered. "Without your father, her threats are meaningless."

"You can't," she begged. "The witch will kill him. She has magic. She'll know."

A ghost of a smile crossed Neo's lips. "Only if you go. I believe she has a kind of grip on you, the curse. She'll find out if you relocate your father, but she won't expect me. If I go, being immune to her magic, I can bring your father under the protection of the crown."

Zula's eyes went wet, and all her ideas of sneaking off, stealing a horse, and taking back her ukulele fled. Her voice felt small, so tiny in her throat. "Why would you do that?"

His voice dropped lower. "Do I really have to tell you? Haven't you guessed by now, how I feel about you? What kind of man would I be if I didn't?"

"But . . . but it's not your job. You don't have to."

"Would you rather I didn't?"

"No, but it's too much."

"Nothing is too much for those I care about." His lips grazed hers ever so slightly. "Nothing," he repeated.

And Zula was lost.

A slow, sweet kiss hovered on her lips, light as the petals of a flower, sweet as nectar

before it hardened into honey. He held the kiss, and she tasted his uncertainty, felt the gentle tug of his arm around her waist, the splay of his long fingers against her hip. A small sound of encouragement escaped her throat, but he held her at the edge, pressing another kiss to the corner of her mouth before tasting her lips again.

He was testing her, teasing her, and the hint of the kiss that bloomed across her mouth made her desire him all the more. Neo was a distraction from anxiety, a balm to her wound, the edge of impossible hope and a future she dared not allow herself to dream about. It was his actions that gave her surety, there in the hush of darkness among the white beams of moonlight. Anyone might see them standing to the side of the path, two shadows entwined, perhaps hidden by the bulk of the horse.

Her mind urged her to flee, a natural response to her predicament, but the way his long fingers splayed against her, the way he kissed her, gave her an enchanting glimpse of what life might be like by Neo's side. She could be a royal prisoner, his royal prisoner, if this was how he treated her, with moonlight rides and stolen kisses.

The tight circle of fear around her heart loosened, and even though her time with Neo had only been a brief moment in her many years, deep in her soul she felt a shift, a yearning, a desire to belong, to stop going out on her own with the entire world resting on her shoulders.

Each heist, each theft ripped her apart, just a little bit, and left her to play music, to hop through life with gaiety ringing in her ears. She moved too fast to let the truth catch up with her, kept company with those who smoked and drank and counted their treasures. Was she unhappy? She didn't think she was, but she was always striving for more. It was never enough, and not because of the witch's curse. No, it was the fact that treasure was fleeting, gold slipped through her fingers like water, nothing in her life was steady, secure, or trustworthy. Thieves were as backstabbing as they came. Perhaps Neo would be too, but he was also a prince.



One of his broad hands cupped her cheek, fingers twisting into her hair. “Are you going to run?” he asked.

“Not this time,” Zula said.

He studied her, his expression unreadable, and Zula’s heart squeezed. At that moment, she knew that despite his feelings for her, he didn’t entirely trust her, nor had she given him reason to. She had to remedy that, but she didn’t know how. When it came to matters of the heart, of love and trust, actions spoke much louder than hollow words.

21

NEO

S unlight beat down hot and humid, the sound of a waterfall promising relief. Neo mopped his face with his sleeve and glanced at Zula, who sat astride the horse in front of him. Trepidation made him feel hotter as he tugged on the reins, slowing his mount to a stop just before the broad palm leaves shaded the path. Not that shade would do much good against the relentless heat of the jungle. Neo's pulse quickened as he swung off the horse, wondering if Zula had noticed his nervousness. Would the plan work?

"We're here." He gestured to the thick foliage before them. "Do you know the way from here? "

Zula held onto the pommel of the saddle with one hand, using the other to squint against the sunlight. Because she insisted on riding astride, her skirts rode up her thighs and his gaze lingered on her smooth brown skin. Worst of all, their moments together had only cemented his desire. He wanted her, and before, when he was chasing her, he thought he'd be able to bear it if she was sent away, and he never saw her again. Now, the very idea of it was too painful to imagine.

"I know my way from here," Zula confirmed, a frown marring her face. "It's all jungle, though. I doubt the path has been widened enough for a horse to make it through."

"I guessed as much." Neo swung one of the saddlebags over his shoulder. The other

bag he opened, and held up the ukulele.

Zula cried out, both hands outstretched as though it were her greatest treasure. “You fixed it!”

Neo handed it to her. “I had it repaired the day we arrived at the palace.”

The way she was looking at him with such rapt attention made his heart hurt. He was the one who’d initially broken the ukulele, the one who’d caught her, and the one responsible for the mess she was in. What was the lesser of two evils? Prevent a war, save his family, lose the woman he was falling in love with? Or start a war, run with his family, and still lose her?

“Thank you.” She strummed a few notes.

Neo pulled a bandage from the saddlebag and moved around to Zula’s sprained ankle. “I’m sorry your ankle isn’t any better. I should have brought more salve. I’ll wrap it tight, and you have a crutch. When the going gets tough I’ll carry you on my back.”

A soft laugh left her throat. “I’d like to blame you for my woes, but you’re right. I’ve made bad choices. My ankle is yet another sign of poor decisions. Don’t worry, I’ll manage it.” She glanced behind them, eyeing the empty road. “Where are your guards?”

“Nearby,” he said, offering as little information as possible as he re-bandaged her ankle. “As you know, I prefer my space when I travel.”

“Isn’t that dangerous for you? ”

Neo knew she meant for him as a prince, not a sheriff. “It is risky, but I like the adventure of it. It makes me feel alive, free, in a sense. Freer than I feel at home.

Then, when I return home, I appreciate the comforts, the security, and the sameness of it. I crave the peace, but out here I prefer the chaos.”

“We are more alike than I first realized,” Zula admitted.

Neo helped her down and sent the horse off to find its way home, although he rather hoped it would be waiting for their return. If return was possible. The secrets he was keeping from Zula weighed upon him as they entered the dense jungle.

As he suspected, they barely spent any time on the road before plunging into the thick of it. Zula took her time, pausing to examine landmarks, the vines twining around her crutch, attempting to trip her up. Despite the difficulty, Neo noticed that she didn’t let go of the ukulele.

A mosquito bit his neck, and a parrot flew across the path, squawking at them. Monkeys hooted in the trees and slowly, Neo relaxed, taking in the sights and sounds, awed by the bright colors, the scenery. Was this Zula’s life? Where she grew up, traversing the paths, knowing every inch of the forest as though it were her own?

Suddenly, the air shifted with an odd whistling sound that set his teeth on edge. He ducked half a beat too late as something struck the back of his head. A stone? Blood rushed. Zula screamed as he fell, and it took him a moment to understand her words.

“Stop! I said not to hurt him.”

She knew ?

And the hope he’d had burrowed deep, the pain of disappointment, of utter betrayal, almost canceled out the ringing in his skull. Spots danced before his eyes and he felt her hand on his cheek. “I’m sorry, Neo. I have to save my father. I have to do this my way.”

“ I will personally deliver her head on a platter,” Diana snapped, standing over Neo. “Look at how much blood you lost. Which way did she go? ”

Neo sat up with a groan, took the wet cloth, and pressed it to the back of his head. He was slightly impressed with how quickly Diana and the rest of the royal entourage had caught up. Regardless, they were never far. “Don’t take off her head,” he protested.

“She did this to you!”

“It was the ruffians she hired,” he started, but when Diana’s steely eyes flashed, he added, “But yes, she is responsible. Give me a moment. I assume she’s returning to steal the trolls’ treasure, but I want to make sure I’m not missing anything.”

“I told you she’d be tricky,” Diana fumed. “Thieves don’t change, no matter what.”

“I felt the betrayal,” he admitted. “Almost too late. She was angry they hit me.”

“So am I!” Diana held up her hand. “Don’t say another word. I see you’re about to make excuses for her and I won’t hear it. You’re compromised, emotionally caught in this. I will continue from here.”

“You need me. I’m the only one who knows how to track her. ”

“True. Because of the weight of this venture, I will allow you to join me, but I’m taking the lead from now on. Agreed?”

Neo started to nod, then winced at the pain in his head. Instead, he held out his hand and Diana took it, grumbling as he stood.

### ZULA

Treachery was the domain of thieves. After all, thieves were not to be trusted, and it was important to have a few tricks up one's sleeve—just like a magician—in order to survive. Zula had learned long ago to only trust herself, regardless of what others promised, which was why, now, she stood in the heart of troll territory, playing her ukulele. But her heart wasn't in it, and her fingers kept missing notes. Worse, tears pricked at her eyes and made her nose run. Impossible to wipe a dripping nose while playing. A vision of all that bright red blood from Neo's head flashed in front of her face, the way he wavered and fell, as though he couldn't see anymore. She'd had the opportunity of a lifetime, yet she was forced to toss it away .

A gentle snore tugged her from her misery. Under the shade of a hut, she made out a female troll and her child, curled in the shade, dreaming peacefully. A memory bloomed of being a small child herself, a woman, her mother, holding her hand, laughing, showing her the silver fish in the waters, the frogs that hopped among the lotus blossoms, the wide lily pads.

Zula closed her eyes and opened them again, reminded of Neo's kisses, the way his fingers played with her hair, his hand on her hip.

Her fingers slipped from the strings and, tucking the instrument under her arm, Zula walked up the hill to the tower, barely limping. Because that was the treachery of thieves. While her ankle throbbed from time to time, she'd discovered she could put weight on it. But it wouldn't do to be fully healthy in the palace, and she'd seen the

way Neo eyed her ankle, believing she had a weakness. She couldn't flee, couldn't run from him, therefore he'd let his guard down.

It had worked, but she hated herself for it, misery a weight on her chest, guilt dragging down her limbs. If she were tossed into the sea she was sure she'd drown.

Instead, she stole the egg for the second time, planted her peacock-blue feather with the golden eye on it, and slipped away to the meeting spot where Scarred Joe and his band of thieves waited for her.

"Took your time coming, didn't you?" Scarred Joe taunted as Zula limped into camp. He sat in the middle of his band of thieves, picking his teeth with a knife. He held out a hand for the egg. "Let's see the treasure."

Zula stepped around the men to hand him the sack. Scarred Joe's thieves were rough on the eyes, hardened men, most of them slim, light on their feet, quick with their hands. Any of them could have figured out a way to elude magic and steal the treasure from the trolls .

She wasn't sure what they gained from it, but she was certain she was the scapegoat for their devious plans, and it filled her with trepidation. She wished she had a weapon, other than her ukulele. A dagger to stick into flesh would send a better message than lulling the thieves to sleep with music.

"I've upheld my end of the bargain," she said flatly.

Scarred Joe opened the sack and lifted the egg in the air, licking his lips as he held it up to the light. "Yes, fair is fair."

He snapped his fingers.

One of the thieves tossed a pouch of gold at Zula. She caught it deftly and turned to leave, stepping out of the circle, but fingers wrapped around her bad ankle.

Frowning, she glanced over her shoulder, silently daring the man to let her go.

He didn't.

"Where do you think you're going?" Scarred Joe asked.

"To pay my friends," she answered truthfully, thinking of Issa, who'd scouted for her, and the gang of thieves she owed a share of the cut. They could have the entire purse for all she cared.

"You still owe us," Scarred Joe hissed.

Zula's shoulders went stiff. So it was to be like this—one last trick. Stepping back into the circle of thieves, she faced Scarred Joe. "What do you need me to do?"

"It's time to pay her a visit."

And a hood was yanked over her head.

Zula clutched the ukulele as they led her through the jungle. Blindfolded, she often tripped over roots and ran into leaves and vines. The silent party led her deeper into the heat, pushing her ahead whenever she slowed down or tripped.

The sack over her head made the humidity worse. Soon, her curls were stuck to her neck, and she felt lightheaded, almost dizzy. She was sure it was their way of punishing her for the delay in retrieving the treasure, but she kept her patience by imagining how much she'd like to punch each one of them in the nose .



At last they slowed down, and with one more push, the sack was snatched off Zula's head. She blinked, expecting light, not the dusky, dim room of a hut. Her skin crawled. The place was empty, but she had no doubt she'd been there before. The scent of old mushrooms lingered, black feathers lay in the corners, and great globs of mold crept across the ceiling, rendering the hut unlivable. Moss carpeted the floor, the jungle eager to take back the abandoned hut.

Zula held her ukulele tight, fingers buzzing, itching to play, to take herself far, far away. The air shifted with the acrid scent of power as a woman dressed in black walked through the wall.

Woman was a kind word for the witch. Her shape was vaporous, void, and wrong. Her cheeks were hollow, and her eyes were nothing more than pure black orbs devoid of irises. She glided to a stop across from Zula, maintaining her distance. Nevertheless, Zula felt her suffocating essence fill the room.

"I heard there was a bit of a mix-up with the sheriff," the witch purred .

Her voice had a lulling note to it, and Zula felt like she was underwater, listening to someone speak above her. "There was," she heard herself say, as though she were outside of her body and not actively part of the conversation. "But it's over now."

"Is that the story you tell yourself?"

Zula tried to banish memories of his kisses from her thoughts, unsure if the witch could read minds. "It's true," she said weakly.

"I hoped you'd say the opposite, that you were pining to return to life in the palace, for another invitation to a masquerade. Hopefully you didn't ruin any of the precious relationships you built with them."

A sinking sensation rippled through her belly, because she had ruined everything. “I stole the trolls’ treasure. I came to uphold my end of the bargain.”

“ You? ” The witch laughed, holding her side. “ You stole the treasure? You returned to uphold your end of the bargain? Those thieves practically had to drag you. You would have double-crossed me if you had the guts. I was deeply unhappy with your performance, allowing yourself to get caught like that. I made you who you are—the Blue-Feathered Bard, the legendary uncatchable thief! You’ve sullied your reputation and now the trolls will think twice before going to war against the kingdom, all because of that silly sheriff. So, no, you did not complete or uphold your end of the bargain. But I’ll give you one last chance. Bring me the buried harp, and you, and your father, will walk free. It is the treasure of all treasures, buried for thousands of years, so I’ll give you more time. You have thirty days.”

Rage boiled in Zula’s belly. She gritted her teeth, trying to hold back the wails and rants that rose to her lips. It was all unfair. Horribly unfair. “The buried harp has been lost for centuries. It’s impossible to find.”

“Is that so? You should ask your friends at the palace.”

Zula’s throat went dry. “How can I trust that you won’t go back on your word and give me another assignment?”

The witch glided toward the wall, waving her hand—if it could be called a hand. “You don’t have a choice, do you? ”

Zula’s shoulders sagged as the witch disappeared, and tears of disappointment stung her eyes. She wrinkled her nose, trying to hold them back, then burst out of the foul hut.

Neo had been right. She should have trusted him.

23

NEO

Head throbbing, Neo moved gingerly through the jungle, conscious of the forthcoming sunset. He sensed the aura of her presence moments before he saw her. Pausing beside a papaya tree, heavy with unripe fruit, he waited for her to notice him.

She grimaced when she saw him, brown eyes widening, then lingering on his bandaged head. Awkwardly, he touched his bandage, aware it made him look more injured than he was, which might be to his advantage.

“My sister made me wear it,” he said by way of greeting .

Zula always looked beautiful to him, but now he sensed her frustration and utter devastation. Something terrible had transpired. Her hair was a wild tangle, her dark eyes red-rimmed, and she radiated an angry aura he’d never felt before. It eclipsed the fury she’d directed at him for capturing her. Her energy had shifted to something feral and desperate.

She limped closer, but he held out a palm, warding her off.

Shoulders sagging, she nodded, and then, in the softest, most contrite tone he’d ever heard, said, “I’m sorry, Neo. I’m so sorry.”

He let his hands hang by his sides, unsure what to do with them. His men were in the woods, likely with crossbows drawn, ready to shoot Zula if she tried to harm him

again. It also made him feel awkward, aware they were listening to their conversation.

He had to speak calmly, with control, as though Zula weren't his undoing. "I thought you might betray me. I sensed it." He shrugged. "It's only what thieves do."

Zula's face crumpled and she hugged the ukulele to her chest. "I . . . I should have trusted you, but I wanted to do things my way. I'm used to being in control, to ensure everything goes right. But they double-crossed me, and worse, the witch gave me another task. It's too late to throw myself at your mercy, but I have to save my father."

Neo nodded, which only made his head hurt. He'd expected as much. Where was the honor among thieves? He should make her suffer, make her sweat, because her actions didn't just impact him. Her actions threatened the crown, the kingdom, and all the people living within it. "What do you want from me?"

Zula stared at the ground, her words barely above a whisper. "I have thirty days to find the buried harp and deliver it to the witch, or my father's life . . ."

She choked, unable to go on.

Neo's throat went tight. The buried harp was nothing but a legend. In the beginning, there was no magic until a god chose to dwell alongside mortals. All who heard the music of his heart were blessed, and a quickening began in their blood, and magic flowed from their fingertips. All was well for a time; most used their magic to contribute to the growth and expansion of their world. Eventually, there came a rift, and those who were magical disagreed on how they should rule the world. War broke out for the first time, and the god, in his grief, decided no more gifts, no more magic, and so he buried the harp where no one could find it and vowed no one would find it, not until the mortals could learn to live in harmony. Treasure hunters sought it out as

the ultimate magical relic, an instrument many believed would allow one to control magic.

Neo forced the next words out, harsh as they were. “Is this another ploy, another trick? A ruse to gain my trust and steal from me?”

“No! I’m aware there’s nothing I can say or do to regain your trust, but you’re the only one who can help me, the only one who has told me the truth. I don’t deserve it, but I’m backed into a corner with nowhere to turn. Don’t do this for me. Do it for my father.”

Neo’s heart softened as he watched the tremor of her lips, heard the heartbreaking agony in her tone. She was sorry because nothing had gone her way. Would that change when she was no longer desperate?

“Zula. I’ll tell you the truth: the mission never changed because you tricked me. It was always to take your father out of reach of the witch. Even as we speak, he’s on his way to the palace, guarded by my sister.”

Zula let out a cry and sank to her knees.

Neo resisted every urge to go to her, to take her in his arms and comfort her. His station in life called for him to be above temptations of the heart, to deny himself for the good of crown and kingdom. He’d gotten carried away at the masquerade and again traveling with Zula to the jungle. Her actions helped him see reason, and now she kneeled before him, contrite. He’d come to find her, to take her away to prison and lock her up, to put an end to the yearning of his heart.

Except somehow, his longing was worse than ever before. He wanted to gather her in his arms, kiss away her tears and reignite that fire in her eyes, to chase her as she strove to escape, to hunt her down, claim her, and make her his own. All thoughts a

sheriff, let alone a prince, should not have for a thief.

His jaw tightened, which only made his head hurt worse. But it was the least of his worries, because the witch knew about the buried harp.

24

ZULA

Z ula did not see Neo again for two weeks. After the incident in the jungle, he left, and guards escorted her to a prison. At least she assumed it was a prison, a tower of sorts set in the middle of a lake where the shore was just a swim away. But Zula did not attempt to escape, because she felt undeserving. Besides, she wasn't sure where she would go. Back to the jungle, where everything had gone wrong? Or start a new life without being sure what had actually happened to her father?

Most frustrating of all was the loss of Neo's company. She felt the ghost of his presence as she worked in the garden, pulling weeds, or washed dishes in the kitchens, or mended clothes on rainy days in front of the firelight. All tasks she was not good at, tasks that made her feel as though she was only good at stealing. Try as she might, she couldn't figure out what to do next.

Deep within, she knew that Neo had gotten under her skin, and if she'd trusted him instead of setting him up for an ambush, she might be in a very different situation. Guilt ate at her and she thought of escape, she thought of her father, she considered the buried harp, but she knew if she left, she'd be under the power of the witch again, without protection. She'd lived so long for herself, laughing in the faces of her enemies, enemies who might have become her friends had she not stolen from them.

All along, she'd chosen the wrong alliances for the thrill of the heist, for the praise she heard whispered in corners, gossiped about in taverns. She'd achieved fame, stolen wealth, but for what purpose? She had no one to rely on, nothing to return

home to.

Whereas Neo, the prince, had everything. He had an important job, a family, a beautiful home, people who cared about him, friendships, everything she wished she had. He was famous, powerful, but without the rotten attitude that often haunted those who had everything at their fingertips.

And he liked her.

Might have even been in love with her.

And she'd thrown it in his face, discarded his affections as though they were worthless.

Was she always meant to push people away, to steal their joy and replace it with frustration, anger, and unhappiness?

And so, for the first time in her life, she didn't steal, nor did she plan an escape. She let the realization sink in that all her heists, all her thefts, counted for nothing. Life was much more than stealing.

Was it too late to change? To live a life worthy of a prince? Impossible, but she wanted to try. Her fingertips danced over her lips as she recalled his sure, steady kisses, his hand on her hip, and the way her heart fluttered.

It was him, possibly had been him all along, who made her want to change.

"Someone is here to see you," one of the female guards called, interrupting Zula's thoughts. She climbed down the ladder, oranges in both hands. The grove was full of women working, most of them singing as they harvested the oranges.



A knot of dread sat in the pit of her belly. “Who is it?” she asked, thoughts drifting to one of the thieves, or perhaps the witch.

Another reason she hadn’t attempted escape was because she was concerned about who’d find her, and what that might mean for her life.

“You’ll have to come see,” the guard said, not unkindly.

Zula followed her back to the tower. On the round balcony that overlooked the orchards, a man leaned against the railing, watching the workers. Zula drew in a sharp breath when she saw that it was Neo. He wore dark blue, which highlighted the redness of his hair, all brushed back from his forehead, neatly trimmed. As usual, he stood casually, hands in pockets, his easy stance welcoming, belying the fact that he carried the power and authority of both sheriff and prince.

He turned when she entered and the guard beat a hasty retreat, leaving them alone. A smile pulled at the corner of his wide mouth. “You’re still here. I thought you would have escaped by now.”

Zula self-consciously tucked a curl behind her ear. A leaf fell out of her hair and she noticed dirt on her palms. Nothing unusual, but in Neo’s presence, she wanted to look her best. “There’s nowhere to go. I figured here would be the safest place for me.”

She didn’t ask about her father, although she wanted to.

“I’m impressed,” Neo said. “I have a proposition for you.”

She shifted from foot to foot. “What if my answer is no?”

He paused, his gaze moving to the orchards. “Is your answer no? You might as well tell me and save me the time. I didn’t expect you to so easily trade the life of a thief

to work in the orange orchards.”

A smile tugged at the corner of Zula’s mouth, and she relaxed. Out here, away from the palace, it was easier to think of him as just Neo. Not a prince. Not a sheriff. Just an oddly attractive man she found herself bemused by. “Working in an orchard has many perks—dirt under the fingernails, the constant itch from being tickled by leaves, the scent of orange that always lingers. Not to mention the peacocks that roam the islands. Did you know they get incredibly upset if anyone goes near their nests? For such a pretty bird, they are vicious.”

Neo laughed, and something in his gaze shifted. Taking his hands out of his pockets, he closed the distance between them and picked yet another leaf out of her hair. “I rather like the scent of orange that lingers, and I understand the peacocks. They are vicious when intruders cross into their territory. I’d be too.”

Zula took a shuddering breath and forced herself to hold his gaze. “I hoped you’d return, and so I stayed. I know it’s not much, but I hope you’ll give me another opportunity to earn your trust.”

“Words I thought I’d never hear from the legendary Blue-Feathered Bard. Do you still have your ukulele?”

“I do. They never took it from me. I’ve wondered why.”

Neo’s face turned red. “It was a test to see if you’d walk out of this prison and set yourself free. You passed.”

“Is that why you came for me?” Zula quipped, suddenly aware of how close he stood and how much he towered over her.

“I thought you might want to see your father, and we have a witch to defeat.”

“Where? What happened?”

“Nothing yet, but I have a plan.”

He winked, green eyes creasing as his entire face lit up with a mischievous smile. Zula’s heart tumbled and suddenly the heat of the day got to her, her breath coming short.

Neo stepped back and scratched the back of his neck. Rather violently, he put his hands in his pockets again and glanced at the sky.

“We should be going.”

Zula nodded, unable to keep the delight from sizzling up her spine.

The guard escorted her to gather her belongings, which was really just the ukulele. There was no one else to say goodbye to, and when she stepped outside of the tower, Neo was waiting for her in a rowboat.

It rocked as she sat down across from him and placed the ukulele on her lap, suddenly tongue-tied.

Neo didn’t seem to mind as he rowed them back to shore, past the croaking frogs, the white-and-orange koi fish, and the cloud-white lilies floating in the water. Fish jumped out, snatching at their prey, the tiny bugs that hovered over the surface, and on the far bank a group of ducks dived for food.

It was peaceful. Lovely. Almost a sort of paradise, except for the tower on the island of oranges. Zula still couldn’t figure out if it was a women’s prison or a nunnery. She didn’t think she wanted to know.

When they reached the shore, a carriage was waiting for them, complete with four horses and a driver.

Neo opened the door for her and Zula climbed inside, marveling at the plush seats. She eyed Neo. “This is excessively nice. Why are we traveling by carriage?”

Neo settled across from her, long legs stretched out across the seat. “Oh, it’s so that we draw attention. There’s a particular spot I suspect we’ ll get robbed at, and the gang is one I’ve been wanting to catch for a while. Perhaps you’ve heard of Robin Greensleeves and his gang?”

“The man who wears the green hood?” Zula scowled. He was competition and had beaten her out of some jobs.

“The very same,” Neo confirmed.

“Why do you want him?”

Neo cocked his head, studying her. “Are you jealous?”

“I’m not jealous.”

“You sound . . . upset,” he teased.

Zula crossed her arms. “Do you make it a habit? Going around and collecting thieves?”

“You know I do.”

“Is he going to work with us, too?”

Neo chuckled. “No. But he has something I need. Then it’s off to prison for him.”

Zula shook her head. “You do know that you’re the most incorrigible sheriff I’ve ever met. ”

“I’m aware my habits are unusual. Is it going to distract from our working relationship?”

Cheeks heating, Zula turned to the window. “It already is.”

“What can I do to endear myself to you?”

“Are you flirting with me?”

“Shamelessly.” Neo’s voice went low. “I thought it was clear.”

Zula shifted in discomfort. “Isn’t it . . . against the law?”

He moved to sit beside her, leaning close. “I’m sure it is, but I’ve never shied away from skating along the boundaries of the law.”

That fluttering began in her lower belly. “Neo—” she began.

“Zula,” he cut her off.

And then his mouth was on hers.

25

NEO

“I have something to tell you,” Neo said.

It was later. Much later, after exchanging heated kisses. After their carriage being stopped by Robin Greensleeves and his gang—who had an unhappy surprise as they were taken off to prison. And Neo had taken Robin’s sword, of all things.

“What is it?” Zula asked as they walked down the road, side by side.

Neo noticed she’d been smiling at him, quite often, and his heart felt light, hopeful. But it was time to stop delaying the bad news. “I came to find you because the witch left the jungle. My mother—er . . . the queen, sensed a mass of magic on the move, headed toward the palace.”

“No,” Zula breathed.

“Yes. There’s more. We believe the witch was using you to collect magical relics. She needed the power of seven, perhaps to free herself from an old curse or break the magic that kept her bound in the jungle.”

“Oh.” Zula came to a standstill, eyes wide with horror. “And I’ve been her magic supplier. Every heist, every magical relic I stole, somehow made its way back to her.”

Neo nodded. “That is the conclusion we drew too. And then there was the final relic,

the jeweled egg.”

Zula slapped her palm against her forehead and groaned. “And I just handed it to her!”

“You didn’t,” Neo disagreed.

“But I did. I stole that egg three times.”

“Did you notice anything different the last time?”

“No. I was in a fog of misery. I’d just . . . ”

Zula trailed off and Neo waited, watching as knowledge took hold and her jaw dropped. She pointed a finger at him.

“There was something different about the egg. It wasn’t as heavy and the gems weren’t as bright.”

Neo grinned. “It wasn’t the real one, just a decoy. We assumed thieves would return for the jeweled egg, so we helped the trolls disguise it. They are very good with stonework, and they moved quickly. Your final theft helped to heal the relationship between the trolls and the kingdom while we helped them restrengthen their borders.”

Zula stared at him. “You knew? You used me?”

Neo sobered, expression darkening. “I was hoping another thief would finish the job. I didn’t want it to be you.”

Zula’s eyes went shiny. At last she bit her lip and looked away. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ve already apologized.”

She brushed impatiently at her face. “So what happens now?”

“I assume the witch discovered she’d been tricked, and she’s coming. She has enough magic to leave, but not enough to rise to her full ability. I think she’s coming for you, Zula, and it will be a battle, but it’s time to free you from the witch, time to free you from the dark purpose she cast over you. It’s time to give you what you want, to set you free.”

“I don’t understand—how will we defeat her?”

“I’m sure you’ve heard of the royal family.” He grinned at her. “I’m very familiar with them. I’ve been to the palace many times and I can tell you about their habits.”

Zula made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. “Tell me.”

“Magic flows through their veins, and how does one fight magic?”

Suddenly Zula grabbed his arm, eyes wide. “Neo, I know how to fight the witch.”



26

ZULA

Neo had chosen the place well: a grassy knoll, surrounded by the jungle. Anyone might be hiding in the foliage, but those standing in the middle of the clearing had the high ground, and a clear view of anyone or anything that might come at them. Zula stood with Neo, nerves dancing up and down her spine. The air was thick with trepidation, with waiting, and she was the bait. She glanced at him, hardly daring to believe he'd given her another chance. Neo stood tall, shoulders back, head held high, but the biggest surprise was the sword he drew.

She hadn't guessed him to be a swordsman, didn't think he had the power in his shoulders, but if she knew anything about Neo, appearances meant nothing. He, as ever, was full of surprises. Tossing the blade lightly from hand to hand, he looked at her, a calm surety in his gaze.

"Where is everyone?" Zula studied the clearing. "We're the only ones here."

"We only look like we're the only ones here."

"Ah."

A shimmer hovered at the edge of her vision, a ripple of magic visible in the air. Zula swallowed hard, wanting to freeze, wanting to close her eyes and wish herself far away. The clean scent of the plants shifted to something foul, an omen of death. Destruction. The grass shuddered, bending over, and out of the jungle walked the

witch.

She had a form now that made her appear more like a woman than an old bag of bones covered in black. Her posture was only slightly hunched, and she carried a sack over her shoulder as she approached.

Neo didn't address her, or move, which, for a moment, made Zula wonder if she was the only one who saw the witch. But no, Neo watched as the witch paused near the bottom of the hill, looking up at them as though she had no wish to be on equal footing.

"You tricked me," she began, swinging down the sack. It landed with a thump at her feet. Bending to open it, she reached inside, then pulled out the jeweled egg. Or at least the decoy Zula had given her. It was nothing but a gray rock, carefully painted with various colors. But there were no jewels on it.

"I didn't know, but I'm glad of it," Zula said defiantly.

"I thought you might be feisty. At first," the witch admitted. Setting down the decoy, she reached into the bag and removed more treasures, one after the other, until all six were lined up. "You, Blue-Feathered Bard, decided to work with royalty, shifting your loyalties from one power to the other. I don't take kindly to your betrayal. It's time you learned your lesson."

"I have learned my lesson." Zula positioned her ukulele in her arms, fingers on the strings. She strummed a note that hovered in the air, vibrating into the shadows of the evening. "I learned that stealing is wrong, and thinking only of myself and of the coin I might earn is meaningless and harmful. I learned that my actions had unintended consequences. I gave you power, didn't I? I almost started a terrible war and lost the trust of the man I might be falling in love with. Even though he's a prince and everything between us is impossible. I've been cursed, blackmailed, and betrayed.

But through it all, I learned that I also have a voice, and I have a choice. It's never easy to choose to do the right thing. It's hard and scary, and the risk of failure is high, so very high. But I'm making this choice now, because I finally see my purpose. I finally know what I want. It's not treasure; it's not something I can steal or physically hold on to. Today, I choose joy. I choose peace. I've decided to do the right thing, once and for all."

The witch cackled, but Zula wasn't listening. No more words. No more banter. No more bargains. Taking a deep breath, she let a calmness fill her senses. A golden glow hovered over her fingers and magic gained strength deep inside as she started to play. This time, a song she'd never played before poured out of her. Not one of the fast jaunts she played in taverns, nor the ballads she sang while on the road, nor the lulling tunes that sent her foes to sleep so she could steal from them. This was a song of war, a song of battle, and magic leaped from her fingertips, soaring like an arrow for the witch.

The witch lifted her hands and bolts of white lightning crackled from them. But Neo was there with his sword, warding off the blow. He moved, he twirled, he danced, and the sword was a blur, everywhere at once. But the witch was fast. She ducked and dodged, and that's when halos of magic came out of the jungle.

Zula's eyes widened as the entire royal family stepped forth, wielding their magic. The princess with her daggers, the crown prince with white arrows, and the queen with blood-red magic that also crackled from her fingertips like lightning. All four of them moved together in a dance of death, surrounding the witch, weakening her as Zula continued her song.

The witch stumbled, unsure which way to turn, and one by one the treasures shattered, leaving her howling as her form turned into shadow, getting smaller, darker, as though she might turn into a wisp of smoke.

It was the queen who stepped back first, followed by the crown prince, the princess, and, at last, Neo. The witch fled from them, a wordless shadow hurling into Zula. Everything burned. She heard herself screaming, shrieking as she played. Shaking herself loose from the shadow.

It left her with a cry, yet it stood before her, a vile specter, a crooked finger pointed, warning. Zula played one more note, and the witch turned to ash. Weakness filled her limbs and Zula dropped to her knees, the ukulele falling from her fingers, landing with a soft thump on the grass.

A breeze began to blow, and a thunderclap came. A moment later a cool rain began, a cleansing rain. Closing her eyes, Zula tilted back her head. She let the rain fall freely on her face, let it mix with her tears, with the weight she'd been carrying all those long years. No longer did she have to concern herself with what might become of her future, of her father's future. She was free.

27

NEO

“That was entertaining,” Mother announced.

Neo was back in the palace, in yet another private meeting with his mother, Hans, and Diana. He’d seen Zula reunite with her father, then excused himself to see to matters of the crown, as was his duty. Three days had passed since the death of the witch and his men had been busy, rounding up gangs of thieves.

“I disagree,” Hans said dryly. “We shouldn’t have let that witch get so far with her power. What would have happened if she’d succeeded?”

Diana shuddered. “But she didn’t succeed. We stopped her.”

“Zula stopped her,” Neo said, then wished he hadn’t said anything when his mother gave him a sharp look.

She folded her hands on the table, studying him. “Seems we have a problem. A thief on our hands.”

“You could pardon her and send her away, with some dire warnings about thieving,” Hans recommended. “I don’t like the idea of her here in the palace.”

“But if you send her away, she might get bored and turn back to her thieving ways,” Diana said.

“Neo, what do you think?” Mother asked.

Neo opened his mouth and closed it again, wondering if he’d been led into a trap. Had they seen him kissing the Blue-Feathered Bard like his life depended on it? He certainly could not admit his feelings to them, although nothing got past his mother. “I will keep an eye on her,” he said weakly. “She’s good at what she does. There might be a use for her skills.”

Diana snorted. “She’d be a good spy, wouldn’t she?”

“We always need informants,” Hans agreed .

“Informants should be trusted, not former criminals.” Mother shook her head. “No, we don’t know that she has reformed. This business with the witch was very personal. We need another test, another way to discover whether she will be true, or go off on her own again. Neo, I want you to take her to find the buried harp.”

Neo groaned and put his head in his hands. “Mother, it’s been lost for centuries. It’s an impossible task.”

“Oh, and whose information are you relying on?”

Neo lifted his head, then glanced from Hans to Diana. “It’s real? It’s been found? How come I’m the only one who is surprised?”

Hans shrugged. “You weren’t here. We’d spoken about it at length?—”

“Argued,” Diana interrupted, eyes sparkling. “Nothing good can come of finding it. It’s a magical relic.”

“It’s a gift from the gods,” Hans went on. “Might be useful to have. Besides, now that

we have an inkling of its location, I'm sure others do too. It will be a race to find it first. Perhaps no one should have it, that's true, but if it's going to be found, we should be the ones to find it."

"Good. It's settled, then," Mother said. "Neo, there's a bit of peace in our kingdom now. Your men will continue the good work you've begun, but your new orders are to take this Blue-Feathered Bard and find the buried harp. Between the two of you, I'm sure you'll be successful."

"Mother . . ." Neo trailed off.

She stood. "This has been productive, but there are other responsibilities to set our minds to. Come see me before you leave, Neo. I'll give you the details you need."

With those words, she swept from the room, leaving Neo with his brother and sister. He glanced at them, but Diana stood, yawned. "I supposed it's going to be boring again for a bit." She winked at Neo as she slipped out of the room.

"I don't like the idea of you going off with that thief," Hans said. "Keep the parrot charm—I'm sure it will continue to protect you from her, although I get the idea she's more likely to charm you than you her. "

Neo shook his head. "I'll do my best."

"You better." Hans stood, then paused in the doorway. "Good job, by the way. It was your quick thinking that saved the kingdom."

Neo glowed under the praise.

*Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:18 am*

Zula stepped out of the room where her father was resting and closed the door behind her.

“There you are,” came Neo’s low voice. “Do you have a moment? I want to talk to you.”

She fell into step with him, unable to keep the wistfulness out of her voice. “I haven’t seen you for days. I was wondering when we might speak again.”

Neo’s fingers slid down her arm, sending goosebumps across her flesh as he took her hand. Knots of worry tightened in her lower belly. It was over. The witch vanquished, the trolls appeased, the kingdom and her father safe. Time for them to go their separate ways .

“I want to show you something,” Neo said.

He led her to a private balcony with a view of the hanging gardens, bathed in the orange glow of sunset. Lush green ivy twined around the railings with purple flowers, faces lifted to the light. Nearby, a waterfall poured over a large boulder into a pool, and the air was perfumed with the fragrance of lotus, coconut, and something else. It felt like a fresh beginning.

“It’s beautiful here,” Zula offered, suddenly tongue-tied. She moved to the railing and leaned over it, letting the spray from the water dance across her face.

“You’re the one who is beautiful.” Neo joined her, standing so close their arms touched. His fingers found one of her curls, twining it around his knuckle. The



silence between them lingered, stretched, filled with unspoken yearning. “I was thinking about you—more specifically, what to do with you.”

“Me?” Zula asked, trying to keep her tone light, teasing. “Don’t you have much better things to think about? ”

“I don’t.” Neo nudged her. “Especially when the security of the kingdom is at stake. Even though you’re supposedly a reformed thief, I have to keep my eye on you.”

“Fair.” Zula side-eyed him. “How do you propose to keep an eye on me?”

“I want you to work with me.”

Zula laughed. “As a sheriff? What would I be, an associate sheriff?”

“No, no titles.” Neo moved his hand down her back.

A delicious shiver went down her spine, awakening a craving. Without thinking, Zula leaned into him.

“The queen has a task for us. Another job, hunting another relic.”

Zula leaned back to study his face. “Stealing?”

“Not stealing, hunting. Rumor has it there’s a buried treasure, a gift of the gods. Hidden for thousands of years. Its location has been found.”

Her breath caught. “No, it can’t be. The buried harp? ”

Neo raised an eyebrow. “How did you guess?”

Zula’s heart pounded. “I thought it was just a trick from the witch.”

Neo shook his head. “She knew. She always knew how to find the magic.”

“Are we really going after it?”

“Only if you agree, and it’s for the kingdom.”

Zula exhaled as a rush of excitement filled her. Another adventure. Another chase. But this time with a purpose. “Neo, this is the adventure of a lifetime.”

His arms went around her, pulling her close so she was forced to look at him, their lips barely a breath apart. He searched her eyes, voice soft. “It is the adventure of a lifetime.” His lips brushed against her temple. “But I’ve found I don’t much care where we go or what we do, as long as I’m with you.”

Zula sucked in a breath, trying to bring him back to reality. “Neo . . . I don’t think we can be possible.”

He was quiet for a moment. Then his lips brushed against her ear. He pressed a kiss to her jaw .

“No?” he murmured against her skin.

Zula’s body trembled.

Another kiss. Softer, slower.

“How about now?”

Her heartbeat stuttered.

“You’re a prince,” Zula protested.

He pressed a kiss against her collarbone, then moved back up, teeth grazing her skin in a way that made her entire body go weak.

“How about now?” Neo teased.

She tilted her head back as his lips trailed upward—her throat, her cheek, the corner of her mouth. Her fingers curled into his tunic—steadyng herself or pulling him closer, she wasn’t sure.

“I think . . .” Her voice was breathless. “I think we’ll figure it out.”

And then she kissed him, kissed him like she meant it, as though they were two souls always meant to find each other .

Twilight descended over them, the jungle quieting, the air ripe with the glow of magic. A slight splash came from the pool, but neither of them noticed the racoon washing a stolen orange.