



PROLOGUE

THE QUEENS' VISIT

The dungeon was a miserable place. Light was scarce and flickered from the torches bolted to the stone walls. Foul-smelling water dripped inside from the moat circling the palace above. Large rats chased each other across the floor searching for food. This was no place for a queen.

It was just past midnight, and all was quiet except for the occasional rustle of a chain. Through the heavy silence a single set of footsteps echoed throughout the halls as someone climbed down the spiral steps into the dungeon.

A young woman emerged down the steps dressed head-to-toe in a long emerald cloak. She cautiously made her way past the row of cells, sparking the interest of the prisoners inside. With every step she took, her pace became slower and slower, and her heart beat faster and faster.

The prisoners were arranged according to crime. The deeper she walked into the dungeon, the crueler and more dangerous the criminals became. Her sights were set on the cell at the very end of the hall, where a prisoner of special interest was being watched by a large private guard.

The woman had come to ask a question. It was a simple question, but it consumed her thoughts every day, kept her lying awake most nights, and was the only thing she dreamed about with the little sleep she managed.

Only one person could give her the answer she needed, and that person was on the other side of the prison bars ahead.

"I wish to see her," the cloaked woman said to the guard.

"No one is allowed to see her," the guard said, almost amused by the request. "I'm on strict orders from the royal family."

The woman lowered her hood and revealed her face. Her skin was as pale as snow, her hair was as dark as coal, and her eyes were as green as a forest. Her beauty was known throughout the land, and her story was known even beyond that.

"Your Majesty, please forgive me!" the stunned guard

apologized. He quickly bent into an overly pronounced bow. "I wasn't expecting anyone from the palace."

"No apology necessary," she said. "But please do not speak of my presence here tonight."

"Of course," the guard said, nodding.

The woman faced the bars, waiting for them to be raised, but the guard hesitated.

"Are you sure you want to go in there, Your Highness?" the guard said. "There's no telling what she's capable of."

"I must see her," the woman said. "At any cost."

The guard began turning a large, circular lever, and the bars of the cell rose. The woman took a deep breath and continued past them.

She journeyed through a longer, darker hallway where a series of bars and barriers were raised and then lowered after she walked past them. Finally, she reached the end of the hall, the last set of bars was raised, and she stepped into the cell.

The prisoner was a woman. She sat on a stool in the center of the cell and stared up at a small window.

The prisoner waited a few moments before acknowledging the visitor behind her. It was the first visitor she had ever had, and she knew who it was without looking; there was only one person it could be.

"Hello, Snow White," the prisoner said softly.

"Hello, Stepmother," Snow White replied with a nervous quiver. "I hope you are well."

Although Snow White had rehearsed exactly what she

wanted to say, she was now finding it nearly impossible to speak.

"I heard that you are the queen now," her stepmother said.

"It's true," said Snow White. "I've inherited the throne as my father intended."

"So, to what do I owe this honor? Have you come to watch me wither away?" her stepmother said. There was such authority and power to her voice; it was known to make the strongest of men melt like ice.

"On the contrary," Snow White said. "I've come to understand."

"To understand *what*?" her stepmother asked harshly.

"Why..." Snow White hesitated. "Why you did what you did."

And with this finally said, Snow White felt a weight lift off of her shoulders. She had finally asked the question that had been so strongly on her mind. Half of the challenge was over.

"There are many things about this world that you don't understand," the stepmother said, and turned to look at her stepdaughter.

It was the first time in a long time that Snow White had seen her stepmother's face. It was the face of a woman who had once possessed beauty without flaw, and the face of a woman who had once been queen. Now, the woman sitting before her was just a prisoner whose looks had faded into a permanent, sorrowful scowl.

"That may be," Snow White said. "But can you blame me for trying to find some sort of reason behind your actions?"

The recent years of Snow White's life had become the most scandalous of the kingdom's royal history. Everyone knew the story of the fair princess who'd taken refuge with the Seven Dwarfs while hiding from her jealous stepmother. Everyone knew of the infamous poisoned apple and the dashing prince who had saved Snow White from a false death.

The story was simple, but the aftermath was not. Even with a new marriage and a monarchy to occupy her time, Snow White found herself constantly wondering if the theories of her stepmother's vanity were true. Something inside the new queen refused to believe that someone could be so malicious.

"Do you know what they're calling you out there?" Snow White asked. "Outside these prison walls the world refers to you as the *Evil Queen*."

"If that is what the world has labeled me, then that is the name I shall learn to live with," the Evil Queen said. "Once the world has made a decision, there is little anyone can do to change its mind."

Snow White was astonished by how little her stepmother cared, but Snow White needed her to care. She needed to know there was some humanity left in her.

"They wanted to execute you after they discovered your crimes against me! The whole kingdom wanted you dead!"

Snow White's voice faded to a faint whisper as she fought off the emotions building up inside her. "But I wouldn't allow it. I couldn't..."

"Am I supposed to thank you for sparing me?" the Evil Queen asked. "If you expect someone to fall at your feet and express gratitude, you've come to the wrong cell."

"I didn't do it for you. I did it for myself," Snow White said. "Like it or not, you are the only mother I have ever known. I refuse to believe that you are the soulless monster the rest of the world claims you to be. Whether it's true or not, I believe there is a heart deep down inside of you."

Tears rolled down Snow White's pale face. She had promised herself she would stay strong, but she had lost control of her emotions once she was in her stepmother's presence.

"Then I'm afraid you're wrong," the Evil Queen said. "The only soul I've ever had died a long time ago, and the only heart you'll find in my possession is a heart of stone."

The Evil Queen did indeed have a heart of stone, but not inside her. A rock in the shape and size of a human heart was on a small table in the corner of the cell. It was the only item the Evil Queen had been permitted to keep when she was arrested.

Snow White recognized the stone from her childhood. It had always been very precious to her stepmother, and the Evil Queen had never let it out of her sight. Snow White had never been allowed to touch it or hold it, but nothing was stopping her now.

She walked across the cell, picked it up, and curiously stared down at it. It brought back so many memories. All the neglect and sadness her stepmother had caused her as a child rushed through her.

"All my life I only wanted one thing," Snow White said. "Your love. When I was a girl, I used to spend hours hiding in the palace just hoping you would notice I was missing, but you never did. You spent your days in your chambers with your mirrors and your skin creams and this stone. You spent more time with strangers with anti-aging methods than you did with your own daughter. But why?"

The Evil Queen did not answer.

"You tried to kill me four times, three of which you attempted yourself," Snow White said, shaking her head in disbelief. "When you dressed as an old woman and came to me at the dwarfs' cottage, I knew it was you. I knew you were dangerous, but I kept letting you in. I kept hoping that you would change. I let you harm me."

Snow White had never confessed this to anyone, and she couldn't help but bury her face in the palms of her hands and cry after saying it.

"You think *you* know heartbreak?" the Evil Queen said so sharply that it startled her stepdaughter. "You know *nothing* of pain. You never received affection from me, but from the moment you were born you were loved by the whole kingdom. *Others*, however, are not so fortunate. *Others*, Snow White, sometimes have the only loves they've ever known taken from them."

Snow White didn't know what to say. What love was she referring to?

"Are you speaking of my father?" Snow White asked.

The Evil Queen closed her eyes and shook her head. "Naïveté is such a privileged trait," she said. "Believe it or not, Snow White, I had my own life before I came into yours."

Snow White grew quiet and slightly ashamed. Of course she knew her stepmother had had a life prior to marrying her father, but she had never considered what it had consisted of. Her stepmother had always been such a private person, Snow White never had reason to.

"Where is my mirror?" the Evil Queen demanded.

"It's to be destroyed," Snow White told her.

Suddenly, the Evil Queen's stone became much heavier in Snow White's hand. Snow White didn't know if this was really happening, or if she was just imagining it. Her arm became tired from holding the stone heart, and she had to put it aside.

"There's so much you're not telling me," Snow White said. "There are so many things you've kept from me all these years."

The Evil Queen lowered her head and stared at the ground. She remained silent.

"I may be the only person in the world with any compassion for you. Please tell me it isn't going to waste," Snow White pleaded. "If there were events in your past that influenced your recent decisions, please explain them to me."

Still, there was no response.

"*I'm not leaving here until you tell me!*" Snow White yelled, raising her voice for the first time in her life.

"Fine," the Evil Queen said.

Snow White took a seat on another stool in the cell. The Evil Queen waited a moment before beginning, and Snow White's anticipation grew.

"Your story will forever be romanticized," she told Snow White. "No one will ever think twice about mine. I will continue to be degraded into nothing but a grotesque villain until the end of time. But what the world fails to realize is that a *villain* is just a *victim* whose story hasn't been told. Everything I have done, my life's work and my crimes against you, has all been for *him*."

Snow White felt her own heart grow heavy. Her head was spinning, and curiosity had taken over her entire body.

"Who?" she asked so quickly that she forgot to hold back the desperation in her voice.

The Evil Queen closed her eyes and let her memories surface. Images of places and people from her past flew out from the back of her mind like fireflies in a cave. There was so much she had seen in her younger years, so many things she wished she remembered, and so many things she wished to forget.

"I will tell you about my past, or at least the past of someone I once was," the Evil Queen said. "But consider yourself warned. My story is not one that ends with a happily-ever-after."