



# JESTER



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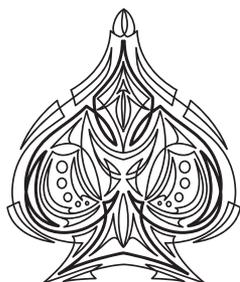
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*To Johnny,  
I know we don't believe in soul mates,  
but baby, you're mine.*







# CHAPTER I

A group of tourists has gathered to watch me throw knives at a shop-boy. They've come here for magic; I've kept them here with misdirection and lies. Maybe it's not magic exactly, but it is undeniably entertaining watching my unwilling assistant flinch every time the knife point gets too close to his groin.

I hold the knife steady, aiming, watching his limp hair flop as the wooden wheel he's strapped to slowly rotates.

Stefan lets out a whimper, and I toss him a smile. He was a lot braver in the shop where I'd found him, flirting as he bagged my books. It hadn't been hard to trick him into volunteering.

The crowd jeers.

"Aim lower!"

"Aim *higher*! Maim his ugly face!"

"Throw three at once!"

"Mirage, don't you dare!" Stefan shouts.

The nighttime crowd is always hungrier for violence. I hold up my hands placatingly.

“Obviously, I can’t throw three knives at once. That would be dangerous and highly irresponsible . . .”

There are a couple of groans, but my reputation must precede me, because there are a few whoops and chuckles thrown in as well. With a sweep, I pull my deadliest knife from my belt, the one with the wicked serrated edge, brandishing it for the crowd.

“But I think we can spice things up a bit!”

I stab the knife into a vat of oil, the shimmering liquid sliding down the tang of the blade. Then, with a flourish, I sweep it through a nearby torch. Flame devours the knife. The crowd roars its approval. Stefan pales.

The hilt burns in my hand, throwing off sparks, as I wonder if perhaps I’ve gone too far. I’ve only tried this a few times. And the jackrabbit I had caught to practice with wasn’t even good to eat after, blackened to an inedible crisp.

Either way, I’ll give them a show.

Even though the knife feels like it’s blistering my palm, I take a moment to pan the audience. This is always my favorite part. The tension is a palpable thing, visible in held gasps, wide eyes, and awe.

Magic.

And that’s when I see him. Expression carefully neutral, almost bored, one eyebrow raised, arms folded across a suit that costs more than my father made in a year. A seeker.

My heart pounds, as I realize more than Stefan’s crotch is at stake here now. If I nail this, that pretentious clown in a suit has the power to get my act in front of the queen. I could be the next jester. It’s the reason I’ve come here tonight, the same reason I’ve performed for thousands of crowds like this one.

Sucking in a breath, I hold the knife level.

Stefan thrashes, but the binding's pinning him to the wheel like a dead butterfly hold. Right as I pull back to throw, there's a shout.

"Kingkiller!"

The knife slips in my grip, but it's too late. I watch, horrified, as the blade wobbles in the air, the trajectory off. It clatters to the ground a few feet away from Stefan, flames smothered in the dirt. There's a moment of shocked silence, as though the crowd is waiting for me to do something.

Make a joke. Throw another knife. *Something*. I can still save this. Even Stefan gawks at me as I stare unseeing at the crowd. But I don't do anything. I just stand there, the word pounding in my head, over and over.

*Kingkiller.*

Even real magic couldn't save me now. It couldn't save my father—traitor to the throne and murderer of the king. Not that I have magic anyway, as my father's magic died with him when they executed him for treason. Leaving my family disgraced, leaving me to peddle illusion in a cheap imitation of the real thing.

The seeker is gone. I watched him leave, head shaking as if disappointed, the crowd swallowing him up again. My one big shot, gone as quickly as the smoke from my act.

I gather up my knives, suddenly too exhausted to even finish the show. There are a few shouted threats, but I hardly notice through the fog of disappointment. I can't believe it's over. Seventeen months I've waited for the opportunity to impress a seeker, and with just one word, it's over. And I didn't even make enough gold dust to buy myself dinner.

I loosen Stefan's bindings, my fingers slipping as a loud gasp from the nearby crowd steals my attention. Stefan drops with a thud and a curse, but I hardly hear his complaints. Most of my audience has wandered off, inflating the already bloated numbers of the show next to mine. The entire stretch of street, known fondly to those in the business as the *Noose*, is filled with performers clamoring to be seen. Nowhere

else in the kingdom of Terraca is there a place so gluttoned with magic: everything from the mundane enchantments like the ones used to keep the hotels refreshingly cool inside—even here in the desert—to the spectacular.

Sandwiched between the most impressive hotels in Oasis—including the impressive Crown Hotel—the Noose is one of the best spots to snag wealthy patrons with too much gold in their wallets and too much liquor in their blood.

A bolt of lightning so bright it leaves a streak in my vision cracks the pavement several feet away. Applause and gold nuggets are thrown at the magician, who bows.

Ignoring Stefan's shouts, I wander over to see what has the tourists so hot. I've seen most of the shows in the Noose multiple times; after all, I've got to maintain a healthy edge over my competitors. So, I'm not surprised when I recognize the performer instantly. His name rises in my throat like bile.

Luc.

Long blond hair swept into a knot on top of his head and with a jawline that could cut glass, Luc is one of the most popular acts on the Noose, besides my own. Even with his face arranged in an arrogant sneer, he's still irritatingly handsome. A simple flourish of his long red coat sparks deafening applause. The crowds love him and he knows it. His gaze sweeps the crowd greedily, sucking in the cheers as though they physically sustain him. I know the feeling well.

I jolt when his eyes land on me, pick me out in the crowd. I want to shrink, to disappear, the same caught feeling as a mouse in the gaze of a hawk.

“Can I have a volunteer, please?”

The hand of every eligible woman in the crowd shoots up. He grins, cocky, surveying the desperate volunteers. He raises an eyebrow at me, intention clear. I cross my arms, unwilling to give him the satisfaction

of a reaction. With a disappointed shake of his head so slight I could've imagined it, he selects a different young woman.

Even from where I stand near the back of the crowd, it's obvious she is heartbreakingly lovely and fantastically wealthy. Luc's smile broadens as he helps her onstage. Flowing blonde hair, full lips, flushed cheeks, and a garnet necklace like a collar of blood against her pale throat. I roll my eyes. Luc definitely has a type.

He takes her hand gently and leans in to whisper something in her ear. She titters, cheeks rosy. She's clearly enraptured, unaware of the fate that awaits her, a butterfly in a web. Even if she did know, I doubt she'd care. Half the women in this audience have seen Luc's show before, and in spite of its macabre ending, they still keep coming in droves. He ignores her fluttering lashes, his eyes finding me again in the crowd. A chill runs down my spine.

Without breaking eye contact, he stabs the girl onstage. And even though I've seen his show hundreds of times, know exactly how it ends, a gasp breaks free from my tight lips as she crumples to the ground. Blood stains the wood around her, a stage that has seen its fair share of death. Seeing my reaction, he actually has the nerve to smile as she bleeds out on the ground beside him.

He steps away from the blood before it can reach his expensive snakeskin boots, ignoring the paunchy man who clammers onstage with him, pawing frantically at the bloody maiden.

"Olivia! What have you done to her? Olivia, wake up!"

Olivia's father, I assume, if his age and resemblance to the girl are any indicator. Luc smiles down benevolently at the man, whose face is blotchy and panicked. Tears run down his cheek as he blubbers, and my gut clenches both in shame for him and pity.

"Who will pay the debt for this maiden?" Luc asks. He doesn't extend a hand to the man, who grasps at his trousers, unaware of the blood that stains his fine clothes.

“I will,” the man cries, wiping the snot from his face. “Please, I’ll do anything! Just bring back my daughter.”

Luc has chosen wisely; it’s obvious this man will pay anything for his jewel of a daughter. Luc eyes him as though weighing a handful of gold dust and then glances at the ropes of garnets choking the woman’s fragile neck. The desperate father seizes upon his meaning, and with shaking fingers unclasps the heavy necklace and passes it to Luc. Holding it up for the crowd first, Luc pockets the jewels with a satisfied smile.

“The debt has been paid. Arise, fair maiden!”

For a moment nothing happens. Everyone’s eyes are on the girl, whose lips have turned a faint blue. But my eyes are on Luc. I can see the strain as he tries to bring her back from Beyond. The sweat that runs, neglected, down his temple. The clenched fists. Watching for any kind of rise in her lungs. But they stay still.

I’ve only seen Luc fail once. That girl’s family was desolate but could do nothing, because that’s what these wealthy fools come here for. To be thrilled. To be entertained, no matter the cost. And Luc never fails to give them a show.

Heart pounding, I watch Luc cross the stage, jaw tight. To anyone else he looks collected, but I can see the way his teeth grind. *She’s not coming back*, I think, and before I can register the thought, Luc lifts the dead girl up and kisses her passionately. The man, her father, I remember numbly, lets out a startled cluck like a chicken on a chopping block.

For a minute it’s deathly silent. Then the girl gasps for air, hands scrabbling at Luc’s neck. I let out a gust of air, then feel my lungs inflate as hers do. Luc bows to riotous applause as gold nuggets rain on the stage. No one sees the girl, whose lips are still blue, whose lungs struggle to reset, her father crying into her hair. She’ll likely suffer brain damage, being without oxygen for as long as she was. That’s the price of magic, true magic. Luc’s show is cruel but effective. There’s a reason he’s known on the Noose as the devil. Sell him your soul, and he’ll give you a show.

And although I'm loath to admit it, he's my biggest competition for the position of Jester.

Sure enough, not one, but two seekers have joined him onstage. I watch as they fight for his attention, eager to claim the commission that comes with finding a worthy act. As though he can feel my eyes on him, Luc lifts his gaze from the seekers. I can read the words on his lips as clearly as if he spoke:

“Kingkiller.”



## CHAPTER 2

Whirl away, the anger so hot I can feel it pounding in my blood. How did that idiot find out about my father? For not the first time in my life, I curse my father for his murderous impulses. I don't care if he killed the king. But I do care that he left me alone, disgraced, the daughter of a traitor, and without magic.

There's no point in performing my last show of the evening now, not after Luc reminded half the Noose of my father's wretched legacy. I reach the doors to the Shipwreck. I grasp for the mother-of-pearl inlaid handle, ignoring the valet rushing to open it for me. The hotel is nothing short of magnificent, despite the name. Marble floors gleam. Everywhere, jeweled sea life frolics, creeps, and slithers.

The opulent chandelier is even a pearl-and-diamond jellyfish, long tentacles swaying. But the true jewel of the Shipwreck is the huge wall-to-wall aquarium, which boasts a large array of sharks, a shy cave octopus, and mermaids.

The mermaids aren't real, of course. Like everything else here, they're a carefully crafted illusion, not truly sirens of the deep but show-girls wearing fake tails, spelled to breathe underwater. Even knowing that, I find myself captivated. Their long, powerful tails flash as they swim elegantly through clouds of jellyfish. They are nude on top, only the barest sprinkling of glitter. One of the mermaids catches my eye through the glass, long azure hair floating, framing her heart-shaped face. I notice her eyes are bloodshot, no doubt from hours of exposure to tank water and exhaustion. The sympathy in her gaze shakes me, as if from a dream.

Turning away from the mermaids, I make my way to the front desk, praying Bale, manager of the Shipwreck, is off duty. Unfortunately for me, I haven't had good luck for longer than I can remember, so I steel myself for the worst.

But the woman at the desk is new, dark hair pulled back into a shining clamshell clip and a worried look on her pretty face. I force a haughty expression, the kind most of the patrons here are wearing, and slam my hand on the heavy gold bell, even though she's right in front of me.

She jumps and eyes me, taking in my worn and filthy costume and unkempt hair.

"I'd like to check into my suite early," I say, drumming my fingers on the gleaming countertop, scanning the room as if everything in it displeases me. Still, the receptionist hesitates, not buying either my look or my tone. Time to seal the deal.

"After suffering a wretched bout of motion sickness through the canyon, I certainly hope your establishment proves itself worthy of my husband, John Ellington's, patronage."

This gets her attention.

"Of course, madam. We've been expecting you both."

I cover my mouth as if yawning, hiding the relief that gusts out of me. The name was a crapshoot; John Ellington, oil baron and notorious gambling addict, visits Oasis often and always seems to have a reserved

room. Thanks to the many holes pockmarking the desert from his drills, he has neither a shortage of gold nor new wives.

She riffles through the guest book and scratches a neat checkmark next to John Ellington's name. I watch, hardly daring to breathe, as she pulls two tiny brass keys from a drawer. Just as she reaches to hand them to me, a shout turns my blood to ice.

I turn, groaning inwardly, as a short, sweaty man makes his way across the shining floors. Even in a hurry, he keeps his head high, as if to bely the fact that he physically can't look down on anyone, not even me.

"Hello, Bale," I say, resigned, when he finally reaches the desk. He daubs at his high forehead with an intricately embroidered handkerchief. Even Bale's sweat is worth more than I am.

"Elizabeth, darling," he begins, once he's caught his breath, "this girl has a lifetime ban from the Shipwreck."

"Come on, Bale," I break in, as Elizabeth's gaze darts in my direction in shock.

"I can't believe you made it past the valets," he mutters, wiping his brow again. "What's the story this time, Lisette? Traveling royalty? A lady-in-waiting sent early to prepare the queen's rooms?"

"She said she was the wife of Mr. Ellington, sir," Elizabeth says, twin points of red on her cheeks. I curtsy.

"Ah, of course," Bale says, shaking his head. "Get out of my hotel."

"Please, Bale," I say, hating the pleading tone that's crept into my voice. I'd really prefer to do this the easy way tonight. "I'll give you all the dust I make tomorrow."

It's a lie and we both know it.

"Shoo," he repeats, stubborn. Out of the corner of my eye, I see one of the guards glide in. To anyone else, he's just a very big, well-dressed man. But I see the copper stains on one cuff, the one that he self-consciously folds into his suit sleeve. Bale is clearly not going to change his mind, so I make my way to the doors, shame curdling in my stomach.

I'm so focused on the floor, I almost run headfirst into another patron.

"Watch it!" I cry.

"Begging your pardon, *madam*," the patron says, smirking, and that's when I realize I know him. Tall, lithe frame cloaked all in red. Luc.

"Get out of my way," I snap, but he just stands there, barring the door. A heavy gold snake winds its way across his shoulders, a scaled stole. I ignore the way its slitted eyes follow my every move.

"I didn't know you were married," Luc says, a lazy smile on his lips. "And to John Ellington, no less. That makes you his fifth wife in six months. Lucky man."

So, he saw everything then.

"Move before I disembowel you," I say, meeting his arrogant gaze, making sure he sees the glint of the knife in my hand.

"Such a lady," he chuckles. "How did you like my show?"

"Getting a bit predictable," I bite out, finally shoving past him. To my great annoyance, he follows me out into the street.

"We can't all be wizards with a knife, can we?" he calls after me. "Pity you can't do any real magic though."

I whip around to face him, pleased when he almost stumbles.

"Even so, I did notice you still had to resort to name-calling to steal away my audience," I say, trying not to wince when the snake lets out a low hiss.

Luc strokes the snake on his shoulder, enjoying my evident disgust.

"I'll be honest, not my finest moment, but it worked better than I could've imagined. Headliner at the Panther now, thanks to you."

I scowl. That should have been me.

"Soon to be Jester," he murmurs near my ear, and it's then I realize how close he is. The snake on his shoulder sways, half its body suspended in the air. I stumble backward quickly, as I realize it's bridging the gap between us.

“Oh, I do apologize,” Luc says, letting the snake slide down his arm and twine around his fingers. “Do you not like my snake?”

“I have no interest whatsoever in your *snake*,” I reply scathingly.

“Shame,” he says, white teeth glinting.

I turn away, disgusted.

“Come now, *Lisette*, don’t be like that. I’m only teasing.”

I freeze at the mention of my name, my real name, not the stage name I don’t like a mask. I whirl around, but he’s gone, nothing to indicate he was even there, other than a few wisps of smoke and the smell of oranges.



I always swear that I won’t come back. That each night here is my last. And yet, every twilight finds me here again, returned like a dog to its vomit.

The place certainly smells like vomit. I wrinkle my nose against the assortment of foul odors assaulting my senses: cheap alcohol, the spicy musk of body odor and bad breath, years of mold . . . I’m fairly certain that if despair had a smell, this would be it.

I peel off my Noose costume regretfully—black corset, black cape with embroidered gold stars in the lining, black trousers that lace up the sides, black boots. It’s a simple outfit compared to Luc’s, but I like to think my show stands on its own. Trading one disguise for another, I fold my clothes neatly, careful to ensure nothing comes in contact with the grimy vanity or stained carpets. The server getup, like everything else in the Bird of Paradise Casino, is gaudy. Bright, unnaturally colored feathers adorn the corset, which is sequined, and the headdress, which is heavy. Fake gold bangles, chipped and worn, line my wrists and arms. The headdress is studded with large plastic jewels. I eye the faux gemstones balefully. Once upon a time, the jewels I wore were real.

Everything was real, once.

I cringe as I slide on the bottom half of the costume, little more than a pair of panties adorned with a sweeping tail of feathers. Half the feathers are missing, no thanks to the wandering hands of patrons. Given the more than fifty servers working the casino floors and a less than adequately staffed laundry, there's never any telling whether or not the girl before me bothered to wash the costume.

I sit in one of the stained wardrobe chairs and unbraid my hair, shaking out the long rose-gold waves, hating the feel of them against my exposed back. The shoes are always last, painful stilettos that I'm not allowed to kick off no matter how much they pinch. I take a shallow breath, as deep as the corset will allow, eyeing myself in the cracked gilt mirror of the vanity. One of the girls told me when I first started working, in scandalized whispers, that Louie, the owner, had a black-market magician spell the mirrors to be two-way. I squint at my reflection, wondering if he's watching right now.

I cared once.

Now I pretend not to know, like the rest of the girls.

"Last night," I promise the girl in the reflection. I've only said it a million times before.

The dressing room door bangs open, and Pearl, one of the servers, collapses into the chair next to mine in a heap of feathers. She peels her shoes off, groaning.

"Long day?" I ask, patting a glittery balm onto my lips.

"One of the patrons won the jackpot," Pearl says, without even opening her eyes, still slumped in the chair.

Now it's my turn to groan. Most of the time the bouncers, Louie's carefully trained enforcers, can sniff out even the faintest magic, ensuring there are never any cheaters. Not coincidentally, most of the bigger winners end up accused of magical manipulation, but even the bouncers can't prevent all wins.

“Louie’s been a nightmare,” Pearl adds, although that part is obvious. Louie hates winners, even though a big win usually means more patrons, all hoping the luck is contagious. I steel myself for the long night ahead.

Adjusting my headdress, I head out onto the casino floor, grabbing a tray of drinks. All around, dead-eyed patrons drink and gamble. Faded palm trees adorn the worn and scuffed carpets. Being one of the lower-end casinos on Oasis, Louie doesn’t have it in the budget to use much magic to keep patrons willingly imprisoned here, so he has to resort to more ordinary techniques. There are no windows, no clocks, nothing to distract players from their own self-destruction. Even without the added allure of magic, I’ve seen players spend days in the casino, unaware of anything but the whirl, spin, and lights of the games.

“Over here, darling,” a voice drawls, shaking me from my thoughts. I dutifully make my way to the Hanged Man table, where a group of elderly women are tossing dice. Free liquor is another tactic Louie employs to keep his patrons happy and stupid enough to keep losing money. I set down the drinks wordlessly. I’ve learned better than to engage the patrons. Louie likes us to flirt a little, to tease, but he has showgirls for that, and anyway, I don’t get paid nearly enough to endure more torture than I already do.

“Fill ’em up,” the woman says, not even looking my way. She’s clearly on a winning streak; a stack of crystal chips sits in a pile next to her heavily adorned wrists. It’s obvious she had money, once. Maybe her husband died. Maybe she lost it gambling. No one worth anything gambles at Bird of Paradise. Likely all these women are disgraced in some way, hoping to clamber back into society’s good graces with someone else’s money. I know the feeling.

I take the shot glasses, filled to three-quarters with a garish purple liquor, and with a snap, light them on fire. It’s just a cheap bit of theatrics and carefully placed chemistry, but the patrons love it. A few of the

ladies ooh, although most are focused on the woman who summoned me. From across the room, Louie's heavy brow darkens into a scowl. I'm not supposed to perform while on the clock, just fill drinks and clean, like a good little waitress.

"Beautiful," the woman says, downing the whole glass without even looking up. I'm dismissed. I collect the spent glasses as the women chatter and murmur, pretending I don't exist.

"Did you hear Raster is holding one of his parties tomorrow?" One of the women says, fanning her florid face. It is abnormally hot tonight; Louie's clearly tight-fisting money after his loss, skimping on air-conditioning.

"The seeker? I heard he's still sore about losing that headliner from the Panther . . ."

I stop, gripping one of the glasses, still warm from the pyrotechnics. I hadn't expected the news about Luc to travel so quickly. He might actually have a shot at Jester.

"I heard he spent more gold on his new menagerie than the queen spent on the princess's christening."

"Such a show-off," one of the women sighs. "Isn't he single?"

"Now, now, Cecilia, the party is by invitation only, very exclusive, you know . . ."

The woman named Cecilia, who must be pushing seventy, waggles thick eyebrows. "Like that's ever stopped me."

I manage to choke back my surprised laugh just in time, although the noise catches the attention of one of the other women.

"That will be all," she says pointedly, casting a disdainful look at my costume. All hopes of a tip vanish. I take the hint. Hurrying, I pick up the tray and gracefully make my exit.

"Maybe if I wore something like that," Cecilia says as I swish away, and the table erupts into hoots and catcalls. I barely hear them; my mind is racing. Raster can ignore me all he likes on the streets, but if I were

able to go to his party, I could make him pay attention to me. Unfortunately, there's no way I can secure an invitation to a party as exclusive as Raster's.

Which means I need Del.

I'm so focused, I barely see the man stumbling from a chair in front of me, and we collide head-on. My tray falls, glasses shattering. I let out a cry of dismay, but hardly anyone looks up at the sound.

"Stupid girl," the man grumbles, wiping at his suit, a worn thing that does him no favors. I kneel to pick up the broken tumblers, ignoring the bite of glass in my fingers and palm. As long as I can get this cleaned up before Louie sees—

"What's all this?"

I grip the handful of shards, cringing.

"Your idiot server ran into me," the man slurs, swaying on his feet.

"Shoulda known it'd be you," Louie grumbles behind me. I stand up on wobbling knees, still clutching the broken tumblers.

"It was an accident—"

"Sir, I do apologize," Louie says, talking right over me, using the stuffy voice he saves for patrons. "Allow me to assist you in cleaning that up."

He snaps his fingers at me, and confused, I hand him the sodden rag I've used to wipe up the mess. Bits of glass cling to it, and it's stained purple.

Louie's eyes roll heavenward, as though I'm the biggest fool there ever was. "A clean one, if you please?"

I scramble to the bar, dumping the tray of broken glass at the bartender, who casts me a bewildered look. Grabbing a pile of clean cloths, I hand them to Louie, who snatches them away without even looking at me. He daubs uselessly at the man's lapels, the giant blotch of purple refusing to budge.

"It's ruined," the man says, lamenting. "My best suit."

I can see the way Louie's teeth grind as he wipes so hard at the stain, bits of cloth scrape off.

"There's a laundress in town," I pipe in, tentatively. "Magical stain removal—"

"Quiet, you," Louie growls. His face smooths, as he turns to the patron. "We'll replace the suit."

The man's face grows shrewd. "And you'll throw in a free round of Dead Man's Bluff?"

Louie's jaw works. "Of course."

The man shambles off, pleased. I know better than to be relieved though, and sure enough, as soon as he's out of sight, Louie turns on me.

"Third offense in less than a month," he snaps, shoving the cloth back at me. "You know what that means."

I do know what that means. Louie has been threatening to fire me for months. Outrage blooms in my chest. "It wasn't my fault!"

This time, anyway.

"Not my problem," Louie says, bustling off in the direction of the game machines. I follow him, limping, a shard of glass burrowed deep in one toe.

"What about my room?" I get half my meager salary in dust, and the other half pays for one of Louie's dingy rooms. Without that, I'd be homeless.

"Every bit of dust you earned tonight is going towards damages," Louie growls, then plasters on a large, fake smile for a table of patrons. "Who's feeling lucky tonight?"

"We had a deal!"

Louie's faux smile becomes bared teeth as he turns to face me. "A deal that was conditional on you remaining an employee."

With a snap, one of the bouncers slides in between us. The man is large, brutish, lacking the subtlety of the Shipwreck's bouncers. Two meaty hands clasp in front of a garish suit covered in flamingos.

“Escort her out.”

I shrug away from the bouncer’s reach. “I’ll walk myself out, thanks.”

“Leave the costume in the laundry room.”

Cheap pig.

“Fine,” I snap, although I have no intention of doing so. I stomp back to the dressing room, livid. Thankfully, it’s empty, and there are no witnesses as I throw the headdress as hard as I can at the mirror. To my great disappointment, the glass stays stubbornly whole, although the headdress cracks. I flop into one of the chairs, listening to the throbbing of my own heart in my ears.

This is the fourth job I’ve lost in three months. As bosses go, Louie isn’t even the worst around. Girls younger than me have been forced into showgirl jobs at other, seedier casinos, and although Louie is far from perfect, the only thing he allows underage girls to do is serve. I’m not going to find a better job than this one.

I stare at my red-rimmed eyes, my face lined with exhaustion too great for my seventeen years. If my father hadn’t killed the king, I’d be training to inherit his magic right now, not slaving away at a minimum-wage job.

My father’s magic should’ve been mine. But my father was as selfish in death as he was in life, and when they took his head, he took his magic with him to wherever comes after.

There’s only one way to get back everything I’ve lost. I have to win the position of Jester. As the queen’s hand-selected entertainer, I’ll be the most sought-after show in the kingdom, magic or no. The highest-ranked magician in the world. With fame like that, no one, not even Luc, will be able to use my past against me again.

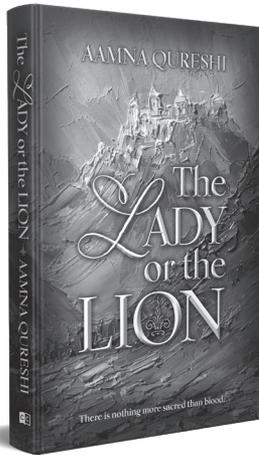
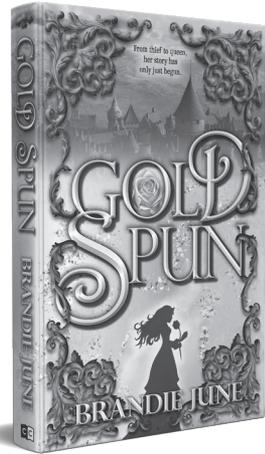
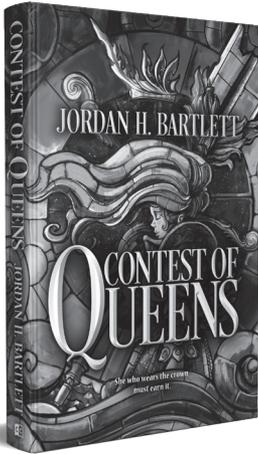
I’ve wasted enough time in jobs like this, going nowhere. I stare at the girl in the reflection, the one I’ve lied to so many times.

“Last night,” I tell her, and this time I mean it.

I’ve got a party to go to.

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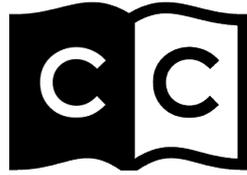
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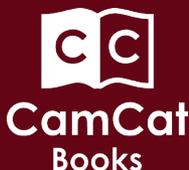
# WHAT HAPPENS IN OASIS, STAYS IN OASIS.

**LISETTE'S FATHER KILLED THE KING.** His execution leaves Lisette alone, disgraced, and without the magic he intended to pass on to her. In Oasis, that's a problem. Glutted with enchanted performers, Oasis is a sin city where courtiers pay in gold to drink, gamble, and above all, be entertained. To survive on its competitive streets, Lisette peddles paltry illusions in place of magic.

Desperate to prove herself, Lisette enters into a deadly competition to be chosen as the highest-ranked magician in the world, the Queen's Jester. But her rival, the irritatingly handsome Luc, possesses the one thing Lisette does not have—real magic. Lisette will do anything to win, but when evidence implicating the queen in her husband's murder surfaces, Lisette must choose between redeeming her family name, or seizing the fame she's hungered for her entire life.



**“IT’S NOT REAL MAGIC,” SHE CONFIDES, IN A WHISPER.  
“THAT’S OKAY,” THE BOY SAYS, WHISPERING TOO. “AS LONG AS IT  
MAKES PEOPLE HAPPY, IT’S REAL.”**



Cover Design: Maryann Appel  
Illustration: Natalia Hubbert / Scarlet Heath



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