

A GILDED CAGE IS STILL A PRISON



THE PLATED PRISONER SERIES

RAVEN KENNEDY

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

GILD

RAVEN KENNEDY



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raven Kennedy is an international bestseller, whose love for books pushed her into creating her own worlds. The Plated Prisoner series, a dark fantasy romance, has sold in over fifteen countries. It became a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Sunday Times*, and *Spiegel* bestseller, hit #1 in the Amazon store, and has sold over four million copies worldwide.

The Plated Prisoner series is being adapted for television by Peter Guber's Mandalay Television.

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By the same author

THE PLATED PRISONER SERIES

Gild

Glint

Gleam

Glow

Gold

Goldfinch

THE HEART HASSLE SERIES

Signs of Cupidity

Bonds of Cupidity

Crimes of Cupidity

For the Love of Cupidity

Sheer Cupidity

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About The Book

The myth of King Midas reimaged.

This compelling and dark adult fantasy series is as addictive as it is unexpected. With romance, fae, and intrigue, the gilded world of Orea will grip you from the very first page. Be immersed in this journey of greed, love, and finding inner strength.

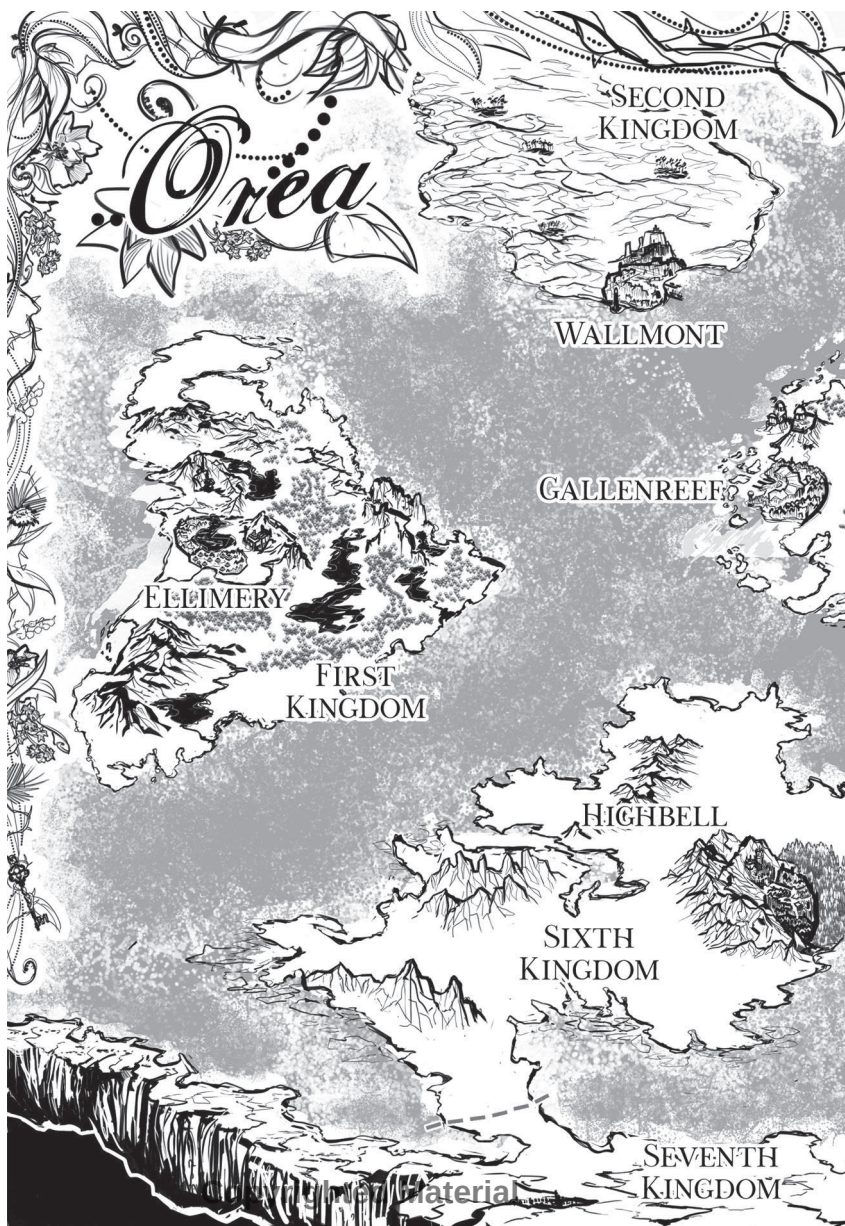
Please Note: This series will contain explicit content and dark elements that may be triggering to some. It will include explicit romance, mature language, violence, non-consensual sex, and emotional manipulation. It is not intended for anyone under 18 years of age. This is book one in a series.

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To the ones who try, but can't see the stars.
Keep looking up.

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CHAPTER 1

L*ift the gold goblet* to my lips as I watch the show of naked flesh through the space between my bars.

The lighting is low, deliberate. Just a crackle of flame over promiscuous shapes that move in warm tandem. Seven bodies working all to one sole release, while I'm here, apart, like a spectator for a sport.

The king called me in here a couple of hours ago when he started getting hot and heavy with his revolving harem of concubines—also known as his royal saddles. He decided to have his pleasure in the atrium tonight, probably because of the acoustics in here. To his credit, the moans really do echo nicely.

“Yes, my king! Yes! Yes!”

The skin around my eyes tightens, and I quickly gulp more wine down and force myself to look away and take in the night sky instead. The atrium is huge, and all of the walls and the domed ceiling are made entirely of glass

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windows, so it's the best view in the palace. That is...when it stops snowing long enough to see anything.

Right now, there's a snowstorm like usual. White flakes fall from the sky, a promise to cover the panes by morning. But for now, I can see a faint hint of a single star high above, peeking out from between the oppressive clouds and looming white. Always, the puffy, frozen vapor stands sentinel over the sky like a miser, stealing the view from me and hoarding it to itself. But I have a glimpse, and I'm thankful for that.

I wonder if at one point, past monarchs from forgotten times built this atrium so they could chart the stars and decipher the stories that the gods left for us in the sky. But then nature thwarted them, those sentry clouds mocking their effort and blocking truths from us.

Or perhaps the long-dead royals just built this room to see the glass frosted over and blizzards whipping around while they could stand in here, untouched by the vast, white cold. Olean royals are arrogant enough to do something like that. Case in point...my eyes flicker over to the king who's currently balls-deep in his saddle while the others flaunt and play for his pleasure.

Maybe I'm wrong though. Maybe this space wasn't built for the purpose of us looking up, but for the gods to look down. Maybe those old royals brought *their* saddles up here too, as a visual offering for the heavens to enjoy the debauchery. Based on some of the stories I've read, the gods are a horny bunch, so I honestly wouldn't put it

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past them. I don't judge them, though. The royal saddles are very talented.

Despite the fact that I'm being forced to watch and listen to the lewd acts right now, and despite the fact that the top of the dome is usually blocked with snow, I still like coming in here. It's the closest I ever get to being outside, or feeling the wind on my face, or having my lungs expand with fresh air.

Bright side? At least I never have to worry about my skin getting chapped from the wind or shivering from the snow. The snowstorm *does* look cold, after all.

I try to keep a positive outlook on life, even if I am in my own person-sized birdcage. A pretty jail for a pretty relic.

"Oh, Divine!" one of the saddles—Rissa, I think—cries out in bliss, pulling me from my thoughts. She has a husky voice and blonde hair, beauty effortlessly held on her face.

I redirect my gaze to the scene in front of me, unable to help myself. There are six saddles doing their best to impress. Six is the king's lucky number—since he's the ruler of the Sixth Kingdom of Orea. He's a bit obsessive about it, really. At any given time, I see the number surrounding him. Like the six buttons on every shirt that his tailors make for him. Or the six spires in his gold crown. The six saddles he's fucking tonight.

Right now, five women and one man are catering to his carnal needs. The servants brought up a bed so that he

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could be comfortable while he's getting his thrill. It seems like a big hassle for them to take apart the enormous bed, walk up three flights of stairs, and then put it back together again, only to have to remove it again later. But what do I know? I'm just the king's *favorite saddle*.

I wrinkle my nose at that term. I prefer it when people call me the king's favored. It has a much nicer ring to it, though it still means the same thing.

I'm his.

I kick my feet up on the bars in front of my cage, settling back on the cushions beneath me. I watch the king's ass flex as he plunges in and out of one of the girls beneath him, while two more women kneel on the bed on both sides of him so that he has full access to their bare breasts, which he's currently kneading, two-handed.

The king is a breast man.

I look down at my own chest, which is currently wrapped in gold silk. It looks more like a toga than a dress, the strip of fabric clasped together at each shoulder and then cascading down, belted with gold loops at the waist. Gold is all I wear or touch or see.

Every single plant in this atrium that used to be fertile and green is now lifeless and metallic. The entire room, other than the clear glass of the windows, is gold. Just like the golden bedding the king is fucking on right now, gold flakes peppered into the wood grain of the bed frame. The gold marble of the floor, darker veins burnished into it like frozen, silty streams. Gold

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doorknobs, gleaming vines creeping up gilded walls, metallic columns holding up all the wealth as they reach for the archways.

Gold is a big theme here in King Midas's Highbell Castle.

Gold floors. Gold window frames. Rugs, paintings, tapestries, cushions, clothing, dishes, knights' armor, hell, even the pet bird is frozen in lifeless shine. As far as the eye can see, everything is gold, gold, gold, including the entire infrastructure of the palace itself. Every stone and rung and pillar.

The exterior of the castle must be glaring when the sun hits it. Luckily for everyone who lives outside of the palace, I don't think the sun has actually ever come out to shine on it. If it's not snowing, it's sleeting, and if it's not doing either, there's usually a blizzard on the way.

The bell here always tolls with a warning when there's a blizzard coming, warning people to stay indoors. And that enormous bell in the tower that sits at the highest point of the castle? Yep, that's solid gold too. And damn, is it *loud*.

I hate it. Its peals are noisier than a hail storm on a glass ceiling, but with a name like Highbell Castle, I guess *not* having an annoying bell would be blasphemy.

I've heard that people can hear it ringing from miles and miles away. So with the loud bell and the dazzling gold, Highbell Castle is a bit garish from its spot perched on the side of this snow-covered, rocky mountain. King

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Midas doesn't believe in subtlety. He flaunts his renowned power, and the people either bow in wonder or hunger in envy of it.

I walk over to the edge of my cage to pour myself more wine, only to find that the pitcher is empty. I frown down at it as I try to ignore the squeals and male grunts going on behind me. A different saddle—Polly—is getting ridden by the king now, her sex noises grating on me like an aching tooth scraped over ice, while jealousy cringes inside my chest.

I *really* wish I had more wine.

Instead, I snatch up the grapes on my cheese and fruit platter and stuff them in my mouth. Maybe they'll ferment in my stomach, and I can get a little quasi-drunk from it? A girl can hope.

Stuffing in another mouthful for good luck, I walk back to the corner and settle down on the plush gold pillows on the floor. With one ankle crossed over the other, I watch the writhing bodies as they put on their lovely performance for the king.

Three of the saddles are new, so I don't know their names yet. The new male is standing up on the mattress, totally naked, and great Divine, he is pretty. His body is molded to perfection. I can see why the king chose him, because with those chiseled abs and effeminate face, he's *very* nice to look at. It's clear that when he isn't servicing Midas, he's working out to sculpt his each and every muscle.

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Right now, he has his forearms braced on the top beam of the four poster bed frame, and a female saddle is perched on it like a squirrel on a branch, her legs spread wide as he eats her out. Their balance and showmanship can't be ignored.

The third newbie is on her knees in front of the male, sucking his length like poison from a snake bite. And...wow, she's *really* good at that. Now I know why she was chosen. I tilt my head, taking mental notes. You never know when something like this can come in handy.

"Your cunt is boring me," Midas suddenly says, making Polly quickly get out from under him. He spansks the boob girl in front of him. "You're up. I want your ass."

"Of course, my king," she purrs before spinning around and dropping onto her knees, her ass high in the air. He plunges into her with the slick juices of Polly still on his cock, and the woman gives off a moan.

"Faker," I mumble under my breath. No way that felt good.

Not that I would know firsthand. I've never been breached *down there*, thank Divine.

The sounds in the room intensify when a couple of the saddles orgasm—either faking it or real—and the king slams harshly into his female before finally spilling his seed with a grunt.

Hopefully, he'll be well and truly done this time, because I'm tired and I'm out of wine.

No sooner does the woman collapse beneath him than he smacks her on the ass again, this time in dismissal. “All of you can go back to the harem wing. I’m done with you for the night.”

His words interrupt the rest of the saddles, cutting short their own releases. The male is still rocking his erection, but none of them complain or pout or ignore his command. To do so would be pure stupidity.

They all quickly disentangle themselves from each other and walk out naked in a single file line, some thighs still wet and sticky. It’s been a long night.

I wonder if the saddles will finish things off themselves in the harem wing. I wouldn’t know, because I’m not allowed in there, so I don’t know their dynamic when the king isn’t around. I’m not allowed to go *anywhere* unless I’m in my cages or in the presence of the king. As his favored, I’m kept locked away and safe. A pet to be protected and kept.

I watch Midas carefully while he pulls on his golden robe as the last saddle walks out. Just the sight of him standing there, barely dressed and satisfied from his sensual pleasures makes my stomach tighten.

He’s beautiful.

He’s not muscled, because he has a very plush life, but he’s naturally slim and broad shouldered. Young for a ruling king, Midas is only in his thirties, the edge of youth still softening his face. He has tanned skin, despite the fact that all it ever does is snow and rain here, and his hair

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is blond with reddish honey tones, the scarlet hue more pronounced in the candlelight. His eyes are a deep brown, and there's a presence about him—a charm. It's his charm that always gets me.

My gaze travels further down, over a tapered waist and the outline of his softening length that I can still see beneath the silky fabric.

“Getting an eyeful, Auren?”

At the sound of my name, I jerk my attention away from his crotch and up to his smirking face. My cheeks go warm, though I play off my embarrassment. “Well, it *is* a nice view,” I tell him with a lift of my shoulder and a wry curve of my lips.

He chuckles and then begins strutting over to the bars of my cage at the back of the atrium. I love when he smiles. It gives me the crawling caterpillars in my stomach—not butterflies. I'm jealous of those free-flying bitches.

His eyes run over me from my bare feet all the way to my chest. I'm careful not to move from where I'm seated, even though I want to fidget under his scrutiny, my head tilted up in expectation. I've learned to stay still because that's what he likes.

His gaze runs over my body in a slow stroke. “Mmm. You look good enough to eat tonight.”

I get to my feet fluidly until the fabric of my dress cascades down to skim over the tops of my toes, and then walk over to the bars in front of him. One hand curls

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around one of the delicate bars that separates us. “You could let me out of this cage and have a taste.” I’m careful to keep my tone playful and my expression sultry, though my gut burns with want.

Let me out. Touch me. Want me.

My king is a complicated man. I know he cares for me, but lately, I’ve just been wanting...more. I know that’s my fault. I shouldn’t want more. I should be happy with what I have, but I can’t help it.

I wish Midas would look at me the way I look at him. I wish his chest would beat with yearning as mine does. But even if he could never give me that, I wish he’d simply spend more time with me.

I know that’s an impractical thing to want. He’s a king. Constantly being pulled in a thousand directions. He has duties that I can’t even fathom. The fact that I get any attention at all should be something I celebrate.

Which is why I bury the want, a shovelful of snow covering the craving with numbing weight to hide in my depths. I distract myself. I flounder. I fill up my hours with whatever I can. But no matter how many people I see every day, I still wake up lonely and go to sleep the same way.

It’s not Midas’s fault, and it’s pointless to pout about it. That would get me nowhere—and I live in a cage, so going nowhere is my expertise.

Midas’s smirk widens into a grin at my cheeky words. He’s playful tonight, a mood I don’t often get to

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see, but love when I do. It reminds me of how we were when we first became friends. When I was just a lost girl and he swept in to show me a different life, the way he smiled at me and reminded me how to curve my own lips.

Midas takes another sweeping look over my figure, my skin warming in flattery at his pleased attention. I'm shaped like an hourglass, with a generous chest, hips, and butt, yet that's not what people notice when they first look at me. I'm not even sure *he* notices it either.

When people look at me, it's not to appreciate the curve of my shape or to decipher the thoughts in my eyes. No, they're only preoccupied with one thing, and that's the luster of my skin.

Because it's *gold*.

Not *golden*. Not tan. Not painted or dipped or dyed. My skin is real, shimmering, satiny, gilded gold.

I look just like everything else in this palace. Even my hair and irises glimmer with a metallic sheen. I'm a walking gold statue, everywhere except for my gleaming white teeth, the whites of my eyes, and cheeky pink tongue.

I'm an oddity, a commodity, a rumor. I'm the king's favored. His prized saddle. The one he gold-touched and keeps in a cage at the top of his castle, my body bearing the mark of his ownership and favoritism.

The gilded pet.

I'm the darling of King Midas, ruler of Highbell and the Sixth Kingdom of Orea. People flock to see me just as

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much as they come to look upon his gleaming castle
worth more than all the riches in the entire realm.

I'm the gold-plated prisoner.

But what a pretty prison it is.

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CHAPTER 2

My tiredness is forgotten with Midas standing in front of me.

All of my focus is on him, my every nerve aware of his attention. As Midas continues to watch me, I take the opportunity to look over the handsome planes of his smooth face, the determined edge of his eyes.

The longer I look at him, the more I forgive him for bringing me up here tonight. For making me be a bystander of the pleasure I took no part in as he spread the thighs of his saddles.

Midas raises a hand and slips his finger past my bars. “You’re so precious to me, Auren,” he murmurs, voice low, tone tender.

I freeze, my breath contorting in my chest like a stiff, sharp bevel that scrapes my nerves into awareness. He carefully draws closer until a finger trails down my cheek. My skin tingles at the contact, but I continue to hold

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perfectly still, too nervous to even flutter my eyelids closed in case that tiny movement would make him stop touching me.

Please don't stop touching me.

I desperately want to lean forward and nuzzle against him, to reach through the bars and touch him back, but I know I shouldn't. So I stay still, though I can't keep the eager glint from shining in my gold eyes.

"Did you enjoy watching tonight?" he asks, his fingers carefully trailing down to skim the edge of my plush bottom lip. My mouth parts, breath demanding as it wraps around the pad of his thumb, heat drawing in heat.

"I would enjoy participating more," I reply, extremely mindful of how his fingers move with my mouth as I speak.

Midas brings his hand back up so that he can touch a piece of my hair. He rubs the strands together, watching the way they glimmer in the candlelight. "You know you're too precious to pile you in with the other saddles."

I give him a tight smile. "Yes, my king."

Midas drops my hair and taps me on the nose before pulling his hand out of the cage. It takes a lot of self-control to stay still, to not arc my body toward him like a branch bending to the call of the wind. He breezes past me, and I want to bend.

"You're not like one of the common saddles to be ridden daily, Auren. You're worth far more than them. Besides, I like you always there, watching me. It makes

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me hard,” he says with a heated gaze.

It’s funny how he can make me feel both immense desire and crushing disappointment at the same time.

Even though I shouldn’t, I push back. I blame the coiling forlorn want in my stomach. “But the other saddles resent me, and the servants talk. Don’t you think it would be better if you let me participate one night, even if all I do is touch *you*?” I ask. I know I sound a bit pathetic, but I yearn for him.

His brown eyes narrow on me, and just like that, I know I’ve overstepped. My stomach tightens for an entirely new reason now. I’ve lost him. I’ve torn the playfulness off like a ragged strip of parchment.

Handsome features harden, charm cooling like snow over coals. “You are my royal saddle. My favored. My precious,” he lectures, making my eyes drop down to the edges of my toes. “I don’t give a forged fuck what the servants and saddles say. You are mine to do with as I wish, and if I wish to keep you in your caged quarters where only I can get to you, then that is my right.”

I shake my head at myself. *Stupid, stupid*. “You’re right. I just thought—”

“You are not here to have thoughts,” Midas snaps, cutting me off in a rare harsh discipline that makes my breath catch. He was in such a good mood, and I ruined it. “Do I not treat you well?” he demands, flinging his arms up as his voice cracks through the vast room. “Do I not bestow every comfort to you?”

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“You do—”

“There are whores in the city right now, living in squalor, pissing in buckets and humping in the streets to make a coin with their cunt. And yet, you complain?”

My lips clamp shut. He’s right. My situation could be so much worse. It *was* worse. And he saved me from it.

Bright side: The fact that I’m the king’s favored gives me lots of advantages and protections that others don’t have. Who knows what would’ve happened if the king hadn’t rescued me? I could be owned by horrible people right now. I could be living where disease and cruelty runs rampant. I could be fearing for my life.

After all, that was my existence before. A victim of child trafficking, I lived for far too long at the hands of bad people. Saw too many vile things.

I ran away once, lived with the only kind people I’d ever met since my parents. I thought I’d escaped the brutality of life. Until raiders came and ruined that too. My life was going to be pushed right back into misery, but Midas swooped in and saved me.

He became my shelter from the harsh, biting violence always raining down on my beaten soul, and then he made me into his famed figurine.

I have no right to complain or demand. When I think of how I could still be living...well, the list pretty much just goes on and on with *lots* of other really unpleasant things, and I don’t like to think about that. I get

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indigestion when I think of my past, so I prefer not to. After all, indigestion doesn't mix with the amount of wine I drink every night. That's why I'm a bright side kind of girl.

The second King Midas sees the contrition on my face, he looks pleased with himself that he was able to redirect my line of thinking. His eyes soften again, and his knuckles come up to brush against my arm. If I was a cat, I'd purr.

"That's my precious girl," he says, and the worry knotted up in my gut loosens a bit, because I *am* precious to him, and I always will be. He and I, we have a bond no one else understands. No one else can. I knew him before he wore the crown. I knew him before people bowed to him in reverence. Before this castle gleamed with gold. Ten years I've been with him, and that decade knotted the string between us.

"I'm sorry," I tell him.

"It's alright," he soothes, one more stroke over the bones in my wrist. "You look tired. Go on back to your chambers. I'll call for you in the morning."

I frown as he pulls away. "In the morning?" I fish. He doesn't normally call for me until after the sun has set.

He nods as he starts to turn and walk away. "Yes, King Fulke is leaving tomorrow to return to Ranhold Castle."

It takes a lot for me not to visibly sigh in relief. I can't stand King Fulke of Fifth Kingdom. He's a sleazy,

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crass old man with the power of duplication. When he uses his power, he can duplicate whatever he touches exactly once. It doesn't work on people, thank Divine, or I bet he would've tried to duplicate me ages ago.

If I never see Fulke again, it would be too soon, but he and my king have been allies for several years now. Since our kingdoms border each other, he comes here a few times each year, usually with wagons full of things for Midas to turn to gold. Once he gets back to his own castle, I'm sure Fulke duplicates it all. He's gotten *very* rich off of Midas's alliance.

I'm not sure what my king gets in return, but I highly doubt he's making Fulke rich out of the kindness of his heart. Midas isn't exactly known for being selfless, but hey, when you're a king, you have to take care of yourself and your kingdom. I don't fault him for it.

"Oh," I reply, knowing what this implies. King Fulke will want to see me before he leaves. He has a near obsession with me that he doesn't try to hide anymore.

Bright side? His enthrallment makes Midas pay more attention to me. It's like when children are fighting over a single toy. When Fulke is around, Midas hoards me, making sure Fulke doesn't get a chance to play.

If Midas notices my discomfort, he doesn't say anything about it. "You'll come to the breakfast room in the morning while we dine," he says, and I nod. "Now go to your room and get some rest so you can be fresh. I'll send for you when it's time."

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I bow my head. "Yes, my king."

With another smile, Midas walks out of the atrium with a flap of his robe, and I'm left alone, the atrium suddenly feeling cavernous.

I sigh and look at the expanse of gold bars that curve out into the room, silently hating them. If only I was strong enough to pull the bars apart and slip out. It's not even that I'd run away, because I wouldn't. I *do* know how good I have it here. But to just be allowed to roam on my own within the castle, to follow Midas to his bedroom...that's all the freedom I long for.

Just for fun, I grip two of the bars and pull with all of my might. "Come on, you little gilded prick sticks," I mutter as my arms strain.

Admittedly, I don't have much to boast about in the muscles department. I probably should use some of my free time to exercise. It's not as if I'm too busy. I could do sprints from one end of the floor to the other, or I could climb up the rungs of the cage and do pull-ups, or I could...

A snort of laughter escapes me, and my hands drop back to my sides. I'm bored, but I'm not *that* bored. That male saddle with the abs is obviously much more motivated than me.

I look past my bars to the birdcage that's hanging from a pedestal a few feet away. Inside, there's a solid gold bird sitting frozen on her perch. She used to be a snow finch, I think. A belly marked to match the white

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snow she would've flown over, wings outstretched to glide through icy swept wind. Now, her soft feather down is all hard metallic lines, her wings forever tucked against her small form, her throat clogged into silence.

"Don't look at me like that, Coin," I tell her. She stares unblinkingly back at me.

"I know," I say with a sigh. "I know it's important to Midas that I'm kept safe inside my cage, just like you," I say with a tilt of my head before I glance at all the luxuries I have within reach.

The food, the pillows, the expensive clothing. Some people would kill for these things, and I don't just mean that as a figure of speech. They would *actually* kill for it. Poverty is a vicious motivator. I know that all too well.

"It's not like he hasn't tried to make me more comfortable. I shouldn't be so greedy or thankless. Things could be a lot worse, right?"

The bird just continues to stare at me, and I tell myself to stop talking to the thing. It took its last breath a long time ago. I don't even remember the sound of its song anymore. I imagine it was beautiful, though, before it solidified into a gleaming, silent specter.

Is that going to be me?

Fifty years from now, will my body go completely solid like the bird? Will my organs fuse, my voice silence, tongue weighted? Will the whites of my eyes bleed out, lids stuck forever open, unseeing? Maybe it'll be me on my perch in here, stuck immobile forever, while people

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look in, talking to me through the bars when I can't talk back.

It's a fear I have, though I've never voiced it. Who knows if this power will change? Maybe one day, I really will be a statue.

For now, all I can do is keep singing, keep ruffling my proverbial feathers. Keep breathing with a chest that still rises and falls like the sun. Coin and I aren't the same. At least not yet.

Turning, I run my hand down the bars before letting my arm drop to my side. *Bright side, Auren. You have to look on the bright side.*

Like the fact that my cage isn't small. Midas has slowly expanded it over the years to reach throughout the entire top floor of the palace. He had workers construct extra doorways at the backs of the rooms to be fitted with barred walkways that spill out into large circular cages. He did all of that for me.

On my own, I can get to the atrium, drawing room, library, and royal breakfast room, plus my personal rooms, which takes up the entire north wing. It's more space than a lot of people have in the kingdom.

My personal rooms include my bathroom suite, dressing room, and my bedroom. Lavish rooms with giant-sized bird cages built into each one, and connecting barred walkways that allow me to walk from one room to the other so that I never have to leave my cage unless Midas comes to escort me elsewhere. But even then, he

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usually only takes me to the throne room.

Poor favored golden girl. I know how ungrateful I sound, and I hate it. It's like a festering slice deep under my skin. I keep scratching at it, irritating it, even though I know I shouldn't touch it, should let it heal over and scar.

But while every room is opulent and my every view elegant, the luxury of it all has long since faded away for me. I guess that's bound to happen after being here for so long. Does it really matter if your cage is solid gold when you aren't allowed to leave it? A cage is a cage, no matter how gilded.

And that's the crux of it. I begged him to keep me and protect me. He fulfilled his promise. It's me who's ruining this. It's my own mind warping me, whispering thoughts I have no right to think.

Sometimes, when I drink enough wine, I can forget I'm in a cage, I can forget the pestering scratch.

So I drink a lot of wine.

Blowing out another breath, I look up at the glass ceiling, noticing more clouds rolling in from the north, their puffy forms illuminated by a left-behind moon.

A foot of snow will probably dump over Highbell tonight. By tomorrow morning, I wouldn't be surprised if all of the atrium windows are completely covered in white powder and thick ice, the sky hidden from me once again.

Bright side? For now, I still have that single star peeking through the night.

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When I was young, I remember my mother telling me that the stars were goddesses waiting to hatch from the light. A pretty story for a little girl who would lose her family and her home in one fell swoop.

At five years old, on a clear, starry night, I was ushered out of my bed. Single file we walked, me and the other kids living nearby, while the sound of fighting erupted in the air. We crept out into a warm eventide, trying to get to safety while danger surrounded us. I cried beneath my parents' kisses, but they told me to go. To be brave. That they would see me soon.

One order, one urge, one lie.

But someone must've known that we were being whisked away. Someone must've told. So while I and the others were snuck out, it wasn't safety that we reached. Instead, before we could even get out of the city, thieves attacked from the shadows, like they were just waiting for us. Blood was cut out of our escorts. Hot liquid sprayed over small, stunned faces. The memory still makes my eyes burn. That was when I knew that I was awake during a nightmare.

I tried to yell for help, to call for my parents, to tell them that this was all wrong, but a leather gag that tasted of oak bark was pressed into my mouth. I cried as we were stolen. Tears trickled. Feet shuffled. Heartbeats lurched. Home faded. There were screams, and metal clangs, and crying, but there was silence, too. The silence was the worst sound.

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I kept looking up at those shells of light in the black sky, begging the goddesses to be born and come to rescue us. To return me to my bed, to my parents, to safety.

They didn't.

You'd think I might resent the stars for that, but that's not the case. Because every time I look up, I remember my mother. Or at least, a piece of her. A piece I've been desperately trying to hold onto for twenty years.

But memory and time aren't friends. They reject each other, they hurry in opposite directions, pulling the binding taut between them, threatening to snap. They fight, and we inexplicably lose. Memory and time. Always losing one as you go on with the other.

I can't recall what my mother's face looked like. I don't remember the rumble of my father's voice. I can't dig up the feel of their arms around me when they held me for the last time.

It's faded.

The single star above winks at me, the sight blurred from the water gathered in my eyes. In the next second, my star is smothered by roiling clouds that block it from view, making a pang of disappointment scrape the surface of my heart.

If those stars really are goddesses waiting to be born, I should warn them to stay where they are in the safety of their twinkling light. Because down here? Down here, life is dark and lonely, and it has noisy bells and not nearly enough wine.

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CHAPTER 3

*I*n the morning, I get woken up by the damn bell, a headache bursting to life behind my eyes.

I snap open my crusty eyelids and rub away the blur. As I sit up, the wine bottle that was apparently still in my lap falls onto the gold floor and rolls away. I look around and find two of the king's guards standing watch on the other side of my bars.

My cage takes up most of the room, but there's enough space for the guards to walk through all the rooms on the outside when they're doing their rounds.

I quickly wipe the drool from my mouth and stretch, waiting for the bell toll to stop its incessant dinging, my head tender from the alcohol I consumed before I finally fell asleep last night.

"Shut up," I grumble at it, my hands swiping down my face.

"About time she woke up," I hear.

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I look over at the guards and notice Digby—the older one with gray hair and a thick beard—standing sentinel by the door. He’s my regular guard, and he’s had this post for years. He’s completely straight-laced and serious, always refusing to chat with me, or play any of my drinking games.

But the guard who talked? He’s new. Despite my hangover, I instantly perk up. I don’t get many new ones.

I study the newcomer. He looks like he’s barely seventeen winters old, still with pockmarks on his face and gangly limbs. He was probably just drafted from the city. All males who come of age are immediately enlisted into King Midas’s army unless they have farming rights.

“What’s your name?” I ask, walking forward to grip the bars.

His eyes shoot over to look at me, and he straightens his golden armor, the bell emblem on the chest plate shining proudly. “Joq.”

Digby cuts him a glare. “Don’t talk to her.”

Joq chews on his lip in thought. “Why not?”

“Because it’s orders, that’s why.”

Joq shrugs, and I watch the whole exchange with budding curiosity. I wonder if *he’d* ever play a drinking game with me.

“You think she has a gold cunt?” Joq asks abruptly, tilting his head as he looks over at me.

Ookay, so he’s not interested in a drinking game, then. Good to know.

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“It’s rude to talk about people’s cunts right in front of them,” I tell him pointedly, and his eyebrows shoot up in surprise at my blunt words.

“But you’re a saddle,” he says with a frown. “Your cunt is what you’re good for.”

Wow, okay. So Joq’s an asshole.

I grip my gold bars as I narrow my eyes on him. “Female saddles aren’t *only* good for their cunts. We usually have awesome tits too,” I say dryly.

Instead of catching my scathing tone, he just looks excited. Joq is an idiot too, it seems.

Digby turns to him. “Careful, lad. The king hears you speaking about his favored’s body, and he’ll have your head on a gold spike faster than you can say *forged fuck*.”

Joq’s eyes trail over me like he isn’t listening to Digby at all. “She’s a fine piece, that’s all I’m sayin’,” he replies, clearly not wanting to shut up. “I thought it was a myth that King Midas gold-touched his favorite saddle.” Joq scratches the back of his mussed up, mud-colored hair. “How do you think he did it?”

“Did *what*?” Digby asks, clearly irritated with him.

“Well...shouldn’t everything he touches turn solid gold? She should be a solid statue right now, right?”

Digby looks at him like he’s a fool. “Look around, boy. The king turns some things solid gold, and other things keep their form and just go golden, like the curtains and shit. I don’t know how the fuck he does it, and I don’t

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care, because it's not my duty to care. It *is* my duty to guard the top wing of the castle and his favored, though, so that's what I do. If you were wise, you'd do the same and stop yapping your damn mouth. Now go walk your rounds."

"Alright, alright." Chastised, Joq sends me one more curious look before he turns away and slips out the door to do his walking rounds of the rest of the floor.

I shake my head. "Young guards these days. Idiots, all of them, am I right, Dig?"

Digby just glances at me before looking away to stare straight ahead in his *guardy* pose. After all the years of being around him, I've learned that he takes his job very, very seriously.

"Best get ready, Miss Auren. It's late," he says gruffly.

I sigh, pressing a thumb against my sore temple before I head for the archway that leads to the barred walkway that separates my rooms. I walk through it and go into my dressing room, while Digby stays in the other room to give me privacy.

Some of the other guards like to push the boundaries and follow me in here from the other side. I'm glad to be behind my bars in those instances. Luckily, I do have a golden sheath of fabric draped down from the ceiling. It covers part of the cage so that I can undress behind it without being seen, but I'm pretty sure it still casts off the shadow of my silhouette, which is why those pricks

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follow.

But I don't have to worry about Digby ogling my shadow. He's never tried to be inappropriate or steal looks at me—not like some of the others. Come to think of it, that's probably why he's been my guard for so many years, while some of the others haven't lasted. I wonder if King Midas put *their* heads on golden spikes.

This morning, it's dark and dreary in my dressing room. I only have one skylight in the ceiling above, but the window is usually covered in snow, and today is no different. My only other light source is the lantern on the table. I quickly refill it and turn up the flame, and then get started with my morning routine in the soft light. Midas is going to summon me this morning, so I have to be ready on time.

I look around at all the racks of gowns hanging up in the room, my eyes searching through them. They're all made with gold thread and fabric of course. As Midas's favored, I'm never seen in anything less.

Walking over to the back, I pick one with an empire waist and a non-existent back. *All* of my dresses have no backs. It's necessary because of my ribbons.

I call them ribbons for lack of a better word. I have two dozen long golden ribbons that sprout out on both sides of my spine, spanning the entire length, from my shoulders to my tailbone. They're long too, so they drape to the floor like a train on a gown, dragging behind me as I walk.

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That's what most people think they are—just extra fabric from my dresses. They have no idea that they're actually attached to me. And honestly, it was a surprise to me as well. I grew them right before Midas saved me. It wasn't painless, either. I went through weeks of night sweats and burning pain as they grew from my back, slowly lengthening each day until they finally stopped.

As far as I know, I'm the only person in Orea with ribbons. All the royals have magic, of course. They can't take the crown without it. Some commoners have magic too. I once saw a jester who could make the flares of light emit from his fingers every time he snapped or clapped. A nice little night show for shadow puppets on the wall.

But as far as my ribbons, they aren't just pretty or unusual. They aren't just a throne room trick. They're prehensile. I can control them like I can control my own limbs. Usually, I just let them drape behind me like supple fabric, but I can also move each one when I want to, and they're stronger than they look.

Lifting off my night dress, I leave the wrinkled fabric in the pile near the bars where the maids can come to pick it up later for washing. I pull on the new gown, adjusting the drapery to lay just right and cover everything that should be covered.

Sitting down at the vanity table, I look into the mirrored glass. My ribbons raise behind me, threading through my hair and braiding it into intricate weaving plaits until it looks like I have a net of braids resting

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