

The Masquerade

Shane had lived in the Castle her whole life. So had her brother, older than her by one year. Her parents, on the other hand, had *not* lived in the Castle their whole lives, which was perhaps why they were okay with moving. Her parents had been given the Castle the day after their wedding. They had gotten a letter bequeathing Mariner's Castle to the "Gentlefolk newly married couple." The letter had been from an unknown sender, but Shane had a sneaking suspicion that it was from the Castle itself. Her parents had been grateful when they first moved in, but now they were having a new castle being built for them.

In Shane's opinion, the Castle was much more gorgeous than anything that could be built by humans. Beautiful with its gleaming jade stones and mahogany molding. An eight-story tower stood at each cardinal point, with an eleven-story tower in the center of the Castle. The rest of the Castle was four to six levels depending on where you were in the building. The kitchen made up the majority of the first two levels of the center tower, with stairs leading down to a massive basement and a medium-sized cellar. Some rooms around that tower were also part of the kitchen. Shane thought it was adorable how the Castle used food to bring people together, even if she sometimes hated dealing with all the delegates at feasts.

The next three levels above the overly-massive kitchen were dining rooms for the morning, midday, and evening. The next two were all empty rooms; Shane wasn't quite sure what they used to be. The three floors above that were old nurseries for maxplain drakons (they weren't raised in the Castle any more). The very top floor of that center tower was one enormous room with windows for walls and a mosaic tile floor.

Shane loved this room more than anywhere else in the Castle. She once spent an entire week cleaning it so that the mosaic lit up when the sun shone on it. The roof was glass, and on clear nights she would lay on the floor and gaze through the ceiling at the sky. Sometimes she even climbed onto the glass roof to look at the stars, but then she had to make sure to clean it later, which was unnecessarily difficult.

If Shane ever cared to lie face down when she was up on the glass roof she would be able to see the mosaic in all of its magnificent entirety. Bright, shimmering tiles that formed a glorious battle between gods so ancient, only the most crumbling bits of the Castle could remember when they had existed.

But she didn't, because the stars were too beautiful to turn around and look at the floor of her favorite room. Actually, the top of the tallest tower was only her second favorite room. The third was the library (for obvious reasons). The first was her bedroom.

The Castle had hand picked it for her, and she thought it had excellent taste. A bookcase was set into one of the walls, floor to ceiling, and it was well-stocked with books of poetry, short stories, and novels that sometimes spanned series. It was a jungle of different colors and sizes, organized to Shane's eyes but no one else's. Candles and knick-knacks sat on the shelves in front of the books, and flowering vines were entangled around the stories.

The rest of the walls were covered with artworks done by Shane and her father, except for the giant window that had a squashy reading seat set into it. Shane's room was in one of the Castle's corners, so she had two outside walls. The one that didn't have her reading spot had double doors leading out to a balcony that mostly overlooked the ocean. If she looked far to the right she could see the new castle her parents were building.

Quite a few years after her parents had been crowned king and queen they had decided to do things in a more orderly fashion than what had been done in the past. At first, the king and queen did everything themselves, with the Castle helping them; but now, her parents were going to have a grander, more orthodox castle built for them. They also started delegating tasks to advisors in order to have a system in place.

Unfortunately for her parents, one of the advisors hated advising (even though it was what he signed up for) and decided that he would like a more *powerful* position in the kingdom. Lord Daughery had at first been most satisfied with his job when the king had appointed him. Now he was less than satisfied, but more on that later.

Every year the Castle hosted a grand masquerade ball the night of the lunar eclipse. Everyone said it was to celebrate the coming of the new year, but what they didn't know was that the Castle just liked being full of people having fun. For a very long time people were only in good moods when they were celebrating the new year and the eclipse, so the Castle made sure it was surrounded by people on that day.

Shane loved the masquerade ball for the anonymity it gave her. This year for the ball, Shane's outfit turned her into an ozlaen fox. Her dress was a green a few shades darker than the Castle, and wispy bits of fabric that resembled the feathery fur of the fox made up the bodice, with the skirt flaring out from her waist and just brushing the floor. Her more exuberant movements revealed the dark brown lacy-looking heels that were the same color as the ozlaen fox's paw pads. Her mask was an organized mess of peridot, amber and green wisps of fabric that framed her brown eyes. Boring eyes, Shane thought, but not when they were surrounded by jewels. The mask also had dark green ears tipped with gray, just like her outfit's namesake.

The night of the ball came almost too quickly, Shane hardly had any time to look forward to it. Her lady's maid, Nadia, helped her put on her dress, fix up her hair into a bun (so that it wouldn't get in the way of her dancing), and lace up her heels and elbow-length gloves. Shane glanced at the gloves dubiously.

"At least keep them on for your entrance," Nadia said sternly.

"Fine," Shane sighed. She hated how her hands felt in gloves, like they were trapped. She would definitely find a way to ditch them after her entrance.

Shane met her parents and her brother in the entry hall to greet the guests. She tried to use the time with her family to convince them (yet again) that she could live in the Castle alone. She knew it would take care of her, but her mother shushed her and told her to greet the guests.

"Good evening Lord Daughery," Shane said when he strutted by covered head to toe in a shaggy blue costume meant to resemble the ebrasian cattle from the highlands.

“Good evening young Shane!” He exclaimed with much exuberance. While the lord wasn’t Shane’s favorite, she did love the way he was always excited about whatever he was discussing. Of course, she didn’t know that that excitement was covering up his contempt for her family, but illusions must be preserved.

That night was when Daughery had planned his not-so-grand takeover. He thought it was a wonderful plan, one that no one would see coming, and no one could stop. He was wrong on all three accounts, only because of the Castle. The Castle knew what he was planning and it was not impressed. It knew that it could stop him easily without even straining itself. So when Lord Daughery sprinkled the sconces with his special purple powder, the Castle just darkened them after he had left. Even though the Castle knew the Gentlefolks were going to leave, it still wanted to protect them, especially Shane.

Daughery locked all the doors and blocked all the windows. The Castle opened them right up once he had passed. When Daughery hid flowers with sedating fumes in the vases around the Castle, the Castle encouraged the other plants to strangle the new ones. It wasn’t that hard for the Castle, what flower wants its home crowded by a smelly new invader?

The Castle was mindful of Daughery as he tried to fulfill his dastardly plan, and by the time the night was a third of the way through Daughery thought his plan had been meticulously set up, but the Castle knew that it had been skillfully dismantled.

Shane’s entrance into the great hall was not what she was expecting. It was very different from last year. *This* year the music that played for her entrance brought to mind leaves drifting down to rest in a pool below a wild waterfall, the best place to find ozlaen foxes. The music swelled to a crescendo as she entered the room with the announcement of “Ozlaen Fox!” She was immediately swept up by a young man, whereupon they struck up a diminution to her song which was rapidly becoming more complicated. Shane watched the lights blur into bright lines as she twirled before she closed her eyes and gave into the music. The streaks of light

against the back of her eyelids turned into splotches of color as she swayed and spun with the melody. Her partner was a skillful dancer. He led her around the room, avoiding the other couples, and she was able to add nuances to the dance that she couldn't have if he hadn't been so talented.

She opened her eyes and smiled at him. "You're quite the dancer."

"I'm just trying to keep up with you," he responded. And indeed, Shane noticed that he had a look of concentration on what she could see of his face.

The song changed as someone else entered the room, and they slowed down to a dance that was a combination of a waltz and a bruines. The man's look of concentration disappeared as he directed himself and Shane through the simple yet elegant steps.

"Don't you want to know who I am?" he asked as they passed an older couple turning in slow circles.

"I think you miss the whole point of the mask," Shane laughed.

She already had an idea of who the young man was anyway. She danced with someone of his exact height last year, and she could never forget the way he moved fluidly with the music, as if it required no second thought even though it clearly did. She had asked around, and found out that he lived far North in the kingdom. He was most likely the son of Duke Archdon, a close advisor of her mother's, who had retired last year after having a stroke.

"Well, Princess, it doesn't seem quite fair that I know who you are but you don't know *anything* about me."

"I'm not as clueless as you might think," she responded, quirked an eyebrow that he couldn't even see because of her mask. Shane opened her mouth to say something else cutting to the cocky lord, but was cut off by quite a few people shouting in alarm.

Throughout the ballroom the sconces were blinking out one by one, eliciting screams as the room plunged into darkness. Shane squinted, her eyes picking out details by the faint light

coming from some of the guests' glowing costumes. She found the eyes of the lord across from her and saw that they were dark with worry she knew was mirrored in her own eyes.

The sconces flickered back on and Shane abandoned her dance partner to hurry to where her parents were standing. It was only once she had reached them that she realized Lord Daughery was standing on the stage, in front of the band that had been shocked into silence.

The advisor, who was now wearing a tasteful suit, spread his arms wide as Shane's father subtly motioned to the guards lining the ballroom.

"You should have been expecting this from the moment you sent me on that measly assignment to Shargrey," he directed at the king. "No person can argue my power after what has happened here today!"

The lights flickered out again and a sweet-smelling smoke flooded the room, summoning more screams and a stampede towards the doors. The room started to spin around Shane as the windows and doors burst open, removing the sedative and allowing the reserve guards in, just like the Castle had planned. Shane thought she saw her dance partner trying to shove through the crowd of people, but then all she could see was Daughery. People backed away from him as he charged at her dad. Shane felt a scream tear through her throat before she was thrown to her knees as the Castle rippled.

Shane lifted her head from her position on the floor. The Castle had softened itself beneath her, but she could see that it hadn't for others. People were rising to their feet, rubbing bruised knees and elbows. She patted the floor in thanks before standing herself. She could just make out Daughery struggling to stand up through the smoke that still drifted through the room. The guests who were still in the ballroom had backed up to the walls, and guards were racing towards Daughery.

Then Shane's dance partner was next to her, pushing her behind him as Daughery came stumbling towards her with outstretched arms. Shane knew the guards weren't going to make it in time, but right before the traitorous advisor could reach them one of the lanterns

decorating the ballroom was dropped by the Castle, cutting Daughery off from them. Shane once again met the eyes of the man holding her as the lights flickered back on and the guards restrained Daughery. She saw relief in them, and something else that she didn't feel like interpreting, so instead she turned to look at Daughery and the guards. The Castle was incredibly smug about its clever takedown of Daughery's plan. Shane watched as rugs rustled under the former advisor's feet, tripping him up as the guards dragged him to the dungeons to await trial.

She caught a glimpse of her mom and twisted away from the young lord holding her to run towards them. "Mom, the Castle saved us, it saved *me!*"

"I know darling." Shane thought that her mom looked troubled, but then her face smoothed over and she walked towards the stage to address the attendees still present. Shane's father and brother had already left to call a meeting with the other advisors, only some of whom had been at the masquerade ball.

Everyone was heading to the doors when they swung shut with gentle clicks. The lights flared different colors as the band members stared at each other confusedly before starting to play again. The Castle knew there was no more danger, and it wanted people to have fun.

"You didn't have to run away," a familiar voice said over Shane's shoulder. She turned around to see her lord grinning at her.

"Still here?"

"Of course." He offered her his hand. Shane debated for a second before she realized that the best way to convince the guests that everything was fine was to return to dancing. She placed her hand in his and he twirled her onto the dance floor.

Shane smiled as she spun. She knew it would be infinitely easier to convince her parents to let her stay with the Castle after the way it had protected her tonight. She would have been even happier had she known about the letter sitting on her writing desk in her room, addressed to "Shane and escort," from an unknown sender.