

THE DEATH
OF
SOPHIA ACADIANE

The Death of Sophia Acadaine

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CHAPTER ONE

Heat blazed and drenched the inside of the tent as the Ringmaster breathed fire. Expelling the licking flames onto the swinging acrobats, gracefully flying from hoop to hoop.

The cheery crowd gasped in awe, claps rising in entertainment. Whistles shrieked from somewhere within the throng. The Ringmaster slowly lifted a hand, commanding silence from the bleachers. Audience willingly handing over authority. Once the eerie stillness held everyone captive, only then did the Ringmaster speak. His voice laced with temptation made for drawing in people into their wildest desires, “Welcome to Akuji’s Cirque.”

Wild hollers blared at his words. If there was one thing that the people in the City of Somnium loved, it was the beginning of fall. The annual circus tents would be put up. Red and white peaks jutting right over the trees of the Botanic Garden between the two wealthiest parts of the city. Flags and banners flapped in the cooling breeze capturing the curiosity of the wandering citizens. Lines of lightbulbs strung from each high apex, flashing warm lights.

“Where the difference between life and death is only a step away.” His dark laden voice nicked a grin onto Jinx’s lips. She remembered being in his clutches before, the very man who taught her how to pickpocket and move with ease between the shadows. Time was a peculiar thing indeed. In a different time, face, and name, Jinx had once been one of his best acrobats. Though now, she went by the name of Sophia Acadaine, cloaked under her illusion of a woman in society.

Discomfort found itself as an elbow lodging between Jinx’s ribs. “What is so funny?” Lady Panchak loudly whispered as stern as her motherly tone let her. Her blond hair woven into curls atop her head. Corset cinched tightly to the point; Jinx wondered if Lady Panchak could even breathe. She touched her forehead in resignation and clutched her stomach.

“Apologies Lady Panchak. I only found it amusing that someone named the circus after Akuji the Virtue of Death and Fear, yet it doesn’t seem quite fitting. Wouldn’t an act like this have a more appropriate title for a Virtue of Trickery?” Lady Panchak's brows pinched in confusion, wrinkles deepening. Jinx waved a hand, “Ignore my rather... ridiculous thoughts. I just found it odd we have four Virtues, yet none dip into the pool of mischief.”

“A ridiculous thought indeed, only one you would have, Sophia.” Rylee Panchak – Sophia’s cousin – called from the other side.

Jinx had been wanting to learn the proper ways of being a lady for some time and, as an eighteenth birthday present, she'd gifted herself the lesson. The Panchak family was her golden ticket.

Lady Panchak hadn't spoken to her sister Lady Acadaine in quite some time—not since the Acadaine family had moved to east. Prying and poking around the right edges, Jinx had got her sly hands on a portrait of Sophia Acadaine. Using her illusions to create her masterpiece. As well as some information on her relationships with every member of the Panchak family. Rylee and Sophia had always been opposing sides in any game.

Rylee hadn't been too happy when Jinx had come knocking her door, pretending to be her cousin Sophia Acadaine. An eighteen-year-old woman with skin of ivory and sheets of hair as red as a burning fire. Freckles peppered the bridge of her nose, extending to her cheeks. Blue eyes matching the Charmed Bay by Wateredge. Slim cheeks and a button nose. Sophia held a sort of edge to her delicate beauty. Sophia's figure held wider hips and a bigger bust than Jinx, yet that didn't stop her from doing all she could.

“What are you insinuating, dear cousin?” Jinx said icily. Her smile quickly fading.

Rylee smiled, flipping back her golden hair, adjusting the pastel yellow skirt of her dress as she turned to face Jinx. Sending daggers her way behind those deep brown eyes. “Only that if anyone were to have any radical ideas, it would be from your pitying mind. Who knows what horrible words will spill from your mouth next? I assume it’d be something like you supporting the Cursed.”

Beneath her unwavering, collected mask, Jinx’s neck warmed as she bit down her tongue to refrain from saying anything out of character. One of the few difficult things about being an illusionist and impersonating someone. Staying in character.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Jinx snapped, trying to wield some playful tones in her voice. Her stomach clenched uneasily at the lie. The Cursed weren’t the ones people should be afraid of, it was only themselves. Driving them into the darkness. Jinx swallowed the irritation climbing her throat. “It would be a disgrace to our family name, Rylee.”

Rylee’s lips peeled back in annoyance. Jinx smirked at the minor victory.

Jinx muttered, the words forming around her lips before she had the chance to stop them, “At least I’m not trying to trick Apollo Volcaine.”

You couldn't have his Grace even if you wanted to," Rylee snapped. She seethed, her pale face turning crimson red with fury. "Even if you walked into the House of Lords with nothing but your underthings, none of the seven sons would even glance your way."

Oh yes, because that is what every woman should desire. Impress the seven aristocratic families to have one of their sons and be treated like cattle in the marriage market, all just to provide more heirs to a lineage. Jinx itched to tell her, yet that would be out of role.

"Sophia." Lady Panchak barked, staring wide eyed. "Why you aren't wearing your Tutela?"

Jinx's eyes jumped to her wrist. The red string bracelet was missing. It was the new custom for society to wear a Tutela in protection from the Cursed. Believing the Virtue Elu—representing Life and Nature—blessed it. In Jinx's mind, it was most likely a brilliant businessman with a brilliant marketing strategy. No Virtue would come down from their realms and bless a bracelet, let alone thousands. "It must have fallen."

"Well, you must get a new one by tomorrow. We don't want society to think you *are* a supporter of the Cursed." Lady Panchak tapped her wrist.

"Of course, Lady Panchak. I wouldn't want them to think the same." Jinx dipped her head in false submission.

The Ringmaster announced again, rallying recognition, his red tailcoat seeming to glow under all the eyes staring at him. He bowed deep at the waist, tipping over his black top hat. “Let the night begin. As we say in Akuji’s Cirque, may fortune favor the brave. You do only have one life to spare.” His coal rimmed eyes from the darkest pits of Akuji’s home landed on her as if he knew she was there, and defied the Virtues.

A crack whipped, sparking an explosion of thick clouds. Not a trace of the Ringmaster insight. A beat of silence wavered until a single applaud ignited a cascade of popping handclaps. Though Jinx couldn’t shake off the tight nausea coiling around her stomach.

“If there really we had Virtue of Trickery, maybe they were the ones that damned the city with the Cursed.” Lady Panchak whispered into her ear. A hint of disgust coated her tongue. If there really were a Virtue of Trickery maybe, she never would have gotten into that stupid bargain. Jinx’s caught sight of Rylee behind Lady Panchak’s shoulder, her eyes falling to her hands, turning hollow. Jinx offered her a tight smile that didn’t reach her eyes. Gooseflesh peppered along her skin.

Thunder threatened the sky, banging a fist against the tent ceiling. Horses trotted out behind the red draped curtains and the show began.

Stepping out of the main tent, the buttery smell of popcorn mixed with the humid air. Speckled night stars blanketed away by the waiting storm in the sky. Jinx and the Panchak's would have to get home soon before patience ran out. The downpour inevitable. A sheet of darkness hung low. A calm breeze tickling the nape of her neck and brushing her blue laced dress.

“Mother, let's get some sweets before we head home.” Rylee wrapped her fingers around Lady Panchak's elbows.

“Rylee.” She said, almost scolding. “We need you in shape by the spring if you are to find a suitable bachelor.”

Jinx swiftly shut her mouth, refraining from making any comments on that matter. Rylee's vicious smile softened just a tad on the tips. The smallest edges of her face muffled, showing hurt behind the mask.

A strange heavy sensation crept up her core... pity, almost.

Rylee met Jinx's gaze, features hardening back into her glacial look. Eyes thinning, gleaming in defense. The light overhead casting a silver glint, making Rylee looking near Cursed.

Her pulse kicked up. Jinx blinked, and it was gone. Rylee already set her sights elsewhere, not allowing Jinx another peek. She shoved down the notion before letting it grow.

“Come now, darlings, the coach is on its way.” Lady Panchak ordered. Rylee fell into step beside her. Jinx followed along, walking between the various shops and stands the carnival offered.

It was refreshing to see everything from a customer perspective. When she was an acrobat, the Ringmaster worked her day and night, no time for breaks. It was something she hated at the moment but now appreciated. If not for all that training, she wouldn’t have those nimble feet or sly hands.

Closing in on a booth, a paper hammered into the body of a tree with big lettering snagged her eye. Pride and a little fear buzzed in her veins as she read the wanted poster.

WANTED

Dead or Alive

Jinx

10,000 Marcs for the capture of the face stealer

10,000 Reward

Face Stealer? That was catchy.

Her hand caressed the edge of the grained paper. A smirk teased her lips. It was no hidden fact the authorities were aware of a criminal going by the name of Jinx, yet seeing it like this; it felt like real accomplishment. Everyone knew her name, yet there was no face to go along with it.

Light footfalls crunched the drying leaves. Considering the rhythmic beat, it was Rylee approaching. “Why is it always the weirdest things that capture your attention?” Jinx had been right. Her steps falling always a second early and her oddly calming voice were hard to miss.

Flatly, “Do you mind? Your breathing is ruining my dress.”

They both stared at the poster, missing a face. The air thickening between them and it wasn't the storm looming above. “Does Jinx scare you?”

Rylee raised a brow, “It's not like it's going to come steal my face any time soon. Rumor on the street is that it's a Cursed hungry for blood. When it finds you, it eats your face and wears it like a mask.”

Jinx swallowed a laugh. Close but not quite, though that would be an interesting spin to her tale.

She gave a side glance, measuring the ticks of Rylee's face. “Interesting theory. Must be hard to catch a criminal when no one knows what they look like.”

She just said, “Not my problem.”

“Is there something you wanted, Rylee?”

“Mother said to fetch the dog. The stagecoach arrived. I just didn’t think I needed a leash to bring you back.” Rylee picked at her nails, invisible grime underneath.

“Charming.” Jinx folded her hands together. She stepped away, eyes stealing one last glance at the poster. She’ll remember to get it soon.

Rylee’s expressions cinched together, “As always.”

They walked in silence together. A healthy distance away and vigilant, neither daring to acknowledge the other.

Frankly, boredom was never a good thing when it came to Jinx. Maybe that’s why she’d been so many people before. With a heavy sigh, “Did you get those sweets you wanted?” Jinx knew she shouldn’t have instigated the argument, though it was that or more silence.

“No.” Rylee bit.

They reached the carriage. The coachman immediately pulling the door for her.

Jinx lifted a shoulder. “Shame, they were delicious.” The annoyance radiating from Rylee was considered a win for Jinx.

CHAPTER TWO

There is nothing better than a thunderstorm wreaking havoc outside while devouring a good romance novel inside. Wrapped in a wool blanket, Jinx lied on the edge of the window, book propped up on her knees. Cracking her fingers, eyes stitched open, drinking in every word the page had to offer.

The enemies to lovers novel held her by the throat. Her heart racing as she reaches the point where she finds out the male fell in love with the woman first. He'd been keeping it from her, not wanting to impose on her decisions in love. As she told him in the beginning, she could not love. Though it did not stop him from falling for her.

Jinx's heart coiled as she squealed in her seat. Excitement rolled up her spine. Skin peppering as the male confessed his love for her. And she walked away?

What?

That's not supposed to happen. What is wrong with this author? Jinx tossed the book across the room. Anger firing under her skin, neck heating up. Yet there were a hundred pages left so she couldn't jump to conclusions yet. Though that didn't stop Jinx's emotions.

Light flashed through the window, dousing the room in white. Thunder followed after, cracking the sky in half.

Jinx picked up the book from the floor, shoving her bookmark where she'd left off. She wasn't going to deal with that tonight. Needing to be mentally prepared with the trauma the book was going to leave her with.

Despite jumping from life to life, person to person, Jinx would find a book in any spare time she had. Reading words off the page comforted her. Warmth spread through her chest as it reminded her of being home with her uncle. Bringing her books every time he stopped by from his printing press.

She placed the book on the shelf, locking the door next to her with a click. Jinx lowered her cloak, her real face and body breathing. Pressure releasing around her. The ivory skin of Sophia peeled back to reveal the silk brown layer she's always had. The picture of fire red hair replaced with the reality of satin obsidian hair, trailing down to the small of her back. Jinx jumped to the hanging mirror on the wall. Staring into her eyes. Emerald jewels teased with streaks of silver – the silver reminding her of her ability and who she is. Slender cheekbones, arching with elegant grace.

She dipped into bed, cuddling the sheets to her chest. Watching as the rain fell outside her window, hearing the patters splash against the roof.

Thunder boomed again, nestling Jinx further into her comforter. A thud sounded. A crack of glass soon followed.

Jolting alert, Jinx propped off her bed, clutching the dagger under her pillow. Rapidly robing herself as Sophia. She hauled open the door and tracing back the sound.

Halls of the Panchak residence drenched in darkness. Wicked candles hung from the walls, offerings little light in support. Grunts resonated from the room at the end of the hall.

Jinx wielded her stammering heart, soothing her shaking hands. Deep breaths to slow her pounding pulse at her temple. The silence dragged out as she got closer. The road to her door getting further away with each matching step.

She held her dagger in a white knuckled grip. Palms clammy. Free hand touching the knob. Forcing a grating gulp, “Rylee?” She whispered. Fear of what might be inside flipped her stomach. She pushed it down. Logic over emotion, she told herself.

No response.

“Rylee?” A breath, “Are you okay?”

She knocked. The silence was unbearable. Jinx drew in a deep breath and wrapped her fingers around the knob. Rattling the lock. The door wouldn’t open. Hitting the hilt of the dagger against the latch.

Pushing the door open, a wave of icy wind clashed against Jinx’s frame. Her heart fell to the floor at the sight.

A storm of air slashed in circles around Rylee in the center of her room. Snow spun around her in a whirlpool. Her eyes were shut closed, she hunched over herself. She had to stop this now. If Lady Panchak discovered her daughter was a Cursed... who knows what could happen to Rylee.

Jinx turned, shutting the door behind. Shoving her dagger into the lock, sealing it to the outside.

She cut through the snowstorm, frost nipping at her exposed rinds. Hands shielding the incoming hurricane. Pushing against the force of the wind, Jinx reached Rylee in the eye. Crouching down to meet her. She held Rylee by the face, forcing her to meet her stare. "You're okay."

Rylee's brown eyes were red rimmed, tears spilling down her puffed cheeks. Sheer terror screaming behind those eyes, streaks of silver beginning to peek through the deep color. Magic lived in her. What she saw at the carnival wasn't her imagination. "Rylee. I need you to listen to me. You need to calm down."

Her skin frosted, chilled beneath Jinx's touch. "You can contain it. It cannot control you, it will only if you let it."

The wind slowly stopped. Room filled with raw energy fell to the ground. Jinx finally got a clear view of her quarters.

Curtains, sheets, vanity, bed frame, window, the floor. Everything inside these four walls, coated in a blanket of frost. Specks of white ice folded in every home it could find.

“At least it’s certain Tutelas are a scam.” Jinx teased, stunned in awe. Her eyes couldn’t stop soaking in what Rylee had created.

Rylee sniffed. Jinx set her eyes back on the creator. Her hair had gone from a golden yellow to a snow white. The brown in her eyes slowing giving up to the silver peaking behind. Virtues bless this one.

Jinx had heard rumors but never seen it happen. Magic overtook Rylee. She handed over the key and let it travel every road of her body. She wasn’t ready to use that amount of power. It’s unlikely she built any kind of stamina. This was the equivalent of breaking a bone, only that this bone was poisonous and could kill a person.

“Rylee, how long have you been doing this?” She stumbled back, trying to get up. Letting the floor support her weight.

“You aren’t afraid of me?” Jinx’s ears strained, attempting to hear her.

“No.” Rylee seemed to find some relief in her word. Like she could be safe for just another minute. Jinx may not particularly like her, not at all in fact, but handing a life over to Akuji was something she would not risk. Kneeling close to Rylee, softly, “I need to know; how long have you been practicing magic?”

She said shyly, not meeting her stare. All that confidence, the snarky woman Jinx knew, gone. “Four months ago. A couple of days after you arrived.”

“Had you been infected when the plague hit?”

“I was only a babe, barely born.” If the plague had hit eighteen years ago and Rylee is just now seeing effects of it. It’s possible there are still more Cursed out there, plenty of them waiting to be released. A great deal of people died during the plague, however, some survived. Many possessed magic the moment they’d gotten better, retiring to the shadows. Others lived on like nothing occurred. Not a trace of energy left behind.

Jinx clasped Rylee’s frigid arm. “We need to get you to a doctor.”

“No.” She protested.

“I don’t think you understand. If you stay like this, you will die.”

“What will we tell mother? It’s dangerous for us to be seen out so late.”

“This could kill you before your mother comes to find out, and she will kill you once she finds you. If you want to wait until the morning, we can, but this will become more dangerous for you as time goes on.”

Her eyes pleaded. Fear struck Rylee's heart, obvious to Jinx. She remembered a time where she felt like that. She huffed, "Fine. We leave at the first morning ray. Not a moment later."

She turned to the door, pulling out her dagger. Ready to leave the room. "Wait." Rylee called from the floor. "Why are you helping me? I've been so rude to you your entire life."

Jinx grinned over her shoulder. "I considered leaving you here, if it's any comfort." She fled through the doors of her room, beelining for her own. Rain and thunder continued to crash outside. Locking her door, she stripped from the nightgown and plucked out her leathers from the wardrobe—hidden from the handmaidens inside a compartment she made on her arrival.

Slipping into the comfort of what was known, Jinx huddled into bed. Remembering the last moments of what it was like to sleep on a comforter before her departure. Because after tomorrow, the floor would be her friend again.

CHAPTER THREE

The first ray of light brushed Jinx awake. Twisting her wrist, she summoned magic from the organ deep inside her body. A mix of hot and cold ran fingers down her muscles and skin. A blanket of Sophia Acadaine covered Jinx.

The Panchak residence reveled in stillness as she made her way to Rylee's room. Not a servant breathing. An unnerving feeling sped through her veins. Mind knocking her aware.

She lightly tapped on Rylee's door. Waiting for a response, Jinx's heart quickened. A primal instinct telling her to run, that danger lurked nearby. Jinx opened the door, hinges creaking her arrival.

A chilly breeze greeted her. White and blue overloaded the weight of the room. Everything the same as she's seen last night except Rylee.

She was missing.

Itching fire burst in Jinx's stomach. Fury lodged in her throat as she held it down. Finding Rylee was a priority right now. She could be dead. Under her breath, she muttered a series of curses. Striding to the window, the sun ascended. One hour to find Rylee and get her to a doctor. An hour to flip this house inside out.

Jinx searched top and bottom. She wasn't sure why she felt the need to protect this girl. Rylee had been rude to her, condescended her, in every sense been a horrible person. Made her look bad in front of others. Ridiculed her often and spread rumors—well, about Sophia.

Stretching across the second floor, faint knocks sounded. Jinx followed. It sounded everywhere and nowhere at once. Strange rhythmic beats. She poked her head in each incoming door. No sign of Rylee. Jinx felt for the finish of the wall.

An indent wavered under her palm. Realization clicked. A hidden door. Masked between the intricate swirled markings decorating the yellow walls. Lines outlined a door. Jinx wrapped her fingers and knocked, matching the pelting song.

It returned in answer. Sternly, “Rylee?”

Barely a whisper, “Sophia?” Rylee tried, “My mother.” A cough. “She found out. Locked me here. Help me.” She cried. No mother should have to lock up their daughter just for being different. “Please, I'm so scared.”

She burned, wrath boiling inside. Jinx wished she could give Lady Panchak a piece of her mind. Put her in the shoes of the Cursed. What it's like having to live in the dark because people are scared of you. She stayed in the shadows because it was her job as an illusionist and thief, but as a normal person who had been infected. That is not their fault.

Jinx nodded as if Rylee could see her. “Just hold on. If you see a Virtue run the other way. Don’t take their hand as soft as they may look.” Behind the barrier, she heard Rylee stifle a little laugh. Jinx rubbed her forehead and cracked her fingers.

She crouched down, eyeing the keyhole. She pulled a pin from her hair, bending it to the appropriate teeth to pick the lock. Wiggling it around, it wouldn’t free. Pressuring it could end up hurting the situation rather than helping it. Jinx is going to have to get the key from Lady Panchak, optimistically assuming it is on her.

“I’m going to get a friend to help you. You most likely won’t see me after this for a while.” Before she could give any more information, Jinx sped off. She jerked her fingers, flinging out a sliver of magic. Her army grade suit veiled under a gorgeously white lace dress she remembered seeing in the window of a shop.

The ding of a bell rang for breakfast. Jinx swaggered down the crescent stairs to the dining room. Upon entering, a pot of porridge stirred on the oven as an assortment of cold meats and cheeses were posted on the table.

Lady Panchak rolled in; disgust squeezed Jinx's chest. She wanted to scream at her. Try to understand what kind of mother lock away their daughter. Holding her tongue, "Good morning, Lady Panchak." Jinx curtsied coolly. True emotions tucked away.

"Good morning, Sophia." Lady Panchak said with a smile. Dark circles peeked below her tired eyes. She must have remained awake for the majority of the night with a face like that. Even cosmetics couldn't hide the desperation etched in her expression. She must have come for Rylee shortly after Jinx did. Lady Panchak sat at the table serving herself some tea.

Jinx joined beside her. "Awful storm last night. Did it keep you up?"

"Yes, yes, it did." Lady Panchak pinned a hoax of a smile; one Jinx had seen her use plenty of times out in public. After lying all her life, Jinx could smell a sham nearby.

She lightly interrogated, "Odd for Rylee to be late to breakfast, is it not?"

"Oh, the strangest thing," Lady Panchak sounded dumbfounded. Voice going up a pitch as she chortled, waving the hair out of her face, "She woke ill with a horrible case of the chills. Luckily, it's nothing like the plague." She giggled, moving on to sip her tea.

Jinx fought the tug of her lips. She couldn't help but smile, catching someone in a lie other than her own. "What a peculiar thing indeed." Her gaze jumped to the ticking clock hanging on the wall. "Oh, would you look at the time? I must get going." Limbs of the chair groaning as she stood up.

"Where to?"

"The Botanic Plaza, a group of ladies had sent an invitation last week to meet, and I had completely forgotten about it until last night." Side stepping the chair, Jinx purposefully bumped into Lady Panchak, sly hands checking for the key. "Oh, I'm so sorry. I must be off balance today."

Clear. Not a trace on her.

It must be in her chambers then.

Walking back through where she came from, Lady Panchak commented, "It's the other way dear."

"Oh yes, I'm aware. I have to change; it seems I must have stained my dress when I crashed into you." Jinx waved. "I hope you have a good day, Lady Panchak."

She sped straight to Lady Panchak's chambers. Fishing for the key in the room. Between the brown curtains, matching sheets. She jumped to the nightstands, like a dog scavenging for its last meal, digging and pushing around the contents. Key, Key, Key, she repeated to herself. Footfalls neared and the door to Lady Panchak's room opened, revealing Lady Panchak standing. Smug written all over her.

“So close, it’s the third drawer.” She held her hands behind her back.

Jinx slowly shut the cupboard, dragging her gaze to Lady Panchak. “Why did you do that to her?”

Lady Panchak closed the distance between them, “She’s a Cursed.”

“She’s a kid.” She said coldly.

To her amaze, Lady Panchak had the audacity to look stunned. Slow steps circling Jinx, she looked at her with hunger glossing in those eyes. “Society would have had her killed. I’m protecting her.”

“You’re killing her by leaving her in that room. She will die if she doesn’t see a doctor soon.”

“What doctor will see her? Hm? No doctor will see a Cursed.”

“I can handle that. Just let me take your daughter to a doctor and I’ll bring her back. No one must know what she is.” Lady Panchak burst out in a hysterical laugh. “Or maybe you just can’t handle that she is one of them.”

She stopped dead in her tracks. Lips peeling back, nose crinkling, resentment oozing, “I love my daughter. She is all I have. Don’t you dare speak of what you don’t know.”

“I know clearly.” Jinx puffed up. The room seemed to darken from the wrath Jinx had tucked away. Slowly slipping. “Let’s play a game, Lady Panchak.” Jinx rallied her energy. “Let me put in perspective what your daughter is feeling and how this can play out.”

Slamming her hand to the ground. An eruption of power exploded into the room. Flashes of green and silver tornado the room. Whisps of illusions bending to Jinx’s will. The smell of sweet magic tasted the air. Light and dark blended transforming into one. She flooded the chambers reveling in her strength. She manipulated the walls, the floors, whatever lied inside these four walls. Darkness enclosed the space.

Lady Panchak gasped, “What’s happening?”

Jinx cloaked herself within the space, leaving herself invisible to the eye. “I’m showing you the pain you are causing your daughter. You think you are doing her good but in reality . . .” Jinx conjured a sketch of Rylee, her body limp, lips blue. Her frame frail, turning slimmer the more she watched.

“Mother,” Rylee called.

Lady Panchak shook her head in rejection. Jinx whispered in her ear. “You’re causing her pain.”

“No, you’re wrong. It’s not true.” Lady Panchak wept.

“Oh, but it is.” Jinx changed the illusion, Rylee turning skeletal. “You’re killing her. The walls are closing in, and she can’t breathe.” Lady Panchak ran to Rylee. As she was about to grab it, Jinx dissolved it. Becoming sand under Lady Panchak’s touch.

Maybe it was wrong, but a sprout of satisfaction bloomed in Jinx’s chest. Unleashing the heat of pressure she felt. Some fear glinted in her eye, Jinx drank it, finding herself enjoying the sheer terror of reality. Causing Lady Panchak to see what it really was like to be a Cursed. Be denied everything you wish for just because of who and what you are. All those years...

It wasn’t fair. Jinx changed reality for Lady Panchak, manifesting Rylee crying in her room. “This is what could happen if you let me take her to the doctor.”

“But she’s crying.”

“There is no happy ending as a Cursed. You people are too scared of us, what we are capable of, to let us be out and be normal. This is the hurt your society has caused. What you are doing to your daughter. But living is better than not being alive at all, is it not?”

“No, no. What are you doing?” Lady Panchak panted, pulling at her dull blonde hair. Chest rising. “You, you’re hurting her. Let her go.”

“I’m not doing this; this is all you Lady Panchak.” Jinx created a replica of Sophia, walking it out of the shadows. She also put a fake pistol in Lady Panchak’s hand. The grip and weight similar to a real one.

The replica of Sophia cried, “Why are you doing this? Please stop.” Sophia sucked in a sharp breath, “You’re scaring me, Lady Panchak.”

Jinx forced the pistol to shoot. A bullet piercing through the chest of the twin. Red showered down her heart. Lady Panchak trembled, dropping the revolver. Sophia looked at Lady Panchak and collapsed to the ground. Lady Panchak choked, panting heavily. She grabbed a hold of the dead body. Sophia Acadaine died by the hands of Lady Panchak. She cried into Sophia’s body.

Using the distraction, Jinx swept the key and left the chambers. Quickly disguising herself as a house servant, informing another she had heard something strange coming from the master bedroom. And headed for Rylee.

Guilt of torturing Lady Panchak sat low in her belly. Good and bad was always a fine line, maybe this situation stood in the dead center. Jinx wasn’t a good person, she’s broken all the rules of society: she lied, she stole, she cheated. But she wasn’t bad either. Jinx was currently saving Rylee.

She lowered her illusion, securing her hood over her head. Face out of sight. Jinx unlocked the door, Rylee falling right after. She caught her midfall. “Stay up, I’m getting you out of here.” Rylee’s skin burned, freezing from inside out. The tips of her fingers purple, they had to be feeling numb. Her tears iced onto her cheeks. Unease ruptured all around her, Jinx should have taken her last night.

Getting her to Crosspoint Yard from Wateredge like this was going to delay the walk. Doubling the time at least. “Do you think you can walk?” Jinx asked.

“Yes.”

Sirens of the authorities sounded outside the residence. It was their cue to leave. “Good. Let’s get you to the doctor.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Even in midday, not a soul in Somnium dared to walk the back alleyways. Rumors of unknown creatures living in those parts scared people away. Jinx had come face to face with one of those creatures however, it resided in the Woodlands. No one really knows what creatures were unleashed in the plague, nor the effects of it. Jinx had only seen and talked to one. The result wasn't something she talked about.

Jinx walked in the shadows of the back streets with Rylee in tow. Carrying most of her weight sent shocks of discomfort down her spine. They hadn't uttered a single word to each other, besides Rylee thanking her once. They should be close to the medic. She only knew of him because he'd helped her once. She fell ill on the streets, just past the age of ten, and he'd found her. She made sure to always keep her illusions up, though she had a feeling he knew it wasn't her real face. He helped her, nonetheless.

After restoring her back to health, he offered her stay in which Jinx kindly declined. Never forgetting the benevolence she'd been shown. Since then, Jinx had sent people his way if they were in need—Cursed or not. She stopped by to visit, a different person every time. Though, deep down, she knew, he was aware it was Jinx.

“What happened to my mother?” Her voice barely audible. Ache laced in her words.

Jinx only said, “I’m not sure.” A hint of shame loomed over her. She bit her lower lip, not wanting the conversation to go any further.

She halted before a black door. Knocking on it three times. Footfalls thumped inside, yet they waited.

Rylee shivered, “Sophia was never here, was she?”

Leveled tone, “What makes you say that?”

“If Sophia really was here, she would have left me back there. She isn’t as kind as the impersonator.” Rylee casted a glance at the door and then back at her. “Who was it back there in her place? Who did I live with for the past four months?”

Jinx kept her face down, “What are you really questioning?” She stopped for a moment. Thinking, feeling, understanding. Rylee mumbled under her breath, “My reality.”

Jinx’s lips leaned into a grimace, “Many people don’t.”

“Maybe we should.”

She looked around the hidden streets of Crosspoint Yard. Classic clinking sounds of hammers hitting steel and puffing fire, chiming from a nearby factory. Red brick stacked atop each other, moss picking at its corners. “I couldn’t agree more.” At least no one followed them. That didn’t stop vigilance from digging into Jinx’s shoulders, the hairs on her back standing on end.

“For all I know you could be the same impersonator who pretended to be Sophia. Maybe you’re Jinx.” Rylee peered under Jinx’s hood, attempting to get a look. Jinx hid it away using her art to extend the shade the hood provided. “Are you?”

“Would you like me to be?”

“Maybe?” It almost sounded like a plea. “I preferred the impersonator over my actual cousin. I owe my life to them; I am in debt.”

“I am whatever people want me to be. The mind is a cruel creature. We either love it because we innovate, or we hate it due to the fact it is our own destruction. Once you are in control in of your own mind and body, I think you can find peace, Rylee. Intelligence is a gift, but society makes us wicked. You will find people here who will help you.”

The door finally opened. A short man a little over the age of sixty smiled. His wrinkled face and white coat conveyed plenty of words without saying a single one. It warmed her heart; his beam was solace enough. “Doctor Watts will take care of you.”

“Wait.” Rylee’s arms slithered and squeezed around Jinx’s frame. Her face nestling into her neck. “Thank you.” She whispered into her ear, “You don’t have a scent.”

“What about it?” Jinx asked, letting her go.

“Strange is all. I wonder what useful tricks you can do with that Jinx.” Rylee stepped inside the office. Leaving Doctor Watts and her outside.

She said, “I’ll see you around. Or I won’t.”

Jinx dusted off imaginary lint off her leathers. Making to leave, Doctor Watts stopped her.

“Another one?” Doctor Watts queried, “Maybe you should be a Curse Hunter.”

Jinx snorted, “That would involve me being a good person.” And as far as she was concerned, she wasn’t. Not after finding some entertainment in the fear she instilled in Lady Panchak.

“No one is ever truly good, just as no one is ever truly bad. You can be both.” His earnest voice rasped. He held the tone of the grandpa everyone wished they had. It mended a fracture of her core to hear that. Though breaking a mother’s heart tipped the scales over to bad. She gave him a one over, he wasn’t wearing a Tutela.

Jinx tsked, “You’re becoming soft, Doctor. Who would have thought you had a spot for a thief.”

He waved her off. Suddenly sounding annoyed with her, “You’re a pain. You could easily give yourself the life you want.”

“Take care. You have a patient waiting.” She turned. Walking into the shadows. Climbing up the side of the red brick building, stepping onto the black crusted roofs. Heading towards Eastern Heights. Wondering who she’d animate next.