

Chapter 5: Savior or Captor?

GIRL'S POV

Kierygan. That's his name.

I don't know who he is or what he intends for me. I don't know if he's a savior or just another captor. But at least I know what to call him. I know his name.

I know he's a dragon. That he breathes fire. That he's the reason Mistress and Master's castle burned, the reason they died.

I didn't see it happen. My prison had no windows, but I felt the tremors. I heard the screams. I listened.

I always listened. Even when they thought I wasn't paying attention. Even when they assumed I was too dumb to understand.

Maybe that's how I survived. By listening. By learning. Quietly.

In that dark tower, the greatest lesson I learned was this: kindness always has a price. The mistress made sure of it. Smiles meant tests. Softness meant traps.

Before I was allowed food or water, I had to bleed for it. I had to scream in pain or cry in fear.

At first, I always gave in. Hunger makes you desperate.

But I listened. I learned. And when I understood what they were using my light for, and what it did to others, I stopped giving.

I had to stop feeling. No pain. No fear. No matter the hunger. No matter the sting of the whip, the slap, the stabs.

So when Kierygan gives me food and tells me I can eat, without demanding I scream or sob, I can't help but wonder what he wants instead. I waited for the catch. Because there's always a catch.

He hasn't hurt me. Not yet. And somehow, that makes it worse.

In the tower, I always knew when pain was coming. The door would open. The mistress or the master would appear.

It was predictable. Expected.

But here, in this place, anyone could become the new mistress. The new master. And that makes it all the more terrifying.

So far, the closest thing to pain I've felt since Kierygan took me was Grace and Emma's merciless scrubbing to rid my skin of grime, and the relentless tug of a comb through my tangled hair. I heard their groans, their muttered curses under their breath.

All I could do was bite my lip and whisper, "Sorry."

Again. And again.

Grace momentarily stopped, one hand on her hip. "What are you apologizing for?" she asked, then resumed combing through my hair. "You don't have to say sorry every few seconds."

I blinked at her. It was almost the same thing Kierygan told me earlier. That I didn't have to apologize. But then... what do they want?

Emma watched me through the mirror like I was something strange. Well... I am strange.

Still tugging at my hair, she sighed. "Is it true you've never left that tower until today?" she asked.

I nodded.

Her eyes widened. "How does it feel, seeing the world for the first time?"

The question caught me off guard. I didn't know how to answer. I was glad to see that beauty existed beyond my tower. But was I glad to be here? Was I truly any freer than I'd been in my old prison?

I wasn't sure.

"It was... a lot," I said at last. "A little scary."

That last part was a lie. Because I wasn't a little scared. I was terrified.

Grace had stepped away for a moment, but when she returned, she was holding a dress.

"That's enough, Emma," she said. "The king must be waiting."

Emma sighed. "This is the best we could do with your hair," she murmured, sounding defeated. "We'll try again tomorrow. Maybe trim the ends."

Grace handed me the dress and told me to put it on.

It was nothing like the one she made me throw away. My old rags had matched the color of the lousy tower—dull, gray, forgotten.

But this... this had color. Soft fabric I didn't know the name of. It felt nice. Strange. But nice.

Grace turned me toward her and gave me a slow once-over. Then she nodded in approval. "Who knew there was a pretty face hidden beneath all that dirt and ash?"

I blinked, unsure how to respond. Was that... a compliment? I couldn't tell. Compliments weren't something I'd learned to recognize—let alone trust.

Whenever Mistress gave me one, pain always followed.

Grace and Emma led me through the hall, their steps steady, mine hesitant. When we reached the dining chamber and I saw the others seated at the long table, I nearly turned back. I opened my mouth to ask if I could return to the room, but the words caught in my throat.

There were too many people. I didn't know how to count, but it felt like a lot.

I recognized Kierygan instantly. He sat at the head of the table. On one side were the two men who had turned into beasts during the journey. On his other side, seated close beside him, was the beautiful woman from earlier, the one in the red gown with the sharp, watchful eyes. She reminded me of the Mistress. Not in appearance, but in something colder... something hidden beneath her smile.

Emma cleared her throat. "Apologies for the delay," she said to the table. "We had to repeat the bath. And don't get me started on the hair."

A few chuckles scattered through the room.

Then all eyes turned to me.

Instinctively, I wrapped my arms around myself, wishing I could shrink smaller—disappear into the floor. I stepped back, trying to hide behind Emma and Grace, but they nudged me forward again before stepping aside, leaving me alone under everyone's gaze.

The man who had turned into a black wolf let out a low whistle. I thought his name was Orryx. "Is that the same girl?" he said, squinting. "Didn't recognize her."

Kierygan didn't say a word. He simply looked me over—from my head down to my boots—before his gaze returned to my face and lingered there.

I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Pleased, angry, or... something else entirely. His jaw ticked. His expression was unreadable, heavy in a way that made me want to look away.

Then he turned to the woman beside him. "Mirael," he said, his voice booming across the hall. "Move."

Her brows pulled together in a frown. "Why?"

Kierygan's hand tightened around his spoon. "The girl sits there."

Mirael looked like she might protest, but something in Kierygan's expression shifted. It was cold, sharp, and dangerous.

She sighed. "Fine," she muttered.

Without another word, she stood and moved to the next chair, casting me a quick, wary glance as she passed.

Kierygan motioned to the seat she had just vacated. "Sit," he ordered.

I obeyed without hesitation and lowered myself into the seat, waiting for whatever came next.

The table was filled with food, warm, rich smells I didn't have names for. But none of it tempted me. Not with every gaze pressing down on me, like I was something strange, something other.

Then Kierygan spoke again, and his voice made me inch. "What are you waiting for? Eat."

I blinked at him, then glanced around the table. Some looked curious. Others were amused. A few shook their heads like I was ridiculous.

In my prison, I couldn't just reach for food. Even if Mistress placed it in front of me. It was usually a trick. I could always tell by the way she smiled, or how her eyes shifted.

But here, with these strangers around me, I couldn't tell. I wanted to. I needed to.

What happens if I touch the food? What happens if I don't?

Slowly, I lifted my gaze to Kierygan—and almost fainted when I met his sharp stare. "Is this... is this a test?" I asked, my voice shaking, already bracing myself for the blow... for daring to speak.

Kierygan let out a sharp breath, the sound more angered than annoyed. "For stars' sake," he muttered under his breath, shoving his chair back slightly.

He reached forward, scooped a portion of food onto my plate, and set it down in front of me. "Eat," he said again, more firmly this time.

I picked up the fork with trembling fingers, but just stared at it. I knew what it was called. But I'd never held one. Never been taught how.

Kierygan's eyes narrowed as I fumbled, his expression darkening. I panicked and tried harder, clumsily stabbing at the food, my hand shaking.

He exhaled again, frustrated now, and snatched the fork from my grip. Without a word, he scooped up a small bite and brought it to my mouth.

I froze.

"Eat," he said one last time.

I opened my mouth, and he placed the bite inside. I chewed slowly, my face burning. Not from the food, but from the eyes still watching me.

"It's like tending to a baby," Mirael said with a laugh that cut through the air. "How precious."

My hands twitched in my lap.

"Shut up," Kierygan said at last, without even looking at her.

Silence fell over the table again.

He fed me a few more bites, and though they were small, my stomach tightened uncomfortably. I wasn't used to this much food. Not all at once. Not ever.

I hesitated, unsure if I was allowed to speak. But Kierygan glanced at me, his expression unreadable. "If you want to say something," he said, "just spill it."

I looked down at the plate, then back up at him. "... I can't take any more down," I whispered.

He leaned back slightly, fork still in hand, and nodded. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

I hesitated, casting a quick glance again at Kierygan. "May I... go back to my room now?"

He stared at me for a few moments. I held my breath, certain he would refuse—tell me to stay. But then he gave a single nod. "You may."

Relief loosened something in my chest. I rose from my seat. But before I could take a step, a hand caught my wrist.

Mirael.

She held my arm, her nails like polished claws against my skin, her eyes fixed on the strange metal band around my wrist.

"What's this?" she asked. "That bracelet, it's glowing."

I tried to pull away, voice shaking. "You can't touch it."

Mirael raised a brow, clearly unimpressed. "Rude," she pouted. "I only wanted a closer look."

She didn't let go. Her fingers slid to the edge of the band, trying to pry it loose.

"No," I cried, yanking harder. "Please—don't."

But it was too late. Pain exploded.

The bracelet arched with a blinding light, and I screamed as the surge hit me. A thousand bolts of lightning ripping through my veins. My knees buckled. The world twisted.

And then, I was falling.

I didn't even feel the ground because darkness caught me first.