

THE QUARRY

Hush Little Songbird

Sophie Ormshaw

Avelina curled up in the corner of the room, shaking as the stone walls dug into her back. It was cold and every so often the wind would come through the opening in the wall. She looked out and remembered what the tower looked like from the outside. High above the rest of the house, the tower looked like the most luxurious spot in the entire house. Who would have thought that it was actually the castle's dungeon?

This was the second time he had left her in here, and just like every time before the sun was low on the horizon. Soon it would leave the tower dark. Soon he would return. Unlike the first time he put her in here, she knew she had to get out, she knew what would happen if she didn't. Her body shook with the memory of what was in the dungeon. Must get out, must find a way.

A bird landed on the bed post next to her. It looked at her, then outside, then back to her. When it looked back at her, their eyes connected and it was as if it was trying to tell her, 'Get out. Jump. You can do it.'

But she knew what would happen if she jumped. She had already tried the first time.

Avelina brought a hand to her ankle and said to the bird, ‘If I’m to escape, that’s not the way out.’

She started to think about the first time she met Lars. He was so nice, who knew he was really evil inside.

6 Weeks Ago

Avelina’s music rang through the seedy bar.

Her fingers flew across the piano and her voice sang over with a melody. She could feel the nerves from the beginning of the set leave her as she grew comfortable in the music she created.

When the song finished there was some applause. Who really listened to the entertainment anyway?

She smiled around the room, looking at the different creatures that frequented the establishment. Some had tails poking through their pants, some had pointed ears like hers, some even had claw like hands.

But she had another peculiarity to her body. Grotesque deformed limbs that hid beneath her skin of her back. Limbs that she made sure they couldn’t see; they couldn’t tease her for what they couldn’t see.

She brushed her hand across her pointed ears, she belonged here, she was fine. Though the bar was not one of the best it was the only one that would give her a chance to play. She had to take what she could get.

Avelina looked around for a second time, but this time she caught someone staring back at her.

He was a handsome man with cat like eyes standing at the other end of the room. As soon as she caught his eyes, she looked away getting up and starting to pack up her music sheets that sat upon the piano.

‘Hey.’

She spun around to find the man behind her. He must have moved fast.

‘My name is Lars. That song was beautiful. Like a songbird. This is for you.’ He brought his hand out from behind his back and produced a single rose. His voice was melodic and rich. That combined with his eyes made a hypnotic presence. ‘Can I buy you a drink?’

She blushed, nodded, and accepted the rose.

He was amazing. The most amazing man she had ever met. And the things he could do. He could make things appear right before her eyes. Avelina asked him once how he could do that, he said magic. *I wish he would teach me.* Then she could do the beautiful things that were only possible in her dreams.

They arrived at his castle and Avelina couldn’t keep her eyes from expanding wide in wonder. It was beautiful. It looked like a castle from a story, with stone walls and conical roofs and a luscious green garden that lay in front of the giant front door. As she looked, she could even see a tower looming over the rest of the house. *What a view that tower would have over the countryside, surely that would be the best room to live in.*

He led her to the front door and turned to her. ‘Now that you are here Avelina, you must know, that your voice belongs to me now. You mustn’t speak to anyone here except for me. Understand? And no singing unless I give you permission.’

She nodded, though she didn’t understand.

He smiled his charming smile and led her inside.

She gasped as she looked around the grand entrance. There was a huge staircase in the middle and a chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The entire room seemed to be alive and glow with magnificence. By the time she looked back at Lars he had a small box in his hand.

Her smile grew wider and she accepted the gift, he would take offence otherwise. Inside the box was a diamond necklace. The stones shone from the light in the castle and she picked it up, gave it to Lars and turned around so he could put it around her neck.

‘For you. And as long as you keep the rules there are many more to come.’

He led her up the stairs, and her fear was the only reason her feet moved instead of dragging along the ground like she wanted them to. The staircase Lars led her up was cold and hard. The cold spread up through her bare feet and as they spiralled up, the air around them grew colder. Avelina had disobeyed him; he didn’t like that. She didn’t know what was up the stairs, but she knew nothing good.

At the top of the stair was a door. One that creaked when it opened and looked heavy to push. He led her into the room with a gentle hand on her elbow. She kept her head down and stayed silent, too afraid of what he might do.

‘You were such a good girl, but you disobeyed my orders. I said no singing on your own. So now you must be punished. It’s so you can learn.’ He brushed a hair from her face with soft fingers. She turned her face into him, but he turned and left the room. No other instructions or signs of the affection. She missed his warm hands against her skin.

Once he left, she looked around the room. It was like a veil had been lifted from her eyes, she was trapped. He locked her up. Her throat started to seize, she had to get out. The room was decorated with a simple bed, a standing mirror in the corner and nothing else. Opposite the bed was a skinny section of the wall that was open to the air outside.

Perfect for escaping.

The shirt she was wearing would have to be altered for the ligaments under her skin to be useful. It was long sleeved and high on her neck. No way her wings could escape from underneath it without some help.

She looked around the room trying to find something sharp. There was a standing mirror in the corner of the room. Perfect. She went to the mirror and with all the strength of her coming panic attack she could muster, she tipped it. The frame slammed against the floor and the glass shattered leaving a selection of small and large shards for her to choose from.

She took off her shirt and sliced two lines in its back with the glass shard. It bit into her hand as she sliced, but she persevered. She pulled the shirt back on and pushed her wings

through her skin and out of the cuts in her shirt. It had been a long time since she had exposed them, even Lars didn't know about them, and as they stretched out Avelina could feel how weak they had become.

They would just have to do.

She looked over her shoulder at them, and quickly looked away. They were thin and discoloured, hideous, the reason she never showed them to anyone.

She stood on the ledge. No rail, just a sudden end to the room with a fifty-meter drop at the end. Nothing to hold her back. She wasn't scared of the cliff; she was scared of the room she was in and what would happen if she stayed.

Taking a couple of steps back she prepared herself for the jump and ran.

Across the room gaining speed and going into the light that was her freedom. Her feet left the floor as she leapt of the ledge. Her wings caught the wind and lifted her up and up until—

A jolt from her ankle stopped her ascent. The jarring sensation from going too fast and being pulled back made her wings falter and she fell.

Her arms flailed, and her body slammed against the stone of the fortress's tower. Her shoulders took the brunt of the force, but she must have also hit her head because for a moment all she saw was black and all she could feel was something holding her by her ankle. When her vision returned, she looked up and saw a chain attached to her ankle that wasn't there before.

Blood rushed to her head making her lightheaded.

Her arms had hung above her head as she had no strength to keep them at her sides.

As soon as the sun had begun to set, she had felt a sensation of being lifted up the tower wall.

'You shouldn't have jump, Songbird. But it did show me something you haven't shown me before. Why did you hide these from me? I suspected of course. Your aura showed me that you were something special. Something different. Something powerful' He had stoked her wings gently. 'These wings are lovely. Shame what I'll have to do to them.'

He had gotten up from the chair he was sitting on, leaving her on the cold floor.

She kept her eyes downcast as he walked across the room and picked up a glass shard that was left on the floor.

Tears leaked out of her eyes as he sliced some of the feathers. It had felt like he was cutting her nerves and she wanted to scream in pain.

‘Okay now to deal with this ankle. The chain was just a precaution, but it will disappear if you don’t jump out the window again. The chain catches everything.’ He looked at her with a soft smile that hid his devilish side underneath. ‘It is also next to impossible to get up without help.’

Once Lars was gone again, she had felt around her ankle. Though the chain and bruises were gone the soreness remained.

Avelina touched her ankle. There was no more evidence of what had just happened.

It had been a week since her time in the tower and Avelina was exploring the castle, careful not to sing a merry tune while she walked. Lars would hear and punish her again. She shivered. She didn’t think she could handle another night in the tower.

After discovering her wings, Lars would ask her to bring her wings out for him to admire. She didn’t understand why, they were discoloured annoyances that looked out of place on her body. But him admiring her made her feel beautiful.

As she was walking down another dimly lit hallway, she came across a door. Not a fancy looking door, something plain and ordinary, except for the fact that she could feel the magic radiating through the wood.

He never told her specifically to stay away from certain rooms. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to know more about him and his magic.

Her hand touched the doorknob and she pushed it open to find a staircase.

The magic called to her and she walked in, down the stairs and through the doorway at the end.

She stopped her steps and her eyes widened.

Around the room was piles and piles of ... bones.

The blood rushed out of her head and she turned and bolted up the stairs.

Why would there be bones, what were they for, who were they?

Avelina threw herself out the door and continued to run until-

‘Avelina. What were you doing?’

Oh no.

He wasn't as calm as he was the first time he put her in the tower. He was angry. He had thrown her inside with murderous eyes and said, ‘When the sun sets, I'll be back, you won't have such an easy stay in here this time,’ before he left the room and slammed the door.

Once he had left, she curled up in the corner of the room, and she feared what he would do when he returned.

His words when he caught her outside the room with the bones, rang in her head, ‘it is not your time to be sacrificed... The Castle feeds my power... I must feed the Castle.’

Avelina looked at the door, she didn't think she could stay another night here.

She got up and walked towards the ledge.

She learnt from that first time that she couldn't fly out of there, not unless the invisible chain was detached. But maybe there was another way out. What if she could take Lars by surprise, evade his grasp and leave through the front door....

She looked to the door frame and noticed it was big enough to stand on. With a new determination in her step, she started to pull the bed frame to the wall next to the door

The bed screeched against the stone floor and she stopped. Her ears tingled as she listened for a noise outside the door.

When it seemed to be silent outside, she ripped the thin sheet from the bed and started to tuck it under each bed post. Her hands had started to shake, adrenaline coursing through her veins. At any moment she could be discovered.

Once she had the material under each post, she pushed the frame to the wall next to the door frame.

The light coming in the room was dimmer now, she had to hurry.

She got onto the bed and put a foot onto one of the flat posts and lifted herself up with a hand on the wall to steady herself.

She reached for the frame and balanced on the balls of her feet, but she couldn't pull herself up. Thinking of no other option Avelina rolled her shoulders and pushed out her still tender wings.

She thought to Lars admiring them. Should she be doing this, going against him? No, he was going to kill her if she didn't escape. No affection was worth death.

Avelina gripped the door frame and beat her wings a few times. She almost screamed in pain as her wings tried to pull up her body and she pulled on the wood with all her might. Until finally she balanced precariously at the top of the door frame the wood having hardly enough room for her feet.

The sun had almost set. He would return, and she would strike.

It was when all the light had fully disappeared, she heard the footsteps coming up the stairs.

Breathe in, breathe out. Stay calm.

Lars pushed open the door, took a step inside and then paused noticing the bed.

At his pause, she leapt.

'Where are—'

Off the door frame with hands extended, pushing the magician to the opening in the wall.

Her attack seemed to surprise him, but he quickly recovered and started to restrain her. She pulled at his hands and fell to her knees to push him further towards the edge.

She couldn't tell if he knew that she was trying to steer him towards the ledge or not, but it didn't matter, as long as he went over the edge.

The struggle went for an eternity and yet it couldn't have been more than a minute until they were at the edge.

She let go of her grip on his arms and stopped struggling.

'What are you—'

In a final burst of strength, she pushed him off the ledge and, not waiting to see if the chain caught him, she fled the room.

Down the stairs, through the hallways, across to the giant staircase and to the front door.

I will not become bones in this house. She paused at the thought. Avelina didn't want any others caught in this house either.

She would have to be quick, who knew how long it would take Lars to get out of the chain and back into the tower. Her eyes turned towards the lit fireplace that warmed the room to her right.

Time to burn this place to the ground.