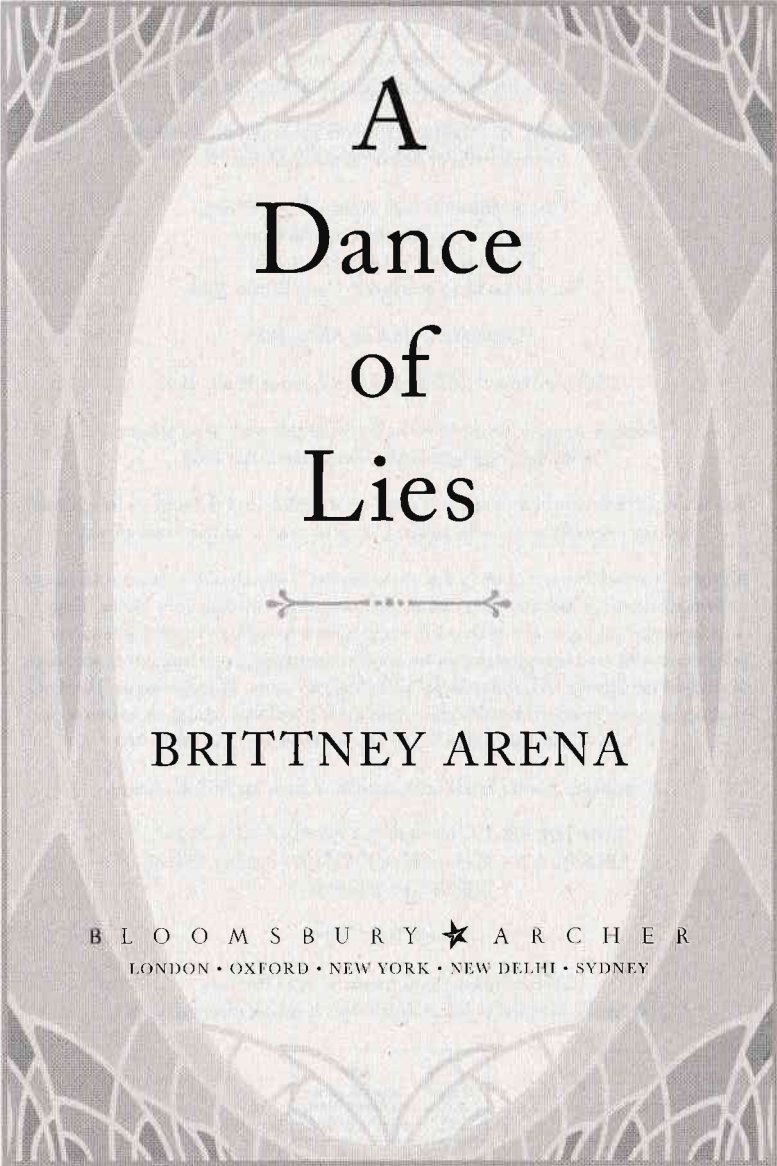


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PART ONE



King  
of  
Lies

## Chapter One

Voices speak to me in the endless dark.

Sometimes, it's my own voice. An incessant humming.

Then it warps. Fragments.

Becomes ten, twenty. A choir. People I used to know, calling my name. *Vasalie. Vab-sah-lee.* They sing to me. They recount my failures. They tell me all is hopeless, that I am lost to this prison.

Only today, they are silenced by a long, winding screech.

Blades of torchlight cut into my cell, falling across my skin in stripes.

I shift from the onslaught of light, but clamps of steel dig into the raw skin of my wrists, fettering me in place. I narrow my gaze toward the window inset into the cell door. It never opens—never ever—save the rare occasions when the warden opts to ensure I'm still breathing. Which he did yesterday.

I think.

Still, I await the passing of a profile. The closing squeal of those shutters.

For the dark to swarm in once more.

My eyes have long since adjusted to it, after all. There is only ever the soft, taunting flicker from underneath the door.

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Too exposed.

Far too *bright*.

I turn my gaze from the legs poking out from beneath my scratchy linen shift, unable to look at them for long. I count the rats instead. So many of them, huddling in the corners, gnawing on whatever they can find. Their razor-edged teeth are as familiar to me as the dirt and grime that coats my skin.

I am little more than a husk. A corpse. A set of bones, waiting to be buried.

I'm not sure my heart beats anymore.

I'm not sure I want it to.

Still, the window does not shut.

Then the groan of metal shakes the very foundation of this place—the outer door to the prison. Footfalls echo, echo, *echo*, a thundering pulse.

I lift my head.

Moments later, silhouettes crowd around my window, blotting out the light. The sound of keys rustle from just outside.

"Morta's teeth. That *smell*," someone says.

"If you take her out, I'll polish your armor for a week."

A weak pulse flutters within my chest.

"A week? You can't be serious. I wouldn't touch her with a ten-foot lance."

Have they come to carry out my execution? Metal bites into my forearms as I lean forward. I would beg for it, for that sweet moment of release. For a chance to stand on my own two legs and fill my lungs with the warm western breeze, if only for a moment before a blade strikes me down.

"I can't believe King Illian wants to see her like this. Can't imagine any amount of scrubbing would do any good."

*King Illian.*

Like the swing of an axe, his face cleaves into my mind.

The sharp, marble cut of his jaw.

The sleek sheen of dark curls.

The endless black of his eyes, and the way they always glittered when they beheld me, save for that last time.

*That last time.*

Illian.

His name is like the stab of a nail, straight into the cavity of my chest. I pull in a breath, feeling the ghost of a puncture in my lungs.

Part of me has begun to wonder if he was a dream. A wonderful one, then a terrible one. A phantom I cannot shake.

He's sent for me. *Why?*

I remember . . .

What do I remember?

That I was to live out my days in isolation, half mad, until I finally succumbed to the horrors of this fates-forsaken place. But . . . perhaps they need the cell? Perhaps I am too expensive a prisoner?

No. If the king wants me, it isn't to spare a cell.

"The hair will smell the worst. Throw this over her head," one of them says. "At least until she's back within the palace walls."

The cell door jerks open, smearing a fan of dirt across the flagstones. Armored boots come into view between my snarled, honey-brown strands.

One guard blocks the doorway as if I could run, while the other reaches for my arm with a gauntleted hand. A click, and my shackles separate from the main chain. A frisson of fear sets my limbs to trembling. I press my back against the jagged wall, but he wrenches me up with merciless intent.

Sudden dizziness tilts my equilibrium. But I'm held upright, a sack shoved over my head.

Daggers of pain embed themselves into my joints. My knees give way as I'm forced forward. My palms meet stone, my brittle bones quivering as though they might fracture. A cry hisses from between my teeth, my voice scraped raw.

"Let's go," says one of the men, hauling me up again. With a sigh, he gives me a moment to stabilize, to figure out how to balance once more.

Some weeks ago, or perhaps months—time has lost all meaning now—the warden reset my shackles. Until then, I was able to move around. A comfort I took for granted. I could stretch, lie down on the plank I used for a bed. I could feel around my cell, keep myself somewhat tethered to reality. Then came the warden, grumbling about the constant, annoying clank of my chains.

He tightened them after that. Removed several links, so that I could barely shift at all. Gone was the ability to stand.

Cool air stipples my skin as we slowly, painfully traverse the prison halls. Alarm ripples through me at the severity of the pain.

It's as if my weathered body can no longer hold what little weight I have left.

My muscles have atrophied. My strength is nonexistent. Eventually, my legs go numb save for a relentless, itching tingle, the pain like the stab of a thousand pins.

I've lost the body I'd earned, crafted through years of dancing, and now I struggle to remain upright. It is by the guards' strength alone that I make it up the stairs, both men heaving me upward from beneath my armpits.

Again, that grind and screech of metal, this time much closer. Then light washes over me like a warm breeze; even the sack over my head glows orange.

*Warmth.*

A sudden, unexpected tear tracks a line down to my chin. For so long, I've felt nothing but a gaping, cold hollow, both outside and in.

And I realize I cannot go back. Not ever. Whatever the king wants from me, I will *not* return to that cell.

Commotion whistles past as I'm dragged through cobbled squares. Every step is a negotiation, pleading with my body to obey. Even so, dizziness sends me toppling more than once. The guards wait with impatient huffs, not wanting to touch me more than necessary. All the while, sounds crowd my ears in a disorienting rush.

The trot of horses, the clatter of carriage wheels. I collect gossip, an endless trail of whispers.

*Fates above, who is that?*

*More like, what is it?*

But it takes all my focus just to keep my feet moving.

I'm hefted up yet another set of steps. And though I can't sense where I'm being led, recognition comes as my feet slip against cool marble, the ambience changing once more.

A frigid, echoing space. I have reached the palace after all, it seems. A few long corridors later and the sack is finally ripped from my head.

I blink, my eyes struggling to adjust to the light, even dim as it is. Familiar smooth beige stones make up the walls, floors, and vaulted ceilings. Sconces are set at intervals, light spangling across a pool for bathing on the far end. Rich incense laced with myrrh clouds my lungs, so different from the ever-present miasma of urine and sweat in the prison.

I clutch my abdomen, swaying with a wave of nausea.

A trio of women enter, encircling me as the guards step back, and all at once I'm being stripped, my shackles removed, and led into the pool—

Rags and sponges scrub soap across every inch of my bared flesh. Water is dumped over my head, over and over and over.

I feel as if I'm drowning. Or jerking awake from a long, terrible dream.

Flint razors and stones graze up and down my legs and under my arms, leaving my flesh smooth but red. When I'm led from the bath, perfumed oils are rubbed into my skin. Combs attack my hair, ripping their way through the tangles. And all I can think now is—

The king.

The king.

The *king*.

I have been here before, in this very chamber.

I have worn these perfumes before.

I have been prepared before.

*Before . . .*

Before the day my life was upended. Fragmented as my memories may be, that night is the one recollection time has not stretched thin. Here and now, it comes into even sharper relief—the jab of fingers into the tender flesh of my upper arms as I was dragged sleepily from my room in the dead of night; the way the king watched me from the shadows, even as his diadem betrayed him, snagging a glimmer of torchlight.

The way he took his time stepping forward, even as I was thrown before him.

The prod of rough hands as his men searched for weapons—as if I could hide one in my whisper-thin negligee.

My arms bound tightly in ropes like they were chaining some untamed beast.

A body I hadn't even known was there, pulled from my room.

The shouts. The accusations. The *interrogations*—

The slam of the guard's fists when I tried to run.

A small cry slips through my teeth as the memory crowds in—a horror I've yet to understand no matter how many times I turn it over in my mind. He *knew* I couldn't have murdered his adviser. I had been in his company the very hour the man supposedly died.

He knew I was innocent, yet he did nothing.

It was the first time he had allowed anyone to touch me. He was a jealous man, and that jealousy spread across his soul like a wick doused in oil—especially where I was concerned. So much as an ember, and he would combust.

But his jealousy was my shield. He was my protector. No one—no matter how highborn—touched me, and those who tried to get close to me paid for it with their livelihoods, their titles, and sometimes even their heads. Yet he had allowed those guards to put their

hands on me—something he hadn't even done himself. Not once. Not even when I felt his yearning the way a man craves an ale after a grueling day's work.

Then, when I was sprawled on the floor like a puppet unstrung, he flicked his wrist so subtly I almost missed it, and his guards heaved me away. A reminder that no amount of hard work, wealth, or status can protect you from the wrath of a king. It didn't matter that I was his most esteemed dancer, his prime performer, his choice—*always* his choice—of entertainment.

The King's Jewel, they called me.

But that girl was someone else entirely. And like a mirage in a desert, I question if she ever existed at all.

And yet he sent for me.

The attendants give nothing away, going as far as to avoid my gaze. My arms and legs are shoved into clean garb: this one a shift of plain white cotton that reaches my knees, cinched at the waist by a rope.

I try not to look at my reflection in the pool, and fail.

I feel numb as I gaze at the unrecognizable waif before me. She barely looks alive, her eyes sunken, her frail form hunched like a hag as the attendants wrestle her frayed, waist-long locks into a pitiful braid.

When I'm deemed acceptable, the guards reenter. I hadn't even known they had left. Their grip on my arms is punishing now.

Before they lead me away, a new woman strides inside the chamber. She's middle-aged and fitted in a high-collared gray velvet dress that washes out her pale skin, her red-brown tresses tucked into a chignon.

It startles me when she looks directly into my eyes.

Like I hadn't spent the last however long in prison—and for murder, no less.

"I'm Brigitte," she says, matter-of-fact. "Have they given you something to eat?"

"We were instructed to take her directly to King Illian," says a guard, hooking the shackles back around my wrists. "We cannot delay."

"Fates above, look at her! She can barely stand," Brigitte says, noting my wobbling legs. "The least you could have done was had something simple prepared. Can't think for yourself, the lot of you," she harumphs before spinning on her heels and following us out.

I'm pulled into a vast hallway and led to yet another achingly familiar set of ornate double doors, these guarded by no less than ten armored men.

They swing wide at our approach.

Three wings unfold beyond expansive archways. The center is for private entertaining—where I'd spent most of my days. The far right is for his personal guard and staff, where I had dwelled in a small but gilded apartment that overlooked the gardens. Even now, a painful recollection paints itself in the canvas of my mind—ivory plasterwork filigreed in gold, a tall bay window, flashes of cherry red roses dancing in the breeze just outside.

My haven.

All over again, I feel the loss of it like a melody I can no longer hum.

But it's the third arch, far on the left, that we enter.

A knot of pain hitches up my throat, each encroaching memory more devastating than the last. These are King Illian's personal quarters, where we lounged for hours after his soirées, night after night, battling it out over chess, sampling cheeses, fruits, wines, usually in his study—

With a start, I realize that's where we are now, right outside his office.

"Wait here," says Brigitte, entering alone—no doubt to announce my presence.

The sound of birdsong pulls my gaze to my left, where a wide, arched window is open to reveal the vast forest sprawling beneath the palace and the hazed, blue crescents of the Galan Mountains in

the distance. Clouds have swept in since I was released, bringing with them a fresh shower of rain. A few magpies dip underneath the eaves for shelter.

They play, and it looks like dancing.

It looks like *joy*.

The sight sends another spear of longing through me, and for once, my knees want to buckle for a reason other than pain.

I'd forgotten what real beauty was. What really existed beyond the walls of that prison.

I'd forgotten the simple things, like the scent of rain, the feel of water, the sound of wind.

The artistry of nature.

The breadth of it.

I'd forgotten what it was to use all my senses at once.

To see everything at once.

Feel everything at once.

Tears burn the backs of my eyes.

I'd forgotten what it was to want to be *alive*.

A breeze slips through the window, stippling gooseflesh along my arms and legs. And as I breathe the crisp, wet scent of petrichor, I vow to myself that no, I will *not* return to my cell.

Even if I must steal a guard's weapon.

Even if I must run Illian through myself.

## Chapter Two

The King of West Miridran lounges at his gilded desk, its thick, four-pronged legs digging into the carpet like claws.

He does not bother to glance up. Not even as I'm ushered inside and Brigitte turns to leave, the door clicking shut behind her.

His brows are furrowed, his black quill gliding against parchment in smooth, steady strokes.

I take the moment to study him.

He is just as I remember. Young, nearing thirty. Only a handful of years older than I am. Strong shoulders, jaw still angular and sharp as a scythe, though his dark curls are shorter now, trimmed over his ears.

I draw in an uneasy breath, a spark of anger simmering in my belly.

There he is—my defender, my protector. The king who'd gaze upon me as if I were his most precious gem. The savior who'd offered me the world, so long as I came and danced only for him.

The liar who'd promised me refuge and opulence in the comfort of his court, only to abandon me to the rats.

I still can't understand why it happened, why he had punished me for a murder he knows I didn't—couldn't—commit. Had he

grown bored with me? Had I done something wrong? Or had he discovered who I really was or where I came from? But no, that couldn't be; I'd left my old life behind with no tracks.

Over time, I'd realized the answer didn't matter. He could simply do whatever he wanted.

I'd thought I was special to him, but what is a single jewel to a king who has thousands?

I drag my gaze away, allowing my eyes to drift over the room. Low-hanging lanterns throw fragmented light across the walls, the ceiling, the ominous statue behind his desk.

*The Fate of Morta.*

Courtesan of Death, Reaper of Souls.

She stands tall, crafted from gold-threaded marble. An intricate hood shrouds her eyes, her nose, revealing only her famous full-lipped smirk. Her hair, long and flowing, drips down her gown like oil. King Illian always found her fascinating—perhaps because he's obsessed with beauty.

Lore tells us she offers every soul a chance to return to their life among the living, but she's so beautiful that no one can resist her, so alluring that refusing death is impossible. Some say she changes forms, or perhaps your perception, because everyone takes her hand.

Everyone accepts their death and is led willingly to Morta's Lair. *Death's Lair*. Everyone but me, because I never had the chance.

I waited and waited, but she never came.

King Illian releases a sigh, finally dropping his quill. Then his attention drifts up, slowly, as if time lags in his presence. His eyes crawl over me, pausing at my legs, my waist, my shoulders, before meeting my gaze. I want to shrink away. I feel like a fallen star—a once glittering gem now dragged through the mud.

He is still so elegant and I . . . I have withered away.

"Vasalie Moran," he says, his onyx gaze holding mine. "The past two years have not been kind to you."

I don't answer, though a retort climbs to my lips. *You did this to*

*me, you lying swine.* But then his words hit me like a blow. *Two years.* I hadn't known how long. I'd lost track.

The king studies me, his lips pulling into a frown. I hope he remembers everything—the color of my blood, the pitch of my screams. I will him to see it in my eyes.

I hope he sees a ghost come to haunt him.

He blows out another exhale. “You wonder why I’ve brought you here, no doubt.”

At my silence, he eases back, his long fingers twining around the arms of his chair. “I am merciful,” he says, almost wistful. “I always have been—especially to you. I allowed you to live, after all, despite your horrendous crime.” I tighten my jaw, but he continues. “And here you are, out of prison. So relax, my Vasalie; fortune has smiled upon you once more. Follow my commands, and you will never see your cell again.”

*My Vasalie.* His property, as always—though a kernel of hope unfolds within my chest. *Follow my commands, and you will never see your cell again.*

But I know him. I’ve learned the taste of his lies. Whatever he says next will be tempting, like a gown strung with rubies and pearls, the flashy gems hiding the steel-boned corset underneath. Another cage.

“The reward,” he says, “will be your exoneration.”

“Exoneration . . .” The word escapes before I realize I said it aloud. It shatters on my lips, rough and broken, pitiful even to my own ears.

His lips peel upward into a knowing smirk—the same smirk he showcased at the end of my performances. “I want you to join the entertainment on the Isle of Anell during the Crowns’ Gathering,” he says. “As my informant, so to speak—though you’ll be so much more. Of course, I can only guarantee you an audition. You must impress the Master of Revels to be granted a performer’s spot. Succeeded, however, and after . . .”

I sway and lose my balance, almost fall, but the guard behind me clamps my shoulder.

The Crowns’ Gathering. My mind reels as memories return. It’s a monthlong conclave for the united northern nations—also known as the Crowns’ Syndicate—hosted by Miridran’s three kings. It occurs every three years as a way to renew trade agreements and keep the peace among once warring nations.

An invitation to perform at the Crowns’ Gathering is an honor, one any serious entertainer would kill for. Such a coveted position would bring as much fame as it would riches.

Despite being hosted on an island in East Miridran just a few days’ ride from here, King Illian has never allowed me to audition before. It didn’t matter how much I pleaded. And now, after all this time, after what he’s done to me . . .

“Vasalie?” he prods. Impatience spreads across his face.

Anger flushes my cheeks and my voice cracks in what sounds like shock. Is this a joke? “Look at me, Your Majesty.”

“I am looking.”

My eyes drop to the floor—to my bony feet, my thin legs, no longer padded with muscle. Scars pucker the skin around my ankles and wrists, visible beneath my shackles. “I am in no condition to dance. I haven’t been for a long time.” *Thanks to you.* But my voice sounds frail, lacking the bite I wish I could muster.

“You will be,” he says. “We have two months to prepare for your audition. But I won’t sit here and convince you, Vasalie. Refuse my order, and you can go back to your dungeon and rot.”

He can see it on my face; I’ll do anything to avoid going back.

I’m on a hook, and all he has to do is reel.

“What will be required of me should I make it in?” I ask, almost a whisper.

“As an entertainer, you will be allowed access to places my other informants cannot go. You will act as my spy, reporting to me on everything I wish to know. And once the Gathering ends, you will

be released with a full pardon. I'll return your title, your apartment, whatever you wish. Ask for it, and it will be yours."

Whatever I wish.

Back in my cell, I spent countless hours wondering what that was. What I would have done differently; what I would do if, by some miracle, I escaped. That was before hopelessness set in, absorbed like ink into the fibers of my being.

*Whatever you wish. Ask for it, and it will be yours.*

For the longest time, I thought it was revenge. I wanted revenge against the man before me, who threw me away without half a thought. I imagined all the ways I wanted to hurt him, and I don't deny that rage still exists. I still want revenge.

But more than that, I want to be free. I want to forget my past, my pain, and disappear. I want to pretend I never came here. I want to forget everything.

I want to forget *him*.

I look at Illian. "My name will be cleared?"

"Yes," he says.

"Then I want permission to leave West Miridran."

He opens his mouth, pauses. It was bold, I know, but I've realized something. He must need me, and only me, or he would have chosen a dancer who doesn't loathe the carpet on which he stands.

But . . . *why?*

"If you wish," he finally says.

"I want it in writing. Stamped with your seal."

"Fine, Vasalie," he drawls, scribbling on a document before snatching his seal. Once he finishes, he holds it out so that I can see. "But I will hold on to this until the Gathering has concluded."

I study him. If there is a lie there, it's hidden beneath the surface of his dark, hooded eyes. But . . . "Why? What is it you wish to discover?"

King Illian gives me a sour look. "To you, it matters not."

I swallow, threading my fingers together. Whatever he intends to uncover at the Crowns' Gathering, it is no small thing. Not when

the whole of the Crowns' Syndicate will be in attendance. Not when he's offering me whatever I wish if I obey. There's something he isn't telling me, some hidden agenda. But if the cost of my freedom is lies and deception, I'll pay it.

I dip my chin, just once, in acceptance, even as I strain to keep my spine straight.

A smile creeps over his lips. "My Vasalie, returned to me at last."

My stomach turns inside out at the possessiveness once again coating his words. He motions toward the door, and a guard allows Brigitte inside once more. He juts his chin toward me, addressing her. "Take her from here. Do whatever is necessary to ensure she is ready, but she is not to leave my personal corridor."

Brigitte offers her arm, and I need her strength more than ever. I lean on her as she turns, leading me toward the door.

"And Vasalie," King Illian calls after me.

We halt.

"I have eyes and ears everywhere on the Isle of Anell," he says. "If you run, I will find you. If you speak ill of my name, I will hear of it. If you betray me, I won't only revoke your reward . . ." He pauses, and his eyes go cold. "I will kill you myself."

And just like that, new shackles bind my wrists, hewn from promises and carved from threats. But with them comes a second chance, and I won't take it for granted.



Muscles spasm in my back and legs the moment Brigitte and I emerge from the king's office, and I collapse, doubling over in a heap.

I expect the guards to yank me up. Instead, I hear Brigitte ordering them to fetch the physician and the meal she fussed at them about earlier.

"Foolish, the lot of them," she grumbles as their footsteps recede.

I feel her arm around me next.

She stays that way until the physician arrives.