

# *The Caged Bird*

*By Katelynn Laird*

## Chapter 1

Mayra Lennick was staring out the small, grimy hole in the wall that passed for a window. She did this most days, hours and hours she'd gaze into the bleak world beyond her cell. The sky was grey, not uncommon for early spring. The land outside was unremarkable, mostly a mixture of yellows, greys, and browns – sparse patches of grass, sharp rocks, and dried out dirt. Maybe the occasional oak tree.

A bird flitted past the window and Mayra's heart hammered in time with its flapping wings. She sighed heavily. "Look, Quill, a sparrow. Don't see those too often around here." She didn't look toward the guardian to whom she spoke, and for all he knew, there was another person in there with her named Zander Quill, one only she could see. But he decided she was probably talking to him.

"No, most of them are farther south." Still, she didn't turn to the sound of his voice. If he listened closely, he could hear her humming softly to herself.

Heavy boot steps sounding down the hallway drew Zander's gaze from within the cell. He stood at attention, for a royal soldier was approaching.

"At ease, Guardian."

Zander obeyed, raising a questioning eyebrow at the soldier's unannounced appearance in one of the most heavily guarded prisons in the kingdom. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"I've come to retrieve this prisoner and take her before the King," the soldier replied briskly.

"Why? She's already had her trial. Serving a double life sentence right here."

The soldier shrugged. "Above my pay grade, I guess, and certainly above yours." Zander bristled at that comment. Sure, this guy was a soldier in the King's private guard, but guardians served the rest of the kingdom and, most agreed, were infinitely more skilled. "I was just ordered to bring her to the city," the soldier continued, Zander's annoyance going unnoticed.

"Yes, sir. I'll form up an escort right away. I think ten men plus myself should be sufficient." Zander turned to walk away, but the soldier's snort of laughter brought him back.

"Eleven armed men, plus the soldiers accompanying me? I've heard the stories, but surely that is overkill, isn't it?"

Zander didn't share in his amusement. He lowered his voice, conscious of the cell's occupant. "That is the bare minimum." He didn't elaborate, but his steely grey eyes bored into the soldier's.

The soldier frowned. "Yes, well I've been ordered to move as inconspicuously as possible and I don't see how I can do that with an entourage of three royal soldiers, ten

guardians, and the warden of the prison,” he said, eyeing the iron warden’s badge on Zander’s chest, beside the silver one marking him as a guardian. He chewed his lip in thought and tugged on his bristly mustache. “I’ll take five of your men, dressed as common men-at-arms. But not you. I reckon you are too well known around here. Besides, I’m sure as warden you have more important duties than the transfer of one prisoner.” As it happened, Mayra’s transfer warranted Zander’s utmost attention, but he could tell the soldier wasn’t in the mood to argue and, despite Zander’s station as warden, a royal soldier equaled him in rank. Most of them thought they were above guardians all together.

“I’ll get those men,” Zander informed him, already dreading the disagreement that would erupt when he informed them they would have to forgo the status of guardians to travel as simple men-at-arms.

He returned to Mayra’s cell quickly, five armed guardians trailing behind him. He doubted their presence would be necessary at this stage – she hadn’t attempted an escape in several weeks – but it was protocol for Mayra and he wanted to impress upon the soldier how cautiously he should handle the transfer. Each man’s hand hovered over his weapon as Zander turned the key to Mayra’s cell. The soldier raised his eyebrows, but remained silent. Hearing the click of the lock, Mayra looked away from the window and stood. The guardians formed defenses on either side of the hallway and one was at Zander’s back.

The cell door swung back and the soldier got his first good look at Mayra. “So this is the Bird...” he started, but his words trailed away when he saw her. Mayra was

devastatingly beautiful. Her black hair was shiny and fell down past her waist. Most was loose, but she'd started a few small braids out of boredom. She was petite, thin but still curved where it mattered, and not diminished by the ragged shirt and shorts she wore. Her skin was pale from spending so long indoors, and before that, going out predominantly at night. Her nose was small and straight, her lips full and the color of strawberries. Her eyes were the most breathtaking, a mixture of blue and green that was reminiscent of distant seas, a color no local body of water could match. Looking at her, one would never guess what she really was. But if you focused just on the luminescent eyes, past the perfect size and color, it was like looking through splintered glass.

She laughed abruptly, causing everyone present to jump. The soldier's eyebrows had disappeared into his thinning brown hair and his mouth was hanging open. Whatever he'd been expecting in the notorious Bird, Mayra defied expectation.

"And who is this fly trap with his tongue dragging on the ground?" she asked, her expression of disdain at odds with the girlish voice she affected.

Zander cleared his throat and glared meaningfully at Mayra, then realized he'd never actually gotten the soldier's name. After an awkward pause, the soldier collected himself and responded, "First Lieutenant Argus Fletcher," not meeting her taunting gaze. "I'm here to take you to the King." He mustered as much authority as he could, but it was clear Mayra already had him rattled.

"Ooh," she squealed, "how I've missed my chats with Benny." She was referring to her trial in the King's court.

“*King* Benjamin has requested your presence forthwith,” Fletcher continued, doing his best to ignore her.

“What does he want with me? He’s already taken my dignity, my freedom, my money.” Her voice lost some of the high-pitched teasing tone.

Fletcher shrugged, “All of which you took from many others. You brought that on yourself. As to why he wants you, I’m not at liberty to say.”

Mayra snorted. “So, you don’t know.” Then she looked behind her, into the empty cell. “Oh, he likes to pretend he’s in charge, but he’s just the errand boy.”

“Excuse me?” Fletcher said, his neck flushing.

Mayra looked back toward him. “I wasn’t talking to you.” The Lieutenant stared at Zander in confusion.

“Alright, Lennick. Time to go. You know the drill,” Zander ordered, taking command of the situation before Mayra pushed Fletcher any further. Plenty of time for that on the journey back to the city. Mayra stepped up to the cell door and turned, presenting her hands behind her back.

“Make them nice and tight,” she said, grinning.

“Don’t worry, I will.” Zander yanked the latch on the shackles. He didn’t return her smile. “She’s all yours, Lieutenant,” he said once Mayra was secure. “Make sure you keep a close eye on this one.”

Fletcher nodded but Mayra didn't move. "You're not coming with?" she asked, frowning.

"Guardian Quill has more important things to attend to," Fletcher informed her.

"More important than me?" Mayra pouted.

Zander rolled his eyes. "Of course not, Lennick," he said sarcastically. "But I'm still staying here, so get a move on." Mayra looked like she wanted to argue, but Zander's hard eyes compelled her not to. Still, when Fletcher led her past him, she surged forward, crashing into his shoulder. The other guardians drew their swords, but Zander waved them off.

"When you break, don't let them see the cracks," Mayra whispered before righting herself. Zander didn't give any indication he'd heard her. He brushed off his uniform, picked up the chain attached to Mayra's shackles, and placed it back in Fletcher's hands. Fletcher tugged her forward, but when she looked back, Zander nodded almost imperceptibly. Only after she and Fletcher had turned the corner did he realize his warden badge was missing.

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