



Scarlett woke with the feeling she'd lost something significant. Unlike most days, where her eyes opened reluctantly and she took her time stretching each limb before easing out of bed and cautiously looking around, on this day, Scarlett sat up the moment her eyes flickered open.

Beneath her, the world rocked.

"Careful, there." Julian steadied her, reaching out to catch her before she tried to stand up in the boat—if the tiny tub they were in could properly be called a boat. A raft was a more appropriate name. It was barely large enough for the two of them.

"How long have I been asleep?" Scarlett gripped the edges of the vessel as the rest of her surroundings came into focus.

Across from her, Julian dipped two oars into the water, careful not to splash her, as he rowed through an unfamiliar sea. The water almost looked pink, with small swirls of turquoise that swelled as the copper sun crept higher into the sky.

It was morning, although Scarlett imagined more than one dawn

had passed while she'd slept. Julian's face had been smooth when she'd last seen him, but now his jaw and chin appeared to be covered in at least two days of dark stubble. He looked even more disreputable than when he'd flashed that wolfish grin on the beach.

"You blackguard!" Scarlett slapped him in the face.

"Ow! What was that for?" A ruby welt bloomed across his cheek. The color of rage and punishment.

Horror filled Scarlett at what she had done. On occasion she had trouble taming her tongue, but she'd never struck another person. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to do that!" She clutched the edges of her bench, bracing for him to strike back.

But the hit she expected never came.

Julian's cheek was a blaze of angry red, his jaw nothing but a series of tight lines, yet he didn't touch her.

"You don't need to be afraid of me. I've never hit a woman." He stopped rowing and looked her in the eyes. Unlike the come-hither gaze he'd worn inside the barrel room, or the predatory look she'd seen on the beach, he now made no attempts to charm or scare her. Beneath his hard appearance, Scarlett could see the ghost of the expression he'd worn as he had watched her father strike Tella. Julian had looked as appalled as Scarlett had been terrified.

On his cheek, the imprint of her hand was fading, and as it disappeared Scarlett could feel some of her terror slip away. Not everyone reacted like her father.

Scarlett's fingers unclenched from the sides of the boat, though her hands still felt a little shaky.

"I'm sorry," she managed again. "But you and Tella should have

never—wait.” Scarlett stopped. The awful feeling she’d lost something vital flooded back. And that something had honey-blond hair and a cherub’s face with a devil’s grin. “Where is Tella?”

Julian dipped his oars back in the water, and this time he did splash Scarlett. Icy drops of wet sprayed all over her lap.

“If you’ve done something to Tella, I swear—”

“Relax, Crimson—”

“It’s Scarlett.”

“Same difference. And your sister is fine. You’ll find her on the isle.” Julian tipped an oar toward their destination.

Scarlett was prepared to keep arguing, but when her eyes caught sight of where the sailor pointed, whatever she intended to say melted like warm butter on top of her tongue.

The isle on the horizon looked nothing like her familiar Trisda. Where Trisda was black sand, rocky coves, and sickly looking shrubs, this bit of earth was lush and alive. Glittering mist swirled around vibrant green mountains—all covered in trees—that rose toward the sky as if they were massive emeralds. From the top of the largest peak an iridescent blue waterfall streamed down like melted peacock feathers, disappearing into the ring of sunrise-tinted clouds that pirouetted around the surreal isle.

*Isla de los Sueños.*

The island of dreams. Scarlett had never heard of the isle before seeing its name on the tickets to Caraval, yet she knew without asking that she stared at it now. *Legend’s private island.*

“You’re lucky you slept on the way here. The rest of our voyage wasn’t this scenic.” Julian said it as if he’d done her a favor. Yet no

matter how beguiling this isle was, thoughts of another isle weighed heavy on her mind.

“How far are we from Trisda?” she asked.

“We’re somewhere between the Conquered Isles and the Southern Empire,” Julian answered lazily, as if they were merely strolling on the beach next to her father’s estate.

In reality, this was the farthest she’d ever been away from home. Scarlett’s eyes stung as a spray of salt water hit them. “How many days have we been gone?”

“It’s the thirteenth. But before you hit me again, you should know your sister bought you time by making it seem as if both of you were kidnapped.”

Scarlett recalled the destructive way Tella had gone through all her things, leaving her room in shambles. “That’s why my room was such a mess?”

“She also left a ransom note,” Julian added. “So, when you return, you should be able to wed your count and live *happily ever after*.”

Scarlett admitted her sister was clever. But if their father figured out the truth, he’d be livid—especially with her wedding only a week away. The image of a purple, fire-breathing dragon came to mind, coating her vision with ashy shades of anxiety.

*But maybe a visit to this isle is worth the risk.* The wind seemed to whisper the words, reminding her that the thirteenth was also the date on Legend’s invitation. *Anyone who arrives later than this will not be able to participate in the game, or win this year’s prize of one wish.*

Scarlett tried not to be enticed, but the child inside her drank in this new world greedily. The colors here were brighter, thicker,

sharper; in comparison, every hue she'd seen before seemed thin and malnourished.