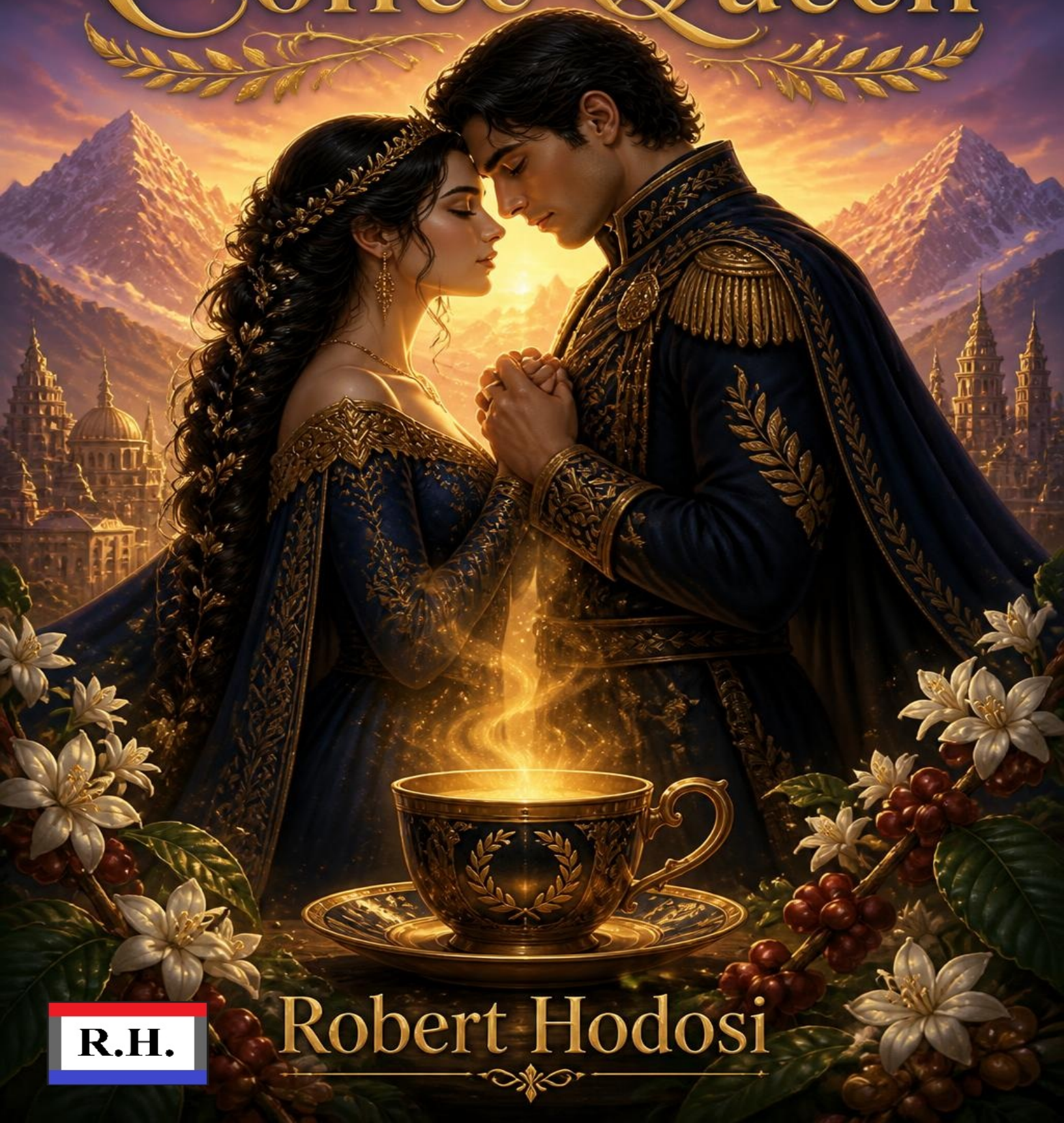


The Coffee Queen



R.H.

Robert Hodosi

THE COFFEE QUEEN

A Novel

by Robert Hodosi

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Portions of this book were created with the assistance of generative AI tools. The author has reviewed and edited the content.

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Author's Note

When I began writing this book at the request of a friend of mine who lives across the ocean, I knew I wanted to tell the story of a girl who has to learn to be strong at a time when everything around her is falling apart. Princess Elena did not come to me as a figure out of a history book, but as a living person with her own heart, her own fear, and her own hope. Her journey is not about becoming what everyone expects of her—it is about becoming herself, even when that is dangerous and painful.

While writing, I discovered that this book is really about the search for home—not just a physical place, but that deeper feeling of safety we all carry in our hearts. Elena is surrounded by darkness and uncertainty, but in her story I wanted to capture, too, the people who teach her that even in the hardest moments there is grace, mystery, and hope. The magical elements in this book are not merely decoration—they are echoes of our own hidden strengths, the abilities we all carry within us when we dare to believe in ourselves.

This book is dedicated to everyone who has ever felt alone, vulnerable, and lost. To those who know that the world has far more layers than it seems to at first glance. To everyone who wishes to find something in these pages that touches them—whether it's a flash of courage, a feeling of understanding, or simply a beautiful moment to rest and believe that change is possible.

Thank you for taking the time to read Elena's story. I hope it accompanies you the way it accompanied me while I wrote it—with gratitude, with quiet wonder, and with the sense that home is not just a place, but a feeling we all carry within us.

Introduction

Every fairy tale is born of pain. This one was born of shadow—the shadow of loss that follows young Princess Elena like her own shadow, and the shadow of a threat that draws closer with every day. Her world was once one of royal hope and safety, but now it trembles beneath the weight of the unknown. Her parents are gone. Her kingdom is under threat. And she, alone and without a guide, must find a way forward—whether that path leads to salvation or to a destiny of her own that is about to step into her life.

This book is the story of how a person is transformed when the world they once knew ceases to exist. It is a story of searching—for home, for peace, for meaning—when everything we thought we had slips through our fingers. Yet at its heart there is not only darkness. There is magic here too. There is love here too. And there is something as unexpected as the power of an ordinary drink, one that, at the right time and in the right place, becomes a symbol of hope and transformation.

As I wrote this story, I tried to capture what it means to be vulnerable and yet unafraid—to be desperate and yet to find courage within. I wanted to write a fairy tale full of ethereal beauty and deep mystery, one that would move between intimate, painful moments of self-discovery and a whirlwind of adventure, where the choices people make play out amid courtly intrigue and in forests older than memory.

If this book has brought you here, it is because you were searching for a story about the power of fate and change. Or perhaps you were searching for a story about how feeling and determination can transform us. Perhaps you simply wanted to feel that there is a world where fear and hope touch one another, and where each of us has the power to change our own world. If so, then a place on these pages belongs to you.

CHAPTER 1

The Fall of the Kingdom of the Rooks

June 24, 1875

The darkness in the chamber was so thick that Elena could almost taste it. She sat on the edge of the bed, hands folded in her lap, staring at the place where she guessed the window to be, though not a single ray of moonlight pierced the heavy velvet curtains. The air was still and cold, thick with the smell of old wood and wilted flowers that no one had changed in three days. Not since her parents had drawn their last breath. They had been poisoned during the summer welcoming feast.

Her fingers gripped the hem of her nightgown. It was fine linen, embroidered with silver thread that her mother had ordered from craftsmen in the southern valleys. Now it felt foreign to her, as though it belonged to someone else. Someone who still believed that mornings would bring breakfast with her father and evenings would bring conversations with her mother by the hearth. But that Elena no longer existed. Neither did the king and queen.

A distant scream echoed from the hallway beyond the door. Elena lifted her head, the muscles in her neck tightening. That sound did not belong in the palace. She did not recognise it. It was raw, animal, full of something these walls had never known. Panic. Real, unfeigned panic from the servants and guards.

The doors burst open.

"Princess!"

Her loyal maid rushed in and immediately shut the door behind her. Her face, usually calm and marked by the small wrinkles around her eyes that Elena knew so well, was now pale as moonlight. Her hands trembled as she lit a candle on the table. The small flame

flickered, casting long shadows across the tapestries depicting the ancient victories of House Rooks.

"What's happening?" Elena stood. Her knees buckled, but she forced them to hold her.

"The armies of King Malicious," the maid breathed, pressing a hand to her chest as if trying to calm her own heart. "They've surrounded the palace. They're everywhere. They broke through the outer walls before the guards could even raise the alarm."

Elena heard her own breath. Too fast. Too shallow. "How is that possible? Father always said the northern passes were impassable until spring."

"They came from the east, Princess. Through Martin's realm. Someone opened the way for them." The maid seized her by the shoulders. Her fingers were cold, but her grip was firm. "There's no time for questions. King Malicious has given the order. For your execution. He wants to make certain that no one from House Rooks remains who could claim the throne."

The words fell into the silence like stones into still water. Elena felt her whole world tilting, the solid ground vanishing from beneath her feet. Only a week ago she had sat with her mother in the garden, listening to her laughter. Only a month ago she had danced with her father at the autumn festival, and he had whispered to her that one day she would be a wise queen. Now both of them were gone, and a foreign king was closing in on her, sword in hand.

"You must flee," the maid said, releasing her shoulders. "Now."

"Where would I even go?" Elena's voice sounded foreign, as though it belonged to a child lost in fog. "The whole kingdom—"

"There's a hidden passage. Behind the library. Your mother showed it to me years ago, in case something like this ever happened." The maid was already rummaging through the wardrobe, pulling out the plainest clothes she could find. A coarse wool skirt, a

linen blouse, a shawl frayed at the edges. Clothes that had once belonged to a kitchen girl and had been left behind after the last linen exchange. "Change. Quickly."

Elena looked at the clothes, and then at her own hands. Soft, white, with nails that had never known labour.

Princess hands. Hands that knew how to embroider, to play the lute, to turn the pages of books. Not hands that would survive in a forest.

"Princess!" The maid's voice startled her back. "There's no time."

She pulled off her nightgown. The coarse fabric of the peasant dress scratched at her shoulders, the waist felt too loose, the skirt heavy and stiff. She felt like an actress in someone else's play. But when she threw the shawl over her head and looked into the mirror, she did not see a princess. She saw a stranger with eyes the colour of forest honey, in which fear now shimmered, and hair like the night sky, spilling now in disordered strands from beneath the shawl.

"Take this." The maid handed her a gem—a blue sapphire—and a small leather pouch. "Jewels. They can be sold. And this." Into her other hand she placed a small bottle of dark glass. Elena recognised it at once. It was the bottle her father always carried with him, filled with the rarest coffee beans from the southern plantations. The symbol of their house. An inheritance stretching back six generations, to when the first of House Rooks had brought coffee to this kingdom and built his power upon it.

"How did you get this?" Elena whispered.

"Your father gave it to me that evening, when—" The maid paused. "When he knew he wouldn't be coming back. He said it belonged to you. That one day you'd understand why."

Elena closed her hand around the glass bottle. Through the glass she could see the small beans, hard and unyielding. Like hope. Like a life that refused to end.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. Heavy. Metallic. Not the footsteps of servants.

"They're already inside," the maid breathed, snatching up the candle. "Come. Now."

They ran out into the hallway. Elena felt her bare feet against the cold stone, felt the draft that swept past like the ghost of dead kings. Everything was happening too fast. The walls she had known since childhood now blurred past her like shadows in a nightmare. Tapestries depicting ancient battles. Portraits of ancestors staring down at her with stern eyes. A vase of blue porcelain that her mother had loved so much, still standing in its place, as though nothing were happening at all.

The library was steeped in darkness. The smell of old books and leather bindings mingled with the cold seeping in through the tall windows. The maid headed without hesitation toward the farthest wall, where shelves rose with the oldest volumes, the ones no one had read in decades. Her hands—those careful hands that had bathed Elena as a child, that had combed her hair when she cried for her mother—now pressed against a hidden mechanism in the wooden paneling.

Part of the shelf slid aside with a quiet sigh.

"This way," the maid said, pushing a small lantern into her hands. "The passage leads all the way to the old well beyond the outer walls. They won't see you there."

"And you?" Elena gripped her wrist. "You're coming with me."

The maid shook her head. Tears glistened in her eyes, but her voice was steady. "Someone has to stay and confuse them. Tell them you fled north. I'll buy you time."

"You can't. They'll kill you."

"I am an old woman, Princess. I have served your family my whole life. If this is to be my last service—your survival—I accept it

gladly." She touched Elena's face, her thumb wiping away a tear Elena hadn't even known was falling down her cheek. "Find yourself a new home. Find a place where you'll be safe. And never forget who you are. You are Elena Rooks. The last heir of your line. And that means something."

Elena wanted to embrace her. She wanted to tell her that she loved her, that she had never thanked her enough for all those years, all those nights she had sat beside her when she was sick, all those moments when she had been the one steady point in the storm-tossed sea of royal life. But the maid gently pushed her into the darkness of the passage.

"Go. And don't stop."

The door closed behind her.

There was only darkness. Elena stood in a narrow stone tunnel that smelled of damp and mould, listening to her own breath. The lantern in her hand cast a weak, wavering light on the cobweb-covered walls. Somewhere above her were the chambers where she had grown up. The hallways she had run through as a child. The garden where she had learned to identify herbs with her mother. And now there were foreign soldiers up there. Men who had been sent to kill her.

The first step was the hardest. Her leg trembled as she set it on the cold stone. Then the second. The third. And then she was running.

The passage sloped downward. The walls narrowed until she had to stoop so as not to strike her head on the low ceiling. Cobwebs clung to her face, sharp stones cut into her bare feet. But she did not stop. She could not. Behind her she heard only silence, yet she imagined she could hear the footsteps of pursuers, the clang of swords, the screams of servants being caught. Perhaps it wasn't only her imagination. Perhaps it was truly happening, even as she ran like a rat from a sinking ship.

The thought struck her like a blow to the face. She had abandoned them. Abandoned everyone. The maid, the guards, the servants who had faithfully served her whole life. And she was running. Saving her own skin while they faced the enemy.

She stopped. Her breath caught in her throat. What if she should go back? What if it was her duty to stay and fight, as her father would have done? What if—

The bottle in her pocket gave off its scent. A faint, earthy smell of coffee that pierced even through glass and skin. It reminded her of her father's words. "Coffee is not just a drink, Elena. It is patience. It grows slowly, blooms quietly, but its strength comes at the right time. And when it comes, it changes the world."

She closed her hand around the bottle more tightly. No. She would not give up. Not so she could die a martyr in a palace that had already fallen. But so she could survive. So that one day she could do what was right. Whatever that turned out to be.

She ran on.

The passage finally began to rise. The air changed, grew fresher, cooler. Elena caught the scent of damp earth and leaves.

Then she saw light. Faint, diffuse, but real.

The way out.

She scrambled through the narrow opening and found herself beside an old stone well, hidden among dense bushes. She was beyond the outer walls. Beyond the walls that had bounded her entire world her whole life.

The night was cold and clear. The moon hung low on the horizon, silver and indifferent, illuminating a landscape Elena did not recognise. The palace burned behind her. Flames licked from the windows of the eastern wing, smoke rising to the sky like a black prayer. She heard screams. The clash of weapons. The pounding of

horses' hooves. Chaos rolling through the night like a ravenous river, sweeping away everything she had ever held dear.

She shivered. Not from the cold, though the wind was icy and her bare feet were bleeding into the damp grass. She shivered from something deeper. From the knowledge that this was the end. The end of everything she had known. The end of Princess Elena Rooks, daughter of the king and queen, heir to the throne. That girl's station in life was dead. And what remained of her now stood barefoot in a stranger's clothes at the edge of the forest, not knowing where to go.

Behind her she heard pounding footsteps. Drawing closer. Soldiers. Searching for her.

Elena looked back one last time at the burning palace. At the place where she had grown up, where she had laughed and cried, where she had lost her parents and where they now wanted to kill her. Then she turned and ran into the shadows of the forest.

Branches lashed at her face, roots tangled beneath her feet, but she kept running. Deeper and deeper into the darkness, away from the flames, away from death, away from everything she had ever known. She clutched the coffee bottle in her hand like a talisman. Like the one remaining bond to a past that was burning behind her back at this very moment.

The forest swallowed her whole. And behind her, only silence and smoke remained.

CHAPTER 2

Whispers of the Forgotten Forest

June 25, 1875

She woke to a silence that did not know her name.

The cold had crept through the layer of leaves she had burrowed into during the night, settling into her bones like an ancient memory of a winter she had never lived through. Elena opened her eyes. The light filtering through the branches was thin and colourless, as though someone had strained it through dirty cloth. Above her arched trees unlike any she had ever seen—trunks twisted into shapes that resembled frozen screams, bark cracked into patterns that looked like a forgotten script.

The Forest of Forgotten Whispers.

The name came to her mind on its own, though she couldn't say where she knew it from. Perhaps from the fairy tales her mother used to tell her. Perhaps from the warnings servants whispered when they thought she couldn't hear. A forest one enters only in the greatest need. A forest few return from.

She sat up. Her body was stiff from hours of running and from the ground, which had not embraced her during sleep, only tolerated her. She still clutched the bottle of coffee beans in her palm—her fingers had closed around it so tightly that she had to consciously release them, one by one. The glass was warm from her body. The only warmth she had left.

The distant crack of a branch made her flinch. She turned her head, eyes sweeping the forest, but she saw only shadows swaying slowly in the still air. No one was chasing her. Not yet, at least. King Malicious had soldiers who knew how to track, and she had left the kind of trail a frightened animal leaves—shallow, chaotic, leading nowhere and everywhere at once.

She had to keep moving.

She stood. Her knees shook, but she forced them to carry her. The clothes the maid had given her—coarse peasant linen, foreign against her skin—were damp with dew and clung to her thighs. She tucked the bottle deep into her pocket, where she could feel it with every step, and set off.

The forest received her without a word.

She walked for hours. Perhaps longer. Time did not pass here the way it did in the palace, where bells tolled every hour and the sun followed a path precisely mapped between the towers. Here the light merely crept slowly across the moss, unhurried, unwitnessed. Now and then she caught a whisper—not words, just a sound resembling a voice, though it could have been the wind. Now and then it seemed to her that the trees changed position when she wasn't looking, that the path behind her was no longer the one she had walked.

Hunger announced itself as a dull ache beneath her ribs. She couldn't remember when she'd last eaten. Yesterday? The day before? Back in the palace, when her parents were still alive and the table was laid with white linen? The image flickered before her eyes and she quickly chased it away. The memories were too sharp to hold in her hands right now. They would wound her.

She stopped at a stream flowing between the roots—water clear, cold, without the taste of iron. She cupped it in her hands and drank until her teeth ached. When she lifted her head, she noticed the light had changed. It was no longer thin and colourless. Between the trunks appeared a bluish glow, faint as breath on a mirror.

She had no reason to follow it. She had no reason to trust anything this forest offered. But her legs carried her forward on their own, as if guided by a thread she couldn't see but could feel pulled taut somewhere in her chest.

The glow grew stronger. The trees thinned until a small clearing opened before her, and in its centre stood a willow.

It was no ordinary willow. Its trunk was so wide that three men could not have encircled it with their arms, and its branches hung all the way to the ground like a bride's veil worn by someone who has waited too long. The bark was silvery, threaded through with veins that pulsed faintly, as though sap from another world flowed within it. In the trunk gaped a hollow—not a wound, but a doorway, natural and as old as the tree itself.

Elena stepped closer. The leaves beneath her feet made no sound. The air around the willow was warmer, thicker, smelling of damp earth and something sweet she couldn't name. Her heart beat slowly, heavily, as though it too felt the weight of this place.

She leaned into the hollow.

And there, on a bed of moss, grew a violet.

It was not blue the way blue flowers usually are. It was blue like the sky just before a storm, like a vein at the wrist, like a light that came from no sun. It pulsed. Slowly, steadily, in a rhythm all its own that resembled nothing Elena had ever seen. Each pulse sent a wave of light across the petals, revealing for an instant a network of silvery veins, then faded, only to flare again a moment later.

Elena held her breath. Her hands fell to her sides. Something within her—an instinct older than reason—whispered for her to step back. Something else, just as old, told her to stay.

Then the violet spoke.

"You've come at last."

The voice was quiet but clear, like the tone of a glass harp that lingers longer than it should. It came from no particular place—it sounded directly inside her head, and yet outside her too, as though the forest itself had breathed it out.

Elena opened her mouth but made no sound. Her fingers gripped the edge of the hollow. The bark was warm.

"Don't be afraid," the voice said. "I have waited for you a very long time."

"Who... what are you?" Elena blurted. Her own voice sounded foreign to her, hoarse, like an instrument no one had played in a long while.

The violet's light brightened for a moment, as if the flower had drawn a breath. "I am what you see. And at the same time, far more. My name would mean nothing to you now. Call me the Blue Violet."

Elena felt her knees tremble. Not from fear—or perhaps it was fear, but a different fear than any she had known. It was not fear of soldiers, of death, of loss. It was the fear of what comes when everything familiar ends.

"Are you... a fairy?" she whispered.

The violet pulsed faster. "I was. Once. Before I was imprisoned in this form. But that is a story for another time. Right now, this is about you, Elena Rooks."

Hearing the name of her house spoken in this forest, in this voice, struck Elena like a blow to the chest. She stepped back. "How do you know my name?"

"I know far more than your name," the violet answered. "I know the smoke rising over your palace. I know the silence left behind by your parents. I know the path you ran, and the shadow that pursues you. And I know, too, the path that still lies ahead of you."

Elena pressed a hand to her mouth. The tears she had held back since leaving the secret passage welled up in her eyes—hot, uninvited. But they did not fall. Something in the violet's voice kept her from weeping. Not coldness. Rather... a promise.

"My parents are dead," she said, and the words burned her throat. "My kingdom is in flames. I have nothing. I am the last heir of my house."

"You are the last of House Rooks," the violet agreed. "But you are not the last one in this world who matters. And you are not alone."

The light in the hollow spread wider, enfolding Elena's hands, her face, her eyelids. It was warm, but not like fire—more like the memory of summer in the middle of winter. Elena felt her breath slow, felt her shoulders, drawn tight from her flight, slowly loosen.

"I will help you," the violet said. "I can carry you to a place where King Malicious has no power. To a world that knows nothing of your past, where you can begin again. To the Kingdom of Coffee."

Elena blinked. "The Kingdom of Coffee? I've never heard of such a place."

"Because it lies on no map your father ever owned," the violet answered. "It is a world beyond the border of this one. A place where coffee is not merely a drink, but magic. And where fates are not carved into stone, but brewed slowly, like the finest beans."

Elena reached into her pocket and pulled out the bottle. The coffee beans inside gleamed in the violet's blue light—each one the colour of dark honey, the colour of her own eyes. "My maid gave me this. She said it was my family's inheritance."

"And she was right," the violet said. "Coffee runs in your blood, Elena Rooks. Six generations of your family knew its secrets. You are the seventh. And if you let me, I will help you discover what that means."

Elena gazed at the bottle in her palm. At the beans that had survived the fire, the flight, the night in the forest. At the one inheritance her parents had left her—not a throne, not a crown, not a palace. Only this. And perhaps that was enough.

"Why are you helping me?" she asked. "What do you get out of it?"

The violet darkened for a moment, as though thinking. "Because your fate and mine are entwined. Your path out of this forest is my

path too. I will help you, and one day you will help me. That is how it works."

"And if I fail?"

"Then we both fail," the violet said simply. "But I don't believe you will. I watched you run, Elena. I watched you fight your way through this forest, hungry, frozen, broken—and still you did not fall. That is not weakness. That is a beginning."

Elena raised her head. The trees around the clearing stood motionless, witnesses without judgment. The violet's light reflected in the dewdrops on the moss, a thousand tiny blue stars at her feet. In the air hung a scent she could now name—it was the scent of rain that had not yet fallen. The scent of possibility.

"What do I have to do?" she asked.

"Reach out your hand," said the violet. "And trust."

Elena drew a deep breath. The air entered her lungs cold and clean, the first true breath she had taken since leaving the palace. Then, slowly, as though wading through water, she reached her hand into the hollow.

Her fingers touched the petals.

And the world exploded into blue light.