

---

## Chapter 1

---

### Iolanthe

She believed him—the liar, her beautiful stranger, even as her body fell into darkness with a faint, her eyes opening to this. A cell, with her huddled upon a military style cot set in the corner, her hands tied before her.

The light overhead swung in movement as a second man righted himself from against the edge of the inside wall and stepped forward. Her knife was gone. The beautiful man had taken it, her devious deceiver. So she did the next best thing. She followed his example.

She lied, too.

Her mouth felt gummy and dry, though her voice worked. “Where am I?” she said, pretending to be brave.

She wanted to choke on the tangy, sweet and cloying smell in the room. Violets. They were everywhere, around the cot, around her, and on the floor. She shoved one away with a disgusted jerk of her toe. Someone had a sick sense of humor.

“Now, don’t be like that, sweetness,” the liar spoke.

*Don’t trust them, Iolanthe. Men are full of deceit, having nothing but*

*their desire and the lustful root that hangs between their legs. Don't give in. Never give in.*

Iolanthe held out her wrists, recalling her mother's repeated words. "Let me go. I don't want to be here."

She cast her eyes low, only looking out from under her lashes. Her head spun. She held out her wrists again, repeating her demand.

"Let me go."

A raspy baritone startled her, coming from the depths of the shadows. A voice harsh and terrible came from that second man who kept himself hidden from her. She wanted to hear it again, the sound dark, and ravenous and utterly magnificent.

"You," the baritone-voiced man told her, "fucking behave."

Inwardly she cursed at how the light trained on her, leaving the rest of the area blackened. She'd never be able to take down two men. One, she might be able to coerce. Two, she was doomed to whatever fate they had in store. And as her mother often warned her, there was one thing a man wanted from a female, one thing only. To bed and then impregnate her.

She swallowed the bile in her throat, terrified to move. Too afraid to do anything but freeze, her legs curled up to her chest. When her voice stammered in fear, she let it. It was real. She was petrified, and no amount of posturing would take that away.

"My mother," she whispered. "Where is she?"

There was a long pause of absolute silence. Then a soft chuckle escaped the harsh man's mouth, and with a gasp Iolanthe realized he had been there during her capture. She had been so sick – both at heart and from hunger and from the pain of betrayal – she'd been nearly unaware. Yet who could forget such a laugh? Triumphant, devastating with intention, a deep caress upon her ears.

He stayed back against the wall in the darkness, a shadow-man. It was as her mother always warned; he'd come for her, the man with the violets. The man from the deepest dark.

The liar stepped forward, the man she had trusted with so much. She had almost gifted him with the most intimate part of her body. She blinked, again aware of his appeal. He defied masculinity and gender with his Raphaelite beauty, high cheekbones, a jaw that peaked ruggedly sharp. It prickled with stubble in a way that made him look carnal. His eyes pondered her. His gaze turned rapacious, a dark and careful boldness.

She repeated, “My mom? Where is she?”

The dark-haired man with the harsh voice answered, his voice like a scythe, biting sharp and slicing into her like icy fire. “She’s dead.”

He didn’t step into the light. He was a halo, a dim reflection on the edge of the blackness. Iolanthe strained to see him. She failed, his words punching her in the gut. Dead.

The liar hissed and turned his body to face the other man, combative. A patch of cold crept over her skin. The showdown was like two predators of the wild, both out to stake their claim. The liar backed down. He gave a long exhale and turned to her, trying to soften the blow.

“She didn’t make it,” the liar said. “I’m sorry.”

He lied. Of course he did. Why should he care what happened to her mother? Iolanthe blinked. Blinked again. She curled her legs tighter to her body, a cocooned safety. Only she didn’t feel safe. She gulped and shook her head in denial, unable to articulate her pain, the hurt rolling around, an incomplete nothingness filling her belly.

Dead. It couldn’t be true. All this time her mother stayed alive just for her. She never left her, not even in the midst of all their deprivation. Why now? Why?

Her hands, tied at the wrist by a thick rope, shoved up to her mouth, trying to hold back the screams. Her mother was gone. Her mother died and left her alone, alone. Alone.

The devastating caress of the harsh man’s baritone voice

tugged at her, grounding her further into the present. There was nothing but danger and warning in his tone.

“Undress.”

“I won’t,” Iolanthe answered, her clipped voice like ice. She wanted to keep focused. Charm them. Persuade them. Convince the leader – the man of the shadows – to let her go. But fear and desperation clouded over the innocent and naïve mask she always wore to survive on the streets, the mask a woman must wear. No female could be anything but property to a male, useless to anyone unless owned, and until impregnated—until a viable child was born. More women died than succeeded. The situation galled her, for she had trapped herself, caged herself in. She’d gone with the liar willingly.

Her carefully portrayed mask slipped, and part of her debated risking everything just to play all her cards. Let them know how scared she was. Let them know she was brilliant at averting danger, and not willing to blatantly take what a man offered. Those qualities kept her alive while living in the back alleyways and abandoned buildings. But maybe part of that was a lie, too.

She was bound and at these strangers’ mercy, and it was all her fault. Iolanthe adjusted her too-large, tatty olive-green sweater closer to her body and curled her body as small and tight into the corner of the cot as she could. Her eyes darted about, looking for an escape. Needing to run.

Though the air in the cell wasn’t damp or cold, she shivered. The man who demanded from her was a man she didn’t want to cross. But she would and did.

There was little she had left, just her prized virginity. Her mother thought it important to fight over. So Iolanthe would fight harder to keep it.

The shadow-man stepped forward, and her breath caught. His black hair had been cut short with military precision about his masculine face. He wasn’t handsome, not even attractive, but

there was something oddly persuasive about his looks. His ugliness gave fire to his gaze and depth of character to his facade. There was nothing soft about the man before her. His eyes were obsidian dark, and he perused her silently. Though he stood several inches over six feet, he was massively muscular. Wide shoulders, lean hips, strong thighs and legs. He looked to be in his mid-thirties. A man shouldn't be so well-formed. And she shouldn't be noticing.

He examined her steadily, a neutral expression on his face. She stared at him, and tried not to choke on the decaying aroma of the hideous flowers scattered about the cell. His scent wafted through. Smoky. Like good earth and lush forest. She inhaled and blushed at her traitorous reaction to him.

"I gave you an order," he said.

He crossed his arms about his muscular chest. She tore her gaze up and away, her blush furious. His eyes snapped, and his pupils darkened when she hesitated.

"No," she said.

She licked her dry lips, wishing she dared ask for a drink of water. But it was either keep her clothes or get liquid for her parched mouth.

There was no debate. If she undressed, they'd use her body that much faster.

A serrated knife entered his palm. The man wore weapons like jewelry, swatches of them, about his waist and around his shoulders and back. The knife looked puny in his large palm.

Iolanthe squealed and reacted. Adrenaline kicked in, the fear she had tempered boosting her into flight. Though her wrists were still bound, she leapt from the cot, darting to the opposite corner of the cell from where the men were. The shadow-man followed, eerily calm. He beckoned with a curl of his hand. She shook her head. He stalked her, a ruthless foe, not caring that her eyes glistened with unshed tears and fright.

He reached for her. She begged him, her voice trembling,

tear after tear trailing down her cheek. Once they fell, they wouldn't stop. Her mother was dead and her virginity was deeply in danger.

Iolanthe knew she should have tried to run when she saw the violet wildflowers upon waking that morning, but she'd stayed to see her mother safely taken care of. She had tried to enact upon her baser needs when she met the liar in the warehouse later that same morning. Now she'd pay. The shadow-man yanked her close.

"Don't. Don't..."

Ignoring her, he cut the rope on her wrists and slit her sweater from neck to waist, opening it wide. Her beloved sweater, the one she'd worn since girlhood. She gasped, trying to cling to the remnants. She wore no bra, having outgrown hers years ago. His eyes roamed her body, down over her full but small breasts, though she tried to shield herself from his glowering stare.

His fingers reached out, the one with the knife in hand. The tip of the blade caressed her skin, leaving a fine line of warmth behind.

"I think you want my discipline, Iolanthe," the shadow-man said, his voice hoarse. "I think you crave it."

She stammered. He didn't force the knife into her skin hard enough to make her bleed, but she didn't dare provoke him. His eyes gleamed with a dangerous light. He was angry, and for what, she didn't dare ask.

"Please," she asked. "Let me go. I'll be good."

He grinned, an ugly smile. "Will you? I've seen no evidence of that."

She tried again. "I will. I promise. I'll behave."

Sheathing the knife, the shadow-man canted his dark-haired head thoughtfully, then ran his fingertips over the exposed points of her nipples. Her nipples were traitorously hard to his touch. He grunted dispassionately, his gaze darkening when she let out a slow moan. As he tapped the crest of

her rosy peaks, dreadfully smiling down at her, she felt a disturbing and embarrassing arousal sodden between her thighs. Her body betrayed her. Maybe being Pure meant being a whore, after all.

After licking her dry lips to gain courage, she dared to question him. “What happened to her? My mom? Why is she dead?”

The liar, the man she had presumed was her prince, leaned back against the wall, insouciant. The liar smirked and let out a low chuckle. His eyes plastered on his leader, the shadow-man. Iolanthe lowered her chin again, her bravery gone as soon as the words left her mouth, and as soon as she saw the flare of fire in the shadow-man’s pupils. He liked that she fought him.

He answered, his voice cold. “She had syringes and broken pill capsules all around her. You tell me why the fuck she died,” he said, his eyes narrowing.

His thumb ran over his lower lip, perusing her for an answer. Like a glutton at a feast, his eyes devoured her. Slowly he began to pace, circling her. Circling all about her, a lethal animal ready to consume. She kept her focus on him. He watched her, his gaze undeterred by her sudden shivering.

“I think Jonathan was right. You are a dirty girl,” he told her. His voice became like ice, glacial and sharp. “You would slut yourself for any cock that begged for you.”

The liar’s name was Jonathan, and now she knew why the shadow-man was angry. His jealousy reverberated off him. She glared at the liar. Carefully though, she answered the man in front of her, the one who held all the power. The one who might let her go free.

“I wouldn’t,” she began. She tried again. “I just...”

The dark-haired man interjected, the underlying lust in his voice turning thicker than pitch. “I reward obedient little pets. You, Iolanthe, have been very naughty.” He stalked forward. Instinctively she walked back until her legs touched the edge of the cot. With an ugly smile, he shoved her to the mattress. “Have

you fucked him?" he asked, the anger in his voice making her eyes squeeze shut in fear.

"No. No! I'm not..."

"I hate liars, Iolanthe," he said. He straddled her, his massively muscled body pinning her down. Despite herself, she felt her heart race with anticipation. He smelled good, and the hot heat pouring from his livid body brought a reciprocal warmth to hers. His mouth pressed to her ear, nipping her and leaving a bruising mark. His temper flared as she shivered underneath him. "Tell me, little girl. Did you like the taste of his cum on your lips?"

She blinked. Blinked again. Jonathan smirked, enjoying her discomfort.

How could she answer? She couldn't.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

The shadow-man licked away the hurt of the bite mark. "I know, baby. I know. But you'll have to be punished, anyway."

"I didn't know!" she said, squirming, begging for his mercy. She knew instinctively, though, that he wouldn't have any.

He rolled off her. Immediately she breathed easier, thinking he was done with his threats. Stepping back into the shadows until he was nearly hidden again, she could hear his harsh breathing and see the shine upon his weapons. His voice growled from the dark, a purr of black passion thrumming in the dim light and almost silence.

"Do you bleed?"

She was startled by the change in conversation. "Why?"

"Answer the goddamn question."

It was a low rumble. She couldn't see anything but the halo of his shape anymore. But she heard him, his quick breaths. His inhaled of desire and exhaled of malcontent. Jonathan watched, staying quiet. Staying out of his way.

Maybe she could stall. Maybe they wouldn't know how old she was. She looked younger than her age, with her ice-blonde



hair that she wore in a long braid to her waist and her green eyes. Her mother used to bargain with others on how innocent Iolanthe looked. She played on that innocence now.

“No.”

It was honest. It was also a bit deceiving. She bit at the inner side of her lip and kept still and quiet and hopeful.

He exhaled. Silence filled the cell’s chambers.

Her captor chuckled. She chilled, and instinctively she leaned back towards the wall. She kept her eyes on his shadow.

Jonathan shook his head, his honeyed voice breaking into the quiet. “Not smart, sweetie.” Her gaze darted over to him. He smirked. “He knows you’re lying. We know all about you.”

She gaped, cutting her words off before she burst into noisy tears. Iolanthe quickly retorted to the treacherous man. He didn’t care about her, so she must defend her own actions. “Why would you act like we...”

He had deceived her. Betrayed her. Made her believe that he cared. But Jonathan was a liar, a man who had handed her into captivity. She hated him.

Jonathan left his slouched position at the wall. “There’s nothing he hates more than someone who doesn’t tell him the truth.”

She snorted at the irony, then hurriedly covered her mouth as Jonathan smirked once more at her inglorious reaction. Her eyes widened when her outburst only made the dark-haired man speak to her again.

“Do you?” he asked, unwilling for her to ignore him.

She whispered truthfully. “Not now.”

“Why not? You are of a mature enough age.”

His gaze was steady and she didn’t doubt he was baiting her. The reason why eluded her. If he knew everything about her, he surely knew how old she was. He exhaled again, a low puff of cinnamon-scented breath. She leaned into his clean aroma, so unlike her own.

Jonathan nudged her shoulder with his hand. “Answer him.”

She jerked her chin up, not wanting to reveal all of why she wasn’t able to bear children. It was her only commodity, after all.

“Because I’m starving, all right? It’s normal that a woman who doesn’t eat—”

The leader stepped out of the dark, his eyes fierce. His tone more so. “You won’t starve here. You’ll regain your fertility.”

His eyes gleamed. She looked to the floor, scared to the bones of her by his expression. She skirted the edge of the cell at the look on his face. It was possessive. Needy. The look a man gives a woman when he’s ready to bed her.

Why him? If it had to be one of them, why couldn’t it have been the other one that truly desired her? Jonathan didn’t scare her, she just never wanted him near her again. It still stung how she had been used.

The dark-haired leader spoke again, a rasp in his voice. She knew she was about to get part of her so-called punishment. His eyes covered in sin, lustful inclination in his gaze. “Lie down. I want you to open up for me, knees spread wide like the good little slut you are,” he said, the metal of his weaponry rattling as he strode toward her. “And use your fingers to show me how wet your cunt is.”

His words terrified her because there was so much truth in it. She was aroused, her pussy glistening with juicy wetness. But there would be no reprisal with the man who served as her jailer. Jonathan teased but never came through on any promises. This man – this dark haired, shadow-man – scared her by his angry eyes and the thick arousal he didn’t bother to hide. If she gave him any leeway, he’d take, then take some more, until she burned out completely. She had to refuse him for her own wellbeing.

Jumping away from the cot, she backed up. Backed up, three steps, until she rammed into the wall. She moved swiftly, doing her best to elude him. The shadow-man followed, one step for her every three. Like a dance, they tangoed. Back and forth,

across and around the large parlor-sized cell. She skirted him. He chased. But he didn't have to quicken his steps for long. He only had to reach out and grab her when he decided he was done playing. Maybe that's all he did, toy with her. He meant for her to suffer, to think that he'd let her have her way. Iolanthe screamed.

His fingers circled her upper arm. Struggling, she kicked and clawed. He threw back his head, laughing, not caring when she got her hits in.

His arms encircled her, his muscular chest against her bare breasts. In her fight, she had let loose of trying to cover them. Now he was the one who covered her, his large body eclipsing her smaller one. He whispered in her ear, his voice raspy. His breathing was sharp, but not from exertion. His eyes betrayed him, for he wanted her. She had been around her mother and her mother's lovers enough to know a man in lust.

"My pretty little kitten thinks she has dangerous claws," he said, mocking her.

She stared up at him, at his ruthlessly ugly face, so cold and austere. It wasn't cold now. Heat from desire radiated from him. Iolanthe struggled one last time, until she realized how it made him want her more. Her fight spurred him on. He liked her to try; he liked her to fail.

"I'm not your anything."

She deliberately went limp in his arms, making him take her full weight. He settled it nicely against him, cradling her. She hid a glower. He didn't let go, even throughout all her subtle struggles.

He chuckled, a reminder of who won. "But you are. You belong to me, Iolanthe." He leaned in, his mouth at her ear. "And those who belong to me obey without question or suffer the consequences."

With one gesture, he ripped the rest of her clothes from her body: her too-large jeans and the panties that had stretched with

time, a grungy staleness wafting out. He took them both, and she stood naked, fully exposed to his judgment.

Jonathan came at her, a metal instrument in his hands. She dared to glance up at her captor. His eyes were unimpressed.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her voice pitched high in fright.

She attempted to back up, to escape. The monster’s massive body held her firm. His voice created a rumbling sound against her body from where he turned her to face Jonathan’s advance, his chest meeting her bare back. “You’ve lived on the streets. I doubt you’ve ever had a female examination.” Iolanthe’s eyes widened at the intimate truth. He continued, “You’ll have it now.”

She jerked away, terror making her momentarily mute. Her head shook in denial and pleas.

“No, please,” she said, looking to Jonathan, hoping against hope that he might save her, that he might stop the madness. “Don’t do this.”

He shook his head once, refusing. She turned her face up to the monster, imploring the beast.

“Please, sir. Please. Don’t hurt me.”

The shadow-man grunted. “Stop your sniveling, pretty Iolanthe. I don’t fuck filthy sluts.”

His voice was raw. His tone cold. And he didn’t tell Jonathan to halt.

She didn’t want either of them to touch her at all. But she was female, and Pure. She may not be stunningly perfect, but with her mother’s fertility, she’d been given that same genetic ability. Her mother warned her, yet she’d stayed intact, never with any man sexually. Now it would bring her price up. She’d be sold: the market square becoming the place of her indignity, a place of her shame. Or worse—given to the shadow-man who hungered for her with every stolen touch. If he thought her defiled, then he might let her go. No man wanted to touch what

might be stained by the virus sweeping the nation. The more partners a woman had, the more chance the virus infected her and ruined her chances for childbirth. After all, wasn't a woman's only glory and reason for being, to bear a man a child? Inwardly she fumed. Inwardly she feared and kept her mother's words at heart.

*Remember the Resistance. They will save the Pure.*

Iolanthe's face streamed with tears, but they only seemed to incite him further. She tugged on the leader's arm as he stood in the depths of the dark, a devilish demon-prince. Maybe he'd stop his cruel agenda if she kept begging.

"Please, sir. Please." Her fingers soothed his wrist. He jerked back as if scalded. He hissed, a sharp intake of breath. His muscular body encapsulated back into the dark. He was hidden, and his reaction could only be determined by his icy command.

"Lie the fuck down," he said, mercilessly void of emotion.

Her breathing hitched. Another sob left her. Jonathan swept in and scooped her up, dropping her down on the cot before she had a chance to react. He wouldn't meet her pleading gaze before he forced her thighs apart. She balked but let him proceed. Embarrassment rocked her into stillness. Jonathan took the blunt, cold instrument and with lubricant, inserted it into her vaginal walls. Humiliation stung her. Shame. Bitterness, and all that her mother warned. Then it was over. The jelly slid out from her onto the sheet of the cot. She brought her knees together, covering herself as best she could, tears drying on her cheeks. She couldn't look at the shadow-man as Jonathan pronounced her chastity.

"She's intact."

It sealed her fate. She closed her eyes, cursing her mother for dying and leaving her, for being selfish until the end. Cursing her own ability to procreate, for being born Pure.

A purr came from the dark, a shifting of body and form, then a strained, shallow intake of breath. "Good," the monster said. A

pause. “Take her upstairs to her quarters. Make sure she’s bathed.”

Quiet followed, and Iolanthe realized the man had departed from the cell with predatory stealth. Relief came that he’d left, but with it, more fear. Now she was given her assignment. He claimed her. Damn it to hell. The monster wanted her. Now she wouldn’t get away as easily as she expected and hoped.

Jonathan gave her a steady stare. “Come on, you heard him. Let’s get you ready.”

Jonathan handed her a voluminous robe, draping it about her quivering shoulders. He sighed, analyzed her carefully and then took her wrist. She nodded. She’d go. But as soon as she was able, she would find a way to run. She may be a breeder, but her heart roamed free.

“Don’t cry, little one. The Colonel may be harsh, but if you obey, he’ll treat you generously. You’ll see.”

The Colonel. It was worse than she’d thought. She’d not just been taken by a shadow-man. She’d been taken by the beast himself, the leader of the nation. Everyone knew the cruelty and injustice of the Colonel. Now she was his slave.

Iolanthe nodded, her thinking becoming unclear. She turned to Jonathan with cautious cruelty.

“Who are you, then?” she asked, her voice just as icy as the Colonel’s had been moments before.

“The same as you,” he answered obscurely.

“What is that?”

She couldn’t stop the sharpness in her voice. Nor did she care that he sucked in his breath at her defiance.

“Whatever the Colonel wants us to be,” he answered. He tucked his hand under her elbow, guiding her. Guarding her. “Come, little one. You heard him. Let’s run you a bath.”