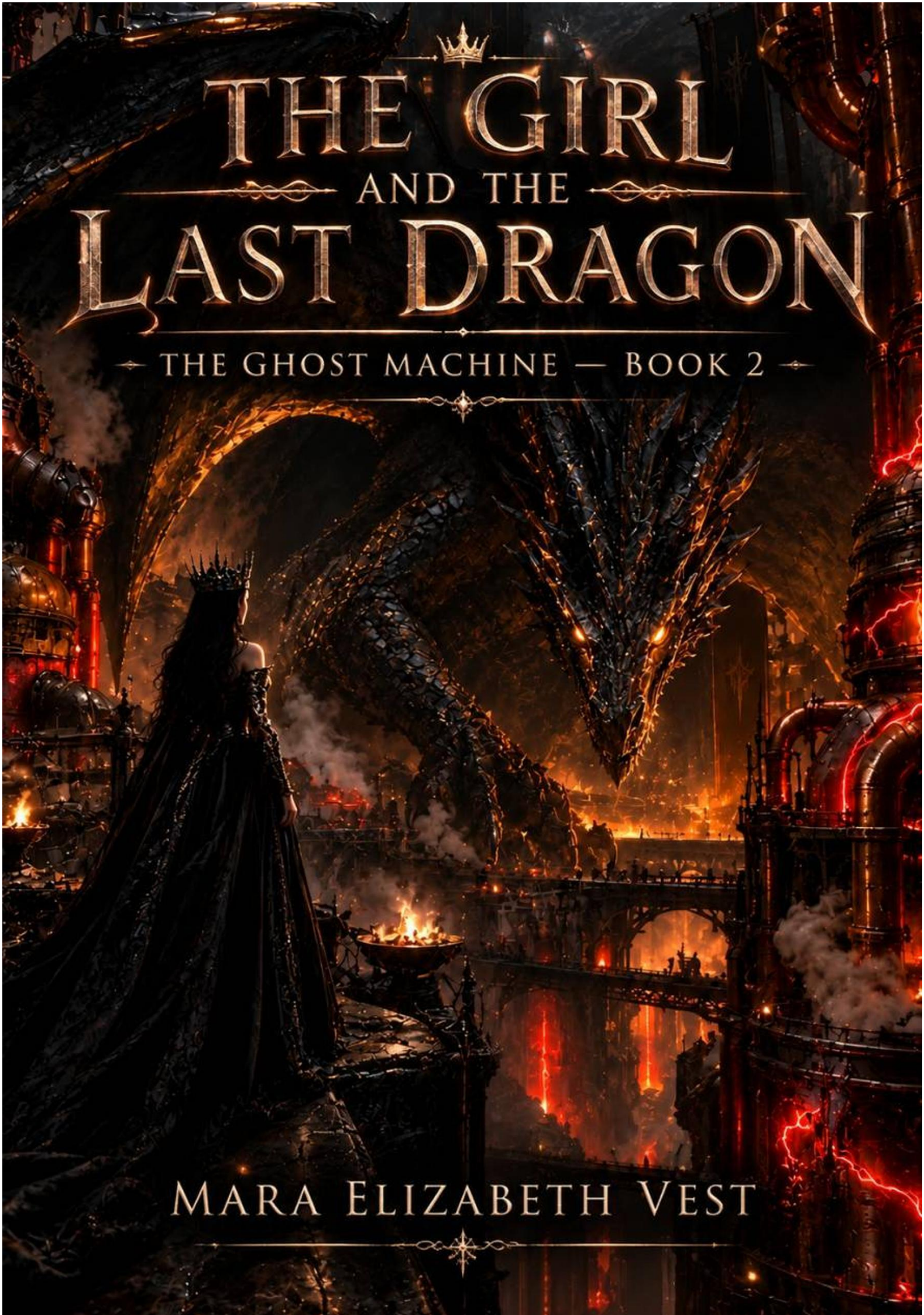

THE GIRL
AND THE
LAST DRAGON
THE GHOST MACHINE — BOOK 2
MARA ELIZABETH VEST

Mara-Elizabeth Vest

The Girl and the Last Dragon. Book 2: Ghost Machine

«Автор»
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A year has passed since King Aerions steel empire fell to ash. Queen Morizelle and the Black Dragon Khasar have finally found peace in the blooming Endless Woods of Elyria.Yet the past refuses to stay buried. When a chilling mechanical signal wakes up deep beneath the western mountains, Morizelle realizes that Aerion left behind an automated "Ghost Machine"—programmed to pierce the Crystalline Heart and drain the magic from their world forever.Joined by Khasar and the young inventor Lily, the High Queen must descend into sealed subterranean factories, bypass lethal steam traps, and face an army of pilotless steel guardians to protect her home.Dive back into an atmospheric dark steampunk fantasy filled with ley-line magic, ancient runes, fierce battles, and an unbreakable bond stronger than steel.

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Book 2

Book 2

The morning sun rose over the restored realm of Elyria, casting long, clean rays of golden light across the endless sea of white trees. A full year had passed since the fall of Oakhaven's steel towers, and the unbreathable yellow smog was nothing but a distant, fading memory. The air was crisp, pristine, and thick with the heavy scent of blooming starlight-orchids that now covered every inch of the Deepwood valley. I stood on the high marble terrace of the palace, the obsidian crown resting heavy but familiar on my dark hair. My hands didn't shake anymore. The udu-shai-ush-chaya anxiety that had cursed my life in the modern human world was completely gone, replaced by a profound, royal serenity.

Beside me, a massive, warm shadow fell over the stone floor as Khasar shifted from his colossal eighty-foot black dragon form back into the tall, sharp-featured warrior in the dark leather vest. The mental link inside my head flared with a deep, comforting heat—a permanent connection that bound our frequencies into a single, unbreakable loop. For twelve months, our world had been at peace. The lines were healed, and the crystalline Heart of Primal Magic throbbed rhythmically deep within the mountain sanctum.

But as I breathed in the fresh mountain air, a sudden, violent spike of high-pitched ringing shot straight behind my eyes.

I gasped, my fingers automatically clutching the stone rail as the blood rushed to my face. The ringing didn't sound like the cry of a dying tree; it was a rhythmic, artificial clicking that pulsed with cold, mechanical precision. Inside my mind, a jagged red blueprint flared for a split second, showing a hidden iron chamber buried miles beneath the western peaks—a sector that didn't exist on Lily's drawings.

Khasar's winter-storm eyes snapped open, his golden slit pupils locking onto my pale face as he stepped forward, his clawed hand instantly gripping my shoulder. Through our mental bond, I felt his internal dragon furnace flare with sudden, protective alarm.

"Morizelle," he growled softly, his deep voice vibrating straight through my bones. "I felt it. Your frequency just dropped. The fever... it's trying to return."

"It's not a fever, Khasar," I whispered, my voice trembling as I looked out toward the western mountains, where the sky suddenly felt heavy and static. "The steel isn't entirely dead. Deep under the stone... something just turned on. A ghost machine is waking up."

The grand throneroom of the lost citadel was silent, but it was no longer cold. The white marble pillars, completely restored by the living magic of the lines, caught the soft reflection of the three pale moons through the dark glass dome above. Celine stood by the violet fountain, her silver robes catching the dim twilight as she held her moonstone staff. Across the hall, Raven stood near the arched entrance, his wild dark hair damp from the mountain mist, his fingers restlessly tracing the carved handles of his curved hunting knives.

Khasar and I stood at the high dais before the White Throne. The mental link inside my head was still humming with that intense, artificial clicking, a relentless countdown that made the gold veins beneath my skin pulse with defensive heat.

"The western ridge is vibrating," Raven said, his fierce eyes narrowing as he stepped forward into the moonlight. "My scouts returned an hour ago. They didn't see any iron-clads or automated steam-saws, but the deep soil inside the caverns is shaking. The underground rivers are running black with old oil and ancient soot. It’s as if the mountain itself is beginning to breathe metal."

"It's not the mountain, Raven," I said, my voice carrying the steady, resonant echo of the ancient queens that made the forest scouts along the balcony stand straighter. "I felt the blueprint. When

Aerion built his industrial empire, he didn't just construct the capital. He hid something deeper. A sealed, autonomous facility buried beneath the bedrock."

Celine's face went completely pale, her hands tightening over her silver staff. "The text of the first pact mentioned a dark contingency. Aerion was a man consumed by his own ambition, but he was also a master builder. He feared his own death. If the main refinery collapsed, or if his mechanical heart stopped beating, his central server blocks were programmed to trigger a hidden protocol. A Ghost Machine."

"An automated harvest," Khasar growled softly, his voice dropping into that deep, terrifying draconic roar that made the stone floorboards vibrate. His storm-colored eyes burned with a fierce, protective madness. "The machine doesn't care that Aerion is dead. It doesn't care that the grid pressure fell. It has its own pneumatic power, and it is designed to finish what the King started—to plunge the giant iron needles into the Heart and drain Elyria until the white trees stop breathing."

I looked down at my hands, resting against the obsidian crown on my knees. A year ago, I was just a broken girl running from a modern city. Now, I was the Warden of the Lines.

"We aren't going to wait for the smoke to reach the citadel walls," I commanded, looking at the council. "Raven, prepare your elite scouts with starlight arrows. Celine, weave the moon-wards to mask our entry. Khasar and I are going down into the black sectors. We are going to find the throat of this ghost machine and rip it out before it silences our world forever."

The air inside the abandoned western tunnels grew thick, heavy with the suffocating scent of wet copper and freezing slate. Celine’s moon-wards hung over us like a pale, protective mist, catching the faint starlight from the opening above and keeping our frequencies completely hidden from any automated sensors. Khasar moved smoothly before me, his massive black wings half-unfurled against the damp stone walls, his golden slit pupils scanning the absolute darkness with predatory precision.

At the dead end of the cavern, half-buried under a landslide of cold rocks, stood the entrance to the sealed sector. It was a gargantuan brass floodgate, forty feet high, its metal surface heavily corroded by ancient grease and stained with deep red streaks of rust. Carved directly into the center of the brass plates was King Aerion’s official crest—the split mechanical heart surrounded by iron cogs.

The heavy valve was vibrating rhythmically. *Clank. Hiss. Clank.* The clicking inside my skull flared with brutal force, making my chest tighten as if a heavy weight had been placed over my heart.

"The architecture behind this gate is active," Khasar growled softly, stepping up to the floodgate. He extended his transformed dragon claw, his long black talons scratching against the rusted brass frame as he prepared to force the lock. "The pneumatic seals are building pressure. If I rip this central core out, we can slide beneath the plate before the alarms trigger."

"Wait! Don't touch the matrix!" a sharp, breathless voice hissed from the dark shadows of a broken drainage pipe nearby.

Khasar whirled around instantly, his broadsword clearing its sheath with a dangerous metallic ring as his massive body shielded me from the darkness. But it wasn't an armored infantry unit that emerged from the pipe.

Lily stepped out into the faint silver moonlight. The sixteen-year-old runaway girl was covered in black soot from head to toe, her oversized leather jacket damp, her eyes wide with a frantic, terrified energy. She was holding a thick new roll of drawing paper tightly against her chest, her fingers stained with fresh red ink.

"Lily?" I gasped, stepping around Khasar's protective wing. "How did you get past the ridge guards? You were supposed to stay in the lower district with the scouts."

"I followed your scent through the water lines," Lily panted, her voice trembling as she unrolled the paper right on top of a flat rock. "You don't understand, Morizelle. The ghost machine... it's smarter than the old factories. Look at my new drawings. Aerion rigged this specific floodgate. If Khasar breaks that central valve, it will reverse the hydraulic flow and flood the entire tunnel with

five hundred degrees of pressurized chemical steam. It's a fail-safe trap. It will melt the flesh off your bones before the gate even moves an inch."

The steam trap inside the brass floodgate was humming with an invisible, deadly pressure. I leaned over Lily's new drawing, my eyes tracking the messy red ink lines that mapped out the hidden hydraulic tubes. She was right. King Aerion had built a dual-valve system; any brute physical force applied to the outer lock would have triggered a total catastrophic release of boiling chemicals.

"The copper matrix bypass is right here," Lily whispered, her soot-stained finger pointing to a small, circular copper plate hidden beneath a layer of thick rust at the base of the gate. "If you can cut off the fuel supply lines before Khasar turns the valve, the steam will vent back into the mountain storage banks."

"But we don't have the tools to cut through reinforced copper," Khasar growled softly, his storm-colored eyes scanning the dark corridor behind us, his black wings twitching with intense protective vigilance. "The clicking inside our link is accelerating. The ghost machine is drawing more power every second. We don't have time to dismantle the pipes."

"I don't need tools," I said, a calm, regal confidence steadying my voice.

I didn't hesitate. I pulled a sharp piece of obsidian glass from my dark dress and dragged the edge cleanly across the palm of my right hand. A deep, sharp cut split my skin, and vibrant royal blood—thick, glowing with gold veins of pure elemental energy—poured out. I stepped past Khasar, pressing my bleeding palm directly onto the rusted copper plate Lily had found.

The moment my blood met the mechanical components, a sharp, beautiful flash of golden lightning hissed through the metal. The architecture encoded in my veins rushed through the machine's tubes like an electrical shortcut. I closed my eyes, feeling the literal flow of the boiling chemicals inside the door. The gold magic didn't break the brass gears; it commanded them to freeze.

The heavy clicking inside my skull suddenly stopped, replaced by a deep, satisfying pneumatic hiss as the red warning lights along the frame turned into a soft, steady gold. The massive forty-foot floodgate slowly, heavily groaned open, sliding upward into the stone ceiling to reveal a long, dark tunnel that led into the deepest black sectors of the earth.

Lily let out a ragged breath of pure relief, staring at my glowing hand. "The trap is dead. The line just rewrote the engine's orders."

Khasar stepped to my side, his rough fingers gently taking my wrist to examine the cut. The moment his skin touched mine, the mental link flared with his fierce, silent pride. He looked into the dark abyss ahead, his hand drawing his massive black broadsword. "The threshold is open, my Queen. Let's go silence this ghost."

The dark tunnel opened up without warning, plunging us into a vast, subterranean void that felt entirely hollowed out of the mountain's frozen roots. Celine's moon-wards could no longer protect us here; the ambient magical starlight died the moment we crossed the threshold, instantly smothered by the intense, heavy pressure of ancient grease and dormant electrical grids.

I held the cold obsidian glass tight in my hand, relying entirely on the gold veins beneath my skin to cast a faint, breathing radiance over the iron floorboards. Beside me, Khasar moved with absolute silence, his massive black wings tucked tight against his back, his fingers wrapped hard around the hilt of his unsheathed broadsword.

"Look," Lily whispered, her voice a tiny, trembling hiss as she pointed her soot-stained finger toward the endless rows of darkness ahead.

I raised my glowing palm, and the gold light washed over the terrifying geometric reality of the chamber. We were standing on an elevated iron catwalk inside a gargantuan, multi-level assembly workshop. Suspended from the ceiling rails, stretching for miles into the black abyss, were thousands of steel cages. And inside each cage sat a dormant brass sentinel—automated, pilotless soldier units

designed by King Aerion's final engineers. Their polished metal plates caught our faint gold light, showing heavy pneumatic joints, steam-pack slots on their spines, and cold glass lenses where their eyes should be. They were entirely offline, their heavy arms folded over their chests like brass corpses waiting for a resurrection command.

The rhythmic clicking inside my skull suddenly changed, dropping into a deep, vibrating hum that made the iron catwalk beneath my boots tremble. The architecture in my blood was warning me: the primary security matrix was scanning the air pressure.

"The acoustic valves are active," Khasar growled directly inside my brain, his mental link tight and heavy with predatory caution. "The automated infantry doesn't rely on sight. They are hardwired to wake up if the air pressure changes or if a single mechanical frequency is introduced. No magic, Morizelle. If you spark the lines here, the entire assembly line will drop from the ceiling."

Lily carefully stepped over a loose rivet, clutching her roll of red ink blueprints like a shield. "The shortcut to the primary processor is right through the central conveyor shaft. But we have to cross this catwalk without touching the copper tripwires. If we drop anything... if a single piece of loose stone hits the floorboards below, the automated harvest begins."

I looked out over the sea of silent brass soldiers, my pulse hammering a fast, panic-stricken rhythm against my ribs. The fever behind my eyes was burning with a clear, icy focus. I took a deep breath of the cold, oil-choked air and took my first step down the shaking catwalk, keeping my movements locked in perfect sync with Khasar's steady, heavy breathing. We were walking right through the teeth of the ghost machine, and the silence was our only armor.

Every step along the suspended catwalk felt like walking on the edge of a razor blade. The rusted iron plates beneath my boots groaned under our weight, a faint, agonizing sound that felt deafening in the absolute, heavy silence of the subterranean vault. Below us, the thousands of brass sentinels remained perfectly frozen in their steel cages, their blank glass lenses reflecting the pale gold shimmer radiating from my hand like the eyes of a sleeping mechanical plague.

"Stop," Lily breathed, her body freezing so suddenly that I nearly collided with her oversized leather jacket. She lowered herself onto her knees, carefully holding her breath as she gestured toward the narrow space ahead.

I leaned forward, raising my glowing palm just enough to illuminate the air. Stretching across the entire width of the catwalk, barely an inch off the metal plating, was a dense, intricate web of thin copper wires. They were spun so tightly and cleanly that they looked like the work of a giant metallic spider, humming with a very faint, almost imperceptible static charge.

"Tripwires," Lily hissed into the shadows, her eyes wide with a frantic, terrified intensity. "They are wired straight to the acoustic valves. If we snap a single one of these lines, the mechanical frequency will trigger the drop-switches on the ceiling rails."

Khasar stepped up right behind me, his massive black wings folding even tighter against his back to minimize his profile in the suffocatingly narrow corridor. Through our mental link, I could feel the immense, protective heat of his dragon core pressing against my mind, heavy with an ancient, predatory vigilance. He looked at the complex web of wire, his hand resting firm on the hilt of his black broadsword.

"The gap near the primary valve is wide enough for one body," Khasar's deep voice growled directly inside my skull, his mental frequency tight with caution. "But the catwalk is crumbling. We must move in perfect sync, Morizelle. If the metal bends too much, the static field will collapse."

"I'll go first to map the steps," Lily whispered, her small, soot-stained body sliding through the lowest loop of the copper web with the agile grace of a street thief. She didn't touch a single thread, landing safely on the stable iron platform on the other side.

Then it was my turn. I stepped into the narrow, suffocatingly tight gap between the hot copper wires and the cold iron rail, but the space was too restrictive for my long black silk gown. As the

fabric caught on an iron rivet, I lost my balance for a split second, my pulse instantly hammering a fast, panic-stricken rhythm against my ribs.

Before I could slip, Khasar's massive, calloused hand shot forward, catching me securely by the waist and pulling my back hard against his solid chest. The physical contact was so sudden and intense that the boundary of my own skin dissolved completely. Through our permanent bond, I felt the blistering, primitive heat of his internal furnace and the raw, crushing weight of his devotion to my face. We were locked into a single frequency of absolute survival. For a breathless, agonizing heartbeat, we remained frozen, our chests rising and falling in perfect unison, our bodies squeezed tightly against the narrow metal frame as the copper tripwires hummed mere millimeters away from my obsidian crown.

Slowly, deliberately, Khasar guided my steps, his powerful wings shielding us from the static lines until our boots finally touched the stable platform where Lily was waiting.

We had made it past the web. But as Khasar stepped back, breaking the physical contact, his heavy boot shifted an unstable plate. A sharp, deafening *clink* echoed through the darkness as a loose iron rivet popped from the structure, rolling lazily toward the edge of the catwalk, ready to plunge into the silent abyss below.

Time seemed to fracture into slow, agonizing frames as the heavy iron rivet tipped over the rusted edge of the catwalk. Below us, sixty feet down in the pitch-black abyss, lay the solid steel floor of the assembly chamber—and thousands of dormant brass sentinels whose acoustic valves were tuned to detect the slightest metallic echo.

Lily clapped both hands over her mouth, her eyes wide with sheer terror as she watched the falling piece of iron. Beside me, Khasar tensed, his muscles coiling like steel springs, his massive black wings flaring an inch as he prepared to dive after it—knowing full well that the rush of wind from his wings alone would trigger the pressure sensors.

No, stay still, I projected into his mind, locking onto our mental frequency with every ounce of royal discipline I possessed. *If you move, the air shifts.*

I couldn't unleash a burst of golden lightning. I couldn't summon roaring ironwood spikes. Any surge of raw elemental energy would spike the room's electromagnetic grid and wake the entire legion. Remembering Khasar's lessons in the palace gardens, I closed my eyes for a fraction of a second and reached down past the cold iron, past the grease and soot, until I felt the faint, sleeping pulse of the mountain bedrock miles beneath the factory floor.

I didn't command the earth. I whispered to it. *Catch it. Softly.*

Instead of a blinding flash, only a faint, warm shimmer of pale gold breathed from my fingertips. Miles below the iron plating, ancient spores buried deep in the stone answered the call of their Queen. Silently, without a single crack of shifting metal, a thick, velvety cushion of deep green forest moss and soft white starlight-petals bloomed upward through a microscopic seam in the floor directly beneath the falling rivet.

The heavy iron bolt struck the dense moss with a completely muffled, soundless *thud*.

For five excruciating seconds, none of us dared to breathe. High above, the brass acoustic valves hummed steadily, their red indicator lights remaining dim and unbothered. In the steel cages below, not a single sentinel stirred.

Lily let out a silent, shaky breath, collapsing slightly against the iron railing as she stared down into the dark, then up at my faintly glowing hands. "You didn't even make a spark," she whispered, barely moving her lips. "You're learning how to hide your magic inside the stone."

Khasar's hand found mine in the dark, his rough thumb brushing over my knuckles as a wave of fierce, silent pride washed through our mental link. "Quickly," he breathed into my mind, gesturing toward the heavy iron hatch of the central conveyor shaft just ahead. "Before the pressure cycle resets."

We slipped inside the dark shaft, pulling the hatch shut behind us with agonizing care, leaving the sleeping army of steel behind as we descended deeper into the beating mechanical heart of the Ghost Machine.

The central conveyor shaft was a vertical throat of cold, grease-slicked iron that plunged straight down into the suffocating darkness of the mountain's core. Once the heavy hatch clicked shut behind us, the silence of the sentinel workshop vanished, replaced by a low, rhythmic thumping that vibrated through the soles of my boots like the pulse of a buried giant.

I held my glowing palm close to the rusted ladder rungs, the soft gold light illuminating thick, stationary iron chains as wide as tree trunks and gargantuan gears frozen in mid-turn. Heat rose from the abyss below—not the clean, nourishing warmth of Khasar's draconic fire, but a stale, metallic stench of boiling oil and scorched sulfur.

"Keep your hands clear of the chain teeth," Khasar growled softly from just below me, his massive black wings folded tight against his back as he descended with effortless, predatory grace. Through our mental link, I felt his winter-storm eyes scanning every shadow beneath us, his internal dragon furnace burning with a steady, protective vigilance. "If the pressure cycle shifts, these gears won't give us a warning."

Lily climbed down between us, her oversized leather jacket smudged with fresh black grease, her roll of red-ink blueprints strapped securely across her back. Every few yards, she paused on a narrow maintenance grate, squinting at the glowing red lines on her paper under the faint gold radiance of my skin.

"We're almost at the bottom of the primary spine," Lily whispered, her voice trembling slightly as she looked down into the amber glow rising from the depths. "Look at the size of those pistons. King Aerion didn't build this shaft to carry coal or iron ore."

I leaned over the rusted railing of the grate, peering down through the tangled web of chains. Hundreds of feet below, suspended in a vast cavern bathed in toxic orange light, lay a colossal assembly cradle. Resting inside it was a single, terrifying construction: a spear-like needle forged from black reinforced steel, nearly a hundred feet long, its tip glowing white-hot from massive subterranean induction coils. It was aimed straight downward—directly toward the hidden sanctum where the Crystalline Heart of Primal Magic lay beating.

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