



A Cage of Gold and Lies

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Complete summary including spoilers.

Zari used to daydream about being plucked from squalor and magically delivered to a better life. Then she figured out magic was real—but it skipped over her and granted all her wishes to her best friend, Rahanna. About six months ago, Rahanna showed Zari that she could conjure magic. With her newfound powers, Rahanna was offered a high-paying job at a billionaire's estate. Zari tries to be happy for her friend's good fortune, but she can't help but feel envious. After all, Zari works hard to care for herself and her little sister, Nia, even though that meant dropping out of school to take on responsibilities that their father should have been doing.

Rahanna departs for her glamorous new job, and Zari doesn't hear from her gifted friend for months. Until one day, Zari unexpectedly runs into Rahanna on the street. To Zari's great concern, Rahanna is in rough shape. She begs Zari to pretend they never saw each other.

Concerned about her old friend's odd behavior and obvious terror, Zari follows Rahanna. Rahanna heads to her family's home, where she yells at her parents and little brother to hide. But it seems to be too late: three strangers dressed like secret service agents magically materialize in the room. The men tell Rahanna that she must be punished for attempting to escape. With that, they kill Rahanna's father, then disappear with Rahanna in tow.

Terrified of what she has just witnessed, Zari flees the apartment, realizing that magic might be real, but fairytale endings clearly aren't.

Three years later, Zari is living with her little sister and their father, Sergio, in a blocked off room in a condemned building. Out their window, they can see beyond the slums to the beautiful Crystal Estate that belongs to the billionaire King family, who unofficially own the city of Oramont. Most people believe it's money that gives the Kings power, but Zari knows it's magic.

Zari never told a soul about what she witnessed with Rahanna's family, fearful of what might happen to her if she did—especially considering she is an undocumented immigrant. Now she heads to her low-paying job at the cotton processing factory; with their mother having abandoned them six years ago and their father lost to drink and depression, it falls on Zari to work and care for her younger sister.

At work, Zari's colleagues gossip about the allegedly handsome Darian King, and his brother, who is rumored to be sick and disabled. Zari has no patience for this gossip; she suspects that the King family was behind what happened to Rahanna and her family.

That day, one of Zari's sick co-workers begs her to take over her shift so that she doesn't lose her job. It's not hard work for Zari, as she has a talent for memorizing patterns that helps her run the machines.

Zari agrees, but for a price: she gets to take home today's earnings. A life on the street has taught Zari that no one helps others simply out of the kindness of their heart; there must be something in return.

After work that night, twelve-year-old Nia offers to drop out of school and get a job so that Zari doesn't have to work so much. She assures Zari that she has a special skill she can use to earn money, and she offers to demonstrate. To Zari's shock, Nia's "special skill" turns out to be magic. Horrified—and remembering how the magic started for Rahanna in a similar way—Zari commands Nia never to do that again. For their family's safety, Zari knows that keeping Nia's magic a secret from the King family is of utmost importance. She won't let what happened to Rahanna happen to them.

Months later, Zari finds that Sergio has stolen the money she's been secretly saving up to support Nia's future. She tracks her father down at a nearby bar to confront him about his thievery—and finds him boasting to his friends about his daughter's magical ability, in public for all to hear.

Zari rushes home to Nia, but it doesn't take long for a strange man to appear. The man, Mr. Shaw, says he is here on behalf of Mr. Darian King, who would like to offer the daughter of Sergio a job with generous pay. In a desperate attempt to protect Nia, Zari lies to Mr. Shaw and tells him that she is the one with the "talents," not Nia. With that, Mr. Shaw transports her away. He locks her up and confiscates her phone, cutting her off from the outside world.

The next morning, Mr. Shaw escorts Zari as well as two other recruits, Lainey and Cam, to a meeting where they will determine their "career paths." Cam is ecstatic to be here, but Lainey appears to be there against her will, much like Zari.

Mr. Shaw informs them that they are forbidden to use any form of magic without explicit permission. Outside, a group of men are maintaining a magical protection barrier around the estate. Mr. Shaw explains that the barrier keeps unwanted visitors out—but Zari realizes that it also keeps her and her peers *in*.

Darian King turns out to be jaw-droppingly gorgeous—almost unnaturally so. He tells them he has recruited them personally to work for him, which is a real honor for them. But first, they must test their abilities.

Knowing she has to get out of this situation somehow, Zari informs Darian that she has no magic, so she should just go home. Unfortunately, Darian doesn't believe her. He simply tells her she should be grateful to have the opportunity to escape the squalor she lives in—and that he owns her now. If she doesn't make herself valuable to his service, she and her family will suffer the consequences.

Zari, Lainey, and Cam are taken to the basement for their testing, where they are given only one instruction: perform magic to the best of their abilities. But Zari doesn't have any magic.

Cam explains to Zari that there are three types of spellborn: conjurers, who perform the most basic magic; ritualists, who are more advanced, able to cast specific spells; and then thaumaturgists—but those are just a once-in-a-generation spellborn talent.

Cam, who comes from a family of spellborn, easily performs a spell and is taken away, evidently having passed the test. Alone, Zari and Lainey exchange their concerns about their fates here at Crystal Estate. Zari learns that the Kings killed Lainey's brother, Ethan, and her parents. This only confirms her resolve that she must escape somehow before it's too late.

While Lainey naps in her cell, Zari attempts to perform a spell, but as expected, nothing happens. Zari worries what will happen to her family if Darian finds out she really is a fraud. Then, to Zari's surprise, a ghostly, transparent man appears in her cell and asks her why she hasn't cast a spell yet. Zari asks him if he's a ghost. He tells her he must be, because no one can see or hear him unless he wants them to, which he usually doesn't.

Zari confesses to the ghost that she has no magic. When she tells him about the threat Darian made against her and her family if she doesn't perform, the ghost offers to cast a spell for her; if they believe she can do magic, they won't hurt her family.

When the ghost insists that he does not want anything in return for this act of kindness, Zari feels suspicious, because she believes that no one helps others simply out of the goodness of their hearts—but she takes him up on his offer when she realizes she has no other choice.

Darian King arrives, annoyed by how long Zari has taken with her test. She shows him a bobbin of gold thread that was blue before. When he touches it, it reverts to blue once more. Zari tells Darian that this is all she can do, and that it's useless—so he should just send her home. Darian expresses that he thought she'd be more useful, considering who she is. Zari puzzles over this comment. When she asks if this means she can return to her family, Darian refuses—and promises to find a place for her here equal to her worthlessness.

In the cell beside Zari, Lainey has refused to perform any magic for her test because she is unwilling to succumb to the King family's will. Instead, she attempts to cast a spell against Darian, but it seems to backfire. She tries this a couple more times—but whatever magic she has used to attack Darian returns on her and kills her instead.

Shocked by Lainey's death, Zari realizes that there is no stopping Darian, and any hope she had of returning to her little sister slips away. She memorizes the spells that Lainey uses against Darian and stashes them away in the back of her mind.

Mr. Shaw escorts Zari to her dorm room, which is a large, forty-bed room for those of conjurer rank. On her way there, she spots Rahanna, but they pretend not to know one another. Thinking about the ghost that helped her, Zari asks one of her new roommates if this place is haunted, but the woman tells Zari she has much bigger problems to worry about than ghosts. One older man tells Zari he knows her, but Zari doesn't recognize him. She has no choice but to settle in, knowing that for now, the only way to protect Nia is to stay here and play along—and try to survive.

Darian assigns Zari her new job: she is now responsible for Darian's disabled brother, Peldin. When Zari tries to push Peldin in his wheelchair, he indicates that he wants to do it himself. She follows him to his quarters, where he begins to drink heavily. He tells her to get out, expressing that this is a new low, even for Darian—and that he, Peldin, should be the one up there in charge. Zari learns that Darian is not even spellborn. She also realizes that Peldin is as much a prisoner as she is, and she softens to him despite his grumpy demeanor.

Zari spends her days trying to look after Peldin, and eats her dinners in the mess hall with the other conjurers. One night, a young girl transforms the sparse dinner into a feast, hoping to cheer everyone up. In doing so, however, the girl betrays the fact that she has been hiding her more advanced magical abilities in order to stay with her conjurer-ranked sister. Mr. Shaw and two security guards immediately

appear in the room, demanding to know who cast the spell. Worried what they might do to the young girl—and knowing full well the violence the Kings are capable of—Zari claims that she is the one who cast the spell.

Mr. Shaw immediately teleports her to Darian's office, and Darian says he knew Zari had lied about her abilities. They decide to test Zari again—and Darian tells her that if she doesn't give him amazing results, he will kill her.

In her glass cell in the basement, Zari notices the old man she had met in the dorm room coming out of what appears to be a high-security vault across the hall, attending to dirty laundry and dishes. She wonders what Darian is hiding in there.

Ghost appears, and offers to help her again. Zari insists that she must repay him somehow, so Ghost tells her that if she really wants to help him, she can try to find out who he is and how he came to haunt this place.

She requests a spell, and he uses his magic to spin her a beautiful gown. He makes her promise to stay safe, then disappears.

When Mr. Shaw and Darian return, Zari apologizes for lying about her magic, but tells him once again that if he touches it, it will revert back to how it was. When Darian touches the gold dress, it turns blue again.

Zari is relieved to have survived the night—but now Darian believes she is a ritualist, despite the fact that she doesn't actually have any magic of her own. Her situation has just become that much more precarious.

Zari is moved to the ritualist quarters, where she finds Rahanna. The old friends catch up. Rahanna explains that every morning, Darian has one of his most trusted ritualists cast a protection spell on him that makes him untouchable—and she's one of them. Darian's threats against her family are enough to keep her loyalty. Zari asks Rahanna if she has ever seen a ghost around here, but she says she hasn't. The old conjurer who works in the basement claims to have, but Rahanna says that he is scrambled from working down in the vault. There are spells of secrecy cast on anyone who works down there to mess with their minds and keep what is hidden in the vault secret.

Trying to maintain her ruse, Zari signs up for the only ritualist task that she hopes won't betray her lack of powers: cleaning. She spends days cleaning by hand while fearing getting caught, all the while comforting herself by repeating old nursery rhymes her mother used to tell her. One day, Cam finds Zari cleaning by hand, and demands to know if she tricked the Kings into believing she is a ritualist when she is really just a conjurer.

Zari is forced to come clean and confess that she has no magic at all. Cam agrees to keep her secret in exchange for the "spell" she was reciting—her mother's old nursery rhymes. In exchange for his help, Zari also shares with him one of the spells she heard Lainey recite before she was killed. Cam casts the cleaning spells required to finish her task for the day so that she doesn't get caught.

With her afternoon free, Zari finds herself worrying about Peldin now that she's no longer caring for him. She goes to his quarters to check on him. Here, she asks him if he has ever seen a ghost in Crystal Estate, but he hasn't.

One day, Zari attends a party that Darian is hosting; she and the other ritualists are meant to be entertainment for his important guests. When one partygoer commands Zari to show his wife her best trick, she refuses. Darian confronts Zari about her lack of cooperation, and things escalate. Zari tries to control her temper. Darian orders her to hit him if she's so angry, and threatens to pay her little sister a visit if she doesn't oblige him.

Zari throws a punch at him, but it backfires, just like the way Lainey's spells had backfired, returning with three times the power onto her. Zari is the one who takes the hit. He makes her do it multiple times, and then she is dragged to his office. Once there, Darian tells Zari she needs to perform a special job in order to demonstrate her commitment and her worth: he wants her to kill the father of an uncooperative business partner in order to teach him a lesson.

The man is dragged into the room, gagged and bound. Darian leaves her alone to finish the job. That's when Cam arrives to check on her, and he is shocked to discover what Darian has ordered her to do. He experiences an inner struggle as he grapples with the truth of what goes on around here—this is not what he signed up for when he came to work at Crystal Estate. Troubled by his new understanding of what Darian is really like, Cam offers to help Zari sneak the man out of there and save his life. Ghost arrives and creates a statue replica of the man she was supposed to kill so that she can use it as fake evidence of having done the deed.

When Darian returns, he is impressed with the gold statue, and Zari has renewed hope, knowing that Ghost and Cam both have her back.

Darian gives Zari a day off for her good work. She reflects on how kind Ghost has been to her, and wonders if there's something more there than just kindness. She wants to repay him for all his help, so she decides to use her free time search for his true identity, since he doesn't remember who he is.

Cam finds her, and Zari confesses that a ghost helped her pull off the night's previous stunt. They brainstorm who the ghost might be: Allister, a powerful ritualist who died recently; Ethan, Lainey's brother; or perhaps even Ronald King, Darian's father, killed for the inheritance. Cam explains, though, that the inheritance went to Peldin, not Darian. Darian only took over after Peldin got sick.

Peldin tracks Zari down and apologizes for not being able to help her last night at the party when she was being beaten in front of all the guests. He says he would stop Darian if he could, and he resents how useless he is, how he can't protect her.

Zari is consumed with rage for the way Darian has ruined so many lives. Ghost arrives to comfort her, and offers to send her home to visit her sister. He can't free her entirely, but he can send her there in spirit. He uses his magic to allow Zari to visit Nia by means of astral projection. Zari and Nia have a heartfelt exchange. Nia reports that their father drinks most of the money the estate sends them.

When she returns to her own body, Zari tests her identity theories on Peldin, but it turns out that he is not Ethan, Allister, or Ronald.

Later, in the middle of the night, Darian barges into Zari's room, having discovered that the statue of the man she was supposed to kill was a fake. He accuses her of lying this whole time about being a ritualist—when in fact, he thinks she is a thaumaturgist, the most powerful of spellborn, able to conjure any miracle they desire. Once again, Darian throws Zari into the testing cell in the basement where he

commands her to create something wonderful. Then he leaves and goes straight for the high security vault across the hall. Zari memorizes the tune that the passcode makes when he enters it.

In the cell, Zari realizes that whoever Ghost was, he was a thaumaturgist—and Darian hinted that he knew his identity.

Ghost finally shows up, eager to help. Zari grapples with her growing feelings for him, and they get to know one another. Zari informs him that when she was young, she wanted to be a singing gondolier, and that if she could go anywhere, it would be Venice. Ghost encourages her not to give up on her dreams, despite her current predicament.

Ghost uses his magic to create a large gold relief depicting Venice. When Darian returns, he is happy with the results, and says he has been looking for a new thaumaturgist since he had to destroy the last one for being uncooperative. This confirms Zari's suspicion that Darian had something to do with Ghost's death, but it still doesn't tell her who Ghost was before he died.

Darian gives Zari a box that contains her father's severed finger. With that threat in mind, he orders her to get rid of Peldin so that she and him are the only people who ever knew he existed. Not only that, but she has twenty-four hours to do it.

Zari knows she can't possibly ask Ghost for help taking someone's life, which means her ruse is almost up. When Darian finds out once and for all that she's a fraud, he'll kill her and her family.

Zari pays Peldin a visit to warn him about her conversation with Darian—and the fact that Darian has asked her to kill him. Peldin doesn't seem to recall a thaumaturgist living here before, which means he can't help her solve the mystery with Ghost—but he can help her escape. Touched by his friendship, Zari asks Peldin to run away with her, but he declines.

That night, Zari follows his instructions and is able to exit the magical barrier through a treehouse on the perimeter of the estate. As she is finally about to achieve freedom, a plan to defeat Darian forms in her mind. Zari realizes she can't leave until she ends his reign of terror once and for all. She turns around and goes back.

The first thing Zari does is find the vault, where she enters the code she memorized earlier. Inside, Zari is shocked by who she finds being held captive: it's her long-lost mother. It turns out that her mother did not abandon her and Nari—she's been held here this whole time. The revelation shakes Zari's whole world.

Her mother explains that Darian threatened to hurt Zari and Nia if she didn't perform an ancient spell of destruction to steal magic from a thaumaturgist and destroy them. Then Darian threw her in this cell so she could never tell anyone—and the only reason why he kept her alive is because he feared the spell would unravel if she died.

Zari realizes that the thaumaturgist in question was Peldin, and it dawns on her that Ghost isn't dead. He is just a powerful thaumaturgist, locked away from his physical form. The two men she cares about—Peldin and Ghost—are one and the same.

Zari runs through the estate, searching for Ghost, but Mr. Shaw and two security guards find her first. She is bound with magic ropes, but then Ghost appears and rescues her from her assailants. Zari is eager

to tell Ghost that she has finally discovered his true identity, but just as she reveals his name, he disappears involuntarily—which means something bad may have happened to his physical body.

Zari rushes to Peldin's room, fearing the worst. When she arrives, she finds a man dressed as Peldin, but standing straight with just a slight lean to the same side that Peldin always slouched. His face is young and unmarred by the diseased-ravaged skin. Zari throws herself into his arms, relieved to find that he is whole again, having been restored to his body.

With Rahanna's help, Zari and Peldin form a plan to overthrow Darian.

Ready to avenge all the people that Darian has harmed, Zari, Peldin, and Rahanna work together to formulate a plan. Zari and Peldin surprise Darian in his office, where Zari punches him in the face. Darian is shocked that the punch doesn't bounce off of him, because he heard his ritualist recite his protection spell that morning—but it turns out that it was just Zari in disguise, and since she has no magic, the spell did not work.

Enraged by the deception, Darian orders Cam and the others to kill Zari and Peldin, but they refuse. Peldin turns Darian into a rose sitting in a glass display, then announces to everyone that Darian's reign is over and that they are all free to leave.

Alone, Zari and Peldin discuss the potential of a romantic relationship, having grown close during Zari's time at the estate. They decide to take things slow. Zari frees her mother, and she and Peldin take down the magical barrier, finally freeing the enslaved spellborn that Darian has kept in his service all these years.

Zari never does learn magic, but she learns that she can make her own kind of magic with bravery, kindness, and love.

Months later, she is studying to finish up high school. She and Peldin work together to restructure the King family businesses into co-operatives, putting the ownership and the profits of each business into the hands of those who work there.

Reunited, Zari and her family move out of the condemned building, into a downtown apartment.

One day, Peldin takes Zari to the treehouse, where he uses magic to make them appear in a gondola in Venice. This is when she kisses him for the first time. Later, she moves in with him at the estate. By now, Sergio has undergone rehab and therapy for PTSD and depression. Peldin has given up most of the estate, which is now owned by the spellborn.

During a private moment at a potluck they're hosting, Peldin proposes marriage, and Zari accepts.

Zari gets her happily-ever-after after all. Maybe there is such a thing as fairytale endings.

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