



Bride of the Fae Duke

Author: *Lisette Marshall*

Category: Romance, Fantasy

Description: Six wives. Six deaths. Can a humble housemaid break the curse?

The half-fae Duke of Locke is cursed to never find love... or so everyone says. But Nellie Finch does not believe in magic. As far as she's concerned, that leaves only one explanation for the death of His Grace's last six wives: he killed them himself.

It is therefore unpleasant surprise when, out of nowhere, the duke proposes to her.

Marrying this cold and unpleasant nobleman is the last thing Nellie wants. But his money can save her little sister, and Locke is damnably convincing about the arrangement. All he needs is an heir, and apart from the, well, necessary duties, she won't have to see him at all. She should be able to survive that, shouldn't she?

But when she begins falling for her mysterious husband, Nellie needs to figure out how to break the curse that killed six women before her... or be the next to die.

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Chapter 1

Nellie Finch did not believe in magic.

Many people did – she was well-aware of that undeniable fact – but then again, many people believed in love, too, and that seemed roughly equally nonsensical. Lady Eyestone could wail on about fae, spells, and unnatural disappearances as much as she liked. The fact remained that after twenty-four years of life on the edge of Faerie, Nellie had yet to hear of any mystery that could not be solved with a dollop of plain old common sense. Lord Eyestone's regular and much bewailed absences at night, for example, could just as easily be attributed to the busty human woman who went by the name of Mrs. Virtue, no fae powers required.

Magic was a fairytale. An easy way out. A convenient excuse.

Which was exactly why she found herself unable to suppress a cold shiver when, as she stood folding the earl's linen on a sweltering Linden Month morning, a footman loudly announced the arrival of Lord Locke at the Eyestone household.

Two cold shivers, perhaps.

Not because the duke was half fae – even though she knew it was the main reason many Elidian citizens distrusted the man, she considered his mother's origins the least of his crimes. Nor was she particularly worried about the curse that was rumoured to haunt him. She did not believe in curses, after all, and therefore didn't share the other maids' fear of getting caught up in its deadly web if she accidentally stepped too close.

Rather, it was the simple statistic of one man losing six wives over the course of just a decade.

Which, once you took away the mitigating veil of magic and curses and other balderdash, left a rather unsettling pattern at best.

In the hall upstairs, she could hear the brittle-leaf voice of Mrs. Radcliffe approach, doubtlessly to tell His Grace that Lord and Lady Eyestone were out and would not be back for the rest of the day. Which was just as well, Nellie grimly decided as she hauled her last pile of bedsheets into the linen closet, then wiped the summer sweat off her clammy forehead. The fewer minutes she had to share a roof with a murderer, the better – although Anne would doubtlessly object if she ever spoke that thought out loud, reminding her how the guards' investigations had found nothing incriminating and making points about assuming the best of people. Anne did believe in curses and magic, of course. In love, too.

She'd only been three winters old when Father left, after all. She hadn't seen Mother wilt away in the months that followed.

The closet door slammed shut with more force than intended, the bang reverberating down to the basement and up to the floors above.

Drat. She should know better than to be so careless at work. With gritted teeth, she snatched the empty linen basket off the floor and made her way back to the scullery, forcing her thoughts into the here and now of the humid servants' quarters beneath Eyestone Manor. At least the voices in the entrance hall had quieted. If she was lucky, Mrs. Radcliffe hadn't noticed the little misstep of the slamming door, though it was a rarity for the housekeeper's piercing eyes and ears to overlook even the smallest imperfection.

Not that she could complain. Lord Eyestone paid better than most employers, and if

perfection was the price to keep Anne fed and clothed, then she ought to be glad to pay it.

The scullery was empty, save for the usual piles of unfolded linen. Good. One last batch to iron, and then the laundry would be done for the week. Which left the floors to be scrubbed, of course, and the chamber pots to be cleaned. And as soon as those tasks were done, the silver would have to be polished yet again, even though Nellie could swear she'd spent two whole days on Lady Eyestone's cutlery last week ...

A never-ending cycle. But she really shouldn't complain, and either way, what other options did she have if she—

'Nellie?' Lucy Clarke's nasal voice yelled, a few doors away. 'Nellie, where are you? Mrs. Radcliffe wants a word with you in the blue drawing room!'

Oh drat.

She shoved her empty basket into the corner, reflexively straightened her apron, and hurried out, tucking loose locks of strawberry blonde hair back into her braid as she darted up the stairs. Better not to let the housekeeper wait – a valuable lesson she'd learned within her first hours at this job. At least if she was punctual, Mrs. Radcliffe might forgive her for the noise she'd made within hearing of a guest. And the sooner she could get back to ironing, the sooner she'd finish her list for the day ...

The door to the drawing room stood ajar in an ominous invitation.

Wiping her brow with raw, soap-reddened hands one last time, Nellie sucked in a deep breath and slipped inside.

Mrs. Radcliffe stood at the mantelpiece, thin and crowlike in her proper black dress – somehow managing not to look sweaty even in this damp summer weather. Around

her, even the furniture seemed to be holding its breath, afraid to move a hair out of line. But there were no obvious signs of displeasure on the housekeeper's severe face, and only then did Nellie's gaze draw around the rest of the room, noticing—

Locke?

Her feet froze mid-step.

Sweet divines help her, this couldn't be true – but it was undeniably the duke of Locke who was sitting grimly in the room's best chair as if he was the master of the place, long legs crossed and bulky shoulders tense under his dark grey coat. If she hadn't heard the footman announce the man's name, his hair would have taken away all last doubts as to his identity: that unfashionably long queue gleaming unnaturally blue even in the muted sunlight of this north-facing room. Like a magpie's feathers, or a night sky that had just begun to brighten. Even his eyebrows held a faint blue sheen – she'd never noticed it from a distance before.

What in the world was he doing here?

And far, far more urgent – what in the world was he doing here?

Nellie risked a glance at Mrs. Radcliffe, expecting the housekeeper to answer at least one of those questions. But Mrs. Radcliffe's dark eyes were on the duke, as if his reaction to Nellie's appearance was the only thing that mattered here, and all the duke himself said was a terse, 'This is her?'

Oh no.

Nellie's mouth went instantly dry – had he come here to ask for her?

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But why? He couldn't have heard of her unflattering opinions of him, could he? She was sure she hadn't spoken those outloud to anyone but Anne. Then again, there really didn't seem to be any other reason for him to still be in the building if Lord and Lady Eyestone were nowhere near, and surely a man of his stature would not be interested in Mrs. Radcliffe's dressing down of a clumsy maid ...

She had only been perspiring mildly before. Moisture itched between her shoulder blades now, prickling down the length of her spine; it took all of her manners and training to stand perfectly, unflinchingly still.

'Yes, Your Grace,' the housekeeper stiffly confirmed. 'This is her.'

Locke didn't respond. He merely turned back to Nellie, looking her up and down twice – an appraising look, as if she were a horse he was considering buying. His expression didn't change. Resolute chin, nose like a marble sculpture's, and then the strange, almost feminine contrast of his long blue lashes which framed grey eyes with unnerving, catlike pupils he must have inherited from his mother ... There was plenty of strength in his features, but nothing that suggested even the smallest hint of softness. Offeelings.

Only after two, three heartbeats of excruciating silence did he give a brisk nod – a gesture that said, this will do. 'What is your name, girl?'

He didn't even know her name?

Then how had he possibly asked for her?

‘Nellie Finch,’ she stammered, and then, remembering who she was talking to, she hurriedly amended, ‘I mean, Eleanor, Your Grace. Eleanor Finch.’

‘Excellent.’ A curt, offhand word, and his expression didn’t soften with it. It wasn’t even cold, his face. There was no anger or impatience to be found in that strange mixture of bullish human and elegant fae features, only a stoic reserve that could have been carved from stone. ‘Are you healthy, Miss Finch?’

She stared at him, the heat forgotten.

Healthy? Why in the world would the duke of Locke, unconventional but a man of means and standing all the same, care a whit about a common housemaid’s health? And not even one of his own maids, at that? Had she been accused of carrying some devastating disease, perhaps? Had the duke been sent on a mission by the Princeps to eradicate all pox patients from Elidian, as well as all those who might be suspected of infection?

‘Nellie,’ Mrs. Radcliffe sharply said, ‘answer His Grace, will you?’

Drat.

Perhaps the facts didn’t warrant being quite so dramatic.

‘I ... I think I am quite healthy, Your Grace,’ she managed to force out, clamping her damp hands together behind her back. ‘I haven’t been ill in years, Your Grace.’

‘Excellent,’ he muttered again, more quietly now, as if the word wasn’t intended for her ears at all. ‘Do you have any brothers or sisters?’

‘One sister, Your Grace.’ An accident, Mother had regularly muttered. They’d barely been able to afford a single child. ‘She’s eight years younger than me, Your Grace.’

He pursed his lips, seemingly content with that answer. ‘And are you clumsy, Miss Finch? Do you make a habit of falling down stairs, tripping over furniture, and the like?’

What in the world?

Perhaps he was going mad, she considered. Perhaps Mrs. Radcliffe was just trying to keep the poor lunatic calm and engaged until someone arrived to constrain him and take care of him. In that case, she should probably not wait too long to give him the answer he was looking for – so she straightened her shoulders, willed her voice to sound as though her thoughts weren’t falling apart behind her face, and said as calmly as she could, ‘I wouldn’t call myself clumsy, Your Grace. I haven’t injured myself walking down stairs with full baskets or scrubbing the kitchen or ... or ...’

‘Thank you,’ he interrupted with a quick flick of his muscular wrist. ‘That is enough.’

She obediently snapped her lips shut, glancing at Mrs. Radcliffe. The housekeeper still looked as she always did: stiff, severe, and like there was nothing unusual going on. There was a touch of anticipation in her swift look at Lord Locke, though, as if she too was tensely waiting for the next bit of insanity to fall from his mouth.

‘Yes,’ Locke added slowly, sitting straighter so that his dove grey coat strained around the impressive hulk of his shoulders. ‘Yes, that will be sufficient.’

And again there was that glimpse of calculation in his eyes as he examined her, a look that made her suddenly painfully aware of her messy blonde braid and her rough servant’s hands and the dust mark she hadn’t yet brushed off her skirt. Half of her itched to start fidgeting. Half of her stood paralysed with fear. Something was off – by now the facts did safely justify that conclusion – and why was he watching her like that, as if he was trying to estimate the cost and weight of her every flaw?

Then, abruptly, his lips curled.

It was a joyless smile. A performative smile. His mouth, too soft and sensuous for the square-jawed face around it, didn't look like it was used to the motions, and not a glimmer of joy reached the shadows of his eyes.

‘Then I only have one last question to ask,’ he said, and with those words he rose to his feet, thoughtlessly tugging the cuffs of his coat back into place. He was tall. Much too tall, forcing Nellie to tilt back her head as he took a measured step towards her, and another one ... Sweet divines, why was he coming so close? And why wasn't Mrs. Radcliffe saying anything, when surely this crossed the lines of propriety and this was supposed to be a respectable household and dear Mother Ostara, she still had all that ironing to do—

The duke of Locke sank to one knee before her.

And said, with not the faintest trace of jest in his voice, ‘Eleanor Finch, will you marry me?’

Chapter 2

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Onedidnotsayno to a duke.

One didnotsay no to a duke.

Which was unfortunate, given that a loud and wholehearted refusal was the only response Nellie could think of for a full ten heartbeats of stunned silence – that and perhaps making a run for it. But one did not run from dukes, either, and in some paralysed compromise, all she could do was stand and stare at the man who had just uttered that unthinkable question – kneeling at her feet, watching her expectantly – as the sheer, absolute insanity of those words hovered in the space between them.

Marry.

Him.

The floor she'd scrubbed herself last week seemed to be swaying beneath her.

Now the duke ought to start laughing. Now he ought to admit he was just playing the fool – that was the only way any of this could ever begin to make sense ... And yet he was stillsitting there, on his knee, looking up at her with one blue-black eyebrow slightly higher than the other. As if she should have seen this coming. As if he wasn't a nobleman proposing to a housemaid whose name he hadn't even known five minutes ago.

The silence was growing deafening.

She parted her lips, trying to find an answer that would not offend him while also

making perfectly, unambiguously clear that she was not going to move into a murderer's home, thank you very much. I'm very honoured, but ... You must excuse me ... I do not think I could possibly make you happy ...

Instead, all that slipped from her tongue was a blunt, 'What?'

By the mantle, Mrs. Radcliff let out the quietest *tsk*.

Oh drat. That had certainly not been the right thing to say. Then again, if she made sure to come across as a boorish, unmannered fool, perhaps Lord Locke would realise all by himself that he was committing the misstep of the century here? Perhaps he would simply retract his proposal, announce he had better things to do than explain his ways to witless maids, and vanish to find another, more enthusiastic victim for his schemes?

But the duke didn't so much as frown as he rose to his feet. Nor did he smile. There was no frustration or impatience in his gestures as he straightened his cravat with his large, muscular hands; only his measured side glance was full of unspoken requests.

'Radcliffe?' he said.

And before Nellie knew what was happening, the housekeeper had slipped out of the room, quietly shutting the door behind her stiff, black-clad back.

Shutting her in.

With Lord Locke— six-time widower and brand new suitor.

For one mindless moment, Nellie wondered what would happen if she were to take flight after all – if Locke would catch her before she could escape this mahogany-and-velvet trap. But even if she managed to get out of the room, causing a scene might

very well cost her this position at the Eyestone household. And where would she end up if she lost her room and her daily meals, if she could no longer earn her money by ironing sheet after sheet after sheet?

In a duke's home, a treacherous little voice whispered.

In a grave, she countered, gritting her teeth.

No, she had to stay here and face him, whatever he had to say. And then she had to refuse him –politely.

Which would be much, much easier if he wasn't standing there looking at her with those frigid cat eyes, the slitted pupils so narrow as to almost be invisible. They didn't gleam or glitter or glower, those eyes. They just ... watched, taking in the world with a detached air of indifference that seemed far less human than even his fae hair or his unnaturally sharp cheekbones.

She'd have shivered if her tense muscles had allowed for it.

'Your Grace ...' she started, rubbing her clammy fingers behind her back. 'Your Grace, I'm afraid I don't fully understand—'

'Yes,' he curtly interrupted, finally taking his eyes off her. She almost breathed a sigh of relief out loud. 'Of course. I'm happy to provide some elucidation, if that is necessary in order to come to an agreement.'

What had he thought? That she'd be so elated to place herself in the position six dead women had held before that she'd throw herself into his burly arms at his first proposal, no further questions asked?

'I would appreciate that, yes,' she managed to say. 'Your Grace.'

He turned away with a terse nod, intertwining his hands behind his back. 'It's a purely rational matter, you see. I'm in need of an heir.'

Anheir.

Which meant ... oh, sweet divines. Was she blushing? This was not the moment to think of Lucy Clarke's scandalous stories and imagine this man naked in his own silk sheets – but something about the breadth of his shoulders made it far too easy, the small, elegant motions of his hands that did not fit the roughness of their shape.

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Or perhaps the simple fact that he'd just invited her to join him in those sheets.

Which she wasn't going to accept.

Ofcourseshe wasn't going to accept.

'In other words,' Locke flatly continued from the other side of the room – and whether he hadn't noticed her moment of confusion or simply didn't care about it, she was twistedly grateful either way – 'I need a wife to give me that heir. A wife who will stay alive for longer than a few months, that is.'

That was enough to instantly banish every heated thought from her mind again.

Because he spoke the words so matter-of-factly – not a sliver of emotion, as though the poor women had been remote acquaintances at best. Which stood to reason, Nellie sternly reminded herself. How would he have killed them, one after the other, if he had felt even the slightest bit of sympathy for them?

Although ...

Her thoughts wavered.

Although thatwasodd, wasn't it? Sure enough, she could imagine him as a killer – could see him calmly, meticulously pressing a pillow over a sleeping face at night. But if he needed an heir desperately enough to resort to marrying maids, then why would he have killed his previous wives at all? Shouldn't he have restrained his murderous urges until one of them had born him a son or two?

That really did not add up at all. Not because of love and other fairytales but because of the stark, hard facts.

‘Oh,’ she said weakly – suspecting she ought to say something in the mounting silence, but unable to come up with any more intelligent remarks as her thoughts folded in on themselves. ‘I ... I see. And your previous wives ...’

‘Were killed by my curse,’ he finished, upper lip curling a fraction. ‘Exactly.’

He believed in a curse? Odd, for a man calling this a purely rational matter. Unless he was lying, of course, unless this was just a game to lure yet another unsuspecting woman into his bed – hell, perhaps he didn’t care about heirs at all. Perhaps he had told the other six the exact same thing, only to poison their tea or push them down the stairs three weeks later.

It really was about time she got herself out of here. Divines knew what tale he’d come up with next; if she wasn’t careful, she’d accidentally spin right into his trap.

‘With all due respect, Your Grace,’ she started, faltering for a moment as those strange grey eyes swept her way again, ‘but if a curse is killing everyone you marry ... well, then it would be rather dangerous for me to accept your proposal, wouldn’t it?’

His mouth tightened. ‘Not for you.’

‘But ...’

‘My curse,’ he interrupted, his voice not so much sharpening as tightening, ‘doesn’t kill my wives, per se. It kills those I fall in love with.’

She blinked at him.

‘So what I need is a wife with whom I have nothing in common. A wife who evokes no feelings or affections. A wife who will simply be a means to an end to me. In return, I am more than content to be the same to her.’ He paused for a moment – just long enough for those brisk words to settle – then added, more calmly now, ‘Let me be very frank with you, Miss Finch. This is not and will never be a love match. If you were hoping for a grand romance, then you’d do well to refuse me.’

This was her chance, then – wasn’t it?

He was offering her the perfect, graceful way out. A wide-open door, and all she needed to do was step through it. I’m sorry, Your Grace, but my heart belongs to the young footman next door– who cared it was a lie? Who cared her heart would never truly belong to anyone anyway, duke or otherwise?

And yet ...

She wavered.

He seemed so uncannily straightforward, standing stiff and dispassionate between Lady Eyestone’s velvet couches. He sounded so sensible. A simple transaction and no attempts to soften or sweeten that blow – much better than the young men who made advances every now and then, spinning fairytales of a forever she knew did not exist.

Much, much better than Father, who had insisted he loved them until the very day the money ran out.

And when she opened her mouth, what came out was not a refusal. Instead, the words she heard herself speak through the whirlwind of her thoughts were, ‘Why me?’

‘Ah.’ The duke snapped back into motion, snappish strides across the polished floorboards. His ears were just a fraction pointed beneath his blue hair – she hadn’t

known or noticed that before. ‘Excellent question. I came here to ask Radcliffe for advice. She was our housekeeper when I was a young boy, and there are few people whose judgement of character I trust more.’

It took a few seconds for that to register.

Mrs. Radcliffe had recommended her? To this man? Knowing his history – knowing what he might be capable of?

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Any other day, it would have been a compliment to be singled out ... but here, now, Nellie found herself wondering for a moment whether the housekeeper may simply have chosen her as the girl she could most easily do without.

Then again ... this was Mrs. Radcliffe, proper and punctual, who had not hesitated to call for the guards even when the Viscount Westmoor had jokingly run off with Lady Eyestone's jade tiara. If the housekeeper had suspected this man she'd known all his life of murder, would she have quietly stood by as he singled out his next victim right under her nose?

It seemed unlikely.

Truly, every part of this morning seemed thoroughly unlikely.

'So ...' She was grasping for sense now. Sweet divines, why couldn't he simply be the ruthless, sweet-tongued murderer she'd assumed him to be, without his unexpected frankness and Mrs. Radcliffe's unspoken endorsement? 'So what did she tell you about me, exactly? I'd like to know what is expected of me.'

'I asked Radcliffe if she knew any level-headed, pragmatic young women with a proper brain in their skulls,' Locke said with a short shrug. 'It wouldn't do for my wife to collapse into hysterics whenever that blasted curse is mentioned, you see. And of course' – a hint of that glacial smile lay on his lips again as he glanced at her, forced and measured and wholly devoid of true amusement – 'if I am to have a son, I would prefer for him not to be a halfwit. Which means his mother shouldn't be, either.'

So rational. So perfectly calculating. A list of requirements, and since she fulfilled them, he had asked her – how could she possibly disapprove of that approach?

‘I see,’ she said.

And this time, it was true.

The duke must have noticed the change in her demeanour, because something shifted in his face, too, as he ceased his pacing and turned towards her – the most minuscule softening of his broad, chiselled jaw. Before, he had merely been defending his proposal. Now ...

Now, they were discussing it.

She felt like a woman sucked into deadly quicksand. But no matter how hard she tried, she could no longer even remember what steady ground felt like.

‘I do not expect charity from you, Miss Finch,’ Locke added before she could regain her footing – before she could figure out if there even was any footing to be regained. ‘When I said I expect to be a means to an end to you, I was entirely sincere. There will be no need to stick with me for all your life. All I need is an heir, and as soon as I have one, I’m happy to settle a generous yearly allowance on you that will allow you to either live comfortably in Elidian or travel elsewhere. If you’d prefer to settle in the Dragon’s Bay cities and pretend to be a rich widow, you would have my full blessing.’

‘You ...’ The floor was wobbling in earnest now; she had to take three quick steps and sit down on the edge of the nearest sapphire couch before her knees gave way. The heat was creeping up on her, clouding her mind. Had she heard him correctly? A yearly allowance and her freedom – freedom – and no lye soap burning the skin off her hands ever again? ‘You don’t even expect me to actually ... be a wife, then?’

His eyebrows rose a fraction. 'Apart from the, let us say, necessary duties, no.'

A shivery laugh escaped her before she could stop herself, sounding far too nervous. Necessary duties— for goodness' sake, was she actually considering this, stepping into a man's bed to buy her own future? A scandalous, scandalous thought ... but scandal, like love and magic, rarely had much to do with facts and far more with fear. So if she looked past the fear and took the facts at face value ...

There seemed to be a very decent chance he wouldn't try to kill her.

Better still, she wouldn't need to be a true wife to him; if she wanted, she could avoid him around dinner and at the top of stairs to increase her chances of survival. And even if it turned out he was a terrible lover, even if she spent a few nights staring at a ceiling and composing grocery lists in her mind, would that really be too high a price to pay?

She'd never have to iron a single sheet again. She'd never spend her sleepless nights scrubbing the floors of others again.

And Anne ...

Oh, Anne.

'I have one request,' she heard herself say.

Was that pushing too far? But Locke merely cocked his head in a wordless question, silky blue hair brushing his solid shoulders – his whole bearing so perfectly aloof, so entirely strait-laced, that nothing human remained below.

'My little sister,' she quickly continued before she could lose courage again in the face of that hollow shell of a man. 'Anne. She was injured in an accident a few years

ago – lost her right hand and her ability to work. She relies on me to keep her housed and fed. I would prefer for our marriage contract to also include a clause guaranteeing her a sufficient living in case any harm comes to me.’

The duke’s face didn’t darken – not much, at least. But there was a noticeable tightening to his lips, and he all but snapped his response. ‘You won’t die.’

‘I’m supposed to be pragmatic,’ she countered, realising only then she had forgotten about the Your Grace for the past two minutes at least. Since he didn’t seem to have noticed yet, she didn’t feel particularly inclined to add the honorific back into the conversation. ‘Even without any curse, I might end up below an ox cart tomorrow. You know how those Kraalian merchants drive these days.’

He stared at her, a small vein pulsing at his temple – trying to figure out, by the look on his face, whether he would be challenging fate too much by acknowledging the possibility of her untimely demise.

‘You can subtract her allowance from mine, if you like,’ Nellie added, jutting up her chin. ‘I’d spend it on her anyway. You might as well pay it to her directly.’

‘The money is not the issue.’ He drew in a harsh breath, then abruptly turned away and gave a single sharp nod. ‘As you wish, Miss Finch. If –if– anything happens to you, she will be taken care of. I’ll have my solicitor add it to the paperwork.’

She could have cried.

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And now ... Hell, how could she possibly refuse him, if it was not merely her own future she was securing?

‘Thank you.’ Her hands were suddenly trembling; she tried to bury them in her apron, then realised she would never wear those aprons again and only trembled harder. Just a few words and she would no longer be Nellie Finch. Lady Locke— a thought as surreal as it was terrifying, a door she’d open and never be able to close again. ‘Then ... then I believe we have an agreement, Your Grace.’

He did not smile.

He did not kneel again.

His nod was the gesture of a man closing a sale, and his grey eyes remained as cold as ever. But there was a small crack of relief in his voice as he cleared his throat and said, ‘I’m sure Radcliffe will give you the day off to pack your and your sister’s belongings. I’ll make an appointment at the Temple for tomorrow morning.’

And with that meagre goodbye, he swept around and was gone, leaving Nellie weak-kneed and light-headed on Lady Eyestone’s velvet couch.

Chapter 3

The Locketown house was situated along one of Elidian’s most prestigious canals, a stone’s throw from the Princeps’s seat and the domed building where the Senate gathered to make day-to-day decisions. It was the kind of neighbourhood Nellie had only ever visited to run errands, and even then she’d felt out of place; a humble

housemaid certainly did not go for morning walks in this part of the city.

A duchess, on the other hand ...

Sweet divines, a duchess.

Her knees were still trembling when she stepped out of Lord Locke's hackney; if not for his footmen, she may have tripped and crashed onto the spotless cobblestones. Her thoughts were a screaming haze. Half of the Temple ceremony had gone by in a blur, and the other half would not stop rising from her memories in jumbled shreds – the empty rows of chairs, Lord Eyestone by her side, and no one but Anne, a stiff-shouldered Mrs. Radcliffe, and a wide-eyed Lady Eyestone to witness the proceedings. Locke, it seemed, hadn't bothered to invite anyone at all.

Perhaps even his friends had rather given up hope for wife number seven.

Her knees wobbled more fiercely.

Behind Nellie, the footmen helped Anne step from the hackney, her sister's quiet voice thanking each of them with heartbreaking sincerity. Servants poured from the house to take care of their luggage. Three small bags, carrying all of their earthly possessions – even Locke had blinked in surprise when he'd realised how little she'd brought with her.

Locke ...

Her husband.

More than anything, she wanted to run like the wind and leave this deadly charade behind. But her little sister appeared next to her, frail and rosy in the faded pink dress that had been Nellie's and their mother's before ... and whatever she ran from,

whatever choices she might regret, she couldn't leave Anne behind.

Which meant she had to face this.

Which meant she must be brave enough for the both of them.

So she forced a reassuring smile and turned to see the duke of Locke emerge from the hackney last – more elegantly than seemed possible due to the sheer size of him, his blue hair glowing like sapphire. No matter how warm and bright the sunlight, it couldn't melt the duke's countenance. Nellie was granted no more than a curt nod as he strode up to her and Anne; he didn't meet her gaze until the last moment, and even then his expression remained blank, nothing but perhaps a touch of grim impatience to the angle of his jaw and the grey of his cat's eyes.

'I have business to attend to,' he informed her, ignoring Anne entirely. 'I'll send my steward to show you around.'

And just like that he strode off, without even waiting for an answer. Nellie watched his broad back vanish into the shadowy hall of the townhouse with a sinking feeling in the bottom of her stomach – a sensation of imminent, very imminent regret.

'I don't think I like him much, Nell,' Anne whispered beside her.

That was all she needed to pull herself together.

Because she could regret her own decisions as much as she liked, but Anne should not – could not – suffer the same fate, not if Nellie had any say in the matter. With newfound resolve, she let out a breezy chuckle, grabbed her sister's left hand, and lightly said, 'Good thing you didn't have to marry him, then, isn't it? Let's go take a look inside, before we melt to puddles in this heat.'

Anne's attempt at a laugh was half-hearted, even as she obediently followed towards that towering façade of red brick and white, ornate woodwork. 'But Nell ...'

'Don't you dare worry about me, little bean.' Was she trying to convince herself or her sister now? Walking up the steps to the open door felt not unlike stepping between some monster's gaping jaws, and yet she kept going, giving herself no time to falter and show fear. 'I'm a duchess now, remember? That's worth a little unpleasantness. I'll be perfectly fine.'

Anne's silence was more damning than her objections could have been. Duchesses can be unhappy, too, her glowering expression said, loud and clear in the shimmering morning air. Duchesses can die.

Since that was undeniably true, Nellie decided it would be best not to respond to those unspoken arguments.

'We'll go shopping tomorrow,' she continued with stubborn cheer, letting go of her sister's hand as she stepped over the threshold. Servants hurriedly moved out of the way around her – a more disorienting feeling than even the sound of her new title on her tongue, but she pressed on all the same. 'You're in dire need of new dresses, and so am I. Perhaps we can even afford to visit Miss Grey's shop! And we'll buy you some books and a bunch of those Issian honey treats you liked so much, and ...'

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The last two maids parted before her, revealing the entrance hall beyond.

She faltered.

She ought to keep talking – she knew she ought to when she felt Anne stiffen beside her, heard the catch of her little sister's breath. But the space before her swallowed the words before they'd even left her lips, and for a heartbeat and a half she could only stand and stare – stare and feel the boulder sink and sink and sink into the deepest pits of her stomach.

This was not the grand duke's home she had envisioned.

This was nothing, nothing like the warm, inviting space that welcomed visitors into the stately mansion where Lord and Lady Eyestone spent their days.

The hall was long and narrow and strangely dusky. Even the summer light outside did little to penetrate the gloom. There was no dust, no trace of cobwebs on the crystal chandelier, and yet the air felt stale and hollow, as if it had been years since a fresh breeze had last breathed through the front entrance. All the doors along the corridor were drawn shut. The six paintings on the walls had been covered up with black velvet drapes, the heavy fabrics uncannily similar to the robes of funeral mourners.

Six paintings.

She shivered.

A bouquet of cornflowers on an oak side table was the only visible attempt to

brighten the atmosphere. Somehow, their sharp contrast to the black and white floor tiles only heightened the icy sense of foreboding that suffused the hall.

It was like stepping into the dark grey of a dreary winter morning. Like walking straight into an empty tomb – as if Lord Locke had interred himself along with the six wives he'd laid in their graves.

At the front door behind them, the maids and footmen were still rushing back and forth, even their voices strangely muted. Nellie could no longer tell if it was the gloom of the house or the fog sinking over her own panicked thoughts that seemed to swallow every last sprinkle of sound. Sweet Mother Ostara, this was where she was forcing Anne to spend the next few months of her life? This was the duchess's existence she'd been promised?

And this ...

This was where her child would grow up?

She'd hardly dared to spend a single thought on him yet, the boy she'd have to bring into the world – had vaguely, hopefully, assumed Locke had a plan to make sure his heir would be taken care of, even with a mother who would be little more than a hired womb. But the sight of this hall made it suddenly urgent, the vision of a small blue-haired toddler running up those steep, narrow stairs ...

She swallowed, tasting gall.

What in the world had she gotten herself into?

'Nell?' Anne whispered, voice wobbling on the edge of tears. 'Nell, do you really think—'

A door slammed above their heads.

And a warm, male voice boomed, ‘Ah, Lady Locke!’

The owner of said voice appeared at the top of the stairs a moment later, hurrying down with a vigour that seemed oddly out of place in this macabre environment – a tall, slender gentleman with ruddy brown hair and the sort of grin that made him look perpetually apologetic. He was all energetic motion as he jumped down the last steps, shook Nellie’s hand, then turned to her sister and added with equal zeal, ‘And you are Miss Anne, I presume? Absolutely wonderful. My name is Walford, Peregrine Walford, steward of the Locke family. Othrys sent me to show you the way to your rooms – if you could just follow me upstairs ...’

Othrys.

A fae name. Nellie hadn’t even known it until the ceremony that morning, when the high priest had first addressed her husband-to-be; Lady Eyestone had visibly shivered at the inhuman sound of it.

Nellie gestured for Anne to go up the stairs first, just in case her sister slipped – she’d be unable to break her fall one-handedly. Walford seemed to catch that line of thinking without missing a beat and positioned himself behind the girl as she began to climb, visibly bracing himself to catch her whenever he might need to.

On this dismal morning, that small show of consideration was enough to make the tears sting behind Nellie’s eyes.

Anne did not slip, and they reached the next floor safely, arriving in a shadowy passage that managed to be impossibly gloomier than the hall they’d left behind. Curiously, it seemed that someone had made a start at redecorating the walls, then stopped midway; about two thirds of the corridor were covered in a deep purple that

had been fashionable ten years ago, whereas the section opposite the stairs had been replaced with a more modern, flowery motif that strongly resembled the style Lady Eyestone preferred. An initiative of one of the duchesses, presumably. And then when the poor woman had died ...

For what had to be the fifteenth time that day, Nellie suppressed a cold shudder.

Walford's quick glance of understanding as he opened the door to the left suggested he had noticed it, too.

The corridor through the back wing of the house should have been a cheerful one, lined with shelves clearly intended to display a colourful collection of exotic trinkets and other curiosities; unfortunately, however, the items in question had been unceremoniously packed away in rough wooden crates, which now balanced on the top shelf, allowing little more than glimpses of the treasures inside. The other shelves were empty, pale spots on the wood the only trace of the past.

On the far side of the passage, shutters were half-closed over the only window. To keep out the summer heat, presumably, but the resulting lighting was dim and greyish, casting long shadows over the spotless wooden floor.

Walford interrupted her observations. 'These will be your rooms, Lady Locke.' He gestured at the door to his left. It stood ajar. 'Your bags have already been placed inside. And I thought Miss Anne might prefer to sleep close to you, so we have prepared this room for her to stay in.' He hurried to the next door with that energetic step, pushed it open, and cast a look inside. 'I'm afraid it's a little bare, but we did our best to add some cosy touches. Of course, we'll have plenty of time to adjust it to your preferences ...'

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Of course.

He had to know, didn't he, that she might not have all that much time in the end?

'That ... that is really very kind of you,' Nellie managed to say, once again mortifyingly close to tears. Since when did she cry over such small kindnesses? 'We'll let you know if there's anything else we need.'

'Please do, Lady Locke. Anything you may think of.' His rueful smile faltered as he met her eyes – oh yes, he knew very, very well that he may be standing at her grave within months. 'You can usually find me in my office on the next floor, second door to the right. You too, of course, Miss Anne.'

'Thank you,' Anne murmured, audible only because of the stifling quiet of the townhouse.

With a last nod, the steward strode out and left them alone, his footsteps on the stairs a little less energetic now. Nellie forced a brave smile, pointed at her sister's open door, and said, 'Shall we take a look?'

The room wasn't large, and it gave the impression it had been out of use for a while. But someone had spread a plush pink quilt over the bed, and a vase of fresh wildflowers stood on the bedside table; on the small desk, a pile of history and fairytale books lay waiting to be explored. It wasn't enough to make one overlook the pale squares of removed paintings on the moss green walls entirely ... but at the very least, it didn't evoke visions of funeral ceremonies either, and with a few prints on the wall and a cosy chair or two, it could turn into something quite passable.

‘There you go,’ Nellie said as Anne remained quiet, aiming for upbeat and falling just short. ‘That will do for now, won’t it?’

Her little sister stepped into the room, plopped down on the bed, and glared at her – a look that tore straight through all pretences of light-heartedness. ‘I’m not an idiot, Nell.’

Not a good start. ‘Of course you aren’t, but—’

‘You don’t like this place either,’ Anne interrupted brusquely – nothing like her, to be so blunt about her likes and dislikes. Her left hand balled into a fist in the pink quilt; the stump of her right wrist looked like it would have followed suit if it had been able to. ‘Can’t we go back to Eyestone Manor? At least Lord Eyestone never killed anyone.’

‘I married Locke,’ Nellie said, fighting the urge to close her eyes and crumple onto the floorboards. Married him – why hadn’t she run from the Temple screaming, to hell with his money and promises and his bloody cheekbones? ‘And either way, I thought you believed the curse killed his other wives?’

Anne gave a little huff. ‘That was before I’d seen his house.’

‘I’m sure a curse is perfectly capable of ruining one’s atmosphere, if it’s capable of killing people,’ Nellie said firmly. ‘And either way, I told you it doesn’t make sense for him to have killed them. So I’ll be perfectly fine, and this will all be just for a few months, and then ...’

Then we’ll be free.

It felt dangerous to even speak the words out loud. She’d seen the numbers in her wedding contract: more money per year than she’d ever dreamed of possessing in all

her life.

‘Yes,’ Anne admitted, and her round face was truly darkening now, ‘but in the meantime you’ll have to ... to ...’

Bed him.

That sentence, too, felt too dangerous to finish. As if Nellie wasn’t excruciatingly aware of it herself, the night rushing closer with every breath she took: those large hands the priest had bound with hers, moving on her body, on—

‘I’ll be just fine,’ she made herself say, squeezing a smile onto her face. ‘I wasn’t holding out for love anyway, and this man is no worse than any of the others walking around in this city. So consider it from the bright side – when you inevitably fall for some penniless poet, at least we’ll have the means to feed the both of you now.’

Anne didn’t laugh. ‘Nell ...’

‘Not another word of it,’ Nellie sternly interrupted. ‘You should have a look at those books. I’ll go inspect my room and unpack my bags, and then we’ll have dinner together. I’m sure the food will make up for most of Locke’s behaviour.’

Her sister seemed sceptical, but Nellie didn’t wait for objections: one or two more of them and her desperate shield of optimism might fold like wet paper. With a last smile, she hurried out, shut the door behind her, and made for the other room Walford had pointed out. Just a few minutes in solitude to gather her wits. Just a single space, no matter how small, that she could call hers in this strange new world in which she’d trapped herself – surely that wouldn’t be too much to ask?

She swung open the door, then froze on the doorstep.

There was nothing ominous about the room. Nothing that suggested its last six inhabitants had one by one died an untimely death – nothing that suggested the same fate might await her.

Really, the room didn't look like anything.

Not cosy. Not dark. Not sumptuous or austere ... There was a bed, a desk, a dresser. A little seat by the windows and a narrow door that would presumably lead to a dressing room. But nothing, nothing between these four blue walls carried even the faintest personality: no art, no flowers, not a splash of colour. Only her own bags lay small and abandoned at the foot of the bed, waiting for her to unpack them.

Although she should probably ring for someone else to unpack them, being Lady Locke and all – she couldn't help a cheerless little laugh at that thought.

The floor felt unsteady beneath her feet as she wandered inside, feeling like a ghost already, an intruder in a place she did not belong. The room felt like it could swallow her whole. Just like it seemed to have swallowed the six previous Ladies Locke, wiped every trace of their existence off the walls, and left only the haunting, incomplete stories of their deaths ... Curse or murder, it suddenly no longer seemed to matter.

Either way, they were gone.

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Like she might soon vanish, too, if she had misjudged this game even the slightest bit.

With a sharp shake of her head, she paced to the windows, hoping a glimpse of the city basking in its golden summer light would dispel some of this morbid brooding. Hell, wasn't she supposed to be the sensible, practical one here? But even the garden below seemed to be conspiring to add to her creeping unease ... Weeks away from midsummer, the grounds should have been in full bloom. Instead, most of the plants looked as dead and dreary as the rest of the house; the few flowers that had blossomed from the tangled, muddled green did so almost apologetically. Bad soil, perhaps? But on either side of the townhouse, the neighbours' gardens were bursting with colour as far as the eye could see.

Which suggested this was just neglect again, wilful or otherwise. Or would a curse be capable of killing flowers, too, if it could kill human beings so easily?

She had no idea. She hadn't believed in the damn thing until yesterday, and she still wasn't entirely sure whether she did believe in it now – divines help her, why had she agreed to come here at all before she understood what forces the duke of Locke was playing with?

Her breath was quickening. Hell take her, there had to be something more innocent to think about. Something that didn't remind her of death. The dressing room – how bad could a dressing room be?

She paced away from the windows, drawing deep breaths. The narrow door opposite the bed was locked, but the key protruded invitingly from the hole – a heavy, cast-iron thing the size of her forearm, the type of key one would expect in a Karwaldian

castle rather than an Elidian townhouse. It turned easily despite its weight, and when she yanked at the door, it opened without a creak, revealing ...

She gasped.

Here they were.

Locke's wives may have been scrubbed meticulously from the bedroom itself ... but there was no erasing the six dead women from the racks and shelves of dresses they'd worn, the shoes, the gloves, the ribbons. The clothes seemed to buzz with untold stories, the personalities of their owners woven into every thread and stitch, every inch of lace and silk and satin. There, to the left, the belongings of a practical, businesslike wife, who'd worn simple dresses and good, sturdy boots. Next to her, a wife whomust have loved travelling, or at least the notion of the faraway: exotic Issian motifs decorated her hems and collars, and were those snake-leather gloves there on the shelf above her gowns?

Oh, sweet divines, this was far, far worse than the garden.

Nellie stood paralysed, unable to look away, unable to stop seeing. An extravagant coat with mink sleeves, belonging to a lady who kept up with the latest fashions ... A wide range of playful, flowery dresses, hinting at a lady who did not care about the dominant trend of stately and elegant styles ...

Dead.

They were all dead.

She staggered back, air tattering in her throat. The dresses did not move, and yet it seemed as though they were following, whispers seeping into the bedroom. Warning her. Reminding her. We stood where you once stood, girl, as alive as you are, and

look what's left of us now ...

Out.Out.

Her thoughts were a pounding drum. Damn the cheerful pretences and the calming down – there was no more sense in attempting to reassuring herself, in trying to close her eyes to the bitter truth. She had to understand the rules of this game and understand them now. If she gambled wrong, if she played even one bad hand, it would be her humble pile of dresses added to those shelves in two months.

But she couldn't let Anne see her in this state ...

Anything, Walford had said.

She barged out of the room and up the stairs, almost flinging herself through the second door on the right as she knocked.

Chapter 4

'Ah,LadyLocke,'Walfordwarmly greeted her from behind his desk, then narrowed his eyes and shoved his paperwork aside as she stumbled in. 'Are you well?'

She was not well.

Lady Locke.How odd was it for him to address yet another woman by that same title, after all the others he must have known?

'Thank you,' she managed, clinging to her good manners with every last ounce of composure she could marshal. For once, she was grateful for Mrs. Radcliffe's strict training; her shoulders straightened themselves at the thought of the old housekeeper's reprimands, and her voice came out steadier than she felt. 'I ... I just

had a small shock, that's all. Could I ask you a few questions?'

'But of course.' He hurriedly stood up and removed a pile of cash books from the chair on her side of the desk, long legs tangling in his haste. 'Please take a seat. Could I get you a glass of water, perhaps? You ought to drink a good deal in this heat.'

Nellie shook her head, clutching the doorframe, attempting to catch her breath. How ghastly did she look, for him to make such a fuss about her? Although she was a duchess now – perhaps people just fussed over duchesses all the time, regardless of the state they were in? 'None of that, thank you. I'll be fine in a moment.'

'I'm glad to hear,' he said, sounding unconvinced. 'May I ask what caused your distress, or ...'

'Oh yes. Yes.' She sat down, wrestling with the words on her lips. Away from the dresses, in this small room full of leather and parchment, her reckless flight was starting to seem increasingly foolish as her heart slowed down. 'I ... I mostly did not expect to find the dresses of Lord Locke's previous wives in my dressing room.'

Walford froze.

'Just a small oversight, I presume,' Nellie hastily added, her voice climbing. 'But if they could be stored elsewhere, I—'

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‘Good gracious – yes, ofcourse.’ He let out a befuddled laugh as he dropped back into his seat, raking ink-stained fingers through his reddish hair. ‘That is very thoughtless. Those used to be stored in the room your sister is now sleeping in – Mrs. Hartnell must have moved them back into the dressing room prior to your arrival. I’m so sorry, Lady Locke. I’ll have them taken out as soon as possible.’

‘Thank you so much.Somuch.’ She buried her face in her hands, trying to wipe the image of those dresses from her mind’s eye and managing poorly. ‘I’m sorry, I promise I’m not usually this weepy. I just ...’

He let out a mirthless chuckle. ‘You haven’t struck me as particularly weepy so far. I’ll be the first to acknowledge this household could grate on anyone’s nerves.’

Knowing she wasn’t imagining it made her feel better and worse at the same time. Since she wasn’t quite sure how to makethat point, she sat up, smoothened the skirt of her pale yellow dress, and sheepishly repeated, ‘Thank you.’

‘My pleasure, Lady Locke.’ He hesitated, then slowly added, ‘You wanted to ask me something, you said?’

‘Oh yes. Yes, please.’Tell me how I survive this trap– but if he knew the answer to that, Locke wouldn’t have had to marry her in the first place. ‘I was wondering ... have you been with Lord Locke for a long time?’

‘Nine years now, give or take.’ If he was surprised by the question, he hid it well. ‘But I’ve known him for much longer. I used to work for his uncle, you see.’

Nellie blinked. ‘His uncle?’

‘Good old Sir Percival.’ A smile slid over his freckled face. ‘He was the one who saw potential in me and trained me to be his steward. Then after he died, Othrys offered me this position. So I know the family well, which is what I think you were asking – I owe them everything, frankly.’

That was sincere fondness in his voice, wasn’t it? A man who knew the family well, a man who wouldn’t think ill of Lord Locke if he could possibly avoid it.

Nellie tucked that little observation away with the few other facts she dared to be sure of. ‘Then you’ve known the previous ladies as well, I presume?’

He sighed. ‘Yes.’

‘And ... and their deaths ...’

‘Ah,’ he muttered, giving her another of those cheerless, apologetic smiles. ‘Of course. Yes, I can tell you more about the curse, if you are sure you wish to know.’

About the curse.

Not a moment of hesitation in his voice. Not a trace of suspicion or disbelief.

‘So there is a curse,’ she blurted, feeling like a fool but unable to hold back. ‘You are really very sure ...’

‘Of course there is.’ He looked genuinely surprised now, blinking at her with his red eyebrows halfway up his forehead. ‘I understand you’d prefer for it not to be the case, Lady Locke, but I’m afraid there is absolutely no doubt that there’s dark magic at play here. Trust me – we’ve gone over every other option over the years.’

Two days ago, she wouldn't have believed it. Magic. Fairytales. But she'd seen Locke's grim distress since then, and now there was this kind, intelligent man who had no reason to deceive her ...

'So who cursed him?' she whispered, feeling like an even greater fool.

Walford gave a discreet little cough. 'His mother.'

'Hismother?'

'Not deliberately, we think, but— Well, let me start at the beginning.' He planted his elbows on the table, chewing on his thoughts for a moment. 'When Cyril became Princeps of Elidian twenty-three years ago and passed the law that banned all magic wielders from the city, the late Lord Locke found himself in a difficult position. He'd married a fae woman. That marriage was declared void. He needed to decide whether he'd follow the new rules or fight them.'

'And he followed the rules?' Nellie quietly guessed.

'Yes. Sent her away the very day after the law was passed. He was ... not a sentimental man, Othrys's father.'

Not sentimental. Through the lens of his unwavering loyalty to the family, she could only guess at the heartlessness that lay below those words.

'I was here with Sir Percival the morning he made her leave,' Walford continued, lowering his voice as if the maids might be listening by the door. 'It was a whole scene. She wanted to take Othrys with her. The duke wouldn't let her. And I vividly remember how she finally stormed out of the house, turned onelast time on the doorstep, and yelled at him that she would make sure he never found love again.'

‘Oh,’ Nellie breathlessly said. ‘Oh no.’

‘Yes.’ A grim smile. ‘Well, the old lord never remarried, so we all assumed that was that. He died a few years later. Sir Percival died, too. And Othrys married Isaure – very sweet, very earnest young woman, avid botanist, loved working in the garden. Cut her hand on the garden shears one day and the wound got infected. She died of a fever before they were married a year.’

Nellie shivered, remembering the sturdy, practical dresses in the dressing room. ‘That’s horrible.’

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‘It was,’ Walford grimly affirmed. ‘Then again, such things happen. Tragic but not extraordinary. No one considered it to be anything but bad luck. But then a count’s daughter named Colette became the second Lady Locke – brilliant woman, wrote very engaging theatre critiques – and she fell down the stairs in the middle of the night, after drinking just a glass too many at a late show. Followed within the year by our lovely songbird, Lady Jeanne, who drowned in the marshes during a summer stroll outside the city.’

It had become hard to stop shivering now.

‘We were all there, you see,’ Walford said softly, rubbing his temples. ‘When she drowned. That’s when I began to believe it must be a curse – because it was nothing like Jeanne to be that careless. One moment she was just behind us on the path, the next she was being sucked into the mire. I tried to reach her – they had to drag me out of the quicksand, too – but they were too late to help her. As if something was ...targeting her.’

Divines help her. She didn’t want to hear any of this, didn’t want to know any of this – and yet she forced herself to sit and listen, to absorb every damning, deadly fact. She had to know. She wouldn’t survive this marriage without knowing.

‘Did Othrys—’ She caught herself just too late and quickly amended, ‘Did Lord Locke believe it was a curse then, too?’

‘He didn’t.’ A bleak sigh. ‘He’s stubborn, Othrys – very sensible, but too sensible at times. And of course, he didn’t want to believe his mother could have cursed him, too.’

‘Of course,’ Nellie said weakly.

‘Yes.’ He gave her a thin smile. ‘But people had started whispering, and for a while, remarrying seemed out of the question. Then an old friend of his – Lady Alis – returned from her travels to Issi and the Dragon’s Bay cities. Thought it was all ridiculous and decided she’d just marry him, if no one else was willing to.’

Nellie only just suppressed a whimper.

‘She lasted five months,’ Walford grimly continued. ‘We found her dead in the stables. One of the horses had kicked her in the head.’

‘And did Lord Locke believe in the curse then?’ she whispered.

‘Yes. Mourned for over a year.’ Walford rubbed his hands over his face, leaving his skin almost as red as his hair. ‘Frankly, we all thought he’d never marry again, and I can’t say we weren’t glad for it. But the estate still needed an heir, so ...’

Nellie swallowed. ‘So that’s when he married that half fae lady? Blanche?’

It was on that occasion that she’d first heard of Locke and his curse. Lady Blanche did not wield magic either, meaning the marriage was technically legal even under Princeps Cyril’s laws ... but of course Lady Eyestone had loudly declared it a disgrace all the same, second in reprehensibility only to the duke of Arragher and that fullblood fae mongrel he called his wife. What was to come of the city, if all its most powerful men started courting magic now?

Her fears had been excessive, though. Like the four wives before, Blanche had died – a piece of fish gone bad, sending half the household to bed with cramping guts for days, yet killing only her.

‘Yes,’ Walford said softly. ‘I assume Othrys hoped the curse wouldn’t affect her since she was part fae as well. Needless to say, that was idle hope.’

‘And yet number six married him.’

‘Rosamund. Yes.’ He shook his head. ‘She approached him to get married. Impoverished widow with expensive taste and a good eye for opportunities – lovely company, don’t get me wrong, but love certainly wasn’t the first thing on her mind. I think that was a reassurance to him. Didn’t save her life in the end, though.’

‘Hung herself in the attic,’ Nellie muttered. That particular death had been the topic of the month among the Eyestone household last year. ‘For reasons no one could figure out.’

‘Exactly.’

‘And now ...’ A watery laugh slipped over her lips as she glanced down at herself. ‘Now there’s me.’

Walford was quiet for a moment – and another moment, and another, until there was really no way left to interpret his silence as anything but the gravest of hesitations. When she looked up, he had closed his eyes, forehead resting in his hands as if to pray for strength.

‘Mr. Walford?’ she cautiously said.

He jolted as if he’d forgotten her presence, eyes flying open. ‘Yes. Yes, I’m sorry. I was just— Forgive me, I was just thinking ...’

She waited, quietly, the way Mrs. Radcliffe had taught her to wait when she was being spoken to. It took another moment before the steward seemed to come to a

decision, rubbed his face again, and started, 'Lady Locke ...'

There his resolve ran out. Once again, he hesitated.

'Yes?' she said, encouraging.

'Please do not misunderstand me,' he quickly added – as if there was anything she could have misunderstood from his meagre hints so far. 'I truly meant it when I said this family is everything to me. I would kill for the duchy – well, not literally, but ...' A nervous laugh. 'You see what I mean. And Othrys is a good man – he really is. But he's also a very, very unlucky man, Lady Locke, and seeing young life after young life end right under my nose ... well, that would drive anyone with a heart insane.'

Oh.

Oh.

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‘So if you ever regret this choice,’ he continued, and now he was almost whispering, throwing haunted looks at the closed door, ‘if you ever decide you would rather get out of here ...pleaselet me know. I would be able to help you. I could find a quiet, safe place for you – for you and your sister.’

A way out.

Away from this cursed house and the dead garden and the racks of whispering dresses. Could it truly be? For a moment, a single mortifying moment, she almost fell to her knees before his desk and begged him to get her to safety, back to someone’s servants’ quarters or a little one-room weaver’s house for all she cared ...

Then the hard hand of reality whacked her.

Because if she flednow– before the marriage had even been consummated – no doubt Locke would simply annul the whole thing. Which meant she’d lose her future again, Anne’s money, too, and how could she ever justify that except in the gravest, most imminent danger?

And if it trulywasa curse haunting this household – if she’d been wrong, all these years, to assume the rumoured powers of the fae were nothing but children’s tales – then she might even stand a chance at survival in the end.

Whatever happened, Locke wouldn’t fall madly in love with some lowly housemaid before the month was over.Noneof his previous wives, even the ones he’d married of his own accord, had died within the first three months. So she would be safe for a while. She had time to make sure the marriage contract was fully and clearly fulfilled,

to study the duke's behaviour, to determine if there was any danger of sudden, deadly romance.

And if that were the case, then and only then would she get the hell out of there.

'Thank you,' she managed, and despite the newfound clarity of her thoughts, her throat felt tight as if someone had wrapped their hands around it. 'Thank you so much, Mr. Walford, that is very kind of you. I don't think I should leave just yet, but I'll keep it in mind. I will let you know if I need help.'

He nodded, still smiling ever so apologetically. 'Of course, Lady Locke. I'll leave that decision in your hands.'

No doubt in his voice, no sudden shadows on his face ... and yet, as she rose to her feet, she couldn't help thinking she saw a flash of resignation in his eyes.

Chapter 5

By the time afternoon blurred into evening, Nellie had unpacked her bags and made her plans, so ready for the unpleasant but inevitable next step it almost felt like impatience.

Her new husband did not show up for dinner, and so she ate with Anne alone, the two of them seated at the head of a table built to accommodate two dozen guests. The dining room gave the impression it hadn't been touched by a breathing soul in years, with the brand new candles in the candelabras, the pristine white-and-blue earthenware, and not a fleck of ash in the fireplace; even the servants seemed a little skittish as they served the soup and the grilled lamb, as if the ghosts of their former mistresses could soar from beneath the long rows of empty chairs any moment.

And perhaps they could? If Nellie had to accept the existence of magic, she had no

idea where the insanity might end.

Even that thought didn't bother her as much as it would have in the past. She had the facts straight now. She had a plan. And if everything went to hell, she held the key to her own escape – or more accurately, Walford did – which meant she did not depend on Locke to get out of here alive.

So she was not a prisoner of this place.

Just a grim but mostly willing guest, biding her time.

She ate in moderate amounts, careful not to overstuff herself in preparation for the physical exertion that might follow later that night. Next to her, Anne barely ate half of the meat a footman had cut into bite-sized pieces for her, staring gloomily at her plate in between courses. During dessert, not even the excellent raspberry pudding could entice her appetite back to life.

'You do realise,' Nellie said, and now that the shock and uncertainty of the morning had ebbed away, the light firmness of her voice was fully genuine, 'that this place will surely kill you if you refuse to eat?'

Anne glared at her, looking about to burst into tears any moment, and took one more bite of pudding before she dropped her spoon again.

They'd work on that tomorrow, Nellie decided. One plan at a time.

After they retreated upstairs, she helped her sister undress, braided her hair for the night, and read her fairytales until Anne's eyes started to fall shut. Then she blew out the candles and tiptoed back into her own bedroom, where the previous ladies' dresses had been removed and only her own meagre wardrobe now occupied the shelves.

She picked her yellow summer dress, not because it was the most flattering – it was not – but because it was easiest to get out of.

Then, having changed clothes, she waited.

Time ticked by far too slowly. She wasn't used to having nothing to do: usually she had too much to do, and even knowing the idleness would end, her hands were restless, itching for something to clean or organise. This house wasn't comfortable enough by far to happily do nothing in it, either – she'd have to work on that.

Not today, though.

One plan at a time.

Except that right at this moment, even tonight's plan wasn't exactly making much progress, while she lounged here on her bed and glared impatiently at the door.

The temple bells struck ten outside, and she decided she'd had enough. Perhaps Lord Locke had a preference for midnight trysts or some such nonsense – but Nellie knew she'd wake at her usual time of half past six tomorrow, midnight tryst or no, and then she'd have to get out of bed to help Anne get dressed. As long as she went ahead and found her husband now, surely they could be done soon enough to allow her six hours of sleep?

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They'd have to be, she reassured herself as she slipped out of her room and crossed to the front side of the house, her nervousness drowned out by her far more imminent annoyance. The duke came across as the sort of man who'd tell her to spread her legs, pound away for five minutes, and promptly fall asleep, like the men the other housemaids had whispered about – which was perhaps not entirely enjoyable, but efficient enough for the purposes of their marriage. So it seemed likely she'd be back in her own bed well before eleven ...

Assuming, of course, she could remember which of these dratted doors gave access to his rooms. She should have paid better attention during the housekeeper's quick tour of the house that afternoon.

Hoping for the best, she eventually picked a door at random and knocked. She was the duchess of this place now, after all. Surely the rest of the household would forgive her if she accidentally went bursting into the wrong place?

No answer followed, even after she knocked a second time. She moved on to the next room.

This time, the reply came immediately – an audibly terse, 'Yes?'

Her husband.

All the resolve in the world couldn't keep her hands from trembling slightly as she twisted the doorknob and pushed.

The room beyond was what she'd started to expect from this house – so carefully

devoid of all personality it had to be deliberate. Not a fleck of colour on the walls. No flowers, no paintings, no little piles of human clutter. Just stark functionality wherever she looked: a set of methodically organised bookshelves, a near-empty desk, a chair so stiff it did not look intended to be sat on. The only hint of softness was the couch in the farthest corner, plush and more worn than she'd expect in a duke's household.

It was on that couch he was sitting, in his shirtsleeves, his blue hair unbound and a crystal glass of some amber-coloured liquor in his hand.

She caught a single glimpse of him like that – a man she hardly recognised as the harsh creature she'd married that morning. Broad shoulders sagging. Stiff spine bent. And the look she found in his eyes as he snapped around towards her ... it was not the absent formality with which he'd regarded her before the altar of the High Divines, or even the blunt practicality with which he'd proposed to her the day before.

Instead, the catlike eyes that met hers exuded nothing but bone-deep exhaustion.

Just for a moment, and then he recognised her. In a single, disorienting eyeblink, he morphed back into the hard-shouldered, square-jawed aristocrat she knew – a look in his eyes that brought to mind all seventeen generations of familyhonour upon which she was infringing by barging in on him like this.

'Eleanor?' His voice was as sharp as his cheekbones.

I prefer Nellie, she almost told him, then realised that this would be infinitely better – that she didn't mind at all if she didn't have to be herself in his bed. Perhaps Nellie Finch did not even have to sleep with him. Just Eleanor, duchess of Locke – just the woman who was a stranger to both of them.

She pushed the door shut behind her. It fell into the lock with an ominouclick.

‘Good evening, Your Grace,’ she said, ignoring the tremor of doubt at that honorific – did duchesses still call their husbands Your Grace, or was she supposed to have switched to a more informal alternative at this point? He likely didn’t care. If he cared, he shouldn’t have married a housemaid. ‘Forgive me for imposing on you like this, Your Grace. I was wondering when you were planning to get to work.’

He stared at her as though she’d walked in straight through a solid wall.

And again it was as if a layer of ice cracked around him for a single heartbeat, as he blinked at her and blinked again – forgetting for a moment, it seemed, to be haughty and perpetually on the brink of vexation, as if his manners were an ill-fitting coat he had trouble keeping on in the far more familiar surroundings of this room.

‘Work,’ he said slowly.

It came out flat. Hollow. As if he was just repeating the sounds from her lips without the faintest notion of their meaning – as if he had forgotten why he’d married her.

Sweet divines. Just how much of that bottle had ended up in his stomach already?

‘Yes, Your Grace,’ Nellie said, speaking just a fraction slower in case it was more than the single glass in his hand. Lord Eyestone became a positive simpleton after three glasses of Cook’s plum liquor – better to be sure. ‘Conceiving a child. Getting you an heir. That was the whole purpose of this charade, wasn’t it?’

This time, he didn’t reply at all.

She really was getting tired of him gaping at her like that. She wasn’t the one who’d come up with this entire plan, for goodness’ sake. He didn’t get to look at her like she

was the mad one here, when she was doing nothing more insane than reminding him of the desperate approach that he had devised for the both of them.

Folding her arms, she pointedly added, 'Your Grace?'

That seemed to shake him awake. In a single jerking motion, he plunked his glass down on the side table, turned the full muscular bulk of his body towards her, and sharply inquired, 'You want to get started tonight?'

'Well, most people seem to prefer the night for that sort of business,' Nellie said, feeling more and more indignant. 'All the same to me if you'd like to have me over the breakfast table, but in that case, you could have let me know in advance that would be the approach. I would have eaten more at dinner.'

'You— Divines help me.' He planted his elbows onto his thighs as he leaned forward – rather muscular thighs, she couldn't help but notice, and what little she could see of his arms beneath his shirt appeared to be similarly corded. 'I prefer to eat my breakfast uninterrupted, thank you very much, and I generally agree the night is the most convenient time of day for our work. That said, I assumed you and your sister might like to have some time to settle in.'

'To settle in?' she echoed. 'You thought I'd still be unpacking those six whole dresses I have in my possession?'

His blue-lashed eyes narrowed. 'You've only just arrived.'

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‘Yes, and I’d prefer to be out again as soon as possible,’ she flung back with a snort – realising only a moment later that she was snorting, at a duke. Sweet divines, what had gotten into her? But the man before her hardly seemed to notice, and either way, what was he going to do about it? ‘So if it’s not too much to ask, I would very much like to get started. If you didn’t have any other plans tonight, of course.’

‘My plans,’ he tartly said, groaning as he hauled himself off the couch and straightened to his full towering length, ‘were to get mind-numbingly drunk and forget for a few hours that I’m officially a married man again. So I don’t have any pressing obligations, no.’

Oh.

Oh dear.

Seven-time husband. Six-time widower. Only now, seeing that look on his face, did the cold facts truly punch through to her: six women, six deaths, and if the curse was real, he must have loved every single one of them.

At once, her firm determination felt painfully, shamefully misplaced.

‘I see,’ she said, suddenly feeble again. ‘Of course. If ... if you prefer for me to leave, I’ll—’

‘Don’t bother.’ He all but snapped the words, as if her sympathy was an even greater offense than her unthinking lack of it before. His angular, almost-human face had gone expressionless again, although his loose long hair and comfortable white shirt

rather spoiled his effort to look entirely unruffled. 'It was not my wellbeing I was concerned about. We can get started whenever you wish.'

That was a victory ... wasn't it?

So why did her nervousness choose this moment, of all the moments it could have chosen, to claw its hooks back into her guts?

She swallowed, unwilling to back down but equally unable to follow the duke as he made for the connecting door between his bookshelves and swung it open with an almost theatrical flourish. Through the open doorway, she caught a glimpse of a candlelit room and a broad, canopied bed.

Abed.

As glad as she should be that he wasn't planning to deflower her on his couch, the sight of those tightly made blankets had the last drops of courage evaporating from her limbs.

'There you go,' he flatly said as he turned back to her, rolling up his shirtsleeves like a man preparing for a deeply unpleasant task. 'After you, Eleanor.'

Which meant she had to step forward.

And again and again, all the way to those stiff, unwelcoming pillows ... And then she'd have to take off her dress, or let him do it. Lie down or let him fold her into whatever position he preferred. Which was all fine, of course. This was a job; it did not need to be pleasant. She'd suffered far worse than a little pain, and ...

'I'm a virgin,' she blurted before she could help herself.

Locke didn't even blink. 'That seemed a possibility to me, yes.'

'Oh.' A blush stormed her cheeks. Why was she suddenly blushing now, if far worse had left her lips already? 'That ... that is good. I didn't want to cause any unpleasant surprises. I suppose I'll just lie down then, and—'

'You'll do no such thing,' he sharply cut in, holding out a tanned hand to her. Only now, with his sleeve rolled up, did she see the line of silvery blue, scale-like marks that ran over the inside of his forearms, embedded in his wiry muscles like a second skin – more signs of his fae heritage, presumably. 'I may be a cold-hearted bastard, but I'm not a brute. Come here.'

This time she was the one to gape at him.

'Unless,' he added, and she had to be delusional because she imagined just the slightest fraction of bitter amusement in the twist of his lips, 'you'd rather leave me to my boozing after all. In that case, you are more than welcome to go.'

That helped.

'No, thank you,' she managed, kicking herself forward in a burst of extraordinary courage – nerves or no, retreating would be too much of a defeat to bear. Every step brought her closer to that bed. Closer to him. 'I ... I was just surprised for a moment.'

'I fully understand,' he said in his low voice, his palm settling in the small of her back as she passed. The warm touch guided her into his bedroom as he shut the door behind them with his free hand. 'I'd take me for a brute, too, if I were you. Let me help you with that dress.'

Wait.

What?

Had that been ... a joke?

She stood stiff as a broomstick as he untangled her lacings with seasoned ease. Her mind spun. After the way he'd proposed to her, after the way he'd vanished all day and left her to the care of his steward and housekeeper, the last she had expected from this man was any consideration ... and yet how else was she to take these remarks, this encouragement, or even his decision not to summon her at all tonight?

Of all the things she hadn't expected, accidentally having married a decent man was probably the first.

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The duke's hands began bunching up her skirt, and she obeyed his unspoken command without thought, moving along as he pulled the dress over her head. In only her shift, even the summer air seemed suddenly cool. When she kicked off her shoes and turned, Locke had just sunken down onto the edge of his bed, still fully clothed but for those sculpted bare forearms.

He did not look in a particular hurry to get rid of his breeches, either.

'May I assume,' he said, one blue eyebrow raised inquisitively, 'that you know ... let us say, the basic mechanics of the act?'

Nellie managed a nod, feeling more naked than if he'd just torn her shift off her.

'Wonderful.' He gave a brisk jerk of his head. 'Come here.'

'Shouldn't you ... undress?' she risked asking as she tiptoed towards him, well-aware she was not the expert in the room but quite confident all the same that one did not bring forth children by remaining all buttoned-up and covered. 'Or at least ... partly?'

'Later.' His left hand landed on her hip as she came within reach, and she barely managed not to jerk away again – far, far too intimate a touch for a man with such an icy hardness to him. 'I want to prepare you first, to make sure it doesn't hurt when I enter you. There's no need to make this more unpleasant than it needs to be.'

She blinked. 'What?'

'Prepare you,' he repeated, voice still so inhumanly impassive – as if he was talking

about travel arrangements or midsummer festivals. As if he wasn't talking about bodies. 'Once you've reached a climax once or twice, the rest will be far less likely to cause you any pain. Which seems helpful, especially for a first time.'

Helpful?

Was she going mad? What in the world did her hurt matter to him, when he'd just hired her to do a job that she was perfectly willing to do regardless? Why in the world did he think she would be helped by him dragging out this business however long his preparations would take, when they could just get to work and be done in fifteen minutes at most?

'There ... there is really no need for any of that,' she managed, hoping her chuckle sounded breezily amused rather than like he'd lost his mind – because even if the latter was perfectly accurate, the man was still a duke. 'I would prefer to just get things over with as soon as possible. I don't care if it hurts a bit or—'

His eyebrows shot up. 'I do.'

'You're the one who wanted to minimise contact,' she sputtered, willing her legs to move, to step away from his solid, muscular form. They did not; the warm pressure of his hand on her hip did not abate, heating the muscle below. 'Wouldn't it be much healthier for me if you didn't have to spend that much time with me every night?'

Was that a small twitch of his fingers on her hip? But his marble-carved face did not stir, and his voice did not betray any hint of emotion. 'I was not planning to fall head over heels in love with you over a daily hour of nothing but physicality, Eleanor.'

Right.

Because she was still a graceless housemaid, and this man moved among the highest

circles of the city; that had been a preposterous objection from her side, if she was honest. And yet ...

Yet her muscles resisted giving in, a defiance as instinctive, as reflexive, as the beat of her heart. She wasn't even sure why she was arguing – why his thoughtfulness was worse, somehow, than the cold disregard for which she'd braced herself. Just that this was not how things were supposed to be. Just that this had to be a misunderstanding, somehow, a trick she was failing to see through, and—

Locke rose.

A single, graceful motion, and suddenly he towered over her again, his hand sliding from her hip to her waist to keep her in place. Divine help her, there was so much of him – a wall of corded muscle in all directions, his blue hair cascading down his white shirt like a veil of midnight silk. His grey eyes bore into hers with an intensity that made her want to crawl away and take cover, something about him that seemed, more than ever before, decidedly inhuman.

'Eleanor.' That, she knew instinctively, was his duke's voice. All noblemen had a voice like that. They usually employed it when firing servants. 'What exactly is the matter?'

'Why do you even care?' she squeaked.

'You're my wife.' He pronounced the word as if it meant something. 'Sham or no, I still took responsibility for you the moment I married you. Which means I'm not going to hurt you if I can at all avoid it, I'm not going to treat you like some bloody harlot, and there's no negotiating on that. Is that clear?'

No.

No, that wasn't clear at all.

The defiance won, that little streak of stubbornness even Mrs. Radcliffe's strict training had not erased from her bones entirely. Her scoff left her lips before she could stop herself. 'I accepted your money to step into your bed, Your Grace. I think you'd be perfectly within your rights to treat me like some bloody harlot.'

'Oh, come on.' She thought for a moment he would shake her. 'Do you want to get hurt?'

'No!' Her breath rushed from her lungs in a bewildered chuckle. 'No, but this is not supposed to be fun, is it? It's work. I accepted it as work. If it hurts a little – well, then it's still much better than scrubbing floors until my hands and knees are bleeding, which is what you've saved me from for the rest of my life. So you could stop fussing and just ... just ...'

'Assault you?' he suggested, and although his eyes remained dull like a grey winter's sky, there was a bite in his voice that made her swallow the rest of her words.

'It's not assault if you have my permission,' she muttered instead, forcing herself to hold his gaze.

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‘For the bloody divines’ sakes.’ He swept her off her feet before she realised what was happening – one arm beneath her knees, one beneath her shoulders, a mockery of a bridal carry for a mockery of a wedding day. ‘Eleanor Locke, when did you last do anything just because you enjoyed it?’

Eleanor Locke.

The sound of her new name was so strange, so unexpected, that the rest of the question took another two seconds to come through. He had planted her on the silk sheets of his canopied bed before she’d fully processed it –enjoyingthings?

What in the world did any of this have to do with enjoyment?

That was not how life worked. That had never been how life worked. Enjoyment didn’t keep little sisters alive and happy, after all. It didn’t pay the surgeon’s bills. It didn’t keep the house clean when one’s mother would no longer leave her bed. Enjoyment ... enjoyment was for people who believed in love and magic and happy endings, for people who could afford not to see the darker side of life.

She washed other people’s linen until her hands were raw instead. She smiled even when she wanted to cry. She married dukes who might or might not end up killing her.

When had she last done anything else?

‘Yes,’ Locke said, lowering himself onto the edge of the bed beside her, and although she had not spoken a single thought out loud, she had the strange impression he’d

heard them all the same. 'I see.'

'What?' she bit out.

'I've never quite regarded myself as a floor to be scrubbed.' If not for his even tone and the stoic mask of his angular face, she may have thought it a joke. 'But if that is how the matter stands, let me attempt another approach. See, there's a book by the esteemed physician Lord Heartstrong – esteemed enough that the Princeps awarded him a name change for his research – on human reproduction. One of his many interesting findings is that the chances of conception appear to be higher when both partners reach their climax, which means that, if you are as devoted to the success of the endeavour as you claim to be—'

Nellie squinted at him. 'You're making this up, aren't you?'

'Do I need to show you the source material?' He nodded at his study, eyebrows raised. 'I have the page marked, in case you were wondering.'

That did not look like a joke at all.

Mother Ostara have mercy. How thoroughly had he prepared for this marriage, exactly?

'Oh,' she said belatedly, because the silence was stretching on in mortifying ways and his eyes were glittering alarmingly in the candlelight. 'I ... I see.'

There was no joy in his smile. It did things to the structure of his features all the same, though – brought out the sharpness of his cheekbones, the breadth of his jaw, in ways that made her feel annoyingly and unnecessarily breathless.

'Done arguing?' he pleasantly enquired.

‘I think so?’ She swallowed. ‘For purely pragmatic reasons, that is.’

‘I wouldn’t dare accuse you of any other motives.’ His large hand hovered over her leg for a moment, then landed lightly on her shin, the strength of his fingers a strangely reassuring weight against her bare skin. ‘If we have that inconsequential matter cleared up, then, do you think we could get started with the work?’

Chapter 6

This was nothing like work anymore.

Nellie felt like a fumbling fool in that overly large bed, gaping at the man who called himself her husband, her bare skin pebbling no matter how mild the night. The plan had been so very clear a few minutes ago. He would take, she would give. As she’d been paid to do – as she’d always been paid to do. And now—

Now she was supposed to enjoy things, and she did not have the faintest clue how in the world one went about that sort of thing.

‘Come here,’ Locke said, his voice gruff but not unfriendly as he lifted his hand from her leg and held it out to her. ‘Or if you prefer to come back tomorrow—’

To hell with that.

She might be clueless, but she was not a coward; if this was what he expected of her, she’d make it work somehow. Pressing herself up in the smooth silk blankets, she managed an almost-composed, ‘There’s no need for that, Your Grace.’

‘No,’ he admitted, hands wrapping around her waist. ‘I suspected as much, to tell you the truth.’

Drat. He wasn't blind, the bastard – and somehow not that much of a bastard either as he pulled her easily into his lap, far more gently than the sight of him suggested he would. One arm wrapped around her, tucking her into his broad chest. The other brushed past the bare skin of her calf, there and gone again – as if he was still waiting for her to object, to push him away, to burst into tears and admit she should never have married him in the first place.

Nellie squeezed her eyes shut and steeled herself, unmoving.

'No need to be tense, Eleanor,' he murmured into her hair. 'I'll take care of you.'

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A ludicrous promise. How could she trust him to keep it, she wanted to say, when she had not even been able to trust her own bloody father to do the same? But then his fingers traced a line up the inside of her thigh, and she abruptly forgot about every bitter rejoinder on her lips.

He wastouching her.

Sweet divines, the duke of Locke was holding her andtouchingher – strong fingers brushing over soft, sensitive skin, not even her shift between them to dull the intimacy of his caresses. Which shouldn't make her feel so much. This marriage was not a place for feelings – he had been more than clear on that – and yet ...

That gossamer touch was dancing up her thigh, creeping closer and closer to parts of her she'd barely ever touched herself, and she couldn't help but feeeverything.

'That's more like it,' he muttered, and only then did she realise that she'd slumped against the solid wall of his chest, that her legs had unclenched around his hand. His shoulders and biceps shifted as he adjusted his hold. 'Open your eyes, Eleanor. There's nothing here you need to hide from.'

His voice was a low rumble in his chest, deep and mesmerising. She obeyed before she could think, blinking against the candlelight, against the sight of her own shift bunched around her hips. His wiry forearm lay between her thighs, the silver-blue scales even more alien next to the pale softness of her own body, and his hand ...

His hand shifted.

A finger slid beneath her drawers.

She saw him move, she saw his wrist and forearm bulge as he slipped past the last of her defences, and yet nothing could possibly have prepared her for the feeling of it – the first firm stroke of his finger over her own slick flesh below, the flurry of sensation sparking into every nerve and fibre of her body. She gasped, words evaporating. He repeated the motion in response, slow and deliberate, and a shudder wracked through her, pleasure fizzing up her spine and all the way down into her curling toes.

Again she gasped, more urgently now.

‘That’s it.’ There was a strange encouragement in his voice, calm and unaffected but soothing all the same. ‘That’s what I need from you. Do you want more, Eleanor?’

Did he expect her to talk now?

She jerked back her head before she could think twice, meeting his gaze – grey eyes watching her with unruffled interest as his finger continued to explore her most intimate places in methodical, unhurried circles. No glimpse of a blush on his tanned cheeks. No sign of glassy arousal in his eyes. As if this was nothing but mundane routine, and yet his touch didn’t falter, winding her tighter, coiling something terrifying yet glorious in her lower belly ...

This should have been mortifying. She didn’t even know this man. Yet all she felt, all she could possibly feel, was the building ache under his fingertips, rippling outward at his every stroke, his every brush.

It left no room for shame or fear.

It left room only for him.

‘More, Eleanor?’ The words were conversational, almost detached. She struggled for air, light-headed with the effort to focus, and still he barely even blinked, his eyes intent upon her face as if to read the words her gasps were hiding. ‘Do you want me to go on?’

‘Yes,’ she whimpered. ‘Yes, please—’

A finger slid into her.

She almost came apart around it.

She hadn’t known she’d been empty all her life, not until now, not until this moment in which she learned what fullness felt like – the blissful, delicious presence of him in the hollow tightness of her body. A moan slipped over her lips. and then there was a second finger pressing into her, stretching her open, and somehow that felt even better than the first had done ...

Locke drew halfway out of her.

Then thrust back in, and oh, the ecstasy tightening within her at the roughness of that touch. Her eyes fluttered shut. His free hand clamped around her hip to steady her, and once more his fingers drove deep, drawing an unthinking cry from her lips. A tension was building in her body, and she knew it instinctively, knew without words that she needed the release of it in every desperate fibre of her.

Just not when.

Just not how.

‘Please,’ she panted, words slurring. ‘Please, more ...’

‘Even more?’ he muttered, and in that moment, she would have given her soul for more of the approval brimming in his voice. ‘As you wish ...’

A third finger pressed into her, and she imploded.

She was all breathless surrender, all tangled limbs, as release tore through her and had her clenching up to the tips of her fingers, sending her collapsing against him. Strong arms wrapped around her. And then she lay slumped against his chest, out of air and out of strength, as her body pulsed and trembled and her heart echoed more, more, more ...

‘There.’ Gone was that sliver of softness in his voice above her – as if he’d remembered just in time that her pleasure did not mean a blasted thing to him. ‘That should get us started.’

Sweet divines.

This was only the start?

When she scrambled upright on his thighs, knees still shaking, he met her gaze without blinking. Framed by ink blue strands, his sharp-edged face was almost entirely expressionless ... but she could have sworn on her mother's grave that the bittersweet trembles at the corners of his mouth were hiding something close, very close, to a smirk of satisfaction.

Bastard.

The thought didn't come with great conviction this time.

'And?' he muttered, as if he'd seen it in her eyes and was determined to change her opinion for the worse again. 'Still impatient to get this over with?'

There was no holding back the laugh that spilled out of her.

It was shrill and breathless and elated in a way she hadn't felt in years, that laugh – and divines help her, impatient indeed. Not for the end. For more. Because even if this madness was entirely unnecessary, even if none of these glorious feelings would ever pay a single bill ... how in the world was she to resist this brand new hunger, the lure of whatever else he might have in store for her?

And why would she even try?

It all made sense, suddenly – work, yes, but if he wanted to pretend it wasn't, then who would ever need to know?

'I could be persuaded to take things slowly,' she managed, that same giddy laugh still lacing her words. 'Should ... should I lie down, or—'

'No.' He lifted her off his lap and placed her on the blankets, then shifted back over the mattress himself, reclining until his weight rested on his elbows. He still hadn't even taken off his boots; his feet remained firmly on his mahogany floor. 'I want you on top. Go ahead – loosen my breeches.'

She hadn't thought she could blush even deeper, but the bluntness of his instructions managed it – that or perhaps the visible bulge beneath those same breeches. 'Why ...'

'Because it allows you more control,' he interrupted, raising an eyebrow at her. 'And before you start objecting that that's too much consideration from my side, I don't mind having the best view while you do all the work for me, either.'

Another snort-laugh escaped her as she reached for the buttons of his breeches, fingers shaking as she wrestled with the metal. 'You don't care whetheryouare enjoying this, do you?'

His face went a fraction tighter. 'I'll be fine.'

'But—'

'Eleanor.' He didn't raise his voice, but the bite in his tone was enough to discourage any further protest. 'I'll never be the victim here. Take care of yourself, not me.'

Nellie swallowed but nodded, unsure how else to respond.

His features softened again. ‘Go ahead, then.’

She fumbled open the last of his buttons and swiftly pulled the fabric down. His arousal sprung free as if it had waited for her, thick and dark in the candlelight, and ...

Sweet divines help her.

And fae.

She’d thought she knew what the male member ought to look like, from the whispers of the maids who shared her rooms. Thick and long. Hard, if one was lucky. Oddly curved, Lucy Clarke had confessed amidst fits of giggles after her rendezvous with the stable boy last year. But this...

Locke’s manhood was large, much larger than she’d imagined such a thing could reasonably be, emerging from a tuft of blue-black hair like a pale, smooth tower of flesh, glistening like silk at the ruddier tip. And swirling across that shaft, like artful spirals designed to draw her attention across its full unsettling length, were the same silver-blue scales she’d noticed on his forearms. Two slender lines of them, glittering pearlescent with every throb and pulse, running all the way up to the blunt head.

Scales.

She’d married a man with scales on his member.

Vaguely, she was aware of the sound that came tumbling from her lips. Locke’s hollow chuckle held an edge of resignation to it – hell, how many times had he dealt with the same dismay and breathless shock already?

It was that thought that made her pull herself together. Fae or no, surely a man would

sooner or later get sick of his wives gawking at his body as though he were some eldritch monster? She was supposed to be the pragmatic one, and did it really matter what colour his appendages happened to be as long as they fulfilled their practical functions?

‘That could have been worse, I suppose,’ she said weakly, still not quite able to pull her eyes away. ‘No thorns and barbs. That’s good.’

He gave a short bark of laughter. ‘No urge to run yet?’

‘No more than the one I’ve been suppressing all day.’ She gently poked his rigid flesh before she could stop herself. The duke didn’t object, so she returned for a more thorough exploration, running a finger down the silky rim, crossing the shimmering lines of scales. They weren’t sharp, just smooth and cold, a strange contrast to the dizzying heat of the taut skin around them. ‘So how do we proceed now, Your Grace?’

‘Impatient?’ he retorted, and again that unexpected flare of emotion below the impassive façade almost looked like amusement.

‘I need my night’s rest,’ she informed him, pulling back to tug down her drawers, leaving her shift on. Oddly, she barely felt naked under his eyes. ‘And it’s already past my usual bedtime, so let’s get to work. Do I just ... straddle you?’

He seemed to find that quite funny, too, for some reason she wasn’t sure about. ‘One knee on either side of me, yes. Then lower yourself over— Yes, just like that.’ He wrapped a hand around his own shaft, holding it up as she settled on top of him. ‘Slowly. It shouldn’t hurt.’

That seemed almost laughably optimistic, but then again, he was the one who had bedded at least six women with the same monstrous instrument. So she just nodded wordlessly, biting her bottom lip in concentration as she sank down and down and down until—

Her breath caught in her throat.

Until they touched.

His broad tip was slick and smooth against her core, her skin still shivery and sensitive from the torment of his fingers. No matter how large he might be, there was something instinctive about the feel of him in that hot, forbidden place – something that made her suck in a last breath for courage and sink down another fraction without any urging, pressing herself onto the first half-inch of his length.

An intrusion.

A completion.

It had no right to feel so good, having this near-stranger inside her, and yet she barely paused before sinking lower – unable to stop craving the sensation of her body parting around him, his girth filling her in the most irresistible of ways. Another inch. So, so much feeling, balancing on the edge of pain ...and yet the pleasure was stronger, the overwhelming fullness, a breathtaking satisfaction that turned his fingers into a distant memory.

Another inch. She yelped as the cold surface of his scales met her own heated skin. Her hands shook, her thighs trembled with anticipation; she squeezed her eyes shut and speared herself two more inches onto him, gasping as her body stretched and strained to its limits around him.

‘Slowly, Eleanor.’ His warm hand enveloped her thigh. ‘Slowly.’

‘Feels ...’ It was more moan than word. ‘Feels so good ...’

‘And it’ll feel even better,’ he said, his voice still as before – calm, dispassionate, as if he was instructing her on how to ride a horse. ‘But I’m going to fuck you again tomorrow, and the day after, and I don’t want you to be too sore. So—’

She sank down another half-inch.

He faltered, gulping in a breath.

He gasped— Othrys Locke, the duke of ice, gasped— and oh, that sound alone sent a whole new heat spiralling through her, tightening her body around his hardness in the most delicious ways. She blinked open her eyes, breathing a laugh. He still rested in the blankets as he'd done before, propped up on one elbow, his other hand guiding her down ... but dispassionate voice or no, his jaw had tightened considerably.

Oh, this was glorious.

'Enjoying this?' she murmured, sinking lower.

'Doesn't matter.' His voice came out a little tight. 'You should stop thinking about—Fuck.'

Because she'd pressed herself all the way down in one reckless, painful, perfect slide, and now he was all inside her, every impossible inch of him, and his breath had abruptly gone shallow and strained below her. The fingers on her thigh were squeezing into her muscles. Her hips instinctively began to rock, seeking that perfect angle, and again he cursed, lip curling up in a last, desperate bid for self-control.

'Here ... anyway ...' Nellie managed, finding her rhythm, up and down, stroke after stroke of wicked friction. He'd been right. This was even better. 'Might ... as well ... enjoy ...'

'Little minx,' he snapped.

And then his hands were on her hips, both of them, and he was bucking up beneath her, dragging her down with every thrust into her throbbing tightness. She arched

back with a cry, lost to the onslaught of sensation. Cold scales, hot skin, the ravenous strength of his fingers ...

‘Eleanor,’ he growled – a caress, that name that was hers yet not hers at all. ‘Pleasure yourself.’

She couldn’t obey fast enough.

Fumbling up her shift, her hands clumsily found the spots he’d touched before – and oh, divines have mercy, magic must exist after all because what else could this feeling be? This rising tide within her, climbing and climbing with every thrust and stroke ...

She shattered.

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Every muscle in her body tightened around him as the world dissolved into glory and bliss and perfect oblivion. He slammed into her at the same moment with a roar of surrender, and spurts of warm wetness filled her as she rode him through their shared release, through every tremor and shudder, until finally the madness waned and she collapsed powerlessly onto his heaving chest.

Then she lay there, limbs like pudding and mind like fog, listening to his labouring heart as it slowly settled back into its usual rhythm.

‘I’d say,’ he finally muttered, voice jarringly level, ‘that that should do the job for today.’

Oh. Yes.

The job.

This was just work. Of course. And of course ... of course she did not at all want him to wrap his arms around her and hold her a little longer, to chat with her and laugh with her as they lay here basking in the afterglow of this glorious night. That would be utterly nonsensical, and dangerous to boot.

‘Shall I ... shall I just return to my room, then?’ she made herself mutter.

‘You should rest for a few more minutes,’ he corrected, all stoic business again as he rolled her off him, sat up, and began to button his breeches with quick, matter-of-fact gestures. ‘Lord Heartstrong’s instructions.’

‘Oh.’ She came up on her elbows to look at him, sticky seed seeping out of her and staining her inner thighs. He wouldn’t meet her gaze, and now she did feel naked, in spite of all pragmatism and sense. ‘That’s good to know. I’ll bring a book tomorrow.’

He strode out the room without speaking, returning ten seconds later with a well-thumbed volume that he tossed onto the bed without further ado. ‘Anything else I can do for you?’

‘Oh no,’ she hurriedly said and smiled until her jaw started cramping. ‘No, I’ll be fine. See you tomorrow, then.’

The door to the study closed behind his broad back with a little too much force.

She lay in his bed for close to an hour, scanning Lord Heartstrong’s preface with unseeing eyes ... but no matter how intently she listened, no matter how close to the doorway she strayed while she finally slipped into her dress again, not the faintest sound emerged from the neighbouring room.

Chapter 7

Flinging open the curtains in Locke Manor was an unfulfilling experience.

Somehow, even on this sunny summer morning, little more than a few watery rays made their way into the bedrooms, as if even the light itself was hesitant to touch the cursed interior of this luxurious tomb. In an attempt to make up for the absence of a glorious dawn, Nellie made herself smile all the more broadly as she swept around the window and announced, ‘Good morning, little bean!’

Anne groaned dismally from beneath the blankets.

‘You’ve got some time to wake up,’ Nellie brightly continued, tucking the fairytale

book she'd been reading last night onto the shelf where it belonged – a servant's reflexes, and she didn't suspect she'd ever get rid of them. 'I told the maids to bring you breakfast in half an hour. But I need you to be ready to get dressed after that, because we're going shopping.'

One brown eye blinked open beneath the mess of strawberry-blond hair, glaring at her suspiciously. Then a second eye. Finally, her sister's voice emerged, wary and drowsy in equal amounts.

'You look ... cheerful.'

'Well, I'm still alive,' Nellie said, which was admittedly not the full story – but then again, she wasn't going to tell her little sister about the scales on Locke's member, or the size of it, or the way it had felt inside her. 'And I don't think he's as bad as he seems at first glance. Lord Locke, I mean.'

My husband.

Strange, how that suddenly seemed a far more reasonable thing to say.

Anne hauled herself up in the bed, eyes narrowing. 'You're not going to fall in love with him, are you?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Nellie said impatiently, stepping around the bed. 'We've simply come to an understanding. Now stay awake, ring if you need help, and enjoy your gentlewoman's breakfast. I'll be back in half an hour or so.'

'Nell ...' Her sister didn't sound reassured in the slightest. 'Nell, where are you going?'

'Oh, some preparations,' Nellie said, turning with her hand on the doorknob. This

time, there was nothing forced about the smile growing on her face. 'If I have to be Lady Locke for the foreseeable future, I might as well make sure I don't hate every minute of it.'

Mrs. Hartnell was a large, stylish woman with chamomile-bleached hair, too proper to show any explicit displeasure at her lord's latest marriage but too staunchly aware of the world's natural hierarchies to be entirely happy she had to serve under a glorified maid. The previous day she'd been civilly haughty while giving her tour of the house. Which had seemed perfectly fine to Nellie at the time, and not that unreasonable either ...

But for some reason it had started stinging this morning, the prospect of spending divines-knew-how many months surrounded by respectful dislike. Work, yes, but didn't Locke seem to think that was no excuse to be miserable?

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Which meant it was time to do something about the matter.

She found the housekeeper in her own rooms, her small desk buried beneath a rather imposing pile of invoices and receipts. It was with notable reserve that Mrs. Hartnell looked up from her bookkeeping, rose from her chair, and said, ‘Ah, Lady Locke?’

For goodness’s sake, the expression on her face added. As if a morning of bookkeeping wasn’t bad enough already.

But Lady Eyestone had been much more impolite than that on her bad days, and if there was anything Nellie had learned over the course of her employment in that household, it was to keep smiling kindly no matter what. So smile she did, as if her life depended on it. ‘Good morning, Mrs. Hartnell – do you have a few minutes?’

Of course Mrs. Hartnell had a few minutes. Maid or no, one did not say no to a duchess.

‘Perhaps we should move to the drawing room,’ the housekeeper stiffly suggested as she closed her inkpot and majestically strode to the door. ‘That might be a more fitting place for a quick conversation.’

In case you and your boorish manners weren’t aware, her expression elucidated.

‘Indeed,’ Nellie said, smiling with almost aggressive stubbornness. ‘Mrs. Radcliffe already mentioned you were one of the most attentive housekeepers she knows. I’m starting to see what she meant.’

‘Oh,’ Mrs. Hartnell said, faltering at that unexpected crumb of information. ‘Oh, you’ve worked under Honoria Radcliffe?’

From the way she spoke the name, this was clearly a badge of honour. Nellie might still be a maid, that tone suggested, but at least she was a maid worth her pay now – and, potentially, a source of information.

‘I have, yes,’ Nellie brightly said, stepping aside to let the other woman through. ‘She spoke of you quite regularly.’

That was a lie, technically speaking. Mrs. Radcliffe had spoken of her colleague exactly once, as she was helping Nellie prepare for her departure from Eyestone Manor: Mathilde Hartnell is a perfectly fine housekeeper, she’d said, which every Eyestone maid knew was the highest possible compliment to ever leave those strict, thin lips, but she’s rather susceptible to flattery, and you should be clear about your intent towards her as soon as possible. Remember that every new Lady Locke might threaten her position.

A warning Nellie had forgotten to heed in the confusion of her wedding day ... but judging by the abrupt softening of Mrs. Hartnell’s face, the damage was not yet beyond repair.

‘Oh,’ the housekeeper said again, much more warmly now. ‘Now that is lovely to hear. She used to work for this family, of course – did she tell you? She left her position after His Grace’s mother was sent away by the late Lord Locke.’

‘Really?’ Nellie said, although she’d known half of it already.

‘Oh yes.’ Mrs. Hartnell held open the door to the next corridor, then continued, ‘I was a lady’s maid at the time, you see. After Honoria left, I took the position of housekeeper.’

‘That speaks of exceptional loyalty to the family,’ Nellie said, making sure to sound properly impressed, and Mrs. Hartnell gave a humble little chuckle that suggested she was glad someone had finally noticed.

The rest of the walk to the drawing room occurred in much more amiable silence. Mrs. Hartnell sat down in a stiff-backed wooden chair; Nellie took the much more comfortable moss-green couch, as that seemed to be expected of her. The wall opposite her seat was bare, as she’d started to expect in this house; faded shapes on the wallpaper suggested the room had not always looked so dour, however.

‘So,’ Mrs. Hartnell said as they were seated, folding her hands in her lap, ‘what was it you wanted to discuss, Lady Locke?’

‘Well, first of all I would like to introduce myself properly.’ A self-aware grimace seemed appropriate there, so Nellie inserted one. ‘I’m afraid I wasn’t quite in the right frame of mind to do so yesterday. And of course there are some things on which I would very much like to hear your expert opinion, since this is all quite new to me ...’

‘Of course, of course,’ Mrs. Hartnell agreed, her voice growing cautiously warmer with every next syllable. ‘I’m happy to be of help in any way I can be.’

‘That is very generous of you,’ Nellie said, pressing a hand to her chest. ‘Frankly, the first thing I was worrying about ... well, you no doubt understand that I barely have a decent dress to wear here. And I wondered, since you are of course very well-informed on general etiquette and the latest fashions in more well-to-do circles ...’

That wasn’t an exaggeration. Mrs. Hartnell’s dress spoke of a sharp eye for style and quality, a perfect balance between the latest trends and professional modesty.

‘Oh, you flatter me,’ the housekeeper appreciatively protested, her opinion of Nellie

visibly improving by the heartbeat. She might still be a maid, but she was one without illusions of grandeur after her unexpected promotion – one who wouldn't threaten Mrs. Hartnell's livelihood or position of authority. It could have been worse, her handsome, expressive face read. It could have been a whole lot worse. At least she appears to be civilised.

'Oh no, no,' Nellie insisted, preparing for her final nudge. 'I would frankly be quite lost without your guidance. If you could just suggest what tailors to visit, or ...' She gasped, as if coming up with the idea on the spot. 'Or perhaps you could even come with us? Although you're very busy of course, and I'd hate to impose on your schedule ...'

Mrs. Hartnell's eyes had lit up.

A smile inched across her lips, eager and conspiratorial in equal amounts.

'Surely the merchants will understand if the duke's marriage delays my weekly orders for a day or two,' she said, and every effort to keep her voice measured was ruined by that genuine excitement growing on her face. It was strangely contagious. 'And of course I would enjoy a quick visit to Sunfield Street. So ... how about we leave after you've had breakfast, Lady Locke?'

'New dress?' the duke of Locke said.

It was his only greeting as she slipped into his study at the stroke of ten – no good evening or how was your day? or, divine forbid, glad to see you, Eleanor. He did not sound unfriendly, though. Not as impassive and curt as he had before. Rather, his welcome had a strange air of familiarity to it – as if they had known each other for decades and had given up on politeness or even full sentences years ago.

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‘New dress,’ Nellie confirmed, shutting the door behind her – because meagre greeting or no, he had noticed what she was wearing, and she was too content with the day so far to make a point of his manners.

‘Excellent,’ he said absently as he scribbled his signature on a last document and shoved the whole pile aside. Only then, as he fully turned towards her in his chair, did his strong-jawed face regain some of its old detachment. ‘You’re early.’

‘I figured there was not much reason to wait.’ Only half the truth. She had thought of reasons to wait – her pride and some last illusion of chasteness – but had decided over the course of the evening that there was no reason to let those redundancies get in the way of what she actually wanted, which was him, inside her. ‘And as I told you, I need my night’s rest.’

His chuckle did not seem entirely natural. ‘Ah.’

She squinted at him. ‘Is there anything wrong, Your Grace?’

‘Not as such, no,’ he said, but there was too much pause between the words, and he did not rise from his seat. His eyes clung to his hands, slitted pupils too narrow for the dusk of this candlelit room. A small hesitation, and then he repeated, ‘No, not necessarily.’

Nellie waited. Experience had taught her waiting was generally the wisest choice when dealing with dithering aristocrats who were unsure about their own wishes.

It didn’t fail her this time, either.

‘You’re not worried at all?’ he abruptly burst out, his half-hearted mask of ice shattering as his hand rose and landed on his desk with so much force it qualified as slamming. ‘You’re not supposed to be here early. You probably ought to have run away already, after ... after ...’

Last night.

There was no need for him to speak the words, and he seemed to know it as he faltered, finally jutting up his head to meet her gaze. Last night. His broken composure. Her honest pleasure. They both knew it, the memory tangible in the air between them – that small, shameful, joyful secret they couldn’t help but share even if they would never have anything else in common.

‘I’m not worried at all, no,’ Nellie said, respectfully clasping her hands behind her back. ‘Why are you, if I may ask?’

He let out a groan like a wounded animal. ‘I enjoyed that, Eleanor.’

‘As was the intention, Your Grace,’ she politely reminded him.

‘Was it? Was it really?’ He rose now, all six-and-something feet of him, his grey eyes glinting with inhuman ferocity in the candlelight. He must have fretted about this all day, Nellie realised, unable to suppress an unexpected sting of contentment – the heartless duke of Locke, spending his day consumed by the thought of her pleasure. His voice was a thinly veiled growl. ‘It’s one thing if I like fucking you ...’

Her head caught fire. ‘Yes, but—’

‘... but what if it turns into liking you?’ he finished, a snapped demand rather than a question.

‘That is really very unlikely,’ Nellie said impatiently. Dratted nobles. ‘You know there’s nothing I could add to your life, Your Grace. I don’t know anything about poetry or literature. I can’t tell a comedy from a tragedy. It’s the whole bloody reason you married a housemaid, if you recall – the guarantee that you wouldn’t find some kindred soul in me.’

He groaned again as he turned away, rubbing a rough hand over his face. ‘Yes, of course.’

Not the most convincing of agreements. ‘But?’

‘But it’s hard for menotto worry about this,’ he muttered. ‘And very easy to see signs of alarm in the slightest bit of intimacy.’

‘Of course.’ She bit the inside of her cheek, mind whirring. ‘In that case, the best way forward is presumably to eliminate as much intimacy as we can, isn’t it? No need for bedrooms, really. And if we can avoid all that pesky eye contact ...’

He choked on his breath as he whirled back around. ‘Eleanor, you’re not suggesting I just bend you over my desk, are you?’

Was she?

Scandalous. Outrageous. Then again ...

‘Don’t you want to?’ she innocently retorted, fluttering her lashes. As if sparks weren’t erupting in her lower belly at the thought alone. As if she wasn’t already feeling his hands on her hips, his breath on her neck. ‘It might be fun.’

‘Since when do you care about fun?’ he sputtered.

‘You made some good points last night.’ This shouldn’t be so enjoyable. He shouldn’t be so enjoyable. But his fluster was oddly exhilarating, the agitated twitches of his stark jaw and the way his shoulders tensed beneath his sapphire coat, and she couldn’t help savouring the thrill of seeing him like this, no longer the cold, frosty lord of winter himself. ‘And if I’m able to combine the pleasant and the useful, I don’t see why you shouldn’t be allowed to.’

‘If it’s pleasant to me,’ he bit out, raking an exasperated hand through his blue hair, ‘that means you should be all the more worried, don’t you see? I’m poison, Eleanor. The last thing you should want is—’

‘Ah, yes,’ Nellie said. ‘About that. I had some thoughts today, Your Grace.’

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He stiffened. 'Divines help me. Do you ever stop having thoughts?'

'Not voluntarily, no,' she admitted, grinning at him. 'I wouldn't have brought them up if you hadn't made such a fuss, though. But I had a look around the household, and it struck me ... Well, you like Walford, don't you? You like Mrs. Hartnell? You presumably have friends whose company you enjoy, too?'

His silence was enough of a confirmation. Judging by the resigned expression on his face, he knew exactly what argument she was about to make.

'And they aren't dead,' Nellie added, unfazed.

'No,' he muttered, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers. 'No, they aren't.'

'So clearly warm feelings are fine as long as they're just that. As long as you don't start feeling all fuzzy and protective about people, or whatever love is supposed to be. Which doesn't appear to be the case.'

His laugh was strangely hollow, an echo of the times true amusement wasn't such a stranger to his heart. 'You don't give the impression you need the protection.'

'Exactly,' Nellie said, crossing her arms and raising her chin. There. That should put an end to the wallowing. 'So if we've cleared that up, don't you think it's time we get to work, Your Grace?'

He stared at her for a long heartbeat.

She defiantly glared back, jutting her chin even higher.

A strange expression flickered across his face. Not a smile – it was too cold, too desolate, to truly count as a smile. And yet it lent a ghost of life to his features, a whiff of emotion – like the watery sunrays that would pierce through the fog on misty Birch Month mornings, announcing the imminent arrival of spring.

If it wasn't a smile, it certainly was a surrender.

'As you wish,' he said, canting his head as his fingers thoughtlessly found the buttons of his coat and began loosening the mother-of-pearl studs. His voice had lowered, the sound a fraction rough at the edges now. 'You're still going to bend over that desk for me, though.'

So she did.

Chapter 8

'Mr. Walford?'

The steward jolted up from his work as if she'd caught him burying a corpse, his red hair ruffled, an ink stain on his cheek. 'Oh, Lady Locke! Come in, come in – wait, let me make some space for you to sit down ...'

It took relocating a cash book, two empty mugs, and a pile of letters, but eventually Nellie was seated in the same chair by the desk she'd occupied two days ago while Walford hurried around the cluttered study to tug files and documents back into place. Two days – an eternity. Hard to imagine she'd been so frightened so recently, when she was feeling almost giddy on this stuffy morning, full of plans and something that, in other circumstances, might have been worthy of the name excitement.

‘Lady Locke,’ Walford repeated as he finally folded himself into his chair again, entwining his long fingers on the table surface. Behind his slender back, the sunlight came seeping in through the room’s single mullioned window, its radiance somehow absorbed by the dark purple walls without truly illuminating anything. ‘Wonderful to see you again. Please tell me what I can do for you.’

‘I was wondering,’ Nellie said, smiling her brightest summer smile at him to soften the rather unladylike bluntness of the request, ‘if I could do something about this house.’

He blinked emphatically. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘The house.’ She gestured at the open door behind her back and the hallway beyond, where a single vase with dried flowers was fighting a losing battle against the dreary atmosphere. The cold tile floor and unused chandelier rendered the effort utterly moot. ‘It’s a rather gloomy business, you see. My sister doesn’t like it in the slightest. So I was wondering if I might have a budget – I’ll leave the numbers to you – to make some changes to the place.’

Walford stared at her as if she’d turned into a frog on the spot.

‘I already discussed the matter with Mrs. Hartnell,’ Nellie cheerfully added, in case that helped her cause. ‘She is very excited to get started and insists she has plenty of time to assist me. And of course, I don’t have anything else to do. So you or Lord Locke wouldn’t have to worry about the matter at all, aside from the money.’

Something about the fidgety way he chewed on his bottom lip suggested money was the least of his concerns. What worried him so much? Her safety? Did he think she would not flee the household in time if she poured too much of her heart and soul into this temporary home?

‘And I’m sure it won’t cause me any trouble with the curse,’ she suggested. ‘If anything, I figure Lord Locke is less likely to fall in love with me once he realises how much money I’m spending on his behalf.’

The steward’s chuckle suggested he was chuckling only for her benefit. ‘If I may speak freely, Lady Locke?’

‘Of course!’ He might, after all, save her life one day. ‘Please tell me what worries you.’

‘You showed up here two days ago in a state of significant shock from seeing your predecessors’ dresses,’ he said, rubbing his temple in a gesture that oddly reminded her of Locke. ‘I wouldn’t dare question your resolve and fortitude, of course, but looking into all the furniture that’s been packed away in the attic ... There are a lot of the previous ladies’ things among it.’

She hadn’t yet considered that. Then again ...

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‘I was entirely unprepared, two days ago,’ she said, straightening her spine. It had been barely an hour after her wedding. Not even a full day after the proposal that had led to said wedding. ‘I’m sure it will all be much easier to handle now, with some planning and Mrs. Hartnell to guide me through it.’

‘I see.’ He sighed, looking far from reassured. ‘As you wish, then. I will discuss the matter with Othrys when I next see him.’

‘Much obliged,’ Nellie said and beamed at him, then bounced out of the room feeling much more well-disposed towards the pitiful dried flowers in the hallway.

‘Walford said something about house improvements,’ Locke said as he stood thrusting into her that night, her upper body draped over his desk, his hands rough and bruising on her hips. His voice made a good attempt to sound conversational, yet the strain was unmistakable – an edge of fraying self-control. ‘I assume you’ve been having thoughts again?’

Nellie laughed, then couldn’t help but moan as his next stroke hit deep in just the right place, the cold scales on his length adding an addictive complexity to every sensation. Her fingers clutched tighter around the edge of the desk, holding on for dear life. ‘I’m afraid – oh – I’m afraid I have, yes.’

‘Of course you have.’ His next thrust drove even deeper – as if to punish her for the audacity. ‘Why, though? Seems unlikely you’ll live here long enough to profit from it.’

‘Yes, but—Oh.’ Her eyes rolled back in their sockets as he shifted his hips and

slammed into her again, finding an angle that hit entirely new devastating spots. ‘Do that again, please. I—Yes—’

There was little joy in his guttural laughter, but she thought she detected an undercurrent of satisfaction all the same as he complied, reducing her once again to wordless gasping. ‘Last one. You’re not getting more until I have my answers, Eleanor.’

‘What answers?’ she panted.

He slid out of her in response, growling a laugh at her squeal of outrage. ‘Turn onto your back.’

‘Oh no,’ she muttered, obliging as well as her shaking limbs allowed. Around her, documents lay strewn over the wooden surface like leaves blown about by the wind. Her husband towered over her, his waistcoat still buttoned, his cravat still tied; only his breeches had been opened, his member protruding with obscene hardness from that gentlemanly façade. ‘So you can glower at me more intimidatingly?’

‘That is exactly what I was planning to do.’ He wrapped his hands around her thighs, then lifted them, guiding her legs to rest against his shoulders before settling his tip against her entrance. ‘Why are you so concerned about the state of this house?’

She squirmed, trying in vain to get him closer. ‘Anne hates living here.’

‘Ah.’ Locke seemed unfazed by the news as he glared down at her, eyes narrowed, brows drawn close. ‘And that is all?’

‘And I need some way to spend my time,’ Nellie admitted, clawing at his waistcoat. He pulled back slightly in revenge. ‘Because – oh,damn you – buying dresses will get boring, and if my only diversion is tugging my husband – which, to make things

worse, he is currently explicitly preventing...’

He barked out another mirthless laugh and slid back into her, the sheer girth of him almost robbing her of speech again. ‘Your husband wouldn’t mind diverting you a little more often, if necessary.’

‘Don’t you—Oh!’ She arched off the hard desk, body pleading for more, more, more of that devastating hardness inside her. ‘Don’t you want me to work on the house?’

He drew out almost entirely, then drove himself back into her in a single punishing stroke, his hands on her hips dragging her even closer. Nellie cried out again. Vaguely, she registered a pile of paper thudding to the ground as she flailed for grip, for some semblance of control; then he pounded back into her, and all thought evaporated. Divine help her, how could he be so utterly all-consuming, this man she didn’t even know – how could he be so utterly blissful?

‘Avoiding ... answers,’ she gasped between thrusts, eyes fluttering shut. ‘Don’t ... you ...’

‘I’m avoiding the past,’ he growled, and at once the restraint shattered, his ragged breaths punctuating each word. His thumb found the little bud between her lips, rubbing it ferociously. ‘I’m avoiding the fucking heartache. It’s staining every inch of this place, and you might drag it all back into the light, you impossible little—’

Pleasure washed over her.

She cried out, clenching tight around him. He pounded into her convulsing body once, twice more, then followed her over the edge with a snarled curse, his hot seed filling her insticky waves – his outburst lost in breathless pants, his words punching through to her dazed, lust-fogged mind only slowly.

The past.

The heartache.

Oh, she remembered how Mother had clung to Father's spare coat for days, refusing to let go, refusing to believe the facts ...

'Have you considered,' she breathed, legs slumping down as he lifted them from his shoulders, 'that the heartache won't fade as long as you don't let anything else in?'

He staggered back, buttoning his breeches with shaking fingers as he dropped his hulk into the cushions of the worn couch. His voice abruptly went cold again, like a lake freezing over. 'What the hell do you know of it?'

'Enough.' A bitter chuckle escaped her, sending rivulets of seed dripping down her thighs. 'Trust me, more than enough.'

He didn't respond to that.

She could feel his gaze on her without looking, feel the silence take shape in her gut – a strange, nervous silence after the clamour of their moans and groans, like a path leading straight into deadly marshland. Had she angered him? Pushed too far? Presumptuous, for a lowly housemaid to think she knew anything about the suffering of dukes ...

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‘Go ahead, then,’ Locke said sharply, the couch creaking as he rose from its pillows. ‘Restore the place however you see fit.’

By the time she’d lifted her head from the desk to ask if he was joking, he’d already vanished, slamming the bedroom door behind his hard-set shoulders.

Chapter 9

‘Seewhatadifferencethat makes?’ Mrs. Hartnell triumphantly exclaimed, gesticulating at the large antique mirror held against the wall of the drawing room by two tall footmen. ‘Lights up the whole room – and it will do so even in the middle of winter, I can promise you that.’

It did make a difference, indeed. Enough to transform the room from gloomy and dark into something one could almost call cheerful – the silver surface reflected every glimpse of sunlight filtering in through the high windows and scattered it across the mismatched chairs, the empty bookshelves, the dark wallpaper where paintings should have hung.

Nellie nodded to the footmen, who promptly lowered the mirror again, and said, ‘Then why was it ever removed from this spot?’

‘Oh.’ Mrs. Hartnell’s triumph abated at once. ‘Lady Jeanne brought this particular mirror with her when she moved into the townhouse – an heirloom. Then after the duke remarried ...’

‘Lady Alis preferred not to have it around and had it sent up to the attic?’ Nellie

finished wryly.

‘Yes.’ Mrs. Hartnell permitted herself a watery smile. ‘Yes, I suppose it’s becoming predictable.’

The attic, Nellie had learned the previous day, was stocked with enough furniture, decorations, and other odds and ends to fill five separate households – the result of duchess after duchess banning her predecessor’s possessions upon arrival, then dying before they could finish their own furnishing of the home. There were crates of books, piles of paintings and drawings, marble busts from Lady Colette’s theatre days, and Issian blown glass from Lady Alis’s travels. The space as a whole was a macabre treasury, smelling of oblivion; Nellie was as loath to spend time in it as the servants seemed to be, never sticking around for longer than the few minutes it took to pick some promising items from the mess.

Only Anne seemed perfectly happy to spend hours upon hours between the towering stacks, peeling off wrappings and rummaging through trunks, pilfering fluffy velvet pillows and painted landscapes and dramatic silver candelabras for her own room.

‘Let’s keep the mirror, then,’ Nellie firmly decided. ‘If it’s an heirloom of Lady Jeanne, it doesn’t deserve to be stacked away in the attic. And then we should fill those shelves again – they’re just gathering dust like this. Some books, perhaps?’

‘We have Lady Isaure’s volumes on botany,’ Mrs. Hartnell offered, gesturing at the footmen to find the crates in question. They promptly hurried out of the room. ‘And of course, Lady Blanche read a lot, although I’m not sure those novels would be at all suitable to display in one’s drawing room ...’

‘Let’s not,’ Nellie said with a grimace, remembering Lady Eyestone’s outrage on the topic. ‘Do you know whether Lord Locke himself has any reading preferences?’

‘Oh.’ Mrs. Hartnell blew out her cheeks. ‘Well, he used to read all the grand Elidian literature, of course. And the great playwrights, Stoke and Merland – but I admit I haven’t seen him hold a playbook since ... well, not for years, but I couldn’t tell you ...’

‘Since Lady Colette died?’ Nellie suggested.

A short and uncharacteristic silence fell, broken only by the thuds and thumps of the servants rummaging through the crates piled up in the hallway. Mrs. Hartnell blinked. And blinked again. Then she dazedly sank into the nearest armchair, perfectly manicured hand slowly rising to her ample bosom.

‘Good gracious,’ she said, sounding shocked and embarrassed in equal amounts. ‘Good gracious, Lady Locke – you may be right.’

‘We found a whole pile of charcoal sketches this afternoon,’ Nellie panted as she fell down on Locke’s bed for her fifteen minutes of rest, still dizzy from the force of the climax that had just washed over her. ‘In one of the attic crates. Very pretty work, really.’

On the other side of the room, her husband was buttoning up – shoving his armour back into place like he did every single night, his chiselled face hidden behind a veil of blue-black hair. The scales on his forearms glimmered in mesmerising ways in the candlelight. Nellie couldn’t help studying them attentively as she curled up on his blankets in nothing but her shift, well-aware that she would not be granted more than these few minutes to take in the sight of him and feeling unreasonably cross about the fact.

‘Did you?’ he curtly said, moving from his breeches to the shirt buttons she’d torn open in the process of this night’s work.

‘Mm-hmm,’ she said, and when that did not elicit any reaction, she pointedly added, ‘They were very pretty.’

His voice didn’t mellow. ‘Isaure was an excellent artist.’

‘Oh, I love her work,’ Nellie admitted, which was true. She had dedicated an entire salon to the duchess’s flower drawings. ‘But these didn’t look like her style. Landscapes. The city mills. A view of the marshes. That sort of thing.’

Locke’s fingers had stiffened.

‘They were signed with O.L.,’ she added sweetly, observing the slope of his shoulders.

A single frozen moment was the only confirmation she was given – but it was a moment, proof that those stunning, gloomy drawings had not been created by some distant cousin or forefather sharing the same initials. Considering the place where she’d found them, stashed away in a yellowed folder at the bottom of a trunk, she hadn’t dared to be sure.

‘Have you drawn anything in the last few years?’ she asked, prodding despite his hardening exterior. It felt like testing a newly formed layer of ice on the canals in winter – putting more and more weight on the slippery surface, waiting for the inevitable crack. ‘I couldn’t find any more recent work.’

‘I would prefer not to talk about this,’ he bit out, snatching his coat from the floor without looking her in the eyes.

‘Well, all the better,’ Nellie said, unfazed. ‘You ought to think of me as a little nuisance you can’t wait to be rid of. I assume you quit drawing, then?’

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He snapped around – a razor-sharp motion, as if to bite her head off. ‘What is the point of this bloody interrogation, Eleanor?’

What was the point?

‘Curiosity,’ she said, which should have been the whole truth. If she had a single sensible bone in her body, it could not be anything else. ‘Just curiosity.’

His lips tightened to a thin line, and even that gesture looked unreasonably pretty in that stark, inhuman face. ‘Are you satisfied, then?’

No.

No, she was not.

She ought to be, and yet seeing him like this, a hardened shell of a man so unlike the glimpses she caught in every crook and corner of his home ... How in the world could she ever be satisfied with it?

‘Anne has been trying to pick up drawing again,’ she said, speaking without thinking. ‘She’s had to switch hands, though, so it’s a challenge. I think she would benefit a lot from some help, if you happen to have a few hours to spare.’

Locke stared at her – a hard, incredulous stare, but no longer nearly as cold as the glowers he’d levelled at her in the first days of their marriage.

‘After all,’ Nellie cheerfully continued, ‘it’s not a problem if you spend some time

with her, is it? I'll make sure to stay far away, of course.'

The word he muttered under his breath as he turned away and strode out of the room sounded a suspicious lot like impossible. The door to his study slammed behind him the next moment. She heard the croaking of the couch on the other side – then heard the couch croak again, followed by the sound of pacing footsteps, back and forth, back and forth.

Good.

She'd prod him again tomorrow.

With a content sigh, she sat up a little straighter in the pillows, turned to the nightstand, and picked up the Merland play she'd requested from him the day before.

The entrance hall seemed a different place entirely with the cream-coloured, flowery wallpaper she and Mrs. Hartnell had chosen after hours of deliberation: warm and inviting, a perfect match to the summer sunlight bursting in whenever the front door opened to let a servant or craftsman through. Or perhaps it was the brand new, pale green carpet runner on the narrow stairs, or the garlands on the banister, or the far simpler chandelier they'd found in the attic to replace the unwieldy crystal creation that had hovered over the room before ...

'Now all we need to do is figure out some decoration,' Mrs. Hartnell said with audible smugness as she surveyed the walls. 'We had the portraits, of course?'

The portraits of three previous ladies Locke. They had been shrouded in black velvet, as if the mere sight of them might bring death into the home.

'Yes,' Nellie said slowly, chewing her bottom lip. 'The portraits.'

Mrs. Hartnell's side glance didn't escape her. 'You may prefer not to have them in the hall at all, Your Grace.'

'I would be overjoyed to have them in the hall.' It was not even an exaggeration. Two weeks of digging through her predecessors' belongings were doing strange things to her heart – as if she knew them, now, the six women. As if they might have been friends. 'They lived here, after all. I see no reason to treat them as rivals. I'm just not sure ...'

She didn't finish the sentence, cognizant of the maids scrubbing the floor one room away. Her quick glance upwards was enough for the housekeeper's keen eyes, though.

'Ah. The duke.'

'Yes.' Nellie gave a quick smile. 'Perhaps we'd better not take the risk. Do we have any other suitable options – any family portraits, for example?'

'Those should be somewhere.' Mrs. Hartnell pursed her lips. 'I'm sure I've seen Sir Ambrose and Sir Percival – the duke's uncles – at some point this week. And Lord Peregrine Locke – the duke's grandfather – must have a portrait too.'

'Well, let's start with those, then. And who knows ...' Nellie glanced through the open door of the salon, where Anne sat bent over the couch with a sketchbook and a set of charcoal pencils, tongue out between her lips as her left hand swept over the paper. 'We may have some new art to display soon.'

Mrs. Hartnell's face lit up. 'She's made great progress this week, hasn't she?'

'Oh yes,' Nellie said, smiling her most innocent smile. 'Yes, she really has.'

‘OfcourseEgeric’s wife isn’t the true heroine of the play,’ Locke grunted between gritted teeth as she rode him, his hands fisting in the blankets, his hair a tangled blue halo around his face. His eyes glittered feverishly as he watched her, and sweet divines, it was hard to remind herself there was nothing but simple lust in that look. ‘She’s never even named. She only appears in a single scene, and ...’

Nellie shook her hair down her back, coming up over him. ‘But she does uncover the whole conspiracy, doesn’t she?’

‘She doesn’t know anyone is listening!’ He cursed as she impaled herself hard, fast, on his length, taking him all the way to that little sensitive spot where she could never, never get enough of him. ‘Little good her questions would have done if the actual heroes hadn’t been around to hear—’

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‘Maybe she does know.’

He growled a laugh. ‘No evidence for that in the text, is there?’

‘Why else would she question her husband, if she knows he has a tendency to get violent when—Oh.’ Her eyes rolled back as he thrust upwards, meeting her in a glorious slide of hot flesh and cool scales and perfect, overwhelming friction. Her next argument came out in gasps and moans. ‘So perhaps she saw the heroes sneak in, realised this was her only chance to get the truth out, and—’

‘Merland would turn in his grave, Eleanor.’ He slammed into her again, as if to make her feel the playwright’s wrath – but if that was his intention, it only encouraged her to anger the man a little more. ‘None of this is even hinted at in—’

‘Perhaps,’ she retorted breathlessly, ‘you should re-read the script a little more attentively, Your Grace.’

‘Watch your smart little mouth, you.’ With a groan, he came half up in the pillows, ink-blue hair cascading down his bulging shoulders. ‘And also, don’t Your Grace me while I’m sitting balls deep inside you, for bloody goodness’ sake.’

She laughed so hard at that she could no longer get her thighs to cooperate, sagging onto his member in a boneless heap of giggles.

‘That wasn’t a joke,’ he protested, flipping her over as she shook with mirth beneath him. His strong hands spread her legs, rough fingers warm on her skin, and just like that he was inside her again, driving deep and then deeper. In between laughing and

gasping, she thought she might suffocate. 'There's no need for you to use the title anyway, and even if there was ...'

She wrapped her legs around his hips, arching into his thrusts. Her fingers tangled into his hair, brushing the sharp rim of his ears, and he growled in a way that made him sound decidedly un-dukely.

'So what should I call you, then?' she managed, fighting for breath. His rhythm was quickening, pounding into her with a frenzy that made it hard to keep speaking full sentences. 'Lord Locke? That's hardly better than—'

With a roar, he spilled his seed inside her.

She gave up on eliciting any coherent answers from him for a minute as he pistoned in and out more and more slowly, gathering his breath. Then he rolled himself onto his side beside her and slipped his hand between her thighs, still without speaking as his rough fingers began stroking the little core of her pleasure.

'Well?' she tried, biting down a moan. Sweet divines, she was close to the edge already. 'If titles are no longer allowed, then what—'

He dipped two fingers inside her, thumb on that sensitive bud.

She blew into oblivion, questions or no.

By the time she came back to her senses, he'd already hauled himself off the bed, closing up his breeches with those strangely elegant finger movements. Not meeting her eye, as usual ... but she could have sworn there was a hint of something tender on his face, something lighting up the deep grey of his eyes like a sunrise in spring.

He snatched the copy of Merland's play off his nightstand as he passed. Then he

turned around one last time at the door to his study, as if he'd already sensed she was about to yell her questions after him.

'Just call me Othrys, will you?' he said.

Then he vanished.

Chapter 10

Hervoice wasthefirst thing Othrys heard as he stepped through the front door and into his unrecognisable entry hall – two rooms away, chattering about dining hall decoration in that tone of earnest excitement, as if there was nothing more important in the world than the fate of a few antique vases and a table runner or two.

Matters of insignificance. He knew they were.

He found himself slowing down all the same.

'... know that there's noneedto keep them,' she was saying around the corner, presumably to Hartnell. 'But I don't think we have anything else with Rosamund's coat of arms on it, and I don't want to erase her from the room if this is where she hosted her dinner parties ...'

Othrys barely heard what she was saying. He only heardhowshe was saying it, knowing what expression must rest on her face as she spoke – that unflinching resolve, kindness with a core of steel, a look that somehow made it bloody hard to contradict her even though he was a duke and she had, until three weeksago, been a humble housemaid. Hartnell was already hurrying to agree on the other side of the wall.

A smile had crept onto his face, he realised.

He hastily erased it.

‘... thinking we should go with lighter curtains,’ Eleanor was continuing in the dining hall. ‘That should brighten up the room enormously, don’t you think? Although we should take care to choose a manageable fabric. Not damask – the stuff is impossible to clean if someone ends up spilling a glass of wine over it ...’

Hartnell responded in an amused tone. Eleanor’s laughter cascaded through the house next, that radiant sound, spilling through the not-so-dreary corridors like the light of the summer sun outside.

‘Your Grace?’ a footman said, suddenly close.

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Othrys startled as if from a dream. Damn it, but it was time he got out of here – he had plenty to arrange before the whole city took a day off for midsummer tomorrow, and besides, he was not supposed to pay his wife any attention. Even if it was bloody hard to ignore her when his house was changing around him by the day. Even if she stubbornly refused to make herself forgettable, the way she dazzled as she bounded into his study every night. Even if—

‘Lord Locke!’ Anne’s voice interrupted his unwilling musing. She came hurrying down the stairs with charcoal stains on her pink cheeks and a sketchbook clutched against her equally stained dress. ‘Lord Locke, look what I made!’

A portrait of her sister.

A stunningly beautiful one, at that.

It was ridiculous, the way his compliments and suggested adjustments made him itch to take up a pencil himself again. He hadn’t felt that urge since Isaure had taken her last breath in his arms nine years ago, her skin burning hot with fever, the infected wound on her finger an oozing shade of blue – a day that he’d thought would haunt him forever. And yet, these weeks ...

He’d covered and hidden every trace of his first wife for years in his desperate attempts not to think of her, and now he was finding she haunted him not nearly so much when he walked past her drawings every day.

What had Eleanor said? The heartache won’t fade as long as you don’t let anything else in.

He'd lost track of his own voice for a moment. But whatever he'd managed to force past his lips for Anne, it seemed to have been sufficient: she was glowing with pride as she bounced on into the living room to show her work to her sister and housekeeper. Forcing himself to walk on towards his study, he heard her excitedly declare, 'Even Lord Locke says it's the best thing I've ever drawn ...'

'Oh!' Eleanor interrupted, suddenly breathless. 'Did he come home? Lord Locke?'

Othrys stiffened again.

Which was nonsensical, of course it was nonsensical ... but sweet divines, had that been a hint of impatience in her voice?

He had no time to wonder. He barely had time to blink before she came rushing into the hall, dressed in brilliant yellow, her blonde hair a mass of curls around her blushing face – and it was in that moment that he realised he had not seen her in the bright light of day since the morning of their wedding, when she had been quiet and timid and justifiably overwhelmed. Now, on the other hand ...

Now she swept in like summer itself.

She did not look like a duchess. There was no hiding the slight clumsiness of her motions that betrayed she was not used to the attire; her steps were just a little ungainly, proof her mother had not trained her since early childhood to walk straight and poised. But there was a vibrancy to her, a light in her eyes and a sparkle in her smile, that turned her stumbling grace into something far, far more addictive than the most elegant of manners.

Something so painfully alive it might just be an antidote to the bitter, deadly poison of him.

‘Give us a moment, would you, Tanner,’ she told the footman, who removed himself with a surprisingly respectful nod. And then she stood before him, small yet fierce, looking as if this was nothing but routine to her – as if they hadn’t meticulously avoided each other around the house for the full three weeks of their marriage.

‘Hello, husband,’ she said, a mischievous smile playing around that clever mouth.

A befuddled bark of laughter escaped him. ‘Hello, wife. Is anything urgent the matter, or—’

‘A little bit.’ She lowered her voice, throwing a quick look around the hallway before she continued, ‘My monthly bleeding started this morning. I thought you should know.’

That he should— Oh.

Yes.

Because he still needed an heir. Because this meant their first round of trying had failed, in spite of all Lord Heartstrong’s advice and their dutiful ... well, work.

Or something like work.

‘Ah,’ he said, clearing his throat, trying to refocus his thoughts. It didn’t help – it really didn’t help – that he always undressed her the moment she stepped into his vicinity. His eyes kept straying down now, towards the body he knew lay hidden beneath the yellow silk – too tanned and too muscular for a lady, and disconcertingly alluring all the same. ‘I see. We’re not yet done with each other, then. I suppose that is ... rather bad news.’

‘Yes,’ she said, chewing pensively on her bottom lip. She did not appear terribly

distraught, Othrys couldn't help but notice. 'Yes, I suppose it is, isn't it?'

'Yes,' he said again. 'Yes, definitely.'

They stared at each other for a moment, as if waiting for a countermove in some game they might or might not be playing. What did she expect him to say now – that it was fine? That it wasn't fine? Hell, was he supposed to console her?

She really, really did not look in dire need of consolation.

'I suppose that means we'll just have to keep trying,' he guessed, and she abruptly released a breath – almost like a sigh of relief.

'Yes.' This time her agreement came almost eagerly. 'Yes, that's the only sensible conclusion, isn't it?'

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‘I’d say so, yes.’ He rubbed his temple, forcing out his next words despite feeling inexplicably disgruntled about them. ‘Of course, now that we know the start of your monthly cycle, we could probably take a break of a week and a half. Since Lord Heartstrong says—’

‘Lord Heartstrong says it’s unlikely to conceive in those first ten days,’ she interrupted in a pressing whisper. ‘He doesn’t say it’s impossible. So if we want to give ourselves the best chance ...’

Oh.

The best chance.

Of course – and of course that was what made him feel so much lighter at once, the prospect of a quick resolution to this cursed business. He was lucky, wasn’t he, to have found a collaborator as eager to succeed as he was? Surely that was where this sudden surge of fondness was coming from, simple gratefulness for her devotion ...

‘Good point,’ he heard himself say as he nodded. ‘Yes, that is a very good point.’

Her face lit up. ‘It really is, isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Yes, absolutely. It ... Yes.’

Another small silence fell.

She did not look away – watching him with eyes both eager and fearful. It made him

feel oddly self-aware, that look. As if she was seeing someone else in his place – someone better. Someone braver. Someone who hadn't killed six women with nothing but his battered, blood-stained heart.

What was she hoping for?

For him to be anything else than lethal poison?

He coughed again, pushing that thought from his mind. 'Do I just see you as usual, then?'

'Ah.' She blushed, averting her face as if the question had shaken her sense of time back into her. 'I was thinking— Well, perhaps not tonight. I'll bleed all over your sheets, and those stains are a nightmare to get out.'

Not what she'd wanted him to say, then ... and yet he didn't manage to stop himself, baser urges moving his lips as he muttered, 'The bathtub is significantly easier to clean, may I remind you.'

'Oh.' Her eyes snapped back to him, narrowing in unmistakable interest. 'Rather scandalous, husband.'

'I'm only trying to be pragmatic,' he retorted – which was, admittedly, a shameless lie. But the truth ... Even if he shouldn't think of her as a wife to honour and cherish, it felt like crossing some line to tell her in the bright light of day what the vision of her pretty arse bent over his bathtub was doing to his nether parts. 'The best chance, remember?'

'Of course, of course.' Her blush really didn't help matters at all. 'How about tomorrow night, in that case?'

He quirked up his eyebrows. ‘Not tonight?’

‘Well, I was wondering ...’ The pink on her cheeks deepened to a beguiling cherry red. Ah. They were getting to the core of the matter, then. ‘Since I’m slightly indisposed, I wondered if perhaps you might like to have dinner tonight? Just once, of course. Just ... just ...’

He stared at her.

‘I figured it couldn’t do much harm,’ she stammered, deer-brown eyes trained on the cuff of his sleeve. ‘We don’t have to talk about anything important, and I assure you my table manners will inspire the absolute opposite of fondness in you. But there are a few things I’ve been meaning to ask you about the house, and they don’t seem entirely suitable to discuss while you’re ...’ She cleared her throat, threw another look around the hall, then leaned in half an inch towards him and whisper-breathed, ‘While you’re sitting balls deep inside me.’

His laughter burst out of him with the force of a thunderclap, echoing back at him from the walls and ceiling.

Hell’s sake. He’d forgotten how it sounded, his own amusement – but that grin growing on her face made it suddenly easy to remember, a fraction smug and naughty in a way that sent another rush of blood into his loins. He could only hope she didn’t glance down; his cock was starting to tent his breeches.

‘So?’ she prodded, her voice still conspiratorially low. ‘Will you have dinner with me?’

He should not – he really should not. Hadn’t he learned anything from these six damned deaths, Rosamund dangling in the attic, Colette’s broken body at the foot of the stairs? Tomorrow a bust might drop off a shelf and hit Eleanor on the head. A cart

might run her over in the street. The curse would always loom around every corner, and he should know so, so much better than to invite it at his table.

Then again ...

His friends were still alive. His servants were still alive.

And he didn't want to love and cherish her, this little sunray in human flesh before him. He just wanted to bask in her warmth.

'Just this once, then,' he heard himself say, and her little squeal of delight made it worth every second he'd lie awake over the choice. 'I'll see you at eight.'

Chapter 11

Nellie really had no reason to be nervous.

It was not like she was going to meet her husband for the very first time, after all. He'd seen her in plenty of more intimate ways than on the other side of a dinner table; they'd had conversations before, albeit interspersed with other, more physical activities. So there ought to be nothing new about this, eating a meal together. It ought to be a step back rather than forward.

She changed dresses four times all the same. Clothes suddenly seemed to matter now that she was supposed to keep them on for longer than a few minutes.

'Aren't you worried about the curse?' Anne inquired, sketching a still life of an apple, a book, and one of the giant silver candelabras she'd found in the attic. 'He might suddenly fall in love with you if you spend a whole night talking.'

Nellie squinted at her own silhouette in the mirror, examining the fresh green of her dress. 'That seems rather unlikely.'

'Why?' Her sister huffed. 'You are very nice.'

'Thank you,' Nellie absently said, turning to inspect herself from the side. Hard to refute that argument without shocking her little sister to the core. Lord Locke feels nothing but lust for me— you couldn't really tell a sixteen-year-old that, could you?

Instead, she added, 'He's still mourning six other women. And either way, I have no

reason to be nervous. If he starts showing any particular signs of attachment, we can always ask Walford to get us out of here.'

As the steward had promised. As he'd reminded her twice in the past few weeks, hastily whispered reassurances in between her meddling with bouquets and wallpapers.

Anne grumpily sketched on, but did not argue.

The green dress would do, Nellie decided – which was for the best, because the bell could toll eight at any moment. She locked the dressing room with its heavy iron key, checked herself in the mirror one more time in case a giant blood stain had suddenly materialised on her skirt, and made for the door when that didn't appear to be the case.

'Don't leave any charcoal on my bed when you go to sleep,' she warned, slipping out.

Her sister's scoff was, presumably, a declaration of both love and worry.

The bell of eight came as she descended the staircase, and there he stood waiting for her – entirely the frigid nobleman, his blue hair tamed into a lifeless queue, his face so blank it could have been hewn from marble. This was the man who'd proposed to her, who'd married her ... but she knew that emotionless beauty now, had learned all the ways the mask could shatter with pleasure or amusement, and somehow that was enough to turn him into a different person entirely in her mind.

At once, she was no longer nervous.

Rather ... excited?

'Your Grace,' she greeted him, and that alone was enough to quirk his mouth as he

held out his arm to her.

‘I seem to recall a conversation on the matter of that title,’ he murmured as he began walking.

‘So do I.’ It was strange to wrap a hand around his arm with a glove and a coat and a shirt in between; she’d gotten used to the warmth of him, the feel of muscles shifting right beneath his skin. ‘I wasn’t sure if it applied to other contexts, too.’

When both of us are dressed, for example.

She didn’t say it out loud. There were servants within earshot, and either way, her husband didn’t need to know she had trouble looking at him without thinking of his nakedness.

‘I don’t see why it wouldn’t,’ he said, his voice so flat she dared to be sure he wasn’t thinking about nakedness at all. ‘Unless, of course, you’d prefer for me to address you by your title as well during dinner, in which case—’

A snort escaped her, settling the argument.

Again his lips trembled suspiciously.

The dining hall was unrecognisable after her work of the past few days, even though it was far from finished: the stiff and soulless seats had been replaced by a set of upholstered dining chairs that had been banished to the attic after Jeanne’s death, and Alis’s paintings of Issian and Karwaldian landscapes had returned to the bare walls. The candelabras on the table carried the coat of arms of Rosamund’s family. Nellie couldn’t help glancing at Locke – no, Othrys – as they sank into their seats, but he didn’t pay the heirlooms any particular attention.

Instead ...

Instead, his gaze appeared focused on the blue-and-white porcelain plates.

‘It’s been a while since I’ve seen these.’ There was no emotion in the statement.
‘Where did you find them? The attic, too?’

‘We— Yes.’ She wasn’t sure what to make of that expression on his face, or rather, the lack of it. ‘Mrs. Hartnell wasn’t sure where they’d come from, but ...’

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‘They were my mother’s,’ he said softly. ‘My father must have put them away after she was made to leave.’

Sweet divines. She’d known she’d have to bring up the topic over the course of the evening, but not like this— not sprung upon him before he’d even finished his entrée. ‘I’m so sorry – I didn’t realise—’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ he interrupted, his voice still unnaturally quiet. ‘I’m glad you found them, frankly.’

She wasn’t sure what to reply to that, so she settled for a watery smile and a nod. Thankfully, the footmen choose that moment to serve the soup; the silence was not nearly as pressing with the clanking of spoons and pans to break it.

It was only after Locke –Othrys, damn it – dismissed them that he met her gaze again, spoon hovering delicately over his plate. ‘You wanted to discuss something?’

No small talk. No polite enquiries after her day. She should have expected it – she should be glad for it, with her own life on the line – and yet the weight in her stomach felt suspiciously close to disappointment.

She blew a whiff of steam off her spoon, overly conscious of her inelegant fingers around the silverware, and admitted, ‘It does concern your mother, to be honest.’

‘Ah.’ There was no resentment on his face as he took a first bite, nodded approvingly at his plate, then lowered his hand and added, ‘I see. Go ahead, then.’

‘We found her portrait in the attic.’ A stunningly beautiful woman, smiling alluringly at them from the canvas – her face inhumanly sharp, her neck and arms adorned with scaly patterns not unlike her son’s. Nellie had known who she was before she’d read the small name plate: Lithrina, Duchess of Locke. ‘Stashed away in the back. Mrs. Hartnell suggested adding her to the gallery of family portraits in the hall, but I wasn’t sure ...’

‘I see,’ he said.

He said it so very calmly. He took his next bite of pea soup so very guardedly. But something seemed to have changed about his face, about the look in his storm cloud eyes – an echo of lost laughter haunting the corners of his expression.

Nellie waited, sipping soup from her spoon and trying not to look like a toddler holding cutlery for the very first time.

‘What do you think?’ he asked.

She almost spilled soup on her skirt. ‘What? Me?’

‘Yes?’ He did not look like he was mocking her – the opposite, if anything. ‘It’s your life she’s threatening, after all. Would you feel unsafe, walking past her every day? Would she remind you of the danger?’

Sweet divines. She hadn’t even thought about her own opinion yet.

‘I ... I’m not sure.’ The words left her mouth in a stammer. ‘To be honest, I half expected you’d never want to see her again. You’re the one who lost ... well ...’

Six wives – but six times herself as well, six quiet, creeping deaths that no one in Elidian whispered about. Deaths she had come to recognise only gradually herself,

marked by gravestones in disguise – his sketches in a forgotten drawer. His abandoned books, his empty home. Most of all, that cold, dispassionate demeanour, so different from the man she'd glimpsed in unguarded moments – every spark of joy buried deep behind that fortress of composure, as if to spare him all other feelings, too.

I'm poison, Eleanor.

She wasn't sure when she'd started seeing him as a victim rather than a murderer, his bleeding heart as a wound rather than a weapon. She only knew he wouldn't believe it – not truly.

Her husband did not fill the silence. He sat motionless on the other side of the table, eyes trained on his plate, the slits of his pupils wider than she'd ever seen them. In the dim light, his jawline was sharp as a blade – as if she'd cut herself if she were to wrap her hands around his face.

Not that she would ever do any such thing, of course.

'Othrys?' she said quietly instead, and suddenly the intimacy of that name seemed the most familiar thing in the world.

His shoulders clenched as he lowered his spoon onto his plate and rubbed his temple, sending a single strand of blue hair fluttering down onto his shoulder. 'I should not want to see her face ever again.' Flat, curt, factual words. 'I ought to tell you to tear the bloody portrait to shreds, after all the suffering she caused. So if that's the answer you'd prefer to hear ... feel free to accept it. Feel free to fling it into the nearest canal and never think of it again.'

The easy answer.

But she'd seen him look at those plates –plates, for goodness' sake. The first tangible trace of his mother's existence in divines knew how long, in this city that no longer even allowed her existence, and he'd soaked it up like a man dying of thirst.

'It's not the truth, though, is it?' she whispered.

His throat bobbed. 'No.'

Again she waited – a silence brimming with conflicting desires, the hollowness of it growing crueller with each passing heartbeat.

She knew that silence. She knew the war raging on his face. She remembered coming home from the market with the few bruised, half-rotten vegetables their last pennies could buy and finding their little house similarly quiet, the damning absence of Father's comforting whistle or his heavy footsteps on the creaking boards ...

And even then, she'd missed him.

Even then, through the sharpest pangs of her hunger and the hottest flares of her fury, she'd never been able to banish the grief entirely.

Which the man sitting before her shouldn't know –couldn't know. And yet she couldn't help opening her mouth, a stupid, sentimental attempt to soften the lines of guilt etched into that inhumanly beautiful face ...

'It's alright.' It was little more than a whisper. 'It really is. You must have been very fond of her, before she was banished.'

Like a dam broke, his bitter laugh shattered out of him. 'I didn't even believe it at first – can you imagine? Simply refused to accept the bloody facts. Walford argued and argued after Jeanne died, and I kept clinging to coincidences and lack of evidence, told him that surely she'd loved me too much to curse me in such a vicious way ...'

He'll come back, Mother had insisted, gaunt with hunger and red-eyed with grief. Of course he'll come back. He loves me. He loves all of you ...

'Yes,' Nellie mumbled, throat clenching tight.

'And then Alis died.' He didn't seem to have heard her; he certainly hadn't heard the emotion she was so desperately trying not to feel. His fingers clenched and unclenched erratically beside his plate. 'Horse kick to the head –Alis, of all people, who could tame a bloody horse by smiling at it. So then ... then ...'

Then he'd given up on his arguments.

Losing not just a fourth wife, but also the mother he'd thought he'd known.

'So why do you think she did it?' Nellie whispered. 'Could she have made a mistake? Tried to curse your father and accidentally targeted you?'

'Walford said the same thing.' His lips curved into a cramped, joyless smile. 'But she really wasn't one to make mistakes. Not even if she was furious. The notion of her wielding magic that carelessly seems even more impossible than the notion of her cursing me deliberately.'

'But then why—'

'The best I've managed to come up with is that she wanted the family line to die with me,' he cut in, not waiting for her to finish. The words came out with strange, restrained eagerness – as if he'd waited years to speak them out loud and hated himself for wanting to do so. 'That she wanted everything my father had worked for to come to naught. She would have known how much that would haunt him – having caused the decline of the Locke estate.'

Oh.

Oh dear.

She shouldn't ask – she shouldn't invite him to bare so much of his own heart and soul to her. But this was relevant to her own role in the tragedy, the entire dratted reason why he'd married her ... so out it slipped, a question she'd never even thought of before. 'Is that why you're going to such lengths to have an heir, then? Your father's wishes?'

He closed his eyes. 'Not exactly.'

Not an answer, and she really shouldn't ask.

Then again, asking was only dangerous if it made him feel fonder towards her. And if every line on his angular face, every twitching muscle in his jaw, was telling her that he didn't wish to dive deeper into his own motivations, wouldn't asking him be a very decent strategy for survival?

'So what is the reason, then?' she blurted, absently spooning up pea soup. Somehow, most of her plate had emptied itself over the course of the conversation. 'What happens if you die without an heir? Does the duchy cease to exist?'

'Oh no. Nothing so dramatic.' He opened his eyes, slumping back with the air of a man about to recount an unpleasant history lesson. 'It's rather ... When my great-great-grandfather fled the tyrants of Pavella and came to Elidian, he left a significant part of his family behind. So while the Elidian line always remained small, I still have distant cousins living under the iron crown'

Nellie lowered her spoon again. 'Do you know them at all?'

'They write me every now and then to ask for money,' he muttered, sounding bitter. 'Other than them, my father and uncles are the only family I've known. The youngest of them, Percival, drunk himself to death a decade ago and never had any children with either his wife or his impressive string of mistresses. My other uncle, Ambrose, is alive but hasn't set foot in Elidian for twenty years. He left home to travel as a young man and never returned.'

Matters began to solidify. 'So if you were to die tomorrow, Ambrose would become the next duke of Locke?'

‘Exactly.’ It came out grim.

‘And you don’t think he’d come back to Elidian and take up life as a nobleman here?’

‘He regularly assures me in his letters that he never wants to see the city again.’ The way his lip curled up lay a hair’s breadth removed from a sneer. ‘Which means the house would be sold. The servants would lose their positions, the family possessions would be traded, any influence we wield in the Senate would be gone. And if Ambrose were to die childless, which seems likely at this point, all of it would go back into the hands of some squandering cousin licking the boots of the Pavellan tyrants.’

Not his father’s wishes, then.

Just principles. She should have known.

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‘I’m sorry,’ she said quietly, because that was all that seemed left to be said.

He cocked his head, one pointed ear breaking through the blue silk of his hair. His gaze met hers for the first time in minutes, and to her surprise, the emotion in those cat eyes was not grief or anger or even exhaustion, but rather ...

Relief?

No, amusement?

‘Thank you,’ he said, the most miniscule tremble of his lips confirming that bewildering hunch. ‘I understand you won’t even tell me to stop wallowing?’

‘I— Look, noteverythingyou do is wallowing!’ An unexpected laugh wormed free. ‘All you do is care about your people and your responsibilities, and even if you do so a little too much at times ... should I chide you for it?’

‘No,’ he admitted, looking away again, his smile dwindling. As if he couldn’t bear to see her face – to see how she might react to the next words he’d speak. ‘No, not for that. But then there’s my unforgivable sentimentality over my mother’s memory, even after she killed six innocent women, andthat...’

Nellie huffed. ‘She’s still your mother. That’s the bloody trouble with parents, isn’t it? They don’t stop being your parents even when they leave.’

A small silence fell.

Perhaps that last sentence had come out with a little too much force.

‘I mean ...’ she started, a helpless attempt to correct the mistake. ‘Of course, not everyone—’

‘I know what you mean,’ he interrupted, and if his voice was curt, it didn’t sound unkind. ‘So who left, if I may be so impertinent as to ask?’

Drat.

‘My father,’ she whispered.

He sighed. ‘Ah.’

‘And my mother just ... stopped living.’ The words spilled out whether she wanted them to or not, lured into the open by his own vulnerability. ‘Kept telling me how much he’d loved us, how much he’d loved her, how he would surely come back soon. And then he didn’t. So after months she finally gave up – stopped getting out of bed, stopped eating.’

He closed his eyes. ‘How old were you?’

‘Twelve summers,’ she breathed.

His jaw tightened. But all he said was, again, ‘Ah.’

As if she’d answered questions he’d been mulling over for weeks. As if he’d wondered but never dared to ask. She’d been naked in his arms so many times, and yet she’d never felt so bare before him as in this moment – as he sat there and watched her with those strange eyes, grey depths brimming with years upon years of shattered affections.

‘I’m sorry,’ she stammered, shrinking in her chair. ‘I shouldn’t—’

‘You should.’ A brisk bite to the words – too brisk, as if he was hiding the opposite beneath that snappish tone. ‘And you ... Divines help me, you know that I’ll never let any such thing happen to you again, don’t you, Eleanor? You know I won’t allow it?’

Her jaw fell shut again.

Allowit?

She should scoff, a little voice reminded her, sounding uncomfortably like her own. She should laugh and shrug off his vows. Pretty promises, all of them. Like magic. Like fairytales. The sort of promise Father had made, and Father hadn’t minded dooming her to a life of scrubbing floors ...

But Othrys Locke wasn’t Father.

Othrys Locke was the bloodyoppositeof Father – a man who would collapse beneath his duty before he’d run from it, who understood the weight of heartache better than perhaps anyoneelse in this city. Sitting there with that gleam of honest concern in his inhuman eyes, ready to protect, ready to do what must be done and save her ...

Looking like a fairytale.

Like every fantasy she’d laughed at come true.

‘Eleanor?’ she heard him say again, his voice distant.

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‘Yes,’ she managed, feeling like someone else was speaking the words. Her eyes would not leave his face – that sculpted face, chiselled lips and cheekbones, an inhuman arrangement so beautiful it almost hurt to look at it. ‘I know. I promise I know.’

‘Good,’ he said hoarsely, and then again, ‘Good.’

Her breath was quickening. His throat bobbed, but he did not speak again, did not avert his eyes from hers – watching her like a man possessed as the quiet deepened around them, like a starving beggar regarding the bread he couldn’t have.

He should not be looking at her like that.

It took a moment too long for the alarm bells to start ringing, even her panic muffled beneath the roar in her ears. Sweet divines, he shouldn’t be looking at her like that, and she should not have spoken a single word to him, should not have invited him here in the first place ...

His hand came up, as if to reach for her.

‘Don’t!’ she gasped.

His fingers froze in midair.

A moment of motionless deadlock as they stared at each other, opposing forces tugging at that hand – the need for his skin on hers against the ghosts of six dead women whispering at them from every corner in this hall, reminding him of their

fates, of every life cut short. Just a moment, and then he jerked back his arm, the ice closing in over his face again.

As it should.

She felt the cold of his expression in the pit of her stomach all the same.

‘I should go,’ he said, voice choked as he rose. ‘I’ll see you. Later. Elsewhere. I ... I ...’

No, her heart screamed.

‘Yes,’ she whispered. ‘Yes, you should.’

He’d already started walking.

A dozen long strides, not a word or glance of goodbye. Then the door of the hall shut behind him with a soft, utterly restrained click, and he was gone from the room – leaving her alone with their unfinished meal, his mother’s porcelain, and the weight of that bloody curse pressing down upon her like a shroud.

Nellie sat frozen, staring at the place from which he’d vanished a moment before.

And slowly, very slowly, a decision began to take shape in her mind.

Chapter 12

‘Anne?Anne?’

A dismal groan emerged from beneath the rumpled blankets.

‘Anne, wakeup.’ Nellie yanked the down and linen aside, to be rewarded with an even more miserable wail and an elbow almost hitting her in the face. ‘I have a question for you. It’s too important to wait.’

One bleary eye blinked open, glaring at her with the fury of a thousand hells in the pale morning light. With a tormented groan, her little sister pulled her pillow over her head and garbled something from which Nellie could only make out the words away and middle of the bloody night.

‘Watch your language,’ she snapped, tugging the pillow away as well, ‘and it’s clearly not the middle of the night, seeing as we’re minutes away from sunrise. Now—’

‘It’s midsummer day, Nell,’ Anne grumbled, finally opening her second eye. In her rumpled nightgown, blonde hair fuzzy around her head, she vaguely resembled a cranky lady’s cat who had been petted at the wrong moment. ‘Sunrise is pretty much the middle of the night.’

‘You’re exaggerating.’ Nellie plopped down on the edge of the mattress, folding her arms. ‘And either way, you’re awake now, so you might as well answer my questions. How does one break a curse?’

Anne stared at her.

‘Come on –you’re the one who knows all the fairytales.’ It took an effort not to shake her sister. It had taken an even more monumental effort to wait until the first light of day at all; she’d slept maybe two hours, and she was buzzing with energy all the same, with the irrepressible need to act. ‘If someone created that curse, shouldn’t we be able to remove it, too? Pragmatically speaking?’

‘Have you gone mad?’ Anne cautiously enquired.

‘I feel like I’m the only sane person in this household,’ she retorted. Even the walls seemed to be buzzing. ‘They’ve all been tiptoeing around the matter so much they’ve forgotten to solve it. Can curses be broken? What do the fairytales say?’

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‘There ... there are stories with broken curses.’ Somehow, the suspicion on her sister’s face was only deepening. ‘Usually the cure is something like true love, though, which—’

‘Which is a problem here. Yes.’ Nellie jumped up again, unable to sit still for more than ten heartbeats. ‘Still, there needs to be something—’

‘Nell,’ Anne interrupted, hoisting herself up on her elbows, squinting. ‘Nell, did you fall in love with him?’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ Nellie impatiently said, waving the question away. ‘This isn’t about me. Listen, if we can theoretically get rid of the curse, then—’

‘Nell,’ her sister repeated, and now there was no trace of sleep left on her round face, not a brush of softness. It had come out with all the bite of a despairing governess twice her age, that one name. ‘What are you thinking? He’s not—’

‘I know he’s not safe,’ Nellie cut in, closing her eyes. Divines help her. Was this love, then, this unbearable need to move and fix things – to fix him? ‘But the curse doesn’t give a damn what I feel, does it? And either way, it doesn’t matter, because I’m going to break it. I just need to figure out—’

‘You’re going to need fae for that,’ Anne said hoarsely. ‘The fairytales don’t give any details. And there are barely any fae left in Elidian, because the Princeps banned them and their magic, did you forget?’

Nellie’s thoughts burst around another corner.

‘Lord Arragher.’ She almost gasped the name. ‘Lord Arragher has a fae wife, doesn’t he? Or well, a fae fiancée, because obviously they’re not allowed to get married ...’

But the duke of Arragher was rich as sin and a prominent member of the Senate, and somehow the combination of decadent wine fountains at public festivals, generous charity to the poor, and a good dose of blinding charm had kept the populace of Elidian from voting him out when the affair had come to light a few years ago. Lady Eyestone had spent multiple days hyperventilating on the sofa when the news spread, declaring to all who would listen that she wouldn’t have any of those thieving liars anywhere near her home.

Nellie had not dared to point out that while fae may occasionally be thieves, they weren’t even capable of lying.

‘So then send her a letter,’ Anne was saying, rubbing her face. ‘I’m sure she’ll reply in a few days, and then—’

‘I’m going to visit her,’ Nellie declared.

Anne stared at her as if she couldn’t decide whether to laugh or cry. ‘Nell, it’s midsummer day.’

‘Yes, so?’ Restless impatience was taking hold of her feet. ‘Surely she won’t be at the festival yet. It’s still pretty much the middle of the night.’

‘All servants have their day off!’ Anne protested. ‘You can’t send them with a note to announce you, and—’

‘I’ll just go by myself.’ Who cared about etiquette when there were lives at stake – when there were hearts at stake? ‘I’m a duchess now, after all. And she’ll probably forgive me for trying not to die, don’t you think?’

If Anne didn't think so, Nellie didn't wait for her to make the point. She had already hurried out of the room again.

Arragher Manor – grand, glorious, and shining like the summer sun itself – lay alongside the Rope Canal, a mere stone's throw from the Iron Hold and the market square where executions took place. The same places where the duke's not-quite-wife would have ended up if not for the considerable influence her not-quite-husband wielded; Nellie couldn't help but wonder, walking past the grotesque façade of the city's prison, how often her ladyship thought of it, the threat of what her future might have been.

Then again ...

She'd found herself forgetting about the dratted curse more and more often, these weeks. Perhaps even looming death could become comfortable routine when surrounded by enough money and—

Love?

She hurriedly pressed that thought away.

Around her, all of the city was preparing for the midsummer festival, building bonfires and decorating the streets with flower garlands and laurel wreaths. Yet somehow the Arragher gardens were more summery still – exotic flowers and lush greenery wherever Nellie looked, their sweet perfumes enough to mask the marsh smells that hung over the city in these warmest months. Bumblebees buzzed. Fountains gurgled. Oh yes, she could imagine it was hard to think about death in a place like this.

Had the Locke gardens been like these, once?

Was that why Othrys had allowed them to die and wither after Isaure was gone – because he could no longer stand the sight of so much life without her?

She couldn't shake off the look in his eyes even here, the hint of a thaw in that frostbitten heart of his. The fear, most of all. I'm poison, Eleanor...

She walked a little faster.

A haggard-looking housekeeper received her, made an attempt to send her back home, then gave up when the title of Lady Locke was mentioned. Nellie was left waiting in the gold-and-marble entry hall while the lingering servants went looking for the lady of the house – a search of a few minutes, and yet it felt like an eternity until at long last a door flew open at the top of the stairs.

'Lady Locke!' a bright and decidedly inhuman voice cried out.

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And in a dazzle of gold and purple, Lady Arragher – or at least the woman informally going by that title – swept down into the hall.

She was wearing a decadent dressing gown and very little else, elegantly holding a flaky pastry in one hand and a glass of some fizzy, amber-coloured drink in the other. Her white hair – not blonde, not grey, but a pure, snowywhite– had been pinned up in messy curls, framing a face like a winter's rose, soft and ethereal in equal amounts. Her eyes were almost too blue to look at, her movements too swift for the human eye to follow. And her voice ...

Like the alluring song of violins, a tempting melody that even now made Nellie's feet itch to follow her and keep following her for the rest of her days.

Sweet divines.

The only fae she'd ever seen up close were the ones chained for the gallows, gaunt and dishevelled, looking about as magical as the cobblestones on which they stood. This creature, on the other hand ...

There was no way to look at her and not believe in magic.

‘How utterly lovely of you to come pay me a visit!’ Lady Arragher proclaimed, hurrying down the final stairs without bothering to give even the most half-hearted curtsy. Somehow she managed to look perfectly refined even as she stuck the entire pastry into her mouth and quickly licked the remaining honey off her fingers. ‘What about a stroll in the gardens, darling? The weather is absolutely lovely, and— Oh, before I forget, would you like a glass?’

‘No, thank you,’ Nellie managed, because the drink the other woman was holding looked suspiciously alcoholic, and she hadn’t even had breakfast yet. ‘Thank you for receiving me on such short notice. I hope it’s not an inconvenience to—’

‘Oh, I was getting sick of Kieran’s snoring anyway,’ the almost-duchess dryly said. ‘Your arrival was simply the last straw to get me out of bed. So. Othrys Locke’s newest wife, aren’t you? What is your name?’

Nellie, Nellie almost said.

Instead, changing course at the last moment – ‘Eleanor.’

‘Delighted to meet you, Eleanor. Call me Doretha.’ She sallied outside the way she’d descended the stairs – as if every step she took was the spectacular climax to some highly anticipated play. Nellie felt more like a housemaid than she had in weeks, hurrying after her as the duchess continued, ‘To what do I owe this rather unexpected visit? Are you urgently in need of a festival dress? Are we starting a club of counterfeit duchesses, perhaps?’

She seemed genuinely gleeful about the last suggestion. Nellie swallowed something bitter – she couldn’t help it.

Counterfeit. And if that was all she’d ever be to her husband ...

Then what?

Then the bloody curse still had to go.

It helped, that thought. It felt like finding firm footing in marshland again.

‘I was wondering if I could ask for your advice,’ she said, following the other woman

into the golden sunlight, the perfect flower beds and pathways surrounding the house. Shewasa duchess, damn it all; she was not going to let herself be dazzled into stammers. ‘About matters of magic. Curses, specifically.’

Doretha froze.

Then spun around, her dressing robe swirling scandalously about her pale bare legs, and flicked her gaze over Nellie once again. Her blue eyes had gone impossibly bluer. She was no longer smiling, suddenly – was no longer even pretending to.

‘Ah,’ she said, and a world of meaning lay beneath the surface of that single world. ‘Of course.’

‘I hope that does not offend you?’ Nellie cautiously added, unsure where the sudden change of tone had come from. Was this some bit of fae etiquette she should have known about? ‘I would have looked elsewhere, but the trouble is there are so few fae in the city, and ...’

‘Oh, there are plenty of them,’ Doretha interrupted, resuming her walk with swift, elegant steps. Her smile was joyless. ‘You just won’t find them, for obvious reasons. I’m happy to answer your questions, Eleanor, but you may not like the answers in the slightest. Please be aware before you continue.’

Which couldn’t be a lie.

Then again ... was she supposed to just not ask what she needed to know?

She wasn’t fleeing, and therefore she had to fight – the only fact she dared to be sure of on this day of bewildering insight. So she swallowed something sour, followed her hostess down the winding path surrounded by white chrysanthemums, and said, ‘Do you know whether curses can be broken?’

Doretha sighed. ‘Most can be, yes.’

‘They can?’ Nellie’s heart skipped a beat. ‘Are you able to do it? Would you be able to break the curse on Othrys, then?’

The duchess took a small, elegant sip from her glass. A small tick of silence went by.

Then, flatly, she said, ‘No.’

Nellie stumbled to a standstill on the flagstone. ‘What?’

‘No.’ Doretha did not glance at her, piercing blue eyes trained instead on the boxwood hedge surrounding the garden. ‘I’m afraid I would not be able to solve the trouble at Locke Manor. I’m sorry, Eleanor.’

‘But ...’ She felt like a pouting child begging for sweets. ‘But you said—’

‘I know what I said, darling,’ Doretha cut in, absently swirling her drink around in her glass. She seemed to be weighing her words. ‘And it may be best to leave the matter at this, before either of us regrets the conversation. You—’

‘Is the magic too complex?’ Nellie blurted, barely hearing that warning. ‘Does that mean otherfae could possibly break it, even if you’re not able to do it? I’m happy to ask around, if you say there are more of them in the city, and—’

‘Asking around wouldn’t help you.’ The duchess hesitated a last moment, then snapped her gaze back to Nellie’s face, apparently having reached a decision. Her voice lowered. ‘Complexity is not the issue. I’m a fine enough mage, if I may say so myself. The trouble is rather ...’

A last pause.

‘The trouble,’ she repeated, then, briefly closing her eyes, ‘is rather that there is no curse.’

It took a moment for those words to land.

Two moments, perhaps, and they still didn't make a lick of sense.

'What?' Nellie managed to force out, and the word was accompanied by an involuntary chuckle so joyless she almost winced. 'No. No, that is nonsense. Of course there is a curse – everyone knows ...'

'Everyhumanthinks they know,' the duchess corrected, all but rolling her eyes. 'The problem is that humans don't understand the first thing about magic or its workings. There is no curse on Othrys Locke. Every fae in Elidian knows there is no curse.'

'But six women died!' Too loud. Too shrill. 'That can't be a coincidence, can it?Sixof them?'

Doretha took another sip. 'No, I agree that seems unlikely to be a coincidence.'

'So then ...' She was grasping for straws now, Nellie realised, was clinging to thoughts shehadto believe, because the alternative was too terrible, too devastating, to even consider for the span of a heartbeat. 'So then therehasto be a curse. It's the only possible explanation. Perhaps there's a magic trick you don't know, or ... or ...'

The other woman remained quiet.

Sweat was starting to prickle between Nellie's shoulder blades, beneath the hasty loops of her hair. Throwing a wild glance around, she added, 'And if there isn't a curse, then why didn't you tell anyone else until now? Why didn't you warn Othrys or the city guards or—'

'Eleanor,' the duchess interrupted, closing her eyes. 'I'm fae.'

'So then they would have to believe you! You can't lie! That's no reason to—'

‘Eleanor.’ The undertone beneath her name was one of unflinching finality, worryingly close to Mrs. Radcliffe in her state of utmost vexation, and Nellie snapped shut her mouth at once, a reflex as old as her working life. ‘You don’t understand what I’m saying. I am the most public fae alive in a city that has banned all of us. The man who calls himself our Princeps is biting his ratty nails over the fact of my personal existence. I cannot step outside these gates without being trailed by the Mirror Queen’s spies wherever I go, and three times now they have accidentally called out my name on the list of those about to be executed on the square next door.’

The gallows.

Swinging peacefully in the summer breeze, waiting for the next neck to snap.

‘Kieran is rich and powerful and annoyingly charming,’ Doretha continued, her violin voice low and pressing. Her glass trembled slightly in her hand. ‘He can protect me to a certain extent, and he does it flawlessly. But we’re walking a very, very thin line, and Cyril and his cronies are waiting for a misstep – for even the smallest reason they can find to chain me up and kill me. Do you understand?’

Nellie wished she didn’t.

She wished this chain of arguments didn’t make so much sense.

‘So the last thing I’m able to do, Eleanor’ – suddenly there was a century of weariness on that flawless fae visage – ‘is march up to the guardhouse and announce that I have a murder to declare. Especially when there are six of them. And especially when it’s very well possible ...’

‘No,’ Nellie breathed, chest constricting. ‘No, please—’

‘... that the murderer is no less than a duke himself,’ Doretha finished and downed

the rest of her glass.

Chapter 13

Nocurse.

No magic.

By the time the red brick façade of Locke Manor loomed up before her, Nellie could no longer remember how she'd managed to find her way home, the sun-drenched city and its endless garlands and flowers a blur. The sun was beating down, but she barely felt its heat; just below her skin, a layer of ice seemed to have settled, cold and dark and hollow and whispering of death.

She'd been right from the start.

Why, why had she allowed his pretty words to blind her to the facts and lure her into this fairytale world that had always been too good to be true?

The hall was strangely empty, all servants gone for their midsummer holiday. She staggered past the portraits of Sir Percival and Sir Ambrose, past the open door to the dining hall, up the narrow stairs with its new green runner – step after step through this house that had begun to feel like her own already, and to what end?

It had been home to six other women, too.

Who had died, and there was no curse to blame.

Why? Why? Othrys was the common factor they all shared, there was no way around it ... but what did he stand to gain from their deaths? Their family fortunes? Their connections? Had he been so impatient for an heir that he'd killed them when they'd failed to conceive within the first two months?

Was that why he all but knew the bloody Heartstrong book by heart?

She faltered on the landing, hand halfway to the door giving access to the back wing of the house. All she wanted was to crawl beneath her blankets and forget this miserable marriage existed at all ... but Anne would ask questions, Anne would panic, and how could she do that to her little sister before she had a plan to deal with these revelations?

She had to go somewhere else. Somewhere far, far away and—

Wait.

If you ever decide you would rather get out of here ...

She burst back into motion, flying up the stairs as if monsters were snapping at her feet. Second room to the right. That little office bursting with books and leather folders. The door stood ajar, and behind it—

Oh, thank the divines.

‘Mr. Walford!’ She all but sobbed the name as she stumbled through the doorway. ‘Mr. Walford, I ... I ...’

‘Good gracious, Lady Locke?’ The steward jumped from his seat, knocking a pile of paperwork onto the floor. His eyes went wide beneath the floppy tumble of his red hair. ‘Are you unwell? What is the matter?’

‘The curse,’ she stammered, collapsing into an empty chair. ‘The curse ... Mr. Walford, it doesn’t exist.’

He stared at her from behind his desk.

An eternity crawled by in silence, sunlight brushing the side of his freckled face as his eyes went wider, then narrowed to slits. His lips parted. Closed again. Then parted, letting out an oddly feeble, 'I beg your pardon, Lady Locke?'

'I asked Lady Arragher.' Nellie hunched over, burying her face in her hands. 'I ... I thought we might be able to break it with her help, you see? But she said ... she said ...'

'That can't be right,' Walford brusquely interrupted, and she'd never heard him sound so little like his cheerful, amiable self. 'She must have been playing some fae game with you. Of course there is a curse. What else—'

'I said the same thing,' Nellie managed through the hiccough of a first sob. 'I didn't want to believe it either – but she'sfae, Mr. Walford. She can't lie! So then ... then ...'

She didn't get it past her lips.

A small thud suggested Walford had sat down again. When she lifted her head, he was watching her with those narrowed eyes; his fingers had tightened around the edge of the desk, knuckles white with the force of his shock.

'Then?' he said sharply.

'Then Othrys ... He must ...'

The steward's shoulders slumped at once – as if he hadn't believed, until the very last moment, that she'd truly speak the words out loud.

'Unless there's another explanation,' Nellie hurriedly added, feeling like a heroine clinging to a cliff in one of Anne's fairytales. 'Unless it was a coincidence after all –

or perhaps someone else has been trying to make his life hell for whatever reason ...'

'Impossible,' Walford said bleakly. 'I would want to believe the same thing, but no one could have snuck into the house at night to push Colette down the stairs or attack Rosamund in the attic. And Othrys, he ...'

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He swallowed audibly. His eyes were darting from the doorway to Nellie and back to the door, the indecision tangible in every twitchy movement. A lifetime of family loyalty, she realised, and what else than the very darkest of suspicions could convince him to set all of it aside?

‘I’ve never wanted to take the thought seriously,’ Walford finally whispered, his voice clogged with dread. ‘His grief always seemed so genuine to me, you see? And of course, I owe him and his uncle everything. I wouldn’t want ...’

To be ungrateful. To bite the hand that fed him. And so he’d squashed away every spark of discomfort – she understood it now. All he’d dared to do was quietly offer her his help, the only possible compromise between his loyalty and fear.

‘But there were things that made you ... wonder?’ she managed.

‘Just glimpses. Moments where suddenly he no longer looked like the grieving husband I knew but strangely ... calculating.’ He shivered. ‘He seemed to expect Blanche to die long before she did. We were all sick after the fish stew had gone bad, and yet he only talked about her as if he thought she wouldn’t make it— Oh good gods, and when Rosamund was nowhere to be found, he was the one who suggested we look in the attic, even though no sensible soul ever went there ...’

No. No. She didn’t want to believe it – still didn’t want to believe it, not Othrys, who laughed with her and promised her he’d keep her safe, who grieved his mother and taught her sister to draw ... She had come here to be proven wrong, she realised. She’d come here to be reassured and find another explanation for the chilling facts.

And instead ...

Instead, even Walford believed it.

Instead, he made it worse.

She wanted to fold herself into the darkest corner and bawl like a lost child. Wanted to give in and give up, a helpless victim for the world to save. But Anne was still here, blissfully ignorant and perhaps in danger as much as Nellie was herself ... so she willed her hands to still. Willed her voice to lower. Sucked in a deep breath and managed to sound calm, almost detached, as she said, 'Then I should leave as soon as possible, shouldn't I?'

That last lifeline. That little key to freedom she'd begun to believe she'd never need ... and look at her now.

'Yes,' Walford said shakily. 'Yes, you should – you and Anne both. I suppose we're lucky it's midsummer day, in a way. No servants around to witness anything while we smuggle you out of the house.'

Out of the house.

Out of her house.

Why that feeling of heartbreak, if she'd always known this was temporary, a dream that would end the moment she bore him a son? How dare her heart care in the slightest when she'd believed her husband a murderer for years and only a few weeks' folly stood between her and those wiser days?

'Yes,' she said, voice hollow.

‘Alright.’ He rose again, long limbs fidgety and restless. ‘Give me a few hours to arrange matters for you. We’ll wait until we’re sure no one will come back unexpectedly, and I’ll make sure I have a place for you and Anne to stay for a few days. After that ... you should leave the city, probably. Perhaps you could join Uncle Ambrose in Jelen, or whatever Dragon’s Bay city he’s staying in at the moment?’

‘Yes,’ Nellie managed again, barely hearing herself. ‘Yes, perhaps.’

‘Go pack your bags, Lady Locke.’ His forced smile was more painful than the lack of it, panic and bewilderment tangible behind that flimsy façade. ‘And stay in your rooms in the meantime. The last thing we want is for anyone to find you in this state and ask questions, do you understand?’

‘Yes.’ It seemed she could no longer say anything else. ‘Yes, I’ll do that.’

‘Good,’ he said, voice soothing as he sank back into his chair. ‘Be careful, then. I’ll come see you within a few hours.’

She didn’t dare go see Anne – not yet.

So she floundered into her own room instead, shut the door behind her, and collapsed onto the bed, burying her face in the pillow and making desperate attempts not to think. Not to remember.

I’m poison, Eleanor...

Had it been some twisted warning? The six-time murderer, telling her well in advance what he was truly up to?

And she’d ignored it. Had allowed herself to get sucked into the lie by strong hands and a pair of grey cat eyes, by this silly, silly notion of having fun rather than

surviving ... and so she'd forgotten the facts, the first rules of her existence. That she should always protect herself. That there was no sense in relying on anyone else in this world – not if they could just as easily abandon you from one day to the next.

No magic. No safety. No fairytales.

No love.

Especiallyno love.

And now ...

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Now she'd reduced herself to some heartbroken idiot, hurting like hell over a man who would have hurt her far, far worse. She knew, and still she couldn't stop seeing that desolate look in his eyes. Couldn't stop feeling his gentle hands on her skin. Couldn't stop hearing him, most of all – I'll take care of you, Eleanor.

Bastard.

She turned onto her back, staring unseeing at the ceiling. The facts. She couldn't get lost in the mire of her feelings now; she had to stick with the facts. No curse. Six deaths. Simple, damning truths, and so ...

So Othrys Locke had to be a murderer.

Why, then, wouldn't her heart accept it? Why was that persistent itch of doubt still gnawing at the back of her mind, as if he hadn't told her in so many words what was going on. I'll never be the victim here ...

Although that was, admittedly, an odd thing to say.

She blinked as the thought took root – a desperate, nonsensical thought, but a strange one all the same, a little anomaly waiting to be explained. Because if her husband had single-handedly murdered his six previous wives – if he had been the one to drown Jeanne in the marshes, the one to whack Alis on the head in the stables – then shouldn't he be going out of his way to paint himself as a victim, too?

It would be rather stupid, wouldn't it, to call himself a perpetrator to her very face? And whatever Othrys Locke may be, he wasn't stupid.

So then ... why had he said it?

She scrambled upright on the bed as thoughts rushed in, as if that tiny inkling of doubt had been enough to open the floodgates. No curse, six deaths ... but she'd had that discussion with Anne before, hadn't she, back at the Eyestone household? And Anne had cited guard reports. Outcomes of the investigations that had made their way into the hands of every gossiping Elidian – because of course the law had been suspicious about the deaths in Locke Manor, too, and yet the guards had found that the duke had not even been around on the day Rosamund had taken her own life in the attic ...

They might have been wrong, of course.

But what ... what if they hadn't been?

What if, rather than assuming her husband must be a violent killer, she took a moment to consider the wild, disturbing possibility that he may be ... innocent?

Her heart was a pounding drum against her ribs as she swung her legs out of bed and blinked at the clarity of her own uncoiling thoughts. It was hard to even let herself stray this way. He loved me, Mother still keened in her memory, broken and delusional ... but divines be damned, Nellie was not Mother, Othrys was not Father, and why, why had she immediately assumed that that whole dratted history was doomed to repeat itself?

If Othrys was innocent, then someone else had killed his wives.

Which seemed nonsensical, too. Who in the world would have a motive to do such a dreadful thing? And yet ... was it that much more nonsensical than gentle, dutiful, principled Othrys Locke murdering six innocent women?

The world seemed to slide off-kilter around her – slipping sideways, inside out, in all directions at once.

Who else?

Who had been around the family all this time? Who had been the first to blame the curse for the rising death toll, the last to have seen at least one of the previous ladies alive? Who had tried to getherout of the house, too, from the very first day she'd set foot on the doorstep?

But why ...

You could join Uncle Ambrose.

And just like that, she understood.

As if in a dream, her legs lifted her from the bed, sent her floating from her bedroom and into the corridor that stretchedthrough the full back wing of the house. There, mere steps away, was the door to the landing. The door that gave access to the stairs, the entry hall, the only way out of the building ...

She wrapped her hand around the doorknob despite knowing with sudden, bottomless certainty what would happen.

Indeed, it didn't turn.

It was midsummer day, there was no other living soul in the house ... and she and Anne had been locked into their rooms, like prisoners awaiting their sentence.

Chapter 14

Othrys needed a long day of midsummer revelry like he needed another funeral – that was to say, he'd sell his soul to be able to avoid the blasted jollity and merrymaking on this particular day.

He hadn't slept for more than two hours. He'd barely eaten breakfast. How in the world he'd completed his morning rituals without storming into his wife's bedroom to beg her forgiveness, he no longer knew; perhaps it was the knowledge that she needed his regret over their miserable dinner even less than that bloody funeral.

They had a deal, after all. Evenings and nothing else.

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And if those sensible restraints felt like unbearable fetters this morning, if the notion of waiting a full twelve hours to see her again filled him with sickening dread, then it was all the more important that he stuck to those blasted rules today.

So midsummer revelry it would have to be. At least the Princeps' yearly gathering would keep him out of the house; if he was lucky, it might even temporarily distract him from the mess he'd caused. Not that he'd ever enjoyed it, spending the longest day of the year in the palace gardens with fellow nobles, senators, and other citizens of note ... but on the bright side, there would be plenty of drink around, and the divines knew he could do with a few hours of oblivion.

No matter how early he was, others had arrived even earlier, standing in little groups around the low hill on which the palace was built. Othrys forced a smile as he accepted a first glass from a lanky servant girl, pretending not to see the flash of fear in her eyes – he had not expected anything else.

Poison.

Except that Eleanor didn't seem to think— But for fuck's sake, he was not going to think about Eleanor today. He was not going to jolt at every blonde head in the crowd. He was not—

'Locke!' a familiar voice bellowed.

Thank the divines.

He would have gladly welcomed an intervention by Cyril himself at this point, and

Ilios Tisri was a far better alternative – former boxing champion, current senator, and driving force behind a campaign to improve education for the poor. At least their amiable discussion of recent political developments filled a good fifteen minutes, and at least Tisri tactfully avoided any mention of—

Damn it.

Why was he thinking about Eleanor again?

The sun had barely made any progress across the sky by the time his conversation partner announced he was going to look for another drink and Othrys was left alone again between the lanterns and the blooming trees, nursing his own glass as around him the gardens slowly filled up. Henrietta Nightingale, the famous singer, arrived with her two enormous cats in tow. The Viscount Westmoor came in with a giggling and rather scantily clad beauty on his arm. Lord Waterwar, scion of Elidian's most influential noble family, was accompanied only by his oldest daughter as usual; the youngest was said to be stark mad and rarely left her room.

At the moment, Othrys rather envied the girl.

Time crawled by like thick syrup. He exchanged polite greetings with the Princeps, smiling all the while as if the bastard hadn't been the one to destroy his family. Senators and charitable ladies flocked towards them to vie for donations, and he pledged more money than Walford would approve of. Arragher and his wife arrived, the latter clearly muting her fae charm in the Princeps' company; as usual, she avoided Othrys throughout most of the afternoon, save for a polite but noticeably quick greeting.

When they'd first met, he'd been surprised by her coldness. Soon enough, though, he'd realised it was likely a matter of politics: Cyril would be quick enough to accuse her of conspiring with other fae, after all, and the Mirror Queen's spies were

everywhere even during gatherings like these.

Lunch was served. Speeches were given. Othrys stared unseeingly at the face of the High Priest blathering endlessly about the blessings of summer and the gifts bestowed upon humanity by Mother Ostara, unable to think of anything but the face of that same High Priest in an empty temple, binding a small, shaking hand with his.

Where was she now? Celebrating midsummer day at home, or perhaps with friends from the Eyestone household?

Why for the bloody divines' sakes hadn't he asked her about her plans at all?

The day progressed in ever noisier and more raucous manner. No more discussions of business and politics now; the wine flowed in abundance and washed away most of the collective sense with it. Westmoor was now surrounded by no less than three eager young ladies. Lady Millicent, the Mirror Queen, had appeared and was smiling encouragingly as inebriated guests waxed on about their most scandalous secrets. Othrys made a detour to avoid an editor of the Key Gazette who would no doubt gleefully inquire about the state of his marriage, realising too late that—

'Othrys!' A high-pitched wail. 'What a delight to run into you!'

Lady Sobgoblet came staggering towards him, a full glass of wine in her hand, several more clearly already in her stomach. In her glittering green dress, covered in ostrich feathers and diamonds, she resembled a particularly gaudy peacock; her cheeks were painted so red she would have looked feverish even on a theatre stage.

In hindsight, the Key Gazette would have been perfectly harmless.

But there was no way out now, not if he didn't want to make a run for it in full view of the collected Elidian nobility ... so he braced himself and smiled his iciest of

smiles instead. 'Ah, Lavinia. I suppose you're enjoying the festival?'

She patted his arm, kohl-rimmed eyes squinting to focus on his face. 'Of course I am, silly. Tell me, where is your wife?'

Oh, for fuck's sake.

His expression must have revealed too much, because she burst out laughing before he'd opened his mouth, sending the imposing tower of her hair wobbling. 'Didn't bring her along, did you? Can't blame you – the little wench probably eats with her hands and dances like a heathen. Better to keep her away in case she tries to blow her nose into her napkin. Haha!'

She sloshed down another gulp of wine, chuckling smugly all the while. Othrys had to drag in a few deep breaths for calm. You could not punch a marchioness in the face while standing in the Princeps' own gardens, could you?

'Much as it may surprise you,' he said, speaking through gritted teeth and a smile so forced it hurt, 'her manners are better than those of some nobles I know.'

'Oh, how gallant of you to defend her like that!' She leaned in closer, swaying slightly on her feet. The smell of wine and nose-clogging perfume washed over him. 'You should come and join my parties again, though, Othrys. I'm sure we can find you a nice lady to keep you company – one who doesn't bray like a donkey in the sheets. Haha!'

He jerked away from her as if stung by a wasp.

Vaguely, he was still aware of her powdered face, looking just a fraction uncertain now, of the laughter and the music and the clinking of glasses around them. The roar in his ears drowned out all of it. He should just smile and walk off, he knew, keep the

high ground and ignore her ... but then there was Eleanor – his lovely, witty, sensible Eleanor – and how dare this bloody shrew assume he would prefer anyone over her ...

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‘No thank you, Lavinia.’ The words spilled over his lips by themselves. ‘Just because you jumped on everything with a cock when Albion was alive doesn’t mean everyone regards their marriage vows with such contempt, you see?’

She froze, blinking.

Her glass slid from her hands.

He had already turned by the time it shattered on the flagstones, the high-pitched tinkle a perfect match to the ringing in his ears; he barely registered the shocked and curious glances as he stormed off, his blood boiling in his veins. Divines help him, what in the world had come over him? His duty to protect his wife, yes, but it was hardly his duty to turn back around and stuff those ostrich feathers into Lavinia’s throat, like he very much felt like doing ...

He could hear Eleanor’s laughter, echoing in the back of his mind.

What would she say if she were here? That he was being dramatic, probably. Wallowing. And fuck, he still shouldn’t be thinking of Eleanor ... but there was the Viscount Westmoor, entangled with his pretty blonde behind a rhododendron bush, and all he could think of were strong, roughened hands clawing into his back. Arragher and his wife, dancing ... fuck, why had he never danced with—

Because he couldn’t. He shouldn’t want to.

And yet ...

It was as if she was standing by his side anyway, arm tucked into his, her warm brown eyes smiling up at him with that unshakable firmness. Arguing with him about Merland's plays, perhaps. Taking every broken shard of his life in her hands and piecing them back together so gently, so ...

Lovingly?

No.

Never love. It couldn't be love, because he was fucking poison and she was a perfect, precious little gem, a beacon of life and beauty and everything comforting in the world, and—

Oh.

Ohfuck.

And then he was running after all, damn the watching eyes of the gathered Elidian nobility, because hell take him, there was no denying it any longer ...

And he had to get her out of here.

Before he killed her, too.

Chapter 15

By the end of the afternoon, the house was so quiet Nellie heard the turning of the key even from her own room.

Her heart jumped into her throat at the scratching sound, but she forced herself to stay where she stood, to wait and be silent the way Mrs. Radcliffe had trained her to be.

No reason to collapse into hysterics – not yet. She needed evidence first.

And she'd talked with Anne. She had a plan.

It did not help the trembling of her knees in the slightest, though, as footsteps padded closer down the corridor and knuckles hit her door with undiminished vigour. Walford's voice, sounding like it always had, yelled, 'Lady Locke?'

Nellie squeezed her eyes shut, sending a last prayer to any divine spirit that might be listening. 'Come in!'

The door swung open.

Walford hurried into the room, then came to a befuddled standstill three steps in – blinking somewhat owlily at the books lying about, at her open, empty trunk by the foot of the bed. The genuine confusion of a man desperate to help ... or so she might have thought.

'Lady Locke?' he said again, sounding more unsure now.

She managed a smile. 'As you can see, I've changed my mind.'

'Changed your— What?' His eyes narrowed on her. Genuine concern ... but for whom? 'You don't mean you do not wish to leave after all, do you, Lady Locke?'

'That happens to be exactly what I mean,' she said, nodding at the entrance. 'Would you close the door, please?'

He did so mechanically, his eyes never straying from her. 'But—'

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‘I would like to confront my husband first,’ she interrupted, trying to keep the frantic pounding of her heart out of her voice. ‘With the city guards present, perhaps. And you, of course. Doesn’t that seem a much better idea to you, to make sure he pays for his crimes?’

‘I— Good gracious, Lady Locke.’ A joyless laugh escaped him. ‘Of course he should pay for his crimes, but that’s hardly a job for a lady, is it? You and Anne ought to come with me to safety, and then I will make sure—’

‘No,’ she said.

He stared at her, breath quickening. ‘What?’

‘I said no.’ Her smile could not have been any more brittle. ‘I will stay here and see to the matter myself, Mr. Walford. No need to argue. My decision has been made.’

For a heartbeat and a half, he stood frozen.

Only his expression shifted, and it was then that she knew she’d been right – because that was no longer concern or confusion in his eyes but rather ...

Panic.

The look of a cornered animal with only one last means to survive.

‘That is extremely unfortunate, Lady Locke,’ he said, and his high voice cracked a little. ‘I’m afraid I can’t allow any such thing to happen.’

‘No,’ she admitted. ‘I expected you’d say that.’

‘I’m just looking out for your safety, you see,’ he hurriedly added, shuddering hand pointing at the closed door behind him. ‘If you don’t know what’s good for you, I—’

‘And that’s all?’ Nellie interrupted. Her mouth was dry as ashes. ‘You’re not worried, for example, that a confrontation with Othrys may lead to the inevitable conclusion that he is not a murderer after all?’

Walford stiffened.

He stared at her, then slowly lowered his hand and said, shakily, ‘Ah.’

‘He has no idea, does he?’ It felt like taunting a rabid dog, but she had to be sure. She had to be sure. ‘That you’re the son of Percival Locke?’

His involuntary twitch forward did not escape her – as if his first reflex had been to grab her by the throat. ‘I don’t know where you got this ridiculous—’

‘Oh, but it all makes sense,’ Nellie reassured him, forcing herself not to back away. ‘Your mother was one of his many mistresses, I suppose? So he couldn’t tell his wife. He couldn’t acknowledge you. But he named you after his father anyway – Peregrine Locke, Peregrine Walford – and as soon as you were old enough, he had you trained as his steward. Pretty decent of him, really, to make sure you’d be provided for.’

A high laugh escaped the man before her. ‘You little—’

‘And I’m guessing,’ Nellie continued, unfazed, ‘that he made arrangements to acknowledge you after he died. Created official documentation, at least, that you were his son. Which of course you’d know, having access to his files. Was that when you realised you’d have a shot at all of the Locke fortune if you played your cards

well?’

‘You should stop there,’ he bit out, jutting a finger at her. ‘I was trying to save your life, Eleanor. I was trying to—’

‘From yourself, yes.’ She couldn’t suppress a joyless chuckle. ‘How gallant.’

He jerked a step forward, breath heaving. ‘If you had the faintest idea of what I’ve suffered...’

‘Oh, I suppose it’s been a tense couple of years for you,’ she said with a scoff. ‘Very unhelpful situation. You couldn’t just kill Othrys and then act surprised as the news of your parentage surfaced, could you? Because Ambrose is still alive, and you’ve had no chance of killing him since he’s off on his faraway travels. So I assume that instead you resolved to bide your time, wait for Ambrose to die before you did away with Othrys, and most importantly, make sure no other heirs would be born in the meantime.’

The steward was shaking from head to toe now, his face a ghastly white beneath his freckles. ‘I was never planning to kill so many of them! If the stubborn bastard had just stopped marrying, like any sensible man would ...’

A confession.

Through her raging fear, she barely felt the triumph.

‘You helped take care of Isaure’s wound, I take it?’ she added. ‘Deliberately bandaged her finger with infected cloth? Pushing Colette down the stairs must have been easy. And you told me you were there when Jeanne drowned – they had to drag you out of the marshes too, not because you were trying to help her but because you were the one who held her head under ...’

‘I didn’t want to!’ Walford screeched. ‘I liked them! I swear I did! But it’s my right – it’s my legacy—’

‘And so it never even occurred to you to stop, seeing all the harm you were doing?’ She was spitting out words now. ‘You just had to bash in Alis’s head in the stables and make it look like a horse kick? You really had no choice but to poison Blanche while the whole household was down with food poisoning?’

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‘Othrys was the one marrying them!’ he protested, half a sob in his voice. ‘He forced my hand! I told him to stop so many times – I begged him to stop – and yet—’

‘And yet you overpowered Rosamund and hung her in the attic.’ Nellie pressed her nails into her palms, a desperate attempt not to tremble. ‘Even though she must have trusted you. Even though she must have liked you. So how were you planning to end me, if I may ask?’

‘I wasn’t going to kill you!’ His eyes were so wide she could see the white around his irises. ‘You gave me the perfect solution, this morning – I was going to send you and Anne away, and then he’d never be able to marry again without committing bigamy. You would have been safe! I like the two of you, Eleanor, I—’

‘But not enough to spare us?’ she sharply interrupted.

He let out a shuddering moan. ‘You’re not leaving me a choice!’

‘Well, bad news for you, then.’ It took every last drop of her courage to scoff. ‘Because while you’ve been standing here, talking and wasting time ... Anne? Anne!’

‘What?’ Walford gasped, jerking around.

She didn’t give him time to move, raising her voice even further. ‘Anne, do you see anyone coming yet?’

‘There are guards in the street!’ Her little sister’s voice was crystal clear even through the closed door. ‘They’re marching this way— Oh, and I see Othrys too, Nell!’

‘What?’ Walford squeaked, gaze shooting wildly between Nellie and the door.

She grinned at him, inching back – away from him, closer to the dressing room. ‘Turns out you’re not as clever as you thought you were, Peregrine.’

For a single moment, he stood paralysed.

Then he dove towards her.

Nellie just managed to hook a foot around his long legs, lunging for the dressing room as he stumbled ... and then his ink-stained hand clamped onto her ankle, and she almost followed him to the floor. A cry was wrenched from her lips. He cursed, hands dragging her back as he came up on his knees, voice strained as he hissed, ‘Shutup!’

‘They’re very close now!’ Anne shouted, shrill with tension. ‘They’ll be here in a minute!’

Walford let go of Nellie’s ankle. She kicked, hitting his face, and he roared as he let go. Again she lurched towards that narrow dressing room door with its heavy key, and again he caught her a moment too soon, yanking her back just as her fingertips brushed over the cast iron.

‘Oh no.’ A growled laugh. ‘You’re not locking yourself away from me that easily, you little—’

‘Anne!’ she cried, and then Walford slammed her back-first against the door, panting and cursing.

Her little sister’s footsteps sprinted down the corridor outside. The steward loomed over her, red hair in disarray, face contorted into a desperate grimace –

unrecognisable, now, as the kind man who'd joked with her and comforted her in his office before. Nellie tried to shrink away and found his hands on her shoulders wouldn't let her, his fingers stronger than his lanky limbs suggested.

'You'll never get away with this,' she breathed. 'If you kill me now ...'

His hands wrapped around her neck.

She tried to gasp for breath and couldn't, the pressure on her throat relentless and tightening with each passing moment. No.No.Her nails scratched his arms, to no avail. Black spots crept up on the edges of her sight as she struggled, knowing she should save her breath but unable to stop fighting as a primal panic took control of her limbs ...

Fuck.

Had she misjudged?

'I'll be fine as long as he doesn't find your corpses,' Walford snapped through gritted teeth. 'I'll tell him the two of you are off for midsummer, and who'll think of me when they declare you missing?'

The two of you.

Fuck. Please, Anne, be quick ...

She let go of his wrists as her vision blurred, running her hands over the door behind her back. Finding painted wood. Hinges. Then, finally, the cold iron of the key—

Something heavy banged against the outer door of her room.

Three swift knocks, like steel-clad fists banging on the wood. And then Anne's voice, loud and out of breath – 'She's inside there, Lord Locke! He's trying to kill her there!'

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Walford's grip on her throat loosened.

Nellie gulped in a desperate lungful of breath, almost crying with relief. Another impatient ruffle followed, metal on wood. She didn't dare to flee, didn't dare to move as her would-be murderer glanced back and forth, visibly hesitating ... and then he stepped away from her, raking his red hair in place with a cramping, shaking hand.

'Not a word,' he hissed. 'If you accuse me of a single thing, I'll tell them you were trying to seduce me. Want to see who they believe: a steward or a housemaid?'

She didn't have the air to respond, managing half a nod with her fingertips still clinging to the dressing room key. Walford frantically pulled his sleeves back into place and stumbled to the door, just as a third burst of pounding landed against the wood ...

Nellie tugged the key from its hole.

And then she was after him.

On the tips of her toes, holding her breath ... Past the desk and past her empty trunk. Past her messy bed. Crossing the last open yards separating her from the man who'd tried to murder her a moment ago ...

Walford yanked open the door.

Then froze, blinking at the threat waiting for him in the corridor. No Othrys. No guards. Instead, all that stood at the threshold of the room ...

Anne, rosy-cheeked and fawn-eyed, a heavy silver candlestick clenched in her trembling fist.

A single moment of stunned paralysis, and Nellie was already moving.

Up swept her arm as she leapt forward, the heavy cast-iron weight lending satisfying heft to the swing. And down, before Walford could recover, before he could turn and realise she was no longer where he'd left her – iron meeting skull in a wet, sickening crack, sending the bastard crumpling to the floor.

She swung again, even while he was still falling.

And again, dropping to her knees beside him.

And again. And again. For Isaure and her drawings, for Colette and her books. Down, down,down– she could no longer stop, the sickening squelches blurring in her ears as rage and vengeance took over. For Jeanne and Alis and Blanche and Rosamund, lying cold in their graves. And for Othrys,alwaysOthrys, dying over and over again ...

‘Eleanor!’ a voice bellowed.

She faltered.

The red haze over her eyes lifted.

The clump of red hair and bloodied mush beneath her was barely even recognisable as a head anymore, nothing but a grotesque, misshapen mess. Her hands were covered in blood. So was the key between her fingers, so much blood, as if the iron itself had started bleeding ...

‘Eleanor?’ that same voice said again, more choked now.

It couldn't be him. It couldn't possibly be. He was celebrating midsummer day with the other nobles of the city and wouldn't return until hours past midnight, just like every other member of the household ... but she looked up, and divine help her, it was Othrys, standing wide-eyed in the doorway. Blue hair ruffled. Tanned cheeks flushed. One arm around Anne, pressing her face into his coat to shield her from the gore and blood, the other pressed over his mouth, as if to smother his own shocked cries.

'What in the world,' he whispered, voice choked, 'have you done, Eleanor?'

'Hello, husband,' Nellie said, lowering the bloodied key to the floor. A wild, violent grin curled her lips, as heated as the fury thumping through her veins. 'I broke your curse.'

Chapter 16

It was six in the morning. The sun had set and risen again. Outside, the city had gone exhaustedly quiet after even the most determined merry-makers had finally left for their beds; inside Locke Manor, on the other hand, the constant coming and going of guards and other visitors had not slowed for a heartbeat. Doretha had swept in for a few minutes, confirming the absence of curses. Mrs. Radcliffe, thin-lipped and stiff-shouldered, had appeared to vouch for Nellie's sanity and sense. A letter by Sir Percival was found among Walford's private papers, confirming that his former steward was, indeed, his illegitimate son.

And now Nellie was sitting at the kitchen table with Mrs. Hartnell and a cup of warm milk, still shivery despite the balmy night and the blanket an attentive guard had wrapped around her shoulders. Anne had been given a cup of valerian tea and put to bed, but Nellie couldn't bring herself to go to sleep – not yet, not until ...

Othrys.

She rhythmically nodded along with Mrs. Hartnell's agitated rattling, listening for the shreds of his voice she'd caught from elsewhere in the house all night.

He'd barely exchanged a word with her after ushering her away from Walford's corpse and calling in the guards – he'd had plenty to do, she supposed, and yet it stung that he was doing it without her. Even if there was not a single reason she would be involved. Even if she knew their marriage was a simple charade and the truth behind the curse would not have changed anything about it.

Even if it seemed rather likely, really, that he was already kicking himself for getting himself stuck with a housemaid, now that it turned out he could have loved anyone he wanted.

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‘... should have seen it,’ Mrs. Hartnell muttered for the seventh time. ‘That Locke nose ...’

And then, out of nowhere in the doorway – ‘Eleanor?’

She jolted, the chill gone from her bones between one moment and the next.

He was in his shirtsleeves, hair unbound, a thousand emotions warring for preference beneath the veneer of his stony expression. Even now, in the chaos of the night, there was a commanding air to him that he rarely wore so openly – dragging himself from hours of tense revelations with nothing but the safe haven of authority to hold him together.

The tired smile he sent her seemed genuine, though. ‘You’re still awake?’

‘As you see,’ she managed, which was not what she wanted to say but all Mrs. Hartnell’s presence allowed her to. ‘Are the guards—’

‘They’re looking into reports from their previous investigations.’ He gave the housekeeper a quick nod, then turned back to Nellie and added, ‘Coming along for a walk? I need to get out of the house.’

She blinked. ‘But Anne—’

‘Oh, I’ll take care of Anne,’ Mrs. Hartnell interrupted, fluttering her hands at the door. ‘Don’t worry about it.’

Any other day, Nellie would have worried all the same. Now, with her mind shrouded in exhaustion and the phantom feel of Walford's fingers still pressing into her throat, she took her last sip of milk, shook off her blanket, and followed her husband into the hallway, feeling oddly naked in her oldest and most comfortable dress.

'Your Grace?' a nervous-looking guard stammered by the door. 'The inspector has decreed no one is to leave the home, Your Grace, until—'

'My wife was almoststrangledtonight,' Othrys sharply cut in, every clipped word impeccably polite and somehow all the more threatening for it, 'and I've barely had the time to bloody ask her how she's doing. We'll be back within the hour.'

The guard paled a fraction. 'But—'

'Good man,' Othrys informed him, then yanked open the door, all but shoved Nellie out, and followed before the baffled watchman could get out another word of protest. The door slammed behind his broad back with a most decisive bang. 'Alright. Let's walk.'

Nellie wanted to grab his arm for support and just barely managed not to. They were not acouple, she reminded herself once again. Just collaborators, and unnecessary ones at that. 'Won't you get in trouble for—'

'Doubt it,' he muttered, making for the east end of the street with brisk steps. 'Inspector Hane knows damn well he failed to recognise six murders in a row, and at the moment, I'm not above making a point of it if he annoys me. Which he knows, too. I told him the moment he threatened to take you in for questioning.'

She had to trot after him to keep up. 'He was going toarrest—'

'He was absolutely not,' he growled, eyes narrowing. 'You're still my bloody wife.'

Her gut clenched. As if there was still any meaning to that title ... but this was Othrys Locke, principled and dutiful, and ofcoursehe would continue to honour this meaningless marriage even if it was the last thing in the world he wanted.

Somehow that was even worse than the thought of losing him.

They walked in silence through the deserted streets, side by side but never touching – past the domed Senate hall, then across the Hay Canal, which separated the rich centre from the poorer neighbourhood at the east flank of the city. Flower garlands lay trampled on the cobblestones. The smell of beer and woodsmoke hung heavy in the air. In these early, exhausted hours, no one was around to see them – which was for the best, really. A duchess in a housemaid's dress and a duke in shirtsleeves ... the gossip would spread like marsh mud.

Although that would presumably happen anyway, the moment the world woke up and heard what had transpired in Locke Manor the previous day.

Walford's fingers were still there, squeezing the air from her lungs.

'So,' Othrys finally broke the otherworldly silence – having noticed her moment of trepidation, perhaps. 'Are you alright?'

Spoken like the dutiful husband. She forced up the corners of her lips and managed, 'Mostly.'

'Hmm,' he said, voice low, and then he was quiet again.

They had reached the easternmost parts of Elidian now. For a moment, Nellie thought he was headed towards the cemetery, but he changed course at the last minute, aiming instead for the small public park surrounding the towering flour mill by the city's dykes. The smouldering ashes of a bonfire were all that remained of last night's

celebration; the citizens had all left, a line of linden trees separating their small, sagging houses from this stretch of grass.

It was as they climbed the outer dyke, hands unceremoniously grasping at clumps of grass, that Othrys cleared his throat and added, 'I'm aware that murderous cousins are ... not the sort of danger you agreed to when you married me. I'm sorry.'

A huffed laugh escaped her even as her heart constricted again. 'That doesn't seem something you ought to apologise for, does it?'

'Perhaps.' Predictably, he seemed unconvinced.

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Nellie clambered up the last few feet, then stood on top of the dyke, squinting at the endless marshland stretching out before them. On either side of them, a few dozen yards away, mills turned their slow rounds in the summer breeze, pumping the water from the city. To the north, so distant that they were nothing but hazy grey outlines, the mountains of Faerie rose above the horizon.

She kept her gaze trained on the landscape. It was much, much easier than looking at the man standing by her side, close enough to reach out and touch her, yet keeping his hands pointedly to himself.

‘If you no longer want to stay around after this mess, I can’t say I wouldn’t understand,’ he flatly continued. ‘We ... well, I’m sure we could arrange something.’

And there it was.

Mere hours after the truth had come to light, and he’d already drawn his conclusions – why keep her here, now that she was no longer a necessity, and likely more of a burden than even she realised?

‘It wouldn’t be that dangerous to stay, would it?’ she blurted, her voice higher than usual. ‘It seems unlikely more murderous cousins of yours will jump out of the woodwork anytime soon.’

‘He tried to strangle you.’ A crack of fury broke through the levelness. ‘If you never want to see that damned house again—’

‘I promised you an heir.’ Too quick. Too breathless. ‘Don’t want to leave that

unfinished. So I'll just stay around until ... until ...'

Until you have no more use for me. Until I have no reason left to stay. A few months. A few years, perhaps.

It would end, of course ... but at least she'd have him for that time.

He sucked in an endless breath beside her. 'I suppose ... I mean, if you're very sure ...'

It was his reluctance that broke her, that cramped, half-hearted excuse for an agreement; she burst without warning, words gushing over her lips like water breaking free. 'Bloody divines, Othrys, I'm so very sorry that you got stuck with me like this, and if you just want me to go, just tell me and I promise I'll—'

She saw him whip around on the edge of her sight. 'Wait, Eleanor? What—'

'—just go and leave you alone,' she barrelled on, unable to stop now that she'd started, 'and then I can pretend to have died from the Issian pox in two years and you'll be free to—'

'Eleanor.' His duke's voice. 'Where in the world did you get the idea that I'd want you to—'

'You never wanted to marry me in the first place! You married me because you didn't want to!' Sweet divines – this was even crueller than quiet agreement, having to spell out the obvious to a man who really should know better than to play the fool to her. 'And now it turns out that it never mattered a damn how much you didn't want it! So is it that odd for me to conclude—'

He cursed.

And then his hand wrapped around her jaw, warm and large and strong – too intimate a touch to resist as he turned her head towards him with fingers that would not allow resistance. He was agonisingly close, suddenly. Shoulders tense, lips tight. The slits of his pupils had widened farther than she'd ever seen them before, dark chasms of an emotion she wouldn't have been able to name if her life depended on it.

His hand shook ever so slightly against her face.

'You're the only good thing to have come from all of this, Eleanor.' He bit out the words, an almost desperate hurry to speak them. 'If I console myself with anything, it's that at least I got to meet you thanks to—'

'What?' she stammered.

'—this fucking mess.' His fingers squeezed tighter, then let go; he stepped back in the grass, breathing heavily, making visible attempts to loosen his shoulders. 'But don't you dare let that stop you from doing what is best for you. I promised you freedom. So if you want to leave ...'

She stared at him in the frantic silence, her heart pounding like the thumping printing presses. Wanting to leave?

Her?

But that ... that wasn't the point at all, was it?

'Don't you want me to go?' She almost whispered it, the words no louder than the rustling breeze brushing through the marshland, the linden trees. 'I thought ...'

He briefly closed his eyes. 'I'm not the one who nearly got killed, Eleanor. My wishes are hardly the relevant ones here.'

‘I can’t agree with that if I don’t even know what they are, can I?’ she managed. ‘So why don’t you just tell me, rather than operating on nothing but assumptions about my opinions?’

His jaw twitched.

Divines help her, he was so senselessly beautiful like this, mussed up and vulnerable, his storm cloud eyes clinging to hers with frenzied intensity ... as if he’d blink and she’d be gone. As if he’d wilt and die for lack of her.

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Duty and principle. Only now did the alternative explanation sprout in her mind, far too good to be true yet impossible to shake – that maybe keeping her here was not the obligation he dreaded so deeply.

Rather ...

But that couldn't be, could it?

'Othrys?' she breathed.

'If the choice was mine alone,' he said hoarsely, lips twitching around the words, 'which, to be very clear, I don't expect it to be, then you ... you would stay.'

Her heart thudded. 'Until we had a child?'

'No.' He swallowed, throat bobbing. 'Forever.'

Like in the fairytales.

She forgot to breathe.

Like the lies, some last part of her thundering heart tried to remind her. Like empty promises and senseless dreams. But he was the one who'd spoken the word, the man who'd never broken even a single promise to her, and divines help her, that look in his eyes ...

'So ...' Her mouth was dry as dust. 'So what if I wouldn't mind that at all?'

He blinked. ‘You wouldn’t mind— Hell, Eleanor. I know you’re not terribly practiced at enjoying life, but let’s raise that bar alittle, shall we?’

A breathless laugh wobbled past her lips. ‘What if it would make me very happy, then?’

‘Are you serious?’ Almost a snarl, and yet this was not his old, emotionless sharpness. Instead, a ragged, fraying one, a bruised heart on the edge of breaking. ‘If you’re merely trying to spare my feelings ...’

‘What feelings?’ she burst out, voice cracking. ‘You’re not making sense! How am I supposed to spare things I barely even know to—’

A single step and he’d crossed the distance between them, his arm slipping around her waist as if it belonged there, pressing her against his tall body with a finality she felt in her bones. ‘Do you know why I came back early from that cursed party, Eleanor?’ His voice was rough. ‘Because I couldn’t for the life of me stop thinking about you. Because I almost punched a marchioness in the face for joking about our marriage. Because I finally realised I’d fallen madly, senselessly in love with you, and I wanted to make sure you got the hell out of here before I could kill you, too.’

Fairytales.

Fairytales.

But there was no stopping the mad, hopeful fluttering of her heart, like a bird caught in a cage too small for its wings; there was no stopping the warmth spreading through her chest like a summer sunrise. His touch didn’t leave room for doubt, for disbelief, for pragmatic scepticism. The pressure of his arm was a promise in itself – an unyielding declaration.

Mine, it said, and it felt like truth.

‘But ...’ she stuttered against his chest, the world turning on its axis around her. ‘But I’m a bloodyhousemaid! I don’t know anything! I don’t have any manners! People will laugh about me and laugh about you and—’

‘They can all go to hell,’ he interrupted brusquely, lowering his face to the crown of her head. ‘If the fools can’t recognise a treasure when they see one, it’s us who should be mocking them. I don’t care, Eleanor. You’re brave and brilliant and far kinder than I deserve, you’re all the sense I lack, and don’t you dare tell yourself you’re not enough for me. You’re a lavish abundance.’

She could no longer speak.

She only just managed to lift her head and meet his gaze, his grey eyes mere inches away from hers. In the golden sunlight, his otherworldly beautiful face was softer than she’d ever seen it before – no more ice, no more marble masks, as if the summer sun had finally melted away the last of his defences.

‘I’m afraid I went about my first proposal all wrong,’ he muttered, the self-depreciating quirk of his lips a glimpse of the shields she knew. ‘So if you’ll allow me ...’

His arm loosened around her waist.

He sank into the grass before her.

‘Othrys,’ she said breathlessly. ‘Othrys, there’s no need for—’

‘Oh, but there is.’ He took her calloused hand in his, bringing it to his lips. ‘Eleanor Finch, you have saved me, freed me, and utterly bewitched me. And I’m afraid I’ll be

a bit of a mess while I come to terms with all that's happened, I'll probably wallow and whine and make a fuss of absolutely everything, but if you'll have me nonetheless ...' His fingers tightened around hers. 'I'll be entirely, gratefully yours.'

One did not say no to a duke.

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Which was for the best, really. It was the last thing in the world Nellie wanted to say.

‘I ...’ she stammered, and then faltered, overcome by too many contrasting reflexes at once – laughing, gasping, unladylike crying. ‘Good gracious, Othrys. I’ve never evenkissedyou.’

He was already standing.

One large hand cupped her cheek. The other hooked around her nape. She had a single thought ofwaitandnot hereandwhat if they see us, and then his lips were on hers, fierce and tender at once, and damn it all, if anyone came ambling by, they might as well enjoy the show ...

Because he felt like a dream.

He feltbetterthan a dream.

She knotted her fingers into his hair. Came up on her toes and met him instinctively, melting into a touch that was familiar and new at once – a body she knew, but unrestrained now, unguarded, and so sweetly, beautifully alive.

Hers.

Forever.

And she knew then, as his lips promised her again and again, that magic did exist.