



Fall of the Ember Throne (Crown and Crest 3)

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Category: Romance, Fantasy, Young Adult

Description: The princess is evil, and the king is dead.

After leading an indulgent lifestyle, Prince Lawrence is suddenly poised to ascend the throne, with Lady Clover at his side. Clover's goal of claiming a crown appears to be moving forward as planned, even though it's a life she no longer wishes to pursue. She finds herself trapped between responsibility and love, desperately missing the commander who claimed her heart.

Meanwhile, Henrik is in Ferradelle, under the rule of a vicious princess who has declared herself queen of the High Vale people. With magic at her side, it seems no one can stop Camellia from taking over all of Caldenbauer.

War appears to be inevitable, unless Henrik can discover the root of Camellia's power and escape the swamp island to deliver the information to the soon-to-be king. The fate of the entire kingdom rests in the commander's hands, but Camellia will do everything in her power to thwart his plans.

And time is running short. As Lawrence's coronation draws near, so does a royal wedding—one Henrik is determined to stop...

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CLOVER

I clench my hand in the neck of Lawrence's doublet, this close to inflicting bodily harm upon the heir to the throne.

"I understand you're angry," he says calmly, "but do you think it's a good idea to murder your intended?"

"You said you'd fix it!" I exclaim. "You said—" I release him with a feral growl, whirling away and shoving my hands into my hair.

Lawrence crosses his arms, watching me pace like a madwoman in his spacious study. There's a hint of a smirk on his lips, but his eyes betray his distress.

The truth is, I'm not the only one who feels like desperation and anguish have become live, untamable beasts in the last few weeks.

A fortnight ago, I lost Henrik to Camellia, but that same night, Lawrence lost his father forever—and found out his sister is stark raving mad.

We suspected the latter, but having our suspicions confirmed was far less satisfying than I'd always imagined. In fact, it wasn't satisfying at all.

It was tragic.

I choke back the lump in my throat, refusing to cry again. Every time I accidentally let down my guard, I think about Henrik.

Is he all right? Is he alive?

The commander and I had been acquaintances for the better part of our adult lives, but it wasn't until recently that I stumbled in love with him.

It wasn't my fault. How was I to know I have a weakness for uptight, often-impatient commanders?

If I had realized I was susceptible, I would have guarded my heart. I would have trampled that seed of interest when it tried to take root—I would have left Henrik in the mountains when he told me to go.

And all because this emotion I'm feeling now is too awful. It's going to consume me like a plague, eventually steal my breath and leave me shattered, broken, and empty.

I want to forget. I want to be numb.

I'm also a liar because when Pranmore offered to lock the precious memories away for a bit, warning I might never be able to retrieve them again, I adamantly refused.

I don't want to go back; I don't want to forget.

I just want Henrik here.

But even if he does escape Camellia somehow, we can't be together—because Lawrence won't release me from this betrothal.

I growl again, feeling the anger expanding in my hollow chest.

“This isn’t the right time to break the engagement,” Lawrence says reasonably. “You know that as well as I do.”

Idoknow. The king just died, and the princess betrayed her entire family—the last thing the people need is a sign their prince isn’t stable enough to take the throne. They’re already worried as it is—Lawrence has a reputation.

Yes, I understand.

But suddenly, we have a wedding date. Minda is begging to fit me for a gown, the royal pastry chef is cornering me to ask about wedding cakes, and the gamekeeper is diligently trying to persuade me that venison is preferable to beef for the wedding feast.

Amidst the onslaught of disaster, the people have latched onto our engagement and made it their beacon of light.

Because, oh joyous day, the rogue prince is finally ready to settle down. He’s taking his position seriously. Like the Phoenix King before him, he’s going to rise from the ashes of this turmoil and bring us into a stable era once more.

It’s a lot of pressure.

“Let’s speak to your father,” Lawrence finally says. “He was my father’s most trusted confidante—he’ll tell us how to navigate these difficult waters.”

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My father—yes. He'll help me. If anyone will know how to end a royal engagement with tact and aplomb, it's him. He was on King Algernon's council for twenty years. He'll know what to do.

It's going to be all right.

"You'll summon him?" I ask.

"I will."

I sit at the large hickory table in the middle of the room, staring at him.

Taking a step back, Lawrence widens his eyes. "Rightnow?"

I clasp my hands in my lap and give him a curt nod. "Right now."

* * *

Father sits back in his chair, studying Lawrence and me. Finally, he says, "You cannot break the engagement."

He's a calm man—rational, wise, excellent at seeing pitfalls up ahead.

It's always made me a little crazy, to be honest.

Pressing my forehead to the cool tabletop, I groan. "So, you think it's best to wait a while?"

“No, Clover,” he says gently. “I mean you cannot break the engagement at all.”

Slowly, I lift my head to stare at the man across from me—my flesh and blood, a man who used to carry me on his shoulders and read to me before bed.

“Define ‘at all,’” I say slowly.

Lawrence looks down at the table, saying nothing. He’s certainly thinking something—I can tell from the strange crease in his brow and the angle of his mouth. But what, exactly, I have no idea.

Undaunted by my displeasure, Father says, “King Algernon approved of the union. After worrying about Lawrence’s inclination to take a wife for years, he was overjoyed to learn you two wished to marry. Not only would your separation be detrimental to the people’s confidence in their monarchy, but it would go against his last wish to see you settled together.”

“I didn’t agree to marry Lawrence!” I cry. “Why did no one bother to ask me how I felt about the matter?”

My father raises a brow. “Are you telling me that I have not heard about your desire to marry Lawrence from the time you were sixteen?”

Eyes going wide, I glance across the table at the prince. He’s looking up now, eyeing me with the strangest expression.

“N-no!” I stammer, and then I wince. “I mean, I might have mentioned something like that. But that was years ago!”

Calmly, Father continues, “This summer, right after you and your brothers returned from one of Lawrence’s hunts, you told Gavriel you would make him muck stalls as

soon as you became queen.”

“That was—” I cut myself off, changing my mind halfway through. “You misunderstood. I didn’t mean...”

Oh heavens, Lawrence’s expression has turned into a smirk. I’m never going to hear the end of this.

“Obviously,” Father continues, all but ignoring me, “I cannot tell Lawrence what to do. If he wishes to break the betrothal, it is within his power to do so. But for the people, and for his recently departed father’s sake, I strongly advise against it.”

My eye twitches. I turn to Lawrence, horrified by the look on his face.

“You’re certain my father wanted this?” he asks quietly, avoiding my eyes.

“He did—very much,” the traitor-who-shares-my-blood answers solemnly.

“Lawrence, you made him very happy the day you asked to marry Clover.”

“Then...” Lawrence pauses. “Perhaps, for now at least, the wedding should move forward as planned.”

I make a choking noise, feeling as if I’m drowning. “Lawrence!” I exclaim. “You can’t possibly intend to go through with this!”

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He stands, meeting my eyes only briefly before he looks away like a royal coward. “I didn’t say I do. I simply believe that we shouldn’t make any rash decisions. The wedding isn’t for five months—we have time to think this through.”

My father nods as if he approves.

“In the meantime, what do the two of you expect of me?” I demand.

Lawrence looks at my father for help.

“You will behave like a princess of Caldenbauer,” Father answers. “You will dine by Lawrence’s side and join him for tactical meetings. Stroll the gardens and castle—let people see you together.”

The prince nods. “And I will make an effort to get to know your brothers and mother better.”

“Lawrence,” I say weakly, true fear making my stomach squirm.

The prince glances up, smirking in a way that’s never been unwelcome until now. “Why don’t you let Minda begin on your wedding gown? For appearances.”

Father rises. “I think this is a wise course of action. In the interim, we will focus on your coronation, Your Highness.”

Suddenly, Lawrence’s teasing expression vanishes. He nods solemnly, looking like he ate something off. “Yes.”

Father excuses himself, apparently not caring that he's leaving me alone with a man with a highly questionable reputation.

I turn to Lawrence when the door closes, setting my hands on my hips, ready to battle.

But before I can utter one word, the prince presses his hands to my shoulders and looks me right in the eyes.

"Forgive me, Clover, but I need you. For just a few months, let me use you as a crutch. You are my dearest friend, and I cannot get through this without you. It's selfish, I know. But I'm asking you to help me."

The fight leaves me, and my face crumples. "That's low."

Lawrence tugs me in for a hug. "Is it so wrong to lean on each other for a while? I'll offer you my shoulder, and in return, I would like to use yours."

"What about Henrik?" I ask softly, refusing to return the embrace.

Lawrence pushes me out at arm's length, giving me a stern look. "Henrik took a dagger to the sword arm to ensure your safety. He accepted our engagement, and he told me to take care of you. Let me make good on my promise, even if just for a little while. If Henrik returns—"

"When Henrik returns."

"When Henrik returns, we will reassess our situation."

"And if five months pass and he's still not back? Do you expect me to marry you?"

Lawrence's expression softens with pity. "If five months pass, and he still hasn't returned, it's not likely he's coming back."

2

HENRIK

"We had an agreement, Camellia," Augmirian snarls. "If you're not the heir, what good are you to me?"

"Father's death was a mere setback in our plan," Camellia soothes her husband. "You must trust me."

I stand in the corner, staring at the opposite wall of the room as is expected of me. My arm is bandaged and hangs in a sling, useless. The elven court physician said it's possible I'll never have full use of it again, which means Lawrence has excellent aim.

He didn't even hesitate, though I doubt maiming me was a hardship for him.

"Most of my people do not want another war," Augmirian argues. "We must go about this cautiously. If they know what we're planning, they'll revolt."

"They won't," Camellia coos. She places her hand on her husband's thigh and glides it up and down, placating him. "Yes, it would have been ideal if Father hadn't died before he signed the agreement, but we must make do with the situation we're given."

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I've heard a dozen different variations of this same argument in the last few weeks. Usually, Camellia can successfully distract Augmirian with a soft stroke or sweetly murmured words—she is beautiful, after all, and Augmirian's convictions are weak at best. But this time, he pushes Camellia's hand away, rising to escape her touch. "Give me one reason why I shouldn't order your death and be done with it?" he demands.

Camellia's eyes flash with warning. "I would like to see you try."

Augmirian's attention moves to the not-so-subtle orb of sickly green magic in his wife's palm, not as confident as he was a moment ago.

The duke is all too aware that he's an empty shell of an elf, containing no magic in which to fight Camellia. Thanks to intel from his aunt, I know that as well, and I suspect Camellia is not unaware of the fact either.

"Stop fighting with me, Augmirian," she purrs, extinguishing her flame. "Let me give you back the kingdom which is rightfully yours. My ancestor stole it from you. It's only right I make up for my family's wrongs."

She goes to him, looping her arms around his neck—an easy task considering she's so much taller than he. He gives in as always, groaning when Camellia runs her fingers through his curls.

"You may go now, Henrik," the princess says, smiling for her husband.

Gladly, I stride from the room, already dreading her next summons.

Outside the door, two human knights stand guard with several of Augmirian's men—Dalvin and Bendon, brothers from House Blancole. They traveled here with the king, but they didn't return to Cabaranth with Lawrence. Instead, they remained in Revalane, pledging their allegiance to the princess.

The elves don't trust them, and for obvious reasons, I don't either.

They watch me go, never saying anything to me, but I can sense their resentment. They gave up everything for Camellia, betraying their new king, hoping their gamble would pay off when she won the throne. Yet the princess barely spares a glance for the pair, taking their loyalty for granted.

Lost in my thoughts, I don't see the female elf until she stops right in front of me. Startled, I look up, pausing just before I run into her.

"Audra," I say.

She gives me a halfhearted smile, but her eyes are filled with pity. Her gaze dips to the sling before she looks back up. "How's your arm?"

"The same."

Slowly, she nods. Her eyes dart down the hall—not as if she's making sure we're alone, but like she's uncomfortable.

I decide this wasn't an accidental meeting. "What is it?"

The pretty elf pushes her long brown hair behind her shoulder and finally meets my eyes. "Lawrence and Clover's wedding date has been set."

It feels like someone punched me in the gut. The air leaves my lungs in a loud exhale,

and my stomach tightens.

“I just heard from Lyredon,” she adds, and her eyebrows draw low as I try to mask my reaction to the news.

“He’s returned then?” I ask.

She nods.

My fingers twitch, itching to find the comfort of a sword that I cannot wield. “They made it back to Cabaranth without incident?”

“Yes,” she says softly.

“And the...wedding?” I nearly choke on the word. “When is it?”

“The twenty-seventh of Palnim.”

A little over five months then, after the long, dark nights of winter have passed, the thaw has stolen the snow, and the first flush of wildflowers has bloomed in the hills.

“Thank you for informing me,” I say, preparing to pass her.

Before I can escape, Audra grasps my good arm, surprisingly strong for such a slender woman. “Are you all right?”

Pretending I don’t know why I wouldn’t be, I frown. “I’m fine.”

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Her worried expression softens. “Much can change in five months, Henrik. Lawrence doesn’t seem like the type to commit to forever.”

“He’s not the type to commit for a week.”

Slowly, she releases my arm and drops her voice. “Should I have kept it to myself? Will it distract you from your mission?”

I shake my head curtly. “It will not.”

The elven noblewoman looks around again, this time to make sure we are alone. “Have you overheard anything about my cousin’s plans?”

“Nothing we don’t already know.”

“Any mention of Ayan?”

“No.”

Looking pensive, she nods. “We’ve hidden him well.”

Lady Elaine, Audra’s mother and the late duke’s sister, planned to reveal Ayan at the council meeting that was held a week ago, but she decided to wait in light of recent events. Camellia’s magic makes her unpredictable and dangerous. We need more information before we can remove Augmirian from his place of power.

Thoughtfully running her fingers through her hair, Audra says, “Has Camellia said

anything about the necklaces?”

“She’s being cautious with the information she shares.”

Especially information about the deadly charmed necklaces she gave to the elven noblewomen and my sister. Camellia is well aware that I remain by her side for my sister’s sake alone. The moment I find a way to remove the necklace, I will steal Brielle away from Revalane and gladly give Lawrence any information I have collected.

Although Camellia may hold my lead, I am not loyal to the murderous princess.

“She’ll let her guard down eventually,” Audra assures me. “Do everything in your power to win her trust. You must get her to confide in you.”

“I will,” I promise.

But there are limits to my dedication. Camellia would likely tell me everything if I were to enter into a relationship with her—she’s made that more than clear.

But I won’t betray Clover, even if she’s promised to Lawrence.

Five months.

It’s plenty of time to learn Camellia’s secrets, escape to Cabaranth with my sister, and convince Lawrence to call off the wedding.

It has to be.

* * *

“You look like death,” Maisel says when I step into my quarters.

The gnome woman sits in her favorite chair by the sleeping hearth, knitting an ugly tunic she’s been working on for weeks. She’s so short her feet only extend just past the cushion, making her look like a tiny child.

But looks are deceiving. The Dorian gnome is a warrior—and a spiteful one at that.

“Why are you still here?” I sigh as I sit in the chair next to her, being careful to give the rock leopard at her feet plenty of room. Ulfric lifts his head and glares at me before he stretches his legs, showing off his claws, and then he goes back to sleep.

“Someone’s gotta keep an eye on you, you traitorous git.” Maisel hops from the chair and pauses in front of me. “Try it on.”

I eye the tunic. “I’m not wearing that.”

“You’ll wear it if I tell you to wear it. Now stop your fussing and put it on.”

“It’s sweltering hot. What do I need with it?”

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Maisel glares at me. “Calendula is likely worrying herself to death, hoping someone’s taking care of you—making sure you’re eating, tending your wound, keeping you clothed. I’m doing this for her, not you.”

Eyeing the gnome with a tight frown, I yank the tunic from her hands and then pull off my brigandine. I slide the knitted garment over my shirt, giving her a pointed look to ask if she’s happy.

She studies me. “Hold out your arms.”

I do as she asks, and she shakes her head as if disgusted. Looking at my wrists where the fabric has pulled up, she says, “Too short. All right, take it off.”

Glad to be free of the itchy, hot fabric, I tug it over my head and thrust it back at her. Then I walk to the balcony door and stand outside, drawing in several gulps of sticky southern air.

It’s Sempra now. It could be snowing at home.

The image of Lawrence and Clover cozy by a fire, her head on his shoulder and his hand stroking her back makes my stomach revolt.

They’re engaged—officially. Royally. And now the date of their wedding is set.

Groaning, I shove my good hand into my hair, and my fingers twist in the strands as I try to force the image out of my mind. With a groan, I lean forward and rest my forehead on the iron rail. I give myself just a few seconds to mourn everything I’ve

lost, and then I straighten and return inside.

I can't dwell on events that haven't yet come to pass, especially when I have very present worries.

3

CLOVER

The thwack the arrow makes when it meets the target is highly satisfying, and I shoot again and again, ignoring the way the cold bites at my numbing fingers and makes my lungs feel like I'm breathing in shards of frozen air.

It hasn't snowed yet, but I smell it coming. The clouds are thick and dark, scented with a crisp brightness that can only mean it's imminent.

"It's cold," Pranmore says from my side, huddled under his heavy cloak. "You should go inside."

After spending most of his life in temperate Dulane, the Woodmore still hasn't adjusted to the cooler region.

I eye him curiously. "Pranmore, how is it you are comfortable wearing wool?"

Looking frozen half to death, he answers, "I thanked the sheep for its gift, and all is fine. It went on its merry way, and I went on mine."

I blink at him. "Is that one of your poems?"

"It's an old Woodmore saying."

I'm not sure what to make of that, but then again, Pranmore still baffles me more often than not. I'm grateful for him, though. So grateful.

"You'll freeze out here, Your Highness."

I pull another arrow from my quiver and nock it into my bow. "Don't call me that."

"Even if I use your name, it doesn't change who you are," he answers.

Now that I'm engaged to Lawrence, my rank has been honorarily elevated. It's a strange human tradition, one that came from our ancestors' kingdom of Calendria. I am now a princess of Caldenbauer, in title if not blood.

No one less is worthy of marrying our king.

At one time, I would have lorded my new status over Camellia, but now...everything is different.

"I don't feel like a princess." I shoot, but this time the arrow misses its mark, and the sting in my hand becomes too painful to ignore.

"You look like one."

Hesitantly, I touch the circlet nestled into my hair, burdened by its presence. It's just a simple gold band, nothing ornate, but people treat me differently because of it. "I'm an imposter."

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“An imposter?” Pranmore asks, following me to the target. He assists me as I pull arrows from the coiled straw mat, replacing them in my quiver himself.

“I have no intention of marrying the king.”

He watches me with his dark brown eyes, too knowing for my liking.

“Lawrence isn’t the king yet,” Bartholomew says from a few spots down, fighting to nock an arrow in his bow. Despite the fumbling, he’s getting better. He almost hit the bullseye today. “Not until tonight.”

We’re mere hours away from Lawrence’s coronation. He’s been locked away with his council for most of the day. I should be with him, but I claimed a headache and napped for less than fifteen minutes before I escaped to the bailey for fresh air.

It wasn’t an excuse. The tension still sits heavy on my shoulders, radiating up my neck and into the back of my skull. Pranmore warned the cold air could make it worse, and he was right as usual.

“You’re bleeding,” Pranmore says mildly.

Startled, I look down at my hand. Sure enough, the long practice was too much.

“Let’s go inside, and I’ll tend it for you,” Pranmore urges.

Bartholomew follows us. Together, we leave the practice yard, and people watch as we enter the castle through the side entrance.

From the looks we get, I imagine we make a funny group, but I don't care. Pranmore and Bartholomew understand. They are the only people who miss Henrik like I do.

Well, maybe not exactly like I do, but just as much.

No one questions their constant presence at my side, likely because Lawrence approves. He knows he has nothing to fear from the Woodmore elf or his young cousin.

We enter the quarters Lawrence gave Pranmore—a spacious trio of rooms in the physician's wing.

Pranmore pauses when we step inside, startled to find someone waiting for him.

Minda rises from the bench near the window, her hands fluttering self-consciously at her waist. The Woodmore elf is like Pranmore, with pretty freckled spots on her temples and fawnish brown hair. She has antlers as well, but hers are two petite spikes that poke out from her hair, where Pranmore sports a full, impressive rack.

Though, believe me, you don't want to comment on them.

“Hello, Minda,” Pranmore says when he recovers from his surprise, ushering Bartholomew and me inside. “Are you injured or feeling ill? Have you come for treatment?”

It's not a shock she's here. Pranmore opened this entertaining area for waiting patients, though many in the castle are still wary of the elf.

“I thought you might like to join me...” Minda's eyes move to me as if looking for support, and I give her an encouraging nod. She swallows and looks back at Pranmore. In a horrible rush, she finishes, “I was hoping you might like to walk in the

tea garden—but it seems you’ve just been outside, and I imagine you’re chilled, and it’s already so late, and I need to go.”

She hurries from the room, leaving Pranmore looking befuddled. When she’s gone, he turns to me. “What...what was that about?”

I want to tell him not to be daft, but Minda is shy enough she might never forgive me if I explain to Pranmore exactly why she’s like that around him.

Bartholomew only shrugs as he takes Minda’s recently vacated seat and stares out the window at the sleeping garden below. The colorful autumn foliage has fallen from the trees and bushes, leaving branches bare, and the summer flowers have gone brown. It looks like winter now.

“Sit down, Clover,” Pranmore instructs, gesturing toward a chair at the small tea table. “I’ll fix your hand.”

I wince as he works, never quite growing used to the pinch and pull of his magic.

Once he’s finished, Pranmore releases my hand and sits back. “You should consider wearing gloves next time.”

I nod absently, thinking of the pair of soft leather ones Mother bought for me when I turned seventeen. She said a lady shouldn’t have calloused hands. I suppose a princess shouldn’t either.

A queen even more so.

I shudder at the thought, acknowledging how close I’ve come to my life’s goal. Apparently, I set the plan into action even better than I realized.

Pranmore studies me, and the furrow in his brow betrays he doesn't like what he sees.
“Why don't you lie down? This evening will be tiring.”

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I nod, now tired enough I might be able to sleep for a bit. My insomnia has been so bad lately, I've found it's been a little easier in the daylight hours. At night, I spend my time staring at the ceiling and hoping I won't dream of Henrik when I doze. The dreams are too painful.

Instead of leaving, I lay my head on the table, pillowing my cheek on my arm. "Perhaps I'll rest here for a bit."

"You would be more comfortable in your bed," Pranmore says gently.

I close my eyes, already feeling the tug of exhaustion pulling on my eyelids. "I sleep better when I'm not alone."

I sense Bartholomew and Pranmore's worry even with my eyes closed.

"At least lie down on the settee—"

Pranmore is interrupted by a knock on the outer chamber door.

He answers, looking prepared to send the visitor away, but he pauses instead, listening to whatever the person has to say.

He then glances into the room, concerned. "Your friends have come looking for you. They're here to help you prepare for the coronation."

"Has it already grown that late?" I ask as I straighten, my stomach twisting with apprehension. "Wait...what friends?"

Calla steps into the room with Lavender, Hyacinth, and several ladies' maids. She gives me a sympathetic look before she frowns at my wind-blown hair and haven't-slept-in-days appearance. "It's going to take a while to make you look presentable."

I sigh, knowing there's no point in arguing. But I pause as my eyes drift over the additional ladies. Calla and I are friends—I know why she's come. But I've never been particularly close to any of my other fellow ladies-in-waiting.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

Lavender and Hyacinth exchange a look before Calla answers, "Lawrence requested we transfer our duties to you since it doesn't seem likely Camellia will return."

"To me?" I say dumbly.

Calla widens her eyes, silently begging me not to make a fuss.

"All right," I say, resigned.

Perhaps it won't be so bad. After all, these three chose not to accompany the princess to Ferradelle, and it's not as if I don't know them well enough.

Once Henrik returns, I'll shed my honorary title and the ladies, but for now, I'll play the part.

"I have an errand to run, so I will now take my leave." Pranmore bows his head and then gestures for Bartholomew to follow him from the room. "Please remain as long as you would like. You are always welcome, Your Highness."

I watch the pair leave sullenly. Though I want to call them back and beg them to stay, I'm going to have to get through the next few hours on my own.

As soon as they're gone, Lavender giggles. "Are you having a fling with the Woodmore, Clover?"

I barely resist the temptation to throw my circlet at her. "We're friends, you great gossip. And he transferred a life debt to me."

Looking disappointed, she stares wistfully at the door. "I've always wondered what it would be like to kiss a Woodmore."

Looking equally intrigued, Calla says, "Do you think his antlers would get in the way?"

The maids stand in the corner, trying not to laugh. They seem taken with the handsome elf, too.

"I have no desire to find out," I answer. "If you want to know, go chase him down and see if he's open to an experiment."

He wouldn't be.

Calla grins as if imagining it, and then she primly sits opposite me at the tea table and pulls her long, blonde braid over her shoulder. "What do you mean he transferred a life debt to you?"

I haven't told her about Henrik—I haven't told anyone.

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“It doesn’t matter,” I say. “You’re here to help me dress for the coronation. We might as well go back to my rooms and begin.”

“She’s right.” Hyacinth grins as she nudges my shoulder. “If we start now, we might have Clover presentable in time.”

* * *

King Algernon’s steward opens Lawrence’s door when I knock, smiling when he sees my ladies and me. “Hello, Your Highness.”

The greeting makes my smile freeze on my face, and I remind myself he’s no longer Algernon’s steward, but Lawrence’s. And I am no longer a mere lady-in-waiting.

“Prince Lawrence is expecting you,” he says.

Lawrence appears behind him, stepping into the doorway. “I’d like a moment with Clover.”

When I see the prince in his coronation finery, my greeting catches in my throat. He looks very much like a young king. Tears sting my eyes for no reason I can name, and I realize if I’m not careful, I will undo all the work the ladies and their maids put into me.

“Of course.” The steward bows his head as he steps past me into the hall. “I will return when it’s time to leave.”

Before the man has the words out of his mouth, Lawrence grabs my wrist and drags me into the room. To the ladies behind me, he says, “I’ll return Clover to you soon.”

They giggle, likely thinking the moment is more romantic than it is.

“We’ll wait for you near the back entrance to the great hall,” Calla says as they leave.

“That’s fine.” Lawrence firmly shuts the door and then releases me. With a shaky grin, he gestures to his burgundy velvet doublet. It’s studded with gems and embroidered with gold—very different from his everyday attire. “What do you think? Do I look kingly?”

His face is pale next to his light copper hair, and his eyes are too wide.

“You can do this,” I say softly, ignoring his bravado.

His expression dims, and he rubs a hand over his eyes. “I’m not ready.”

“I don’t think you have a choice.”

He drops his hand, frowning slightly. “Aren’t you supposed to offer encouragement at a time like this?”

I smile. “I thought the truth might be more helpful in this case.”

Slowly, his eyes travel over me. Minda prepared a silken dress in dark emerald, with long, fitted sleeves and a high neckline with a sweetheart cutout that keeps it modern. I’ve worn it before—I stood in Camellia’s place for the final fittings several months ago.

How fortunate we wear the same size.

“You look beautiful.” He pinches my sleeve between his finger and thumb, rubbing the fabric as he studies me. “I’ve always liked you in green. It brings out the fire in your eyes.”

“You’re going to be a fine king,” I tell him quietly. “You know that, don’t you?”

A self-deprecating smile flickers over his face. “I will be an adequate king at best, but no one will care. The people will be blinded by my beautiful queen, seeing nothing but her. It’s a devious plan, but I think it’s going to work.”

“You’re ridiculous,” I whisper, feeling that all-too-familiar, painful hitch in my chest.

The prince sets his hands on my sides and pulls me into him. His light brown eyes meet mine, pleading. “Let me pretend you’re mine—just for tonight.”

“Lawrence…”

“Let me pretend that you love me.”

I set my hand on his cheek. “I do love you, and I know you’re going to get through this.”

Surprising me, he leans into my touch and closes his eyes. “Say it again, but this time, try to make it sound less like you’re talking to one of your brothers.”

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I breathe out a quiet laugh and remove my hand. “You know where my heart lies.”

Lawrence opens his eyes partway, studying me with a hint of a smirk. “If I can’t have your heart, I could be placated with other parts of you, you know.”

I cock my head to the side. “Have you always been this horrid, or was it a learned trait?”

He laughs, genuinely amused. And then his expression becomes solemn. Dropping his voice, he says, “It’s not a crime for me to desire you, Clover. We are engaged.”

“On paper.”

He takes a step closer. “If Henrik returns, I will give you up—but only because it’s what you want. It has nothing to do with a lack of devotion on my part.”

I know what this is, even if Lawrence doesn’t. He’s terrified, and he’s always soothed his anxiety or boredom in the arms of a woman. Determined to be faithful, he’s resisted the urge to seek someone out, so now I am the only option.

Oddly, it reassures me our friendship is solid. Lawrence respects me enough to deprive himself, and I acknowledge the sacrifice, as ridiculous as it may seem.

I raise an eyebrow. “If your affection runs so deep, why didn’t you pledge your love sooner? Why waste your time chasing after so many other women?”

He grins. “Would you believe I was terrified by the depths of my emotions?”

“I wouldn’t.”

He laughs, looking away. “I wouldn’t either.” Then he becomes solemn. “Who would put a man like me on the throne?”

I take his shoulders, giving him a gentle shake. “You’re going to be a brilliant king, Lawrence. You’re feeling suffocated by your past, but as your friend, I know very well there’s more to you than meets the eye.” I tap the royal crest on his chest. “It’s time to rise above your reputation and become the man I know you can be. You’re a phoenix, Lawrence. And you’re going to make me proud.”

Slowly, he smiles. “Do you truly believe that, Clover?”

“I do.”

He offers his arm and huffs out a bolstering breath. “Then let’s go claim a kingdom.”

Nodding, I step up next to him.

We’re almost to the door when Lawrence pauses and turns to me, flashing me a lopsided grin. “What about a kiss for luck?”

“Do you want to accept your crown with a black eye?”

He chuckles as he continues for the door once more. “I’ll take that as a no.”

4

HENRIK

I’ve avoided the smithy, but my father’s presence is like a bur that keeps embedding

itself deeper into my flesh the longer I ignore it.

There are other blacksmiths working today, but the elves make no attempt to stop me as I walk past them and turn down the stairs that lead to a private workroom. It's sweltering in the heat of midday, and the high humidity makes it feel like I'm venturing into the depths of oblivion.

Water seeps through the walls, glistening on the rock and pooling on the floor in several low places. It seems it's impossible to keep the swamp out completely—even the magic-wielding High Elves cannot accomplish it.

Either that or they care little for the comfort of their manual laborers.

The workroom is silent today, making me wonder if Father is out. I pause at the door, looking through the bars. The forge sleeps, and the room is dark.

Trying to decide if I care enough to wait, I loiter for a minute.

I hear the telltale sound of the resident smith descending the stairs long before he announces himself—the shuffle, thud, shuffle, thud of his wooden leg meeting the stone steps and echoing in the stairwell.

I cringe at the familiar sound, my hand balling into a fist, and I immediately wish I hadn't come.

“Henrik?” a rough voice says.

I turn to face my father, saying nothing.

His eyes travel over me, but there’s no warmth in his expression. “I wondered when you’d finally show your face.”

He brushes past me, pulling a key from his heavy work apron. With a creak of the hinges, the door swings open.

“All high and mighty now, aren’t you?” he continues. “Serving the princess herself.”

“It seems I’m not the only one.” I follow him in, working my jaw. I know what I truly want to say—I want to ask how he could blindly follow Camellia and then demand he tell me what he was thinking creating all those talvernum necklaces.

I want to ask him if he knew one was intended for his daughter’s throat.

But I know even he’s not that wretched. He was blinded by money and glory, thinking he was finally doing something worthwhile. Something to take pride in.

“You gonna talk, boy, or did you come to stare at me?” Father says gruffly as he turns back to face me. His eyes drop to my injured arm, but he doesn’t mention it.

“Did you finish the armor you were creating for Camellia?” I ask.

He begins straightening his workspace, gathering tools and scraps of metal. “About a

week ago. I've already given it to the princess."

"What did she want it for?"

He glances up, his eyes partially hidden under his heavy graying eyebrows. "It's a wedding gift for the duke."

"Why would she have you make such a thing?"

"How should I know?"

"You made it from a talvernum alloy, just as you made the necklaces."

"Who am I to question the princess?" Father sneers. "She provided the materials, and I did as I was asked—for a lot better pay than Algernon ever gave me, I'll tell you that."

"What good could possibly come from talvernum necklaces?" I demand. "You realize they can be charmed, don't you?"

"Wouldn't be a point in using the metal if that weren't the intention."

Growing irritated with his complete lack of concern, I step forward and lower my voice. "And when you agreed to make all these, did you know Camellia is a sorceress? Did you realize she's been using blood magic?"

Father glances up to make sure he won't be overheard, but he doesn't meet my eyes. "What do I care what she has planned for the elves?"

Shaking my head, I turn to go, wondering how much Father knows of Camellia's plans but unable to bring myself to ask him. My stomach feels hollow, and I'm afraid

I'll lose what little respect I have left for him if I learn more.

I pause as I step through the door. "She gave a necklace to Brielle."

"What?" Father says sharply, finally showing some emotion. "Your sister is at Dulnmarin's."

"She's here. Camellia fetched her from school and is using her to control me with one of the necklaces you created."

I leave without waiting for his answer.

* * *

I've barely stepped into my quarters when an impatient knock sounds at the door. I glance around before answering it, making sure Maisel isn't here.

When I'm confident the gnome is absent, I open the door. Immediately, Camellia pushes her way inside. She shoves her hands through her golden hair and groans like the day has been too long.

"Please, come inside, Your Highness," I deadpan, wishing my patience was infinite.

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The princess turns back and gives me a coy smile, but it's tinged with frustration. We've found ourselves in a strange, antagonistic relationship.

Camellia doesn't trust me, and I loathe everything about her, especially the fact that I was so blinded by her pretty face at one time. When I look at her now, I see my weakness—I see a cruel, selfish woman who wrapped me around her finger, and it fills me with shame.

"I've never met such an infuriating man," she seethes.

I study her with little feeling. "Are you referring to the duke or me?"

She lets out a mirthless laugh and then wanders the small room.

"It doesn't have to be like this between us, Henrik." After a few seconds, she turns her bright blue eyes on me. "We could be so much more."

"You have taken my family prisoner, Your Highness. Explain how different things could be."

She clenches her hands into fists. "Stop saying that. I rescued them from their miserable existence. Everything I've done, I've done for you. You'll see it eventually."

"You put a poisoned necklace around my sister's neck...for me?"

Camellia rolls her eyes, looking genuinely frustrated. "Only because you gave me no choice. Do you have any idea how much it pains me that you've made me resort to

such a thing?”

“Do you even hear yourself?” I demand, stepping forward. “Camellia.”

She crosses the room to face me, her eyes pleading. “Tell me you love me, Henrik. Pledge your sword and swear your allegiance, and I will remove your sister’s necklace.”

I snort out a laugh, looking away. “And if I lie?”

“You wouldn’t lie.” She grasps my uninjured arm, and I clench my jaw, resisting the urge to shove her away. “If you made the vow, you’d honor it. I know that.”

I meet her gaze and deadpan, “I love you. I pledge my sword and swear my allegiance.”

Her face crumples like an angry child’s, and suddenly, she slaps me. The sound echoes in the small room, startling though not unexpected. It’s not the first time she’s struck me since she chained me to her side.

“Don’t toy with me, Henrik,” Camellia warns, her eyes glossy. “And don’t vow empty words while your eyes curse me.”

I lean forward and say harshly, “Then don’t ask for something you know I won’t give you.”

“I could kill your sister,” she says softly, running the tip of her finger down my chest. “Right now, without even being in the same room. For all you know, Brielle is gasping for breath as we speak.”

“Camellia.” I grab her wrist, stilling her hand. My stomach rolls as I bow my head to

her. "Please."

"Apologize."

"I'm sorry."

"On your knee, commander."

I immediately drop, turning my face to the floor.

"Say it again," she commands.

I nearly choke on my anger, but somehow, I manage to sound remorseful. "I'm sorry, Your Highness."

Temporarily placated, Camellia sets her hand on my head. Thoughts of Brielle are the only thing keeping me from flinching away.

"Your sister is fine." She strokes my hair. "But don't forget the power I wield."

I look up, careful to keep my expression blank.

"And stop fighting me, Henrik," she says. "It might not feel like it now, but I'm standing before you, offering the world. I've chosen you. Don't you understand?"

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Slowly, I stand. As I rise, my eyes fall on her dagger. The steel glints in the lamplight, taunting me. Begging me to take it.

To finish this madness.

Camellia's eyes follow my gaze, and then she laughs. With a subtle, twisted smile, she pulls the dagger from its sheath and offers it to me. "What wicked thoughts are you having, Henrik?"

I look away, hating myself.

She takes my left hand and shoves the hilt of the dagger into it, wrapping my fingers tightly with her own. Then she steps forward, pressing the tip of the blade against her breast. "You want to kill me?"

I try to yank away, but she holds me tightly.

"Do it," she purrs, jerking my hand forward.

"Camellia, stop."

"Do it if you want to." Her eyes are mad as they dance over my face. "You're one breath away from freeing yourself, but can you kill an unarmed woman? Can you murder me, valiant soldier?"

And for one terrifying moment, I waver. My hand presses forward, and Camellia's eyes widen.

“Do it,” she taunts again at a fevered whisper. “If that’s what you want, I’ll die for you. That’s how deep my devotion goes.”

Her slap still stings, as does the humiliating way she continually pets me like a dog and threatens my sister’s death. She is a wretched human being, a threat to all Caldenbauer.

“Kill me,” she whispers. “Murder is powerful, Henrik. See for yourself.”

With a growl, I yank the dagger from her hands and heave it across the room, stepping away and breathing hard.

Blood seeps into Camellia’s gown, oozing from a slice that didn’t go far enough to cause real damage. She looks down, pressing her finger against the small cut in her bodice, and then she laughs. Her fingers are stained with her own blood, and she rubs them against her thumb, entranced.

My stomach heaves at the sight, and doubt makes me break into a cold sweat.

Did I miss my opportunity? Will I regret this moment?

“Now we know where we stand.” Camellia steps up so close, I can feel her breath on my skin. Running her stained fingers over my neck, she whispers, “You cannot kill me, and I won’t let you go. Do you know what that means?”

I gulp, trying to control the bile that rises in my throat.

She stands on her tiptoes, her lips far too close to my own. “You belong to me, Henrik. Chained, bound. Mine.”

CLOVER

I suppress a yawn, knowing full well I'm on display and must at least appear somewhat invested in the historical event taking place before me. And perhaps I was in the beginning.

But I didn't realize that historical moments are quite this boring.

We've been in the throne room for almost two hours now, surrounded by most of the noblemen and women of the kingdom, along with all the high-ranking soldiers in the royal military.

A trio of honored scholars have taken turns blathering on about this and that—basically giving a history lesson even though we're all well-aware of our heritage.

I glance at Lawrence, wondering how he's faring upon his throne, but he stares at the present speaker, every muscle in his body tensed, his mind likely on his father's newly buried body.

Algernon now rests in a new marble tomb in the royal crypt, along with his ancestors, including Telgin, the great Phoenix King who freed us from the High Vale's tyranny.

I sit near Lawrence on the dais, surrounded by my poor ladies who have been forced to stand. If I'd known there wouldn't be proper seating, I would have demanded extra chairs be placed before the ceremony.

Lavender shifts, obviously growing weary. She's prone to dizzy spells when she doesn't eat, and with all the excitement, I'm not sure she remembered to feed herself. I finally decide that propriety can be cursed—it's better than the poor girl fainting dead away. People murmur as I stand, and the speaker turns, startled by the

interruption. I press on Lavender's shoulder, wordlessly telling her to take the seat, and then I motion for the man to continue his never-ending lecture.

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Lavender looks like she'd like to protest, but she doesn't dare make a fuss in front of this esteemed crowd. She sits, pasting a smile on her face, and I take her place next to Calla.

After several seconds, I look back at Lawrence and find him smirking at me, perhaps glad for the small interruption.

And then, my father appears at the entrance of the throne room with King Algernon's crown resting on a red, tasseled pillow.

A collective breath is taken as he walks up the aisle, his footsteps silent on the plush runner.

I glance at Lawrence and find the blood has drained from his handsome face, leaving him looking pale and terrified.

My heart goes out to my friend who doesn't feel he's ready for this cloak of responsibility.

The bishop moves into position next to Lawrence. When my father reaches him, he takes the crown.

"Prince Lawrence Telgin Gevaldry," the man begins solemnly, "son of King Algernon Gevaldry, direct descendent of Telgin, the great Phoenix King, the day has come for you to claim your birthright."

Lawrence swallows, looking straight ahead.

“By the power vested in me, I crown you the sovereign king of Caldenbauer.”

Lawrence sits straight and tall, flinching only slightly when the crown settles upon his head.

“May the kingdom prosper under your rule and your days be long.” The bishop bows his head to Lawrence and then steps to the side.

Father comes to the front to address the waiting audience. “Stand.”

The crowd does as they are directed, with their eyes on our new king.

“I present to you Lawrence Telgin Gevaldry, King of Caldenbauer. Swear your allegiance and bow before him now.”

And like a wave, the people fall. Women drop into deep curtsies and men lower on bended knees.

Lawrence stands, taking in the moment, looking overwhelmed as he surveys the nobility solemnly. After several seconds, he says, “You may rise.”

His voice rings throughout the throne room, strong and sure, and I nearly burst with pride.

He turns to me, extending his hand. I immediately join him, smiling to tell him how well he’s doing. His fingers squeeze mine as if grateful I’m by his side, and then we turn forward once more.

“Those who wish to be considered for my guard, come forward,” Lawrence says, continuing the ceremony.

We're nearing the end now.

At least fifty men are here for this moment, including my brothers. They are a mix of noble-born sons sent from their houses and high-ranking soldiers eager to make their mark in history, each hoping to gain His Majesty's favor and secure his spot as one of the elite. They come before the dais, the noblemen standing in the colors of their houses and the soldiers wearing their military best, all handsome and proud.

But my heart bleeds because Henrik is absent. He belongs here, fighting for his seal, and it absolutely destroys me. I lift my chin, refusing to show weakness in front of the court.

Looking even more nervous than Lawrence, Bartholomew steps forward to address the men who will be under his command one day. It was decided that he should oversee this part of the ceremony even though he's too young to claim his position as royal duke marshal.

He glances at me nervously, looking for support. I give him a small smile, subtly nodding him along. After taking a deep breath, he turns to the men.

"You have all served King Algernon valiantly, and the royal family thanks you for your dedication and sacrifice. King Lawrence will now bestow seals upon his chosen elite. They will rise above their peers and stand as the king's personal guard. It is not an honor to take lightly. If any of you believe you should not hold the position, please step down."

No one so much as flinches.

Colter catches my eye, my ridiculous brother grinning at me. Denny elbows him in the side, reminding him this is a sober occasion. Immediately, Colter rips his eyes forward, but he doesn't completely mask his mirth.

My eyes scan the rest of the gathering. The knights who served on Algernon's personal guard have been retired with honors, though several requested to be considered for Lawrence's guard as well.

I take a deep breath, wishing...

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But it doesn't matter what I wish.

"Miguel of House Galdega," Lawrence says to no one's surprise. The sealed knight served Algernon, and he and Lawrence are good friends.

The audience claps as Miguel steps forward to stand behind Lawrence.

"Denny of House Flauret," Lawrence continues.

My brother blinks, startled to receive the honor. Colter has to shove him forward, surprising him out of his stupor. I clap furiously with the others as he bows before the king and joins Miguel.

"Alfred of House Sumner and Xander of House Yalnen," Lawrence finishes.

There's a pause, followed by a buzz of murmurs. Father clears his throat, stepping close so only Lawrence and I may hear him. "Your Majesty, the king's guard usually consists of five men."

Lawrence glances at me, looking burdened. "I'd like to keep one spot open."

My heart warms, and my eyes gloss with tears. I barely manage to blink them back, determined not to shame myself in front of this vast audience.

Father frowns with confusion. "Of course, that is your choice."

Lawrence nods. "Please complete the ceremony."

I stand quietly, smiling for the people while desperately wanting to drag Lawrence somewhere private to thank him.

Finally, the coronation is over.

I accept Lawrence's offered arm, and we walk down the aisle, followed by the king's new personal guard.

We end up in a small, private room. Before I can speak with Lawrence, he must address his knights.

"Congratulations on a successful coronation, Your Majesty," Miguel says.

"Did you worry we'd run into trouble?" Lawrence asks, seeming at ease around these men he considers friends.

Solemnly, Miguel answers, "I think we all worried your sister would show up."

The others nod. They weren't all in Revalane, but rumors have a way of spreading through the court like wildfire.

"Congratulations," I say to Denny. "Mother was so proud she began to cry. Did you see?"

He gives me an ornery grin. "Never mind Mother. Do you think Gavriel shed a few tears?"

"Possibly," I laugh, "but for a different reason, I'm sure."

"Your eldest brother has his own retinue to command," Lawrence says. "He'll get over it."

“Why four?” Xander asks, stealing my question.

He’s the sixth son of a wealthy lord from Ladora, almost as serious and dedicated as Henrik.

I turn to Lawrence, holding my breath as I wait for his answer.

“I want to keep my options open,” the new king hedges.

I narrow my eyes at him, knowing he’s bluffing.

“Go on.” Lawrence jerks his head toward the door, dismissing his knights. “They should be starting the feast. I need to speak with Clover for a moment, and then we’ll join you.”

Before they go, I catch Denny’s arm and make him stand for a hug. “I’m truly happy for you.”

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He smiles, nodding once. “Who would have thought the day would come that I’d have to serve my little sister? Appalling, isn’t it?”

I shake my head, trying not to laugh. “Just horrible.”

Denny is the last to leave, and before he goes, he bows his head to Lawrence one last time.

When we’re alone, I say, “Thank you, Lawrence. You’ve honored my family.”

“Denny earned the position with merit. I am glad to have him at my back.”

I cock my head to the side. “And the fifth position?”

He looks away. “What about it?”

“Who are you holding it for?”

When he looks back, he gives me a cocky grin. “I told you—I just want to keep my options open.”

“It’s for Henrik.”

Quickly, he shakes his head. “No.”

“You are a good man, Lawrence.”

“It’s not his spot,” he insists, but we both know.

I sigh, conflicted. “You’ve done a terrible thing.”

He eyes me. “What’s that?”

“I’m afraid you’re growing as a person, and I don’t know what to do with this new side of you.”

He grins, stepping in. “Did your heart skip a beat? Am I making you waver?”

“It stuttered a little,” I tease. “But I’m not wavering.”

“Yet.”

I roll my eyes, laughing despite myself. “Are you ready to join your feast, Your Majesty?”

He rubs his stomach. “I don’t think I could eat.”

“Me either.” I offer my hand. “But let’s go push things about on our plates.”

6

CLOVER

The coronation was a week ago, and Lawrence is slowly settling into his new role. I, however, feel like an imposter sitting in the seat beside him. This spot should be reserved for the true queen-to-be, whoever she might be.

Not me.

And after sitting through three hours of this wretched council meeting, I couldn't be more sure about my decision to give up my chance at the crown. Lawrence, his advisors, several high-ranking noblemen, and his personal guard have debated and argued, no one having a clear answer about what should be done about Camellia.

Lawrence is at the head of the table, and I am seated to his right. An empty teacup rests in front of me, along with a porcelain plate and crumbs left from a shortbread biscuit. A maid will clear the dishes soon, and not for the first time.

Apparently, we're stuck here until Lawrence makes a decision.

"Camellia attacked Clover," Gavriel exclaims, growing frustrated as he sits back in his chair and crosses his arms. "She openly used blood magic. With all due respect, Your Majesty, you can't ignore her crimes, even if she is your sister."

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“Gavriel.” Father rubs his temples. “Enough.”

“He has a point, Rodger,” Lord Garamond says. “She’s not just your daughter—Clover is our future queen.”

Lawrence silently listens to the argument, his chin resting on his clasped hands.

“But we mustn’t forget that Camellia is married to Duke Augmirian,” Father adds. “A move against his duchess could be seen as an act of war. It could void the treaty.”

“Considering Camellia has yoked herself to the High Vales,” Gavriel argues, “what she did could be considered a breach of the treaty on their part.”

“I still don’t understand.” Lord Winston shakes his head. “It seems as if the duke is using Camellia. Why do you all make it sound as if she’s the source of the trouble?”

“My sister is not innocent,” Lawrence finally says, drawing every eye in the room. “She was working with Augmirian, and she tried to deceive my father. She’s been using blood magic, she admitted to killing the man who was found in her closet, and she committed an act of treason against the crown. This discussion has nothing to do with her guilt—she is most certainly guilty. It’s whether or not we’re willing to drag the kingdom into war because of it.”

“I doubt she will give up, Your Majesty,” Miguel says, the voice of calm reason in the agitated crowd. The sealed knight shakes his head, looking genuinely pained. “Her plan was thwarted in the worst possible way, but if she’s gone to these lengths, she will regroup.”

Agreeing, Gavriel nods. “And she’s allied with the High Vales, so she has access to their resources.”

“Let’s not forget they’re making war golems,” I add hesitantly. “Even before Duke Augmirian agreed to Camellia’s marriage proposition, he began illegally mining talvernum in the Dorian Mountains. Henrik, Bartholomew, Pranmore, and I saw it ourselves.”

“It’s true,” Bartholomew says.

Pranmore stands near the wall, looking as if he’s unsure he belongs, but he nods as well.

“Where is Henrik?” Lord Garamond asks, and the room goes quiet. “The commander’s name repeatedly comes up, but no one has explained his absence.”

“He remained in Revalane to protect his sister,” Lawrence says. “Camellia has taken her hostage.”

“The princess has taken hostages?” Lord Winston exclaims. “Camellia has prisoners, and we’re not sending in men?”

“It’s complicated,” Lawrence answers, growing agitated. “Pranmore, explain.”

The Woodmore steps up to the table, looking uncomfortable. “The girl wears a talvernum necklace that’s been laced with Camellia’s blood magic. The princess gifted them to all the high-ranking noblewomen of the dukedom, and she can inflict pain or even death through them at will.”

I stare at the table as the men ask him questions, wishing I could run away.

“I heard it was Henrik who attacked Clover,” says Sir Patrick, the retired sealed knight drawing the discussion back to an unwelcome topic. “Is it possible he has defected to the princess?”

“Henrik has very specific orders,” Lawrence says. “He’s working for me.”

“And what orders are those, Sire?” Lord Winston asks.

“He’s placed himself by Camellia’s side, working as my shadow rogue.”

“Henrik?” Gavriel laughs. “A shadow rogue?”

My eldest brother is right—I might laugh myself if I didn’t feel like I was choking. Henrik wasn’t created for deception and spying. He’s too upstanding, too straight and true.

“We are dealing with the situation we were given,” Lawrence snaps, his tone startling more than just me. “And I’m not comfortable making any decisions until Henrik sends me information. My first act as king will not be to drag Caldenbauer back into war.”

“But if we act now—”

“We could kill every elven noblewoman in Revalane,” Lawrence snarls. “I will not put my people in danger until I have more information.”

“Your Majesty—”

“We’re finished.” Lawrence stands. “I want extra patrols along the coasts. Send word to the guard posts and coastal fortresses. If Camellia attacks, I doubt she will come through Heistone. I suspect she will march her soldiers through Doria. Thankfully,

the mountains are impassible this time of year, so that might buy us some time.”

“There are no ports in Doria, Your Majesty,” Sir Patrick argues. “The cliffs—”

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“The High Vales need no ports. Do not underestimate their resourcefulness.”

Lawrence offers me his hand, and I scurry from my seat. Together, we leave the room. Chairs scratch across the floor as his knights hurry to follow.

Just in case someone in attendance missed his subtle signal, Lawrence announces as we walk through the door, “The meeting is over.”

We continue down the hall, closely followed by his guard.

“I need to speak with Clover a minute,” Lawrence says, gesturing into a small study in which he obviously wishes to disappear.

“Allow us to search the room, Your Majesty,” Miguel says, stepping inside with Denny. Xander and Alfred wait with us in the hall as the two make their sweep. Once it’s deemed to be safe, the pair returns.

“Was that really necessary?” Lawrence asks dryly.

Miguel laughs. “Whether it was or not, the room is clear.”

Lawrence rolls his eyes as he escorts me inside. As soon as he closes the door, he sags against the wall, resting his head back as he groans.

I join him, standing shoulder to shoulder. “You did well.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“I’m sure no new king ever does.”

He groans softly. “If I could pluck Camellia out of Revalane without casualty...”

“But you can’t.”

Peering at me from the corner of his eye, he says, “I know.”

We stand in silence for several long seconds, and then I turn to face him. “Is Henrik actually acting as your shadow rogue, or was that an excuse to keep his reputation intact?”

“No, it’s true. But our plan was concocted in less than a minute, and we were far more concerned with your safety than espionage at the time.”

“You work well together considering you both claim to hate the other.”

“I cannot tell you how frustrating it is that so much currently relies on Henrik’s return.” Lawrence shakes his head as if disgusted, but there’s a smile in his voice. “What a truly wretched turn of events.”

“Camellia has done an excellent job of protecting herself,” I say darkly. “What kind of monster do you have to be to use innocent women as a shield?”

“She is a master manipulator. Though we both knew that, didn’t we?”

I let out a mirthless laugh. “It’s too bad no one ever listened.”

Lawrence takes my hand, grasping it in a friendly way. “They are now.”

“They are,” I agree softly.

He turns his head to look at me. “I suppose I should return you to your ladies.”

I roll my eyes. “Speaking of that, I don’t remember asking for an entourage.”

“I knew you’d hate it.” He laughs as he pushes away from the wall and walks to one of the windows. The drapes are pulled back, letting in the late afternoon light.

“I’ve asked Father’s steward to see to your new suite of rooms,” he says after several seconds. “They should be ready soon.”

“My new rooms?” I ask, startled. “Why do I need those?”

The setting sun brings out the red in his hair, and it catches my attention as he turns to look at me. “You’re the queen-to-be, Clover.”

“Not actually.”

“As far as anyone else is concerned.”

I cross my arms, studying him. He’s been acting suspiciously, as if he has no intention of breaking the engagement like he promised.

We’ll have to talk about it soon, but not right now. The day has already been long enough.

* * *

“It’s larger than Camellia’s suite,” Lavender whispers to Hyacinth, loud enough for everyone in attendance to hear her.

And she’s not wrong.

The antechamber opens into a large entertaining area. A set of glass doors lead into a spacious study that’s already full of books and a roomful of feminine furniture upholstered in an ivory fabric with golden leaves stitched into it. The balcony beyond is covered in frost now, but the eastern-facing patio would be a pleasant area to take tea or read in the cool shade of the summer months.

The bedchamber is twice the size of my current one, and the bed’s drapes are made from the same ivory fabric. Gossamer sheers cover the window that looks across the garden for daytime privacy.

I pause in front of a painted scene that takes up most of the north wall. It's a landscape, depicting King Telgin and his queen Hortensia walking in the gardens. It's incredibly detailed, constructed of several panels that are fastened to the wall...and a bit gaudy for my taste.

Turning, I take in the rest of the space. There's even a smaller room off this one for one of my maids. And just like Camellia, I have a spacious closet that could home an entire family but instead holds a selection of gowns.

"What do you think?" Lawrence asks, beaming at me—obviously proud of himself.

"It's lovely," I say. "But don't you think it's a bit much?"

"For my queen? Absolutely not."

We're surrounded by people, so I don't dare correct him, but I shoot him a stern look that he blatantly ignores.

"I had the entire room completely reupholstered to fit your tastes," he continues. "The space was a bit dark before."

A shadow crosses his face before he quickly dismisses it.

I turn to him, glancing at my nearby ladies and deciding they're too enamored with the room to pay me much attention. Stepping close so I won't be overheard, I ask, "This was your mother's room, wasn't it?"

Lawrence wrinkles his nose before he nods. "I suppose it was."

"You suppose?"

When he looks back, he wears an easy smile. “I don’t remember her, Clover. I was little more than a baby when she died.”

“You shouldn’t place me here,” I whisper. “Save this room for your real queen. I’ll just have to return to my old one once this is over, and that seems like far too much fuss.”

He cocks his head, smirking. “You don’t have to.”

“Lawrence—”

“Your Majesty,” the king’s steward says, coming into the room. “Lord Winston wishes to speak to you.”

Lawrence sighs as he looks back at me. “I’ve been summoned.”

Frowning, I jerk my head to the door, telling him he’s free to leave.

Before he goes, he grins. “Take a closer look at the drapes.”

“Why?”

He leaves without answering.

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Curiously, I examine the fabric.

“Oh, isn’t that sweet?” Calla says, joining me.

“They’re little clovers.” Lavender sighs. “He must have had all this made just for you.”

“Who knew Lawrence could be so romantic?” Hyacinth says wistfully.

While they swoon, I look at the closed door Lawrence just passed through, my heart feeling heavy.

* * *

I lie atop my new bed, staring at the clovers on the bed drapes, racked with guilt, when there’s a knock at the wall.

Not the door, mind you, the wall.

Deciding I’ve finally lost my mind, I sit up, straining to hear, and nearly jump when it echoes softly throughout the room again.

“Clover,” Lawrence calls. “Are you decent?”

“Lawrence?” I scramble off the bed. “Where are you?”

Suddenly, a section of the royal garden mural rotates, and the king sticks his head

into my room. He smirks, taking in the gown I wore to dinner. “Apparently, you are too decent.”

Gaping at the wall, I hurry forward. “What is that?”

Lawrence steps inside, letting me inspect the swiveling panel. It’s lightweight, and it pivots right in the center. The other side is painted as well, and when I step into the other room, I find a gargantuan bed and more gilded knickknacks than a person could ever need in their life.

I turn around and discover a mural on this side of the wall as well, this one depicting King Telgin and Hortensia upon their thrones.

“This is your room?” I ask, taking in the space.

Lawrence follows me in, his smile dimming. “I suppose.”

“It was your father’s room,” I correct myself.

Slowly, he nods.

“You don’t sleep in here?”

“I moved in, but I’ve been staying in a guest-chamber on the other side of the suite. Eventually, I suppose I’ll sleep in here.” He gives me a lazy grin. “Maybe when I’m married and need more space.”

“The queen’s bedchamber leads right in here,” I say.

“Scandalous, isn’t it?”

“Hardly. I know little of royal matters, but I never understood why the queen requires a separate set of rooms from her husband.”

“To appear grand,” Lawrence says with a laugh. “Normal couples share a set of rooms in the castle. The king and queen have two.”

I smile, shaking my head.

He jerks his chin toward the open panel. “This is the real reason I moved you in.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I hope you’re not getting any ideas.”

“Oh, Clover, I have so many ideas... But I won’t act upon them if you’re not willing.” He pauses, giving me a wolfish look. “By chance, are you willing?”

“Goodnight, Lawrence.” I walk back through the panel.

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He chuckles, following me into my bedchamber. “I actually thought it might be nice to have a way to visit each other where people won’t be—”

“Hovering?” I interrupt.

Smiling in a friendly way, he nods. “That’s right.”

“You promise you won’t come in unannounced?” I ask warily, scanning the wall for a lock.

“Only to occasionally stare at you while you sleep,” he says in a deep, teasing voice, stepping close so the words tickle my ear.

I swat him back. “You’re ridiculous.”

“I won’t come in unannounced,” he promises, covering his heart with his hand.

Knowing he’s serious this time, I nod. “I won’t either.”

“You see, that’s the difference between you and me.” Lawrence steps into his room. “I didn’t ask for such a promise.”

I inspect the panel once it’s closed, marveling at how it blends in seamlessly with the rest of the painting.

“Now I’m a bit lonely...” Lawrence calls through the wall.

Laughing, I turn around and head toward my bed. “Go to sleep, Your Majesty.”

7

HENRIK

The court physician studies me as he asks me to do multiple exercises. “Extend your arm—good. Now rotate it, twisting your palm up.”

I grit my teeth, knowing something is wrong even though the injury appears to be healed. The bruise is gone, and a scar is all that remains of the laceration, but my arm feels weak—useless. I can move it for the most part, but I have no strength. Even my bicep looks odd, not as it was before the incident.

“I’ve seen enough,” the physician finally says, taking a seat and inviting me to do the same. “I had hoped for a full recovery, but it seems the damage was too severe.”

Master Calphas is an elderly elf, with long gray hair and small spectacles that sit on the bridge of his nose. He’s a kind man, even to the likes of me, but I’m not sure he was overly invested in my care. I belong to Camellia, after all, and rumors about the night the king died have traveled.

The majority of the High Vale people don’t seem comfortable with the dark magic she wields.

“Do you still experience pain?” Calphas asks.

“Not pain, exactly.”

He frowns at my arm. “We can attempt surgery, but I’m afraid it’s too late.”

When he first examined me, Calphias was hesitant to operate upon my arm, hoping it would heal on its own. Like humans, High Vales rely on surgical procedures, ointments, and bandages to provide aid. Woodmores, they are not.

But I suppose that's a blessing. Camellia cannot use me like this.

"I'm thankful you've done so much," I say, "but I must ask—is there a chance I will be able to wield a sword again?"

The physician meets my eyes, pressing his thin lips into a grim smile. "Perhaps you should learn to fight with your other hand."

Resigned, I bow my head in thanks and leave the infirmary.

* * *

The weeks pass, each one a little faster than the last, the days falling into a pattern. Camellia fights with Augmirian, and then she visits me to vent her frustration.

She hasn't commanded I give her physical comfort, likely because she's proud enough to assume I'll come to her eventually.

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She'll die waiting.

Clover and Lawrence's wedding is in only four months now, and word has reached us that the new king and his beautiful bride are knee-deep in preparations.

I'm no closer to escaping Revalane with Brielle than I was the day King Algernon died. Ever since our confrontation in my quarters, Camellia tells me nothing that I wouldn't already hear around the castle.

Not that I'm terribly friendly with those in the palace. Augmirian's men don't trust me, Audra's men question my loyalty to Lawrence, and Dalvin and Bendon resent my presence altogether. The brothers likely believe me unworthy of Camellia's attention, being the lowly son of a mere blacksmith while they are noble sons of a lord. I would gladly let them take my place if I were able.

Despite the tension in the ranks, it's elven custom for the duke and duchess's elite knights to dine together after the duke has retired, and I've fallen into the same routine. I'm addressed rarely, but I listen.

And even though I join them in the evenings, I don't consider myself a knight, no matter what Camellia calls me. She has no authority to elevate my position. Until I wear my seal, I remain a commander.

If I wear my seal.

Now that the king is dead, and I am tethered to the sorceress princess, it seems the chances have become very slim. My entire life's work...

But no. That, too, is something I won't dwell upon.

I stab the potato on my plate, yet again wondering how things have become so bleak—and so quickly at that.

My elven companions look toward the dining hall entrance as Brielle walks inside. They might not trust the princess or me, but no one can hate Brielle. They smile when they see her and then turn back to their meals.

My sister grins as soon as she spots me, hurrying a little faster than is socially acceptable. The cursed necklace is ever-present at her throat, and I lose my appetite at the mere sight of it.

Pushing my meal aside, I stand. “What are you doing here?”

“Did you know Father is in Revalane?” she asks, too innocent to know she should detest the cold man.

My smile freezes, and I glance at the men. They watch, likely because there's nothing better to keep their attention.

“I did,” I say gently, unsure how to navigate this.

Brielle's eyes flicker with hurt that she's not quite able to hide—I'm not even sure she tries. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“He's working for Princess Camellia,” I say carefully. “She's kept him busy.”

Immediately, Brielle's face goes slack, and she glances at our audience as her hand strays to the pendant at her throat. “He's working for Princess Camellia...like you're working for her?”

She has no love for the princess, nor is she delusional enough to think almost dying in the meeting room was an accident.

“Something like that, yes.”

Believing Father is a prisoner in the same way we are, her eyes become glossy. “Am I allowed to see him?”

I want to keep her as far from him as possible. Even I haven’t seen the man since the solitary time we talked in the lower level of the duke’s smithy.

But he’s still our father—and he should see what he’s done. He needs to be held accountable for his actions.

Just as I have.

Reluctantly, I relent. “I’ll take you to him now, but try not to be disappointed if he’s not available for a visit.”

Brielle nods, too eager.

We leave the dining hall, not speaking again until we’re alone.

“Are you all right?” She’s not quite able to look at my face as she asks. “Is your arm...?”

“It’s healed, and I am fine.”

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“Audra said you still can’t use your sword.”

I’m glad she’s been spending time with the elf—Audra is far better company than Camellia.

“It’s not a great loss,” I lie.

My sister glances at me, looking hesitant. “May I ask you something?”

“You may.”

But I wish she wouldn’t.

“Ayan says you’re in love with the woman Camellia—” she stops abruptly, looking around us before she lowers her voice. “The woman Camellia ordered you to kill. Prince Lawrence’s intended.”

The question is more painful than I expect, and I don’t hide my reaction fast enough.

“Oh, Henrik, I’m sorry,” Brielle says hastily. “I didn’t mean to bring up a tender subject.”

I swallow, shaking my head. “I’m fine.”

“Ayan says Prince Lawrence knew your heart, and that he attacked you out of mercy. He said the prince will know you didn’t turn from the crown.”

“Ayan talks a lot, doesn’t he?” I answer curtly, not as eager for Brielle to spend time with that particular elf.

“Is it true?” she asks in a small voice.

I turn to her, studying her before I nod. “I asked Lawrence to intervene should it come to it.”

Her eyes swim. “Why didn’t you save her yourself?”

I let out a long-suffering sigh. “Why are you asking me this when you know the answer?”

She blinks several times. “I shouldn’t have left Dulnmarin’s.”

“As if you had a choice when the princess herself came to fetch you.”

“I could have done something,” she insists, too naïve for her sixteen years.

“You were at her mercy with the rest of us.”

We continue walking, and I nearly groan as we step into the humid night. Evenings should be cooler than the day, but it’s not like that here. The swamp holds the heat, carrying it through morning. There is no respite, even this late in the year.

Brielle steals another glance at me. “Since we’re on the subject, may I ask you something else?”

“And if I refuse?”

She gives me a tentative smile. “I’ll probably ask anyway.”

“Then get on with it.”

“Why did you allow yourself to fall in love with Prince Lawrence’s intended? That’s not like you at all.”

“We didn’t know,” I say darkly. “You learned at the same time as us.”

“You didn’t know?”

“Lawrence didn’t bother to share the information with Clover or me.”

Instead, he let us carry on like fools.

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It's late when we reach the dark forge—hopefully, Father will have retired for the night. I have no idea where he sleeps, nor can I say I care.

We enter the hot building, but Brielle doesn't flinch from the heat or the sooty filth. She was raised in a smithy, and she knows what they are like.

Unfortunately, the clang of a hammer meeting metal drifts up the stairs, telling me Father is working late.

Brielle descends the steps by my side, looking increasingly nervous. It's been well over a year since she's seen Father, and if it were up to me, that stretch would be longer.

He never hurt her, nor did she endure the verbal abuse I became accustomed to, but he was far from a good parent. He ignored her for the most part, working long hours, chastising her when our house wasn't clean enough or the food to his liking.

I believe she reminds him of Mother, and he's too cowardly to face his pain, so he runs from it.

She pauses at the bottom of the stairs, grabbing my arm. "Do you think Father will be angry if we interrupt his work?"

"We don't have to do this, Brielle."

She steels herself, standing straighter, reminding me of someone. Someone who I'm afraid is me.

Stepping forward, she raps firmly on the wooden door.

The sound of hammering is replaced with the thud of Father's wooden leg. He comes to the door, spotting me first.

"Henrik." He unlocks the door and shoves it open. And then he sees Brielle.

He comes to a standstill, his eyes falling to the necklace at her throat. Slowly, he shakes his head and whispers, "No."

"I'm so glad to see you," Brielle says, her eyes wide and bright, looking like a small child hoping for approval and love.

Gruffly, Father clears his throat. "Why aren't you in school?"

Brielle blinks. "I..."

"Does the money that Henrik spends on you every month mean nothing to you?" He turns away from us and ventures deeper into the room. "You think you can take a holiday on a whim?"

He's angry with himself, probably scared too, but he doesn't have a right to take it out on his daughter.

I step forward, placing my hand on Brielle's shoulder as she composes herself. "The princess fetched her. You expect Brielle to turn down a royal order?"

Father looks back at me, his eyes dark as he draws into himself. He picks up the hammer and returns to his work, hitting the cooling metal with more force than necessary.

“Father...” Brielle says, looking like she’s going to cry.

I knew this was a mistake.

Nudging her toward the stairs, I say, “Let’s go.”

Suddenly, Father lets out a guttural cry and heaves the hammer across the room. It hits the wall and falls to the floor, creating a horrible racket. Brielle flinches, stepping partially behind me.

But Father doesn’t yell and rage. He crosses the room and presses his hands to a workbench, hunched over as he takes ragged breaths. After a moment, he asks, “What does it do?”

“The princess can force magic into it,” I say heavily, knowing he’s speaking of the necklace. “And if Brielle tries to remove it, it will kill her.”

Father turns back, his face scrunched under his heavy graying beard. He turns to Brielle. His voice shakes as he asks, “Has she hurt you?”

Immediately, Brielle shakes her head. “I’m fine—”

“The night King Algernon died, Camellia tried to suffocate her.”

Father rips off his gloves and throws them on the bench. He then rubs his face, looking haggard.

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“Do you have any idea how they work?” I ask, deciding it’s as good a time as any to broach the subject. “A clue as to how to remove it?”

Father swears under his breath, making Brielle flinch. “I just made them. It’s a talvernum alloy, but you know that already. How would I know how magic works?”

Looking small and terrified, Brielle breaks away from me and walks forward. Father watches her from the corner of his eye, unable to bring himself to look at her directly.

She wraps her fingers over his arm, saying nothing. He clears his throat and then pats her hand roughly—as much affection as I’ve ever seen him give. Gruffly, he says, “Go now. I’m busy.”

Brielle nods and walks back to me. Her eyes are red, but she stoically holds in the tears.

“If you think of anything that might help...” I say to him. “Anything at all...”

“I’ll find you,” he grunts.

I know he doesn’t want to let us see him break. Taking pity on him, I usher Brielle out the door.

“There’s a strange rumor circling,” Calla says as she settles next to me on a bench in the indoor practice arena. It snowed last night, and most of the knights have decided to exercise inside.

There are no windows in the space, but the ice-laden skylights let in light. With nothing better to do, I huddle under my cloak and watch Lawrence spar with the others, bored to death.

Lavender and Hyacinth immediately perk up, intrigued by Calla’s announcement, and they turn on the bench to face us.

“And what’s that?” I ask, though I’m not sure I want to know.

Calla leans in, her eyes practically sparkling. “Some people are saying you and Henrik had a fling while you were gallivanting across the kingdom.”

“Who are people?” I demand.

Calla’s eyes brighten with mischievous glee. “Hyacinth overheard Gavriel talking to Denny.”

“Don’t toss me into the fire!” Hyacinth exclaims, horrified.

I turn to face her, rolling my eyes. “I’m not going to send you to the stocks.”

“Is it true?” Lavender asks, her dark blue eyes wide. “Did you and Henrik...” She bites her lip, eagerly waiting for my reply.

They likely don’t realize they’re prodding an open wound.

It’s times like these I miss Pranmore and Bartholomew’s company. Ever since this

trio has been assigned to me, I've seen them little.

I look away, shrugging.

"It is true!" Calla exclaims. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Are you in love with him?" Hyacinth whispers, her eyes dewy with what might be actual concern.

Before I can answer either of them, Lavender clutches her hands to her chest and exclaims in a loud whisper, "How romantic."

I sit back on the bench. "Xander is doing well today. He's bested Miguel and Lawrence with the short sword, and that's usually one of his weaker weapons."

"Clover," Calla exclaims.

I look at my ladies-in-waiting, glaring. "Fine. Yes, it was romantic. Yes, I am in love with him. And I didn't tell you, Calla, because it's painful."

Surprise flickers across their faces—apparently, none were prepared for an honest answer.

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“What about Lawrence?” Calla asks quietly.

“Lawrence and I are friends,” I say testily, watching the prince as he ducks an attack and then boots Jove off balance. The knight falls, and the men laugh. “You know that.”

Lawrence looks over, smirking when he sees me watching. He gives me a flirtatious bow and then returns to his practice, looking for his next opponent.

“Lately, he hasn’t been looking at you like you’re a friend,” Hyacinth muses. “And he hasn’t been making his rounds, either.”

“I don’t know why you all let him play with you like that,” I say absently.

“I think Hyacinth’s point is that Lawrence has been faithful ever since you became engaged,” Calla says, her tone thoughtful as well. “Which is strange, don’t you think?”

“He’s not a complete louse,” I argue. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Does he know about you and Henrik?” Lavender asks softly.

I rub the dull pain in the middle of my chest. “He knows.”

Hyacinth sighs. “How sad.”

Calla laughs softly. “Who would have thought Clover would be the one out of all of

us to get herself tangled up with two men?”

“Henrik and Lawrence,” Lavender whispers as if in awe. With a giggle, she adds, “You certainly know how to pick them.”

But they’re wrong—I’m not tangled at all. My heart belongs to Henrik, and my hand belongs to Lawrence. It’s as simple, and sad, as that.

“Lawrence said he’ll take care of it,” I say softly. “When Henrik returns, he’ll fix it.”

Calla lets out a startled gasp. “You’ve already set the wedding date.”

“I’m aware—though I certainly didn’t set it.”

“You think he will truly call it off?” Lavender asks.

“Enough about me,” I say. “Have you noticed how Barret has been watching Calla? Ever since she joined us, he’s been glancing our way.”

Proving to be easily distracted, Calla subtly turns toward the sparring knights, looking for the man in question. He’s fighting Redge right now, but as soon as he bests him, he looks over to find her. A wide grin spreads across the knight’s face when he sees her watching him, and he holds up a hand to acknowledge her.

She flushes, grinning prettily, and then looks away as if shy.

The three launch into a conversation full of speculation, and I let out a sigh of relief.

Again, Lawrence looks over, this time raising his brows as if to ask if I’m all right.

I nod, and he returns to his practice.

As the girls prattle on, my mind wanders back to Henrik. It's been over a month now.

Is he well? Has he found a way to remove the necklace and escape Camellia? Could he possibly be on his way back now?

Suddenly, I stand, refusing to dwell on it any longer.

"Where are you going?" Calla asks.

"I'm going to ask Lawrence to have a practice target brought in so I can shoot."

If I don't do something, my questions will drive me mad.

Making sure my ladies are properly distracted with Barret, I sneak away with the excuse of fetching my bow, enjoying a few quiet minutes to myself.

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When I find Pranmore and Bartholomew in the hall near my rooms, the elf's eyes move behind me, and his face betrays his surprise. "You're alone?"

I offer the pair a grim smile. "I found a distraction for my ladies and left them in the practice arena."

"And now you're free?" Bartholomew asks with a friendly grin.

"Unfortunately, no. I'm just getting my bow, and then I'm supposed to return." I motion for them to walk with me. "You should come along—keep practicing your archery, Bartholomew, and Henrik is sure to be impressed with your progress when he returns."

Bartholomew's smile falters briefly, but when he glances at me, it's back in place. "Then I shall be sure to practice daily."

Does Bartholomew doubt Henrik will return? Surely not. He's the most optimistic person I know. If he's questioning it...

My mood plummets.

When we return to the indoor arena, my target has already been brought in from the bailey. Lawrence joins me as I brush snow from the top. It falls to the sandy floor, not likely to melt soon in the cool training space.

"Are you warm enough?" Lawrence asks. "Shall I have someone bring over a brazier?"

“I’m fine.”

“Your cloak isn’t very heavy.”

I turn to the new king, setting my hand on my hip. “You remember I’m not actually a princess, don’t you?”

Lawrence smirks. “You talk like you were a war-hardened soldier I magnanimously plucked from the barracks. You’re a nobleman’s daughter, Clover. A gentle flower.”

I roll my eyes and turn back to the target. Ignoring the man at my side, I nock my arrow, still my breath, and focus.

Much to my immense pleasure, the arrow hits the bullseye, and the men around us hoot and holler, proving they were paying more attention to Lawrence and me than their own practice.

“A fine shot.” Lawrence casually wraps his arm around my back and places his hand on my side.

I flinch, looking up at him with a scowl. “What are you doing?”

“We have an audience,” he reminds me quietly, not above taking advantage of the situation.

I want to elbow him in the side, but he’s right. I stand stiffly as a page runs forward to collect my arrow.

The boy holds it in the flat of his palms and offers it with a deep bow. “Your Highness.”

I smile for him, but I'm disconcerted by Lawrence's manner.

"Bartholomew," I say. "Why don't you go next?"

The duke takes my place, and I turn to Lawrence and lower my voice. "Let's talk."

His eyebrows shoot up with feigned innocence, pretending he has no idea what he's done. But he follows me, waving away his guards.

They follow us anyway, but at least they keep their distance. This is not a conversation I want my brother to overhear—especially now that I know he and Gavriel have such big mouths.

"Let's go to the library," Lawrence suggests. "Then we can speak quietly, and no one will think anything of it—or overhear."

We step inside the large space, and I breathe in the scent of parchment, old leather, and the lemon oil the maids use to bring out the shine in the wooden tables, desks, and bookcases. A fire burns in the massive hearth, making the area warm and cozy. Scholars and scribes dot the room, sitting at tables and resting in plush chairs.

Several more relax near the fire, engaged in a quiet conversation. They pause when they see Lawrence and me in the doorway.

The librarian hurries over, smiling shyly at Lawrence. She's pretty, probably a little younger than I am, with light brown hair and dewy eyes.

"Welcome, Your Highness," she says to me before turning to Lawrence. She looks at him as if they are familiar. "Your Majesty."

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Appearing a touch uncomfortable, Lawrence clears his throat. “Hello, Marian.”

“May I assist you in some way?” she asks. “Is there a specific text you are searching for?”

Lawrence shakes his head. “We’ll just look around a bit.”

The librarian nods, her doe eyes wide. “If you need anything...”

Lawrence thanks her, and he escorts me into the corner of the room, toward a pair of chairs by a window that are partially blocked by a tall bookcase and a potted fern on a small table.

“One of your girls?” I ask wryly.

Lawrence smiles. “Jealous, princess?”

I sigh. “Curious.”

“My eyes haven’t strayed from you since our engagement.”

I lean into the armrest of my chair, stacking my fists and resting my chin on them.

“What’s wrong, Clover?” Lawrence lowers his chin onto his own armrest to meet me at eye level. “Why are we here?”

“Rumors are spreading about Henrik and me.”

“And you’re uncomfortable?”

“I’m...” Sad doesn’t seem like enough.

Gutted. Broken. Empty.

I draw in a deep breath and close my eyes, turning from Lawrence, jumping a little when he brushes my hair away from my face.

“I’m sorry you’re hurting,” he says quietly.

“You meant it, didn’t you? That you’ll end this when he returns?”

Lawrence doesn’t answer right away. Slowly, I open my eyes.

“Do I have to?” he asks, cocking his head to the side like he’s teasing.

I don’t have the energy to get upset. “You promised.”

He frowns. “I did, but...”

“But what?”

Smiling, he laughs to himself, probably knowing I’m not going to like what he’s about to say. “I’m comfortable.”

“Comfortable?” I say, feeling a tinge of irritation stirring. “Comfortable?”

He extends his hands in surrender. “I like you standing by my side. I like sitting with you at dinner. I like...being with you.”

“Lawrence.”

“We’re different together, Clover. Other women...” He shakes his head as if struggling. “I like how they feel—”

“That’s too much information,” I interrupt.

“No, listen,” he insists. “I like the rush, but I don’t like them. They’re disposable—”

“You are the worst.”

“But you...I don’t want to touch you.”

I straighten in my chair, wondering if I’ll be arrested if I slap the king.

“Because you are precious,” he continues carefully. “And I’m afraid if I mess up, I’ll lose you.”

This conversation is dancing dangerously close to something real, and I didn’t expect it. Lawrence has never convinced me his feelings are genuine, but right now...

“Stop.” I press my hand to my chest, to that constant dull ache that’s growing more painful.

“See?” Lawrence exclaims in a whisper, gently catching my wrist. “You’re about to run away, aren’t you? This is why I’m never honest with you.”

I look down at his hand. “You said you didn’t want to touch me.”

He laughs, releasing me. “Let me amend my words—I want to touch you. I want to touch you very much. I’ve just never been stupid enough to try it.”

I sink back into my chair, drawing my legs up to my chin and pulling my skirts low so I’m decent.

Lawrence frowns, shaking his head. “You initiated the conversation, not me.”

Again, I close my eyes. “I just wanted a confirmation, that’s all.”

“How about a compromise instead?”

I open one eye and scowl. “How could there be a compromise in a situation like this?”

Lawrence leans close. “Fine, a deal.”

“Go on.”

He grins, but his light brown eyes are serious. “I won’t hold back—I’ll woo you like I’ve never wooed a woman before, but in return, I won’t touch you. If Henrik returns—”

“When.”

He sighs. “When Henrik returns, I will release you from the engagement if that’s what you want. But if you fall madly in love with me, promise you won’t be too proud to admit it.”

I think about it for several seconds. “So I have to put up with you smothering me with affection?”

He raises a brow. “That’s right.”

“I don’t like it.”

He shrugs. “Take it or leave it.”

“And if I leave it?”

Leaning very close, he teases, “I’ll probably marry you out of spite.”

Huffing out a laugh, I say, “Fine, I agree to let you be nice to me.”

I begin to rise, but Lawrence grabs my hand. “Wait.”

“You’ve already broken your side of the agreement!” I exclaim, yanking my hand away.

A wicked look crosses his face. “Oh, princess, that is not the kind of touching I was referring to.”

“Never mind. What do you want?”

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His expression becomes serious. “I would take your pain away if I could, even if it meant giving you to Henrik. But, Clover, he’s not here. And I don’t know if he’s coming back...or how damaged he’ll be after my sister is finished with him. You need to prepare yourself for that possibility.”

My heart rails against his words, but deep down, I worry.

Slowly, I nod. “I know.”

“There’s something else.”

I widen my eyes, telling him to hurry up and finish.

“I admire your loyalty. I swear, I won’t try to destroy it. It really is your choice.”

“May I leave now?”

Lawrence smiles, sitting back regally as he mock-graciously says, “You may be excused.”

9

HENRIK

I pause in front of a statue of the late Duke Augmirian in the center of the indoor solarium, noting how much Ayan resembles his father. Auggy, on the other hand, must have taken after his mother.

When I turn, I breathe out a startled exclamation.

Hellebore stands behind me, silent as a wraith, eyes almost as black as coals. The mute High Vale handmaid has always been disconcerting, but it seems she's been suffering an illness lately, and it's aging her at a rapid rate. She's terrifyingly gaunt, and her once-porcelain skin has taken on a gray pallor.

"I apologize." I clear my throat. "I didn't hear you come up behind me."

She offers me a sealed letter, and I pretend to miss the way her hand trembles with sickness.

Masking my irritation at receiving the summons, I accept the note and bow my head to the woman. "Thank you, madam."

She leaves, her expression never changing.

Already knowing what I'll find, I rip open the letter. As expected, it's from Camellia. Apparently, her husband is engaged in a game of dice, and she won't be missed for several hours.

With little choice but to go to her, I walk through the water gardens. Oil-burning torches light the stone pathway. Their scented smoke is supposed to keep away insects, but it doesn't seem to work. I swat a mosquito on my neck, cursing them and the other biting nuisances that come out in the evening.

The constant sound of running water puts me on edge, and I'm not sure I'll ever pass a fountain without remembering my time in wretched Revalane.

Suddenly appearing beside me, Maisel asks, "Where are you going?"

I look at the gnome, growing used to her showing up whenever, and wherever, she pleases. “Camellia summoned me.”

“And you jumped, like a thrall.”

“I might as well be a thrall,” I say darkly. “As long as my sister wears the necklace, I’m at the princess’s mercy.”

“You should have killed her when you had the chance.”

I look down sharply. “What are you talking about?”

“In your room. The fool woman put a dagger to her heart, and you didn’t finish the job.”

“You were there?” I demand.

Her expression flickers with indecision. “I wasn’t going to tell you, but it seemed worse to keep quiet.”

Shame embraces me like wet marsh weeds, clinging and impossible to shrug off. The fact that anyone saw me on my knees...it’s almost unbearable.

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“You did the right thing,” Maisel says quietly. “She was too eager. Blood magic—nasty business. I’m not entirely sure what would have become of you if you’d killed her.”

I pause. “What do you mean?”

She frowns, studying a water lily bloom in the torchlight. “I’ve heard tales of murdered necromancers rising soulless and far more powerful.”

Her words set me on edge, but I force a laugh. “Sounds like a story meant to scare children. I’ve battled blood magic users half a dozen times, and none of them ever came back to life. Dead is dead.”

“You’re young, Henrik,” she warns. “Do not let my beauty fool you—I’ve lived several hundred years, and I am wise.”

I choke back a laugh and nod solemnly. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Go on.” She motions deeper into the garden as if excusing me. Making the words sound like a warning, she says, “I’ll be nearby.”

Maisel then slips into the shadows, leaving me seemingly on my own. Oddly, it makes me feel slightly better to have the vicious gnome woman watching my back.

The clouds part just as I locate Camellia, and the moons’ silver light falls on her, making her look more like an ethereal faerie than a twisted witch. But her beauty is now repulsive to me, and she cannot conceal the darkness on the inside any longer.

“Henrik,” she says with a radiant smile—the same smile she’s worn for me for years.

Does she think I will dismiss all she’s done? How can she look at me like that?

Has she no conscience whatsoever?

Camellia crosses the garden to meet me, subtly swaying her hips with each step. She wears a blue gown the color of the dark waters, and her pale hair is loose. It falls around her shoulders, soft but no longer tempting.

“You summoned me?” I ask tonelessly.

Hurt flashes across her face, and she pouts. “Must it be like this between us, Henrik?”

“Do you have a task you wish to give me?”

Her practiced expression falters, changing completely. Sounding defeated, she asks, “Are you going to hate me forever?”

I stay silent instead of answering.

When she looks up, she appears exhausted. “Perhaps...”

“Perhaps what?”

She wraps her hand around my wrist, studying her pale fingers against my tanned skin in the moonlight. “Perhaps I could have made some better decisions where you’re concerned.”

Perhaps?

“Tell me what I must do to heal this rift between us,” she begs softly. “What will it take for you to look at me like you used to?”

I shake my head. “There is nothing.”

“You were going to marry me at one time. Surely that must count for something?” She tightens her fingers as she grows frustrated. “Didn’t I mean anything to you? Have you become so jaded you can’t accept my apology?”

I pull my wrist out of her grasp. “I don’t remember you apologizing.”

Camellia steps right in front of me. Emotions pool in her eyes, making the blue glisten like a crystal lake in the torchlight. “I’m sorry, Henrik—I am. I never wanted things to be like this between us. I was jealous of Clover, and I—”

She cuts herself off, gasping back a sob.

I cross my arms and stare at her tears, feeling nothing. “And you what?”

“I wanted to keep you.” She hugs herself, turning from me. “I thought if you had no choice but to stay with me, that eventually, you’d choose me.”

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Studying her, I wrestle with indecision. She's given me a golden opportunity, but will I take it?

Am I even capable?

I let out a heavy sigh, pretending to be moved by the display. "What is it you want from me?"

She turns back, encouraged by my tone. "I just want you by my side. Nothing else."

"Why me?"

Her eyes search mine, pleading with me to believe her. "Because I love you."

"Are you capable of love?" I ask gently, raising my brows.

Hurt flashes across her face. "That's a wicked thing to say, Henrik."

"It doesn't matter what you want, or even what I want. You're married, Camellia. Have you forgotten?"

Her face scrunches with anger. "I believe my husband's usefulness has expired."

My insides coil with expectation, and I know I must tread carefully. Tentatively, I prod, "You told me when I first arrived in Revalane that you didn't intend to stay married to him."

She meets my gaze. “I don’t.”

“Why marry a man you don’t plan to keep?”

“Oh, Henrik,” Camellia says with a roll of her eyes. “Are you so naïve? I needed his title, but mostly, I needed his army.”

“His army?”

She sits on the edge of the fountain. “I was hoping it wouldn’t come to it—that Father would care about me enough to sign the kingdom to me. Nice and clean.” Her face darkens with true hate. “But the old fool couldn’t do it, could he?”

“So now that you’re the duchess of Ferradelle, you don’t need Augmirian?”

“Of course not. He was always disposable.”

“And you believe the High Vale military will follow their human duchess even after you dispose of the duke?” I ask incredulously.

She waves me over, gesturing for me to sit by her side. “I don’t just believe it—I know.”

“And you plan to wage war against Lawrence?”

“Certainly not,” she says with a bright laugh that’s at odds with her plan. “It needn’t come to that. As long as Lawrence surrenders his throne to me, all will be well and fine.”

“Why would Lawrence do that?”

She's going to realize I'm fishing for information soon, but she's not suspicious yet.

"He doesn't want a war on his hands, does he?" Camellia says. "I know the foolish boy—he'll worry about the lives of his people and soldiers."

"And you...won't?"

Her expression sharpens, and she slowly turns her head to look at me. "There are always casualties in war, Henrik. That's simply the way of it. But the people should be glad I'm now in control and not Augmirian. He wants a battle, blood. Revenge. I don't need unnecessary bloodshed—I simply want the throne."

"Why do you want to steal your brother's crown so badly?"

She presses a hand to her heart and gives me such a pained look, I sit back slightly. "Animosity has been brewing between the High Vales and us for years, and Father's exorbitant taxes have only made the problem grow. It's my greatest wish to unite the kingdom and remove these walls which make us weak."

I narrow my eyes at the carefully executed speech, far from convinced Camellia's motivation is that altruistic.

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“And you don’t believe Lawrence is capable of such a thing?”

“You know Lawrence as well as anyone. He’s motivated by his own pleasure, and he cares little for the people around him.”

I would have agreed wholeheartedly at one time, but I’m not so quick to nod now.

“He would be happy living with the status quo,” she continues, “ignoring the animosity that is growing louder every day. Augmirian began building his war golems long before I contacted him. How else would I have known he’d be open to the marriage?”

“How did you know?”

She laughs. “If Father had employed half the spies I do, he would have been a far better king.”

“I have one more question.”

She nods regally.

“Do you truly believe placing the charmed necklaces on the necks of all the noblewomen in the dukedom will endear the High Vales to you?” I stand, unable to listen to her any longer. “If you’re serious about creating harmony amongst the people, you might consider removing their shackles.”

She inhales sharply, perhaps startled she didn’t fully win me over with her speech.

I turn back. “You can’t use force to cultivate loyalty, Camellia. People will serve you, yes, but they’ll also turn on you the moment they are freed.”

She narrows her eyes. “Is that a threat?”

I shake my head. “I know what you are capable of, and you needn’t remind me. It was merely friendly advice. That’s what you want, isn’t it? For us to be friendly again?”

Her face darkens, making her look like a petulant toddler who didn’t get her way. “I do want that.”

“Then don’t get angry every time I tell you something you don’t want to hear.”

I turn away from her, leaving her alone by the fountain.

10

CLOVER

I step into Pranmore’s quarters, waving my ladies away. “You don’t have to wait. I’ll find you later.”

Pranmore looks up from his desk by the window, smiling before turning back to his journal, waiting for me to finish my conversation.

“It’s not like you to get so many headaches.” Calla studies me, looking far too concerned.

“I’m fine,” I promise, feeling a little guilty for making them think the ailment is worse than it is. “Pranmore will take care of it.”

The three ladies stand around me like sheep, happy to follow wherever I lead—notleaving.

“You certainly weren’t this dedicated to Camellia,” I huff. “Why are you this devoted to me?”

Hyacinth laughs. “Because you’re not Camellia.”

She’s got a point.

“Really, though,” I insist. “I’ll be fine in Pranmore’s care.”

The Woodmore finally takes pity on me. He abandons his journal and joins us, giving the ladies a sincere smile. “I will escort Clover back to you when we are finished.”

Starstruck by the handsome elf, the girls all nod, and Lavender says, “Of course, Master Pranmore.”

They reluctantly leave, waving more to Pranmore than me. The moment he closes the door, I let out a loud sigh and throw myself on a chair in front of his desk.

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“Headache again?” he asks.

“Sure.” I pull his journal toward me, reading his latest poem. They’re starting to grow on me, though he doesn’t write as much as he used to.

Pranmore snatches it from my hands and returns to his seat. “It’s not finished.”

“Where’s Bartholomew?” I ask, realizing he’s not here.

“He left a little while ago—said something about practicing his archery.” The elf gives me a knowing look. “He’s become a bit obsessed—likely because someone said Henrik will be impressed with his growing skill when he returns.”

“I’m impressed with his growing skill. After seeing him with that ridiculous crossbow, I never thought he’d take to archery.”

“He’s rather skilled in horticulture as well. I made a tincture last week and needed icebane. He had some growing in the solarium in his estate.”

“Bartholomew grew it? Not his mother or a gardener?”

Pranmore shakes his head. “I met his mother. She said Bartholomew grows and tends everything else in the sunroom. If we get a chance to return to Dulane, there are some seeds I’d like to give him. I’ve collected them here and there—some are quite rare.”

“I’m sure he’ll be pleased you’re trusting him with something so precious.”

Pranmore knots the tie of his journal and then sets it aside. “So why are you here?”

“Am I not allowed to visit you?”

“Of course you are, but I thought you might have a purpose.”

“I just needed to breathe.” I glance at the closed door, realizing anyone could walk through it at any moment. Even my sanctuary is open to the general public.

Pranmore clasps his hands on the desk and studies me. “Feeling smothered?”

“You have no idea.”

“I suppose you’ll get used to it.”

I narrow my eyes at the elf. “I won’t have to. Lawrence said he’ll break the engagement as soon as Henrik returns. I just have to survive until he escapes Camellia.”

Pranmore looks down at his hands, avoiding eye contact. “Lawrence doesn’t have the look of a man who intends to end his engagement.”

“It’s a show,” I argue, “for the people’s sake.”

Sort of.

“He promised me,” I add.

After a long, skeptical look, Pranmore brushes the subject aside and stands. “I want to show you something. Wait a moment.”

He disappears into his bedchamber. Just a minute later, he returns with a familiar wooden box.

I recoil as soon as I see it. “Why do you have that?”

“Audra sent it to me.” He sets the box on the desk between us and then opens it, revealing a rose gold necklace. The pendant is etched with a phoenix surrounded by the High Vale knotted wreath, with a small diamond set in the center. “She asked me to study the magic further.”

It’s identical to the necklace Henrik’s sister wears, along with several dozen of Ferradelle’s High Vale noblewomen.

“Have you made any discoveries?”

“Possibly,” he says with a frown, prodding the chain with the tip of his finger. “I’ve tried to dissect the magic, and I’ve come to a strange conclusion.”

Wondering if I’m going to have to draw it out of him, I ask, “And that would be...”

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“Not only is the blood curse extremely powerful, but there’s High Vale magic in here as well.”

“High Vale? Do you think it was Augmirian?”

Pranmore shakes his head. “According to Audra’s mother, the duke has no magic, remember?”

I mull it over, and then it hits me. “Of course—Hellebore.”

“Hellebore?”

“Camellia’s elven handmaid.” I frown at the cursed necklace. “But that doesn’t do us a lot of good, does it? What difference does it make if there are two types of magic or one? It’s deadly no matter how you look at it.”

He nods thoughtfully.

I sit back in my chair, crossing my arms. “I don’t suppose you’ve found a safe way to remove it yet, have you?”

Pranmore shakes his head. “Not yet, but I’m working on it.”

A knock sounds at the door moments before it opens. Lavender sticks her head inside, smiling apologetically. “I’m sorry to interrupt, Clover, but Madame Linwa says Master Edart has just arrived with a selection of table settings for the wedding, and they need you to decide which one you’d like.”

“I have to look at them right now?”

“They said if you don’t approve a design today, the dinnerware might not be finished in time.”

“Can’t Lawrence do it?”

“Surely you don’t intend to involve the king in such decisions,” she says as if personally horrified by the idea.

Heaven forbid we trouble Lawrence.

“Why don’t you choose for me?” I suggest, liking that idea quite a lot. “You’re better at that sort of thing anyway.”

Lavender gasps, and her dark blue eyes go even wider. “Clover!”

“Fine,” I sigh, pushing myself up. “I’m coming.”

As I leave, Pranmore calls me back. He glances at Lavender for only a split second before he dons a professional smile. “Until your headaches improve, I believe you should see me in the afternoons. Come before tea—I have a blend that I believe will help.”

“Can’t you package up the tea?” Lavender says ever so helpfully. “Then Her Highness can drink it with the rest of us.”

Pranmore falters for just a heartbeat before he quickly recovers. “I would like to monitor the effects.” He gives her a warm smile. “I’m sure you understand.”

She nods at him dreamily. “Oh, of course.”

“Give us a moment, will you?” I ask Lavender.

But she simply stands there, staring at Pranmore as if she doesn’t hear me, completely smitten.

“I’ll be out in just a moment,” I say pointedly.

When Lavender still doesn’t move, I snap my fingers in front of her face. She blinks, finally turning her attention to me. “What?”

“Wait for me in the hall. I’ll be out in a moment.”

“Don’t be too long,” she warns, casting a last longing smile at Pranmore as she pauses in the doorway.

“GO,” I mouth, shooting her a stern look.

She flashes me a look of her own, and then she flounces out the door.

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Once she's gone, I turn to Pranmore. "Thank you."

He nods.

"I don't suppose you want to help me choose the table settings for a wedding that's not going to take place, do you?"

"Not particularly."

"Fine," I say regally. "I'll just do everything myself."

Pranmore laughs as I leave, already heading back to his unfinished poem. When I meet Lavender in the hall, she practically pounces on me.

"Can I come with you in the afternoons when you visit Master Pranmore?"

"No."

"Why not?" she demands as she falls in step with me, offended. Then she narrows her eyes. "Is there something going on between the two of you? You already have Lawrence and Henrik, and now you want Pranmore, too?"

I snort at the thought. "No."

Putting on a full pout, she clasps her hands at her chest. "Then, please, let me come, too."

“Don’t get all lovesick for nothing. Pranmore is still suffering from requited childhood love. I haven’t seen him so much as give any woman a second look.”

“He’s heartbroken?” she asks, sounding entirely too hopeful. In a dreamy voice, she adds, “Perhaps I could soothe his pain.”

I shake my head, deciding to give up. “Maybe you could.”

“You think so?” she asks eagerly.

“Sure.”

She goes on about Pranmore as we walk, but I only half listen, already feeling sorry for the elf.

My concern for Pranmore is replaced with dread when we step into a room off the kitchens. Tables have been dressed with linens, each in different colors.

There are no less than ten options of dinnerware, all meticulously crafted and likely ridiculously expensive.

“Your Highness,” Madame Linwa says when she spots us, hurrying across the room. She’s Bartholomew’s maternal aunt and a well-standing member of the court even though her husband lacks a title. Somehow, she ended up in charge of the wedding preparations. “I hope it was no trouble to meet us now. Master Edart said we are quite tight on time, and he and his apprentices will need to begin crafting whatever design you choose.”

“It’s fine.” I smile at the ceramist.

He stands toward the head of one of the tables, looking nervous that his precious

work is up for inspection.

I walk down the line, admiring the delicate porcelain. “You are an artist, Master Edart.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” the man says, bowing his head modestly.

“Do you paint them as well?”

“Many of them, though my daughter is growing quite accomplished. She studied in Heistone.” He motions to a design with intricate, tiny vines painted in gold on the rim of the dinner plate. “She did this one.”

I can’t even begin to imagine how long the process would take. I look at Madame Linwa. “How many settings are needed?”

“Five hundred.”

I nearly choke as I look back at the master. “And you’ll begin right away?”

“Yes, Your Highness. Just as soon as you decide. It will take months, but it is such an honor.”

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They're going to do all this work...for nothing.

"They're all so beautiful," I say, panicking slightly. "I don't think I can make the decision on my own. I would like Lawrence's opinion."

Master Edart's eyes go wide. "His Majesty?"

"Surely you don't want to bother him with something such as this?" Madame Linwa chides gently. "Men don't usually—"

"I'll be back." I leave before Lavender has a chance to follow me, gulping great breaths of air as soon as I'm alone in the hall.

I can't order five hundred settings when I know the wedding will be called off—how horrible. It's bad enough that Minda is already making a gown.

"Your Highness!" calls Saletta, a resident artisan who often resides at court.

I jerk my head up, hoping she didn't notice me hyperventilating near the potted pothos. "Yes?"

She steps in front of me, tall and slender, with an aristocratic nose and features that are interesting if not beautiful. "I'm so pleased I ran into you."

I force a smile, not certain I've ever spoken with her in my life. "I as well."

"I started on the invitations as Madame Linwa requested, but I wanted your opinion

on the calligraphy.”

“Invitations?” I say with a squeak.

She laughs. “Your wedding invitations, of course. Do you have a moment? Would you mind looking at them?”

“I need Lawrence,” I blurt out.

Her dark eyebrows dart up.

“I mean, I’m looking for Lawrence. So I can’t right now.” Or ever. “Why don’t you give a few samples to Calla, and she can show them to me?”

“Of course,” the woman says soothingly, and then she suddenly takes my hand. She smiles in a maternal way that makes me hide a cringe. “You seem on edge. Wedding jitters are normal, Your Highness. Don’t work yourself up too much.”

I manage a laugh, but I think it makes me sound half-mad. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

She bows her head, thankfully releasing me, and then continues down the hall.

“This is madness,” I whisper to myself.

It takes a little while, but I end up finding Lawrence with Denny, Miguel, and Alfred in the entrance hall. A devastating smile spreads across the young king’s face when he spots me, and I falter for just a second. Lawrence has never looked at me like that before.

Immediately, he breaks away from the knights. “Fancy meeting you here, princess.”

“Don’t call me that,” I say, more out of habit than anything.

Lawrence leans a smidgen closer, his eyes wicked. Dropping his voice to a sultry whisper, he says, “Fancy meeting you here, Clover.”

“Don’t say that either!” I hiss.

He grins. “I can’t say your name?”

“No.”

“Then what shall I call you?”

“Don’t...” I exhale, frustrated. “Don’t call me anything.”

“You’re ridiculous.” He laughs, stepping back. “But you know that, don’t you?”

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Whispering to ensure my brother and the other knights won't overhear, I say, "Do you realize I have to choose table settings for a wedding that will never take place?"

He glances at his knights, jerking his head to dismiss them. They move to the doors, out of earshot but hovering close enough he's not truly alone.

"They're just plates, Clover. Bowls and spoons. Don't overthink it. Just pick something you like."

"They'll cost a small fortune," I argue. "It's a waste."

He shrugs. "A king only marries once."

"We're not getting married!"

"Have you already forgotten our agreement?" He waggles his eyebrows. "I'm still confident I'll win you over."

"Lawrence..."

"Do you want to know another difference between you and I?"

"There are far too many to list."

He leans in until his lips are entirely too close to my ear. In a silken purr, he says, "I like it when you say my name."

My stomach knots, and I look away, refusing to let him affect me.

The evil king grins again. “I’m getting to you, aren’t I?”

“My reaction is purely physical, so you’re not making as much headway as you think.”

“I can work with physical.”

I give him a droll look, but that only makes him laugh.

“Choose the table settings,” I say. “You’ll likely use them for your real wedding, so you might as well make the decision for me.”

“You want me to go with you?” he asks, sounding genuinely surprised. Immediately offering his arm, he says, “Doesn’t that sound delightfully domestic?”

When they see we’re leaving, the knights immediately fall into step behind us, and I fear our entourage will grow when Calla spots us. She stands with Barret, looking at the knight like Lavender looked at Pranmore earlier.

“Clover,” she calls reluctantly. “Are you feeling better?”

Much to the knight’s chagrin, she presses her hand affectionately to his arm and then excuses herself.

“A little,” I say when she joins us, and then I subtly nod toward the jilted knight. “You didn’t have to end your conversation on my behalf. I’m fine.”

She glances at Lawrence. “If you’re sure...”

“Go on,” I say. “Lavender is on nursery maid duty right now. She’s waiting for me.”

After a few more seconds of indecision, Calla finally beams at me. “Well, all right. I’ll see you at dinner?”

I nod.

She scampers off to rejoin Barret, much to his delight. As soon as she reaches him, she slides her arm into his and tugs him away.

With a sigh, I realize court is exactly as it’s always been—ladies and knights flitting around each other, people wholly concerned with the next festival—or in this case, wedding. It all feels so superficial now.

But then again, maybe it always has.

And in many ways, I hope it never changes. Because if the High Vales and their insane princess declare war, these trivial things will be of little importance. We’ll be concerned with battle, death count, and how much ground we’re holding against the elven war golems.

Survival instead of life.

And I don't want that for the people of Caldenbauer—whether they be human, boermin, gnome, or elf.

11

HENRIK

A strange sense of foreboding has plagued me ever since I received Camellia's summons this morning. She requested a gathering of all the noble families, calling it a celebration of sorts. I'm not sure how she convinced Augmirian to give her permission considering their arguments have been growing more frequent and far more chaotic.

Camellia smiles at me as I enter the room she's designated for the occasion. Brielle stands in the corner just beyond the princess, looking nervous. My sister lifts her hand in greeting, but she doesn't join me. My apprehension grows, but I give her a tight smile.

I study the space. It's the same we met in when Camellia distributed the necklaces, but this time, several long tables have been set up, allowing people to sit. Refreshments wait for the guests—sweet biscuits and scones, tiny iced cakes and steaming pots of tea.

When I join Camellia, I say, "After yesterday's argument, how did you convince Augmirian to allow this?"

“It’s my apology,” she says with a smile that sets me on edge.

She has something planned, but what?

Hellebore stands just behind the princess, silent as always.

Members of the High Vale nobility filter into the room, casting wary glances at their new human duchess.

Audra and her mother arrive with Lyredon. She catches my eye, silently asking me if I know what this is about.

I shake my head, wishing they hadn’t come. Not that they had any choice. If the duke’s own aunt and cousin were to refuse to attend Camellia’s event, it would look like a political statement—one the princess wouldn’t overlook.

Augmirian is the last to arrive, and he doesn’t look pleased to be here. The duke pauses as he enters the room, narrowing his eyes at Camellia. I almost think he’s going to turn on his heel and leave, but instead, he stalks to the head of the central table and sits.

His knights take their places at the side of the room, and I stand near Camellia and Hellebore.

The murmuring and quiet chattering falls away as Camellia steps to the front of the room and dons one of her brilliant smiles. “Welcome, friends. I’m so glad you could all come on such short notice.”

Someone mutters something scathing that’s not quite loud enough for me to hear, and Camellia’s eyes travel to the lord. Her smile sharpens, and the man clears his throat and raises his eyebrows as if to ask what the princess is going to do about his

defiance.

Uneasy, I look at his wife. She sits next to her husband, uncomfortable with the attention they're receiving. Camellia's necklace rests at her throat, just as its sisters adorn every other High Vale woman in attendance. All except Audra.

Apart from Audra and her mother, I doubt the High Vales sense the cursed magic that's been inlaid into the talvernum. They haven't removed the necklaces thanks to a charm they are likely unaware of. Right now, they wear the piece of jewelry because they think it's their choice.

After another moment, Camellia graciously dismisses the man with a tilt of her nose and turns to her audience once more.

"When Duke Augmirian and I celebrated our wedding, the gift I had intended to give him was not yet complete. Today, I wish to bestow that gift upon him in front of you all."

Augmirian casts Camellia a suspicious look.

To her husband, she quietly says, "Consider it an apology. I know you're disappointed in me, Your Grace. But I vow that Ferradelle will rise in power very soon."

Our attention turns to the door, where Bendon and Dalvin wheel in a full suit of golden armor. It's expertly crafted and detailed—without imperfection. It's also short. So short, in fact, it looks like it was made for a tall child.

A chuckle burbles in my chest, but I hold my breath to keep it from escaping.

Intrigued, Augmirian stands to inspect the armor. It's the perfect size for him,

constructed by a master armorsmith—my father.

“Will you accept my gesture of goodwill, Your Grace?” Camellia looks at her husband as if there is nothing she would rather gaze upon.

Augmirian glances back at the snake he married, softening at the sweet tilt of her lips and eager-to-please eyes. With a grunt, he nods.

She beams and steps forward, gesturing for her knights to assist the duke. “Try it on.”

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Ten minutes later, the duke stands before us in full armor, looking like a man about to proclaim war. My unease grows, and when I look across the room, I see my emotions are mirrored on every face in attendance.

“You look magnificent, Your Grace,” Camellia gushes, clasping her hands together as she inspects Augmirian. Dropping her voice, she adds, “And so handsome.”

He smirks like a proud, petite peacock, letting her praise go straight to his head.

Apparently, he and Ayan have something in common—women make them fools, and they have too much pride for their own good.

“Your Grace,” a nobleman near the front asks, his face solemn. “Why do you require armor?”

“I suppose now is as good a time as any to officially announce it.” Augmirian’s face sharpens, and his eyes light with his mania. Armor clanking as he walks, he takes the front of the room. “You’ve likely heard rumors anyway. Today, let me confirm your suspicions. In secret, I’ve been building a golem army. Almost a hundred years ago, the humans stole our land from us, and I will be the man who wins it—”

Suddenly, Augmirian goes still. People begin to murmur, startled by his strange demeanor.

“Your Grace?” one of the elven guards says hesitantly, stepping forward. “Are you all right?”

But instead of answering, Augmirian's eyes roll back in his head, and he falls to the floor, creating a horrible racket when the metal armor clatters against the stone.

People jump to their feet, talking all at once, but Augmirian's guards wave them back.

"Give him room to breathe!" one commands as another kneels at the duke's side and tries to rouse him.

"The armor must have been too heavy," a woman mutters.

"Perhaps he overheated—it is quite warm in here."

"How could he suddenly lose consciousness like that? One second he's talking, and the next, he falls."

"He's dead," the guard on the ground breathes.

"What?" another guard demands, shoving the first out of the way. He presses two fingers to the inside of Augmirian's wrist, and then he goes pale.

"Well?" another asks.

The guard slowly lowers Augmirian's hand to the ground. "There's no pulse."

The room bursts into complete pandemonium until a soft, feminine voice rises above the chaos.

"Everyone, sit down," Camellia commands.

Slowly, the High Vales turn to her. An elderly nobleman pushes forward and accuses,

“Human witch! You killed the duke!”

Camellia looks only slightly vexed. “I did, yes. And if you don’t want to suffer any further casualties, then I suggest you heed my command.”

Magic is kindled around the room, making the air spark and crackle.

“Arrest the princess!” the foolish man demands.

Before anyone can touch her, Camellia merely lifts her hand, and the man’s wife gasps out a startled, struggling mew and then falls to the floor.

That catches the room's attention. The man cries out and kneels at his wife’s side.

“She’s not dead, but do consider it a warning,” Camellia says, sounding as if she’s fighting to remain calm. “Sit down.”

Slowly, the elves release their magic and return to their seats—all except the aged elf, who kneels on the floor with his unconscious wife in his arms. It’s a painful sight to witness, and a lump forms in my throat.

The rest stare at Camellia, just now realizing she’s far more of a threat than they first assumed.

“Augmirian’s armor was made of a blend of talvernum, steel, and gold,” Camellia says conversationally once the room quiets. “That’s how I was able to enchant the metal even though it doesn’t look like talvernum.”

“Sorceress,” someone whispers in the back.

Camellia smiles. “The necklaces your wives and daughters wear are a talvernum alloy as well, even though the metal looks different.”

She watches as the attending women’s hands fly to their throats and the men stare at the necklaces in horror.

“Consider them your bindings—I am now your grand duchess, and you will treat me with the respect the position is due. If you choose to step out of line...”

A young woman suddenly shrieks as if she’s in excruciating pain. Her mother grabs her, panicking as the girl screams like she’s been thrown into a fire.

I step forward to intervene, but Brielle’s sharp cry grabs my attention, and I whirl around to face her. My sister blinks at me, terrified. Her face flushes, and her eyes gloss with tears; she was obviously in horrible pain only a moment ago.

“Henrik,” the princess chastises calmly. “Think of your sister.”

For Brielle’s sake, I squeeze my hands into fists and hold my ground. My muscles shake as I watch the horrific display, but I don’t dare move. There’s nothing I can do anyway.

Finally, it ends.

The young woman gasps for breath. Her face is bright red and marred with tears. She

hides behind her hands, shaking as she collapses into her mother's arms.

Camellia clasps her hands at her waist and dons a serene smile. "As you can see, death isn't the only horror I can inflict."

"Remove the necklace," one of the men says to his wife urgently. "Now."

The woman shakes her head, horrified at the thought. But with trembling fingers, she locates the clasp at her neck and obeys her husband.

Camellia watches impassively, making no move to stop her.

"Don't—" I yell, but it's too late.

As Pranmore predicted, the moment the necklace is removed, the woman falls, first hitting the table and then the floor.

Muffled exclamations of horror surround us, and I close my eyes when our fears are confirmed.

"She's dead," a man announces sagely.

"Does anyone have any questions?" Camellia asks.

A nearby woman snarls out a curse, clutching the necklace like it's repulsive.

Camellia shakes her head, looking as if she's dealing with a room full of disrespectful children. "If you don't fight me, you will see I am a gentle ruler. I don't wish harm or pain to come to any of you. If you defy me, please know you are bringing punishment upon yourself. Truly, I am blameless in the matter. Ultimately, it's your choice if you suffer."

Cold dread runs down my spine and then pools in my stomach. The humid room, which was swelteringly hot a few minutes ago, suddenly feels cold.

“Come along, Henrik. I believe we are done here.” To the room, Camellia says, “Please, feel free to stay and enjoy the refreshments I have prepared.”

I stare at her, barely able to form words. “Camellia...”

She takes my arm. “They’ll be fine. They just need a day or two to process.”

I want to yank away from her, but I’m just as trapped as the High Vale nobility.

As we walk, guilt churns in my gut, making me wonder if I should have killed her when I had the chance. After all, the princess was never truly unarmed. She’s been wielding a sharp, double-edged blade this whole time.

Did those people die because I was too cowardly to use the dagger?

“Now that we’ve cleaned up that mess with Augmirian, I believe I’d like to attend my brother’s wedding.” Camellia looks at me. “What do you think, Henrik? Would you like to see Clover?”

“You have become a wretched human being,” I say tonelessly.

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She frowns as if frustrated I don't understand. "Do not hate me because I'm efficient. And take comfort in the fact that fewer people will die if we do things my way. Surely you agree that a handful of casualties is better than a bloody war?"

"Do you hear yourself?"

"Let's return to this conversation in a few months when I'm seated on my family's throne, ruling Caldenbauer as its queen. The kingdom will prosper, Henrik. You'll see."

I stare at her back as she continues walking, vowing to myself that I will do everything in my power to make sure her plans never come to fruition.

12

CLOVER

I stare out the window of a high tower, looking at the greening meadows that stretch beyond the city's walls. Winter has come and gone, and spring has arrived with gentle rain and windy days.

The change of the seasons has made the wedding feel imminent, and my hope is slowly dying.

I press my forehead against the cool glass and close my eyes.

"Clover," Lawrence says from behind me. "What are you doing up here?"

“You found me.”

He sets his hand on my shoulder, rubbing gently. “Were you hiding from me?”

“No. Yes.” With a sigh, I push away from the window and turn toward the king.
“Maybe. I was hiding from everyone.”

“As am I.”

My eyes move past him. “You’ve lost your knights.”

“For now.” His honey eyes search mine, and he frowns. Softly, he says, “Talk to me, Clover. Tell me what’s troubling you.”

“I don’t know if Henrik is going to return in time,” I whisper.

Lawrence purses his lips, looking like he needs to tell me something but doesn’t want to.

“What is it?” I ask reluctantly.

“He’s sent a message.”

Standing straighter, I clasp his arm. “Henrik?”

Lawrence nods. “Through one of Audra’s men.”

“For me?”

After studying me for a second, Lawrence slowly shakes his head.

I look down, feeling foolish for getting my hopes up. “What did he say?”

“Camellia has killed Augmirian. She’s seized control of the dukedom.”

My eyes fly to his. “Are you serious?”

Lawrence nods solemnly. “I’m afraid so. She’s controlling the nobility through the necklaces.”

“We knew she was going to,” I whisper.

“We did. They haven’t found a way to free Brielle yet, so Henrik remains by Camellia’s side.”

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Swallowing the lump in my throat, I nod.

Hesitantly, Lawrence raises his hand to my face, gently brushing my hair from my cheek. “Are you all right?”

“I’m not.”

“I thought after all these months...” He frowns. “You weren’t together very long.”

Looking away, I shrug.

“There’s more. Would you rather I wait? Tell you later?”

I shake my head, preparing myself. “No, I’m fine. Go on.”

“Camellia intends to come to our wedding.”

“Excuse me?” I snarl, losing my composure. “After everything she’s done—”

“We believe she’s traveling with a small group of nobles, not nearly large enough for an attack. She’s pretending it’s a gesture of goodwill—”

“It’s not.”

“I know that, and you know that—the entire kingdom knows that. But this is political, Clover. We must tread carefully.”

“I hate politics. Can’t we just destroy her?”

“Blood-thirsty princess, aren’t you?”

I crumple forward, feeling like we’re helpless. Lawrence goes still as I rest my forehead on his shoulder.

“Do you remember when we were only friends?” I ask. “Before the engagement, before you claimed to love me?”

“All right,” he says slowly, not really answering.

“Can you hug me like you would have then? Without expectation or hidden meaning?”

Slowly, Lawrence wraps his arms around my back.

I let out a sob, so frustrated and angry I almost can’t bear it. “Let’s just attack her ship and be done with it.”

“Henrik and Brielle are on that ship.” Lawrence rubs his hand up and down my back. “Do you really want that?”

“No.”

“We’re going to welcome my sister and the elves traveling with her, but don’t believe for one minute I trust her.”

“What if it’s a trick?”

“I’ve ordered extra soldiers to the western guard posts to watch the coastline, just in

case. We're keeping an eye on things."

I pull back. "Camellia wants your throne."

"I'm aware."

"She's going to try to kill you, and yet you'll welcome her?"

"I trust my guards, and..." He winces, shaking his head. "I trust Henrik."

I almost smile. "How painful was that to admit?"

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“So painful.”

“How are we going to get through this?” I ask softly. “Everything is so...wrong.”

Lawrence releases me and turns to the window. “In some ways, I’m glad Father died. It would have broken his heart to see this.”

“How did Camellia become like this?” I ask, though I don’t expect an answer. “She was always wicked, yes, but does she seem the type to plot something like this?”

“I have no idea. But it’s occurred to me that I never knew my sister very well. She was always with Hellebore.”

The air goes still, and we slowly turn to look at each other.

“Hellebore,” I say quietly.

Lawrence wrinkles his nose as he thinks about it, nodding to himself.

“Pranmore said there is High Vale magic woven into the curse in the necklace.”

“Perhaps there is more to the handmaid than meets the eye,” Lawrence muses.

“Where did she come from? Who is she really?”

He shakes his head. “I have no idea.”

“Perhaps it might be wise to find out.” Feeling marginally better now that I have a task, I turn from the window. “I’m going to see if anyone knows.”

“Father would have known,” Lawrence says absently, his voice laced with sadness.

I turn back, hesitating before I set my hand on his shoulder. “You’ve played your part so well; I didn’t realize you’re still hurting.”

“I lost my entire family in one night. I feel like an orphan king. Pathetic.”

“Lawrence...”

Still facing the window, he softly steals my words as he says, “Do you remember when we were only friends? Before the engagement, before you realized I loved you?”

I bite my lip, stepping close. I wrap my arms around his waist and press my cheek against his back.

“I will be your sister,” I vow. “I will be your family.”

He laughs, but there’s no happiness in his tone. “I don’t want you to be my sister, Clover.”

I don’t know what to say, so I hold him tighter, wishing I could give him what he wants. He places his hand over mine, and we both mourn in silence.

* * *

Today, it’s nice enough to shoot in the bailey with only a light cloak, and though the breeze is cool, the sun is warm and welcome. A few birds chirp from budding tree

limbs, swooping down to the garden beds and searching for stray seeds they missed the autumn before.

The weather is a tease, though. Next week, it could snow.

As I draw my arrow back, focusing on the target, I half-listen to Lawrence and his knights. They were shooting as well, but now they're gossiping about the comings and goings of court with my ladies.

"Your Majesty," a soldier says with a bow of his head, interrupting the conversation. His arm pennant is green, and he wears a gold medallion upon it. He's a commander, like Henrik. "We've just received a messenger pigeon from the Trimell guard post. Camellia's retinue is headed south, toward Dulane."

I lower my bow, turning toward the group.

"They must intend to come up through Forsten instead of Heistone," Miguel says.

My heart begins to beat too quickly. "How long until they reach the port?"

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“Two days, maybe three at most,” the commander says. “They were seen skirting the coast, taking the same route as the passenger ships.”

“How many are in her party?” Lawrence asks.

“One ship—they assume less than twenty passengers. There are women aboard as well.”

“Of course there are,” Lawrence says darkly. “High Vale noblewomen, no doubt.” He growls under his breath and then commands, “Send word to Forsten. Tell them to detain Camellia until I can personally welcome her back. We’ll leave today.”

Xander clears his throat. “Your Majesty, I’m not sure that’s—”

“You’ll have my back, won’t you?” Lawrence interrupts.

“Yes...”

Lawrence nods, not about to be coddled. “Good. Tell the grooms to prepare our horses.”

“I’m going as well,” I say boldly, preparing myself for a fight.

I’m not disappointed. Lawrence whips back, giving me a sharp look. “Camellia has already tried to kill you once. Do you really think it’s a good idea to give her another opportunity?”

“She’ll have plenty of chances once she’s at court,” I argue. “And I have no intention of hiding.”

But we both know why I really want to go. Lawrence stands, indecisive. Finally, he throws up his hands. “Fine.”

“Your Majesty,” Denny begins to protest.

“I’m going,” I say to my brother, giving him a look of death.

It doesn’t work terribly well on him, but he closes his mouth, his stern gaze telling me we’ll have words later when he has a chance to corner me.

But then he turns to Lawrence, looking like something has just occurred to him. “Your Majesty, if I may make a request, would you consider assigning Clover a personal guard?”

“Denny!” I exclaim.

Don’t I already have enough people trailing me?

Lawrence slowly nods, and then he turns to me. “Bring Pranmore.”

“He’ll come even if I want him to stay,” I point out, relieved by his suggestion. “He transferred Henrik’s life debt to me.”

“I was thinking of someone with combat experience,” Denny says.

“Pranmore is better,” I argue. “He’s excellent with wards, and since we’re dealing with magic users, that will be more effective than a sword.”

“How about someone who’s not afraid of a sword?” Denny counters.

I’m about to snap at him when Lawrence says, “No, it’s all right, Clover. Your brother has a point. Prannore is excellent when it comes to protective spells and healing, but he’s not a knight.”

“I absolutely refuse to have anyone else following me. I can barely breathe as it is!”

“Hurtful,” Calla teases from the shade of a nearby wall, where she and my other ladies drink tea at a small table and pretend they’re not bored to tears in the bailey.

I roll my eyes. “You know what I mean.”

Then I focus on her, thinking.

“What?” she asks nervously.

“Lawrence, may I choose my knight?” I ask.

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“That depends...” he says slowly.

“I want Barret.”

Calla’s eyes widen, and she presses her lips together to hide her pleasure.

She likely thinks it’s a kindness to put her with her new love, but I have another reason for choosing the knight—if they’re distracted with each other, maybe they’ll give me a little space. If I can find a way to get rid of Lavender and Hyacinth, I might have some time to myself.

“Barret is an excellent choice,” Miguel says to Lawrence. “He’s strong with a sword, and he’s coolheaded in tense situations.”

“Very well.” Lawrence turns to Calla. “Go fetch him, please. I’m assuming you know where he is?”

She blushes deep red as she hurries from the courtyard.

The king then turns back to me, hesitating like he wants to say something.

“Tell my steward my plans,” he says to his knights. Then he nods to Lavender and Hyacinth. “Please excuse us.”

The knights hesitate.

“I’m not helpless,” Lawrence says, growing frustrated. “I can manage the courtyard

on my own.”

Apparently, I’m not the only one feeling suffocated.

“There are guards on the walls and all the entrances,” he adds. “We’re fine.”

“Very well,” Miguel says reluctantly.

The knights leave with the ladies, and we finally have a moment alone.

“Are you sure you want to accompany us?” Lawrence asks me. “It could be...unpleasant.”

“You don’t think Henrik will still want me?” I ask with a smile.

Inside, though, I’m dying a little.

Lawrence looks away, irritated. “I mean he’s still chained to Camellia, and you’re still betrothed to me. You must act the part until we agree to break the engagement.”

“I won’t bring shame on you or the crown,” I say quietly. “I will act according to my current position—I promise.”

He sighs, looking back. “If I ask you to stay here, will you?”

“Don’t ask,” I beg softly.

Lawrence studies me, and I watch him right back. He’s so handsome—it’s impossible to deny. Since our trip to Ferradelle, he’s been pulling his hair into a knot at the back of his head like he doesn’t have patience for it any longer. It brings the focus to his face and makes him look more rugged.

“I feel like I’m losing you,” he says after several seconds pass. “I’m not ready.”

“Lawrence…”

He smiles, looking at the ground between us. “I could keep you, you know. I’m the king—I can have whatever I want.”

“I trust you to uphold your end of the bargain.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Are you nervous about seeing Camellia?” I ask, needing to change the subject.

Lawrence snorts out a laugh. “Our relationship won’t change just because she wants me dead.”

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“She’s likely wanted you dead for a while,” I point out, trying to make the situation a little lighter. “Now you just happen to know it.”

“Exactly.”

We smile together, laughing because it’s our only option—laughing because we don’t know how much longer we’ll have the chance.

13

HENRIK

Camellia leans against the paddle ship railing, staring across the water. It’s a moonless night, dark and thick with cloud cover. There’s just a hint of rain in the air. In the dim lamplight, alone like this, Camellia doesn’t seem like a necromancer intent on taking over the kingdom.

She looks like a woman—like any other. And perhaps even a little lonely.

It’s a fleeting thought, and one that doesn’t last long. Any sympathy I had for Camellia is long dead. I was willing to overlook her flaws at one time, but that was before I realized they ran so deep.

I stay clear of her, finding my own spot to look over the dark water.

Like timid puppies starved for affection, Dalvin and Bendon remain nearby, not daring to get too close since Camellia has a history of snapping at them. But as usual,

they're happy to be at the princess's beck and call—not that she ever makes use of them.

The hum of the Vallen propulsion apparatuses mingles with the sound of the water as the great paddle wheels cut through the sea. We'll reach main Caldenbauer in just a few days, and Cabaranth only a day after that.

Home.

But I'm not sure what that word means anymore. After Mother's death, our small house near the smithy lost its warmth. It was a place of necessity but not comfort, a place to dread. Once I could afford to send Brielle to Dulnmarin's, I rarely spent time there, choosing to sleep in the soldiers' barracks instead, seeing Father more than enough when I worked in the family forge.

With Father in Revalane, the smithy and house are now empty. But blacksmiths are easily replaced. I'm sure another has been found to fill the royal orders.

Was Algernon even notified when Father disappeared? They were friends once, before Father became injured and rank came between them.

As I stare into the dark night, I try to imagine Father the way the older soldiers claimed he was before the accident—noble, strong, generous.

Kind.

My eyes travel to my arm. Cursing under my breath, I yank my attention back to the ocean.

I smell the scent of Camellia's floral perfume seconds before she steps up beside me, but I don't look her way.

“You seem pensive this evening.” She sighs as she crosses her arms on the rail.
“Does your arm ache with the storm?”

“No,” I lie.

“I have an injury that pains me when the weather is poor,” she says softly, likely hoping I’ll ask her about it.

I don’t.

“My mother died on a night like this,” she says anyway. “With clouds so thick it felt like breathing water. But it was summer then, hot.”

Her voice is softer than usual, less haughty and calloused.

“People say I was too young to remember, but I do,” she continues. “I remember the night, the taste of my tears. The raw feeling in the pit of my stomach after crying for hours.”

Unable to resist, I turn my head to look at her.

“The nursery maids took me to Father so he could soothe me.” She lets out a soft laugh as she pushes her long, blonde hair over her shoulder. “Do you know what he did?”

I shake my head.

“He sent me away.” She looks at me, her expression sour. “I was heartbroken—devastated—and he rejected me. It’s my first memory of him. I’ve never been able to forget.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

She nods.

“How did Hellebore come to you?”

“Broken things have a way of clinging to each other in hopes of becoming whole. I lost my mother, and Hellebore lost her family. She’s the only person I trust without question.” She turns to me. “You’re broken, too. I’ve watched you—I know. I’ve seen the way my father treated your father, the way he treated you. You should have had your seal years ago, and yet you’re still a commander. Lawrence mocked your hard work, taunting you openly. Why do you wish to protect him?”

I look away. “Because it’s my duty.”

“What can I do to win you?” she asks quietly. “What can I give you or say?”

“Allegiance can’t be bought.” I glance back at her. “Neither can it be manipulated.”

The princess’s expression hardens, making her look less like a young woman and more like a jaded ruler. Casting her hand back toward the ship, she says, “It seems to work well enough, doesn’t it?”

“Those people don’t love you, Camellia—they’re scared. But a cornered dog will eventually fight. Don’t forget that.”

She begins to respond, but a shadow suddenly appears at the side of the rail, just

behind Camellia, climbing from the sea itself.

Out of instinct, I shove her behind me and lunge for the figure, taking him onto the deck before he has a chance to react. But once he's down, he lashes out with magic, pressing his hand to my shoulder and searing through my tabard.

I roar in shock, using the intense pain to fuel my fight and give me the upper hand. I elbow the elf in the face and then draw my dagger with my good hand.

The elf breathes hard, glaring at me as I hold the blade to his throat. "Whose side are you on?"

I rear back.

"I could have freed your sister," he hisses.

Before I can reassess the situation, Dalvin and Bendon yank the man up by the arms.

"Use your magic, and you're dead," Bendon growls.

"I'm dead anyway," the elf snarls back.

Breathing hard, I push myself to my feet and study him. Dressed all in black, with a bandana covering his long hair, he was on a mission. The lack of weaponry means nothing with an elf. He's an assassin, and I came between him and his target.

I glance at Camellia, feeling sick. Others in our party gather around as the duchess steps in front of the elf.

"Who are you?" she demands.

“I am no one.”

“You’re right,” she says coolly. “But I don’t care about your identity. Instead, tell me who sent you.”

He glares at her, refusing to answer.

“Arisel!” a woman cries as she pushes through the crowd. She’s close to Audra’s mother’s age, usually perfectly poised.

Horror crosses the shadow rogue’s face. He begins to shake his head, silently begging the woman to be silent.

She comes to an abrupt stop, her wild eyes going between the man and the wicked duchess.

“You know this young man?” Camellia asks.

“I’ve never seen her in my life,” the shadow rogue insists. “I acted on my own—this has nothing to do with her.”

He’s young, twenty at the most.

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The woman begins to cry. “It’s not his fault. I sent him—it was me, not him.”

Camellia assesses the situation, looking amused. “Interesting. And you are?”

“I’m Lady Ophelia of the family Tilmanai.”

Her husband appears at her side, his face ashen in the dim light. “What’s going on?”

Camellia ignores the lord. “And this boy...is he your son?”

“No!” the woman cries. “He’s just a young man I paid. He didn’t even want to do it!”

Camellia turns back to the shadow rogue, kindling her magic in the palm of her hand.

“That’s fortunate. If you were her child, it would be painful to witness her death.”

Suddenly the woman lets out a bloodcurdling scream, and she falls onto the deck. Her husband falls to her side as she writhes, begging Camellia for mercy. The young man rips away from Dalvin and Bendon, dropping to his knees beside the woman who is so obviously his mother.

A few moments later, she goes limp.

“Toss her over the side,” Camellia says to Bendon. “And kill the boy and his father.”

I move forward to intervene, but Dalvin steps up next to me, pressing his dagger to my side. “You’re no match for me with that injury, Henrik.”

I turn to glare at him, a heartbeat away from attacking.

He grins. “And if you were to cause trouble, Brielle would most certainly die.”

It’s a low threat, but it turns me into the princess’s marionette every time.

I don’t watch as the bodies are tossed over the side of the ship, but my muscles tighten, and I hold back the urge to be sick.

Around me, elves cry and murmur.

“I’m going to retire for the night,” Camellia announces to no one in particular. Before she goes, she turns back to me with a knowing smile. “Thank you for saving me, Henrik.”

I hold out just long enough for her to leave, and then I wrench over the side of the ship.

* * *

I hope to be arrested as soon as we near the waters outside Dulane, and I’m disappointed when we aren’t. But knowing the power Camellia wields, Lawrence would be callous to risk so many High Vale lives like that. As much as I hate to admit it, I don’t think he would.

I look at Brielle, glad she’s with us but wondering if it would have been safer for her to remain with Audra in Revalane. She stands at the prow of the ship, letting the breeze blow her hair back.

“Are you happy to be home?” she asks when she realizes I’ve joined her.

“Ask me again in a few days.”

I have no idea what Camellia has planned. She wisely hasn't told me. As far as I know, this is simply a power move to make Lawrence squirm.

Or it might be another way to break me. Perhaps we are here just so I can witness Clover and Lawrence's wedding. It certainly wouldn't surprise me.

My sister gives me a soft smile. “It will be all right.”

She is far more optimistic than I am, especially after the events of a few nights ago. Thankfully, she was in her quarters and didn't watch Camellia murder the family.

Because I don't want her to worry, I nod.

“This visit must be painful for you,” she whispers. “How are you holding up?”

“I'm fine.”

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Brielle lets me get away with the lie, changing the subject to the weather before she finally grows bored and wanders to her cabin.

I watch the coastline, dreading our arrival as much as I am looking forward to being back on the mainland. It's cooler here than Revalane, but the air is warm, and the sea breeze is pleasant.

Under different circumstances, I would enjoy the detour—after all, people pay to take tours of the coast in passenger ships such as Caldwell's.

Well, maybe not exactly like Caldwell's. We're lucky we made it to Ferradelle without his ship springing a leak.

Absently, I wonder what happened to the captain after we escaped the swamp port. He probably sold off the luggage we abandoned on his ship and is now sitting smug and happy somewhere in Ferradelle. Clover's gowns alone would have been worth a fortune.

For just a minute, I let myself think about Clover. Knowing her as I do, I imagine she's going stir-crazy in the castle. It was a life she thought she wanted, but being cooped up doesn't suit her.

I cringe to myself as Camellia joins me, acknowledging I stood here alone for too long.

"It seems Lawrence has sent a welcoming committee," the princess says as she studies the distant port, sounding amused.

She's not wrong. Our ship has been spotted, and a band of the king's men gathers on the pier, their red and gold tunics a crimson smudge against the sandy shore. As we sail closer, I begin to make out guards, recognizing stony faces.

Perhaps I was wrong—maybe Lawrence does intend to arrest Camellia here and now.

What will the princess do if she's cornered? I certainly don't doubt she's capable of the worst. I think of Brielle, and I become edgy.

The paddle ship drops anchor in the bay's shallow water, and the ship's men begin to prepare the dinghies so we may go ashore. Camellia watches with disinterest, seeming completely at ease with the men waiting for us on the pier.

"We are ready to take you across, Your Grace," Lord Fenninglore says coolly, only as polite as necessary. He's about my age, with a young wife who is currently expecting their first baby. She remained in Ferradelle, but that certainly doesn't ensure her safety, and Lord Fenninglore knows that as well as I.

Camellia has chosen him to lead her retinue.

"I'll wait for the second dinghy." A smile toys at her crimson lips as she turns her attention to the waiting guards. "Let's see what kind of greeting we receive before I go ashore."

"Yes, Your Grace," Lord Fenninglore says. He gives me a tight nod before he leaves.

A strange thing has happened since the High Vales learned the necklaces' true purpose. They've realized that I, too, am Camellia's captive, and it has changed their attitude toward me. They are warmer now, realizing we have a common foe.

With an air of detached curiosity, Camellia watches the first dinghy cross with a

small group of nobles and several of their Vallen guards.

A satisfied smile spreads over her face when they are greeted without issue. “It’s as I expected. Lawrence is too cowardly to confront me.”

“Or perhaps he doesn’t want to risk the lives of the innocent women you’ve cursed,” I point out.

Camellia turns to me, her smile becoming darker. “While I’m glad you feel comfortable enough to speak freely, I’m not entirely sure I like your tone.”

“Apologies, Your Highness.”

“Your Grace,” she corrects. “I am now the grand duchess of Ferradelle, no longer a helpless, powerless princess under my father and brother’s thumbs.”

I bow my head and correct, “Your Grace.”

“Your tone is positively venomous, Henrik.” She turns to me, her expression betraying her intrigue. “I like this side of you—this defiance. Was it always in you, lurking under your eager-to-please exterior?”

Her tone is flirtatious, bordering on seductive, but I have no desire to engage. I give her a mild look, staying silent.

Laughing, she shakes her head. “Sometimes you’re so dull. That’s all right; I’m patient. I will tame you one way or the other. Fight or roll over and expose your belly—the choice is yours. The first is more fun, but the second is certainly easier.”

I bite my tongue, knowing she’s purposely baiting me.

“Your Grace,” Lord Fenninglore interrupts. “Would you care to go ashore now?”

“I would, yes.” Camellia takes my arm. “You’ll escort me onto the boat, won’t you, Henrik?”

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“Yes, Your Grace.”

Brielle ends up in the dinghy with us, along with Lord Fenninglore and Camellia’s attending ladies. The four young women look pale, likely worrying they will face the consequences of their betrayal soon.

We’re halfway across when there is a commotion on the pier. Instead of giving Camellia their full attention, the guards focus on something behind them.

“What is it?” Camellia demands, preferring to be the center of attention.

One of the ship’s men stands for a better look. “I believe the king has arrived, Your Grace.”

“Lawrence is here?” she asks sharply.

“That’s the way it appears.”

The crowd parts, and it feels like a vice squeezes over my heart. Clover pushes her way to the edge of the pier, wearing a riding gown in ivory and copper. A circlet sits in her golden-brown hair, catching the sunlight.

Our eyes meet across the water, and her lips part. Her face conveys everything in a mere few seconds—that she missed me. That she still cares.

Suddenly, I can’t breathe. An ache builds in my chest, spreading throughout my body, making me feel like I’m drowning.

“Well, isn’t this uncomfortable?” Camellia says, growing irritated. “Do I have to remind you that Clover, though unworthy, is engaged to my brother?”

I pull my gaze from Clover, barely registering Camellia’s words.

Instead of finding a playful look upon the princess’s face, or one of casual taunting, Camellia is livid. Her eyes spark with unveiled jealousy, and her fingers dig into the side of the boat. “Do not look at her like that, Henrik, or I will become angry. You are mine, and she belongs to Lawrence. Do you understand?”

I swallow, realizing I’ve bared my neck to Camellia. Clover is as much my weakness as Brielle. “Look at whom, Your Grace?”

She scoffs, looking away. Beside her, Brielle and the princess’s ladies sit as if frozen, terrified of Camellia’s sudden temper.

“I believed I was taken with Clover,” I say carefully, “but the absence has changed my heart.”

The words aren’t a lie. With each month, I missed Clover more. I yearned for her smiles and her impulsive sunshine. Her heart. Her warmth. The way she made me feel valuable just as I was, without having to earn her approval.

Without needing a seal on my arm to prove my worth.

“Good,” Camellia says sharply, not buying it for a moment. “Then don’t look at her. Don’t give her even a grain of your attention.”

The men and Lord Fenninglore stare at the pier, too still, as uncomfortable as the women.

“Understood.”

“I mean it, Henrik.” Camellia looks back at me, and her voice becomes shrill. “I won’t stand for it.”

I bow my head, hiding my own anger. “Forgive me for upsetting you.”

“When we arrive on the pier, you will stay by my side. You are my knight.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

She leans closer, hissing low. “If you humiliate me, I will kill Clover and your sister. Is that clear?”

I look up, meeting her eyes. Smiling, I move close like I intend to whisper an endearment in her ear. “Do not be rash, Camellia. I am by your side for their sakes alone. If you kill them, my only goal will be to destroy you. Do not make an enemy out of me—I promise you; you will regret it.”

She slowly pulls back. Her eye twitches, but she forces a smile for our audience. Laughing as if I said something flirtatious, she looks away. “Henrik.”

Taking my hand like we’ve just made up after our spat, she squeezes her nails into the palm of my hand.

But I don’t flinch, not even when she draws blood.

14

CLOVER

All I see is Henrik.

Henrik leaning close to Camellia. Henrik sharing a long look with her.

Henrik holding her hand.

I'm going to be sick.

Turning from the pier, I breathe in the moist sea air and almost run right into Lawrence.

"Clover," he exclaims softly, taking my shoulders. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I say brightly, forcing a smile. "Just a little seasick."

He raises an eyebrow. "Don't you have to be on the sea for that?"

"Obviously not," I mutter. "I'm going to stand with Pranmore."

Looking concerned even though he likely knows the reason for my distress, he lets me go.

Pranmore waits near the horses—ours, not his. He still refuses to ride unless it's

absolutely necessary.

Lavender and Hyacinth have cornered him, the poor man, and he looks like a spooked deer. Calla and Barret are nearby, flirting with each other. Oddly, Cortana stands with Pranmore as well, and the guard seems slightly enamored herself.

She flinches when she sees me, dropping her eyes and looking properly ashamed. We haven't spoken since Camellia tried to pin her blood magic crimes on me. The guard believed I was guilty, and I'm sure she well knows she's not my favorite person—especially since my innocence has been proven.

“Your Highness.” Like a coward, she bows her head and hurries to join her fellow guards.

“What did Cortana want?” I ask even though my mind is still on Henrik.

Lavender scowls. “She said she twisted her wrist during morning exercises a few days ago. She wanted Master Pranmore to look at it.”

Judging from Lavender's tone, that's not all the guard wants from Pranmore.

He shifts, highly uncomfortable in the strange position in which he's found himself.

“I need to speak to Master Pranmore,” I say to the girls. “Excuse us, please.”

Lavender puts on a pout, but I ignore it.

“I cannot go far,” Barret says gently, wisely picking up on my bad mood. “But I will give you privacy. Should you need me, I will be close.”

I smile, thankful I chose him as my knight. He doesn't smother, but he's attentive. I

give Calla an approving look, wholeheartedly approving of her choice. She smiles back, biting her lip.

When they leave, I turn to Pranmore. “You’ve become quite the ladies’ man.”

He lifts his eyes to the sky, jumping when his large rack of antlers brushes against the mare behind him. He turns, apologizing to the animal who couldn’t care less.

“I don’t understand it,” he says when he looks back. “I’ve never been this popular. I suppose it’s because I am a novelty.”

“You’re not a novelty,” I say sharply. “They’ve just realized your worth. You were obviously wasted amongst your people.”

He gives me a doubtful smile. “My self-esteem is fine, Clover. There is no reason to feed it.” His gaze sharpens on me. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” I lie. “I was just feeling a little sick to my stomach, and I hoped you could do something about it.”

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“I cannot fix heartache, Clover,” he says gently. “I’m assuming you saw Henrik?”

Tears suddenly pool in my eyes, and I nod. Blinking quickly to chase them away, I clear my throat. “It looks as if... I mean, it appears...”

“You’re worried he’s forgotten about you?”

I bite my cheek hard, focusing on the pain as I nod. “He and Camellia seem to have grown close.”

“Impossible,” Pranmore scoffs. “Henrik would never befriend a woman who nearly killed you or his sister.”

I look back at him, knowing he’s right but unable to get the picture of them out of my mind. “He wouldn’t, right?”

“Not ever,” Pranmore says vehemently.

I stare at the elf, letting his certainty soothe my irrational fear. Taking another deep breath, I nod. “I’m all right now.”

He gives me a skeptical look. “Are you certain?”

“Sure.”

Laughing softly, he loops his arm around my shoulders, pulling me against his side in a friendly embrace.

I check to ensure no one is looking, but everyone's attention is on the princess's retinue. I look up at Pranmore's antlers. "You know, if I were much taller, this would be impossible."

He shakes his head, not bothering to be offended this time.

"You best release me," I say. "I don't want word to get around I'm competing for your affections. Someone might murder me in my sleep."

"Honestly, Clover." The elf chuckles as he lets me go. "You're ridiculous."

Grinning, I turn back toward the pier. Then my smile falls. "I think they've arrived."

"I believe you're right."

"I should pretend I'm brave and join Lawrence. If Camellia thinks I'm hiding from her, she'll be entirely too smug."

"I'll go with you," Pranmore says, his tone growing solemn. "Just to be safe."

Knights and guards part as we make our way to the pier. I step up to Lawrence's side just in time to see Henrik offer Camellia a hand so she may exit the boat.

Fall, I whisper in my head, smiling as I imagine Camellia emerging from the bay soaking wet and covered in seaweed.

Sadly, she makes it to the pier safe and dry.

Lawrence steps forward, pasting a pleasant look on his face. "Hello, Camellia."

She runs her eyes over him, smiling faintly as if amused. "Look at my baby brother,

playing king.”

Around us, knights stiffen, preparing for a confrontation.

But Lawrence only grins, unruffled. “Look at you, playing High Vale Duchess.”

She laughs, and they share an embrace that’s awkward at best. I hold my breath, terrified she’s going to try to kill him right here and now.

Thankfully, they part without bloodshed.

Unable to help myself any longer, I turn my eyes on Henrik. But the commander doesn’t look my way. In fact, he seems oblivious to my presence. His attention is on Lawrence and Camellia, unwavering. He stands stoic, the perfect personal knight.

My heart aches as I drink him in. Was he always this handsome? This tall and strong and capable?

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Did he truly hold me and promise forever? It feels like a lifetime ago.

I wait, silently begging him to look at me. Just for a moment—one brief glance in my direction to acknowledge I still mean something to him.

But instead of Henrik, Camellia turns to me. “Hello, Clover.”

“Your Grace.” I bow my head as is expected, but her tone isn’t cordial, and I don’t bother to pretend I’m happy to see her either.

Her gaze moves to my circlet, and she wrinkles her nose. “That’s an interesting piece of jewelry you’re wearing.”

“Do you like it?”

“Is it one of mine?” She smiles. “Not that it matters. I am happy to share my old things with those in need.”

Behind me, Calla draws in a startled gasp, but I’m too familiar with Camellia to be surprised by her audacity.

“It was made for Clover,” Lawrence answers. “I certainly wouldn’t give her your castoffs.”

Camellia shrugs, easily dismissing the bite in his tone. She then extends her hand behind her, silently beckoning her knight. Expressionless, Henrik steps forward, allowing her to take his arm. She presses herself against him, smirking at me.

“Don’t look down on castoffs, Lawrence.” She runs her free hand down Henrik’s arm. “Some things are more useful in another person’s hands.”

It takes every ounce of my willpower not to lunge at her. I could knock her into the bay before she realized what hit her. She’d probably kill me, but I bet I could get one good punch in first. It would almost be worth it.

Knowing me well enough to sense my thoughts, Lawrence subtly grasps hold of my arm. I tremble under his fingers, so angry my vision blurs.

Henrik, however, doesn’t flinch—he doesn’t do anything. He merely stands there as if bored, not so much as letting his eyes drift to me.

Lawrence wisely changes the subject, asking Camellia how their short voyage went. She is momentarily distracted, giving me a chance to remind myself I need to breathe before I pass out and end up in the bay myself.

A moment later, Brielle joins us. She stands next to Henrik, casting Camellia a wary look and frowning when she sees the way the new duchess clings to her brother. Resigned to Henrik’s fate, the girl’s eyes move over the crowd like she’s desperate to find a friendly face.

Brielle is as pretty as Henrik is handsome, with dark hair and blue eyes that are a shade brighter than her brother’s stormy color. She was radiant when we first met, before she was aware she was being used as a pawn to control her brother, but her beauty is now marred with fear. There are dark circles under her eyes, and her golden skin looks washed out.

My attention drops to her necklace, and my anger rises anew. She’s far too young to be so affected by Camellia’s cruelty.

As I study Brielle, her eyes latch onto someone. Intrigued, I follow her gaze.

Bartholomew stands in the crowd nearby, surrounded by the guard Lawrence assigned to him. Realizing Brielle is looking his way, he blinks several times, subtly glancing around him to see which knight has caught her attention.

She offers him a tentative smile when he looks back, obviously relieved to find someone close to her age in the group.

When he realizes she's actually looking at him, Bartholomew blushes deep red under his freckles, and he offers her a hesitant smile in return.

The exchange is so sweet, so innocent, it eases some of my anger. It cools my temper and returns me to my senses.

I look back at Camellia, taking a deep breath.

Henrik is caged. What did I expect? That he'd sweep me into his arms right in front of Camellia?

You're ridiculous, Clover.

I am engaged, sort of, and Henrik is under Camellia's control. I don't like it, but there's nothing we can do about it.

Not yet anyway.

"Are we going to talk on the pier all day?" Camellia finally demands. "I'm weary from the trip, and I would like to rest."

"Lord and Lady Cordin have graciously invited us to stay with them before we return

to Cabaranth,” Lawrence says. “If it pleases you, we will accept their offer.”

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“Isn’t Lord Cordin’s land half a day’s ride from here?” Camellia sighs. “I suppose—as long as my retinue is welcome as well.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” our host says in response, stepping forward. “You are all very welcome.”

“Well then.” She turns to Lawrence, clutching Henrik even tighter. “Let’s not linger here any longer.”

As Camellia pushes past us, her shoulder jabs into mine.

I close my eyes, telling myself to remain calm. After all, I’ve dealt with her for the better part of my twenty-two years. I can manage her now.

She suddenly turns around to ask Lawrence a question. The move inadvertently puts Henrik very close to me since she’s still clinging to him.

Slowly, hoping to be covert about it, I lift my eyes to his face. But even when we’re so near we’re almost touching, he ignores me.

Disappointed, I prepare to step away. But suddenly, Henrik’s hand brushes against mine, lingering for only a second.

I stand stone-still, not even daring to move. My heart hammers in my chest, and I can’t help but wonder if it was an accident...or something more.

The commander shifts away, and when I find the courage to look at him again, he

appears oblivious.

* * *

Lord Cordin's estate is in the middle of his expansive land, positioned almost perfectly between Forsten and Cabaranth.

Lawrence's knights decide we are safer in a group. Therefore, I am given the room next to Lawrence's, and my ladies stay with me. Cots are brought in for their comfort, though Hyacinth looks particularly put out at the thought of sleeping on something that isn't a down-stuffed mattress.

But she falls asleep quickly enough, and I envy her for it.

It's now the middle of the night, and I'm the only one awake. I roll one way and then the other, trying to get comfortable.

It's a losing battle.

Finally, I sit up. The covers pool at my lap, too warm.

I need fresh air, but there are far too many knights outside my door to sneak out. I could join them, however. Wasting time with my brother and his companions sounds better than trying to sleep.

I tiptoe past my ladies as I pull on my dressing gown, and then I come to a dead stop. A folded piece of parchment lies on the floor directly in front of the door. Someone must have slipped it under sometime during the night. The pale ivory message shines in the dim light, begging to be read.

Glancing into the room to make sure the ladies are sleeping, I snatch the note off the

floor. It's too dark to see it well, so I edge closer to the candle's single flame to inspect it. It's not sealed, and there's no signature. It simply reads, "Beyond the garden, by the lake."

Anyone could have sent it, but my heart hopes.

I study the handwriting, wondering if Henrik was its scribe. And if he was, how did he get past the knights?

I would be a fool to follow the note's directions. For all I know, Camellia sent it. She could be waiting for me now, ready to finish me off.

In fact, that's more than likely. Who else but a mage could sneak past the men?

And even if it was Henrik, how am I supposed to sneak past the men?

I stand by the door for entirely too long, and then something hits me: we're on the ground level of the estate.

What will stop me from slipping out a window?

Even though I haven't made up my mind whether I'm going or not, I sneak across the room once more. As quietly as possible, I draw back the drapes and mouth a silent curse when I spot one of Lord Cordin's guards just beyond the evergreen bushes that grow right up to the glass.

They've thought of everything, haven't they? Am I a princess or a prisoner?

I let the drapes fall and pace the window a few times, wondering if there's another way out—and then I have an idea. Determined, I step into the hall.

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Immediately, the three knights look up from their game of cards. Barret sits with Denny and Alfred between the two doors, keeping an eye on both Lawrence and me.

“What are you doing out of bed?” Denny asks, stifling a yawn.

They must be taking shifts. Miguel and Xander are likely resting.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I say, wishing my brother wasn’t here. “I’m a little achy from the ride, and I thought a warm bath might help. I was hoping to visit the bathhouse.”

Denny gives me a skeptical look, knowing the gentle ride didn’t affect me in the slightest. But Barret, innocent knight that he is, immediately nods. “I’ll take you.”

Xander gestures toward my door and tells him, “We’ll keep an eye on the room.”

“Don’t be long,” Denny says to me. “If you’re gone more than an hour, we’ll be forced to wake His Majesty and come look for you.”

If I’m gone for more than an hour, I hope they form a search party to recover my body.

The estate is quiet and still in the wee hours of the morning. Neither Barret nor I speak until we’re in front of the separate building that houses the manor’s bathing facilities.

Barret looks unsure as we stand in front of the women’s entrance. “I can’t let you go inside without checking things over.”

But going into the women's bathing chamber is obviously the very last thing he wants to do.

"Perhaps we'll announce ourselves at the door?" I suggest. "If someone is bathing, they'll let us know. If no one answers, then you can search the room."

Still looking less than eager, the knight nods.

Steam wafts out of the room when I open the door, lightly scented with expensive, lightly floral neroli oil. "Hello?" I call. "Is anyone in here?"

When no one answers, Barret and I step inside.

The oil-burning lamps have been dimmed for nighttime, and the small bathing pool in the middle of the room is perfectly still. Quickly, Barret walks through the room, checking the two separate changing rooms before he's satisfied it's safe to leave me.

"Don't be too long," he warns. "I'd rather not get on your brother's bad side."

"I promise I'll be finished before the hour is up."

Hopefully.

As soon as he steps outside, I scurry into one of the changing rooms and climb atop the wooden bench. It only takes a few seconds to swing open the small window, though it's far more of a struggle than I expect to crawl out. The dressing gown makes it challenging to climb, and I end up stuck halfway out the window, my rump and legs flailing helplessly while I stretch for the ground. Suddenly, I slide forward...and down.

I try to catch myself with my outstretched hands, but I end up falling to the ground

with a quiet thump and a murmured “oof.” I freeze, worried Barret might have heard from the other side of the building. Thankfully, the night remains quiet.

Dusting off, I push up to my feet and then quickly dart to the nearby brush. If I remember correctly, the lake is just beyond this copse of cottontuft trees. Lower in elevation here, and further south, the trees and bushes are fully leafed out, hiding me with their foliage. Moments later, I see the moonlight glinting off the surface of the water through the thick limbs.

I brush my fingers over my hip, realizing I didn’t think to bring a dagger. I was so concerned with escaping, I didn’t even bother to arm myself.

I pause in the shadows just before the trees make way to grass, scanning the shoreline as I look for a dark figure. A breeze blows through the cottontufts, and goosebumps prickles my arms.

It feels ominous.

For several seconds, the wind moves through the grass like ocean waves, and then the night goes eerily still. The cool lake water laps at the nearby shore, and though I can’t make them out, frogs croak from their watery perches.

I don’t see anyone, and this doesn’t feel right. I should turn back.

But what if Henrik is waiting for me?

What if it’s not Henrik?

No, I can’t risk it. Lawrence would be livid, and what is the point of getting myself killed? There will be another chance to meet with Henrik. I have to believe that.

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Reluctantly making up my mind, I turn just in time to see a dark figure appear behind me. It slips from the trees, a nocturnal hunter focused on its prey.

I gasp, cursing myself as I step into the grass.

The ginden stalks forward, keeping its head low as it follows me into the moonlight. Light glints off its bared teeth—sharp teeth—and its tail whips back and forth. It's shaped a bit like an overgrown rat, with short legs and a stout belly.

Except instead of fur, it has dark scales armoring its body. The beast is easily as long as I am tall. Its eyes reflect the dim light, bright yellow and focused.

I've never even seen one in person.

Slowly, I kneel in the grass, feeling along the ground for something I can use to protect myself, not daring to look away from the ginden for even a moment.

I find a puny rock, small but somewhat sharp. As I clutch it in my palm, I debate the best place to target my attack. Everything vital is protected by its scales.

Before I've made my plan, the creature leaps forward, screeching out a hunting cry that makes every hair on my body stand on end. It hits me like a beast of stone, easily knocking me to the ground. Using my rock, I strike the creature's head, grunting with each impact...only realizing after the third or fourth hit that I'm not dead.

I'm not even wounded, though the weight of the ginden atop me is certainly not pleasant.

Before I can make sense of it, the beast is rolled away and replaced with a face I've dreamt of so many nights.

"Clover," Henrik says urgently, kneeling over me. "Are you all right?"

Breathing hard, I stare up at him. "I killed it?"

He runs his eyes over me, looking for signs of injury. Once he decides I'm in one piece, he laughs. "Not quite."

Groaning, I push myself up. Still in shock, I turn to face the beast, noting the way Henrik's sword protrudes from its back. "Oh. You killed it. That makes more sense—not that I don't think my rock and I didn't have a fighting chance."

Henrik sits back with a loud exhale, crossing his long legs under him. We're surrounded by the tall grass, in a natural cocoon, safe from prying eyes.

I look at the ginden again. Henrik managed to slide the blade right between its scales.

"Impressive aim," I say.

He breathes out a tired laugh. "I stabbed and got lucky."

"Your arm?" I ask quietly, feeling suddenly shy. "Did it heal?"

I've longed for his return for months, and now that he's here, I'm a little overwhelmed.

Henrik watches me in the moonlight for several long seconds before he clears his throat. "The elven physician did what he could. I still have little strength—not enough to wield a sword."

I nod toward the dead beast. “It looks like you did a decent job of it to me.”

A smile crosses the commander’s face as he looks away. “I can stab...just nothing that requires more finesse.”

“Pranmore can heal you.”

“Perhaps,” he says, though he doesn’t sound convinced. “But it’s best if Camellia believes the injury is permanent.”

Just hearing him say the princess’s name makes me angry. I drag my eyes away from his face, too cowardly to ask him why he was so cold earlier.

But I can feel him watching me.

Quietly, he says, “Camellia will kill you if she thinks you’re a threat.”

“Camellia will probably try to kill me anyway.”

“She has forbidden me from even looking at you.”

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Slowly, I turn back. “Is she that petty?”

“Serving the princess is a test in patience,” he says wryly, knowing I’m well aware. “She’s hot-tempered and jealous, and I don’t trust her not to murder you or Brielle on a whim, so I am humoring her as best as I am able.”

“Then why did you risk sending me the note?”

He looks startled. “Note?”

“The message telling me to meet you,” I say, growing nervous. “The one you slipped under my door?”

Tensing, Henrik leans forward. “I didn’t leave you a note.”

Another cool breeze blows through the grass, making the nearby lake reeds sing. I shiver, suddenly feeling vulnerable. “Then who did?”

Henrik shakes his head, obviously not liking the situation any more than I do.

“What are you doing out here then?” I demand.

“I couldn’t sleep, so I came out for some fresh air.”

“Have you seen anyone else?”

“No.” He studies me long and hard, looking like he wants to say something. Then he

glances at the dead ginden and seems to change his mind. “You best return to your room. It’s not safe out here.”

I, too, look at the creature, cursing it for killing what might have been a romantic interlude.

But, giant scaled rodent aside, it’s hard to think of romance when an unknown someone lured me from my room.

They could be watching us right now.

The thought makes me uneasy, and I agree. “Barret is waiting for me in front of the bathhouse. Lawrence has assigned him as my guard.”

Henrik gives me a sharp look. “How did you escape him?”

“I crawled through a back window.”

“Why would you do that?”

Feeling bold despite the circumstances, I say, “I would do nearly anything for a chance to see you.”

The commander’s expression softens, and for a moment, I wonder if he’s going to reach for me.

But maybe that’s just wishful thinking.

“If I wanted to meet with you, I wouldn’t leave a note.” Henrik’s eyes capture mine. “I’d wait until I could find you alone.”

My breathing hitches. “Then you’d wait a very long time because I’m never alone.”

“You’re alone now,” he points out, his tone darkening.

But are we?

I shiver, feeling like we’re out here with targets on our backs.

“I’ll walk you back,” Henrik says, preparing to rise.

“What if we’re spotted?”

“We’ll stay low until we reach the trees.” He then yanks his sword from the ginden, cleans the blade on the unprotected hide of its belly, and crawls through the grass.

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I follow, cringing as I pass the overgrown rat.

Only once we reach the shadows do we dare rise. Henrik offers me his hand, and I stare at it for several seconds, swooning a little when I finally take it.

The commander helps me to my feet and then keeps me close as he scans our surroundings. "I don't see anyone."

But my attention is no longer on the owner of the mysterious note. Instead, I focus on Henrik's warm palm and the rough, slightly calloused skin he earned with years of manual labor and weapons training.

My hand feels dwarfed in his. And more, I feel whole. Right.

I slowly look up. Unlike this afternoon, Henrik looks back.

My breath stutters, and butterflies that have laid dormant for months stir in my stomach.

If we're caught together, there will be chaos. As far as the rest of the kingdom knows, I belong to Lawrence. They won't listen when I swear it wasn't real, or that the king promised to call it off. I'll be disgraced to the point of shunning. I can't have these thoughts yet.

But they swirl in my mind nevertheless, urging me to grab Henrik by the ties of his brigandine and drag his mouth to mine.

Emotions that seem just as tumultuous as mine swirl in the commander's eyes. His hand tightens, and his gaze drops to my mouth.

Just the look is like a bolt of lightning to my heart. My stomach clenches with anticipation, and I lean forward.

When I can take it no longer, I softly demand, "Are you going to kiss me or not? It's been over four months, soldier. Surely I've waited long enough."

Henrik closes his eyes as if he's in pain. In a rough, strained voice, he says, "You're engaged to Lawrence."

I step close enough we touch, desperate to feel more of him. "It's a farce, a trick to keep the people calm. I have no intention of marrying Lawrence, and he agreed to free me upon your return. He said if I still want you, then he'll end the engagement." I pause to put emphasis on my next words. "And, Henrik, I want you."

The commander breathes out a groan, but this time, his hand ends up on the curve of my side. A shiver races down my spine, and Henrik's fingers tighten over my dressing gown when he feels it.

We've entered dangerous territory.

But I've never wanted something so badly as I want Henrik to kiss me. To have physical reassurance he still needs me like I need him.

"And I want you," he says gruffly. "But we can't." Slowly, he pulls his eyes from my lips. His hand falls from my waist, and he takes a purposeful step back. "I'll escort you to the bathhouse."

With a frustrated sigh, I follow him to the small building. I know he's right, but I hate

his self-control all the same.

“Do you need a boost?” Henrik asks as we stare at the small window.

I glance at him, looking unsure. It was easy enough to get out, but I didn’t think about how difficult it would be to climb back in.

But I imagine what a boost will require—Henrik’s hands on my waist as he lifts me, then on my thighs as he supports me so I can shimmy inside.

My face heats, but not with embarrassment. The trouble is the idea is a little too tempting.

“Clover?” Henrik asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Hmm?” I look over and find him kneeling at my side, offering his knee as a step.
“Oh.”

He gives me a quizzical look and whispers, “Why do you look disappointed?”

“No reason.” I gingerly step on his leg and grasp hold of the window frame.

I manage to pull my front through, but just like before, I end up stuck halfway with nothing to clasp hold of or use to propel myself forward. And the trouble is, the stone bathhouse floor wouldn’t make a soft landing should I crash this time.

“A little help?” I whisper.

“Where...” Henrik sounds flustered. “Where should I hold?”

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I snort out a nervous laugh that's too loud in the silent night and instantly clamp my mouth shut.

Henrik ends up wrapping his hands around my ankles, one more firmly than the other. "I'm going to lower you slowly, all right?"

I squirm like a worm through the window, making progress thanks to Henrik's assistance. Grasping hold of the wooden bench, I manage to pull my legs through without falling. Immediately, I turn, standing on the bench to look out the window.

Henrik lingers on the other side, so close I could lean over and kiss him. He smirks, amused by my lack of grace. "At least we didn't need Pranmore to heal your head this time."

"Next time we meet, I'm wearing trousers," I say. "You have no idea how difficult it is to climb with fabric wrapped around your legs."

He shakes his head, still smiling. "You've mentioned it. Don't forget to brush off your dressing gown. You're covered in dirt and bits of grass."

I look down, realizing he's right. "How long has it been? More than an hour?"

"I don't think so." He grins. "Do you have a curfew?"

"I do," I answer darkly.

He chuckles quietly. "Go—clean up."

“Henrik,” I call at a whisper when he begins to turn. Gathering my courage, I blurt out, “I missed you.”

He pauses, and I hold my breath as I wait for his response.

My tone was rawer than I intended. I meant to say the words lightly, in a positive, happy way to match the current mood.

But I failed.

The commander fills the window once more, no longer smiling. “Thoughts of you were the only good thing I had to dwell upon, but knowing you were here with Lawrence nearly drove me mad.”

“Even if, for now, I belong to Lawrence on paper, I am yours in heart and body. I’ll wait for you.”

Henrik’s face darkens with an emotion that makes my heart ache for him.

“Goodnight, soldier,” I say softly. Then I close the window and hurry to the steaming pool, determined to pluck my dressing gown clean before my time is up.

15

CLOVER

Barret looks relieved when I emerge from the bathhouse. Perhaps he thought he was going to have to come in after me.

“Your time must be nearly up,” he says.

“Then let’s not dawdle.”

Even at this lower elevation, the spring night is cool with wet hair. I’d hurry back to the manor even if we weren’t running late.

Denny looks agitated when we appear around the corner of the hall, but there’s relief on his face as well.

“I think I can sleep now,” I say airily, waving to them as I near my door.

Unfortunately, my brother’s eyes narrow on the skirt of my dressing gown. When I look down, I find a stray blade of grass. Instead of making a flimsy excuse, I hurry into the room and shut the door behind me.

He won’t ask me about it in front of the other knights, but I have no doubt he’ll corner me later.

* * *

The girls and I are just about ready to join the group for breakfast when there’s a knock at the door.

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Calla answers, smiling prettily for Barret.

“I’ll tell her,” she responds to whatever he says. They then share besotted smiles as she slowly closes the door between them.

Were Henrik and I that ridiculous? I don’t think so.

“His Majesty has requested you join him for tea before breakfast,” Calla says.

“Does Lawrence even like tea?” Hyacinth asks.

“No.” Lavender shoots me a smile in the mirror as she brushes out her long, glossy hair. “But he likes Clover.”

The girls all swoon, and I roll my eyes as I dismiss them. “I’ll see you at breakfast. I’m sure I’ll walk to the dining room with Lawrence and his knights.”

They all nod and then begin talking about one of the grooms that caught Hyacinth’s attention last night as I leave.

Denny opens Lawrence’s door with a stony expression, obviously not liking the king calling me for a private meeting. “Where did you go last night?” he whispers.

I give him a vague look and hiss, “To the bathhouse. Ask Barret.”

“You climbed out a window?” he guesses.

“If I did, it’s my business.”

“Did you meet Henrik?”

I look at him sharply. “Why would you think that?”

“Clover,” Lawrence calls from inside the room. “Is that you loitering in the entry?”

Denny shoots me a stern look. “We’ll talk about it later.”

Not if I have a say in it.

I walk into the room, noting that Lawrence’s is larger than mine. A pot of tea, fruit, and a selection of pastries waits on a small table.

“Thank you,” Lawrence says to the maid and the servingman who assists her. “You may go.”

Looking flustered to be attending the king, the young woman flutters her hands at her waist. “If you need anything else, please let me know.”

She then stares at him, not any differently than Lavender looks at Pranmore. After several awkward seconds, her companion elbows her, and she jumps.

Lawrence hides a smile as they leave. As soon as the door closes behind them, he gestures to the chair opposite him. “Come, sit. Would you like tea?”

“My brother isn’t pleased with our lack of chaperone,” I say with a wry smile as I help myself to a shortbread biscuit.

“I was shortsighted when I decided to make him one of my knights.” Lawrence

scowls. “It’s awkward to have one of your brothers judging my intentions.”

I laugh. “You made your reputation—you can’t really blame him.”

Lawrence shrugs, more amused than he probably should be. “Where did you go last night?”

“Go?” I ask, wondering who ratted me out.

“Alfred mentioned that you were achy from the ride and requested to go to the bathhouse. We both know you could outride me, so you must have had an ulterior motive.”

Suddenly, the shortbread seems too dry. I gratefully accept tea when Lawrence offers it and then pause, nodding for him to add one more spoon of sugar before I take it.

“I found a note that had been slipped under my door in the middle of the night,” I tell him after I take a long, slow sip. “It just said to go to the lake, so I went.”

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“How did Henrik get that past the guards?”

I frown, mulling that over. “Henrik said he didn’t send it.”

Lawrence pauses with his hand halfway to the sugar bowl. “Then who did? And how did you see him if he didn’t set up the meeting?”

“We have no idea, but thank goodness he was there. He ended up saving me from a hungry ginden. I didn’t even realize they were carnivorous.”

“Gindens? They’re not. You probably disturbed its nest—they’re highly territorial.”

“Oh, that’s awful—Henrik killed it.”

Lawrence leans forward. “Would you focus?”

“We can’t just leave the babies to fend for themselves,” I argue.

Exasperated, Lawrence sits back in his chair. “I’ll send someone to look into it. There’s a Woodmore community only fifteen minutes from here. If we find young, we’ll send them there.”

Mollified, I nod.

“So, the note was signed with Henrik’s name, but he didn’t send it?” Lawrence prods, redirecting the conversation back.

I shake my head. “The note wasn’t signed at all.”

Lawrence stares at me, looking like I’ve lost my mind. “The note wasn’t signed, but you blindly followed it?”

I take another sip of tea, scratching the bridge of my nose and avoiding his eyes when I reluctantly say, “Basically, yes.”

“Clover!”

“I won’t do it again.”

“What were you doing up in the middle of the night?”

I study my tea. “I couldn’t sleep.”

Lawrence doesn’t respond right away, and when he does, he clears his throat first. “I need you to be cautious of Camellia. Don’t taunt her like you usually do.”

“When have I ever taunted Camellia?”

He raises his brows, skeptical.

“She brings out the worst in me,” I finally relent, hiding a smile. “It’s not my fault.”

“She’s dangerous,” he reminds me. “And she hates you. Don’t provoke her. In fact, stay as far from her as possible.”

“Fine.”

“And...” He suddenly becomes wildly interested in his scone. “Stay away from

Henrik, too.”

I narrow my eyes. “Say that again.”

“Just for now,” he hastily explains—but he still won’t look at me. “It’s obvious he’s trying to minimize your connection. Didn’t you see the way he ignored you yesterday?”

“I noticed, thank you. He said Camellia ordered him not to look at me.”

He nods. “I suspected as much. I’m afraid jealousy runs in the family.”

“Lawrence...”

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“Don’t. We’re not talking about any of that right now. Henrik’s not free, so we’re not breaking the engagement.”

I hold my tongue, knowing it would be pointless to argue about that right now anyway.

“But I’m not going to stop seeing him,” I say quietly. “You know that, don’t you?”

Giving me a steely look, Lawrence nods. “Just don’t get caught. It would be worse for you than me.”

“I’m aware.”

“And it would destroy Henrik. He’ll never earn his seal if he’s caught sneaking around with my intended. He’d be forever shamed. You’d have to move to Ferradelle.”

I smile. “At least you wouldn’t hang us.”

“I might,” he grouches, but he’s obviously bluffing.

“We should go.” I help myself to a few more biscuits before I stand. “If we’re in here too long, Denny will have heart failure.”

Lawrence mutters under his breath. “This king nonsense is getting old.”

I grin at him as we step out the door, joining the knights. “If you think that’s bad, you

should try being a princess.”

Denny grimaces. “Do I want to know?”

I offer him a biscuit. “Not likely.”

* * *

Even though we only left Cabaranth a few days ago, the king’s return to the city results in much fanfare. People line the streets, waving and cheering. Children push to the front of the crowd, hoping for a glimpse of Lawrence...and me, as strange as that is.

It’s especially bizarre when Lawrence regularly came and left the city before he was crowned. I wonder if it’s wearing on him as well. He nods and smiles, but he looks like he’s just about over it.

Camellia, however, receives less adulation. People clap politely when she passes, but rumors have spread, and the people are cautious of Ferradelle’s new grand duchess. She travels in the carriage she insisted upon—heaven forbid the woman ride like the rest of us—and ignores the common people around her as usual.

The elven nobility that makes up Camellia’s entourage get nearly as much attention as Lawrence, though for a different reason. They ride their grand white and gray horses, looking regal and distant. No one knows whether their presence is a sign of peace or looming conflict, but I believe there’s much speculation.

After passing through the city, we pause outside the gatehouse, waiting for the guards to open the seldom-closed gates. The sound of the portcullis rising sets me on edge and reminds me that the bright spring day masks the tension growing in the kingdom. Father and the council, whom Lawrence left in charge in his temporary absence, must

have decided it was wise to protect the castle from attack while the king was away.

After all, we don't know what Camellia has up her sleeve.

As soon as the way is clear, our party continues past the barracks and armory. Eventually, we go through the gardens and into the courtyard outside the castle's main entrance.

Lawrence's advisors, including Father, wait on the steps. Castle guards stand in formation, looking as if they were called to celebrate the king's return.

But I know better, and from the uneasy looks on the High Vale's faces, they aren't fooled either.

Lawrence dismounts his horse and hands the stallion to a waiting groom. He then comes to my side as I dismount. A groom takes my horse as well, and we join Henrik and several of Camellia's guards at her carriage.

Just like yesterday, Henrik doesn't acknowledge me. The commander simply opens the door and offers his hand to the duchess. Camellia appears, looking showy in a turquoise velvet gown trimmed with snow-white fur—the colors of her newly won dukedom. She exits the carriage like a queen, pausing to make sure everyone gets a good look at her before she steps down.

I resist the urge to scoff, remembering the promise I made to Lawrence. I won't intentionally anger Camellia, no matter how tempting it might be.

But I nearly forget my irritation with the new duchess when her handmaid appears behind her. Hellebore wears black as usual, but her skin has a gray cast, and her dark eyes are dull. She looks as if she's lost weight while in Ferradelle, and now she's skeletally thin.

I accidentally meet her eyes and look away, pretending I wasn't gaping at her.

"Your Grace," Father says as he steps forward, bowing over Camellia's hand.

"Welcome back to Cabaranth."

"Thank you, Rodger," she answers loftily, looking around. "I see very little has changed in my absence."

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Father smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "Discounting the loss of the king, I suppose you are right."

I draw in a startled breath, not expecting my father to be the one to chastise the princess.

Camellia narrows her eyes at him, lifting her pert nose in the air. "Discounting that, of course. Forgive me, but the memory is too painful to address. I'm sure you understand."

"I apologize for bringing up a tender subject," Father says with a bow of his head.

Close to my ear, Lawrence mutters, "And I always assumed you got your sharp tongue from your mother."

I press my lips together, trying not to snort out a highly inappropriate laugh.

Lawrence's steward steps forward, bowing his head before the king and then turning to Camellia. "Your rooms have been prepared, Your Grace. If there is anything you require to make your stay more comfortable, please tell me. His Majesty has also assigned a small group of staff to serve you while you are here."

Camellia turns to look at Lawrence. "It's unlike you to think of such details."

"I didn't." He grins. "I have people for that."

What Camellia doesn't know is that her new "staff" is comprised of disguised

soldiers brought in from a fortress in north-eastern Ladora. She won't recognize them, but they will certainly be keeping an eye on her.

"And as for my party?" she asks, sparing a glance at her elven companions.

"If it pleases you, your guards will be housed in the barracks, and your servants will be welcome in the staff quarters," the steward says, casting the elves an uneasy glance. "Rooms have been prepared for the rest of your group."

Suddenly, Camellia glances at me. A smile curves her rosy lips before she looks at Lawrence. "Henrik will stay with me in my quarters."

"Several cots have been set up for your personal guards, Your Grace," the steward assures her.

Camellia loops her arm in Henrik's and presses herself close. "Henrik won't need a cot."

For the first time, the commander's face betrays his anger. With a stony expression, he stares across the courtyard, looking like it's a struggle not to shove the princess away.

"That is between you and Henrik," Lawrence says mildly, shooting the soldier a concerned look. "We don't need details."

Camellia shrugs, looking far too smug for my liking.

I believe it's a show, but what has she demanded of Henrik? What has he given her?

The thought makes me ill, but I mask my worry. I won't show weakness in front of Camellia—I never have, and I am certainly not going to start now.

“Will the grand duchess’s ladies return to their rooms?” the steward asks Lawrence, just now remembering their existence.

The four girls stand next to the carriage they just exited, looking as if they’re hiding behind Camellia.

A quick glance at my own ladies confirms the three are staring daggers at the traitors.

“No,” Lawrence says coolly, unbothered by the fact that he’s had romantic encounters with most, if not all, of Camellia’s ladies-in-waiting. “They will stay with my sister or return to their families—it’s their choice.” He pauses, making sure they’re listening. “And it’s the only time I’ll offer it.”

My eyes travel to the girls’ necks, and I realize Camellia didn’t yolk them. She either believes they are loyal or thinks they’re too scared to abandon her even without a necklace.

Camellia’s eyes flash. “I believe that is my decision, not yours, brother.”

Lawrence smiles. “That was true when we were merely siblings, but now you are but a duchess, and I am your king. Things change.”

The princess’s lips twitch, and I can almost see her wanting to scream that his days are numbered. Wisely, she keeps her mouth shut.

“Of course, Your Majesty,” she says. “Strip me of my companions if you find their presence threatening. I imagine your intended has a personal issue with your past relationships, and that is the true problem.” She turns her witch eyes on me and presses closer to Henrik. “Some women are...insecure.”

I bite the inside of my cheek so hard, the metallic taste of blood fills my mouth.

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Iris steps forward, staring straight at me, looking terrified. “Your Highness, if I make you uncomfortable, I respectfully ask to be sent back to my family.”

Camellia turns to her, giving her a look of sheer death.

The pretty girl trembles as she ignores Camellia. “Please.”

It’s a cry for forgiveness and mercy, and I glance at Lawrence, wondering how he will respond.

The king nods, jerking his head toward a nearby guard. “Take a small band of men and return Lady Iris to her parents.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” the man says.

Iris scrambles to the guard’s side, still not daring to look at Camellia.

“Would anyone else care to leave?” Camellia asks the girls.

Rose looks like she’d like to bolt as well, but she’s not brave enough. Lily and Dahlia stare at the cobblestones, staying quiet.

“Very well.” Camellia turns back to Lawrence. “It’s been a long, trying day. I’m going to retire to my rooms. Have dinner brought to my chambers for my companions and me.”

Lawrence looks like he wants to either laugh or strangle her. “That’s not my job, but

I'm certain a staff member would be happy to see to your needs."

With a soft "hmpf," Camellia ascends the steps, dragging Henrik along like she's worried if she lets him out of her taloned grip, he'll escape.

I watch them go, silently seething.

The crowds begin to part now that Camellia's gone, and I turn away from Lawrence.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"I'm going to find Pranmore."

Looking genuinely baffled, Lawrence asks, "Why?"

"I'm not going to be able to hold my tongue for long. We need to find a way to remove those necklaces, and he's the only one I trust to find a solution."

16

HENRIK

I yank away from Camellia the moment we step into the privacy of her bedchamber. She flashes me a dark look but doesn't mention it.

I've never been in her rooms here in Cabaranth, but I'm too disgusted with her to be uncomfortable. We passed a portrait of the princess in her sitting room, hanging right on the wall. How narcissistic can a woman be? And how did I ignore it for so long?

"I need to speak with Vignim," Camellia says, "but I cannot go to him myself. I have no doubt Lawrence is watching my every move."

“Who’s Vignim?” I ask.

“He’s an apothecary.” She looks back. “I need you to deliver a note to him.”

“Isn’t that the sort of task you usually assign your handmaid?”

A shadow of what looks like genuine concern softens the haughty anger in Camellia’s expression. Quietly, she says, “She hasn’t been well lately.”

“What’s wrong with her?” I ask, though I have my suspicions. Camellia didn’t have access to blood to feed her magic in Ferradelle, not without being caught by the High Vales. Has she been drawing it from Hellebore? Is that why the woman looks so close to death?

“She’s ill,” Camellia says, waving away the question, obviously not wanting to talk about it. “But that doesn’t matter. You are perfectly capable of delivering a message.” Her eyes rake over my face, and from the dissatisfied pout of her lips, it’s apparent she doesn’t like what she sees. “Go tonight. I’ll keep Brielle company in your absence.”

My muscles stiffen, and I give her a curt nod. “I’ll deliver it.”

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She studies me for several seconds, and then she waves her hand toward the door. “Good. Go now. I need to rest.”

Camellia’s ladies jump when I open the door, spooked now that they’re back in Cabaranth. If they were smart, they would have leaped at Lawrence’s offer and gotten as far away from the princess as possible. But the ones who remain are terrified of Camellia’s wrath and too cowardly to flee.

“Where are you going?” Lily asks, stepping forward as I head for the door.

“I’m going to make sure Brielle is settled,” I say.

My sister was placed in a small suite of rooms in the princess’s hall, near Clover’s quarters. I believe it belonged to one of the ladies before they fled with Camellia, but I don’t know which one.

“When will you be back?” Dahlia asks, circling around me.

I frown at the three girls, uncertain why they’re clinging. They barely spoke to me in Revalane.

“Camellia will be angry if she realizes you left,” Rose says, begging me to stay. She’s pretty, with blue-green eyes and a sweet face, but I’m immune to it now. All of Camellia’s ladies are beautiful, and it certainly isn’t an indication of the state of their hearts.

“She’ll think you went to find Clover,” Lily whispers. “She’ll take it out on us.”

“Camellia said she’s going to rest,” I tell them. “If she wakes and asks for me, send someone to fetch me from Brielle’s room.”

“You promise you won’t go to Clover?” Rose asks quietly.

“Clover is engaged to Lawrence.” I remove Rose’s hand from my arm, beginning to lose my patience. “I know my place.”

The three girls share a look, and Rose’s tone becomes somewhat caustic. “You might, but that doesn’t mean Clover does. If she wants to see you, she’ll find a way.”

Her words are meant as a warning, but instead, they raise my spirits. They’re right. If Clover wants to see me, she certainly will.

I glance back at them as I leave, feeling somewhat guilty. They crowd together, looking young and scared. Did they realize Camellia’s wicked acts before they went with her?

Do they wish they’d chosen a different path now? And why do I get the impression that they think I’m going to be the one to save them?

I shake my head as I leave. They had their chance, but twice, they chose to stay by Camellia’s side. Just as I was a fool to befriend the princess, they were foolish to trust her.

We’re all paying for our choices.

“Bartholomew,” I say when I step into the hall, startled to find my squire pacing beyond Camellia’s door. A duo of elven guards watches him, apparently seeing no threat.

“Henrik!” the boy says brightly, looking overjoyed. For a minute, I think he’s going to rush in to embrace me, but he composes himself in front of our onlookers. Clearing his throat, he says, “You seem well.”

“Well enough.”

“Where are you going?”

“To visit my sister.”

He nods, looking unsure. “Perhaps I can accompany you on your walk to her room?”

I glance at the men, wondering if Camellia will see it as a sign of betrayal.

One of the guards raises his brows. “We have no reason to volunteer information to the duchess.”

And I do not doubt them. Their orders came straight from Lord Fenninglore, and he certainly holds no tenderness for Camellia.

“Thank you,” I say. “I’ve already told the duchess’s ladies, but I’ll be with Brielle if she needs me.”

They nod as we walk away.

I glance at Bartholomew, smiling despite my somber mood. “You’ve grown several inches since we parted. You’re almost as tall as I am.”

But just as lanky as before.

He grins. “I still have several inches before I catch you.”

“Have you been practicing with the sword I bought you?”

“A little.” He shoots me a sheepish look. “Clover has been teaching me to shoot.”

I pause in the hall to turn to him. “Archery?”

“I’m not too bad.”

I shake my head, smiling as I pretend to be disgusted. “Imagine my squire choosing a bow over a blade.”

“Now that you’re back, I’ll resume my practice,” he vows solemnly.

We’re alone now, far enough away from eavesdroppers. With a sigh, I carefully say, “You know things can’t be the way they were before, not while I’m...”

Bartholomew nods. “I know—but you’re in Cabaranth. As far as I’m concerned, it’s a step in the right direction.”

Dropping my voice, I say, “I don’t suppose Pranmore has puzzled out a way to remove the necklaces?”

“Not yet, but he’s been working on it. I can’t tell you how often I walk into his

quarters and find him frowning over the one Audra sent.”

We continue to Brielle’s room, and my eyes stray to a door as we pass it. It leads into Clover’s chambers. I’ve been in there before. It’s where I burned Camellia’s letter when the princess accused Clover of sorcery.

What I would give to go back to that night now.

Too astute, Bartholomew follows my gaze and frowns. “Lawrence moved Clover to a different suite of rooms.”

“What?” I ask sharply.

“She’s a princess now,” he says carefully, gauging my reaction. “Lawrence has given her larger quarters in his wing.”

Pretending I don’t care, I make a noise of understanding and continue down the hall. Before I get much farther, I realize several knights are gathered outside a door. They watch Bartholomew and me approach, looking uncomfortable.

My concern grows when I realize they’re outside Brielle’s room.

“What’s going on?” I demand. “Has my sister been moved?”

Denny steps forward. “She is entertaining visitors. Perhaps now isn’t the best time.”

Bartholomew scowls at the knight as he steps past him and knocks on the door, silently pulling rank. He then stands just behind me, nervously shifting from one foot to the other as we wait.

When I look back, he gives me a self-conscious smile, making me suspicious. But

before I can ask him about it, Brielle opens the door. “Henrik!”

Even as she says my name, her eyes stray behind me, and her grin grows.

Instead of questioning Brielle’s reaction, my attention is captured by the woman standing in the room.

Clover stares back, as startled to see me as I am her. Lawrence stands by her side...looking less pleased by my arrival. Pranmore is here as well.

“Let him in,” Lawrence says impatiently to what must be his new guard.

I glance back, startled by the sharp jab of disappointment. If things had gone according to plan, I would be a knight by now. My eyes stray to the seal Miguel wears upon his arm. He holds a position I have been working toward my entire life, but now...

Now it’s not important. I need to focus on our present situation. If Camellia finds out I met with Lawrence, she will be livid.

I should go...but I find myself stepping inside.

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“We came to give our greetings to your sister,” Clover says as if she must explain. “And Pranmore wanted to inspect her necklace.”

Bartholomew shuts the door behind us, and the room falls silent.

“How’s your arm?” Lawrence finally asks, looking more uncomfortable than I’ve ever seen the cocky prince.

King, I correct myself, remembering he is a prince no longer, but the ruler of all Caldenbauer. While trapped at Camellia’s side, I missed King Algernon’s funeral and Lawrence’s coronation. Much has changed in my absence.

“I can’t wield a sword if that’s what you’re asking,” I say dismissively, not wanting to speak of it again. “But it’s healed.”

Pranmore moves forward. “If you’ll let me look at it—”

“Not yet.” I step back, away from the threat of his healing magic. “For now, it’s better this way. Camellia cannot use me in this state.”

Lawrence rolls his eyes. “Who says Camellia has to know? Let her think you’re still useless.”

I study him, wondering if I dare.

“Oh, get off your high horse,” Lawrence says impatiently. “Camellia has been hiding her sorcery from us, and yet you cannot keep a secret from her?”

“No, I can.” I nod toward Pranmore, concealing my nerves as I roll up my sleeve.
“Go ahead and look at it.”

But Camellia isn’t the only reason I’m reluctant. I’m nervous that it’s too late and even Pranmore won’t be able to heal me. And if that’s the case, I’ll have to resign myself to the knowledge I’ll never be able to fight again.

Just like my father, my life’s goal will go up in flames. I’ll never be a true knight. I’ll never earn my seal.

I inhale deeply, looking away while Pranmore prods the scar, wincing when his magic nudges a little too deep.

He eventually looks up, nodding solemnly. “Lawrence sliced through a tendon. It will take less time if we reopen it so I can see what I’m doing.”

“You have to cut his arm again?” Brielle asks with a gasp.

“It would be easier,” Pranmore answers, “but I made a vow to never wield a weapon. Someone else will have to do it.”

“Some healer you are,” Lawrence mutters, but then he steps forward, looking a little too eager. “I’ll do it.”

“You’ve done enough damage,” I snap at him.

“I can’t,” Brielle says immediately, throwing up her hands.

Bartholomew steps forward. “I’ll try—”

“No,” I cut him off, shuddering at the idea.

“I’ll do it,” Clover says, and silence blankets the room.

I swallow as I turn to her. Her bright green eyes meet mine, and a look of determination graces her face.

She steps in front of me, so beautiful, and extends her hand. “Give me your dagger.”

Slowly, I pull it from its sheath and extend my arm.

“We should sit down.” She nods toward the nearby tea table. Once we’re seated, she says, “Rest your arm on the table to keep it steady. Pranmore, can you numb the pain?”

“I can.”

Her hand trembles as she grips the dagger.

“Can you do this?” I ask quietly.

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“If I don’t, you’ll have to do it yourself, and that seems too cruel.” She tilts her head from side to side to stretch her neck, preparing herself, and then she leans forward and asks Pranmore, “Where do you want me to cut?”

“Along the scar.”

She presses the tip of the dagger to my skin. Quietly, she says, “You’re making me nervous. Don’t watch.”

Refusing to close my eyes like a child, I look at the table, studying the grain in the wood. Brielle whimpers when Clover begins. Pranmore’s magic joins the first bite of the blade, numbing after the initial sting. I feel the strange tug and pull, and there is some pain, but it’s bearable.

With a relieved exhale, Clover sits back.

“You did well,” Pranmore assures her, and then he takes her seat. “Once I begin to work, it will be difficult for me to control your pain,” he warns.

I grit my teeth, waiting.

“It’s not much different than what I did for Clover in the gnome village,” he says. “It won’t take too long.”

“Gnome village?” Brielle exclaims with a start, but Pranmore begins before I can answer.

I jolt in my seat as the Woodmore works his magic, feeling like he's ripping my arm apart instead of putting things back together.

"Sorry," Pranmore says when he hits a particularly tender spot. "It's always a little more difficult when it's an old wound. A few minutes more."

When the pain finally subsides, I slump back in the chair.

"Finished," Pranmore says, sounding pleased. "My best work yet."

I look at my arm and find the scar is gone.

"You can't leave it like that," Lawrence says as he takes a closer look. "If Henrik suddenly loses his scar, Camellia will realize something is amiss."

Pranmore raises his eyes to me. "Do you often go around shirtless in front of the princess, Henrik?"

"No," I say sharply, glancing at Clover.

"Lawrence is right," she says mildly. "Better safe than sorry—you best fix it."

Looking disgusted, Pranmore shakes his head. "Fine."

A few minutes later, a new scar graces my arm. It doesn't look exactly like the old one, but I doubt anyone but me would notice.

"How long before he can fight?" Bartholomew asks Pranmore.

"It'll be tender for a few days," Pranmore says. "But it's fully healed now."

I rotate my forearm, waiting for weakness. But my muscles respond as they used to, my range of motion restored. My pulse begins to quicken.

Standing, I pull my sword from its sheath. Stepping away from the others, I hold it in front of me.

“Well?” Pranmore asks. “How does it feel?”

I look back, breathing hard. “It feels good.”

Intense relief floods me with unexpected emotion.

“For so many months, I worried...” I clear my throat and turn to Pranmore. “Thank you.”

He bows his head, accidentally hitting Bartholomew with his antlers. My squire complains, and Pranmore turns to him, looking both chagrined and annoyed. “I would think that you’d know not to stand so close by now.”

“He’s taller than he was a few months ago,” I point out.

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Brielle and Clover share a laugh, and I smile, genuinely happy for the first time in a long while.

“Now that we’ve taken care of that, why don’t you tell us the real reason my dear sister came for a visit,” Lawrence says as he takes my seat at the table. “What’s she plotting?”

“I don’t know.” I sheathe my sword. “We’re not on the best of terms, so she tells me little.”

“You looked like you were on decent terms in the boat as you came ashore,” Clover says as if she can’t help herself.

I look at her, silently reminding her what we talked about last night. Her eyes lock on mine, making me wish we were alone.

Lawrence’s gaze passes between us, and his frown deepens. “She must have a purpose. She wouldn’t leave her stronghold for no reason.”

“She would if she thought it would hurt Henrik,” Brielle says quietly, making me realize my sister is more aware of the current situation than I hoped.

Lawrence turns his head toward the window. Perhaps it’s just me, but he looks like he feels guilty—not an emotion I’m accustomed to seeing him wear.

Hesitantly, Pranmore asks, “Perhaps it’s time to break the engagement?”

“It would cause chaos,” Lawrence says, still avoiding eye contact with me.

Clover groans and rubs her temples. “Especially with Camellia here. The people are already nervous about Lawrence taking the throne—and who could blame them?”

“Thank you, Clover,” Lawrence says wryly.

Clover shrugs at him, smiling as if it’s an inside joke between the two of them. A bout of jealousy plagues me when I remember, yet again, how comfortable they are with each other.

Perhaps picking up on my discomfort, Pranmore decides it’s time to change the subject. “How is Audra? Did Camellia punish her for helping us escape?”

“There was so much pandemonium that night, neither Camellia nor Augmirian seemed to fully grasp the events that surrounded your departure.”

“And what about Ayan?” Lawrence asks. “Has he been discovered?”

“Not yet.”

“I didn’t see Audra when you arrived,” he says. “I assume she stayed with her mother and Lyredon in Revalane?”

“That’s right. They weren’t one of the families Camellia chose to travel with us.”

“And the High Vales—do they know about the necklaces?” Clover asks. “Surely they haven’t given the princess their allegiance willfully?”

From the corner of my eye, I see Brielle absently touch her throat.

“No, they’re not following her by choice. She controls the nobility, and through them, the army and the people.”

“If we could just find a way to remove the necklaces...” Bartholomew muses.

“I’m working on it,” Pranmore vows, though he looks dispirited. “But the magic is so tangled.”

Clover then explains their theory about Hellebore lending her magic, and I tell them that I believe Camellia has been taking her blood as well.

“Pranmore,” Clover asks, “if Camellia used High Vale blood in her magic, would that transfer to the curse?”

He thinks about it, shaking his head. “I have no idea. I know so little about blood magic, other than it’s repulsive. It would likely take a lifetime to study the effects of merging the two.”

“We don’t have a lifetime,” Clover points out.

The Woodmore gives her a frustrated look. “I’m aware.”

A knock at the door startles us all, and we freeze.

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Miguel calls from the hall, “Your Majesty, you have a meeting with Lord Keverston in fifteen minutes.”

“Is it that late already?” Lawrence asks with a sigh. He then turns to Clover. “I have to go, but I’ll see you this evening at dinner. Don’t forget to see Minda for your gown fitting.”

Clover’s eyes dart to me briefly, but she nods for Lawrence.

“And don’t leave without Barret,” he warns. “Now that Camellia is here, it’s absolutely essential that you remain with your guard.”

“Yes, fine.” She shoos him away with her hand. “I’ll stay with my keepers.”

Lawrence pauses in front of me before he leaves. “I’m glad you’re not dead.”

“Are you?” I can’t help but ask, my gaze briefly flicking to Clover.

Laughing under his breath, he says, “Mostly.”

He then gives Brielle a nod and steps out the door. The room becomes silent in his absence, and the remaining eyes fall on Clover and me.

“I should go as well,” Pranmore says as if uncomfortable. “Henrik, if you need me, Lawrence has given me a small suite of rooms in the physician’s wing.”

“I’ll visit soon,” I promise.

Once he's gone, there are only four of us. Brielle stands next to Clover, wringing her hands at her waist like she doesn't know what to do with them.

Bartholomew looks uneasy as well, and he clears his throat, scanning the room as if looking for something to talk about. Suddenly, his eyes brighten when he spots a plant that sits in front of a window in the adjoining sitting room. "Is that a weeping dormantia?"

Brielle turns, glad for the distraction. "Oh, I don't know. Is it?"

My sister has never taken an interest in plants, but she hurries toward it as if it's wildly fascinating. Bartholomew gladly follows, leaving Clover and me alone.

When our eyes meet, my heart beats faster. As Clover steps forward, the evening light glints on the golden circlet she wears, reminding me she's forbidden.

I gulp as I swear to myself I will not reach for her no matter how tempting it might be.

Not here.

17

CLOVER

Henrik glances toward Bartholomew and Brielle to make sure they're still distracted, and then he closes the distance between us, standing so near, I have to look up. Lowering his head, he drops his voice to a bare whisper and says, "Do you remember the old fountain in the back garden?"

My heart begins to beat faster. "The one I dragged you to when we returned from the

mountains?”

The barest smile plays at his lips. “If you can escape your keepers, meet me there at midnight.”

He then takes several steps back, putting a respectable amount of distance between us. My heart dances, and I press my lips together to hide my flustered smile.

“Astounding,” Bartholomew says as he and Brielle rejoin us, sounding genuinely impressed by a plant that looks like every other plant to me. “They’re native to the Ladoran forests. I don’t think I’ve ever seen one. Who do you think brought it to Cabaranth?”

“Most likely Rose,” I say absently, looking everywhere but at Henrik, afraid I’ll give away our plans if I so much as glance at him. “These were her rooms before she left for Ferradelle with Camellia.”

Mentioning Rose makes me think of Iris, and I wince as I remember the look on her face when she begged to return home. Though she was wise to get as far away from Camellia as possible, if the princess ever comes into power...

No, the thought of Camellia wearing the crown is too horrible to contemplate. She’ll never find herself upon the Phoenix throne—Lawrence won’t allow it.

I won’t allow it.

“I should be going.” I turn to Brielle, offering her a warm smile as I continue to studiously ignore her brother. “Perhaps we could meet for tea soon?”

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Her eyes flick to Henrik, and she gives me a sad sort of smile. “I’d like that.”

As I leave, I glance back into the room, unable to help myself. Henrik looks up, his expression giving away nothing as he meets my eyes.

And yet, my stomach flutters, and I leave in far better spirits than when I arrived.

* * *

I knock on the swiveling wall panel that separates Lawrence’s bedchamber from mine. As I hoped, my request goes unanswered, which means Lawrence is either still with his council, or he’s already preparing for bed in the guest room and didn’t hear me knock.

Gingerly, I push through the panel, poking my head in the crack before I go any farther. A fire crackles in the screened hearth. Do the maids realize Lawrence sleeps in a different room?

“Lawrence?” I whisper quietly. “Are you in here?”

When there’s no answer, I fist my hand with triumph and tiptoe into the room, quietly closing the panel behind me. I then hurry to the door that leads to His Majesty’s balcony and slip into the cool spring night. I shiver under my heavy cloak, wondering when the evenings will be as pleasant as the days.

From the balcony, I climb a pillar that conveniently stands near a window in the study in the floor above—a window I made sure was unlocked earlier in the day. My own

balcony has no handy architectural features to make use of.

I sneak through the dark room and into the hall, feeling very smug. Perhaps instead of a princess, I should be a shadow rogue. Laughing to myself, I reach for the daggers at my hip, letting their presence soothe a few nagging reservations.

But I know the castle well, and most people are asleep at this hour. The oil lamps burn low, offering just enough light to see by and casting dark shadows as I hurry through the halls and down several winding sets of stairs.

A few minutes later, I slip through a servants' entrance and into the garden near the laundry quarters. Now that the weather is nice, the maids have been bringing the linens outside again. Forgotten bedsheets hang from the lines, fluttering in the gentle breeze like ghosts under the light of the sister moons.

I pause for just a moment to breathe in the blossoming snowstar bushes that grow nearby. The froths of white flowers herald in the season, blooming before the other bushes wake.

After I take a few seconds to get my bearings in the dark, I push forward, hastily making my way through the sleeping garden. This time of year, no one bothers to light the torches. In the summer, they burn down the pathways, welcoming people to stroll through the gardens even in the middle of the night.

I get turned around a few times, not accustomed to walking the paths without light, but eventually, I find the meeting place. The garden is overgrown here, the plants thick and left to their own devices. Evergreens grow tall and wide, creating shadows the moons' light cannot penetrate.

The fountain is a sad sight, abandoned and alone—a High Vale relic no one has bothered to refurbish. The white, crumbling stones reflect an eerie glow in the night,

and old leaves litter its basin. I run my hand along the rough, pitted edge of the empty pool, imagining it when it was new.

A rustle in the nearby bushes startles me, and I turn toward the shadows. My hand immediately strays to one of my daggers.

“Hen—” I begin to whisper, and then I stop myself when I realize it’s best not to say his name aloud.

Suddenly, a hand falls on my shoulder. I unsheathe my dagger and turn in one smooth movement.

My heart beats at a frantic pace, and I exhale sharply as I drop my weapon. Henrik wears a dark cloak, and his face is shadowed by the hood.

But I would know him anywhere.

“What are you doing?” I demand. “I could have killed you.”

He tips his head back as he chuckles. The moonlight shines on the commander’s face, betraying how amused he is by my jumpiness. Then he takes my hand, drawing us into the shadows. “I’d like to think I could protect myself against a lady-in-waiting.”

My pulse continues to race, but it’s no longer from the shock. Henrik doesn’t release my hand, and his body blocks me from the chill of the night. I want to wrap up in him and never let go.

I return my dagger to my hip and say scathingly, “I’m a princess now.”

“I’m aware.” He shifts in place as if he wants to move closer but doesn’t dare. “Though I don’t particularly like it.”

“I promised Lawrence I wouldn’t bring shame upon the crown,” I murmur as I set my fingertips against his chest, testing myself, testing Henrik.

His voice dark and rough, he says, “Then you shouldn’t touch me like that.”

I press my hand flat, spreading my fingers over his cloak. “You misunderstood. That doesn’t mean we must part—it means we must not get caught.”

“Clover...”

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“Lawrence knows my heart,” I say quietly. “I’ve told him countless times I will not marry him. So why can’t you hold me in the shadows? Why must we pretend I’m his even when we’re alone?” I look up. “I’m not his, Henrik. I’m yours.”

The commander groans quietly as he slides his hands under my cloak and catches me by the waist. I draw in a startled breath as his warm palms press into my sides, enjoying the unexpected closeness.

“You tempt me,” he murmurs near my ear. The words are gritty and dark, full of the desperation I feel in my heart.

“Good,” I breathe, letting my head fall back as his thumb strokes my side. “I shouldn’t suffer alone.”

Dropping his head, Henrik pushes aside my hood and whispers my name against the crook of my neck. “I’ve missed you.”

Only his words touch my skin. The moment is agony laced with bliss, unfairly forbidden.

“Kiss me,” I beg, grasping his shoulder. “Stop this torture.”

“I can’t.” He moves to my throat, never letting his lips touch me, though his breath is a caress all on its own.

A shiver passes over my skin, impossible to hide.

He murmurs, “Are you cold?”

“Frustrated.”

He barks out a startled laugh, and I smile even though I know I’ve ruined the moment.

Slowly releasing me, Henrik crosses his arms as if to prevent himself from reaching for me again. “Good—I shouldn’t suffer alone either.”

I bring my hand to my face, so ridiculously irritated with the situation we’ve found ourselves in.

“How long do you have?” he asks. “Do you want to walk into the city with me? I’m afraid if we linger here, I’ll do something I’ll regret.”

“Really?” I ask, intrigued. “In that case, I’d rather linger.”

Henrik laughs quietly, sounding a bit like he wants to murder Lawrence, and then takes my hand and leads me away from the fountain.

Happy even for this tiny bit of contact, I twine my fingers through his. “How did you escape Camellia?”

“She gave me a message to deliver.”

“Now she’s decided you’re a courier?” I scoff. “I suppose it’s inevitable, really. Everyone who serves her finds themselves delivering illicit messages at some point.”

Henrik looks over, and his eyes travel to my hair. He smiles to himself and tugs the hood over my head, hiding my face from anyone who might spot us. “I see you left

your circlet behind.”

I’m not surprised he noticed. Earlier, I found him frowning at it, its presence likely reminding him we cannot be.

“It’s hard to play shadow rogue with it shining in the moonlight,” I say lightly, enjoying the simple pleasure of walking with him.

Just us, together.

“Shadow rogue?” he asks with a quiet laugh. “Is that what you are now?”

“I must be. I’m pretending to be a princess when I’m no more than a lady-in-waiting. Smiling for the people, lying with each benevolent nod.” I tug back my cloak and motion to my hunting outfit. “Besides, don’t I look the part?”

My dark brown trousers are fitted, and the matching deep blue tunic is cut like a short dress. It’s belted at the waist and free of fussy adornments. The dark ensemble is as close to a spying outfit as I own.

“I see you made good on your promise to wear trousers. I like this better than the outfit you bought in Denmel.”

“Liar,” I say lightly. “You know you liked it.”

He laughs as we pause outside a rusted gate that few know exists. Retrieving his key, Henrik works the lock and then holds the gate so I may pass through. “Maybe you’re right, he says, “but I didn’t like everyone else liking it.”

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Once we're through, he locks the gate once more, and we continue into the quiet city streets.

Something bothers me, and I pause, gently tugging Henrik to a stop. "It's going to work out for us. I truly believe it, and I need you to believe it too."

The commander's smile softens, and he sets his hand on my neck, softly stroking my jaw with his thumb. "Even if it doesn't, I'm glad for the time we were given."

"Henrik," I say sternly. "I mean it."

"I won't give up hope until there's a ring on your finger," he answers, though I'm afraid he's placating me. "I promise."

"I won't marry Lawrence," I swear. "We're going to defeat Camellia, and then we will be together."

Nodding with a resigned look that breaks my heart, Henrik takes my hand once more. "You might not have as much say in the matter as you believe."

I open my mouth to argue, but it's pointless. On some level, I know he's right. But I don't think anyone realizes how determined I am.

Henrik is mine, and I am his. I gave my heart to him in Revalane, and that is simply that. I will be with him when this is all said and done, or I will give my life fighting.

There is no other option.

HENRIK

The city is nearly silent this time of night, but as we near the section where Camellia instructed me to go, the streets become slightly more populated. People loiter in the shadows in small groups.

A guard turns the street corner, and two nearby men slip behind a building to continue their business. Whatever it is, they don't want him to spot them.

The guard eyes Clover and me, taking note of our dark cloaks. I don't know many of the men stationed in the city barracks. But even though he doesn't look familiar, I lower my head, hoping the shadows will obscure my face so he won't recognize me.

"Best be getting home," he warns as he passes. "The hour is late, and I won't tolerate any trouble in my district."

"Is there a curfew now?" Clover demands, getting riled up—as she is prone to do. "Have we done something wrong and deserve to be singled out?"

I close my eyes with an internal groan, realizing bringing Clover along might not have been the best decision.

Shadow rogue my foot.

"Our apologies," I say, tugging Clover so she keeps walking. "We don't wish to cause trouble."

The guard grunts, thankfully letting us leave.

And by some miracle, Clover lets me pull her away. When we're out of earshot, she hisses, "He really shouldn't harass people like that."

"It's his job."

"What about us looks suspicious?" she demands.

"We're walking through the seedier section of the city in dark, unmarked cloaks at nearly one in the morning. What about us doesn't look suspicious?"

She grins up at me. "You've got a point."

"Let's try not to anger the guards, all right?" I say. "Things would get uncomfortable if we were arrested together."

A ruckus comes from a nearby tavern, and we pause as several large men toss a drunken patron onto the street. The man yells something incoherent, stumbling forward as he shakes his fist at the tavern men. Unmoved, they return inside.

"Camellia's acquaintance resides in a lovely area of the city." Clover frowns as the drunken man begins to argue with a post. "Do you think he's all right?"

"A patrol guard will come through and collect him soon," I say dismissively.

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We give the man a wide berth and continue to the closed apothecary shop. Clover looks at the dark windows and turns to me. “Is this the place? It doesn’t look like they’re open for business in the middle of the night—imagine that.”

I pull the note from the inside pocket of my cloak. “Camellia instructed me to go around the back.”

Clover nods to the folded piece of parchment. “What’s it say?”

“It’s sealed, and she didn’t tell me.”

Clover studies the shop with a frown. “Do you think she’s gathering ingredients for something?”

“Most likely, though anything the apothecary sells should be harmless enough.”

“Something tells me Camellia wouldn’t have sent you here for a common throat tincture.”

Suspecting we’re dealing with necromancers just as Clover must be, I begin around the back, taking a narrow winding path that meanders through an herb garden. “Only one way to find out.”

The plants are just waking from their winter rest, sprouting from the ground to fill in the stubby brown growth that was trimmed back the autumn before. Bushes and trees fill the bare space, giving the dark garden structure even this early in the growing season.

A rickety wooden staircase leads to the entrance of the second level.

“Wait here,” I tell her.

“That’s not likely.”

Knowing there was little chance she’d agree, I nod.

“I’m not sure they’re going to welcome a visit this late at night,” Clover whispers as we climb the stairs.

We pause in front of the door, noticing there’s no sign of light inside. The residents are likely sound asleep. Uncomfortable calling this time of night as well, I knock quietly.

When no one answers, I hesitate.

“You could come back tomorrow,” Clover says.

“Camellia won’t be pleased.”

“Camellia can choke on one of her potions for all I care.” Then she winces. “But she has Brielle. I’m sorry—that was thoughtless of me. Go ahead and knock again. You’re here on royal business after all.”

I rap again, this time soundly. Half a minute later, a bouncing light appears through the cracks in the shutters. I take a step back, preparing myself, glad Pranmore healed my arm.

The door opens a crack, and an elderly man peeks his head through the gap. “What do you want?”

“I have a message from Princess Camellia,” I say.

He narrows his eyes at us. “Where’s the elf who usually comes?”

“She’s indisposed.”

“And who are you?”

“Her Grace’s knight,” I say tonelessly, nearly choking on the words.

He jerks his head toward Clover. “And the girl?”

“She’s a friend, though I don’t see how that’s any concern of yours.”

He raises his thin eyebrows, muttering to himself like he thinks we’re a little too pompous for his liking. But he releases the chain and opens the door. “Might as well come inside.”

We enter the room hesitantly, unsure what we’re going to find. But it looks like a normal home, with nothing particularly alarming in plain sight. A large black and gray tomcat with bright yellow eyes and a matted coat sits on the table, watching us.

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Clover nods to the mangy animal and whispers, “Someone else doesn’t approve of the late-night visit.”

The man shoos the cat away and sets his lamp on the table. When he turns back, we get our first good look at him. He’s tall, practically nothing but skin and bones, with only a few wisps of long hair covering his balding head and a gray tinge to his skin.

He’s a necromancer, I have no doubt.

Pretending not to notice, I offer him Camellia’s message.

He turns the letter over, inspecting the seal before he breaks it, casting us a suspicious look. He then scans the contents, wrinkling his nose. “I don’t have much of this in stock. Live blood rats are hard to come by this time of year. And I sold the last of my bitterbark last night.”

“How long will it take you to gather what she requires?” I ask, cringing at the thought of what all that might entail.

“A week,” he says with a grunt.

I should have read the message before we handed it over as Clover suggested. “I will inform Her Grace.”

I press my hand to Clover’s back, directing her out the door. She hurries down the steps without question, both of us relieved when we reach the street.

“Blood rats?” she exclaims in a whisper. “What exactly does Camellia plan to cook up?”

“I’ll see if I can find out. But for now, let’s return to the castle.”

We’re halfway back when Clover turns to me. “Why doesn’t Camellia look like that?”

“She must be using a tambrel stone to contain the ill-effects of her magic.”

“So, there’s a chance she’ll blow herself up?”

“The stones are known to be unstable,” I say.

Clover flashes me a wicked grin. “Do you think we could be so lucky?”

I’m about to answer when a shadow behind Clover catches my attention. Acting on instinct, I yank her behind me and pull my sword from its sheath.

I barely block the blow in time.

Like us, our attacker wears a dark cloak, but I recognize the blade—it’s army issued, the kind gifted to swordsmen when they gain their blue-stripe pennant. I have one just like it at home.

I fight on instinct, drawing on years of training, but I’m a little rusty after so many months without practice.

“Who are you?” I demand, putting my full force behind a strike to shove the man back.

“You seem to fight well enough for a wounded man,” he says from the shadow of his hood. “I’m sure Camellia will be interested to hear you’ve been lying to her.”

Before I can answer, another man appears. I kick the first in the stomach, sending him flying onto the cobblestones, and meet the second man’s attack.

“Henrik!” Clover cries as a third shadow appears. I whirl around, ducking as the man swings his sword too high. The second two aren’t swordsmen like the first, and their attacks are clumsy.

I hear a yell from behind me, and I barely have time to register the dagger sticking out of the man’s chest before the first pushes himself off the ground and makes a lunge for me.

“Clover!” I holler when I see the other man heading her way.

“I’ve got it!”

My opponent fights hard, and his hood falls back in the fight. I recognize the swordsman, though I don’t know his name.

He fights well, though, and I’m already growing tired.

I wait for him to make a mistake, trying to reserve my energy. But I’m worried about Clover. What do these men want?

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Finally, the swordsman slips up. He attacks with too much strength and loses his footing, giving me a chance to move in. With one hard strike of the butt of my sword to his head, the man falls.

I whirl around just in time. The man Clover fights evades her dagger and manages to grab her from behind. She struggles like a rock leopard, cursing him to Ferradelle and back again.

He goes still when I press my blade between his shoulders.

“Release her and drop your weapon,” I command.

The assassin immediately obeys, and Clover darts away from him. Her hair is a mess, and blood trails from her cheek. Even in the dark, her eyes flash with anger.

“Who are you?” I demand. “What do you want?”

“None of your business, traitor,” the man bites out.

I smack him across the back of the head. “That’s not an answer.”

Clover saunters forward, twirling her dagger in her hand. “Should we kill him?”

“I’d like to make him talk first,” I bluff.

“You don’t have the guts to kill an unarmed man,” he sneers, turning around to look at me. “Everyone knows you’re too high and mighty for such a low thing.”

“Henrik’s nicer than I am,” Clover says, drawing his attention back. She lowers her hood and gives him a smile. “You know who I am, don’t you? Tell me, are you confident I won’t kill you?”

The man balks.

“Let’s take him back to Lawrence,” I say. “You can torture him after we throw him in the dungeon.”

She narrows her eyes, stepping close to the man. “Is that a promise?”

I nearly snort. Clover is enjoying this a little too much.

She frowns. “I don’t have a rope to tie him up with.”

“I do,” a third voice says, startling us all.

I whip around and find Maisel examining the man I knocked unconscious.

“That’s a nice sword,” she says as she peers at it. “Do you think it’s too long for me? It might drag the ground as I walk.”

“What are you doing here?” I demand.

She looks up. “What do you think I’m doing? I followed you.”

Ulfric, Maisel’s rock leopard, noses the second man, looking put out when Maisel shoves him out of the way. “You can’t eat him, Ulfy,” she says. “He’s not dead.”

“He couldn’t eat him even if he was dead,” I say blandly.

“You tell him that.”

“You’re a Dornauth,” the still-conscious man stutters, gaping at Maisel like she’s a ghost.

Maisel looks at him. “And you’re an idiot. We done calling each other names, or would you like me to go on?”

He blanches, clamping his mouth shut.

“Did you throw that dagger?” I ask Clover, impressed. The man nearly doubles over when Maisel yanks it out of his chest.

She preens. “I did.”

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“It was a good shot, Calendula,” Maisel says. “Unless you were trying to kill him.”

“I guess I missed.” Clover turns back to our hostage and points her other dagger at his heart. “But I bet I could hit my target at this close range.”

“Stop toying with your prisoner,” Maisel grouses. “We still got to haul them back for questioning.”

“Maisel says I can’t kill you,” Clover purrs as she sheathes her little blade. “It’s your lucky day.”

The man gulps, looking both intrigued by and terrified of the pretty queen-to-be.

As we’re discussing the most efficient way of transporting the men back to the castle, the guard we spoke with earlier appears around the corner. He pauses a moment, startled, and then he runs forward.

“You there!” he hollers. “What are you doing?”

Maisel slips behind a nearby bush before she’s spotted, leaving Clover and me to fend for ourselves. “Ulfric!” she hisses. “Over here!”

The rock leopard disappears just before the guard reaches us.

“What in the...” the guard begins, drawing his sword as Clover steps between him and our prisoners.

“Do you recognize me, guard?” she asks, this time giving him a good look at her face.

“I saw you earlier.” He raises his sword. “You told me you didn’t want any trouble.”

“Save me!” our conscious prisoner cries pitifully. “My friends and I were on our way home from the tavern, and these two robbed us.”

I cuff him in the back of the head once more for good measure. “Enough.”

“You’re under arrest,” the guard says, eyeing us nervously, most likely realizing he’s outnumbered. “It’ll be better for you if you come peacefully.”

“I’m Commander Henrik Solbane,” I say with a sigh, “conducting official royal business for His Majesty.”

The guard steps forward. “I’ve heard of you. You’re that traitor, aren’t you? The one who attacked the new king’s intended?”

“I’m the new king’s intended!” Clover exclaims, throwing up her hands.

The man shoots Clover a skeptical look, and then he says to me, “Show me your medallion.”

“I don’t have it with me,” I say flatly.

“Course you don’t.” He jerks his head to the man. “What’s his crime?”

Clover lets out a huff. “He attacked us!”

We’re not getting anywhere with this conversation.

“Listen,” I say with a resigned sigh, “if you help us drag these men to the constable and promise to lock them up, we’ll go with you peacefully. I’m sure someone will know who we are.”

“Or we could knock you unconscious and arrest you for interfering with the king’s business,” Clover says, sounding as if she likes that idea better.

“Clover,” I warn under my breath.

She gives me an unrepentant shrug.

Not as confident as he was a moment ago, the guard finally nods. “All right. I’ve got to take the lot of you in anyway to sort out what happened.”

Loudly, I say, “Just in case they don’t report directly to Lawrence, I hope someone lets him know what happened to us.”

Clover glances toward the bush, but the guard looks at me like I’ve suddenly gone daft.

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“Might want to move quickly.” Clover nods toward the man on the ground. “I’m not sure how much blood he has left.”

The guard groans, and I feel a twinge of pity for him. When I was placed on guard duty, I hated nights like these, too.

* * *

“I’ve never been behind bars before,” Clover says as she leans against the side of the jail cell, refusing to sit on the filthy floor. She turns to look at the constable. “You sent a message to the castle, didn’t you?”

“I did,” the bored man says, frowning at the table as he chooses where to place his next card. “Several hours ago.”

“To Lawrence?”

The man flicks his eyes up, traveling over Clover as if assessing her again. It’s obvious he finds her attractive...but difficult.

I understand all too well—I’ve felt the same about Clover myself.

“If it makes it that far,” the constable says.

“If I stay here all night, you, sir, will be out of a job come morning,” she says hotly.

“Calm down.” I gently tug her arm. “They’re going to realize you’re missing anytime

now.”

She looks back at me. “It’s the middle of the night. They don’t even know I’m gone.”

“Maisel will tell Lawrence.”

“You have more confidence in her than I do,” Clover says.

Our attackers share the holding cell with us. The swordsman I knocked out is awake now. He and his companion refuse to talk. The third needs medical care, but a female guard roughly wrapped a bandage around his chest to keep him from “bleeding all over the cursed floor” and decided that was good enough. He lies on a filthy straw pallet. Sweat beads on his face, and his chest moves with his labored breaths.

Like us, the men carried no identification. It was apparently a night for illicit missions.

A guard about Clover’s age comes into the room to ask the constable a question, and he glances into the cell. He pauses when he spots my accomplice in crime, cocking his head to the side. “You’re...”

Clover steps up to the bars eagerly. “You recognize me?”

“Of course I do. You’re that girl who was arrested last year for that string of burglaries, aren’t you?” He sets his hands on his hips and squares up to Clover. “What did I tell you about getting your life back on track? What’d you do this time?”

Clover growls and turns around, pressing her back to the bars. “This is madness.”

“What in oblivion is going on here?” Lawrence demands from the doorway, startling us all.

The guard's jaw falls open, and the constable drops his cards and scrambles to his feet. "Your Majesty!"

"Oh sure," Clover says to me, "they recognize him."

Lawrence jerks his head toward the cell. "Let the woman out."

"What about Henrik?" Clover demands.

Lawrence sighs. "Fine, let him out, too."

"Much appreciated," I say dryly, extending my hands as the constable fumbles with his keys to release my cuffs.

"I have so many questions," Lawrence says, shaking his head as he eyes the men in the cell. "I'm not even sure where to start. Are these the men you robbed?"

"We didn't rob anyone!" Clover exclaims, sending an icy look at the constable.

Now that she stands next to Lawrence, the man looks slightly less comfortable. "Forgive me, I—"

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“They attacked us,” I tell Lawrence, and then I nod to the swordsman. “That one there has an army-issued sword.”

“He might have stolen it.”

“He fights like a trained soldier.”

“Could he have left the army and turned to a life of crime?” Lawrence muses. “Bad choice of target if that’s the case.”

“That one there called Henrik a traitor.” Clover covers her mouth as she yawns, jerking her head toward the men. “And he knew about his arm. They were well aware of who we were.”

Lawrence looks at her with concern. “You must be exhausted.”

“A bit.”

He narrows his eyes. “Maybe you shouldn’t have sneaked out of the castle.”

With a smile, she answers, “Maybe you shouldn’t treat me like a prisoner.”

“How did you get past your guard?”

“I slipped through the panel between our rooms and climbed the pillar outside your balcony to the floor above.”

He gives her an incredulous look. “Are you serious?”

“I climb well,” she says.

“Up—not down,” I add, earning a scowl from Clover that makes me want to laugh despite the circumstances.

Lawrence shakes his head. “Never mind. I wish I hadn’t asked.”

“I have to get back,” I say quietly so the guards won’t overhear. “I don’t know what Camellia will do to Brielle if I’m gone too long.”

Lawrence nods. “Yes, go on. I’ll sort this out.”

Before I leave, I look back at Clover. But with too many eyes on us, I can’t say anything. She offers me a small smile, looking as frustrated as I feel.

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CLOVER

“Do you think the Constable and his men will talk?” I quietly ask Lawrence as his knights escort us back to our wing of the castle.

Our attackers have been moved to the dungeon, where Miguel is persuading them to give him their information. I’m not sure what that entails—but I’m certain I don’t want to know. They were identified as soon as we arrived. All three, as Henrik suspected, are in the king’s military.

Or rather, they were. Now they’ll be lucky if they leave the dungeon alive.

Lawrence shoots me a dark look. “Rumors will likely travel.”

We pause in front of my door. I’m not ready to end the conversation, but I don’t want to speak with him in front of Lawrence’s knights. It’s too awkward.

Palmer, my new door guard, looks baffled when he sees me. “Your Highness, I thought you... Aren’t you inside?”

“I’m pretty sure I’m right here.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lawrence tells the man, and then he turns to me. “Try to get some sleep.”

I nod halfheartedly and go inside, worried about potential gossip and wondering who the men were targeting. It would make sense if it were me, but it seems they were after Henrik.

But mostly, I’m worried about Brielle.

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Did Henrik make it back too late? Did Camellia punish the girl because he was delayed?

I'm brushing my hair when there's a knock on the panel. After throwing on my dressing gown, I say, "You can come in."

Lawrence pushes through the wall and steps into my room. I'm not particularly surprised to see him.

He studies me for several seconds, arms crossed and angry. "Why?"

I walk back to my mirror and pick up my brush, feeling a twinge of guilt. "Why what?"

"You didn't have any idea this could end badly?"

"How was I supposed to know we were going to be arrested?" I say with a forced laugh, hoping to keep the conversation lighter than it looks like it's going to be.

"Those men are loyal to Camellia, Clover, and she wants you dead. If Pranmore hadn't healed Henrik's arm, this night could have ended very differently."

"But Pranmore did heal Henrik's arm, so that's a moot point."

He jerks his head to the side, refusing to look at me. Lawrence is never angry. Frustrated, yes, but not this. I don't like it.

“So we’ve confirmed the men are working for Camellia?” I ask.

“They must be.” He walks to a bookshelf and stares at the contents. “Tell me again what they said.”

“The swordsman was particularly interested in Henrik’s arm. He said he was going to tell Camellia that Henrik was no longer wounded. He made it sound like he knew Henrik was deceiving her.”

“Then it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“But why would Camellia’s men attack Henrik while he was running an errand for her?”

Lawrence shakes his head. “I’m not sure—unless you were their target.”

“How would they know I left the castle? You didn’t even know.”

But that response doesn’t do me any favors.

Aggravated, Lawrence looks back over, and I wince. Silently, he crosses the room, his expression darker than I’ve ever seen it. When he’s close, I back up, accidentally bumping into the vanity. The brush drops to the floor, and I begin to reach down to pick it up.

“Leave it,” he says, taking my arm to stop me.

I look at his fingers wrapped around the thin material of my dressing gown, startled by the contact. My voice wavers a little as I say, “You’re touching me again. I’m not sure you remember the terms of our agreement.”

“Why Henrik?” he demands, so close I can smell the subtle scent of the dark, fragrant oil he applies after he shaves. “Why not me?”

“Lawrence.” I try to laugh, pretending he’s only teasing as we’ve done so many times.

But this is different. I can sense it.

“Stop,” he murmurs when I try to pull my arm free. “Look at me.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Clover,” he commands, slowly running his hand up my arm to my shoulder. “I’m not playing this time.”

My mouth goes dry.

“Don’t do this,” I beg softly.

“I want you,” he says. “I have for years.”

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Tears swim in my eyes, and panic rises in my chest. “Please.”

“I love you.”

“You don’t,” I say softly.

Lawrence’s chestnut eyes are intent on mine. “I do.”

I can’t answer because I know I will hurt him.

“I’ll take care of you, be loyal to you, dote on you every single day of our lives,” he says quietly. “Just...choose me.”

A tear spills over, and he watches it as it trails down my cheek. I look to the side, wiping the moisture away.

He waits several long seconds, and then he drops his hand with a sigh. “No?”

Reluctantly, I look back. “I’m sorry.”

Slowly, he nods, raising his hand to his chest as if to shield himself from further pain. After another long moment, he gives me a half-hearted grin. “Can’t blame me for trying, right?”

“Lawrence.” I reach out for him and then pull back.

He turns to leave, and my heart clenches. Just before he reaches the panel, I race

across the room and hug him from behind.

“I’m truly sorry,” I say again with my cheek pressed to his back. “But you must know you are my closest friend, and that means the world to me.”

Lawrence stands motionless for several seconds, and then he sets his hand over mine. “I know.”

“Are we all right?”

He twists his head to look back at me. “If you put yourself in another bad position like you did tonight, Henrik will never earn his seal.”

I drop my arms. “That’s low.”

He turns around to face me. “I won’t forgive him if something happens to you.”

“Why bring him into this?” I demand.

Lawrence lets out a broken laugh. “Because he’s the only thing I can threaten you with. Now, hold still.”

“Hold still?”

Before I realize what he’s planning, Lawrence wraps his arms around me and places his hand on my back, pulling me against him. Then he moves in without hesitation and presses his mouth to mine. When I begin to protest, he deepens the kiss with warm, insistent lips, shocking me senseless.

I’ve barely gathered my wits before he pulls back.

“W...what was that?” I demand, pressing my fingers to my mouth.

Lawrence’s eyes sparkle with mischief. “Now you know what you’re giving up. It’s only fair—don’t you want to make an informed decision?”

“I didn’t give you permission to kiss me!”

He grins as he pushes through the panel. “I didn’t ask.”

I stare at the closed panel for several seconds, still not fully comprehending what just happened.

But I think, in his own strange way, Lawrence just gave Henrik and me his blessing.

* * *

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The morning comes too soon, and I roll over, yawning as I ignore the dawn. When I finally open my eyes to see what time it is, I nearly shriek.

Maisel lays atop the covers beside me, her head propped up on her hand. “I see you’re awake now.”

I sit up, breathing hard. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to check on you—make sure you made it back all right.” She sits up, shaking her head so hard her strawberry blond braid swings back and forth like a rope tied to the back of her tiny head. “Seriously, Calendula, I get no respect around here.”

“Thank you,” I say once I recover from the surprise, eyeing the gnome as I leave the bed and slip on my dressing gown. “For telling Lawrence. We’d likely still be in the constable’s cell if it wasn’t for you.”

“You shouldn’t have gone last night,” she chastises. “I could have told you that you were being followed.”

“Well, then why didn’t you?”

“I took care of one,” she says, mildly offended. “The other three slipped past me.”

“There was another?”

She nods. “I didn’t get a good look at his face, but his voice was familiar.”

“Dalvin or Bendon? One of the brothers who defected to Camellia?”

Maisel shakes her head. “No, I know their brutish tones all too well.”

“What did you do with him?”

“I smacked him on the head with the butt of my axe and knocked him out cold. When I went back after you all were arrested, he was gone.”

That’s...not good.

Pushing aside my panic, I ask, “Where have you been all this time?”

“I stayed in Revalane.” She gives me a sideways look. “Keeping an eye on your commander.”

“Maisel,” I say, pressing my hand to my heart.

“Now, don’t go getting all squishy on me,” she says, frowning. “Someone had to watch over him with that witch in control.”

I return to the bed, smiling. “I’m glad we stumbled into you in the mountains. You’re a good friend.”

The woman’s cheeks turn pink, and she looks away as if embarrassed. “Enough of that.”

“Is Devlin with you? Or did he return to Crevershim Hollow?”

She reluctantly looks at me. “He went back—wanted to tell Gruebin about the king’s death.”

“Oh, Maisel, I’m sorry.”

She shrugs, but I can tell it stings that he left her.

I assure her, “You’ll find someone who’s head over heels for you, and then that will show him.”

Smirking, she jerks her head toward the panel. “Maybe I’ll snare myself a giant king.”

Laughing, I say, “Maybe you will.”

“I’ll help you again if you want to see Henrik,” she says, hopping up to leave. “Don’t go making plans on your own—the two of you are hopeless without me.”

“Again?”

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She looks back before she heads for the balcony. “Who do you think slipped the note under your door in Lord Cordin’s estate?”

“That was you?”

“Take care of yourself, Calendula.” She then slips through the door and disappears.

* * *

“The prisoners talked,” Miguel informs Lawrence. “They pledged their loyalty to Camellia before she left Cabaranth to marry Augmirian.”

We’re in the hall, on our way to breakfast with Lawrence’s knights. Lawrence pauses to give Miguel his full attention. “Why did they attack Henrik?”

Miguel looks uncomfortable. Avoiding his friend’s eyes, he says, “They followed Clover.”

I cringe, glancing at Lawrence to gauge his reaction. He gives me a condescending, “What did I tell you?” look that I probably deserve.

Miguel continues, “If Henrik hadn’t stopped them, they would have taken Clover to Camellia and told the princess about Henrik’s treachery.”

“He didn’t deal with them singlehandedly,” I say, wanting a little credit.

“So that’s why Camellia’s here?” Lawrence asks, ignoring me. “She’s after Clover?”

Denny scowls at me, just as angry as Lawrence that I slipped my guard last night.

“According to them, they acted on their own,” Miguel answers. “Word has spread that Camellia commanded Henrik to go after Clover in Revalane, so those who are loyal to your sister—”

“We get it,” I interrupt. “I’m a prize goose for the princess’s table.”

Just what, exactly, does she intend to do with me anyway? And what did I ever do to earn so much of her wrath?

“How many of my men are loyal to Camellia?” Lawrence demands.

“It’s impossible to know how many she won over before she left Cabaranth.”

“Surely not that many,” Xander argues, joining the conversation for the first time. The quiet knight usually keeps to himself, listening more than adding his own opinions.

Miguel turns to the knight. “It’s better to err on the side of caution. From now on, we must be suspicious of anyone who comes close to Lawrence or Clover.”

Xander gives him a solemn nod, respecting the senior knight.

We reach the dining room, and I hesitate before I walk inside. It’s an intimate breakfast, with only those close to the king attending.

But Camellia will be here, along with her esteemed companions and Henrik.

“What’s wrong?” Lawrence asks, pausing next to me.

“Nothing,” I answer quickly.

Together, we walk in. I breathe a sigh of relief when I spot Brielle next to her brother. She’s all right.

I’m less pleased when I see Henrik is seated at Camellia’s right, not standing behind her as her knight, but filling the place of a consort. Her hand is on his arm as if she cannot bear to spend a moment without touching him.

She catches me looking, and a satisfied smile spreads over her face. Quickly averting my eyes, I pretend not to notice as Lawrence leads me to the head of the table.

Dalvin and Bendon, the two brothers who openly turned traitor and remained in Ferradelle with Camellia, stand at the back wall with a mix of elven and human guards, looking moderately uncomfortable in the presence of Lawrence and his knights—as they should.

But the pair is no great loss. Neither can shoot, and only Bendon is moderately talented with a blade. Though I will admit they’re better with their fists, they’re both large and somewhat stupid, and to be honest, I’ve never liked them much. Camellia can have them.

But their presence reminds me of the men who attacked us.

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Just how many of our knights and soldiers are loyal to Camellia? Do we have far fewer men than we realize? How many will side with Camellia if, when, she decides to attack?

And is that her true purpose for the visit—to recruit more out from under our noses? Distract us into watching our backs while we should be keeping an eye on the wolves preying on our soldiers?

I thank Lawrence as he pulls out my chair, keeping my eyes off Camellia and Henrik, hating to see her clinging to him. But I know she's purposely trying to infuriate me, so I'll ignore her childish games.

Breakfast is a tense affair, with stilted conversation.

The visiting High Vale nobles aren't pleased to be here, and they refuse to be drawn into conversation. Camellia is content to silently revel in the discomfort she's caused, and Lawrence is unusually quiet as well. That leaves the rest of the conversation to Bartholomew's mother and whoever she chooses to address.

Duchess Alousia Gevaldry sits next to her son, two spots from me. She's a pretty woman, with a familiar dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose and a quick smile. Her younger brother is in attendance today as well, and I can't help but sneak peeks at the man. He looks exactly like an older version of Bartholomew...and he's very handsome.

Blocking everything else out, I laugh to myself as I compare the young duke with his uncle.

“What are you smiling about?” Lawrence asks near my ear.

I lean close, keeping my voice low so I don’t embarrass Bartholomew. “After seeing his uncle, I’ve decided your cousin will be quite devastating when he grows into his frame.”

Lawrence angles his head to look at me, looking rather put out. “Now I must compete with Bartholomew as well as Henrik?”

I laugh again, shaking my head at the ridiculous notion. When I pull my eyes away from Lawrence, I find Camellia watching us, her eyes slightly narrowed.

Henrik drums his fingers on the table, studiously ignoring everyone and everything. Brielle casts a nervous look in his direction, but he doesn’t notice.

“I had a grand idea,” Duchess Alousia declares when the meal is almost over. “Since Camellia has returned in time for the wedding, she should throw a bridal tea for Clover.”

I nearly choke, and a painful hush falls over the room.

Bartholomew’s mother doesn’t seem to notice. “It’s a Calendrian tradition for the mother of the groom to celebrate her daughter-in-law with such a celebration. Because Cathriella is no longer with us, I think it would be lovely if Camellia were to take her place.”

Camellia dabs a folded napkin to her lips and clears her throat before she addresses the room. “I would be happy to celebrate dear Clover and Lawrence’s impending nuptials, but perhaps you, Your Grace, would be better suited to arrange such a gathering? Of course, I will assist you however I am able.”

Duchess Alousia says graciously, “I would be honored to host the event.”

“When is a bridal tea traditionally held?” Bartholomew asks his mother.

“A week before the wedding.”

That’s a little over two weeks away—plenty of time to figure out how to remove the necklaces and bring doom upon Camellia’s perfect head.

“A tea sounds lovely. Thank you, Your Grace,” I say to Bartholomew’s mother. I then boldly meet the princess’s piercing blue gaze. “And thank you, Camellia. It will be a rare treat to have you fuss over me for once.”

Lawrence smacks his knee into mine, but I ignore him, beaming innocently at his sister.

Camellia returns my smile, but her eyes are cold and calculating.

When we finally leave, Lawrence pulls me aside. “What did I tell you about taunting her?”

I roll my eyes. “We already know Camellia will kill me if she gets the chance. Does it really matter if I take a few stabs at her when the opportunity presents itself?”

“Clover,” he says heavily. “Please be careful.”

“Fine,” I relent. “I won’t do it again.”

“You promise?”

Resigned, I nod. But under my breath, I mumble, “Joy killer.”

Lawrence groans, draping his arm over my shoulders. “Better your joy than you.”

20

HENRIK

Pranmore sits at his desk, his forehead resting against the tips of his fingers and his eyes closed. He looks like he hasn't slept in days, and his usually tidy hair is pulled back in a ratty tail.

"I've tried everything I can think of," he says. "Even inserting a ward into the thread of magic to break it. But it's like trying to stop water—it simply flows around, completing the circuit."

"Do the necklaces contain an energy crystal?" I ask. "Perhaps they will weaken with time?"

Vallen charms usually draw from the wearer to stay charged—if the wearer is elven. Brielle has no magic of her own, so it must be diminishing without a crystal to keep the charm active.

"It's not powered by a crystal but blood. The center diamond fuels the enchantment, and it doesn't show any sign of weakening. I'm afraid the magic Camellia harvests is far more potent than what we wield."

"Keep working on it," I beg him as I head for the door. "I can't be gone long, or Camellia will come looking for me."

"I'll let you know if I discover something," Pranmore says, already returning to his

experiments.

I walk down the hall, keeping to myself. Very few people speak to me anyway. Even here, in the city I grew up and trained in, my allegiance is questioned.

When I return to Camellia's chambers, I nearly run into Hellebore as she's on her way out. "Excuse me. I didn't..." The words die as I take a good look at her gaunt face and sunken eyes.

The elven woman casts a glance at me as she passes, saying nothing.

"Henrik," Camellia calls from inside the room. "Where have you been?"

Dismissing my worry, I walk in. "I needed some fresh air."

"There is a concerning rumor passing around the city." She turns to her ladies sharply. "Leave us."

The three women exchange nervous glances, and then they hurry out the door like a trio of spooked deer.

Once we're alone, Camellia walks to me, her eyes sparking with anger. "Did you meet Clover when you delivered my note to the apothecary?"

I tense, uncertain how to answer.

"Your silence is all the response I require." She turns toward the closed door of the adjoining sitting room. "Bring her in."

I go cold as the door opens, and Dalvin drags Brielle into the room. My sister looks terrified, with her hair disheveled and her eyes too large.

Without thinking, I step forward and reach for my sword.

“Stop,” Camellia commands, raising her hand.

I freeze with my sword halfway out of its sheath, intensely aware of Camellia’s power.

The princess’s eyes travel to my arm. “It seems some of your strength has returned.”

Slowly, I slide the blade back in place. “What do you want?”

“Did you kiss her?” Camellia asks, stepping in front of me, blocking my view of Brielle.

“No.”

“Did she want you to?”

I hesitate again, swallowing even though my mouth has gone dry.

“She did,” Camellia coos. “How pathetic—and treacherous. Imagine how the people would react if they knew their future queen threw herself at my knight. Lawrence might have no choice but to send her to the gallows.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to meet with Clover again,” Camellia says, smiling. “Somewhere dark and illicit—lure her into a trap. Seduce her, Henrik, so I can ruin her.”

My hand moves to my sword once more, and this time, I’m not sure I can stop it. Suddenly, Brielle cries out, screaming like she’s been stabbed.

Immediately, I raise my hands, surrendering as I shake with fury. Brielle gasps out a sob, and my vision blurs with hatred.

“On your knees,” Camellia commands.

I do as she asks, lowering myself before the sorceress. From the corner of my eye, behind Camellia, Brielle, and Dalvin, I spot movement. Keeping my head lowered, I focus on Maisel. She clenches her hand axe, moving toward Camellia on silent feet.

I subtly shake my head, begging her to reconsider for my sister’s sake. It would only take a heartbeat for Camellia to kill Brielle. And even if she didn’t, I don’t believe Dalvin would hesitate to use his blade.

Maisel glances at my sister, pursing her lips before she reluctantly nods. Then she slips into the study, disappearing just as quickly as she came—hopefully to find Clover.

“Oh, Henrik, you brought this on yourself, you know,” Camellia says as she strokes my hair. “If you’d obeyed me, I might have considered leaving Clover alone.”

Lawrence is so taken with her, after all. I can be benevolent.”

I close my eyes, focusing on the sound of Brielle’s tears, ashamed and so angry I almost can’t contain my rage.

Camellia runs her hand along my face, caressing my cheek before she strikes me with the back of her hand. Her ring catches my cheek, stinging like poison, but I don’t flinch.

“Stand,” she commands.

I do as she asks, meeting her eyes, silently vowing I will destroy her. A trickle of warm blood runs down my face. The princess studies it, looking half intoxicated. She then wraps her hand around the back of my neck and drags me down like she expects a kiss. But her lips meet my cheek instead of my mouth, pressing over the bead of blood.

When Camellia pulls back, her lips are stained red. She presses them together as if savoring the taste, and then she smiles. “Write Clover a message. Tell her you’ll meet her tonight.”

21

CLOVER

I’m dozing on the chaise longue in my sitting room, exhausted from the long night, when there’s a knock at the outer door. I peek an eye open, dreading the idea of visitors.

My ladies are in the room with me, pursuing proper feminine pursuits such as sketching and needlework while I nap.

“Maybe it’s Barret,” Calla says eagerly, leaping to her feet.

The knight has been absent much of the morning. Though it certainly wasn’t my intention, I’m sure I humiliated him when I slipped away last night. He’s supposed to be protecting me, and I ended up in a holding cell in a constable’s office in the old district of the city. It can’t look good for him. I’ll apologize sometime when we’re alone. If I do it now, amongst the ladies, I’ll only embarrass him further.

Calla greets the caller, and I begin to doze once more.

A sudden hard shove to my shoulder jolts me, and I bolt upright, snapping, “What?”

Then I realize it’s Denny.

“Get up,” my brother says. “You can sleep later.”

“What’s wrong?” I demand, hurrying to my feet even though my head is still fuzzy.

“Where are we going?” Lavender asks.

“I’m taking Clover to speak with Lawrence,” Denny answers. “It will be best if you remain here.”

Startled by my brother’s tone, Lavender nods dumbly.

“What’s going on?” I demand the moment we’re alone in the hall.

“Camellia found out you met Henrik last night.”

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My stomach drops, and I hurry ahead of Denny, passing Lawrence's guards and yanking the door before they can open it for me. I find Lawrence in his private study, his knights and Maisel standing with him.

Lawrence faces the window. His hand is pressed into the window frame, and his arm is too straight. He looks highly agitated.

Suddenly, he lets out a guttural yell and smacks his hand against the window frame. The knights and I flinch at the uncharacteristic outburst. Maisel, however, stands behind the king, unmoved.

"She's torturing the girl as we speak, and I'm supposed to stand by and let her do it?" Lawrence demands.

"Who's being tortured?" I gasp.

"If you barge in, Camellia will kill her," Maisel says evenly, though there's fire in her eyes. She's not as calm as she appears.

"Who?" I cry.

"Brielle." Lawrence pushes his hands into his long hair, grasping the strands like he means to rip them out. "And Henrik through her."

I grab the back of a nearby chair, taking slow breaths as the room begins to spin.

"Sit down," Denny commands, pressing my shoulder so I have no choice but to obey.

“You’re going to pass out.”

“Your Majesty,” Miguel says carefully, “it would be fairly simple to get rid of your sister, if that is your wish.”

Lawrence turns to the knight, desperate for suggestions. “How?”

“She’s not that well protected, at least not yet. If we attack, I’m confident we’ll win.”

Denny shoots him a disgusted look. “She’d kill Henrik’s sister and all the other women who wear her cursed necklaces as soon as she realized our intention.”

Miguel looks uncomfortable. “There would be casualties, yes. It’s very likely.”

“You expect me to sacrifice that many people to take her out?” Lawrence demands.

The senior knight stands taller, though he looks troubled by his own suggestion. “I’m not saying it’s right...but I do believe it’s what your father would have done.”

And for just one moment, Lawrence looks like he’s thinking about it. Then he suddenly shakes his head, visibly slamming a door on that idea.

“No, that’s not an option,” Lawrence says firmly. “Not only will I not sacrifice innocent lives, but I also won’t set Caldenbauer up for another war. Camellia has ensnared every noble family in Revalane. If I give that command, there will most certainly be an uprising even after she’s...gone.”

He blanches at the last word, likely not comfortable discussing his sister’s assassination.

“Henrik’s sister is safe as long as Henrik submits to Camellia,” Maisel says, growing

impatient. “It’s Clover we need to worry about.”

The situation must be dire if she’s using my real name.

“Why me?” I demand.

Lawrence looks at me for the first time since I arrived.

One of Lawrence’s door guards steps into the study. “Your Majesty, Calla has arrived with a message that was delivered to Clover’s room.”

Denny’s hand tightens on the back of my chair.

“Allow her to come in.”

A few moments later, Calla joins us, immediately sensing the tense mood. “I’m sorry to interrupt,” she says hesitantly. She lifts the folded piece of parchment as if it’s her pass inside.

“Who’s it from?” Lawrence demands, striding across the room to take it from her.

“The courier didn’t say.”

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I know better than to protest when Lawrence opens the message, but it's hard to resist the desire to rip it from his hands.

"Camellia doesn't waste any time," Lawrence says, handing me the note once he's finished with it.

I scan it, and my stomach knots.

"It's from Henrik," I say for the other's benefit. "He wants to meet me tonight."

"It's not from Henrik," Lawrence snaps. "It's from Camellia—and it's a trap."

"What's she plotting?" I ask Maisel.

Lawrence answers before Maisel has a chance, "She's hoping to humiliate me and destroy you."

"Buthow?" I snap, growing impatient.

"She wants Henrik to coax you into a compromising position so she can catch you being unfaithful to your royal intended," Maisel answers, glaring at Lawrence. "She wants to see you hanged."

"Henrik would never—" I cut myself off, realizing it's precisely as Henrik feared when we parted in Revalane. Camellia has cornered him, using Brielle to manipulate him into hurting me.

“Don’t look so dejected,” Maisel says impatiently. “He saw me. He knows you’re not going to walk into the witch’s snare blindly.”

“What if you hadn’t been there?” I say weakly.

“Don’t dwell on things that didn’t come to pass,” Denny says, but his tone is gentle. It’s unnerving.

“All right.” I crumple the message in my hands. “What am I going to do?”

“You’re going to go,” Lawrence says, his sharp gaze making me nervous, “and you’re going to reject him.”

It takes a moment for his words to soak in. Once they do, they chill me like freezing rain.

After I find my voice, I demand, “What’s going to keep Camellia from ordering him to kill me when she realizes her plan fell through?”

“We’ll follow you,” Lawrence assures me. “And I’ll send in someone to hide before you arrive.”

“Someone?” I ask.

Lawrence looks at Maisel. “Can you still turn into a rock?”

A swift grin crosses her face. “I can.”

* * *

Knowing what I must do and actually doing it are two very different things. I barely

touched dinner, but my stomach churns as if I ate something that didn't agree with me. Henrik and I are supposed to meet at the fountain in the garden, just as we did yesterday.

I wish Henrik had chosen a different place. I don't want to taint our good memories with these painful ones. Though Maisel swears Henrik will know my words are a lie, I can't help but worry he'll believe, on some level, that they are true.

I wear my dark cloak, and this time, I don't pause to smell the snowstar blooms or watch the fluttering linens on the lines. I don't hurry, either. I walk down the pathways, each step harder than the last.

Henrik waits for me by the fountain as expected, his back turned toward me. When he hears my footsteps, he turns. "You came."

His words are heavy, like he wishes I hadn't.

My mouth feels cottony, and I try to swallow, knowing I must make this convincing.

Maisel is here somewhere, along with Camellia and whoever else she decided to hide in the shadows. I'm not sure where Lawrence is, but I know he's nearby. I wouldn't be surprised if Denny recruited our brothers to join the watch as well.

I step up to Henrik and push back my hood. Slowly, he does the same. For several moments, we stare at each other. I can't read his face, but I see the struggle in his eyes.

I'll make it brief, I silently promise him.

"Clover," he finally says.

"We're done, Henrik," I respond softly. "We talked about it last night. Why did you ask me to meet you again?"

For the briefest moment, confusion flickers over the commander's face.

Before he can say something and ruin my carefully planned monologue, I continue, "I love Lawrence—you know that." My throat tries to thicken like an invisible hand is clamped around my neck, but I press on. "Do not destroy my chance with him because we had a fling in the mountains. It was fun, yes. But it didn't mean anything."

The commander's expression flickers, stung by the sharp lies.

Looking away, I say, "And you still care for Camellia."

Henrik exhales slowly, dropping his head as if he's afraid his expression will give something away.

"I know things feel unresolved between us, but it's time to part ways," I continue. "Don't ask me to meet you again—I won't come."

Henrik looks up, his eyes intent on mine. I stare at him for several heartbeats, feeling broken.

Know that I love you. Even if I haven't been brave enough to tell you, don't doubt it.

Then I turn, waiting for something to happen—anything. But the night is silent, and a sliver of me begins to doubt. What if it was a lie? What if Camellia wasn't behind this, and Lawrence simply wanted to build a wall between Henrik and me...

No.

I won't doubt my friend like that. And Maisel wouldn't betray me. Henrik knows what this was—nothing more than an act to thwart Camellia's spiteful plans.

I have to believe that, or I will never be able to forgive myself for the lies I just spoke.

A breeze blows through the garden, chilling my cheeks and nose. I hold my dagger in my hand as I walk, not trusting Camellia to leave me be.

However, I make it back to the castle without incident. But I don't go back to my room. Instead, I knock on a door, holding my composure only until Pranmore answers.

"Clover," he says, startled to see me at this hour.

No longer able to hold in my tears, I fall apart as I step forward. Immediately, Pranmore pulls me into the room and closes the door.

"What's wrong?" he demands softly. "What happened?"

I look up at him, tears streaming down my face. "I had to do something awful."

HENRIK

I watch Clover go, nearly sick with relief.

Maisel told her.

The words were for show. We never said we were going to end things last night, and Clover knows I certainly have no feelings for Camellia.

But her rejection still cut deep.

With a sigh, I sit on the ledge of the fountain, giving Clover plenty of time to navigate the gardens and return to the safety of the castle. I can only hope she didn't come alone, especially now that Camellia's plot didn't go the way the princess expected.

Once I'm certain we won't meet on the way back, I begin walking. Moments later, Camellia steps from the shadows, joining me. Dalvin, Bendon, and several of her elven guards aren't far behind.

"That didn't go as I expected," she finally says, her tone agitated. "Did you warn her?"

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I stop to face the princess, so tired of her manipulations. “I haven’t left your side since I wrote the message. How would I have warned Clover?How?”

She crosses her arms, studying me. “You look upset.”

Shaking my head, I continue walking.

This ended in the best possible way, but I feel as if I’m nearing the end of my quickly fraying rope. I don’t know how much longer I can go on like this.

When we step inside Camellia’s quarters, I sit on the rug in front of the fire in her bedchamber, where I slept the night before as well, refusing the princess’s bed—choosing to become her dog instead of her lover.

She closes the door, trapping us in here alone. Moving nearly silently, she steps up behind me. I flinch as she sets her hands on my shoulders. I want to cringe away, but there’s no point.

She massages my muscles for several minutes before she finally speaks. “What did Clover mean when she said you still care for me? Did you tell her that?”

I know why Clover said it, but I wish she hadn’t. I have no desire to placate Camellia.

“I’ve done as you’ve asked,” I say heavily. “Let me sleep.”

“The floor is hard,” she says. “And my bed is soft.”

Her bed is poison.

I turn to look at her. “Let me tend my wounds in peace. It’s all I ask.”

Disappointment flickers over the princess’s face, but she drops her hands. “Very well. But if you change your mind, know you are most welcome.”

* * *

Several weeks pass, and a storm sweeps over Caldenbauer. I haven’t met with Clover, and she doesn’t look at me anymore. We coexist as strangers with a haunted past, and the royal wedding marches closer.

I’m not a fool—I know Lawrence has no intention of calling it off.

Pleased with my heartbreak, Camellia has left Brielle and me be, though I’m sure the respite is only temporary.

“Go to the apothecary tonight,” Camellia says as she finishes her afternoon tea. “Vignim should have gathered the ingredients I requested by now.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

She pushes aside her cup and studies me. “You’ve been agreeable these last few weeks, Henrik.”

I stare at her, not in the mood.

“Oh, but you are still upset with me.” She makes a soft tutting noise. “Please remember it was Clover who rejected you—you can’t blame me for that. You should be more careful with your heart.”

Camellia rises, coming to stand in front of me. She raises her hand to my cheek, running her finger over the scar left by her ring. “I’m surprised your pet deer hasn’t healed this like he healed your arm.”

I lift my eyes to hers, startled.

Camellia laughs softly, stroking her hand through my hair. “Oh yes, I know about him. Tell me, has he had any luck with the necklace?”

I draw in a sharp breath through my nose, which only amuses her further.

“Because I like you, I’ll tell you a secret.” She leans closer. “There is no way to remove the necklaces. I was very careful with their creation. But since a small bit of defiance seems to make you breathe a little easier, I won’t stop the Woodmore from trying to puzzle it out.”

“How?” I demand, knocking her hand away.

“I have my ways,” she says cryptically. “I do have one question, though. Perhaps you’ll indulge me.”

I narrow my eyes, waiting.

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“How, exactly, did you befriend aDornauth?” She laughs. “Such a handy little spy. I have a theory—would you like to hear it?”

Again, I refuse to answer.

“I think your little gnome overheard our conversation, and she’s the one who warned Clover.”

My muscles begin to quiver, and dark thoughts overtake me once again. I could kill the princess now—we’re alone. Half-mad, I lift my hand, brushing her hair over her shoulder.

A smile toys at Camellia’s full lips, but she doesn’t move.

Swallowing hard, I lift my other hand, setting them both on her cool skin like a man about to pull his lover in for a passionate kiss. I rub my thumb over her pulse point, feeling her blood thrum in her throat.

I could do it.

I squeeze just a little, testing myself.

Camellia laughs. “It would only take a second for me to kill your sister. You’re aware of that, aren’t you? You could certainly murder me, but I wouldn’t go alone.”

Trembling, I meet her eyes.

“But I’m not scared of death, Henrik,” she whispers. “Go ahead. Let’s see what happens.”

With a growl, I yank my hands away and turn my back on her.

“That’s twice you’ve almost murdered me and then had a change of heart. Your chivalry won’t go unrewarded. Though I am eager to dispose of Clover, I think I’ll give you a gift instead.” She loops her arms around my waist, pressing against my back. “I think I’m going to allow her to marry Lawrence—let them have their wedding night. I cannot promise much after that, but it feels like a generous offer nevertheless, don’t you think?”

I pull away from Camellia and leave the room, not trusting myself to stay a moment longer. After walking the castle halls with no particular destination in mind, I end up in the practice arena. Since it’s still raining, training has moved indoors. But the knights and soldiers who have gathered seem content to talk and loiter instead of spar.

Men watch me as I stride into the space, shooting nervous looks my way. I step up to the rack and choose a blunt sword, gripping the hilt in my hand. I no longer have a reason to hide my recovery.

Turning to my audience, I announce, “It’s been far too long since I’ve trained. Who will fight me?”

* * *

The afternoon turns into evening, and then to night. I sit on a bench, dripping sweat. I’m exhausted, and my anger is sated. I’m the only one left, and the arena is quiet now.

I have no idea what time it is.

With a heavy sigh, I pick up my discarded tunic and rise. When I turn, I come to an abrupt stop.

Clover sits on one of the raised benches, watching me. “I’ve never seen a man throw himself into practice like that.”

She wears a gown of deep purple, looking regal. But her smile...it’s still mischievous. It still guts me.

“How long have you been here?” I ask hesitantly.

How didn’t I notice her arrival?

“Most of the day,” she says. “My ladies were here for a while as well.”

I look around, a little uncomfortable. “You’re...alone?”

“I asked Barret to wait for me outside the doors.”

“And Lawrence—”

“He knows I’m here.” Clover descends the steps, coming to stand in front of me. Softly, she says, “There are no windows, and though I wouldn’t put it past her, I doubt Camellia has men hanging from the skylight. You can relax.”

“She knows everything,” I say quietly, taking her arm and leading her down a hall beyond the benches and into a small storage room, safe from anyone who might walk into the arena. “About Maisel’s existence and that Pranmore healed my arm. She even knows the Woodmore is trying to unravel the magic in Audra’s necklace.”

Clover's eyes go wide. "How?"

"I have no idea. But right now, she's just toying with us."

"You have to figure out what she's planning." Clover turns from me, perusing the straw-stuffed training dummies that line the side wall. "There must be a way. She keeps you closer than anyone. You haven't overheard anything?"

I think about that, frowning. "There is someone closer."

"Hellebore." Clover looks over her shoulder at me. "But she's practically a mother to Camellia. She wouldn't betray her."

We fall silent, and I watch her, feeling a sharp ache in my chest.

"I'm going into the city to see the apothecary tonight," I say. "Camellia likely believes I've already left."

"See if you can get him to talk. Maybe if we have some idea what she's concocting, we'll know what she's plotting." She smiles as she joins me once more. "I'd go with you if I could, but I don't think it's a good idea."

We study each other, and Clover's smile falls. Softly, she says, "I didn't mean what I said that night. You know that, don't you? I haven't had a proper night's sleep in two weeks because I was terrified you might have thought..."

"I knew." I look down. "But perhaps it would have been better if it were true. I think

I could manage if I knew you loved Lawrence, that you could be happy with him. I'd step back—for you."

Clover's eyes grow sad, and her gaze moves to my cheek. Lifting her hand, she brushes her fingertips over the new scar. "What happened?"

"Camellia." After so many months of torment, it's impossible to resist the comfort Clover offers. I close my eyes, leaning into her hand, not caring if she knows I'm weak.

I start when Clover's lips replace her fingers. She kisses my cheek softly, erasing the memories of Camellia's unwanted touch.

"I cannot imagine everything you've been through," she says quietly, wrapping her hand around the back of my neck and massaging the tight muscles with gentle fingers.

"I'm sweaty," I protest, half-heartedly pulling away.

"I don't care."

Pulling me down to meet her, she kisses my mouth. Her lips are warm and soft, and I want more.

"We can't," I try to protest, but it's impossible to step away when we have so little time left. This may be our last chance to be alone.

"I've missed you," she whispers. "So much."

"Lawrence truly knows you're here?" I pull back just slightly.

Though I hate to bring him up now, for my peace of mind, I need to know that I'm not betraying my king.

"He does." Clover's spring green eyes meet mine, confessing things she hasn't yet said with her lips. "He's resigned himself to the fact I've picked you—not that he likes it. But I don't want to talk about him. Right now, all I want to think about is you."

"Clover..."

"Kiss me, soldier," she pleads quietly, and the soft, desperate request is my undoing.

I press my hand to the small of Clover's back, dragging her against me. The silk of her dress is slick against my bare skin, and she's warm and small and perfect.

Too exhausted for self-control, I kiss her without reservation, my hunger fueled by her soft exclamation of surprise. Perhaps if she tried to pull away, I could stop myself. I could be rational. But Clover stands on her toes, clutching my shoulders as she meets me kiss for kiss, sigh for sigh, breath for breath...

And I am lost to her.

23

CLOVER

Anyone could walk into the storage room at any minute, and Henrik and I are surrounded by discarded swords and leather training armor. It's the least romantic location, but I couldn't care less.

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Henrik's head falls back when I run my hand down his bare chest. "I should put on my tunic," he breathes.

I tease, "You are rather distracting."

But the commander doesn't move, and I don't step away. My hand moves with each of his labored breaths, rising and falling. His skin is a little tanner than mine, with a light dusting of hair that I explore with my fingertips.

"You're like a painting," I say quietly. "I used to scoff when the ladies giggled over you—I must have been blind."

Henrik takes my hand as if he cannot bear the contact anymore, holding it in his as he brings it to his mouth. Instead of kissing me, he runs his lips against my knuckles, nuzzling my skin. It's somehow sweeter...and more heartbreaking. With a wry smile, he says, "I remember. You claimed I would kiss like a fish."

"I was wrong," I say with a laugh, sighing when he proves, yet again, his prowess in the art.

Henrik kisses me long and slow, skimming his hands over my sides, setting me on fire with every touch. I press into him, wishing I were taller.

Shoving a stack of woven archery mats aside, the commander lifts me onto a table, lessening the distance between his mouth and mine. I wrap my arms around his neck, savoring each stolen second.

But the bliss is tinged with sorrow because our minutes are numbered. We can't hide in here forever.

When we're out of breath, and my cheeks are flushed, I rest my forehead against Henrik's shoulder. He gathers me into his arms, wrapping me against him. I breathe deeply, taking in his scent and the way his skin feels against mine. I'll log the details into my memory so I will remember them forever.

"You told me I wasn't allowed to give up hope," he says gently, sensing the shift in my mood. "Doesn't the same apply to you?"

"Everything seems impossible right now."

He strokes my hair. "I need you to know something."

"Hmmm?" I murmur, snuggling in closer, setting my hand against his warm chest and feeling the steady thrum of his heart.

"I know what love is now."

I look up slowly. Though my fractured heart aches, it yearns to hear Henrik's confession. It might break me...but I need it.

The commander's gray-blue eyes meet mine, solemn and calm. "I love you, Clover. You were right—love isn't something I chose or expected. I fell into it, unaware and far too clumsy. And though I know I don't have a right to feel this way about you, it doesn't matter. Because I do."

"Henrik," I whisper, overwhelmed.

"Never wonder, never doubt it." He kisses my lips softly. "Even if life takes us in

different directions—”

“I love you, too,” I interrupt, clutching his face. “So much.”

I cling to Henrik as he kisses me again, wishing we could run away—leave Caldenbauer and never look back. But too many people depend on us, and we can’t flee.

And time, cruel as it is, moves quickly. Too soon, we must part.

“You go first.” Henrik holds my hand, walking me to the arena doors. “I’ll leave in a bit so we’re not spotted together.”

But we linger, our fingertips clinging.

“I don’t want to go,” I tell him.

He smiles. “And I don’t want you to go.”

“Be careful tonight,” I warn, wishing I could go into the city with him.

“I will be.” He brushes one last kiss over my lips and then nudges me forward. “Now go.”

I’m just reaching for the door when Henrik calls my name. When I look back, he says, “Don’t look for me again—it’s too dangerous.” When I begin to protest, he gives me a rare grin. “I’ll find you next time.”

* * *

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Barret doesn't say anything when I emerge from the practice arena, but I'm certain my red cheeks give me away.

"I'd like to see Pranmore," I say to my quiet, attentive guard. "Let's see if he's in."

It's only nine days until the wedding now, and the bridal tea is in just two. We're running out of time.

Barret only nods.

I glance at the knight, feeling guilty—an emotion that clings to me whenever I'm with the man. Clearing my throat, I say, "Lawrence knows I met with Henrik."

Barret gives me a sideways look. "That's between you and His Majesty. And Henrik, too, I suppose. Though the three of you share a strange connection, it's not my place to analyze it."

"I'm sorry I brought shame upon you when I slipped out of the castle. It wasn't my intention."

The knight gives me a reassuring smile. "I know."

We're almost to Pranmore's hall when I spot a familiar trio up ahead. I come to a full stop, staring at the group before I laugh out loud and hurry forward, surprising my knight but not the newcomers.

Ayan opens his arms, giving me a lopsided grin. "Look at you, Lady Clover. No

longer a lady, but a princess.”

I raise my brows as I stop in front of him. “I’m not going to hug you.”

The handsome elf looks almost respectable, in tailored clothing that suits his High Vale heritage, with his long, deep brown hair half pulled back and smoothly brushed.

He gives me a knowing look and leans down. “Afraid you’ll like it too much?”

I counter, “I’m afraid you’ll like it too much.”

Audra laughs, shaking her head.

“What are you doing here?” I ask her. “I thought you stayed in Revalane.”

Ayan’s cousin shares a look with Lyredon before she turns back to me and drops her voice. “Henrik’s father requested assistance leaving Ferradelle. We’ve brought him home.”

“Does Henrik know?”

“Not yet. They aren’t on good terms. But when Roarke learned Camellia gave Brielle a necklace, he decided he couldn’t stay in her service any longer.”

“He didn’t know what Camellia planned?”

Audra shakes her head. “Not until recently. He didn’t even know Brielle was in Revalane. Henrik kept it from them both.”

I sigh, feeling like an additional weight has been added to my shoulders—and just when I thought my heart couldn’t ache more for that man.

My attention drifts to Ayan once more. “Is it safe for you to be out and about?”

“Sometimes the prize pony needs a little exercise,” he says. “They’ve taken me out of the stable, but don’t worry—I’m still properly tethered.”

Audra rolls her eyes. “I don’t suppose you want to nanny him for a while, do you?”

“Not particularly.” I smirk at Ayan, and he gives me a cheeky wink. “But I was just on my way to see Pranmore. Would you all like to join me?”

Audra nods eagerly. “Has he discovered anything?”

“I was hoping to ask him myself.” I nod to Barret, who has now joined us. “This is Barret, my guard. Barret, this is Lady Audra, her cousin Ayan, and their...Lyredon.”

The knight bows a greeting, looking mildly surprised that I’m so well-acquainted with the visiting High Vales.

“You have a keeper, too?” Ayan asks me flippantly. “Look at us, moving up in the world.”

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I turn to Audra. “How have you put up with him all these months?”

She smirks when Ayan pretends to be offended. “It hasn’t been easy.”

Up ahead, a woman in black turns the corner, and I look her way, leery. Hellebore pauses when she spots us, and then she lowers her head and continues. Though it’s obvious she doesn’t wish to linger, she walks slowly as if it’s painful for her to move any faster. But in her haste to be past us, she stumbles.

Ayan darts his hand out, grasping her elbow to keep her from falling. The High Vale looks like she’s going to yank away from him, but her expression freezes when she sees his face. She stares up at him, her thin, pale lips parting.

“It’s all right,” he says with a grin, unaffected by her haggard appearance. “I’m used to women falling for me.”

She lets out a scratchy noise—the first sound I’ve ever heard her make.

Ayan’s bright smile turns to concern. “Madame, are you all right?”

“Ayan,” Audra says quietly. “You’re making her uncomfortable.”

Hellebore begins to shake violently, and then her eyes flutter...and she passes out.

Ayan catches her before she hits her head on the floor, and then he scoops her into his arms like he’s carrying a doll. Startled, he says, “Well, that’s a first.”

“This is Hellebore,” I say nervously. “Camellia’s handmaid. You haven’t seen her in Revalane?”

“Ayan’s never been to Palace Eloudore,” Lyredon reminds me.

“I’ve been,” Ayan argues, and then he gives a half-hearted laugh, studying the frail woman. “Just not recently.”

Audra frowns. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen her either.”

“She’s a bit reclusive,” I say. “And she’s mute, so it’s difficult for her to converse. But that doesn’t matter right now. We best take her to Pranmore.”

When we arrive, we find Lawrence’s four elite outside the door.

“Lawrence is inside?” I ask Denny, relieved.

My brother takes in our strange group, his eyes drifting to Hellebore’s still-unconscious form, and then he nods. “He is.”

“That saves us the trouble of fetching him.” I push through the door, pausing when I see Lawrence and Pranmore seated at the elf’s tea table, looking very solemn.

They glance over like I’ve interrupted something, and I pause. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Did you see Henrik—” Lawrence cuts himself off when he realizes I’m not alone. His eyes drift behind me, and he stands. “Audra.”

“It’s nice to see you too, Your Kingliness,” Ayan says, stepping inside. “Congratulations on the crown.”

Audra comes in behind him, her eyes going between Lawrence and Pranmore. But this isn't the time for reunions.

Before Audra can say anything, Ayan looks down at Hellebore and asks, "Where should I put her?"

Pranmore leaps to his feet, gesturing for Ayan to follow him into the room he's been using for the occasional patient. Most go to the court physician, but some—especially the female some—seem to prefer to visit the Woodmore.

Ayan places Hellebore on the bed, resting her head carefully on the pillow. "Should I cover her with a blanket? She's like ice."

"What happened?" Pranmore asks me as he nods to Ayan.

"I'm not certain," I say. "She was passing us in the hall, and then she fainted."

"She's Camellia's handmaid, isn't she?"

"That's right."

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Pranmore begins his examination, and a look of revulsion crosses his face when he touches her. He pulls back, crossing his arms.

“What is it?” I ask.

“She’s riddled with dark magic.”

“Dark?” Audra demands, startled and possibly a little offended.

Pranmore turns to her, giving her an affectionate smile that’s tinged with revulsion.

“Not High Vale.”

“If not High Vale...thenwhat?” Lyredon asks.

“Blood magic.”

It takes a moment for that to sink in, and the others don’t look any less befuddled than I am.

“How is that possible?” I demand.

“I have no idea,” Pranmore murmurs.

“Can you do anything for her?” Ayan asks.

Pranmore studies the woman, torn. Quietly, he says, “I’m not sure I should.”

We exchange looks, and then Lawrence says, “She might have answers for us.”

“Even if she does, I don’t think she’ll give them freely,” I say.

He turns to me. “Were you able to discover anything about her?”

I shake my head. “I asked around a bit. It seems King Algernon was the only one who knew anything about her.”

“Your father doesn’t even know?” Lawrence asks.

“No.”

“I can’t guarantee she’s going to wake up,” Pranmore says. “But I will watch over her if that’s what you would like.”

“Is that safe?” Audra asks, looking at the Woodmore with concern.

“She’s too frail to do much at this point,” Pranmore assures her. “I’ll put up a ward. It will alert me when she wakes.”

Slowly, we filter out of the room. Pranmore closes the door, and then a web of blue magic envelops it, visible for only a few seconds before it fades.

Hesitantly, I ask, “Should someone tell Camellia?”

“No,” Lawrence answers in a stern, unyielding voice. “Let this stay between us.”

The apothecary opens the door and studies me for several seconds before he invites me to come inside. The light cast from his lamp creates shadows on his face, reminding me of a warlock from a children's tale.

“You got the payment?” he asks.

I left right after parting with Clover, not bothering to go back to Camellia first. But as if it's all part of the plan, I say, “Camellia will send a courier with it tomorrow if the goods are satisfactory.”

The man grumbles, but he doesn't look eager to turn me away empty-handed. Apparently, he's dealt with Camellia and her temper before.

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“Wait here,” he orders, disappearing through a doorway.

His cat saunters into the room in his absence, almost as if it’s keeping an eye on me.

A few minutes later, the aged apothecary returns. He carries a small birdcage, but there are no birds inside. Instead, it houses a pair of hairless rodents, both gray and bloated, with pink tails and eyes that glow red with their own unsettling light.

“Blood rats?” I ask.

The apothecary grunts as he tosses a square of black fabric over the cage. “Both female, just as the princess requested. Best keep them covered while you walk through the city, and don’t loiter while you’re on your way. It’s illegal to possess them in Caldenbauer.”

He hands me a satchel with what I assume are the rest of the ingredients.

“It’s none of my business,” the man says, “but if I’m correct in my assumption, you best tell Camellia to be cautious.”

I stare at him, hoping my knowing silence will trick him into giving more away.

“Not many people have attempted the Kivear concoction,” he adds as if to defend his warning, shifting from one foot to the other. “Dangerous business. Few have the stomach for it.”

If the necromancer is telling me Camellia is dabbling in things more dangerous than

the norm, it must be bad.

“How long will it take to prepare?” I ask, wondering how much time I have to figure out what it does.

“The concoction takes about a week.” He narrows his eyes. “If Camellia begins tomorrow, it’ll be ready the day of the wedding.”

A chill passes over me, but I give the man a curt nod as if unaffected. “Good. You can expect your payment tomorrow.”

“I want my service remembered when Camellia takes the throne,” he says, eyeing me as I take the covered cage and satchel.

“What’s your name again?” I ask as I step out the door.

“Vignim,” he says eagerly.

Nodding, I commit his name to memory, prepared to tell Lawrence. His service will be well remembered.

I walk briskly through the dark streets of Cabaranth, thankful when I make it back to the castle.

Camellia sits on her chaise longue when I return, and her eyes light when I step in the door with her illicit goods.

“Out,” she commands her ladies, sending them to the small room that was intended for a solitary maid. The girls happily scramble away, closing the door after them.

“Set them down,” she says eagerly, gesturing toward the tea table.

I cross my arms as she pulls the cloth from the cage. Even in the bright lamplight of the princess's sitting room, the rats' eyes glow red. Opening the cage, Camellia pulls one of the rodents out, inspecting it with a frown.

It squeaks its displeasure, but she doesn't seem affected by its distress. "Plump, aren't they? They'll do nicely."

"If I were to ask what you have in mind for them, would you tell me?"

"That depends." The princess puts the rat back in the cage and then peeks into the satchel. "Are you still angry with me?"

"The apothecary said the concoction you're collecting ingredients for is dangerous."

"He figured out what I'm making, did he?" She laughs softly, obviously amused at the thought. "It's not the first time I've made it. I've taken a steady supply of the concoction since before I left for Revalane."

"What is it?" I demand, taking a step closer.

Camellia looks back at me, a self-satisfied smile twisting her lips. "Insurance."

"Do you have to kill someone to make it?"

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“I don’t have to.” She shrugs as she pulls various herbs and unmentionables from the satchel and spreads them on the table. “But it’s happened.”

“The man in your closet.”

“He almost ruined an entire batch.” She scowls, but she laughs when she meets my eyes. “You should see your expression, Henrik. It’s positively horrified.”

I stay silent, but my hand clenches into a fist.

“Will you offer your blood then? To save an innocent life?” She steps up to me and brushes her hand against my thigh. “I could make it enjoyable.”

Revulsion makes me step back.

Annoyed by my rejection, Camellia returns to her task. “At least think about it. If you refuse, maybe I’ll ask your sister for assistance. But Brielle is such a tiny thing. How much blood do you think I could drain from her before she collapsed?”

I begin to step forward, but Camellia raises her hand.

“Or I could kill her now.” She watches her green magic as it swirls in her palm. “Your choice.”

I don’t move forward, but my hand strays to my dagger. She glances at me, unimpressed. “Oh, stop being so dramatic—I didn’t say you have to decide right now.”

“I’ve been denying it, wondering if the thought makes me as wicked as you, but I think it’s inevitable,” I say heavily. “I’m going to have to kill you one of these days.”

Camellia looks over, giving me another smile. “I’m counting on it.”

Again, Maisel’s warning circles in my brain. The princess is too eager for death.

But why?

Or is this just another one of Camellia’s head games intended to make me question myself?

* * *

I wake to a knock at Camellia’s inner bedchamber door. Still mostly asleep, I roll over on the rug and look at the window. It’s dark.

“What is it, Henrik?” Camellia asks groggily from her bed.

“I don’t know.” Clearing my throat and blinking the haze from my eyes, I answer the door.

“A message has come for Camellia,” Rose says meekly. “The courier said it was urgent.”

Nodding, I take the sealed letter from the lady-in-waiting and deliver it to the princess. She sits up, yawning as she pushes her disheveled hair from her face. “Turn up the lamp.”

I do as she asks, wincing as the bright light floods the room.

Irritated at being roused at this hour of the night, Camellia opens the letter and scans the contents. Her face goes pale, and she rips back the covers, throwing her legs over the side of the bed.

“Hurry,” she commands. “Get dressed.”

It’s not a difficult task since I’ve taken to sleeping in trousers and a tunic since we returned to Cabaranth. Not five minutes later, I’m following Camellia out the door.

“Where are the Woodmore’s quarters?” she demands.

“Woodmore?”

“Your elf friend,” she says sharply, more flustered than I’ve ever seen her.

“Why do you want to see Pranmore?” I ask warily.

“Guard!” she screeches, ignoring me. “Where are the Woodmore healer’s quarters?”

And unfortunately, he tells her.

I follow her at a brisk pace, at war with myself. I won't let her harm Pranmore, but Brielle...

"Who sent the message?" I finally ask.

Camellia spares me a brief glance as we practically run down the hall. "One of my associates."

"What's this about?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

"Has he found a way to remove the necklaces?" I ask her, unable to think of anything else that could put her in such a tizzy.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" she snaps.

"What could you possibly need to see him for, especially at this hour?"

"He has something that belongs to me."

I grab her arm, pulling her back. Quietly, I warn, "Do not hurt him. He is peaceful, and he has never done anything to you."

She yanks her arm away. "I'm not going to kill your fool deer, Henrik. Not unless he

gets in my way.”

When we arrive at Pranmore’s quarters, Camellia jerks her head. “Knock.”

Though I would like to snidely ask if something is wrong with her hand, I do as she requests.

Pranmore opens the door a few moments later. “Henrik,” he says, startled to see me at this hour. His surprise turns to reservation when he notices Camellia by my side. “And Her Grace.”

Bowing his head, Pranmore steps aside, allowing us to come in.

“Where is Mairea?” Camellia demands, thoroughly ruffled now. She looks around, eyes wide, ready to tear the room apart.

“Mairea?” Pranmore asks.

“Hellebore,” she says impatiently, sounding seconds away from bursting into tears.

“You know her name?” I ask, startled. “What’s she doing here?”

Pursing his lips, Pranmore opens a side door. The female elf lies on a bed, unconscious. Camellia rushes inside, throwing herself next to the woman who raised her.

“What happened?” I ask Pranmore quietly. “And how did she end up here?”

“She passed out,” he answers. “Clover brought her last night. Well, Ayan technically carried her.”

“Ayan’s here?” I ask, startled by the news.

“As are Audra and Lyredon.” As if just remembering, he adds, “I believe Audra needs to talk to you. You might want to find her tomorrow.” He then lowers his voice and asks, “How did Camellia discover she was here?”

“Someone sent her a message.”

“Who? No one knew she was here but our group, and Lawrence commanded us to keep it quiet.”

“I don’t know,” I answer, growing increasingly uneasy.

We enter the room, and Camellia turns to face Pranmore. She’s livid, and her blotchy face is wet with tears. “Why didn’t you tell me she was here?”

Instead of giving her an excuse, Pranmore bows his head. “My apologies.”

“Is she going to be all right?” she demands.

Pranmore studies Hellebore, frowning. “You’ve used her in place of a tambrel stone, haven’t you, Your Grace? She’s been harboring the ill effects of your blood magic for you.”

Camellia’s lips part with surprise—she looks almost scared. Horrified, she whispers, “How could you know that?”

“I’m a Woodmore,” he says simply.

“She said it wouldn’t harm her,” Camellia insists, her voice shaking. “She said she could dilute the effects with her own magic.”

“She was wrong.”

The woman on the bed moans, drawing our attention as she wakes.

“Mairea,” Camellia breathes, clutching the High Vale woman’s hand. “I’m here.”

“Camellia,” Hellebore says in a voice that’s like a nail scraping against a piece of slate. It’s almost inhuman. “My son is alive.”

Apparently, she’s not mute...at least not completely. But it’s no wonder she chose not to talk. It sounds painful, like each word is cruelly ripped from her throat.

“What?” Camellia asks, shocked.

“I saw him,” the elf manages, clutching Camellia’s hand, growing hysterical. “He’s here.”

“That’s impossible,” Camellia protests, aghast. “Augmirian sent men after him, and they swore he was dead—” Camellia comes to a stop, gasping softly when she realizes her mistake.

Hellebore jerks away from the princess. “You knew?”

“No,” Camellia says in a rush, reaching for the elven woman again. “I mean, I heard rumors that someone claiming to be Ayanleon returned, but it was before I ever went to Revalane!”

Pranmore and I share a startled look, but we both stay silent.

“You knew there was a chance he was alive, and you didn’t tell me,” Hellebore accuses in a harsh, grating whisper. The elf’s eyes flash with anger. “Get out.”

“Mairea, please,” Camellia cries, bending over the woman as she begs. “There was no way to know he was your true son! You said he died as a baby, didn’t you?”

“OUT!” Hellebore screeches, suddenly sending a ball of magic directly into Camellia’s chest.

The princess screams as she rears back, startled by the attack. She stumbles from her chair and throws herself at me, cowering from the woman who raised her.

Hellebore pushes up to her elbows, trembling with fury. “I gave you Ferradelle, I gave you magic, and you dare keep this from me?”

“I’m sorry,” Camellia sobs.

“You worthless, ungrateful girl.” Hellebore falls back, wheezing with each breath. “Get out of my sight.”

I grasp Camellia by the shoulders. “Let’s go.”

Before I can coax the princess out the door, Camellia rips away from me, new anger shining through her tears. “I have been a daughter to you, doing everything you have ever asked of me—stealing the dukedom away from Augmirian and destroying Lillianna’s legacy, just as you wanted. I’ve sacrificed for you, and now you think you can toss me away because you’ve caught a glimpse of someone whomightbe your dead son?”

Hellebore makes a choking noise, and her pale face turns red. Camellia lets out a horrified mew as the woman’s eyes flutter. The elven woman gasps and shakes, and then she falls back onto the pillow...and goes still.

“Mairea?” Camellia whispers. “Mairea!”

The woman doesn’t move. She lies like a discarded rag doll, eyes closed, gray and skeletal, her face still red from the taxing argument.

Clutching my arm with horror, Camellia whispers, “Is she...”

Pranmore steps up to Hellebore, blocking her from Camellia’s view. After a moment, he turns back to the princess. Gently, he says, “I’m sorry.”

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Camellia begins to shake as severely as Hellebore was only moments ago, and I pull her out of Pranmore's quarters and into the hall. Her dress is singed from the High Vale magic, and she's likely burned. But if she is, she doesn't seem to notice the pain.

She yanks away from me, pacing like a madwoman, and lets out a keening wale that's sure to wake anyone nearby. The princess then drops to her knees, sobbing into her hands.

I watch, detached. Though Camellia is a painful sight, I can't bring myself to feel much more than disgusted pity.

* * *

Camellia weeps the rest of the night, falling asleep just after dawn and giving me much-needed freedom this morning. My head swims with the information I've learned.

Denny eyes me as I pause in front of Lawrence's door. After ending up in the constable's holding cell with Clover, I'm not one of his favorite people.

"I need to speak with the king," I say, ignoring his look of scorn. "It's urgent."

The knight jerks his head toward Lawrence's door guard. "Tell His Majesty Henrik is here."

"And if he's asleep?"

“Wake him,” I say.

The man turns to Denny, waiting for authorization. When he nods, the guard disappears inside.

Denny is the only knight in attendance at this early hour, and we wait in stony silence. Unbidden, my eyes drop to the gold medallion he wears on his arm. It bears the king’s phoenix, along with a ring of rubies around the crest. Clover’s brother is a sealed knight now, one of the king’s five elite.

I look away, unable to quell my unfounded resentment.

A moment later, the guard appears in the doorway. “His Majesty has granted you permission to enter.”

I step inside, closing the door behind me. The room is empty, and Lawrence’s bedchamber door is closed. I wait, taking in the appallingly large space. I never stepped foot in here when it was Algernon’s private quarters—was certainly never close enough to the king to be invited or have a reason to request an audience.

Lawrence appears from down the hall, dressed but looking groggy. “What is so important you had to wake me before the sun is fully up?”

“You’re a king now,” I answer with an agitated bite in my tone that’s likely thanks to lack of sleep. “You no longer have the luxury of lounging in bed all day.”

“Oh? Are you an authority on matters of royal conduct now? I had no idea.” A wry smile crosses Lawrence’s face, reminding me that even though we are friendlier than we’ve ever been, it would still be satisfying to punch him just once. “Tell me, Henrik the Disciplined, how should I schedule my day?”

“Never mind,” I say impatiently. “Your sister is gathering ingredients for a concoction a local necromancer said is highly dangerous, Hellebore was Ayan’s mother, and you have a spy in your guard.”

The new king stares at me, looking flummoxed. “You met a necromancer in Cabaranth?”

“He’s the apothecary in the old part of the city, near the High Vale gardens. Camellia sent me for ingredients she needs for the cryptic potion she’s making.”

Orwasmaking. Now that Hellebore is gone, Camellia has lost her vessel for the ill effects of her blood magic. If she uses magic now, she’ll pay the cost herself. Will she be willing to give up her beauty for power?

Lawrence cocks his head to the side, thinking it over. “So you’re telling me this man acts as a local grocer stocking necromancy ingredients? And he’s running this operation right under my patrol guards’ noses?”

“Lawrence,” I say with a growl. “That doesn’t matter right now.”

“I suppose not.” He shakes his head, waving my concern away as he sits on a bench with a world-weary sigh. “But it sounded like the least headache-inducing item on your list. Let’s start with this Hellebore business. What do you mean she was Ayan’s mother? Are you saying Camellia’s handmaid was his father’s mistress?”

“So it seems.”

“Wait...washis mother?”

“She died last night.”

“How did you find out?”

“That brings us to the matter of the spy. Camellia received a message that Hellebore was in Pranmore’s care in the early hours of the morning, and she stormed in to see her. According to Pranmore, no one knew she was there except you, Clover, and Audra’s group. As well as...”

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“My sealed knights.” Lawrence follows my eyes to the door, and then he shakes his head. “No, it’s impossible. I’ve known them all for years. I would trust them with my life—Ihavetrusted them with my life.”

“Camellia knows too much about our inner circle,” I argue. “She must be getting her information from somewhere.”

A knock sounds at the door, making me uneasy.

“Answer it.” Lawrence gestures listlessly toward the entrance.

I raise my eyebrows, not as eager to obey his every whim as I was for his father.

“Do you want to be a knight, or not?” he asks, not above lording it over me.

“You’ll give me my seal for answering your door?” I counter.

He smirks. “Not likely.”

But I go anyway and find Pranmore waiting in the hall with Denny and the door guard, looking uneasy.

“Henrik,” he says, perhaps relieved to see a friendly face. “I’ve come to speak with Lawrence.”

“That’s why I’m here as well.” I lead him inside.

“Are you here to tell me my sister was in cahoots with Ayan’s birthmother?” Lawrence asks, hiding his exhaustion with amusement. “Because if you are, Henrik already beat you to it.”

“Er...” Pranmore glances at me. “No. Actually, I thought you might like to speak with Mairea before she passes away. She doesn’t have much time left.”

I turn to Pranmore, genuinely shocked. “She died last night.”

The Woodmore’s face flushes red. “While that is what I wanted Camellia to believe...it’s not strictly true. She merely passed out again.”

I stare at him, surprised by his subterfuge. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“That would make two of us.” He wrings his hands, obviously uncomfortable. “Will you come?”

Lawrence is already on his feet.

Xander has joined Denny and the door guard now, and he greets Lawrence when we step out of the room.

He and Denny begin to follow us, but Lawrence looks back, hesitant. “Stay here for now. I’ll return soon.”

Denny turns his gaze on me. “Are you certain that is a good idea, Your Majesty? No offense to Henrik, but he is under Camellia’s command. It would be unwise to trust him.”

I want to roll my eyes, but I settle for a long-suffering sigh.

Xander watches, looking unsure but not as vocal about his doubts.

“At least tell us where you’re going,” Denny argues. “So we can look for you if you don’t return.”

A worm of doubt makes me pause and study Clover’s brother. And then guilt overtakes it. Denny isn’t the spy—surely not. He wouldn’t turn on his own sister, would he?

“I won’t be long,” Lawrence answers, avoiding the request.

Confused by the unease between Lawrence and his knights, Pranmore hesitates for a moment as we start down the hall, but he soon hurries after us.

Lawrence reaches the Woodmore’s quarters first. When he sets his hand on the doorknob, there’s a spark of light, and he hollers as if burned.

“Sorry,” Pranmore mutters. “I warded it when I left. You can’t be too careful these days.”

He steps inside, and Lawrence and I follow him into the side room. Hellebore lies on the bed...looking as dead as she did when Camellia and I left several hours ago.

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“Pranmore,” I say carefully, keeping my voice low. “Are you certain...?”

He sits near the High Vale’s side and softly whispers, “Mairea? Are you still with me?”

She opens her eyes, her dead gaze meeting his. “Ayanleon.” She draws in a stuttering breath. “I want to see my son.”

Lawrence jerks when he hears her broken voice, just as startled as I was when I first heard it.

“We can make that happen,” Lawrence says when he recovers. “In exchange for information.”

Contempt and desperation mingle in her expression, but she nods. “Anything.”

Lawrence asks me, “Can you find Ayan?”

“I’ll track him down.”

Pranmore takes Mairea’s hand, shuddering when he makes contact. He then turns to me and quietly says, “You best hurry.”

I leave the room, my mind reeling. What secrets can the woman tell us, and will she? It sounded as if she orchestrated her revenge on Augmirian’s family through Camellia.

Did she raise the princess to become her personal weapon, planning this from the time the queen died? Has Camellia been a pawn all these years?

Camellia was so young when her mother passed away. If King Algernon had been more attentive, if he'd drawn his daughter closer instead of pushing her away, would things be different now?

I find myself outside Clover's door, hoping she might know where I can find Ayan. Her guard watches me approach, his eyes growing wide with terror when he realizes I mean to stop.

"Commander," he says with a peep. "Perhaps you don't know about the rumors, but it might be best to—"

"Come in with me if you believe Her Highness needs a chaperone. I simply need to ask her a question."

Slowly, he nods. "One of her ladies arrived a few minutes ago, but I'm not sure Her Highness is awake yet. She returned very late last night."

Turning, he knocks on the door.

A few moments later, Calla answers. The lady-in-waiting's eyes brighten when she spots me. "Henrik!"

"Good morning, Lady Calla." I bow my head. "I'm sorry for calling so early, but I must ask Clover a question."

"Of course—come in." She flutters her hands as I enter, and I try to pretend I don't notice she's still in her dressing gown. "Let me fetch her."

A few moments later, Clover appears. She looks tired, with her honey-brown hair disheveled and her eyes sleepy. There's a softness about this early morning version of the woman, and I grow warm. I think of the way she kissed me last night—of the words we exchanged.

“Henrik,” she exclaims, holding back a yawn and then laughing. Though it's obvious she's surprised to find me, she smiles like I'm very welcome. “What are you doing here?”

“I'm looking for Ayan,” I say. “Do you know what part of the castle he and Audra are staying in?”

“I'll take you—oh.” She winces. “I can't do that, can I?”

Camellia won't be pleased if news reaches her that we roamed the castle halls together, especially at this strange, quiet hour.

“Shall I fetch him for you?” she asks. “It will be easier than trying to explain where they're at.”

I'm already turning toward the door. “Bring him to Pranmore's quarters. Tell Audra and Lyredon to come as well.”

“What's happened?” she asks. “Did Hellebore wake up?”

“She did.”

“Wait—how did you find out?” Then she hurries away and calls over her shoulder, “Never mind, you can explain later. I'm going to get dressed.”

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“Clover,” I say before she disappears. “You might want to warn Ayan.”

She pauses, turning back. “About what?”

“We’ve learned that Hellebore is his mother.”

“What?”

“Hurry,” I remind her.

Dumbly she turns back. “I’ll...see you there.”

I return to Pranmore’s quarters and shock myself on his blasted ward.

A moment later, the door opens. Lawrence must have heard my surprised curse. When he sees me rubbing my hand, he grins. “Apparently it’s only set on the outside. Where’s Ayan?”

“Clover said it would be easier for her to fetch him.”

His smile dims. “You spoke with Clover?”

“Are we going to do this right now?”

Eyeing me with a modest amount of disdain, he steps out of the doorway so I can come inside.

“Did you learn anything while I was gone?” I ask.

“One thing,” Lawrence says hesitantly.

“Did you find out what Camellia has planned?”

“No...” He averts his eyes. “But Hellebore did tell us how we can remove Brielle’s necklace without the curse killing her.”

“How?” I ask desperately, just stopping myself from grabbing his shoulder and dragging it out of him.

“It’s complicated,” he hedges, oddly uneasy. “Pranmore asked me not to tell you.”

Instantly angry, I demand, “What do you mean—”

“But I believe you have a right to know.” He glances toward the door. “But not now. Pranmore says Hellebore doesn’t have much time left, and there’s still so much we need to ask her.”

Hellebore’s eyes travel to me when I step into the room, but her face falls when she sees I’m alone.

“He’s coming,” I assure her. “Clover knows where he is, and she’s fetching him.”

Hopefully, she won’t be long.

Ayan looks only somewhat surprised when he finds me outside his door so early in the morning. The handsome elf leans against the doorframe, sans shirt, languidly looking me up and then down. “Oh, Clover, I knew this day would come. I told myself I would stoically turn you away, but now that you’re here...”

“Get dressed,” I snap, impatient.

He looks down, smirking. “But half your work is already done. Surely, you don’t want to start from the beginning?”

“You’re a pig. Get dressed—we need to go to Pranmore’s quarters right now. Rouse Audra and Lyredon as well.”

The flirtatious look falls from Ayan’s face, replaced with a frown. “Is it about that elven woman?”

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I remember what Henrik told me, wondering how I'm supposed to gently broach the subject in such a short amount of time.

After a moment's deliberation, I decide. "Apparently, she's your mother, and she's about to die."

Ayan gapes at me.

"Get dressed," I snarl, grasping his shoulders, turning him around, and shoving him back into his room. "Go."

A few minutes later, all three of the elves join me.

"What's going on?" Audra asks. Her brunette hair is tidily plaited into an intricate braid, making me think she must be an early riser.

"I'm not sure," I say as we walk. "But Henrik made it seem urgent."

"He said the woman who fainted is my mother," Ayan says, his tone solemn.

I glance at him, feeling for the usually cheerful elf. He looks nervous, hesitant even.

Audra looks at me, stunned. "But Mairea is...dead."

I shrug, telling her I have no idea.

When we arrive outside Pranmore's quarters, I reach for the doorknob.

“Wait!” Audra cries, but it’s too late.

I yip, startled by a shock that stings my hand and travels through my muscles like a jolt of lightning.

“It’s warded,” Audra says belatedly.

I clench and loosen my hand a few times. “I noticed.”

Henrik must have heard the racket I made. He appears moments later, allowing us inside.

“You could have warned me about the ward,” I say as I step past him.

He laughs under his breath and then leads us into the adjoining room where Hellebore rests. Pranmore is with her, sitting on a chair by the head of her bed. Lawrence stands to the side, looking very sober.

A hush falls over us as we’re reminded of the serious nature of our visit.

Hellebore turns her head, and her mouth parts in an inaudible cry when she spots Ayan. He pauses in the doorway, the tallest man in the room, looking like he wishes he were the smallest.

“Ayanleon,” Hellebore says in a scratchy, jarring voice that startles me so badly, I jump. “You’ve come.”

Pranmore rises, leaving the chair so Ayan may claim it.

The High Vale elf walks forward slowly, his eyes on the woman who claims to be his mother. Because he looks so much like his father, it’s impossible to see a family

resemblance between them, especially now that Hellebore is so close to death.

I try to remember what she looked like years ago, before sickness took her.

Ayan sinks into the chair, carefully extending his hand to Hellebore when she reaches for it.

Tears stream from her face, wetting her cheeks and pillow. Pranmore has removed her ever-present cloak, revealing that she's almost bald now.

At one time, she had long black hair, the color of a raven.

"The dukedom is yours," she says urgently. "Your father named you as his heir."

Ayan slowly nods. "So I've discovered."

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“Fight for your birthright,” she says, still crying as she clutches his hand between her two frail ones. “Caldenbauer is yours.”

Ayan casts a look at Lawrence, uneasy. But the king only shrugs, not terribly concerned by the whims of the dying elf.

“I’ll try...” Ayan finally says.

“Claim your throne,” Hellebore says again, not completely coherent.

“I will.” He pats her hand awkwardly. “How...how did you come to serve Camellia?”

“Algernon offered me sanctuary,” she rasps. “After Lilliana murdered your father and tried to kill you. I...I was a political refugee, biding my time until I could bring justice upon...” She draws in a breath, her eyes clouding as she tries to put together the pieces.

“Lilliana’s line,” Audra breathes, finishing for her. “So you’ve been here all this time?”

Hellebore focuses on the elf, looking confused. “Who are you?”

She steps forward, kneeling next to the bed. “I’m Audra, Ayanleon’s cousin. Do you remember me?”

“Ellaine’s daughter.”

“That’s right.” She brushes the fine hair away from Hellebore’s face. “My mother and I are going to see Ayan take his rightful place, I swear it.”

Hellebore looks at Ayan, bringing his hand to her cheek, wetting his skin with her tears. She nods, overwhelmed.

“But we need you to help us in return,” Audra says. “Camellia is a threat to Ayan—she’s a threat to all Caldenbauer. Please, tell us what she plans.”

“I had no choice,” Hellebore says to Ayan. “I...couldn’t allow...”

She begins to breathe hard, gasping as if her lungs will no longer work. She stares up at Ayan, her eyes growing wild. “So handsome.” She coughs several times, but they’re small, rasping things. “Like your...father.”

Ayan looks overwhelmed.

“Take...your birthright,” Hellebore says before she draws in one final breath and goes still.

A hush falls over the room, and I bow my head, filled to the brim with conflicting emotions. This woman did wretched things, yet part of me feels sorrow on her behalf. Or maybe I’m aching for Ayan, for a traumatic past he was too young to remember.

“Is she...?” Henrik asks Pranmore quietly.

The Woodmore nods. “She’s gone.”

Looking stunned, Ayan slowly pulls his chair back, setting Hellebore’s hand across her stomach. “Excuse me,” he says raggedly, leaving the room.

I stare at my feet, processing.

In the end, we learned answers, but none that make a difference in the grand scheme of things.

Slowly, we filter out of the room, accompanied by the heavy cloak of death.

“We must cremate her body quickly,” Pranmore says to Lawrence. “The residual effects of the dark magic she carries will leach from her and spread sickness.”

Lawrence nods. “I’ll send for someone immediately.”

I leave the rooms, needing a moment to myself. But I find Ayan seated next to the wall in the hallway, his face in his hands.

With a sigh, I sit next to him and rest my head against the wall. “Are you all right?”

He looks over wearily. “I’ve just learned that every wicked thing Camellia has done—every murder, every person she’s tortured—is essentially my fault.”

“You were a child when the Woodmores slipped you out of Ferradelle,” I argue. “You don’t have to take responsibility for any of it.”

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“But it was done on my behalf—for revenge against Auggy’s mother. If nothing else, I have to come to terms with the fact that my mother was psychotic.”

I don’t have an answer for that.

“She didn’t tell us how to remove the necklaces,” Ayan says heavily. “Why didn’t I ask? I let her go on about my birthright, but I didn’t ask about the necklaces.”

“Actually,” Pranmore says, stepping into the hall and overhearing the last part of our conversation, “she told us before you arrived. However, the answer is one I already suspected but didn’t want to have confirmed.”

“What is it?” I ask.

“Either Camellia has to die to break the spell—”

“Not a great loss, if you ask me,” I interrupt.

He shoots me a look. “Or I can ward the wearer so only the person working the clasp will receive the brunt of the magic.”

I mull that over, not liking that the more I think about it. “So the person who touches the clasp will die, but the wearer will not?”

Pranmore nods.

I stand up, grasping his hand. “Don’t tell Henrik. Please.”

I know exactly what that fool man would do.

“Don’t tell Henrik what?” the commander asks as he appears in the doorway.

“Nothing,” I say quickly, shooting Pranmore a stern look. “Nothing.”

“It’s about the necklaces, isn’t it?” Henrik asks, looking exhausted. “Lawrence already said Pranmore doesn’t want me to know about it.”

“Why would he tell you that?” I exclaim.

Lawrence joins us in the hall, looking like a tired monarch. “Because Henrik should make the choice, not us.”

* * *

The day has been long, and now we gather in Audra and Ayan’s quarters. Bartholomew has joined us as well. He sits next to me, looking overwhelmed by today’s events.

I stare at my clasped hands as Pranmore explains the process of removing the necklace, refusing to look at Henrik.

“So, you see, it’s not a solution at all,” Pranmore finishes. “No matter how we tackle it, someone will die.”

“Can’t you ward the person removing the necklace as well?” Audra asks desperately.

“I can, but the magic has to go somewhere. If unable to find a path to flow through, it would likely break both of the wards and kill the wearer and the person working the clasp.”

“No,” I say, growing angry. “I don’t accept it.”

“What don’t you accept?” Pranmore says, sounding less patient than usual.

“This can’t be the only way.”

“She’s right,” Ayan says. “This isn’t a solution.”

“What do you expect me to do?” Pranmore asks. “I’ve stared at the necklace for months.”

“So you’re saying we should just give up?” I demand. “Henrik should sacrifice himself to save his sister?”

“That is most certainly not what I’m saying,” Pranmore responds hotly. “For now, I believe we should leave the necklace be and focus on the source of the spell.”

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“You mean Camellia,” Bartholomew says when none of the rest of us dare.

“Now that Hellebore has died, it’s possible she’s had a change of heart.” Quickly, he adds, “Clover, let me finish.”

I clamp my mouth shut, glaring at the elf even though I’m not truly upset with him. But he’s a fool if he thinks Camellia was innocent in Hellebore’s plot.

“She’s been orphaned,” Pranmore continues, “bereft of her mentor, and is likely realizing she’s in over her head. Lawrence, if you’re willing to call a truce, I believe she might turn from her dark magic.”

“It’s a nice thought, Pranmore,” Lawrence says skeptically, “but Camellia isn’t as innocent in all this as you believe.”

I nod, thankful he took my side.

“And too many have died cruelly at her hands to simply excuse her of her crimes,” Audra argues.

“I understand that,” Pranmore says gently. “But this is a political situation. If it prevents more deaths, is it worth offering forgiveness? If it frees your mother?”

Pain crosses Audra’s face, and she looks down at her lap.

“This is a turning point in Camellia’s life,” Pranmore argues. “A chance to bring her back from the edge of darkness. Shouldn’t we at least try?”

“How do you propose we go about it?” Ayan asks. “And what do we do about Ferradelle? The elves aren’t likely going to allow her to keep the dukedom.”

“Ferradelle belongs to you,” Audra says vehemently.

Ayan smiles. “And while I’m excited at the prospect, I’m not certain Camellia is going to go quietly when we oust her from her ill-won throne.”

“The first step is talking to Camellia,” Pranmore reasons. “Let’s find out what the princess truly wants.”

“Who’s going to go to her?” Audra asks, her eyes straying to Lawrence.

“I nominate Henrik,” Lawrence says. “He’s the only person she truly likes.”

But Henrik sits like a statue, arms folded and tense, jaw clenched and eyes hard.

“What is it?” Pranmore asks, also startled by the dark expression that graces the commander’s face.

Henrik suddenly rises and heads for the door. “Choose someone else to make peace with Camellia. I cannot.”

He strides into the hall, practically slamming the door behind him.

“What was that?” Bartholomew asks, looking a little like a spooked puppy.

“Camellia has manipulated, mentally tortured, and humiliated Henrik every chance she’s been given,” Audra says quietly. “It’s too much to ask him to extend the olive branch.”

Pranmore finds a chair and sits, steeping his hands in front of him and resting his forehead on his fingertips.

“I’ll talk to him,” Lawrence says heavily, already rising.

“Should I come with you?” I ask.

He studies me with a frown. “Not this time.”

26

HENRIK

Lawrence finds me in the garden, in the overgrown section that seems to draw me. Maybe I feel a connection with the broken, weathered fountain.

He sits on the ledge, studying me in the waning light as I stare at the dead leaves and dirt in the basin. After several minutes, he says, “We should repair this.”

“What’s the point?”

Lawrence shrugs, “If we can fix something, shouldn’t we?”

Angry, I look back at him. “Do you honestly believe Camellia will turn from her dark magic and allow you to lead her back into her place like a lamb?”

“No.” Lawrence rolls his eyes at the thought. “But I believe she can be bought. Find out what she wants so we can placate her. She’s wicked, but she’s not stupid. Pranmore’s suggestion is generous, and the women she’s snared need to be our priority.”

I think of Brielle’s screams, torn between justice and my sister’s freedom.

Lawrence stands, stepping in front of me and suddenly looking very much like a king. “If you pull this off, I will give you your seal.”

Perhaps I should feel joy or relief—my life’s goal is finally within my grasp.

But instead, I feel nothing.

“Henrik,” Lawrence says solemnly. “If you pull this off, I’ll give you Clover.”

I meet his eyes, irritated he’s bringing her into this. “You realize she’s already mine, don’t you?”

Lawrence grins, clasping my shoulder. “Her heart, perhaps, but I hold her hand. If

you want it, convince Camellia to retract the magic from the necklaces. Then I will give the two of you my royal blessing. I'll even stand at your wedding, posing as your friend since you have none."

"I'm going to hold you to it."

Lawrence takes a step back and extends his hand. "You have my word."

I stare at him for several seconds, and then I clasp his hand, sealing the agreement.

* * *

When there's no answer at Camellia's bedchamber door, I glance at the princess's ladies. "Are you sure she's in there?"

Lily clasps her hands at her waist. "She hasn't left her room all day, and she's refused food and company."

"Has anyone gone in to check on her?"

"We haven't dared," Dahlia whispers.

Nodding, I step inside, closing the door behind me.

I fumble through the dark, searching for the lamp. When I locate it and spark the flame, Camellia groans from atop her bed and rolls away from the light.

"What time is it?" she asks groggily.

"After eight. Have you been in bed all day?"

She makes a noncommittal noise, almost as if she doesn't want to admit it.

"There will be a small funeral held for Mairea tomorrow," I tell her, sitting in a nearby chair that faces the bed.

Camellia sits up. She still wears the same nightgown as before, and the fabric is wrinkled. Her golden waves are a riot of tangles, and her eyes are puffy from crying.

She was closer to Hellebore than I would have ever guessed.

"Lawrence is giving her a funeral?" Camellia asks, narrowing her eyes. "Why would he do that? By now, he must know the things she plotted. If you didn't tell him, surely the Woodmore did."

"He knows," I say heavily, hating my task more than any other I've been given.

"Then why?"

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I hesitate. The unspoken words are bitter in my mouth. “Your brother wants to call a truce.”

“A truce?” Camellia asks, startled.

“Mairea is gone, and you know as well as I do how unstable tambrel stones are. If you continue to use your magic, you will bear the ill effects.”

“My brother thinks I’m that vain?”

“You’re very beautiful, Camellia,” I say, playing to her ego. “It would be a shame to destroy yourself to continue someone else’s plot for revenge.”

She watches me, looking wary of the compliment but affected by it all the same.

Encouraged, I continue, “Abandon the dark arts, retract the magic from the necklaces, and Lawrence will forgive your crimes. You could step out from under its oppressive weight and move on, choosing whatever path you wish.”

“No one would be foolish enough to make that deal,” she argues.

“Then perhaps you best accept it before he retracts the offer.”

Feeling her wavering, I kneel in front of Camellia, taking her hand and hating the man I’ve become. Quietly, I say, “Aren’t you exhausted, Your Highness? Tired of the fight and this lonely existence? I know you are—I’ve seen it on your face.”

She pulls her hand away, her eyes flashing. “Do you think I can be so easily swayed with soft words? That I don’t see your attempts to manipulate me?”

I give her a wry look. “You would certainly recognize that scheme, but you’re wrong. I simply want to believe the princess I once swore allegiance to is still in there. That this wicked woman you’ve become is a facade, as easily removed as it was to slip on. I want to respect you again, Camellia. I want to take pride in the fact that I serve you. If not for yourself, do it forme.”

She focuses on me, her eyes softening. “If I agree and remove the necklaces, I want something in return.”

“Lawrence has offered you more than you deserve,” I point out, impatience souring my tone.

She shakes her head. “This isn’t something Lawrence can give me.”

Dread overtakes me. “What is it?”

“I want you to step aside so Lawrence may marry Clover. If I’m going to sacrifice everything I’ve worked for, then you must as well. Show me you’re serious about this—show me I have someone on my side.”

I stare at Camellia, breathing hard.

She leans forward, pulling my dagger from its sheath. Quietly, without the taunting tone I’ve become so used to, she says, “Or you could kill me now and be done with it.”

“Why are you so eager to die?” I demand.

A tear rolls down her pale cheek, glistening in the lamplight. “Because I have nothing to live for.”

She leans forward, clutching my tunic as she cries against me. “The one person who I thought loved me threw me away in the end. Without you, I have nothing and no one.”

I freeze, refusing to offer comfort.

“Please, Henrik. I’ll free your sister,” she begs, her eyes swimming with tears. “I’ll turn away from the magic. Just choose me. Don’t leave me alone.”

“How can I forgive you?” I say quietly. “After what you’ve done to my family and me, how could I give myself to you as you want?”

Camellia pulls back, wiping her face with her fingertips. Dropping her eyes, she says, “I don’t know.”

“Apologize,” I command.

Her eyes fly to mine, hopeful enough I nearly abandon my assignment.

But my resolve is great. I would die to protect my sister; I would lay my life down for my kingdom. This is no different, though my suffering will be long.

It’s politics, as Pranmore said. There will be casualties. Better me than Brielle or Clover.

“Apologize,” I repeat coldly, “and I will think about it.”

“Truly?” she whispers. “Henrik, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry—”

“But if I agree to your terms, you will retract your magic from the necklaces before we marry.”

“I will,” she promises, dropping to the floor beside me. “I swear I will—just as soon as Lawrence and Clover exchange their vows.”

“You’ll give up sorcery.”

She hesitates, but then she nods. “All right.”

“And you will give Ferradelle back to the elves.”

Aghast at the idea, she says, “Why?”

“Because it’s what Mairea would have wanted—to see the dukedom go to her son.”

“Fine,” she agrees on a hiss. “But do not take this show of devotion lightly. I’m willing to give up everything for you.”

So am I.

I stand, needing to get away. “I’ll give you my answer in the morning.”

“Where are you going?” she asks, reaching for me as I leave.

“I’m not sleeping on the floor like your dog again tonight.”

“Henrik!”

I close the door, not interested in whatever she has to say.

27

CLOVER

“Duchess Alousia wanted to talk to you about the bridal tea,” Calla says as she and Barret escort me from the dining hall. “It’s been so pleasant lately; she’s thinking of holding it outside. She was hoping to meet with you this evening to discuss it.”

My ladies don’t know all that’s happened in the last twenty-four hours. They don’t realize we’re on the precipice of change—good or bad.

Call me pessimistic, but I’m inclined to think it’s bad.

“Go for me—tell her it’s fine,” I say, my mind on Henrik. Though Lawrence returned, the commander wasn’t at dinner. Neither was Camellia.

Rumors have spread that the princess spent the day locked up in her quarters, but no one knows why.

“Clover, I can’t go in your place,” Calla chides. “You know that.”

“Then tell her I’ll meet her tomorrow. Would that be all right?”

“I suppose—”

“Good, why don’t you and Barret go now so she’s not waiting long.”

“We can’t leave you alone.” She glances behind us and then whispers, “It’s not safe.”

“It’s fine. Camellia has been preoccupied all day anyway. I doubt she’s prowling the halls now, hoping to take revenge on me.”

Calla crosses her arms, looking torn. But finally, she gives in. “Fine, we’ll go—but you must promise to head straight to your room.”

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“Calla,” Barret protests.

She takes his arm, shaking her head. They share a silent conversation, and when Barret relents, I know Calla has won.

“Go right to your room, all right?” Calla commands. “I mean it—don’t try to find Henrik.”

With a heavy sigh, I nod and keep walking.

But I pause in the hall once I’m alone, feeling like the heaviness in my heart has traveled into my limbs and stomach. Camellia doesn’t deserve a pardon—not that she’ll agree to it anyway.

And she certainly won’t remove the necklaces, not when they’re her only protection. But if we can’t remove them, Henrik will be chained to her forever.

Or he’ll sacrifice himself to free his sister.

I draw in a shuddering breath, realizing I’ve felt this hopelessness for so long, it’s become a familiar companion. Though the raw ache is sometimes more prominent than others, it’s always in the back of my mind.

“Your Highness,” Palmer says when I reach my door, the guard standing in his usual post. “Where are your ladies? And your knight?”

“I sent them away.”

“But His Majesty said you weren’t supposed to—”

I offer him a weak smile. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

With a displeased sigh, Palmer opens the door. “If you need anything, please tell me. I’m here for the night watch.”

“Thank you, Palmer.”

He closes the door behind me, leaving me alone. Lamps burn in the entertaining area, and a low fire crackles in the hearth to ward off the chill of the spring evening. I pass it without pausing, stepping out of my silken court slippers as I walk, not bothering to pick them up.

As soon as I reach my bedchamber, I fall onto the bed, stomach first, letting the coverlet press into my face and breathing in the familiar fragrance of the castle’s laundry soap. It smells faintly of lavender and violets, fresh and pleasant. But even its cheerful scent is no match for my sullen mood.

“Henrik,” I moan softly, the commander’s name muffled by the fabric.

The bed shifts as someone sits next to me, and I let out a startled scream as I turn toward the intruder. I clutch a hand over my frantically beating heart, letting out a great huff when it’s Henrik’s eyes I meet. Leaning forward, I swat his arm. “You scared me half to death.”

The commander holds a finger to his lips and whispers, “You’re too loud. Your guard will come to check on you if you don’t keep your voice down.”

“What are you doing here?”

Henrik sits on the edge of the bed, studying me with a sorrowful sort of smile that makes me nervous. I push myself up, crossing my legs and yanking at my gown's skirts when they catch underneath me. "How are you here?"

Before Henrik can answer, there's an urgent knock at my inner bedchamber door. "Princess!"

"I'm fine," I call to Palmer, my voice strained. "I..."

I flash Henrik a helpless look.

"You tripped," he suggests at a bare whisper.

"He'll never believe that!" I hiss.

The commander widens his eyes, wordlessly telling me if I can come up with something better, I best do it quickly.

Cringing, I reluctantly say, "I...tripped."

I shift myself in front of Henrik, standing on my knees, prepared to use my body to hide him if needed. Granted, it's not the best plan, but it's the only one I have.

"You tripped, Your Highness?" Palmer asks.

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I wince, flashing Henrik a look over my shoulder. “That’s right.”

There’s a heavy pause outside the door, and then the guard laughs. “Perhaps if you didn’t leave your things strewn about...”

He must be referring to my slippers. I roll my eyes, but I’m thankful he believes me. “You may go now, Palmer.”

His voice grows distant as he walks away. “Yes, Your Highness. Sleep well.”

I sag with relief and gulp in several deep breaths.

“What exactly are you doing?” Henrik asks, amused.

When I look at him, he gestures to my awkward position.

“I was going to hide you.”

He replies with a lopsided grin that makes my insides melt. “Did you think that would work?”

Instead of answering, I push myself up and turn the door lock. Then I turn back to Henrik, clasping my hands at my waist to keep them from trembling. “Did you talk to Camellia?”

Henrik rises from the edge of the bed, just as handsome as ever. A knight in appearance if not title. “Let’s not talk about her right now.”

He pauses in front of me, close enough to touch. Close enough to kiss.

Henrik sets his hand on my neck, caressing my jaw with his thumb. My heart races, and my mouth goes dry. I have no idea what's gotten into him, but I don't dare risk ruining the moment by asking.

I sigh at his gentle touch, realizing we are truly alone for the first time in far too long.

As he studies me, Henrik quietly says, "You have a habit of making me doubt myself."

I memorize every line and angle of his face, loving every inch of him. But he looks as tired as I feel.

"What does that mean?" I set my hands on the sides of his trim waist, needing to touch him as much as I need to be touched.

Sighing, he leans in. "I came to give you and Lawrence my blessing—to set you free from any promises that are binding your heart and making your path difficult."

"What happened?" I demand, craning my neck to look up at him. "What did Camellia say? Tell me."

"I told you—I don't want to talk about her right now."

Before I can shove him away and demand answers, Henrik steps in even closer, pressing our bodies flush and resting his forearms on the door on either side of my head. "I told myself I could let you go, but then the first word that passed your lips when you were alone was my name."

My mind goes blank as I process his words and this sudden nearness. Pushing aside

my questions, I focus on this moment, reveling in the delicious weight of him as he pins me to the door.

Every fiber of my being wants this man, but I draw in a shaky breath to control myself. “If your name is so powerful, you should know it was on my lips every day we were apart. There wasn’t a day that I didn’t wish you were here.”

Wrapping his arms around my back, Henrik tugs me away from the door and into him, wrapping himself around me. He’s upset—I can feel it in the tense hardness of his muscles and the strange way he talks like we’ll never see each other again.

And that makes me very nervous.

“You have to tell me what’s happened,” I beg, holding him tightly.

“Camellia agreed to retract her magic from the necklaces.”

“What?” I rear back, not believing it for one moment. “It’s a lie.”

“And to abandon her dark magic and leave the dukedom.”

Getting angry, I say, “Henrik, there’s no way you believe her—”

“But she made an additional term.”

His tone is off and cool...and I don't like it one bit.

“What?” I ask hesitantly.

“You have to marry Lawrence, and I...have to remain by her side.”

I curse out loud, saying something very unladylike, startling Henrik so much he almost smiles.

“Absolutely not,” I snarl. “No.”

I push out of his arms, angry enough I want to smack him for being so gullible.

“She said she'll remove the necklaces as soon as you and Lawrence exchange your vows,” he says.

I whip back to look at him and say again, “She's lying.”

The commander pins me with his gaze, looking resigned. “I don't think she is this time, and what choice do we have but to believe her? You heard Pranmore. There's no way to remove the necklaces.”

“We'll find a way.”

“Clover—”

“Stop!” Angry, terrified tears well in my eyes. “I won’t hear it, Henrik. I will not throw away our lives because Camellia made a promise.”

“Marriages are often arranged for political gain. This is no different, Clover. We knew from the beginning we were destined to walk different paths.”

“It’s not right.”

“It is what it is,” he argues. “Right or wrong, fair or not.”

Suddenly, the fight leaves me. “Will you give up so easily then?”

Turning to leave, he says, “There is no part of this that’s easy.”

My chin wobbles as I watch the commander stride to the door. He’ll cause Palmer to have heart failure if he walks out now, but he’s not in the mood to care, and frankly, neither am I.

I wait for him to turn around, to tell me we’ll figure something out.

But he doesn’t.

When I realize he truly means to leave, I step forward. “Henrik!”

His name passes my lips before my pride has a chance to stop it. The commander pauses, his hand on the doorknob, preparing to leave.

Slowly, he looks back over his shoulder. Our eyes meet and hold, and my heart pinches painfully.

“Please don’t go—not like this,” I whisper.

I fully expect him to walk out the door and leave me drowning in a pool of my own tears, but instead...he turns around.

I hold my breath, waiting.

Without a word, Henrik crosses the room and pulls me into a crushing embrace. Roughly, he says, “I’m doing this for you—don’t you realize that? For your future, so you can live in a kingdom that’s not torn apart by war. You have no idea what I would sacrifice for you, Clover.”

“But I just want you,” I say on a sob.

He tilts my head up, looking like a man about to go to the gallows. Like a vow, he says, “I’m yours until morning.”

“Henrik—”

He kisses me, cutting me off, and I wrap my hands in his tunic and tug him as close as I am able. It’s a frantic kiss, desperate and heartbroken.

We spend the night together, clinging to each other, vowing our devotion. If he were any other man, he would likely take advantage of the situation and my heartbreak. But he’s Henrik.

He’s noble.

He’s chivalrous.

And when we wake in the morning, wrapped in each other’s arms, greeted by the light of pre-dawn, there are no regrets between us. No awkward moment where we question our decisions.

Only the memory of this time we spent together, sharing nothing but sweet, desperate kisses, wishing the night could have lasted forever.

28

HENRIK

I return to Camellia just after dawn, resigned to my fate.

The elven guards don’t question my morning arrival, and the sitting room is quiet.

Walking through the princess's bedchamber door, I find her awake, staring at the wall.

She glances over when I enter, looking like she's cried all night.

"Where were you?" she demands.

I step in front of her, hating her a little more each day. "I've made my decision."

Something vulnerable flashes across her face. She watches me, waiting for my answer, her mouth pressed into a tight line. She looks even more ghostly in the light of early morning. Her grief has stolen the color from her cheeks and lips and left her eyes lifeless.

"I accept your terms," I say.

Surprise overtakes Camellia's face. Quietly, she says, "Truly?"

I give her a tight nod.

"You'll choose me?" she questions as if skeptical.

"Yes—but only if you uphold your end of the bargain. You'll free the women, you'll give up your magic, and you'll break ties with Ferradelle."

Nodding, she reaches for me. "I will."

I step back, evading her. "We're not together—not yet. Not until you remove the necklaces."

Anger sharpens her features. "I won't remove the necklaces until Clover and Lawrence are married."

“Very well.”

I feel like I’ve signed my own death sentence.

“We’ll be happy together,” Camellia promises listlessly, looking down at her hands.
“Eventually, you’ll come to love me as much as I love you.”

The princess is acting strangely, more reserved than usual—melancholy even.

I expected her to revel in her victory.

My eyes follow hers, and I frown at her palm. It’s wrapped in white gauze.

“I didn’t notice the bandage last night,” I say.

Camellia looks at her hand, and an embarrassed smile flits over her face. “Oh, this? It’s silly. I became hungry in the middle of the night, and I snuck down to the kitchens.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing, really.” Camellia looks up, meeting my eyes as she gives me a dismissive smile. “I merely cut my hand while I was slicing an apple.”

* * *

To be continued...