



Knight from the Ashes

(Crown and Crest 1)

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Category: Romance, Fantasy, Young Adult

Description: With single-minded determination, Henrik has worked toward gaining his knighthood so he may rise above the lowly station in which he was born. But just when the coveted position is within his grasp, he's tasked with a mission that proves to be far more difficult than expected—secretly keeping a watchful eye on Lady Clover, a nobleman's daughter with a sharp tongue and a knack for starting fights.

Clover, too, has one goal in life, and it has nothing to do with joining dull and dry Henrik on his supply run to the northern guard post. Why the blacksmith's son is so determined to keep her close, she has no idea. They bicker and fight, and if Clover were to find a troll pit, she would certainly dump Henrik into it.

By the time they reach their destination, they are more than ready to be rid of each other. Unfortunately, something is amiss in the northern mountains. The usually quiet aynauths are on the move, with a bloodthirsty agenda of killing the peaceful Woodmoor elves.

Putting their differences aside to work together, Henrik and Clover trek across the mountains to investigate. As they slowly unravel the mystery, uncovering clues that hint at a conspiracy against the crown, it quickly becomes apparent that what started as mutual distaste has morphed into something entirely different. Something dangerous, something they didn't expect.

But neither Henrik nor Clover has room in their lives for love—especially when a sinister plot is already in the works that might not only tear them apart, but the entire kingdom as well...

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Henrik

When I look backon this night, one thing will stand clear in my memory—the morning is blasted cold for early autumn.

Sharp, dead weeds find places to jab between my leather tassets as I sit in a dark field, waiting for the creature that's been terrorizing the small village of Danmire to grace me with its presence. Sunrise is still a few hours away, but the grass is already stiff with frost. Clouds have settled along the nearby river, spreading fog throughout the field.

I rub my gloved hands together, trying to work feeling back into my fingers. My knees ache from crouching, my ears are frozen, and I'm starting to question the villagers' sanity.

Every night, they told me.

Just after dark, they told me.

A wise man would have given up hours ago, admitting the creature wasn't going to make an appearance. But no one can blame me for sitting here in the cold of night, not with my knighthood so close.

I'm going to slay the monster when it finally decides to make an appearance, bask in the villagers' praise, and then carry its hide back to Cabaranth.

And finally, after all these years of training and mucking through dozens of ridiculous, mundane tasks, I'll have earned my seal.

It's not just any seal—it's a badge of golden honor. It declares the man who wears it is no ordinary mounted knight. Only a step under the Royal Class, answering to the king directly, there is no greater position for a man of common or even noble birth. A sealed knight is the best, one of the king's elite. The envied, respected—

I curse low and leap from my crouch, grasping the hilt of my sword.

Not far away, a shadowed creature creeps through the field, keeping low in the late wheat. Somehow, it slipped past me and now heads in the direction of the silhouetted cottages.

There aren't many houses in the village—only seven in total, along with a tavern that doubles as an inn. The people who live here are simple folk, all farmers and a bowyer who used to own a shop in the capital before he retired to the country. The old crafter is half-blind now, which is a shame considering he's the only man who might have had a chance to take on the beast and live to tell the tale.

But instead of facing the monster themselves, the villagers requested the king's assistance, telling him a jacquesalaupe is wreaking havoc in his fair province. And for once, His Majesty sent me on a task worth completing.

And now here I am, five bloody seconds from botching up my chance at knighthood.

I hurry after the creature as silently as possible, imagining it in my mind. I have no memory of the beast, no remembered pen-and-ink illustration to pin to its name. It's an elven word, something rare.

Jacquesalaupe—terror of the night, beast of nightmares. Key to obtaining my seal.

I creep along, staying low. It's impossible to discern the monster's size as it remains close to the ground in the cover of the wheat. I don't dare get too close, not until we're clear of the field and in the open.

Adjusting the grip on my sword, I wait for the creature to reach the edge of the field. The wheat stirs as the beast briefly hesitates before leaving its protective cover. Finally, it darts into the open.

I murmur a string of curses, resisting the urge to plunge my blade into the frosted field.

The creature wasn't slinking. It wasn't hiding most of its bulk in the wheat—it's merely small. Small enough, in fact, that it's only the size of a rabbit. With the body of a rabbit. And a white cotton tail...just like a rabbit.

But this is no bunny.

The jacquesalaupe went still the moment I cursed, and now she tilts her pink nose in the air, taking in the scents on the breeze. An obscenely large rack of antlers tilts back with her head, and the tips nearly brush the ground.

Fortunately, I'm downwind, and she can't catch my scent.

But I don't dare move a muscle lest I startle her. After several long, cautious seconds, the antlered rabbit hops to the closest vegetable patch and begins sampling the green cabbage before helping herself to a few peas.

I watch as she moves onto the lettuce, wondering what in oblivion I'm doing here.

I shake my head, livid. It's the most ridiculous-looking creature, and there's not the slightest chance its hide is going to secure my seal.

With a sigh, I shove my sword into its sheath and pull the bow from my back. I don't use it often, preferring to feel the weight of my blade, but it will do for this.

The seldom-used weapon creaks as I nock an arrow. Instantly, the jacquesalaupe freezes. She turns my way, and though her body goes still, her nose twitches.

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And then she spots me.

It's too late. She's going to run, and that's the last I'm going to see of her. I'm going to end up sitting in the frigid field again tonight.

But she doesn't run. No...

She grows.

I blink at her, and my mouth falls open. As the jacquesalaupe becomes larger, wicked fangs descend from her mouth. Talons sprout on her once dainty front paws, and her awkward antlers become deadly weapons glinting in the starlight, ready to impale the idiot soldier who dared interrupt her feasting.

I'm just wondering why no one thought to mention the monster's affinity for shifting before they sent me to sit in the field when she charges. Or rather, leaps.

Tossing the worthless bow on the ground, I grab the hilt of my sword and run toward the demon rabbit, preparing to finish the battle before it has a chance to begin. Satisfaction swells in me as I realize my first assumption was wrong—slaying this jacquesalaupe might be enough to earn my seal after all.

But just as I lunge, the jacquesalaupe leaps back and bounds away. I circle with her, watching as she bounces about on muscular hind legs, studying her moves. Several times, the beast leaps forward, meaning to gore me with her antlers. Every chance I have to stab the creature, she hops to safety.

Several minutes pass, and then several more. The jacquesalaupe continues to evade me, and I realize her game. She's toying with me—playing cat and mouse, hoping to finish me with one deadly attack of her sharp antlers the moment I tire.

Breathing hard, no longer bothered by the chill of the early morning, I watch as she lines up for another attack. Her wild eyes meet mine, and I sense the finality in her gaze.

This is it.

I tighten the grip on my sword and lower into a crouch, preparing for her to charge. My breath steams in front of me, joining with the shifting fog. I wait, fighting for patience. One, two, three...

Just as she leaps, I heave myself back upon the cold, prickly ground, avoiding her antlers. My shoulders press into the dirt and frost-covered weeds, and I thrust upward, into the jacquesalaupe's soft, unprotected belly.

She lets out a piercing, shrill cry that echoes throughout the night, and then she stumbles forward, eventually falling to the ground. Her leg twitches for several seconds before she goes completely still.

A nearby cow bellows, disturbed by the sound of the creature's death, and then silence falls over the valley.

After a moment, I pull myself up, satisfied with the outcome of the fight but irritated it took as long as it did. I scowl at my blade, which is now slick with demon bunny blood, and step forward to wipe it on the creature's hide. I'm just about to commence the unpleasant task of skinning the beast when it begins to shrink.

Toshrink.

Before my eyes, the jacquesalaupe returns to its original, harmless size. Her fangs disappear, as do her claws. The only remnants of her grotesque appearance are the antlers, but even they look less than impressive on the rabbit-sized creature.

I prod the beast with the toe of my boot, hoping it will miraculously turn back. But the creature's magic has faded and sunken into the earth, leaving nothing but its lifeless, harmless, and most unimpressive self behind.

My hopes of trading the beast's hide for my seal blow away in the frozen breeze.

Growling, I sheath my blade and toss the rabbit over my shoulder, wondering how much a person can hope to fetch for a rack of jacquesalaupe antlers.

2

Clover

Henrik's handsome in a brawny, beautiful sort of way. He's a head taller than the average man, with broad shoulders that taper to a narrow waist and a way of moving that humbly proclaims his graceful strength. With his dark hair, steel blue eyes, and controlled demeanor, he's a favorite with the female members of the court.

The soldier strides into the throne room, carrying what appears to be a limp rabbit and a large set of antlers. Around me, the ladies giggle. I scoff under my breath, tired of hearing the girls' breathless sighs every time the blacksmith's son makes an appearance.

Mind you, I don't hold any ill-will toward the soldier—I don't hold any will toward him at all. Perhaps I admire his perseverance and his skill with a sword, but my heart certainly doesn't beat faster the moment he walks into the room.

Despite that, like everyone else, my gaze stays firmly on the man.

What is that thing?

I narrow my eyes at the strange creature in Henrik's arms. It isn't a rabbit and a set of antlers; it's a rabbit wearing a set of antlers.

The soldier's face is stone, and he looks very much like he's trying to veil his emotions. With his chiseled jaw clenched, he carries his chin slightly tilted in the air. It's an almost indignant look, one that intrigues me.

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Court is dull, but judging from the look of distaste on the soldier's face, this has the makings of something amusing.

"Sire," Henrik says as he lowers himself to one knee in front of the king, holding the rabbit-creature for inspection. "I have slain the jacquesalaupe that plagued Danmire."

Several titters break free from the mouths of the well-dressed courtiers. They loiter in the throne room, bored and stitched up like peacocks. They possess no skills or talents, but they cozy themselves up to the king in hopes of gaining his favor. They're like dogs, all fighting for the table scraps of His Majesty's attention. I don't have an ounce of patience for the lot of them.

It's for that reason alone I fight the smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. Though there's undoubtedly something amusing about tall, strong Henrik offering the king the pathetic creature, I refuse to join the vapid, bleating sheep who are my peers.

King Algernon doesn't laugh either. He frowns at the miserable creature, looking almost saddened. He's having a good day—one of his best. The royal physicians have kept His Majesty's condition quiet, but word has leaked out that our king suffers from a sickly heart. He's plagued with weakness, chest pains, and a plethora of other ailments that often leave him bedridden.

Today, however, the Phoenix King is on his throne, sitting in front of the massive tapestry that bears his family's crest. He looks frail compared to the firebird that graces the coat of arms—not old, but tired.

His brow knits, and he presses his lips into a thin line, perhaps trying to organize his

thoughts. “Rise, Henrik.”

With a stoic expression firmly etched on his face, Henrik does as he’s told.

“This is the fearsome jacquesalaupe?” King Algernon asks.

In answer, Henrik gives a curt nod.

His Majesty’s mouth works, and now he, too, attempts to hide a smile. “I’m afraid I find that difficult to believe.”

“It became larger when threatened, sire,” Henrik explains in clipped tones that betray the fact that he knows how ridiculous his words sound, and he hates saying them aloud.

The king’s eyebrows jump with incredulous disbelief. “It becamelarger?I’m afraid you must explain.”

Much to his apparent chagrin, Henrik entertains the court with every detail of his fateful night in Danmire. By the end of his report, the king and his guards, along with all the courtiers in attendance, don’t bother to hold back their laughter.

Henrik’s face is a mask, void of expression, but I’m positive he would like nothing more than to climb into the hole that creature in his arms once crawled out of. I don’t blame him. If I’d come strolling into court with that story, I’d want to hide, too—especially if I were trying to obtain my seal. Which, of course, I cannot because I’m a woman.

Not that I want to be a knight. I have different aspirations, ones that have nothing to do with my current position as one of Her Royal High-and-Mightiness’s ladies-in-waiting.

As I think it, I glance at Camellia, flower of all Caldenbauer. The princess is rumored to be the most beautiful woman in the kingdom. Her hair is golden, her cheeks are pink, and her lips are the color of a dusky rose. She's perfection tidily wrapped up in a willowy princess package.

Yes, I can believe Camellia's the most beautiful girl alive, just as I'd wholeheartedly agree the princess is the most spoiled, obnoxious, poisonous woman to ever grace our kingdom or any other.

"I'm sorry, Henrik." King Algernon rises and reaches up to clasp a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "I cannot grant you your seal, not for this."

Henrik nods, his expression schooled. The soldier had to know the king's answer before he stepped into the castle, but he's worked harder than any man before him, and his disappointment must be great. Though he's the youngest man to become a commander after entering the military in the infantry, he's determined to wear that coveted medallion on his arm before the year is complete. Or at least before the king abdicates his throne to make way for Lawrence, our crown prince and Henrik's unofficial, undeclared nemesis. At least, that's the rumor.

And since I regretfully spend a significant portion of my waking hours with the women of the court, I know every rumor involving Henrik.

A sharp elbow jabs into my side, making me whip my head to the right to glower at one of my fellow ladies.

"Look at the way Camellia watches him," Lily whispers low, so only I can hear. The girl is the sole daughter of Sir Renault—an old curmudgeon of a knight—and the largest gossip at court.

Though I couldn't care less, I turn my attention to the princess. Sure enough,

Camellia's eyes are on Henrik, and her expression is unreadable. That's another rumor—that the princess and the soldier are together, secretly and passionately entangled in shallow love.

Though this particular rumor is thoroughly unconfirmed, it's one of the few I do not doubt. Henrik's handsome, and the princess is vain. Why wouldn't she want him?

They're a match made for the bards—a fair princess and her valiant, soon-to-be knight. If Henrik can overlook her noxious personality and caustic tongue, then they're certainly destined for each other.

And is that perhaps the real reason I hold no admiration for the strong, driven soldier?

Possibly.

I watch the spectacle for a while longer, and then I excuse myself, claiming a headache. Camellia waves me away, glad to be rid of me. No one notices as I slip from the ladies; no one cares that I'm leaving.

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Henrik

Lawrence, our worthless heir to the crown, smirks at me from behind his father. His arm rests casually on the back of the throne, and he doesn't bother to hide his amusement.

My hand itches to clench at my side, but I stand as if unaffected, trapping anger and shame deep in my core. It's a routine action, almost comfortable in its familiarity. I learned it young, and now I am better for it—stronger, unflappable.

But inner doubt plagues me daily, telling me I'm weak and breakable—still that young boy who cried into the soft, newly-mounded dirt of his mother's grave, bruised by the hand of the one parent he had left. I've honed my body, but my mind has proven itself a more difficult foe.

As I listen to the brainless chatter coming from the loitering courtiers, I resist the urge to glance at Camellia. The princess stands to the left side of the room with her ladies-in-waiting. The eight girls are Camellia's own figurative garden of Dahlias, Roses, and Calendulas. Each young noblewoman was named after a flower at birth to appeal to our deceased queen's strange whims—all their parents desperately hoping Her Majesty would choose their daughter for the infant princess's entourage.

They're beautiful, every one of them, but no one outshines our princess.

Once I claim my seal—after I hold in my hand the engraved medallion that proclaims I am worthy, that despite my parentage and lowly birth, I have risen from my rank—Camellia will be mine.

But that time has not yet come.

Ignoring the rise in the already daunting conversations in the gilded hall, I give the king a solemn nod, acknowledging that, once again, the task wasn't enough.

"I want the creature," Lawrence says, his voice carrying above the din. The prince snaps his fingers at a young page who stands near the edge of the stairs. "You, boy, come here."

The page leaps to attention, doing as he's commanded.

"Take the fearsome beast to the tanners and tell him I'll be around shortly. Careful now—the Mighty Jacquesalaupe of Danmire is a wily creature, even in death. I'd hate for her to shift while in your arms." Lawrence lowers his voice to a stage whisper that still manages to carry throughout the room and warns, "You could becrushed."

The boy's eyes go wide, but he's the only one fooled. The courtiers chortle and giggle, and one particularly boisterous woman lets out a honking guffaw that sounds remarkably like it came straight from the goose she resembles.

"Lawrence," King Algernon breathes so only his son—and I, consequently, since I am standing so close—will hear him. "Enough."

The prince steps back, looking pleased despite the chastisement.

I hand the jacquesalaupe to the page, almost assuring him the beast won't shift. Instead, I look at his trembling arms, skinny for his age, and sternly say, "Do not be so gullible."

"Yes, Henrik," he says with a gulp, bowing so low I worry he's going to accidentally

dump the creature at my feet.

Somehow, he rights himself, monster and all, and hurries toward the hall with an armful of brown fur.

My eyes follow him, and I frown. One of Camellia's ladies holds the door for the boy, smiling at him warmly as he passes.

As if sensing my gaze, the young woman looks up. I don't remember her name, but I know it's something ridiculous. While most of Camellia's ladies are named after hothouse flowers, this girl shares her name with a common field flower—something that grows wild.

Was it Poppy? Daisy?

Clover, I finally remember. A meadow weed, nothing more than fodder for cattle and sheep.

Boldly, she meets my eyes. I wait for her to become flustered, to realize the room has noticed her misstep. Instead of fluttering her lashes and darting from the hall with a giggle on her lips, she stares back, challenging me—silently informing me that she'll open the door for a lowly page if it pleases her, decorum be cursed.

There is something striking about her, a quality that singles her out from the rest of the ladies. Mildly perturbed by it, I study her, trying to place what it is.

Clover's hair is a fawnish shade of brown—almost too light to be considered brunette and too dark to be blonde. She's an average height for a woman, slender but far from frail, and though she's probably never run a day in her pampered life, she looks like she might be fast.

It's her eyes, I finally decide. They hold a pixie-like quality that is less than desirable in a woman of noble birth. They're too sharp, too bright, too captivating.

I don't believe I've ever exchanged more than a few words with her, but from the time I began the trials for my seal, we've existed in the same circles.

She's the daughter of a count, the youngest of four children, and the only girl in the family.

My father is the king's personal blacksmith, injured on horseback when he was a young soldier and unable to achieve his knighthood. The woman and I are not equals, not yet. But the chasm in our rank is far less pronounced than it was before I became a commander in the king's army.

Once I obtain my seal, I will be awarded land with rich hunting grounds and tenants. I will go from simple soldier to nobleman, the same rank as a viscount. It's an elusive honor, one bestowed on only five men at any given time. There is currently one spot available, and I will secure it before King Algernon abdicates. If Lawrence takes the throne before I achieve my knighthood, all will be for naught.

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Bartholomew, the king's seventeen-year-old nephew, grasps hold of the door, relieving Lady Clover of the task. She pulls her eyes from mine to face him.

"Forgive me, my lady, for being tardy in my duties," he says, beaming at her like she hung not only the stars, but the moons as well. "Please, let me assist you with the door."

The puppy is a squire, serving under Lawrence. He's too eager, too clumsy, too rash. His father, Duke Corgin Gevaldry, King Algernon's younger brother and head of the royal military, passed away many years ago, leaving Bartholomew a responsibility he's not yet ready to claim. That's why King Algernon placed him in our ranks—so that he will learn what it takes to grow from a boy to a man.

It shouldn't amuse me that Lawrence got saddled with his nuisance of a cousin. But it does.

With one last defiant glance at me, Lady Clover slips through the door.

"That reminds me," King Algernon says with a sigh, drawing my attention back to the front of the room. "I have a job for you, Henrik. Come to my study at five, and we will discuss it."

I bow my head once more. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Dread snakes in my gut as I put Lady Clover out of my mind. What demeaning task is the king going to send me on now?

Clover

“You’re in for it,” Calla says when she catches up to me in the hall. She straightens her bodice as if it twisted out of place while she was hurrying after me, though with the way we’re cinched into these things, it would take more than a quickened pace to move them.

I smile at my friend. “What did I do this time?”

Calla shakes her head. “You truly have no idea, do you?”

Laughing, I parrot, “I truly have no idea.”

“That odd thing that happened between you and Henrik—don’t bother playing stupid. The entire court saw it.”

“Whatthing?” I pause in the hall, giving her my full attention. “What are you talking about?”

“You held the door for that boy, and then you and Henrik stared at each other for the longest time. Camellia is livid. Her face turned red—she looked like she swallowed a toad.”

“Oh, that,” I say, losing interest. It really doesn’t take much to get the princess in a tizzy. “He was giving me an awful look. Believe me, it was nothing even marginally interesting.”

“Did you want it to be?” she asks, lowering her voice.

I frown. “What do you mean?”

Calla rolls her eyes and then whispers, “I mean, do you like Henrik?”

I wrinkle my nose and bark out an incredulous laugh. “No, I don’t. Camellia is welcome to him.”

We continue walking, and Calla idly runs her fingers through her long, blonde curls. “Then you’re the only woman at court who doesn’t.” Dreamily, she adds, “What I would do to get that man to look at me.”

“Try locking yourself in a tower and screaming for help. Henrik will do anything to get his seal.”

She flashes me a stern look. “You’re cold, you know that?”

I bump her shoulder with mine. “I’m only teasing. But you must admit Henrik is solemn all the time. I have no idea how Camellia kisses him. It would be like locking lips with a fish.”

“Ladies,” a man says from directly behind us.

Calla gasps, and I whirl around.

My eyes lock with Henrik’s, and shame washes over me. I hadn’t meant to be unkind, not really. At least not to the soldier’s face...which probably doesn’t make it any better now that I think about it.

Henrik looks thoroughly unimpressed, and I’m worried Calla is going to faint right here. I grasp hold of her arm, hoping to keep her upright.

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He gives me a sharp nod, the barest of respectful gestures, and then he passes us.

I very much want to slink under the plush red carpet.

“Clover,” Calla breathes after Henrik turns a corner. “I’ve never been so mortified in my life.”

“How was I supposed to know he was behind us?” I rub the middle of my chest, trying to work the embarrassment away. “I thought he was still with the king.”

She shakes her head. “I left right after he was dismissed, but I had no idea he came this way.”

“Oh well,” I say with a shrug. “Henrik can cry to Camellia, and she will have just one more reason to hate me. That will make her happy, don’t you think?”

Looking like she’s trying not to laugh, Calla nods. “Yes, most likely. Hating you is one of the princess’s favorite pastimes.”

* * *

The knights and archers who have gathered around me howl with laughter when my arrow hits the target almost dead center of the bullseye. Resting the end of my bow on the ground, I smugly watch the fletching tremble before it finally goes still. Then I turn to Gavriel. “I believe I win. Again.”

“Bested by a woman,” Danhugh says to my opponent, slapping him on the back.

“We’ve been here half an hour. It’s time to admit defeat, my friend.”

“No shame when the woman is your sister,” Gavriel answers smoothly. He extends his hand as if making a lecture. “Clover’s great skill is a testament to my fine teaching skills.”

I snort, rolling my eyes. Leave it to Gavriel to twist my win into one of his own.

“Because we had nothing to do with Clover’s training,” Denny says to Colter.

The pair stand near me in the crowd, laughing at our older brother’s narcissism.

Father says it’s impossible to miss that we four are related. I am slender, and my brothers are tall and lean, with frames that were gangly when they were youths but they thankfully grew into. We have the same mischievous smile and sandy brown hair that lightens to blonde in the summer. We also inherited Mother’s spring green, vaguely almond-shaped eyes that betray there’s likely High Vale elf somewhere in our lineage.

Besides the princess, no one in court has ever dared taunt or tease me—I have my own familial bodyguards right here. Call it a perk of being born last.

Granted, my brothers are slightly overprotective, but they mean well.

I smile at Denny and Colter, acknowledging that they too had a hand in my success, and then I turn my eyes toward the arch that separates the practice yard from the rest of the bailey.

Prince Lawrence walks into the courtyard with Miguel, one of His Majesty’s sealed knights.

Standing straighter, I turn back to Gavriel. “One more time,” I urge. “Let’s see if you can redeem yourself. This next shot for the win.”

My brother readily accepts the challenge. He nudges me out of the way and nocks an arrow into his bow.

The crowd parts for Lawrence, thinking nothing of his presence. The prince is often in the practice yard.

Gavriel shoots, and the shot is a good one. His arrow pierces the target, edging just inside the centermost red circle.

Feeling Lawrence’s eyes on me, I line up to the target, prepare my arrow, and draw back. Stilling my breath, I shoot...

And miss.

My arrow lands just outside the bullseye.

My crowd of admirers groans, and I let my head fall back.

Despite his bluster from a few minutes ago about relishing how skilled an archery tutor he is, Gavriel raises his brows at me, looking quietly pleased.

“It’s all right, Clover,” Danhugh says, setting his arm across my shoulders, perhaps thinking I need consoled. “We all saw you trounce him.”

Gavriel shoots his friend a stony look of warning, and Danhugh immediately removes his arm.

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Sensing the match is finally over, our audience filters away. Miguel excuses himself, and Lawrence nods absently as the knight leaves. The prince, however, remains nearby as if waiting for the crowd to clear.

Quietly, Denny says to me, “I know you’re friends, but be cautious of him, Clover,”

“Go away,” I hiss.

It’s not the first time one of my brothers has voiced the warning, and I’m certain it won’t be the last. But I’m not a fool—I know what kind of philanderer Lawrence is. If I walk into his trap, it will be with my eyes wide open.

Once Denny is gone, Lawrence ambles toward me. The man is wickedly handsome, with thick, light reddish-brown hair that falls past his shoulders and warm honey-brown eyes. Every time I look at him, my heart gives an extra thump—not necessarily because I’m besotted, but because he holds the thing I want most in life.

A crown.

And while some might think it’s the prestigious position itself that I covet, they would be wrong. My ambitions are rooted in one small hope—once I make myself queen, I will finally outrank Camellia.

It’s a petty thing, perhaps. But I yearn for it all the same.

All my life, I’ve answered to the horrid princess. When we were children, I was forced to play dolls with her and the other unlucky girls, and she would lord over us

like a wicked empress. If we didn't like her game, she would throw tea on our dresses and cry until someone removed us from her sight.

She's not any better now, though her tantrums are a bit subtler.

It was a dark day when I turned fourteen and was officially chosen as one of her ladies. After all these years, it's time I hold a little power over her. And if Lawrence is the key to making my dream a reality, then I'm going to snare myself a prince.

"That was a fine show," Lawrence says, following me as I walk to the target to retrieve my arrow.

The day is warm, and the sun shines down on the courtyard, heating the stones and making it feel like mid-summer. But the smell of autumn is in the air, with the scent of meat curing in the castle smokehouses, and the breeze is cool. Our pleasant days are numbered.

Soon, I'll be trapped in the castle with Camellia for the long, dreaded winter.

"Sadly, you missed most of it," I say.

"I was watching from the wall." Lawrence offers me a knowing smile. "You didn't miss until I joined you. Do I make you nervous, Clover?"

I smile prettily and look away as if embarrassed, pretending the question is rhetorical.

But as I feign Besotted Girl, I notice Henrik from the corner of my eye. The soldier is rarely in this section of the bailey, as he prefers blades to bows. He pauses, his attention momentarily captured by Lawrence and me. Then, with an enigmatic expression I cannot read, he continues to the gatehouse.

Lawrence follows my gaze and groans. “Don’t tell me you’re taken with him, too?”

“Taken with whom?” I ask, turning my attention back to him.

“Henrik the Stoic, the Mannered, the Valiant. The Dull as Dirt. Choose any title you like.”

I laugh and pull the arrow from the target. “I only have eyes for one man, and he’s not Henrik.”

“You know I’m good at keeping secrets.” Lawrence edges closer. “Tell me who it is.”

Turning my gaze on him, I play coy. “If I were to tell you, it would be a secret from him no longer.”

With his eyes locked on mine, Lawrence presses a hand over his heart. “You must not say things like that, Lady Clover, for I will jump to conclusions and be heartbroken if I learn it isn’t so.”

And though I’m trying to play the part of a doe-eyed girl, I can’t help but snort. He’s too much sometimes.

“Ah, there’s the Clover I know and adore,” Lawrence says, abundantly amused. He leans against the wall, crossing his arms. “Make my day; tell me you love me.”

“Why?” With the arrow in my hand, I press my palms to my hips. “Do you secretly pine for me, Lawrence? Have you been waiting to confess all this time, but fear of rejection has held you back?”

“Just admit it—three little words. Say you love me.”

“What’s not to love?”

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He grins, enjoying the banter. “You tease, but I am well aware you only want me for my title.”

“Figured it out, have you?”

“And I only want you for your wit.” His smile morphs into a frown, and he slowly drifts his eyes over me and pushes away from the wall. He takes two languid steps forward, catching me by the waist. “And your eyes and your lips and your—”

“Careful,” I warn. But because we’re alone for the moment, I don’t bother to push him away.

“When, exactly, did you become so delectable, Clover?”

“About the same time you started chasing everyone’s skirts but mine.”

Lawrence raises his brows, intrigued, and then he lowers his voice suggestively. “Would you like me to chase your skirt, Clover?”

Laughing, I step out of his arms. “I see a flaw in my grand plan.”

“And what’s that?”

“If I marry you for your crown...I would have to be married to you.”

He drops his arms, releasing me. “Your words gut me like a knife.”

“I’m sure,” I say, laughing.

“Clover!” screeches Camellia from across the practice yard.

“She’s found me,” I deadpan as we watch Lawrence’s sister hasten to us.

Sunlight shines upon Camellia’s warm blonde hair, making it glisten like spun gold. The agitated sway of her hips catches the attention of several guards on the inner wall, proving that Henrik is not the only man blind to the princess’s many, many shortcomings.

“Are you not one of my ladies-in-waiting?” Camellia demands when she reaches me. Her blue eyes bore into me like glittering daggers, but I’m familiar with her agitation. She places her hands on her hips. “Tell me, are you supposed to be attending my brother or me?”

“Choose me,” Lawrence says under his breath. “I’m more fun.”

I bow my head and fight the impulse to laugh. “My apologies, Your Highness.”

“Come along,” she commands, already turning back the way she came. “I need you to stand for the dressmaker. You know how I hate wasting my day while the clumsy girl stabs me with her pins.”

“Lucky you,” Lawrence says when Camellia is a safe distance away. “You’re nearly the same size as my sister.”

“It’s not as bad as it sounds.” I drop my voice. “Minda only stabs Camellia.”

“As she should.” Lawrence chuckles. “We must take those golden opportunities as they arise.”

Camellia's dulcet tones reach me once more. "Clover!"

"If you'll excuse me," I say to Lawrence with a sigh, already starting for the castle.

Before I go, my friend catches my arm, smirking. "If you need comfort when the ordeal is finished, you know where to find me."

"Yes, I'll just knock on all the girls' doors. I'll eventually discover the right one."

Laughing, Lawrence shakes his head. "You wound me, Clover."

Smirking, I hurry after Camellia.

5

Henrik

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My father grunts in lieu of a greeting as I walk into his smithy after an absence of nearly a week, and then he commands, “Make eight horseshoes. After that, work on nails.”

Even with the windows thrown open, it’s sweltering in here.

Bracing myself for his agitation, I say, “I have an audience with the king soon.”

He sneers, as expected, but he doesn’t say anything—which is unexpected.

I watch him as he limps to the forge and pulls a stick of red-hot iron from the fire. He lies it across the anvil, but I produce a cream-colored piece of parchment before he can begin to shape it and say, “Brielle sent a letter.”

Father eyes it with the same distaste he’d show his daughter if she were here. “Put it on the table. I’ll look at it later.”

My sister sent a letter to me as well, but Father doesn’t need to read that one.

I’ve worked hard all these years for Brielle, both here in the smithy and for the king. A soldier’s salary isn’t enough to pay her school tuition alone, and she’s better off away at Dulnmarin’s than here with Father.

She’s the real reason I must obtain my seal. If I can earn my knighthood, I’ll be able to afford a respectable dowry for her and ensure she makes a good match with a kind man who will care for her. Heaven knows Father won’t see to her future.

And if I marry the princess, Brielle will be secured a position in the nobility for life.

“Did you kill the beast of Danmire?” Father asks between clanging smacks of his hammer.

“I did.”

He glances up to glare at me. “Earned your seal then?”

My spine stiffens. “Not yet.”

Father scoffs. “He’s not going to give it to you. Your aspirations are too big, boy. You could have been a regular knight ten times over, but no. You want the prestige of being one of the elite.”

“You were working your way to becoming a sealed knight,” I remind him.

He yanks aside his leather apron and stomps his wooden leg to the ground with a sneer. “And this is what I have to show for it. You want this, Henrik?”

“I can’t afford to become a regular knight,” I remind him, tired of the familiar argument.

Only those who earn their seal are granted land and gold. I’d never be able to afford my armor on a commander’s salary, especially when I send most of my earnings to Brielle’s school. You must be born into the nobility for that, like Clover’s brothers.

I frown when I think of the woman, fervently wishing she hadn’t drifted into my head. I’ve already seen her twice today—surely that’s punishment enough.

“Who needs knighthood anyway?” Father mutters, going back to his task.

“Mercenaries make more money.”

“There’s no honor in selling your blade.”

“Honor.” Father shakes his head as if disgusted, and then he falls silent.

“I’ll work on the horseshoes tonight,” I promise before I leave. “And the nails, too, if I have time.”

Father doesn’t answer, and he certainly doesn’t say goodbye when I leave. No “Glad you’re back, son” or “I missed you while you were away.”

Not that I expected it. This is how it’s always been.

* * *

“Hello, Henrik,” Bartholomew says cordially, matching my steps as I walk down the hall. “Where are you off to at such a brisk pace?”

I barely spare the boy a glance. “I have a meeting with your uncle.”

“What a happy coincidence. I’m headed there as well.”

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I jerk my head in acknowledgment, not in the mood for his chipper conversation.

“Did you see I spoke with Lady Clover earlier?” the young duke says with a grin, not picking up on my subtle signals that I prefer to walk in silence. “In the throne room—I held the door for her.”

I grunt.

“Clover’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” He lets out a heartsick sigh. “Before, I didn’t think she even knew my name, but today, she said, ‘Thank you, Bartholomew.’ What do you think it means?”

“I think she was thanking you for holding the door.”

“Oh, but the way she said it...” He trails off as if reliving the blessed moment once again.

Meanwhile, my brow furrows as I’m reminded of the conversation I was unfortunate enough to overhear earlier. Though I know little of Clover, it’s obvious she’s thought a great deal about me. And she’s formed opinions.

“Like locking lips with a fish,” I mutter.

“Excuse me?” Bartholomew says, startled from his daydreams.

“Nothing,” I answer sharply.

We reach the king's study, and one of the guards nods. "His Majesty is expecting you both. You may go in."

Bartholomew scurries inside, and I follow him with slightly less exuberance.

"Hello, Uncle!" Bartholomew sets a basket on top of a desk in the massive library that the king calls his study. "Mother has made tartlets for you—raspberry, I believe."

A smile flickers over the king's face. "Thank you, Bartholomew."

"She said they are a bribe, but she wouldn't tell me what for."

Looking slightly vexed, King Algernon sighs. "You may tell her that her message has been received."

"Ah, good. Mother said you'd understand, and I'm glad for it—she wouldn't breathe a word of it to me when I asked her to elaborate for the sake of clarity." He grins. "It must be something terribly secret."

"Yes," His Majesty says somewhat curtly. "That's fine—sit down, Bartholomew."

Immediately, the boy obeys. King Algernon studies him for a moment, frowning, and then he turns his attention to me. "Henrik."

I stand straighter. "Yes, sire?"

"Bartholomew will no longer be apprenticing Lawrence. From here on out, he will be assigned as your squire."

I study the king, confused. "But, Your Majesty...I am not a knight."

Wryly, he answers, “Yes, I am aware of that.”

If Algernon were anyone but the king, I would question him further. After all, a squire can only apprentice a knight—that’s how it works. Those are the rules.

Why in the kingdom would he assign his nephew—the royal military’s future duke marshal—to me, a lowly born soldier?

Instead of arguing, I bow my head, trying not to look ill. “As you wish.”

“Truly?” Bartholomew says, sounding pleased as he turns to me. “Will you teach me that thing you do with your sword?”

“Thing?” I ask hesitantly.

“The one where you lunge forward”—he leaps to his feet and extends his arm in front of him as he acts out the move—“And then you feint to the right, and then to the left, and you turn three-quarters of the way around, duck down, and sweep your opponent’s feet out from under him.”

I’ve never done that in my life.

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“It sounds as if you have a fine grasp of it already,” I answer.

“There will be time for that later,” King Algernon says heavily. “For now, Bartholomew, you will accompany Henrik as he oversees a supply trip up to Fortress Lintanry.”

My stomach sinks. A supply run to the northern mountains is a tedious assignment, the command of which is usually given to aging knights and often takes several weeks to complete. There isn’t the slightest chance I will earn my seal with the mission.

Bartholomew turns to me, grinning. “Up into the Dorian Mountains? It sounds like a grand adventure, doesn’t it, Henrik?”

“Grand,” I manage.

“Bartholomew,” Algernon says, “Why don’t you go home and prepare—tell your mother you’ll be gone for a while.”

The boy turns on his heel to face his uncle and gives him a curt bow. “As you command, Uncle. I thank you for giving me this new opportunity to grow.”

With a frown, the king nods him out of the room.

After the door closes, Algernon sighs. “His mother begged me to transfer him to someone with a bit more patience than Lawrence. I know you’re not a knight yet, but you’re the only man who came to mind. You’ll watch over him, won’t you? He’s all

my sister-in-law has left. I fear someday I will learn the boy accidentally shot himself with his own crossbow.” He shakes his head. “And heaven help us all—in four years when he comes of age, the boy will be at the head of our military.”

“I’m honored to be chosen, and I will protect him and train him for his future position as well as I am able,” I vow.

Though I do fervently wish someone else had come to his mind.

“I know you will.” He pauses. “I’m sorry about your seal, Henrik. You’ve worked hard.”

“It will mean little if I don’t earn it,” I assure him.

He nods, but he still looks regretful. Then, changing the subject, he says, “We’ve heard of trouble in the mountains. That’s why I’m assigning you to the supply run.”

“What kind of trouble?” I ask, my interest piqued.

“Rumors mostly. People are saying the aynauths are on the move.”

“Aynauths? They rarely leave their territory.”

Algernon nods. “I’m not certain there’s much to the gossip, but I would like you to speak with the local guards. Perhaps scout a bit while you’re up there. Return to me with any information you can glean.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Sensing the audience is finished, I turn to leave.

“Henrik,” he says before I’m to the door. “Take heart. I am certain you will earn your seal soon.”

I swallow my disappointment and nod. “Thank you, sire.”

6

Henrik

Preparing for a supply run into the mountains is like herding flockchicks. I stand in the courtyard, list in hand, surveying the madness. The morning is brisk but quickly warming, and soon I’ll have to shed my cloak.

Men and maids go every which way, in absolutely no semblance of order, carrying crates, baskets, and bulging leather bags. They load eight large wagons with dry goods, caged fowl, and various supplies, all of which we’ll bring to the guard post.

A nearby donkey brays, loudly protesting the load that’s secured to his back, and the goats decide to join in his racket.

Just as a headache begins to form at the base of my skull, Bartholomew steps up beside me, looking bright-eyed and far too eager.

“What fun,” he exclaims, and the fool boy sounds like he heartily means it.

I give him a sideways look and frown before returning my attention to the supply list.

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“I’ve never been to the north,” he says. “Do you think it will be cold?”

“Yes.”

“Mother is worried sick.” He laughs good-naturedly. “I assured her that I am too old to be thought of as a mere boy, but I suppose mothers are prone to worry, aren’t they?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Hoping to put an abrupt halt to the conversation, I add, “My mother is dead.”

The moment it’s out of my mouth, I trap in a vexed sigh.

Bartholomew’s expression falls as he murmurs, “As is my father.”

I shouldn’t have said it—and I wouldn’t have if I’d thought about it a moment more. Though the boy is burdensome, I don’t wish to hurt him purposely.

Wincing to myself, I wonder if I’m more like my father than I would like.

For a moment, I study my new squire from the corner of my eye. He has a mop of unkempt brown hair, a smattering of light, boyish freckles, and less muscle than any of the maids who carry goods to the wagons. When I was his age, I’d already risen from a drudge in the Infantry Class to a swordsman in the Soldier Class, but I’ve never even seen Bartholomew lift a sword.

Though the duke is seventeen years old, he seems younger—naïve, far too optimistic,

and easily crushed. I, however, won't be the one to destroy him—no matter how I wish I weren't tasked with his keeping.

I turn to the boy, prepared to apologize, but he beats me to it.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Henrik," he says solemnly.

"And I am sorry for yours," I answer, my tone unintentionally gruff. "My words were hastily spoken."

The smile returns to his face, and he looks back at the madness. "How may I be of assistance?"

As he says it, a woman appears at my side. She stands quietly, waiting to be acknowledged.

I turn toward the somber handmaid, startled Camellia would send for me so openly.

Clearing my throat, wishing Bartholomew wasn't standing with me, I say, "Do you have a message for me?"

I would address her by name, but she's never given one—not to me and not to anyone else. Behind her back, people call her Hellebore, after the cold winter flower. But the High Vale elf is too aged to be one of Camellia's ladies, nor is she connected to wealth and stature. For a High Vale woman to serve a human, even if that human is a princess, she must have found disgrace at some time in her life.

Without a word, she offers me the folded parchment. I'm not sure she approves of our meetings, but she is mute and unable to object. Whenever she must exchange words, she writes them upon a small slate she carries in the pocket of her gown.

Though Camellia's boldness makes me uncomfortable, I accept the note. With a bow of her head, the woman leaves the way she came. People part for her, wary of the solemn elven woman who always dresses in black.

"She gives me chills," Bartholomew says quietly when she's gone. "I don't know how my cousin can spend so much time with her."

"The woman practically raised Camellia." I subtly shift away, making sure he won't be able to read the note when I open it.

"Yes," Bartholomew says. "I suppose that must be it."

I scan the message, and then I shove the supply list into Bartholomew's hands. "We're nearly finished. Begin making rounds and see if anything is missing."

Eagerly, Bartholomew accepts the list. "Really?"

Nodding, I turn to leave. Even he can handle that simple task.

* * *

Camellia waits for me in a private corner of the garden, a quiet place surrounded by thick, dusky evergreens and overgrown hedges that have gone from deep green to fire-red in the last week.

Already fallen amber leaves from several nearby grespit trees litter the cobblestones, and they muffle my footsteps as I walk.

"You came," Camellia says, smiling brightly when she spots me.

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I bow my head. “I am always at your command, Your Highness.”

She laughs and places her hand on my arm. “So formal, Henrik.”

I look up, meeting her cornflower gaze, silently reminding her that our relationship is purely professional.

Camellia rolls her eyes and turns her back to me, crossing her arms. “I’m beginning to think you don’t like me nearly as well as I like you.”

“I like you as much I am permitted—”

Cutting me off with a laugh, she turns back, giving me a triumphant, radiant smile. “Then stop playing with my heart and kiss me. You’re leaving soon.”

I hold in an annoyed sigh. It’s not the first time Camellia has initiated the conversation, and I’m confident it won’t be the last. We’re not together, but she very much wishes we were.

“You should not say such things,” I remind her. “I am too far below you. Perhaps once I—”

“Secure your seal,” Camellia says with a huff, and her eyes flash with irritation. “I know.”

The princess is angry with me, but that’s not a recent development. Though I have given her no encouragement, Camellia has proven difficult to sway. She’s headstrong

and too used to using her beauty to get her way, but I'm sure she will mature in time.

“And if you miss your chance?” Camellia asks with a pout. “There are plenty of other handsome men, Henrik. Ones who show me the attention I deserve.”

Perhaps Camellia hopes to make me jealous, but I'm well aware I'm not the only man she seeks affection from.

“My only hope is that you will choose a man who is worthy of you.”

The princess lets out a long-suffering sigh, and then she throws herself at me, leaving me no choice but to catch her so she won't fall. “For being common-born, you are certainly valiant, Henrik. You put the rest of us to shame.”

Camellia wraps her arms around my waist, clinging to me tightly. Before I can extract her, we're interrupted by a muttered curse.

“Where is she?” a female someone says—and from nearby. “And what is she doing in this part of the garden?”

Camellia and I look over sharply, startled by the interruption. No one comes this way, and the soft, newly fallen leaves made it too easy for the intruder to approach without us realizing she was coming.

“Princess Camellia, are you back here?” the young woman calls, her voice carrying into our sanctuary. “Hellebo—I mean, your handmaid informed me you'd be here.”

Before I have wits enough to push Camellia away, Clover suddenly appears beside a large pine. She comes to a startled stop, and the lady's mouth slowly falls open as she gapes at the scene in front of her. Immediately, I step back, dropping the princess like she scorched me.

What is Clover doing here? And why do we suddenly keep running into each other when our paths have barely crossed before?

“What do you want?” Camellia asks Clover sharply.

“I...” Even though it was the princess who addressed her, Clover’s eyes drift to me. She gives me a strange look—not as if she’s embarrassed she interrupted a tender moment...but rather like she’s questioning the princess’s sanity.

I bristle, remembering her words from the hallway all too clearly. Like locking lips with a fish indeed.

After a moment, a mischievous smile flutters over the lady’s face, and she barely conceals her mirth long enough to say, “Minda asked me to inform you that your gown will be ready for a final fitting tomorrow.”

Camellia huffs out a breath. “You tracked me down to tell methat?”

Clover shrugs, and her eyes dart to me once more. “Would you like me to go in your place again?”

“Do you even have to ask? You know how I feel about that awful woman.”

And though Clover is likely supposed to respond, she’s paying little attention to Camellia. No—her curious gaze is on me.

What she’s curious about, I don’t know. But I find my neck heating with embarrassment. Thankfully, she turns back to Camellia before I must look away.

“Is there anything you need while I’m here, Your Highness?”

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“No,” Camellia answers curtly, obviously keen to be rid of her.

“Then I’ll be going.” Clover shoots me another strange look, and this time I know she’s secretly laughing at me. “Please...carry on.”

With one last glance over her shoulder, she disappears the way she came.

“Oh, I hate her,” Camellia breathes when Clover is gone.

My surprise must show on my face because Camellia looks back at me, and her eyes narrow with anger. As if she believes she must defend herself, she says, “You don’t know how awful she is, Henrik. You don’t know what I’ve had to put up with all these years.”

“You needn’t convince me,” I say. “But do not fret. Soon, I’m sure Lady Clover will marry, and you will be rid of her.”

Camellia’s smile warms. “You’re so sweet. But I cannot imagine there is a man in his right mind who would wish to marry Clover. She’s not even pretty.”

Before I can stop myself, I give her a skeptical look—one Camellia thankfully doesn’t notice.

She laughs wickedly. “And she has her heart set upon my brother, poor thing. As if Lawrence would give a girl named Clover a crown.”

Suddenly, the memory of the lady and Lawrence leaps into my mind. They were

standing close, smiling at each other.

“But I don’t wish to speak of her anymore,” Camellia says, pressing herself flush against me once more and locking her arms around my waist. “You’re leaving. At least tell me you love me before you go.”

The move effectively brings my thoughts to the present. Gently, I set my hands on the princess’s shoulders, holding her in place as I step back. “Those are words that may only be confessed by a man who has a right to speak them.”

“Fine.” She steps away, finally tired of the fruitless banter. “Enjoy your holiday.”

I frown. “I’m not sure I’d call it a holiday.”

Camellia makes to leave, but then she shoots me a flirtatious smile. “Just remember, while you’re gone, I’ll be here—pining for you. Don’t forget it.”

She then leaves, following the same path as Clover.

Once she’s gone, I smile to myself, replaying the meeting in my head. I’m almost back to relieve Bartholomew of his task when I stop short.

It isn’t Camellia’s face in my mind.

“You look positively horrified,” Bartholomew says brightly. “Something troubling you?”

I shake my head, dismissing my rogue thoughts. “No, nothing. How is it going here?”

“Well,” Bartholomew says dramatically, making me wish I hadn’t asked. “One of Lord Kelvin’s hounds got loose a few minutes ago, and he chased a cow clear across

the courtyard. She ended up stampeding right into a farmer's stand—you see it there? The one that's standing askew, with all that splintered wood surrounding it? It was quite a sight. Turnipseverywhere."

I stare at him for a moment. "I was asking about the supplies."

"Oh." Bartholomew looks down at the list in his hand, and then he looks up with a grin. "I'm not sure. To be honest, with all the excitement, I forgot why I was here."

I extend my hand, silently asking him to give me the list. Chagrined, he hands it over.

"Go..." I can't think of a reason to send him away.

"Do something?" he supplies helpfully.

"Yes."

He stands straighter. "As you command, it will be done."

"Good, fine." I scan the list. "Leave now."

Bartholomew hasn't been gone for even a minute when a horrific scent accosts my nostrils. I turn sharply, wondering what in the world could be emitting such a putrid stench.

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“Hello, Henrik,” a woman says. She’s clean and tidy, with carefully pinned gray hair and a friendly smile. But the smell seems to be coming from her.

I bow my head, trying not to let my revulsion show.

The odor is putrid, like the scent of a rotting carcass combined with the smell of the guards’ barracks when they’re not adequately aired out on a hot day.

“How may I be of assistance?” I manage.

“I understand you’re leading the supply trip up to the north?”

I swallow hard, trying not to breathe through my nose. “That’s right.”

“Good, that’s good.”

I wait, hoping she’ll hurry to her point. When it seems she’s going to need some prodding, I ask, “Is there something I can help you with?”

“As a matter of fact, young man, there certainly is.” She practically beams, thankfully not noticing the tears pooling in my eyes.

“You see, my husband is up north right now at Fortress Lintanry. Lord Forlentina? I’m sure you’ve heard of him?”

Never in my life.

“All right,” I say.

“He can’t come home until spring, you see.”

What is that smell?

“And he so loves this cheese I make...” As she says the words, she removes the tea towel from the basket at her side, releasing a fragrance that is so potent, it could be considered a political act of war.

And there it is, the source of the stink. A mottled wheel of cheese, green with fuzzy mold, lies nestled in the basket—smelling and looking like an elgernaut rolled over it.

“Would you be so kind as to take it to him, dear? It would mean the world to me.”

I stare at the cheese with dread, imagining smelling that unique aroma the entire trip up to the north.

“I...” Accidentally breathing through my nose, I falter. “I don’t think...”

Her face falls.

“I don’t think it will be a problem,” I end up finishing, earning an approving smile.

“But you’ll have to put it in something. Something closed tightly—to keep it safe.”

“Oh no.” She shakes her head adamantly. “It must be allowed to breathe, dear. Simply keep my tea towel over it, just like this, and it will be safe as can be.”

“Breathe?” I manage.

She wrinkles her nose. “Otherwise, it gets a bit soggy, you understand. And no one

wants that.”

“No one wants that at all,” I mutter.

Like a fool, I accept the basket.

“You are so kind, Henrik,” she says. “Just as everyone says. Good luck with your seal.”

“Thank you.” I bow my head once more. “I will send your husband your warm regards.”

She pats my arm before she leaves. “Yes, yes. Such a nice young man.”

The moment she’s gone, I shove the basket at the closest unsuspecting guard. “Take this to the wagons.”

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“Whatisit?” Aghast, he lifts the tea towel.

I knock his hand away. “Don’t open it. Just...put it somewhere.”

Grimacing, he says, “Yes, Henrik.”

He then hurries to the wagons, holding the putrid cheese as far away as possible. People turn as he passes them, muttering surprised exclamations.

With a sigh, I begin the task of checking off the supplies, making sure everything is accounted for.

“Are we almost ready, Henrik?” one of the wagon drivers asks a few hours later.

“Just about.”

A strange look suddenly crosses his face. He pauses, sticking his nose into the air and sniffing like a dog. “Whatisthat?”

Ignoring him, I go back to counting sausages. Thirty-seven, thirty-eight...

A dog howls, and I turn and find Lord Kelvin’s hound is loose again. I shake my head as a page chases him through the courtyard, looking back to my task only to realize I’ve lost count.

I grimace as I start over.

It's going to be a long trip.

7

Clover

“Thank you for coming again, Clover,” Minda says to me, smiling. The dressmaker steps back to survey her work. “The afternoon is much more pleasant when Camellia sends you in her place.”

I smile at the seamstress as she finishes the final gown fitting, understanding all too well.

If it weren't for the two short antlers protruding from her brunette hair and the faint, rounded freckles that run from her jaw up across her temples, she'd look like her High Vale elven cousins—easily mistaken for human, but generally taller, with sharper features and a certain etherealness. But she's not a High Vale elf—she's a Woodmore elf, rarely seen inside the cities.

And like all Woodmores, she's meek and peaceful, with a softness that Camellia finds unnerving. Especially when the woman becomes so nervous, she accidentally pokes the princess with her dress pins. At least, no one can prove it's anything but an accident. If I were in Minda's shoes, I'd probably take a stab or two myself.

“Will you tell Camellia the dress will be finished in a few days?” Minda asks softly as she carefully arranges her pins in their felted pincushion. “I'll bring it to her quarters after I make these last adjustments.”

Taking pity on the woman, I say, “Shall I deliver it?”

Minda looks back, and her eyes widen with hope. “Would you do that for me?”

“Of course,” I say brightly, though I’m not looking forward to the task any more than she is. But at least I’m not terrified of the princess. “Just fetch me when it’s finished.”

The dressmaker gives me a rare smile. “I will. Thank you, Clover.”

“Are we done here?” I ask, itching to move.

“All finished.” She waves her hand. “You may change—just be careful not to prick yourself.”

I gingerly hop from the stool, careful of the pins that threaten to stab my flesh, and disappear behind the changing screen.

“What’s this gown for, anyway?” I ask, shimmying out of the emerald dress and wincing when a rogue pin pokes my hip.

“Camellia didn’t say.”

I frown at the fabric as I step from it, running my thumb over the silken material. “It’s a bit ornate, isn’t it? Is there a ball looming in the future?”

Just the thought makes me shiver. On the surface, a ball seems as if it would be something I would enjoy immensely—food, dancing, flirting, laughing. What could be better? And perhaps that’s what a ball is for everyone who isn’t one of Camellia’s ladies-in-waiting.

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We ladies, however, are practically chained to Camellia's side, only free to dance or eat when she's dancing or eating. And since the princess is contrary, and undoubtedly enjoys making us suffer, she prefers to spend her time on her parents' dais, with her pert nose raised in the air with disdain, looking down upon her people.

I didn't pass out from hunger at the last ball only because Lawrence kept sneaking me cherry tartlets behind his sister's back.

"I haven't heard of a ball," Minda says. "Though perhaps the princess knows something we do not?"

It certainly wouldn't be the first time.

Quickly, I slip on my own gown, and then I leave, saying my goodbyes to the dressmaker.

"I'll let you know when the dress is ready," she calls. "Thank you, Clover!"

* * *

Several days after the final fitting, I knock on Camellia's outer chamber door, growing impatient. Her gown is large and cumbersome, and if I so much as let the hem brush the floor, the princess will send it down for cleaning.

"You're sure she's in there?" I ask Cortana, the guard unfortunate enough to be stationed outside Camellia's room.

“She retired after lunch, claiming she had a headache.”

I shift from one foot to the other, weighing my options.

If I leave, the gown will be late, and Minda will bear the brunt of Camellia’s wrath.

But since I’m one of the princess’s ladies, Cortana will let me in if I ask. I could slip the dress into Camellia’s sitting room and leave it without having to disturb the princess—or talk to her, which is even better.

Liking the second option the best, I say to Cortana, “I think I’ll just tiptoe inside quietly.”

Nodding, Cortana opens the door, revealing the opulent antechamber that leads into Camellia’s rooms. I walk through the entry and into Camellia’s sitting room, immediately greeted by a massive portrait of the princess herself. It hangs above a red velvet chaise longue, where she often reclines in the afternoons.

Relieved to find her favorite lounging spot unoccupied, I lay the dress upon the settee by the fireplace.

But then I frown at it, worried it might crease while Camellia whiles the day away in bed.

After several moments of indecision, I decide it’s worth the risk to sneak into Camellia’s bedchamber and fetch the dress form.

But when I step into Camellia’s room, I find the drapes wide open and the bed unoccupied.

I’ve barely paused to wonder where the princess is when raised voices drift from

Camellia's closet.

Though I can't make out the conversation, one of the voices is distinctly the princess's. The other is low and scratchy, and it sounds vaguely masculine.

But that can't be right—Henrik has been gone for days. So, who's in the closet with Camellia?

And for that matter, what are they doing in there?

Shaking my head, I decide it's none of my business—and I'd like to keep it that way.

"I don't want any blacksmith," Camellia says loudly enough I can just hear her. "I want Henrik."

Well, that's odd.

Working quickly, I slip the gown over the dress form and give the garment a few good tugs to coax it into place. Then I turn toward the door, prepared to sneak from the room before I'm caught.

But then the closet door opens.

Left with no choice but to look oblivious, I quickly turn back to the dress and run my hand down the skirt as if tidying it.

"Clover," Camellia says sharply when she finds me in her bedchamber. "What are you doing in here?"

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I gesture to the dress as if she's daft. "Minda sent your gown."

Camellia's eyes travel to the new garment, and her mouth pinches. She crosses her arms, preparing to scold me. "How long have you been here?"

"Only a few moments. Cortana said you had a headache." Unable to pass up the opportunity to rib Camellia, I glance at the closet and raise my brows pointedly. "I didn't want to disturb you."

As expected, Camellia bristles, obviously up to no good. Who does she have in there, and what were they doing?

I'm just about to ask her when she moves her hand to brush a strand of hair from her face, and she leaves a bloodstain upon her ivory sleeve.

"You're bleeding." Startled, I step forward, reaching for the princess's hand. "What did you do?"

Before I can touch her, she jerks away. "It's just a small cut. My knife slipped while I was slicing an apple."

To prove her point, she nods her head toward the porcelain plate that sits atop the table by her bed. Sure enough, a browning core rests upon the dish, along with a knife.

"Take it with you when you leave," she commands.

I almost ask her if I look like a kitchen maid, but I manage to hold my tongue. If she's giving me an excuse to go, I'll gladly take it.

"Oh, Clover," she says as I'm leaving. "I don't like the green. Tell Minda to make the gown again, but this time in amethyst."

"Didn't you pick out the fabric?"

"I liked it then," she says impatiently, "but now that I see it, I don't care for it at all. I'm sure it looked acceptable upon you, but my delicate complexion requires cooler tones."

Barely resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I turn for the door. "Of course, Your Highness. I'll speak to Minda."

I'm just leaving, so close to freedom, when the closet door opens. Hellebore emerges, wiping her hands upon a cloth.

"Is that blood?" I ask, aghast.

Startled, perhaps thinking I'd already left, Hellebore jumps. Her eyes flash when they meet mine, and I take a step back, wary of the silent elven handmaid.

"Are you going to stand there all day?" Camellia snaps. "You have two perfectly good feet—use them."

What exactly did I stumble on?

No—no.

Whatever the princess and Hellebore were doing in the closet, I want absolutely no

part in it.

And with that thought, I hurry out the door without so much as a second glance behind me.

8

Clover

A sealed envelope falls upon the table in front of me, right over the book I was reading. Henrik's name is scrawled across the front.

I glance up at Camellia, wondering why she's giving me the note.

"I want you to deliver this to Henrik," she says, her tone snippier than usual.

"But he's on the supply run."

"I know where he is," she answers tartly.

"Am I a courier now?" I demand, brushing the letter aside. "I already cleared the dishes from your room. Find someone else to deliver your love letter."

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“It is not a request, Clover. You will take this to Henrik.”

With an aggravated sigh, I slam my book shut and push my chair from the table, accidentally creating an awful scratching noise that makes the scribes in attendance glare at me.

I know what this is. It’s punishment for interrupting...

Whatever it is I interrupted.

My eyes drift to Camellia’s hand, and she immediately crosses her arms, hiding her now-bandaged palm from sight.

Frowning, I snatch the letter from the table. “I’ll leave in the morning.”

“You’ll leave now.”

I glance out the wall of arched windows. A storm has settled in, thoroughly soaking the valley. Rain runs down the windowpanes, and the sky is a miserable gray.

It doesn’t show signs of letting up soon.

“It’s raining,” I needlessly say, waving listlessly toward the dreary day.

“Wear a cloak.”

With a flick of her hair over her shoulder, Camellia turns to leave. As she goes, she

warns, “He’ll check the seal—no snooping.”

As if I want to read whatever flowery, nauseating drivel she penned.

I turn the envelope, studying Camellia’s phoenix crest that’s pressed into the red wax. If Henrik’s truly gone, who exactly was in the closet with Camellia and Hellebore, and what were they doing?

I assumed it was an afternoon tryst, but with her handmaid present? And I’m sure that was blood...

No.

No, no, no.

I’m not involving myself in this. Absolutely not.

But...if I didn’t know better, I would say Camellia has taken up necromancy and that she and her maid were offing someone in the privacy of her closet.

As soon as I allow myself to think it, I laugh at the idea of Camellia dirtying her hands with the dark blood magic and push the ridiculous thought away.

The princess may be many vile things, but she’s far too vain to dabble in sorcery. She’d never give up her beauty for power.

* * *

“Clover!” Lawrence hollers from across the courtyard.

I pause in the middle of the downpour, watching as the prince runs across the

cobblestones. He holds a hand over his eyes to block the rain from dripping down his face, but his hair is already wet.

I smile, acknowledging that he makes a dashing figure, even when half-drenched.

“Where are you going in this weather?” he asks when he reaches me, jerking his head toward my horse.

“Your lovely sister is sending me on an errand.”

“To where?” he demands. “And surely it can wait until the storm passes.”

I shrug a bored shoulder. “Apparently, it’s urgent.”

“What could possibly be this pressing?”

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“She has a letter for Henrik.”

Lawrence mutters a curse under his breath, shaking his head. “Come inside—we’ll send a courier.”

“No, it’s all right. I’m pretending it’s a holiday. I’ll spend a night in Roversten with my aunt Talia and then get an early start in the morning. I should reach the group before they make it to the river crossing and be back before the end of the week. Just imagine—several days without your sister hovering over my shoulder imagining new and inventive ways to torture me.”

“Who’s going with you?” Lawrence asks. “Haven’t you requested a guard?”

I roll my eyes. “Is there a safer stretch of road in all of Caldenbauer? Have some faith in your patrol guards—I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll go,” he says stubbornly. “Wait for me.”

Shaking my head, I begin walking my horse toward the gatehouse once more. “You know very well you can’t escape your duties to play knight to me. I’ll be back soon.”

Lawrence grasps my arm, pulling me back as he puts on a pout. “I’ll worry about you. If you won’t let me accompany you, stay with me and send a courier.”

Laughing, I shake him free. “Go inside. You look like a drowned rat.”

“A handsome rat?” he asks, flashing me an appealing grin.

I roll my eyes and mount my mare, giving him a wave over my shoulder. “I’ll be back.”

“Do your brothers know?”

“Goodbye, Lawrence!” I yell over my shoulder.

“Be careful,” he calls when he realizes he can’t talk me out of it. “Watch out for troll pits! And don’t wander off the road!”

As soon as I leave the castle, my smile fades. As glad as I am to be away, it’s going to be a damp, miserable ride.

I feel for the letter in the inside pocket of my cloak, making sure it’s still there. As it keeps trying to do, my mind wanders to the strange thing I interrupted in Camellia’s chambers.

It’s none of your business, Clover.

Dropping my hand, I continue down the road.

* * *

The rain thankfully lets up by the following afternoon, leaving the air smelling clean but still too hot and humid for autumn. At least it will be pleasant in the mountains—if I can figure out the best way to reach them. Ahead of me, there’s a fork in the road, and both options seem to lead north. Which one do I take to find Henrik?

Wishing I’d thought to bring a map with me, I turn back and head to the farm stand I passed that was just outside a roadside orchard.

The last summer peaches are ripe, and many a housewife is here, bartering for a good deal with the Boermin man who runs the stand with his young granddaughter.

I wave at the girl when she spots me standing to the side, and she shyly waves back. She wears a tidy dress in pale pink, with a crisp apron over the top. She wears no boots, as the Boermin prefer to go barefoot—or rather, bare-hooved. A white bow adorns the coarse, tufty hair atop her head.

With their short, stocky build, stout snouts, tusks, and floppy ears, some people say they bear an uncanny resemblance to pigs, but that's a cruel connection.

The Boermin are a kind people, friendly and quiet, who have an affinity for working the earth. They also have wicked tempers, and if you even breathe the word “hog” in their presence, they'll likely chase you off their land with a sharp sickle.

The girl extends a wooden plank that holds sliced peaches, silently offering me a sample.

“They're the best this time of year,” I tell her as I bite into the juicy fruit. “Have you had a good crop?”

She nods.

“Did the rain slow down business?” I ask, looking around, careful to phrase my questions so she can answer with a shake or a nod of her head. Though the Boermin can understand the common tongue, they lack the necessary vocal cords to speak it. Instead, they communicate with a variety of grunts that very few in Caldenbauer can understand.

She extends a hand and waves it side to side as if to say, “Only somewhat.”

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“May I buy a couple?” I ask, motioning to the peaches. “I’m traveling, or I’d take more.”

Quickly, she nods and motions me into the orchard. I follow, bemused, wondering why she doesn’t pick a few from the baskets. Carefully, she studies several, and then she motions to them, silently asking if those will be all right.

I nod, and she plucks them from the tree. She then carefully wraps them in a white handkerchief and gestures to the painted wooden sign to show me what I owe.

Before I pay, I ask, “Can you tell me which way I need to go to reach Riverwren? I’m not sure if I should take a left or a right up ahead.”

She walks to the edge of the road and extends her arm, pointing to the right.

“Thank you so much.” Smiling, I slip a gold coin into her hand and bid her a good day.

The clouds break up as I ride, and the air becomes a little less sticky. I eat one of the peaches as I breathe in the smell of the wet, sun-warmed grass.

It almost feels like summer. Squirrels run up and down the massive cottontuft trees that dot the landscape, preparing for winter, and locusts clack as they leap from the road into the long meadow grass.

It feels serene out here—peaceful even, and I decide going after Henrik isn’t such a chore after all.

“Maybe I should become a courier,” I tell my horse with a satisfied sigh.

She doesn’t answer, but I’m sure she agrees. I give her neck a pat, and we continue toward the towering northern mountains.

9

Henrik

“And then hesaid he killed five calnauths in one hunting trip, but everyone knows that’s impossible.” Bartholomew takes a deep breath, preparing to continue. “So I told him—”

“Just a minute,” I say, glad to have a reason to cut my squire’s story short. “Hector, mind that goat. It’s chewing on the wagon wheel.”

It’s the morning of the fourth day, and an all-too-familiar headache already stiffens my shoulders and neck. So far, except for a few rainy days, the trip has gone smoothly. But after we cross the Ileastra River, the road will be less traveled and far rougher. Our progress will slow by half. I’m afraid it will be at least another week before we reach the northernmost guard post.

Bartholomew continues, “I told him if he didn’t have the furs to prove it—”

“The barge isn’t crossing today,” Simon hollers to me as he walks back into the meadow outside the village of Riverwren, where we made a temporary camp for the night. “We’ll have to wait for the captain to return.”

“Where’s the captain?”

Simon ambles over, giving the wagon with the cheese a wide berth. The trip has done

nothing to improve its aroma.

My second-in-command is a tall man, a few years older than I am, with close-cropped, cool brown hair. He's efficient and trustworthy, but he has an easy way about him that I envy. The men all like him.

They don't feel the same about me.

"They said his mother is sick," Simon answers. "He had to ride to Cabaranth for medicine."

"Of course, he didn't have a single fur to show for his trip," Bartholomew finishes smugly, unaware that I stopped listening to him ages ago.

"You're telling me there's only one man in the entire village who can run the barge?" I say to Simon.

The captain shrugs.

"What do we do, Henrik?" Bartholomew asks, finally focusing on the situation at hand.

Concealing my irritation, I say, "I suppose we wait."

The young duke looks at the sky. "What about the birds?"

In the last day, we've attracted a whole flock of Calendrian vultures. They circle high in the air for no apparent reason, making the livestock nervous.

“They’re scavengers,” I answer. “They won’t bother us.”

Bartholomew looks as if he wants to disagree, but he doesn’t voice his thoughts aloud. Instead, he asks, “Why don’t they build a bridge across the river instead of relying on a barge?”

Simon answers, “I’ve heard the river is unpredictable. Past bridges have been swept away with heavy spring runoff.”

“And the High Vale elves decided not to rebuild to keep the aynauths out of lower Caldenbauer,” Hector adds, ambling over now that he’s distracted the goat. He’s a young man, not much older than Bartholomew, but he’s been on plenty of supply runs. “The monsters can’t swim.”

The mention of the beasts catches my attention.

“Aynauths?” Bartholomew asks, surprised. “I thought they were reclusive. Don’t they usually stay in the mountains?”

Simon answers, “Before the humans came into power, they migrated lower and caused all kinds of trouble. Rumor has it they’re on the move again.”

Bartholomew’s eyes go wide. “Why?”

Simon shrugs. “No one knows.”

“Stay with the wagons,” I command. “I’m going to speak with the dockhand.”

Leaving the group, glad for a moment alone to hear myself think, I enter the village of Riverwren.

“Afternoon, soldier,” a young woman says from the door of the local tavern, leaning on her broom. Her eyes wander to the badge and pennant on my arm, and her face lights with interest. Practically purring, she amends, “Or should I say commander? Care for a rest? First drink’s on me.”

“Good day,” I return, politely ignoring her invitation. “Where would I locate the attendant who runs the barge tollhouse?”

“Luck is with you.” She nods her head toward the entrance. “He’s just inside.”

I pause, not entirely sure I believe her. With little choice, I give her a curt nod and walk up the old wooden steps.

“Trendleman,” the barmaid calls as she comes in behind me, her attention on the men at a full table. “Someone’s looking for you.”

The man in the middle of the bunch sits leaned back in his chair, with the two front legs off the ground. He appears to be close to my age, with a flop of blond hair and a lopsided hat, and he doesn’t bother to take his feet from the table to greet me. “You with the supply group? Listen, I just talked to your man. The captain’s not here. Consider yourself on holiday for the next few days.”

“The supplies are scheduled to arrive in Fortress Lintanry in a week’s time. It’s imperative we stay on schedule.”

With a knowing glance to his comrades, the man drops his feet and brings the legs of his chair back to the floor with a thud. “You’re new at this, aren’t you? All eager—I can spot your type. Now listen, I applaud your enthusiasm, but let me tell you, life is

a lot easier if you just go with the flow.”

The men around him laugh, and I grit my teeth, grasping for patience.

“Take a load off,” Trendleman says. “The captain will return when he returns.”

“There’s no one else who can man the barge?” I demand.

The attendant extends his hands as he looks around the table. “I don’t even have a boat. Do you, boys?”

Laughing, the rivermen all shake their heads. They’re lying, obviously, but it’s not going to do me a lot of good to stand here arguing with them.

“How about that drink, handsome?” the barmaid says, coming to my side. “I promise I can make your wait more pleasant.”

Declining tightly, I leave the tavern.

“Did you find someone to take us across?” Bartholomew asks when I return.

“No,” I answer, trying, but likely failing, to hide my frustration. “We have no choice but to wait for the captain. Get comfortable—we might be here a while.”

* * *

Two days later, a boy walks into camp, announcing the captain has returned and we may begin the tedious crossing.

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The man we've been waiting for must be nearing his eightieth year, and he reeks of drink. If he was truly tending a sick mother, then I'm a gnome.

He gives us a friendly grin when we meet him, smiling with all five of his teeth.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, boys," he says as we begin to load onto the barge.

The long, flat vessel is only large enough to transport a few wagons each trip, and the first few crossings end up taking most of the day.

The barge is fitted with an ancient Vallen propulsion apparatus that wheezes and sputters as its gears turn the massive paddle in the rear of the barge. Its bronze casing is dull and dented, and it's smudged with black oil. It was likely crafted before humans ever stepped foot in Caldenbauer.

Bartholomew catches me frowning at it, and he leans close. "I shudder to think how many energy crystals the captain goes through in a week—not that he didn't charge us enough to replace them."

I nod, not entirely at ease with the High Vale elves' creations. Many have been banned since King Telgin's time, including the armored, weapon-wielding golems that once guarded their cities. The forbidden contraptions were melted down long ago by order of the king, and now the elves use the rare, magically conductive talvernum metal to create the charmed trinkets and jewelry they sell.

As we slowly float across the long, wide river, the conversation turns to last month's joust. I stare across the water at the Dorian mountain range as it steadily rises in the

distance, thinking of the task ahead of me, making a mental list of all I must accomplish before I may return to Cabaranth.

We're just making the last crossing—trying to ignore the potent fragrance of the sun-warmed cheese as it mingles with the burnt scent of sludge that at one time might have been oil—when one of the circling vultures grows brave.

Hector hollers as the bird swoops low, knocking him off balance as it passes.

Spooked chickens begin to squawk, disliking the sudden appearance of the massive scavenger.

“Lousy vulture stole my pocket pie,” Hector says, astonished. “Right from my hand. Did you see it?”

I'm about to answer when a man who boarded the barge on this last crossing steps forward. He tilts his face toward the sky, and his large rack of antlers tilts back, nearly gouging my shoulder as he passes. “Magnificent creatures,” the Woodmore elf says. “I've never seen so many gathered together. What do you think has drawn them?”

“Our supplies,” I say tonelessly.

The elf meets my eyes. “They're rather pungent, aren't they?”

I nod, cursing myself for agreeing to take the cheese with us.

“I'm Pranmore.” He offers a friendly hand. “From Dulane, on my way to the Furlaskin Ruins.”

“Henrik,” I say brusquely.

He gestures toward the wagons. “What is all this?”

“Supplies for the northernmost guard post.”

“Are you in charge?”

“Yes,” I answer, not feeling up to making small talk.

“That’s quite an honor.”

Apparently, he’s easily impressed.

I give him another curt nod, hoping he’ll move on soon.

“Henrik is a man of few words,” Bartholomew says, joining the conversation. “But don’t let his humble silence fool you—he was hand-selected for the task by the king himself.”

A task usually given to an aging knight who fancies an outing.

But my mission isn’t merely a supply run since King Algernon wants me to check on the situation with the aynauths once I reach the guard post—at least that’s how I’m trying to convince myself the assignment isn’t a step in the wrong direction.

I think back to the men’s discussion about the creatures.

Simon said the aynauths moved lower before. Perhaps it’s a normal migratory pattern? Even though humans have been here for several hundred years, there’s still plenty we don’t know about the land.

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“Aggressive creatures, aren’t they?” Bartholomew says as another vulture sweeps close to the barge, circling the wagons.

“What do you say we toss the cheese into the water and let them have at it?” Hector suggests with a cheeky grin.

While I would like nothing more than to do just that, I made Lady Forlentina a promise.

“No,” I tell them. “It’s part of our supplies—recorded and accounted for.”

Hector rolls his eyes toward Simon, but I ignore him.

The bird drops again, this time pulling the canvas from atop the cargo.

“Away with you!” a guard hollers, waving his hands in the air as if that will scare the vulture away.

Before we make it to the opposite shore of the river, two more of the ugly brown and gray birds swoop down, attempting to snatch our supplies. But it’s not until we drive the last wagon from the barge that they become aggressive.

I’m just thanking the captain when Hector suddenly cries out. I turn and find the young man on the ground, under a large vulture’s hefty weight.

Immediately, I draw my sword from its sheath and take after the bird. It lifts itself into the air before I reach it, cawing angrily.

“Are you all right?” I demand, offering Hector a hand up.

His shirt sleeves hang loose, torn. Deep slashes line his upper arms where the vulture dug its talons into his skin. He swears when he spots the blood dripping from the wounds, turning pale.

But there’s no time to worry about Hector’s injury right now because more of the winged beasts descend upon the group.

“Don’t kill them!” the Woodmore elf yells, frantically waving his arms in the air as he runs into the fray. “They’re only hungry!”

“Unless you want to offer yourself as a meal, get out of the way,” I growl, shoving the elf back just before one of the vultures makes a dive at him.

The bird meets my blade and falls to the ground.

“Henrik!” Simon yells. “The supplies!”

Two of the vultures have successfully torn the canvas off one of the wagons, and they’re poking through the contents with their sharp, hooked beaks, tearing into sacks of grain. Rice flows from a slice in the burlap and spills onto the road.

The livestock bray, squawk, and squeal as the birds attack.

Several of my soldiers run after them with swords, but the vultures simply fly away.

“Don’t we have an archer in the group?” I holler.

“I have a crossbow!” Bartholomew says from somewhere behind me.

“No, wait—” Before I can finish, one of the vultures attacks me, grasping my shoulder with its talons before it meets my sword. It falls to the ground, as large as an eagle, with a wingspan that’s as wide as a grown man is tall.

“No!” the elf hollers when Bartholomew aims his massive crossbow into the air. He bumps into the young duke, causing the bow to fall sharply just as the bolt is released.

It whizzes past my shoulder and lodges itself into the side of a wagon, barely missing one of the tethered goats.

“Sorry, Henrik,” Bartholomew yells, wrestling his crossbow away from the elf.

This is madness.

I kill five more vultures, but the feathered beasts keep coming. The few archers assigned to the supply run all prove to be nearly worthless. They send arrow after arrow into the sky, missing every time.

“Can’t anyone shoot a bow?” I yell, losing my patience with the lot of them.

Suddenly, a vulture falls to the ground in front of me. It lands belly up, with an arrow protruding from its chest.

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I turn around, looking for the archer who shot it...and then I spot her and wish I hadn't.

Clover strides forward, dressed in a sapphire riding gown fit for a day on a formal hunt, bow raised as she concentrates on her next target. She releases another arrow, and one more vulture falls like a dead weight.

Lowering the bow, she turns her eyes on me. "Are you going to stand there staring at me, or are you going to help?"

Giving myself a mental shake, I return to the fight.

Finally giving up on their quarry, the flock begins to move out. Clover takes aim once more, preparing to shoot one of the last vultures that lingers, when a large one makes a dive at her from behind.

"Lady Clover!" I holler, racing across the road to intercept.

Just before the vulture can sink his wicked talons into her unprotected shoulders, I grab hold of the girl and yank her out of the way.

"What are you doing?" Clover cries, not yet realizing the bird is behind her.

Losing her balance, she drops her bow and falls against me. Trying to catch her, I step backward, twisting my ankle when I step in a rut in the road. Suddenly, we're tumbling back, back...and then down.

I manage to twist midfall, landing flat on my back to cushion Clover's landing. She ends up on top of me, with her long hair splayed across my face.

Before she can utter so much as I word, I grasp the back of her head and roll, protecting her from the vulture's attack. The bird digs its talons harmlessly into my leather brigandine before it flies away.

Breathing hard from the shock, Clover shoves the hair out of her face. She then slowly pulls her gaze to mine. We stare at each other for several long seconds, startled to find ourselves so close. So close, I can see the dark emerald specks in her spring-green eyes.

So close, in fact, that if I were so inclined—which I am not—I could prove to her that I do not kiss like a fish.

As soon as the dust settles around us, I realize the air has gone silent. The last of the flock has finally flown off, and my men have nothing better to focus on than their commander...and the girl pinned underneath him.

Suddenly realizing our awkward position, I jerk back, releasing my grip on her.

"Lady Clover!" Bartholomew exclaims, breaking the silence as he runs through the mess of wagons, spilled supplies, and dead vultures. "You were magnificent!"

After giving me a questioning look I can't decipher, Clover pushes herself to her feet. I follow her, dusting myself off as I stand.

"Truly, Lady Clover," Simon says, joining us. "That was incredible."

She shrugs as if humble, but I see the pride shining in her eyes.

Suddenly, all my men are crowding around the lady-in-waiting, acting as if they've never seen a woman use a bow before. I get butted out of the way until I'm on the outside of the group, standing amongst the birds that I almost single-handedly killed.

"It was nothing," Clover says, and for some reason, I glance over. Meeting my eyes through the crowd, she hides a smirk. "Henrik killed a few, too."

Slowly, the men turn back to me. Simon says, "Oh, yes. Good job, Henrik."

Shaking my head, I survey the damage. Immediately, my gaze lands on the elf nuisance. Tears flow down his face as he crouches over one of the scraggly vultures, holding it tenderly in his arms as he whispers soft nonsense.

Suddenly, a golden orb encircles both elf and bird. When it fades, the bird jerks away from the man and staggers into the air, flying off as if drunk.

"I can't do anything for the rest of them," the elf says, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand before he shoots me a reproachful look. "They're dead."

"What did you expect us to do?" I ask, not used to dealing with his people. "Look around—half my men are injured—and you would have been as well if I hadn't pulled you out of the way."

Sniffing, the elf glances at the group, attempting to smooth his long brown hair as he nods. "Though it's tragic, I suppose it's not entirely your fault. I will lend my magic to your men."

"You're a healer?" I ask, taking a second look at him.

He's a slender man, with fair skin and faint, fawn-like freckles along his hairline. He wears a simple brown linen tunic over black trousers, and his boots are tall. Oddly

enough, even without his antlers, he'd resemble a deer.

The man nods sagely. "It's my gift."

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“We would appreciate any help you can offer,” I say, and then I scan the group, looking for a particular girl. When I spot her, I command, “You—follow me.”

Clover presses her lips into a thin line, looking like she would like to argue.

Reluctantly, she leaves her group of ardent admirers and follows me to the side of the road where we won't be overheard.

“What are you doing here?” I demand, hoping to sound like an authoritative figure and not a simple blacksmith's son who's still flustered from the ridiculous situation we found ourselves in.

Clover glances over her shoulder, smiling to herself. “Saving the day, apparently.”

“I had it well under control.”

“Sure you did, soldier.”

When the barmaid called me by the title, it was mildly obnoxious, but when Clover says it, I want to grind my teeth together.

“Why are you here?” I ask again.

She slips her hand into a deep side pocket of her gown and produces a sealed letter. “It seems your beloved believes I'm a courier in my free time.”

“This is from...” Even though Clover saw us together, I won't say the princess's

name aloud.

“Camellia,” Clover so helpfully supplies, and then she cocks her head to the side, her eyes wickedly bright. “Do you have more than one beloved?”

Scoffing, I take the letter, wishing Camellia would act with a little more discretion. Why would she send Clover of all people, and what could she possibly need that is so urgent, she had to tell me while I was on a supply run?

“And now, my task is complete,” Clover says, already turning. “Good luck with your birds.”

“Wait,” I call to her, ignoring the letter for now. “How did you get across the river?”

Clover wasn’t on the barge.

“I saw you crossing, so I asked one of the local men if he would take me.” She gestures toward the riverbank, where the floppy-haired man from the tavern waits for her. When he spots me, he raises a smug hand in greeting.

I walk with Clover, meeting him.

“Nice boat,” I deadpan.

The man laughs, unrepentant. He then turns his eyes on Clover and offers her an exaggerated bow. “Are you ready to return, my lady?”

Clover takes his hand as he helps her into the small vessel, barely giving me a second glance. Though she’s not my responsibility, she’s still a noblewoman of the kingdom, and I don’t like the way he’s leering at her.

Sternly reminding myself Clover is none of my concern, I turn away and break the seal on Camellia's letter.

My eyes scan the note, and my frown deepens. What does Camellia mean she suspects Clover of nefarious deeds? Black magic? Sorcery?

I read the last bit, growing increasingly agitated.

Watch her for me, Henrik. Keep her close and don't let her out of your sight—and whatever you do, don't listen to a word she says. I'll gather the evidence needed to convict her by the time you return.

You're the only person I can trust.

Yours truly,

Camellia

I turn back toward the water, watching as the girl floats farther and farther from the shore. Surely Camellia doesn't expect me to keep Clover with me on the supply run? Haven't I been saddled with enough? Does she know what she's asking?

After exhaling a weary sigh, I holler across the water, "Lady Clover, wait!"

10

Clover

“You can pretend you don’t hear him if you like,” Trendleman says with a grin.

Ignoring the man, I turn toward the soldier on the shore. “What is it?”

“Come with us,” Henrik yells.

Startled, I blink at him. “On your supply run?”

He nods.

“Why?”

He rubs the back of his neck, looking as if asking me to stay is the last thing he wants to do. Still forced to holler, he says, “You’re a good archer. We could use you.”

I laugh, not sure I believe him. I mean, yes, I am a better archer than any of those fools. But for Henrik to admit it and ask me to stay? It’s odd.

“What’ll it be?” Trendleman asks. “Will you return to Riverwren or go back to the uptight captain?”

“He’s a commander,” I correct absently.

And what will it be? Will I go back to Camellia...or stay here with Henrik? I can practically hear Calla's voice in my head, telling me I'd be a fool to return to Cabaranth with that offer.

But my parents and brothers will be angry if I stay. Camellia will be upset as well, but Lawrence will smooth things over with his father, so the princess is the least of my concerns.

Drawing my bottom lip between my teeth, I think back to Camellia's wounded hand and the bloody rag Hellebore carried. It was probably just as Camellia said—she accidentally sliced her palm while cutting an apple. Hellebore likely used the cloth to stop the flow of blood.

Still...perhaps it would be best to stay away from the castle for a few weeks.

"Well?" Trendleman asks, growing impatient as he fights the lazy current. "Are you coming or staying?"

"I'm staying," I decide impulsively.

With a shake of his head, he turns the boat around.

Henrik waits for me, and he offers his hand as soon as the boat skims upon the sandy bank. I pause before accepting it and study the soldier. "You're sure you want me to stay?"

Giving me a tight smile, he nods.

My gaze shifts to his other hand, where Camellia's letter is crushed in his palm.

That's...bizarre.

Curiosity gets the best of me. What did Camellia have to tell him that was so important? I assumed it was a love letter...but what if it was something else? Something that had to do with the masculine voice I heard in the closet.

I don't want any blacksmith—I want Henrik.

“Bad news?” I ask, jerking my head toward the letter.

Henrik studies me. His eyes are somewhere between gray and blue, and they're a little disconcerting. The soldier simply stands there...looking all irritating and handsome, unknowingly reminding me there's a reason all the girls swoon when he comes to court.

Suddenly, the memory of lying in his arms, with his hand protecting my head from the hard press of the dirt and his body blocking me from the vulture's attack, leaps unbidden into my mind.

“It's not good news,” he finally answers.

It takes me a moment to remember what I asked him. When I do, I smirk. “Oh, I wouldn't worry too much. From what I saw, Camellia is very fond of you.”

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As I was hoping, he bristles like a Calendrian porcuhog.

Still looking at me, Henrik asks, “How much do I owe you?”

“Excuse me?” I demand, wondering if he’s asking what it will take to keep me quiet about his romantic affair with the princess.

His eyes slide to Trendleman. “For bringing Lady Clover across the river. The crown will compensate you for your time and effort.”

Looking quietly amused, Trendleman shakes his head and then gives me a wink. “It was my pleasure. Next time you’re in Riverwren, you’ll be sure to look me up, won’t you?”

With a laugh, I say, “I have no choice—you have my horse in your paddock, and my things are still at the inn. Take care of them for me?”

“With the knowledge that you will return, I will gladly see to them,” he says gallantly, waving as he goes.

Once Trendleman is well on his way, Henrik turns back to me. “It’s in your best interest not to flirt with my men like that. They’ll misunderstand.”

I roll my eyes, shouldering my bow, and follow him back to the group. The situation doesn’t look any better than when we left it. An entire sack of onions is strewn across the road. Rice and oats spill from bags.

Somehow, several chickens escaped their pen, and Bartholomew is chasing them down the road.

“We have a problem, Henrik,” one of the men says as he walks up, eyeing me curiously. He wears an emerald arm pennant, showing he’s in the Soldier Class like Henrik. However, his medallion is bronze instead of gold. He’s a captain, likely acting as Henrik’s second on the mission.

Henrik nods, silently telling him to get on with it.

“One of the drivers left.”

“Who?”

“Gertferd. He was... Well, he was wounded in the fray. The emotional elf healed him, but he claimed he wasn’t getting paid enough for this—” he cuts off abruptly as his eyes move to me again. Lamely, he finishes, “Stuff.”

“What do you mean he was wounded?” Henrik demands.

“He got an arrow in the rump,” a nearby guard says, looking as if he’s trying not to laugh. “No one’s fessing up to the accident.”

I press my lips together, trying very hard not to snort out a laugh myself.

“What do you mean he left?” Henrik demands. “Haven’t we already paid him?”

The captain shrugs, his meaning clear—it’s not his problem to solve.

“Fine,” Henrik says heavily. “One of you can take his spot.” He turns to the group. “Who will volunteer to drive Gertferd’s wagon?”

Several dozen eyes drop to the ground as Henrik's men suddenly find themselves wildly interested in the state of their boots.

"What's wrong with Gertferd's cart?" I ask warily.

Finished with his chicken chasing, Bartholomew steps up next to me. "It carries a rather pungent cheese," he says, wincing.

"If it reeks so badly it's drawing vultures, don't you think you'd do everyone a service by tossing it out?" I ask.

"We can't," Henrik begins, "It's—"

"Recorded and accounted for," several of the men say before he can finish.

Looking as if he doesn't think he's getting paid enough for this "stuff" either, Henrik ignores their good-natured ribbing and turns away. "Find someone to drive the wagon."

* * *

"Clover will ride with me," Henrik says, ending the argument about with whom I'll travel.

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“What did I do to deserve that?” I mutter under my breath, making sure it’s just loud enough Henrik will hear.

He turns his stern gaze on me, unimpressed. But he’s just in a foul mood because he ended up stuck driving the cheese cart.

“Lady Clover,” Bartholomew says, gallantly stepping to the front of the group. “Please, take my Vidnar. The horse is as gentle as a lamb and will take excellent care of you. I will gladly accept your place beside Henrik.”

“Bartholomew,” Henrik begins. “Though that is—”

“I accept your kind offer,” I say to the young duke, interrupting Henrik. “Thank you.”

“Clover will ride with me,” Henrik says again, and this time his voice is rigid with authority. “We have things to discuss.”

We do?

Though I don’t particularly care to have a conversation with Henrik, my curiosity gets the best of me—as it so often does.

“Fine,” I say heavily, making it clear I’m not riding with him because I want to.

Henrik offers his hand to help me into the wagon, and I take it to humor him. I wrinkle my nose as I adjust my burdensome riding gown and its umpteen layers of skirts, deciding the stench was the reason Gertferd left—not the vultures. And yet,

there's something familiar about it.

Odd.

"I've sent a message to King Algernon back with the captain of the barge," Henrik says once he takes the seat next to me.

"All right...?"

He glances at me, looking a little impatient. "I let him know you've decided to accompany us. I'm sure he'll share the news with your parents. I felt it was too forward for me to send something to them myself since we have not been personally introduced."

With a cluck of his tongue and the gentle shake of the reins, the wagon lurches forward, following the others in front of us. We're in the back, likely because no one wants to travel behind us.

Henrik falls quiet, and I wait for him to continue. When he doesn't, I turn my eyes on him. "Is that all? You realize that took all of five seconds and you could have easily told me before we left."

He glances at me from the corner of his eye, looking silently pleased.

Apparently, he decided that if he was going to be subjected to the wagon, I might as well join him. Misery loves company, after all, and he and I haven't exactly gotten off on the right foot.

But it's awkward riding with Henrik. All I can think about when I look at him is finding him with Camellia in the garden.

I shudder at the thought. What the man sees in her, I have no idea.

“Are you cold?” Henrik asks, looking straight ahead.

“What?”

The early autumn sunshine beats down on us, hot and balmy.

He glances at me. “You shivered. There are blankets in the back if you need one.”

I’m tempted to tell him why I shivered, but I hold my tongue.

“I’m fine,” I answer primly, clasping my hands on my lap.

We travel in silence for a long while before he clears his throat, looking as if he wants to say something. I’m just about to tell him to spit it out when he finally gets on with it. “I don’t think we’ve ever been properly introduced.”

I shake my head at his formal tone. Can any man truly be this uptight?

“I’m Henrik,” he continues. “My father—”

“Is the royal blacksmith. Your sister, Brielle, attends Dulnmarin’s. You’ve been working toward your seal since you were a tiny tot, and you probably could best most of the king’s men with a sword by the time you were Bartholomew’s age.”

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A flummoxed expression passes over his face again, and he corrects, “I was fifteen when I joined the infantry.”

I roll my eyes. “The point is, I know who you are, Henrik.”

Suddenly, a horrible thought crosses my mind. Appalled, I say, “But you don’t know me, do you?”

He glances over, meeting my eyes briefly. “You’re one of Camellia’s ladies.”

“Lovely.” I roll my eyes, so glad that, first and foremost, I’m known to be associated with the princess.

“Your father serves upon King Algernon’s council. Your eldest brother is a knight commander, and the other two are bannerets.”

“Anything else?” I say wryly.

“You’re friendly with Lawrence.” He says the prince’s name with distaste.

It’s a mark against me, to be sure.

“And you’re a decent archer,” he adds.

I press a hand to my chest, pretending to be offended. “Decent? If I am only decent, why did you ask me along?”

He drops his voice and nods ahead of us. “Because decent is better than what I’ve got.”

I cross my arms, shaking my head.

And then Henrik looks over, making me forget what we were talking about. His eyes are soft, and his mouth curves up in a tentative smile. “All right—you’re good.”

I find myself returning his smile, and my stomach suddenly warms. I’ll admit he’s a bit charming with his broad shoulders, muscular arms, and serious eyes. In his own way.

“Especially for a woman,” he has the nerve to add.

My warm thoughts evaporate, and I scoff under my breath.

“I didn’t mean it as an insult,” he says, looking confused.

“Well, it certainly wasn’t a compliment.”

Irritated with my reaction to him, I gesture to the captain who rides ahead of us. “What’s that man’s name?”

Henrik seems confused by the abrupt change of subject, but he answers, “Simon.”

With a nod, I call out to the captain.

“What are you—”

“Yes, my lady?” Simon immediately yells back, turning his horse around. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m not stopping the wagon for you two to switch places if that’s what you have in mind,” Henrik says under his breath.

“That’s not a problem—I’ll just ride with him.” Without a second thought, I twist on the bench and hop from the slow-moving wagon.

“May I join you?” I ask when the soldier reaches me.

Simon’s face goes blank. “You want to ride with me?”

“That’s right.”

“Y...yes.” He clears his throat. “Of course.”

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I feel Henrik's eyes boring into me as Simon helps me atop his gelding, but I don't bother to look at him.

11

Henrik

I tried to be cordial, but Clover refuses to be civil. Now she and Simon ride his horse, chatting like they're the best of friends.

Irrationally agitated, I stare at them. Clover has been with the group less than four hours, and she's already a thorn in my side.

I certainly hope that after I earn my seal, the royal family will see me as something more than a glorified nursery maid. Was Bartholomew not enough?

The reason why I'm tending Clover comes to my mind, and I frown. Camellia said she suspects Clover of sorcery, but that doesn't seem right.

King Algernon sent a group of us to clear a coven of sorceresses from the Kessamare Woods several years ago, and I studied much in the weeks that led up to the mission. Dark magic users have a certain feeling about them—just looking at them makes your skin crawl. Besides that, the blood magic taints them and makes them age beyond their years.

Some say sorceresses can siphon the effects into a tambrel stone so it doesn't affect them directly. If Clover were a magic user, could she have done that? If so, she would

carry the stone upon her. Could she have tucked it away somewhere? Obviously, she wouldn't be bold enough to wear it as a pendant on a chain.

I study the girl intently, looking for some sign she's been corrupted by the dark arts.

Simon pauses ahead, and Clover gets off the horse. She hurries to the wagon in front of them, stopping next to a lamb that's managed to wrap the rope lead around his front leg. The poor creature stumbles every time he takes a step.

Gently, Clover unwraps the lamb's leg, laughing when it leaps forward. She then turns back to Simon with a grin.

I shake my head, suspecting Camellia's wrong. Clover might be many irritating things, but she's not a sorceress.

* * *

Several flies buzz around my head, landing on me occasionally and nearly driving me mad. We plod along at the wagons' pace, which I could easily outwalk, making me wonder if we'll ever reach the guard post. The road is rutted and rough, and my spine is stiff from sitting on the hard wooden seat.

Thankfully, I've almost gotten used to the aroma wafting from the basket in the back. Almost.

I should have made someone else drive the wagon—I certainly have the right—but I felt responsible for the cargo and couldn't bring myself to give the direct order.

Now I'm regretting that decision.

I'm rubbing the back of my neck, dreaming of a hot meal and a bath, when the horses

slow.

“Why are we stopping?” I ask Simon, who finally rides alone.

Clover is ahead, on Bartholomew’s beloved horse, Vidnar, and my squire sits next to me. The only one who looks regretful about the new riding arrangement is Simon.

“I’ll go find out,” the captain says, nudging his horse forward. A few minutes later, he hollers back, “They’ve spotted a troll pit ahead.”

I groan, hoping it will be easy to avoid.

“An actual troll pit?” Clover asks, her voice bright with curiosity. She turns to Hector from atop Bartholomew’s horse. “I’ve never seen one.”

“They’re not terribly exciting,” Hector says with a laugh. “But they can cause all kinds of damage if you neglect to discover one. We lost a horse on the last supply run. We missed the blasted thing, and he stumbled into it, breaking several legs.”

“That’s awful,” Clover exclaims.

“The scouts found this one in time,” Simon reassures her as he returns. Then, to me, he says, “We’ll have to go around it, but it’s in a bit of a tricky spot.”

They’re always in tricky spots. Trolls, though vile, disgusting little creatures, aren’t stupid. They have a habit of digging their pits in the roads, and then they camouflage them with branches and dirt—whatever they can find.

A few days later, they’ll come back en masse, checking to see if they’ve caught any unsuspecting travelers. If you’re unlucky enough to get stuck in one of their traps, they’ll eat you and spirit away your belongings like packrats.

Thankfully, at only six to eight feet deep, it's not difficult to escape a troll pit unless you're wounded in the fall or frail to begin with. Still, Hector's right—they can cause a fair amount of damage.

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I hand the wagon reins to Bartholomew so I can survey the pit.

Clover follows me, walking Bartholomew's horse by my side. I glance at her, frowning, but she only smiles when she catches me. "What does a troll look like, soldier? Have you ever seen one?"

I press my lips into a thin line, irritated with her for no reason I can pinpoint. "I have."

"Well?" she asks.

"They're a little larger than a tomcat, with a riot of scruffy black fur that protrudes from their bodies in all directions, making them look like a round, mangy ball. Their short muzzles, and their razor teeth, hide in all that hair, so if you get a glimpse of them, you'll likely only spot their black, beady eyes."

"Do you think they'll attack us while we're stuck here?"

Most women would look nervous while saying something like that, but Clover almost looks eager for a fight.

"Trolls are nocturnal." My frown deepens. "They don't come out until dusk."

Seeming satisfied with that, she nods. "How do they dig such a large hole if they're so small?"

"They have long claws on their front feet, and it's usually a group affair."

“Have you ever fallen into one of their pits?”

I choose not to answer, instead focusing on the guards who are removing pine boughs from the pit ahead. As Simon said, it’s in a difficult spot. The road narrows around it, and there are short, rocky inclines on either side.

Perhaps we could go around the hill, but runoff has created a deep ditch on the left side of the road, making it impossible to get the wagons over, and the other side is blocked with trees.

We have no choice but to fill the blasted hole.

“Get shovels, men,” I command. “We have to bury it.”

Hector eyes the sky. “It will be evening before we’re finished.”

The sun is overhead now, but it will take a good while to fill the pit.

“Then we best hurry.”

12

Clover

I’ve been around plenty of authority figures in my life, but Henrik is an anomaly.

Absently nibbling my lip, I watch as the soldier shovels dirt with the guards even though he’s ranked so much higher than they. Like the rest of the men, Henrik pulled off his leather brigandine, so he works in only his shirt. Even that he’s rolled up above his elbows. My eyes stray to his emerald arm pennant and the golden medallion that proclaims he’s reached the highest rank in the Soldier Class.

From there, my eyes absently wander down his arms. The muscles in his forearms tense as he works the shovel, and when sweat rolls down his brow, he wipes it away with his shoulder.

Perhaps sensing my attention, he suddenly glances my way. Our eyes meet, and my mouth goes dry.

Henrik lifts his brows as if to ask me why I'm staring at him, and, heaven help me, I cannot seem to look away.

"The sun is hot today, isn't it?" Bartholomew says from my side. "Are you very warm, Lady Clover?"

"Mmm," I answer absently—and then I come to my senses. I rip my eyes from Henrik and turn to the young duke. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

Bartholomew studies me, looking concerned. "You look flushed, my lady. Perhaps you should sit under the shade of a tree—I will fetch cool water for you from the nearby stream."

My gaze nervously darts back to Henrik. I expect to find his attention has gone back to his task, but instead, he casually rakes his eyes over me in question.

"Flushed?" I respond, my voice a little too high, resisting the urge to fan my face. "Certainly not."

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Bartholomew's eyebrows come together with confusion, and the poor boy looks as though he's wondering if the sun has addled my brain as well as caused my skin to blush red.

"How much longer do you think this will take, soldier?" I ask Henrik, deciding it's better to address him instead of letting him think I was casting longing glances his way—which I certainly was not.

Even if he is a little more appealing right now than usual.

If I were a lesser woman, my mind might wander—perhaps remembering how he held me when the vulture attacked, going as far as to reminisce on the way his body felt pressed next to mine. Thankfully, I am not that easily flustered...

"It will take less time if you grab a shovel," Henrik responds, to which several of the men draw in surprised gasps.

Beside me, Bartholomew looks positively scandalized. "Henrik, surely you can't be suggesting that Lady Clover—"

"How hard can it be?" I walk to the pit, which is now about half full. I extend my hand, asking Henrik to give me his shovel. "If you need a break, I can dig for a while."

A grim smile plays at Henrik's lips, and he narrows his eyes. Without a word, he offers me the handle, calling my bluff.

Not about to run away, I take the shovel from him, wincing as the rough wood digs into the palm of my hand.

Turning my eyes from him, I walk to the side of the road, where the men are collecting dirt, and press the shovel into the ground—at least, it's supposed to go into the ground.

Instead, the sharp point of the spade cuts into the first few inches, and then it stops.

I must have found a rock—not a problem. I move the shovel over and push it into the dirt. Again, it sinks several inches and then seems to get stuck.

“You’re going to have to put your weight into it,” Henrik says from nearby, drinking from a waterskin. “The earth in this region is clay, and it dries like a brick.”

“Lady Clover,” Bartholomew says from nearby, practically wringing his hands. “Please, let me—”

I wave my hand, cutting him off. “No, it’s fine.”

After watching the men around me, I realize I need to press my foot to the top of the spade, as they are doing.

I smile as the shovel digs into the earth at least halfway. Deciding that’s enough for my first time, I awkwardly tilt the shovel back, trying to lift the dirt...and finding it to be quite a bit heavier than it looks.

All right, I’ll admit it—it’s not as easy as I thought.

My brothers may have taught me many things, from shooting to hunting to riding bareback...but they never made me do manual labor.

I'm not sure they've ever done manual labor.

Apparently, there was a reason Henrik was getting all hot and sweaty—the task is more difficult than it looks. However, I am stubborn.

I just need some practice...and perhaps a little more muscle.

“What’s wrong, your ladyship?” Henrik says innocently. “Not accustomed to grunt-work?”

“It’s fine.” I grit my teeth as I balance the dirt upon the shovel and walk to the pit. With great satisfaction, I dump the earth in.

It barely makes a dent.

“All right,” Henrik says, tossing the water skin to Bartholomew, finally taking pity on me. “That’s enough.”

“I’ve got it.” I hold the shovel away from him, fully aware I’m acting like a stubborn toddler.

But there’s something about the way the soldier is looking at me that is driving me mad.

“Lady Clover,” Henrik says with abundant patience. “You’ve proven your point.”

“I wasn’t aware I was making one.” I grimace as I press my foot to the shovel to scoop up more dirt and feel the unmistakable bite of a splinter digging into my finger. “I’m just doing my part—”

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The words get caught in my throat as the soldier comes up behind me and sets his hands on my shoulders. He nudges my foot off the shovel with his boot and then presses the spade into the earth himself. The move puts us close.

Very close.

My back rests against his chest, and his leg presses next to mine.

“The choice is yours,” Henrik says from entirely too near my ear. “We can work as a team, or you can relinquish the shovel. Either way, we need to put more than a cupful of dirt into the pit at a time if we want to be finished by dusk.”

Slowly, I turn my head to look at him. Henrik wears a patronizing look that makes me want to dump him into the pit.

Or maybe...

My eyes take an unexpected detour to his lips.

No.

Bartholomew is right—the sun has addled my brain. Immediately, I relinquish the shovel and duck out from under his arms.

I fist my hands as I walk away, serenaded by the sound of his soft chuckle, feeling like I lost an unspoken battle of wills.

* * *

We make it well past the troll pit by dark, and we stop in a grassy, open area that Simon declares will be easy to guard.

I've never slept outside before.

"We're going to camp?" I ask Simon, trailing behind him as he surveys the area, trying to hide my concern. "There isn't a village somewhere up ahead?"

One with a nice little inn...

"I have a canvas tent that you may use," the captain says warmly. "You won't have all the comforts of the castle, but I can assure you that you'll have proper privacy, and you'll be away from the elements."

Regretting my decision to stay with the group, I offer him a tight smile.

Every part of me is sore—my backside from riding, my back from the tiny bit of shoveling I did, and my finger, where the stubborn splinter remains buried.

And now I'm going to sleep on the ground.

"What about insects?" I murmur to myself after he's walked away. "Or rodents? Or trolls?"

The beasts didn't seem so disturbing in the light of day, but now...

Not only that, but I have nothing except the clothes on my back. What will I sleep in?

"Here," Henrik says from behind me. When I turn, he shoves a bundle into my arms.

“What is it?” I ask, wrinkling my nose at the weight of it.

“It’s a bedroll.”

“A bed...roll,” I say slowly.

“You unroll it.” Henrik pauses as if he cannot believe he’s forced to utter the explanation. “And it becomes your bed.”

I look down, feeling a little ill. I’m supposed to sleep on this scratchy, canvasworm?

“Lovely,” I say brightly, giving it a subtle sniff. It smells like campfire smoke. “Has it been recently laundered? I mean, has anyone slept on it...before?”

My skin crawls at the thought.

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Henrik studies me a moment before he turns away. “It’s mine.”

My stomach wobbles, and I look down at the bedroll. As he walks away, I ask, “What will you sleep on?”

“Don’t worry about me, Lady Clover. I can take care of myself.”

It’s clear from his tone that he’s insinuating I cannot. And...he’s not wrong. Everything I brought with me—my clothes, my horse, my nightdress, the tonic and face cream I use before bed, and even the soft ties for my hair—are in Riverwren, waiting for me to return.

Tonight, I’m just going to have to make do.

A few hours later, after the fire has died down, we’ve eaten a meager meal, and Simon has constructed my tent, I leave the group to retire for the night.

“Don’t worry about a thing,” Simon assures me. “Henrik has assigned several guards on a nightly rotation. You are completely safe, and if you should require anything, someone will be awake to assist you.”

My fingers tremble as I clench Henrik’s bedroll close, and I nod as if unconcerned. After all, am I bothered by a night in the woods?

Certainly not.

I push my way through the flap, grateful Simon put a canvas drop cloth underneath

the tent to separate me from the ground.

And the insects.

Rodents.

And possibly trolls.

“Trolls don’t come up through the ground,” I whisper, impatient with myself.

And then I freeze in the dark. They don’t, do they? What do I know of the nightly movements of trolls?

Deciding it’s best to sleep fully dressed, I fumble with the bedroll’s ties and then attempt to lay it flat upon the ground. I have no pillow.

No blanket.

Just the canvas worm.

Gingerly, I lie on it, hugging myself tightly. A rock digs into my ribcage, and another pokes at my hip. The ground is uneven and lumpy, and—

“It’s an adventure,” I say aloud. “Be brave, Clover.”

I close my eyes, determined to find sleep. Slowly, the sounds of the men talking die down. The wind whispers through the nearby cottontuft trees, and shadows fall on the tent as the moons rise for the night.

Slowly, I grow cold. Also, my corset twisted as I tried to find a comfortable position earlier in the night, and now it jabs into my flesh.

Despite all that, I'm finally dozing when something shrieks from not far away.

I yelp, sitting up. What was that?

My eyes have adjusted to the night, but the moons must have gone behind clouds because it's still too dark to see well.

"Lady Clover," Henrik's deep voice says from outside the tent. "Don't be alarmed. It was only a leopard."

I huff out my held breath.

"Only a leopard?" I demand. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"There's plenty of prey in this area—it wants nothing to do with us."

He goes quiet, making me think he left. I must have disturbed him when I screamed. Maybe he was on night patrol and just happened to be walking by.

If so...I wish he'd come back.

It's lonely here in the dark, with only the local predators' screams to lull me to sleep. I sit on the bedroll, exhausted. Feeling like an overly emotional female, I draw my legs to my chest and clasp my arms around them.

"Are you all right in there?" Henrik asks, making me jump again.

"I was until you startled me," I snap.

He laughs a little, but it's not an arrogant sound.

I press my hand to my racing heart, telling it to stop overreacting.

"Bartholomew made tea earlier. Nobody else wanted it, so I think there's some left by the fire. Would you..." Henrik pauses, sounding uncomfortable. "Would you like a cup?"

I pull back the flap. "Tea?"

The soldier sits in front of my tent, with his back facing me and his hands pressed into the earth behind him.

"How long have you been there?" I ask, startled.

He's silent for several seconds, and then he reluctantly says, "Most of the night."

“Why?”

He gives me a wry look over his shoulder I can just make out in the dark. “To protect you from insects and rodents...and possibly trolls.”

I close my eyes, sternly telling myself not to mutter to myself anymore—even if I don’t believe anyone is about.

Slowly, I stand, accepting Henrik’s hand when he offers it.

Once we’re on our feet, he frowns at me. Saurene, the smaller of the two moons, comes out from behind a cloud, giving us a sliver of silvery light to see by.

“What?” I ask self-consciously, running my hand over my riding gown, resisting the urge to tug my corset back into place.

Gruffly, he asks, “Is that comfortable to sleep in?”

“Terribly,” I answer immediately.

He nods, turning to the nearby fire, obviously having no desire to pursue the conversation further.

I watch Henrik take the copper tea kettle from the grate with a heavy leather glove. He then fetches a tin cup from a nearby pack of supplies and pours the steaming liquid into it.

“Bartholomew might have brought sugar,” he says, his eyes on the cup, “but he’s asleep. And I’m afraid we have no cream.”

I gratefully accept the cup, wincing at the heat through the tin, turning it to hold the

handle. “I can drink it plain.”

“Careful,” he says quietly. “The metal gets hot.”

“Now you warn me,” I say, but I soften the words with a hesitant smile.

I shiver as a gust of wind passes over the clearing and take a tentative sip of the tea. It’s a little bitter from sitting so long, but it’s welcome all the same.

With a content sigh, I settle on a log someone pulled over to the fire earlier in the night.

Henrik rounds the log, apparently leaving me now that I have my tea. Which is fine.

The company would have been nice, I suppose, but I’m a big girl. I can sit alone by the fire.

I shiver again.

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In contrast to the hot tea, the night seems even colder now. At least it is until the chill is blocked by fabric that's suddenly draped over my bare shoulders.

“Warmer?” Henrik asks, coming around the log once more and sitting next to me.

I clutch his cloak, feeling awkward—and incredibly grateful he didn't leave after all. “I don't remember mentioning I was cold.”

The soldier looks over, and the firelight plays across his face as his eyes trail over me. He wears a skeptical look—one I might bestow on a child.

I suppose that's how I've been acting, though Henrik is certainly not as innocent as he would like to pretend.

“Thank you,” I murmur, looking down at my tea. After a moment, I glance back at him. “Why were you really outside the tent? I doubt it was to protect me from mice.”

Henrik's expression becomes pensive as he stares at the fire. “You're the only woman on the supply run, and you're Count Flauret's daughter at that. I thought it was wise to...”

“Protect my virtue?” I say, enjoying the embarrassment that crosses his face more than I should.

“I have a responsibility to your family to keep you safe, and I don't take such things lightly.”

“What are you going to do? Guard me every night? I knew you were a soldier among soldiers, but I didn’t know you are a man so great he doesn’t need sleep.”

“Simon is a good captain,” he says, ignoring my teasing. “I trust him to take your nightly guard. Bartholomew, too, would protect you at all costs—if he didn’t fall asleep.”

I smile. “It’s an awful lot of nuisance. Did you consider it when you asked me to join you?”

His expression hardens. “Yes.”

A strange response. I’m not quite sure what to make of this man.

He invited me to join the run, and he’s certainly determined to keep me safe, but at the same time, he’s so rigid. Maybe he’s just uncomfortable.

But why?

Is it because of what I saw between Camellia and him? Perhaps.

The memory isn’t a welcome one, not when I’m feeling rather cozy next to him by the fire.

“Thank you for the tea,” I say, rising when I’ve finished. “I think I can sleep now.”

I begin to untie his cloak, but he holds up a hand. “Keep it for the night. I don’t need it.”

I should give it back, but the air really is cold. If Henrik is foolish enough to offer it, that’s his problem.

“Very well.” I cross the camp and slip back into the tent.

I lay atop the bedroll, far warmer with Henrik’s cloak covering me like a blanket.

But as I hear shifting noises from the front of the tent, guilt riddles me.

Henrik is out there, in the frigid night—watching over me like a personal bodyguard.

With a sigh, I push myself up to my knees and stick my head out of the tent. “You’re sure you don’t need your cloak?”

“Go to sleep, Lady Clover,” Henrik answers, sounding as if he’s suppressing a smile.

“All right...”

I return to the bedroll and wrap up in his cloak, feeling the tug of sleep pull at my eyelids.

Henrik can’t say I didn’t try—if he freezes, it will be his own fault.

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With the knowledge he's just outside, I close my eyes and drift.

* * *

The soundsof the men breaking camp wake me. I yawn as I sit up, taking Henrik's cloak with me.

Early sunlight glows through the canvas tent, and the air is far warmer than it was last night.

Before I step outside, I comb through my hair with my fingers, vowing I'll buy a brush in the next village we reach.

"Good morning, Lady Clover," Bartholomew says when I join the others. "Did you sleep all right?"

Self-consciously, I run my hand over my hair. "Well enough for my first time in a tent."

"Did you stay warm?"

I think of Henrik's cloak, which I left folded on the bedroll. I didn't dare wear it in front of the men.

"It was chilly without a blanket, but I managed." I frown, wondering who created such a miserable thing. Grouchily, I add, "The fabric was a bit scratchy though."

Bartholomew looks flummoxed. “The fleece was scratchy? Are you perhaps sensitive to wool?”

“Fleece? No, mine was canvas.”

“On the outside, yes, but the inside is soft fleece.”

I stare at him, thinking hard. “Inside?”

Henrik emerges from my tent, busy packing up, and he carries both the bedroll and his cloak. He pauses as he passes me, his eyes glittering with amusement. As if he means to tell me a secret, he leans in a little closer. “You’re supposed to sleepinit—not on top of it.”

As if to demonstrate, he opens the bedroll, revealing the soft, warm lining within.

I flush with embarrassment. As he walks away, I exclaim, “It was dark!”

The soldier has the audacity to laugh.

“You could have shown me.”

Simon steps up next to me, crossing his arms as he gives me a sideways look. “I’d be happy to tuck you in tonight, Lady Clover.”

Rolling my eyes, I swat his shoulder. “Kind of you to offer.”

“Anytime.” He grins, turning away. “We’re getting ready to leave. Will you ride with me again?”

Henrik tenses from his position by the wagon, and I watch him.

Curious.

“Maybe later,” I say, noting the way the commander’s shoulders relax when I turn down Simon’s offer.

“Let me know if you change your mind,” the captain says lightly as he heads toward the horses.

“Maybe I’ll ride with you,” I tell Henrik lightly when I join him, jerking my head toward the wagon as I carefully gauge his reaction.

If anything, the soldier’s scowl deepens.

So, he doesn’t want me to ride with Simon...but he doesn’t want me in the wagon with him either? Honestly, there’s no making the man happy.

Henrik

“What’s the matter with your hand?” I ask Clover as we crawl down the road on the seventh day into our trip.

The roads are worse than I remembered—or perhaps worse than I realized because I’ve never come this way by wagon—and we’re making terrible time.

Clover scowls at her finger, pressing the tip of her fingernail into the skin. “Splinter. It’s been there for days.”

“Do you want my knife?”

She smirks to herself. “Do you trust me with it when we’re sitting so close?”

I shoot her a look, to which she rolls her eyes.

I let her fuss with the splinter in vain until we stop to give the animals a rest and let the men stretch their legs.

Before Clover can get down, I capture her wrist and examine her finger.

“What are you doing?” she says testily.

“Removing the splinter.” I pull out my knife. “Hold still.”

“Who said I trust you with a knife when we’re so close?”

I chuckle despite myself, once more cursing Camellia for charging me with this sharp-tongued woman.

A woman whose hands are soft and who faintly smells like flowers, likely thanks to the bathhouse she insisted we stop at earlier so she could bathe.

The scent fills my nostrils, distracting me. I have the oddest urge to nuzzle my nose against the crook of Clover's neck, see if the fragrance is stronger near the heat of her skin. The bizarre impulse takes me by surprise and fills me with irritation. I would never act on it, but it's there all the same.

But Clover isn't accompanying me so I may enjoy her company—she's here because Camellia suspects her of sorcery.

Ridiculous, an inner voice scoffs.

If Clover is a necromancer, then Bartholomew is an axe-wielding berserker.

"Hold still," I say as I locate the splinter and press the tip of the blade to her skin.

Clover freezes, not entirely trusting me.

I carefully coax the fragment of wood out, and then I lean down and blow it away.

Clover's soft intake of breath startles me, and I turn my eyes up to look at her—a mistake.

She's drawn her full bottom lip between her teeth, and she stares down at me with the strangest look on her face. A blush dances across her skin, flushing her neck and cheeks.

Not for the first time since I've taken charge of the lady-in-waiting, I think of kissing her rose-stained lips—proving that she should be careful about spreading false accusations.

Clover makes the softest noise, and it brings me to my senses. Immediately, I drop her hand and move away, busying myself with sheathing my knife—a chore that takes all of five seconds.

“Stretch your legs,” I command as I step down from the wagon, unable to look at her. “We’ll continue again soon.”

* * *

Nine days into the trip, we reach Denmel, a large village only a day from the northernmost guard post. After crossing the Ileastra River, we began to climb, leaving Caldenbauer’s rich farmland as we entered the lower mountains.

Autumn has fully cloaked the landscape at this higher elevation, turning the groves of grespit trees and the oar-oak brush that grows beneath them shades of gold and russet. The first snow of the season could come any day, though the afternoon is still warm enough.

The breeze that blows from the west is not.

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I eye the clouds building in the distance, hoping they head south.

“Do you want to camp outside the village or stay in the guard barracks?” Simon asks from atop the horse that he thankfully rides alone.

Clover is once again on Vidnar, and Bartholomew travels next to me in the wagon.

The boy loves his horse—he talks about him with such pride, it’s amazing he lets Clover ride him. The boy truly must be smitten with the lady-in-waiting.

“We’ll head to the guard barracks,” I tell Simon, looking away from the impending storm. “Let the men sleep in real beds tonight.”

And Clover.

I’ve slept outside her tent every night, and it’s become a strange sort of torture. Not only does she mumble in her sleep, but she also sighs, shifts, and stirs.

I should let someone else take a shift, but I cannot bring myself to leave her. At first, I told myself it was because I had to stay close in case she decided to wander off by herself and do something nefarious in the dead of night.

But if I’m honest, it’s because I like the way Clover calls my name when something startles her awake—as if my presence alone is enough to soothe her worries.

It’s...concerning.

“You heard the captain,” Simon calls to the group. “Into the village.”

Veterans of the supply run holler greetings to the guards they recognize when we reach the open gates.

“Hello, Simon,” one of the guards says. “Last trip before winter?”

“I certainly hope so,” he replies, hanging back to speak to the man.

The guard’s eyes linger on Clover, who’s paused just ahead to study an old Vallen totem at the side of the entrance. “Who’s the girl?”

“Lady Clover, one of Camellia’s ladies-in-waiting.”

“What’s she doing on a supply run?”

That is an excellent question.

“Who cares?” Simon replies flippantly. “She’s better to look at than the rest of these boarkers.”

Clover laughs under her breath, obviously within earshot of the conversation. She then turns my way, catching me watching her, and smirks. Apparently, she likes the idea of lumping me in with the “boarkers.”

I turn away just in time to see the guard raise his brows suggestively in Clover’s direction as he says, “The king is providing you with entertainment now, is he? Maybe I should volunteer for the next run.”

“Now just a minute—” Bartholomew begins before Clover cuts him off.

Looking over sharply, she purrs, “You want to see how entertaining I can be, guard?”

Then, without the slightest hesitation, she pulls the bow from her back, nocks an arrow, and aims it at the man. “Let’s play a little game.”

“Lady Clover,” I begin wearily, not believing she’ll actually shoot—but that’s a mistake.

Before I can finish my sentence, she releases the arrow. It flies past the man and embeds itself in the wooden post next to his head, so close the fletching smacks his ear as it settles.

Lowering her bow, Clover gives him an innocent look. “Shame. I missed.”

“Clover,” I repeat more sternly this time.

The guard stares at her, stupefied and angry.

She pulls another arrow from her quiver. “I’m better with moving targets. Why don’t you run, and we’ll see how I do?”

“Clover.”

She looks over, her eyes sparking with indignant fury. “What?”

“You’ve made your point.” Then, to the guard, I say sharply, “Does the crown pay you to gossip? Lady Clover is a noblewoman of this kingdom, and you will show her the respect she is due. Get back to your position, and keep your mouth shut, or I will have you placed in the stocks.”

Ready for a fight, and likely mistaking me for a hired driver, the man’s face scrunches as he turns—but then he spots my pennant and badge. I might not be a knight, but I certainly outrank him.

“Sorry, Commander.” He immediately steps back into place, shooting Clover a look of death as he does so.

“Simon, lead the group,” I say.

With an amused nod, Simon continues to the front.

“I don’t think she actually missed,” Bartholomew whispers when we finally begin moving once more, his voice full of admiration.

A sharp response is on my tongue, but I hold it back.

Clover coaxes her horse ahead of the group and ends up riding next to Simon. They are too far ahead to hear, but she laughs at something he says, and then she glances

back at me. They could be talking about anything, but my back stiffens.

“Do you think she’ll be safe in the barracks?” Bartholomew asks.

“There are plenty of female soldiers,” I remind him, sick to death of that woman invading my thoughts.

“There are,” he agrees hesitantly. “But Clover...”

Doesn’t look like a soldier.

“It will be fine.”

Well, it will be fine as long as Clover doesn’t make trouble—not that the guard didn’t deserve what he got. I smile grudgingly when I remember the look on his face when the arrow whirred past his head. Then I catch myself and quickly wipe my expression clean.

We reach the guard barracks just before sunset, and I gladly leave the wagon. To Simon, I say, “Hire another driver before we leave tomorrow.”

“Yes, Henrik.”

I then locate Clover. “Come with me.”

She stands with Bartholomew’s gentle gelding, fondly stroking his cheek. “Why?”

“Because I need to speak with you.”

Making it clear she likes me about as much as I like her, she turns her eyes on me and studies me like I’m a nuisance. “Perhaps if you ask nicely.”

I work my jaw for several seconds before I force a smile. “Please.”

“Better,” she says airily, and then she turns to Bartholomew and hands him his horse’s reins. “He’s so well mannered.”

Bartholomew’s cheeks flush with pride. “You are welcome to ride him whenever you please.”

Clover directs a wicked smile my way. “I was speaking about Henrik, but Vidnar is lovely as well.”

Simon snorts, but he manages to choke back his amusement when I shoot him a hard look.

Swallowing my irritation, I lead Clover to a quiet corner near the barrack’s summer vegetable garden, out of earshot and partially protected from prying eyes. The frost has settled, and all but a few hardy herbs are brown and withered.

“You’re going to scold me, aren’t you?” Clover crosses her arms. “I won’t apologize—the guard deserved the scare.”

“I only ask that you act a bit more cautiously. I’m afraid you’re going to stumble into more trouble than you’re prepared to handle.”

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“What makes you think you know how much I can handle?”

Losing my patience, I forget myself. “Are you always this difficult?”

Clover raises a single eyebrow, studying me with a mix of amusement and agitation.

“You realize I outrank you, don’t you, soldier?”

“I am acutely aware of the fact,” I say tightly. “And please—call me Henrik.”

For some reason, that makes her laugh. The smile that flashes across her face is genuinely friendly, and it irritates me far more than it should.

“You don’t like your title?” she asks.

I’m one step below her on the social ladder—just one. So no, I don’t like my title. Now more than ever.

“I’m not interested in making small talk, Lady Clover. I have an entire group to see settled. I only wanted to speak with you to express my concern for your wellbeing.”

In a tone that says she thinks I’m very trying, she says with a sigh, “Fine. I won’t shoot at any more guards.” Then, unable to help herself, she adds, “Even if they deserve it.”

“Good.” I turn to leave but then glance back at her, and my dread grows.

Her deep blue riding gown is fitted at the top, tailored to expose her shoulders and

cinched at her waist to accentuate her curves. The skirt flares at her hips, looking miserable to ride in, especially for a garment designed for that very purpose—but it's not her traveling comfort I'm concerned with at the moment.

There's a reason the guard noticed her. How could he not? A man would have to be blind to miss Clover.

“What is it now?” she asks.

“Perhaps you have something to wear that's less...”

I can't say revealing.

In fact, I should have kept my fool mouth shut. No matter how I finish the sentence, I'm doomed. I'm going to get slapped at best or shot at worst.

14

Clover

Henrik trails off, looking painfully uncomfortable. He looks away, rubbing the back of his neck.

But it's all right—I know what he's getting at, and he has a point. The gown cost a small fortune, and it's embellished with sapphires. Even though it's covered in trail dust, I'll be a beacon amongst the simple people of the village, begging to be noticed. Walking around in this is practically an invitation for the less savory crowd to rob me.

Let's not even mention that the gown is cut in a style that's popular at court, which means the bodice is so tight there's little place for my chest to go but up, and it's low-

cut enough that fact is very obvious. But I very much doubt valiant Henrik has let his eyes linger past my chin, so he's referring to the value of the gown alone.

"What do you expect me to wear?" I ask. "I left everything behind when I joined you."

Henrik meets my eyes and stares at me so intently I must resist the urge to squirm under his steel-blue gaze. Obviously, he's regretting his decision to ask me along. After a moment, he tugs off his cloak and tosses it at me. "Take this."

I immediately throw it back. "I'm not wearing your cloak again."

Henrik catches it, and his jaw works for several seconds before he answers, "Suit yourself."

Turning back to the group, I say, "I'm not staying at the barracks either."

"What do you mean you're not staying here?" he demands.

"We passed a perfectly good inn on the way through the village."

"Lady Clover—"

"I'll see you in the morning," I call over my shoulder as I leave.

“You can’t just—”

I turn back, flashing him a look. “I can, soldier. I can.”

Half expecting Henrik to follow me, I walk from the bailey and onto the street. He must decide I’m more trouble than I’m worth because he lets me go.

Two guards, however, follow at a distance, looking as if they’ve been instructed to keep an eye on me.

I would like to be irritated, but their presence isn’t altogether unwelcome—especially when they scowl at the old beggar who leers at me and my sapphires, causing him to turn tail.

They leave as soon as I reach my destination. I wave as they go, and they respond with shy grins, realizing they weren’t as stealthy as they thought.

The Denmel Inn and Tavern has a cheery red door, with evergreen and dried berry wreaths fixed to each front window. There’s a small yard to the right of the stone building, surrounded by a short iron fence, several pots of autumn-blooming flowers, and oil lamps atop short poles. Patrons take dinner on the patio, enjoying the last of the nice weather before the storm moves in.

After I secure my room in the inn, I wander into the adjoining tavern. It’s a busy establishment, and almost all the tables are full. After scanning the bar, I find one open stool between a Woodmore elf and a skinny woman who’s laughing a bit too loudly to be sober. I slide into it, wrinkling my nose at the sticky smudge marring the

wooden surface in front of me.

When the barman glances my way, I raise my hand to let him know I'd like service.

"Dinner, drink, or both?" the man asks when he joins me a few moments later. He gives the patron next to me a wary look before he adds, "We have venison stew tonight."

As expected, the elf stiffens.

Even though I'm starving, I nod to the bowl of bland vegetable soup in front of my quiet elven companion. "I'll have what he's having."

The barman leaves, and I drum my fingers on the bar, avoiding the sticky spot. Glancing around the large room, I note the abnormally large number of Woodmore elves at the tables. What are they doing this far north? Don't they usually stay in their vineyards in the far south, relishing the temperate climate and peaceful wine-making lifestyle?

A few minutes later, the barman returns with my supper.

"Anything else I can do for you?" he asks, flashing me a smile.

He's good-looking, with light brown hair and dimples that dot his cheeks. I mean, he's not as handsome as Henrik, but—

I stop the thought abruptly, shivering. In the last few days, my mind has wandered places it has no right to go.

"What's the local news?" I ask, dipping my spoon into the thin soup.

The man laughs. “You mean the gossip?”

With a shrug, I say, “News, gossip—what’s the difference?”

Looking amused, he ignores a man who calls for him down the bar. “Both are based in fact, though one is usually skewed.”

“Give me whichever is more interesting.”

The man yells again, but the barman hollers back, “If you hadn’t spilled half of it down your shirt, Otto, your tankard would still be full. I’ll get there when I get there, and you’ll be patient, or I’ll toss you into the street.”

He then turns to me, leaning his elbow on the bar. “Allow me to give you the best of Denmel’s news. Farmer Tucker’s daughter ran off with a traveling peddler a few weeks ago, and Old Renford lost an entire flock of chickens to a pair of foxes last night. Someone vandalized Erhud’s rain barrel, and Goodwife Lisella’s horse threw a shoe.”

“Denmel is teeming with excitement,” I joke as I eat the nearly tasteless soup.

“Don’t be too quick with hasty judgments—I’ve saved the best for last. You see, several hunters have reported that aynauths are suddenly on the move and venturing into the lower elevations.”

I look up with my spoon halfway to my mouth. “Truly?”

“That’s the word. They’ve been spotted following the local deer population.”

Without meaning to, we both glance at the man next to me.

But the elf studiously ignores our conversation, instead focusing on the journal that he's furiously scribbling in.

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The man down the bar grows more vocal, and my new friend flashes me an apologetic look. “I’ll check on you again in a bit. Let me know if you need anything.”

When he’s gone, I eat the soup slowly, pretending the carrot and limp celery medley is more satisfying than it really is.

“What’s another word for listless?” the elf suddenly asks me, glancing my way for the first time. Before I can answer him, he narrows his eyes at the wall across from us. “Lethargic? Torpid?”

Coming to a decision all on his own, he returns to his notebook.

I lean forward and crane my head to the side to get a better look at him. “I know you.”

The vulture-healing elf glances over, looking as if his mind is still on his journal. Then his eyes focus on my face, and his friendly, if slightly bemused, expression turns into a scowl. “Oh. It’s you.”

Bird killer.

He needn’t say it—I know what he’s thinking.

“What are you doing all the way up here?” I ask.

Before he answers, he glances at his journal longingly. Then, as if deciding he can’t be rude—even to the likes of me—he flips the leather cover closed and meticulously

wraps the long lacing around it several times before tying a tidy knot. He then clasps his hands in his lap and angles his body toward me. “I’m going to the Furlaskin Ruins.”

“Where are those?” I ask.

His rich brown eyes widen with shock, and he lets out a tiny gasp.

He has fine, delicate features, full lips, and high cheekbones. His light brown hair is long and silky, and he wears it loose about his shoulders. The truth is, he’s prettier than I am, but in a masculine way.

Pushing the dregs of the soup aside, I place my elbow on the bar and rest my cheek on the palm of my hand—too late remembering the sticky spot. Grimacing, I sit up and glare at my elbow. “I take it I should know?”

“They’re to the far north, the last once-settlement before the land meets the ocean.” Frowning, he produces a handkerchief and dips it into the tankard in front of him.

I move back when he attempts to take my arm.

“It’s water,” he says impatiently, giving me no choice but to hold still while he first cleans my elbow and then the table. “The wine here is appalling.”

“What’s your name again?” I ask.

“Pranmore,” he says after the slightest pause—as if maybe he doesn’t want to give a sinister vulture murderess the information.

“Why are you going to the ruins, Pranmore?”

His expression becomes faraway and dreamy. “There is something indescribably beautiful about nature taking back its territory—trees growing through once-mighty foundations, wildflowers blossoming upon the graves of those who trampled their predecessors. It’s magnificent—the natural world in its purest, most powerful form.” He glances at my bow and wrinkles his nose. “But I suppose you wouldn’t understand.”

He’s right—I don’t really. I like trees and flowers as much as the next girl, but I am also quite fond of heated running water and all the other creations the High Vale elves so cleverly engineered with their magic.

“Aren’t you worried about the aynauths?” I ask.

Pranmore sits a little straighter. “Aynauths are one of nature’s creatures, just like you and me. As long as I do not provoke them, they will leave me be.”

“You heard that aynauths eat...deer?” I pointedly look at his prominent rack of antlers.

The elf clears his throat, and his fair cheeks flush with color. “As I said, I have nothing to fear.”

“All right then.” Finished with my meal and eager to sleep in a real bed for the night, I slip from my seat. “Best of luck with your travels.”

Without hesitation, he goes back to his journal. “You as well.”

I stop by the inn’s heated bathhouse, intending to fully enjoy Vallen ingenuity.

An attendant unlocks the door to the women’s rooms, and I step inside.

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It's not a fancy establishment, but the stone floors appear to have been recently cleaned, and it smells fresh, like lavender and rosemary. Heavy, dark beams lend a cozy, quaint feel to the space, and the steam that rises from the heated pool in the adjoining room wafts through the area like a hot cloud.

After spending the last several days on the road, I can't imagine a more welcome sight.

Before I bathe, I attempt to wash the dust, horsehair, and trail grime from my gown. Once satisfied the garment is as clean as it can be without proper laundering, I luxuriate in the warm water for ages and then finally make my way to my room.

After preparing for bed, I blow out the candle by the side of the bed and snuggle into the covers. The room is warm and comfortable, and I smile to myself as I decide I made the right choice leaving the group for the night. I doubt Henrik is this comfortable in the barracks.

Feeling slightly wicked, I indulge in a laugh. Then, as minds are prone to do when you're drowsing, I replay the day's events in my head.

Henrik putting the smarmy guard in his place.

Henrik scowling at me, his blue eyes making my stomach flutter.

Henrik tossing me his cloak, still warm from the heat of his body.

My eyes fly open. What am I doing?

I blame Calla. After all, she put these thoughts into my head. My mind would never have wandered on its own.

All right, I admit, I find Henrik attractive, but the fact is he's enamored with the snake princess—which means he has the sense of a flockchick.

And with that thought, I punch the pillow to fluff it, roll onto my other side, and tightly close my eyes, refusing to think about the irritating soldier again.

* * *

The bell above the nearby church sounds at twelve in the morning—and then again at one, two, and three. Its dull, metallic clamor fills the streets every hour upon the hour—and I've heard them all.

I lie awake, eyes accustomed to the dark, staring at a chair in the corner of the room. Sometime in the long night, it began to resemble a troll.

But a chair troll is preferable to the alternative. Every time I close my eyes, I see a pair of storm-blue eyes and a displeased frown.

I blame it on ingestion—the soup didn't settle well, and my stomach growls with agitation and hunger pangs.

"I don't need sleep," I say aloud to my chair troll friend as if I must convince him. "I'll just stay awake all night."

* * *

"Henrik," I murmur, in a daze.

The soldier has just rescued me from a tower, and we've fallen to the ground near a fishpond. Now we're surrounded by circling vultures. The birds crow that it's time to leave, but I need just a few minutes more. The soldier's lips hover inches from mine, growing closer...closer...

He murmurs my name, and I lean up to meet him, breathless with desire.

"Clover," Henrik says again, but this time, his tone is sharp. "Why are you still in bed?"

His words startle me, and I look around, confused. What is he going on about? We're in a field of soft wildflowers, near a ruin where trees tower over crumbling stone walls.

"Stop talking," I mumble, grasping the back of his neck. "You're ruining it."

"Clover."

Suddenly, my eyes fly open. My cheek is pressed against a pillow, and my legs are tangled in the covers. I grasp a bunched-up blanket in my hands, yanking it close in a rather amorous fashion.

There are no vultures. No ruins, no meadow, no fishpond.

"Wake up."

But there is Henrik.

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My dream lingers in vivid, tantalizing detail, and I snap my mouth shut.

Bright light streams in through the window of my inn room, and the half-burned candle sits on the nightstand. The soldier hovers in the doorway, looking acutely uncomfortable.

Horried, I stare at him.

My brothers teased me in the past, claiming I mumble in my sleep. But surely that was nothing more than a childish jest.

I don't actually talk in my sleep...

DoI?

"What are you doing in my room?" I demand, my voice groggy and stiff.

"I knocked, and you answered."

"Ianswered?"

He clears his throat. "You said my name."

Let me die.

"I did." I nod several times, hoping to convince him that it was intentional. "Yes, I did."

There's an awkward pause, and the air suddenly feels too thick to breathe.

"But why are you here?" I finally ask.

"It's almost noon. We need to leave, and I became worried when you never returned."

Clutching the covers to my chest as I sit up, I slowly meet Henrik's eyes. "How did you get in? I'm certain I locked the door—you know, to keep out the riffraff."

Henrik rolls his eyes toward the ceiling before he says, "I said I was looking for you, and they saw my badge."

"And they just gave you a key?" I ask skeptically.

"You only secured the room for one night—they want you out and were happy to let me fetch you."

Self-conscious, I rub a hand over my face and then try to smooth my hair. "How long were you standing there?"

"Long enough to wake you up."

"Did I..." I resist the urge to throw the covers over my head. "Say anything?"

Other than his name.

Henrik narrows his eyes, and it's obvious yesterday's bad mood is still lingering. "Like what?"

Relieved he seems clueless, I wave my hand. "Never mind. Go away so I can get

dressed.”

The moment the soldier stalks out of the room and closes the door behind him, I turn into the pillow and groan.

15

Henrik

Did Clover say something? No, nothing except my name...which she called out in a low, silken voice that makes the back of my neck warm every time I think about it.

Feeling ashamed for the places my mind has traveled, I firmly keep my thoughts upon the mission as we walk to the barracks.

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It didn't mean anything—Clover simply responded to me, but she was half asleep, so her tone was distracted and warm. She certainly wasn't dreaming about me.

Besides, Clover is thoroughly taken with Lawrence. I would be the worst sort of fool to have these thoughts about a woman with that little sense.

The lady-in-waiting is abnormally quiet this morning, and I shoot her a stern look. "Were you drinking last night?"

She returns my look with a venomous one of her own. "I don't drink."

"Did you start a bar fight?" I can't help but ask, not about to pass up the opportunity to needle her for once.

"No."

"Then what's wrong with you?"

"Nightmare," she mutters.

I pause in the street. "Were you afraid in the inn? Did someone bother you?"

Suddenly, I'm burdened with guilt for a different reason. Like it or not, Clover is my responsibility. I shouldn't have let her go off alone just because I was sick of dealing with her.

She rolls her eyes and continues walking.

“From now on, you must stay with the group.”

Testily, Clover answers, “From now on, you must remember I don’t answer to you.”

“Why did you agree to stay if you so loathe to be here?”

“Why did you ask me to stay if you don’t want to deal with me?” she counters.

We stare at each other, neither of us relenting. Slowly, my irritation turns to grudging concern.

The delicate skin under Clover’s eyes is dark, and her cheeks are pale. Her eyes still spark with spirit, but other than that, she looks awful.

“Are you all right?” I reluctantly ask.

She shoves a strand of hair behind her ear, looking away. “I told you—it was a bad night.”

“Are you ill?”

She looks back at me, narrowing her eyes. “Something is certainly wrong with me.”

“Stay in the barrack’s infirmary for a few days. You may rejoin us when we return from the guard post.”

Suddenly, a trickle of doubt works its way through my veins. I was so confident Clover wasn’t a sorceress, but she looks absolutely terrible.

Could she have been practicing last night? Is that the reason she looks so rough?

“I’m fine,” she says, oblivious to my wandering thoughts as she continues down the street. “I just didn’t get enough sleep.”

“But you just said—”

“Ignore what I said.”

I would argue with her further, but a crowd stands outside the guards’ barracks when we arrive—and an unusual one at that.

“Have you ever seen so many Woodmore elves in a northern village?” I ask Clover, momentarily forgetting we’re at odds.

“I think they’re here to see some old ruin.” She stretches her neck from side to side, looking like she’s still trying to wake up. “Something about nature in its purest form.”

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It doesn't take long to discern the reason for the group's arrival at the barracks. My ears perk up as soon as I hear the word "aynauth."

"Where did you say you were attacked?" a female guard asks, jotting down the details on a piece of parchment.

"On the road to the Furlaskin Ruins," one of the elven men answers.

"And you're all accounted for? No one was injured?"

"We're all here, and there were no major injuries. We have several healers in the group, so we've taken care of it. We simply wanted to report the incident," the man who's designated himself as the leader says.

"Where's Pranmore?" Clover asks me as she scans the group.

"Who?" I ask.

"The elf who was there during the vulture attack. I saw him last night in the tavern. He said he was going to the ruins today."

"I'll ask." Stepping forward, I say, "Excuse me. Is there a man named Pranmore in your group?"

The elves look over, politely acknowledging Clover and me. "We didn't travel with anyone by that name," their spokesman says. "But there are many who choose to make a private pilgrimage to experience the true peace of connecting and being one

with the forest.”

Beside me, Clover makes a scoffing noise under her breath. Thankfully, I don’t think they heard her.

“Do you think he’s out there by himself?” one of the women says, her liquid brown eyes soft with worry for a man she doesn’t even know—so like a Woodmore.

Clover sets her hand on my arm. “He’s going to be connecting with nature in the belly of the aynauth if someone doesn’t go after him.”

“I’m sorry, Commander. We’ve just sent a large team to the east,” the guard says. “But we’ll send someone to the ruins as soon as we can.”

Beseeching me with her eyes, Clover suggests, “You could go.”

“The supply run is already behind schedule,” I tell her reluctantly, torn between my two duties.

“He healed your men after the vultures attacked,” she points out, judging me.

I give the lady-in-waiting a pointed look. “He also nearly killed me with a stray crossbow bolt.”

Her nose wrinkles with disappointment, and she shrugs. “Fine, go on ahead without me. I’ll go after him.”

I catch Clover’s arm before she gets very far. “You’re not going after an aynauth on your own.”

“So you’ll go with me?”

Releasing her, I glance past the group of concerned elves to the wagons waiting to continue to the guard post.

What would the king have me do?

But I already know—he'd have me save the fool elf, and then he'd decide it wasn't worth a seal. After all, the aynauths are the true reason I've been sent, aren't they?

I turn back to Clover. "You're certain he was headed to the ruins?"

She nods.

To the guard, I ask, "How long does it take to get there?"

"Half a day on horseback," she answers.

I look back at Clover. "All right—but if we find trouble, I want you to hang back."

"Certainly," she lies smoothly.

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I jerk my head to the stable. “You’ll need a horse. You can’t keep riding Bartholomew’s.”

No less than five of my men who have been lingering at the edge of the group step forward, all offering their steeds to the pretty noblewoman they’re desperate to impress.

“Henrik,” Simon says, “Allow me to come with you.”

I shake my head. “You’re in charge here while I’m gone. Bartholomew, you’re with us. The rest of you, stay with the wagons and listen to Simon. We’ll be back before nightfall.”

* * *

“Have you ever seen an aynauth?” Bartholomew asks Clover as we ride down the forest road.

Yesterday’s storm clouds skirted Denmel, and the day is pleasant, with a cool breeze that blows through the trees. Golden leaves fall like snow, gently drifting to the ground around us. We must be nearing the ruins by now, but we haven’t seen any sign of the monster or the elf Clover is determined to rescue.

“I’ve never crossed the Ileastra River before,” Clover answers.

“Neither have I.” Bartholomew grins as if delighted they found common ground. “It’s a grand adventure, isn’t it?”

We turn around a bend, and I raise my hand, asking for silence. Up ahead, the base of a worn stone wall becomes visible through the trees.

Clover brings her borrowed horse close to mine. Dropping her voice, she asks, “Have we reached the ruins?”

“I believe so.”

“Do you think we’ll find an aynauth in there?”

“I don’t know. I’m not familiar with their territory or their ways.”

She lifts her brows. “Have we discovered something in which the mighty Henrik isn’t an expert?”

Caldenbauer is full of odd creatures—things seldom seen in the other human-settled kingdoms. Many of them we’re now familiar with, but others remain a mystery to all except the elves who are native to the land.

I shoot Clover a wry look. “Until recently, I wasn’t acquainted with jacquesalaupes either, and now I’m an authority on the subject.”

She laughs as if startled, and the bright sound of it travels through the quiet trees. Immediately, she presses her lips together.

“Sorry,” she murmurs with a guilty smile. “I didn’t realize you knew how to make a joke, and it took me by surprise.”

My response is lost as we pass the last of the trees and pause atop the bridge that leads into the city. Bartholomew makes an exclamation under his breath as we take in the structures that have crumbled with age and battle. Below us, the remnants of High

Vale architecture stretch like skeletal hands into the sky.

The mighty city of Furlaskin fell a hundred years ago in one of the bloodiest battles between man and elf, several years before we came out victorious. It's now a ghost of its former glory.

"Careful," I warn as we continue through the open gates and down the road that leads into the heart of the city. "There could be elven creations."

"Any remaining golems are likely rusted by now, wouldn't you think?" Bartholomew asks warily.

"One would hope."

Even Clover is solemn as we ride through the abandoned streets. "It's just as Pranmore said—the flora is reclaiming the land."

A massive tree, as wide as a manor and far too large to grow unaided, rises from the center of the city. Its leaves are spring green, shining in the sunlight. Bits of stone towers cling to the lower limbs—as if the tree simply grew through windows and doors and ripped pieces of the abandoned masonry from its foundation.

"It must be the work of Woodmore magic," Bartholomew says in wonder. "Can we see it closer, Henrik?"

I nod. "We have to look for Pranmore anyway."

Grass grows through the broken cobblestone streets, still green even though the surrounding wood is deep in autumn. Birds warble their afternoon songs from crumbling rooftops, and formal gardens now grow wild, their flowers vining over cottages so densely, it's difficult to see the stones underneath.

The ruin is thick with the elves' earth magic—completely different from that which humans conjure with blood and death and foreign from what their mechanically inclined cousins create.

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It dances across my skin with the breeze, effervescent and unsettling.

The two elven races were at quiet war long before the humans arrived in Caldenbauer—their magics as different as oil and water. Even though it was technically the humans who fought the High Vales in the battle, this must be the Woodmores' unassuming way to celebrate the victory.

We ride through the nearly silent city, saying little, all of us a little wary of the foreign setting. We pass the tree and its unsettling adornments, and though I don't voice it to the others, I wonder what the chances are the tree will take offense to our presence and simply crush us with one of its massive limbs. Not that I believe trees are sentient.

"Henrik," Clover breathes, her eyes focused on something in the distance.

I follow her gaze, and I draw in a breath.

We've reached the northernmost edge of Furlaskin, which ends at a massive courtyard that stretches the length of the city along the sheer cliff. Beyond the battered stone rail, the bay sparkles in the late afternoon light. The sea stretches past it, infinite and hazy, with a sheer veil of mist that rises from the water.

Clover dismounts, and Bartholomew and I follow her.

Ancient benches sporadically dot the long stretch, the black iron impervious to the corrosive sea air. Lampposts stand on the balcony, their copper aged to a muted green.

“Do you think they still turn on at night?” Clover asks, gesturing to the lights.

“I doubt anyone has filled the city’s oil reserves in a century.”

“It’s a little sad, isn’t it?” she says softly, running her hand along the back of a bench.
“I imagine it was lovely.”

“It’s still lovely,” Bartholomew says. “Just...empty.”

It’s not hard to imagine the city at the height of its glory, filled with the beautiful Vallen people who built it over a thousand years ago. But the beauty is marred by something darker.

When the first human explorers discovered Caldenbauer, they found a land rich in magic, fertile earth, and wondrous new creations. The High Vales welcomed them, and for a while, there was peace. But it was not to last. Like the Boermin before us, the humans were eventually enslaved and forced to serve the High Vale people.

The original Phoenix King, King Algernon’s grandfather, freed us from our shackles—he pulled us from the ashes of our sad existence and brought a new era to the land. But Furlaskin was a casualty, abandoned after the battle—the elves’ once golden city left to crumble.

“Do you wonder if this is the future of all Caldenbauer?” Clover asks pensively.
“Generations from now, do you think people will explore our ruins and wonder what happened to us hundreds of years ago?”

“We know what happened here,” I point out.

Bartholomew nods sagely. “It’s no wonder the High Vale elves hate us, isn’t it?”

“They brought it upon themselves with their greed and cruelty.” I turn from the disconcerting sight. “And they’ve certainly found a way to gouge us, haven’t they?”

After the long war, when the humans finally claimed victory and the treaty was signed, King Telgin granted the native races a choice of land. The Woodmore people claimed the temperate vineyard region, and the Boermin chose a chunk of the rich farmland in the middle of the continent. Though the High Vale people could have taken a section of the northern mountains or the eastern forests, they retreated to the swamplands.

Later, the Phoenix King realized he’d been quietly deceived. All of Caldenbauer’s precious oil, a resource that lights and heats much of the kingdom to this day, comes from the swamps. We pay dearly for each barrel that’s shipped into the mainland.

“Let’s continue looking for the elf,” I say, ready to leave the silent ruins.

But it doesn’t look like we’ll have to search for long.

A loud, semi-masculine scream comes from the center of the city, carrying on the breeze that gently blows through the central tree.

Clover pulls the bow from her back. “Well, that’s fortuitous. I believe we’ve located him.”

Drawing my sword, I take off at a run, firmly instructing Clover and Bartholomew to wait for me to return—so naturally, they follow me into the depths of the city.

By the time we reach the tree, my lungs pinch painfully, and I feel like I'll never be able to draw in enough air to soothe them. I'm exhausted after attempting to keep up with Henrik—the man can run. Bartholomew is somewhere far behind us, lugging his ridiculously large crossbow. The fact that he and his weapon are at our backs doesn't instill a lot of confidence in me.

Henrik and I pause for a moment in a square that partially contains the tree, frantically trying to locate Prannore. As we stand here, I get my first glimpse of an aynauth.

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Without a doubt, my fellow ladies-in-waiting would faint on the spot—not a bad strategy when you consider the monster is as tall as three men. Playing dead doesn't seem like such a terrible idea.

How are we supposed to fight this creature?

The monster walks upright on two treelike legs, swinging long, muscled arms that hang to his knees. His entire body is covered in thick, black fur, and one solitary eye bulges from above his massive bat-snout nose.

Upside down, Pranmore hangs from one of the aynauth's meaty paws, his hair and antlers nearly brushing the ground.

Henrik curses under his breath, not bolstering my spirits one bit.

“Stay here,” he commands, a little firmer than before. But apparently doubting I'll listen this time either, he turns and locks his eyes on mine. “I mean it, Clover. Stay put.”

I grab his arm before he can walk away. “What are you going to do?”

“I'm going to save the idiot elf,” he says, frustrated.

Refusing to release him, I demand, “Buthow?”

Turning, he takes my shoulders and physically sets me back. “You're not going to stay here, are you?”

“It’s not likely.”

He releases me, turning to look at the aynauth. The monster stops to stare at several chattering birds in the tree, and he absently swings Pranmore back and forth like a child with a doll.

“All right,” Henrik says. “This is what we’re going to do. Do you see that building there?”

I follow his eyes when he points. “The two-story one?”

He nods. “Do you think you can make it to the upper level and then climb through the window and onto that tree limb?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“All right. I want you to get into position there in the tree—nice and high. As soon as I have Pranmore, and we’re safely away, shoot the aynauth—and don’t be shy about it. He’s not going to be happy if all works out as planned, and I don’t want him taking after us until I have Pranmore safely away.”

“What are you going to do exactly?”

“Don’t worry about it. Follow me.”

He jogs into the inner square, half-crouched, hiding behind damaged buildings, random trees, and rubble.

Feeling like a fool, certain we’re going to be spotted, I stay low, retracing Henrik’s steps, hurrying to keep him in view. One thing quickly becomes apparent—I need a new outfit if I’m going to embrace this adventuring lifestyle. Every few seconds,

some weed, twig, or sharp piece of cobblestone catches on my gown's hem, yanking me back. Once, I almost fall on my rump. As if the skirts aren't enough of a nuisance, the corset digs into my ribs as I try to crouch low. The garment was obviously not designed for stealth.

I've lost sight of the aynauth, but I still see Henrik. We make it to the building, and he jerks his head toward the entrance. "Be careful. It's likely not very stable."

Without hesitation, I hurry inside. It doesn't take long to find the stairs that lead to the upper level, but several of the wooden treads are rotted. My eyes land on the iron handrails. Though they're thin, they look sound.

Sweeping my gown and underskirts under my arm so they won't trip me as I climb, I gingerly step up the first stair, tightly holding the railing. The board bows under my weight, but it holds.

Moving swiftly, I hurry up the remaining steps, counting in my head to keep from dwelling on how awful it would be to fall into the dark hole that looms under the stairs.

"Nine, ten..."

Suddenly, the eleventh board collapses under my weight. I let out a girly squeal as I fall, stopping with a horrible jerk as I catch myself with the rail.

I hang here, my palms growing slick, fighting to pull myself up to the next step. My gown fell in the drop, and it tangles around my feet, making it almost impossible to get my footing.

Sweat beads on my brow as I struggle, and panic flutters like a trapped bird in my chest.

Finally, I manage to pull myself up. Breathing hard, shaking a little, I run up the last few stairs.

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Once I'm on the upper level, I immediately work at my skirt's ties, cursing them when they knot. As soon as I've loosened them and the underskirts, I quickly step out of the mass of fabric, trying not to dwell on my stockinged legs and the short bloomers that recently came into style in place of the previously preferred shifts and chemises. My grandmother says they're scandalous, and maybe she's right. At a time like this, however, freedom of movement is certainly more important than modesty.

With less bulk, I climb out of the window and into the tree, dangling precariously for several moments longer than I would like. Gritting my teeth, I drop to the lower branch, breathing a sigh of relief when I land safely.

After I've caught my balance, I scamper to another branch, hurrying around the perimeter of the tree as I try to find Henrik and the aynauth. Leaves and twigs swat me in the face and arms, but my focus is on my task.

Finally, I locate the monster. He's still watching the birds, oblivious to our presence. Safely tucked in the canopy, far above the aynauth, I look for Henrik.

When the soldier spots me, he waves from behind a fallen wall and then creeps out, moving slowly toward the monster with his sword drawn.

I nock my bow, holding my breath. Watching. Waiting.

What's Henrik doing?

It almost looks as if he's going to...

I gasp when Henrik swings at the back of the monster's leg, right above its foot. It only takes me a moment to realize the soldier strategically sliced a tendon.

The beast roars so loudly, the birds fly from the tree before he even hits the ground.

As he falls to his knees, the aynauth drops Pranmore on his head. I gasp as the elf lands like a ragdoll on the cobblestones.

Please let him be alive. Otherwise, this was all for naught.

Henrik darts for him even as the injured aynauth turns to search for his attacker.

“NOW!” Henrik yells as he drags Pranmore to safety.

I shoot as instructed, wondering if it's possible to kill such a large beast with something as flimsy as an arrow.

I pierce the monster's chest, and it roars again, this time turning back to the tree...and trying to locate me. Unable to stand, he crawls forward, looking terrifying as his large eye searches for the new threat.

Taking a deep breath, assuring myself he can't reach me, I shoot again. Over and over, I release my arrows until my quiver is nearly empty.

I'm so consumed with my task, I don't realize Henrik slunk around and scaled one of the aged walls near the aynauth.

In fact, I almost shoot the soldier when he leaps from the wall to the aynauth's shoulders.

“Henrik!” I yell, helpless now that he has wrapped himself around the monster's

back. I don't dare shoot.

The beast turns in circles on his knees, reaching his large arms over his shoulders, howling like a mad thing as he tries to dislodge Henrik.

From the edge of the square, Pranmore wakes. Rubbing his forehead, he sits up. Slowly, his eyes focus on the scene before him, and then his face contorts with horror as he yells, "Don't hurt the creature!"

The moment the elf reveals his location, the aynauth whips his head around. As soon as he spots Pranmore, he crawls forward, propelling himself with his massive arms, building speed. Too close now, he roars, letting spittle fly and revealing wicked, sharp teeth.

Pranmore screams, throwing his hands over his face as if that will save him.

Just before reaching his prey, the monster throws back his head and lets out a gurgling howl. It echoes throughout the city, loud and horrifying.

I lower myself onto a branch, breathing hard. Henrik's done it—he's killed the beast.

The aynauth sways on his knees several times before he begins to topple over—looking as if he's going to crush Henrik underneath him when he collides with the ground.

"HENRIK!" I scream, leaning too far forward...and losing my balance in the process.

Suddenly, I'm falling from the tree, and the ground is coming too quickly for me to even hope to catch myself.

* * *

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I wake slowly, feeling like I've been drugged.

I'm cradled against something warm and unyielding. It smells like leather, rugged man, and bliss.

"Lady Clover," a voice says from above me, all husky and concerned. "Wake up, Clover."

I blink open my eyes and find Henrik's face inches from mine. Tenderly, he brushes my hair out of my face.

"I've got to stop having these dreams," I murmur.

"She's awake," Dream Henrik says, sitting back.

We're in a green city, surrounded by flowers and a magic tree. Everything is just hazy enough I know I'm asleep.

"Come back," I pout, grasping hold of the back of his neck and pulling his face close to mine. "This one is going to end better than the last."

"What's she doing?" Henrik asks, sounding startled as I twine my fingers through his deliciously thick hair.

Confused, I ask, "Who are you talking to?"

"It's common with head injuries," someone answers. "My magic healed her, but

she'll be a bit disoriented for a few minutes. She's all right."

Startled to hear another voice, I release Henrik and crane my neck around. Blinking from Henrik's arms, I try to focus on the elf behind me.

"What are you doing in my dream?" I ask Pranmore, clearing my voice when it's a little scratchy.

"You fell from the tree," Henrik says, carefully placing me on the stone ground next to him and helping me sit up. "You hit your head hard, but Pranmore saved you."

I blink at him slowly. "I fell?"

The soldier nods, frowning.

Still fuzzy, I press my finger to his warm lips. "Yousavedme."

His eyes widen with shock. He swallows hard, and then he says, "Pranmore...saved you."

I laugh a little, marveling at the strange dream. Running my finger along his lower lip, I say, "I like Dream Henrik. He's amusing."

He makes an odd noise as I lean in to kiss him. I'm only inches away when my eyes fall on the massive, dead beast not fifteen feet away.

Startled, I go completely still.

I fell from the tree... Pranmore saved me.

Everything falls into place, and it's like a bucket of water is dumped over my head.

Slowly, I pull my eyes back to Henrik. My finger is still on his lips, and he's looking at me as though I've grown an extra head.

"I'm...awake?" I squeak.

Moving carefully as if he's not sure I'm completely stable, Henrik removes my hand. "Yes."

Gasping, I crawl back on the cobblestones.

"LADY CLOVER!" Bartholomew yells from somewhere nearby. "What happened?"

This would be another fantastic time to faint—unfortunately, I'm a field Clover, not a wilting Rose.

The young duke runs forward, dropping his crossbow so he can reach us quickly. But when he's near, he comes to an abrupt stop, and his boots skid on the cobblestones.

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His eyes drop to my stockinged legs, and his mouth falls open. As soon as he regains his wits, he whirls around.

I glance down, remembering I ditched my skirts before I leaped into the tree.

At some point after my fall, Henrik covered me with his cloak, but I dislodged it when I crawled back.

The soldier tugs it back up now, protecting my modesty. It's not like the important areas aren't covered by my bloomers—they are. But I imagine I do look a bit shocking.

“Bartholomew,” Henrik says. “Go fetch our horses.”

“Are you all...” He gulps. “Are you all right?”

“We’re fine,” Henrik reassures him.

When the young man hurries away, I turn to Henrik, my embarrassment temporarily forgotten. “You weren’t crushed in the fall. I thought...it looked like...”

I turn away, quickly blinking back belated tears. The whole thing was a bit of a shock, I suppose.

“I leaped off before we hit the ground,” he answers solemnly.

“Poor creature,” Pranmore says, rising to go to the aynauth.

“If you manage to revive that beast, I will gladly let it eat you,” Henrik warns.

I snort out a laugh, but suddenly tears are spilling over my cheeks.

“What’s wrong with me?” I try to laugh as I swipe at the tears, but there’s no hiding my distress.

We’re all fine, and the monster is dead. But I keep replaying the events in my head—I keep seeing Henrik falling with the aynauth.

“It’s normal,” Henrik says. “The first few battles are the worst.”

“I didn’t cry over the vultures,” I point out.

The soldier chuckles—a low, fully amused sound that makes the tears flow harder.

Hesitantly, he wraps an arm around my shoulders and tugs me into a side hug. It’s a friendly gesture, one of camaraderie.

“You did well,” he says gruffly. “I’ve worked with many men who don’t execute orders as quickly or efficiently as you did.”

Finally feeling as if the tears are ebbing, I give Henrik a sideways look. “Is that a compliment? Do you know how to give those?”

“About as well as I joke.”

I laugh, turning to face him. He smiles, and I smile back, perhaps both of us sensing we’re entering a tentative truce.

Unfortunately, I also realize how much I like Henrik touching me. His arm is warm

around my bare shoulders, and he's a little too appealing when he's friendly.

I have the strongest urge to crawl onto his lap and press a kiss to his smiling lips. Would he return it, or would he push me away?

Would he be horrified, or would his fingers press possessively into my sides as he claimed my mouth with relish?

Henrik frowns. "How are you feeling? You took quite a fall."

"Still a little dazed." Before I'm tempted to do something stupid, I pull away from his friendly embrace.

"Where did you leave your skirts?" he asks matter-of-factly—a sentence that would be too much for most men to utter with a straight face.

"Just above the stairs," I answer, waving to the building I used to get into the tree. "There's no way I could have climbed the tree in them."

“I’ll fetch them and be right back.”

I nod, holding a hand to my fluttering belly as I watch him go—and then I catch myself.

I jerk my hand away from my stomach and stare at it like it’s deceived me. Then I laugh. I’m not actually besotted with Henrik—certainly not. This is an effect of close proximity and Pranmore’s magic.

At worst, it’s just a fleeting attraction—like a passing illness. I have a plan for my life, and it in no way involves becoming doe-eyed over the soldier.

Keep your eyes on the goal, Clover.

Henrik returns several minutes later with the garment. Kneeling beside me, he sets it across the cloak in my lap.

“I’ll take Pranmore away and give you some privacy so you can dress.”

Clutching his cloak, I nod.

I think he’s going to leave, but before he rises, Henrik meets my eyes and drops his voice. “Just to be clear, when I said you needed a new outfit, I meant you should wear more clothing—notless.”

My lips part with surprise, and my stomach clenches. His expression is solemn, but his eyes sparkle with mischief.

Before I can respond, the knight stands, off to fetch the currently mourning elf.

17

Henrik

I believe I lost several years of my life when Clover fell from the tree. I was too far away to catch her, leaping from a dying aynauth—trying not to die myself.

My heart nearly stopped when she collided with the old cobblestones.

I tell myself it was only my extreme relief that made me wrap my arm around her—that same relief that had my eyes dropping to her lips when the belated shock of the incident overtook her, wondering what it would be like to kiss her tears away.

Yes, it was only relief... or possibly the memory of Clover's finger trailing my lips. Pranmore said her strange mood was a side effect of his magic, nothing more, but I can't get it out of my head.

"Do you feel well enough to ride?" I ask Clover when Bartholomew returns with the horses, half hoping she's not and I'll have an excuse to ride with her.

Which is madness. What is the matter with me?

My mind drifts to Camellia, and I frown. The princess and I aren't together—I've explained that to Camellia more times than I can count. But the idea of eventually marrying the princess has been interwoven with my goals for so long, I can't imagine a future without her.

I need to keep my focus. I can't let Clover get into my head. After all, it's not as if she wants to be there—she has Lawrence.

How does she stand that man?

“I’m fine,” Clover says, pulling me from my thoughts. “I think my head is finally clearing.”

Mildly disappointed—and then disappointed in myself for feeling disappointed—I take my own horse from Bartholomew.

To the young man, I say, “If you’re determined to help next time, leave the crossbow with the horses.”

“But then I won’t have a weapon,” he points out.

“Don’t you have a sword?”

He shakes his head, looking chagrined. “Mother says they are dangerous.”

“They are dangerous.” Clover presses her foot into the stirrup and swings her leg over her horse. “That’s the point of them, isn’t it?”

“Your mother isn’t here,” I say to Bartholomew, shooting Clover a look. “You’re buying a sword when we return to Denmel. I can’t have a squire who doesn’t even carry a blade.”

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Bartholomew nods, looking both hesitant and eager. “You’ll teach me how to use it?”

“That’s why His Majesty has placed you with me, isn’t it?”

He nods, looking pleased.

I turn to Pranmore. “Where is your horse? We’ll accompany you back to Denmel.”

The elf’s expression becomes oddly solemn. “I do not have a horse, sir knight—”

“Soldier,” Clover interrupts, but when I look at her, her eyes sparkle with friendly amusement instead of holding haughty distaste.

“Oh,” Pranmore pauses, looking stumped. “I do not have a horse, sir...soldier, as I do not feel animals should be disrespected.”

The comment makes me pause, and I have the sudden urge to rub my temples. After several seconds, I say, “Considering there are Woodmore-eating aynauths about, do you think you can make an exception and ride Clover’s horse this one time?”

“And what will I ride?” Clover asks.

“You’ll ride with me.”

Her eyebrows fly up. Ignoring my reaction to her, I turn back to the elf.

Slowly, Pranmore nods. “I can, and I will. From now on, I will do all you ask of me.”

I study him, trying to make sense of his words. “Excuse me?”

“You saved my life—I owe you a life debt, and as an elf who values tradition, I will honor that debt.”

“A life debt?” I deadpan.

“It means—”

“I know what it means.” I breathe in a slow, calming breath through my nose. “Tell me, elf—”

“Pranmore,” Clover corrects.

My lips twitch, but I refuse to give in to the smile. “Pranmore. How long do the Woodmore people serve their life debts?”

He drops to his knees before me. Bowing so low his antlers brush the ground, he vows, “Until I draw my last breath, I will stay by your side, protecting you as well as I am capable.”

The fool elf thinks he’s going to tag along with me for the foreseeable future? What is going on? Why have I suddenly started collecting strays?

I clear my throat. “Please...get up.”

Immediately, Pranmore rises.

“Though I greatly appreciate the sentiment, I will not hold you to the debt. You are free to leave as soon as we reach Denmel.”

“But, sir soldier—”

“If you’re going to serve him for life, you should probably drop the honorifics and call him Henrik,” Clover says.

Looking horrified at the thought, Pranmore exclaims, “I couldn’t possibly use his given name.”

She shrugs. “Suit yourself. It just seems that forever is a long time to be so formal.”

And suddenly, I have another headache. “We part in Denmel—”

The elf turns back to me. “I cannot simply leave you. It is my duty.”

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I look away, staring at the tree as I process the afternoon's events.

"He's a gifted healer," Clover points out. "Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to keep him around? We might need him again."

"We will discuss it when we reach Denmel. For now, we should leave. There may be more aynauths in the woods, and we don't want to meet one after dark."

Clover dismounts and hands her horse to Pranmore.

"How do I..." His face goes white as he looks at the mare. He then drops his voice to a whisper. "How do I get up?"

Clover explains the basics, and Bartholomew goes to assist. With the young duke's help, and a ridiculous amount of flailing, the elf makes it atop the horse.

"I beg your pardon," he murmurs to the patient animal. "Truly, I am so grateful for your service."

The mare flicks her ears, bored. If she's thinking anything, which I doubt, it's that Pranmore is an idiot.

And then I forget all about the elf because Clover is walking my way, still grinning at the ridiculous situation. My chest tightens uncomfortably, making me realize this might have been a grand mistake.

Once we're atop my horse, Clover shifts to get comfortable.

“What are you doing?” I ask gruffly.

“Getting seated,” she responds from behind me, sounding as if she’s laughing at my tone.

Once she’s finally still, I say, “You should probably hold on.”

More obedient than she’s ever been, Clover immediately sets her hands on my sides. “How’s this?”

I swallow hard. “Fine.”

“Is it very uncomfortable?” she asks. “You seem rigid.”

Discomfort is not the problem.

“Bartholomew, you lead,” I say instead of answering her. “Pranmore, follow him. We’ll be right behind you.”

Thankfully, Pranmore’s horse trails after Bartholomew’s on instinct because the elf has no idea what he’s doing. At least he’s not yanking at her reins.

Unlike when she was riding with Simon, Clover isn’t particularly chatty. She stays quiet behind me, constantly reminding me of her presence with each tiny shift or sigh.

Because I’m not skilled at starting conversations, I let the silence wrap around us. By the time we make it to Denmel, all my nerves are on high alert.

Once we’ve both dismounted, I turn to Clover, feeling acutely uncomfortable. “Will you stay in the inn again tonight?”

“Yes.” She offers me a knowing smile. “But I won’t sleep in tomorrow.”

And for some reason, I find myself saying, “I can come to get you in the morning if you’d like.”

“That would be fine.”

I turn to Bartholomew. “Walk Lady Clover to the inn and see that she’s settled, all right?”

The young man smiles brightly. “It would be my pleasure.”

“Have a good night,” I say to her, telling myself I must establish a professional distance for both our sakes.

“You as well.” Clover’s eyes remain on mine for several seconds, and then she smiles as she turns away.

* * *

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I walk briskly down the street, heading toward the inn. I spent a good part of the morning trying to decide how long to let Clover sleep. When the church bells tolled eight, I decided I'd given her long enough.

I enter the inn and walk to the front desk, which is currently being tended by an elderly woman with a thin white bun.

"I'm here to escort Lady Clover," I tell her. "May I inquire which room she's occupying?"

"Lady Clover, Lady Clover," the woman murmurs, flipping several pages through the worn leather ledger. Her hand trembles as she runs her finger along the names.

After several painfully long minutes, she says, "It seems she's already checked out."

"She checked out?" I demand, startled. "Are you certain? Lady Clover? A young woman—light brown hair, green eyes, very pretty?"

"You're not too bad yourself, soldier," Clover says from behind me, making me turn around sharply.

"She said you already checked out," I explain, feeling like a dolt.

"Oh, silly me." The woman chortles to herself. "That was Lady Clonver, and it was an entry from last year." She then blinks her pale blue eyes and very solemnly says, "We don't seem to have a woman by the name of Clover staying with us."

Clover bites back a smile and offers me a shrug.

“Grandmother,” a woman exclaims from the doorway, hurrying into the room. “What are you doing down here?”

“Tending the counter,” the woman says.

The innkeeper shoots us an apologetic smile and then says to the woman, “Thank you, Grandmother. But I’m back now...”

I turn my attention back to Clover, this time noticing her clothing. My eyes linger for several seconds too long before I rip them back to her face.

“Better?” She extends her arms to the side, giving me a better view of her outfit than I, or any other man, needs. “I woke up early this morning and went shopping so as not to delay the supply run further.”

Clover exchanged her riding gown for a scarlet bodice and opaque, fitted hose embellished with a gold filigree pattern. Over the hose, she wears a very short pair of gray breeches, and to complete the outfit, she dons a pair of matching, thigh-high suede boots.

Keeping with the modern style, the bodice is still fitted and reveals her shoulders. But it’s not her top half that’s causing concern.

She pats the side of her leg. “The shopkeeper assured me the style is very popular with female mercenaries, and the range of movement is incredible. What do you think?”

I think Bartholomew is going to swallow his tongue.

True, I've seen mercenaries wearing outfits that are similar and thought nothing of it, but Clover is a nobleman's daughter with a reputation to protect. It's one thing for a woman who sells her blade for a living to dress in a manner suited to her profession. It's another for Clover.

"It's a bit..."

Revealing. Scandalous. Ridiculously appealing.

"Modern?" I manage.

Clover lifts an eyebrow. "I bought a skirt to go with it."

"Perhaps you should put it on."

Laughing, she shakes her head. "You're as bad as my brothers. They don't understand current fashion either."

Though I have no quarrel with her brothers, that's not a category I want to be lumped into. But I let it go.

Clover hurries up the stairs to her room to change. When she comes back down, she wears a perfectly respectable skirt—one that looks far more suited to traveling than her ornate riding gown.

After checking out, verifying that she was, in fact, a patron of the inn, we walk back to the barracks.

"How long will it take to reach the guard post?" she asks.

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“We’re getting an early enough start, so we should be there by this evening.”

“I suppose you’re looking forward to returning to Cabaranth? You’re so close to earning your seal.”

I nod, though the mention of it leaves me frustrated.

“I’ll tell Lawrence about the aynauth,” she says, looking straight ahead. “It might help.”

“Lawrence would sooner cut off his own foot than help me.”

Clover gives me a curious look. “Why is that, exactly? The two of you don’t seem to get along.”

“His Highness is...” I shake my head.

“If you can’t say something nice, best say nothing at all?” she asks with a laugh.

“You’re not cursed with such manners, are you?”

“Certainly not.”

“You and Camellia don’t seem to get along any better than Lawrence and I.”

She wrinkles her nose. “That’s because Camellia is a poisonous, bejeweled cow of a girl who’s gotten everything she’s ever wanted and become horribly spoiled.” She

pauses, glancing at me. “No offense.”

“Why would I take offense? I don’t believe you should speak so bluntly about your princess, but it in no way affects me.”

“But you two are...” She pauses as if uncomfortable. “Together.”

“We’re not,” I say too vehemently—as though some part of me desperately needs Clover to understand.

Clover stops in the street, setting her hands on her hips and looking if she’s about to call me on a lie. “I saw you.”

I press my lips together, studying her before I answer. “Though it is true Camellia is eager to begin a relationship, I am not worthy of her. Not yet.”

“Does she know this?”

“I have explained it...many times.”

“But you’re in love with her?”

I frown, not understanding Clover’s confusion—I just explained myself.

Again, I say, “I am not worthy.”

“But that has nothing to do with love. You can love someone even if you believe you are beneath them.”

I shake my head, baffled at the idea.

“Henrik!” Clover exclaims with a laugh. “Love is your heart’s response to finding a kindred spirit—it goes deeper than attraction, to a place of true connection and admiration. It doesn’t matter if you’re below that person, or she below you. It just happens.”

“Is that how you feel about Lawrence?” I ask, the conversation making me uneasy. “Like you’ve found a kindred spirit?”

“I don’t love Lawrence,” she answers, shooting me a strange look.

“Camellia claims you do.”

Clover rolls her eyes. “Don’t misunderstand—I intend to marry the scoundrel. But, no, I don’t love him.”

“Doesn’t that contradict everything you’ve just said?”

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“You can marry without love,” she says flippantly. “If I were in love with someone else, it would be a different matter entirely, but I’m not, and I can live without it, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Why Lawrence? Are you so eager to be queen?”

Clover doesn’t seem the type to want the responsibility that comes with the title.

She scoffs. “Hardly. But there is only one position in all Caldenbauer that’s available to me where I wouldn’t have to answer to Camellia. You know what that is?”

“Queen?”

“That’s right.”

“Does Lawrence know you intend to use him?”

“Of course he does,” she says with a laugh. “There are very few secrets between us.”

That doesn’t settle very well, but neither does the rest of the conversation. Does Clover truly believe love is some obscure thing that stems from a place of connection and admiration?

She’s wrong. Love is nothing more than a spoken commitment. There is no magical feeling that comes with it—you make a choice, and you honor your decision.

But even as I reassure myself, I wonder if it is something more than that—and worry

I'm simply ignorant in the matter because I've never experienced it.

18

Clover

How in the world did Henrik and I stumble upon a conversation about love of all things? No matter, I learned two important things about the soldier.

The first: he's not in love with Camellia, and the rumors of their affair have been grossly over-exaggerated.

The second: even though Henrik doesn't love her, he intends to tether himself to her once he is worthy. Or rather, when he obtains the seal that will make him feel as if he's worthy. In my opinion, he's far too good for Camellia exactly as he is.

I don't know how I feel about either of those things. If Henrik doesn't have feelings for Camellia, why does he want her?

Scoffing, I realize I can answer my own question. Why does any man want Camellia? It's not for her dazzling personality. But after spending several days with the man, I'm having trouble believing Henrik is that shallow.

So what does he see in her?

"Are you warm enough, Lady Clover?" Bartholomew asks from my side. "The air grows cooler the higher we travel."

"I'm all right," I assure him, wondering if Henrik instructed the young man to stay with me. He's been by my side all day, eager to fetch anything to aid my comfort.

I tuck my new cloak tighter around my shoulders because Bartholomew's right—the evening breeze is icy.

We've left the montane woods and the golden, whispering grespit trees and are now in the rocky alpine forests of the high mountains. According to Simon, the guard post is just ahead.

We haven't seen any more aynauths, nor any of the other beasts that make the high mountains so treacherous—which is a shame, considering one might have had a hankering for Woodmore flesh.

To Henrik's extreme chagrin, Pranmore has accompanied us. He walks alongside the wagons, loudly marveling at anything and everything—rocks, birds, trees, dirt.

It's all new to me as well, but you don't see me waxing poetic. At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if one of the guards decided to tie the pungent cheese basket to his neck and send him into the woods to find a new friend.

Alas, the animals we have spotted haven't shown any interest in eating Pranmore.

For the first time in my life, I've seen a diurnal kipper owl, with its tiny white body and deep amethyst eyes that glowed at us from the dark shadows between boughs of a thick spruce.

We also passed a family of prongspringer not long ago, but the small golden deer were far from a threat.

It's all fascinating and new, and the idea of turning around to go back to Cabaranth tomorrow is almost too depressing to contemplate.

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“Have you ever seen a more glorious sunset, Lady Clover?” Pranmore asks me, walking merrily beside my horse. “The colors, the radiance. The hue is the exact shade of spring beet juice blended with the milk of a thornthistle.”

“Or watered-down blood,” I point out, since we’re being fancy.

Pranmore turns to me, aghast. Then his features soften, and he softly chides, “You’re teasing me.”

“I am, yes,” I say with a laugh.

“Well, no one can say I am an elf without a sense of humor.” He pauses. “Though, that was a bit morbid perhaps.”

“Perhaps,” I agree, laughing a little harder. Then I reassure him, “It’s a very nice sunset.”

Mollified, he begins looking for words that rhyme with thornthistle.

“Scorn whistle?” Bartholomew suggests.

Pranmore shakes his head thoughtfully. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

I ride ahead, leaving the elf to ponder his options with Bartholomew.

“Not much longer now, Lady Clover,” Simon says when I join him and Henrik at the front.

And true to the captain's word, as soon as we ride over the next hill, the guard post comes into view. It sits upon the shore of Lake Ileastra, the headwater for the river bearing the same name and the source of much of northern and middle Caldenbauer's water.

Unlike many of the structures in Caldenbauer, this fortress was constructed by humans and not elves, and its design mimics the architecture from our homeland—sturdy, with few of the ornate embellishments that the elves favor. It's beautiful in its simplicity.

The multilevel building is constructed of gray stone, with steeply pitched red roofs consisting of many gables and windowed dormers. Smoke puffs from several chimneys, promising our final destination will be warm.

The bailey surrounds it, and a low wall, made of the same rock, encircles the area's perimeter. Two large wooden gates stand open, and beside them, affixed to the stone on either side, hang massive iron lanterns.

"It looks more like a hunting lodge than a guard post," I say to no one in particular.

Simon laughs. "Wait until you see inside."

I study the building, watching the guards as they go about their business.

Men stationed at the post keep an eye on the nearby talvernum mine to ensure all the extracted ore makes it onto the waiting boats. The talvernum is then shipped down the river to Waterside and taken to Cabaranth. From there, the raw ore is carefully inventoried, and then a ridiculously high tax is placed upon it. Only then can it be bought by the elven people of the swamps—perhaps King Algernon's way of getting back at the High Vales for their exorbitant oil and energy crystal prices. After all, they are the only race who can manipulate the magically conductive metal.

Because the price of talvernum is so high, and it's so carefully regulated to ensure the High Vales don't create their golems once more, it's become a much-sought-after item in Caldenbauer's seedy underground markets.

"The supplies are here," a guard posted atop the wall yells into the bailey when we are close.

Just like when we entered Denmel, the soldiers in Fortress Lintanry watch curiously as I ride past the gates with Henrik and Simon. These ones, however, are wise enough to keep their mouths shut.

Guards surround the wagons like ants, eager for the new rations. They greet one another and share news.

I dismount my borrowed horse, thanking a soldier when he takes him, and watch the organized pandemonium around me.

Henrik stands in the middle of it all, a long list in his hand, checking items off as they're unloaded from the first wagon and barking at anyone who attempts to pull things from any of the others. An older, dark-haired knight stands next to him, tall but shorter than Henrik, nodding as Henrik directs the madness.

"You're efficient, Henrik," he says approvingly when they've finished with the first wagon and are about to move to the next.

"Thank you, sir," Henrik says, and then he reluctantly admits they lost some of the supplies to the vultures.

"How odd," the man says. "I've never heard of them acting so aggressively."

A young soldier next to him says, "Do you think it has something to do with the

aynauths' unusual behavior? Perhaps it is connected?"

Henrik clears his throat. "Actually, we believe they were drawn by cheese we were requested to deliver to Lord Forlencia. It has a unique aroma."

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The knight throws back his head with a groan, “Not that blasted cheese again.”

As if summoned, Lord Forlentina walks from the building a few seconds later. In his mid-sixties, he has slender limbs and an ample belly, vaguely resembling an upright frog. He lost most of his hair years ago, and what remains circles his bald head like a gray nest.

He walks right past me and then stops rather comically, taking several steps backward to check to see if his eyes have deceived him.

“Clover!” he exclaims, looking both delighted and confused. “What are you doing here?”

“Hello, Uncle George,” I say with a laugh, realizing Henrik never mentioned whom the cheese was for. “I’ve come with the supply run. They needed my superior archery skills.”

“Did they now?” He pauses, looking perplexed. “Does your father know you’re here?”

I grin at my great uncle. “He should by now.”

He shakes his head, wearing an expression that’s both chastising and indulgent.

“So the cheese is for you?” I ask, glancing at the last wagon in the line. “I thought it smelled familiar.”

“Did Harriet send some for me?” he asks, looking genuinely delighted. “Where is it?”

“In the last wagon. Aunt Harriet’s packed it in a basket. But I think it’s gone off during the trip—it smells something horrid.”

“That’s normal,” he reassures me, hurrying to fetch the cheese.

Henrik watches him, but he says nothing even though everyone else who’s attempted to take something out of order has been reprimanded. The soldier is likely as appalled as the rest of us that someone would consider the cheese food.

I wrinkle my nose when Uncle George rejoins me and lifts the corner of the tea towel.

“It’s molding...” I say.

“You just cut that part off.”

In the heat of the early part of the trip, it seems the cheese partially melted. Instead of a tidy round wheel, it’s now a soft disk that’s eased into the contours of the basket.

I’m fairly certain he’ll die if he eats it, but I suppose he would know better than me.

“Shall we go inside and find some bread?” Uncle George asks me, holding out the basket. “I’ll share.”

“That’s all right,” I say quickly, taking a step back. “I’d like to wait for Henrik.”

He glances at the soldier and then nods. “Suit yourself.”

Eager to sample the rotting cheese, he disappears into the building. I wander to Henrik’s side, not precisely sure where I belong. It doesn’t seem like many

noblewomen visit the guard post.

“It’s cold,” Henrik says when I step up to him, pausing from his list to frown at me. “You should go inside.”

I glance toward the doors, unsure. Though I wouldn’t say I’m a hesitant person, I’m used to court—not guard posts in the middle of the woods.

“I’ll wait,” I say.

“I might be a while.”

“I’ll escort you inside, Lady Clover,” Simon says, appearing at my side. He gives me a wide smile, dramatically offering his arm. “Every man in the post will envy my good fortune of having you on my arm.”

Henrik barely looks up from his list to nod me along with Simon—dismissing me.

Well then.

Accepting Simon’s offer, we enter the post.

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“What did I tell you?” he asks when I pause in the large entry, taking in the vast array of animal mounts. “It’s very much like a hunting lodge, isn’t it?”

There are weasels, rabbits, bears, boars, and even a stuffed gray squirrel. But the largest of them all is a tawny red stag with exceptionally large antlers directly across from the entry, in a place of prominence over the walkway that appears to lead into a great room.

Our elf is going to pass out.

Eyeing the deer with dread, I ask Simon, “Pranmore hasn’t been in here yet, has he—”

A horrified gasp sounds behind me, letting me know the elf must be right on my heels.

“Never mind,” I finish.

“I will stay outside,” Pranmore says to Bartholomew dramatically, turning to hide his eyes from the disturbing display.

“Pranmore...” I begin as he throws open the doors, but what am I going to say?

Bartholomew gives me a helpless look, but I only shrug. As the young man hurries out the door after the elf, I look back into the room.

I’m not usually squeamish, but even I am unnerved by the dead animals. They seem

to be...staring at me.

Besides the fact it's a bit disturbing, for practical reasons, it seems a poor décor choice due to the upkeep. Who dusts all that fur?

"Does the guard post have a tanner in residence?" I ask incredulously. "How did all these get here?"

"Lord Garamond is an avid huntsman, but his wife won't let him keep the mounts in their estate. He brings new ones every time he's stationed up here."

"Remind me to keep Pranmore away from Lord Garamond."

Simon laughs and leads me into the great hall. There are dozens of round wooden tables, and two great fireplaces keep the vast space warm. Few people are in the room, but serving maids bustle about the area, setting tables with pewter plates and earthen tankards, making me believe the evening meal will be out soon.

"Evening, Simon," a pretty, plump brunette says as she pauses in front of us. She brushes her long bangs from her heart-shaped face, and then she smiles. "When they started hauling supplies into the kitchens, I wondered if you were with the group."

"I always am," Simon says with a grin, and then he turns to me. "Lady Clover, may I introduce you to Savrina. Savrina, this is Lady Clover, Count Rolf Flauret's daughter."

She bobs in a curtsy, her eyes bright with curiosity. "What brings you to Fortress Lintanry?"

"Lady Clover is a masterful archer," Simon says. "She joined the supply run after we had a nasty run-in with Calendrian vultures." He then turns back to me. "I've never

thought to ask. What business did you have in Riverwren?"

Trying to keep the bite out of my tone since I don't know these people well, I say, "Her Royal Highness sent me upon an errand."

Savrina's eyebrows go up with surprise.

"I am one of Princess Camellia's ladies-in-waiting," I explain.

Savrina's eyes do a quick tour of the room, and she seems befuddled. I'm not sure what to tell her—I don't know why I'm here either.

"It was a cold ride," Simon says, thankfully changing the subject. "I'm sure Lady Clover would enjoy some tea if you can spare a moment to fetch her some."

"Of course," the girl says warmly. "Find a seat, and I'll bring it to you."

I thank her, and then I follow Simon to a table near one of the hearths. The pine logs crackle merrily, sending an occasional shower of sparks harmlessly toward the grate.

A few moments later, Savrina returns with a tray containing a small silver teapot, a dainty porcelain cup that seems out of place in this large, masculine fort, a tiny pitcher of cream, and a plate of pressed sugar cubes.

"The cook already had water boiling, but I've just added the tea," she says. "Best let it steep for a few minutes."

"Thank you, Savrina."

She hands Simon a full tankard of something that smells potent, and with one last curious look, she hurries away to finish her pre-dinner chores.

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“Hello, Simon,” a young guard says when he ambles to our table. “Looks like you lived through another exciting supply run.”

“It was riveting as always.” Simon takes a drink.

“I’m Erwin,” the guard says, turning his attention to me. “Care if I join you?”

Deciding the tea has steeped long enough, I gesture for him to take a seat and then pour the pale liquid into my cup and wrinkle my nose. I could have probably waited a little longer.

Erwin has barely taken a seat when two other guards end up at our table.

Simon leans close to me as the men talk with each other. “I’ve never been this popular in my life.”

I quietly laugh into my cup, but the joke doesn’t make me uncomfortable. I’ve always been at ease in the company of my brothers’ companions.

The hall slowly fills up, and I answer my new acquaintances’ questions, laughing at their jokes and deciding my worries were unfounded. No one seems to resent my presence here, even if I am a pampered noblewoman. They’re only curious—and perhaps glad for someone new to distract them from the everyday tedium.

Another soldier strides into the hall, this one so handsome my stomach flutters without my permission—an instinctual reaction I seem to have no control over. I pause with my tea halfway to my lips, studying Henrik over the rim of the cup.

He pauses at the entrance, scanning the room as if he's looking for someone. After a few moments, his eyes meet mine...and hold. Which makes me think the person he's looking for is me.

My chest tightens, and I swallow my sudden nerves.

Purposely pulling my gaze away, I berate myself for my reaction. Taking another sip of tea, I force a smile at something Erwin says.

But from the corner of my eye, I watch Henrik walk our way. My heart beats a little faster, and I set the teacup down before I drop it.

Why is the soldier showing me so much attention? And why did he ask me to stay with him on the supply run—we both know he didn't actually need me.

Now that I know he and Camellia aren't together, I can't help but wonder.

As absurd as it sounds, could he have feelings for...

I mean, could he possibly...

I can't even think it. Why would Henrik take a liking to me when he could have his choice of any of the eligible women at court—including the princess? Before I joined him on this short mission, we'd barely exchanged two words.

I don't have an answer for that, nor do I have an answer as to why I can't seem to breathe properly when our gazes meet.

Henrik stops next to me, and I glance over as if I just noticed him.

"Lady Clover." The way he says my name makes my stomach tie itself into a

thousand knots. “Lord Garamond has invited me to dine at his table. I was hoping you would join me.”

As a besotted smile passes over my lips, something becomes painfully clear. It doesn’t matter whether Henrik likes me or not...because I like him. I’ve gone and let myself become enamored with the handsome, chivalrous knight—and I will have to rid myself of the infatuation very soon.

But not tonight.

19

Henrik

Clover’s smile is a punch to the gut, and I don’t know what to do about it. Without a word, she offers me her hand.

The men at the table don’t seem pleased that I’ve come to steal their pretty companion, but I outrank them all, and they wisely keep their mouths shut.

There is no reason it should irk me that Clover left with Simon. After all, I told her to go. But as I continued to check items off the list, with a line of wagons left to go through, I became edgy. I held out for as long as I could, and then I shoved the list at Bartholomew and told him to finish.

After all, what is the point of having a squire if you don’t get to force the mundane tasks upon him? There must be a silver lining somewhere.

I stare at Clover’s hand a second too long before I take it. Her skin is warm, and her fingers are slender. She rises gracefully, either oblivious to the fact that every eye in the room watches her, or she’s so used to it, it doesn’t affect her.

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It's likely the latter, but I'm not accustomed to the attention, and it makes me feel like all my movements are stiff and awkward.

"Thank you for the tea," Clover says to Simon, turning back to the table before we go. "It was a pleasure to meet you all."

The soldiers offer her far warmer smiles than they flash in my direction, all of them oblivious that they might have enjoyed the company of their future queen.

Hot irritation courses through me at the thought of Lawrence, but I ignore it.

After she says her goodbyes, Clover turns to me and raises her eyebrows expectantly. Too late, I realize I still have her hand. I should have dropped it the moment she was on her feet, but here we are.

She doesn't pull away, and I don't release her.

We stand here, studying each other for mere seconds, but it's seconds too long.

Clearing my throat, I pull my hand back and turn toward the long table at the head of the room, where the lords and a few of the knights have already taken their seats.

"Have you spent so much time on training you've neglected your manners?" Clover teases quietly as we walk.

I turn to her, startled.

With her eyes laughing at me, she whispers, “If you escort a lady through a room, you’re supposed to offer your arm.”

My mouth goes dry, and I pause, unsure of myself. Without a word, I extend my elbow.

Smiling, Clover slides her arm through mine, setting her hand gently on my bicep. “Was that so hard?”

“You should have joined your uncle,” I say instead of answering her, my voice stern even to my ears. “A lady should never dine with guards.”

“I wasn’t dining—I was taking tea.”

I glance at her, mildly irritated. “Have you made it your mission to shirk all the duties of a noblewoman?”

“Shirk my duties?” she says with a laugh. “I just find the customs fusty and outdated.”

“You must demand the respect you are due if you are to receive it.”

She gives me a strange look as we wind our way through the tables. It’s obvious neither of us is in any particular hurry. “You think very highly of the nobility, Henrik.”

“Of course I do. You have been born into a high position and carry great responsibility. You have a duty to the people, and you cannot properly care for them if they don’t believe you are slightly out of reach. You must always keep your distance.”

She pauses, and her eyes laugh at me as she tugs me to a stop. “I cannot care for the people if I’m approachable? If I am kind?”

“No, I...” She flusters me, and it’s frustrating. “You know what I’m saying.”

“I do,” she relents. “But I think you have a skewed view of the upper class. Most aren’t nearly as altruistic as you believe or would like.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just because they’re born with a noble title doesn’t mean they’re noble.”

I frown. “They should be.”

Slowly, she smiles. “If that were true, you shouldn’t have been born as the son of a blacksmith. You’re arguably the noblest man I’ve ever met.”

I want to believe her more than she could ever know. For years, I’ve fought my way up that ladder, wanting—needing—to be something more.

Too soon, we reach Lord Garamond.

“Lady Clover,” the man says warmly, standing as he welcomes her. “What a pleasant surprise to have you grace our table.”

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“Thank you, Lord Garamond,” Clover says, slipping into her birth-given role as easily as she slips out of it. “I appreciate your hospitality.”

Lord Garamond motions to the empty chair next to him. “Please, join me.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

I pull out the seat for her, but before Clover sits, she asks me, “Will you take my cloak, Commander?”

She doesn’t call me “soldier” for once, instead using my actual title in front of these high ranking knights I admire.

As I contemplate that, she pulls her long, honey-brown hair over her shoulder. Facing away, she looks back at me, and her soft green eyes meet mine.

It’s like a dart to my chest.

I stare at her, fighting an unknown foe.

Without waiting for an answer, Clover loosens the ties at her throat. Moving of their own accord, my hands reach for the cloak. My fingers brush over her as I pull the garment away, and I cannot help but watch as the fabric falls from her bare shoulders.

I stand here like a fool, wanting to touch her—wondering if shewantsme to touch her. And worried I might not be able to resist if we were alone.

It takes but a moment, but it feels as if the world has slowed around us.

“Thank you,” Clover says when she turns back to me, her voice softer than usual. She extends her hands for her cloak.

Feeling like a fool, I hand it over.

When I find my seat next to her, I tug at the neckline of my shirt, feeling as if the familiar fabric is choking me.

“Will you return to Cabaranth tomorrow, Henrik?” Lord Garamond asks, thankfully oblivious to my wayward thoughts.

“No.” I clear my throat. “His Majesty is concerned about the unusual movement of the aynauths, and he’s asked me to look into it.”

Clover gives me a curious look, hearing the news for the first time, but I give Lord Garamond my attention.

“It is bizarre,” the man says. “We’ve seen half a dozen this season alone, and we usually only spot one every few years.”

“Do you have any idea what might have spurred the migration?” Clover asks.

Lord Garamond shakes his head. “The local Woodmores are predicting a harsh winter. Though it’s certainly not the first we’ve experienced in the mountains, I suppose that could have triggered it.”

“Are the deer moving to the lower elevations as well?” I ask, wondering if the aynauths’ food source has become scarce.

“No more than usual,” he answers. “They’ll always go lower for winter, but many remain in the area.”

“I’ll scout and see if I can find anything out of the ordinary. Where are the aynauths often spotted?”

“Up high, near the northwestern section of the province. But it’s a treacherous area.”

“There are no mines that far north?” Clover asks.

Lord Garamond shakes his head. “I’m sure there’s ore in the region, but with a lack of roads, it would be nearly impossible to cart out. I haven’t seen it myself, but the trappers who wander that way say the continent ends at sharp cliffs that fall to the ocean.”

Just like the cliffs of Furlaskin.

“Can’t you make roads?” Clover asks.

“We could, but it would require cutting into the mountain itself. It’s a large undertaking, and His Majesty has decided it’s not worth the cost.” Lord Garamond turns back to me. “If you must go into that territory, Henrik, I suggest you plan accordingly. Help yourself to supplies and whatever weapons you require.”

“You’ll need an archer,” Clover hints coyly as she dips a spoon into the soup that was just served, seemingly focused on her meal.

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I don't answer her, instead thanking the maid who refills my tankard.

The meal passes slowly, with too many of my thoughts consumed by the woman next to me. No matter how much I might like to, I can't take Clover into the high mountains. Not only will it be too dangerous, but it will be uncomfortable for her.

Despite Camellia's plea, I will have to send Clover back to Cabaranth with Simon. It's obvious she isn't practicing sorcery, and I will tell Camellia as much in a letter I send back.

I won't, however, mention that I had a good view of Clover wearing little after she fell out of that blasted tree, and I didn't see any sign of a tambrel stone.

Even though Camellia and I aren't together, I don't think she would particularly appreciate that.

But what if the princess is determined to convict Clover simply because the two don't get along? Surely Lawrence would step in, but do I dare risk sending Clover back without any representation?

And what made Camellia question Clover in the first place?

I glance at the woman, wondering if I dare ask.

Yes, but not now—when we have privacy. Which means I need to get Clover alone.

“Why are you smiling to yourself?” Clover asks. “You really shouldn't do

that—people will question your sanity.”

I gesture to her plate. “Are you finished?”

“Why?” Her tone becomes mildly flirtatious, and my blood pumps a little faster. She turns to me, raising a brow. “Are we going somewhere?”

20

Clover

Henrik doesn't tell me where he's taking me, but he does offer his arm this time. Sensing he wants to talk to me about something personal, my heart races. What will I do if he confesses his feelings?

I meant what I told him—I'm fully prepared to live without love to attain a position where Camellia can't touch me.

But as it stands right now, I've made no promises to Lawrence, and the prince has certainly made none to me. Would it be so bad to have a brief love affair with the handsome knight? Would it be so horrible to collect a few bright memories that I may cling to when life with Lawrence proves to be trying and lonely?

I almost laugh out loud. This is all assuming Henrik likes me, which still seems absurd.

But nevertheless, here we are, strolling in the cold, dark night with no particular destination.

“Are you warm enough?” Henrik asks stiffly.

I nod, feeling unusually awkward. We walk through the courtyard and past the stable, eventually leaving the guard post altogether.

Growing nervous, I laugh, “If I didn’t know better, I would think you were taking me somewhere to dispose of me.”

“I need to speak with you,” he says, glancing at me. “Privately.”

My breath catches in my chest, and I swoon a little. This is it—it’s actually happening. What am I going to do?

We stop near the bank of the Ileastra, by a small lake that has formed from the fast-moving river. A wooden dock stretches into the water, likely the place where the riverboats are loaded before they go downstream to Waterside. The cattails and long marsh grass that surround the lake are brown with the impending winter, and they rustle in the light breeze.

The two moons reflect off the surface of the lake, glistening in the dim night. Though occasional laughter or a holler can be heard from the nearby guard post, we’re very alone here.

“This is probably far enough,” Henrik says, releasing my arm. As if he must get his thoughts in order, he turns to stare at the water.

“You’ve brought me all the way out here to talk,” I say lightly after several long, chilly seconds. “Shouldn’t we...talk?”

Henrik looks back. “Tomorrow, we’ll part ways. I must continue into the mountains, and you will return to Cabaranth. You have nothing to fear—Simon will be in charge in my absence, and he’s a good man.”

Startled because I was expecting a different conversation, I cross my arms. “You’re not going alone.”

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“Bartholomew will accompany me.”

I prepare myself for his refusal. “I would like to go as well.”

As if it’s not a horrible idea, Henrik stares at me for several seconds before he reluctantly shakes his head. “You cannot accompany me on this mission. The travel will likely be strenuous, and you’re not conditioned for such a journey.”

“But Bartholomew is?” I laugh.

“He’s my squire.”

Smirking, I press my hands to my chest as if helpless. “Oh, but whatever shall I do? If you and Bartholomew go traipsing into the woods without me, I will be forced to travel with the common folk, and you just reminded me this evening that such behavior is unacceptable.”

My comment is swiftly met with mild irritation. “You heard Lord Garamond—the territory is dangerous.”

“Have I not proven I am competent with my bow?”

“Why do you want to come?” Henrik asks, growing frustrated. “There are no inns in the mountains—no properly brewed tea. You would be far more comfortable returning to the castle.”

“Where I belong?”

“Clover...” he bites out, shoving a hand through his hair.

“For once, I am free of the castle and Camellia. Please, don’t send me back—not yet.”

“This is not a mission for a noblewoman. How will I protect you out there? I understand you are eager for a holiday, but—”

“Is there something else you want to say?” I ask, cutting him off. “Or did you drag me into the frigid night for this lovely conversation?”

Henrik’s expression becomes far too solemn.

“Yes, there is something else I want to discuss with you.” He looks over my shoulder, arranging his thoughts once more. “And we couldn’t discuss it around others.”

“Well?” I ask, my tone far too eager.

The soldier draws in a slow breath and then reluctantly meets my eyes. I can practically feel his indecision.

Honestly, this man.

“You think too much.” I step close enough he blocks the chill of the wind with his body and place my hands on either side of his trim waist. “Has anyone told you that?”

Henrik goes stone still, staring down at me with an enigmatic expression. He tenses as I slide my fingers down his side, but he doesn’t move.

“Lady Clover...” he says gruffly. “What are you—”

“Don’t talk,” I command at a whisper.

I then snatch his dagger from the sheath at his waist, step to the side, and throw the blade at the monauth that wings its way toward Henrik’s head in the dark.

Henrik whirls around, reaching for his sword even though I’ve already dealt with the threat.

The small, furred monster squeals like a tiny demon. It falls only a few feet away from the soldier, twitching its rodent-like arms and the winged membranes between them before it goes still.

Pleased with my shot, I yank the blade from the carcass and then wipe it clean on the dry grass. Casually, I say, “To think, if I weren’t here, that thing would be latched onto your neck right now.”

I step close to Henrik and slowly slide the dagger back into its sheath. Smiling, I meet his eyes in the moonlight. “It seems you’ll need someone to protect you while you’re in the mountains; therefore, I will come with you. No need to thank me.”

Before he can answer, I turn on my heel and make my way back to the guard post, satisfied. Once Henrik gets his wits about him, he tries to call me back, but I ignore him.

Henrik asked me to stay, and now he’s stuck with me whether he likes it or not—at least for a little bit longer.

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Soon, I'll have no choice but to return to my life.

* * *

I'm not the only one who's not going home today. Pranmore, the stubborn elf, refuses to leave Henrik's side as well, bringing our traveling party to a grand total of four—one aspiring knight, a squire who's never wielded a blade, an elf who insists he'll run beside us as we travel so he doesn't have to offend a horse, and a runaway lady-in-waiting who refuses to return to her princess.

It's no wonder why Henrik looks agitated this morning. We're a group of misfits if I've ever seen one.

A wagonload of talvernum arrived a few hours ago, and the yard buzzes with activity as soldiers and guards weigh the ore and then record it on a ledger, comparing it to the list that came from the mine.

But the bronze-colored ore is none of our concern. We have more pressing matters to discuss.

"Truly, there is no reason for you to feel obligated to me," Henrik says to Pranmore, amazingly patient. "I am a soldier of Caldenbauer—I have vowed to protect the king's subjects, which includes the elves as well as the humans. I was simply doing my job, and I'm always happy to have the opportunity to serve."

Pranmore shakes his head. "It makes no difference whether it was duty or will—you saved my life, and I will stay by your side."

Henrik glances at me. The strange look on his face makes me tilt my head to the side, wondering what he's plotting.

"In truth, it was Lady Clover who saved your life," Henrik says. "If it weren't for her, I wouldn't have come after you."

I open my mouth to object, but Pranmore beats me to it. "While I am most grateful to Lady Clover, it was you, sir soldier, who slew the poor creature."

Smirking, I raise an eyebrow at Henrik. He shoots me a dry look that says he had to try, and I press my lips together to trap in a laugh.

"Fine," the soldier finally says. "If you wish to accompany us, I cannot stop you. You are free to travel where you will."

Looking pleased, the elf nods.

Henrik pauses next to me on his way into the guard post. Under his breath, he murmurs, "Perhaps if we travel quickly enough, we can lose him. But do you think you can keep up, Lady Clover?"

Amused, I give my borrowed chestnut mare a pat on the neck and turn to face him. "Worried I'll hold you back?"

His stormy blue eyes linger on mine, but he doesn't answer.

"You won't lose me so easily," I tell him, and then I move a little closer. "I'm persistent."

"I've noticed."

“If you’ll remember, you’re the one who invited me along.” Too innocently, I drop my voice. “Why was that, soldier?”

Uncomfortable with my flirting, and not about to answer me, Henrik squares his jaw.

Laughing, I mount my horse.

* * *

The day ends up pleasant, and even in the high mountains, the sun is warm enough only a light cloak is needed. Henrik bluffed about the pace, and Pranmore easily keeps up with our horses.

We travel deer trails, and Henrik occasionally consults his compass.

Bartholomew talks nearly incessantly, but his chatter pleasantly fills what would be silent stretches. At first, I worried the young duke might scare away the creatures Henrik is trying to track—until I realized the predators very well might be drawn to the noise.

“That rock there looks a bit like a Dornauth, don’t you think?” Bartholomew says when we pass a small boulder in the road. Indeed, it does vaguely resemble a stout little person.

“Dorian gnome,” Pranmore corrects, ducking under a low-hanging pine bough in the trail.

Bartholomew turns to him, curious. “You don’t call them Dornauths?”

Pranmore visibly flinches, and I take pity upon him before he must explain. “‘Dornauth’ is a derogatory name used by the High Vales,” I explain. “As the suffix

‘nauth’ means monster in elvish. The gnomes were not monsters, but a race like humans or elves.”

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Bartholomew frowns, thinking it over. “But all the books refer to them as Dornau—”

The elf clears his throat loudly, cutting Bartholomew off.

Bartholomew shoots Pranmore a cautious look. “They refer to them as...that.”

“The High Vales who penned the tales weren’t known for their...” I pause. “Let’s call it tact.”

Pranmore snorts, but like Henrik, he obviously believes it’s better to stay silent if you have nothing nice to say.

“What happened to the gnomes anyway? Do you know, Pranmore?” Bartholomew gestures to the gnome-like rock that’s now behind us. “Did they really all turn to stone like the stories claim?”

“They went back to the earth,” Pranmore answers sadly. “They were a solitary people. Once the humans won the war, the Dorians withdrew, becoming one with the trees and rocks. Silent sentries, they watch these mountains, protecting them to this very day.”

He pauses and turns toward the trees, bowing deeply at the waist as if to honor their service.

Personally, I find the thought of the trees watching us slightly disturbing, but I don’t voice my opinion aloud. Instead, I say, “It sounds as if they had a lot in common with your people.”

Pranmore shakes his head. “They were vicious fighters—defending their territory and the land. More than anything, my people wish for peace. Peace between the races, peace with the earth. Chaos and war and death—who do those serve? It rips apart families and destroys this continent on which we live.”

We ride in silence for a bit after that, the mood becoming oddly somber.

“We’ll camp here tonight,” Henrik says when the sun is low in the sky and the late afternoon light is golden as it filters through the trees. He stops in a small glade that’s protected by forest on three sides. A large rock outcrop rises to the north, backing the area.

“We’re not the first people to stop here,” Bartholomew says when he dismounts his horse, pausing by a circle of rocks that contain the crumbling ashes of an old campfire.

“Hunters use these game trails,” Henrik explains as he scans the area, seeming unconcerned.

As expected, the word “hunters” makes Pranmore visibly shudder, but he doesn’t have a comment for once.

“Do you think anyone nefarious frequents this area?” Bartholomew asks, looking more eager than nervous. “Bandits? Thieves?”

“Possibly, but I doubt we’ll run into trouble of that kind.” Henrik shoulders his pack.

I feed my mare an oat lump, smiling as her muzzle tickles my palm. “We’re more likely to wake to an aynauth in our camp.”

“Not where we’re spending the night,” Henrik says cryptically. He then jerks his head

toward the rock wall. “We’ll camp up there.”

My eyes follow the outcrop wall up. Way up—at least twenty feet.

“Having reservations about joining us, Lady Clover?” Henrik asks in a tone that’s far too innocent. In fact, I would say the gleam in his eyes is almost mischievous—if the valiant soldier were capable of such an emotion.

I untie my pack and heft it over my shoulder, careful of my bow and quiver. “I think we’ve already established that I can climb.”

“You can go up anyway.” Henrik scans the rock wall. “You seem to have trouble coming down.”

“I don’t know,” Pranmore says thoughtfully, perhaps not realizing Henrik is teasing me. “It seems Clover found the most direct route out of the tree in the ruins.”

Choosing to ignore them, I make a scoffing noise under my breath and begin to roll up my skirt. Bartholomew lets out a peep of surprise as I secure the fabric at my waist, and his gaze momentarily drops to my legs and the mercenary wear that covers them.

Henrik’s amusement shifts to irritation, and that gives me far more satisfaction than it should. I know I’m perfectly well dressed, and he knows I’m perfectly well dressed, but the outfit still offends his delicate sensibilities, the poor man.

I step up next to the soldier, studying the stone wall. “Shall I go up first?”

Clover is the most intriguing inconvenience I've ever encountered. I can't decide if I want to march her right back to the guard post or back her against the rock wall and—

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Catching myself, I abruptly cut the thought off and clear my throat, hating the way I've let her get into my head.

Once again, our tenuous relationship has crossed the line to mildly antagonistic—and all because I suggested she should return to the castle.

Not that I truly wanted to send Clover back. When she all but demanded I bring her along, I didn't fight her very hard. After all, if she had returned with Simon, I would be traveling with only Bartholomew and Pranmore—and Clover is certainly better company. She doesn't need to know that, however.

The lady-in-waiting gives me a sweet smile, but she challenges me with her eyes.

“Well?” she demands.

I didn't expect her to call my bluff, but I should have known better. Though the stone outcrop would be the safest place to camp while there are aynauths on the move, I wasn't actually planning to drag this lot up there.

I glance back at Bartholomew. “Can you climb?”

The young man looks at the wall and then shrugs as if he has no idea but is willing to try.

“Pranmore?” I ask, hoping the elf will object.

Instead, he nods. “Quite well.”

“I’ll spot you,” I say to Clover with a sigh, taking her pack. “If you think you can make it...go ahead.”

Momentary hesitation softens her face, but then she steels her spine and gives me a curt nod. She turns toward the wall and hoists herself up, scuttling up the rock like a stubborn squirrel.

In fact...I think she just might make it.

I watch, grudgingly impressed, as Clover moves swiftly and without any sign of hesitation. It’s not until she’s almost to the top that she loses her confidence.

“Are you all right?” I call up when a few stones fall and Clover stops moving.

She doesn’t answer.

“Lady Clover?”

“I can’t find a handhold,” she finally answers, her voice a little shaky.

Angry with myself for letting this go so far, I say, “Can you climb down? We’ll camp here.”

“No,” she says stubbornly. “I can make it—just give me direction. Your view is better than mine.”

“I’ll say,” Bartholomew mutters under his breath, looking up at Clover.

I shoot him a stern look. A sheepish smile crosses his face, and he raises his hands in a weak apology.

“Just...stay put,” I command Clover, throwing the packs at Bartholomew. He catches them, stumbling back with the unexpected weight.

Unafraid of heights, I climb quickly, coming up beside her. Even though it's not too far up, we shouldn't be up here without ropes, and I know better. But that doesn't change anything now.

“There's a crevice in the rock about six inches above your left hand,” I tell Clover. “Can you reach it? After that, the cliff begins to slope back, and it should be a little easier.”

She nods as if to reassure herself, and then she boosts herself up, blindly following my instruction. When her fingers slide over the divot in the rock, she pulls herself up. I climb with her, keeping to the side and just a little above so I can give her instruction, murmuring senseless encouragements as we go.

“Almost there,” I tell her when she stops again. “Do you want me to go up first and give you a hand?”

“I've got it,” she insists.

But her knuckles are white, her breaths are shallow and fast, and I know she's lost her nerve. I quickly climb the rest of the way and lie on my stomach, ignoring the way the rocky ledge jabs into my chest as I lean over the edge.

“Let me help you,” I say as I grasp her arms. “Let go.”

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Clover lifts her head, breathing hard. Her pupils are too large, and she trembles under my hands, both from the growing strain and her fear.

“Let go of the rock,” I repeat, gritting my teeth, preparing to pull her up.

“Can’t.” She shakes her head, and a strand of wayward hair falls over her eye.

“I have you, Clover—I won’t let you fall.”

Her eyes lock on mine, and indecision plays in their spring green depths. Finally, she releases the rock with her left hand and quickly turns her palm to clasp my arm.

I hold my breath as she releases her second hand, tightening my core to brace myself for the additional weight.

Clinging to me tightly, and using her legs to assist, Clover pulls herself up. I crawl back, ready to let out a sigh of relief, but just as she reaches the top, she finds a loose pocket of stones, and her foot slips.

With a squeal, Clover loses her footing and begins to slide down. The momentum tries to jerk us apart when she comes to a sudden stop, but I hold tight.

She now hangs above the ground with nothing but me to anchor her in place.

Dislodged pebbles fall to the ground, hitting the rocky shelf as they fall, echoing in our ears as we both silently acknowledge she would have gone with them if I hadn’t climbed up ahead.

Without wasting any more time, Clover scrambles to find a foothold and pushes herself up and over the ledge. I pull her away from the cliff's edge, standing on my knees once she's made it.

And then it's just the two of us, together atop the outcrop, with nothing but sky and the forest canopy surrounding us.

"I could have made it," Clover says, blowing the strand of hair out of her face, her voice breathless from the climb.

"I know," I answer, but we both know it's a lie. She would have gone down, and Pranmore would once again be mending her broken body.

"The height doesn't look so great when you're standing on the ground." Her expression is laced with lingering embarrassment and something a touch warmer, and it makes me want to pull her into my arms and assure her it's all right—an impulse I don't dare give in to. "It's different when you're halfway up the side."

"Heights are like that," I say.

After we've had a minute to catch our breaths and let our hearts slow to a somewhat less uncomfortable pace, Clover's eyes drop to the space between us. I follow her gaze and frown at my hands, which still appear to be clasped upon her arms. When I reluctantly meet her eyes, she raises a questioning brow.

Immediately, I release her.

She rises to her feet and steps away. I push myself up, dusting small pebbles and dirt from my leather brigandine.

Clover lets out a soft exclamation as she looks across the forest, and I turn her way. A

cool gust of pine-scented wind catches her long, silken hair, fanning it to the side. The sun glistens off it, turning it from brown to gold, capturing my attention and holding it hostage. When she looks back, she gives me a bright, unburdened smile—the kind of smile that lights her face and makes my heart beat just a little faster. “It’s beautiful up here, isn’t it?”

I open my mouth to answer, but my words catch in my chest. Thankfully, Clover turns back without waiting for my response.

I take a few steps toward the center of the rock outcrop. The formation is wider than it is tall, with plenty of room for us to safely make camp. There are no pockets of soil in the granite, nor vegetation that might grow in them. However, a few recesses dip into the rock and hold water from a recent storm. The shallow pools reflect the sunset, glowing in shades of amber and salmon.

I walk to the ledge and peer down, satisfied with the height and inaccessibility of our camping spot. As long as aynauths can’t climb, we should be safe up here.

“Would you look at that view,” Bartholomew says from right behind me, making me jump as I turn around.

Pranmore stands next to my squire, his eyes on the sunset. “Magnificent.”

“How did you two get up here?” I demand, knowing there’s no use pretending they didn’t startle me.

Bartholomew answers, “We found a narrow trail cut into the rock.”

A trail.

My squire jabs his thumb toward the back of the cliff. “Just back there.”

He stares at me, as clueless as a puppy, and I shake my head and eye his empty hands. “Where are our packs?”

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“Oh.” He looks down as if they will magically appear. “I left them down below.”

I give him a pointed look, waiting. When he doesn’t answer, I squelch my impatience and say, “Fetch them so we can make camp.”

“Right!” He then jogs off, going down the trail that looks as if it was cut into the rock long before humans came to the continent.

At least it’s too narrow for an aynauth to use.

“And gather wood,” I holler down to him.

“He’s a nice lad,” Pranmore says, smiling after Bartholomew. “You must consider yourself fortunate to have such a cheerful squire.”

Instead of answering, I turn my back on the elf and walk the area, looking for a good spot to set up for the night.

* * *

Clover puts on a brave face, but I watch her from the corner of my eye in the light of the flickering campfire, and it’s clear she’s not impressed with her lack of tent—or me, since I’m the reason she doesn’t have it. Perhaps I should have told Bartholomew to lug it up here, but it seemed like too much of a nuisance to pitch upon the hard rock for one night.

For now, it’s on the ground below, where it will be safe until morning.

After he tended the horses for the night, Bartholomew strung the other packs from a tree, so hopefully, we won't wake to a family of bears dining on our rations. If an aynauth finds us in the middle of the night, at least the scent of the food won't lure him up the outcrop.

"It feels like a real adventure now, doesn't it?" Bartholomew says with his usual enthusiasm. He extends his hands toward the dark heavens. "Sleeping under the stars, enjoying a meal of dried meat and a fire with companions—what could be better than this?"

Clover flicks him a disgusted look, but she keeps her mouth shut.

Idly, I wonder how long it will be before she starts to complain, betting it will be before morning. The rock we're camped upon is far from soft, and the autumn wind has an icy bite to it.

I smile to myself, lying back on my bedroll, pillowing my head with my clasped hands. Even if I'm secretly glad Clover is here, it's satisfying to be right—she would have been far more comfortable in Cabaranth.

Pranmore sits near the fire, his nose buried in his leather-bound journal. Earlier, when I asked him what he was working on, he told me he is a poet of all things. Occasionally, he'll look up, mumble a few words to himself, and then dive back in.

"Are you going to sleep already, Henrik?" Bartholomew asks. "The evening is still young."

"We'll rise early. I'll scout until I find aynauth tracks, and then we'll follow them to the beast's territory."

"We'll follow them back?" Bartholomew asks. "But haven't they already gone?"

I close my eyes. “It doesn’t matter where they’re at now—we need to know where they came from in order to discover why they left.”

Satisfied with the answer, Bartholomew lays out his bedroll, and Pranmore reluctantly sets his journal aside. They shuffle and grunt as they try to get comfortable, but my ears are trained on Clover’s shifting and her muffled sighs of discomfort.

Pranmore rises, says something to her—speaking too quietly for me to make out the conversation—and then he finds his own bedroll once more.

Eventually, the party goes quiet as we wait for sleep to find us, and the only sound is the wind blowing through the autumn leaves and the logs crackling as they burn low.

It’s now frigid atop the great stone outcrop—likely the worst place to make camp unless you’re trying to avoid a fifteen-foot creature on the ground. I’m about to fetch the tent for Clover, worried the chill will be too much for her, when Bartholomew turns in his bedroll and quietly asks, “Lady Clover, it’s quite chilly. Are you warm enough?”

“Mmm,” she answers, sounding sleepy...and oddly content.

Opening one eye, I roll my head to face Clover. The firelight dances off her soft features, and she looks completely at peace. Her eyes are closed, and she rests with her hands tucked beneath her cheek.

“Thank you for the heat charm,” she says to Bartholomew, and then she ducks her head under the canvas top of the bedroll, disappearing into the fleece lining so only her hair is visible. “And Pranmore, you too for giving me the blanket for my head.”

Rolling my eyes, I turn the other way, determined to ignore them all for the rest of the

night.

It doesn't work.

I end up lying awake for hours, listening to the chorus of nighttime noises my traveling companions make. Pranmore occasionally grunts, and Bartholomew constantly shifts.

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Those two I can block out, but Clover talks in her sleep yet again.

Like a fool, I strain to listen, wondering if my name will pass her lips. Unfortunately, I can't make out a word she says.

Pressing my hands over my ears, I growl to myself. I'm trying so hard to block out Clover, I almost miss the strange shuffling noise coming from the forest below. I go still, straining to hear it once more.

It was only the horses, I decide after several quiet minutes.

I clench my eyes shut and adjust my shoulders on the unforgiving rock, determined to find sleep like the rest of the group.

A startled whinny sounds from below, followed by the cries of our other horses, and my eyes fly open.

"What was that?" Clover demands, her voice stiff and scratchy from being startled awake.

"I'll check," I murmur, silently slipping from my bedroll and taking my sword with me. "Stay here."

As usual, Clover ignores me and follows me to the side of the cliff. We drop to our knees, peering over the edge.

Clover inhales sharply when she sees the shadowed monster below us. The aynauth is

smaller than the last we encountered, thankfully five or six feet shorter than the outcrop we're camped upon. But he's tall enough he could possibly climb up if he were to spot us.

Quickly, I pull Clover back, pressing us flat to the cold stone so we're out of view.

"Did it eat the horses?" she whispers near my ear, horrified. "Is that what we heard?"

A shiver runs down my spine at the thought.

"I didn't see them," I assure her. "They likely broke free and took off."

"What do we do?"

We could fight it...but it's dark, and it has the advantage right now.

"We'll stay quiet," I tell her. "There's nothing for it here. It will get bored and wander off soon."

A strange snuffling noise fills the air no sooner than I say the words—the aynauth sniffing the breeze. Clover rolls to me, her eyes wide. At a bare whisper, she hisses, "Does it smell Pran more?"

"What's that noise?" Bartholomew suddenly says, waking from a dead sleep. His voice echoes in the night—loud and clear. "Henrik, where are you?"

That's all it takes to get the beast's attention. It roars, shockingly loud in the quiet hours, and a massive taloned paw appears at the top of the outcrop.

Clover and I scramble back as the monster searches the ledge, just out of reach. She grasps my arm, and her fingers dig into my bicep. For a minute, I'm afraid she's

going to climb up my shoulder like a cat.

I frantically wave my hand at Bartholomew, demanding he stay quiet. If Pranmore's awake, he's playing dead, which is truly his only defense.

Bartholomew's eyes grow large with recognition, and he goes mute.

The beast shuffles around the ledge for a while, and then it grows bored, perhaps mistaking Bartholomew for a squawking bird. After it's been silent for a few minutes, Clover releases her death grip on my arm. She breathes hard and presses a hand to her chest as if trying to convince her heart to slow to its usual rate.

"Sorry," Bartholomew mouths.

"Is it still down there?" Clover whispers.

We listen for several seconds, and then I nod. "It sounds like it."

A funny noise then catches my attention. "Stay here," I command—pointing at Clover to make sure she knows I mean it this time.

She nods, reluctantly letting me go.

I creep to the ledge, staying low on my stomach, and peer over. My eyes have adjusted to the dark, and I can make out the monster well enough in the dim light. He sits on the ground like a young child, furry legs straightened in front of him in a V. He's leaning over something and looking at it quite intently.

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It's not until he raises it to his mouth that I realize what he has. I curse under my breath as I retreat.

“Well?” Clover asks when I return. “What's it doing?”

“It has your tent,” I tell her. “He's currently mouthing it like a dog.”

“What does it want with it?” she asks, horrified.

I toss my hands in the air. “How should I know?”

“Maybe it will take it and go,” she says hopefully.

Slowly, I nod. “Maybe.”

If not, we're in for a long night.

* * *

Clover and I sit back-to-back, both of us near dozing. I'm armed with my sword, and she has her bow. Pranmore and Bartholomew sleep as she and I make sure the aynauth doesn't tire of the tent and search the area for its owners.

It's been hours, and if my bleary eyes are not mistaken, the eastern horizon is beginning to lighten. Birds are already starting their chatter, so morning must be approaching.

Clover jolts suddenly, and then she shakes her head.

“Sorry,” she murmurs.

“Go back to your bedroll,” I tell her. “I’ll keep watch.”

“I couldn’t sleep with that thing down there. And besides”—she yawns—“I vowed to protect you.”

I snort out a nearly silent laugh, enjoying her company more than I should.

“What do you think it’s doing now?” she asks. “I haven’t heard it for a while—maybe it left?”

“I’ll check.”

After I creep to the ledge and look over, I hold in a groan and lower my forehead to the rock.

“Henrik?” Clover asks, crawling up to meet me. “Are you all right?”

“It’s not gone,” I mumble. “It’s asleep.”

22

Clover

Needing to see for myself, I peer over the edge of the cliff we’re currently trapped upon. Sure enough, the aynauth is curled up on the ground, holding the ripped-up tent like a beloved blanket.

“How long do you think it’s going to camp down there?” I ask Henrik.

“I have no idea.” The soldier pushes himself up to his feet and then walks back to his bedroll.

I trail after him, uneasy. “Are you going back to sleep?”

“I don’t know what else we can do.”

He stretches out on his bedroll, and I hover close to him. “What if it wakes up?”

Henrik cracks one eye open, smirking at me in the dark. “He’ll only wake if you start talking in your sleep again.”

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“I do not talk in my sleep,” I hiss.

“You do.”

What did I say this time?

With a quiet huff, I turn back to my bedroll. I gingerly sit on it, shivering as the slight breeze ruffles my hair, grateful for the heat charm Bartholomew gave me.

But I’m too terrified to lie down. What if the monster wakes and decides to climb the outcrop?

“Go to sleep,” Henrik insists. “I’m just resting my eyes—I’ll stay awake.”

“That’s what they all say. In all that studying you’ve done for your seal, you’ve never read any of the children’s tales?”

Henrik laughs, and then he falls quiet as if he’s thinking. After a long moment, he says, “If you’re worried...then come over here and keep me awake.”

Unexpected heat washes over me, and it has nothing to do with Bartholomew’s charm.

He didn’t mean—obviously not. It’s Henrik. Lawrence didn’t call him Henrik the Valiant for nothing.

But that doesn’t keep my cheeks from flushing or my heart from deciding it’s a

perfectly good time to run a sprint. Feeling like one of my vapid peers, I resist the urge to fan my face.

One thing is for certain—I don't trust myself to go over there.

And yet, here I am, tugging my bedroll next to Henrik's. I drop onto it, sitting with my legs crossed as I face him. "Only because I want to be sure the aynauth eats you first if it should climb up here."

Henrik laughs softly and pushes himself up, matching my position.

"Are you cold?" I pull the necklace over my head. "I'll share."

"How?"

Gulping—and glad he can't tell in the dark—I take his hand and set my wrist on top of his so they're crossed. I then loop the chain around them both. "Like this."

"That's not very comfortable."

"Fine," I say, pulling away. "Be cold."

But before I can escape, Henrik turns his wrist and captures my hand in his. He looks up, and his eyes meet mine in the dark night. "This seems more efficient."

"Oh," I say. "I get it now."

His lips twitch. "What?"

"I'm dreaming again."

“Do you often dream about me, Clover?” The slight catch in his voice makes my stomach flutter.

“Only on the good nights.”

Even though I’m teasing, Henrik’s fingers jump against mine, and his lips part with surprise. His gaze moves to our clasped hands, and slowly—as if he’s mesmerized by the sight—he twines his fingers through mine.

Now I know I’m dreaming. But...

I’m positive I’m awake.

“There’s something I need to talk to you about,” he says. “It’s been on my mind for some time now, but I haven’t had the nerve to bring it up.”

His tone is so serious, I’m a little nervous. “Yes?”

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Henrik looks up, and our gazes lock. “I don’t kiss like a fish.”

Completely taken by surprise, I bark out a laugh that’s far too loud. I slap a hand over my mouth, startled by my own reaction.

Henrik grins, looking down at our hands.

I wait for either the aynauth or the others in our party to stir, but all is silent. Quietly, I whisper, “I’m sorry—I shouldn’t have said it. And...I didn’t mean it.”

Henrik’s face grows solemn. “There’s something else. It’s about Camellia—”

I clasp my hand over his mouth, mimicking the way I just covered mine. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” His lips move against the palm of my hand and send shivers down my arm. His usually clean-shaven face is shadowed with stubble, and it scrapes against the skin of my palm, making me wonder how it would feel against my cheeks.

“We’re already dealing with one monster right now,” I say flippantly. “Must we deal with her, too?”

Despite himself, the soldier smiles as he pulls my hand away. “Later then.”

I nod, and then suddenly, I don’t know what to talk about. We simply sit here, holding hands in the night, not quite able to meet each other’s eyes.

“You were right,” Henrik finally says.

I raise my brows, waiting for him to elaborate.

“Before this trip, I didn’t really know you.” He pauses. “I don’t really know anyone.”

All his life, Henrik has been so focused on becoming a knight, he’s never made any close friends.

It’s not really a surprise. I’ve never seen him socializing. He’s always training, off on some errand, or preparing for a mission.

“Let’s remedy that,” I say. “What do you want me to tell you?”

He briefly meets my eyes. “Something most people don’t know.”

I think about it for a minute, and then I say, “People believe my mother is the daughter of a minor lord, but in fact, she was born into a family of sheep farmers from Griffin.”

The last bit seems to pique his interest. “Your mother isn’t noble-born?”

“Oh dear,” I say lightly. “You think less of me now, don’t you?”

Henrik laughs under his breath and shakes his head. “Was it your mother who named you?”

“It was, but likely not for the reason you’re thinking.”

“Do you presume to know my inner thoughts now?” His hand tightens on mine, an absentminded move that could easily be mistaken for more.

“Oh, soldier, you’re not difficult to read. You’re thinking my mother named me after

a weed because she is a commoner, but in fact, she was hoping to keep me out of Camellia's entourage."

Henrik's eyebrows fly up. "And why would she do that? No matter how you dislike the princess, you've been given a position of extreme honor. Besides, you can't be much younger than Camellia. If she was just a baby when you were born, how could your mother possibly know how trying she'd grow to be?"

I open my mouth with wicked glee, ready to hold him accountable for his words, but he cuts me off before I can speak.

"Not that I believe she's difficult."

"Right..." I say, but I decide to let him off the hook. "Anyway, according to my mother, our late queen was just as awful as Camellia. Who decides all the noble girls around their daughter's age should be named after flowers? Even for a queen, that's terribly demanding. My mother knew if she'd named me Penelope or Lucinda, it would be seen as an outright snub—a statement she didn't want her daughter even considered for one of Camellia's companions."

"So, she named you Clover instead."

I nod. "Not that it worked, mind you."

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He laughs and looks down. “Are you older than Lawrence then? I can’t imagine he’d like that.”

“A few days younger. Camellia is my senior by one year, eight months, and seventeen days.”

“That’s very specific.”

“We must know our enemies if we are to battle them effectively.”

Looking curious, Henrik asks, “Do the other ladies feel the same as you?”

I sigh, nearly leaning back on my hands before I remember we’re linked by the chain. “Perhaps not to the same extent. Most want to please the princess to gain her favor. Camellia is generally nicer to those who kiss the ground she walks upon.”

“But a future queen never bows to others?” Henrik says with a knowing smile.

I lean forward. “You tease me, but you just watch. I’ll claim that crown, and then you’ll have to eat your words.”

His expression becomes solemn. “I do not doubt it.”

“You think I’ll make a poor queen?” I ask, studying him.

“Don’t presume to read my mind, Clover—you’re not as skilled at it as you think.”

“And you’re not as enigmatic as you think. You wear your emotions right next to that badge on your sleeve—but they’re all terribly stoic. I’m not sure you even rebel in your head.”

Henrik’s eyes narrow on mine. Dropping his voice even further, he says, “All right then. Prove that you’re as clever as you claim. What am I thinking now, Clover?”

He says my name like a caress, and my stomach suddenly clenches.

Feeling a little breathless, I say, “You’re either thinking I’m a nuisance or...”

I bite the inside of my cheek, unable to finish the sentence.

The handsome soldier leans forward slightly. “Orwhat?”

I’m not sure when I decide to move. I simply catch myself bending at the waist, entirely too focused on Henrik’s mouth.

It’s a nice mouth. His lips look as though they’d feel soft, yet they’re firm enough to be masculine. And his bottom lip is just a little fuller than the top.

I want to brush my mouth over his, explore the bow of his top lip and kiss each crease at the sides.

I want his hands on me, his fingers pressing into my back as he pulls me closer, and I want to taste my name on his lips.

This attraction is dangerous—it makes me lose my head and question whether I can commit to a loveless marriage.

I’ve never felt this pull before. Not ever, and certainly not with Lawrence. Perhaps I

was even cocky enough to believe I was immune.

But now I wonder what I've been missing in my life. What would it be like to kiss a man I desire? Not a little peck from a casual, youthful fling, but a real kiss?

And, oh, what is wrong with me? How could I let myself become besotted with Henrik of all men? I'm no better than the rest of the ladies at court, all of them eager to fall all over the soldier just because he happened to glance their way.

But Henrik is more than glancing at me—he's looking.

And unless I'm a far worse judge of him than I believe, I think it's safe to assume this attraction is mutual. Surely these sparks aren't one-sided. They can't be.

Carefully, I say, "If we're proving things, I think you should go first."

Henrik's eyebrows twitch, and his eyes momentarily dart to my lips. "What do I have to prove?"

We're close, but not so close we couldn't deny what's truly on our minds. We could use so many excuses at this point—that we don't want to wake the others so we've leaned close to keep our conversation quiet, or that we must stay close because of the charmed chain.

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But now we have reached the point of no return, and I must decide if I'm going to be brave or run away.

“What must I prove, Clover?” Henrik asks again, and there's a delicious catch in his voice this time.

Slowly, he runs his thumb over my knuckles. It's the lightest touch, but it feels purposeful.

“Redeem your reputation,” I say, trying to keep my tone light but failing miserably. “Prove that your kissing prowess is on par with the skill in which you wield your sword.”

Henrik's eyes brighten with eager satisfaction. “And how am I supposed to do that?”

That does it—I've been wrong this whole time. Henrik is secretly wicked, and he's taking extreme delight in my discomfort. How many people have seen this side of the solemn soldier? A thrill runs through me when I wonder if it's reserved for me alone.

I offer him a half-hearted shrug. “I suppose you'll have to kiss me. I will be an impartial judge, withholding any prior misconceptions.”

Henrik goes still, and his half-narrowed eyes study me in the dark—perhaps waiting to see if I'll back down from the challenge.

When I simply stare back at him, refusing to turn away with fluttering eyelashes and a giggle as most of my fellow ladies would, he releases his hand and unwinds himself

from the chain.

It isn't until he begins to stand that I realize I've pushed too far.

"Oh, stop," I say, grabbing his hand. "Sit down. I was only teasing."

Henrik, however, doesn't walk away. When he pulls me to my feet, I realize his true purpose.

"If we're going to do this, let's do it right," he says, and then he wraps his arm around the small of my back and abruptly tugs me against his iron frame.

I let out a peep of surprise as my hands land on his shoulders. I barely have a chance to get my wits about me before Henrik slides his hand into my hair and curls it around the back of my neck. He presses his fingers into my skin, tilting my head, gently forcing me to look up at him.

The chain has fallen on the ground, and the air is icy as it swirls around us, but I barely notice.

Henrik is going to kiss me—and I'm going to let him.

I close my eyes, preparing myself for unadulterated bliss. My skin tingles with anticipation, and my neck flushes with heat.

Closer, closer...

Henrik's breath is hot against my skin, and I fear the man is playing with me, taking his dear sweet time to drive me mad.

Almost, almost...

No.

A loud, inhuman yawn fills the glade below, reaching my ears and making me want to ruthlessly shoot the wretched monster for interrupting.

The songbirds fall silent, and the sounds of the aynauth moving down below are impossible to ignore.

Henrik releases me as he reaches for his sword, drops into a crouch, and creeps to the ledge.

“Well?” I ask, joining him. The impending dawn has yet to lighten the glade, but I can see well enough to know the aynauth isn’t down there. “Where is it?”

Henrik straightens and sheathes his blade. “It left.”

That’s the best news I’ve heard in days—now we can return to more pressing matters.

But before I can reach for him, Henrik stands. His tone brusque, he says, “Pack your bedroll. I’ll wake the others.”

“We’re leaving now?” I demand.

He looks at me as if he’s confused why I’m still standing here. “We must follow the aynauth’s tracks back to its lair while they’re still fresh.”

23

Henrik

Being such a large animal, aynauths aren't difficult to track—unless your horses are missing.

Which ours are.

As I feared, they broke away from their tethers when the aynauth made his visit, and we haven't seen any sign of them since. Bartholomew was beside himself most of the morning, despondent over Vidnar's disappearance, until I convinced him his beloved horse would surely find his way back to the guard post.

But now we're traveling on foot, making terrible time as we hike the heavily forested path, following a trail of broken tree limbs, crushed brush, and abnormally large tracks.

I kneel next to one of those tracks, frowning as I compare it to my hand. The indentation in the earth is three times larger, and it's sunk in deeply, telling me the beast was heavy.

Is this our aynauth or another? Could their paths have crossed?

Not that it matters. As long as the trail continues north, I'm certain we're on the right track.

“What are these berries?” Pranmore asks. “They don’t grow in southern Caldenbauer, and I’m not familiar with them.”

I glance up, running my eyes over the short bush he stands next to, noting its glossy leaves and the structure in which they grow. The berries are set in clusters of five, and they’re deep red and heart-shaped, with a pronounced point at the bottom. Where other plants are falling dormant for the season, the evergreen is alive and well.

“They’re either dalvinberries or imposter berries,” I tell him.

“What’s the difference?”

“One is edible and the other will make you ill.”

“How can you tell which is which?”

“You can’t—that’s why the latter are called imposters.”

Pranmore frowns at the bush thoughtfully. “There must be some variation between the two. I’ve studied plants a great deal, and I know when you look closely enough, even those that appear similar are not the same.”

He then begins to collect the berries in the palm of his hand.

“You’re not going to eat them, are you?” Bartholomew asks, looking at the berries longingly. “Isn’t that too risky?”

Before the aynauth left, he helped himself to our extra supplies—ripping them right from the tree—forcing us to ration what’s left a little more frugally than is comfortable, especially if you’re traveling with a seventeen-year-old boy who’s constantly starving.

Pranmore glances at my squire. “Woodmores have a high tolerance to natural toxins. It’s unlikely I’ll suffer any ill effects, even if these are the imposters Henrik speaks of.”

Clover makes a slight scoffing noise—the first thing I’ve heard out of her since we left the outcrop.

I glance at her and then look away before our eyes can meet. The guilt is rubbing me raw. No better than Lawrence, I almost kissed her this morning. I would have if we weren’t interrupted.

I probably will if we’re alone again.

I have no willpower when it comes to this woman—no matter whether Clover is baiting me to exchange barbed comments or daring me to prove I could steal her breath and make her knees go weak, I lose my head.

My sights have been set on Camellia for so long, I never paused to question whether I could choose someone else. Someone softer, someone warmer—someone who makes me insane with both agitation and desire.

But am I so easily swayed? Is my loyalty so shallow that I can change direction so quickly?

I have no answer, and it bothers me.

Not that it matters. Perhaps Clover would indulge in a brief affair with a lowly soldier, but she has her eyes set on a prince.

To Clover, this is a lark. But to me, it could be something more. Which means I need to push her out of my mind and focus on the task at hand—securing my seal.

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“Let’s keep moving,” I say, rising. “The tracks lead north.”

* * *

The aynauth’s trail leads us further into the mountains before it begins to veer west. Like yesterday, the temperature is warm enough in the sun, and it’s only in the shadows that the chill is noticeable.

We’re in a valley now, surrounded on both sides by tall peaks. Treeline is visible up the mountain, but the aynauth stayed lower.

We spook a doe and her pair of adolescent fawns, and they dart into the trees.

“How many deer have we seen now?” Clover asks as the graceful creatures bound away.

Unable to stay quiet for long, she’s talking again. If I’m lucky, she’s decided, like me, that the moment we shared was a mistake spurred by lack of sleep and impaired common sense. I will be far more careful in the future, and we will simply put the awkward situation behind us.

“That was our thirteenth,” Pranmore says. “The first was a delicate doe, alone in the dappled shade of a towering fir, the second a proud young buck, with new antlers that he will soon shed. The third was—”

“It’s certainly not a lack of food that caused the aynauths to migrate lower,” I interrupt.

“What else could it be?” Clover leans over to rub her ankles through the thin leather of her boot.

She’s a decent horsewoman, but she’s not conditioned for this sort of trek. I warned her, but it’s not satisfying to see her struggling. Though she hasn’t complained, I know she’s tired.

I frown down the path the deer went, and then I nod the party forward. “I hear water ahead. The tracks lead that way. Once we find the stream, we’ll stop for a drink and a rest.”

“Oh, look,” Pranmore says when we reach the creek where the aynauth must have stopped. “Another dalvinberry bush. I was just feeling a bit peckish again.”

Either the first berries were, indeed, dalvinberries, or Woodmores truly have an immunity to toxins, because Pranmore never got sick.

“What if the first were dalvinberries and this is an imposter?” Bartholomew asks.

“I would be able to tell,” Pranmore says confidently, popping several of the berries into his mouth. “As I said, I have studied herbs and plant life since I was a child.”

Bartholomew frowns. “You’re not called fawns as children?”

Irritation crosses Pranmore’s face, but he patiently tucks it away. “No, Woodmores are elves—not deer.”

“But...you have antlers.”

“And you have two legs and two arms, similar to an aynauth. Perhaps you are one of the monsters?”

“Enough,” I interrupt. “I haven’t had enough sleep to be subjected to this conversation.”

Clover catches my eye as she sinks onto a boulder by the stream, her face bright with held in laughter, and I smile despite myself.

Pranmore shoots me an apologetic look, and then he turns back to Bartholomew. As a peace offering, he extends his hand. “Here, try some of the berries. They’re tart but quite good.”

Just as Bartholomew is reaching for them, Clover says to him, “Perhaps it would be wise to remember you are human and therefore have no immunity to natural toxins.”

The young man pauses, and then he offers Pranmore a sheepish smile before he withdraws. “Lady Clover has a point.”

Pranmore scoffs and then tosses the berries into his mouth all in one go. “I tell you, they’re fine. I would certainly sense any natural poison if they contained it.”

Looking torn, wanting to please them both, Bartholomew crosses his arms.

“There is nothing wrong with exercising caution,” I tell him. “It will keep you alive longer.”

Deciding now is as good a time as any to speak with Clover and reassure myself we’ve put the night behind us, I step up in front of her. She’s removed her boot and set her ankle atop her knee to examine a sore on the back of her heel. The skin has been rubbed raw and is now angry and red.

“Are your boots too tight?” I ask, kneeling in front of her and examining the wound.

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“Too large, I’m afraid.” She gathers her long hair into her hand and then sweeps it behind her shoulder. “Though I didn’t notice until we began traipsing through the woods.”

“Was that a complaint, my lady?” I ask, looking up with a raised brow.

She gives me a droll look. “It was a fact.”

“Your stockings are too thin,” I say, looking to where she has lain one upon the rock. “They offer no cushion. I’m sure Pranmore can heal the blistered skin, but it will happen again unless we correct the problem.”

With that, I leave her and join Bartholomew and Pranmore by the water.

“Clover could use your assistance,” I tell Pranmore before I open my pack and draw out a rolled strip of bandage.

Concern immediately shadows Bartholomew’s face. “Is she all right?”

“She’s fine.”

As expected, Pranmore easily heals the wound. Once he’s finished, I kneel in front of Clover again, unwinding a length of the narrow bandage.

“What’s that for?” she asks.

“Put on your stocking, and I’ll tell you.”

Without her usual questions, she does as I ask. I avert my eyes as she pulls up her hose and tugs the stocking up her calf.

“I’m decent again,” she says dryly after she pulls the hose back into place over the stocking, covering her bare leg. “I didn’t mean to scandalize you.”

Her teasing tone begs me to respond, and though I itch to engage, I cannot.

I look up, giving her a dry look of my own. “Wrap the bandage around your ankle.”

Clover looks down at the length of cloth. “How?”

“Hold the tail in place and...wrap it. Start at the arch of your foot and then work your way up.”

How difficult can it be?

Apparently very if you’re a pampered noblewoman. Fumbling, Clover does as I ask, but the fabric is too loose. The moment she slides on the boot, it will pull up, bunching around her leg and becoming useless.

“Tighter,” I instruct, and then I frown. “No, notthattight... No, not that either.”

“Good heavens.” With an exasperated sigh, Clover balls the bandage in her hand and holds it out to me. “You do it then.”

“No, it’s fine. Try again.”

She wiggles her hand, silently proclaiming she’s finished.

“Fine,” I snap. I locate the tail of the fabric and wrap it snugly, touching Clover as

little as possible in the process—which means my fingers hover over her lower leg as I work, brushing but not pressing.

It's gentle torture—for me, not Clover, though it's possible from the way she draws her bottom lip between her teeth her thoughts have wandered as well.

Once I'm finished, I tuck the end of the fabric securely into the wrapped portion and sit back on my heels. "That should help. How is it?"

"Fine."

"Is it too tight?"

"No."

"Too loose?" I ask, growing exasperated. "How does it feel?"

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Clover's eyes briefly meet mine, and she hides a smirk. "Do you always need this much reassurance? It feels good, Henrik. Very good."

I swallow, knowing I should leave it at that. Instead, I tilt my head back to meet her eyes. "I was referring to the bandage."

Delighted surprise lights Clover's eyes, and she bites back a grin. "So was I."

She then slides her foot into the boot and stands. After taking several steps, she turns back to me. "It fits better now."

"Good," I say gruffly. "Then we will continue."

24

Clover

The back of my ankle no longer hurts, but I'm so exhausted my eyes ache. I try to remember the last time I stayed up most of the night, and I think I must have been ill at the time.

My nerves are on edge as well—it seems I'm not the type of person who can function with less than a full night of sleep, and I'm going on two. Thankfully, the day is growing late, and we'll have to stop soon. But eventually, Henrik and I will have to rest, and who will keep watch? I'm not sure I'm ready to put my life in Pranmore and Bartholomew's less-than-competent hands.

“And that is why the red songstress, ruby jewel of the sky, nests in—”

Pranmore pauses so abruptly, I reach for my bow on instinct. I look around the pine woods that surround us, worried something is poised to attack. Granite boulders dot the forest as if some great giant grew bored one day and hurled hundreds of them into the landscape—creating a whole slew of places for creatures to hide. Is there something out there now, watching us, waiting for the perfect opportunity to attack? Is that what Pranmore sensed?

But the woods are alive with squirrel chatter and the songs of birds who have yet to migrate lower for the winter. There is no apparent reason for this uneasy feeling that’s been plaguing me for the last few hours.

“What is it?” Henrik asks Pranmore.

The elf says nothing. Instead, he holds a hand to his stomach. His already fair face is as pale as milk, and he stands very still. After a moment, he shakes his head, and his antlers nearly catch the branch of a nearby tree. “It’s nothing.”

“Are you feeling all right?” Bartholomew asks, taking a subtle step away from the elf.

“I’m fine.”

“If your stomach is feeling off, maybe it was the imposter berries you ate after all.”

“No.” Pranmore shakes his head violently, mussing his hair and again nearly tangling his antlers in the tree.

“But...what else could it be?” Bartholomew asks.

“It’s not—” Pranmore’s stomach rumbles loudly, and he clears his throat. “It’s just a

bit of indigestion, that's all."

Henrik stands nearby, looking impervious to the long trek and lack of sleep, but his eyes are tired, and he's been a touch tetchier than usual. "We need to keep moving. This isn't a good spot to make camp for the night."

"I'm all right," Pranmore insists quickly. "Let's continue."

I roll my neck and follow Henrik, leaving Bartholomew to tend to Pranmore.

Neither of us is up to carrying on a conversation, but the silence isn't as awkward as it could be considering what happened last night.

My mind insists on dwelling upon the memory, and I sigh. I suppose my waking hours have decided to mimic my dreams—cutting off before the good parts.

Not paying enough attention, I step in a soggy patch in the trail. The ground is soft and spongy here, nutrient-rich humus littered with hundreds of years of pine needles. The deer trails we follow have a habit of ending abruptly, and this one proves to be no different.

Wondering if the trail stains will scrub out of my suede boots, I almost bump into Henrik's back when he stops in front of a large boulder that appears to have wandered smack into the middle of our trail.

"Where do we go now?" I ask.

Henrik pushes the brush aside to go around the rock. "That's strange."

"What is?" I ask, though I'm not certain I want to know.

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“The trail continues on the other side—”

“Pranmore!” Bartholomew suddenly hollers, and Henrik and I look back just in time to see the elf darting into the trees. He clutches his mouth as he runs, and his long hair flies behind him like a banner.

Slowly, I turn to look at Henrik.

“They were imposters,” the soldier deadpans, making me snort out a quiet laugh.

“Will he be all right?”

Henrik cracks a smile. “They won’t kill him.”

“If he truly has a partial immunity to such things, I imagine he won’t be sick for long.”

“Let’s keep moving. He’ll catch up.” Henrik pauses. “Or he won’t—either way, I want to be out of the deep woods before nightfall.”

I glance around, growing uneasy once more. “Do you sense something?”

Henrik scans the densely treed landscape. “No.”

But it’s a lie.

There’s something off about this forest.

Pushing through the brush, I follow the soldier around the large rock and into a small clearing. As Henrik said, the trail continues. More boulders are scattered here, but they form a ring around the open space, almost as if they were carefully placed. They vary in size, though none are taller than my waist.

“Strange rocks,” Bartholomew says from just behind me as he pushes his way past the twigs of the large, dormant bush. “Do you think there was a settlement here at some point?”

A breeze blows through the towering pine trees, making several of the tall, slender trunks sway and creak. The wind carries the chill of the coming evening, along with a swirl of autumn leaves from the few deciduous hardwoods amongst the evergreens. But there’s something else riding its unseen cloak. Whatever it is, it’s too foreign to be familiar...and yet, it gives me a strange sense of *déjà vu*.

Henrik’s back stiffens as if he, too, senses we’re not as alone as we should be this deep in the mountains.

“Henrik,” I say quietly, my fingers brushing my bow. “I have the strangest feeling we’re being watched—”

I cut the sentence off abruptly and blink my eyes several times at one of the boulders—the boulder that I swear just moved.

Apparently, my sleepless nights are catching up with me. As I stare at it, I begin to doubt myself. The rock stays perfectly still, as a good rock should.

“What is it?” Henrik asks.

Not about to admit I’m seeing things, I immediately answer, “Nothing.”

Reluctantly, he keeps walking, but his fingers rest on the hilt of his sword.

Deciding I'd feel better with my bow in my hand, I pull it from my back.

“What is it, Clover?” Bartholomew asks, concerned.

When I turn back to assure him I'm simply being cautious, my eyes slide past the young nobleman and fall on the rock behind him. Specifically, the one I thought moved earlier. The one that's directly behind us now. In the trail—as if it got up and began following us.

The hair rises on the back of my neck, and goosebumps pebble my arms.

“Henrik,” I whisper. “Turn around.”

Perhaps it's due to my odd request, or maybe my tone, but Henrik unsheathes his sword as he looks back.

The moment the blade is free, all the rocks begin to move.

A surprised squeak escapes Bartholomew, assuring me I'm not hallucinating. But there's little relief in that because the creatures, whatever they might be, have us surrounded.

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“What are they?” I cry, instinctively stepping close to Henrik.

Bartholomew does the same, drawing the short sword with which he’s been training on our breaks. We end up in a triangle, backs together, brandishing our weapons—not that they’ll do us a lot of good against stone monsters.

But the creatures don’t remain in their rocky form. Slowly, the glamour fades, and that not-quite-familiar magic fills the clearing.

I gasp as they uncloak, wondering if I’m dreaming again. Lately, life has become too strange.

The short men and women surrounding us are stout and sturdy, with rounded faces and heavy eyebrows. The men have full beards and wear their coarse hair long and free. The women have their locks twisted into thick braids, but they don leather and steel cuirasses and thick hide breeches like their male counterparts.

About two feet tall, some even as tall as three, they’re rather adorable—or they would be if they weren’t brandishing a variety of weapons, from spears and swords to bows and small, wicked maces.

“Who are you, and what business do you have in our territory?” demands a man at the front—my boulder if I’m not mistaken.

Bartholomew, being the ever-helpful squire he is, delightedly exclaims, “I know what you are—you’re Dornauths!”

With a chorus of angry snarls, the gnomes press in upon us. Now, the weapons that once hung by their sides are pointed at our chests, and murder darkens their expressions.

I narrow my eyes at a red-haired woman who pokes my stomach with the point of her spear, tempted to rip the small weapon from her hands.

Turning my head, I whisper to Henrik, “I think we can take them.”

“Clover,” the soldier warns.

Yes, there are only three of us—two since Bartholomew is basically worthless—and about fifteen of them. But what we lack in numbers, we make up in height.

The tiny woman gives me a grim smile, prodding me again. “This one’s too pretty to be venturing in these parts. Bet she squeals when she sees a spider.”

Another woman laughs. “Bet you can make her squeal now.”

Entirely too exhausted for this nonsense, I grasp the spear in one deft move, yanking it away from my stomach and shaking the woman loose from the other end. It’s not as easy as I expected—she’s heavier than she looks, and she clings to the weapon like a squirrel.

She lets out an irate shriek as her feet leave the ground, and then another when I use the spear against her—pinning her to the ground first with the shaft and then my foot. I flip the weapon in my hands and then press the sharp tip to her neck. “It seems you’re the one squeaking, gnome.”

It happens so quickly, the other gnomes stand in a startled stupor. Slowly, they lift their eyes from the woman to our party.

For a moment, the woods are completely silent except for the honking of a flock of geese that passes overhead.

Then, as if synchronized, the gnomes holler out enraged battle cries and surge forward, creating complete pandemonium.

Henrik takes on five gnomes at once, meeting their swords with his own and chucking them away unharmed, moving with such deadly grace I'd likely stop to watch if two women hadn't leaped on me. I try to shake them free, but it's like fighting brawny toddlers, and it seems wrong to hurt them.

At least that's what I think until the one I pinned breaks free and jumps up to grab a handful of my hair.

Like a banshee, she screeches, "I'll wear a braid of your hair on my belt, you scrawny wench!"

And it seems she plans toripit right from my head. I scream as she gives my hair a hard tug, but I manage to twist around and land a solid punch.

Swearing like a sea rat in a language I've never heard, she falls back-first to the ground, clutching her bleeding nose.

Grimly satisfied, I dislodge the other gnomes—but not before one slashes my arm with her sword.

I hiss as the blade slices into my skin, digging deep enough I nearly pass out when I see the damage.

Bartholomew lets out a gurgled holler, and when I look over, I find the young man pinned to the ground by five gnomes. They sit atop him, cackling like grackles.

“Enough!” Henrik yells, his voice so commanding, the fighting temporarily ceases.

Grasping my bleeding arm, I look over.

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The soldier holds one of the gnome men by an ankle, and he dangles him upside down.

The man fights like a cornered cat— lashing out with teeth and hands, gurgling out every insult he can think of. Like his companions, I only recognize half the words.

“We do not have a quarrel with you,” Henrik says, exasperated. “We are simply passing through this territory.”

“Trespassing!” a man at the back of the gathering yells.

Henrik turns hard eyes on him, ignoring the gnome who continues to harmlessly flail at his side. “All of Caldenbauer belongs to King Algernon. I am a servant of His Majesty, sent upon his errand.”

This receives a chorus of murderous mutters, but Henrik doesn’t flinch. “If you let us pass, we will ignore this act of treason. If not, I assure you there will be more soldiers prowling this region very soon.”

“Not if we kill you!” snarls the gnome dangling from Henrik’s hand. “We’ll cut you down to size and then leave your mangled carcasses in the woods for the wolves!”

“Big words for a man hanging upside down,” I taunt, unable to help myself.

Before my offhanded comment can bring about another altercation, a nearby voice yells Henrik’s name.

“Lady Clover?” Pranmore says when he calls again. “Bartholomew?”

All eyes turn on Pranmore as he steps into the clearing.

The usually handsome elf looks like death. His skin is blotchy, a strand of his long hair is tangled in his antlers, and his eyes are red.

As soon as he spots us, he comes to a slow stop. His gaze travels over our new acquaintances, and his mouth slowly falls open.

“You...you are...gnomes of Doria,” he stutters, and then his face transforms with pure rapture, and he falls to his knees and begins to weep.

25

Henrik

“What’s wrong with him?” the tall gnome at the front demands, looking at Pranmore as if he’s diseased.

“He’s...” I fight for the right word.

“Emotional,” Clover grits out.

I turn my eyes on her and then inhale sharply. Blood runs down her arm from a gash that seeps beneath her fingers.

Tossing my angry prisoner aside, I close the distance between us and pry Clover’s hand away from the injury. Her arm hangs limply, worrying me more than the lacerated flesh.

“It hurts,” she hisses, trying to shy away.

“Let me look at it,” I coax. “Can you move it?”

“I haven’t tried.”

If a tendon has been slashed, she might lose the use of her arm unless Pranmore is skilled enough to heal it—and it will be my fault.

I should have sent her home.

Clover whimpers as I pry her fingers from her arm, losing her bravado. She’s like a hellcat when provoked but a coddled lamb once she’s injured. Though she’d like to be a hardened adventuress, she’s a lady at heart.

“I did that,” a gnome woman says, raising her sword as if she’s accepting an accolade. “That was me.”

“Stay quiet, Delga,” the Dorian man toward the front says, perhaps the leader of their band.

Once he’s composed himself, Pranmore comes forward and bows low before the gnomes. “My people thought you were gone, lost forever. You haven’t shown yourselves in almost a hundred years—I am so humbled and grateful to stand before you now.”

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With his sword still drawn, the gnome leader scowls at Pranmore, and then he turns his eyes on me. “Is he one of yours?”

Reluctantly, I answer, “He is.”

The short man stares at me and then scans our group. After several long moments, he slides his sword into the leather scabbard at his side.

It’s an unspoken signal, and the others lower their weapons as well.

I jerk my head toward Bartholomew, who’s currently tied up like a hog and being used as a human bench. “Do you think you could release my squire?”

Grumbling, the gnomes crawl off Bartholomew and begin to work at the knots in their ropes.

“You look like something an aynauth repeatedly smacked against a tree,” the gnome leader says to Pranmore. “What’s wrong with you?”

“It’s just a little indigestion—”

“He ate imposter berries,” I interrupt.

“As stupid as they look,” someone in the crowd mutters, obviously wanting us to hear since he’s speaking in the common language.

“We have a tincture to settle his stomach.” The gnome leader turns and waves for us

to follow him. “Come along, and you can explain why you’re in our woods.”

“My archer needs care,” I tell him. “She can’t travel in this state.”

Pranmore turns toward Clover, and his eyes widen with true concern. “Lady Clover, you’re injured.”

“Can you heal her?” I ask,

Clover reluctantly lets him examine the wound.

“Yes...” He turns a little green and quickly looks away. “But not quite yet. For now, I can help ease her pain.”

“Enough talking,” one of the female brawlers says. “If we’re not gonna kill her, we might as well bandage her up. She’s leaking all over the forest.”

* * *

According to the gnomes, they have no village healer, but when someone needs “sewn back together after a tussle,” Maisel takes care of it.

The makeshift healer’s hut smells like herbs and dried moss, along with the lingering aroma of fried pork fat and potatoes.

It’s a strange little cottage, circular and built of stone, with a cedar shake roof and an ancient potbelly stove that appears to be fueled by wood instead of the oil the elven craftsmen have long preferred.

An axe and hunting knife lay atop the table, along with a pair of shears, a pincushion, a grubby lard candle, and what looks conspicuously like a well-worn collection of

romantic elven literature.

“Thathurts,” Clover growls as the gnome woman she pinned to the ground earlier none-too-gently wraps a bandage around her arm.

“My apologies,” Maisel replies with a hefty dose of sarcasm. “I forgot how delicate you human females are.”

Clover narrows her eyes at the gnome’s bandaged nose. “Did I look delicate when I ripped the spear from your hands and pinned you to the ground with my foot?”

“Clover,” I warn under my breath, reminding her not to taunt our reluctant hostess.

She raises her brows, unrepentant, but she doesn’t rise to Maisel’s provocations again—even when the gnome gives the bandage a final, firm tug. Clover winces, holding her tongue, and gives me a pointed look that says I better appreciate her restraint.

Maisel has created a rudimentary sling, and Clover grimaces as the gnome slides it over her shoulder and guides her arm into it.

“That should keep you until your elf friend stops hacking up berries,” Maisel says almost cheerfully, proud of her handiwork.

“Lovely,” Clover mutters as she stands. “Thank you.”

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We follow Maisel out of the hut, crawling on our knees to get through the door.

The small village stretches around us—a collection of child-sized houses clustered in a protected grove surrounded by thick woods. It was so close to where we met the gnomes, we almost stumbled on it by accident.

The Woodmores were apparently wrong—the Dorian people retreated into the mountains, yes, but they didn't become one with the earth, never to be seen again.

They just chose to live in a remote region so as not to be disturbed.

And, as Jarl Gruebin so eloquently explained on the short walk to the village, King Algernon can't tax them if he doesn't know they're here.

The smell of roasting meat wafts through the air, and the reminder of food makes my stomach clench with hunger. We've been invited to dinner, though I'm not certain the gnomes won't poison us.

"What do gnomes eat?" Clover asks me under her breath.

"You're in for a treat." Maisel rubs her hands together. "It's squirrel night."

She calls to a nearby woman and leaves us standing alone when she scurries off to join her.

"That was the gnome's idea of a joke, wasn't it?" Clover asks.

“I’m not sure.”

“At least they’re not roasting Pranmore,” she points out, biting back a mischievous smile.

We’re quiet for a moment as we take in the comings and goings of the little community. A stream runs through the middle of the hollow, lending water to the orchard, gardens, and small plots that are currently full of sprouting winter grain. The gnomes raise pigs, sheep, and chickens as well, tucking the little pens next to cottages and in their flower-filled yards. Nearby, small, yellow gourds climb an arched wooden trellis, proudly proclaiming that winter is on its way.

The familiar clang of iron being worked upon an anvil makes me wonder if there’s a tiny smithy somewhere in the village as well.

“Can you believe this has been tucked up here, and no one ever knew?” Clover asks.

I shake my head, marveling at it as well. Then I glance at her arm. “How are you feeling?”

Pranmore numbed the pain—it was about all he could manage at the time—but I imagine a wound like that still aches.

Clover looks down and frowns. “I can handle it until Pranmore is better.”

Maisel comes back a few minutes later. “What are you gawking around here for? If you don’t hurry and find a seat, you’ll have to sit at the table next to the muircorn pens.”

We follow Maisel to a community area in the heart of the glade. Already, dozens of gnomes sit at long tables. The wood is gray with age, and they look as though they’ve

weathered a great many years. Long runners, woven from reeds, stretch the length of the tables, and on them sit fat candles like the one in Maisel's hut.

Torches circle the area, giving light in the dimming evening.

Several women fill flat baskets with rounded loaves of bread, taking them from the large pewter platter a man in the center of the tables carries.

"Fetch more," one of the gnome women snaps at the man when the platter is empty. "And be quick about it."

He towers over her, likely as tall as I am, if not a little taller. He wears his black hair long and partially braided back, and his clothing is that of a servant.

It's only his ears that proclaim he's not human, along with the subtle almond shape of his eyes.

"Is that..." Clover studies the scene in front of us with bewilderment. "Henrik, I think that man is a High Vale."

As if sensing we're talking about him, the elf looks over. His eyes land on Clover, and his brows raise with interest.

"He is," I say, not liking the look he's giving her.

"What's he doing here?" Clover asks. "And why does it look like he's a serving boy?"

I don't have an answer to either of those questions, but I'm afraid we're going to find out. With a lazy grin that's focused on Clover, the man tucks the platter under his arm and makes his way to us.

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Clover

One look at the elf and you know the man is trouble. He's good-looking in a roguish way, with a crooked smile that proclaims he's the worst sort of scoundrel. He has slender, aristocratic features, but his nose is just crooked enough it must have been broken at least once, and there's a short, thin scar above his right eyebrow. Though the imperfections mar his beauty, they make him undeniably intriguing.

And he's obviously very aware of this.

With a dramatic bow, he says, "Welcome to Crevershim Hollow. You are our first visitors in... Well, you are our first visitors." He takes my hand and brushes a kiss over my knuckles. "To what do we owe the honor?"

I pull my hand back, less than impressed. "What's an elf doing in a Dorian community?"

"Ayan, you worthless thrall," one of the gnome women yells at the man. "We're not paying you to stand there yammering."

"You're not paying me at all," he calls over his shoulder.

That's met with a string of gnomish words I don't understand—and likely don't want to.

The elf looks back and winks. “We’ll talk later.”

I roll my eyes as he walks away. When I glance up at Henrik, I find him studying the tables a little too intently.

“Come on, soldier,” I say, looping my good arm through his. “Let’s find a place to sit.”

He looks down, mildly surprised, and cracks a smile. “Preferably not by the muircorns.”

I laugh as my eyes wander to the paddock at the far side of the community area. Several of the animals stand near a fence, looking bored.

Like the donkeys the humans brought over when they came to Caldenbauer, muircorns are stout, horse-like creatures, no larger than ponies, with two curling horns protruding from their heads between their long ears.

Native to this land, they were originally domesticated by the Boermin and used for pulling plows.

Even though they’re strong workers, humans don’t generally keep them because they emit a unique smell from a pair of glands that could easily compete with the cheese my aunt makes.

The particular ambiance they’d lend to the dining experience wouldn’t be a pleasant one, and we purposely choose spots at the furthest table from them. Two gnomes sit across from us. They cut off their conversation abruptly and glare at us as we find our seats.

Naturally, the tables are short, and Henrik looks like a giant as he tries to fit his large

self on the bench—which is no easy task. Finding the situation amusing, the gnomes snicker into their mugs of home-brewed mead.

Henrik offers them a tight smile, too well-mannered to let his frustration show.

“Why don’t you sit at the end of the table?” I suggest, taking pity on him.

The soldier nods, uncomfortable, and abandons the long bench to sit on the ground, crossing his long legs. Even in that position, the table only comes to his stomach. Once he’s settled, he grimaces, and I try not to laugh.

Bartholomew joins us a few minutes later. Shorter and lankier than Henrik, he doesn’t have nearly as much trouble maneuvering onto the short bench, though there is no room for his legs, and he too must cross them under the table.

“How is Pranmore?” I ask, knowing Bartholomew stayed with him while Maisel tended to my arm.

“Better, I think,” the young man says, nodding a friendly smile to the inquisitive gnome next to him. “Evening.”

The gnome grunts and turns back to his mead.

“Dinner smells delicious,” Bartholomew says brightly, crossing his hands on the table as he watches gnomes filter in around us, filling the tables. “I’m famished. What do you think we’re having?”

Before I can answer, Gruebin stands and clears his throat, drawing the attention of those in attendance. He’s tall for a gnome, putting him at roughly the same height as a five-year-old child. His thick brown beard is braided, and the tail falls to his chest. Even in the safety of the glade, he wears his metal and leather cuirass, making me

wonder if it's more a fashion statement than a functional piece of armor.

“As you’ve all noticed,” he begins, “we have guests tonight. They claim to be passing through on the human king’s business—”

Several grumbles interrupt the jarl, and suspicious eyes dart our way.

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Gruebin smacks his hand on the table to reclaim his audience's attention. "The tall one there at the end says he won't be telling the king our whereabouts if we keep the peace while they're here. Since we don't be wanting no trouble with Algernon, we'll treat them with respect until we can be rid of them." The jarl gives us a pointed look. "Hopefully, they don't plan to stay long, as that would be a great nuisance."

I look down at my lap, trying not to laugh. They're hospitable, these gnomes.

The man next to Bartholomew stands atop the bench and calls out, "How about we kill them and be done with it?"

"Sit down, Cupert, you pig-nosed haigernauth. We're not killing nobody. If this lot disappears, the king'll be sending more into the mountains to look for them. The last thing we need is more of their kind traipsing around."

A chorus of agreements fills the glade, and Gruebin looks satisfied. Finished, he nods toward several women and Ayan, who wait nearby with platters filled with all kinds of food—only about half of which I recognize.

The jarl then makes his way toward us. "Move down, Cupert. Let me talk to our guests."

Grumbling that he didn't want to sit near us anyway, Cupert and his friend leave the table and venture to the nearly empty one near the muircorns. As they sit, Cupert says, "At least the beasts don't smell as bad as the humans."

Gruebin crosses his arms on the table and looks at Henrik. "All right, knight—"

“Soldier,” I correct as always, pretending to scratch an itch on my cheek and smiling at Henrik behind my hand.

He gives me a stern look, but his lips twitch with wry amusement.

“You’re just a soldier?” Gruebin wrinkles his nose.

“A commander,” I assure the gnome. “One of the king’s best. And soon, he’ll claim his knight’s seal and officially become one of the king’s elite.”

Henrik looks down as if embarrassed by the praise.

Gruebin scowls at me. “Are you a songbird, traveling with him to sing his praises?”

“So what if I am, gnome? Is that any business of yours?”

He leans forward and narrows his eyes behind his heavy brows. “You’re in my mountains, so it’s my business.”

“We’re investigating the strange movement of the aynauths,” Henrik interrupts, changing the subject.

Gruebin reluctantly pulls his eyes from me. “What about the aynauths?”

“They’re wandering out of their territory, into the lower montane forests. We had assumed they were following their food source, but we’ve seen plenty of deer since we’ve been in the area.”

“The beasts don’t bother us,” the gnome says. “We’ve set up deterrents, and it keeps most intelligent creatures away from our village.”

Ignoring the insult, I ask, “What kind of deterrents?”

“Magic,” the jarl says as if I’m daft. “Most animals that wander too close notice a general feeling of unease and avoid the area.”

“Your people have been here for centuries,” Henrik says. “Have you ever heard of the aynauths leaving their territory?”

Gruebin shakes his head as if unconcerned. “The wanderings of the beasts matter little to us.”

“Maybe something spooked them,” Ayan says, appearing behind me. He leans entirely too close as he sets a platter of meat-like substance on the table in front of us, and his chest brushes my shoulder.

I shift away from the elf, shooting him a look.

He merely smiles as he straightens and then sits next to me on the bench, leaning his back against the table. “I’m Ayan.”

“I gathered that when your keeper hollered at you to get back to work earlier.”

He snatches an apple from the table and takes a bite, studying me. With a lift of his brows, he asks, “And you are?”

“Not interested.” I turn from him, focusing instead on the skewers on the platter. A narrow strip of meat has been threaded onto each stick, and it appears to have been cooked over a fire. It doesn’t look like squirrel, but then again, I don’t know what cooked squirrel meat looks like.

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Gruebin piles them high atop his plate, helping himself to an entire round of bread while he's at it.

"Looks delicious," Bartholomew says warmly, choosing a skewer for himself.

I open my mouth to warn him, but he's already taken a bite of the strange meat. He makes a happy noise as he chews, and I grimace.

"Very tasty," Bartholomew says approvingly, setting the empty wooden skewer aside before helping himself to another. "It's dark meat, but I can't place it. Flockchick? Goose?"

Watching the young man with amusement, Ayan says, "Squirrel."

Bartholomew has just taken another bite, and he freezes. Slowly, his eyes move up to meet Ayan's. He hovers a hand over his mouth and thickly asks, "Squirrel?"

Ayan makes a chattering noise before he pointedly repeats, "Squirrel."

As if in pain, Bartholomew slowly chews his bite and then forces himself to swallow. Looking a little pale, he carefully sets what's left of the skewer on his plate.

"Roasted them myself," Ayan says to me, entirely too proud of himself.

"Good for you."

"I've heard women like men who cook," he says with a smirk.

Lowering my voice so the gnomes won't overhear, I say, "Believe it or not, a man who knows how to roastsquirrel isn't as appealing as he might think."

Ayan grins and leans closer. "It's only one of my many talents."

"Thrall," Gruebin commands. "My cup is empty."

Ayan rises. To me, he says, "Have no fear—I shall return."

"I appreciate the warning."

He chuckles as he wanders away, perhaps thinking there isn't a woman alive immune to his charms.

I turn to Bartholomew when the elf is gone. "Come sit by me."

Still looking ill, Bartholomew stares at me blankly. "By you?"

I point to the spot Ayan just vacated. "Please?"

As if suddenly coming to his wits, he leaps to his feet. "Of course, my lady. I would be honored to dine beside you."

When I glance at Henrik, he wears an inscrutable expression. To Gruebin, he says, "So you have no idea why the aynauths are moving lower?"

"I do not." The jarl holds his cup in the air when Ayan returns with a pitcher. "Hurry up, thrall."

Ayan comes around the back of the table to serve Gruebin, smirking when he sees the new seating arrangement. He fills the jarl's cup, and then he offers the drink to the

rest of us.

He then slides himself into the space next to Gruebin—to the gnome’s apparent dismay. Just like Henrik, Ayan looks ridiculous at the tiny table, but unlike Henrik, he’s able to manage it.

“Don’t you have something to tend?” Gruebin questions him.

“No.”

Gruebin shakes his head and takes a large bite of roasted squirrel.

“So,” Ayan says, looking between Henrik, Bartholomew, and me. “You’re a strange bunch to find wandering in the woods. What brings you to our fair mountain?”

“Our mountain,” Gruebin says between bites. “Not yours, you filthy trespasser.”

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Ayan smiles as he rests an elbow atop Gruebin's head. "The Dornauths sound hostile, but they've got good hearts."

"Don't say that word, or I'll gut you right here," Gruebin snarls, taking out his dagger and threatening to jab Ayan in the side.

The High Vale laughs and then crosses his arms on the table and studies me. "You're not an archer."

"I'm sure she'd be happy to prove it." Henrik chooses a piece of bread from the basket near us before meeting my eyes briefly. "Start running—she's better with moving targets."

I smile, feeling those familiar flutters in my stomach.

"I didn't say she wasn't proficient with a bow—I simply meant she's not merely an archer."

"And how would you know that, elf?" I demand.

A lazy smile takes up residence on his lips, and he lets his eyes drift over me in a suggestive way. "You've got noble blood running through your veins. I'd bet my life on it." He then jerks his head to Bartholomew. "Him too."

"Enough about us," I say. "Why are you here?"

Gruebin eyes Ayan with distaste. "He came running through here several months ago,

with a dozen of his kinsmen on his trail, and he ended up crashing right through our ancestral burial grounds. He toppled a rare totem—”

“It was a rock,” Ayan says dryly. “A rock on a log.”

“—and busted it right in two.”

Ayan turns to Gruebin. “And I’ll tell you now what I told you then—get yourself another blasted rock. I’ll even put it on a log if that will shut you up. There was nothing special about the one I broke.”

“It was sacred,” Gruebin says, his hackles rising.

Ayan places his hand next to his mouth as if he must shield his next words from the gnome. Lowering his voice to a stage whisper, he says to me, “It was a rock.”

“So, you’re working off your debt?” I ask, amused as I watch the exchange between the two. “For how long?”

The elf shrugs. “Until I get bored.”

“He’s done his time—he just won’t leave,” Gruebin grunts. He then takes a perfectly good loaf of bread and attempts to smack it across Ayan’s face.

But the elf only laughs, snatching the bread from the gnome’s hands and then taking a bite out of it. With his mouth half full, he says, “Seeing as how I don’t have anywhere better to go, I’m sticking around for now. And what can I do? They’d be lost without me.”

Gruebin mutters gnomish words under his breath and takes another squirrel skewer from the pile.

“Why were you running?” Henrik asks. “And what were your people doing this far north?”

Ayan turns to Henrik, studying him with humor. “That is the question, isn’t it?”

Henrik’s expression hardens, obviously deciding he dislikes the elf a great deal.

Ayan turns back to me and gives me a flirtatious grin. “If you’re nice, maybe I’ll tell you what I know about the happenings up here in the mountains.”

I lean forward, smiling sweetly. “If you tell us what you know, maybe I won’t cut off your hair and wear it on my belt as Maisel threatened to do to me.”

“You want to spar with me, pretty archer? Sounds like a good time.” He extends his arms, nearly smacking Gruebin in the head. “I am more than happy to oblige. I must warn you, though, I’m more of a grappler than a swordsman, and if I win, I’ll claim more than a lock of your hair. What do you think—shall we up the wager and bet a kiss?”

“Enough,” Henrik says sharply, and then he looks at me. “Ignore him; he doesn’t know anything. We’re not here to talk about his crimes—we’ve come searching for information about the aynauths, and no one here has what we need. In the morning, we will be on our way.”

“Leaving so soon?” Ayan leers at me in a way that’s oddly charming. “Perhaps your soldier friend is worried that if he lingers, I’ll steal your heart?”

I laugh out loud. “If I want to be wooed by a cad, I can find one with a crown. Why would I fall for a criminal who’s let himself be held hostage by gnomes?”

Ayan leans across the table, resting his arm between us. Lowering his voice, he says,

“This isn’t common knowledge, but I’m not just a criminal.”

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“Oh, you aren’t? Then pray tell—what are you?”

He raises a brow. “I’m actually the rightful heir to the High Vale dukedom.”

Henrik snorts out an unexpected laugh, delighting me. The soldier and I exchange a look, and I grin when I turn back to the elf. “Of course you are.”

“No, it’s true,” Ayan says flippantly. “I even have the written will and testament of Augmirian Argald Woldervin III to prove it. Or I did...at one time.”

I turn to Gruebin. “Were you aware you’ve made the mighty heir to the High Vale throne your thrall?”

“He’s mentioned it,” Gruebin says dryly.

“So you’re—what?—Duke Augmirian’s older brother, lost at birth?” I ask, playing along.

“It’s far more scandalous than that, my fair maiden. I am, in fact, Auggy the Short’s half-brother, younger by several months,illegitimately born.”

Incredulously, Henrik says, “And yet the duke would choose you as his heir?”

“Appalling, isn’t it?” Ayan says brightly.

Obviously, we’d have to be fools to believe a word of it, but there’s no reason to argue with the elf, especially now that I spot Pranmore walking to our table.

I rise, wincing as my arm throbs at the sudden movement. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” he assures me, and then his attention moves to Ayan.

The two elves assess each other—Ayan with amused interest and Pranmore with distaste. It’s no secret there is little love between the two races, similar though they might be.

Deciding to ignore Ayan altogether, Pranmore touches my arm. “If you are finished eating, let me attend to your wound.”

Happy to escape the squirrel banquet, I follow Pranmore away from the tables. Henrik ends up behind me, but Bartholomew stays with the gnomes.

“Will he be all right?” I ask, glancing back at the young man.

Henrik nods. “They have no reason to kill us now.”

“If they kept Ayan alive all these months, they’re more tolerant than I first believed.”

Henrik shakes his head, looking heavenward. Apparently, the gnomes are more tolerant than Henrik, too.

Pranmore leads us to a quiet area near the gnomes’ small orchard. Nearby, a lantern glows, just bright enough to illuminate the growing night. Now that the sun has set, the air is cool and growing colder.

I’m thankful I won’t have to sleep outside tonight, even if it means I must share a cottage with Maisel.

“Remove the sling,” Pranmore instructs. “I’ll let you undo the bandage as well.”

He draws in a concerned breath when he sees the injury anew, and he shakes his head. “This might hurt a bit.”

“It’s all right,” I assure him. “It can’t be worse than Maisel’s ministrations.”

But actually, it can.

I gasp when he presses his hands over the wound and the tendrils of his magic begin to prod raw places.

“Perhaps you should sit,” Pranmore says sympathetically.

“All right.” Feeling rather dizzy, I clench my eyes shut and lower myself.

“No, not down there,” Pranmore says. “I won’t be able to work on the ground. Henrik, can you pick her up? We need to stay by the light.”

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I couldn't object even if I wanted to. Henrik leans down and scoops me up in one smooth motion, holding me with one arm supporting my back and the other under my legs. I burrow against him, trying not to whimper.

Pranmore's magic feels like fingers in the wound; they explore and manipulate, tug and pull.

"Tendons are tricky," he says as he works. "And so difficult to get a hold of."

My stomach rolls, and I close my eyes tighter.

"Can you heal her?" Henrik asks, his voice tight with concern.

"Oh, yes," Pranmore says calmly. "It just takes longer than I like, and I hate to see her in pain while I work. How are you doing, Clover?"

I meep out a reply, hoping I sound brave.

"Not too much longer," he promises. "The worst of it is over now."

Not too much longer feels like an eternity. Just when I think I might pass out, the pain begins to subside.

"Just knitting it all together now," Pranmore says. "Feeling any better?"

"Yes," I manage, trying to catch my breath.

And then he's finished.

The elf steps back, surveying his handiwork. "It's going to itch something fierce in the next few days—that's normal. It must finish healing on its own, but I've done the brunt of the work."

I look down, breathing a sigh of relief to see the injury has all but vanished.

"Let's make sure I connected everything correctly," he says. "Move your arm around."

I don't want to, and I want to tell him as much, but I don't want to look like a child in front of Henrik.

Hesitantly, I try it. "It's stiff."

"It will be," Pranmore says. "I'll help you exercise it in the next few days. You'll be using your bow before you know it."

"Thank you, Pranmore," I say, and much to my horror, my eyes sting with tears. "You really are a handy elf to have around."

He nods as if he already knew as much, and then he turns. "I'm famished. I'm going to join the others—I saw bread and apples, did I not?"

"And squirrel," I can't help but add.

The elf grimaces as he walks off. "Of all the barbaric..."

Once we're alone, Henrik adjusts me in his arms. "Are you all right?"

Gulping, acknowledging I'm pressed against his very fine chest, I nod.

"It wasn't too traumatic?"

"You're waiting for me to burst into tears again, aren't you?" I chastise lightly.

"What kind of girl do you think I am?"

Last night, Henrik almost kissed me. Tonight, I'm in his arms.

"My favorite kind apparently," he says quietly.

Startled, I meet his eyes.

But instead of elaborating, he clears his throat and looks away. "Can you stand?"

“I think so.”

I try not to look too disappointed when he lowers me to my feet, but what girl wouldn’t be if she found herself in my position?

Once I’m steady, he takes a subtle step back. We stand here, face to face, neither of us sure what to say.

“I’m supposed to stay with Maisel tonight,” I tell him to break the silence.

He nods. “Bartholomew, Pranmore, and I are staying with Gruebin, but who knows how we’ll all fit in his cottage.”

“What are the chances that Maisel is going to try to cut my hair in my sleep?” I gather the long locks over my shoulder as if I can protect it.

“She had better not.”

I smile. “Why?”

“Because...” He sets a hand on top of my head in an almost brotherly way. “Because I like your hair.”

I blink up at him, feeling...something.

Something that goes past simple attraction—something I don’t want to think about.

“If I were going to cut her hair, I’d already have done it,” Maisel says, appearing out of nowhere and making me jump.

She tugs on my arm, pulling me down to a crouch so she can inspect Pranmore’s work. After several seconds, she grunts her approval and releases me.

“Your nose,” I say, realizing she’s no longer wearing her bandage.

She touches it self-consciously. “The Woodmore paused to fix it when he passed me just now.” She turns her head to the side and scowls. “Tell me the truth—it’s crooked, isn’t it?”

“No, it looks fine.”

She grunts as if satisfied, and then she turns to Henrik. “We have strict rules here in the village. There won’t be no dallying in the middle of the night, you here? Calendula will stay with me; you will stay with Gruebin. You’ll see each other in the morning.”

“It’s Clover,” I correct, feeling awkward.

Maisel scowls as if she thinks I’m trying to sass her. “Whatever. We’re a moral bunch, and we don’t want no humans coming in and starting trouble.”

My cheeks flame. “We’re not—”

“I understand,” Henrik says solemnly.

“Good,” Maisel says gruffly as she walks toward her cottage. “I’ll be giving you a chance to say goodnight, and then I’ll collect Calendula.”

“It’s Clover...” Henrik says, but she’s already walking away.

Embarrassed, I turn to Henrik. With a forced laugh, I say, “Honestly, these gnomes...”

Henrik steps close, and my heart nearly stops when he takes my hand. One of the moons has just crested the mountains, and it shines down on us. In the silvery light, Henrik brushes his lips over my knuckles, just as Ayan did earlier.

But Ayan didn’t make me feel like I was going to melt into a puddle in the middle of the gnome village.

“Goodnight, Calendula,” Henrik teases softly when he releases me. “Sleep well.”

I mumble a strange cross between “thank you” and “you too” that horrifyingly comes out as, “Thanks to you.”

A smile ghosts across his handsome face, and then he walks me to Maisel’s cottage. Before he goes, he runs an affectionate hand down my hair.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

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“Trying to commit it to memory—just in case you wake up and find most of it missing.”

Laughing, I swat his hand away. “Go away.”

“Sleep well, Clover.” With one last look, he turns down the garden-lined lane toward the bachelor’s cottage.

Clutching a hand over my heart, I stare after him like a lovesick fool.

“Are you coming inside or not?” Maisel demands through the window, scaring me half to death. “Don’t you realize it’s freezing out there, or are humans too stupid to sense the cold just like they’re too stupid to sense magical wards?”

27

Clover

I’m fully prepared to pull out my uncomfortable bedroll, but much to my surprise, I find Maisel has already created a cozy nest of blankets for me on the floor in front of the fire.

She makes me a cup of mint tea and then sits in the tiniest rocking chair I’ve ever seen and begins to knit.

I study her over the rim of my earthen mug, smiling. She’s exchanged her armor for a long nightdress that has lace on the hems of the sleeves and neck. The cream-colored

fabric is embroidered with tiny pink rosebuds, and she wears knitted pink slippers upon her feet. She's taken down her braid, and now her dark strawberry blonde hair falls in waves to her waist.

She's gone from pint-sized warrior of the woods to an adorable doll in less time than it's taken me to drink a single cup of tea.

She looks vulnerable now—and far younger than I first realized.

“What are you smiling about, human?” she says gruffly, her eyes never leaving her project.

“How old are you, Maisel?” I ask.

She briefly glances at me. “Two hundred and thirty-seven.”

I don't mean to gasp, but it escapes me before I can stop myself.

“It's not so old for my kind,” she says, “though I suppose you wouldn't know that.”

“Why...” I stop myself, wondering if the question I want to ask would be considered impolite.

“Why what?” Maisel asks over the constant clicking of her smooth, wooden knitting needles.

“Why do you live alone?”

Again, her eyes briefly flicker to mine. “My parents and brother died during the war. They were fighting to keep our village safe when a battle between the High Vales and the humans came too close. I've lived here by myself ever since.”

“Are you old enough to marry? Or maybe you prefer to live alone?”

Her expression becomes hard, and I realize I’ve made a misstep.

“Never mind,” I say with an exaggerated yawn. “I’m exhausted and forgetting my manners.”

“No, it’s all right. I do wish to marry, but...it hasn’t come to pass.”

Sensing she actually wants to talk about it, I ask, “Why not? Is there no one you like?”

Her cheeks go pink, making her look even more like a little doll. “There is a man. His name is Devlin. He’s a good man and a fierce hunter—fought a bear alone once.” She smiles to herself. “Dragged the animal back to the village by himself, too, the stubborn man. Took him three days. Thank goodness it was winter, or the meat would have gone bad.”

“Does he know how you feel about him?”

“No.” The clack of her knitting becomes a little more agitated. “He’s been flitting about Bitsy, like all the other eligible idiots in the village. She refuses to choose a beau—an attention-hungry heifer if you ask me—so all the men keep circling. I’m not sure they even like her that much; they’re just too blasted competitive.”

“What’s so special about Bitsy? You’re pretty, and you’re wicked with your spear.”

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She casts me a stony look. “You didn’t do me any favors earlier.”

“Sorry,” I say, laughing a little. “If I’d known you were showing off for a man, I would have played along.”

She grunts, and then it goes quiet.

I drink my tea, thinking over the strange events of the day. I went from waiting for an aynauth to leave our camp to drinking tea with a Dorian gnome.

You’d think I’d be miserable, but I’ve never been so happy in my life—and it’s all thanks to Henrik.

Once I’ve finished the tea, I snuggle into the blankets and close my eyes. As I drift off to the rhythmic sound of Maisel’s knitting, I decide that somehow, someday, I will help Henrik secure his seal.

* * *

I waketo the sound of meat sizzling in a skillet, and the smell of sausage fills Maisel’s hut.

“Finally awake?” my new housemate grouches from the stove. The soft, nighttime Maisel is gone. Once again, her hair is braided into a no-nonsense tail, and she wears her gnomish armor.

Yawning, I sit up and stretch, pleased the gnome didn’t murder me in my sleep. I then

pull my hair over my shoulder, reassuring myself it's all still here.

"I see you didn't steal my hair—" I begin, but my words are cut off when something stout rams into my shoulders from behind me.

Startled, I turn—and then I shriek and crawl back.

The rock leopard stretches as he rises from my bed of blankets and then sits on his haunches, head cocked to the side as if he's chastising me for being much too loud this early in the morning.

How long has he been there?

"What are you squealing about now?" Maisel demands. "He slept with you most of the night."

"Who is he?" I demand.

"Ulfric," Maisel says as she cracks eggs into a cast iron pan that looks larger than she is. "He's my steed."

"Your...steed?" I scoot further back when the massive cat yawns and reclaims the bed we apparently shared.

Maisel shoots me a look like I've again confirmed that I'm daft. "You humans travel about on horses, don't you? Unless you're a Woodmore, I wouldn't think the concept would be foreign to you."

"Youridehim?"

"What else would you do with a rock leopard?"

That is an excellent question.

“What...what does he eat?”

“Whatever he wants,” Maisel says without cracking a smile. “Usually stray humans.”

I look at her sharply, and she finally smirks. I roll my eyes, and then I let out an embarrassing meep when Ulfric stretches on his side and extends his massive front paw as if to say hello. With half-slitted eyes, he yawns, displaying a terrifying maw of sharp, white teeth.

Silvery gray, with ghost spots and a plush coat, he’s just about the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen. His tail is huge and so fluffy, I want to wrap myself up in it. I’m not sure he’d appreciate that, though, so I don’t try.

“You don’t like cats?” Maisel asks.

“No, I do.” I tentatively brush my hand over the leopard’s paw. “I’ve just never seen one so large.”

He’s not so huge that I could ride him—but he could easily eat me.

“Very well. Leave the poor cat alone. Are you hungry?” Maisel asks. “Get up and have some breakfast. I’ve made tea—it’s on the table.”

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I cast one last look at Ulfric and then claim a seat, gratefully reaching for the steaming silver pot.

* * *

Better fed than I have been in weeks, I leave Maisel's cottage and make my way to the short gate that separates her small plot of land from the homes around her, admiring the last of her autumn flowers. The cottage garden is cheerful this time of year, with fat pumpkins peeking from behind the late-blooming carmine daisies, but I imagine it's even more breathtaking in summer when the bulk of the flowers are in full bloom.

I'm disappointed I won't see it then.

The air is cool, but it's warming quickly, and it looks like it's going to be another beautiful day in the mountains. The village is already bustling, with gnomes going about their business. Most appear to be in the nearby orchard, harvesting apples with their rickety ladders and baskets.

A young gnome girl, only knee-high, walks down the lane leading a goat that's twice her size. She eyes me curiously when I walk through the gate, but she doesn't stop to say hello.

Another woman sweeps her small rock porch, and a man smokes a pipe as he critiques the apple harvesters.

In the light of morning, it's just about the most charming village I've ever seen.

“Will you stay for the cider pressing?” a man says from behind me.

I jump a little, startled not because someone is addressing me, nor that the voice is smooth and deep, but because the words came from too high up for the source to be a gnome.

Ayan gives me a flirtatious smile when I turn, and then he matches my pace, clasping his hands behind his back. “Good morning, Clover.”

I eye him. “Good morning.”

He leans a fraction closer and lowers his voice. “No need to look so wary. I don’t bite—not unless you ask me nicely.”

“You’re a pig,” I say, continuing down the lane, trying to remember where Gruebin’s cottage is located.

“Worse,” he says with a laugh. “I’m a High Vale. Haughty, proud, and—”

“Extremely self-confident.”

He grins. “I believe that sums me up nicely.”

I roll my eyes.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he says, undaunted.

“No, we’re not staying for the cider pressing.”

Even if it sounds lovely. Unable to help myself, I glance back at the orchard longingly.

“You could stay here, you know. Let your soldier and his scrappy comrades continue their aynauth hunt. Maisel would never admit it, but I’m sure she’s over the moons to have company.”

“I’m one of the ‘scrappy comrades,’” I say wryly.

Ayan steps in front of me and stops, studying me with his dark brown eyes. “Are you? Are you really?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

He shrugs. “You just don’t seem to be the adventuring type, that’s all.”

Apparently, the outfit isn’t fooling anyone.

“Well, I am,” I say hotly.

“If you won’t stay, maybe I should come with you. It seems you could use an extra member of your party—someone competent in offensive magic, someone good with a sword.” He preens like a peacock. “Someone ruggedly handsome with a dazzling wit and intellect.”

I brush past him. “If you see someone like that, please let me know.”

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The elf laughs as he matches my pace once more. “I could be useful, you know, seeing as how I know why the aynauths are on the move.”

I pause. “Sure you do.”

“Well, let’s just say I have a pretty good hunch.”

I cross my arms, pinning him with my eyes. “All right, elf, what do you know?”

With his arms clasped at his back once more, he leans forward. His dark eyes practically sparkle with delight. “It’s a secret, but I might be persuaded to share it with you.”

“You know, you wouldn’t be so desperate for female attention if you rejoined society.”

His grin grows. “I like you.”

“How about this—out of the kindness of your heart, tell me what you know.”

He clucks his tongue and shakes his head. “Won’t work. I don’t think High Vales have that spot in their hearts.”

“You really are an awful person,” I say, growing frustrated. “You know that?”

“So I’ve heard.” He laughs, and then he stands straight and crosses his arms as he studies me. “All right, I’ll throw you a bone—”

“I’m not a dog.”

“Cutest little spaniel I’ve ever seen.”

“I understand why the gnomes are eager to be rid of you.”

He grins, creating a dimple in his left cheek. “You know how there are rumors that the northwestern edge of the mainland is impossible to reach via ship because of the cliffs and formidable rocks?”

“Yes...”

“It’s true,” he says. “But that doesn’t mean the area is inaccessible.”

“What are you trying to tell me?”

“Continue scouting, but don’t continue north. Gowest.”

I think about it, trying to picture a map of the kingdom in my head. “You’re sure?”

“You could always take me as a guide...”

“I don’t make a habit of inviting rogues on adventures.”

“Shame. Imagine how much fun we could have.”

Spotting Pranmore up ahead on a bridge that crosses the stream, I shake my head.

“Not happening, but thank you for the incredibly vague tip.”

“Happy to help.”

Pranmore's smile becomes tight when he spots me walking with Ayan. "Good morning, Lady Clover."

"Oh, Lady Clover, is it?" Ayan says, raising his brows.

I shoot him a look.

Ayan turns to Pranmore and extends his hand. "I don't think we've been introduced. I'm Ayanleon, illegitimate son of Augmirian Argald Woldervin III and future heir of the dukedom, should I ever convince Auggy to abdicate."

Pranmore's frown deepens, but he clasps Ayan's hand briefly. "Pranmore Cyrus Erming, of the Dulane Ermings."

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“What’s a Woodmore doing this far from his vineyard? Shouldn’t you be sipping wine somewhere in the south, saving baby birds and talking about what a poor year it was for your grapes?”

“I don’t believe that’s any of your business.”

Ayan shoots me a look, raising his brows with humor. “And I believe that’s my cue to leave.”

I wave my hand, telling him he’s free to be excused.

But before the elf goes, he bows low. “Remember, I am here, Lady Clover, should you ever require my services.”

“Good to know.”

“Wretched elf,” Pranmore says under his breath as Ayan leaves. “Snored all night.”

“He stayed with you?” I ask, surprised.

“He lives with Gruebin. Henrik doesn’t seem to like him.”

No surprise there.

“How are you feeling?” I ask.

“I’m fine,” he says, his expression warming as Ayan leaves. “And you? How is your

arm?”

“I haven’t thought of it all morning, so you must have done a very good job. Thank you.”

His neck turns pink at the praise.

“Have you seen Henrik?” I ask. “I imagine he’ll want to leave soon.”

“I left him not long ago.” He points down to a cottage that sits between two large pine trees. “He was with Gruebin.”

“I’ll find him,” I say. “Then I’ll meet you in the community area?”

“Of course,” he says with a smile. “I’m going to fetch Bartholomew.”

“Where did he get to?”

A concerned look creeps across Pranmore’s face. “The gnomes who wrestled him to the ground yesterday decided he needed to ‘learn to be a man.’ They’ve taken him into the woods, heaven help the boy.”

I laugh as I walk toward Gruebin’s cottage, eager to tell Henrik what Ayan shared with me—not that it was monumental. But something tells me whatever he knows is related to the men chasing him, and we may have stumbled onto something a lot larger than the migratory habits of aynauths.

When I knock on the door, there is no answer. Hesitantly, I lean down and open the door a crack. “Hello?”

But there’s no one inside.

Before I close the door, Henrik's pack catches my eye. He must have left it by accident.

Deciding I'll fetch it for him, I quickly slip into the room, aware of how loud my boots sound as they click on the stone floor.

Henrik's cloak hangs halfway out of his pack, looking as if he was in the middle of stuffing it inside and became distracted. Quickly, I shove it back in.

But before I secure the flap, a piece of crumpled parchment catches my eye. My breath catches as I stare at it, recognizing it immediately.

It's Camellia's letter.

"It's none of your business, Clover," I whisper.

But...the pull is too great. Drawing my bottom lip between my teeth, feeling like the worst sort of snoop, I gingerly open the paper.

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My palms begin to sweat as I read it, and I become a little dizzy.

Not only did Camellia accuse me of sorcery, but she tasked Henrik with watching me so she can concoct evidence.

And he...agreed.

That's why he was so agitated that afternoon by the river—that's why the letter was clenched in his hand.

He didn't want me to join the party because of my skill with a bow, and it wasn't because he secretly harbored feelings for me either.

It was because his beloved Camellia asked it of him—a direct order from her Royal Highness herself.

Feeling sick and more than a little confused, I carefully ball the letter and place it back into his pack. I'm just securing the buckles when the door opens, and Henrik's large silhouette blocks the light. He drops to all fours to crawl in the door, smiling in a friendly way that tells me he knows he looks foolish.

My stomach knots, and tears prick my eyes.

"What are you doing in here?" he asks, sounding as if he's genuinely happy to see me.

"Pranmore said you were here..." I gulp back my emotions and gesture to his pack.

“And it looked like you forgot this, so I was grabbing it for you.”

“I was just coming back for it.” He stands now that he’s inside, though he must lean down due to the low ceiling. “How did you sleep?”

“Fine.”

“I see you still have your hair.”

I nod, trying to smile but feeling as if I’m going to be sick.

My emotions are in a jumble, but I have a realization that’s both clear and confusing—I’m not angry with Henrik. He was doing his duty to the crown, as a good soldier should. And this...this is likely what he’s been trying to discuss with me for days.

I feel...stupid. And naïve.

And so, so disappointed.

I laugh to myself, blinking quickly to hold off the embarrassing tears.

“Hey,” Henrik says softly, helping me to my feet and swinging the pack over his shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m a little homesick,” I say quietly. “It hit me rather suddenly.”

His eyes soften with compassion. “It happens to the best of us.”

“I think...” I clear my throat. “I might stay here while you go into the mountains. Ayan said you should head west from here instead of north. It’s all I could get out of

him, but it might be helpful.”

“Something happened.” Henrik’s voice deepens with concern, and he touches my shoulder. “What is it?”

I smile as I shrug away from him. “Nothing. I just think it’s time I remember that I’m a lady-in-waiting and not an adventuress. When you’re finished with your search, perhaps you can take me back to Cabaranth.”

He shakes his head. “I won’t leave you here.”

“Henrik...”

Though his eyes are still concerned, he gives me a coaxing smile. “You promised to protect me, Lady Clover. Surely you’re not a woman who would go back on her word, are you?”

His gentle teasing makes me laugh, which is horrible because that causes a tear to slip down my cheek.

“Clover.” Henrik steps forward, genuinely concerned now.

“I found Camellia’s note,” I admit as I swipe the unwanted moisture away, unable to hide it from him. “And...I read it.”

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He exhales deeply, and then his pack hits the floor with a heavy thump. Suddenly, I'm against him, wrapped gently in his arms. His embrace is meant to impart comfort, but it just reminds me of how ridiculous I've been.

"I swear I'm not a sorceress," I say against his leather brigandine. "And I can't even cook—I'd never be able to concoct a potion."

A quiet laugh rumbles through his chest. "I know you're not."

I pull back to look up at him. "I've been such a nuisance, haven't I?"

"I've enjoyed your company," he says gruffly, and then his frown grows. "Are you very angry with me?"

"I'm not. I know you were following orders." Then I add bitterly, "Camellia outranks both of us."

"I tried to tell you—several times."

"I know that too."

He brushes a strand of hair out of my face, and my heart beats a little faster. Horrified with myself, I squelch the feeling immediately.

Looking at the floor as I pull away from him, I admit, "I thought that... Well, I misinterpreted the situation and assumed you had feelings for me. I've been a bit forward, and I'm sorry for any discomfort that's caused you. Obviously, there can't

be anything between us, and I was foolish to think otherwise. I'm going to marry Lawrence—that's what my future holds. And you're..." I can't bring myself to say he's going to marry Camellia. "Meant for someone else."

When Henrik doesn't answer, I look up and find him studying me. His brows are drawn low, and he presses his mouth into a thin line. But I can't tell what he's thinking.

Instead of staying silent, waiting for him to put his thoughts in order, I fill the silence, unable to stop myself.

"If you truly want me to stay with you on your search, I swear I will keep an appropriate distance." I force an uncomfortable smile. "I hope we can move past this and be friends. Real ones this time, instead of you having to pretend because Camellia forced me upon you—"

Oh, I'm going to be sick.

"Clover," Henrik says, finally cutting me off. "Wait a moment. I—"

But before he can finish, the door opens once more. Bartholomew crouches down to enter the cottage. Oblivious to our tense conversation, he proudly proclaims, "I shot a deer!"

Startled, Henrik turns to his squire. "Does Pranmore know?"

Bartholomew's eyes go wide, and his expression morphs from joyous to horrified in less than two seconds. "No..."

"Thank goodness," I say with a heavy sigh. "Whatever you do, don't tell him."

“But he said...” Bartholomew struggles to find the right words. “He said himself he’s an elf and not a deer. Surely it won’t bother him that much...”

Grateful for the interruption, I give Henrik one more apologetic look, and then I slip out the door.

28

Henrik

I watch helplessly as Clover goes, wanting to call her back. But she’s hurt, and understandably so, and I’m afraid if I push too quickly, it will end in disaster. Perhaps the best thing I can do right now is give her space.

But dread sits heavy in my gut, churning like a ball of lead. Why didn’t I burn the wretched letter? It would have been much better for Clover to hear the news from me than read the outlandish things Camellia wrote.

Bartholomew turns to me after Clover leaves, wringing his hands. “Will Pranmore be very upset?”

I give him a pointed look. “Not if you don’t tell him.”

Nodding, looking only mildly relieved, Bartholomew follows me out the cottage door.

When I rise on the other side of the entry, I find Pranmore standing near the gate, waiting.

And he doesn’t look pleased.

* * *

Pranmore isn't speaking to Bartholomew, and Clover is avoiding me. Bartholomew can't look Pranmore in the eye, and I've twisted myself inside out over the situation with Clover. I don't like where we left things—not one bit.

We're a sorry bunch, and again, I wonder why I was cursed with this lot. My life was on track only a month ago—everything was laid out in a tidy timeline. And then...Clover happened.

But the truth is, I wouldn't change it for anything. Clover is impulsive and stubborn; she's noble and soft even though she wants to be hardened and fierce. She's fire one minute and as gentle as a kitten the next, and I've been happier in these last few weeks than ever in my life.

Right now, though, she's quiet and obedient, quick to agree, and smiling only with her mouth—and I don't like it one bit.

On top of everything else, clouds roll in midday, and it looks like we're in for a storm. We're not prepared for snow—we're barely prepared for good weather, though the gnomes did replenish our supplies.

Poor Bartholomew almost can't walk under the weight of the rations they gave us.

We head west, not because I trust Ayan, but because I have no better plan. Sensing the change in the weather, the squirrels and birds have gone into hiding, and the woods are silent except for the crunch of dried pine needles under our boots. Even the

wind is still, and clouds blanket the forest in silence. The air smells like snow, with bright, crisp notes mixed with the sharp scent of pines and the rich fragrance of the earth.

The first snowflake falls midday.

Clover stops, watching it float down, and extends her mitten-covered hand to catch it. It's beautiful, white and pure, but it feels ominous.

"Where did you get the mittens?" I ask, desperate to start a conversation with her.

She briefly meets my eyes, giving me a smile that doesn't light her face like they usually do. "Maisel gave them to me. She knitted them last night—making them 'gargantuan' to fit my 'disproportionately large' hands."

I laugh a little, and then I catch myself and clear my throat.

Thankfully, Pranmore doesn't notice how uncomfortable things are between Clover and me. "The gnomes, though their speech is venomous, are strangely welcoming for such a reclusive people."

"We won't tell my uncle they're there, will we, Henrik?" Bartholomew asks.

I'm not sure Bartholomew realizes the question is a difficult one. Though I guaranteed the gnomes their privacy, I cannot command Algernon's nephew to keep something from him.

"Do you think we should tell him?" I hedge.

Bartholomew thinks about it for a moment, and then he shakes his head. "Technically, they were here first, and they haven't committed any crimes. Let's

leave them in peace, as we promised.”

“I agree,” I say, relieved.

We become quiet once more, with only our shuffling steps to fill the silence.

Not long later, the snow begins to fall in earnest. Soon, the deer trail we follow is dusted, and our boots leave footprints behind us. Already, the air has cooled considerably, and dark clouds have settled around us, churning overhead.

If we don’t find shelter to weather the storm, we’ll be caught in the worst of it.

I survey the landscape and take note of the cliff that rises to the north.

“Let’s go this way,” I say, veering to the right. “We need to try to find shelter for the night.”

My companions follow without question, and soon we reach a rocky wall that rises from the forest floor.

“What are we looking for?” Bartholomew asks as we traverse the slippery, rocky landscape.

“A cave, if we’re fortunate.”

“Henrik,” Pranmore calls from ahead. “What about this?”

The rocky recess cuts into the mountain, protected by large boulders toward the front. The cliff curves in around the space, creating an overhang that’s already shielding the area from the snow. The opening is large enough for four people to fit tightly, wedged in between a few rocks, and we will be able to build a fire toward the front.

It's not as protected as a cave, and it won't be the most comfortable shelter, but it will do.

“Bartholomew, take the hand axe out of my pack and collect fallen wood—try to pull dry pieces from underneath ones that the snow has already collected on.”

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“Yes, Henrik,” Bartholomew says eagerly.

I look up with a grimace. “And don’t chop off your arm. I’m not sure Pranmore would put you back together right now.”

“I would,” Pranmore says icily. “Unlike other members of this party, I respect all life.”

Ignoring the elf, I crouch low, trying to move as many loose rocks as possible to make more space. Clover kneels by my side to help.

I wait for her to flash me a wicked look and remind me that we’d all be cozy inside her tent if I’d brought it up that night on the outcrop, but she doesn’t mention it.

Her broken silence is demoralizing. I want her to yell at me—get angry. I deserve it, even if only because I didn’t make her listen to me when I tried to tell her. I want to fight so we can make up and put it behind us.

But I say nothing.

As we work, Pranmore stands outside the shelter, staring up at the sky, mumbling about the way the diffused light becomes ethereal as it shines through the falling ice crystals.

“Come inside,” I tell him. “You can look at the ethereal light from in here.”

Not long later, Bartholomew returns with an armful of kindling. The snow is coming faster now, and it’s already collected on the young duke’s cloak.

“Brush off before you come inside,” I tell him. “You don’t want to get wet, or you’ll freeze before the night is over.”

Clover gathers pine needles that have collected in the sheltered space throughout the years. They’re dry and brittle, and when the sparks from my knife and flint land upon them, they catch easily.

Soon we have a fire at the entrance of the shelter, just far enough out the smoke escapes instead of collecting in the space. It warms the area, but only marginally. We huddle under our cloaks, eventually pulling out bedrolls when the storm darkens with night.

The fire illuminates the flurry of snow as it falls outside. Slowly, it accumulates at the entrance, but the central part of the shelter stays dry thanks to the cliff overhead.

We eat food the gnomes packed—several flasks of cider, herb rolls with thick crusts, and slices of hard yellow cheese. Maisel gave us several sausages as well, but Clover and Bartholomew seem reluctant to mention them in front of Pranmore, and I’m not going to be the one to bring it up.

There isn’t room for us to lay down, but as the night wears on, Bartholomew manages to curl into a ball toward the back of the small space, tucking himself so deeply into his bedroll he’s not even visible.

“Are you warm enough?” I ask Clover.

Still wearing her cloak, with her hood tucked tightly around her head, she sits burrowed into her own bedroll. “Only my cheeks are cold.”

We’re side by side, close enough I could wrap my arm around her shoulder and encourage her to lean against me so she can rest. But after this morning, I don’t dare.

Pranmore, too, is cocooned in his bedroll, with only his antlers poking out. He sits by the entrance, as he kept unintentionally poking us with his antlers when he was closer.

“How are you, Pranmore?” I ask.

“Fine,” he says from somewhere in his blankets, his voice muffled and half-frozen. “We Woodmores have a natural immunity to the cold—it’s just another side of nature, which is beautiful in all its extremes.”

Clover rolls her eyes, and I smile. Our gazes meet unintentionally, and we both look down.

“I never thought to ask,” I say to Pranmore. “But what will your family think of you swearing your life away?”

“They will be proud that I value our people’s traditions.”

“Do they all live in the south?” Clover asks, joining the conversation as if she, too, is desperate to talk about something that feels normal in this strange situation we’ve found ourselves in.

Pranmore makes a muffled noise of affirmation.

“And there’s no one waiting for you at home?” Clover asks. “You don’t have a girl anxious for your return?”

Slowly, Pranmore pokes his head out of the covers. “No.”

“Why not?” she asks, sounding genuinely curious.

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He shrugs through his many layers. “There was a woman once...but it didn’t work out.”

Clover makes a soft noise of understanding, apparently deciding not to push for more.

But without prompting, Pranmore says, “We were childhood friends. Even when we were young, I knew I was going to ask Elsette to marry me. But I never got the chance.”

“What happened?” Clover asks gently.

“She fell in love with someone else, and they were married this summer. I left for the Furlaskin Ruins after the celebration, feeling the need to travel for a while.”

Is that why Pranmore was so eager to swear his life to me? So he didn’t have to return home?

“Watching the woman you’re in love with marry another man...I wouldn’t wish it on anyone,” he says absently before he extends a hand from his blankets and leans forward to grab another short log for the fire. “What do you think? Add another, or is it too soon?”

Though far from dwindling coals, the flames have gone low, and the shelter has become cooler.

“Go ahead and put it in,” I say, trying not to dwell on the sudden memory of Clover and Lawrence laughing together in the bailey, standing close enough to casually

touch, their eyes trained on each other.

Lawrence is no better than a leech, but the look of real affection he wore nags at me. Does the crown prince have feelings for Clover? Is her mission to snare him perhaps an easier one than even she realizes?

But no—the prince has had more casual trysts than I’ve had fruitless missions in search of my seal. Surely he won’t settle for one woman, not when there are so many.

And Clover wouldn’t really marry him, would she?

She might. More than anything, she wants to rise above Camellia, and Lawrence represents freedom.

And now that I know Camellia is out for Clover’s blood, I understand Clover’s dedication to her task. What I once assumed was a petty squabble between two bored noblewomen might go deeper. After all, it’s no small thing to accuse someone of sorcery.

If Camellia can somehow prove her accusation is true, Clover could be imprisoned for years—or worse, be put to death.

If Lawrence and Clover are genuinely friends, I still believe he will never let such a ridiculous thing come to pass—but it’s concerning all the same.

* * *

I doze on and off throughout the night, adding wood to the fire as needed.

The snow lets up sometime in the early hours of the morning, but judging from the pitch-black forest, the clouds stay low and thick—a good thing, too. When the storm

clears out, the temperature will drop further. It's hard to say if the weather will return to mild once more. This storm might have heralded in an early winter in the mountains.

If that's the case, we will have no choice but to return to the guard post with King Algernon's question left unanswered.

As I sit here, my crossed legs asleep and my back aching from sitting on the hard ground for so long without being able to change position, I think about Gruebin's story of Ayan's arrival in their village.

If it were only one random High Vale wandering the woods, I don't believe I'd feel this nagging concern. But why were there several of them?

It's obvious Ayan committed some crime against his people. Did they chase him all the way from Ferradelle?

Clover mutters something, slouched against the rock wall. She must have fallen asleep.

Her position looks uncomfortable, and I work my jaw, wondering if I dare coax her toward me, where she'll be warmer and more comfortable. But I risk waking her, and she won't be pleased if I do.

Deciding her comfort is worth the risk, I gently wrap my arm around her shoulder and draw her to me.

She mumbles something incoherent but doesn't rouse as I adjust our position as well as I am able.

I move just enough one of my numb legs comes back to life, and painful pinpricks

make me ache to stretch.

But the temporary discomfort was worth it. Now we're in a far more comfortable position, with me lying in the space once occupied by the two of us. Clover is tucked next to me, with my arm under her back and her head resting on my shoulder.

We're separated by multiple layers of cloaks and fleece and the outer canvas of our bedrolls, but it feels so good lying with Clover in my arms, guilt tries to edge in.

But that's a worry for later.

I hold my breath when Clover turns in her blankets. She's now facing me...and she burrows in closer. Exhausted enough to sleep now that I'm in a more comfortable position, I relax.

Suddenly, Clover tenses. Her eyes open as though something startled her awake, and she blinks at me, in a daze.

"Henrik?" she murmurs, and then she slowly turns her head as if realizing our position.

"You're dreaming," I say quietly so I won't disturb the others. "Go back to sleep."

"Mmm," she groans groggily. "The ground is usually more comfortable in dreams."

I think she's going to pull away, but instead, she closes her eyes and nestles closer to me.

Startled, I tighten my hold on her. "Are you warm enough?" I murmur, feeling suddenly protective of this woman even though she told me less than twenty-four hours ago that I'm not part of her plans for the future.

"Mmmhmm." Clover lets out the tiniest contented sigh, and then she mumbles as she drifts off, "I like Dream Henrik."

Clover

I waket to the faint smell of campfire smoke and the sound of someone shuffling around in their blankets.

A sliver of my forehead is cold, but the rest of me is wrapped in either my bedroll or my cloak.

Slowly I lift my head to peek out the opening in my nest. Immediately, I notice two things. The first is that our shelter is lightening with the dim, bluish glow of early dawn.

The second is Henrik.

His neck is mere inches from my face, and he's fast asleep. The soldier is in his many, many layers, and I'm in mine, but I'm snuggled close to his side, and my head rests on his shoulder.

He stirs a little, and I snap my eyes shut.

"I know you're awake," he murmurs. His voice is thick with sleep, and it sends an arrow of longing to my heart.

What would it be like to wake up next to this man in different circumstances? It's almost embarrassing how quickly my mind can bound down that path, imagining a bedroom in a small estate, with Henrik's seal on the bedside table and a ring on my finger.

And maybe it wouldn't be so blasted cold.

I crack an eye open to peer at him. "How?"

“You stopped talking in your sleep.”

“I did not,” I hiss, horrified. “I mean, I was not.”

Henrik smiles with his eyes half-closed, and so help me, it’s a sleepy, satisfied sort of look that begs to be kissed.

But...no.

We’re not in the place I thought we were just a few days ago, and I would be wise to remember it.

I push myself up, feeling like a caterpillar in a cocoon with all the layers. Unfortunately, there’s not a lot of room for me, and I end up sitting atop Henrik’s legs in a precarious position that isn’t terribly comfortable. His knee digs into my leg, and judging from the way he winces, I must be jabbing him somewhere as well.

“Sorry,” I mumble, keeping my voice low so I won’t wake Pranmore or Bartholomew.

“Clover,” Henrik growls low. “What are you trying to accomplish—

He’s abruptly interrupted by my muffled peep of concern when I lose my balance. I fall forward, my arms still trapped inside the bedroll and unable to stop my imminent crash.

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I end up flopped on top of Henrik, with my face smashed into the blankets next to his head. My cold cheek is pressed next to his cold cheek, and I'm either going to hyperventilate or smother to death if I don't move.

Forcing my arms out of the bedroll, I turn my head at the same moment Henrik turnshishead.

For a second, it's a blur of his rough stubble scraping against my cheek and the bumping of our noses. It isn't until I realize that my mouth has ended up half over his that my brain stops working.

It's not a kiss—it's not anything.

It's just Henrik's lips partially pressed against my lips and both of us frozen from the unexpected shock of it. My eyes are open, and I'm assuming his are too, and this certainly wasn't on purpose.

But as I'm trying to find a way to explain it to myself, Henrik moves ever so slightly. His mouth passes over mine, fully, perhaps evenintentionally, and my stomach clenches.

He pauses so briefly, I'm not sure if I imagine it, his lips brushing but not kissing, and then there's a shock of cold morning air between us as he rises. Pulling his arms from his blankets, he clutches my shoulders and helps me sit. He's shifted just enough I'm no longer on his legs, thank goodness.

My heart races as I stare at the canvas fabric of his bedroll, resisting the urge to bring

my fingers to my tingling lips.

“The fire has gone out,” Henrik says calmly—as if our mouths weren’t connected only moments ago. “Did you stay warm enough?”

Warm? I’m burning up.

All right, no. I’m actually quite cold.

“I’m freezing,” Bartholomew mumbles from within his bedroll, saving us from making post-kiss small talk. “Is it morning?”

But no, it wasn’t a kiss. A kiss wouldn’t leave me this befuddled—more, it wouldn’t be so unsatisfying.

Henrik shrugs from his bedroll, still fully dressed and wearing his cloak. He leans down in the precarious space so he won’t hit his head on the rock, trying not to step on Pranmore as he peers outside. “It is, and the storm is moving out. Let’s have some breakfast and get going.”

* * *

The clouds breakup shortly after sunrise, and the snow melts by midday. The forest is a sloppy mess, and we’re either walking through wet, slick mud or atop squishy moss that squelches with every step we take.

Forest sludge cakes my boots, and the hem of my cloak is filthy.

Thankfully, the day has grown relatively warm by evening. We make camp on a somewhat flat patch of rock—possibly the only place on the whole mountain that’s dry. We’re not protected from aynauths as we were on the outcrop we camped atop

the first night, but Henrik hasn't seen any sign of the monsters all day.

For all we know, the elf sent us on a wild goose chase.

Nothing attacks us in our sleep, and I don't wake up against Henrik's shoulder—which is both a relief and rather depressing, depending on how you wish to look at it.

The next morning, we rise and do it all over again.

Henrik and I have slipped into a strange, professional companionship. Neither of us mentions the accidental not-kiss, nor Camellia's letter—or anything of any importance really.

Unable to stay angry for long, Pranmore forgives Bartholomew, and their chatter fills our travels.

“How much further to the sea?” I ask Henrik as we march toward the sunset, looking for a spot to make camp on our fifth night in the mountains. “I swear I can smell the ocean on the breeze, but it might be wishful thinking.”

Henrik believes we've found a fur trader's route, judging from the wagon tracks in the trail that winds through the trees. It's an easier path to follow than trying to cut our own through the woods—I just hope we don't pass the trapper himself, or poor Pranmore will likely have heart failure.

It's strange, though, that we haven't seen any sign of trapper trails sooner—especially when this one seems to be fairly well-traveled.

“I've never been this far into the mountains,” Henrik admits, “but it seems we should arrive at the cliffs soon. We'll have a better idea when we get to the top of this hill.”

We reach the summit of the slight incline and pause to catch our breath. Relief mingles with accomplishment as I get a glimpse of dark blue water between the thick trees. “If that’s a lake, I’ll be very disappointed.”

Bartholomew laughs, sounding just as relieved as I am. “We’ve done it.”

“Not yet.” Henrik shoulders his pack and continues down the rugged road. “Let’s go a little farther before we make camp.”

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It seems as if no matter how long we walk, we never grow closer to the ocean. Several times, I almost ask Henrik to stop for the night, but I'm stubborn, and apparently, so are the members of my party.

Saurene rises, and then smaller, but full Maurette follows. The moon duet illuminates the landscape, casting it in pale light.

"Should we press on?" Henrik asks. "Clover, how are you doing? Are you all right?"

I nod, determined to reach the cliffs.

Finally, the forest makes way to grass. It's tall enough that in the summer months, I'd be worried about snakes or even venomous skirskas, but those things are all underground right now, where it's warm.

Out of the protective cover of the trees, the wind blows through the grass, making the dry blades hum.

Just ahead, the grass suddenly ends. The sea stretches beyond, as dark as indigo. It looks as if we've reached the end of the world—the land simply falls away.

"It's so far down," I say when I step up to the ledge, a little dizzy from the great height. The ocean is far, far below us, crashing against towering, jagged rocks at the bottom of the drop.

"Am I allowed to say we've made it now?" Bartholomew asks with a weary laugh, bending over to rest his hands on his thighs, breathing hard.

“Yes,” Henrik says wryly, “now is fine.”

“I walked to the edge of the continent,” I say, more to myself than my traveling companions, marveling at this thing I’ve accomplished.

For Henrik, it might not be much, but to me...

As I stare at the churning water far below, I acknowledge I’m stronger than even I’ve realized. I’ve encountered two aynauths, met the nearly mythical gnomes of the Dorian mountains, practically froze to death in an early blizzard, and trekked all the way to the sea.

And the adventure isn’t over yet.

“Henrik,” I say softly.

Picking up on my strange tone, he stands straighter. “What is it?”

I nod far down the coast, to a spot where the sea cuts into the continent in a small inlet. “Why does it look like the water is reflecting lights?”

Henrik turns sharply, as do Pranmore and Bartholomew.

A strange noise catches our attention from the direction of the lights, like the thump of something heavy falling a short distance.

“What was that?” Bartholomew asks, taking a step toward the south.

We fall silent, straining to hear. As we stand here, more peculiar noises become just discernible over the lonely wind.

There's a low hum in the air. It's similar to the sound made by the apparatuses that propel the ships that tour the Ryddle Sea, but it's louder. There's a metallic groaning noise mixed in with it, along with a steady clanking—all sounds I cannot place.

“Machinery.” Henrik's expression becomes solemn as he heads south, following the cliff. “Whatever it is, the High Vales are undoubtedly involved.”

“But how did they get over here?” Bartholomew asks. “Do you see that cliff and those rocks?”

Henrik jerks his head, telling us to follow him. “We're going to find out.”

30

Henrik

We follow the wagon trail until we reach a small hill that appears to overlook the inlet below. “Stay low,” I command as we begin up, hoping we'll have a good view. We're close enough to the source of the lights we can now hear distant voices.

When we're near the top, I crouch low and creep forward, careful to stay out of sight.

“You'd better hang back,” Bartholomew says to Pranmore. “Even if you lay flat, your antlers will be visible.”

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“How will anyone spot them in the night?” Pranmore argues.

“No, he’s right,” I say absently. “And stay quiet. Our voices might carry.”

“See anything?” Clover asks from my shoulder, peering around the rocks. But the forest wraps in front of us, blocking our view.

“No.” I sigh as we back down the hill. “We’ll have to get closer.”

I lead them to the trail once more, confident we’re still too far away to be spotted.

“What’s that?” Bartholomew asks suddenly, pausing.

A new sound has joined the others—this one from behind us.

“Henrik, it’s a wagon,” Clover gasps.

She’s right, and it’s not far away. With the wind blowing, I didn’t hear it approaching.

“Get down,” I say urgently, rushing to the side of the road. We drop to our stomachs, hoping the tall grass will cover us.

“Oh, no,” Clover whispers urgently. “Pranmore, your antlers are sticking up. Can’t you get any lower?”

“Not unless I dig a—”

“Quiet,” I command. “They’re coming.”

The cart appears on the trail. The driver travels by the light of the moons, with no additional light to aid his progress.

“Is he a High Vale?” Pranmore asks at a bare whisper.

“I can’t tell yet.”

As I wait for the cart to get closer, hoping the driver won’t spot us, I try to stay as still as possible. But the ground is cold and rocky, and several of the dry weeds that grow with the grass are prickly.

Bartholomew shifts, and Pranmore tries to get lower.

I’m afraid we’re conspicuous, but they won’t be looking for us, so they might drive right by.

“There’s more than one,” Clover whispers, and she’s right. The first cart is followed by several more, each pulled by two strong Vallen mules—a cross between draft horses and the native muircorns, each stronger than an ox.

The first cart passes us slowly, and I finally get a glimpse of the driver. Even in the dim light, I can make out his distinguishing features—he’s tall and slender, with gently pointed ears that are visible thanks to his partially pulled-up hair.

There’s no mistaking it—he’s a High Vale.

After the lead cart, five more pass. The drivers don’t talk to each other. They simply stay their course, as silent as wraiths.

Only once they're out of sight, and the rumble of the wheels on the rough road fades, do we leave the grass.

"What do you think they're hauling?" Bartholomew asks.

"Talvernum," Clover says darkly. "What else could it be? I bet they're secretly mining all over these mountains and carting the ore here."

It seems we've come to the same conclusion.

The commotion and sudden presence of people likely spooked the aynauths, causing them to move lower.

"But if it is talvernum, where are they taking it?" Pranmore asks. "Have they found a place to make a port? And even if they have, how are they transporting the ore down the cliff?"

I continue walking down the narrow road. "I'm not certain."

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Keeping an eye behind us, we continue until we're so near the source of the noise, I'm afraid we'll be spotted. Ahead, the night is lit up as bright as day, but we must pass through a wooded section, where the trees grow all the way to the cliff's edge, to see the source of the light.

"We'll go into the forest," I say. "It should provide adequate cover."

Utilitarian lampposts come into view first—portable, from the looks of them, with drums of oil piped to the flames. They burn hot and bright, lighting the men who stand near the newly arrived carts.

"Henrik, look." In her excitement, Clover grasps my arm.

It's as we suspected. The elves have removed the canvas covers, and raw ore is piled high.

The elves transfer the talvernum to a large bucket near the cliff's edge, which appears to be suspended from a thick cable.

The men have created an aerial lift, using their metal creations to move the great cable and lower the bucket. But to where?

"I need to get closer," I say. "Stay here—I'll be back."

"You can't go out there!" Clover whispers. "There's nowhere for you to hide—they'll see you."

I turn to face her, acknowledging the real concern in her voice.

It feels as if we've come a long way in this short time. When Clover and I first started this journey, we could barely carry on a civil conversation, and now, her eyes are filled with anxiety on my behalf. Her hand is still on my arm, her fingers holding me tightly as if she can keep me here, protected in the shadows of the forest.

"I'll be careful," I swear, resisting the urge to pull her close.

The memory of the morning we awoke after the storm lights a fire in my chest. I held back before, but I doubt I could be so chivalrous again.

Even now, I want to kiss Clover—claim her mouth and show her how much I've come to care for her in this short time. And, yes, perhaps also prove that I can steal her breath and leave her delirious with desperate longing.

And maybe I would if we were alone—but we're not, which Bartholomew makes abundantly clear when he clears his throat.

When I realize Clover and I have been staring at each other for too long, I reluctantly pull my gaze away. Bartholomew looks between us, his eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"Look at the way they've trampled the grass," Pranmore says, oblivious to us as he glares at the High Vales. "Have they no respect? And that racket has surely scared more than the aynauths out of the region. Do they not think of the animals they're displacing from their homes?"

"They're likely mining the talvernum to create a small legion of war golems," I say. "I don't think they're concerned about the local wildlife."

“Do you really think so?” Bartholomew asks, temporarily forgetting his jealousy over the moment I shared with Clover. “You think they’re building an army?”

“What else would they need that much ore for?” Clover says. “They’ve obviously been at this for a while. Imagine how much they’ve snuck back to Ferradelle at this point.”

Pranmore shudders, and Bartholomew stands straighter. “We must tell my uncle at once.”

“I plan to do just that,” I say. “But first, I need to see how they’re transporting the ore.”

“Be cautious,” Clover says, her voice softening once more.

“Ready your bow, just in case. Do you think you can shoot?”

She moves her arm, testing it, and then nods solemnly as she pulls the weapon from her back.

Staying low, I leave the wooded area, using the nearby grass for cover. Pranmore’s right—they’ve trampled most of the site. It’s going to be impossible to make it to the cliff’s edge without passing through the open.

There are eight elves—six talking and only two loading ore into one of the buckets attached to the cable. How will I slip past them?

Staying low, I follow the grass farther from the light. The dimmer it is, the more my chances of not being noticed go up.

I breathe easier once I make it to the shadowed area just past their firelight, and it’s a

simple task to reach the cliff from here. I pause by the edge to look at the ocean, and dread builds in my gut.

This is no small operation they've created.

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Far past the treacherous rocks, in deeper water, the High Vales have constructed a floating platform. Their cable system is attached to it. Once one of the buckets is full, a man at the top of the cliff pulls a lever, bringing the next empty bucket up and sending the first down. Eventually, the full buckets make it to the sea platform, where men unload them into hand carts. The carts are then pushed up the waiting ship's gangplank, which they've anchored safely away from the treacherous rocks.

I swear under my breath, wondering how much ore they've already transported.

Having seen enough, I push up from my crouch using a large rock near the ledge—a rock that was apparently not well-seated. It falls over the edge of the cliff, taking dirt and smaller rocks with it in a miniature landslide.

Immediately, I duck down, cursing my clumsiness.

“What was that?” one of the nearby elves says, walking to the edge and watching as more rocks and dirt fall to the frothing ocean below. “Is there someone over there?”

Quickly, I do the math. There are eight of them to one of me. Not the best odds, but elves are scrawny, so that works in my favor. But High Vales are gifted with offensive magic, which works in their favor—so it probably voids out my advantage. No matter how you look at it, the situation doesn't look good.

A sudden burst of fire lights the grass around me, and I leap back, barely avoiding the blast.

“There's a man!” one of them yells...only seconds before an arrow flies from the

woods and lodges itself into his thigh. The startled fool stumbles back, right off the cliff.

“We’re under attack!” hollers another, and suddenly they’re all drawing their magic into their palms, caring little if they burn down the forest.

Our cover is already blown, so I leap to my feet, done with hiding. I run forward, dodging another fireball, though the heat of it singes my hand as it goes by.

“They’re the king’s men!” one says frantically, backing away. “The man wears an arm pennant.”

“They can’t talk if they’re dead.” The man who drove the lead ore cart hurls another fireball my way.

This one comes too quickly, from too near, and his aim is accurate. There’s no way to block, so I brace myself for the pain. But instead of fire, it feels as if a bucket of water is tossed over my head. The elf’s magic fizzles before my eyes, sending nothing but a blast of heat my way.

When I look down, I’m shocked to find I’m perfectly dry—and wondering what in the kingdom just happened.

After I come to my senses, I glance toward the woods. Pranmore stands with his hands raised, and his own magic, blue and serene, swirls in his palms. The light illuminates his face and antlers, making him look like a mighty figure from a painting of old.

“They have a Woodmore,” one of the High Vales spits out, saying the name like it’s a curse. He turns to the forest and directs a blast of flames toward Pranmore. But Pranmore stands impervious to the magical attack, and the fire turns to steam before

it even reaches his ward.

Clover steps out of the woods, her bow ready, and shoots an arrow into the arm of the man who fruitlessly attacks Pranmore. The man screams, clutching his wound as he falls to his knees.

Just as one of the elves tries to send an attack her way, Clover steps behind a tree, easily dodging it.

“I act under the authority of King Algernon,” I command. “Stand down, and we will not hurt you.”

My diplomacy is met with another fireball hurtled at my face, and my anger grows.

“Pretty archer you have there,” my attacker taunts, sending another blast that I easily avoid. “Maybe we’ll take her back to Revalane after we kill you. Can’t guarantee she’ll make it there alive, though.”

He heaves another ball of flames at my face, but Pranmore’s protective magic washes over me, and my blade meets its mark before he can utter another word.

“Henrik, look out!” Clover cries.

I turn just in time to see an elf leap at me from one of the empty ore buckets. Several of the men from the floating sea pier are riding them to the top of the cliff. Now, they’ve joined the attack.

Clover shoots one right out of his moving perch, and he falls to the rocks below. She takes aim once more, but a fireball whizzes past her head.

“If you burned my hair,” she snarls, looking for the man responsible, “I will gut you

alive.”

“Lady Clover!” Pranmore exclaims, horrified.

“Fine,” she huffs, locating the man. “I’ll just shoot him.”

I don’t get the chance to see if her aim was true because one of the newly arrived elves attacks me, wielding a short sword. As our blades meet, he presses his hand to my shoulder, sending a jolt of sparking magic into me—paralyzing me for several seconds.

The magic courses through me, making my sword spark. I drop it, and then I turn and punch the elf in the face. His head flies back, and he drops his sword before he stumbles over the cliff.

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More elves run from the ship like ants, realizing their comrades are under attack.

There are too many for us to hope to fight. Thinking I have a solution, I pull the massive lever up, shutting off the lift's mechanisms. Grimly satisfied, I watch as the gears grind to a halt.

Unfortunately, it appears the elves have a lever from the sea platform as well because no sooner than the cables come to a stop, they groan to a start again.

"Ram the elf's sword in the lift's gears!" Clover yells as she sends yet another arrow flying.

Immediately, I retrieve the sword and do as she says. The machine makes a horrible noise, twisting the steel sword like soft metal until it's jammed tight. With one last metallic groan, smoke begins to pour from deep within. The cables come to a stop with a loud creak, leaving several elves stranded halfway over the water—just out of attack range.

But we're not finished yet. There are still men to fight atop the cliff.

I pick up my sword, hoping there's no residual magic coursing through the metal, and then duck as more flames are sent my way. As I dodge them, from the corner of my eye, I see Bartholomew run into the open. His new blade is drawn, and he wears a determined look that terrifies me.

"Bartholomew, no!" Pranmore cries, dousing the flames of the elf who's preparing to attack the young man. But the elf isn't alone.

Too near Bartholomew, another High Vale pulls a dagger from his belt, perhaps sensing the boy will be an easy kill. He lunges for the young duke, stabbing the blade into his side.

Bartholomew yells and stumbles back, clutching the wound. He falls to his knees, and his mouth opens with shock.

My vision blurs, and I let out a guttural cry. I cross the small area, cutting down any and all who get in my way. The elf rises above Bartholomew, dagger raised and already slick with the young man's blood, but before he can deal the final blow, my blade meets his back.

Going limp, the elf falls to the ground.

The night becomes silent except for the hum of the lanterns. The skirmish is over...and we have come out victorious—but not without great cost.

Clover is at Bartholomew's side in an instant, pressing her cloak over the wound to staunch the flow of blood. "Pranmore! He needs you!"

"Sorry, Henrik," Bartholomew grits out when I kneel by his side. "I wanted to help."

"You were brave," I assure him, hiding my fear.

Clover removes her cloak as Pranmore lowers himself, and then the elf pulls aside the torn fabric of the duke's doublet. Bartholomew hisses as Pranmore prods the wound to discern the extent of the damage. "It's deep, but it didn't tear into anything vital. It'll be an easy injury to heal."

Relieved, I rise to give the Woodmore space to work.

Responsibility hits me hard as I survey the fallen around us. I kneel a little way away, lowering my head.

“Henrik?” Clover says softly a few minutes later. “Are you all right?”

Looking up, I nod.

She settles on the ground next to me, careful to keep her eyes averted from the dead. “Does it get easier in time?”

I turn to her, studying her in the firelight. “I hope it doesn’t ever get easier for you, Clover. I hope you’re never put in this position again.”

After I say it, my eyes wander to the sea platform. The stranded elves have managed to slide down the cables, and they loiter on the ship's deck like angry ants. Worry plagues me, and I realize this very well might be the beginning of another war. If the High Vales are truly making a new army, Clover will likely fight again. If war breaks out in Caldenbauer, she won’t have a choice.

Clover’s jaw trembles, and she shakes her head. Trying to smile, she says, “I hope you never fight without me by your side—because I am a very good archer, and you would be wise to remember it.”

Gently, I take her chin and tilt her head toward me. Her eyes swim with emotion, and I brush my other hand over her cheek, wiping away her tears. “You are an excellent archer, Clover.”

More tears pool in her eyes, and her shoulders shake. I pull her close, letting her cry.

“They would have killed Bartholomew if they could have,” I say softly. “And you, Pranmore, and me. I know it is difficult, but you saved us.”

Bartholomew joins us a few minutes later, after Pranmore heals his wound.

“Henrik,” he says softly, absently rubbing his side with his eyes on the ship. “This was their land before humans ever settled here. In some ways, I can understand why they would want to take it back.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 6:40 am

Instead of brushing aside Bartholomew's concern, I mull it over in my mind, examining it from all angles. Humans are not native to Caldenbauer, but we came as peaceful settlers—first welcomed by the High Vales and then enslaved. We did not raid as conquerors—we did not steal this land from them unjustly.

But still, there is no easy answer, because Bartholomew's concerns are valid—this is not our land.

Before I can piece together an answer, Pranmore joins us. Solemnly, he says, “Since the humans came out victorious those long years ago, there has been peace. Your people are not perfect—you have many, many flaws—but the Woodmores have flourished under the Phoenix King's line, and under his rule, the Boermin are a free people. Whether it was right or wrong for your ancient ancestor to declare war against the High Vales...that is a question for kings. We must look at the people—the humans, the Woodmores, the Boermin, the gnomes. Will they thrive if the High Vale duke declares war upon us yet again? They will not. We must protect them, at all costs, because that is our duty as citizens of this kingdom.”

Clover turns to look up at Pranmore, appearing just as surprised as I am. “Pranmore...who are you?”

“He's my friend,” I say, rising as I clasp my hand on his shoulder. “And I am grateful for him. You saved my life, Pranmore.”

Humbly brushing aside the praise, he says, “Well, what can I say. We Woodmores have a natural immunity to magic, and I swore I would keep you safe.”

Clover laughs, wiping more tears away, and then she stands as well. “Henrik, I’ve thought of something.”

“Hmm?” I ask, turning to her.

“If this doesn’t earn you your seal...I don’t know what will. You’ve uncovered a conspiracy against the crown.”

If nothing else, that thought is intensely satisfying.

“Now what?” Bartholomew asks.

Pranmore turns his eyes on the fallen. “Now, we honor the dead.”

“But...you don’t even like High Vales,” Bartholomew says.

“I don’t,” he answers with a sigh. “But that is irrelevant.”

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Clover

We bury the fallen elves, following Pranmore’s instructions, creating small memorials for them and those who fell to the rocks below. It’s a somber process, and we speak little.

It’s strange how much respect Pranmore shows his enemies, and it makes me wonder if I would do the same.

It’s a sobering thought.

The journey back to the guard post is solemn as well. We carry weighty news, and though we've solved the mystery of the aynauths, the nest we've uncovered is far more concerning than a few rogue monsters wandering the lower forests.

On the third day, we walk the woods, looking for something familiar. We're making good time now that we're not trying to track the aynauths, and we should be back to the post tomorrow.

"Are you certain this is the right area?" Bartholomew asks. "I'm not sure."

"Perhaps the gnomes don't wish to be found," Pranmore says. "We were fortunate to stumble upon them the first time."

"Let's look a little longer," I say, feeling a touch wistful, not only for a warm nest of blankets by the fire and cup of mint tea but also at the prospect of seeing Maisel once more.

And I want to thank Ayan. He didn't send us on a fruitless path after all.

"Hello!" I cup my hands over my mouth and call into the surrounding forest. "We've returned!"

But the woods are silent.

We end up walking until dark, heading southeast toward the guard post. Every few minutes, I look over my shoulder, looking for rogue boulders.

But there is no sign of the gnomes.

We make camp, but I'm unable to sleep. I stare at the lonely sky instead, wondering if they'll attack when we're least expecting it—for old time's sake.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 6:40 am

Because I'm awake, I see Henrik rise from his bedroll. I roll onto my side and watch him. He adds a few logs to the fire, and sparks fly into the night. Instead of returning to his bedroll, he stares at the flames.

His eyes follow me as I rise. Wrapping my cloak around my shoulders, I join him.

"What are you doing up?" I ask, trying to stay quiet so I don't wake Pranmore or Bartholomew.

"I couldn't sleep. You?"

I shake my head.

"Tomorrow, we'll be back to civilization," he says. "I don't know..."

I turn to him with my arms crossed, studying him in the firelight. "You don't know what, soldier?"

Henrik's eyes meet mine, and a sad smile tugs at his mouth. "I don't know what that means for us."

"Us?" I whisper softly, ignoring the hitch in my breath.

He studies me intently, wearing that enigmatic look I've both come to love and hate. Eventually, he nods toward Bartholomew and Pranmore. "Our small party will be disbanded."

“Naturally,” I say lightly, though the thought of it coming to an end makes my heart ache. “Once we reach Cabaranth, you’ll be a sealed knight, too high and mighty to rub elbows with the likes of us.”

“Clover...”

“I’m so happy for you—and even happier I was here for the adventure.”

He stares at me, sensing my goodbye is imminent.

“I know you didn’t have a lot of choice in the matter,” I continue, “but I’m so grateful you allowed me to come with you.”

Searching my eyes, he finally finds his voice. Solemnly, he says, “The pleasure has been mine.”

“Close your eyes, soldier,” I whisper, knowing I can’t say everything I need to say with him looking at me like that.

“What?” he asks, startled.

Softly, I say, “Close your eyes, Henrik.”

Swallowing, he does as I ask.

“I won’t begrudge you for promising yourself to Camellia after you’re granted your seal. I know the princess is part of your future.”

His eyes begin to open.

“Eyes closed,” I command softly. “I’m not done.”

“Clover—”

“I wish you every happiness in life. Even if we become mere acquaintances once more, our eyes meeting only briefly when we pass in the halls, know that I am fiercely proud of all you have accomplished and all you have yet to accomplish. You are a good man—one of the few truly valiant ones, and I am grateful I got the chance to know you.”

Henrik tilts his head up, looking as if he’s finding the conversation as difficult as I am. But honoring my request, he doesn’t open his eyes.

“And...I have to ask you to forgive me.”

“For what?” he asks gruffly.

He jumps a little when I take his face in my hands, and his lips part with surprise. But he doesn’t pull away.

I stand on my tiptoes, guiding his head downward before I press a featherlight kiss to his lips.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 6:40 am

When I pull back, he opens his eyes, looking torn.

“There.” I drop my hands. “Now we can go home.”

“Clover...”

Henrik reaches for me when I turn back to my bedroll, but I don’t give in, no matter how badly I want to. Instead, I burrow down into the fleece.

My silent tears are cleansing, and though they burn, I know the goodbye was necessary.

I had to let him go—it was a kindness for both of us. This way, Henrik doesn’t have to choose between Camellia and me, and I don’t have to feel the heart-wrenching pain of watching him pick the princess.

* * *

I carry my cloak over my arm, dreaming of a bath.

Hot water. Soap. And then twelve blissful hours in a real bed.

It sounds like a dream.

We’re close now. I can see the red roof of the guard post in the distance.

“Are those our horses?” Bartholomew exclaims, pulling me from my daydreams.

“Vidnar!”

I narrow my eyes at the pasture outside the post, and sure enough, our horses graze with those belonging to the post's soldiers. They must have returned home.

But the animals aren't what catches my attention.

No less than twenty knights are mounted, appearing as if they're ready to ride—and several of them look extremely familiar. I'd recognize their sandy heads anywhere.

“Henrik,” I say nervously. “Why are my brothers at the guard post?”

No sooner do I spot the mounted knights than they notice us walking down the meadow hill. There are several hollers, followed by not three, but four men riding our way.

My chest tightens uncomfortably, and my feet forget how to move.

“Why is Lawrence with them?” Bartholomew asks.

Too soon, the men are upon us and leaping off their horses.

“Clover!” Gavriel yells. “What in oblivion do you think you were doing taking off—”

He's cut off when Denny grabs me roughly by the shoulders and hugs me so tightly I can't breathe. “Yell at her later,” he says. “Just be glad she's returned in one piece.”

Colter steals me from Denny and takes me by the shoulders. Grinning, he asks, “Have yourself a nice adventure, little sister?”

“Clover,” Lawrence says, coming forward.

Colter lets me go and moves aside for the prince.

Lawrence's face is pale with true relief, and he stops in front of me. His mouth works, but it's as if he has no words. He ends up shaking his head, looking away, and then he lowers himself to a knee in front of me. He takes my hand, pressing my knuckles against his forehead as he clenches his eyes. "You're all right."

I glance at Henrik, who looks wary of the situation, knowing he will likely take the brunt of the blame for my disappearance.

"You too, young Bartholomew," my eldest brother says. "It's such a relief."

I look between my brothers, unsure why they all look so solemn—or what they're doing here at all. "Is there a reason we wouldn't be?"

"Clover," Lawrence says, rising. "Something has happened."

“What?” I demand.

He studies me as if he’s not sure how to break the news. “Camellia has vanished.”

I stare at him blankly. “I’m sorry?”

“Several of her ladies have gone missing, too, and my father was worried that Bartholomew might be targeted as well.”

“She was kidnapped?” Henrik demands, immediately stepping forward.

“We believe so, yes. Though when we left, there was no ransom note.”

“Who do you think has taken her?” I ask, and a horrid part of me wonders who would want her.

“We don’t know.” Lawrence shakes his head, and then he suddenly yanks me into his arms and presses a hand to the back of my head as he holds me close. “I’m so thankful you’re all right. I swear you’re not leaving my side until we find Camellia.”

“We have news as well,” Henrik says to my brothers, all but ignoring Lawrence and me. “Let’s return to the guard post, and we’ll discuss it there.”

Henrik briefly meets my eyes when Lawrence releases me, and my stomach knots with indecision.

“How do you know she was kidnapped?” Bartholomew asks as we walk back.

“A body was found in her quarters,” Gavriel says soberly. “Drained of blood. It seems to be the work of dark magic.”

I suck in a breath, and my world begins to spin.

The cut on the palm of Camellia’s hand—the rag drenched in blood. I’ve been so consumed with Henrik, I’d completely forgotten about the strange scene I walked into that day before the princess commanded me to leave.

“When was this?” Henrik asks, his tone off.

Lawrence glances at him, obviously irritated that Henrik is part of the conversation. “About the time my sister sent Lady Clover away like a common messenger with a letter for you.”

Denny clears his throat, picking up on the animosity between them. The group continues walking, but Henrik pauses.

His expression shadows with incredulous disbelief...followed by suspicion. Slowly, he turns his eyes on me, and my throat goes tight. The accusation in Camellia’s note circles in my head, making me sick.

Surely Henrik doesn’t believe that I had something to do with Camellia’s disappearance. He couldn’t.

But...I think he does.

To be continued...