



Rise of the Phoenix King (Crown and Crest 4)

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Category: Romance, Fantasy, Young Adult

Description: After serving Camellia for the last five months, Henrik is prepared to sacrifice his future to remove the people he loves from the princess's clutches—even if it means he must say goodbye to Clover for good.

But Camellia isn't willing to turn away from her wicked ways. Just when it seems peace might be possible, she rises again, more powerful than anyone could have predicted. Armed with magic to control a legion, the princess is determined to overthrow Lawrence and take the crown by force.

For the first time in Caldenbauer's history, humans, Woodmores, and High Vales must band together to defeat a foe who grows stronger with each passing day. Alliances must be formed, but it's difficult to forgive the wrongs of the past.

A new era is on the horizon, but darkness looms before the dawn...

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HENRIK

Pranmore looks up from his journal when I step through the door, his face softening with sympathy. I must look as wretched as I feel.

“What is the reasonable price of peace?” I ask, glad to find him alone. “How much is a man expected to give for it?”

He closes his journal as he studies me with solemn eyes. After several seconds, he rises. “I have a blend of tea that’s soothing. Let me make you a cup—”

I catch his arm, stilling him. “Answer me as a Woodmore and not a friend. What is peace worth?”

“Peace is priceless.” His brow knits. “What value can you place upon harmony, serenity, and safety? Peace is noble. It’s a husband free to earn a living, confident he’ll return to his wife and children when his job is done. It’s a mother sending her son to play instead of to battle, knowing he’ll come back covered in dirt and not blood. It’s neighbors helping neighbors and a just monarchy watching over them all. What shouldn’t we give up for such a future?”

“What about truth?” I study him, reading his face. “Should we give up truth for peace?”

My friend’s eyes narrow, and he doesn’t answer right away. He’s conflicted.

As am I.

“Is this about Clover and Lawrence’s wedding?” he asks. “Do you feel you’re betraying your heart?”

“No,” I say heavily. “I have come to terms with my fate.”

I’m bitter and jaded, but that’s not what this is about.

“Then what is it?”

“If I ask for help, will you give it?”

His frown deepens. “Even if I hadn’t sworn a life debt.”

With a heavy sigh, I nod. “Then I will return later.”

“Henrik, wait—”

Pranmore’s confused questions follow me out the door, but I ignore them and walk into the hall.

Camellia’s guards let me enter her quarters without question. The princess’s ladies are present, as always, clustered on the settees near the window. They used to be proud and lovely, but now they live in a constant state of fear.

Rose looks up from her embroidery, her mouth working as if she wants to say something. But then she looks back at the swatch of cloth in her lap and pierces the needle into the fabric once more.

I knock on Camellia’s door, staring at the grain in the oak until her soft voice invites

me to come inside.

Though it's the middle of the morning, the room is dark. For the last week and a half, Camellia has existed in this shadowed space, keeping the drapes drawn during the day—shutting out the spring sunshine like a wraith.

But the muted light that penetrates the heavy curtains is enough to see by, and I make my way to Camellia's chair. The princess watches me, her eyes trained on my face.

I kneel before her, fighting the beast that's taken up residence in my chest. It coaxes me to kill Camellia, urging me to take out my wrath upon her. It mocks me, begging me to defy my king and steal his bride before they can marry. It wants retribution for every injustice I've suffered, and the only payment it desires is the anguished cries of my enemies.

It's a bloodthirsty monster, a twisted sickness, and it exists only in my head. Day and night, it torments me, growing louder each day we march closer to the wedding.

And now the wedding is here. Lawrence and Clover marry this evening.

"Am I not enough for you?" I ask after I gather my thoughts.

Startled, Camellia's hand falls to my head. I flinch, but she doesn't notice. She strokes my hair for just a few seconds before she pulls back. "What kind of question is that?"

I look up, meeting her eyes. "I've stayed by your side, just as you asked, and yet you're still practicing your dark magic."

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Her eyes widen slightly, and she drops her hand to her lap. Not bothering to protest, she answers, “You betrayed me, and you betrayed my brother.”

“When?” I demand.

“You spent the night in Clover’s quarters—in my mother’s quarters.” Her hand clenches into a fist. “And the next morning, when your desires were sated, you promised yourself to me.”

My surprise is sharp, but it shouldn’t be. Camellia knows everything.

“I didn’t lay with her,” I say instead of arguing. “I certainly didn’t ‘sate my desires.’”

“What else does a man do with a woman alone until dawn?”

“What have I done in your room every night since we returned to Cabaranth?” I demand, battling my growing rage. “We talked, and then we dozed until morning. It was a goodbye, Camellia. Am I not even allowed that?”

“YOU’RE NOT!” she suddenly screeches, the words warbling on a sob. Leaning forward, she strikes my shoulder and then latches her arms around my neck, crying hot tears against my skin. “You’re mine.”

She’s a broken, miserable creature.

Kill her, the monster whispers. Break her neck.

But I ignore the voice. Clenching my teeth, I set my hand on Camellia's back, rubbing a small circle to soothe her—mollifying her like I would a child.

The princess used to wear perfume that smelled of her namesake, but there's a strange scent to her now—the stench of death. It makes my stomach roll, and it's difficult not to shove her away. But I fight the instinct.

Camellia goes still, surprised by the contact.

I fight back the bile in my throat and say, "I'm sorry I hurt you."

This is my life now—Camellia is my mission. I must keep her from darkness even if it means I sink into the pit myself.

"Please don't cry," I grit out.

Slowly, she loosens her grip on me and pulls back, studying my face. "Henrik?"

"Let me be enough," I say. "Give up the magic for me. Not for the kingdom or your brother. Live for me, Camellia." I pause, my throat constricting. "And I will live for you."

A sacrifice I will make for Clover, Brielle, and all Caldenbauer.

Camellia wants it; she wants me. I watch the struggle in her eyes. The disbelief, the hurt. Suddenly, her mouth turns into a sneer. "What about Clover?"

"The wedding is going to be painful for me," I say, feeling the truth of the words deep in my core. "Sit by my side tonight. Offer me your strength."

Her eyes soften.

“And no more magic,” I warn.

Her face contorts, but she nods.

“Swear it, Camellia. And this time, mean it.”

“I swear, Henrik. Don’t ever leave me, and I will never perform magic again.”

“Agreed.”

Though I feel like I just signed away my life, a happy tear slides down Camellia’s cheek. She smiles, looking like I just promised her the world, and tilts her head up, offering her lips.

I step back. “I need to take you to Pranmore. If Clover sees your hand...”

Thankfully, Camellia hasn’t left her room since she sliced it, refusing to even go to Hellebore’s funeral. If Clover had discovered proof that the princess had lied, she’d be on the warpath. Knowing I could escape this prison if I revealed the truth, I almost told her several times. But Camellia holds too many lives in her hands, including my sister’s. The risk is too great.

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Disappointed I won't kiss her, Camellia looks down at her bandaged palm. It should be healed by now, but I've seen her frowning at the cut several times in the last few days.

"I won't ask what spell you were concocting," I say. "It's in the past."

"As long as you are faithful," she reminds me.

I swallow and then jerk my head in agreement, heading toward the door. For the first time in days, Camellia leaves her room. The ladies look up, their eyes darting nervously between us.

In the light, Camellia looks ill. I hope others believe it's because she's been in deep mourning over the loss of her handmaid, but I know better. Though Hellebore's betrayal broke Camellia, her pale face and the blue-tinged skin under her eyes are thanks to the blood magic. At one time, Hellebore took the ill effects into her body, protecting Camellia—or, more likely, keeping her undetectable. But now, Camellia has no elven companion to use as a tumbrel stone.

Pranmore answers his door when we knock, startled when he sees the princess.

"Sit down," I instruct Camellia, jerking my head to Pranmore's table. She does as I ask without hesitation or reservation, more obedient than I've ever seen her.

Pranmore eyes the princess and then looks back at me. Quietly so she won't overhear, he asks, "Why?"

“Camellia sliced her hand while performing a spell, and it won’t heal. I need you to tend it, perhaps mask the effects of the blood magic if you can.”

“Why would you request such a thing?” he asks quietly. “And she’s still practicing? Why haven’t you told Lawrence?”

“She won’t be anymore,” I say.

He glances at Camellia, unsure.

I square my shoulders. “If Clover learns Camellia continued her blood magic after Hellebore’s death, do you think she’ll marry Lawrence?”

“Henrik—”

“And if Clover doesn’t marry Lawrence, do you think Camellia will stay still?”

“But this...” He wrings his hands. “This is wrong.”

“Peace at the expense of truth,” I say. “That’s why I asked.”

“How do you know she’ll truly walk away from it?”

“I don’t.” I glance at Camellia. “But I know what she’ll do if Clover doesn’t marry Lawrence.”

Pranmore’s frown deepens. Finally relenting, he says, “You only want me to hide the effects of her magic?”

“That’s right.”

With a heavy sigh, he says, “I’ll try.”

He slowly turns to the table and takes a chair, placing it in front of Camellia. I sit nearby, watching the disgust pass over his face as he faces the princess.

Her expression mirrors his distaste. She watches Pranmore, her nose wrinkling as her eyes move to his antlers. Camellia has never liked Woodmores—she’s always said she finds their ways and features uncomfortable.

She’ll have to bear it now.

Pranmore studies Camellia for a minute or more before he nods to himself.

“Can you remove the residual magic?” she asks.

“Even if I could, I wouldn’t.” Pranmore’s expression sharpens. “You’ve invited it into your body, and there it must stay. But I can try to nudge it deeper and lessen the superficial effects.”

“Will it take long?” she asks in a bored tone, as if she has somewhere better to be.

“No.” Pranmore places his hands on either side of her head. “But it will be quite painful.”

CLOVER

Almost every youngwoman imagines her wedding day. I certainly did, along with the crown it represented. Now I'd like nothing more than to throw the golden shackle out the window.

I'm supposed to walk down the aisle in fifteen minutes. My father paces, making me restless. We're in the antechamber off the council room, just outside the great hall where the ceremony is scheduled to take place. Father is terrified I'm going to dishonor our entire family by bolting. For an hour, he's cast worried looks my way, nervously stroking his short, graying beard.

But why would I run? And to whom would I flee? Henrik has presented himself to Camellia as a sacrificial sheep.

She claims he's the only thing that will placate her. And what can we do? She tied our hands the moment she placed her cursed necklaces around the necks of the elven noblewomen and Henrik's sister.

Father turns to me, looking like he wants to say something.

"I'm not going to run," I say dully.

He cracks a smile. "I've got too many guards for you to get far even if you try."

I roll my eyes, laughing a little so I won't cry.

A knock sounds at the door. Grateful for the interruption, Father answers it, stepping aside as my mother walks in. They whisper, sending looks my way, and Father excuses himself.

Mother gives me a sad sort of smile. "You're beautiful, Clover."

I resemble her, with light brown hair and green eyes. We don't always understand each other, but I take after her in more than just looks. She has a temper, and she's stubborn. She's quick to laugh, and she's quick to cry.

Her face falls as I blink rapidly, pulling me into a hug. "You're only supposed to shed happy tears on your wedding day."

"I'm happy," I lie, my voice betraying me.

"Colter mentioned something I wasn't aware of," she says when she releases me.

"What?" I turn back to the mirror, idly tapping a crystal perfume bottle on the vanity's lacquered top, watching the amber liquid sway from side to side.

"You're going to break that," she murmurs, taking it from me like I'm a toddler. "He said you're in love with Commander Henrik."

I turn, wondering why my brothers insist on running their mouths. They gossip like hens.

"Why didn't you tell us sooner?" she asks. "We wouldn't have agreed to the engagement if we'd known."

“Father would have given my hand to a non-titled commander?” I ask, raising my brow.

“Perhaps not—but he would have pestered Algernon until the king gave Henrik his seal.”

I laugh, and a tear escapes, rolling down my cheek like a liquid traitor.

“Sometimes paths diverge for a reason,” Mother says gently, wiping my face carefully so as not to disturb the imported kohl Calla applied to my eyes. “You and Henrik weren’t meant to be. I hope you can accept that and try to be happy with Lawrence. Don’t let an ill-fated past love mar your marriage.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You and Father married for love.”

“Your Father thought this was what you wanted,” she reminds me. “Your match wasn’t political when we made it.”

Curse my grandiose dreams of revenge.

Father appears in the doorway. “It’s time.”

Panic nearly chokes me, but I stand, wrestling with the ridiculous silver gown Minda spent the last five months sewing. It’s huge, ornate, and weighs so much, I’d never be able to walk if my corset weren’t designed to help carry and distribute the weight.

“There.” Mother fixes the veil over my face. “You’re perfect.”

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“I can’t see.”

“You don’t need to see,” Denny says, apparently joining us. “It’s there to keep you from getting spooked—like covering the eyes of a flighty horse.”

“I’m so glad you could be with me on this joyous day,” I say wryly.

My brother pushes the veil to the side, grinning down at me. Quietly, he says, “Lawrence wanted me to check on you.”

“To make sure I wasn’t a blubbering mess?”

“To make sure you didn’t get any murderous thoughts before the wedding.”

“He’s worried I might off him so we can’t get married?”

Denny laughs. “He thought you might go after Camellia. But I’ll warn him to watch your hands during the wedding.”

I smile, looking down at my full skirt as I twist my fingers together.

“We’ve stationed archers around the perimeter of the room for your safety and Lawrence’s,” he says, getting to business. “And I will be on the dais behind the bishop, along with the rest of the king’s guard. Barret is just outside the room right now. He’ll stay with you until you enter the great hall, and then he’ll keep watch at the doors.”

I glance at our parents. They stand to the side of the room, talking quietly. They're distracted, just as I was hoping.

"Have you seen Henrik?" I whisper.

"I have," Denny answers cautiously.

"How did he look?"

"How does the commander always look?"

Henrik rarely wears his emotions on his face. He's always stoic and determined, shielding his thoughts from everyone.

I miss him so badly, my body aches like I've contracted an illness.

"Clover," Father says, reminding me I'm out of time.

My ladies scurry inside when we open the door, chattering eagerly as they help me with my gargantuan train. It's so long, there's no way I could tend to it on my own. Minda says the design is fashionable, but I think royal families use them to prevent escapes. After all, who could run in such a thing?

"Are you ready?" Father asks.

"No."

As if I said I was, he takes my arm, gives it a pat, and responds, "Then let's go."

* * *

A surprising amount of fuss takes place in the minutes before a wedding ceremony. I stare blankly at the closed great hall doors, in a sort of trance, blocking it out.

“You can’t stand here,” Calla scolds as she takes me by the shoulders and directs me to the side. “Everyone will see you when they open the doors.”

“Aren’t they supposed to see me?”

“Not yet. The wedding party must go first.”

I make a noise to acknowledge her, tired of talking and overwhelmed by the chaos.

Once I’m safely out of sight, the doors open. The orchestra begins to play a bright, happy melody as the rose-and-peony bedecked flower girls disappear into the great hall, followed by candle lighters and then my ladies. Soon, my father and I are the only ones left.

An attendant shoves a bouquet into my hands, adjusts my veil to blind me once more, and then there is nothing left between me and my royal future but the aisle.

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The music changes as Father leads me through the door, becoming sober—much like a death march.

Though I can't see a thing, I imagine Lawrence standing at the front of the room. He's likely dashing in his wedding garb, with just a hint of mischief in his eyes.

But as I walk, trembling from nerves and sick with sadness, the image of Lawrence shifts. I see Henrik waiting for me at the end of the aisle. The commander wears slate blue, a color that suits his complexion and thunderstorm eyes. On his arm, the rubies in his knight's seal gleam.

For just a few seconds, I give in to the heart-wrenching daydream. I picture Henrik's smile, slightly crooked, growing wider until it reaches his eyes. He'd take my hands during the ceremony and promise forever, and then he'd kiss me in front of the entire court.

But no matter how much I hurt, these thoughts aren't fair to Lawrence.

Henrik isn't in my future. He sits somewhere in the audience with Camellia. She's likely hanging off her prize's arm like a parasite.

We haven't seen the princess in over a week, but I'm certain she's here to witness her present victory—though I don't believe this is her ultimate goal. Hellebore might be dead, but Camellia has spent too many years dabbling in the dark arts to be trusted. And even before that, she was a miserable person. She's allowed this wedding for one purpose only: to hurt Henrik and remind him who's truly in control.

In a week, maybe not even that long, she'll send an assassin my way. There's no way she'll leave it at this, not Camellia. She won't allow the crown to rest upon my head for long.

But that is another day's worry. Right now, I just need to walk down the aisle in this massive gown, smile at Lawrence so I don't humiliate him or myself, and try not to pass out.

It's better behind the veil. The fabric curtain is a sanctuary, hiding my distress from the curious eyes around me.

At least for now.

With that slow, grating wedding march coming to an end, we stop. My father exchanges words with the bishop, agreeing to give me away.

The voices sound distant, almost like they're in an adjoining room. Perspiration dampens my skin, making the gown even more uncomfortable. It's so hot—why is it so hot? Breathing becomes impossible, and the heavy veil suddenly feels suffocating.

Someone takes my hand, guiding me up the steps, and it's everything I can do not to rip the fabric away from my face.

The bishop begins, "Today is a blessed day. We are gathered together—"

"Just a moment," Lawrence interrupts from right in front of me.

"Your Majesty?" the man asks, startled.

Suddenly, the veil is swept from my face, and I take a gasping breath like I just surfaced from a lake.

My friend stares at me, his amber eyes slitted with concern. I was right—he's so handsome.

Lawrence wears his rich, copper hair down for the first time in weeks. His doublet is deep brown, almost black, and elaborately stitched with the phoenix crest in the same silver as my gown. Minda must have spent weeks embroidering the complex design.

Suddenly, Lawrence grins. Lowering his voice, he says, "I was checking to make sure you didn't send someone in your place."

I suck in another gulp of too-hot air. "Was that an option?"

The attending noblemen and women stare at us, murmuring amongst themselves, wondering why Lawrence interrupted the ceremony. I look into the crowd to find my father, certain he's horrified.

But instead, I find Henrik.

The commander sits in the front row—and of course he does. He's with the princess. Where else would they be?

But I didn't expect to find him so close, didn't realize there was a chance our eyes could meet.

Henrik stares back at me, his skin washed of color, his handsome face haggard. He sits with his shoulders slightly hunched, the weight of the day crushing him. He didn't even bother to shave.

"Clover?" Lawrence says, drawing my attention back.

I look at the new king, not really seeing him, feeling like I'm drowning. The room

smells of burning lamp oil, expensive incense, spring flowers, and gardenias that were brought in from southern Dulane. The floral perfume is too heavy in this closed space. It sits in the air, making it impossible to take a cleansing breath.

Lawrence raises his brows. “Shall we...continue?”

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My heart beats too quickly. I can feel the thrum in my neck, hear the pounding in my ears.

Without my permission, my eyes return to Henrik. But before they reach him, they catch upon his sister. Brielle sits by Henrik's side, her hand clenched on her brother's arm. Her face is twisted with deep empathy. She is heartsick for the brother she cherishes, loving him as desperately as he loves her.

Henrik would give up everything for her, and I would give up everything for him. My eyes drop to the necklace at her throat. Resigned, I turn back to Lawrence and nod.

The king studies me a few seconds longer and then looks at the bishop, gesturing for him to continue. But he seems unsure.

The man clears his throat and begins again, "Today is a blessed day. We are gathered together—"

"Another moment." Lawrence turns back to me. He works his jaw to the side, studying me like I'm a problem.

I cast a hesitant look at Camellia. As expected, her mouth is pinched, and her nose is so deeply wrinkled, her flaring nostrils are on full display.

Frantically, I whisper to Lawrence, "What are you doing?"

"You will owe me forever," he answers with a sigh. "Never forget it. You're beautiful, by the way. Truly."

“What—”

Before I can finish the sentence, Lawrence addresses the court. “There are people who wish to stop my marriage, and therefore deception was necessary. Lady Clover, my closest friend, stood in for my intended to protect her identity. Now that we are gathered safely in this room, I can identify her.”

The room erupts in nervous chatter, and I blink at Lawrence, unable to process his words. Camellia stares at us, her face turning red now. Henrik sits next to her, his back suddenly straight.

“Do you have a plan?” I mutter to the reckless king, wrapping my fingers around his wrist and squeezing tightly. “Or are you making this up as you go?”

“I have a plan,” he answers under his breath. “I concocted it thirty seconds ago.”

“It’s too dangerous!” I hiss, my eyes moving to Brielle’s necklace again. “Lawrence!”

He scans the crowd, apparently looking for his mystery bride. Suddenly, his eyes alight on one of our guests. I follow his gaze, sucking in a breath when I realize who he’s chosen.

“The hidden heir to the Ferradelle dukedom is in our midst,” Lawrence says, growing more confident. “And with him, his cousin—the woman who is the key to uniting our people.”

She’s going to kill him.

Lawrence extends his hand. “Audra Lea’ess Laviet, my beautiful betrothed, join me. Together, we will bring peace to Caldenbauer.”

Audra stares at him from her spot in the crowd, murder glittering in her eyes. Beside her, Ayan looks amused by the turn of events. He whispers something and nudges her out of her seat.

People turn to gawk at the High Vale elf Lawrence suddenly announced will be our next queen, but the moment Camellia stands, it's the princess who commands the room's attention.

The hall falls silent.

"I don't approve," Camellia says, her lilting voice at odds with the rage in her eyes.

"Of course you don't," Lawrence answers. "You're one of those who would have opposed the union."

"Lawrence," I gasp.

Camellia smiles. "You will marry Lady Clover, as we discussed."

"We discussed nothing, and I do not take orders from the previous duchess of Ferradelle."

"Previous?" she asks coolly.

"I'm stripping you of your title. You will remain in Cabaranth and live out the rest of your years in a cell."

Our guests watch, their mouths parted with surprise and their eyes owlshly round.

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I sway on my feet, nearly passing out. What is he doing?

Henrik sits as still as stone, but the archers at the room's perimeter are ready.

I cry out as Camellia lifts her hand, knowing someone is about to die, but unsure who.

“You forget the power I wield,” the princess warns.

“Use it,” Lawrence says flippantly. “I will not be manipulated by you any longer.”

Shaking with fury, she turns her eyes on Brielle. I cry out as Henrik places himself in front of his sister, but...

Nothing happens. My heart pounds, and my fingers dig into Lawrence's skin.

Camellia stares at her hand as if it's betrayed her. With a livid scream, she lifts it again.

Still, the necklace lays lifeless upon Brielle's throat. The girl looks terrified, but she doesn't cry out in pain or fall to her knees.

Lawrence crosses his arms as he watches his sister struggle. “Have you ever heard of a mind ward, Camellia? Of course you haven't—you're repulsed by the Woodmores and their magic, aren't you? Well, let me explain how they work.”

A mind ward? That's the affliction that plagues Ayan.

“It’s a magic shield placed inside you, cutting you off from your magic,” Lawrence goes on. “I’ve heard they’re excruciating for the recipient, but you would know better than I. Master Pranmore placed one in you only hours ago.”

Shock flashes across Henrik’s face, and he looks at the elf who sits a row back with Bartholomew. Pranmore remains silent, having no fondness for confrontation.

Camellia turns her eyes on her knight, genuinely stunned. “Henrik,” she breathes, a woman betrayed. She sounds vulnerable, gutted. “You deceived me.”

“I didn’t know,” the commander says dumbly, his eyes finding mine as if to ask if I was aware.

But I shake my head, as lost as he is.

“You didn’t know?” the princess demands harshly, anger washing away her anguish. Her voice raises to a grating screech. “You didn’t know? Your precious Clover was about to marry Lawrence, and you’re going to pretend you didn’t have a hand in this?”

Camellia whirls around to face the front of the hall. When her eyes land on me, her face contorts with anger.

“This is your fault!” she snarls. “It’s always your fault!”

“I’d like to take credit for it.” I let out a dumbfounded laugh. “But this wasn’t my doing.”

“Henrik.” Camellia whips back to the commander, extending her hand. Her eyes beseech him, and she visibly trembles. “We’re going.”

Henrik looks at her hand for several seconds. And then, slowly, his gaze returns to her face. “No, Camellia. We’re not.”

She stares at him, huffing out several breaths, her chest heaving with her impending tantrum. And then she turns her head sharply, pinning me with her eyes once more. I blink at her, startled by the unbridled vehemence in her gaze.

She takes a slow step forward, and another. And then she runs toward me, screaming like a woman possessed as she produces a dagger from a pocket in her skirt. Unarmed, I stumble back, tripping over the ridiculous train of my gown.

A dozen men shout, and their warning cries are followed by several hysterical screams from the guests. Lawrence hollers something, stepping in front of me to block his sister’s attack. But before Camellia can reach either of us, a flurry of arrows flies through the great hall, hitting their target with terrifying accuracy.

The princess’s anguished cries echo throughout the room, and noblewomen wail in terror. Camellia’s dagger slips from her hand as she falls, clattering across the stone floor.

Lawrence grasps my arm when my legs give out, keeping me upright. I stare at Camellia’s lifeless form, not five feet from us, unable to process the sight even as black, diseased blood pools around her body. She doesn’t move; she doesn’t breathe. Though it feels impossible, there’s no denying the scene in front of me.

The princess is dead.

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Clover stares at Camellia, looking like she's about to collapse. If Lawrence were to let her go, she'd fall to her knees in her grand bridal gown. The pandemonium around me fades into the background. All I see is Clover—she's the only person in the room in perfect focus.

As I watch her, she looks up.

Our eyes meet in the horrified crowd. She rips off the veil that now hangs askew, sending it to the floor. My residual anguish, my fear, is replaced with debilitating relief.

Camellia is dead...and I didn't kill her.

I feel as if I passed a test. I overcame an impossible mountain, and Clover waits for me on the other side. Lawrence has set her free. No, not only set her free—he made her a heroine of the crown.

As we stand here, staring at each other, Clover laughs through her tears. She cries openly, but I rein in my emotion, saving it for when I am alone.

Remembering Brielle, I wrap my arm around my sister's shoulders and turn her away from the horrific sight. But she wrenches her head back, studying the princess with wide eyes. After several seconds, she pulls her gaze to my face and whispers, "Can I remove the necklace?"

"Not yet," Bartholomew says, appearing beside us. "Pranmore asked me to tell you to wait until he can examine it. He's gone to find Lady Ellaine and the other visiting

High Vales.”

“But the princess is dead,” Brielle argues, pulling away from me and turning to my squire. With a laugh, she launches herself into his arms. “Bartholomew, she’s dead!”

Stunned, Bartholomew catches my sister, but his eyes fly to mine. Perhaps he’s wondering if he’s going to join Camellia as a dead body.

But I merely stare at the pair, too befuddled to comprehend it. Deciding I’ll examine their friendship later, I join Lawrence, Clover, and the king’s knights.

“Don’t touch her,” Lawrence instructs several guards who have surrounded Camellia’s body.

“Her blood is tainted,” I add. “Only a Woodmore can safely manage the dark magic seeping from the arrow wounds.”

Lawrence turns to me. “Where’s Pranmore?”

“He went to find Lady Ellaine,” I say. “He wants to examine the necklaces before she and the others remove them.”

“Henrik,” Clover says.

I turn to her, meeting her green gaze. But I hesitate before I reach for her, silently asking Lawrence for permission.

With a roll of his eyes, he says, “Go ahead—but not here. Be discrete about it.”

“Thank you,” Clover whispers to the king, grasping his arm, her eyes shining so brightly I might be jealous if I didn’t know the reason for her joy. “Lawrence...”

“Yes, yes.” He offers her a wry smile that’s covering his heartache. “Go.”

I pause before I let Clover drag me away, bowing my head to the king. No words are needed. He and I both know what he gave up for us. Lawrence nods solemnly, and then he jerks his head to the exit at the rear side of the dais.

The moment the door shuts behind us, Clover and I stumble into each other’s arms, too overwhelmed to speak. She clings to me, and I hold her tightly, afraid I’ll crush her.

We don’t have long before we must rejoin the others, but for now, this is enough.

* * *

A few hours later, Clover and I end up in the council room, along with Lawrence, his knights, and our small group of friends. Pranmore oversaw the removal of Camellia’s body from the throne room, and the castle mortician is preparing the cremation now.

Soon, the princess’s ashes will join her ancestors in the royal crypt, and this dark time will be nothing but a bad memory.

“Why didn’t you tell me you put a ward on Camellia?” I ask Pranmore.

“I couldn’t risk the princess overhearing,” he says with a heavy sigh. “I explained the situation to Lawrence after you left, and we decided to keep it to ourselves.”

“Wait a moment.” Slowly, Clover turns to Lawrence. “I’ve just realized something.”

“Yes?” the king asks innocently.

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“You knew Pranmore warded Camellia before the wedding?”

He smiles. “That’s correct.”

Clover’s eyes flash, and she leans forward menacingly. “And you didn’t tell me?”

“I wanted to give you one last chance to change your mind.” He grins. “Besides, we needed to trap Camellia in the great hall. If we’d called the wedding off earlier in the day, she might have been able to flee.”

“You could have at least told me,” I say to Pranmore, my tone making him wince.

“You needed to look despondent so Camellia didn’t realize something was amiss,” Lawrence says. “And congratulations—you succeeded. You looked awful.”

I rub my hand over my mouth, thinking how close I came to murdering the princess—and feeling a bit like murdering her brother.

“And what about me?” Audra asks, her clear voice commanding the room.

We all turn to the High Vale, wondering how Lawrence will weasel out of this new mess.

“You’re going to marry me,” the king says. He looks at Ayan. “You’re the heir of Ferradelle. Any objections?”

Ayan grins. “I can’t think of any.”

Audra shifts her attention to her cousin, looking like she's having second thoughts about reuniting him with her family.

"You're not in love with someone, are you?" Lawrence asks her. "You don't have a stuffy commander hidden somewhere?"

She turns back to Lawrence, unamused. "No."

"Then what's the problem?"

"The problem is I don't like you."

The knights stiffen, unsure how they should respond to Audra's blatant disrespect for our king.

But Lawrence waves away their concern. Laughing, he says, "You'll get over that. And can you think of a better way to unite our people?"

"I can, in fact," she says. "Relinquish Ferradelle to us so we may rule it as a kingdom, and our alliance will be strong."

Ayan grins. "I like that idea. I could be a king." He turns to Clover. "I'd look good in a crown, right?"

"I'm not doing that," Lawrence says blandly. "Though I applaud your diplomatic audacity."

Audra crosses her arms, smiling in a way that makes me thankful she's looking at Lawrence and not me.

"We will discuss it privately," Lawrence says. "But you'll have to come to terms with

it fairly quickly. After a necessary mourning period has passed, the people will expect a wedding.”

“Who’s next in line after you, Lawrence?” she asks.

Lawrence frowns, jerking his chin toward his cousin. “Bartholomew.”

“I’ll marry him instead.” She smiles at the king, ignoring Bartholomew’s shock. “Lyredon, you don’t mind assassinating Lawrence to get him out of the way, do you?”

“You can’t say things like that,” Miguel protests, even though Lawrence tips his head back and laughs.

“She’s not going to kill me,” Lawrence assures his knight. “If she really wanted to, she’d have done it by now.”

As if she’s had enough, Audra rolls her eyes and leaves the room, dragging Lyredon with her. The door closes behind them slowly, and I stretch my neck, wondering how Lawrence is going to fix the mess he created for himself.

As soon as Audra’s gone, Clover turns on Lawrence. “I want to confirm I’m free of all royal obligations. No more crowns, no more ladies—no more guards?”

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Lawrence turns to her, his face softening. “You’re free.”

She looks at me, beaming.

Clearing his throat, Lawrence says, “But—”

“But?” Clover demands, whipping back.

The king turns his attention to his knights. “Please excuse us.”

The men hesitate, but Miguel finally nods, and the four men leave the room.

“You need to exercise a little patience,” Lawrence says to Clover and me once it’s only our small group. “How do you think it will look for me if you throw yourself at Henrik right away?”

“What difference does it make?” Clover demands.

“Half the people of the court will suspect you jilted me,” Lawrence argues. “You’ll have to wait to announce your relationship until Audra and I marry.”

“Can you be any pettier?” Clover demands.

He shrugs, suddenly looking smug as he strokes his chin. “Yes, I like this. You and Henrik can’t be together until Audra agrees to marry me.”

“That’s low,” Clover hisses.

“And besides,” Lawrence continues, ignoring her, “Henrik has enough to think about right now.”

“What do I have to think about?” I ask warily. He’s not about to send me on a supply run or some other equally demeaning task, is he?

“You must decide in which province you’d like your estate. My guard resides at court the majority of the time, as you well know, so it doesn’t make all that much difference. Why don’t you choose a plot in Doria? You could be neighbors with the gnomes.”

I stand very still, afraid it’s a cruel joke.

“You don’t have to worry about designing your coat of arms, however,” he continues. “I’ve taken the liberty to do that myself.”

“You’re giving him his seal,” Clover whispers, the anger disappearing from her face.

“Henrik earned his seal,” Lawrence responds, almost grudgingly.

I look down, breathing hard. After all these years...

Thankfully, Ayan steps in before I can humiliate myself.

“This is touching, isn’t it?” the elf mock-whispers to Pranmore. “You can feel their friendship blossoming. A king and his knight—it’s beautiful. It really is.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Clover demands, trying not to laugh.

Ayan grins, sitting back in his chair. “So many things.”

A knock at the door interrupts the conversation, and we turn as Miguel enters. “The castle mortician is here, requesting an audience.”

“Let him in,” Lawrence says.

A moment later, the man walks into the room. His expression is somber, and he dabs at the perspiration beading on his brow with a handkerchief.

“Master Regan.” Lawrence stands when he sees the grave look on the man’s face. “What is it?”

“Your Majesty...” The mortician extends his hands in a plea for forgiveness. “Princess Camellia’s body is missing.”

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CLOVER

“What do you mean she’s missing?” Lawrence demands. “Where could she have gone?”

“I don’t know. We had the princess wrapped, and my attendants were preparing to transport her to the fire...”

“Was she left unattended?” Henrik asks. “Surely you had guards protecting the infirmary?”

Master Regan shakes his head, helpless.

“Who would steal a body?” Bartholomew asks, sounding ill at the idea.

An uncomfortable hush falls over the room.

“I want all of Camellia’s attendants, guards, and ladies brought to the throne room immediately,” Lawrence commands Miguel. “Find them all.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Miguel says. “Alfred, come with me. The rest of you, protect the king.”

Alfred and Miguel leave, along with the mortician.

“Clover.” Lawrence meets my eyes, and I don’t like the look he’s giving me. “I know you’re tired of having a personal guard, but I want Barret at your side for a little

longer.”

“Why can’t Henrik be my guard?” I demand.

The commander turns to me. The bare smile on his lips makes my insides feel molten. “I have no objections to that.”

“Henrik is about to become one of my knights. He won’t have time to play nanny to you,” Lawrence argues before he closes his eyes and groans. “The two of you are going to be insufferable. I should send you both to Ferradelle.”

“Audra would probably be happy to escort them there,” Ayan says cheekily.

The king points a finger at him. “Don’t even think about letting your cousin leave Cabaranth. And just in case either of you is tempted to ignore me, know it’s a royal command.”

“Where is Barret?” Bartholomew suddenly asks. “Wasn’t he here?”

“He was.” I look around the room as if he’ll magically appear. “He was in the hall with the rest of us before we came inside, right after Pranmore came up from the morgue.”

“Barret,” Henrik says suddenly, his voice heavy. He meets Lawrence’s eyes, and they exchange a silent conversation the rest of us aren’t privy to.

“What is it?” I demand.

“Lawrence and I suspected one of Camellia’s followers was in our midst,” Henrik says.

Lawrence nods. “I thought it might be Xander—no offense,” Lawrence quickly says to the knight, who looks offended all the same. “But...”

“You think it was Barret?” I ask, incredulous. “He couldn’t...”

Slowly, the puzzle pieces fall into place, and my stomach rolls. Surely not—he’s in love with Calla. They—

I cut off the thoughts abruptly, feeling ill.

“Let’s hope we’re wrong,” Lawrence says. Then he quietly instructs Denny, “Find Barret as well. We’ll meet you in the throne room.”

* * *

“No,” Calla says stubbornly, crossing her arms with her protest, even though her pale face betrays her fear. “Barret wasn’t the traitor—I know it.”

According to the sun, it’s well into the afternoon hours, though I’m exhausted from a night of no sleep. At Lawrence’s command, the entire royal guard turned the castle upside down, looking for Camellia’s body, but it was to no avail.

Both she and Barret are still missing.

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“We’ll find him,” Lavender says soothingly. “I’m sure it’s a misunderstanding.”

Hyacinth looks at me and grimaces, not quite as optimistic. It’s strange the knight would disappear like this, especially now.

“Perhaps he wandered off to take a nap,” Lavender suggests, trying to help.

“It’s been almost twenty-four hours,” Hyacinth points out.

Calla drops her head into her hands. “He wasn’t in league with Camellia. He wasn’t. We’ll find him, and you’ll all see.”

And I want her to be right—desperately. But at this point, I fear the worst.

I excuse myself when Henrik arrives at the door, joining him in the hall. “Have you found anything?”

“Possibly,” he says quietly. “Two bodies have been discovered at the bottom of Wellming Canyon. Lawrence has asked me to oversee the retrieval.”

“Is it Camellia?” I lower my voice and close the door so Calla won’t overhear. “Barret?”

“We don’t know yet. According to the guards who spotted them, they’re both cloaked. I doubt it’s related to the princess’s disappearance.”

I take his arm. “I want to go with you.”

Henrik frowns. “This isn’t going to be a pleasant outing.”

“I’ll stay back when they bring up the bodies.” I glance toward the closed door. “I could use some fresh air, and I’m sure you wouldn’t mind the company.”

The commander thinks about it for a moment, and then he nods. “Bring your bow, just in case. I’ll meet you outside the stables.”

* * *

Though the morning was cool, the afternoon is warm enough I can remove my cloak. Henrik and I don’t say much as we ride, both unsettled by Camellia’s disappearance. And once we arrive, there’s too much chaos for conversation.

A gaggle of guards, several soldiers, a couple captains, and a whole slew of village spectators hang around the cliff’s edge, gawking at the commotion below.

Henrik groans quietly from atop his horse, hating disorder above all else.

“Keep them back,” he commands a captain, jerking his hand toward a group of adolescent boys who teeter a little too close to the ledge. “I don’t want to pull additional bodies from the ravine today.”

“Yes, commander,” the captain says, hurrying to do Henrik’s bidding.

We dismount our horses, handing them to a soldier who runs up to offer assistance, and walk to the cliff’s edge. It’s not a high cliff, maybe thirty feet. I peer over cautiously, glad there isn’t much to see except for guards scurrying around below. I get a glimpse of ivory linen, and then I relax a little. They’ve already wrapped the bodies.

“Neither must be the princess,” I say to Henrik. “They’d have told you by now.”

The commander nods.

“We’ve secured the first!” a guard hollers up to the men waiting at the top.

“Hello, commander.” Master Regan joins us, nodding a greeting to me as well. He squints in the sunshine and brushes imaginary dirt from his hands, making me wonder if he doesn’t get out of the city enough. “I assume Lawrence sent you to oversee?”

“He did,” Henrik says to the mortician. “And you?”

“I don’t know why I can’t verify the cause of death once the bodies are brought to the castle,” he grouses, “but it’s not my place to question the king, is it?”

Lawrence is probably punishing him for losing Camellia. It sounds like something he would do.

The first body is retrieved and placed on the ground. Guards shoo the crowds back, making them keep their distance. Henrik follows Master Regan to the body, and I trail behind them both.

“Get back!” a captain yells to the pressing gawkers. “Have you no respect for the dead?”

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Guards filter in behind the royal mortician, making a human wall. As Master Regan pulls back the sheet, I avert my eyes, having no desire to see the corpse for myself.

“I recognize him,” Henrik says heavily.

I clutch his wrist. “Who is it?”

“Bendon,” the commander answers, speaking of one of the brothers who defected to Camellia’s side and nipped at her heels like a puppy.

I gesture to the second body. “His brother?”

“We’ll see.” Henrik asks Master Regan, “Any idea how long he’s been dead?”

“Scavengers found him, making it difficult to say,” the mortician answers. “At least a week.”

“Any chance the causes were natural?” I ask, my skin crawling.

“Only if a vampiric animal happened upon him after he stumbled off the cliff.”

I inhale sharply. “His blood has been drained?”

“Just like the man we found in Her Highness’s bedchamber before she disappeared to Ferradelle,” he says with a heavy sigh.

Henrik waits in silence for the other body, nodding to himself when it’s confirmed

both brothers were killed and then tossed off a cliff.

“I’ve seen enough,” the commander says, turning back toward our horses.

“What do you think happened?” I ask.

“They wanted to serve Camellia,” he says darkly. “It looks like their mission was a success.”

“Henrik.” I lower my voice to a horrified whisper.

“She must have used them for her concoction.”

“They were the final ingredient,” I say, unnerved. “What exactly did that concoction do?”

His expression hard, the commander offers me his hand as I mount my horse. “I don’t know.”

5

CLOVER

We never find Camellia’s body, nor Barret. The knight’s innocence is slipping further and further from our grasp. He was probably the one who tossed Bendon and Dalvin off the cliff.

After a week of searching, Lawrence has no choice but to move ahead with the funeral.

Only a select few are invited to the event. We wear black out of respect for the royal

family, and the occasion is somber. Though I doubt anyone truly mourns the loss of the princess, her burial is a sobering reminder of how a life can go astray.

With Pranmore's help, the cursed necklaces are destroyed, Camellia's quarters are stripped of her personal effects, and her ladies are returned to their families. Life slowly, and miraculously, returns to normal.

Normal...but better because Camellia is gone, and I'm no longer being addressed as "Your Highness." But in some ways, worse. Because Henrik is well on his way to becoming one of Lawrence's elite, and I don't see him nearly as often as I would like.

He pauses to talk when we pass in the halls, usually accompanied by Lawrence's knights, almost always unable to slip away to somewhere private. I get secret smiles, and we exchange lingering glances, but it's nearly as bad as it was when he was serving Camellia.

I'm sure it's Lawrence's revenge. We're never alone—the king keeps Henrik far too busy.

The spring day is unusually cool as I stroll through the back garden, thinking of Henrik and hoping things will be better after his knighting ceremony tonight. Though the chill in the air is unpleasant, I relish the inclement weather, knowing the people of the court will flock to the castle to avoid the rain and leave me in peace.

"Lady Clover," a deep, familiar voice says from behind me, making butterflies riot in my stomach.

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I turn, and a wide smile spreads over my face when I see the commander. He's alone, for once, wearing a hooded cloak that's beaded with raindrops.

"You escaped?" I ask, feeling a little awkward. Only a month has passed since Camellia's death, but it might as well have been a year at court.

"Lawrence graciously gifted me with a free afternoon to prepare for this evening," he says wryly, striding forward to join me. It's the last day he'll wear his emerald pennant. Tonight, it will be replaced with an amber one. Henrik will be a knight, just as he's always wanted. Officially. Finally.

My eyes drift over his face, to his broad chest and chiseled arms, and I must remind my fluttering heart that Henrik isn't just a handsome acquaintance. He's mine.

If Lawrence will ever allow it, the wretched king.

"And you decided to spend your free time in the damp gardens?" I tease, resisting the urge to reach for him.

A lopsided smile plays at his mouth. "Only because I was told you were here."

I grin, looking down at the wet stone pavers that line the path. "And what will you do now that you've found me?"

"Ask you to join me for a walk." He looks as if he, too, feels slightly awkward.

We've never courted before—never done these simple, boring things that most

couples do, like strolling the gardens or meeting for tea. We've fought aynauths. We chartered a pirate captain to sneak us into Ferradelle and uncovered conspiracies against the crown. We've met in secret and shared kisses that still keep me up at night.

This feels strange. Foreign.

Wonderful.

"And if someone sees us and tells Lawrence?" I tease.

"It's only a walk," he answers, wearing that look of agitation that's reserved for times when he finds Lawrence particularly irritating. "No one can read too much into that."

I laugh, stepping up next to him, wishing we weren't wearing cloaks so I could take his arm. Instead, I have to settle for my shoulder brushing against him as we walk.

Henrik is quiet, his thoughts likely straying to tonight's ceremony.

"Are you nervous?" I ask when we reach our fountain at the far edge of the grounds, where the plants pretend they are wild and the stone path is broken.

He shakes his head. "Not about the knighting—only that it might be a trick and Lawrence will take it away at the last moment."

"He won't," I say. But in my head, I think, He had better not.

Henrik smiles as if reading my mind. Perhaps my tone gave me away.

I look around our overgrown sanctuary. The heavy tree boughs offer some protection from the rain—protection from prying eyes too. I turn to Henrik. "We're alone."

“We are,” he says quietly, looking like he wants to reach for me as badly as I want to reach for him.

Before I can respond, a muffled “Henrik?” sounds from entirely too close.

“Bartholomew,” Henrik says with a disappointed sigh. “He must have followed me.”

“Are you here somewhere?” the young duke calls.

I close my eyes, letting my head fall back and resisting the urge to groan.

“This way.” Henrik slips his hand into my cloak, sliding his palm into mine and interlacing our fingers.

“What are you doing?” I whisper, a laugh burbling past my lips as he pulls me between two large spruce trees. We disappear into the shadows behind them, enclosed in a natural sanctuary surrounded by overgrown shrubs and evergreens. The rain cannot reach us here, but the smell of dusty pine needles and the storm-drenched earth is a brisk embrace.

It’s a tight space, barely large enough for the two of us. We’re so close, we’re pressed together, and a needled twig pokes my shoulder.

“Are we hiding?” I laugh quietly.

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Henrik's eyes match the storm, more gray than blue in the dim light. They crinkle at the edges with his amusement. He still has my hand, and I don't try to take it back. He can have it for as long as he wants.

"This is very unlike you, soldier," I tease.

"I won't be a soldier much longer," he murmurs.

"Sir Henrik." I imagine it, and then I shake my head. "I'll still call you soldier. Habits are hard to break, you know."

His eyes darken, and they drop to my lips. "You can call me whatever you want."

My heart races as he leans down. But just before his lips meet mine, Bartholomew calls again, "Henrik!"

He's found our fountain, and now he stands on the other side of our sanctuary.

I press a finger to the commander's lips, telling him to keep quiet. He playfully nips at it, and I grin.

"I thought they went this way," Bartholomew says to whoever is with him.

"They must have taken a different path," a girl answers.

Realizing it's his sister, Henrik's eyebrows wing together.

I shuffle around quietly, peeking through the trees' heavy boughs to see if they've moved on. But Brielle sits on the fountain's edge, and Bartholomew joins her. They're both dressed in heavy cloaks, and they don't look like they're in a hurry to be on their way.

If we don't want to sheepishly emerge from the trees—and I'm quite certain we don't—we're trapped.

"Is your shoulder sore?" Brielle asks when Bartholomew raises his hand to rub it. "You sparred with Henrik for hours yesterday."

"You were there?" Bartholomew asks, sounding both surprised and pleased.

"I like to watch you train," she says shyly. "You're almost as proficient with a sword as a bow now."

I cringe and look at Henrik, feeling like an eavesdropper. The commander stands very still with a pained expression, the picture of discomfort.

"Henrik is an excellent teacher," Bartholomew answers. "I'm thankful my uncle was kind enough to place me with him."

His voice is wistful, a little sad too.

"I'm sure King Algernon would be proud of your hard work and the progress you've made," Brielle says gently.

"Do you think?" Bartholomew asks. Then he laughs softly. "He worried about me, though he was always careful to hide it. I was never very coordinated, and I wasn't good at fighting when I was young. The knights are an intimidating group—loud, often crass, and always boastful. I didn't fit in, nor did I want to. If it weren't for your

brother, I don't know that I would ever be able to accept the title Father left to me."

Bartholomew will become the duke marshal when he's old enough, a role I admit I find difficult to picture him in. But one day in the near future, he will lead the entire royal army.

"If it weren't for Henrik?" Brielle asks.

"He's shown me what a knight can be, and he doesn't even carry the title yet," Bartholomew answers. "He's strong and proficient, but he's kind. Though I know I was a nuisance, especially at first, he rarely lost his temper with me. He respects Clover, never saying lewd things behind her back, and he treats all people as if they have value. I admire him greatly."

Henrik frowns at the ground, shielding his thoughts.

"You're kind, and you treat all people as if they have value too," Brielle points out. "You're already like him."

Bartholomew doesn't respond, but knowing him as I do, I'm sure his face is bright red.

"And any girl you favor will be lucky to have you as well," she none-too-subtly points out.

Bartholomew sighs. "I'm not sure most girls would agree with you."

"I'm a girl." She sounds exasperated now. "I would know, wouldn't I?"

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“You are a girl, but you’re Henrik’s sister, so you’re also gifted with extreme kindness. I’m afraid your opinion means little.”

Oh, the poor, stupid boy.

“Bartholomew,” Brielle says shortly, sounding like she might laugh—or hit him. “I’m cold. Let’s go back.”

I hold my breath as they stand.

“When do you return to the academy?” he asks as they meander down the path.

“Tomorrow,” Brielle says sullenly. “Henrik has only allowed me to stay for his ceremony.”

“Maybe I can visit you?” He quickly adds, “Once or twice. If that’s all right?”

I smile to myself, my heart warm. Their voices grow faint as they travel further away, until the only sound on the breeze is the chirp of a lone songbird.

I turn to Henrik. “Bartholomew is a good judge of character.”

“I’m afraid I will disappoint him.”

“I don’t think that’s possible.” I nudge his arm. “Your sister is taken with him.”

Henrik frowns. “She should focus on school.”

“Mmm,” I agree, edging close enough we touch. “Wouldn’t want pesky love getting in the way of studies.”

“I pay a small fortune for those studies.”

“Bartholomew is right about you, you know. But you aren’t just the best sort of knight—you’re the best sort of man. Brielle is fortunate to have you.”

“And what about you?” He lifts his eyes to meet mine. “Do you consider yourself fortunate to have me?”

“Do I have you?” I ask softly.

His eyes become solemn. “If you want me.”

I laugh a little, adjusting the rain-dampened fastener of his cloak. “What kind of ridiculous statement is that? Of course I want you.”

He swallows. “After tonight, I’ll be worthy.”

“You were always worthy, Henrik.”

Lifting an eyebrow, he says, “Not according to Denny.”

“My brother is an idiot.” I scowl at the commander. “What did he say?”

“It doesn’t matter.” He raises our clasped hands, pressing his lips to my knuckles. “Bartholomew made me realize something.”

“What?” I ask, distracted by the kiss.

“I want to do this right.”

I quirk a brow. “Have we done it wrong?”

“Even after Lawrence gives us his blessing, I must ask your father for permission to court you. Will you wait for me, Clover? I don’t know how long it will take.”

A little breathless from the way he says my name, I nod.

“Good.” He motions toward the path. “We should probably get back.”

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“Henrik.” I angle my head up, giving him easy access to my lips, letting my eyes flutter shut in sweet anticipation.

He leans down until his mouth is very near my ear, and then he whispers, “Not yet.”

I jerk my head back, staring at him. “It’s not like you’ve never kissed me before.”

“You just said you’d wait,” he points out.

“I didn’t know I’d have to wait for that,” I argue. “You should have made it clear.”

Henrik chuckles as he pushes aside the wet boughs, holding them for me so I can duck underneath. “You should have asked for clarification before you agreed.”

Cursing Bartholomew under my breath, I roll my eyes and step under the tree limbs. Water drips onto my cloak, but the rain seems to have stopped. Clouds churn low, creating a light haze of mist, cold on my cheeks and nose.

I should have known Henrik would want to take each and every proper step. We raced ahead, but now we’ve circled back to the beginning, and he has the chance to start again—this time on a straighter path. It’s so genuinely Henrik; I can’t even be angry with him. I sigh, coming to terms with the fact this might take a while.

“We could speed things along, you know,” I say, my tone bright with mischief. “Our courtship would move along so much more quickly if I were with child.”

I press my lips together to keep from laughing when Henrik whips his head back.

He's so appalled, I'm surprised he doesn't drop the wet branch on me.

"Even Lawrence wouldn't be so cruel as to allow me to live in shame," I go on. "We'd be married by the end of the month."

"Clover," Henrik says, exasperated. "You shouldn't say such things."

"I can say them—I just can't act on them." I pause, unable to help myself. "Unless you want me to?"

He lowers the branches once I'm clear, daring to take me by the shoulders. His smile eases when he realizes I'm only teasing him. "You're wicked."

I grin. "And you're withholding kisses like a coy maiden."

He chuckles as he looks away.

I run my hand up his chest and drop my voice. "Is it so wrong I want you?"

"I want you too." Henrik looks back, his smile softening. "But it will be sweeter if we wait."

"So you won't kiss me until we're officially courting?"

He shakes his head.

"Fine," I say with a sigh. "I'll try to be patient."

Shielding his face, Henrik looks up as gentle rain begins to shower the garden once more. "It's going to start pouring soon. We should get back inside."

We leave our pine-scented sanctuary, walking close together until we reach the well-groomed section of the garden. The viburnums are in full bloom now, their snowball-like clusters of white flowers hanging from the bushes, heavy with moisture. A blanket of petals lines the ground underneath them, having succumbed to the rain.

It's serene, quiet. Everything is at perfect peace.

When Ayan approaches us as we reach the practice yard, wearing a look that contrasts my happy mood, I'm tempted to turn the other way. Whatever somber news he's bringing, I don't want to hear it.

"What is it?" Henrik asks immediately, apparently not sharing my instinct to flee.

"Caldwell has come for a visit," Ayan says.

The name teases my memory, but I can't quite place it. "Who?"

"Our paddle ship captain with the questionable morals," Ayan answers, and his usual smirk finally cracks through his solemn expression.

"What's he doing in Cabaranth?" Henrik asks.

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And just like that, Ayan's smile is snuffed out. "You best hear it for yourselves."

We follow Ayan into the castle, twisting down halls as we walk to the council room.

I nod a greeting as we pass a kitchen maid, silently deciding I don't like her. She pushes her brown hair behind her ear, watching Henrik with hungry eyes, pining for the handsome commander. I noticed her about a week ago, and now she always seems to be around.

And she's not the only one.

The women of court believe the knight-to-be is eligible, and now that things have returned to normal, they fawn over him just as they did before we ended up on the supply run in the Dorian mountains.

I brush the irritating thoughts away when we arrive at the council room. Xander and Alfred stand guard outside, and they open the doors when they see us. Xander offers me a smile, but it's bare and tinged with apprehension.

A heavy feeling of foreboding settles in my stomach, and it doesn't ease when we enter the room.

Lawrence is already here, along with a familiar High Vale pirate I didn't think I'd ever see again.

A grin breaks across Captain Caldwell's face when he spots me. "Lady Clover!"

I respond with a small smile, trying to read the room. Lawrence sits at the head of the table, drumming his fingers on the polished wooden surface. Audra claims the chair beside him, wearing an air of aloofness the High Vales have perfected.

Lyredon leans against the window frame. He's dressed in black leathers like a proper shadow rogue, arms crossed, with one booted foot on the wall under the sill.

Pranmore sits on Lawrence's other side, hands resting on the table. It's the Woodmore's expression that worries me the most. Tired despair has taken up residence on his face, and the fawn spots along his temples stand in high contrast against his fair skin. He stares at his hands, lips set in a grim line, lost in thought.

"What are you doing here, Caldwell?" Henrik asks, wasting no time on small talk.

The captain twists his hat in his hands, casting a nervous glance at Ayan. Apparently he's aware of Ayan's identity now and is even less comfortable in the presence of his duke than his king—even if Ayan hasn't formally ascended his governing position just yet.

Lady Ellaine returned to Revalane in Ayan's stead so he can remain in Cabaranth until the terms of the royal marriage are agreed upon. So far, Audra's not cooperating.

"Two things, commander," Caldwell says. "The first is that we must settle that last payment for your passage to Ferradelle."

"Last payment?" Henrik looks at the king in question.

"So he claims," Lawrence says dryly.

"I believe our terms stated you were to bring us back to Heistone." Henrik raises his

brows, challenging him. “Which you did not.”

“Er, yes. Well. I’ve also returned your things. I assume those mean something to you?”

Henrik merely stares at him.

“And I’ve brought intel,” Caldwell adds, as if that will make up for delivering us into a swamp of High Vale snakes.

“What kind of intel?” Henrik asks, his expression a little sharper than before.

Lawrence waves his hand toward a large crate in the corner. “Take a look for yourself.”

Henrik walks to the box, glancing at Caldwell. “You brought this with you?”

The captain twists his hat again, this time in the opposite direction. “That’s right.”

The lid has already been loosened, and the commander easily pushes it aside. When he glances down, he sucks a breath through his teeth.

“What is it?” I demand, hurrying to his side.

Cold dread washes over me the moment I spot the metal creation. I whip back to Caldwell. “What are you doing with a war golem?”

“Someone commissioned a whole passel of them. My comrades at the port have been transporting them for a good month.”

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“And you only thought to tell us now?” I demand.

Caldwell rubs the back of his neck, giving Ayan a surreptitious look. “It was a matter of loyalty, Lady Clover. You understand, I’m sure. But seeing as how our new duke is friendly with—”

“Enough,” Ayan snaps. “It doesn’t matter why you didn’t talk until now. We need to know who paid you to transport them.”

Caldwell shakes his head, extending his hands, his hat flopping as it untwists midair. “We were told the orders were coming from the duke’s family, but—”

“That’s impossible,” Audra says sharply, seething as she rises and presses her hands to the table. “My mother would never.”

“I know that,” Lawrence assures her in a calm tone. “Your family has proven loyal. One random golem isn’t going to change that.”

Caldwell clears his throat. “What about a hundred?”

“A hundred?” I demand, horrified at the thought. “A hundred?”

“I had ten on my ship,” Caldwell says warily. “And there’s been at least ten other ships loaded with them as well.”

I look back at the golem, never having seen one in pristine condition before. The packing straw has been pulled away, leaving it lying in the long wooden crate like a

patient upon a physician's table. It's a terrifying work of art, created to look like a man but covered in golden metal instead of skin, with crafted joints that fit together. It even has hands with knuckled fingers, but it's thicker than either human or elf. It must weigh as much as five men.

This one is lifeless, at least for now. Like any other Vallen innovation that operates independent of its creator, it requires energy crystals to run.

"These aren't the golems I saw in Revalane," Ayan says quietly, stepping up next to me and studying the metal soldier. "Augmirian had an entire warehouse full—a metal army. But they were talvernum, and this appears to be some sort of alloy."

"No matter, they are most certainly golems," Lawrence says. "And I have no doubt they can be controlled by magic."

"Let's find out." Ayan presses his hand to the golem's chest, shaking his head in frustration when nothing happens. He's been trying to break his mind ward, but so far, he can still only access his magic when he's angry.

"Still not working?" Lawrence asks. He jerks his chin at me. "Clover, punch him and see if it helps."

"Tempting offer." Ayan's mouth quirks to the side in a smirk. "But I doubt sparring with Clover will have the desired effect."

Taking offense, Henrik tenses beside me. I merely roll my eyes, used to the elf's meaningless flirting.

Ignoring her cousin, Audra joins us by the crate, turning her eyes on Lawrence as if asking permission. He gives her a curt nod.

She places her hand on the metal soldier's chest, directly feeding him magic in lieu of an energy crystal. As she explores his enchantment, his fingers respond, and then his hand. It hovers above him, the inanimate object unaware of the unease he's causing.

As soon as Audra withdraws, his hand falls back, and he goes lifeless once more.

Audra gives it a thoughtful look. "It's been spelled with a complicated battle enchantment.

"So much for hoping he was an ugly garden ornament," Ayan says, cutting through the tense silence.

"It has to be Augmirian's men." Audra puts space between herself and the Vallen weapon. "They must be acting on their own, hoping to get revenge now that the cursed necklaces have been destroyed and the noblewomen are no longer at risk."

"But what's their plan?" Henrik asks. "Even a golem army needs a leader."

"Where were you instructed to bring the shipments?" Lawrence asks Caldwell.

"Heistone. But I came up through Forsten to avoid detection."

"Wait." Ayan raises his finger in the air, thinking. "They're bringing them through the main port? How are they getting past the port guards?"

"They certainly checked in Forsten," Caldwell grumbles. "They almost threw me behind bars when they saw what I was transporting."

"How did you avoid it?" I ask.

"How do you think?" he answers gruffly. "I told them I was working for the king, and

that me and my cargo required a proper escort to Cabaranth. They hemmed and hawed a bit, but they finally agreed after they inspected the golems. If I'd had energy crystals on me, I'd likely be strung up in some prison."

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“Someone’s paid off your guards in Heistone,” I say to Lawrence, growing even more uneasy. “How else can we explain it?”

Lawrence grimaces at the thought. “What human in their right mind would join hands with the High Vales?”

“There’s some irony in that,” Ayan says to Audra, who merely answers with a scoffing noise.

“You know what I mean,” Lawrence says. “We’re striving for peace, But this... This is an act of treason. Who would welcome war into their home?”

“Someone who was loyal to your sister,” I say quietly.

Slowly, Lawrence turns to me. I shrug, not liking it any more than anyone else in the room.

Lawrence shoves his hand through his long hair. “Even dead, Camellia’s causing trouble.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” Henrik says reasonably. “Right now, we need to track down the golems and confiscate them before we have a war on our hands.”

“I need you to lead a band to Heistone to deal with this,” Lawrence says, agreeing. “I’m afraid your knighting ceremony will have to wait.”

Henrik merely grunts out an affirmative, looking like he expected nothing else.

HENRIK

I oversee the last of the crates as several guards carry them into the cool, dark vault. Bartholomew stands next to me, silently surveying the vast room. We're underneath the castle, in a highly protected space that used to be the High Vale royal crypt. King Telgin transformed it into a treasury when the elves demanded their ancestors' tombs be transported to Revalane after the humans' victory in the war.

Smoke mingles with the smell of the stale, ancient room. Firelight shines on the men's faces and flickers on the stone walls, but our torches do little to reveal the century of dust that's gathered. When Cabaranth belonged to Ayan's family, the High Vales constructed oil chambers to provide light in the crypt. But it's an outdated, inefficient system, using a high quantity of the precious fuel the elves charge us so dearly for. We won't be here long enough to justify lighting them.

"Strange this has always been down here and I've never seen it," Bartholomew says, my squire's voice hushed in the echo-prone space.

Relics won in the war, precious goods gifted from Calendria, and nearby stacks of gold ingots catch the torchlight. The crown jewels are kept here, as are rugs, art, and even the gowns of queens long past, each adorned with precious gems.

But there is little order. It's a glorified storeroom, a collection of priceless goods carelessly piled upon tables or haphazardly placed in corners and promptly forgotten.

"Is this my grandmother's fabled golden tea set?" Bartholomew asks incredulously, pausing in front of not just a teapot with matching cups and accessories, but an entire table crafted of gold, complete with chairs to match. "I thought it was a family joke."

It's certainly not the only strange item in the collection. And now, elven war golems join the assemblage, secure and guarded.

Once the last crate is placed, Bartholomew and I join Lawrence and his sealed knights in the cluster of torchlight. They surround an open box and stare at the golem inside.

"It looks sturdier than the relics I've seen," Bartholomew says.

Lawrence raps on the golden soldier's chest, creating a clang as his signet ring meets the metal. "The golems created a century ago were made of straight talvernum."

"What is this metal?" Alfred asks, scowling at the Vallen weapon. "And can it be pierced with steel?"

Though it's the only metal that works as a conduit for magic, talvernum is somewhat soft. It wasn't easy to fight the metal soldiers a hundred years ago, but it could be done. In the ancient creations, the energy crystals were installed in the chest cavity—a jewel heart of sorts. Once their energy source was cut out of them, the spelled soldiers fell to the ground, lifeless.

But if steel won't penetrate this metal...

"Try it," Lawrence says to Alfred.

We stand back as the knight draws his dagger. With both hands wrapped around the hilt, he rams the blade downward.

With a horrible clang of hard metal meeting, the dagger slides across the cuirass and embeds itself in the straw the golem rests upon.

Miguel curses. “Wretched High Vales and their tinkering. What have they created?”

“It wasn’t the elves,” I say heavily, pressing my hand to the crate's edge.

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Lawrence eyes me, his expression inscrutable, and then he looks at a nearby guard. “Fetch Roark. He’s returned to his forge.”

“I’ll go,” I say wearily, already turning from the king and his men.

“Are you all right?” Bartholomew asks as we climb the steps.

We leave the stone mausoleum and emerge into the main level of the castle once more.

“He’s my father,” I answer. “I was going to have to talk to him eventually. Now’s as good a time as any.”

* * *

Bartholomew hesitates outside the smithy, looking like he’s not sure he should go inside.

“It’s all right,” I tell him, answering his silent question. “I’m not here for a heart-to-heart.”

“Brielle says you haven’t spoken with him since he returned.”

I turn to my squire. “You’re with my sister often these days.”

His eyes widen, and he gulps.

“Later,” I tell him when it looks like he’s going to start stammering excuses.

I pause when I push through the door, startled to find I’m not accosted with the usual heat. The forge sleeps, and the workroom is quiet and dark. The shutters, which are always open to allow for a cooling cross-breeze, are closed.

The house is empty as well. As I’m rounding the back, assuming Father must be in the nearby tavern because that’s the only other place he haunts, I find him.

Bent at the waist, he stands in the patch that was once Mother’s garden, ripping overgrown weeds from the ground. I used to tend the area, but it’s gone wild since I became a commander. Despite the lack of care, a persistent yellow rose blooms on the arbor, sunshine amongst the bindweed and thistles.

“It’s too damp for such a chore,” I tell him without bothering with a greeting. “You’ve neglected it for the last fifteen years. At least wait until the storm moves out.”

“Henrik,” he says gruffly as he straightens, startled to see me after I’ve been avoiding him for a month. His eyes move to Bartholomew, assessing the king’s cousin, and then they slide back to me. “Your knighting ceremony is tonight.”

“It’s been postponed.” I hope my curt tone will deliver the message that I don’t wish to speak about it. “I have to go to Heistone.”

“Postponed?” Father drops his arms, his lips curling as his eyes go hard. “Why?”

“We’ve just learned elven war golems are being smuggled into the port city. Lawrence is sending me to find answers.”

“I thought your friend’s mother was in charge of Revalane now?”

“This isn’t Lady Ellaine’s doing. We believe whoever is behind it is acting of their own volition. It’s likely a revenge plot concocted by one of Augmirian’s men.”

Though none of them seemed motivated enough to do such a thing. Something feels off, but I’ll find out what it is soon enough.

“Our informant brought one of the smuggled shipments to us, and we’re studying it for weaknesses. His Majesty wishes to speak with you about the talvernum alloy you created. That’s why I’ve come.”

Father takes a step back, nearly tripping over a bucket that’s half-hidden in pigweed. “I didn’t forge the golems.”

“You created the talvernum alloy.”

“It wasn’t treason,” he snarls, dropping his voice. “Camellia asked me to work on it long before she left Cabaranth.”

“Did you know the elves were constructing golems from the alloy?”

“The only ones I saw were made of talvernum,” he says, anxious. “I used the alloy to create Augmirian’s armor and the necklaces—that’s all. I’m the only one who knows how to smelt it.”

“You didn’t think the High Vales could deconstruct it to learn its secrets?”

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Father squares his shoulders, his nostrils flaring. “Even if they did, I’m not at fault.”

“It doesn’t matter who’s to blame!” I exclaim, losing my temper. Taking a calming breath, I continue, “We need to know how to fight the golems should it become necessary. Will you come with me to speak with the king, or must I have you arrested?”

Father glares at me, but he follows. Bartholomew walks behind us, unusually quiet. A web of tension is woven between my father and me, thick enough we could cut each cord with a blade.

Lawrence watches us approach when we enter the vault. “Roark. You’ve come.”

My father bows his head to the king, looking less than pleased to be here. I don’t think he realizes how fortunate he is that Lawrence chose to show him mercy and didn’t throw him in the dungeon on his return to Cabaranth.

“What can you tell us about this metal you’ve created?” Lawrence gestures to the golem. “Does it have any weaknesses?”

“Armor-wise, it’s similar to steel,” Father says, sneering at the abomination crafted with his creation. “At your sister’s command, I blended the talvernum with several elements to create a metal that retained its magic-carrying properties but was significantly stronger. Camellia also specified it must be a unique color so the High Vales wouldn’t recognize it, and I brightened the usually dull greenish-bronze hue to gold.”

“Did you teach the High Vale smiths how to smelt it while you were in Revalane?” Lawrence asks.

Father’s eyes narrow in the torchlight. “I did not.”

“They had access to a suit of armor Camellia commissioned for Augmirian,” I say to Lawrence. “I believe they studied it and discovered its secrets.”

“Which brings us back to the question of who they are.” He looks up when new voices exchange heated words with the guards just outside the vault entrance.

The king strides across the room to meet Audra, Ayan, and Lyredon, assuring the guards they are welcome.

When they join us, Ayan leans a hand against the crate. “It’s like you people don’t trust us.” He gives the golem a pointed look. “I have no idea why.”

“All right, elves,” Lawrence says, mostly to Audra, openly flirting with her just to ruffle her feathers. “Our weak human weapons have failed us. Tell me, how would you defeat a golem?”

“The only way to stop a mechanized creation from performing its task is to remove its energy source,” Audra says.

“And how would you go about getting past its defenses?”

Lyredon leans over the box. “May I?”

Though the king’s knights look uneasy with the High Vales’ presence, Lawrence nods, unconcerned.

Using magic to assist, the shadow rogue hauls the soldier out of the crate as if it weighs no more than a flesh-and-blood man. He then places it on the stone floor, creating an ominous clang that echoes throughout the space.

The Vallen soldier is more disconcerting out of the box. It's easily seven feet tall, built like a sturdy giant, with a heavy cuirass to protect its inner workings.

Lyredon travels his hands over the golem until he finds a latch on the soldier's side. The front half of the molded chest opens like a door to a safe, revealing the empty compartment designed for the energy crystal within.

"That's an efficient method," Ayan says flippantly. "Though it might be difficult to accomplish when it's marching toward you, brandishing a war hammer."

"Your cousin has a point," Lawrence says to Audra. "How would you stop it in the heat of battle?"

"How would I stop it, or how would you stop it?"

The king smirks. "You first."

"I'd either blast a hole in the chest plate with a white-hot orb of fire, or I'd send the lightning element at it to disrupt its enchantment."

Lawrence nods, impressed. "And how would I stop it?"

Audra crosses her arms, frowning at her people's creation.

"Well?" Lawrence prods.

She lifts her eyes to his face. "You wouldn't."

* * *

We stay a while longer, trying to find a physical way to get past the golem's defenses, but with no luck.

Giving up for the time being, we leave the vault, ensuring it's secured behind us. Four guards stand on duty, with instructions to open the vault for the king and no one else.

With a few minutes to spare, I go to Clover's quarters, hoping she's alone. Calla hasn't taken the news of Barret's disappearance well, and Clover, Hyacinth, and Lavender are often with her.

I knock on the door, glad to be standing in the lady's hall. Clover returned to her own quarters after the engagement was broken—away from Lawrence.

Back to me.

I hear footsteps on the other side of the door, and then it swings open.

"I'm not staying in Cabaranth while you go to Heistone," Clover says immediately, standing tall as if she's preparing herself for an argument.

"It could be dangerous," I warn, though I have no intention of leaving her behind.

"Which is exactly why you need me." Her eyes light with mischief. "Who will protect you if not me?"

I step into the room, drawing her away from the door so I can shut it. “I doubt your bow will be much help against golems.”

“I’m a shadow rogue, remember?” She grins. “I was a decoy bride, protecting Audra from certain death.”

I scoff with a smile. “You can lie to everyone except me.”

Determined, she narrows her eyes. “Don’t ask me to stay behind now.”

“I wasn’t going to.” I study her with a smile, knowing she’s as skilled as any of our master archers. We’ve been through worse. “But for my sanity, remain close to Pranmore when we reach the city.”

A smile dawns on her face, bright enough it’s disorienting. “I will.”

My fingers itch to touch her.

“I can see your indecision.” Clover steps into me and wraps her arms around my waist. “Have you changed your mind? Are you allowed to kiss me now?”

I nearly groan.

But I tamp back my physical response and say, “Bartholomew’s words etched themselves into my brain. I want to be the man he believes me to be, and I will deny myself as necessary.”

“Yes, but you revel in the self-discipline,” she scoffs. “The only person you’re truly torturing is me.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. Clover drops her arms, smiling in a way that tells me she

understands—hates it, but understands.

“Lawrence has placed me in charge, which means you’ll be under my command,” I say, changing the subject. “You must listen to me like any other soldier.”

Her smile becomes wicked. “Yes, commander.”

“And you won’t cause trouble.”

“Trouble?” she asks innocently.

I give her a pointed look. “No shooting at guards.”

“He deserved it,” she feels the need to remind me.

“I’ll meet you in the courtyard with the others,” I say when the urge to touch her becomes too great. “Don’t be long, all right?”

Clover nods, but she catches my hand before I reach the door.

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I smile despite myself. “What are you doing?”

She continues to cling. “I’m afraid you’re going to sneak off without me.”

“I won’t,” I promise.

“You better not.” She gives me her pixie grin, finally dropping my hand. “I’ll come after you if you do—and you don’t want that.”

I make a noise deep in the back of my throat. “I never said I don’t want it.”

She laughs, pushing me toward the door when she sees me wavering. “No. You’re being noble, remember? Off you go.”

With a smile, I leave Clover and meet my men in the bailey between the stables and the armory.

The storm has broken up, leaving only the scattered remnants of fleece-like gray clouds in the sky. The days are growing longer as summer approaches, and the sun hasn’t set yet. But it’s low on the horizon, and its golden rays will soon be replaced by the shadows of twilight.

Though Lawrence put me in charge of the mission, I question my authority when I see Clover’s brother Colter waiting with Ayan, Pranmore, and the soldiers who will be joining us. He’s the youngest of Count Flauret’s boys, only a year or two older than Clover, and the amber pennant he wears on his arm outranks my emerald.

If the day had gone as planned, I'd be wearing an amber pennant myself by now, along with the gold and ruby medallion I've been working toward for so long.

But the day didn't go as planned, and the banneret knight is still my superior.

"Henrik." He lifts his hand in greeting as I approach. "What's our mission?"

"The king didn't tell you?" I ask carefully, assessing the situation.

"I only spoke to Denny. He said you'd give me the details when you arrived."

I know Clover's brothers reasonably well, even if they are above me in station. Gavriel is arrogant, and Denny is levelheaded and somewhat reserved like his father, but Colter is the most like Clover. The knight wears a carefree expression, unconcerned by Lawrence's decision to place me at the head of the group despite my lower rank.

Put at ease by his nonchalant demeanor, I begin, "We're looking for—"

I'm interrupted by a commotion near the inner gatehouse. As a group, we turn toward the soldier who rides into the bailey like death is on his heels. I know him—his name is Simon, and he was the captain serving under me on the supply run to Fort Lintanry. When he spots me, he veers my way.

"Commander," he says urgently, his horse shaking its head in protest when the knight comes to a sudden stop. "There's been an attack in Heistone."

"What kind of attack?" I demand, dread rooting in my gut.

He winces, inadvertently looking at Ayan before he answers. "A Vallen war golem was set loose in the city."

CLOVER

I'm in the middle of adjusting my quiver so it rests comfortably between my shoulder blades when I hear Simon's news. I stop dead in my tracks, and dread pools in my stomach.

But what did we expect? It had to be expensive to smuggle the golems onto the mainland. Whoever paid the price didn't plan to leave them lying around in crates.

"You couldn't have told us sooner?" I ask Caldwell when he appears at my side.

The elf lowers his eyes to a stray tuft of grass that grows between the courtyard stones. "I'm sorry, Lady Clover."

Because he seems like he genuinely means it, I say, "I suppose you did all you could."

He turns to me, a wan smile crossing his face before he falls solemn once more. His gaze moves to my bow. "You're not joining the commander on the mission to Heistone, are you?"

"I am."

His scruffy eyebrows fly up underneath the shadow of his cap. "It's dangerous."

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I shrug, knowing he's right. Not that I'll back down now. I'm already too involved in this to hide in the castle with the other courtiers. If Henrik fights, I'll fight with him—side by side. As a team.

At the very least, I'll hide in a tree and pick off enemies. Wherever Henrik decides I'll be most useful, that's where I'll be.

Henrik turns my way when he notices me loitering near the arch that leads into the castle. Caldwell makes a noise of quiet distress and hurries off before the commander can corner him.

Henrik doesn't want to talk with him anyway. His focus is on me.

"We need to get to Heistone as quickly as possible," he says once he reaches me. "We'll have to ride all night, and our pace will be swift. Are you sure you want to accompany us?"

"I do."

A young groom leads my saddled mare to me, looking bewildered by the commotion. He obviously didn't hear Simon's announcement.

Henrik frowns at the boy. His expression tells me he would like to turn the groom and my horse away. But instead, he exhales a resigned sigh. "All right."

The fact that he's not going to try to hide me away like a weakling princess warms a little of the chill that's settled in my chest. I thank the boy for tending my mare, and

then I turn back to Henrik and lower my voice. “I’ll be cautious, and I will heed your commands.”

He nods.

Forcing a bright grin, I say, “Hopefully we can apprehend the culprits quickly, track down the rest of the golems, and then enjoy a brief holiday on the coast.”

Henrik smiles. “That’s the plan.”

* * *

There are fifteen of us in the group, including Pranmore and Ayan. Bartholomew is here as well, along with my brother. Simon also accompanies us, and we have eight high-ranking, specialized soldiers to complete the band. Reluctantly admitting his place is upon the throne, Lawrence remained in Cabaranth. He forbade Audra from joining us, likely out of spite. If he’s stuck in the castle, she might as well be too.

We ride all night—even Pranmore since we’re in a rush. But our pace is slower than we’d like. Shifting clouds mask the moons’ light, and we must watch for troll pits. They’re difficult enough to spot during the daytime, but they’re nearly impossible in the dark.

Other unsavory creatures come out at night as well, though we’ve only passed a herd of sleepy elgernauths so far. Still, my bow is a comfort to me. I missed its weight while playing princess these last few months. I’ve exchanged my gown for suede trousers, a lightweight cream shirt, and a fitted leather brigandine I borrowed from one of the female castle guards.

I finally feel like myself again.

We make it to Heistone just as the sun crests the hills behind us. It washes the jeweled seaport city with warm light, a breathtaking sight, even when I'm tired from the long ride. Only a few scattered storm clouds remain in the sky, and they glow orange with the sunrise.

The day is already warming. I lower my hood as we make our way through the city. The air smells of the sea, a little fishy this morning. But the scent of spiced sweet buns replaces the aroma as we pass a bakery.

Bartholomew gives the shop a wistful look, and my stomach growls in sympathy.

We wind through Heistone's crowded streets, maneuvering around wagons and peddlers slowly pushing their carts as they hawk their wares.

The threat is long past by the time we find the district where the golem was set loose, but there are signs of its wreckage.

"Did they send it simply to make a mess?" Bartholomew asks as we dismount our horses to take a better look.

Spotting our group, a nearby guard comes forward to greet us. He bows his head to my brother, and then to Henrik.

"Blasted thing made a fine mess," he says.

We scan the busted crates, broken windows, overturned pots, and trampled flower beds. I kneel, pulling a small, discarded rag doll out from under a toppled bag of turnips. A child must have dropped it in her haste to escape.

"Was anyone injured?" I ask the guard.

“Not badly, no.”

“That’s a relief.” I stand, sitting the doll upright on a nearby barrel, hoping her owner will find her.

“What can you tell us?” Henrik asks the guard.

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“Not a lot. I was chatting with Jordan Clemmings, the grocer on the corner down there.” He jerks his chin toward a sprawling building with a vegetable stand on the porch. “All of a sudden, people started screaming, and that Vallen monstrosity was making its way down the street.”

Henrik frowns, probably picturing it.

“This is where it was taken down.” The guard gestures to a nearby building. “The High Vale who runs the clock shop intervened when the guards had trouble stopping it.”

“Where did they take the golem?” Henrik asks him.

“To the fortress, commander.” The guard’s eyes wander to the wreckage. “If it weren’t for Lear, I don’t know how we would have stopped it.”

“It must be another made of the alloy your father created,” Ayan says to Henrik.

The commander’s face goes stony. To the guard, he says, “Thank you for your assistance.”

The man nods, taking that as his cue to return to his post.

We talk very little as we make our way toward Fortress Sorbin. It’s a tall stone building atop a hill, fortified like a small castle. We’re greeted before we even pass through the gates.

Several grooms hurry from the stable to see to our horses. The young man who takes my mare gives me a curious look, as if he somehow senses I'm not a guard despite my military-issued brigandine claiming otherwise.

"How are you feeling?" Henrik asks me quietly, drawing me to the side of the group. He reaches for my arm and then thinks better of it, letting his hand fall to his side. "It was a long night."

"I'm tired," I say, "but I'm fine."

"Colter!" exclaims a knight commander when he emerges from the fortress's main entrance, joined by several guards. He's in his mid-forties, with salt and pepper hair and a sober expression.

"Hello, Lord Yorgin," my brother says warmly.

Our father's friend has graced our dinner table on more than one occasion.

"What brings you to Heistone?" the knight asks, though I'm certain he knows.

"Henrik is in charge," Colter answers easily, nodding toward the commander and me. "I'll let him explain."

Yorgin turns to Henrik, just now noticing him. His entire demeanor changes. His shoulders ease, and his face slackens with sheer relief. "Henrik, I'm glad you're here."

My brother gives me a look, silently laughing at how easily he was dismissed. I shrug, offering him my condolences.

"We've received intel that several shipments of war golems were smuggled into the

city,” Henrik says. “Lawrence has sent us to apprehend the culprits and seize control of the contraband. But just before we left Cabaranth, we heard there had been an attack.”

Yorgin lets out a heavy sigh, nodding. “We searched the area but never found any sign of the person who released the golem. How do you sneak a seven-foot metal soldier into the middle of the city?”

“May we see the golem?” Henrik asks.

“Of course, though it’s not in working order anymore.”

“The best state for a golem to be in,” Ayan says, joining the conversation.

Yorgin turns to the High Vale, suddenly wary.

“He’s a friend,” Henrik assures him. “Ayan, may I introduce you to Lord Yorgin Foadskor. Lord Yorgin, this is Ayanleon Woldervin.”

“You left out the best part,” Ayan says with a grin.

“He’s the new duke of Ferradelle,” Henrik adds dryly.

Lord Yorgin’s eyebrows fly up, and he offers his hand, though it’s obvious he’s not sure he wants to.

Ayan grasps it without hesitation, snorting under his breath with good humor.

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“I take it your people are claiming they’re not responsible for the attack?” Lord Yorgin says, making me draw in a startled breath.

“Oh, I think there’s a good chance it was my people,” Ayan says. “But it wasn’t my people, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t.”

Ayan glances at me, raising his brows as if to say, “Tough crowd.” With a sigh, he looks back at Yorgin, becoming solemn. “My family wasn’t behind the attack, nor will we condone the crime.”

Lord Yorgin nods, but he doesn’t look convinced. Relations between our people have been strained for too long to expect otherwise. Suddenly, the knight’s gaze falls on me.

“Clover!” he exclaims.

“Hello, Lord Yorgin,” I say with a grin.

“What are you doing here?”

That’s a hard question to answer. What am I doing here? I’m not a soldier, nor am I someone in a position of authority. I’m a once-lady-in-waiting who posed as a princess for a brief time. Now I’m just Lady Clover.

“She’s the ambassador in charge of High Vale relations,” Ayan says smoothly, as if

there's such a position. "You know how we elves are."

Lord Yorgin doesn't know what to make of it, so he smiles—sort of.

"The golem?" Henrik prods.

"Oh, yes." Lord Yorgin shakes his head as if to clear it. "Follow me."

I blink several times as we enter the building, my eyes trying to adjust from the bright morning to the sparse light in the belly of the fortress. There are a few windows, but they don't offer much light in the cavernous hall, and the space is dim.

We follow Lord Yorgin into a back hallway, and down another hall after that. Eventually, we reach a guarded door. The man immediately opens it for the knight commander, and we step inside.

The golem lies on a table, its metal chest singed with black and curled up on itself like a piece of paper burned from the center out. Unlike the golems currently residing in the royal treasury, this metal soldier is a muted bronze color that actually looks like talvernum—all except for the plating on the cuirass, which has the same bright golden cast as the ones Caldwell delivered.

One leg is mangled, and the exterior as a whole bears significant dings and damage.

"The guards' weapons were unable to penetrate the metal," Lord Yorgin explains.

"We're not certain what type of material they used."

"It's a talvernum alloy," Henrik says, scowling at the golem.

"This looks like the ones I saw in Revalane," Ayan says, and then he motions to the soldier's chest. "But...accessorized."

“You said a High Vale ended up taking it down?” Colter asks.

Lord Yorgin nods.

“If the elf hadn’t been there, what would you have done?” I ask.

“We probably would have had to dig a pit in the street and lure him into it, but it would have taken far too long—and what a mess. It already created enough havoc on its own.”

“We saw the damage,” Henrik says.

“You said there are more of these in Heistone?” Lord Yorgin asks, crossing his arms.

Henrik nods. “If our source can be believed—”

“And that’s questionable,” Ayan interrupts.

“—there might be as many as a hundred or more in the city.”

“A hundred?” Lord Yorgin repeats softly, the idea almost unimaginable.

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I glance at Pranmore. He's been quiet since Caldwell's arrival, as if the appearance of the golems is too much for him.

Sensing me looking, the Woodmore turns my way. His dark brown eyes are weary, and I don't think it's just because we traveled all night.

"Are you all right?" I whisper.

"I'm worried," he says quietly. "I thought we found a way to avoid future conflict, and here we are once more."

I look back at the golem, taking note of how much damage it took before it was defeated.

I'm worried as well.

* * *

The spring breeze smells of the sea as it caresses my face. I stand on a secluded section of the fortress's outside curtain wall, reflecting on the day's events. It's late, well after midnight, but I napped earlier, and my mind is too full to sleep.

Most of the lights were snuffed out hours ago, and only the streetlamps illuminate the dark city now. I imagine the fortress must look like a lantern on top of the small hill. Here, the torches will burn all night, not extinguished until morning. It's a solemn guardian watching over Heistone as it rests.

I lean against the chest-height stone wall, sighing. Pale light plays upon the sea waves, the twin moons' reflections distorted by the movement of the water.

"Heistone is beautiful at night," I say as Henrik joins me.

The commander crosses his arms on the wall, looking into the distance. Though the sea seems as vast as the open ocean, Ryddleport is directly in front of us, only about four days away by paddleboat.

"It is," Henrik agrees.

We stand in silence for a while, both of us lost in our thoughts. Henrik questioned the port guards this afternoon, but he didn't discover any leads. As expected, anyone who knows about the golems isn't talking.

I look behind us at the dark, closed door, and then I set my hand next to Henrik's on the wall. When I brush my pinkie against his, he turns his hand over and laces our fingers together.

"We shouldn't do this," he says quietly. "But I'm tired, and I don't want to care."

He then pulls me into him, wrapping his arms around my back and enveloping me in his warmth. Though we're hidden in the shadows, we're out in the open. Anyone could see us, and rumors will run rampant if someone does. If Lawrence knew we were being so careless, he'd throw a royal fit.

But right now, it doesn't matter.

Henrik moves his hand under my hair to the back of my neck, massaging my tight muscles with his fingertips. His skin is rough from years of wielding a sword, the press of his palm as exhilarating as it is familiar. I melt under his touch, my heart

blooming in the light of his attention.

Oh, it feels good.

Henrik sends tingles along my skin when he brushes my hair behind my shoulder. He angles back just enough to look at me. My stomach tightens, and I lick my lips with anticipation.

He studies me, his eyes hooded, our mouths so close...

“You two realize we’re at the beginning of a war, don’t you?” a female someone says from below us.

The interruption startles me so violently, I shove Henrik away and gasp in a lungful of cool air.

“I swear, half the time I find you two, you’re canoodling,” the small gnome woman says as she hoists herself over the stone wall.

“Maisel!” I exclaim, gaping at her. “How did you get up here?”

“I climbed, Calendula.” She looks at me like I’m daft. “I certainly didn’t sprout wings and buzz up here like a bee.”

“What do you mean we’re at the beginning of a war?” Henrik questions, focusing on what is likely the important part of the conversation.

“You don’t know what a war is, soldier?” Maisel scowls so dramatically, it scrunches her whole face. “Some commander you are.”

“I know what a war is, Maisel,” he says, exasperated. “What I want to know is why

you seem to believe one has already started. The golem was an isolated incident—we're going to find the rest and destroy them.”

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She perches atop the wall, swinging her legs back and forth, tapping her booted heels against the stone. She looks so much like a child dressed up as a warrior, I'm tempted to pull her to safety.

"You sound awfully confident for a man who has no idea what he's up against," she says.

"And you do?" Henrik asks, but the question doesn't come out as snide. Rather, he says the words slowly. They're filled with dread, heavy with trepidation.

"Of course I do—unlike you dolts who spent your time celebrating Camellia's too-convenient death, I actually kept an eye on her."

I gasp, turning the information over in my head to study it. "You know who stole Camellia's body? Was it Barret?"

"What did I tell you?" she says, ignoring me as she addresses Henrik. "What did I say about killing her?"

My eyes pass between the two of them, lost.

Henrik looks just as confused as I am. "What do you mean?"

Maisel watches us intently, leaning forward. "Just because Camellia is dead doesn't mean she's no longer a threat."

"Stop being cryptic," I say impatiently. "You have news—spit it out."

“She embraced the darkest blood magic, Clover.”

It’s always bad when the gnome woman uses my real name.

“Malicious, evil magic. The type that blurs the lines between life and death.” Maisel pauses, gathering her thoughts. “Camellia is dead—yes. But she’s not gone.”

8

HENRIK

“Tell me exactly what you’ve seen,” I say to Maisel, clenching the ledge of the stone wall with my hand. “Everything.”

“I can do better than that.” She hops down and lands in a crouch like a cat. “I’ll show you.”

Maisel walks through the doors like she owns the place, confident we’re right behind her. Because it’s so late, most of the soldiers are asleep or at their stations. And no one expects to see a Dorian gnome wandering the barracks anyway.

“Should we get the others?” Clover whispers to me.

“Not tonight,” Maisel answers. “More numbers will increase our chances of detection. This is a mission for stealth.”

“Can I at least get my bow?” Clover asks, growing frustrated.

Maisel stops in the dim hallway, pausing for a moment before she jerks her chin to give Clover permission. We backtrack a little, going down another hall that leads into the women’s quarters.

“I’ll wait for you here,” I tell them.

“We’ll hurry,” Clover promises, and then she and Maisel disappear around the corner.

I wait, wondering if I look as suspicious as I feel. After a few minutes, footsteps echo down the main hallway. I lean against the wall and cross my arms, trying to look natural.

A night guard pauses when he sees me, bowing his head. “Evening, commander.”

I nod, hoping he’ll keep walking.

His eyes stray from me to the entrance of the women’s hall, and he frowns. “Are you looking for someone?”

“No.”

His brow furrows. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

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Before I can answer, Clover appears in the doorway, with Maisel beside her. As soon as the gnome spots the guard, she darts behind Clover, going back the way they came, out of sight.

The guard misses Maisel, but only because his eyes are on Clover. Surprise brightens his features. “My lady!”

“Ah.” Her gaze goes between us. “Hello.”

“Is there anything I can assist you with?” he asks eagerly. “Perhaps you’re looking for the kitchen? It would be a pleasure to make you a cup of tea.”

Clover glances at me, her eyes sparkling with amusement, and then she shakes her head. “I’m fine, but thank you.”

Understanding slowly dawns on the guard’s face. He looks between us, the cogs in his head clinking together slowly at first but then picking up speed. After several seconds, he lets out a nervous laugh. “Right.Right.” He gives me a knowing look. “I’ll...go now.”

“Have a good evening,” Clover says as he scurries away. Once he’s gone, she grins. “We’re going to be the talk of the fortress in the morning, soldier.”

“Lawrence won’t be pleased.”

She doesn’t look terribly concerned. “What Lawrence doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

“Enough blathering,” Maisel says, appearing around the corner once more. “Let’s go.”

* * *

Our dark cloaks camouflage us as we walk through the sleepy streets. The few people who are out don’t even glance our way, and we don’t look suspicious enough to warrant the guards’ attention. In daylight, Maisel would gather a crowd, but in the night, she’s easily mistaken for a child. People likely think we’re a family traveling and simply arrived late and are looking for a place to spend the night.

“How far are we going?” I ask as we near the edge of Heistone. We’ve wandered into an older part of the city, where many of the houses have been reduced to shacks. The bushes grow tall here, arching over the street and blocking much of the moons’ light. “If you’d told us we were leaving the city, we would have taken horses.”

“We’re not leaving the city,” Maisel says impatiently. “And we’re almost there.”

After passing several more houses and turning down another side street, Maisel pauses in front of a dilapidated cottage that’s set back from the road. It’s against the old city wall, but the canopy of the tall trees shields the small yard from above, giving it privacy.

A short fence is pieced of timber, roughly notched together to make a visual boundary, if not much of a physical one. At one time, there might have been a vegetable patch out front, but even in the dark, I can tell it’s overrun with weeds now.

“Watch your step,” Maisel says. “A kiva lives under the porch.”

Clover pauses, not eager to meet the notoriously nasty rodent.

“I’ll go first,” I tell her quietly, drawing my sword just in case. Covered in smoke-gray fur, the creatures are about as large as a cat, with long, sharp teeth they’re not afraid to use. Thankfully, they’re diurnal and don’t often come out at night.

Cautiously, we walk up the rickety steps that lead to the porch. They creak and groan, feeling like they might give under our weight.

“What exactly are we going to find inside?” Clover asks, the tremor in her voice betraying she’s not as brave as she would like. She pauses in the doorway behind Maisel. “And what’s that smell?”

“The air is stale,” I say, stepping up behind her.

“Not that,” Clover whispers, her tone sharp. “Something else.”

“I don’t know.”

I can’t blame her for being nervous. Maisel is being horribly cryptic about the situation, and I don’t like it any more than Clover. What does the gnome mean Camellia’s dead but not gone?

Maisel doesn’t hesitate in what appears to be a small, covered porch. The shutters are closed, but one hangs askew, one of its hinges busted. Another is missing completely. We follow the gnome into the main house.

“We should have brought the High Vale,” Maisel complains as she stumbles around in the dark. “They make the best torches.”

“Ayan’s blocked,” Clover reminds her at a whisper, loosening up a little when we don’t find immediate danger.

Like me, she probably assumes that if Maisel is talking freely, the gnome must not expect to run into anything alive.

Or...sort of alive.

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“Blasted thrall isn’t good for anything,” the gnome gripes, sounding like she’s tinkering with something. Suddenly, there’s a spark of light, followed by a flickering flame protected by the tinderbox in Maisel’s hand.

It’s just bright enough to make out the oil lamp sitting on the table directly in front of the gnome woman. A few moments later, light floods the room.

The first thing I notice is the layer of dust on the entry table. Some of it has been disrupted, leaving several rings that match the lamp’s base. Someone has been here.

As I’m scrutinizing the filth, Clover gasps.

Turning into the room, I draw in my own startled breath when I spot the body on the floor.

Or what used to be a body.

I pull Clover into me, turning her in my arms to block her view of what’s left of the man. He’s gray and leathery, his eyes clouded and unseeing. There’s nothing left but skin and bones, not an ounce of blood or muscle left to him. He looks like he was dehydrated in the sun like a salted fish.

Even I must look away as my stomach rolls.

“You could have warned us,” I tell Maisel.

“I didn’t realize the two of you were so squeamish,” the tiny warrior says with

disdain.

I rub my hand over Clover's back. "Are you all right?"

She nods, shivering once. "I'll never be able to unsee that."

"I need to take a closer look," I say gently. "How about you stay here?"

"Better you than me."

I release Clover's shoulders, preparing myself. Immediately, I notice several details I didn't register at first glance—the knight's tabard, the amber pennant, and the silver medallion.

"It's Barret," I say heavily, acknowledging something I subconsciously knew the moment Maisel lit the lamp.

Clover makes a noise of distress. I don't believe she and her guard were close, but this is still a horrible shock.

"What did you see?" I demand, turning to Maisel.

The gnome frowns, gathering her thoughts. "The knight brought Camellia's body here after he stole her from the royal mortician. I followed him." She motions to the strange tools scattered on the table near the center of the room—gruesome-looking devices I have no name for. "He did...things to her."

"Things like what?"

"Removed her organs." Even Maisel pales. "And other parts of her. Then he stitched her back up, rubbed her skin with something that smelled bitter, and covered her in

salt.”

“Hemummifiedher?” I ask, only vaguely familiar with the term thanks to my research for my command position. It’s not a practice done in either Caldenbauer or our homeland of Calendria. It comes from further away, from a time of the ancients.

Maisel swallows. “I don’t know. Whatever it was, it wasn’t natural. He tossed a sheet over her and left her like that for weeks, just laying there on the floor. Almost like he was waiting for something.”

“Then what happened?” Clover asks.

“I was beginning to think he’d stuffed her like a beloved pet, and that was that. But one night, he removed the sheet, knelt in front of her, sliced his hand, and dripped blood over her body.” Maisel swallows. “She woke after that.”

“Shewoke?” Clover demands.

“That’s right.”

“What happened to Barret?” I ask, a chill running the length of my spine. I shouldn’t have brought Clover here. What kind of sorcery are we dealing with?

Maisel looks at the wadded-up linen sheet discarded in the corner. “She drained his blood, and I...” She scowls. “Well, I blacked out. Briefly. When I woke up, she was gone.”

Clover’s eyes go wide. “Where did she go?”

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Maisel shakes her head. “I don’t know.”

“When did this happen?” I demand.

Why didn’t Maisel find us sooner?

“About a week ago, maybe a little longer.” Maisel looks around. “I didn’t dare take off just in case she came back. But when I heard you came into the city, I decided to risk leaving to find you.”

“This isn’t good,” Clover whispers, stating an obvious fact.

“We need to have the body taken back to Cabaranth,” I say heavily, averting my eyes from Barret’s face as I kneel next to his corpse.

A folded piece of parchment protrudes from the lacing of his jerkin.

“What’s this?” I ask, gingerly pulling it free.

“I have no idea.” Maisel crouches beside me and peers at the parchment. “I didn’t notice it.”

“What does it say?” Clover demands, standing over my shoulder as I break the wax seal.

My chest constricts as I read the words, and the room begins to spin.

“What does that mean?” Clover gasps, pressing her hand to my arm to keep her balance as she reads over my shoulder.

Maisel snatches the parchment, and I relinquish it without argument. The gnome’s forehead knits as she scans the short message that’s written in dried blood.

To Henrik, with love.

Yours in death,

Camellia

9

CLOVER

Camellia was loathsome enough when she was toying with Henrik while she was alive, but now I must deal with her even though she’s dead?

And what kind of horrifying love letter was that?

It’s too surreal—this can’t be happening. I trust Maisel, but she must be wrong. Maybe Camellia wasn’t truly dead. It’s the only way to explain it.

I stand in the dark street, watching as Henrik talks to the city guards he called over to collect Barret’s body. Not surprisingly, the commotion has caused quite a scene. We’ll bring Barret back to the fortress for now, and then we’ll have him transported to Cabaranth, where the mortician can examine him.

How this all connects to the golems, I can’t even guess. Or if it even does. For all we know, we could be facing a scorned dead princess suffering a wicked case of

unrequited love and a spiteful High Vale determined to start a war.

My lack of sleep suddenly catches up with me, making me want to crawl into bed and pretend none of this is happening. But as I think it, the skin on the back of my neck prickles, causing the hair to stand on end. Feeling eyes on me from the dark street at my back, I slowly turn.

But there's nothing there—nothing I can see anyway.

Spooked, I move closer to the group. If Camellia is truly out there, I had best watch my back.

* * *

“Henrik, we've discovered something in the golem,” Lord Yorgin says to the commander, meeting us at the fortress's entrance.

It's still the middle of the night, but there are far more guards milling around than there were when we left with Maisel.

Lord Yorgin's eyes move to the entourage we lead. It only took two guards to carry the emaciated knight. So, naturally, we ended up with fifteen.

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“We discovered something as well.” Henrik nods for the two guards carrying the wrapped body to follow him.

Pranmore steps into the torchlight, his eyes on the wrapped body, wrinkling his nose as if smelling something sour. With a suppressed gag, he says, “You found Camellia.”

“You’re awake.” I grimace. “And not exactly.”

“I can smell the taint of her magic,” he argues. “It’s overwhelming.”

Sometimes I’m truly thankful I’m not a Woodmore. Well, not a full one at least. Audra says I must have some in my lineage.

“Take the body to the morgue,” Henrik says to Simon, who’s appeared as well. “Guard it personally. I don’t want this one disappearing. We’ll leave for Cabaranth at sunup.”

“Yes, commander,” Simon says solemnly, following the men carrying the body.

Henrik turns back to Lord Yorgin. “What did you find on the golem?”

“When we pried the energy crystal out of its chest, we discovered a note.”

“A note?” I ask, not liking where this is heading.

“What did it say?” Henrik asks coolly.

Lord Yorgin removes a scrap of parchment from a pocket in his jerkin and hands it to the commander. Henrik's face goes stormy as he reads it.

"What is it?" I ask warily.

"Directions."

"To where...?"

Henrik looks up, meeting my eyes. "The shack where we found Barret."

I let the information sink in, and then I tug him aside so Lord Yorgin won't overhear me. "Camellia was behind the golem attack then."

Henrik nods, pocketing the parchment. He turns back to the knight. "I must take this to the king."

Lord Yorgin nods. "We were preparing to send men to the location."

"There's no need. We were just there."

Confusion shadows Lord Yorgin's face. He glances toward the doors the guards took the body through and then decides to follow them.

Henrik says to Pranmore and me, "We need to talk." He glances at the guards milling around. "Wake Ayan and Bartholomew—Clover's brother as well."

Several minutes later, we gather in Henrik's temporary quarters.

To no one's surprise, Maisel shows up at the window a minute later, hanging from a rope fixed to the top of the tower. She raps impatiently on the glass, waiting for

someone to let her in.

“Took you long enough, you worthless thrall,” she grouses when Ayan opens the window and helps her inside. “I thought my arms were going to fall off.”

Used to her people’s grumbling, Ayan grins like she offered him a warm, heartfelt greeting. “I missed you too, Maisel.”

My eyes pass over the group, and I realize we represent every civilized race in Caldenbauer except the Boermin, though we feel incomplete without Lawrence, Audra, and Lyredon. I think of Camellia out there, wandering...

Dead.

I hope they’re all right.

Once Ayan closes the door, Henrik explains what we found on our outing to the northern section of the city. My eyes latch onto Pranmore. With every passing minute, his face falls a little further, until he looks despondent.

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“What magic could bring a woman back from death?” Henrik asks the Woodmore. But Pranmore is too overwhelmed to speak.

Ayan lifts his hand like a pupil in a classroom. “I know.”

Henrik stares at him for several seconds. Reluctantly, he jerks his head, telling him to get on with it.

“I liked to do a little reading the nights I couldn’t sleep over Gruebin’s snores,” Ayan says. “He had a book that mentioned something that happened in a human settlement near the gnome’s territory before the war, not long after you people began settling in Caldenbauer.”

“You snooped through our archives?” Maisel demands, her hand instinctively going to the handle of her favorite, pint-sized war axe.

“Does that matter right now?” Henrik asks her.

The gnome crosses her arms and scowls at Ayan.

“A man in the book contracted some illness,” Ayan says. “It didn’t say what. He was a con artist—a thief. His townspeople refused to help him, all turning him away when he asked for money for medicine. He was dying, but his wife had passed away years before, and he didn’t want to leave his young daughter alone. Desperate, he went into the gnomes’ territory and found a hermit who lived deep in the woods. At the old gnome’s suggestion, the man turned to necromancy.”

“Wretched old git was alive in my parents’ time,” Maisel says darkly. “Had a reputation—knew things he shouldn’t, dabbled in things no gnome ever should.”

Ayan nods. “He ended up helping the fledgling blood mage concoct a potion that would keep him alive. What was the gnome’s name again, Maisel?” Ayan rubs his chin as he thinks. “Kipper? Kiloy?”

“Kivear,” Pranmore says quietly.

“That’s it!” Ayan snaps his fingers and points at the Woodmore. “Kivear. The spell utilized three sources of blood—the man’s, some kind of nasty rat’s, and an unwilling victim’s—along with all kinds of other unsavory things that weren’t listed in detail—”

“For good reason,” Maisel interrupts.

Ayan continues, “As soon as the man drank the finished concoction, Kivear stabbed a dagger right in his heart.”

“He killed him even though he was dying?” Bartholomew asks, looking pale enough I’m not sure we should have roused him.

“There was something about that,” Ayan answers, struggling to remember. “The concoction’s effects only last a day after drinking, or something like that. The man would have to take it every day until death, so maybe the gnome killed him to expedite the process?”

“He couldn’t die of natural causes,” Pranmore says on a deep sigh. “In order for the spell to be made complete, his life had to be taken by someone else.”

“The effects fade after a day? Camellia must have made enough to last for months,” I

whisper, my mind returning to the dead man in her closet and the crime she charged me with.

“Insurance,” Henrik says quietly, his eyes fixed on the wall like he remembers something. “And she made a fresh supply before the wedding.”

“But when?” I ask. “You were guarding her day and night.”

The commander’s eyes meet mine, and I draw in a breath. There was one night he left Camellia alone—the one he spent with me.

“What happened to the man?” Colter asks Ayan, engrossed in the story like it’s a ghostly bedtime tale.

“Kivear prepared his body and took him to his daughter.” He grimaces. “It got a bit gruesome after that.”

I rub my hand over my heart, horrified. “The man killed his daughter when he woke?”

Silence blankets the room before Ayan finally answers, “Once he realized what he did, the man murdered Kivear and then moved onto his town, blaming the people for not helping him.”

“How did they stop him?” Henrik asks.

Maisel answers before Ayan, “They didn’t. After the massacre, he sat in the middle of the square, and there he stayed. A Woodmore woman found him years later and sent him back to the earth when he begged for an end.”

All eyes fall on Pranmore, and Henrik asks, “Can you send Camellia back to death?”

The Woodmore rubs a hand over his face. “I don’t know.”

* * *

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I steal just a few hours of sleep before sunup, and then it's time to move. The next day passes in a blur of travel. We don't get out of Heistone until midday, which forces us to stop at an inn at dusk. Though no one knows much about what monster Camellia has turned herself into, Henrik said blood magic is always strongest after nightfall.

It's now afternoon the following day, and we're finally back in Cabaranth. We've delivered Barret's body to the morgue and told Lawrence our story. All I want is my bed, but I doubt I'll have a chance to visit it anytime soon.

The king's eyes go between the two notes, his face grim. He sits back in his chair at the table in his council room. It's just our close group of friends, along with his sealed knights.

After several seconds, he asks, "What does she want?"

"Power," Audra answers. "What else?"

My eyes move to the note written in blood, remembering the way it was fixed to Barret's body like he was a package wrapped with care.

"But why announce herself?" Lawrence asks. "The element of surprise was on her side. If she's hoping to take the kingdom, why would she give that up?"

"And why was the letter specifically addressed to Henrik?" Bartholomew asks. He looks better now, not quite as pale. We've all had a little time for the gruesome news to soak in.

Lawrence taps his fingers on the table next to the notes, deep in thought.

“Did you recover any other golems?” Lawrence asks Henrik.

“We did not,” Henrik reluctantly admits. “I felt bringing this information to you was a priority. But I have instructed Lord Yorgin to continue the search. His soldiers are combing Heistone as we speak.”

Lawrence nods, satisfied. “Take several men and arrest the necromancer in the city, the one Camellia had dealings with. Perhaps he will be able to tell us something.”

“The one who supplied Camellia’s ingredients?” I ask, remembering the old man. He has a legitimate-enough apothecary shop, but he sells to a different clientele after hours.

“That’s right,” Lawrence confirms. “Do it before he runs.”

“It’s possible he took off the moment he heard Camellia died,” I point out.

Henrik rolls his stiff neck. “I suppose we’ll find out.”

Lawrence ends our impromptu meeting, and the commander and I split off from the others.

“How are you?” I ask Henrik, glancing down the hall to see if we’re alone.

But we’re not. We rarely are.

Henrik runs his hand through his thick hair. “I’m not sure.”

The problem is no one truly knows what the princess wants. If you’re going to take a

potion to prevent death, surely you have some purpose for it.

“You should stay here and try to get some rest,” he says. “I’ll find you when I return.”

I want to tell him I’ll come along, but I’m weary, and I’ll be little help in this state. I didn’t get much sleep in the inn—how could I after what Henrik and I saw? But the night could have been worse. I shared a room with Maisel and her rock leopard, and I was glad for their company. It was better than spending the night alone.

The gnome woman traveled with us, keeping to the greenery and tall grass where the soldiers accompanying us wouldn’t spot her. She warned me she would go north when we neared Cabaranth to take the news to Gruebin and the rest of the gnomes in Crevershim Hollow, and I haven’t seen her since. At least she shared her plans this time. Too often, she simply up and disappears.

“I might take a nap,” I say. “I’m going to have to console Calla soon too. I’m just hoping we have a few hours before the news of Barret’s death reaches her.”

Henrik’s hand moves, looking like he wants to reach for me. Of course he can’t, not here in the hallway. “Sleep first.”

“Be careful, all right?”

He nods.

“Are we going now?” Bartholomew asks, materializing next to us.

Henrik’s eyes betray his reluctance to leave me, but he nods.

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I watch the two of them walk away. They join several knights waiting nearby and disappear down a flight of stairs. I'm left alone, pondering my place again. I'm not a lady-in-waiting, nor a princess. I'm certainly not a soldier or a guard.

"You look like you're questioning every decision you've made in your life," Lawrence says lightly, joining me.

"I don't know where I belong anymore," I say, spotting the kitchen maid who seems to be sweet on Henrik. She walks down the hall, heading in the same direction as the commander and his squire, following him like a lovesick puppy.

"You belong by my side, but you gave that up." Lawrence gives me a sideways look. "You haven't changed your mind, have you? Have the long, tedious weeks we've spent apart filled you with doubt?"

I scoff at the ridiculous idea, giving him my attention. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"The idea of you pining for me for the rest of your life isn't entirely unpleasant."

Unable to help myself, I laugh. "You're ridiculous."

He smiles, but it's tinged with worry. "What's Camellia planning?"

"I have no idea," I say softly.

"While Henrik is away, you'll stay with me. I don't like the idea of leaving you

alone.”

“I’m going to take a nap.”

“Oh? A nap?” Lawrence’s brown eyes light with mischief. “Let’s go then.”

“If Audra hears you, she’ll slit your throat.”

He rolls his eyes. “Audra has told me repeatedly she won’t marry me.”

“This must be a humbling situation for you. You’ve found not one, but two women who are immune to your charm.”

“Audra’s not immune.” He lifts a brow and drops his voice. “You weren’t immune either. You’re just too blasted loyal, and Henrik confessed first.”

“Tell me the truth. Are you sad you lost me...or that you lost me to Henrik?”

“They’re both mortal injuries.” He grins. “How can I be expected to discern which pains me the most?”

I roll my eyes. “Are you serious about marrying Audra?”

Suddenly solemn, he nods. “At the time, hers was an easy name to call out. But the more I think about it, the better the idea seems. If I can’t have you, I might as well enter a marriage for political gain.”

“How romantic,” I say dryly.

“Her mother agreed, and Ayan doesn’t have any qualms. Audra is the only one causing trouble.”

“Well, hurry up and convince her. I’m tired of hiding my relationship just to protect your royal ego.”

The king laughs, a little too smug.

“Why do you think your sister wrote that note to Henrik?” I ask quietly. “Why him specifically?”

The amusement falls from Lawrence’s face. “He rejected her in the end. She’s not likely to forget that.”

I clench my fingers against my palm. “Is it safe for him to leave the castle?”

“During the daylight hours. Thankfully, nightmares can only move under the cloak of darkness.” He chuckles. “Besides, he’s one of my knights. I’m not going to put him under lock and key just because my ghoulish sister is still infatuated with him.”

“You’re taking this better than expected,” I say softly, ignoring his use of the word “knight” when he hasn’t given Henrik his seal yet.

He shakes his head. “I’m not really.”

“You hide it well.”

“What choice do I have?”

What choice does any of us have? This is...horrific. But we can either work past it or hide in a corner. I've never been one to cower at Camellia's feet, and I don't intend to start now—even if she's become a true monster.

But that doesn't mean I'll be able to sleep tonight, and I doubt Lawrence will either.

10

HENRIK

“You're coming too?” I ask Ayan as he joins the small party of men I've gathered for the arrest, his horse already saddled.

“I don't have anything better to do,” the elf says. “If Pranmore gets to join you, I don't see why I can't.”

Does he think this is a hunting trip I've arranged for bored adolescents?

“Pranmore can use wards,” Bartholomew points out. “And you...”

My squire shrugs.

“I can summon fire in the palm of my hand,” Ayan argues.

“Sometimes.” I tighten my horse’s girth strap. “As long as a ralnauth isn’t trying to bite off my leg.”

Ayan tilts his head, studying me with a vague smile. “I feel you may be harboring some resentment toward me, Henrik. Should we talk about it?”

“No.”

The annoying elf laughs. “I outrank you all—I’m going.”

Pranmore is silent throughout the entire exchange. The appearance of the golems unnerved him, but the situation with Camellia threw him into an abyss. He hasn’t even been working on his poetry. He just broods.

“Why are we taking horses when the necromancer lives inside the city?” Bartholomew asks. “Wouldn’t it be easier to arrest him on foot?”

“He might run,” I say. “We must be prepared.”

“He’s already run,” Ayan says.

I make a noise of agreement. “I’ll be surprised if he didn’t. Let’s go.”

There are ten of us—Bartholomew, Pranmore, Ayan, six soldiers, and me. All but Pranmore ride through the streets. The Woodmore walks by our side, the situation not warranting the use of a horse in his opinion.

When we near our quarry, I instruct the men to circle around the shop, blocking exits along the surrounding streets as we make our way to the front. But it’s apparent as soon as we arrive that the necromancer is gone. Even though it’s the middle of the day, the shutters are locked, and a piece of parchment is tacked to the door.

I dismount, climbing the steps to read the notice.

“What’s it say?” Bartholomew asks, joining me.

“He left on urgent business,” I answer, walking down the entry and passing the herb garden. My eyes land on an old man sitting on a porch on the opposite side of the street.

“How long has the apothecary been away?” I call, crossing to him.

The man eyes me and the others. “Since the sham of a royal wedding.”

“He left that night?”

The man nods, and his eyes slide to my arm pennant and medallion. “Seemed like he was in a bit of a hurry.”

“Any idea where he went?”

“We don’t talk much.”

I nod, turning to leave until he calls me back.

“He caters to a different crowd in the evenings, commander.” He narrows his eyes.

“A suspicious lot, all of them.”

“Thank you for your help.”

“Now what?” Ayan asks when I return to our group.

“I’ll ask the constable to assign a few guards to the area to watch the shop,” I say. “If he returns, they’ll make the arrest, and we can question him then. There’s not much else we can do now.”

When we return to the castle, I spot a group in the courtyard. Lord Birchall stands in the middle, speaking with a city guard. The knight commander wears a somber expression, and he nods as he listens.

Miguel breaks off from the group when he sees us.

“Three golems were confiscated by city guards in Drebigan,” the sealed knight tells us. “It was a random gate inspection. The men have been taken to the dungeon for questioning.”

“Drebigan?” I ask. “That’s all the way in Ladora.”

Miguel nods, looking uneasy.

“How long have they been smuggling the golems in?” I ask, more to myself than the knight.

“There’s more,” Miguel says heavily. “There was another golem set loose, this time in Evervale.”

Pranmore freezes. “That’s my village.”

“Was anyone hurt?” I demand.

Miguel glances at Pranmore and then looks back at me. “An elderly elf was injured, but she’ll be all right. She warded a group of children who appeared to be the golem’s target. The guards were finally able to take it down, but without a High Vale to assist, it took hours.”

“Children?” Pranmore says, his voice thick.

A heavy weight settles in my chest. “How did they defeat the golem?”

“With the help of several of the local Woodmores’ wards containing it, they tied ropes to its limbs and yanked it apart with horses.”

Is there any way to defeat these weapons without magic?

“Did they find a message?” I ask.

“I’m not certain they looked.”

“Did they bring the golem with them?”

“The pieces of it, yes.”

“Bartholomew, track it down and pry the energy crystal from its chest. See if there’s a note there.”

“Yes, Henrik,” my squire responds sagely, glad to have a task.

“Did you find the necromancer?” Miguel asks.

I shake my head as I watch Bartholomew weave through the growing crowd of guards and soldiers. “He was long gone.”

“Lawrence is in a council meeting. I only stepped out to ensure the smuggled golems were properly secured. I’m finished now and ready to return. You three should come as well.”

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Ayan, Pranmore, and I walk with Miguel to the council room. When we step inside, we find Lawrence, along with Denny, Xander, Alfred, and the five royal council members, including Clover's father.

"He's too young," Lord Nevin says. "And he's not ready."

Lawrence lifts a hand in greeting as we enter. The young king sits at the head of the table with his elbows on the surface. He rests his chin on his clasped hands, listening to his advisors bicker.

"It's his birthright," Lord Cowell, Nevin's nephew, argues.

Lawrence nods me over.

"What are they quarreling about?" I ask quietly, taking the empty seat beside him.

"Now that I'm king, I'm no longer able to stand in as the duke marshal for Bartholomew. In light of recent events, I've decided the position needs to be filled."

"Bartholomew isn't ready," I say, aghast.

"That seems to be the general consensus."

"Doyouwant to place him at the head of your entire army?" I demand

"Not particularly." Lawrence frowns. "But as Lord Cowell says, it's his birthright."

“Name one of your knight commanders as a temporary duke marshal,” I suggest. “A stand-in until Bartholomew comes of age and is ready for the responsibility.”

Lawrence studies me. “That’s a dangerous suggestion. You expect me to hand over my army to a man who doesn’t share my blood? What will keep him from turning on me and stealing the throne?”

“Choose someone trustworthy, preferably a man who has a decent relationship with Bartholomew so he can teach him.”

Lawrence’s face scrunches with deep thought. “Out of morbid curiosity, who would you choose?”

“Gavriel is hot-tempered, but his family is unerringly loyal to the crown,” I answer. “Or, if you can bear to part with one of your sealed knights, Miguel would be excellent.”

“So let me get this straight,” Lawrence says. “I need someone whose loyalty is unquestionable—someone close to Bartholomew. A person who isn’t power hungry, who will step down when Bartholomew comes of age. A man with a solid understanding of military tactics, who will put the good of my people above his own quest for glory.”

I nod.

“You are the only person I know who fits that description. Are you volunteering, Henrik?”

“What?” Shock racks my body like an earth tremor.

Lawrence lifts his brows, waiting for an answer.

“I’m not noble-born,” I hiss under my breath. “I’m not even a knight.”

“You act like I can’t fix that.”

“Lawrence!” I glance at the council, hoping no one has overheard. Thankfully, they’re too busy arguing to pay our whispered conversation any attention. At least until Lawrence stands. Slowly, the men turn toward their new king.

I extend my hand toward Lawrence and then clasp it into a fist, pressing my lips together, helpless to do anything but wait to see what he’ll say.

Once Lawrence has the room’s attention, he declares, “As Bartholomew’s mentor, Henrik will step in as duke marshal until Bartholomew comes of age.”

The room falls silent.

I shake my head, nervously glancing at our stunned onlookers. “Your Majesty, with all due respect, that’s not what I was suggesting—”

“We’ll do his knighting ceremony tonight, and then we’ll swear him into the position immediately after.”

“Sire,” Lord Nevin says, eyeing me nervously. “Henrik served under your sister until quite recently—”

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“I told you then, and I will tell you again—Henrik was following my orders.” Lawrence’s voice is stern, angry even. “There is no one I trust more.”

His words take me by surprise, and I sit back, trying to make sense of the situation.

“I believe Henrik is an excellent choice,” Count Flauret says. “He has proven himself repeatedly in the last eight years, and there’s not a man in this room who doesn’t know it.”

“But he’s...common-born,” Lord Winston argues, lowering his voice to whisper the words like they’re a particularly nasty curse. He glances at me, weakly lifting his hand in an apology.

I fix my eyes on the wall as the council debates whether I should be elevated to a position that will outrank them all. Breathing hard, I stare at the Phoenix King’s crest woven into the tapestry hanging behind Lawrence.

I can’t make sense of any of it. Lawrence can’t name me as duke marshal, not even temporarily. The position is held by high-ranking nobles, usually of royal lineage. I’m the son of a blacksmith.

“It doesn’t matter if you agree,” Lawrence says to his council members in a bored tone. “I’ve made my decision.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Lord Winston says, bowing his head. The others follow suit.

“We’ll take care of the legalities tonight.” Lawrence waves toward the door. “You’re

all dismissed.”

The king’s advisors leave the council room, but the king’s guard and our group hang back. Once the last of the advisors leave, Ayan asks Lawrence, “Does duke marshal outrank duke?”

“Yes,” Lawrence answers.

Ayan clucks his tongue as if disappointed. Grinning at me, he says, “At least I got to pull rank on you once before you were promoted.”

“You can’t do this,” I say to Lawrence, ignoring Ayan. “I’m not qualified for the position.”

“According to whom?” Lawrence gives me a bland look. “The king of Caldenbauer says you are. Who outranks me, Henrik?”

“We’re not even close,” I protest, exasperated. “And yet you’re going to hand me your army?”

“All the reasons you are dreadfully dull make you the best choice.” Lawrence smirks, amusing himself if no one else. “Even the fact that you’re protesting shows you’re fit for the role. And besides— isn’t this what you want? To climb the ranks and prove your worth? Shouldn’t you bethankingme? Short of handing you my crown, I can’t bestow a higher honor upon you.”

“Make me a knight—that’s all I ask,” I say, growing desperate. “That’s all I’ve ever asked.”

“They’re having another touching king-to-knight moment,” Ayan mock-whispers to Pranmore. “Should we give them some privacy?”

“You—” Lawrence points at the High Vale. “Stay put.”

Ayan shrugs as if it doesn’t make any difference to him.

“We’re done discussing this,” Lawrence says to me. “If I say you are worthy, you are worthy. Stop questioning my authority.”

I give him a curt nod, sensing this is a battle I cannot win.

Satisfied we’re finished with the subject, Lawrence turns to Ayan. “Write to Lady Ellaine and ask her to send men. We need to show a united front against this threat, or the humans of Caldenbauer will believe your people are behind the attacks.”

Ayan grins, reclining against the wall. “I suppose I can spare a few of my soldiers.”

“Your soldiers are still my soldiers,” Lawrence says dryly. “Asking is merely a courtesy.”

The High Vale laughs. He turns toward the door and lifts his hand in a goodbye. “I’m off to do your bidding, my liege.”

Pranmore excuses himself as well, and then Lawrence nods his knights outside. When we’re alone, he turns back to me. “Before my family won Caldenbauer from the elves, we were slaves. My great grandfather tended muircorn pens. Are you telling me Telgin was unworthy of taking the title of Phoenix King because of his lineage?”

“I know what you’re doing.”

“Then you also know I’m right.”

I draw in a slow breath. “I don’t want people to believe I obtained a position I don’t

deserve.”

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“Set your pride aside, Henrik. As absurd as it is—and believe me, I acknowledge it—you’re the only person I trust. I need you to step up and do this for me. Not as a commander taking orders from his king.” He averts his eyes, looking like he has indigestion. “As a friend.”

I cringe. “Are we friends now, Lawrence?”

“I’m afraid so.” He sighs as if disgusted. “I’m just as horrified as you.”

Suddenly, I laugh, running my hand through my hair. “Fine—but only until Bartholomew comes of age.”

“Train him well, Henrik.”

“I will.”

He nods slowly. “I know you will.”

Sensing we need to end this conversation before it suffocates us, I say, “I’m going to find Clover.”

“She’s sleeping.” He grins. “Poor thing was tired, so I tucked her in for a nap.”

I walk to the door. “I don’t care if you’re my king—you’re still a boarker.”

Lawrence laughs as I leave, and I shake my head. His joking doesn’t rankle me as it would have at one time. I know Clover too well to doubt her steadfastness. If she

wanted Lawrence, she had plenty of opportunities to choose him.

I nod to Lawrence's guard as I pass them, wondering how much of the conversation they were able to hear through the door.

"Duke marshal," I murmur to myself when I'm alone. Suddenly, I chuckle, rubbing my neck as I contemplate it.

It's ridiculous, but still...

Duke marshal.

11

CLOVER

As expected, Calla is inconsolable. Lavender, Hyacinth, and I take turns keeping her company throughout the afternoon, none of us eager to leave her alone now that the news of Barret's death has spread throughout the castle.

My heart aches for my friend, but it's more than that—I'm angry. Angry that Barret used her and angry that Camellia is still causing so much pain.

"I just don't understand how he could do such a thing," Calla says, her eyes red and her cheeks pale.

"I know," I whisper, handing her a new handkerchief.

Lavender sits beside Calla. Gently, she says, "It hurts now, but it will get better with time."

“I want to believe you.” Calla turns to her, devastated. “But you’ve never lost anyone.”

Lavender wraps her into a hug. “I know I haven’t, but I did lose Lord Kevington—”

“Lavender!” I hiss, widening my eyes and telling her to cease that sentence immediately.

But it’s too late. Calla pulls back, incredulous. “Yourcat?”

“Ilovedhim,” Lavender exclaims as if we aren’t very aware of that fact, her eyes growing misty. “And why are you angry with me? I’m just trying to comfort you.”

I rub my hands over my face, groaning quietly. It happened years ago, when we’d just become Camellia’s ladies. We heard about that cat’s death for two solid weeks.

“Henrik has returned,” Hyacinth says from the doorway. “You go, Clover. I’ll stay.”

“Lavender brought up her cat,” I warn in a whisper as I pass her. “Again.”

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Hyacinth grimaces. “I heard.”

“Did Henrik apprehend the necromancer?” I ask. The ladies know a little more than the vague information Lawrence has allowed the rest of the court.

She shakes her head. “I have no idea.”

I come to an abrupt stop as I step into the hall. Colter leans against the wall, looking bored.

“What are you doing here?” I ask my brother.

He bows dramatically. “Hello, Lady Clover. His Royal Majesty said I was to escort you this evening.”

“Escort me where?”

Colter steps closer and drops his voice. “I have it on good authority that Henrik is being promoted tonight.”

I grasp Colter’s arm. “Lawrence is going through with his knighting ceremony?”

“According to Father, it’s an intimate affair, with only the highest-ranking nobles invited. Naturally, our family will attend.”

“An intimate affair for a knighting?” I ask, skeptical. Yes, sealed knights outrank all others, but they’re still knights.

My brother grins, loving that he knows something I don't.

"What aren't you telling me?" I demand.

Colter and I have always been friendly, likely because we're so close in age. We grew apart a bit when he became a knight and I was assigned to Camellia, but it's nice spending time with him again.

"It's a surprise." He glances at my riding trousers and belted tunic with disgust. "But you might want to change into a dress."

I raise my brows, wondering what Lawrence is up to—and right now, of all times.

"Fine," I say. "I'll let you accompany me to my quarters."

"How is Lady Calla?" Colter asks as we walk.

With a heavy sigh, I pinch the hem of my tunic, letting my fingers worry the linen fabric. "Heartbroken. Not only is Barret dead, but she must come to terms with the fact that he was using her to get close to Lawrence and me."

"Denny ranted for a good hour last night that he should have sensed something was amiss. Barret hurt Calla, and you were in horrible danger."

I frown, thinking about that. "And yet I came out unscathed."

An image of Barret in the shack comes to my mind, but I shake my head violently, willing it away.

"Thank goodness," Colter says. "Believe me, Clover, if something had happened to you..."

I smile up at him. “I know.”

Colter stays in the sitting area while I go into the bedchamber to change.

Several minutes later, I emerge in a cream-colored gown with a pale green overdress.
“What do you think?”

Colter jerks his head, bored. “Better.”

I set my hands on my hips. “Just better?”

“I don’t know. How’s this—at least you look like a girl now.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “I’ll consider it a win.”

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“Let’s hurry. Father and Mother should be there by now.”

“Mother is coming as well?” I ask, startled.

“Of course she’s going to support her future son-in-law.”

“Son-in-law?” I say lightly, but the words make me tingle.

“If that’s what you want. There’s no way Father will refuse a marriage alliance between you two. Not now.”

My stomach flutters, and I swallow back excited nerves. “You have to tell me what’s going on.”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

As I follow Colter through the halls, I try to puzzle out the surprise. But besides Lawrence making Henrik a sealed knight, I cannot think what it could be.

We enter the throne room and find a small crowd. The people in attendance are the closest to the crown—advisors and their wives, Lawrence’s blood relations, and a few families who were close to Algernon.

Brielle and her father are in attendance as well. Roark looks uncomfortable, but Henrik’s sister is pure sunshine. Bartholomew stands with them, keeping them company in the esteemed crowd. The young duke waves when he sees me, grinning.

I nod a greeting to Brielle, and then I whisper to Bartholomew, “What’s going on? Colter wouldn’t tell me.”

“Lawrence has decided to appoint Henrik as duke marshal,” he says.

I hear the words—I even understand their meaning. But I can’t process them.

“But...” I say dumbly. “But you’re...”

Bartholomew grins. “I will apprentice Henrik in the position, stepping in when I come of age. Isn’t it perfect, Clover? Can you imagine a man more suited to head up our great army?”

I blink at him, turning my eyes on Brielle. She merely shrugs, looking elated.

“Lady Clover,” Bartholomew suddenly says as if remembering his manners. “Have you been introduced to Master Roark?”

“I have not,” I say, turning to the man.

I’ve never seen the blacksmith so well-groomed. His long, graying hair has been carefully combed, and he wears it in a tail at the nape of his neck. There’s not a spot of soot on him, and he stands tall. He bows his head to me, looking like he feels out of place in this crowd. “It’s an honor, Lady Clover.”

I give him a demure nod, choosing not to respond.

I’ve never noticed it before, likely because I’ve never seen the man outside his smithy, but I can see the resemblance between him and Henrik now. But this man cannot hold a candle to his son, and not because Henrik is so handsome.

Roark has hurt Henrik repeatedly. He's made him feel inadequate and small, and it would be difficult to like him even if he didn't blindly follow Camellia to Ferradelle.

"You must be very proud of Henrik," I say.

His expression sharpens. "That sounds like a command, Lady Clover."

I shrug, searching the small crowd for my family. "It was."

Brielle's eyes go wide, but she bites her bottom lip, looking like she's trying not to laugh.

With an airy nod, I say, "If you'll excuse me."

Gavriel lifts his hand from the front row, gesturing to the empty seat beside him. When I take my spot, my eldest brother whispers, "Making friends?"

"Always."

Gavriel laughs. "Tell me something."

“All right.”

He nods toward the dais, where the king’s guard is already waiting. “How did you manage this?”

“Me?”

“There is nothing you cannot accomplish, Clover. And somehow, you’ve even made the common-born man you wish to marry royal.”

“It’s a gift,” I tease.

“That may be, but you might want to stake your claim sooner than later.” Gavriel gestures toward the trio of young women hovering near the front corner of the room, giggling as they wait for the commander to make his appearance.

“Believe me, I would if I could. But Lawrence commanded we must wait to announce our relationship until he and Audra marry.”

Gavriel laughs, shaking his head. “Your friendship with the king is a strange one.”

He has no idea.

The crowd falls silent as my father walks up the steps of the dais. “Please find your seats,” he says to the room. “The ceremony will begin shortly.”

The next few minutes are filled with the shuffling of chairs and swishing of gowns.

Once the people take their places, Lawrence appears at the side of the room. The crowd stands, and we bow our heads to our king.

“You may be seated,” Father says after Lawrence takes his throne. “The knighting will begin in a moment.”

“Knighting?” I ask Gavriel. “But Bartholomew said—”

“Only a nobleman may become duke marshal,” my brother says. “Henrik must first become a sealed knight, and then he will be appointed to the new position.”

Suddenly nervous, I twist my hands in my lap. When Henrik appears in the doorway at the side of the royal dais, my heart forgets to beat. He looks painfully handsome in his military best, wearing the colors of our kingdom. His golden commander’s medallion gleams in the light, newly polished. Bartholomew stands at his side, bursting with pride. You’d think Henrik was his brother.

Together, they walk to the front of the room. Bartholomew takes his place at Lawrence’s side, and Henrik lowers himself before the king.

A young page enters with Henrik’s seal on a red silken pillow, walking carefully. The boy looks keenly aware he has the room’s attention.

Lawrence rises again to accept the seal, but this time, we stay seated. He turns toward Henrik. After several long seconds, he says, “Over the last eight years, you have served diligently in my father’s army, working your way through the infantry and eventually claiming the position of commander. You are trustworthy and loyal, and have risked body and mind for the good of Caldenbauer. It is my greatest pleasure to elevate you from soldier to knight. You were born a commoner, but you are now a nobleman of my kingdom, with all the honor that accompanies the title. Rise, Sir Henrik.”

I press my lips together, telling myself I won't cry. But there's no stopping this fierce pride. I'm overwhelmed with joy, so happy for the man I love, knowing how long he's waited for this moment.

Henrik stands, and even though his back is facing us, I have no doubt he's stoically shielding his emotions.

Lawrence removes the emerald soldier-class pennant and golden commander medallion, replacing them with an amber pennant and the elite knight's seal. I blink several times, clutching my hands together.

After a long moment, Henrik turns to face the crowd.

We rise once more, and Lawrence says, "It is my honor to present Sir Henrik Solbane, my fifth and final sealed knight."

The crowd applauds, but no one is more exuberant than I.

12

HENRIK

My heart beats like a snare drum in my chest. I've reached my goal. This moment I've dreamed of my entire adult life has finally come. I stare at the crowd, taking in the faces of people who were once too far above me to even address. They're my equals now.

But it's Clover who has my attention. She sits with her family, grinning as she claps wildly, so beautiful and within reach.

She cries, shedding joyous tears. She understands; she knows.

“Please take your seats once more,” Count Flauret says when the applause tapers off.
“We will continue.”

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I turn back to Lawrence. Under my breath, I say, “I’ve had my seal for less than a minute, and you’re going to take it from me.”

“I’ll let you keep it,” Lawrence answers wryly. “You can sleep with it tonight.”

With a roll of my eyes, I kneel once more. “Just get on with it.”

But Lawrence waits several seconds, likely just to drive me mad.

Finally, he begins, “Sir Henrik Solbane, I bestow a great honor upon you today. You will rise from the ranks of the nobility and take your place as a ruling member of the royal class.”

I widen my eyes, silently telling him one last time this is asinine.

Ignoring me, Lawrence continues, “The title of duke marshal is not an honor to take lightly. I entrust my army to you, giving you the authority to command it as you see fit. You will answer to me alone, serving as no less than a brother.”

I swallow, processing his words.

“May the people of Caldenbauer be your guide. Every decision should be made with their safety, comfort, and happiness in mind.” He pins me with a royal look. “Do you accept the burden I offer?”

“I do.”

“Then rise.”

I do as instructed, giving my seal one last rueful glance.

“You look like you’re going to pass out,” Lawrence mutters as he removes the amber pennant and ruby medallion from my arm.

But I can’t answer. I hold my breath as the king replaces my newly acquired seal with a red pennant, along with the golden medallion which states I am second only to the king.

“From this day forward, you are a duke of my kingdom,” Lawrence says. “And an honorary member of my family, even after your time is served and Bartholomew has claimed his birthright.” The king meets my eyes, giving me a solemn nod. “Caldenbauer thanks you for your service.”

I slowly turn, feeling like a fraud, especially when the people in attendance bow to show their respect—and not for Lawrence this time.

For me.

Lawrence steps up next to me and surveys the room. Quietly, he says, “What do you think? Can you get used to it?”

I laugh a little, overwhelmed. “Not likely.”

* * *

Dinner follows the ceremony. I sit with Lawrence and Bartholomew, still separated from Clover because Lawrence enjoys lording his power over us. But our gazes often meet throughout the meal. She wears light green. The color brings out the mischief in

her eyes.

Pranmore sits with Clover and her family, but as personal guests of the king, Ayan and Audra are seated at our table.

Bartholomew leans close to me and whispers, “Audra looks no closer to agreeing to a marriage alliance than she did when Lawrence randomly chose her from the crowd.”

My squire isn’t wrong. If anything, she looks like she hates him more. The pretty High Vale stares daggers at Lawrence, piercing her knife into a piece of duck with a little more exuberance than necessary.

Unless Lawrence commands her obedience, it seems Clover and I will have a long wait ahead of us. The thought is sobering, even on an evening such as this.

The night stretches on, and people finally begin to leave. They approach our table in pairs and trios, congratulating me. Some mean it; others cannot forget my heritage.

But now that I’ve been appointed to the position, I intend to earn their approval and teach Bartholomew well. It’s an honor I don’t deserve, but it’s one I will not take lightly.

Count Flauret finally comes to our table, along with his wife and Clover. Immediately, I stand to greet them, nearly knocking over my goblet of wine—much to Lawrence’s amusement.

“Congratulations, Henrik,” the count says warmly. “Caldenbauer has gained a great asset today.”

“Thank you, sir,” I respond, trying to keep my eyes from drifting to Clover.

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She radiates excitement, her gaze instructing me to find her as soon as I'm finished here.

“Have you met my wife?” Count Flauret asks.

I bow my head to his countess, Lady Julianna. “I have not.”

The introductions are made, and I make my way through them, hiding my nerves.

Clover's mother smiles. “I imagine you'll have your hands full for a while as you settle into your new position, but we would be honored if you'd join us for dinner at your soonest convenience.”

“I'd like that,” I say, and from the way Lawrence snorts under his breath, I might have said it a touch tooeagerly.

“And you know my daughter, of course.” Count Flauret gestures Clover forward.

“Congratulations, Henrik.” Clover slides her hand into mine. It's an innocent move, but the contact makes my stomach warm. She nods toward my new pennant. “Red looks good on you.”

It's a mild flirtation, certainly nothing out of the ordinary for the ladies of the court, but I glance at her parents, unnerved. Clearing my throat, I say, “Thank you, Lady Clover.”

Clover steps back, running her finger intentionally along the center of my palm as our

hands fall apart. She hides her promising smile so it's only visible at the corner of her lips, but it's nearly my undoing.

Clover and her parents leave, and eventually, her brothers follow them. I exchange pleasantries with half a dozen other families. Everyone else in attendance seems to have settled in for a long night. The stragglers talk at tables while nursing drinks, enjoying the excuse to catch up with old friends.

I begin to rise. "I think I'll retire for the evening."

"You're the man of the hour," Lawrence says. "Surely you're not in a rush to leave? We must discuss my sister tomorrow, but tonight, we will dwell on pleasanter things."

I would like to dwell on pleasanter things right now, and I think Lawrence knows it.

"Let him go," Audra chastises. "You know Clover is waiting for him."

"I do know Clover is waiting for him," Lawrence says with a rotten grin. "Why else would I keep him here for so long?"

The elf rolls her eyes.

"Go while he's distracted with Audra," Ayan whispers.

Laughing under my breath, I make my escape, nodding to Lawrence's knights and Lyredon. They dine at their own table nearby, and part of me wishes I could have joined them.

"It's late," I say to Brielle and Bartholomew as I pause by my sister's chair.

My father retired earlier, managing a gruff congratulation before he left. Honestly, I'm surprised he came at all.

Brielle looks like she wants to argue, casting Bartholomew a regretful look as she stands. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

He nods, trying to contain his foolish grin in front of me. He fails. "Congratulations again, Henrik."

As I escort Brielle into the hall, I say, "Don't make too many plans. Now that the ceremony is over, you must return to Dulnmarin's."

Her face falls, and she turns to me, clutching her hands together in a plea. "Must I, Henrik? It's almost summer anyway. Can't I stay with you and then return in the fall?"

The idea of sending her back while Camellia's whereabouts are unknown makes me uneasy, but I don't want her to know that. "We'll talk about it tomorrow."

Sensing there's a chance I'll give in, she graces me with a winning smile. "Thank you!"

"I didn't agree yet."

We reach her quarters, and she hugs me like she did when she was a small girl. "But you will because you know how much I miss you while I'm there, and you don't want to deprive me of this quality time we've been sharing."

"I don't believe it's me you want to spend more time with," I say wryly.

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She doesn't bother to deny it. With a smile, she disappears into her room, leaving me to shake my head.

Once she's gone, I glance down the hall, making sure I'm alone, and walk to Clover's nearby door. It's late; I should go to bed.

Telling myself I'll stay only a minute, I knock. The door swings open almost immediately, but it's not Clover on the other side. I take a step back, startled.

"Expecting someone else?" Colter asks with a grin that reminds me of his sister's. "It's a little late to be calling, isn't it?"

Clover shoves Colter aside and glares at her brother. "Go away."

"Lawrence made me your guard for the evening," Colter protests, wedging himself between us just to be difficult. Feigning shock, he says, "You don't expect me to shirk my duties, do you?"

She narrows her eyes at him. "You will if you don't want to die."

Laughing, he relents. "Fine. I give the two of you permission to take a nice stroll about the castle. Henrik, have her back in thirty minutes."

"Go before I hurt you," Clover says testily.

"And leave the two of you without a chaperone?" He shakes his head. "I'm afraid I cannot do that."

Clover presses her lips into a flat line, looking like she just might punch him.

“If you don’t like it, take it up with your good friend the king,” Colter teases.

Before Clover can make good on her threats, I take her arm. “I’ll return her soon.”

“I’ll return when I wish,” Clover says to Colter sharply, angling back to glare at him even as I propel her down the hall.

He merely waves. “Keep an eye out for undead princesses.”

She huffs out a breath once we’re out of earshot. “Lawrence is making this impossible.”

I smile at her irritation. She wears it well, though I don’t think she’d appreciate me pointing it out. “I think that’s his plan.”

“Yes, well, I have plans as well.” She flashes me a look that makes my resolve waver.

Lowering my voice, I ask, “What kind of plans?”

“Good plans.” She dares a step closer, taking her full bottom lip between her teeth.

I laugh, shaking my head as we continue down the hall. A few minutes later, we end up outside the library doors. Clover pauses in front of them. “There’s usually a night guard.”

“He appears to be absent.”

She turns to me—smirking. “Should we go inside and make sure nothing is amiss?”

I study her for several seconds, finally giving in to temptation. “I don’t believe we have a choice.”

Clover nods sagely, and we slip into the library. The rooms are dark, with the panel of windows letting in the moonlight.

A knot in my stomach coils tighter as we tour each silent, deserted room and alcove.

“I think we’re alone,” Clover finally says, turning to me.

I step up to her, not daring to touch her in the dark. “I think you’re right.”

“Are you still determined to keep your distance?”

I’m feeling euphoric tonight, bold and even a little reckless. I’m titled now, Clover’s equal. I can finally ask her father for her hand.

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Testing myself, I set my hand on her upper arm, stroking her bare shoulder with my thumb.

“Is it possible you and I have the same plan, soldier?” Clover asks, dropping her voice to a silken whisper that’s going to drive me mad.

“I’m not a soldier anymore,” I remind her.

She makes a noise deep in her throat. “Oh, yes, forgive me...Your Grace.”

I laugh a little, shaking my head. “I like it better when you call me soldier.”

“You didn’t used to like it.”

I hesitate for several seconds before I lower my lips to the soft skin just under her jaw, brushing but not kissing. “That’s not entirely true.”

Her pulse thrums under my lips as I trail down her neck, its pace as chaotic as my own. The smell of her sweet skin and the lingering exhilaration of the evening are a dangerous combination.

Clover makes a soft noise when I move to her collarbone, letting her head fall back. “Henrik...”

“I know.” I force myself to stop. “Too much.”

“Not nearly enough,” she breathes, laughing a little. “But I don’t have as much

willpower as you. You must be careful what you start.”

She watches me, her eyes bright in the dark, lonely space. Her words don’t feel like a warning...but a dare.

13

CLOVER

Henrik’s gaze is hot and wanting, and I hold my breath, waiting to see if he’ll kiss me or choose to be a gentleman and walk me back to my quarters.

I’m just about to put him out of his misery and suggest we return when my intuition prickles, and I hear a soft noise from not far away. Henrik must hear it too judging from the way he freezes. He wraps his arm around my back, tucking me close, but the move isn’t amorous.

“What was that?” I ask in a bare whisper.

“It sounded like muffled footsteps on the rug.”

We stay still as we listen for sounds in the empty library. But there’s nothing.

“We’re jumpy, aren’t we?” I finally say with a laugh, still a bit unsettled.

And then I realize how little space there is between us. I’m pressed flush against Henrik’s very fine chest, and I have no desire to move.

“We should return,” he says. “We’re already late.”

“Not yet,” I murmur, my eyes moving to his face. I study the bow of his upper lip.

It's been too long since he's kissed me.

Finally giving in, Henrik lets out a soft, dark groan and lowers his mouth to mine.

But our lips barely touch when a horrible, wailing shriek comes from entirely too close by. Suddenly, the library doors fly open, and the silhouette of someone running into the hall shadows the entrance.

"What was that?" I demand, but Henrik is already heading for the doors. "Who was that?"

"Stay here," he commands.

"Like that ever works," I scoff, on his heels.

He flashes me a frustrated look. "At least stay behind me."

I follow him into the hall, bumping into him when he stops dead in his tracks. It takes less than a second for him to come to his senses, and he runs to the unconscious kitchen attendant on the runner, kneeling by her side.

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We're not the only ones who heard the scream. Other people appear, emerging from doors and adjoining corridors.

"What happened?" a man asks Henrik, joining him. "Is she—" His words are cut off by his gasp.

"Stay back, Clover," Henrik warns, but it's too late. I've already seen the red pool seeping into the carpet around the woman's head.

"Is she..." a hall maid asks timidly.

"She's breathing," Henrik says. "But she needs Master Pranmore."

"The Woodmore?" one of the gawkers asks skeptically.

"Find him!" Henrik snaps, losing his patience—something I've only witnessed once or twice.

"I'll go," I offer, already taking off down the hall at a run.

* * *

Blood stains Henrik's hands, and his thoughts are shielded. Along with what appears to be half the castle, he and I watch Pranmore use his magic to heal the seeping wound.

"She must have hit her head when she fell," Henrik murmurs to me.

“What was she doing in the library?” I ask. “And why did she scream like that?”

“I don’t know.”

“You recognize her, don’t you?”

Slowly, he nods. “I’ve seen her around.”

Pranmore pushes himself to his feet. He tells several nearby guards, “She may now be transported to my quarters. Mind her head.”

We follow the procession, trying to puzzle out the strange situation. No one was in the hall—no one saw the woman go down. Did she faint? Did she trip? Was she attacked?

Perhaps she went into the library to fetch something, and Henrik and I startled her? Ghost stories are making their way around the castle thanks to Camellia. Perhaps she fell in her rush to escape.

Once we reach Pranmore’s quarters, the elf excuses the guards, shutting out all but Henrik and me. The woman lies on the bed in the room the elf uses as a solitary infirmary, unconscious but breathing.

“Clover, assist me,” Pranmore says. “We must remove her blood-stained clothing and get her into something clean.”

Henrik steps outside, closing the door to give the woman privacy.

I unlace her overdress, trying not to focus on the drying blood already stiffening the fabric around her shoulders. But when I begin to pull her shift over her head, I gasp. There, lying on a chain against her chest, is a stone I’ve only read about in books.

Blood-red magic swirls inside the transparent crystal vessel, just as unsettling as I imagined.

“Pranmore!” I hiss. “Look.”

He turns around and inhales sharply. “It’s a tambrel stone.”

“She’s a witch,” I say, aghast. Immediately, I think of all the places I’ve bumped into the woman. Who is she?

“I couldn’t sense the magic because of the stone,” Pranmore admits, and then he warns, “Don’t touch it.”

“I wasn’t going to.” Almost wishing we’d left her for dead, I ask, “What are you going to do with her?”

“I’ll place a ward around her,” he says. “We’ll question her when she wakes.”

I cover her and the offensive pendant with a sheet. “Do you think this has something to do with Camellia?”

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“We shouldn’t jump to conclusions.” He pauses. “But...”

“You think it might?”

“I believe it’s possible.”

Henrik knocks quietly at the door. “Is everything all right?”

I step out of the room, leaving Pranmore to place his external wards around the woman. “She’s wearing a tambrel stone.”

Henrik’s eyebrows jump. “You’re certain?”

I nod.

He looks back into the small room and says to Pranmore, “We have to tell Lawrence. Will you be all right alone with her?”

The blue glow of the Woodmore’s wards already surrounds the sleeping necromancer.

Pranmore takes the chair next to the woman’s head to keep guard—the same place he sat when Hellebore lay dying in this very room. Camellia’s handmaid dabbled in things she should have never touched as well, and she paid the cost with her life. Will this woman’s fate be the same?

“I’ll be fine,” Pranmore says, but he doesn’t sound fine.

“We’ll be back shortly,” I promise him, and then we head for the door.

* * *

The young woman doesn’t wake, and by morning, Pranmore says the chances are growing slim. She lost too much blood.

“Other than we know she’s a necromancer, you’ve found no other connection to Camellia?” Lawrence rubs his forehead.

We’re in his private study, with only our small group in attendance.

“Not yet anyway,” Henrik says, turning to his squire as if just remembering something. “Was there a note in the golem that attacked Evervale?”

Bartholomew looks at his cousin as if expecting him to answer. Henrik turns his eyes on Lawrence as well.

The king’s frown deepens. He looks reluctant to volunteer whatever it is he knows.

“Lawrence?” I demand. Too many sleepless nights have been strung together, and my patience is nonexistent.

“A guard delivered it to me before Henrik sent Bartholomew after it,” Lawrence finally admits.

“Why didn’t you say anything last night?” Henrik asks, frustrated.

“I didn’t want to ruin the evening,” Lawrence answers. “Camellia shouldn’t have that much power over us.”

Henrik narrows his eyes. “What does the note say?”

Lawrence studies him for several seconds, and then he pushes away from the table and stalks to his desk. Removing a key from his pocket, he unlocks the long, narrow drawer and retrieves two scraps of parchment. Both look disconcertingly familiar, and for a moment, I wonder if they’re the ones we brought back from Heistone.

Lawrence offers the first to Henrik. “This was found in one of the golems the guards confiscated in Drebigan.”

“What is it?” I ask when Henrik goes pale, grabbing his arm to pull the first message closer so I can read it.

You should have chosen me.

“Honestly,” I say scathingly, handing the note to Ayan when he stretches out his hand for it. “Could she be more dramatic?”

“And this one came from the golem that was set loose in Evervale.” Lawrence gives Henrik the second message.

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As Henrik reads it, he clenches his hand, crushing the parchment in his fist.

“No,” he says when I attempt to take it from him, his voice surprisingly gentle considering how his hand shakes with anger.

“It’s all right,” I whisper, gently prying his fingers open.

Lawrence watches us, saying nothing.

I read the note, and a chill goes down my spine. “This was sent to Pranmore’s village?”

“It was meant for me,” Henrik says darkly.

Again, I read the message, penned in Camellia’s careful handwriting.

I’ll destroy everything you love.

“Death didn’t do anything to improve her disposition,” I say weakly, trying to lighten the moment.

“It might have been a message for Pranmore,” Lawrence finally says. “He placed the mind ward that ended up being Camellia’s undoing.”

Though the princess would likely be all too happy to torture Pranmore as well, I don’t believe he’s the intended recipient. These brief notes are bizarrely intimate—they reek of unrequited love.

“So let me get this straight,” Ayan says after he scans the second parchment and hands them both to Audra. “We’re dealing with a spiteful, undead princess whose apparent goal is to enact revenge upon her former lover?”

“It seems that way,” Lawrence says. “And she just happens to have control of a golem army.”

“Henrik and Camellia were never together,” I snarl at Ayan, my skin crawling at the thought.

Ignoring me, Ayan says to Henrik, “I’ve angered my fair share of women, but none have ever come back from the dead to haunt me.” He presses a hand to his heart. “You have my respect and condolences.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re an idiot.”

“The men helping her are alive,” Audra says, steering the conversation back. “She must have made alliances before she died. If you can find their leader, perhaps we can cut off the head of the snake.”

“We need to add more men to the search,” Henrik agrees. “Let’s end this quickly.”

“My army is yours to command,” Lawrence says. “I trust your judgment.”

Henrik looks daunted, still unused to the fate of so many resting on his shoulders, but he nods.

“But what does Camellia have to do with the necromancer in Pranmore’s quarters?” Audra asks.

“We need to talk to Pranmore again,” Lawrence says. “Let’s see if the woman is

awake yet.”

“Lyredon and I will go,” Audra says to Lawrence. “It’s not safe for you to be that close to a practicing necromancer, even warded.”

He raises his eyebrows, flashing her a flirtatious look. “Why, Lady Audra, are you concerned about my welfare?”

She crosses her arms. “Unfortunately, you’re our king, and I’ve sworn my allegiance to the crown.”

Lawrence gives her a wolfish smile. “I’m growing on you, aren’t I?”

The High Vale turns to Henrik. “You’re second in command now. If we let him run to his death, will you become king?”

Lawrence laughs. “The crown follows bloodline, not rank. Bartholomew is still my heir.” He smirks. “At least until you and I have a son.”

Looking vexed, she turns to Bartholomew. “It’s a shame you’re not older.”

Bartholomew looks bewildered.

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“You all have things to do,” Lawrence says suddenly. “Everyone out.” Then he adds, “Everyone except Audra.”

“Lyredon!” Audra protests when her shadow rogue begins walking toward the door.

The elf hides a smile. “Was it a royal command, Your Majesty?”

Too solemnly, Lawrence says, “It was.”

Lyredon looks back at Audra, extending a hand as if asking her what she expects him to do. She narrows her eyes, and magic sparks at her fingertips. I’m not sure Lawrence is wise to antagonize her.

Uncomfortable, Henrik clears his throat. “With your approval, I’m going to meet with your knight commanders and ask them to send more men to search for Camellia’s followers.”

“You have my permission,” Lawrence says. “I want to be done with this.”

We filter out of the room, abandoning Audra to Lawrence. And though I feel some guilt for leaving her, I secretly hope he’ll win her over—sooner rather than later.

14

HENRIK

I’ve dreaded this first gathering, knowing the men who congratulated me in front of

Lawrence will be less than eager to acknowledge my authority today. Naturally, many will feel I cheated the system by allowing the new king to show me favor.

But this is the position I've found myself in. There's no avoiding it now.

All the knight commanders in Cabaranth and the surrounding area responded to my summons, twelve in total. They filter into the meeting hall in small groups, eyeing me with speculation, many bringing bannerets from their retinues. Not all attended last night's ceremony, and I'm most wary of the ones who didn't.

Gavriel Flauret enters the room, drawing the attention of several already in attendance. He nods to me as he finds a seat, his greeting neither friendly nor aloof. He's an exemplary knight, if a bit arrogant, and he's popular amongst his peers. Considering his father's position on Lawrence's council, he would have been a natural choice for duke marshal. He'd be in my place now if Lawrence had taken my advice.

We're not close, but I know him well enough to guess he resents his father's decision to champion me yesterday. But he's also Clover's brother, and their family is loyal to a fault. If he accepts me, the others will as well.

"I'm a bit nervous," Bartholomew whispers, sounding just as exhilarated as he is anxious. "Can you believe we're already having our first command meeting—it feels monumental, doesn't it?"

I give him a tight nod, wishing I shared his ever-present enthusiasm.

"What if they don't like us?" he asks.

"You're Algernon's nephew," I mutter. "They'll like you just fine."

“Still, I’m glad you’re in charge and not me. My stomach is in knots, and I don’t even have to speak.”

“Thank you for your encouragement,” I say dryly.

Bartholomew winces, laughing a little. “Sorry.”

The man assigned as my new valet joins us. He’s a journeyman scribe, a few years older than I am, with experience in this high-ranking realm which I find mildly foreign. I never studied for this command field. A sealed knight’s mission is focused—protect the king. Now my goal encompasses a much wider range—protect the entire kingdom.

“Everyone has arrived, Your Grace,” Declan says.

“Thank you,” I answer, certain I’ll never grow accustomed to people addressing me like that. “We’ll begin.”

I step to the front of the room, waiting for conversations to die out. Slowly, the men turn their attention to me. I’m younger than most. The majority of the men in the room are my father’s age or older. They’ve served in this field for decades. I scan the faces, looking for defiance and speculation—and find ample amounts of both. Not all the men are bitter, but those who aren’t are in the minority.

“For those of you who don’t know me, I’m Henrik Solbane, and I’m the acting duke marshal until Duke Bartholomew comes of age. I would have liked our first meeting to be a friendly introduction, but we have a situation—”

“Are the rumors true?” Lord Quentin interrupts. “Did Camellia really sell her soul and return from the dead?”

“Ridiculous,” scoffs Lord Birchall, an imposing knight nearing his mid-seventies. “I’ve never heard such foolish gossip passing amongst grown men.”

“We have confirmed Princess Camellia was practicing necromancy before her death,” I say. “We don’t know the details behind her return, or if she’s truly back, but right now, we will err on the side of caution and proceed as if the rumors are true.”

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“You don’t really believe it, do you, Henrik?” Lord Birchall asks, wording the question so I’ll look like a fool if I say I do.

The men begin to mumble, and I hold up a hand, silencing them.

“It doesn’t matter what I believe,” I say sharply. “Right now, there are men smuggling war golems into the mainland, and they believe they are following Camellia’s command. We must track them back to their nest before any more attacks occur. There haven’t been casualties thus far, but we’ve been fortunate. We need to find this threat and eradicate it before it grows.”

“Rumor has it these new golems are fortified and nearly impossible to take down,” Quentin says.

“The few golems we’ve confiscated have been, at the bare minimum, fitted with chest plates made from a new talvernum alloy. The metal is impossible to penetrate with normal weapons.”

“I heard your father created the alloy,” Lord Birchall says. His comment is followed by more mutters.

I hold in a groan, wishing that particular fact hadn’t leaked. “He was working under Camellia’s royal order at the time, yes.”

“So this is your family’s fault,” the man accuses. The knight commander sits back in his chair and crosses his arms. “And yet Lawrence put you at the head of our military?”

I straighten, acknowledging I must deal with this defiance while it's in the budding stage. Coolly, I say, "Are you questioning the king's judgment?"

"The king is aboy," Birchall says boldly, his eyes flashing with hatred. "This mess would have never happened under Algernon's control."

"This current situation cultivated and took root under Algernon's control," Gavriel points out, startling the others.

The aging knight bristles, but he's not as eager to argue with Count Flauret's son.

"We're getting off subject," I say, drawing the attention back to the front of the room. "Whether you agree I should be in this position or not matters little. Anyone who wishes to leave is free to go—" Several men rise, and I grit my teeth before I finish, "But know I will gladly strip you of your title and position, as is well within the authority I've been given."

Two knights immediately tuck their tails and return to their seats. Three stand motionless, questioning whether I'm bluffing.

I'm not.

"Are you so eager to rob your sons of their birthright?" I ask stonily. "Sit down."

Deciding the consequences are too great to risk, they grudgingly return to their seats.

"Ferradelle is sending soldiers to assist our search," I continue once that's taken care of, raising my hand again to cut off the grumbling that immediately follows my statement. "The High Vales are glad to be free of both Augmirian and Camellia, and the dukedom has returned to the hands of the elves who are loyal to the crown. Leave the golems to them. We must focus on finding the flesh-and-blood men behind the

attacks.”

“Let’s say Camellia is truly wandering Caldenbauer like an animated corpse,” Quentin says. “How do we stop someone who’s already dead? Even if we manage to find her followers, what do we do about her?”

I think back to Ayan’s story, wishing I had more information. “Not much is known about the Kivear concoction we believe Camellia was taking before she died, but from the little research we’ve done, we think it’s possible Woodmore magic could send her back to the earth.”

Lord Birchall leans forward on the table, giving me an incredulous look. “Come now, Henrik. Surely you’re not suggesting we enlist the Woodmores to fight?”

At that, the men simultaneously begin to voice their qualms, all trying to talk over each other.

“Camellia isn’t your concern,” I say loudly, trying to make myself heard over the clamor.

With a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, I realize that leading these high-ranking knight commanders is not dissimilar to heading up a supply run—both tasks are like herding flockchicks.

I rub my forehead, silently cursing Lawrence.

* * *

I’ve almost finished doling out the designated search areas when Clover appears in the doorway.

“Clover,” Gavriel says when he spots his sister. “What are you doing here?”

She gives him a small wave, looking uncomfortable even though no one protests her presence. She’s no longer engaged to Lawrence, but the people of the court continue to give her a high level of respect, knowing she’s close to the king.

I cross the room to meet her.

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“How’s it going?” she asks quietly.

“About as well as expected.”

She gives me a sympathetic smile and then says, “The necromancer woke up about thirty minutes ago. Lawrence said I should let you know.”

“Has Pranmore learned anything?”

Clover glances at the room and then lowers her voice a little more. “We’re supposed to meet with the others as soon as you’re finished here.”

I return to the head of the room and pick up the notes I jotted down before the meeting. After giving the last of the men their assigned territories, I ask, “Does anyone have any questions?”

And of course they do—most of which I’ve already answered. The meeting drags on for another thirty minutes. Finally satisfied they have some idea what they’re supposed to be doing, I dismiss the knights. When the last of them is out the door, I let out a sigh of relief.

“I think that went well,” Bartholomew says in a voice that’s entirely too chipper for my current mood. “All things considered.”

Clover laughs, reading my expression.

“Let’s not keep Lawrence waiting,” I say, already heading toward the door.

“Do you require my assistance this afternoon?” Declan asks, gathering his ledger, which holds the meeting notes he took.

“No, thank you,” I tell him. “I’ll send for you if needed.”

“Aren’t you important?” Clover teases quietly as we walk through the hall. “You have attendants now.”

“Don’t remind me.”

She grins as we step into the warm sunshine. The weather has improved over the last few days, giving us a true taste of spring.

“What did Pranmore learn?” I ask her when we’re out of earshot of loitering guards and soldiers.

“The woman says she doesn’t remember going to the library last night.”

“Pranmore said the head injury could leave her addled.”

“But there’s more,” she says. “According to the kitchen attendants, she disappeared a week ago. No one has seen her for days.”

“We’ve seen her,” I argue.

“We have,” Clover agrees ominously.

“Where does she claim to have gone to?”

“She says she doesn’t remember.”

“A likely story.”

“Pranmore has a theory.” Clover lowers her voice. “He thinks Camellia has been using the girl to watch us.”

I pause in the courtyard, not liking the sound of that. “What do you mean?”

She raises her brows. “What do you think I mean?”

“Are you saying Camellia possessed her?” Bartholomew whispers, horrified.

“It’s possible,” Clover answers. “The blood magic made her vulnerable to such intrusions. And for all we know, she might have volunteered.”

“What does Lawrence want to talk about?” I ask.

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Clover gives me a sideways look. “He wants to do an experiment...”

“Anexperiment?”

She grimaces. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

* * *

When we reach Pranmore’s quarters, we find Lawrence’s knights waiting in the hall.

“How did the meeting go, Henrik?” Miguel asks.

Just the mention of it dredges up irritation, but I conceal it. “I’ve assigned the search territories, and the commanders should begin sending out bands this afternoon. We’ll continue to check all cargo coming into the villages, along with every shipment leaving the port cities.”

He begins to respond, but the door opens, and Ayan sticks his head out. With a grin I don’t care for, he says to me, “You’re here.”

“I am...”

The High Vale jerks his hand, gesturing us inside. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

“So I’ve heard.”

He closes the door behind us. “Clover told you what Lawrence wants you to do?”

“Me specifically?” I glance at Clover. “You left out that detail.”

She shrugs.

“Henrik.” Lawrence appears from the back room, followed by Pranmore. “You’re here.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” I ask warily. “And why are you all staring at me?”

Audra has the decency to avert her gaze, but the rest don’t bother.

“I want you to talk to Camellia,” Lawrence says.

A beat passes as I wait for him to correct himself. When he doesn’t, I say, “Excuse me?”

“I want you to try communicating with my sister through Della.”

I work my jaw as I think about his request. When I can hold it in no longer, I say, “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m sure Clover mentioned that we think she’s using the girl to watch you,” Pranmore explains, glancing at the closed door. “If you say her name, it might catch her attention.”

They are serious.

“Should we light some candles to set the mood?” Ayan says flippantly. “Close the drapes, play some haunting music? I’m decent with a flute and not too bad with a lute.”

“You’re rubbish with a flute,” Audra interjects. “And even worse with a lute.”

Lawrence snorts and says to me, “It probably won’t work, but it can’t hurt to try.”

“The flute or the lute?” Ayan asks.

The king casts him a scathing look. “Communicating with Camellia.”

“Flute and lute rhyme,” Bartholomew whispers to Pranmore. “You should write them down to use later in your poetry.”

Temporarily distracted, Pranmore asks, “What kind of poem would—”

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“Enough!” Lawrence commands loudly, bringing the chatter to a close. “We’re doing this.”

“I’m not.” I back up the words with a shake of my head and then cross my arms for good measure. “No.”

“Are you defying a royal order?” Lawrence asks, and now—just there—I see the ornery amusement shining in his eyes. He’s enjoying this far too much.

“Give me a real order, and I’ll obey it. This is ludicrous.”

“You give a man a new title and a bright red pennant, and the power goes to his head,” Ayan whispers to Pranmore. “Remember when he was an obedient commander?”

“Humor me,” Lawrence says, ignoring the High Vale. “What harm is there in it?”

“What if it works?” Audra asks. “What are you hoping to learn?”

“Camellia won’t sit in the dark forever,” Lawrence says confidently. “She’ll want recognition for all she’s accomplished. Already, she’s leaving notes for Henrik so he’ll know how brilliant she is. We’ll just let her talk a bit and see what slips out.”

“Can she hurt him through Della?” Clover asks Pranmore. “She is a necromancer after all.”

“I’ll ward him,” Pranmore says. The Woodmore looks at me expectantly, as if he

thinks Lawrence's idea is sound.

"Fine," I say with a heavy sigh, knowing they won't stop until I give them what they want. "I'll try it."

"Excellent." Lawrence waves me through the closed back door.

Pranmore comes as well, raising his ward as soon as we enter the room.

The girl is awake. Her eyes move to me as we enter, but there's only mild recognition there—as if she's seen me in passing a few times, not as if she stalked Clover and me around the castle. Her brown hair is down around her shoulders, and it looks like she's just brushed it. She's likely Clover's age, but her petite size and delicate features make her look younger.

"Hello, Della," Pranmore says in his soothing voice, the one he reserves for patients and dying Calendrian vultures. "This is Henrik. Do you recognize him?"

Her eyes move to my pennant and medallion, and she frowns. "He was a commander."

"That's right," Pranmore says. "He's been promoted to duke marshal. Did you know that?"

Uncomfortable, she moves her eyes from me to Lawrence. The king's presence isn't making her feel at ease. "No."

"He and Lady Clover have seen you several times in the last week. Do you remember bumping into them?"

Confusion clouds her face. After several seconds, she shakes her head.

“Have you remembered anything since we last talked?” Pranmore gently prods.

“No.” Her eyes dart back to me, almost as if something about me is troubling her.

“We believe we know the reason for that.” Lawrence takes the chair that rests next to the head of the bed, spins it around on one of its legs, and then sits in it backward. He folds his arms over the backrest, a casual stance likely meant to put her at ease. “Did you have contact with my sister before she passed away?”

For the briefest moment, fear flashes in the girl’s eyes. She visibly gulps and then shakes her head. “I did not.”

Lawrence graces her with one of his draconian-like grins. “I don’t believe you, Della. You wouldn’t lie to me, would you?”

“Your Majesty, I—”

“Call me Lawrence,” he says easily.

She drops her eyes to the covers.

“Say it,” he coaxes. “Lawr-ence.”

“Lawrence,” she murmurs.

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“See there? Now we’re friends. Friends don’t keep secrets from each other, Della.”

Slowly, she looks up, suspicion written all over her face. “What do you want from me?”

“I already said. I want to know if you had contact with Camellia before she passed away. We already know you practice blood magic—your fancy tambrel stone gave that away.”

Della pales.

Lawrence continues with a smile, “I don’t know how you all interact, and I’m curious. Are there monthly necromancer meetings? Parties? Soirées? Maybe you all get together and knit.”

Hatred slowly leaks into her features, and she presses her lips together.

“Well?”

“Before she left for Ferradelle, I was one of her acolytes,” Della admits. “But I don’t know why that makes a difference now.”

“Because she’s using you to spy on us,” Lawrence says calmly. “And I don’t care for that. Not at all.”

The chill in his words makes the room feel cooler, and I glance at Pranmore.

Della lets out a staccato laugh, looking at the king like he's lost his mind. "Your sister is dead, Your Majesty. You think she's using me from the afterlife?"

"Are you familiar with the Kivear concoction?" I ask, observing her carefully. When her eyes widen marginally, I say, "You've heard of it, haven't you?"

The girl laughs again, but now there's fear in her tone. "The Kivear concoction doesn't exist—it's a tale. Even if it were real, the magic it requires would destroy a tambrel stone. Camellia couldn't have hidden it."

"But Camellia didn't use a tambrel stone, did she?" Lawrence asks.

Confusion flickers across Della's face, making me think she didn't know about Hellebore and their strange connection.

"We're going to try something," Lawrence says. "We would like your cooperation."

Della leans back, fear flashing in her eyes as she subconsciously reaches for her pendant. "What are you going to do to me?"

"Henrik would like to talk to Camellia."

She blinks at him, huffing out a breath.

"You don't have to do anything," he assures her. "Just sit there quietly."

"Move to the foot of the bed," Pranmore instructs Della before she can protest. "Lawrence, we'll stand at the head so Camellia can't see us. Della, don't turn around. Only look at Henrik."

Uncomfortable with this ludicrous scheme, I roll my shoulders.

“Henrik, take the chair and sit right in front of her,” Pranmore continues.

I reluctantly do as I’m told.

“You’re too far away,” Lawrence chides.

I send a look his way, silently telling him Clover won’t like it. He sends one right back, telling me he doesn’t care.

“How’s this?” I ask, scooting the chair close enough my knees almost touch Della’s. I won’t go closer.

“That’s fine,” Pranmore says before Lawrence can protest.

The girl’s eyes dart up from her lap, and then she averts her gaze to the wall. She’s uncomfortable as well.

“What do you want me to do?” I ask stiffly.

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“Try to get Camellia’s attention,” Lawrence says.

“Try to get her attention?”

He smirks. “Flap your arms around a bit—maybe cluck like a chicken.”

“Just say her name once or twice,” Pranmore says, suppressing a smile.

I clear my throat, feeling like an idiot. “Camellia...?”

Della looks back, judging me. My lips press into a frown, and I have the intense desire to punch the king.

“Try again,” Pranmore says, using that soothing tone on me now.

I take a deep breath, letting it out slowly as I fight for patience with the man I’ve sworn allegiance to. “Camellia?”

Della looks back at me, slowly shaking her head.

“Do you feel anything?” Pranmore asks the girl. “Anything at all?”

“Like what?”

“Like my sister’s presence in your head,” Lawrence says impatiently.

I mutter a curse under my breath, rubbing my hands over my face.

“Let’s not give up yet,” Pranmore says. “It might take a bit of time to catch her attention.”

With a long-suffering sigh, I sit back in the chair and cross my arms. Della watches me, but this time...something is different. I narrow my eyes, and a small smile crosses the girl’s lips. A smile I recognize.

A shiver runs down my spine as I stare back at Camellia.

“I don’t think it’s going to work,” the princess tells Pranmore, doing a fair impression of Della.

“Camellia?” I whisper, both horrified and curious.

She raises a brow as if she believes I’ve lost my mind, giving me a baffled look that’s a ploy.

“Leave,” I say to Pranmore and Lawrence, jerking my head toward the door.

“What?” Lawrence asks.

I stare into Della’s eyes. They’re brown, not blue, but it’s the princess. “Maybe she won’t talk to us because you’re all here.”

“Even if that’s true, it’s not safe...” Pranmore says hesitantly.

“He’s right,” Camellia says. “What if the princess wishes to harm you?”

“She wouldn’t kill me here—not like this,” I say confidently. “It’s not grand enough, not public enough. She’s gone to this much trouble. She’ll want to put on a show.”

Camellia smiles. “Is that right?”

“Go,” I tell Lawrence and Pranmore again. “Now.”

“I’ll set a ward in the room,” Pranmore finally says, and then he warns, “Don’t attempt to cross the line, or it will shock you.”

It wouldn’t be the first time.

“Move back a little,” he directs.

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I move the chair, my eyes never leaving Camellia. Pranmore extends the ward that was protecting me, creating a curtain that separates the room in half—Camellia on one side and me on the other.

“If Camellia truly shows up, it won’t hold for long,” Pranmore warns. “She’s too powerful.”

I swallow, my mouth going dry as I nod.

Lawrence and Pranmore leave, hesitating in the doorway for several seconds.

The princess smiles once the door shuts, transforming Della’s plain face into one of cruel beauty. “Hello, Henrik.”

“What have you done?” I whisper.

“You recognized me immediately,” she purrs. “How?”

“I don’t know.”

The princess’s eyes grow intense, taking on that half-mad sheen I’ve become so accustomed to in the last few months. “We have a connection. You feel it, don’t you?”

“If we had a connection, it was severed when you took your last breath.”

“I’m alive, Henrik.”

“You’re dead.”

She shakes her head. “I was dead. I’ve returned.”

“Why?” I hold my breath, hoping I can make her talk as I once did in the Palace Eloudore gardens.

“Death doesn’t appeal to me,” she says with a sigh. “It’s so final.”

“You cheated it for a brief time, but at what price?”

Camellia smiles. “You care, don’t you? You wish you didn’t, but there’s that chivalrous vein that runs through your heart that you simply cannot suppress. You hate me, and you love Clover. But you’re worried about me all the same.”

I don’t answer.

Her eyes move to the pennant on my arm, and she gasps, “Lawrence made you duke marshal?”

Slowly, I nod.

“Because of me?” She suddenly giggles. “Because of my golems?”

“Camellia...”

How can a dead princess be as vexing as a live one?

“You’re very welcome,” she says.

“Why go to all the trouble of smuggling golems into the cities? Are you planning a

war?”

“You want me to divulge my plan, don’t you?” She laughs again. This time, it’s a throaty, seductive sound.

I lean back when she rises. Before my eyes, Della melts away, leaving an illusion of Camellia in her place. Her once-golden hair is the darkest black, and her blue eyes are the color of onyx. She was beautiful in life, but now she’s a creature of dark myth—the kind of monster capable of luring men to their deaths with the barest tilt of her lips.

I leave the chair, disliking her looming over me.

She toys with Pranmore’s ward, pressing her lips together with amusement as the magic sparks against her finger.

“Adorable.” She lifts her disconcerting eyes to mine. “If you want me to whisper sweet secrets in your ear, I’m afraid you’ll have to come to me.”

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“Stop playing, Camellia,” I say harshly, thankful she didn’t destroy the ward.

She rolls her eyes when I stand my ground and crooks her finger, beckoning me forward. “Be a good knight. Come here.”

What choice do I have if I want her to talk?

Slowly, I move forward, wondering how close I dare venture. I stop in front of the ward, my boots almost toeing the faint blue curtain.

“Tell me,” I grit out.

The princess leans close as she whispers, “I don’t have a plan, Henrik.”

I narrow my eyes, backing up slightly.

She laughs again, shrugging. “I just enjoy seeing you scurry to and fro, trying to make sense of the madness.”

“You’re lying. In Revalane, you said you wanted Caldenbauer—that you would unite the races.”

“I’m lying?” She narrows her eyes, and suddenly, the monster is visible in her face. It’s terrifying, a darkness that seizes hold of my lungs even though I’m safe behind the ward. “I loved you. I was willing to give up everything for you, including my magic and life’s work. If you’d touched me once—if you’d so much as bestowed a chaste kiss upon my lips—I would have moved mountains for you. But you deceived

me. You broke your promise and lured me to my death. Do not belittle my heartache. And do not tell me your pain isn't enough motivation for me, because I assure you, it is."

"The people of Caldenbauer shouldn't suffer for my shortcomings," I say harshly. "Why do you threaten them?"

She smiles again, and the monster slowly fades.

"Because it tears you up. Every woman I kill, every child, and each innocent family I forever separate will bring you to your knees, and that's victory enough." Her eyes flash with madness. "I will take the crown that's rightfully mine, and I will reduce the kingdom that rejected me to ashes. I want you to feel the pain I went through every time you smiled at Clover. The pain I felt when I saw you together in the library. And on top of all that anguish, I want to burden you with the guilt of knowing the rivers of blood that will soon flow are on your hands."

I stare at her, stricken into silence.

Camellia smiles, and she laughs again. Softly. She presses a kiss to her fingers and then turns them toward me in a goodbye, whispering, "We'll meet again soon."

With a flick of her wrist, she shatters Pranmore's ward, and then she's gone.

Della crumples onto the floor, and Pranmore and Lawrence come crashing through the door, with Clover and the rest of them on their heels.

Pranmore drops to Della's side, but Clover hurries to me. She looks up, her eyes wide. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"She's dead," Pranmore says heavily, and we all turn toward the girl.

I wrap my arm around Clover's back, pulling her against me and taking comfort in her warmth. I then look at Lawrence. "I spoke with Camellia."

15

CLOVER

Henrik finishes relaying the details of the conversation, his arm wrapped around me so tightly I begin to wonder if he worries Camellia will snatch me away if he lets go.

"So it's true then," Audra says to him quietly. "Camellia has a vendetta against you."

Henrik lowers his face to the ground as if too weary to bear the weight of his head. "She does."

"Which means she's unpredictable." Lawrence paces, as he's prone to do when he thinks. "If she simply wanted to steal the throne, her attacks would be strategic—we could analyze her movements, find a pattern, and discover her next move. But if she's trying to cause an abundance of turmoil..." He bites out a curse, sharply striking the side of his fist against the stone wall. If he'd hit it harder, he would have broken bones.

"But what can she do if we confiscate all her golems?" Bartholomew asks. "She'll have no army."

"She has her followers." I glance at the girl. Pranmore covered her with a white sheet, but her presence is still sobering. "Della said she was Camellia's acolyte. That could mean she was a student, learning from her master. But knowing Camellia and her patience level, I'm inclined to believe Della was an admirer who flitted around the circle Camellia frequented. And I'm sure there are more like her, enamored with the witch princess. Once word gets out that Camellia was powerful enough to create and

use the Kivear concoction, she'll have a swarm of necromancers falling at her feet.”

Lawrence growls and rubs his neck. He, my brothers, and Henrik have all dealt with small groups of magic users, and I've heard their stories. The covens are usually ten to twenty people large—an influential leader and his or her apprentices. They're a headache, but they're never well organized.

However, an entire legion of them, all gathering en masse to serve their new undead queen? It's unthinkable.

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Unusually solemn, Ayan says, “We need to find Camellia, and we need to destroy her.”

“How?” Pranmore asks. “She’s not blood and bone anymore, and if she’s using weak necromancers to do her bidding, how will we even track her down?”

“Canyoutrack her?” Lawrence asks him. “You sense magic. Could you find her?”

The Woodmore frowns. “With all due respect, Your Majesty, Caldenbauer isn’t a small kingdom.”

Lawrence nods. “What about a hundred Woodmore seekers, more if needed. What then?”

“Possibly,” Pranmore answers, but he’s shaking his head.

“We have to try,” Audra says gently, setting her hand on the Woodmore’s arm and earning a sharp look from Lawrence. “Please, Pranmore. Won’t you try to talk to your people?”

“We have no leader,” he reminds her. “We’re not like you with a dukedom. I don’t know where I’d even begin.”

“Our villages have small branches of leadership,” Ayan argues, not even realizing his slip by claiming the Woodmores as his. “We’ll ask them to gather delegates and invite them to Cabaranth. What does a Woodmore like more than a carefully crafted invitation and polite discussion?”

Pranmore looks torn. “What does a Woodmoredislikemore than conflict?” He turns back to Lawrence. “You’re asking us to get involved with your war.”

“It’s not a war,” Lawrence says sharply. “Not yet.”

“Not ever if we can help it,” Audra adds.

Lawrence turns to Audra, giving her a soft smile that’s more telling than he probably realizes. “Invite the High Vales as well. We need to put up a unified front.”

“And the Boermin,” Bartholomew says quietly. “We must include them.”

“Is there a way to send word to the gnomes?” Ayan asks. “Gruebin should be invited as well.”

The idea of bringing representatives from the five high races of Caldenbauer under one roof is daunting at best. But slowly, plans are formed.

“If we knew where Camellia planned to attack first, we could strengthen the guard,” Lawrence says. “But we can’t send extra men to every city and village in Caldenbauer.”

“We’d stretch ourselves too thin,” Henrik agrees. “But do we have a budget to temporarily hire extra men to guard the more vulnerable communities?”

“Mercenaries?” Bartholomew asks.

Henrik nods.

Lawrence thinks about the idea. “Where are you thinking of placing them?”

“Sherling is large, but it has no wall,” Henrik says, thinking. “Summer Summit only has a constable and a guard who’s contemplated retirement for a year. There are more.”

The king nods. “We can also recruit local men—put notices up in the town squares and such.”

“What will they receive in return?” Ayan asks.

“The opportunity to protect their people,” Henrik says as if the elf is daft.

Ayan laughs, casting his eyes toward the ceiling. “Not everyone is so heroically motivated, Henrik.”

“We can pay them,” Lawrence says. “Not at the rate we’ll hire experienced sellswords, but certainly something. My father left me woefully unprepared for this mess, but he didn’t leave me destitute.”

“Glad to hear all the exorbitant shipping taxes we’ve handed over will be used for something worthwhile,” Audra says sweetly.

Lawrence flashes her an amused look. “Do you think we could talk about trade agreements another day?”

“I suppose,” the elf says airily, but her eyes catch on the king’s, and she looks...ensnared. And while she doesn’t appear particularly happy about it, the spark of attraction is there all the same.

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I steal a peek at Henrik, wondering if he noticed. But his eyes are far away as he mentally moves soldiers into position on the battlefield that is our kingdom.

Miguel knocks on the door, opening it when Lawrence tells him to enter. “The mortician and his assistants are here to collect the girl, Your Majesty.”

“Tell them to come in.” Lawrence waves us into the hall, where we can continue our conversation in relative privacy.

Only Pranmore stays behind. He must dispose of the tambrel stone, though I’m not sure how someone goes about that.

The three waiting men bow their heads to their king and walk into the room.

Lawrence turns to us, looking as if there’s an unpleasant task ahead of him. “And now I must explain the situation to my council and prepare them for the assembly—” He cuts off the sentence, narrowing his eyes in my direction. “Why are you smiling, Clover?”

My betraying smirk becomes a grin. “I’m relishing that I don’t have to join you for council meetings anymore.”

He rolls his eyes and offers his arm to Audra. “But you do, my lovely intended.”

She stares at him for several seconds before she accepts. And though her eyes say she’d rather walk arm in arm with an elgernauth, her flush betrays that she just might be developing feelings for her new intended.

* * *

Lyredon accompanies Lawrence and Audra, and Ayan separates from the group to prepare to travel to Doria to speak with Gruebin. Bartholomew excuses himself as well. He has taken it upon himself to invite the Boermin to the emergency gathering.

The assembly is scheduled three weeks from today—barely long enough to get the message to Revalane and Crevershim Hollow and give the attendees time to travel to Cabaranth.

“Do you think Pranmore is all right?” I ask Henrik once we’re alone.

We walk through the courtyard, heading to the barracks so Henrik can tell Declan to summon the leaders of our province’s mercenary guild. Requests will be sent to Ladora, Dulane, and Ryddleport as well. We can only hope Camellia won’t attack somewhere particularly vulnerable before we can fortify our defenses.

“I think he’s nervous,” Henrik answers. “And he doesn’t want to give us false hope. None of us have ever faced a threat like Camellia. We don’t know what we’re up against.”

“And how are you?” I ask softly, glad we’re alone. The weather is pleasant today, and I roll up the long sleeves of my gown, soaking it in. I’ve seen far too many dead bodies this spring, and the sunshine is welcome. “You know this isn’t your fault, don’t you?”

“My head knows that.” Henrik offers me a weak smile that fades too quickly. “But if people start dying...”

“We’ve talked about this before. You cannot blame yourself for Camellia’s wickedness.”

“I know,” he assures me. “But she’s made this personal, and I’m going to use every resource at my disposal to stop her.”

I glance around, ensuring we’re still alone, and then I flirt, “Power looks good on you, soldier.”

He lets out a soft snort, shaking his head.

“I forgot to ask where your new quarters are,” I say, walking again.

“I told Lawrence I’d remain in the barracks for now.”

I pause again to stare up at him, trying not to laugh. “You’re our duke marshal.”

Looking flummoxed, he says, “Yes?”

“And you’re staying in the barracks...”

With a frown, he says, “I was given private quarters when I became a commander, so remaining there is no hardship. There are more important things to worry about right now.”

And of course he’s right. But I don’t think many in his elevated position would stay with lower-ranking soldiers. It makes me admire him even more.

I pause before we reach the barracks, breathing in the scent of growing life in the air.

“What is it?” he asks.

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“The dursel weed must have started blooming. Can you smell it on the breeze?”

Henrik smiles. “No one likes dursel weed.”

“I do,” I argue. “It smells like summer. Before I was sentenced to Camellia, I used to run through the meadows from sunup to sundown. My mother would join me sometimes, and we’d make flower crowns. It seems like a different life.”

Henrik’s smile fades.

“What is it?” I ask quietly, realizing I’ve somehow upset him.

He takes my elbow and steers me to a quiet alcove in the nearby garden. It’s a semi-private location, with a large ledgerberry shielding us. Sheltered behind its deep purple leaves, Henrik takes my hand. I expect him to say something, but he doesn’t. He just stands there, running the tip of his finger over my knuckles.

“You’re worried,” I say.

He nods, pressing our palms together. “I want to see you in a meadow with our children, running like an elf, your hair loose. I want to kiss you on a moonlit balcony when they’re tucked into their beds, the smell of the wretched dursel weed on the breeze. I want so many things.”

“Henrik,” I whisper.

He looks up, his eyes reluctantly meeting mine. There’s worry circling in them, the

storm clouds in his gaze matching the dusky blue color of his irises. “But mostly, I want to lock you away where Camellia can never touch you.”

I laugh softly, setting my hand on his cheek and rubbing his stubbled jaw with my thumb. “I’d fight you like a calnauth.”

He turns his head to kiss my palm. “I know you would.”

“It’s going to be all right,” I say without much conviction. “How difficult can it be to take down one dead princess?”

But the truth is, I’m anxious—not for myself, but Henrik. How far will Camellia go to break him?

16

CLOVER

“The Woodmore delegates are arriving,” Hyacinth says from the window.

Lavender pauses with her hands in my hair. She cranes her neck, though she’ll never be able to see anything at her angle. “Are any as handsome as Master Pranmore?”

She’s given up on him, realizing her time and effort are better placed elsewhere.

Hyacinth makes a noise, though I have no idea whether it’s a yes or a no.

“Let’s go look,” Lavender says to me, coaxing me out of my seat by my hair.

I roll my eyes, walking with her. It was her idea to fuss with it today, not mine. I’m happy wearing it down.

The maid who tended me before I became the stand-in princess just had a baby and cannot resume her duties. I don't mind, but it finally got the best of Lavender, so she decided to braid it this afternoon.

"He's sort of handsome," Hyacinth says, pointing to a Woodmore with flaxen hair. "He looks tall too."

I glance at Calla, wondering how she's taking the girls' gossip.

My friend sits in the corner of the sitting room, idly directing a marble through a wooden tabletop labyrinth. Her expression is a little sad, but mostly bored.

I think she's doing better.

"When will the Boermin arrive?" Lavender asks as she tugs me and my hair back to our spot on the settee.

"Anytime now," I say.

"I wish I could go to the assembly," she says with a sigh. "You're so lucky, Clover."

I'm not sure lucky is the word I'd use.

Lavender continues twisting the strands, creating an intricate braid. I sit like a doll, having nothing better to do at the moment. Henrik and the others are busy preparing for the assembly.

"We're going to the dinner tonight," Hyacinth reminds her. "You can ogle the delegates then."

Lavender brightens at the thought, and Calla scoffs softly.

"How will you wear your hair tomorrow?" Lavender asks when she's finished, inspecting her work. "Mother says I must go with her to visit my aunt while Father is at the assembly."

"I'll probably leave it down."

Lavender frowns. "That won't do—not for such a momentous occasion. I'll send my maid to your quarters."

I wrinkle my nose. "Isn't she the one who smacked your arm with the brush when you sneezed?"

"She's a little stern," Lavender admits. "But she only did that once when I was little."

"I'll manage on my own."

“Clover,” she says with a sigh. “You’re not a princess anymore, but you’re...”

She turns to Hyacinth, looking for help. But Hyacinth only shakes her head.

“I’m just me,” I argue.

“Well, you’re an important you, and I’m sending my maid tomorrow.”

“Fine,” I say with a sigh. “But if she hits me with a brush—”

“She won’t,” Lavender giggles.

Calla looks up, finally cracking a smile. “Maybe you should borrow Henrik’s armor just in case.”

* * *

The maid Lavender loaned me brushes my hair in my bedchamber, helping me prepare for tonight’s assembly. The High Vale delegates arrived a few hours ago, joining the Woodmores and the Boermin. The gnomes are absent, but no one expects them to attend. Most people don’t even realize they exist.

The last few weeks have passed slowly. There have been no more attacks, and no more golems carry secret messages, though a total of seventy-two have been confiscated across the kingdom. Most have been smelted down, but some have joined the first in the royal storeroom.

The lack of conflict puts everyone on edge as we wait for Camellia to make her next move. I’m sure even this stretch of calm is a form of torture she’s using against us.

None of the people arrested with the golems know precisely where their illicit orders

came from. Each trail is a tangled path that always leads to a clueless necromancer. Sorcerers, witches, warlocks—all claim they have no recollection of the golems when they're brought into custody. If we hadn't seen Della with our own eyes, we wouldn't have believed them.

"Sorry, my lady," the maid says as she hits a particular painful snarl.

I look at her in the mirror, wincing as she attacks it again. She has a stern face, with sharp eyes and a no-nonsense expression. I can't tell if her lips are thin, or if they just appear that way because she has them so tightly pursed. And she doesn't look particularly remorseful.

"Your name is Cythia?" I ask her.

She nods tightly, yanking on a section of my hair as she begins to plait the long strands into a half crown.

"I appreciate your help," I say, hoping a little extra kindness might convince her she wants to braid my hair and not rip it from my scalp—or hit me with her brush.

There's a knock at the bedroom door, followed by Colter announcing himself. Thankful for the distraction, I call him inside and then smile at him in the mirror's reflection.

"Are you almost done here?" he asks, eyeing my hair.

I wince as Cythia tugs my head to the side. "I hope so."

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“Just wear it down. You need to see this.”

“See what?” I ask, and then I turn to Cythia. “Can you pin it like it is? It’s pretty with just that section up like that.”

Looking displeased, she stabs several pins into my scalp to hold the hair in place, and then she gives me a somber curtsy and leaves.

“That looked painful,” Colter says when she’s gone.

I rub the side of my head, trying not to mess up the partial plait. “I’m glad she’s not my maid. I don’t know how Lavender has any hair left.”

“Come on,” he says with a laugh, beckoning me out the door.

Already dressed for the assembly in a gown that hinders my breathing and accentuates my figure, I follow Colter into the hall.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“You’ll see.”

I hurry to keep up with him. “That’s become your favorite phrase, hasn’t it?”

“We all have to cultivate our own joy in these difficult times.” He drags me along when he doesn’t think I’m moving fast enough. I follow him, not even questioning it when he leads me out a door that opens to one of the castle’s outside curtain walls.

Strictly speaking, I'm not allowed up here. If courtiers were granted access to the defensive parts of the castle, we'd loiter up here all day while taking in the view, getting in the guards' way and being general nuisances. The men and women on duty give me strange looks as I pass them in my scarlet gown, but their eyes move to Colter's amber pennant, and they don't dare question him.

When we turn a corner, Colter extends his hand, pointing into the distance. A group moves down the dirt road that winds through the verdant meadow—two lines of tiny dots, traveling side-by-side, with one dot leading the procession and a taller figure riding by its side on horseback.

"Are those..." I say dumbly, squinting a little to try to see better.

"Dornauths," Colter says in awe.

"Dorian gnomes," I correct, counting the tiny warriors.

Fifteen.

The guards mutter exclamations around us, many crowding in from other sides of the walls to get a better look as the small group grows closer.

"Are those Dornauths?" one man says dumbly.

"Can't be," answers another.

Still another exclaims, "What are they riding?"

I press my hand over my mouth, laughing at the reaction Gruebin and his companions are receiving. And the chaos only grows as they close in on the city. From up here, we can see other guards crowding the walls, all trying to get a better look at the

newcomers.

Gruebin's retinue stops at the gates, waiting for the watchkeepers to grant them entry into the city. From our vantage point, we can see it all. Finally, the gates open, inviting the entourage into Cabaranth. They enter like heroes of legend.

The gnome warriors ride their rock leopards, dressed in gleaming armor, armed to the teeth. Ayan stays by Gruebin's side—once a thrall and now a duke. The fool waves to the gathering crowds of frenzied gawkers like he's the one the people are looking at. And maybe he is.

The elf looks particularly dashing today, dressed in High Vale finery with his dark hair smooth and long. His jacket is the deepest blue, belted at the waist and tailored to accentuate his handsome build.

He and the gnomes make quite a picture.

Maisel rides behind Gruebin, next to Devlin. Ulfric, her rock leopard, walks like a proud pony, ignoring the people who have gathered to witness the historic spectacle. Adults shy away from the felines, while young children attempt to get closer. Several strain against their mothers' hands, hoping to break free and stroke the massive cats' gleaming fur.

"Let's go meet them," I say to Colter, turning from the wall and hurrying back the way we came.

We just reach the castle's main entrance when Gruebin and his gnomes march through the gatehouse.

Lawrence spares me a glance as I join Audra and him. "I wondered if you were going to make it."

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“I didn’t know they were coming. They didn’t send word.”

“Do they ever?”

I laugh to myself, shaking my head. Communication is undoubtedly a skill the gnomes could improve upon.

A moment later, Henrik steps up next to me. I turn, sensing it’s him from his familiar build, but my mouth goes dry when my eyes land on him. Gnomes forgotten, I blink at the duke marshal, my stomach suddenly fluttering.

Henrik wears a blood-red and black doublet, no doubt crafted by the royal dressmaker herself. Minda expertly tailored it to skim over his broad shoulders and carved biceps, tapering it into his trim, flat waist. His boots are also black, polished to a shine, as is his belt. Each buckle, button, and accent is made of polished silver that quietly proclaims his importance.

The ensemble is topped with a long, midnight cloak he wears pushed behind his shoulders so his royal scarlet pennant and golden medallion are visible, not dissimilar to the one Bartholomew’s father used to wear. His hair has been recently trimmed, and he just shaved. He smells good too. Dark, clean, tempting.

Henrik wears royal power just as easily as that cloak, like it’s always belonged on him, and he’s finally decided to don it.

A flush travels from my cheeks to my chest, and my stomach clenches as a delicious thought plays in my head: this man is mine.

He looks down at me, a bare smile crossing his lips as if he can read my mind. “You look beautiful,” he says quietly. “Your hair is pretty like that.”

“Is it?” I breathe, too enamored to care what we talk about. It’s taking great willpower not to drag Henrik into a dark, private corner.

He nods.

“You clean up nice yourself, soldier,” I say, letting a hint of wicked color my tone.

One of his eyebrows twitches, and his eyes darken marginally.

“I like your cloak,” I add playfully, fingering the fabric.

“Would you two pay attention?” Lawrence hisses.

With an amused tilt of his lips, Henrik obediently pulls his eyes from mine and turns to the advancing gnomes.

“Fawn over each other on your own time,” Lawrence says under his breath, only loud enough for me to hear.

Oh, I intend to—tonight.

Hopefully the assembly doesn’t drag on too long.

* * *

I sit with my chin resting on my hand, my elbow on the table, slumped over as much as this dress will allow. We’re five hours into the assembly, and there’s a chance I’ll die before it ends.

Lawrence is sovereign, but that doesn't mean his nobles can't stir up trouble. The Woodmores refuse to partner with us, preferring to keep to themselves and saying they'll ward attacks specifically directed at their people only. The gnomes want to fight anything and everything—right this second—and Gruebin's only request is to be given a royal exemption on taxes for the foreseeable future.

Of course, that riles up the High Vales, and they claim that if the gnomes don't have to pay taxes, they won't either.

On top of all that, there's apparently bad blood between the gnomes and the Boermin, and neither knew the other would be in attendance before they arrived. We had to scurry to rearrange the tables so they'd be seated on opposite sides of the great hall, where they can scowl across the room but not breathe on each other.

There are almost two hundred of us in attendance, probably the largest semi-peaceful gathering of the five races in...forever. And we're getting nowhere. The assembly has become an open-air forum to voice all the grievances anyone has ever had for the last hundred years. Camellia has barely been mentioned, but when her name is brought up, all are quick to remind Lawrence that she is his sister and, therefore, his responsibility.

Does it matter that she threatens the whole of Caldenbauer? Of course not. They're all too busy pointing fingers.

After another two hours, Lawrence finally stands. The great hall falls silent as eyes move to the king.

"We're all tired," he says, weary. "We knew there was a possibility the discussions would take several days, and we've prepared rooms. Let's adjourn for the evening, and we'll meet again in the morning."

The same people who grumbled they wanted to retire now lament that they must repeat this tomorrow and claim they'd rather wrap it up all in one go. There's no pleasing them.

But Lawrence's decision is final, thank goodness.

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I stand, leaving my father's side as he and my mother talk to my brothers, and cross the room to meet Lawrence, Henrik, and the others.

"Why should they get to leave first?" Gruebin snarls at the king, Maisel nodding emphatically beside him. They cast scathing looks at their rivals, who are clustered around the attendants who will take them to their rooms.

Several Boermin laugh behind their tusks, eyeing the gnomes with great satisfaction.

"You could go at the same time if I didn't fear you'd cause a brawl in the middle of the great hall," Lawrence points out. "Again."

Maisel rolls her eyes, averting her gaze as she runs her hand down her strawberry blonde braid and primly says, "They started it."

"You started it."

"Well." A smug smile flitters across her lips. "I'm sure his mother does look like a boarker."

Several of the gnomes titter, and I close my eyes, deciding I'm too tired to deal with this. "I'm going to bed," I announce. "I'll see you all in the morning."

"I'll walk you," Henrik says immediately, just as eager to be away as I am.

With a hidden smile, he offers me his arm. Even at this hour, he's devastatingly handsome, and my heart skips a beat.

We leave the great hall, and my skin tingles with expectation. The visiting dignitaries have been placed in another wing of the castle, and this section is quiet at this late hour, with only the midnight guards stationed in the halls. Some patrol the walkways, keeping an eye out for anything suspicious. Others are clustered in small groups, talking in the hushed tones of the hour.

Unfortunately, several have been stationed in the ladies' wing, and though they don't overtly watch us, I can feel their speculating gazes.

What is Clover doing with Henrik at this time of night?

Why are they together alone?

What illicit activities are they up to?

Did she leave Lawrence at the altar because she was having an affair with the commander?

The list goes on.

Henrik reluctantly releases me when we arrive at my door, his eyes darting to the closest guard. Quietly, he says, "It didn't take nearly as long to reach your quarters as I would have liked."

I dare to let my fingers brush against his. "I'd invite you in if I could."

Conflicted, his wicked-fast grin becomes a grimace, and he lets out a soft groan that tugs at my heart. "Another time."

"Act solemn," I instruct, hoping the guards will assume we're discussing the assembly. "How good are you at climbing?"

Henrik looks like he's going to protest, but he can't resist. "You've seen me climb, Clover. I can even go back down without falling."

"Funny." I give him a wry smile. "What about picking locks? Can you do that?"

He lowers his eyebrows as he wonders what I have in mind. "What mischief are you dreaming up?"

"The fun kind." I bite my bottom lip, teasing him. "Are you game?"

"I can't pick a lock, Clover. I'm not a thief."

"It might not be locked anyway."

After waiting a few seconds, he asks, "Can you pick locks?"

"If I tell you I can, will you assume the worst?"

He leans a shoulder against the doorframe, enjoying himself as much as I am. "Most likely."

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“There’s a rooftop courtyard below my balcony window,” I say. “It’s connected to Lord and Lady Hughey’s quarters, but they always spend the summer in Ladora, and I believe they’ve already left. I can toss a rope down to you if you can get into it through their sitting room.”

Henrik gives me an incredulous look. “You want me to break into Lord and Lady Hughey’s quarters? And why do you have a rope?”

Ignoring the last bit, I say, “It’s not like they’re there, and I doubt you’ll swipe their valuables.”

“Clover.” He chuckles, looking at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“It’ll be fun.” I drop my voice to a flirtatious whisper. “Like a game. And I’ll be good—I promise. I just want to spend a little time with you.”

After a moment, he takes the bait. “Like a game?”

I nod.

His smile becomes crooked. “Are you the prize?”

My stomach tightens with expectation. “If you want me to be.”

“This is ridiculous,” he says with a sudden laugh, but I know I’ve won him over. “I’ll get into the courtyard. Unlock your balcony door.”

Elated, I raise my voice and pretend to end our fake conversation. “I believe the negotiations will go better tomorrow.”

Henrik takes a step back, hiding a smile as he bows. “Have a pleasant night, Lady Clover.”

“You as well.”

I slip into my room with an elated laugh and turn back to set the lock. Finally, I’m going to have Henrik all to myself.

Just as I turn around, my bedchamber door opens.

“Oh, Cythia.” I clutch my chest when the dour maid walks into my sitting room. “You scared me half to death.”

She stares at me. “My apologies.”

I clear my throat. “What are you doing here?”

“Lavender said I should help you prepare for bed.”

“Did she? I’m sorry. You didn’t have to wait so long for me. It’s nearly two in the morning. You should have gone to bed.”

“Faithful attendants are worth their weight in gold,” she says solemnly, but there’s a sliver of ice in her tone. “Don’t you agree?”

“Yes...” I try to smile, but something is off. Unease tingles my skin as the woman walks toward me. “How long have you been in Lavender’s household, Cythia?”

“A long time.”

“Did you come to her family before or after her gray and white cat died?”

“Thatwretchedcat,” Cythia says with a roll of her eyes, exactly the way I expected her to—just as she would have when she was alive. Catching herself, she crosses her hands at her waist. “She mourned for a very long time.”

“Why are you here, Camellia?” I ask, wishing I’d stashed a few daggers in my skirt.

Dropping the act, the princess laughs through Cythia, turning my blood to ice. It’s the most horrifying thing I’ve ever seen. She’s there, right there, but she stares at me through the maid’s eyes.

“You’re always so clever, aren’t you?” Camellia says.

“Have you really come to kill me already?” I ask, hedging for time. “If you’re trying to hurt Henrik, aren’t I grand finale material? Shouldn’t you ramp up your strategy a bit? You’re going to burn out too quickly, and then there will be nothing spectacular left for the end of your performance.”

She walks forward, the older woman’s hips moving in time to Camellia’s overly seductive stride. “You aren’t nearly as important as you think, Clover. His sister, his kingdom—those all trump you. You’re an appetizer.”

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I laugh as if unaffected by her threats, though I'm growing nervous. Just what kind of monster has she become?

There's a dagger in the secretary in the corner, more of a letter opener than a weapon, but it has a sharp blade. I edge toward it, not sure I'll make it before the princess decides to attack. "You don't actually eat people now, do you, Camellia? You were always so picky about your food."

The princess scoffs, stalking forward. She's close now. Too close. Can she use her magic through Cythia? Pranmore seemed to think so—that's why he warded Henrik when he spoke with Della.

"I've killed you so many times in my head." She sighs a little. "Now we're here, and I can't decide which would be the most satisfying way to see you go."

My fingers wrap around the bottom of the drawer. I slowly pull it open a crack, attempting to hide what I'm doing with my voluminous skirts. As soon as my fingers slide over the cool metal handle, I pull it free and bump the drawer closed with my rump.

"I have so many new tricks these days," she says. "Fire..."

Flames suddenly engulf me, searing as they steal the air from my lungs. I'm paralyzed, experiencing pain I've never imagined. I scream, falling to my knees. It feels as if it goes on forever, a never-ending torment.

And then suddenly, the fire is gone. Breathing hard, I look at my bare arms. They're

not blistered or burned. Even the fine hair is untouched.

Camellia laughs. “Suffocation...”

I inhale sharply, and then my lungs seize. I panic, reaching for my chest, unable to draw in a breath. I can’t even exhale. Slowly, black smudges blur my vision, and the room spins. I fall over, feeling the world slip away.

And then I gasp, able to breathe again.

Before Camellia can do something else, I grip the knife in my hand and throw it with my remaining strength. I’m a good shot—I have been since Gavriel thought it would be a lark to learn the skill and I ended up besting him within a year. But Camellia catches the dagger in midair.

I stare at her, grasping at the stone floor under my hands.

“I can call darkness.” She studies the blood as it drips from her fist and onto the floor, entranced. “It answers me.”

The lamps snuff out, leaving the room pitch black. Eyes appear, white glowing pairs looming from all corners of the space. Camellia walks forward, illuminated in a ghastly green light. But she’s human no more. A monster stares back at me, irises a depthless black, moonlit white skin, her once-blonde hair the color of night. Somehow, she’s beautiful. Evil, wicked—but stunning. Like the embodiment of a siren.

Death.

“Maybe I’ll carve out your heart.” She turns the dagger in her hand, her long black talons wrapping around the hilt. “I’ll treasure it like a keepsake.”

She grabs my hair, ripping me to my feet. At one time, I could have taken her in a fight, but she radiates power, and she's nearly killed me twice already. She's stolen my fight, not just physically but with magic. I'm a rag doll, helpless to protect myself.

"But first, I'll start with your pretty face," she says. "That way, when Henrik remembers you, this will be what he sees."

I'm paralyzed with fear, realizing this is how I'm going to die—acknowledging that Henrik will find me like this.

I can't even cry out as the tip of the blade bites into my skin and slowly trails across my cheek.

Move.

Fight!

But no matter how I try to convince my body to strain against her, it doesn't respond. My hands merely hang at my sides, useless.

Blood runs down my face, hot against the chill of the room. The heat and pain tell me this is real; this nightmare is happening.

I'm sorry, Henrik.

Suddenly, Camellia screams, and the dagger clatters to the floor. Light floods the room as I collapse onto the ground, unable to support myself.

My vision goes spotty, but I see Henrik standing over Cythia's body, his sword slicked with blood.

“You got into the courtyard,” I murmur.

And then the darkness claims me.

HENRIK

“You’re never allowed to be alone again,” Lawrence says to Clover, and for once, we’re in agreement.

We crowd around her as Pranmore heals the cut on her face, in the Woodmore’s quarters yet again. Each of us deals with our grief and belated terror differently. Ayan tells too many jokes, but his face is white, and he continually taps his finger on the table. Pranmore sheds silent tears as he heals Clover’s physical wounds—the emotional ones, he cannot touch. Those will have to heal on their own.

Audra and Lyredon stand at the side of the room, plotting additional ways to find Camellia’s physical location.

Bartholomew has asked Clover if she’s all right at least a dozen times, not believing her no matter how ardently she insists she is.

And I am trapped in my head, playing the horrifying scene over and over in my mind, imagining a thousand scenarios that will surely drive me mad. What if I hadn’t sensed something was wrong? What if I hadn’t climbed the wall, using the stones for footholds in the absence of the rope she promised? What if I hadn’t arrived in time, or if her window hadn’t shattered so easily?

I cannot think about it. That dark monster in my head has returned, along with fear and gut-wrenching guilt. It’s a dangerous combination, one that can make a man

reckless. But I must not lose my head if I want to keep Clover safe. No matter how I want to rage, I must be objective.

And my objective brain is telling me I will never let Clover out of my sight again.

I close my eyes, leaning my forehead into my palm. It's nearing four in the morning, and none of us have slept. The mortician was summoned again, and another dead necromancer is in his care.

I laugh to myself, and then I sense I've caught the room's attention and open my eyes.

"What is it?" Lawrence asks.

"If I suspected your mortician was paid by the body, I might think he was allied with Camellia."

The others respond with soft, morbid laughter, all of us needing some relief from this gnawing worry. My eyes meet Clover's, and she offers me a smile.

But the sight of her half-healed brings another bout of shame, and I lower my eyes to the table. She'll corner me after we're done here, reminding me I'm not at fault yet again.

She's all right, I tell myself. It's all right.

Frantic voices sound from outside the door. Before I can make sense of it, a woman bursts into the room. Lawrence's knights stand behind Clover's mother, the four looking amusingly befuddled.

"Clover," Lady Julianna breathes, crossing the room like a bear. She hugs her

daughter fiercely from behind, crying.

“I’m fine,” Clover answers, but her voice wobbles.

Pranmore sits back, giving Clover permission to move as he gently says, “I’m finished.”

Clover rises and turns in one smooth movement, falling into her mother’s arms. The rest of us exchange glances, acknowledging that she’s not as all right as she wanted Bartholomew to believe.

My squire looks down, clearing his throat. Audra turns away from us all and brings her hands to her face.

“Clover told you not to tell your family yet,” Lawrence says to Denny quietly.

“I didn’t.” His knight extends his hands. “But the castle is in a state. Everyone’s talking about the attack. It was bound to make it back to my parents.”

“Where’s your father?”

“I’m here,” Count Flauret says, entering the room. An array of emotions swirl over the count’s face—fear, rage, helplessness.

Everything I feel is in his gaze.

He looks at Clover, his face crumpling for a moment, and then he focuses on me. Crossing the room, he says, “I understand you saved my daughter.”

“I was almost too late,” I say thickly. “That’s unacceptable.”

“She’s alive thanks to you. Whatever you wish, if it is within my power, I will grant it.”

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I swallow, looking at Clover. Lady Julianna strokes her hair as the two share a quiet conversation. Clover seems a little better now, crying no more. Sensing my gaze, she turns to look at me. Seeing her like that, with her tear-stained cheeks, nearly kills me.

I look back at the count. “I wish to marry your daughter, my lord. I want to be in a position where I can protect her, and I cannot do that unless I keep her close.”

He’s not surprised. Denny must have spoken with him already.

Count Flauret turns to Lawrence, asking a wordless question. The king sits back in his chair, brooding. After a moment, he nods.

“If Clover agrees, you have my permission,” Count Flauret says. “I cannot think of a man to whom I would rather entrust my daughter.”

“I’m sitting right here,” Lawrence mutters to Ayan.

“Apologies, Your Majesty,” Count Flauret says, his face softening marginally with the barest touch of humor.

“You still must wait until Audra marries me,” Lawrence says to Clover. “I’m not budging on that.”

“I’ll marry you,” Audra says quietly. “You’re a snake for trapping me like this, but I’ll do it for Henrik and Clover.”

We all turn to her, astonished.

“And for my kingdom,” she says quietly. “We must show a united front, as you said. And judging from this evening’s gathering, we’re failing miserably.” She turns her tired eyes to Lawrence. “We’ll sign an official betrothal agreement in the morning. That should be sufficiently binding. Stop wielding your power over Henrik and Clover and let them marry.”

You could hear a pin drop.

Lawrence rises, walking across the room to meet her.

She extends her hand to stop him from coming too close. “That doesn’t mean I’m giving you permission to touch me now.”

He drops his hands, smirking with triumph.

Audra narrows her eyes. “Stop looking at me like that, or I’ll change my mind.”

Lawrence wipes the smile from his face, but he can’t control the glint in his eyes. Audra turns from him with a long-suffering sigh and heads toward the door. “I’m going to bed. Clover, unless you’re going home with your parents, why don’t you stay with us?”

“She’s going home,” Count Flauret says, his tone saying the subject isn’t open for discussion.

Now that Camellia is dead, sort of, Clover is no longer obligated to stay in the castle as a lady-in-waiting. Nor is she engaged to Lawrence. She’s free to return to her parents’ estate.

I suspect the only reason she’s remained here is because of me.

Lyredon and Ayan follow Audra, and the knights step into the hall. Lawrence approaches Clover and her mother, waiting for Clover to look at him.

When she does, he pulls her in for a hug. “Don’t do that to me again, all right?”

Jealousy stirs in my chest, but I recognize the move as friendly, not much different than how I would comfort Brielle.

Well, maybe a little different.

“Okay.” I step up beside them and clear my throat.

Lawrence smiles as he releases her. At a mock whisper, he says to her, “Henrik the Envious.”

She snorts out a soft laugh, smiling. Perhaps it would bother me, but she reaches for my hand, connecting us.

“We’ll give you two a moment,” Pranmore says, ushering Lawrence, Bartholomew, and even Clover’s parents out the door.

When we’re alone, Clover hugs me tightly. “I was terrified.”

My spine stiffens, and I draw in a sharp breath, feeling inadequate. She should have never found herself in that position.

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“I thought you were going to find me dead, and who would tell you it wasn’t your fault?” She shakes her head as if fighting off the imagined picture. “Forever, you would have blamed yourself.”

Apparently, her mind has been running just as rampant as mine.

I wrap my arm around her back, setting my cheek on top of her head as I hold her. “I’m sorry I didn’t get to you sooner.”

“I can’t believe you actually broke into Lord and Lady Hughey’s quarters.”

“I didn’t.” I smile. “I climbed their courtyard wall.”

She huffs out a laugh, holding me closer. “You’ve obtained my father’s permission.”

“Yes,” I say softly.

“And Lawrence has agreed.”

I stroke her hair, nodding.

Clover pulls back, looking up at me. There’s no trace of Camellia’s wickedness on her face—Pranmore made sure of it. But the scar of the night is hidden in her eyes. “We’ve taken all your steps, but we sprinted instead of strolled. Are you disappointed?”

I shake my head. “Are you?”

“I’ve already suffered through a long engagement—they’re not as appealing as they seem.”

“Don’t remind me,” I say darkly.

“So...when?” she asks, hiding a smile.

“Tomorrow, after the assembly. We’ll have a small ceremony, something intimate. Is that all right?”

She nods and presses her cheek to my chest. “Then this is the last night I must sleep alone.”

I kiss the top of her head, holding her close. “Thankfully, there’s not much of it left.”

* * *

“Your Grace,” Declan says, appearing by my side as I walk toward Lawrence’s council room, where Audra and the king will sign the official betrothal agreement in just a few minutes.

I pause, turning to my valet. “Yes?”

“Five more golems have been confiscated at the gates.”

“Here in Cabaranth?” I ask, uneasy.

Declan nods.

“Were the men transporting them arrested as well?”

“Yes, Your Grace. Three, all claiming they were hired through a message delivered by a courier.”

As is the pattern. If we follow the trail to the courier, he’ll direct us down a path that will eventually lead to a necromancer who had no idea Camellia took hold of his consciousness for a few hours and used his body to conduct her business.

If nothing else, we’ve engaged in a successful witch hunt. I’ve lost count of how many necromancers we’ve arrested. Thanks to Camellia, there are fewer murderers preying on Caldenbauer’s people.

“Thank you for informing me,” I say. “No other attacks have been reported?”

He shakes his head. “It’s been quiet.”

Far too quiet, but judging from last night’s confrontation, Camellia has turned her sights toward our inner circle. The allure of killing Clover was too much for her.

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“Was there a note in any of the golems?”

“They’re being searched now. It will be delivered to you immediately should they find one.”

“Thank you, Declan,” I say, dismissing him.

Denny and Xavier stand in the hall outside the council room, along with the usual trio of guards. I give them a greeting nod as I step into the room.

The others are already here.

“Glad you could join us, Henrik,” Lawrence says wryly, glancing up from the assortment of parchments on the table in front of Audra and him.

“Declan stopped me in the hall,” I say. “Five golems were just confiscated at the city gate.”

He growls, rubbing his shoulder. “Why does Camellia try anymore?”

“Even undead princesses need a hobby,” Clover says, earning startled smiles from the solemn councilmen. Everyone seems relieved to see her up and around this morning. If any of her fellow former ladies-in-waiting had been attacked, they’d likely be in bed for a week.

There are about forty of us in attendance—a bishop, Lawrence’s council, Bartholomew and his mother, our group of friends, Lady Ellaine, and several other

high-ranking High Vales I know from my time in Revalane. I expected some resistance from the elves, but they seem pleased that one of King Bathus's descendants will finally return to Caldenbauer's throne.

"Everything is in order," the bishop declares, satisfied with the paperwork. He looks at Audra's mother. "Do you find the agreement satisfactory?"

Judging from the smug looks on the High Vales' faces, Lawrence must have made some serious concessions in order to move this along quickly.

"I do," she answers.

With a solemn nod, the bishop gives Lawrence the quill. Without hesitation, he signs his name and hands it to Lady Ellaine.

Despair crosses Audra's face as she watches her mother sign her life away, but she quickly schools the expression. With a kind smile, Lady Ellaine passes the quill to her daughter.

Audra's signature is the final on the document, not necessarily needed, but reassurance to both sides that the two marrying parties are in agreement.

Audra hesitates for only a second before she adds her name next to Lawrence's.

It's a business transaction, legally binding, over in less than five minutes—but powerful enough to ally the High Vales with the king.

I look up, meeting Clover's eyes. Her smile is for me alone, for our future.

With a mere three signatures signed at the end of a stack of parchments, we are free.

HENRIK

Again, I wonder what Lawrence agreed to in the marriage contract. The High Vales are compliant this morning, offering to send aid wherever, and however, it's needed. They've even agreed to search their own ranks for signs of corruption. I've never seen such an accommodating group of elves.

It's unnerving.

The Boermin are farmers and not fighters, but they've agreed to offer provisions to our growing army in exchange for added guards in their settlements. The gnomes are still vying for a tax-free existence, which Lawrence will never agree to openly, even if he would consider it in private.

And the Woodmores...

"You're asking us to send hundreds of our men on a wild goose chase," an elderly Woodmore man says, shaking his head.

"Worse," another interrupts, a woman with dark hair and short antler spikes. "A witch hunt."

The declaration is followed by murmurs of agreement from their side of the discussion tables.

The older elf continues, "Not only are we morally opposed to taking such an offensive position, but it would also paint a target on our people. If Camellia knew we were actively hunting her, what would stop her from attacking our villages?"

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“We will add extra security to Dulane,” I assure him before gently adding, “And she’s already attacked your territory once.”

The man’s eyes move to Pranmore, who sits by my side instead of with his people. “It was not a random attack. Because one of our own allied himself with you, the princess sent golems to his home village.”

Pranmore looks down at the table, brooding. It’s hard to argue when he’s right, even if his reasoning is flawed.

“I grew up in a Woodmore village,” Ayan says, joining the conversation. “A few of you know me.”

Several Woodmores acknowledge him. However, their pinched faces make me think that while they do, in fact, know him, they don’t necessarily like him. All except one. She’s older, with silver hair she wears in a bun at the nape of her neck. She watches Ayan with soft eyes.

He continues, “You are the most generous people—loving, kind, affectionate. But you’re as stubborn as muircorns, and you’re refusing to look at the bigger picture. We’ve been unified for over a hundred years, but we’re still acting as individual races, keeping to our own separate provinces, horrified at the thought of mingling. But we’re not just elves, humans, gnomes, and Boermin—we’re citizens of Caldenbauer. Your people have unique talents, ones the rest of us don’t possess. Just by agreeing to use them, you could potentially save countless lives. We don’t know what Camellia has planned, but I don’t believe she’ll leave you untouched simply because you refuse to stand up to her.”

It's the longest stretch of solemn words I've ever heard Ayan utter.

The room is silent as we wait for the Woodmores' response. After several heavy seconds, the man who has chosen himself as their spokesman says, "We will discuss it privately. Your Majesty, is there a room we may use?"

"Of course." Lawrence motions to one of the attendants. "You may go to my council room. Please feel free to take as long as you need—I think we could all use a few hours of rest. Let's meet back at two."

As we leave our seats, Ayan rises. He crosses the space to meet the Woodmore woman with the soft eyes. They embrace, and she strokes the hair from his forehead, looking like she's going to cry. He then takes her hand and leads her to Audra and Lady Ellaine.

Giving in to curiosity, I join them.

"Aunt Ellaine, Audra, this is my grandmother, Daphne," Ayan says, making the first introduction. "She raised me."

Lady Ellaine bows her head in respect. "I'm so glad to finally meet you. I cannot tell you how grateful I am..." Her voice becomes shaky, and she presses her lips together when she cannot finish.

"I'm overjoyed Ayan has been reunited with his family," Daphne says. "I hope we'll get a chance to talk more after the assembly is over."

She lingers just a few seconds more, clinging to Ayan's hand, obviously not wanting to leave him. When she has no choice, she hurries to join the other Woodmores as they follow the attendant out the doors.

“She seems lovely, Ayan,” Audra says. “I have no idea how she put up with you.”

Chuckling, I turn to look for Clover. She’s with her family, appearing exasperated. I should rescue her.

“There’s no reason you must be here,” I overhear Colter say as I make my way toward them. “You’re exhausted—go home. Get some sleep.”

“I’m fine,” Clover argues, smiling when she spots me. “And as Camellia so kindly reminded me last night, I am personally invested in all this.”

My hand clenches into a fist, and I pause mid-step, startled by the anger that flares like an inferno in my chest. My discipline, my self-restraint, isn’t infinite. And Camellia has found the end of it.

She’s left me no choice. Somehow—somehow—I will see her destroyed.

* * *

Emotions run high after the break, with yet another altercation between the gnomes and Boermin making people uneasy. I didn’t bother to ask what it was about this time, but I have no doubt that if Maisel didn’t start it, she was certainly involved.

We find our seats again, everyone casting looks at the solemn Woodmores. Pranmore sits next to me, and I lean toward him and lower my voice as I watch the group for clues. “What did they decide?”

“They wouldn’t let me attend.”

I jerk my head toward him, startled. “What do you mean?”

“Because I’ve allied myself with you, they say I’m partial to your cause.”

“Pranmore...”

He looks at the table. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine,” I mutter, my eyes turning to his journal. He clutches it in his hands, never writing in it anymore. But he carries it like Brielle used to cling to a quilt our mother made before she passed away, for comfort and security.

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My frown lessens when I spot Minda making her way toward us. The pretty Woodmore enters the hall looking as though she's not sure she should be here, carrying a steaming cup atop a saucer. She walks carefully, worried about spilling its liquid contents.

Her eyes flicker to the elven delegates, and then she returns her attention to Pranmore.

I nod my head toward the royal seamstress. "You have a visitor."

Pranmore turns, his expression brightening for only a second before it falls again. "Hello, Minda."

"I've brought you the river thistle tea that you like. I heard the morning's session was trying."

"That's very kind of you," he says to the besotted young woman. "I appreciate it."

Her smile flickers between encouraged and unsure, and then she dips her head to me. "Hello, Henrik."

"Hello, Minda."

Her eyes suddenly go wide. "I mean, Your Grace. Forgive me."

"Henrik is fine," I assure her. "In fact, I prefer it."

She smiles, and then she gives Pranmore one last longing look. “I should go...”

He nods. “We’ll begin soon.”

With a curtsy, she hurries from the great hall.

“Minda’s pretty, isn’t she?” I say, wondering if the comfort of a female companion would ease some of Pranmore’s worries. At least he wouldn’t have to face them alone.

He nods, taking a sip of the tea.

“She likes you.”

“I know.” He sets the cup down, staring into the faintly purple liquid.

“You have no shortage of interested women, Pranmore. Surely one of them has caught your eye? This path is lonely when you travel it by yourself.”

He looks over at me, his expression making him seem far older than his years. “I’m glad you found Clover, Henrik. But I’m not in the position to begin a relationship.”

“Because of the life debt?” I ask. “We’ve already talked about that. You owe me nothing. I like to think you remain by my side because we’re friends.”

A sad smile flickers across his face. “It’s not because of the life debt, and we are friends.”

Count Flauret stands, drawing the room's attention and ending our conversation. “Please find your seats. We will continue the discussion.”

After everyone is settled, Lawrence turns toward the Woodmores. “What have you decided?”

They look between themselves, uncomfortable with the conflict they know they’re going to cause.

My spirits sink.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” their ambassador says. “We aren’t soldiers in your army, nor do we wish to be. We cannot offer assistance. It’s too dangerous, and it’s not our battle.”

Lawrence closes his eyes, sitting back in his seat as disappointment racks him. After several seconds, he opens his eyes, his face hardening. “I could command you to cooperate.”

“You could,” the man says. “But that’s no different than enslaving us, Your Majesty, and we believe you are above such acts.”

The king stares at the elf. “Am I?”

The hall goes still as people hold their breaths, waiting.

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Lawrence exhales sharply as his stony expression softens and his mouth twists in a frustrated smile. “I won’t force you, nor will I deny protection for your people. You are free to leave.”

Audra turns to her intended, her eyes dewy in the sunshine that streams in from the skylights. But Lawrence doesn’t look at her or anyone else. He presses his hand to his forehead, staring at the table as if scrambling for a new plan. He’s a broken king, too young to wear such an expression.

His kingdom is fragmented, and his first act as our ruler has failed to bear fruit. For the first time, I feel sympathy for the spoiled, headstrong prince who lost everything and became king before he was ready.

* * *

The assembly wasn’t a complete loss. The High Vales are with us, as are the Boermin. Gruebin, however, is being frustratingly stubborn.

The jarl of Crevershim Hollow refuses to budge on his demands, nor will he stay in Cabaranth. The gnomes have made camp outside the city, where they said they’ll wait until Lawrence changes his mind.

I’m not sure a handful of gnomish warriors will be all that helpful to our cause, but losing another group is demoralizing.

Clover and I stand side-by-side as the Woodmores say their official goodbyes. They’re preparing to leave the city to return to Dulane. Ayan’s grandmother clings to

him, a tiny Woodmore holding her tall High Vale grandson. There's something touching about it, and when I glance at Clover, the sheen in her eyes tells me she feels it as well.

"Take care of yourself," Daphne says. "And promise me you'll visit."

"I will," Ayan responds. "And you'll have to come see me in Revalane." He drops his voice to a loud whisper. "Not to brag, but I'm pretty important these days."

"I know you are," she answers with a watery laugh. "Oh, my dear boy. I love you."

"I love you too," he says without hesitation, as if he finds it easy to speak his heart. Perhaps it's a product of being raised by Woodmores. He bows his head in respect to the woman who raised him. "Safe travels."

As Ayan and Daphne say their goodbyes, the Woodmore spokesman steps up to Lawrence, bowing with reverence. "We thank you for respecting our decision."

"You're still free to change your mind," Lawrence says.

The man nods, but his eyes say they won't.

We watch the Woodmores walk out of the courtyard, refusing mounts just as Pranmore so often does.

Ayan sighs when the last of the delegates pass through the gatehouse, and then he turns to Pranmore. "I guess it's up to you."

Pranmore nods, looking pensive.

"But how will Pranmore find Camellia?" Bartholomew asks. "We have no idea where

she might be.”

“She’s controlled two necromancers here in Cabaranth,” Audra muses. “Surely that means she’s in the city somewhere?”

“We can’t even guess how far her magic can reach,” Clover says. “For all we know, she’s holed up in a fishing shack in Ryddleport.”

“We need to speak with someone who knows more about the concoction she was taking,” Lawrence says. “Someone who can tell us how it works and how powerful Camellia is.”

“The apothecary knew enough to guess what she was creating,” I say. “But we don’t know where he is either.”

“Maybe we could talk to the arrested necromancers?” Bartholomew suggests. “Someone might know where he went. I bet they’d be willing to exchange information for freedom.”

“You’d let a murderer loose?” Lawrence asks, more amused than upset.

Bartholomew winces. “I didn’t think about that.”

“Pranmore.” Clover turns to the Woodmore. “You knew the name of the concoction. You must have heard it somewhere. Do you have any idea?”

He shakes his head. “I read a book that mentioned it in our library in Evervale, but it gave no more detail than the gnomes’ history.”

“I studied extensively when training for my command position,” I say. “And I’ve never stumbled across a mention of it.”

“Unless we can find a necromancer willing to divulge secrets, I suppose we have no choice but to wait for Camellia to make her next move,” Clover says with a sigh—a statement which doesn’t settle well with me.

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“You should go home and sleep,” I say gently.

Clover doesn’t turn on me like she did when Colter suggested the same thing. She gives me a knowing smile. “I don’t think I could.”

Our ceremony is tonight, scheduled for sunset. It will be a small gathering, just Clover’s family, Brielle, and our friends. Father may or may not come, depending on his mood.

“At least take a few hours to rest,” I urge.

Hiding a yawn, smiling like she knows resisting is futile, she finally agrees. “I’ll see you soon?”

I nod, squeezing her hand.

She breaks away from the group, joining her father and brothers. They speak for a moment, and then she and Colter walk down the courtyard steps with several of the count’s guards.

I want to call her back, keep her close to me. But it’s daylight now, and we’ll be together soon enough.

* * *

I stand at the back of the small castle chapel, nervous but eager. The bishop speaks quietly with Lawrence about the ceremony, and Denny has informed me Clover is

preparing in the small antechamber off the sanctuary.

The sun has set, and firelight brightens the space.

Our few guests sit in the pews, waiting. Bartholomew talks with Brielle, and she beams at him, besotted enough the foolish boy should notice. Father has graced us with his presence as well. He sits alone in the front row, wearing the same clothes he wore for my knighting. He's clean and presentable, making more of an effort than I expected. He gives me a tight nod when our eyes meet.

"It's time," Denny says, walking up the steps to meet me. "Are you ready?"

I nod, feeling lightheaded with nerves.

Before he can respond, a trumpet blares in the distance.

"What was that?" Audra asks, her eyes jerking to Lawrence's.

"A warning," the king says, already heading down the aisle.

Before he reaches the end, Miguel throws the chapel doors open. "The Woodmore delegates are under attack, Your Majesty."

His announcement causes a flurry of agitation. Clover bursts into the room from the antechamber, wearing a wedding gown in light green. I take a moment to look at her, a hand fisting over my heart.

I meet her wide eyes, and regret passes between us. We're not marrying tonight.

Immediately, she whirls around and races back into the room, hollering, "I need to change!" Over her shoulder, she calls back to me, "Go—I'll meet you in the bailey."

“If you’re coming, you need armor,” I yell back, wishing I could keep her here.

Knowing I can’t.

“Tell me everything we know,” Lawrence demands as he and I fall into step next to Miguel.

“At least ten golems, along with fifteen to twenty necromancers,” the knight says. “The Woodmores have warded themselves, but we don’t know how long they’ll be able to hold them, and golems don’t tire.”

“We need elves,” Lawrence says urgently to Ayan and Audra. “As many as possible.”

Audra nods, yanking Ayan as she starts across the courtyard that will eventually lead her to the wing where the High Vale visitors are staying. The two break into a run, wasting no time.

The bailey outside the barracks is in chaos. I find Lord Birchall standing in the center, overseeing the madness. “How many men have you ordered?”

“Forty mounted soldiers,” he says, temporarily forgetting his resentment toward me. “Twenty have already left. Shall I call for more?”

“There’s no time, and we’ll have High Vales as well.”

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His shoulders sag a little with his relief. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Your sword, Henrik,” Bartholomew says, panting when he stops next to me. “I fetched it.”

I didn’t even realize he disappeared.

“Thank you,” I say, accepting the blade.

“I’ll get your armor.” He runs off again.

“He almost looks efficient,” Lawrence says with a morbid laugh, and then he looks around. “Now, who’s going to fetch my armor?”

“Lawrence, you can’t...” I shake my head a little, not wanting to finish the sentence.

He squares his shoulders at me, hardening his eyes. “I think you mean Your Majesty.”

“You can’t go,” I say under my breath. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I can’t stay here while everyone else fights,” he hisses.

“And I respect you for that, but you must. You’re our king.”

Lawrence turns as if he can’t even look at me, and then he whips back. He stares at me for several seconds and then lets out a guttural growl that I feel deep in my gut. It’s precisely how I would feel if someone told me I had to send my friends into battle

without me.

“What about Audra?” he finally demands.

“We need her,” I say. “The High Vales don’t trust Ayan to lead them, and they certainly don’t trust me. Not yet.”

“I can’t let my fiancée fight my battles. It’s one thing to fight side-by-side, but to send her alone?” He runs his hand through his hair, clenching the strands between his fingers. “What if something happens to her?”

“I’ll protect her,” Pranmore solemnly swears from our side. “And Henrik, Clover, and Bartholomew.”

“What about me?” Ayan says, pushing his way through the fray to join us, grinning though his face is lined with worry.

It suddenly hits me that his grandmother is in the middle of the attack.

“Are you going to watch over me too?” he jokes.

“I’m only one man.” Pranmore deadpans.

“It’s nice to know you care.” Ayan barks out a tense laugh. “What are we waiting for?”

I look for Audra. She stands at the center of a circle of High Vales, giving her soldiers instructions. The elves don’t wear armor—not leather or chain or plating. They look vulnerable, but I know better.

“We’re ready,” she says when she approaches us.

Lawrence turns toward her, shaking his head.

“It will be fine,” she assures him.

“Give us a moment,” he says to the rest of us, taking Audra and all but dragging her to a corner to talk in private.

I look away, uncomfortable.

“I’m here,” Clover announces a few minutes later, with her bow on her back, wearing leather armor that makes her look like a warrior goddess. Hastily, she plaits a simple three-stranded braid into her long hair, fastens the end with a bit of ribbon, and then tosses it over her shoulder. Determination shines in her eyes. “I’m ready.”

Fifteen minutes later, I ride through the gatehouse with Clover at my side, leading my soldiers into battle for the first time. Every one of their lives weighs on my conscience—I’m heavy with a sick feeling of responsibility that most don’t consider when they covet powerful positions.

We travel thirty minutes before we come upon the fray. The blue light of the Woodmores’ wards is easily visible in the growing twilight, along with the sounds of battle. The soldiers Lord Birchall sent ahead engage with the necromancers and their golems, but they don’t seem to have made progress.

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The wards flicker as the Woodmores tire. I'm not sure how long they can hold them. It's been at least an hour since they were ambushed, likely closer to two.

I raise my hand and draw my horse to a stop to call orders. "Let the High Vales take the golems," I command, raising my voice to a yell to make sure they can all hear me. "The rest of you focus on the necromancers. Archers, keep a safe distance."

Clover nods from beside me, acknowledging her place. She hangs back as I move forward, our eyes locked for a second. There's an unspoken command in her gaze—stay safe.

You too.

We separate.

Woodmore magic is blue, and sometimes gold. High Vale magic can be gold as well, but it's often red. Blood magic, however, is a sickly green or black. It makes it easy to find our targets in the growing night, even in the throng of soldiers. They also wear dark cloaks, shielding their faces with hoods that cast shadows to hide their identity.

The Woodmores' magic fails as we join the fray, the elves likely unused to exerting so much energy. It's like a muscle that must be built, a test of physical endurance, and in this age, the Woodmores have had little reason to exercise their gifts.

Screams fill the valley as the vulnerable elves are targeted, telling me we're too late. Even as the king's soldiers cut the necromancers down, the blood mages attack the Woodmores with an ardent passion—not running away as their gutless people often

do when they find themselves outnumbered. They fight with a sick passion, almost as if entranced.

I strike with my sword, and a robed man falls mid-attack, succumbing to the steel of my blade. His victim lies in the grass, curled into herself with her arms shielding her head, injured but alive. The young Woodmore woman untucks her head from her arm, staring at the bleeding necromancer who lies at her feet. She then turns her light brown eyes on me with horror.

Like I'm the monster.

My heart pounds, the adrenaline from the battle coursing through my veins, and I turn from her, determined to save these people no matter how they resent the blood shed on their behalf.

The High Vales' magic causes booming explosions as it rips through the war golems and destroys the energy crystals within. The noise echoes in the hilled valley and shakes the ground. One of the metal soldiers lies nearby, a hole in its chest plate. It twitches as magic leaches from the destroyed crystal and into the soil. Sparks of white-hot energy fizzle into the air like the fireworks the traveling elves of Saosan sell around the mid-year holidays.

From somewhere nearby, I hear Ayan yell. I jerk my head up, spotting him just as magic explodes from his hand, volatile and rarely used. It collides with a golem, sending it flying back several feet. The seven-foot soldier clatters to the ground like a discarded toy, lifeless.

Searing pain hits me square in the back, and I whip around on my horse. My attacker smirks under her hood, only her mouth visible.

I rear back, startled to find her.

“Hello, Henrik.” Camellia tosses back her hood and reveals her long, ebony hair. It’s as smooth as silk, like a raven’s wing against her now porcelain skin. “I was hoping I’d meet you here.”

I dismount, needing to fight her face-to-face. Letting out a guttural cry, I stride forward, raising my blade. The princess stands impassive, merely wincing when I run my sword through her stomach. But she catches me before I can pull the weapon free, clutching my arm with unnatural strength.

She stands so close, I can smell the stench of death on her breath. Gagging, I try to jerk away, but she holds me in her taloned grip.

“Listen to them,” she whispers, brushing her free hand over my cheek. “Listen to their screams. I hope they’ll be your lullaby tonight.” She laughs softly, the sound chilling. “Think of me as they play in your head.”

And then she’s gone. In her place stands a man. He clutches his stomach, choking as blood trails from his mouth.

I yank the sword free, breathing hard as I watch him fall.

* * *

The fight is over within twenty minutes. Once the last golem topples to the ground, the remaining necromancers flee.

The High Vales proved invaluable against the talvernum soldiers, as they well should be since they are their creators. But the toll is great.

I survey our losses, a sick knot tightening in my stomach.

Dead litter the ground—far too many Woodmores, robed blood mages, several soldiers, and even a High Vale who got too close to a war golem.

A moth, lit by the moons' light, flits near one of the fallen. It's a picture of life against needless death, and it makes my stomach roll. I look away, angry and filled with shame.

Mournful wails replace the sounds of battle, the Woodmores grieving the friends they lost. My men and the High Vales have moved back, encircling the elves and giving them space. A lump forms in my throat as I realize more than half the Woodmores are gone. At least twenty men and women dead. Once their magic fell, they were defenseless.

I turn my head toward the archers, looking for Clover, needing to know she's safe.

Relief grips me when I find her. She sits atop her horse, bow hung slack at her side. I follow her stricken gaze and an iron cage closes over my lungs.

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Ayan walks into the group slowly, his face blank. He drops to a figure in the grass, partially hidden behind a bush.

“It’s not,” I murmur.

But it is. He lifts his grandmother into his arms, pulling her against his chest and bending his head over her still frame. Sobs rack his body, silent. Pranmore joins him, falling to his knees. The Woodmore places his hand on Daphne’s heart, searching for a sign of life.

Ayan turns to him, his grief-contorted face awash in the pale moonlight. Pranmore looks down, shaking his head. Gently, Ayan hands Daphne to Pranmore, and he stands, turning away as if he can’t bear any more.

I look down, choking back emotion I must not show in front of my men.

“Are you going to ignore this?” Ayan suddenly yells, his voice carrying over the Woodmores’ cries as he addresses them. “Are you going to turn a blind eye and claim this, too, was Pranmore’s fault?”

I turn back, watching him. I’ve never seen him like this. Someone should go to him, but we all stand motionless, letting him grieve.

“If this is what your peace looks like, I don’t want it!” he yells, jerking his hand toward his grandmother. “Because it looks like apathy. It looks like FEAR.”

His voice breaks, spurring me into action. I walk to him, avoiding the dead. He turns

to me, broken. I clasp his shoulder and nod, clenching my teeth as he hangs his head and weeps.

“She’s gone,” he says through sobs.

I tighten my hand on his arm. “I’m sorry.”

He nods, stoically trying to gain control of himself.

The people are stricken as they stare at us, silence heavy in the night. I turn to the Woodmores. They watch me, waiting for me to make some declaration. Say something that will ease their suffering.

But what am I supposed to say?

I look down at Pranmore. He closes Daphne’s eyes, tenderly holding this woman he’s never met, mourning her loss simply because she was alive, and now she is not.

Collecting my thoughts, I look up. “A friend once told me we must protect our people because that is our duty as citizens of the kingdom. You don’t have to wield a blade or a bow to help us. Use your magic as it was intended—snuff out darkness and nurture life. Camellia shouldn’t be here anymore. She’s a wraith, a monster... and you’re the only ones who can defeat her.”

I sigh, suddenly weary.

Turning to my waiting soldiers, I say, “I need several volunteers to return to Cabaranth for carts. We must collect the fallen.”

CLOVER

My heart aches as I watch the scene unfold—Ayan, filled with anger and pain. Pranmore, helpless and devastated.

And Henrik, shining like a lighthouse. He doesn't know what a pillar of hope he is. He is honor; he is responsibility. His heartache is almost tangible in his words, but his strength doesn't waver when he speaks.

Even if I weren't in love, I'd follow him into Camellia's oblivion, trusting him every step of the way. And I'm not the only one. In the depths of their grief, the Woodmores exchange looks.

I have no doubt—they are with us now.

* * *

A small crowd waits for us at the castle's grand entry steps, their faces etched with worry in the flickering torchlight. My eyes fall on my father. He spots me as well, and then Colter. Once we're both accounted for, his tense expression eases. Denny remained with Lawrence, and Gavriel stands nearby with a group of knights. My eldest brother must have returned from Ladora, where he's been commanding a golem hunt. At least tonight, Father can rest easy knowing his children are safe.

I gratefully accept a groom's assistance and slide from my horse, weary despite the short time I spent in the saddle. It's late—well after midnight. I assisted Pranmore as he and the other elves gifted with healing tended the wounded, trying not to look too closely at the ones who would no longer benefit from his care.

I want nothing more than a trip to the bathhouse and then a bed. And the bed in my quarters will have to do, even though I haven't stepped foot in there since the incident

with Camellia last night. I try not to think of Henrik. I wasn't supposed to sleep alone tonight, or ever again.

But at least we're alive.

Feeling every muscle, I walk up the steps, keeping my eyes low so I won't make eye contact with anyone. My fingers slide over the leather-wrapped hilt of the dagger I wear at my hip, a comfort. I haven't admitted it to a soul, but I've been spooked since the attack. Too jumpy, too quick to assume everyone unknown is staring at me with Camellia's eyes.

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I'm halfway down the main entry hall when a hand falls on my shoulder. I gasp, whirling around, drawing the dagger on impulse.

Henrik stares back at me, his stormy eyes worried. He glances down at the blade, and his frown deepens.

"Sorry," I mutter, sliding it back into its sheath. "It's been a long night."

"Don't go alone."

I nod toward the entrance. "Everyone has better things to do than nanny me."

He raises a brow. "Then don't sleep."

I laugh a little, shaking my head.

"Stay with Audra," Lawrence says, coming up behind us.

I turn, too tired to be surprised he snuck up on me. "I don't want to impose."

"Don't argue with me," he commands, and then he continues down the hall.

"I need to go with him," Henrik says. "But first, I'll take you to Audra."

I accept his hand when he offers it, thankful we don't have to hide our relationship anymore.

“I’d rather stay by your side,” I whisper, meaning it with every fiber of my being.
“Sleep can wait.”

He gives me a weak smile. “You’re half asleep already.”

“It’s been an awful few weeks,” I whine quietly, only because it’s Henrik.

Nodding, he squeezes my hand.

Tears blur my vision, the kind that are spurred by frustration, heartache, and exhaustion. Everything seems so big, so impossible.

And so many people died tonight.

“Come on,” Henrik says gently, giving my hand a tug. I follow, too tired to argue.

Despite everything, it feels good to walk with Henrik, to hold his big, warm hand and silently declare he’s mine. We’d receive more than a few raised eyebrows if the circumstances were different, but no one bothers to look at us now. No one cares.

We find Audra with Ayan in a shadowed corner of the courtyard, and we hang back, neither of us eager to intrude.

The High Vale looks over when he spots us and stoically clears the grief from his face. He offers a smile that’s a ghost of his normal one and stands a little straighter.
“Are you going to loiter there all night?”

“Ayan, I’m so—”

He raises his hand to stop me. “Please, don’t. Not yet.”

I nod, pressing my lips together.

“Pranmore said Ayan broke his mind ward tonight,” Audra says quietly, changing the subject. “His magic is finally unbound.”

I nod, unsure how to answer. He’s worked so hard on it these last few months, and in one night, it’s destroyed. Though I’m sure it’s a relief, it came about in such a horrific way.

“Lawrence and I are going to be dealing with this most of the night,” Henrik says to Audra. “And it’s too late for Clover to ride to her parents’ estate. Can she stay with you tonight?”

I feel like I’m eight years old.

“Of course.” But Audra glances once more at Ayan, worried.

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“I’m fine,” he insists, his tone angry.

She nods and then looks at Lyredon, who stands silently nearby. An understanding passes between them, and then she leaves Ayan to her shadow rogue. To me, she says, “We’ll go now. You look exhausted.”

“Thank you, Audra,” Henrik says quietly. He steps up to me before we go, dropping his voice. “Sleep well.”

Even now, we don’t get a moment alone.

Audra and I walk through the crowded entry and step into the hall.

“I’m sorry you’re stuck watching me,” I say, trying to make the words light.

“You were attacked last night,” she points out. “And Camellia has a personal vendetta against you.”

“I know—but it’s still embarrassing.”

The elf smiles knowingly and leads me down familiar halls until we reach the queen’s quarters that were mine until recently.

Palmer, my old door guard, greets me, looking befuddled.

“Lady Clover will stay with me tonight,” Audra says.

“Of course.” Palmer bows his head and opens the door.

I pause inside, realizing everything is exactly how I left it.

“It’s awkward, isn’t it?” Audra says.

“You haven’t changed anything.”

“Lawrence said I could...” She shrugs, taking in the space with a wrinkle of her nose.

“But you didn’t intend to marry him until yesterday.”

“Yes.”

My eyes stray to the drapes and the little clovers that decorate the fabric. “You should at least get rid of these.”

Audra laughs, sounding as uncomfortable as I am.

“Did he show you the secret door in your bedchamber?” I ask.

Her eyebrows fly up. “The secretwhat?”

“It leads into his room.” I try not to laugh at her horrified expression. “It must have slipped his mind.”

“I’m sure,” she mutters.

“I’ll take the maid’s room,” I say, already heading in that direction, wishing we’d stopped at the baths first. But it’s late, and I’m not sure I care anymore. “See you in the morning.”

Audra murmurs a goodnight as I slip into the adjoining room. It's cozy, small, and blessedly only has one entrance. Just to be on the safe side, I wedge a chair under the handle and then fall on the covers, fully dressed. Sleep finds me almost immediately.

But so do the nightmares.

* * *

In the last twenty-four hours, we've received word that five more scattered groups have been arrested. Only one resulted in serious casualties, and that's because the attack was centered in the middle of a large market, and they had no elven assistance.

The High Vale mages have made a world of difference. I only wish there were more of them to go around.

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This morning, Henrik assigned territories to the seventy-six Woodmores who came to our aid, creating thirty-eight search groups. Each will be joined by ten specialized, high-ranking soldiers, a captain, and three High Vales. Still, that's not enough to stop Camellia should she plan another large attack.

Hopefully, we'll find her quickly.

Our wedding has been postponed indefinitely, no one able to guess when Henrik will have a moment to spare.

I hide a yawn behind my hand, perched in a soft chair in Calla's sitting room, my mind wandering as I ponder where Camellia might be hiding. Though the princess could be anywhere, I imagine she's near Cabaranth. She'd want to see some of the chaos she's created firsthand; I'm certain of it.

"That was kind of him," Lavender says. "Don't you think, Clover?"

I blink at the girls, trying to recall what we're talking about. "Hmm?"

"Denny," Hyacinth says, shooting me a look. "He asked Calla to walk through the gardens with him this morning."

I make a noise of agreement.

"You're not listening, are you?" Lavender chastises.

"Where do you think Camellia's holed up?" I ask.

“Somewhere far away,” Calla says scathingly. “Hiding under a big rock with the other slithering things.”

“Legends say ghosts stay close to the place they died,” Lavender muses. “Maybe that’s the same for Camellia...whatever she is.”

“Yes, but ghosts aren’t real,” Hyacinth says with a roll of her eyes.

“Are you so sure about that?” Lavender counters. “Then what’s Camellia?”

An excellent question.

“Necromancers can animate the dead,” I say after clearing my throat. “But they’re not sentient—more like puppets. So there really are no ghosts.”

Lavender shudders, running her hand down her long, black hair. “You don’t think Camellia would do that, do you?”

“Why would she need to?” Calla asks. “She has an army of golems and a healthy following of disposable necromancers.”

I stand, suddenly eager to stretch my legs. The whole situation makes me feel helpless, and I hate it. There are too many unknowns and nothing corporal to fight.

“Where are you going?” Calla asks.

“I’m going to take a walk.”

“Are you supposed to go alone?” Lavender widens her deep blue eyes. “Is that safe?”

“As far as I know, Camellia hasn’t attacked during the day.”

Though they look uneasy, they let me go.

I'm lost in my thoughts, toying with my dagger, when I turn the corner and spot Henrik ahead. He pauses in the hall, a tired smile spreading across his face. I'm stricken in place by the sight of it, feeling as if my day is suddenly so much better.

"I was looking for you." He comes toward me, his strides long and sure. My heart beats a little faster, in time with his footfalls.

"How did you escape?" I tease when he stops in front of me.

He takes my hand. "I'm not needed right now."

"Oh, Henrik." I give him a smile that's likely too tired to look as flirtatious as I would like. "You're always needed."

He offers his arm. "Walk with me?"

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I fall into step beside him, leaning against his side and relishing the feel of him next to me. These few normal moments feel nice. Right now, I can almost pretend all is right with the world.

We don't talk, but the silence is comfortable. On habit, we make our way to the garden, walking past the well-groomed flowerbeds and bushes, heading toward the overgrown section at the very back.

The last time we were here, it was raining, but the weather is warm and pleasant today.

I sit on the ledge of the dry fountain, running my hand over the stone. "Lavender said ghosts linger near the places they die."

Henrik smiles. "Do we believe in ghosts now?"

"Honestly? I don't know."

He nods, understanding.

"What is Camellia?" I ask him, knowing he doesn't have answers.

"An abomination. A soulless monster who feeds on life to live."

"Do you think the Woodmores can defeat her?" I turn my worried eyes on him.
"Truly?"

He claims the spot next to me, staring into the garden. “I hope so.”

We exist quietly for a moment, and then I turn my head to study Henrik. He sits close, and our legs touch. He hasn’t shaved since the first day of the assembly, and dark stubble shadows his jaw. He looks over, and our eyes meet.

A second passes.

Then another.

Henrik leans forward, sets his hand on the side of my neck, and kisses me.

It’s so unexpected, I freeze for several seconds, losing myself to the moment. Henrik’s lips are soft but firm. His hand is warm and rough.

I focus on sensations: the feel of our noses brushing, his stubble as it scrapes my skin. The smell of the garden, the sound of the birds chattering in the trees.

Henrik pulls back slightly, caressing my neck with his hand. And then he kisses me again. Softly. Gently.

It’s the sweetest moment, and I feel it in my chest, my stomach. It tingles down my arms and makes me feel weightless.

When he ends the kiss, I blink at him lazily, feeling like I’ve just woken from a dream.

“I’m sorry about our wedding,” he says quietly, letting his hand fall to his lap. “I’m sorry you’re still sleeping alone—that nothing ever seems to go as planned.”

“I told you I’d wait for you.” I brush my thumb over his cheek, loving the man so

much it almost scares me.

He lowers his forehead to my shoulder, allowing himself to be vulnerable and exhausted. I rake my hand through his hair, offering comfort the only way I know how.

In many ways, I think Lawrence was cruel for giving so much responsibility to a man like Henrik. He felt each death deeply, mourning every soul we lost in Camellia's pointless battle. He's not callous enough to be our duke marshal.

And yet, I cannot imagine anyone else in the role. Henrik was born to lead.

I just hope the position doesn't destroy him.

"Someone's coming," I say quietly when I hear footsteps on the path outside our sanctuary.

Henrik sits up, nodding.

Bartholomew appears. He wears a smile, but it flickers before it falls into a look of despair. "I'm sorry to interrupt. Lawrence sent me to find you."

"What is it?" Henrik asks, offering his hand to help me up. Together, we stand.

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I brush off my skirt, preparing myself for more bad news.

“Our scouts have spotted an army in the distance,” the young duke says, his voice devoid of its usual cheer. “Necromancers. Humans. Golems.” He pauses. “A large number of High Vales.”

“How many soldiers total?”

“The scout estimated a thousand or more.”

“Which way are they headed?” Henrik asks, immediately starting down the path, his pace so fast Bartholomew and I must hurry to keep up with him.

Bartholomew glances at me before he answers, “Toward Cabaranth.”

20

HENRIK

Three days—that’s how long the scouts estimate we have before Camellia’s army reaches us. Even with the bands I sent out, we easily have the manpower to stop them, but Camellia knows that.

Why would she make such a bold, seemingly foolish move?

I don’t like it.

The soldiers stationed in Cabaranth prepare for battle under my command. Strong spring winds whip through the bailey, ripping at flags and clothing, putting everyone in a worse mood than they were already in.

I stand in the courtyard, watching a dozen couriers ride through the main gatehouse. They carry call-to-arms they will deliver to nearby knight commanders. By tomorrow, we'll have three thousand men. The day after, five thousand.

Agitated, I drum my fingers on my crossed arms, nodding to Lawrence when he joins me.

"How are the preparations going?" he asks.

"We have eighteen hundred men right now," I tell him. "More arriving in the next few days."

"Then why do you look worried?"

I turn to face him. "Camellia isn't a fool. She at least has a rough idea of how many soldiers we have in Cabaranth. Even right now, we outnumber her almost two to one."

Lawrence nods.

"Is it a distraction?" I ponder aloud. "Is she hoping to lure our army here so she can attack somewhere else?"

"Perhaps she has more faith in her golems and blood mages than she should," Lawrence says darkly.

"And why would so many High Vales defect to her?" I ask. "Those who followed

Augmirian should hate her—she murdered him.”

“But they share a common foe,” Lawrence points out.

“They’re using her to bring you down.”

He nods. “That’s what Audra suspects, and I’m inclined to believe she’s right.”

“It would explain how she got her hands on the golems.” I stretch my stiff neck. “Do you think she’s traveling with them?”

“I’m sure she’s there, but in the flesh?” He scoffs. “I doubt it.”

“Where is she hiding?” I ask with a frustrated growl. “If we can’t find her, this could go on for years.”

“We’ll find her.” Lawrence slaps my shoulder. “Have a little faith. One of the search parties will sniff her out.”

“I’ve studied the army’s current path,” I say, returning to the matter at hand. “I’ve chosen a location to intercept them that should give us the higher ground.”

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“How close is it to the city?” Lawrence asks.

“Half a day’s ride. Tomorrow morning, we’ll leave.”

“You’ll set up camp and wait?”

I nod.

“Sounds like a good time,” he says wistfully, still hating that he’s stuck behind the protection of the castle walls.

“I want Clover to stay here.”

He raises his eyebrows. “You think she’ll let you leave without her?”

“This isn’t a skirmish,” I say quietly. “It’s going to be a bloody, dirty battle, and she’s not trained for it.”

He holds up his hands. “You don’t have to convince me.”

“I’m not trying to convince you. I’m asking for a favor.” I frown. “As a...friend.”

Lawrence answers with a cocky grin. “That was painful for you, wasn’t it?”

“Just tell me you’ll do it—command her to stay.”

“She’s going to be mad,” he warns.

“I know.”

“Like a calnauth in early spring.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m aware.”

“It’s your funeral.” He shrugs. “Just know I’ll place the blame directly on you.”

Grateful, I nod.

The king glances toward the setting sun and raises his brows suggestively. “You know what most men do before they leave for war...don’t you?”

I let out a long-suffering sigh, looking away.

“Henrik the Noble my foot,” he scoffs with a laugh. “Your mind is filthier than mine. I meant they getmarried.”

“Tonight?” I ask, incredulous.

“No time like the present.”

I study him for a moment. “Before or after I tell her I’m leaving her here?”

He snorts. “That depends on if you fancy sleeping alone.”

* * *

I knock on Clover’s door and tap my fist on the doorframe as I wait. A small ceremony is one thing, but this...this is something different. It feels too rushed.

After several seconds, Clover opens the door, raking her eyes over me as her mouth twists into a questioning smile. “Hello, soldier.”

“If I asked you to marry me tonight, would you? Your brothers are preparing for battle, your father has taken your mother to her sister, and this is ridiculous.” I search her eyes. “But...would you?”

Clover lists her head to the side, perhaps questioning whether I’ve been drinking. “Right now?”

I nod.

“All right.” She steps out, closes the door, and sets the lock with a key from the pocket of her gown. “Where?”

I stare at her. “Yes?”

She lifts her eyes to mine, smiling in a way that looks almost triumphant. “The thing is, while I will wait, I’d rather not. So if you show up at my door asking me to marry you, I’m going to say yes.”

“I’m not sure your father would agree to this.”

Clover shrugs, her eyes bright. “We won’t tell him.”

“We won’t...tell him...?”

She nods, liking the idea. “We’ll have a formal ceremony after...well. After. When things are normal again.”

She’s taking this better than expected, but it shouldn’t surprise me.

Looping her arm through mine, she looks up at me. “Who will marry us?”

I laugh, feeling like she pulled a rug out from under my feet. “This is really all right?”

“Are you trying to talk me out of it?” She tugs me forward. “Let’s go.”

* * *

We gather in the chapel once more, but this time, it's only Lawrence, Audra, the bishop, Clover, and me. Denny is here as well, looking unsure but keeping his protests to himself. He hugs his sister before we begin, giving us his blessing.

Lawrence signs the marriage document in place of Count Flauret, his authority all that's needed.

Clover carries a bouquet of white flowers Audra hastily picked from a nearby meadow. And they're perfect. Clover was always the wildflower growing amongst Camellia's hothouse blooms—a wild spirit, with a quick smile and mischief in her spring eyes.

“Henrik, do you take Lady Clover Aunalissa Flauret to be your lawfully wedded wife?” the bishop asks.

I hold Clover's hand. “I do.”

“Do you, Clover, take Duke Henrik Arthur Solbane to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

Clover nods, her eyes bright. “I do.”

“And do you have the rings?” he asks.

I look at Clover in horror, realizing we forgot that part.

“I can take care of it,” Audra says quietly. “Though it might sting a little.”

I raise my brows.

“Clasp your left hands,” the elf instructs. “Lace your fingers together and repeat the vows as one.”

She then nods for the bishop to continue. He studies her for a moment, baffled, and then says, “With this ring, I thee wed....”

I meet Clover’s eyes, and we repeat together, “With this ring, I thee wed.”

Suddenly, a sharp, searing pain encircles my ring finger. Judging from the way Clover’s hand tightens on mine, she’s experiencing it too.

Rings of light twine around our fingers, glowing for a moment until they fade to a simple black band, inked right onto our skin.

We look at Audra in question.

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“High Vale rings,” she says quietly, her eyes glossy with emotion. “Connected with magic. A blessing of my people and my gift to you.”

“Thank you, Audra,” Clover murmurs.

She nods, stepping back.

“Henrik, you may kiss your bride,” the bishop says once the ceremony is complete.

I step forward, taking Clover’s chin gently in my hand. Before I can kiss her, she stands on her toes, pressing her mouth to mine, smiling against my lips at my surprise.

“You’re finally mine,” she whispers when we part.

“I’ve been yours since you showed up on my supply run,” I tell her quietly. “Only now, it’s official.”

21

CLOVER

I shouldn’t be nervous. My heart shouldn’t stutter as Henrik unlocks the doors to our new suite of rooms.

Lawrence said it was about time Henrik started acting like a duke, and he wouldn’t hear of us spending our first night in the barracks. We’re in the royal wing, in our

own hall.

Lamps burn on the entry tables, welcoming us inside. I scan the space, taking it in: plush, cream-colored upholstery, dark wooden floors instead of stone, heavy furniture with ornate details.

I draw a calming breath, pressing my hand to my stomach to coax the butterflies to be still.

It doesn't work.

Henrik comes up behind me, setting his hands on my arms. Quietly, he says, "This has all been very sudden. Please don't feel like we have to—"

"If you finish that sentence, I cannot be held accountable for how badly I maim you."

He lets out a startled laugh. My breath catches as he runs his finger down my arm, my heart beating faster as he toys with the decorative stitching on my sleeve.

I was married in the court dress I was in when Henrik came to see me earlier. It's lovely enough, but not as nice as the one I wore the first time we almost married—and certainly not as ornate as the gown I wore when I was expected to marry Lawrence.

Henrik traces the embroidered vines back up, pausing when he reaches the dropped neckline that leaves my shoulders bare.

I shiver when his finger trails from the sleeve to my skin. His touch is warm and so featherlight, it gives me goosebumps. He pauses when he reaches my neck and then pushes my hair aside. His lips replace his finger, kissing their way up my shoulder, following the neckline around my back.

Each soft kiss tugs at my heart. Heat kindles in my chest and spreads, warming my stomach and limbs. My mouth goes dry as he presses his lips between my shoulder blades, just above the fabric's edge. I swallow, trying to control my breathing.

"You're beautiful," he murmurs.

I shiver, knowing he can tell how he's affecting me.

Setting his hands on my waist, he turns me slowly. Our eyes meet and hold, and my heart races.

Henrik drops his hand to the curve of my hip. I lift my face as he steps in. We come together, our lips teasing, each kiss feather-soft and building with sweet anticipation.

I let my hands rove up his trim abdomen, over the chiseled muscles of his chest and shoulders, and then I run my finger over the top button of his doublet.

Henrik breaks the kiss, looking down. I unbutton it, and then I move to the second. He swallows, his throat moving with the movement as I continue down.

Once I've finished, he pulls the garment free, tossing it onto a nearby chair. The doublet is followed by his shirt.

I stare at him, drinking my fill. He's beautiful. Henrik's breath grows labored as I set the flat of my palm over his heart. His pulse thrums, the pace fast and steady.

There's an inch-long scar at the bottom-left of his rib cage, and I touch it. "What's this from?"

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“A dagger.” He pauses. “Bandit attack in Waterside a few years ago.”

“Did you win?” I ask.

“Yes.”

There’s another scar at his side, this one curved. My fingers drift over it. “Another bandit attack?”

His hand skims over my back.

“A ramdore,” he says hoarsely, speaking of the large, flightless birds in the southern region of Dulane. They’re predators, and they attack in flocks. “We stumbled on a nest while looking for an assassin near Forsten.”

“Mmm,” I trail my fingertips over his skin. “And this—”

Henrik moves his hand to my side, taking possession of my waist. He pulls me against him, and my hands fly to his chest. My knees soften, reacting to his touch.

“You can map my battle scars later,” he promises, and then he drops his mouth to mine. But this time when he kisses me, he doesn’t just caress my lips...

He claims them.

Henrik’s fingers tighten over me, working in tandem with his mouth, warm through the fabric of my gown. When I think my knees will no longer support me, he leans

over and scoops me into his arms, carrying me into the bedchamber. He lays me on the bed, nestling my head atop the pillows.

Brushing his fingers through my hair, he says, “We need to talk about something.”

I shake my head in protest, reaching for him. “I don’t want to talk.”

He takes my hand in his, kissing it and then holding it hostage. “I want you to stay in Cabaranth tomorrow when I leave.”

Startled, I sit up, pushing him back. “What?”

“I was going to have Lawrence command you to stay, but I’ve decided that’s not fair to you, and that’s not the kind of marriage I want. So I’m asking you, please...” He begs me with his gaze. “Don’t come with us tomorrow.”

“Henrik.” Frustrated tears sting my eyes. “But—”

“You’ve seen enough death. You’ve experienced sadness and witnessed the horrors of battle. But I don’t want that for you, and you’ve never trained for this. You are a good archer—” He smiles when I begin to protest and amends, “You are an excellent archer. But you’re not ready for true war.”

“How can I stay?” I whisper. “The whole time I’ll wonder...”

He brings my hand to his face, resting his cheek against my knuckles. “I know.”

“It’s a cruel request, soldier,” I say softly.

He nods. “And a selfish one.”

I draw in a deep breath, feeling like I'm going to cry. "Horribly selfish."

"But will you do it?" He kisses my knuckles. "For me?"

Pressing my lips together to hold back my protests, I nod.

Relief softens Henrik's expression, and he closes his eyes, clinging to my hand. I pull him onto the bed, coaxing him to lie beside me, drawing circles on his bare stomach with my fingertip. And though I don't want to think morbid thoughts, I can't help it. This could be our last night. Our only night.

"We have better things to dwell on right now." I flatten my palm against his skin, emboldened by the way his muscles tense under my touch. "Let's not waste our time with thoughts of morning."

Henrik turns to look at me, his gaze heated. After several long seconds, he rolls over, caging me between his arms. I close my eyes as he lowers his mouth to mine, losing myself to his touch.

No matter how brief it might be, I'm thankful we have this time together.

HENRIK

Camellia's army will reach our camp sometime tonight, but we're prepared. Too prepared.

There's nothing we can do but wait. I lean over my desk, studying the map for the hundredth time, moving small wooden pieces across it like a child playing with toys. My tent is large but hot. The blasted wind continues to blow, and it rips at the sides, threatening to topple the whole thing.

I have more comforts than necessary, including a large table and velvet-upholstered chairs, a bed that's larger than the one I had as a commander with a down-stuffed mattress, a personal cook to see to my dietary needs, rugs, lamps, and more—all brought in wagons as we traveled.

I glance around the tent with a scowl. Shaking my head at the clutter, I look back at the map. Our shadow rogues have reported that Camellia's army has been traveling at night and resting during the day. We could attack now, in the light, but that seems too obvious.

They're also moving slower than we anticipated. It's almost as if Camellia is hoping to lure us to her—further away from Cabaranth.

The city is well guarded, I reassure myself, but the nagging worry won't go away.

We've tripled the guard on the walls, and the city gates are closed. Rations have been brought in, and the fortifications are sound. They could hold off an attack for weeks,

if not longer.

I run my hand through my hair, deciding to leave the sweltering space for some fresh air. The wind whips at the tent flap as I open it, wailing as it passes through the meadow grass.

The wildflowers are in full bloom, adding splashes of color to the green landscape. We're situated on a hill, able to see around us on all sides. Aside from the trees in the distance that grow along a creek at the edge of the valley, the land is open.

Ayan joins me, flexing his hand. He's been unusually somber since the attack on the Woodmores, determined to defeat Camellia. The High Vales have accepted his authority, and he leads them now, acting as my second-in-command.

I'm not sure how I feel about that.

"How's your magic?" I ask.

He kindles a flame in his palm, raising his brows.

I nod, satisfied.

"It's strange." He extinguishes the magic. "It's like a third limb that was bound most of my life, and now I can use it at will. It feels natural, and yet...it's foreign."

"Be careful tonight," I say. "You have no heir, and your people need you."

He smirks. "Oh, I'm sure I have an heir somewhere."

I roll my eyes, not in the mood for his bluster.

He laughs as he walks away, off to join his High Vale comrades. Pranmore joins me once he's gone, one of only ten Woodmores who volunteered to march to battle—every one of them healers, all but two able to control defensive wards.

“Do you think Camellia is with her army?” I ask him.

“We'll find out soon enough,” he says.

“How are you feeling?”

“Torn.”

I turn to look at him, frowning when I see his expression. “How so?”

His hair is tied back for the first time, likely because of the wind. He looks different, almost hardened. “I was raised to avoid conflict, to live in harmony with all around me. But right now...”

I lift my brows, waiting for him to continue.

“Fighting for peace feels like a noble pursuit,” he finishes heavily.

I sigh, feeling his conflict. “I'm a soldier, a knight—a warrior—but I didn't join the army for love of bloodshed and battle. I wanted to serve and protect something I value. For me, it's Caldenbauer and the royal family.”

“What is the cost of peace?” he says, reminding me of our conversation from not long ago when it felt like my world was ending.

“Peace is priceless,” I murmur.

Turning, Pranmore meets my eyes. His expression is now resolved. “Then it must be protected at all costs.”

“I’m thankful to have you by my side,” I tell him. “You’re a good friend.”

“As are you.”

We stand together until he’s summoned, his services needed for an injured horse. I watch as he walks away. Once again, I’m left alone.

Waiting.

“Your Grace?” Declan says, approaching me.

I turn toward my valet. “What is it?”

“Your father is here. He’s asking to see you.”

“My father?” I ask, stunned.

Declan nods, looking uncomfortable. “He’s waiting for you in your tent.”

I nod, dismissing him, and then walk back. What’s he doing here? The battlefield is no place for a man with limited mobility. What is he thinking?

I push through the tent flap, preparing myself for an argument as I enter the space.

My father stands with his back to me, staring at the finery. “I remember my last battle,” he says when he hears me enter. “It was a conflict between a viscount in Roswin and the crown. The duke marshal was there—Algernon’s brother, Corgin. I was a commander at the time, closing in on my seal. I wasn’t invited into his tent.”

Unsure how to answer, I wait for him to continue.

He turns around, shuffling on his wooden leg. “Never thought I’d see the day the tent belonged to you.”

“What are you doing here?”

He snorts, averting his gaze. “That your way of saying I’m not welcome?”

“I’m asking what you’re doing here.”

Father’s mouth moves as he runs his tongue along his front teeth, almost as if he doesn’t want to say what he came to say.

“Are you afraid I’m going to die?” I ask. “Have you come to make your peace?”

His cool eyes move back to my face. “Something like that.”

“Consider your task complete.”

I turn to leave, but Father stops me, calling out my name. I grit my teeth and close my eyes, deliberating for several long seconds before I turn back.

“I know you don’t need it anymore.” He jerks his hand toward me. “But I made you a

set of armor.”

Breathing in through my nose, I study him. “Did it come from Camellia?”

“The money did,” he admits.

“Then I don’t want it.” I turn to leave again.

“Henrik,” he says harshly, his tone stopping me in my tracks. “You were right. I knew she was plotting something, and I didn’t care.”

“Why?” I turn back.

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“Algernon was my friend,” he says harshly. “My good friend, not too different from you and Lawrence.”

I’d like to argue that Lawrence and I aren’t friends, but it would be a lie now.

“But he turned his back on me after I was injured.”

“He appointed you as his royal blacksmith,” I point out.

“And a lot of good that did us,” he snarls. “He did it to ease his conscience.”

I sigh, knowing he’s right.

“And then, for all those years, I saw you following in my footsteps—and saw Algernon leading you on...” He shakes his head. “It didn’t settle right. So when Camellia came to me, offering me a chance to make something of our family—to pay me well enough I could pay for Brielle’s school and make you the armor we could never afford... Well, I took it.”

I remember the conversation he and the princess had when I discovered he was in Revalane, how grateful he was. It cut me to the core then, and it cuts me now.

But it doesn’t change anything.

“That armor was paid for with blood,” I tell him. “I don’t want it.”

“That armor will keep you alive.”

“Is it talvernum?” I demand.

“No. It’s steel—the best I’ve ever crafted. It’s all I’ve worked on since I arrived back in Cabaranth.”

“It doesn’t change where it came from.”

“Use it against her.” His eyes spark with fire. “Yes, it came from Camellia, but doesn’t that make it all that much sweeter? Fight her, Henrik. Fight her in that armor and win.”

I study him, saying nothing.

His face falls, and for the first time, he looks defeated. “This is all I have to give you. It’s all I’ve ever had to give you.”

The plea in his words sits heavy between us.

I stare at him. He stares at me.

After several long seconds, I yank off my gauntlets. “Help me put it on.”

Father swallows, his eyes glossing. Stoic to a bloody fault, just like his son, he shoves the emotion back and nods.

* * *

“The army approaches, Your Grace,” one of our scouts informs me, though I can already see the glow of their torches in the distance from my vantage point atop the hill.

The wind has thankfully died down, with only a mild, cool breeze cutting through the night.

“Is Camellia with them?” I ask.

“I didn’t see her.”

“What do you say we take a look for ourselves?” Ayan says, bored and just as eager to do something as I am.

I frown, thinking about it, and then I nod. “All right.”

“Really?” he asks, startled I agreed.

“Bartholomew, come with us.”

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“Yes, sir,” my squire says eagerly, his beloved horse dancing underneath him as if he, too, needs a chance to stretch his legs.

I turn, looking for one of my knight commanders in the group. When I spot him, I say, “Gavriel, you’re in charge until we return.”

Clover’s eldest brother nods, the torchlight glinting off his plate armor.

Using only the sister moons’ dim light, Ayan, Bartholomew, and I break away from the group, riding into the night, using the cover of the nearby trees to approach the army that moves like spilled ink across the meadow.

They’re still a good hour away, but we easily reach them in less than ten minutes.

We draw our horses to stop in the shadows of the grove, careful to avoid the silver glow that washes over the valley. We’re several hundred yards away, just close enough to make out individual figures.

“Look there,” Ayan says, nodding forward. “Toward the back.”

“Where?” Bartholomew asks, but I’ve already spotted her.

A figure rides on horseback, her long raven hair falling around her shoulders. She wears no armor—no protection whatsoever. Her mount is jet black and large.

“Is that her?” Ayan asks.

“Possibly,” I whisper, uneasy.

Bartholomew squints in the dark. “What’s she riding? Is that a horse?”

“It looks like a horse,” Ayan says, “And it moves like a horse, so...it’s probably a horse.”

“But it has a horn,” Bartholomew argues.

“It’s a horse,” Ayan says, exasperated.

“It must be something else. Maybe a one-horned demon creature? What would you call it, Henrik?”

The two are antsy with nerves, but I’m too busy surveying Camellia’s army to answer. I’ve never seen so many necromancers in my life.

“Maybe a unicorn?” Bartholomew suggests. “One horn?”

“That’s the best you can come up with?” Ayan scoffs. “Let’s call it a sword horse.”

“A sword horse?” Bartholomew says incredulously. “You think that’s better?”

“Enough,” I command, waving my hand at them, hoping they’ll shut up. “We need to get back.”

We ride quickly, rejoining our men.

“Did you see Camellia?” Pranmore asks. He looks like a different elf in armor, wearing thick canvas and steel.

“Possibly,” I answer.

“She was riding a sword horse,” Ayan adds, and I roll my eyes.

“What’s a sword horse—” Pranmore begins, but I hold up my hand, begging him not to go there.

“They’ll be here soon,” I inform my commanders. “Tell your men to take their positions.”

Thirty minutes later, Camellia’s army appears in the wide valley. I wait atop my horse near the front of the lines, watching.

The soldiers are eager, shifting in their positions but holding their ground. I study them, taking in the faces of the men and women. They all have families, friends, and homes to go to when this is over. They trust me to lead them well.

We watch as Camellia’s army comes to a stop. The wind tugs at the necromancers’ cloaks, pulling on their hoods and making them look like dark, faceless wraiths. As the scouts said, there are High Vales in their ranks, along with human soldiers.

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The largest of the sister moons emerges from a cloud as Camellia rides to the front line. She wears white, a deceptively pure color, adding to her ghostly appearance. Behind me, my men murmur. For many, this is the first time they've seen the princess since she returned from the dead.

Steeling myself, glad to have Pranmore at my side, I ride out to meet her.

Camellia glances at the Woodmore, her serene smile becoming a sneer. And then she turns her eyes back on me. "Hello, Henrik."

"Is it truly you this time, or are you using a puppet yet again?"

She merely smiles, choosing not to answer. I glance at Pranmore, but he shakes his head.

A puppet then. Even now, she hides.

"What's your plan, Camellia?" I gesture behind me. "You're vastly outnumbered."

She glances over her shoulder, surveying her army, and then looks back. "What do I care if they die?"

"Is this a game to you?" I demand.

The princess smiles. "You already know what this is."

She rides forward, and my gaze drops to her unsettling steed. Its eyes glow red in the

night. Bartholomew was right—it's a creature of magic, not unlike the blood rats she collected for her concoction.

“Surrender to me, Henrik. Do it now, and I will take mercy on you and your soldiers.”

I draw my horse next to Camellia's and lower my voice. “I will find where you're hiding, and I will destroy you.”

“It was a generous offer,” she says with a sigh. “But have it your way.”

The princess lifts her arm, signaling her army to attack.

23

CLOVER

It's been three days since Henrik left. The last update we received said Camellia's army should reach them tonight.

I walk with Audra and Lyredon to Lawrence's quarters, my stomach in knots.

“How are you holding up?” Denny asks when we arrive.

“I'm fine,” I lie. “Everyone's said Camellia's army is outnumbered.”

He nods. “I'm sure Henrik will be all right.”

But it's not just Henrik. Gavriel, Colter, Bartholomew, Pranmore, and even Ayan—so many people I care about are out there.

I follow Audra inside. Lawrence sits on the settee, his leg bouncing with nervous energy, looking like he's about to steal a horse and join the fight.

I choose the chair across from him. "This is killing you, isn't it?"

He gives me a tight nod and presses his fist to his mouth.

Audra sits next to him, not avoiding him as she used to. "I wish I were out there as well."

He turns to look at her, and his expression softens. "No one would have allowed it. You're too important now."

"I'm not important," I say. "Why am I here again?"

"You're important," Lawrence argues listlessly. And then, as if he can't help himself, his smile becomes crooked. "Just not as important as we are."

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“Good to know my place,” I say wryly.

An urgent knock sounds at the door, making me jump. Miguel rushes inside without waiting for an answer. “Several fires have been set in the city, sire.”

Lawrence is on his feet in an instant. “Fires?”

“It appears to be arson. The guards are working to extinguish them, but there are so many...”

“We can’t leave the people trapped inside the walls,” Audra says, horrified.

“But we can’t open the gates,” Xander argues, entering the room and joining the conversation.

Lawrence groans, dropping his face into his hands. “Where are the fires?”

“They’re isolated in the western part of the city right now.”

“Evacuate the people to the east, and whatever you do, find and arrest the arsonist.”

“I’m sure the guards are doing their best—”

Lawrence interrupts sharply, “Find him. Arrest him. Throw him in the dungeon where there’s nothing to burn.”

I exchange a look with Audra, both of us wondering if Lawrence has reached his

breaking point. We follow him into the hall, unsure what else to do.

“Your Majesty!” a guard hollers, jogging toward us. His face is red, and his eyes are wild and panicked.

“I’ve already heard about the fires,” Lawrence says.

“Several covens of necromancers are attacking people in the streets.”

Lawrence stops dead in his tracks. Slowly, he repeats, “Covens of necromancers?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“What are my guards doing?” he nearly snarls.

“They’re fighting them, sire.”

“Good.” He turns on his heel and heads back to his suite of rooms. “That’s good.”

“Lawrence?” Audra calls. “Where are you going?”

Instead of answering, he closes the door. We stand in the hall, dumbfounded. I turn to my brother. “What do we do?”

“Protect the king,” he says, as a good sealed knight should. His eyes slide to Audra. “And his queen-to-be.”

“But what do I do?” I ask, feeling useless.

Denny studies me, and then he nods to himself. “Get your bow.”

Before I can respond, Lawrence opens the door and strides out, dressed in leather armor, carrying his sword.

“Your Majesty!” Miguel exclaims, eyeing our king.

Lawrence ignores him.

“Lawrence,” Miguel says this time. “You can’t go out there.”

“I’m at a crossroads in my life.” Turning back, he finally acknowledges his knight. “What kind of king do I want to be? One who hides in his castle while his people are under attack? Or one who will risk death and fight with my men?”

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Miguel begins shaking his head.

“I’ve already decided,” Lawrence says. “If I die, then I die. In ten years, Bartholomew will likely be a better king than I am anyway.”

“Lawrence,” Audra says, her tone strange.

He turns back, looking like he’s ready to argue with her as well. But the elf doesn’t try to persuade him to stay. Instead, she closes the space between them, grasps him by the collar of his brigandine, and kisses him.

Hard.

In front of his knights, in front of me, in front of several very shocked guards.

My jaw drops. Once the surprise wears off, I press my lips into a thin line to keep from laughing.

When Audra pulls back, she says, “I’ll fight with you, Lawrence. By your side.”

He swallows, looking stupefied. Clearing his throat, he nods. “I’d like that.”

* * *

I stand atop one of the inner curtain walls, taking aim, acknowledging why Henrik tried to save me from this. Every cloaked man or woman who falls will forever live in my memory; every life I take to save countless others will haunt my dreams.

But I will not back down from the fight, not when they're attacking my city. I didn't start this war, but I will certainly do my part to end it.

There's a commotion on the outside wall. Guards holler, but I can't make out what they're saying with the chaos around me.

Smoke is heavy in the air, bringing with it the acrid smell of burning cottages and businesses. Thankfully the wind died down, making it easier to contain the fires.

I shoot again, targeting a man who's cornered a woman and her young son. The woman looks up when the mage falls, clutching the boy in relief.

Hers is the face I will choose to remember.

Shoving several escaped strands of hair out of my eyes, I take aim again, picking off the blood mages one by one. But there are so many.

Hundreds of necromancers infiltrated the city before Lawrence ordered the guards to shut the gates. Perhaps they lived here all along, preying on the unfortunate and orphaned for their dark spells, choosing victims who wouldn't be missed.

Another scream from the wall distracts me, and I lower my bow, looking at the archer closest to me. "What's going on over there?"

He shakes his head, focused on his mission. But curiosity gets the best of me.

I jog across the adjoining walls, thankful I took the time to change into trousers when I donned my leather armor. I arrive at the same time as Lawrence and Audra.

"What is it?" I ask, though they don't know any more than I do.

I gasp when I look down, trying to make sense of what I'm seeing. Blinking, I stare at the churning mass of attackers.

"They're..." I can't finish the thought.

"They look like skeletons," Audra says.

"Oh, thank goodness," I say with a heavy exhale. "I thought I was losing my mind."

Xander steps up to Lawrence. "They've surrounded the city walls, Your Majesty."

It's not unheard of for a powerful necromancer to raise the dead, but this is inconceivable.

"What kind of blood mage has the power to—" I stop myself. "Camellia's here."

Lawrence curses under his breath, and then he nods. "She must be."

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“Can you shoot them?” Denny asks me.

“I can, but the arrow will go right through. There’s not any...meat to them.”

We watch in horror as they climb on top of each other, making a bone scaffolding that’s growing taller by the minute.

Audra leans over the wall, throwing a white-hot fireball at the undead soldiers. It sends them falling, and their bones scatter when they hit the ground.

“I’ll find more of my men,” she says, satisfied.

But so many accompanied Henrik and Ayan. I’m not sure how many elven soldiers are left in the city.

I look across the landscape and draw in a startled breath. There are thousands of them—hordes upon hordes of skeletal warriors stumbling toward the city.

“We have to find Camellia,” I say. “That’s the only way to put an end to this.”

“But how will we defeat her?” Audra asks. “Pranmore is with Henrik.”

Camellia planned this. Carefully, maliciously. She lured our soldiers away from the city so she could attack Cabaranth with her undead army.

“Your Majesty,” a guard says from behind us, looking relieved to find Lawrence.

“Tell me it’s good news,” the king says, sounding like he’s about to set fire to the city himself.

The guard blanches.

Lawrence growls, “Just get on with it.”

“The golems in your storeroom have come to life. They killed the guards, and they’re going through the castle.”

“The golems in the storeroom don’t have energy crystals in them,” Lawrence says slowly.

The man gives him a helpless look.

I lean against the curtain wall, watching as the skeletons put themselves back together and continue to build their tower of bones.

It’s going to be a long night.

24

HENRIK

I hate blasted mages. Just when you get close, they run. If that’s not enough, when you have them cornered, they summon a plethora of undead, from wraiths to skeletal warriors. Pranmore easily disbands them—they recoil from his life magic. But they’re a nuisance, and it makes finding the true enemies far more difficult.

I’m bloodied from their spells, my armor singed and blackened from their unnatural fire. Bartholomew and Pranmore look worse for wear as well, but we’re still alive, so

I'll count that as a win.

The Woodmore has saved our lives several times tonight.

“Henrik,” Ayan says, fighting his way through the throng, breathing hard once he reaches us. Strands of dark hair have fallen around the High Vale's face, clinging to the sweat on his brow and cheeks. Blood trails down his temple, and there's a concerning gash in his arm. “The golems...they're different.”

I growl as one of Camellia's human soldiers charges me, the clang of our clashing swords lost in the din. Once he falls, I turn back to Ayan. “What do you mean they're different?”

“They're not powered by energy crystals.”

“What?” I demand.

Pranmore raises a ward, blocking us from a rogue spell that fizzles against the boundary in bright green flames.

Temporarily protected, Bartholomew takes a moment, bending at the waist and gulping deep breaths of air. He's fought hard tonight and made me proud, but he lacks stamina. I'm not sure how much longer he'll last.

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“We can blast their chests to oblivion, but still, they fight,” Ayan says. “We managed to tear one to shreds, and when we examined it, the crystal cavity was empty.”

“Then...how?”

“We think they’re using wraiths to control them.”

“You can’t be serious,” I mutter. “All right—that’s fine. Find the Woodmores and team up. The golems are our biggest threat. Once we take them down, the mages will likely retreat.”

Ayan nods, ducking out of Pranmore’s ward and screaming a battle cry as he clashes with a mage.

Though the golems and mutinous High Vales have made the battle more difficult than it should have been with our numbers, we’re winning. By morning, we’ll have our victory.

But it still doesn’t settle right on my weary mind. Why would Camellia send these men at us for nothing? Perhaps she believes they’re disposable, but it’s a waste of her resources, and she’s not that careless.

Suddenly, a thought assails me.

“What is it?” Pranmore asks.

“The golems can be controlled by wraiths,” I breathe.

Pranmore nods, not understanding.

“Lawrence has collected more than a dozen of them in his storeroom.” I turn on my heel. “We have to return to Cabaranth.”

“But Henrik!” Bartholomew exclaims.

I’m frantic as I fight through the mess, cutting down the enemy with little thought or remorse. Finally, I find Gavriel.

“Camellia is going to attack Cabaranth,” I tell him urgently. “It’s possible she’s already there. I need you to take command here.”

“Go,” he says. “I have this.”

* * *

We leave the battle, traveling quickly toward the city. Even Pranmore deems the situation worthy of riding.

None of us are prepared for what we find.

“Cabaranth is under attack,” Bartholomew gasps when we arrive.

An army of skeletal warriors writhes outside the city, climbing atop each other in an attempt to scale the walls. High Vales throw fireballs, knocking down the undead soldiers, but they simply build themselves up again.

It’s like fighting the tide.

Bartholomew worries his reins. “How are we going to get past them?”

“Pranmore? I ask. “Can you get us through?”

The elf nods solemnly, petting his borrowed horse’s neck as if to soothe her worries when I believe he’s the one seeking comfort. “They’ll shy away from my wards.”

But there are so many.

“We don’t have a choice,” I say. “We must get inside.”

Steeling ourselves, we ride toward the undead army. Pranmore raises his wards once we’re close. As predicted, the skeletal soldiers recoil and weaken. Bartholomew and I cut them down as we pass, sending their dry bones to the ground.

But as we’re nearing the gates, Pranmore’s ward suddenly disappears.

“Pranmore?” I yell, looking over my shoulder.

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One of the monsters has grabbed the Woodmore from behind and ripped him from his horse.

“Bartholomew!” I yell, turning my horse back at a gallop.

Pranmore’s magic surges again, but they’ve overwhelmed him, and he can’t hold it.

I leap from my horse, cutting through the dead soldiers and hurling their dry carcasses aside as I try to unbury the elf.

Finally, I find Pranmore’s arm. I yank him up, pulling him away so he can catch his breath. The canvas of his armor is ripped at his shoulders and stomach, and he’s bleeding from several wounds.

“I can’t...” he says, trying but failing to raise his wards again. “I just need...”

The restless dead press in, surrounding us as they brandish rusted swords and spears. Their eyes are empty shadows, unseeing. They reek of death and dirt.

Bartholomew and I fight, but there are too many.

Suddenly, a skeleton flies away from the back of the horde, almost as if it were picked up and tossed away. Another follows it, and then another. Eventually, a small warrior bursts into view, riding an armored leopard.

“Maisel!” I yell, fighting the soldiers back.

“Were you going to take on the whole horde yourself?” she demands. “I knew you were stupid, but I didn’t know you had a death wish.”

More of the leopard-riding gnomes join her, swarming the skeletons. There must be hundreds of them—where did they all come from? They must have invited comrades from all across Doria. How many gnome settlements are there?

“Get to the gates!” Maisel yells, almost gleefully. “We’ll hold them off!”

“It’s Henrik,” A guard yells from atop the wall when Pranmore, Bartholomew, and I reach it. “Let him in!”

We wait, listening impatiently as the heavy beams are removed and the locks are opened. The guards open the gates just enough to let us slip inside. They close them with a thud, replacing the beams and setting the massive locks once again.

“What about the gnomes?” Bartholomew asks.

“They can take care of themselves,” I assure him.

“Your Grace!” A captain runs up to me. “Necromancers are attacking the city, and I’ve heard rumors war golems have been set loose inside the castle.”

“It’s as you feared, Henrik,” Pranmore says heavily.

“Camellia is here.”

“What are we going to do?” Bartholomew asks.

I stride forward, into the madness. “We’re going to find her.”

Bartholomew and Pranmore follow. A haze of smoke permeates the air like a thick fog, and fires glow to the west. Guards line the streets, blocking the eastern entrances, where it appears they're evacuating those running from the fires and fighting.

"Can you defeat the princess in your current state?" I ask Pranmore.

His stride falters, but he nods. "I'm fine now."

"You're certain?"

"I will not fail."

Having no choice but to believe him, we continue through the city. The fighting intensifies near the castle, and we find a swarm of necromancers and royal soldiers outside the inner gatehouse. We push through the insanity to reach the portcullis.

"Let us through!" I holler to the guards on the other side.

The gatekeeper stammers, "But, Your Grace—"

“OPEN THE PORTCULLIS!”

“Henrik!” Bartholomew yells.

I turn just in time to find a rogue soldier behind me, his sword raised above my head. Before I can react, an arrow slices through the air and imbeds itself into his chest. The man stumbles back, his eyes wide as he falls to his knees.

I jerk my head up and find Clover atop the curtain wall. She wears her leather armor, and her golden-brown hair is tied back. Never in my life have I seen a more welcome sight.

She gives me a tired smile as she lowers her bow. “About time you showed up, soldier. You almost missed the real battle.”

The sound of shifting chains draws my attention, and the portcullis begins to rise. The guards don’t lift the metal grating all the way—just enough for us to slip under. Bartholomew and I crouch as we pass, with Pranmore right behind us. But the elf’s antlers catch against the metal, forcing him to drop to his belly and crawl. As soon as he makes it through, we holler at the guards to close it.

I meet Clover at the bottom of the stairs. I grab her by the waist, pulling her to me as I assure myself she’s in one piece. “Are you all right?”

She nods, swallowing back her emotions. Her hand finds my cheek, and she looks like she’s going to cry. “You?”

“I’m fine.” I step back. “Camellia’s here.”

“We know, but we haven’t located her yet.”

“She’s using wraiths to control the golems.”

Clover groans, tipping her head back. “That’s how she’s doing it. Audra has completely obliterated several of them. We’ve tried to trap others in random rooms, but they hack at the doors until they escape.”

“Where’s Lawrence?” I demand as we hurry past the soldiers who guard the western castle entrance, Bartholomew and Pranmore at our heels. “Is he safe?”

“The fool is fighting,” Clover says, exasperated.

I turn to her, horrified. “If Camellia finds him...”

“We best find her first.”

“Where are the golems?” Bartholomew asks.

“Last I heard? Near the library. But Lawrence sent me to the wall to help the archers defend the main gatehouse an hour ago. My bow isn’t a lot of help against the golems.”

“For now, let’s try to find Lawrence,” I say, but then I come to a dead stop.

“What is it?” Pranmore asks, breathing hard. He gasps when he follows my gaze through a doorway.

Dead guards litter the hall, looking as if they fell without a fight. Several are slumped

against the wall. Others lie on the floor, not a wound upon them. If I didn't know better, I'd say they were sleeping.

"This way," I say quietly.

"Henrik," Clover reaches for my arm.

I turn toward her, taking her face in my hands. "Go back to the wall."

"I'm not leaving."

"Clover," I say softly.

"We're strongest together." She begs me with her eyes. "Don't send me away."

I glance down the hall, dread pooling in my stomach. Camellia came this way. I don't know how I know, but I can feel it.

"I know where Camellia is," I say quietly. "If I bring you, she'll kill you."

"And what will keep her from killing you?" Clover demands.

Pranmore steps up. “I will.”

“You’d be dead outside the gatehouse if it weren’t for me,” Clover argues. “I’m not leaving you. We go together or not at all.”

Bartholomew nods. “It was the four of us in the beginning, Henrik. Traipsing in the Dorian mountains, stumbling on the gnomes, and finding the illicit mining operation. We need to finish it as a group.”

I study them for several seconds, shaking my head. And then I realize they’ll follow me anyway. Whether I like it or not, these three will always have my back.

“All right,” I agree, silently vowing I’ll keep them safe. “Let’s go.”

25

HENRIK

We pause outside the throne room, staring at the elaborate phoenix that adorns the pair of doors. If the trail of bodies is any indication, this is where Camellia waits.

“I don’t know what we’re going to find inside,” I tell the group. “Take a moment to prepare yourselves.”

Clover holds my hand and squeezes it tightly. Then she draws in a deep breath and nocks an arrow into her bow. “I’m ready.”

Bartholomew grips his sword, his fingers straining against the hilt. "I am too."

Pranmore is calm, serene almost. "I'm glad you three are with me. It will give me strength."

"Can you do it?" I ask him. "Can you send her back?"

He looks almost resigned. "I will."

"What do you need us to do?" I ask.

"What I'm planning requires physical touch."

Clover frowns. "Will you be able to handle that?"

"I have no choice."

"We'll do everything we can to make your task easier," I say.

Pranmore gives me a solemn nod. With a deep breath, I set my hand on the handle and pull the door open.

And there she is.

The undead princess sits upon Lawrence's throne, a stolen crown atop her head. Her black hair tumbles around her shoulders, and a diamond-white cloak flows around her feet like a robe of freshly fallen snow.

Camellia's ruby lips curve into a pleased smile as we step into the room. "I was hoping you would be the one to find me, Henrik."

Her eyes move to the others, narrowing slightly.

“Ghosts always return to the place they died,” Clover mutters. “How long have you been in the castle, Camellia?”

The princess’s smile grows. “Since I returned from Heistone.”

“Where have you been hiding?” I demand.

“My quarters.” She laughs. “Strange no one thought to look for me there.”

“Ah,” Pranmore says as if suddenly understanding. “I couldn’t sense you over the lingering stench. That’s clever.”

“Is it truly her?” I ask Pranmore.

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He pulls his eyes away from Camellia to face me. "It is."

"Have you come to send me back, Woodmore?" she asks, quirked an ebony brow.

He looks at her, saying nothing.

"I'm afraid I won't go quietly." She rises and pulls her cloak to the side, revealing Lawrence's prone form. "Not when I've finally won my throne."

Clover gasps.

"He's not dead." Camellia turns her obsidian eyes on Clover. "Not yet."

"What have you done to him?"

Camellia looks at Lawrence impassively. "It's a slow form of paralysis."

Clover begins to move forward, but I extend my hand, blocking her path.

"He has two minutes left before his heart seizes, give or take," the princess says, rolling him to the side with her foot and reclaiming her throne. "It took you so long to get here."

"What do you want, Camellia?" I ask.

"Would you like me to release him?" She lifts her witch eyes to mine. "I'll return him to you."

“At what price?” I demand, fully prepared to sacrifice myself.

The princess smiles. “It’s trivial, really.”

“Camellia,” I warn through clenched teeth.

“Yes, I’ll return Lawrence. I’ll even hand over this lovely crown.” She lets her eyes drift to Clover, and her lips quirk into a delighted smile. “I’ve thought long and hard, and I’ve decided I only want one thing in return—your honor. That annoying thread of heart that’s so deeply woven through the tapestry of your being. Your one and only flaw.”

“How can I give you my honor?” I demand.

Camellia lists her head to the side, her depthless eyes glittering. “Kill Clover. I want to see her blood staining your hands. I want her murder to be what makes you a monster.”

My heart clenches painfully. Beside me, Bartholomew snarls. Clover stands very still.

“King and kingdom,” Camellia continues. “Peace, prosperity, and glory...or a woman named after a field weed and the demise of an entire continent. Which will it be?”

I draw my sword, intending to attack the princess just to see if she’s corporal enough to kill. But before I’ve even taken a step, Lawrence’s eyes fly open, and he gasps.

“That’s not an option, Henrik.” Camellia looks down at her brother as his face turns red. “Less than a minute now.”

Clover turns to me, her face white with fear. “Henrik...I’m not worth it.”

“No!” Bartholomew cries, looking between Clover and his dying cousin with horror-filled eyes.

“I won’t,” I vow to Clover. “Never.”

“You’re killing your king,” Camellia reminds me, her tone impartial.

Clover grasps the hand that holds my sword, pulling it toward her. So subtly I almost don’t notice, she jerks her head toward the dais, trying to tell me something. “He’s going to die, Henrik.”

“Clover’s right,” Camellia says, sounding mildly impatient now. “No matter what, someone’s blood will be on your hands.”

“Henrik,” Clover begs, trembling as she watches something from the corner of her eye.

And there—I see it now.

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“Thirty seconds,” Camellia says, bored.

My heart hammers in my chest as Pranmore slips up the side of the dais, each step drawing him closer and closer to the mad princess. So enthralled with the idea of Clover’s demise, Camellia has forgotten about the elf.

A dangerous mistake.

Lawrence grabs his throat, writhing at Camellia’s feet. She’s released him from his paralysis, but the invisible hand of her magic clenches around his heart.

“Ten seconds,” Camellia says. “You best make a decision.”

“Henrik!” Clover cries frantically, creating the distraction Pranmore needs.

“No!” Bartholomew yells.

“Five seconds.” Camellia leans forward. “Four. Three. Two—”

The princess’s words are cut off when she lets out a bloodcurdling shriek.

Camellia struggles against Pranmore. His hands grasp her neck from behind, initiating the contact he needs. Magic circles the room, heavy and disorienting.

“Clover!” I yell, reaching for her and grabbing Bartholomew by the shoulder as well.

Clover clings to me, her hands digging into my arms. None of us were prepared for

the onslaught of the warring magic. Unnatural black clouds form at the ceiling, and lightning crackles in the air. Pranmore and Camellia are illuminated as life and death fight for dominion.

Magic envelops Pranmore, glowing gold and spreading.

“What’s happening?” Clover yells.

“I don’t know,” I answer, but my words are lost in the clash.

There’s nothing for us to do but weather the storm.

The light grows, lengthening the elf,transforminghim. He wraps himself around Camellia, his life magic stretching and growing. Bright green leaves bud on his antlers as they expand, becoming a living canopy in the room.

Camellia screams, her dark powers slowly smothered by Pranmore’s magic as he grows around her, trapping her within this new form.

“Pranmore!” Bartholomew yells, trying to break away from us.

But I hold him tightly, yanking him back. “Don’t interfere, or we might lose you too.”

“What’s he done?” Bartholomew cries, his eyes wild.

With one last scream, Camellia disappears between the twining bark of the massive tree, her dark magic defeated. A deafening explosion of light emits from the dais, sending us flying. We crash against the back wall. Around us, the castle trembles. I pull Clover and Bartholomew to me, trying to shield them with my body. The overhead skylights shatter, the glass falling around us like deadly rain.

And then all goes still.

We look up cautiously and find the last of Pranmore's magic drifting to the floor like golden snow. It's a quiet victory, a joyful end.

But I feel as if someone knocked the air from my lungs. I stagger forward, releasing Clover and Bartholomew.

My squire stumbles to his feet and circles the tree. "Pranmore!"

"Henrik," Clover breathes, her body trembling. "Where is he?"

"PRANMORE!" Bartholomew yells, falling to his knees when his search is unsuccessful.

"Where is he, Henrik?" Clover demands again, her fingers closing around my wrist.

The broken glass on the floor glitters like jewels in the sunrise. I stare up at the tree, watching as the first rays of the new dawn shine through the thick, spring-green foliage. "He's there."

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Before Clover can respond, the throne room doors are thrown open. Lawrence, Audra, and Lyredon rush into the space, followed by the sealed knights. The king stops dead in his tracks, his jaw dropping. “Why is there a tree in my throne room?”

“Lawrence!” Clover cries when she sees him.

Bartholomew stares at his cousin, befuddled. My shock matches his, and it’s followed by the gut-wrenching realization that Camellia was using a decoy. But none of that matters now.

I turn back to the tree. Softly, I whisper, “What have you done?”

Clover hesitantly walks across the space and climbs the stairs. She pauses in front of the tree and presses her hand to the trunk, hanging her head as grief claims her.

My throat thickens, and I bring my hand to my face.

“What happened?” Lawrence demands, trying to make sense of the situation as he stares at the tree.

“Pranmore defeated Camellia,” I say, my voice flat and empty.

The elf fought death with life, giving himself completely.

And he won.

CLOVER

Pranmore's memorial is a quiet, intimate affair. We're in the throne room, seated in front of the tree.

I stare at it now, and so many memories come to mind: our adventure into the mountains, his healing magic that was always tenderly administered, the shoulder he offered countless times when life felt too heavy.

He was our friend, our confidant. And sometimes, he was our mentor.

And now, he's a hero.

Pranmore will go down in history as the first Woodmore to fight a noble battle, and he did it without ever lifting a sword. He confronted darkness and stood firm, giving himself so his people, his kingdom, and his friends could live in peace.

"He will be missed," Lawrence says, finishing his eulogy.

Henrik sits next to me, clasping my hand. I'm not sure if I'm taking comfort from him or if he's giving comfort to me. Maybe it's both.

As Lawrence steps down, Bartholomew takes his place. He looks older than he did when we first joined Henrik for the supply run—less of a child, almost a man. In a few years, he'll take Henrik's place. I no longer doubt he'll lead our army well.

Bartholomew clears his throat and presses his hand to the cover of a journal he's carrying. I hold my breath, pierced with sadness at the sight of it.

It's a beat-up thing. It weathered a snowstorm in Doria and was lost in a bog in Ferradelle. I don't remember a time when Pranmore didn't have it on him.

“I’m sure you recognize this,” Bartholomew says as he holds up the journal. “Pranmore wrote his poems in here, but he never let anyone read them.”

He chokes a little but controls himself and continues, “I was missing him yesterday—so much I couldn’t breathe. So I went to his quarters, and there it was. Resting on the table, almost like it was waiting for me.”

I blink quickly, willing the tears away as I listen.

“I read some of the poems.” Bartholomew laughs a little, and a tear catches the light as it trails down his cheek. “They’re rubbish.”

We laugh through our pain.

“But at the end, I found something I didn’t expect. I want to read it to you all today.”

Bartholomew takes a deep breath before he flips the journal open and begins.

To my dear friends,

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I was going to write a poem, but it didn't feel right. The words wouldn't flow, and it made my heart heavy.

You see, a poem wasn't enough. If you're reading this, then you already know I made a decision. You might be grieving because of that decision, and I want to comfort you one last time.

First of all, please know that I knew what my fate would be, and I embraced it because peace is priceless.

Life is priceless.

And you, my dear friends, are priceless.

It's been an honor living with you these last few seasons. I've laughed more, gone on more adventures, and loved more deeply than I ever thought possible.

To Ayan: You are a better man than you realize or want people to believe. Though you are a High Vale, you have a Woodmore heart and are a much-needed bridge between our people. For too long, the elves of our kingdom have been at odds. It is my wish that through you, they will be united.

To Audra: You'll be a beautiful queen. I'm sorry I won't see you take the throne, but I can imagine it, and you are filled with grace and dignity. Caldenbauer is fortunate to have you.

To Lawrence: You are enough. You are not your father, nor your sister, and I have no

doubt you will rise like a phoenix above the ashes of your family and rule this kingdom justly.

To Bartholomew: In the brief time we were given, you have grown so much, and I couldn't be prouder of the man you're becoming. Never begrudge your kind heart. It's your crown.

And finally, to Henrik and Clover: Ah, my dearest friends. Forgive me for being too cowardly to tell you my plans outright, for shying away from pain. I didn't want to shadow the last of our treasured time together with sorrow, and I didn't know if I could stand firm when you would inevitably try to dissuade me from my decision.

Please know, this was not payment for a life debt. It was a sacrifice made with love. Thank you for saving me in Doria, not from the aynauth, but from my sorrow. You adopted me into your family when I was lost and made me feel as if my life had a purpose once more. I love you both.

I have but one request for you all: promise me you'll be happy. It's all I ask and all I want.

And here we must say goodbye. Although it's a sad parting, my heart is content. Thank you for brightening my life.

Yours always,

Pranmore

Bartholomew scrubs a hand over his face, crying freely. With a heartfelt sigh, he closes the journal and wraps the tie around it one last time. With utmost respect and care, he places it next to the trunk of the tree, in the newly planted flowerbed that circles it. Lawrence says he will transform the throne room into an indoor garden, a

place of quiet peace where we can visit Pranmore anytime we'd like.

But it will never be the same.

I walk up to the tree before we leave, studying our recently departed friend. So many times in the last few days, I've wondered if he's still here—still with us.

I run my hand over the thick bark.

“Can you hear us?” I whisper. “Do you know how grateful we are? Do you know how much we miss you?”

The tree doesn't answer, nor do I expect it to. But as I turn to leave, a leaf falls, drifting lazily from the overhead canopy, right in front of my nose. I hold out my hand to catch it, studying it for several seconds before letting out a soft laugh.

Tucking the leaf into the pocket of my skirt, I smile as I meet Henrik near the stairs.

“Are you all right?” he asks quietly.

“Not yet.” I glance back at the tree, promising Pranmore I will be happy. And then I take Henrik's outstretched hand. “But I will be.”

27

HENRIK

Laughter fills the great hall as Bartholomew mumbles through his toast. Clover turns to me, her pixie eyes bright with humor and joy. She's beautiful, with her honey-brown hair curled and tumbling down her shoulders, half of it pulled up and dotted with pearls. She wears an ivory gown and an inked ring of magic on her finger.

In front of our family, friends, and what seems like all Caldenbauer's nobility, we repeated the vows we made the day before I went to war, giving Clover the wedding I wanted for her. And now the ceremony is complete, and we're in the great hall, celebrating not just our marriage, but life.

It's a gift I will no longer take for granted. I look again at my bride, my heart full.

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Lawrence stands, smirking in a way that makes me nervous. The king waits until he has the hall's attention, and then he says, "Months ago, I drafted a coat of arms for my dear friend Henrik. I've held onto it, waiting for just the right occasion to bestow it upon him." He flashes me a rotten grin. "Today is that day."

I force my mouth into a nervous smile, leaning close to Clover as I ask, "What did he do?"

"I have no idea," she whispers back.

"As I was creating the design, I asked myself: what is the most valiant deed Henrik has performed? As I'm sure you can imagine, the task was daunting. Is there a man alive more heroic than our duke marshal?"

The crowd laughs eagerly, waiting for Lawrence to get to his point.

"But one triumphant moment kept bounding to the forefront of my brain. It hopped to the top, demanding recognition."

Something niggles at my memory, along with a feeling of foreboding. But I can't put my finger on what it is.

"Without further ado, I present to you the Solbane coat of arms and crest." With a flourish, Lawrence gestures toward the hall's entrance. The doors open, and a string of men enter, double file, each carrying flags in blue, green, and white. Upon them is the coat of arms Lawrence created.

“Henrik,” Clover says as if overcome, grasping my arm. “That’s ours—our family’s.”

I let out a sigh of relief when nothing is amiss. It’s a perfectly respectable coat of arms.

Then I lean forward, squinting at the crest. At first glance, it looks like a stag, but...

Laughter erupts in the hall as a stuffed rabbit is wheeled in behind the men. Mounted in a grand posture, it stands on its hind legs, with its head held high and its paws raised in the air like a horse rearing back. Its antlers are so large, they brush the velvet cushion it rests upon.

A jacquesalaupe. Specifically, the jacquesalaupe I slayed in Danmire.

I bark out a laugh, shaking my head as I sit back and cross my arms.

Lawrence turns to us and grins. “What do you think?”

I can’t say what I think in this crowd, so I merely raise my glass to our king.

“Is that a real jacquesalaupe?” Maisel calls across the hall, standing on her chair to get a better look at the animal. Her companions do the same, unconcerned with social faux pas.

“Yes...” Lawrence says, flashing me a bemused look.

“Henrik!” Gruebin exclaims. “You killed it?”

“Alone?” Maisel adds.

I nod cautiously. You never quite know what trouble the gnomes are about to cause,

even though they've been pleasant since they came to an agreement with Lawrence about taxes—specifically, they must pay them, but in return, Lawrence gives them an allowance for “protecting Doria.”

Essentially, we ended up right where we started, but with politics involved.

“Did you really?” Audra asks from our table, the queen-to-be’s eyes wide.

“Yes...”

“Henrik killed a monstrous jacquesalaupé and lived to tell the tale!” Gruebin exclaims to his companions. “Raise your glasses, men!”

“And women,” Maisel grouses.

“What are they doing?” Clover whispers.

Audra looks surprised. “You don’t know? Jacquesalaupés are rare, shapeshifting creatures. Elven legend says only the bravest, most valiant knight will meet one and live to tell the tale.”

Lawrence scoffs out a laugh, shaking his head. Ayan merely chuckles, for once enjoying mischief he didn’t cause.

“To Henrik!” Gruebin yells.

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In good humor, even the rest of the guests join the gnomes in raising a toast. “To Henrik!”

Lawrence returns to his chair at my side and gives me a wry look. “I saw this going differently.”

“Serves you right,” Clover says.

“Let me give you a real gift.” He rests his elbow on the table and angles toward me. “Make a request of me, and I shall fulfill it.”

I look at Clover. “I have everything I want.”

The king feigns revulsion and turns to Audra. “Newly married couples are obnoxious, aren’t they?”

She only smiles, not bothering to answer. It will be their turn soon enough.

Lawrence looks back. “But really—what gift can the crown bestow upon you?”

“You’ve already given me land, gold, a title, and made me an honorary member of your family,” I say. “What more could I ask for?”

He nods toward a nearby table, where Bartholomew sits with Brielle and several young female courtiers. The duke has become rather popular lately, having finally grown into his gangly arms and legs. Months of hard training have put muscle on his once-scrawny bones, and my sister isn’t the only one who’s noticed.

The girls giggle and laugh. Bartholomew is oblivious, but Brielle sits by his side, drumming her fingers on the table with an agitated look on her face.

“What about a good marriage for your sister?” Lawrence asks. “Wasn’t that your true life’s goal? The reason you worked so hard?”

I set my arm on the table and turn to the king, giving him my full attention. “What are you proposing?”

“With my father’s passing, I became Bartholomew’s male guardian, and therefore it’s within my power to arrange a betrothal for him.”

I look back at Brielle and Bartholomew, thinking hard. “With Brielle?”

Lawrence nods.

“Your sister couldn’t make a better match,” Audra says.

“And who wouldn’t want to marry a duke marshal?” Clover adds, teasing me with her eyes.

I think about it for a while longer, studying my sister. She likes Bartholomew—there’s no denying it. And not only is Bartholomew titled, but he also has a good heart. Audra’s right. Brielle couldn’t make a better match.

I watch as my squire leans close to Brielle and whispers something that makes her laugh, ignoring the other girls at the table. Content, I look back at Lawrence. “All right.”

Lawrence nods, satisfied. “We’ll draw up the paperwork tomorrow.”

* * *

The celebration lasts long into the night. When Clover and I finally retire, it's nearly two in the morning.

“Was it everything you hoped?” I ask, pulling her into my arms just outside the door that leads into our suite of rooms.

“And more.” She smiles up at me. “But I’m afraid our adventure is over. Now all that’s left is a long, happy life.”

I drop a kiss to her lips. “That’s the true adventure—and it’s only just beginning.”

She snorts out a laugh. “That was horribly sappy, soldier.”

“It was, wasn’t it?”

I scoop her into my arms and tease my lips against hers as I open the door. When I carry her inside, she pulls back to look at me, smiling.

“What is it?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 6:35 am

“You’ve accomplished so much, Henrik.” Her pretty green eyes shine. “I’m so proud of you.”

“We did it together.”

“Yes.” She drapes her arms over my shoulders as her eyes stray to my knight’s seal.

It rests in a glass case—a memento of our past.

“Do you ever wish things had turned out differently?” she asks. “That you’d become a knight instead of our duke marshal?”

I study the seal before I answer.

Clover and I met at a crossroads in our lives, destined for different futures. But instead of continuing down our individual roads, we joined hands and fought for a new dream, becoming stronger as a team. We left old goals behind and forged our own path—a better path.

“Never.”

I dismiss the seal and kiss Clover, abundantly thankful for this new future we’ve been given.

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