



Ugly: The Stepsister's Story

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Category: Romance, Young Adult

Description: You probably know me as the younger ugly stepsister. The foolish stepsister. The girl who was so jealous of Cinderella's charm and beauty that I forced her to dress in rags and do all the chores while my mother and sister and I did nothing, sitting in our rooms all day while Cinderella slaved away to serve us. But that is not at all what happened.

No one ever remembers that it wasn't just Cinderella's father who died. Mine did too. No one asks why I am considered ugly or remembers that I fell in love with Prince Curtis years before that fateful night at the ball. No one wonders what my family was doing while Cinderella was cleaning. But I am here to tell you. I am the ugly stepsister, and this is my story.

Total Pages (Source): 63

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PART I

CHAPTER 1

I was trying to teach a lesson on Avivian verb tenses to some rowdy twelve year old boys when Curtis came bursting into the classroom. “Truly!” he called enthusiastically. “Truly, Pops wants to see you right now!”

“Close your books students, and I want to see the proper conjugation of those verbs tomorrow,” I told my pupils, ending the tutoring session. Curtis’ father was the king, and if he was summoning me, there was no delaying him.

As the boys whooped gleefully and scampered away down the corridor, I hurriedly gathered my books and notes, and started off toward the throne room. Curtis bounded beside me, keeping up a running, one-way dialogue as he always did.

He had reddish-brown hair and an infectious smile that made him impossible to dislike, and we had been best friends for years. “Do you know why your Father called for me?” I interrupted Curtis.

He grinned impishly. “You will see. Something important, I think. But gee, I forgot the details!” He winked, and I couldn’t help smiling.

“Just tell me. You know.” I playfully pushed his arm.

Curtis gasped in mock horror. “A lady pushes a prince? Best watch yourself, m’lady, or you will end up being tortured in the dungeon!”

I chuckled. The castle's dungeon hadn't been used in more than a century. But I quelled my laughter as the impressive throne room doors loomed closer. I drew a deep breath, nervous about my meeting with the king.

Before I raised my fist to knock on the doors, I closed my eyes, trying to compose myself to look more mature than the fifteen-year-old girl that I was. I reached out my hand, then Curtis leaned down and whispered, "You may want to get that spider out of your hair before you go in."

I yelped and began to swat my long hair wildy with my hands, causing most of my language books to tumble to the ground. Curtis doubled over, hooting, and I realized that there was no spider. "Curtis!" I hissed, half annoyed at his prank, half relieved that there was no spider.

Curtis gathered up all my fallen books and papers, and piled them neatly into a stack. "Just thought you looked a little nervous about going to see Pops. He doesn't bite, you know."

I held out my arms for my books, but Curtis held onto them and gestured me on. The throne room doors were pulled open from the inside by a guard, and I straightened up, trying to look as dignified as Father always did when he spoke to royalty.

"I thought I heard you, son." King Edmont's voice was deep and even. I walked on the scarlet carpet leading up to the throne as sedately as I could, with Curtis bouncing ahead of me. Curtis never walked; he always bounded as if he had springs in his shoes.

"Just giving Lady Truly some tips on how to ruffle your feathers!" Curtis said, grinning as usual and giving a lavish bow with much twirling of his book-free hand.

Prince Hubert, Curtis' older brother and heir to the throne, cleared his throat,

frowned, and shook his head disapprovingly. Curtis and his brother were as different as night and day. Where Curtis was always bursting with energy and laughter, Hubert was solemn and pensive. Curtis was tall and gangly, with freckles all over his face. Hubert had the typical crown prince look—tall, but dark haired, well-muscled, and tanned.

“I am sure you were.” King Edmont looked as though he wanted to laugh. “Did you also tell her why we asked her here?”

“And spoil your big surprise?” Curtis acted appalled. “I would never stoop so low.”

Hubert’s scowl deepened. It was no secret that he thought Curtis was too lighthearted and easygoing about serious matters. Hubert thought every matter was serious. Curtis’ friendly, charismatic personality made him perfect for his duties as “The Commoner’s Ambassador,” in which he would visit with farmers and shopkeepers about their problems, and then report his findings to the Council. He was very well-liked by all the kingdom’s subjects.

King Edmont addressed me. “Lady Truly, please step forward.”

I stepped forward and curtsied. “You Majesty?” I asked.

“Your father speaks very highly of your linguistic capabilities,” the King stated. I blushed, but didn’t know what to say, so said nothing. He continued, “The Council has agreed to appoint you to the position of Official Court Linguist, with your first assignment on the next journey to Avivia with your Father, should you accept.”

My mouth fell open, and the King smiled. “Congratulations, young lady. I am sure you will honor our kingdom.”

I was stunned. An official court linguist? That was a big step up from tutoring

children and tagging along after Father as an apprentice when foreign delegates came to our country. I would be expected to do all the translating for a foreign dignitary! To discuss matters of state! “Th... Thank you, Your Majesty,” I stammered.

King Edmont waved his hand at the door, and the guards opened it, signaling my dismissal. I curtsied again, and moved in a dream-like state down the hall.

Curtis caught up, still clutching my pile of books. “So, Miss Official Linguist, how does it feel being all high class and noble now?”

I laughed shakily. “It doesn’t feel real. I can’t believe it.”

“Well, believe it! You deserve it—you were always the smartest one in classes.” He reached out and squeezed my hand, and I blushed scarlet.

“Thanks.” I said shyly. My hand tingled. When we reached my family’s chambers, Curtis finally handed over all my books.

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“Better study up. I can never get those Avivian tenses right.”

CHAPTER 2

Over the next few days, I studied harder than ever, eager to succeed in my new responsibilities. Everyone in the castle kept congratulating me on my role; being appointed at a young age was an honor. Father was ecstatic that I was going to be working with him, though in public, he acted dignified and unenthusiastic.

The day we left for Avivia, Mother and my sister Comfort presented me with a beautiful necklace, a delicate chain with small emeralds studded along in intervals. “Emeralds are a symbol of wisdom and knowledge,” Mother said to me as she clasped it around my neck. “I am so proud of you, Truly. I know you will do so well.” She hugged me. Comfort also hugged me goodbye, saying that she would plan the biggest ball imaginable to celebrate my success when I returned, as was the custom in our kingdom.

As the carriage door snapped shut behind me, I was gripped with a combination of fear, anxiety, and excitement. I swallowed hard; my mouth felt dry. Father was sharing the coach with me, and he smiled reassuringly. “I was nervous before my first assignment too,” he said, and patted my knee. “Everything will be fine.”

We waved to Mother and Comfort as the carriage jolted into movement, carrying us forward, toward my first official assignment. Mother and Comfort waved back, skirts ruffling in the gentle breeze. Several of the boys I tutored ran to keep up with the carriage, racing each other and leaping over the low ditches in the courtyard. Just before the carriage swept out of the palace ground gates, they fell behind, and we

were off to Avivia.

I stared hard at the neat manor houses now whipping by my window. I felt Father's gaze on me, but wasn't sure what to say. Confide that I was scared? Tell him I would make him proud? I knew he was, but I felt the need to prove myself.

As if he knew what I was thinking, Father took one of my hands in both of his. "Don't worry, my dear. This will be a good introduction into your professional life." He winked. "I think Crown Princess Aria would much prefer a fun youthful translator to an old stuffy bore like me."

"Tell me about her," I pleaded, wishing I had a portrait of her so I would know who to look for upon arrival.

Father smiled broadly. "You and Aria will become good friends, I am sure. She is about your age and height, long straight black hair that comes to her waist, dark eyes... She is musical and is an accomplished harp player. She has a level head about matters of state and is an intelligent girl. She speaks Islandrian too, so it shouldn't be difficult to communicate, even if there are a couple words amiss. She will probably perform at the reception banquet tonight. She usually does. The Avivian court always welcomes foreign delegations with a musical recital."

"I'm not musical," I mumbled, more to myself than anyone else. His description of Aria reminded me of Comfort a bit. Talented, smart, musical, well-liked. But even if I wasn't musical, I felt like I would enjoy being a court linguist, especially if I was assigned to another girl my age. Besides Curtis and Comfort, I really didn't have many friends. There were plenty of servants at the castle, many of whom were close to me in age, but as Father was so high ranking, there was protocol to follow. Servants and aristocracy were not to intermingle.

Father fished some leaflets out of his satchel, and sat back to review documents for

upcoming meetings and negotiations. I didn't want to disturb his focus, so allowed my gaze to drift once more out of the carriage window to watch the countryside become wilder and more forested as we journeyed on.

Several days later, we arrived at the Avivian palace. I was mesmerized by their countryside. Instead of the rigid trees of pine and oak on a bed of grass, I watched tropical trees whisk past my view, laden down with coconuts and bananas. In the last several inns, the food served had a tangy, exotic flavor bursting with color that was much more exciting than our typical meat and potato-based banquets. Children splashed each other among the waves, or ran gleefully across the beaches, spraying up sand as their heels kicked behind them. I wished I had packed lighter clothes. The heavy woolen dresses I had were quickly becoming unbearable in the bright sunshine of this southern country.

As enthralled as I was about the surrounding scenery, apprehension about the upcoming meeting still crept up to knot my stomach. Our carriage rolled and bumped along the cobblestone road up to the giant front doors, painted gold and looking dazzling in the afternoon sun. A welcoming party stood beside a plush carpet that rolled from the front door down to our carriage.

"Is Aria there?" I asked, my eyes searching the small crowd.

Father smiled. "No, darling, she isn't. Can you imagine Prince Hubert waiting out in the hot sun to greet a low-ranking foreign delegate?"

I giggled. "I guess not. But Curtis would."

"He would at that," agreed Father. "That boy doesn't abide by protocol at all. But the crown princess has more important matters on her hands than saying hello a few minutes before everyone else. There is usually one of the princes or princesses out there though. The Avivian court expects at least one member of the royal family to

greet our country's representatives. Ah, it looks like little Aurelia is there now."

The carriage halted, and a footman leapt forward to unfasten the steps and to open the door for us. I held my head high and stepped down, remembering that now, I represented the court of Islandria. I thought of Mother's wide warm smiles, and tried to imitate one now, smiling as I made my way forward to the delegate assigned to greet us, hoping I looked elegant and refined. I heard Father climb out of the carriage behind me just as a young girl with black hair cascading past her elbows and a thin golden circlet stepped forward and handed me a bouquet of colorful and exotic smelling flowers.

"Her Highness, the Princess Aurelia!" a voice boomed out as I accepted the flowers.

"Your Highness," I said in Avivian while I curtsied. "It is an honor to meet you."

"Likewise," Princess Aurelia's voice chirruped in her sweet voice. She couldn't be more than six years old, and already had a dignified air about her, as though she was well aware of the necessity to keep up appearances. She reminded me strongly of what Prince Hubert was like when he was young.

I ascended the castle steps, and heard Father behind me, bowing and greeting the young princess as well. I stood just outside the front door, waiting to be shown where to go. A servant appeared, handing us thin glasses of a faintly pink liquid and gesturing us inside to sit on plush sofas.

"Crown Princess Aria will receive you in due course," the servant said in his native tongue. "Enjoy your refreshment."

We were left to sip the refreshing juice as the servant's soft-slippered feet moved silently away. The few other delegates from our party also sat stiffly on seats, waiting for our turn to be seen into the throne room. As I looked around, I had to remind

myself to breath—the view was stunning.

This palace was the complete opposite from our castle back home. The Islandrian castle was spacious and elaborate, it was true, but there were many small rooms partitioned off along each hall, sometimes giving a slightly claustrophobic air about it. Thick, heavy tapestries covered our walls, showing great feats in battle, but the blood and gore depicted everywhere sometimes left me feeling squeamish. And the stale air in our castle, trapped in the many rooms, often felt stuffy and musty.

But here, there were innumerable windows, all flung open to invite in the balmy summer breeze. A soft, thin fabric of light blue hung over the bare stretches of walls, and with the wind blowing gently through the halls, the fabric fluttered faintly, giving the impression that we were watching waves steadily rolling in from the ocean. The illusion was also helped along by the fact that through the open window, I could hear the cries of seagulls and the waves crashing along the beach not far from here. Ornate chandeliers of crystal hung from the high ceilings, catching the bright sunlight pouring in from the windows and casting dancing rainbows all over the spacious hall.

Our castle was made from thick stone; in contrast, the Avivian palace walls were made from a light sandstone, glossed over with that luminous golden shine. My view from the nearest window showed an immaculate courtyard, gardens alive with every color imaginable, and fountains merrily throwing water toward the sky. ‘This’ I thought, ‘is how royalty was meant to live!’

“Like it?” Father whispered.

I looked around at him and saw him watching me with amusement. I realized my mouth was gaping open in amazement and quickly snapped my jaw closed. Father said, “I was in awe the first time I came here too. It is simply breathtaking.”

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I pulled myself together. This was no time to be a gaping child. I was an official ambassador of Islandria. And I would honor my country by being dignified and proper.

It was a long wait, and I began to get a little antsy. Glancing around surreptitiously, I supposed it must be the typical routine—to wait for extended periods of time. I saw that several delegates had extracted papers to review, or lengthy scrolls to read, as they waited. I wished I had thought to bring along something for myself too, but all my books were locked in my luggage, on their way to be placed in our quarters by a servant, no doubt. I watched clouds slowly cover then uncover the sun through the window opposite my spot on the sofa. A bead of sweat rolled down my cheek as I sat waiting, anticipating the arrival, but the time stretched longer and longer with no sign of being allowed in.

Just as I was beginning to doze off, a voice wheezed, “The Crown Princess awaits.”

I snapped to attention. Curse those soft-soled slippers all the servants wore here. I hadn’t heard his arrival at all. Delegates were standing, and I leapt to my feet as well, trying my best to compose myself and look just as official as all the people around me.

We were led down the hall with the thin fluttering drapes, down another hall that had long stretches of windows open to the spectacular view of the ocean. Palm trees bent gracefully in the breeze, and tropical birds flew from branch to branch, calling to each other. I couldn’t tear my eyes away.

I mentally shook myself. What a simple bumpkin I was, gawping out the window.

Surely, I looked like a foolish young girl to everyone else. I fixed my eyes forward. There would be time later to go and explore. But right now, my only concern was making my country proud as the youngest delegate from Islandria.

The servant, silent as ever, halted our procession and padded noiselessly forward, passing a man in an ostentatious robe with a matching hat, all a deep violet spangled with orange diamond shapes. He wore skintight yellow leggings. What would have looked ludicrous in our own halls back home seemed to merely add to the fascinating culture here.

I was proud that I didn't stare, and Father leaned down next to me. "He is the bard," Father whispered in my ear. Of course. Much to chagrin of other members in the castle, Prince Hubert had dismissed our own bard years before, saying that he was the cause of too much frivolity, and that such levity was not appreciated. But I still remember sitting, enthralled, listening to legendary tales of long ago and songs passed down through the generations. I couldn't recollect our bard wearing such flamboyant colors, but I did remember with great fondness the hours Curtis and I had spent enchanted by the bard's stories and ballads. I hoped the bard would be performing during our stay.

The soft-soled servant had come to large doors, also painted that shimmering gold color and this time studded with jewels. This could only be the throne room. He stood outside and clapped. Once, twice, then an additional two times in rapid procession. This must have been a signal, because just after he had clapped, the doors swung inward.

"Announcing the delegates from Islandria," an unseen, stately voice boomed out.

CHAPTER 3

The spacious room was the only area so far that didn't have multiple windows on

every wall. Instead, the entire domed ceiling seemed to be made of glass. More crystal chandeliers were in this room too, and the rainbows leaping about on the wall were slightly disorienting.

Brightly colored tapestries hung on the walls, giving the illusion that they were windows opening to the world beyond, with scenes stitched onto them. A colorful parrot swooping past palm trees or a distant whale spouting on a beach, for example. Other tapestries held regal portraits of the Avivian royalty.

Ahead, I could see Princess Aria sitting atop an ornately carved throne. It was astounding to me that someone so young could radiate such a commanding presence. The Avivians had a matriarchal monarchy, meaning that the queen was the primary ruler, as opposed to the king. So even though Aria also had an older brother, she was the first one in line to rule, and Father had told me that Aria was currently in training to take over the throne.

Our group moved forward in single file. As the youngest and newest, I was last in line. I was grateful, because I had time to watch those in front of me and see what the exact greeting was to be. Even though I had learned the protocol during our culture etiquette courses required for all aristocratic children in Islandria, Father had drilled it into me again on our journey here.

The person at the head of the line would bow or curtsy deeply, then when told to rise, would clasp the princess's hands in their own and the men would press their lips respectfully to her fingers. The women, instead of kissing the princess's hands, would place their jaws against hers and make a slight kissing sound with their lips, but not actually placing lips against the princess's cheek. After this customary greeting, each person would bow or curtsy again and back away to wait for the remainder of the line.

With each step I grew more anxious. I memorized where to step, when to curtsy,

imagined the exact tilt of my head I would need to achieve in order to bump jaws. Just as one person remained in front of me, I realized I didn't know where to look, and this was something I was unable to see whilst behind the entire line. Should I avert my eyes to show my humility? Meet her eyes as a friend? Was that too familiar? Should I look pointedly away, or was that too rude? My mind churned with questions.

I settled for a brief, friendly meeting of eyes and friendly smile, then looking down respectfully before I curtsied and placed my jaw next to hers. It seemed sufficient, and I moved to stand at the end of the line, the knot in my stomach loosening slightly.

“Welcome, friends,” Aria's musical voice said in our language. Then she reverted back to Avivian. “It brings me joy to see so many old and new friends. I trust you will enjoy your stay.”

She smiled, her white teeth standing out brilliantly against her dark skin. She inclined her head, and everyone in our procession began moving off. Eager to follow suit and look like I knew the procedure, I traipsed along, but was internally confused. Was that it? We waited for well over an hour for a greeting and two sentences? I suppose I had been waiting to be chivvied immediately into meetings.

I followed our group's guide through a maze of corridors until we came to a hallway lined with doors. One by one, the guide would gesture a person into a room and move on. Of course; these must be the guest chambers for the duration of our stay.

Again last, I was gestured into the final room in the hall. I bobbed my head in appreciation to the servant and murmured “Ethelenda” to him which was ‘Thank you’ in Avivian.

The room was small, but pleasant. My trunk had been placed at the end of the four-poster bed. A window opened onto the courtyard beyond, and the same blue silk from the entrance hall hung like curtains to the side. I sat on the bed and wondered what

our schedule would be like for the rest of the day. Did I have time to rest? Was I expected to wash up and begin working?

A soft tapping on the door broke into my thoughts. "Come in!" I called. Father walked in.

"Father!" Even though we had been together almost every moment on the journey here, I was glad to see him. I always loved his company. He had a way of making me feel safe, and exuded an air of wisdom and confidence that I admired.

"What do you think?" Father asked, closing the door and sitting on the bed next to me.

"Well, I thought we would be busier," I confessed. "It has just been sitting and a couple minutes of introductions so far."

"Don't worry, dear, the work will start bright and early tomorrow," Father informed me. "Today is just a welcoming ceremony. We were greeted, shown to our rooms, and will have dinner and the recital this evening. It is customary to give travelers a day to recover. Once you are old and feeble like myself, you will understand."

Father's self-deprecating humor was one of the many things I loved about him. Even though he was neither old nor feeble, he was always quick to make jokes at his own expense if it would put others at ease. Prince Hubert, on the other hand, would get angry very quickly if anyone made light of any of his own characteristics. I had seen Curtis take advantage of Hubert's over sensitive nature on a multitude of occasions.

I still wasn't sure what I was supposed to do to fill my time between now and dinner. But Father was prepared. He pulled out a small wooden chess board and challenged me to a match.

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We played chess until it was time for dinner. The welcoming banquet seemed to overwhelm each and every one of my senses. The smells emanating from the food were intoxicating. The bard, in his eccentric costume, danced among the tables, singing funny tunes so rapidly that I could only understand a fraction of his words. Small children darted between the rows of tables, snatching at bowls of food then scampering off again.

Father and I sat at a table reserved just for our company. Servants appeared and offered us dish after dish of food. Pineapple glazed in honey, a variety of creamy soups, soft yellow cheese bread, portions of meat still sizzling in pans, and a number of colorful vegetables I didn't recognize. I ate daintily at first, trying to maintain a prim and proper image. But then I noticed that the other Islandrians were eating with gusto, packing their mouths and asking for thirds and fourths.

I glanced quizzically at Father, who whispered, "Avivians find it a compliment to their cooking and culture when their food is greatly desired. The more you eat, the happier they are." He then returned to ravenously attacking his food. My manners instructor would faint.

So I ate. And ate. And ate. My stomach was nearly bursting when I finally refused to consume another bite. Everyone else in the hall seemed to have slowed down too.

It was at this point that the bard sat and musicians brought their instruments onto a raised platform. They began to play. Some instruments I had never seen before. Others were variations of instruments back home. The melodies flowed throughout the room. Some bouncy and peppy, others slow and dramatic. No one danced, which is what would have happened in Islandria. Instead, people swayed, bobbing their

heads rhythmically in time to the music.

Instrumentalists played, singers warbled their songs, and I began to nod off. Father put his arm around my shoulders, and I woke up enough to hear Aria playing a beautiful piece on her harp before it was time for bed.

On the way back to our chambers, Father smiled at me. “Well Truly, you ate a lot and started to doze during their music. You will fit right in.”

I felt embarrassed. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“It is alright,” Father reassured me. “Just as eating an inordinate amount of food is a compliment to their cooking, and they consider the ability to play someone to sleep a compliment to their music.”

“Well, I like these customs,” I said sincerely.

“Good night, my dear.” Father said as we arrived at my door. I barely had time to undress before I collapsed into my bed, fast asleep.

CHAPTER 4

The following day was nothing like our relaxed arrival. From dawn until dusk, we were kept busy with meetings and negotiations. I barely had time to shovel down breakfast before I was swept along to a lengthy conference regarding trade prices of grain between our countries. The negotiations were drawn out and moved forward at infinitesimally small increments. Sweat beaded my forehead as I continued to sit rigidly straight and speak as fluently as I could, translating our delegate’s offer into Avivian. The sun, which felt so warm and balmy the day before, now beat down incessantly, burning my exposed arms and face as I sat directly under an open window.

After hours, the trade delegation finished their negotiations. I wished I could have told them that they would have saved themselves an immense amount of trouble and time if they had both put their offers on the table then met in the middle first off, instead of moving up or down in price a fraction at a time, only to meet in the middle at the end. But it wasn't my place.

I hoped for an afternoon break so I could eat and maybe take a walk to stretch my legs, but my hopes were squashed when a serving girl deposited a plate of food in front of me, and it was announced that we had ten minutes to eat before the next meeting would begin. I wolfed down my meal, not even noticing what I was eating, before the next meeting began.

It continued all day, with me sitting perfectly still and translating the best I could for whichever delegate I was assigned. I was so intent on focusing every fiber of my being into understanding and translating the ongoing dialogue that by the end of the day, I was utterly exhausted. Even though I had done nothing physical, my body was more fatigued than I could ever remember feeling before.

The following days were the same. Constant meetings, negotiations, and conferences. But once I began feeling a little more confident and at ease, I started paying attention to the other people in the room with me and picking up on little mannerisms that they had. It helped to pass the time during meetings when my assigned delegate wasn't a primary speaker.

There was a man with an abnormally large nose who would dig into his ear with his quill when he was thinking. I made a mental note to inspect any parchment he wrote on for residual earwax. There was a plump, dark-skinned Avivian woman with elaborately set hair, braided and twisted into an elegant knot shaped like a blooming rose. She always paid the utmost attention to anyone speaking and had eyes that never blinked and seemed to stare straight into the speaker's soul.

Another interesting person to watch was a mousey looking boy about Curtis' age, with buck teeth and a nervous, twitchy manner about him. I had no idea how such a young man was a courtier, but then again, here I was as well.

It wasn't until the last evening of our journey that I spoke to Princess Aria. Father and I were sitting in the dining area after supper, and listening to the bard reenact a comical story about a fisherman who was trying to capture a whale. A touch on my shoulder made me turn, and Aria stood there, regal as ever. "I wish you to accompany me on a walk," she said to me, and immediately strode off. I rose to hurry after her.

"Tell me how it ends," I whispered to Father as I nodded toward the bard, then scurried after Aria.

Aria and I walked out of the castle, down the front steps, and out into the courtyard. Neither of us spoke at first. I was unsure of what to say. I knew the proper term to address her would be Crown Princess Aria but had no idea what to say after that. She was the one who had asked me to accompany her, so I felt it only fair to let her start the conversation.

"You live with the royal family in Islandria?" Aria queried finally. She surprised me by speaking in Islandrian.

"Yes, Your Highness," I replied.

We continued to walk. The silence was awkward. Was the question supposed to be a conversation starter? If so, it wasn't working. Should I begin to recount childhood memories to her? Surely not; I couldn't imagine the future queen of Avivia would be interested in tales of Curtis and I sneaking honey buns out of the castle kitchens.

"Have you visited Islandria?" I asked, hoping she would pick up the cue to talk. "I beg your forgiveness, but I do not recall having seen you in our homeland before,

Crown Princess Aria.”

Aria continued to glide forward as though she had wheels. “No, my duties require me to stay here. My older brother tends to foreign affairs.”

Her Islandrian was perfect. I supposed she would be required to be fluent in multiple languages, just as our royalty was required to be. Again, we lapsed into silence.

“Are you familiar with Crown Prince Hubert and Prince Curtis?” Aria asked.

Finally, an easy topic! “Yes, Your Highness, I know them both very well.”

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“I have only met Crown Prince Hubert twice,” Aria said mildly. “Describe him for me.” I firmly told myself to not say anything negative about Hubert. I was an official representative of the crown. I had to be diplomatic. I couldn’t say anything about him being an overbearing, pompous prat.

“He is very knowledgeable. Very intelligent,” I said. “He is well-versed in many languages, highly involved in military drilling, and takes pride in all his duties. He always is sure to do any task properly. He is very dignified, and...and punctual,” I finished lamely.

Aria paused in her walking and looked shrewdly at me. “So he is a bore,” she said slyly.

Before I could stop myself, I snorted in laughter. I stifled it quickly. I mustn’t speak ill of Hubert; I was here on behalf of him and the royal family.

“No, no, not a bore,” I tried to amend. “He just takes his duties very seriously.”

“I can tell he is serious,” Aria mused. “He didn’t so much as crack a smile when our bard performed.”

“He isn’t one for jesting,” I admitted. “But Curtis is.”

“I have not met Prince Curtis,” Aria contemplated. “Is he very different from his brother?”

“Very!” I said enthusiastically. “He is very funny, and loves to be with people. He

doesn't really care about being proper, but since he isn't crown prince, no one really minds. Our commoners absolutely adore him."

"He sounds amusing," said Aria politely, but didn't seem interested in pursuing the subject further. She had lapsed into silent thought. Was I talking too much? Too little? Was I too casual in how I had described the princes? I began to over-analyze everything I had said so far.

We had walked halfway around the castle. I was glad that I had on my wide, flat shoes. Not fashionable, but so very functional. Perfect for walking, and I was able to hide them under my excessive number of petticoats and skirts. Comfort and I had both been cursed with Father's overly large feet. Comfort always made fun of my big flat shoes, and I always teased her right back for stuffing her giant feet into shoes too small and high-heeled to try and fit in with fashion trends.

"You are aware that Prince Hubert and I are betrothed?" Aria asked, jolting me out of my thoughts about feet.

"No, Your Highness," I said, caught off-guard.

Aria nodded. "Since birth."

I knew that arranged marriages were common for royalty, but had never stopped to consider that possibility happening in our kingdom. I hadn't known that about Hubert, and I had known him my entire life. Was Curtis betrothed? What should I say to Aria? Tell her congratulations for an event she couldn't possibly remember and had been assigned to her since her birth? Wish her good luck? I couldn't discern if she was happy about the fact or not.

"Hubert will be a loyal husband, I am sure." I told her, trying to sound positive.

“Hmmm.” Aria sighed. “I would like to hear more about him.” She waited expectantly.

What should I say? Recount the innumerable times Curtis and I had made him the butt of our jokes? Tell about the many servants and staff Hubert had dismissed? I settled on the safest answer.

“He loves competing in the tournaments,” I said. “He excels at horseback riding, wrestling, jousting, swordplay, and archery. We have tournaments often. Perhaps you could attend one.”

“Perhaps,” Aria mused noncommittally, then asked, “Is he musical?”

I thought of the few times Hubert had been forced to pick up and attempt to play musical instruments by his tutors. They were poor attempts at best. Nor could I say that Hubert enjoyed attending musical performances; hadn’t he dismissed our own bard?

“No, Your Highness. He has many talents, but unfortunately, musical ability is not one of them.”

“Is the other prince musical? Curtis?”

I felt a sharp pang of protectiveness. “No, he is not musical either,” I said, a little too quickly.

Aria smiled, her brilliantly white teeth standing out just as they did when I first met her. “I appreciate your honesty, Lady Truly. Until you, no one has given me candid answers about my husband-to-be.”

I felt a little guilty for twisting the truth. We had finally circled the entire castle. I

dropped my deepest curtsy. “Thank you for allowing me to accompany you on a walk, Your Highness.”

Aria inclined her head and departed.

CHAPTER 5

On the journey back to Islandria, Father praised my translating. “You are a treasure, Truly,” he told me proudly. “Any father would be privileged to have you for a daughter.”

As promised, Comfort and Mother hosted a feast and a ball to celebrate our safe return. It was a merry event, with the royal orchestra filling every corner of the castle with lively, cheerful music, and the aroma of the sumptuous dishes tantalized us for hours before the feast. Comfort insisted on selecting my dress for me and fixing my hair. I let her; she had that knack for fashion I so dismally lacked. Mother even allowed me to carefully apply some of her cosmetics, a luxury I was almost never allowed, as they were so expensive and difficult to procure.

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The food that evening was delicious. There was roasted deer, pickled herring, smoked cod, saffron rice, quail eggs, and a wide variety of the succulent Avivian fruit we brought back with us. Comfort and Mother ate delicately, determined to not strain their corset strings in the slightest, but I was famished. I managed to tuck away just as much as Father, and nearly as much as Curtis, though no one could ever quite match his appetite.

After eating, the men began to rise and escort women to the ballroom. King Edmont gave his arm to Queen Evelyn, who grasped it and walked with him to the ballroom first. Father and Mother also walked in together, eyes locked on each other in that adoring gaze which was so widely envied. It was commonly said that Father and Mother were the perfect pair, and all the ladies in court frequently commented on how ideal my parents' marriage was.

Comfort had a flock of suitors all clamoring to escort her in and claim the first dance. She laid her hand on the elbow of one burly squire, who looked delighted at his luck, and he led her off. Prince Hubert found an attractive earl's daughter to lead in. I wondered what he thought of his betrothal, or if any of the girls he danced with knew.

Many people were walking in alone now, and I went to join them, but was stopped by Curtis, who extended his elbow to me. "My lady," Curtis grinned at me. Embarrassed, but really quite pleased, I took his arm and allowed him to escort me into the ballroom.

The royalty of Islandria loved to throw balls for any occasion. A huge crystal chandelier, illuminated by hundreds of candles hung over the wide marble floor, casting a soft, glowing light over all the dancers. Ladies' hooped dresses swished

over the floor as dances were led, and an aroma of sweets lingered in the air. Tables laden with desserts and drinks stretched along one wall, the orchestra played at the front, and soft settees and winged armchairs lined the sides of the room.

Curtis and I often danced together at balls, best friends that we were. But tonight seemed different. Before, Curtis would only dance for the most energetic of songs, whirling me across the floor until I felt dizzy, and laughing as I began to lose my balance. But this time, we danced for most of the evening together, both fast and slow songs, and Curtis asked about the trip. I told him everything. In return for all my chatter, Curtis told me about his latest visits with the commoners in our kingdom.

“Do you ever wish you had been assigned a different role other than Commoner’s Ambassador?” I asked him. Since he wasn’t crown prince, Curtis had the flexibility to mingle with anyone without having to uphold a rigid image of power.

“I can’t imagine a better life than the one I have right now,” Curtis answered sincerely. “I can help the people who really need it, and don’t have to act like Prince Stuffed Head.” He nodded toward his older brother, who was indeed looking haughty and aloof as he stiffly led his dance partner through a series of steps.

“What is the worst part?” I asked, curious if anything ever dampened Curtis’ eternal optimism.

He pondered for a moment, then flashed his dazzling smile again. “Well, I did have a bad run of it in one of the northern seaside villages while you were in Avivia. There I was, innocently distributing out blankets to some of the families, and one of them had this huge dog that looked more like a bear than anything else, and it decided it didn’t like me at all. So it started chasing me, and I had to climb a tree until they could call it away.”

A vibrant mental image of Curtis dangling from a tree, knees and elbows crooked

around a branch as a dog snapped at his breeches was too much. I burst out giggling. Curtis smiled and softly confessed, “I like making you laugh.”

I gently squeezed his leading left hand with my right, and replied, suddenly shy, “I like when you do too.”

Conversation lulled, and I watched the other dancing couples. I saw Mother and Father together, with Mother resting her head on Father’s chest, and Father laying his cheek against her hair, smiling in a way that told everyone how happy he was to have the beautiful Lady Lenora as his wife. Comfort looked flushed from the excitement of having one partner after another in rapid succession, with several boys still eager for her attention. She favored the burly squire that had led her into the hall and danced with him several more times. Hubert rotated between several dance partners, but never speaking to any of them.

“I didn’t know Hubert was betrothed,” I blurted out.

Curtis was unsurprised. “Oh, yeah. Him and Aria.”

“You knew?” I cried. “You never told me!”

“What, are you interested in him?” Curtis asked, waggling his eyebrows.

“Don’t be silly!” I chided. “I just wish you had told me! Aria was asking all these questions about him, and I didn’t even know I was talking about her future husband!”

“She has met him; she knows what he is like,” Curtis shrugged.

“Still!”

I wanted to ask Curtis if he was betrothed, but that seemed too forward. It shouldn’t

matter if he was. We were just friends. But I couldn't stop myself from imagining him moving away to a distant land to wed some unfriendly, cold princess who surely wouldn't appreciate his sense of humor and wit and practical jokes.

"Who determines the betrothals?" I asked cautiously, not wanting to give away my concern about Curtis.

"The Council."

"Oh," I mumbled, then unable to stop myself, asked in a rush, "Are you betrothed too?"

"Nope. I'm a free agent!" whooped Curtis. "There are plenty of benefits of not being first in line to the throne, and that is one of the top ones."

It suddenly felt like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I felt much lighter and happier than only a few minutes before. I glanced over at Hubert, still stiffly dancing, though seemingly unconcerned about who he was leading through the crowd.

"Does Hubert even care?"

"What, about being betrothed?"

I nodded, and Curtis considered. "I honestly don't know. We don't exactly have brotherly heart-to-heart conversations late at night. Isn't that a sister thing?"

Comfort and I did often stay up late, talking to each other. I tried to picture Curtis and Hubert, staying awake until dawn, and clutching pillows, giggling about girls and swapping stories about what had happened that day. I tried to picture Hubert smiling at all, but it hurt my brain to try and conjure up such an unlikely scenario.

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Eventually, the stubs of the candles began to burn out, and Curtis walked me to my room. As the sounds of the laughter and music from the ballroom grew fainter, I became acutely aware of just how tired I was. “Your dancing has improved,” I told Curtis teasingly. “My feet aren’t even sore this time around.”

“And you have always been a good dancer,” replied Curtis sincerely.

We reached my family’s quarters, and Curtis inclined his head formally to kiss my hand. “Lady Truly, until we meet again.”

CHAPTER 6

The days fell into a comfortable rhythm as the months went by. I continued to tutor younger students when not traveling as a member of the foreign delegations. With my earnings, I purchased a horse—a beautiful black mare that I named Storm. Even with all my duties, I still managed to find time each day to ride and groom her.

Curtis and I, when not in lessons together, would ride horses, practice archery, or simply go on long walks around the grounds, discussing everything from childhood memories to pressing matters of state. We frequently played practical jokes on castle staff, though Hubert was also a common target as well. His stuffy, pompous ways were tolerated by all—being the heir to the throne came with certain privileges—but everyone liked to see him riled up when Curtis poked fun at him.

At night before bed, my father would tell our family animated stories. Most children stop getting bedtime stories around ten years old, but it was different with my father. Everyone loved listening to him. He was the best storyteller I knew and could make

each tale come alive so that I felt as if I was living the story as it unfolded. He would impersonate voices with impressive accuracy, create a whole world with his words, and would hold us all spellbound as he spoke, often for more than an hour at a time. If he hadn't become the Chancellor of the Exchequer, he would have made a wonderful bard.

As an official court linguist, I was often sent to Avivia, always accompanied by Father. Hubert would occasionally come with us. Any voyage that involved Hubert was tedious and dull at best, as he sat formally and straight-backed in his seat, speaking only when necessary and after a great deal of thought. Hubert would only stay at the finest of inns and would remain aloof from the innkeepers and servants scurrying around to serve him. He deemed it prudent to have a certain amount of distance between himself and the common class of people. I kept a close watch anytime Hubert and Aria were near each other, but far from the flirty teasing I would expect to see from a betrothed couple, they seemed to tolerate each other at best.

Formal negotiations involving Hubert were rarely productive. Hubert was always convinced that his way was the only right way and would never bargain or deviate in the slightest from his proposal. It was frustrating for both the foreign delegates and embarrassing for our own.

Eventually, I suggested to Father that Curtis come in Hubert's stead. Father brought the proposal to the Council, who agreed. The following journey to Avivia was resoundingly successful. Negotiations went forward quickly and fairly and with a great deal of jokes. Curtis and I would listen to the bard for as long as he was performing in the evenings, no matter how tired we were.

Everyone in our company preferred having Curtis along. Instead of staying at remote and upscale inns, Curtis would stop at small villages and mingle with the commoners, insisting on purchasing meals from the humblest of homes and trinkets from every tiny shop. By the end of our stay, most village members had at least one silver coin,

and would bow us out of town, waving scarves and calling out “Long live Prince Curtis!”

After each return from Avivia, I found myself looking forward more and more to the balls. Comfort was always the girl who turned the most heads and had the most invitations to dance. Mother and Father would waltz together in such perfect unity they were often called upon to lead the dances. My dancing skills were not nearly up to the standard of Comfort or Mother, but Curtis was getting better all the time, and we would whirl across the floor with dizzying speed, or else sneak out of the ballroom to slide down the long banisters in the entrance hall.

One afternoon found Curtis and I racing our horses across the fields, trying to leap them over hedges and narrow streams. As we reached the outer stone wall, the furthest point from the castle while still remaining on the grounds, we reined in our steeds. Curtis’ stallion had beaten my mare. Again. I wasn’t surprised—his horse had a pedigree just as long as Curtis did.

We dismounted, and I fed Storm a few sugar cubes from my skirt pocket. “Good job, girl! We will get them next time.” I rubbed her nose and patted her neck. She and Pooter began grazing while Curtis and I plopped down on the grass. Pooter’s real name was actually Xanatas the Twelfth, named after a famed ancestor’s horse, and the name had been passed down through the generations.

Curtis had declared to me that Xanatas the Twelfth was a dreadful name for any horse, let alone his horse, and had rechristened him Pooter because of his frequent flatulence. You would think that hundreds of years of trying to achieve the ideal horse would have resulted in one with fewer episodes of passing gas, but it was not to be. In public however, Curtis would revert to the pedigreed name. Queen Evelyn had nearly fainted when Curtis once let slip what he had dubbed his horse.

“Your birthday is next week,” I told Curtis, making sure to sit far away from Pooter

and his dangerous hindquarters. “What do you want?”

Curtis shrugged. “I don’t need anything. Mother and Pops always give me some boring, ceremonial gift with some history attached. You know, the sword of my great-great-great-great grandfather who fought during the Second Avivian Rebellion, or a ring that my great-great-great-great-great uncle during his coronation.”

“Oh come one,” I wheedled. “With all those boring presents, you must have something that you want.”

Curtis shook his head. “What would I ask for?” he asked. “I have everything I need and many more things I don’t need or really even want.”

It was true. As prince, he lacked nothing. But I wasn’t going to give up that easily. “Sixteen is a big birthday. I want to get you something. Or I could make you something!”

Curtis raised his eyebrows at me. “You aren’t thinking of cooking again, are you?” he asked. “That wouldn’t be much of a gift.”

“Hey, you be nice!” I teased, pushing him over into the grass. The previous year, I had managed to convince the pastry chef to allow me into the kitchen to make Curtis a birthday cake. The result had been disastrous—a soupy concoction that refused to bake correctly and tasted terrible.

“I will only be nice if you promise to never cook for me again,” Curtis snickered mischievously. “I would have to get a new taste tester after every meal if you were the chef.”

“I don’t remember your culinary skills being anything to brag about,” I shot back. “It seems like you burned, what was it again? Water?” Father had told a story recently

about one of the hunting trips that the men in the castle had gone on, during which time Curtis had been in charge of boiling water, but forgotten about it and boiled away all the water and burned the pot.

Curtis put his hands up, admitting defeat. "I guess it is a good thing I am a prince and have people to cook for me, or I would shrivel up and die of starvation."

Undeterred, I went back to our original topic. "You still haven't said what you want for your birthday. A fine outlook it would be for your best friend to not give you anything for the big sixteen!"

"Why is sixteen such a big number to celebrate?" he asked curiously.

I shrugged. "I don't know. It just seems like it." That wasn't entirely true. I had been looking forward to my sixteenth birthday because Father said his daughters couldn't be courted until age sixteen, but I didn't want to tell Curtis that part. People already mistook us for a couple often enough.

"Okay then," he said casually, and flipped the bill of my riding cap down. I righted it and pushed him again, but before he fell, he grabbed my wrist and I was half pulled over him as he rolled onto the grass. I snatched my wrist back, suddenly shy about being too close to Curtis.

"If you are going to fight me, m'lady, I would suggest you improve your wrestling skills!" Curtis laughed at me.

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“Well as a gentleman, perhaps you should seek to protect a lady instead of wrestle her,” I teased back, laying on my side in the grass and propping up my head. I knew I had no wrestling abilities; it was a skill never taught to women. But there were always wrestling matches between the men at tournaments.

Curtis, still laying down, placed his hands under his head and turned his face towards me. “You started it. I just finished it.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but couldn’t think of a single come-back, so closed my mouth. Normally there were no awkward silences between myself and Curtis. We could remain in thought, side by side, for hours without feeling the need to say anything. Though admittedly, Curtis was rarely quiet. But this silence felt different. My heart began to beat faster and butterflies fluttered in my stomach.

Curtis propped himself up on his elbow, still turned toward me. He reached over and fiddled with a few strands on my hair that had come loose from under my riding cap. “I like your hair,” Curtis said, somewhat clumsily. “It’s...really, uh, nice.”

“Um, thanks. I...I like your hair too,” I replied timidly, feeling foolish at such childish language and wondering what else to say. I looked down at the grass and pulled up a few blades, letting them loose into the breeze. Curtis let my hair drop and pulled up some grass blades as well. His hands looked so much larger than mine. I reached over and traced the veins on the back of his hand.

In a normal circumstance, Curtis would have made a joke at this point. But he didn’t. He let me touch his hand then turned his hand and entwined our fingers. It felt like such an intimate gesture. I glanced up at his face. He was looking at me, but not in

the eyes. His gaze had drifted down to fix on my mouth.

If my heart was racing before, it was nothing compared to what it was doing now. I felt like it was about to beat out of my chest as I felt each heartbeat pound in my ears, drowning out the sound of the rustling trees and chirping meadow larks. Curtis scooted over in the grass, closer to me. He leaned in, still looking at my lips. The rush of emotions that flooded me bordered on frightening.

I hadn't prepared for this. Hadn't anticipated this. I didn't feel ready. I sat up sharply, letting our hands come apart. "It is getting late!" I said, much too loudly. "We better get back." I stood and began walking toward Storm. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Curtis's disappointed face.

We mounted our horses and rode back to the castle in silence. I felt like I should say something but had no idea what. Should I explain that I just didn't think about Curtis as anything more than a friend? That wasn't entirely true. There had certainly been wandering daydreams during dull history lessons when my imagination ran loose, picturing him rescuing me from some calamity and me showering him with affection afterward. Silly girlish fantasies, I had always scolded myself afterward.

Should I say that it wasn't a lack of interest, but just that I personally wasn't ready? Perhaps I should blame my parents and say they didn't want me being courted until I was sixteen, though that was only a few months away for me. Perhaps I was ready, but just nervous. What would a relationship with Curtis look like? After all, he was a prince. There had to be extra obligations tied into being with him that there wouldn't be with another nobleman or commoner.

I stole a glance at Curtis. He looked uncharacteristically serious, staring straight ahead and determinedly not looking at me. The sight was disconcerting. Curtis was always so bubbly and full of life, and now he was sulky and moody.

Our horses' hooves clattered onto the cobblestone courtyard. Still, we rode on without saying anything. At the stables, Curtis dismounted quickly and tossed the reins at a stable boy. He strode out quickly without a single word to anyone.

The stable boy looked surprised by this sullen departure. "What is wrong with him?" he asked me, looking after Curtis, who was now storming up to the castle.

"I don't know," I lied, and began to curry Storm.

CHAPTER 7

That night, I couldn't sleep. I kept remembering Curtis scooting over, leaning toward me, his gaze fixated on my lips. After hours of tossing and turning, I threw off my covers and went into the sitting room. I curled up on the sofa with a blanket but still couldn't get comfortable. I lit a candle and attempted to read, but my eyes wouldn't focus on the words. Curtis' face kept swimming before my eyes, looking disappointed and rejected.

Of course he would look rejected; I had run away from him! I sighed heavily, not sure what to think. If I opened that door, what would happen? I actively woke up my imagination, and let it rush into overdrive, imaging Curtis holding my hand, hugging me close, kissing me.

I jumped as someone entered the room. It was Comfort, sleepily shuffling over. "I thought I heard someone," she said, and peered into my face. "What is wrong? You leapt a mile when I walked in."

I hugged my knees. I wanted so badly to talk to someone about the Curtis situation, but also felt embarrassed discussing it. But what were big sisters for if not to confide in about boys? I wanted to ask so many things but didn't know where to start.

“Have you ever kissed anyone?” I asked rather timidly.

Comfort looked suddenly wide awake. “Why do you ask?” She grinned, and I could tell she already could guess.

“I think um...someone...someone maybe wanted to kiss me today.” I said evasively.

“So you are saying that Curtis tried to kiss you but you didn’t let him?” Comfort asked knowingly.

I looked up, amazed. “How did you know?”

Comfort smiled and slid onto the sofa with me and pulled some of the blanket to cover her legs. “Let’s see, the only boy you ever spend time with is Curtis, and it is obvious he likes you a lot and I’ve been wondering when he would make a move. Secondly, you said that someone tried to kiss you. If he had succeeded, you would have phrased the question differently. Thirdly, you are sitting here looking all gloomy and upset, and if you had actually kissed him, you wouldn’t have been able to stop smiling. So my guess is that you got scared and bolted, am I right?”

I gaped at her.

Comfort smiled broadly. “Big sisters know a thing or two.”

“Do you really think he likes me?” I asked. I knew the answer, but wanted to hear it validated from someone else.

Comfort giggled. “Oh puh-leez. He can’t take his eyes off of you and is always finding excuses to touch you.”

I blushed.

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Comfort jiggled my shoulder. “Hey, if you were going to be with anyone, Curtis is a great choice. He really likes you, you already do everything together, and for goodness sakes, he is a prince! Just imagine, you could be second in line to be queen!”

“That makes it sound like I am using him,” I protested.

Comfort ignored my comment and instead asked, “Do you like him?”

“Yes,” I answered quietly. “I do. A lot.”

Comfort raised her eyebrows at me, as if to say “Then what is the problem?”

“But what if it doesn’t work out between us?” I asked in a rush.

“If it doesn’t work out, then it doesn’t work out,” Comfort said breezily. “But at least you won’t regret not ever finding out. And besides, you and Curtis are perfect for each other. He gets you to have fun, and you stop him from doing anything too crazy. You have similar interests, and you think that he is soooooo handsome...” she puckered her lips and I rolled my eyes.

“So have you ever kissed anyone?” I asked.

“Four someones, actually,” Comfort admitted. “But don’t tell Father!”

“Who?” I asked eagerly. “Tell me!”

“Do you remember Fredrick, the stable boy?”

I gasped. “Does Father know you have been kissing stable boys?”

“Shhhh! No he doesn’t. And he better never find out. So do you remember him?”

I screwed up my face as I searched my memory. “I don’t think so...Wait, was he that boy with black hair that was always following you around a couple years back?”

Comfort giggled. “That is the one. Well, I thought he was cute, and I would always find excuses to go down to the stables, pretend I had lost a hair clip during riding lessons, and he would help me look, but we both knew I hadn’t really lost anything. And then he would come deliver messages to Father or would volunteer to help with the horses for my horseback riding classes. Anyway, one day we snuck away to the woods, and he kissed me.”

“Just like that?” I asked incredulously.

“Well, it was the first time for both of us, so it was a little sloppy. But,” she winked, “practice makes perfect!”

“Weren’t you nervous?”

“Of course I was! Everyone is the first time. But he was really cute and I wanted to know what it felt like.”

“What about numbers two, three, and four?” I asked.

“Let’s see...” Comfort began ticking off on her fingers. “James was that one squire I would always dance with. Charles was an earl’s son that would take me out on long carriage rides. And then there was Theodore, who knew all the secret passageways

and hidden rooms in the castle. All. Of. Them.” She grinned wickedly.

I couldn’t believe it! Prim and proper Comfort, sneaking around kissing stable boys and squires?

“What happened to them?” I asked curiously.

Comfort shrugged. “Stable boys don’t hang around long. They usually move on to bigger and better things. James was gone a lot with the knight he serves, and Charles became smitten with some girl in town about the time that Theodore noticed me. James and Theodore had a fight over me though.” Her mischievous smile broadened. “Theodore won.”

I stared. I couldn’t help it. Comfort always seemed so ladylike.

Comfort giggled. “Don’t look so shocked! It is flattering to be desired. You should know.”

I bit my lip. “What should I do though? Curtis was so upset when I pulled away.”

“Boys are pretty simple creatures,” Comfort said matter-of-factly as she picked a bit of stuffing out of the pillow she was holding. “They really aren’t difficult to figure out. He likes you and tried to kiss you, and you ran off, right?”

“Right.”

“So he was really disappointed and probably got all grumpy and pouty, right?”

“Right.”

“So now, all you have to do is go back and say that you like him.”

“I can’t do that!”

“Why not?”

“That would be weird!”

“He already told you that he likes you, didn’t he?”

“No he didn’t.”

“He tried to kiss you, didn’t he? That is the same thing.”

“But I just can’t tell him that!”

Comfort rolled her eyes, exasperated. “Look, Truly. He was probably super nervous. It doesn’t matter if he is a prince or a serving boy from the kitchens. Boys do all the asking. All the initiating. All the leaning in, hoping to get something, anything, back. It was a huge blow to his ego to have you reject him.”

I felt crushed. What had I done?

“I know you didn’t mean it that way!” Comfort hurried on. “I know you wouldn’t want to do anything that would hurt him. But you were scared. So tell him that. Tell

him that you were scared but that you do like him. He will try again if he knows he won't get rejected."

"But it will be awkward."

"Of course it will be awkward," Comfort exclaimed. "But would you rather have one awkward conversation and everything be fixed, or no conversation and every interaction with him from now until forever be awkward? Just watch. He will start to avoid you. And if you don't address the issue, he won't ever talk to you again. He won't even look at you again. So tell him! I promise, he will appreciate it. The longer you put it off the worse it will be. If you say nothing, it will get worse and worse, so it feels like you are becoming more distant each day, and then that becomes your new normal—never talking or looking at each other ever again. Is that what you want?"

"Well, when you put it that way..."

"Boys need a lot of encouragement," Comfort said knowingly. "But they are a little obtuse too. So don't drop subtle hints. Be blunt, and he will forgive you." She paused. "And then tell me what happens after. Sisters need to know these things."

CHAPTER 8

The next day, I saw Curtis during our morning languages class. The tutor was at the front of our small group, drily explaining common grammatical errors. We usually sat next to each other, but today, Curtis walked in last and selected a seat far away from mine. I kept trying to catch Curtis' eye, but he stared at our instructor the entire hour and refused to even glance in my direction. The same thing happened in archery, literature, and arithmetic. Any time I tried to get Curtis' attention, he would pretend like I wasn't there. It was just as Comfort had predicted.

I could just leave the conversation for another day. He clearly didn't want to look at

me, let alone talk to me. But I couldn't stand not talking to Curtis. It hadn't even been a full day since I had shied away from his advances, and I already felt lonely and missed his companionship. Comfort's advice about not putting it off kept ringing in my ears. Finally, I cornered him as our classmates were headed to the dining hall for lunch.

"Curtis, may I talk to you?" I asked, blocking his way down the hall.

Curtis shrugged indifferently, looking pointedly over my shoulder as he continued to refuse to make eye contact.

I waited for everyone else to pass us before I took a deep breath, but no words came out. A shrill squeak emanated from me instead. I tried again. I inhaled and then forced myself to say, "Curtis, I...I like you."

Curtis' grumpy expression cleared, replaced by one of incredulity. "What?"

"I like you," I repeated to Curtis's shiny shoes. I was too embarrassed to look at him. "A lot. I just wanted to let you know."

"Oh," was all Curtis could come up with. Eventually he added, "I like you too. But I guess you already knew that because of...you know..."

I rocked back and forth on my heels. "So... so sorry about, you know, yesterday... I was just, well..."

"It's okay," Curtis cut me off. I chanced a glance up at him. He looked embarrassed too and shuffled his feet as he rubbed the back of his neck, which was bright red. "I was trying to be...well...never mind." He stopped talking and gazed off over my head.

The air was thick with the uncomfortable silence. I watched a spider slowly crawling up the wall by Curtis' shoes. What now? Neither of us knew what to say or do.

"So... I'm going to go, uh, eat." I said. I couldn't think of what else to say, and the situation was already uncomfortable enough.

"Yeah. Yeah, okay. That is a good eat. I mean, a good plan... you know, to... uh, eat," he finished lamely. "I guess I will see you later."

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“Bye!” I said, grateful for the escape. I hurried off, now wondering if I should have waited for a better time to tell him. That was so painful. I was glad we didn’t have any more classes together that day. For all the nobility’s children, same-age peers had group classes in the morning then broke out after the noon meal for individual or small group tutoring, based on our rank, gender, and interests.

On my way to the dining area, I saw Father emerging from a meeting. “Truly!” he called out. “I was hoping to see you.” He hugged me with one arm, his other occupied with a bundle of papers. “We are headed back to Avivia next week. Aria requested you particularly.”

“That is wonderful,” I said, trying my best to sound confident and casual to cover up the embarrassment of my recent conversation.

“Yes it is,” Father agreed. “It will be a large entourage this time.”

“Who else is coming?”

Father began ticking off on his fingers. “Let’s see—a hundred guards, the usual members from court, and some merchants and nobles who want to travel with us as well. There have been more skirmishes near the Avivian border and they want the protection.”

“Hubert too?” I asked, careful to phrase the question in a way that avoided use of Curtis’s name.

“No, no. Not this time. Curtis was requested for this journey.”

My heart leapt. “Well that is good,” I said, still forcing my voice to sound relaxed and nonchalant. “I think the villagers like him better anyway.”

“I think everyone does,” whispered Father conspiratorially. “Except for Hubert.” He gave me a hug. “I will see you tonight, darling.”

I worried that stating my feelings for Curtis would make things awkward and uncomfortable between us, but it had the opposite effect. It seemed to have cleared the air, so that Curtis and I could talk again like we always had, and any residual frostiness from Curtis melted away entirely. We had great fun planning out the route to Avivia the group would take (being a prince came with certain privileges), mapping out towns we had yet to visit, and swapping the latest castle gossip.

I kept expecting it, but he didn’t try to kiss me again. I told Comfort that one evening during Mother and Father’s evening walk.

“Of course he won’t rush right in,” Comfort said, wagging her finger at me. “He is probably lying awake right now, planning it all out in his head. He failed once and isn’t going to go forward without a plan now. That boy of yours is light-hearted about a lot of things, but I can guarantee you that he is meticulously planning every detail after being rejected once.”

CHAPTER 9

The day before our journey to Avivia was to commence, I was packing when Father knocked and entered my room. “Looks like my little linguist is all ready,” he said, ruffling my hair so it stood on end.

“Father!” I protested, smoothing my hair back down.

He flopped down on my bed, toppling a neat stack of my folded clothes. He lay there,

grinning up at me as an avalanche of petticoats and corsets cascaded down around him. The funny thing about Father is that he was always so dignified and proper when he was in public. But at home with just our family, he was relaxed and playful.

He grabbed one of my corsets and held it out. “My lands!” he exclaimed. “How did you get old enough to be in one of these torture contraptions already?”

“How do you know they are torture contraptions?” I teased. “Do you wear corsets often?”

“How else do you think I have such a neat figure?” Father replied, sucking in his girth.

“I should have known where mine were disappearing to,” I laughed and threw a stocking at him. He caught it and threw it back at me, and the stocking wrapped around my face. We then proceeded to throw all my stacked petticoats, underwear, and stockings at each other, dodging behind furniture, then popping out and returning fire.

Mother opened the door. “Mercy me!” she exclaimed.

Father and I looked up, Father had a frilly petticoat draped over his receding hairline and was holding a corset back, ready to throw. I was holding up one of my gowns to defend against the onslaught, stockings thrown haphazardly over my shoulders and arms.

“Really!” Mother scolded. “Cuthbert, what are you doing?”

“We are discussing important matters,” Father declared. I nodded solemnly.

Mother rolled her eyes. “You two are so alike.”

She began tidying up the chaos surrounding us. We both bent to help, but Mother shooed us away. “Go on and discuss your important matters outdoors, you silly things.”

Father pecked Mother on the cheek. “Lenora, you are the best.”

“Am I?” Mother asked, plucking underwear off Father’s shoulder.

“Yes, you are,” Father said fervently, kissing her cheek again. This time, he rubbed his beard against her neck.

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“Oh, get out of here you sly old fox!” giggled Mother, and swatted at the seat of Father’s trousers.

“Thanks Mother!” I hurried after Father. Mother sighed in a long-suffering way and turned to tidy up my room and pack.

Father and I spent the afternoon gathering documents to be carried with us—business proposals, trade agreements, and several letters.

Hubert added a letter to the stack, which surprised me. He had never struck me as the type to send letters. “Who is this for?” I asked.

“That is none of your concern,” Hubert said in a clipped, unfriendly tone.

I handed it back. “I can’t deliver a letter if I don’t know who to give it to.”

Hubert rolled his eyes and pulled a quill from inside his jacket pocket, scribbling on the outside of the envelope before returning the letter, which was addressed:

To: Crown Princess Aria

From: Crown Prince Hubert

“Thank you. I will see that she receives it.” I smiled at Hubert, but he simply turned and walked off.

“He is a charmer, that one,” said Father sarcastically.

The journey to Avivia was a merry one. Upon our arrival, Curtis leapt from the carriage and bounded up the front path, stopping to pump hands with anyone who stretched out an arm. His energy was contagious; the usually stoic greeting party broke into smiles as Curtis greeted each person by name. I envied his ability to naturally put people at ease, and his knack for remembering not only the names and faces of nearly everyone he met, but also tidbits of information about each person.

When greeting someone, instead of the mechanical ‘Pleased to meet you’ greeting Hubert gave, Curtis would grab hands, shake vigorously, and say, “Why if it isn’t the Duchess of Mostentia! How is your cat? Isn’t it the one with differently colored eyes?”

Once the entire company had disembarked, Curtis sprang up the front steps and was greeted by the same servant who always served us pale pink juice. “Jeorge!” Curtis cried jovially. “It is so nice to see you again. How is your daughter?”

I had never even thought to ask the servants’ names. I eavesdropped on their conversation as Jeorge told Curtis about his daughter, who suffered from uncontrolled tremors, and watched as Curtis followed Jeorge back to the kitchens, listening to his concerns all the while.

Curtis still wasn’t back by the time we were called in for Aria to welcome us before being led to our rooms. After the customary greeting, Aria held up her hand, stalling the servant who was to lead us out.

“Where is Prince Curtis?” Aria asked. “It was my understanding that he was to arrive with your company today.”

Father stepped forward. “Your Majesty, we beg your forgiveness, but our prince must have lost track of the time. He is with us, but we were separated. He is discussing urgent matters with colleagues.”

Aria stared at Father, not batting an eye. Her entire demeanor seemed to shout, ‘What is more urgent than greeting the crown princess?’

Father respectfully lowered his gaze. “Again, we apologize most deeply, Your—”

He was cut off as Curtis threw open the doors and strolled in. “Your Majesty!” he said upon reaching the throne. He bowed low. “Charmed, as always.”

“Likewise,” droned Aria. “What caused your tardiness?”

“Personal matters, Your Majesty.” Curtis answered breezily and didn’t elaborate about his time with Jeorge, only deepening my respect that he would consider a servant’s personal matters worth keeping confidential.

CHAPTER 10

“Curtis, you amaze me,” I told him sincerely that afternoon. We had left the grounds and were sitting on the shore of a nearby beach, watching the waves rhythmically roll in. I wanted to soak in the free time we had before we were launched into back-to-back meetings the next day.

“Why is that?” Curtis asked.

“You make everyone feel so comfortable,” I exclaimed. “You remember everyone’s name and make them feel like the most important person in the world. Like they really matter.”

Curtis seemed puzzled. “Everyone does matter. The world needs everyone—farmers, butchers, soldiers, blacksmiths... Everyone has to do their part for a society to succeed.”

“I know that!” I said. How could I explain what I meant? “It is just that...being a prince, people expect you to be high and mighty. Distant, like your brother. But you treat commoners just the same as royalty.”

“We all put on our trousers one pant leg at a time!”

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“Well, I really admire that about you. Not many people understand that. Just look at Hubert. He acts like he is much more important than anyone else, and no one likes him. But everyone likes you! Within five seconds of meeting you everyone likes you.” I sighed. “I wish I was more like you.”

“You shouldn’t. I’m nothing special.”

His statement surprised me. Curtis was always overflowing with energy and confidence. Everyone adored him. Who wouldn’t want to be like him?

“Why do you say that?”

Curtis dug in the sand with his toes. “Put it this way. I am expected to give one hundred percent all the time. There is no down time where I can just relax. From the time I wake up to when I go to bed, I am expected to give everything my fullest attention. It is exhausting. Don’t get me wrong, I really do like talking to everyone, and I honestly do care about all our kingdom’s subjects. But everyone I meet wants me to solve their problems. No one asks about me and how I am doing.” He stopped grinned at me. “Except you, of course,” he added before continuing, “but everywhere I go, whatever I do, people need something from me. Tutors are never satisfied with what I do; with the villagers, there are always more problems than need solved. The work is never done.”

It was the first time I had ever heard Curtis express any dissatisfaction with his role. I reached over and squeezed his hand. “Well, any time you need someone to relax with, I will be here for you.”

Curtis squeezed my hand back. “I know you will. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

I blushed scarlet. “So, how are you doing?” I asked.

Curtis chuckled. “Just fine, thanks for asking.”

We stayed there for a long time, just watching the waves and listening to the seagulls. It was so peaceful. So beautiful. We watched as the sun slowly sank beyond the ocean and darkness settled in.

“They will probably be looking for us soon.” Curtis said.

“We can relax for a few more minutes.” I told him. “Besides, the stars haven’t come out yet. And you need to unwind sometimes, remember?”

“If you insist.”

We watched stars slowly come out, one by one. It was amazing to me that in this country, even the nights were warm. The sea breeze smelled salty, and I heard the palm fronds rustling behind us.

“Truly?”

“Yes?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Do you plan on staying?”

“Where? Here on the beach? In Avivia?”

“At the castle. In Islandria. As a linguist.”

“Of course! Why would I do anything else?”

Curtis shrugged. “Just wondering. People come and go all the time.”

“Father is the Chancellor of the Exchequer. That isn’t a job you just throw away. We will probably be there my whole life.” I bumped my shoulder against his. “You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Good. I like having you around.”

“Is that right?”

“Yep. I couldn’t make it without you.”

On the final day of our trip, Curtis was called to watch the Avivian troops drill, and I was sitting in on a lengthy and tedious meeting about the evolution of cultural customs and their effects on the wellbeing of society. I was supposed to be translating for the Avivian commoner who sat on the Council to represent the villagers, but he wasn’t a talkative fellow and seemed more inclined to listen. The bulk of the meeting was about preserving historical artifacts and traditions.

I was nearly nodding off under the bright sun pouring in from the window when I was suddenly jolted to full attention by the conversation.

“What do you mean, re-negotiate your betrothal?” a nasal voice wheezed.

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“Just what I said,” Aria’s voice was crisp.

She continued. “The Crown Prince of Islandria currently has no interest in me nor I in him. I wish to postpone our wedding for a minimum of an additional three years. There is no need to rush into a marriage until we can agree on a mutually beneficial merger for our countries, particularly when our governments are run so differently. It is a political disaster waiting to happen.”

“Perhaps Your Highness would prefer an engagement to the other prince?” the nasal voice asked. I whipped my head around to look at the speaker. He was an ancient man with powder white hair and skin that looked as though his wrinkles had wrinkles. I held my breath as I waited for Aria’s answer.

“It is an option, I suppose,” Aria mused, and drummed her fingers idly on the table. Her attention flicked over to me. “Lady Truly, would you deliver a message to Prince Curtis? Tell him to meet me in the entrance hall tonight at sunset. I will see if he is a viable possibility.”

A viable possibility? She was talking about Curtis like he was a possession to be examined before purchasing. She didn’t know him at all. I left the meeting in a daze. I was stunned. How could I tell Curtis that Aria wanted to see if he was suitable husband material for her? I wandered around the halls, half looking for Curtis and half hoping I wouldn’t find him, because I was dreading the conversation we would have.

I came upon him telling one of his favorite jokes, the one about a bard who had one leg and three thumbs, to a group of guards. I hovered around the corner, not wanting

to interrupt. When he finally finished telling the joke and laughing, I caught up to him.

“Curtis?”

He turned. “Truly! What—what is wrong? You look upset.”

I couldn’t meet his eye, and swallowed as a lump formed in my throat. Once all the guards were out of earshot, I muttered, “I am just delivering a message. From...Aria.” Suddenly, I didn’t want to use any of Aria’s titles as I should have when talking about her.

“What is it?”

The lump in my throat grew so speech became nearly impossible. I loathed each syllable that formed on my tongue. “She wants you to meet her tonight at sunset. In the entrance hall.”

“Did she say why?”

“She is thinking about... about changing her betrothal... to you.”

Curtis didn’t say anything. Why wasn’t he reacting? The hallway no longer felt warm at all. I felt cold goosebumps erupt all over my skin. “I was just in a meeting with the Avivian Council, and she suggested moving her wedding back a few years. Someone suggested you as a substitute to Hubert instead.”

Curtis remained silent.

I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Why? Why was it that someone else was making a bid for Curtis just a week after I had confessed my feelings for him? And I

couldn't compete with the beautiful crown princess of an exotic, tropical land. I looked up at Curtis. He didn't seem disturbed by the news at all, merely contemplative.

"Well, I guess I will entertaining Her Highness this evening, then," Curtis said finally, seeming completely unconcerned. "I best get ready." He walked off, leaving me alone and confused in the hallway which suddenly felt dark and chilly.

I couldn't understand it. I thought my friendship with Curtis was evolving into something more, but now, I felt cast off and betrayed. Was I simply an item to be traded in when a newer, fancier model became available?

I lingered in the far end of the entrance hall that evening, pretending to be engrossed in a document comparing wheat prices. But I kept watching closely for Curtis and Aria to meet up. I saw Aria appear first, then Curtis came out of the dining hall shortly after. He bowed and they exited through the golden front doors.

I couldn't stand it! I hadn't considered before today that other girls would be interested in Curtis. I had never considered that Curtis could return their feelings and enter a relationship that would take him away from me. I would lose my best friend. Why had I never thought of that before? He was handsome, he was funny, and he was a prince. Of course other girls would be interested in him. What was not to like? How had I been so stupid as to think that he and I would stay best friends forever, without anything or anyone else to get in the way?

I tried to inconspicuously peer out of the windows after them. It was difficult to track them in the dusk. I could barely make them out, shadowy figures walking along the same path that Aria had walked with me all those months ago.

Jealousy pulsed through my body. I thought Curtis cared about me. That just showed how shallow boys were. Ugh! I wished Comfort was here. I would be able to tell her

everything and she would readily agree with me, be angry at Curtis for being so flighty. See if I cared! Who needed boys anyway?

I stomped up to my quarters. I paced back and forth, driving myself mad by imagining what Curtis and Aria would be doing right now. I thought briefly of going to wait for Curtis in the entrance hall, but discarded the idea almost immediately. I wouldn't be the girl who was going to chase after someone. If Curtis wanted me, he would have to prove it.

Then I wilted. Why would any boy choose me? Aria had much more to offer Curtis than I did. She was rich, beautiful, elegant, refined... She would be the ruler of a scenic and successful country. I sat down heavily on the bed.

A soft knock on my door interrupted my thoughts.

"Come in," I called, hoping against hope that it would be Curtis. It wasn't.

Father poked his head in. "I didn't see you at dinner, sweetheart. I brought you a plate."

He brought over a platter with food and placed it on the bedside table. He looked closely at me. "Are you alright?"

"I think so," I said, suddenly feeling like I wanted to cry.

"Want to talk about it?" he asked, sitting down next to me.

I shook my head.

Father studied me for a moment, then leaned back. “Have I ever told you the story of how I met your mother?”

Of course he had. I knew the story well; it was one of my favorites. But I always loved hearing it each time he told it. “Tell me.”

“Way back in the day, before I was old and fat, I made a bet with my friend who was, at the time, equally as young and stupid as I was. I bet that I would be able to sneak into a nearby finishing school and steal a cake before anyone caught me. You see, his sister attended the school and had told him that there was a cake decorating contest that day. Now, boys are interested in three things: food, competing in sports, and girls. And when a young man is dared by his best friend to any absurd challenge, the man code states that he must agree. So I found an open window and saw tables all laid with cakes inside. I ducked back down and waited until the room was empty.

“Once I knew there wasn’t anyone inside that room, I got a running start and tried to jump through the open window. But I misjudged the window’s height, and my foot caught on the frame, and instead of jumping through the window, I fell through the window, did a full front flip, and landed flat on my back on one of the tables holding cakes. It broke clean in half, and several cakes fell onto me. The noise I made would have woken the dead. The wind was completely knocked out of me, and I couldn’t move a muscle.

“So I just lay there, gasping for air and covered from head to toe in cake and frosting, and one of the instructors came in. Now, I don’t know why this woman was teaching

at a finishing school. Everyone expects finishing school graduates to be dainty and ladylike, but this woman must have been there as a bodyguard, because she was immense! She came in and saw me lying there, yanked me up by my ear, and marched me down to the headmistress.

“All the girls heard the commotion, and watched as I was being dragged down the hallway, trailing cake crumbs all the way. We came to the headmistress’ office, and the bodyguard woman slammed me down into a chair to wait for her. But, all of that was worth it, because after the headmistress was done interrogating me, the most beautiful girl I had ever seen in my life came in. The headmistress said that this was the girl who had baked and frosted all those cakes I had smashed, and it was up to me to make things right with her.”

Usually, it was at this point in the story that Mother would chime in with ‘And you girls would not believe how silly your Father looked, sitting there with frosting plastered in his hair and cake ground into his shirt, looking as though he had been clubbed over the head. His eyes were as big as saucers!’

“And then I started stuttering and spluttering and making a complete fool of myself, trying to explain to this beautiful girl what had become of her cakes. The best I could come up with was telling her I would take her to the market and replace all of her ingredients and help her recreate her masterpieces.

“So the next day, after I had washed all the frosting from my hair, I picked a bouquet of flowers and took them to your Mother. I apologized profusely about my behavior and took her on a long stroll through the marketplace and let her pick out all the ingredients she wanted. Then the rest is history! She fell madly in love with her cake thief, and we lived happily ever after.”

I always loved hearing that story. It was so easy to imagine a young Father, tumbling through an open window, being dragged off to the headmistress’ office by his ear,

and Mother coming in to see a young man covered in her cake and stammering an apology.

The story had made me forget my anger. “You should have been a bard,” I told Father. “I’m sure you could put that story to song.”

Father pretended to strum an imaginary lyre and sang in a dreadfully out-of-tune voice,

“There once was a lovely cake,

So difficult to frost and make,

A lovely lass left her class,

Then heard a great big crash!”

“I take it back! I take it back!” I cried, covering my ears. “Never sing in public or you will be run out of town!”

Father laughed. “Feeling better?”

I smiled and hugged him. Father always knew what I needed. I never had to explain myself to him. I heard another knock on the door. “Come in!” I called for a second time.

This time, it was Curtis. “Sorry, I didn’t realize you were busy,” he began, and was about to leave, but Father forestalled him.

“I was just on my way out,” Father said and winked at me as he passed. “In any case, I believe my daughter was planning to run me out soon to protect her hearing. Good

night, dear, I love you! And happy early birthday, Your Highness.”

Curtis thanked him and bowed as Father passed, then flicked his eyes over at where I sat.

“So, how did it go?” I asked, much more formally than I ordinarily would have been.

“Well, let’s see. She thinks Hubert is a stuffy old bore, and I couldn’t disagree there. And we compared notes on army drills. Then she asked if I was in a committed relationship.”

He paused. Stupid storytellers with their dramatic effects. “What did you say?” I asked, trying to sound as though I didn’t care.

“I said I was.”

My head shot up. “Really?”

“Well I did consider just picking my nose and passing gas more often than Pooter but decided that wouldn’t do well to uphold the dignity of our country. I figured honesty was the best policy for foreign diplomacy.”

I couldn’t suppress my grin. “Are you serious?”

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“About the picking my nose and passing gas?”

“Not that! I meant... being in a relationship.”

“If you agree.”

I felt like my beaming was going to split my face in two. “Yes.”

All that jealousy for nothing. He chose me...me! Just a girl with no title over the gorgeous leader of a vast country. I felt like I could fly.

CHAPTER 11

We traveled all the next day. That night, the local inn set out an elaborate feast in honor of Curtis’ birthday. There was roasted pheasant, a rainbow of vegetables and fruits, seared fish, and trays upon trays of cakes, pies, and puddings.

We ate for hours, with Curtis being the center of attention. Village children would press flowers or special rocks into his hand throughout the evening as tokens of their affection for the fun-loving prince. Each time this happened, Curtis would exclaim that this flower had the most radiantly colored petals he had ever seen, or that this rock was the exact shape of the king’s nose, and that he would treasure it forever; at which point the children would giggle and dash away to collect more items to present to him.

The adults from the village came to pose questions to Curtis, with worry lines furrowing their brows. ‘What are all the taxes being used for?’ and ‘My cousin was

injured in a skirmish near the border of Avivia. What is going on?’ or ‘My older brother is refusing to split our inheritance. What should I do?’

As he had with each child, Curtis took time to look each person in the eye, shake their hand, ask their name, and answer their question personally, never getting annoyed that he had just answered the same question three minutes before, but patiently explained what he knew.

It was obvious that Curtis was adored by all the townsfolk, and that he truly cared for each of them in return. His plate of food was barely touched because of the number of people clamoring for his attention, first to discuss their struggles and concerns, and then to wish him a happy birthday. Several gifts were produced by members of our traveling party: a gleaming polished lute, a thick riding cloak with a galloping stallion beautifully stitched on, and ruby ring to name a few.

“Which present do you like best?” a small voice chirped after the last parcel had been opened. I looked around and saw a young girl, perhaps four years old, peering up at Curtis earnestly. Curtis studied all of the gifts, some laden with precious gems, others richly embroidered, or finely crafted, and then snapped his fingers.

“That is an easy decision!” he cried, then began looking all around. “But where did it go?”

The girl looked on the floor, lifting the dirty hem of her skirt to check to see if anything had rolled underneath. “There it is!” Curtis pulled from behind the girl’s ear a limp dandelion. “This is the prettiest yellow dandelion I have ever seen, and I love it.”

The girl felt all around her ear, unable to figure out how he had magically made it appear. “Wow!” she said, amazed, and then gasped gleefully, “That is the flower I gave you!” She threw her arms around Curtis’ legs, then dashed off calling, “Mama!

Mama! Guess what?"

Curtis watched her run off, then winked at me before turning back to the line of people still waiting to speak to him.

After the last well-wishers had gone to bed, Curtis pulled me by my hand. "C'mon, Truly. Let's go see Storm before we turn in." Curtis held the inn's front door open for me, and we crossed the dark yard, listening to gentle noise of crickets, as we crunched through the crisp leaves that coated the ground. I wished I had brought a shawl; the chill of the evening was setting in. Only a day's northward travel, and already, the weather was transitioning from tropical and humid to cool.

"I can see why all the villagers love you," I told Curtis as we walked toward the stables. "I can see it in their eyes. You are a hero to them."

Curtis shrugged. "Royalty should serve his people, not the other way around." He took my hand and applied slight pressure to my fingers.

Storm whinnied when she saw us opening the stable door. I got out her brush, stroked her fur, and patted her mane. "Hey, girl," I told her softly. I replenished her water and straw and returned to stroking her soft black fur.

"You know Truly, you never gave me a birthday present," Curtis said abruptly from the doorway. Surprised, I turned and saw him watching me groom Storm.

"You said you didn't want me to," I told him emphatically. "Remember?"

"I changed my mind."

"Oh, really?" I asked, somewhat suspicious. "And did you have something particular in mind that you wanted?"

“Actually, yes. I do,” he answered, still looking steadily at me.

I waited for him to go on. When the silence stretched between us, I asked. “And what is that?”

“I want to kiss you.” The statement was so bold that my mouth fell open. I had wondered when he would try again to kiss me, but I had expected something less brash. I had anticipated that he would try to sidle up to me and be sneaky about it.

“Okay,” I agreed, a little scared but also excited, and stepped out of Storm’s stall. I hoped I didn’t smell like horse. Having never kissed anyone before, I wasn’t sure what to do. I then wondered if Curtis knew what to do. Had he kissed anyone before? Where should I put my hands? Where would he put his hands?

He held the small of my back and pulled me in close. “Happy birthday, Curtis,” I said quietly, and tilted my head upward. I felt his other hand hold the back of my head, and our lips touched. A thrill of excitement swept through me, and I suddenly didn’t feel the chill of the night’s air anymore.

Curtis drew a breath. “This is a happy birthday!” He kissed me again. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him back. It felt like my whole body was flooded with a sudden heat that radiated from my chest to the very tips of my toes. I timidly ran my fingers up through his curly hair, trying to fix this moment in my memory forever.

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An embarrassed cough came from the door. “Excuse me, Your Highness?”

Curtis and I broke apart. A stable boy entered slowly, shuffling his feet, face bright red. “Um, someone was looking for you, uh, Your Highness,” he bowed awkwardly toward Curtis. Embarrassed, I looked down at my feet and tried to turn inconspicuously so that the stable boy wouldn’t see my face.

“I’ll be there in a moment,” Curtis stated with all the princely dignity he could muster. The stable boy nodded and exited quickly, clearly eager to leave, his face still scarlet.

Once we were alone again, Curtis turned to me. “Well, that didn’t quite turn out the way I planned.”

“Oh, did you plan this out?” I teased.

“With military precision,” Curtis exclaimed. He entwined our fingers together. “Though I had to change the location a little.”

“Hold on, of all the places you could have picked, you chose a stable?” I teased, “Not the beach, or a forest picnic, or somewhere a little more romantic?”

“Hmmm, I think you need a lesson on what is romantic,” Curtis said, mocking Hubert’s voice. “You own a horse, and horses live in stables. Therefore, you like stables. Thus, stables are romantic to you.”

I laughed. “So what had you planned exactly?”

Curtis looked thoughtfully at me. “Ah, milady, if I told you, I would then have to devise a new plan for next time!”

“Next time?”

“Next of many,” Curtis smiled. Not his usually boyish, mischievous smile, but a more mature smile. He bent and kissed me again, longer this time. I couldn’t stop myself; I grabbed his tunic and pulled him closer, and he responded enthusiastically, picking me up and twirling me around, our lips still pressed together.

CHAPTER 12

Comfort had been right—after being kissed, I couldn’t stop smiling. All the way back from Avivia, Curtis and I would try to find stolen moments to spend together. But with the massive throng of people we were traveling with, it was difficult to find any time when someone wasn’t hovering close. At night, flocks of villagers would come to question Curtis, to talk with him, to bring their children to meet the prince. I assured myself that once we were back home, there would be plenty of time for being alone with Curtis.

I thought back to his comment about never being allowed to relax. The closer I watched Curtis, the more I saw that what he said was true. He never had time off from being a prince. Demands were heaped on him constantly. I envied Comfort’s ability to sneak off whenever she wanted to with carefree spontaneity. It seemed like Curtis had every minute of every day spoken for.

A ball was prepared for us when we arrived back home. But instead of dancing together as usual, Curtis led me to a dark corridor and asked, “Do you want people to know? About us?”

I thought. It was still a few months until I turned sixteen, and my parents didn’t want

me being courted before then. “Would you mind if we don’t?” I said. “Just not yet. Father doesn’t want me—”

“I figured as much.” Then he frowned slightly, as though deep in thought. “I wouldn’t want to do anything that would make your Father distrust me.”

I was surprised. This was a more mature, responsible side of Curtis I wasn’t familiar with. He continued to think. His eyebrows furrowed, and I examined his face with interest. I hadn’t really looked in depth at his features from so close a distance. His nose was almost unnaturally straight. His hazel eyes focused on the problem at hand. I could have counted the freckles that were splashed across his face.

“If your Father agreed, would you want to tell people?” he asked finally.

I considered. Comfort had always snuck out to see boys and had never introduced them to the family. I knew Father would be beside himself if he knew she was sneaking around; he had vowed to distrust any boy that ever showed any interest in his daughters. But also...he would want to know, and it would feel wrong to be deceptive. “Yes, I think so. Do you want to tell?”

Curtis looked at me like I was crazy. “Of course I want to tell. I plan on announcing it to the world, if I can. I can’t have some lowly squire making a move on my girl now, could I?”

I blushed. Finally, Curtis nodded solemnly. “I need to have a man-to-man talk with your Father.” I started to panic. Curtis talk to Father? Man-to-man?

“About what?” I squeaked.

“About you of course,” he replied, completely unabashed. “About us!”

“But... but...” I spluttered. What would Curtis say? What would Father say?

“When?”

“Now is probably a good time.” Curtis said, and started walking back to the ballroom.

“Wait!” I said, pulling him back.

“For what?” Curtis asked. “There aren’t many opportunities that both the Chancellor of the Exchequer and prince have a few minutes to spare at the same time.”

“What are you going to say?” I asked.

Curtis squeezed my hand. “I guess you will find out soon.”

He pulled me behind him back to the ball. We found Father and Mother dancing in the middle of the floor, as usual. I hadn’t realized until now that Curtis was almost as tall as Father. Curtis approached Father and tapped him firmly on the shoulder.

When Father turned, Curtis asked formally, “May I have a word with you, please?”

Father led Mother over to a couch then followed Curtis out of the hall. I sat with Mother on a sofa. Comfort came and joined us. She looked at me, a delighted expression on her face. “Did you and Curtis...?” was all she asked, then trailed off. I nodded. Comfort squealed and clapped her hands, bouncing up and down in her seat.

Mother looked at me curiously. “What is all this about?” she asked.

“About us... me and Curtis, that is...” I said softly.

Mother was too ladylike to gasp. But as she looked between my embarrassed, fiery red face and Comfort’s delighted grin, her eyebrows popped upward. “Really? When did this happen?”

“Recently.”

“Settle down.” Mother chided Comfort in her gentle way. People were beginning to stare at her exuberant cheering. “Your father and I will still need to discuss this.”

Then she smiled at me. “But I’m sure we can bend the sixteen rule a little for someone like Curtis.”

I smiled, hope swelling in my chest. We sat waiting for a long time. What could they possibly be talking about that would take that long? Several songs played and I sat with Mother and Comfort, watching as couples drifted by, spinning and waltzing.

It was maddening to just sit and wait. Was Curtis declaring his love for me? Was Father strangling him? What was happening?

I was just about to get up to go find them when I saw Curtis and Father returning. Curtis seemed a little overwhelmed, but managed to smile encouragingly at me and gave a tiny thumbs up. Father beckoned, and I followed him. Father led me around the corner and then turned to face me, arms folded.

I gulped, unsure what to say.

Father broke the silence for me. “Curtis says he is interested in you,” he said.

I nodded.

Father sighed. “Normally, this would be the point in the conversation when I would ask if you like this boy, but I already know the answer.”

“I really do like him,” I assured Father.

He sighed. “I still say you are very young.”

I waited.

“Curtis is a fine young man, and he assured me his intentions are honorable. I guess it

is alright, but with some rules.” Father narrowed his eyes. I wasn’t quite sure if he was teasing me by pretending to be overly firm or was genuinely serious.

“I already laid them out to Curtis, along with a few warnings. But to sum up for you—you will have a curfew. You will tell your mother or myself where you are planning to be at all times. You are not to be in any bedroom alone with that boy ever. Ever, ever, ever, ever, ever. If he even once treats you with anything less than the utmost respect, you tell me and I will break his scrawny little neck like a twig. I don’t care if he is a prince. Nobody tampers with my girl’s affections. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Daddy,” I said, using my early childhood name for him. This seemed to soften him a little. He hugged me.

“Don’t grow up too fast, okay?” Father said quietly. “You are still my little girl.”

Then he straightened and said, “I won’t tell you to have fun. That is what your older sister is for.”

“Thanks, Daddy.” I said, hugging him quickly.

I found Curtis shortly after Father had returned to the ball. “How did it go?” I asked.

“Your father is absolutely terrifying,” Curtis answered calmly as he casually looped an arm around my waist. “He listed off several different ways that he would utterly destroy me if I step out of line with you. If it was Hubert in my place, he probably would have your father arrested for threatening a member of the royal family, but that wouldn’t exactly put me into your father’s good graces. So instead, I was very polite and agreed to all of his terms and conditions.”

I laughed. “I thought I would be the one getting lectured and threatened from your

parents. Be told to keep my grubby hands off their son and stay away from the kingdom.”

“You can put your grubby hands on me any time!” Curtis grinned, then hastily amended, “Just not around your Father. He might use my face to shovel all the horse manure out of the stables.”

“Well, we can’t have that.”

Curtis took my hand in his. “You are the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

Word spread fast, helped along by Comfort. She and I sat up all night, analyzing and re-analyzing every word, every moment, that I told her about. Just as I knew she would, she was eager to abuse Aria for making a play for Curtis. “Just because she is going to be a queen doesn’t mean she is queen of the world!”

She gushed over Curtis’ standing up for our relationship, to Aria and again to Father. She said I had found my knight in shining armor. Then made me tell the story of our first kiss at least a dozen times. I didn’t mind. I loved remembering it.

We were the sole topic of gossip for weeks. Everyone said that they knew it was only a matter of time, that they had already thought we were a couple, that it didn’t surprise them in the least. Busy as he was, Curtis would always clear his schedule after dinner each evening so he could spend time with me. We would go on long walks around the moat, or through the gardens, or would ride our horses to secluded areas so we could be alone.

Each day seemed like a dream. Everything fell into place and seemed so perfect. I had a happy home life; my parents adored each other and loved us girls. Comfort was the best sister a girl could wish for, always willing to stay up late and giggle with me or help me fix my hair, and always took my side. Due to Father’s status, our family was respected, financially well off, and wanted for nothing. I was on a trajectory to have a successful career. I was in a relationship with my best friend, a prince no less! Curtis constantly bragged about me and made me feel like I was the best part of his

life. When we weren't studying or traveling together, we were playing pranks on Hubert, or sneaking in kisses when no one was looking. It seemed like nothing would ever go wrong.

PART 2

CHAPTER 13

"Make sure your elbow isn't too high!" the archery instructor snapped.

Everyone on our row adjusted their arms. Sweat trickled down my back as I held my bowstring taut, waiting for the command to release my arrow. It was summer again. A full year had passed since I had been granted a position as court linguist. It had been the best year of my life. I was confident in my translating abilities and traveled with Father and Curtis constantly. Comfort had finished her final year of finishing school and was a highly sought-after tutor for music, dancing, etiquette, and sewing. She and Mother were lauded as the epitome of ladylike class.

Despite Hubert's constant cynical predictions that we would break up, Curtis and I were still crazy about each other. Even Father, who had initially vowed to distrust any boy that showed interest in me, would routinely go fishing with Curtis on the short days of travel between countries. It always warmed my heart to see my two favorite men in the world getting along so well. Curtis also became just as familiar as one of the family; in the evenings, he would sit beside me on the sofa as we recounted the day's events, listen as Father told stories, would join his tenor voice to my alto and Mother's soprano as Comfort plucked at her harp.

The only thing that had changed was that Aria's betrothal to Hubert had been pushed back several years, and we were now required to travel with an entourage of guards every time we went into Avivia. Locals near the borders of our countries were growing increasingly angry about the other side of the border's residents encroaching

on their territory, and claimed that they were being cheated out of land and resources. There had been several scuffles and even a few casualties. But the Council was optimistic that a goodwill trip to deliver supplies and offering to listen to their struggles would solve the entire matter.

“Release!”

We all fired our arrows. I was no archery master, but I could hit a target well enough.

“My muscles are all seized up,” I complained to Curtis. The archery instructor was notorious for having us hold the ready position for an outrageously long time.

“Does that mean I get to give you a shoulder rub later?” Curtis asked, a sly, playful expression sliding over his face.

“Quiet over there!” the instructor barked.

“Lovebirds,” someone else in the class muttered, but Curtis and I heard. We grinned at each other.

Our instructor kept us hard at work until every second of his class time was exhausted. As I put away my quiver and bow, I rolled my shoulders, trying to relieve the tension. “Why do they even teach girls archery when we can’t compete in tournaments or go on the hunting trips?” I asked.

“In case we are under siege,” replied Curtis knowingly. “Just imagine, if us menfolk ever were to fall in battle and an army came to take over, they would then have to deal with an angry horde of women armed to the teeth.”

I tried to imagine Mother ever ducking out from behind a window, rapidly shooting arrows at an oncoming legion. The idea was preposterous. “Well, you better never

fall in battle!” I said. “I like having you around.”

Curtis grinned at me. “Don’t worry. I will make sure you never have to use those arrows to defend yourself. I am here for that.” We held hands and walked back across the grounds.

CHAPTER 14

Our next trip to Avivia was to be one of service and goodwill. Aria was determined to appease her restless subjects by the border. She was preparing in earnest to take the throne and wanted to win their allegiance. I felt like she was a highly competent leader. She cared about her people and wanted the best for them. She worked tirelessly to ensure that all her subjects were employed and fed.

Father had suggested a tour of the kingdom during which Aria and Islandrians together showed a unified front and gave out supplies to the villages. It was a common practice in our country, usually undertaken by Curtis. It was one of the primary reasons that he was so popular.

When Father, Curtis, and I reached Avivia along with all the guards, we found Aria in good spirits, excited that she would be able to reach out to her people and show some support. We had wagons packed with food, clothes, tools, and gifts for those we met, and looked forward to being able to listen to their concerns. Knowing what success these trips had in Islandria, we were confident that the people would be overjoyed to see us and receive the gifts.

Curtis, Aria, and I traveled at the front of the caravan, with Father, several delegates, and another translator bringing up the rear. The guards would follow further behind to show that we were friendly. We certainly didn’t want to give the idea that we were trying to use an army to look intimidating. Our first stop was at a small fishing village near the castle. Curtis was eager to talk with the locals, and his dreadful Avivian

grammar coupled with his heavy Islandrian accent made him most popular with the small children, who crowded around him, giggling about his pronunciation and trying to get him to say complicated words.

Aria discussed the current issues with the adults. Many expressed concerns about the growing population and limited land, and about the Islandrians being hostile toward their families and friends closer toward the border. But being far from the border, close to the castle, and after we had distributed some gifts, everyone seemed content with our presence.

Our tour of the kingdom was to take a week, and as the days slowly passed, I noticed a trend. The closer to the Islandrian border we got, the less receptive the locals were to us being there. Aria and the other members of the Avivian Council had to head up the procession, since the Islandrian lighter skin earned us dirty looks and fists shaken at us. With every village we left, my anxiety grew. But we were nearly done. Just three days left, and we would be able to go home. Just two more days. One more day, and we would be able to leave and go back to Islandria where I would feel safe again.

I will never forget the dreadful last day of our trip. We were on our way to visit one of the last towns early in the morning, with Curtis, Father, and I bringing up the rear of the wagon train, when we heard yells and screams from the front of the caravan. Father spurred his horse into a gallop, and raced to the front to find out what was wrong. It didn't take long for me to find out.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 9:59 am

A band of angry locals had come out of the trees around the trail bend and attacked the wagon train. Armed with clubs, bows and arrows, and torches, men had begun to strike down the wagon train drivers, pull supplies out of the wagons, or else set everything on fire. Curtis and I saw them coming down the line toward us.

Panic set in. I saw the men coming but was frozen with fear. Should I run? Get my bow and arrows? Try to reason with the horde of men? But this band seemed beyond reasoning. Terrified, I looked at Curtis beside me. He had reined in his horse close to a wagon, and was reaching behind the headboard for his weapons.

He saw me rooted to the saddle, paralyzed by indecision, and yelled, “Don’t stay here, Truly! Go! Go get the guards!”

I wheeled my horse about, but more men had poured out from the trees behind us. We were trapped. I knew the guards must be close, but there was no way to reach them. Or were they all dead by now?

Screams tore at the air, and it was these anguished cries that jolted me into action. I reached down and pulled up my bow and arrows, the ones I thought I would never need to use. Curtis, now at my back, needed what little protection I could offer.

I loaded my bow. “Stay back, or I will shoot!” I called in Avivian to the oncoming men. They saw me, and didn’t stop, but continued straight toward me. I called once more, praying they would obey, but to no avail. I squeezed my eyes shut, hating what I had to do.

I began firing my arrows. I only had time enough for a few arrows, and knew I had to

make each one count. In a panic, I released them as quickly as I could, trying to protect myself, Curtis, and the unarmed wagon train driver next to me. I hit three of the men, and two other arrows missed. By now, the crowd of angry men were closing in fast. After my last arrow hissed away, I wanted to retreat, but to where? We were surrounded. One of the men waved a torch and Storm, terrified, reared back wildly. I was thrown from her back and landed hard on the ground. I covered my head with my arms as Storm's hooves pounded away.

One man with a scar down his face pulled me up by my hair. "Islandrian scum," he growled in my ear, and yanked me back toward the group of attackers. My eyes watered with pain as the scarred man dragged me over to a nearby tree and slammed me into it. Stars popped in front of my eyes as I blinked furiously to clear my head.

"Leave her alone!" I heard Curtis cry out.

I tried fiercely to break free of the man's grasp, but he was far stronger than I was. My efforts did no more than amuse him as he roughly tied me to a tree. Looking beyond him, I saw the wagon train driver laying on the ground, several arrows protruding from his body and blood pooling around his unmoving body. I screwed my eyes shut, trying to block out the scarring image, then wretched as my insides heaved their contents forward, spattering the scarred man's boots.

Leaping back in disgust, the man pulled a torch from one of his comrades and approached me with a nasty smile spreading slowly over his face. "Let's teach this Islandrian a lesson, boys!" he called to the group at large. The men gave up a sickening cheer. My entire body was tied tightly to the tree, and I couldn't move anything other than my head.

I screamed over and over. I simultaneously wanted the others to get to safety, but also for the guards, Father, Curtis, anyone to come save me from the scarred face leering sickly over me. A harsh, strong slap to my face broke through my thoughts and made

me gasp for air as I felt the side of my head beginning to swell from the force used.

“Nobody is here to save you, lassie,” the man growled. “They will all be dead soon. You too.”

My brain raced in overdrive as I felt panic begin to take over my body, overwhelming my senses. I forced my eyes forward, refusing to look at the driver’s dead body. I knew it was only a matter of time before they killed me too. Would they torture me first?

“Guards! Over here!” I screamed out suddenly, defiantly, hoping my voice would lead them to me, scare my attackers, anything. Why? Why didn’t we keep the guards right with us? Why were we stupid enough to think that not having guards would make us seem more friendly? Of course it would put a target onto us!

The scarred man slapped me again, even harder than before. Blood began trickling from my mouth, and the bark of the tree I was tied to scratched the side of my head as I was hit.

“Got a feisty one, eh Garrit?” another man, squat with a droopy eyelid, came loping from the group over to the scarred man. The squat man grinned evilly, revealing a mouth full of jagged, broken, and blackened teeth. “She is a pretty one, this lass!” he leered at me. He was too close. I could smell his putrid breath. “Got a kiss for me, sweet?”

I spat into his face.

Several other men were gathering around the scarred face man and the squat man with broken teeth now. They laughed as the squat man wiped my blood and saliva from his face. “Alright boys, who wants to have some fun?” the scarred man yelled.

A cheer that turned my stomach went up, as the men began coming closer, wielding clubs, torches, swords, and other weapons.

“Help!” I screamed frantically, desperately. “Help! Someone help! Help me!”

I was slapped again and this time, someone from behind me yanked my hair painfully so I couldn’t even move my head.

Even over the roaring in my ears, I could hear Curtis shouting “No! No, No! Truly!”

“Curtis!” I screamed back, unable to see anything but the mass of foul-smelly bodies pressing forward.

The squat man chuckled softly and said, “No help is coming missy. Is that your boyfriend? We will take care of him in just a minute. Just after we take care of you.” Then I saw the scarred man approaching, bringing with him the burning torch.

Nearer and nearer he came, leering as he tauntingly waved the flaming branch in front of my face as a roar of approval came up from the men gathered around. I could feel the heat radiating off the torch and knew what my captor planned to do.

“Shame that your boyfriend won’t have a pretty face to look at anymore,” he leered, indicating the torch’s dancing light. “Not that you are long for this world anyway.”

I pulled against my unyielding bonds as much as I could, desperate to get away from the insufferable heat. As much I was trying to hold them back, tears began to slowly leak out of my eyes. My head was filled with a high-pitched whine of panic as I began to hyperventilate.

I knew it was coming, but that didn’t help at all. It made it worse. Time seemed to slow down. The scarred man held the hungry flame against my face.

The agony was indescribable. Every fiber of my body seemed to explode in protest of the blazing fire against my face. I tried to pull my head away from the flames, yanking against my bonds as hard as I could, but the men only laughed and kept the torch on my skin.

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My eyes watered, smoke choked at my lungs, and I screamed as I had never screamed before in my life. And yet the torch remained on my skin, burning everything it could reach.

My hair caught on fire. I felt a heavy blow break my left arm as someone smashed a club into it. I thrashed about wildly, eyes rolling madly, screaming endlessly, trying to relieve any of the all-consuming pain.

Suddenly, the torch dropped, and the men were scattering as new shouts joined the rest. The guards had caught up at last! I smelled the acrid scent of my burning hair as my eyes began to roll and eyelids flutter. Darkness was taking over my body in wave after wave of pain.

Just as I thought I would pass out from the agony, I saw a group of Islandrian guards running in my direction. Curtis sprinted at the front, leading everyone toward me. He was bleeding from his own wounds, but he ignored his injuries and rushed to my side. I vaguely remember him smothering the flames and cutting me from the tree before I slipped into a blissful blackness, oblivious to all else.

CHAPTER 15

The next time I fully awoke, I was back at the Islandrian castle. Between the attack and that time, I only had brief, confused memories. A dark Avivian woman strapping my arm painfully into a splint. Aria sobbing uncontrollably and Curtis patting her on the back. Having my face covered in a thick, foul-smelling paste, and being spoon fed broth.

When I was conscious, my pain returned in full measure. My whole head was throbbing and what was left of my skin felt tight, hot, itchy, and raw. Unable to move my left arm, I slowly raised my right hand to touch my face. All of the left side of my face was covered in a poultice, and most of my hair was burned away.

Tears sprang to my eyes, and I let out a shuddering gasp. “Truly? Sweetheart, are you awake?” Mother rose from an armchair in the corner of my room. She looked dreadful, with dark circles under her eyes and hair snarled, as though she hadn’t brushed it in weeks.

I couldn’t talk. I began to cry but stopped quickly; it hurt too much. Mother sat on the edge of my bed and rubbed my right arm. “I am glad you are safe.” Mother said. She tried to smile, but it looked too difficult.

There was a gentle knock at the door, and Comfort came in from the next room. “Truly!” she cried, and ran toward me. I cringed, anticipating the pain that would surely come when she touched me. She seemed to understand and stopped herself. She patted my leg instead. “We were so worried about you.”

I nodded, but still was unable to speak. Images of the attack swam before my eyes, and I scrunched them shut, trying desperately to block out the screams still echoing inside my head. As much as I wanted to avoid crying, tears slowly seeped out of from between my eyelids. Mother kept patting my arm, and Comfort started saying meaningless phrases like, “It will all be okay,” and “At least you are safe.”

I don’t know how long we sat there like that, but after awhile, the plump court physician bustled in. He painfully scraped the paste off my face to examine my burns underneath, though I could tell he was attempting to be gentle, making “hmmm,” noises while he did so. He washed my face then applied more paste, and went about examining my arm. After that, he began tending the other scrapes and bruises I had sustained from being thrown from the horse. I must look terrible.

“Well, you are very lucky to be alive,” the physician said. “Everything should heal fine, and there won’t be any lasting damage. You will have some scarring, but not too much.”

I turned away from him. I didn’t want to hear anything he had to say. Mother rose and walked him out. I heard their voices from behind the door but I didn’t care what they were saying. Let them talk about me.

Comfort stayed by my side, rubbing my leg, which was one of the few parts of me that wasn’t throbbing in pain. I looked around for Father. Surely, he would want to see me, and I hadn’t seen him since he took off toward the front of the column during the attack.

“Co—” my voice came out croaky and hoarse. I tried again, “Comfort.”

She snapped to attention. “Yes? What is it?”

“Father?” I asked weakly.

Comfort bit her lip, and her eyes began to water. She looked away from me and shook her head. “His funeral was yesterday,” she whispered.

CHAPTER 16

Finally, after weeks of care and smelly pastes and creams, I had healed. I had full use of my left arm again, and all my bruises from being thrown from Storm were gone. There were still scars that ran ragged and red all over the left side of my face, and the court physician assured me it would fade over time, but I didn’t believe him. I knew his words were shallow, full of false hope for the fools who believed such lies.

I knew what I looked like; I was hideous. Mother and Comfort would give me their

painful smiles and tell me they could barely even see the difference, but if it bothered me, they would buy me a whole stock of cosmetics, and that looks didn't matter anyway. It is easy for someone pretty to say that.

I shunned mirrors. I never looked at myself. I couldn't. The image made my stomach churn sickeningly. Anytime I would accidentally glimpse my reflection, I would have painful, vivid flashbacks to that horrible day in the woods. To the man with the scarred face shouting, "Who wants to have some fun boys?" as the mob closed in around me. I felt the overwhelming, frantic panic take over my body. I re-lived the all-consuming pain that the burns had inflicted on me.

When I had worked up the courage to ask about Storm, I was told that she had disappeared, either killed or stolen.

I could still recall with perfection the sensation of my hands loosing arrows into the oncoming hoard of men. I could still see the faces of the men I hit with those arrows. I wondered if I was the cause of some families now being fatherless, as mine now was. Anytime I thought about Father, I heard the pain in Comfort's voice as she whispered, "His funeral was yesterday."

I never even saw Father or got to say goodbye.

Father. The one who always knew how to cheer me up. The one who always looked out for us. The one who loved us fiercely and was protective of his daughters. If he had lived, surely he would have saved me. I couldn't imagine life without Father. I wanted him there to tell stories that would turn gloomy evenings into adventures, to feel the security of knowing he was always there to give me guidance and reassurance.

But now, frequent panic attacks would leave me huddled in the corner, rocking back and forth on my heels, tears pouring from my eyes—one normal and the other scarred

with pinched, taught skin. My breath would come in short, panicked bursts that deprived my brain of oxygen and left me even more inconsolable than at first.

I was ugly. I knew it.

I knew I must be revolting to look at, whatever Mother and Comfort pretended. I refused all visitors.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 9:59 am

Curtis came to call several times, but I never allowed him in. Comfort would come back to my room, say that Curtis was here to see me, and ask if I wanted to see him. Every time, she would hand me the flowers, or notes, or whatever he had brought to try and make me feel better.

But I preferred to stay alone, in my darkened room, avoiding all contact with the outside world. I never read Curtis' letters, just let them pile up on the bedside table where Comfort dropped them.

I know Mother would have tried to cheer me up if she could, but she stayed in bed for days at a time, crying uncontrollably, grieving over the loss of Father. She barely ate, rarely slept, and looked like she had aged a decade in just a few weeks. Shadows were constantly under her eyes, and her eyes looked deadened. She grew pale and bony. She had always been thin, but now became skeletal, her face sunken and hollow.

Comfort was the only functioning member of our family now. As Mother and I withdrew from the world, Comfort was the one bringing us meals, reading us fantasy novels aloud to try and take our minds off our suffering. She was the one taking on the whole burden of nursing a damaged sister and grief-stricken mother back to health. The task seemed to harden her. I never saw Comfort cry. She seemed determined to be strong enough for all of us. Day in and day out, she would chatter away about the weather outside (I always kept the shades tightly drawn), or what the cook had said about his granddaughter, or about how the rumor was that Hubert had given a speech so lengthy and dull that the king himself fell asleep.

It seemed impossible to me that life was still moving on for people outside of our

chambers. That there were still people who woke up and went about their day, not knowing or caring that Father was gone. For Mother and myself, nothing mattered anymore.

CHAPTER 17

Two months after Father's funeral, Comfort called a family meeting. Mother and I both refused initially, but this new, hardened, determined Comfort wouldn't take no for an answer, and we dragged ourselves to sit on the dusty furniture in the living area.

"We are leaving," Comfort announced. Mother and I stared blankly.

"We are leaving," Comfort repeated firmly. "Tomorrow. We will be moving to the manor you grew up in, Mother, and we are going to start a new life there. I already made the arrangements."

Mother and I continued to stare, lost for words.

"We can't live like this anymore," Comfort continued, unaware it seemed, that she was proposing leaving behind everything I ever knew. "Yes, Father died, and yes, Truly, you were burned. But you both need purpose and to snap out of this depression. Father wouldn't want this for either of you."

Did she think it was that easy? That we could just decide to stop the all-encompassing dark thoughts that forced themselves into our minds? I looked at Mother, who sat, numb to the world. Did she even hear what Comfort was suggesting? I felt a lump rising in my throat and a burning heat building behind my eyes. I simultaneously wanted to weep and felt too exhausted. I felt...defeated. Life had defeated me. Sucked away who I was as a person and left me residing in an empty shell instead.

“So pack up what you want, or I will have someone else do it tomorrow and send it along after us.” Comfort said in a business-like way before she stalked back to her room.

Mother and I remained in our seats. We didn’t even exchange glances. After a long time, I rose and silently left the room, still not having said a word to Mother.

It felt surreal, sitting in the carriage as we headed further and further away from the castle. It just felt like another trip to Avivia, except that I was sitting with Comfort and Mother, instead of Father and Curtis.

Curtis.

I didn’t say goodbye to him, even though Comfort said he tried to call on me multiple times. It was better this way. I didn’t want his last memory of me to be my hideous face. Let him remember me as pretty. He could go on and find someone new. Someone whole, undamaged. He deserved someone like that. He deserved someone who could love him back. I couldn’t even love myself.

I vowed to forget my life before my injury. Forget my success as a linguist. Forget Curtis and our time together. Forget everything. Each memory brought me fresh pain. I could never go back to the way things were.

The stately manor that was to be our new home crept into view. Our family used to vacation here in the summer months of happier years past. It was almost as though I could see a younger version of myself, running across the fields dotted with wildflowers, weaving crowns of grasses and flower blooms with Comfort.

During those summers, Mother had showed us all the different plants and animals, and Father would take the family on walks through the forested glades. We would explore the woods, swim in the pond, and spend hours just watching the clouds drift

by. It was a peaceful place. Comfort had chosen well for a home where we could recover from the trauma of the last few months.

Upon arrival, Comfort took charge, directing servants to carry our belongings into the house, rearrange furniture, and wipe away the layer of dust that had settled since our last visit. Mother's parents had long since passed away, and she had a sister as well, but they rarely saw each other. My Aunt Jaelyn was married and lived on the other side of Islandria with her family. I wondered if she even knew of Father's death. I hadn't seen Mother so much as pick up a quill since Father's death, but then again, I rarely left my room, so I probably didn't know anything of what she did.

Mother surprised me by exiting the carriage after Comfort. I had become so accustomed to her sitting and pining for Father that I expected her to stay put until Comfort gave her exact instructions.

I stayed away from the carriage window, twirling a curl on the left side of my wig. Since my face on the left side was now scarred, I had taken to the habit of finding any excuse to hold my hand over my face, twirling hair, pretending to massage my forehead as if I had a headache. The wig was a necessity since almost all my own hair had been burned away. The wig selected was close enough to my normal hair tone, but set in elaborate curls that were very different from my own original straight hair.

Comfort had tried multiple times to convince me to shave off the small remainder of my own locks on the right side, to even it out, but I always refused. It seemed like a betrayal to cut off what little of myself I had left, so I would wind up the small portion of my hair and tuck it neatly under my wig. My real hair was slowly growing back, but it still looked like baby fuzz, not even two inches long.

But even with the wig and holding my hand in front of my face, I still felt the need for more protection. I had several hats, again thanks to Comfort, with thin veils trailing from the middle of the hat that would drape gracefully over my left shoulder,

covering the vast majority of my scarring. It was difficult to see much of my face at all, but I liked it better that way.

I still couldn't bear to apply cosmetics because doing so would necessitate looking into a mirror, and that was a trial I still wasn't ready for.

I leaned back in my seat, tilting my head so I would be able to peek out of the heavily curtained windows, but still remain unseen. I saw Comfort, conducting two men inside with a heavy bureau. Mother was a little distance beyond them, seeming to breathe in the fresh air and look around. If nothing else, she looked more relaxed now than I had seen her since Father's death.

It was hours before the servants had finished unloading and left. It was only then that I left the stifling heat of the carriage to hurry up the manor steps and closet myself into the bedroom that held my four-poster bed and bureau, sure to not be seen by anyone. There I breathed a sigh of relief, alone. I saw that Comfort had placed Curtis' letters, all still unopened, into one of my side table's deep drawers. I would read them later. When I was ready. But for now, all I sought was solitude. To be alone. To forget.

CHAPTER 18

The next few months were a blur. To my disbelief, the physician was correct—my scars were actually fading. They slowly changed from glaringly red to a more neutral color, but I still felt hideous. I stayed in my room and rarely came out. Before, when we still lived at the castle, Comfort had coddled me, bringing me meals into my room, and never asked me to do anything. She had just allowed me to sit and mope. I had been glad of that. Back then, getting out of bed required more effort than I usually had.

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But now, she was far less accommodating. Meals were served in the dining room only, and if I was hungry, I had to leave my room. Comfort had also hired a housekeeper that would prepare meals and tidy the house for us. It was an essential expense; having been raised in the castle, none of us knew how to cook or clean. Mother and Comfort had both graduated from elite finishing schools and knew how to ice cakes beautifully when presented with the materials but couldn't even prepare the frosting independently. None of us had ever foreseen the need to learn.

But as the weeks crawled by, I saw the wisdom Comfort had when she had suggested we move and selected this location to live. I saw Mother coming alive again. She began going out on walks, smiling, and I even heard her sing on occasion. It was a very gradual process, but after six long months, the weeping in bed all day had almost completely ceased.

Comfort had become acquainted with several girls in the village, all eager for the latest and greatest castle gossip. Comfort had always been a social butterfly, friends amongst all the girls and the highest prize for any boy to ask out, but now she was the epitome of popular. She became an instant celebrity because she grew up around royalty, and everywhere she went, she was flocked by friends and admirers.

All the girls asked about the latest fashions, all the boys would stare as she passed by. Or so Comfort said. I never left the house to find out for myself. Comfort told me that there was a girl just between us in age who lived at the nearest manor and claimed we would be the best of friends. The girl lived with her father, her mother having died in childbirth. Cynthia, Comfort called her. They quickly became close friends. From my window, I would often see Cynthia arriving at our manor, or she and Comfort walking to town together.

At dinnertime, Comfort would chatter to fill the lonely silence of our house, telling us about how Cynthia made a dessert that was supposed to be set on fire before being served. Her father was a merchant, but his hobby was cooking, so he and Cynthia would search for recipes from all over the world, from all different cultures. Every time Comfort would prattle on about Cynthia's latest travels with her Father, and what fantastic recipe they had brought back to try, I couldn't help but remember Father and all the journeys we took together.

I wanted to make friends. It was desperately lonely in our large, empty manor. Comfort spent most of the day out and about socializing. Mother began a weekly women's embroidery meetup in town, and I was often left behind, alone and trying hard to not feel neglected.

Comfort constantly beseeched me to come with her, but as much as I wanted to, I still couldn't bear to go into public. The thought of being seen by other people, by strangers who would stare... I just couldn't subject myself to that inevitable humiliation.

As Comfort began spending more time in town enjoying her popularity and newfound freedom, I found myself alone for the majority of the day. I tried to distract myself with one pastime then another, but none stuck. I was floundering for purpose. I did begin spending more time with Mother. I could tell she was lonely too, still grieving for Father but trying desperately to fill that void by talking to me, with sewing circles, by any way she could. Just like I was.

I had always spent so much time with Father, learning languages, traveling as a delegate, that Mother and I didn't have much to talk about. I never had felt as close with Mother as I had been with Father, but it was our mutual love for him and our memories of him that brought us together. Mother seemed so fragile lately that I felt the need to help her in whatever way I could. And for me, that was talking.

Mother missed the balls, her friends, the celebrations, fashions and fancy hairstyles. But mostly she missed Father. She missed having someone to talk to and be with, go on walks with and dance with. Comfort went out as often as she could, and I had hidden myself away ever since Father's death. So Mother was by herself just as often as I was. We were three women living under the same roof, but all feeling isolated from the others.

Day after day, week after week, I aimlessly wandered around the manor, searching for purpose. Dozens of times I picked up a quill to write to someone, but who? Surely the council members I worked with would be too busy or too uninterested in writing to a girl, a commoner at that. I had no real friends that I had lived by except Curtis.

The idea surfaced over and over, my hand itching to write, but whether it was to say hello, or to offer him a proper farewell, I wasn't sure. To tell him how much I missed him?

"No!" I said, surprised when the words came out aloud. Internally, I added, 'that part of my life is over. I have to move forward from here, not go backwards.' Curtis would be absolutely fine without me. Better than with me, I was sure. What self-respecting prince would want an ugly wife?

As ever, I tried to push Curtis from my thoughts. A handsome prince had no place in the thoughts of an ugly girl like me.

CHAPTER 19

"Truly?" Mother called through my bedroom door one morning. "You have a letter."

"Okay," I responded dully.

"Do you want it? It is from Curtis."

Curtis? My interest was piqued, but only mildly.

“Oh, Mother,” Comfort’s voice joined hers. “She won’t read it if you give it to her. Haven’t you seen the stack of letters she still hasn’t touched? Watch—” She raised her voice “Truly, if I give you this letter, will you read it?”

“Maybe later,” I said.

“Well, we are going to read it now. You need some excitement in your life.” I heard her ripping apart the envelope.

“Comfort, no!” I called, but too late.

“It says, ‘Dear Truly, I received—”

I jerked the door open, snatched the opened letter out of Comfort’s hands, and slammed the door again.

Comfort laughed. “Problem solved. Come on, Mother, there is a bazaar in town today.”

The opened letter stared up at me, Curtis’ untidy scrawl scribbled across the page. As much as I wanted a clean break from my past, I couldn’t stop myself from reading now that the words were so easily accessible.

Dear Truly,

I received a letter from your sister. She said that you need time to recover and that you are struggling right now, but also want to be left alone. It is hard for me to imagine you alone. I keep picturing the princess from that story your father used to tell us, locked up in a tower for years. I hope you aren’t locking yourself away! You

are too wonderful a person to stay hidden away forever. The world needs your goodness in it.

I am still trying to figure out how to navigate my life without you here. Everything seems so much sadder and duller. Since the Avivian border incident, Hubert has insisted that he and I have private tutors, no more group classes. He says it is for our own protection. If it was up to me, I would have you and Hubert trade places. I would be okay with Hubert locked in a tower for years and you and I having private tutors to ourselves!

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I can't even begin to describe how much I am tempted to just take off from here so I can come see you. I miss you. But I can't make this about me. This is supposed to make you feel better, but here I am prattling on about me. I just wanted to say if you need solitude right now, I will give that to you. As hard as it will be for me, I can give you all the time you need. Take the time to recover and get feeling better. I will wait for you. You are worth waiting for.

Your Best Friend,

Curtis

Tears welled up in my eyes again. Curtis was so patient. So kind and funny and compassionate. He deserved so much more than what I could offer. He said that he would wait for me, but I knew that wasn't true. Princes didn't have that luxury.

I had no doubt that Curtis would go on to find a beautiful princess that would love him and provide a much more advantageous marriage than I ever could. Perhaps it would even be Aria. Mother was always telling me to find peace with my circumstances. I knew what I needed to do.

I picked up a quill and wrote back:

Dear Curtis,

You know how much I care for you. The last year of being with you has been the best of my life. It is only because I care for you so much that I know that we cannot be together. You deserve so much more than what I can offer. It isn't fair to you to have

you wait for me to heal when you deserve happiness. I have to be realistic about what a future with me would look like for you. I wouldn't want to saddle you with that burden. I hope you know that I wish nothing but the best for you.

Goodbye,

Truly

Before I could lose my nerve, I stuffed the letter into an envelope and hurried out to catch Comfort before she and Mother left for the bazaar.

"Would you mail this to Curtis for me?" I asked breathlessly.

She took it and looked at the sealed envelope curiously. "What did you say?"

"Oh, nothing important," I said, fighting back the tears that threatened to come.

Comfort turned back to fastening her shoes. "Alright then."

I returned to my room and watched from my window as Mother and Comfort walked along the path out of sight. Then I turned and fell onto my bed, sobbing for hours at the loss of my best friend.

CHAPTER 20

"Just come down for the dinner," pleaded Comfort.

"No!" This was about the sixth time we had had this same exact conversation. "I am not going to go down there just to have people stare at me."

"They won't!" Comfort promised. "You will really like Cynthia and her father. Her

dad travels all the time, so you could talk about that with him.”

“No! I am not going to talk to anyone. I am not leaving this room.”

“Honestly!” Comfort was beyond exasperated. “I have been telling Cynthia and her father about you and Mother for months. I finally get Mother to agree to have them come to dinner, and here you are acting like a spoiled two-year-old.”

“So have them over for dinner. But I don’t have to be there. And I won’t be! I am not leaving this room and besides, I’m not hungry.”

I knew Comfort would get tired and give up soon. She kept trying to find ways to get me out of the house and meeting people. She would suggest me going to market with her, or attending a dance, or going to meet new friends. Each time I would refuse. I had to admire her persistence, but my patience was wearing thin. Why wouldn’t she respect my wishes?

I knew what would happen if I left the house. People would gawk and mock how I looked. Mother and Comfort claimed that they couldn’t tell, but I knew they had just become desensitized to my face. It wasn’t that I was any less ugly; it was just that they were used to seeing how ugly I was.

“Well, what am I supposed to tell Cynthia when they get here? That my sister they have never met is still hiding? That you don’t want to meet them? They will think I am making you up!”

“So?”

“So this is important to me. Just come downstairs and meet them and then pretend to get sick so you can run back up to your hidey hole.”

“I am sick. Of people staring.”

“Ugh, you are infuriating!” Comfort snarled. “You haven’t even seen anyone outside the family since Father died. How would you know if they would or wouldn’t stare?”

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“I can just tell.”

“Truly, please. I am begging you to do this...for me.”

“No.”

“There is so much more to you than how you look, Truly. I want people to see you the way I do. You are smart and funny and witty. Come down. Please.”

“N-O. No!”

She screamed in frustration, stomped out of the room, and slammed the door.

What did it matter if Comfort and Mother were entertaining guests? I didn't care, so long as I didn't have to be there. I pulled out one of my favorite books to pass the time. It was one that Father had frequently read from, and one that I had very nearly memorized in the past few months of solitude—one of fairytales, stories about giants and ogres, daring knights, and beautiful damsels in distress.

Beautiful.

If only I had appreciated my beauty when I had had it. Now I had nothing. Again, I forced myself to not think about my past. It was as if those memories belonged to someone else.

Muffled voices rose up from the first floor. Comfort's guests must have arrived. I opened the door a crack to listen, but I was too far away to make out more than a few

phrases at a time.

“Pleased to meet you.”

“—couldn’t be here.”

“—feeling ill.”

I could hear names being exchanged, a few pleasantries, then they retreated further into the manor where I couldn’t hear them at all. I went back to my book.

Late that evening, Comfort came back to my room. She knocked and entered before I invited her inside. I prepared myself to be criticized for not attending the dinner, sat stiffly on my bed, and kept my nose buried in my book.

“You missed out tonight.”

“No, I don’t think I did.” I replied, turning a page and refusing to look up.

“You really did. Guess what happened?”

“I have no idea,” I intoned in a bored voice.

“I think Algernon is in love with Mother.”

That got my attention. I raised my head.

“What?”

Comfort sat on the bed, snatched up my book and tossed it to the side.

“I know!” She curled her legs under her and hugged one of my decorative pillows. “Algernon saw Mother and got all tongue-tied and started stuttering like mad. You should have heard him introducing himself; he was all of a dither.”

“What did Mother do?”

“Oh, you know Mother. She was the ever-gracious host and asked him all about his work and past and everything. Polite and cordial, but distant.”

I tried to wrap my mind around the idea of someone other than Father being interested in Mother. And what did Mother think about it?

I shook my head. “I can’t believe it. That is just so...bizarre! Mother and...what was his name again?”

“Algernon.” Comfort wrinkled her nose. “Pretty awful name, isn’t it? Cynthia told me that it is a family name. She said that her dad hoped he would only ever have girls so he wouldn’t have to pass it on.”

I laughed. “I guess we shouldn’t be surprised though.”

“About what?”

“Men finding Mother attractive. She is beautiful and elegant. A man would have to not have eyes to not notice her.”

“Especially compared to the other women in town.” Comfort said.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, of course, you haven’t seen them,” Comfort rolled her eyes. “Truly. Believe me when I tell you—all the women in this town don’t know anything about fashion or etiquette or anything. The tailor in town is just horrendous. I am surprised the girls don’t run away screaming when he shows them the dresses he made.”

“Makes you glad you can sew, right?” I giggled.

“More than you know,” Comfort agreed fervently.

“What about your friend, Cynthia?”

“Cynthia is different. She isn’t just some country bumpkin. She goes with Algernon on business trips and gets her clothes tailor-made from people with actual talent. And I am teaching her how to sew too.”

“That is wonderful.” I was glad for Comfort. She hadn’t tutored girls for very long before Father had died, but I knew she had loved it. She had so many talents—dancing, singing, playing the harp, sewing. But I couldn’t see any way she

could put that knowledge to use here, in this tiny rural town. She must feel out of place, just as Mother and I did.

“Do you miss before?” I asked her.

“Before?”

“Before Father died,” I clarified. Comfort gave an impression of constant strength. As if nothing would bother her. Almost as though she thought having feelings was weakness.

“Of course I do,” she said. She traced the stitching on the pillow she was still clutching. “But what good does it do to think about it? It just makes me sad.”

I wanted her to talk about it with me. I wanted to have someone to confide in about my struggles. But Comfort had blinders on. She didn’t want to think about anything except the present and future. She refused to look back.

I felt partially responsible for her behavior. Mother and I had been broken, and Comfort felt she needed to carry all of the burdens on her own. Even now, she managed all the finances, all of the marketing and managing of housekeeper. It was a lot to put on any one person.

“Thank you for always being there, for us,” I told her, smiling for what felt like the first time in months. Perhaps it was. “You really stepped up and took on the lion’s share of all the work and let me and Mother just recover in our own time. So I wanted to tell you thank you. I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Sis,” She reached over and hugged me. “You just focus on getting better, and we will have you back to translating in no time.”

CHAPTER 21

Recovery was slow, but steady. Not just my physical improvement, but emotional as well. I still missed Father terribly, but it had been reduced from an overwhelming, all-encompassing pain to a dull throb. I began going on short walks around the property surrounding our manor. I still didn't venture out into public; I wasn't prepared for that yet. But I would seek the tranquility of the outdoors again, reveling in wind blowing on my face, the soft carpet of pine needles beneath my feet, the chatter of birds and squirrels. It felt healing. Peaceful. Exactly what I needed.

Instead of staying closeted in my room, I began staying in the sitting room after dinner, talking to Mother and Comfort beside a crackling fire. Comfort would tell us about the freshest batch of gossip from town. She would occasionally even bring me new books in various languages as a gift, something to help me pass the time. I rejoiced each time I received one.

Mother would sit in her rocker, calmly knitting lace doilies and listening to us. Every once in a while, Comfort would press her for details about the increasing amounts of time she was spending with Algernon. Mother would blush that delicate shade of pink and tell us about how Algernon had taken her for a carriage ride to see the mountainside, or to visit a waterfall.

Then one evening, she made an announcement. "Algernon asked me to marry him." She always was so soft-spoken and mild-mannered that this declaration didn't seem to register at first.

Comfort squealed and jumped up. "Oh, Mother! I knew it, I just knew it!" She hugged Mother.

I sat stunned. How was it that I was so grossly out of the loop that I hadn't foreseen this? I had only supposed that he and Mother would be friends. Good friends, but just

friends.

“What did you say?” I asked, still dumbfounded.

“I said that I would talk with you girls first.” Mother smiled at us. “We are a family...a package deal.”

“Say yes, Mother! Say yes!” Comfort was beside herself with glee. “Oh, this will be so much fun. We can plan a huge wedding. Truly, Cynthia, and I will be your bridesmaids, and we can have it right here in the garden. Truly! We get another sister!”

Comfort kept talking, discussing plans for who to invite, which house we would live at, how much fun it would be to have more people join our family, if we should release birds at the ceremony, and about a thousand more things, but none of it registered with me.

Mother was going to marry someone I hadn't even met. Was I the only one still thinking about Father? Who missed him at all? Did my opinion count for nothing? If we were a package deal as Mother claimed, why hadn't a word of this been breathed to me before now?

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‘You are the one shutting yourself away from the world,’ a voice at the back of my mind said. ‘You can’t blame anyone else for moving on with their lives.’

I stood up, a smile plastered across my face. “I want you to be happy, Mother.” I hugged her and left her and Comfort to discuss wedding preparations.

The next few weeks passed in a flurry of invitations, cake testing, wedding dress sewing, and a multitude of other tasks. For this I was grateful—I had a purpose again! Comfort and Mother needed me to work on the wedding dress, carefully address each envelope, and prepare the decorations. I still retreated back upstairs any time we had guests, but I had each day filled with wedding preparations. I didn’t have time to feel sorry for myself when I was busy helping Mother.

Cynthia and her father came for dinner nearly every night. It was getting much more difficult to avoid them. I knew at some point I would have to meet them, but I was still so self-conscious. I wanted our first meeting to go well, but my embarrassment about my face kept me paralyzed by fear.

The wedding was only a month away. I knew I needed to greet Cynthia and her father soon. But with each passing day, it felt like it was now too late to meet them. What had Mother and Comfort told them about me?

One evening while we sat around the fire, creating each invitation by hand, I asked, “What do Cynthia and Algernon know about me?”

“That you are a talented linguist, that you enjoy horseback riding, and that you were very close with Father,” Comfort said.

“That isn’t what I meant.”

Mother smiled understandingly. “I told Algernon about the incident in Avivia when he asked how Cuthbert died. I did ask him to not tell Cynthia. I thought perhaps that was too personal an experience to share with just anybody, and I would certainly never spread around any information I knew you didn’t want people to know about.”

Comfort nodded. “I didn’t say anything to either of them.” She squeezed my knee. “That is your story to tell. It doesn’t matter what someone looks like, but who they are as a person. They will understand that.”

Tears welled in my eyes. They were so good to me. So patient and kind. “Thank you,” I whispered.

The next day after Comfort had been to town, I found a bag full of cosmetics, brushes, and creams outside my bedroom door, along with an intricately carved hand mirror. “To help you see the beauty we already see in you. We miss your confidence,” was written on the card.

CHAPTER 22

“You can’t stay shut up in this room forever you know.” Comfort stood in the doorway to my living quarters. It was the day of the engagement party for Mother and Algernon, and instead of helping get ready, I found that it was much, much easier to stay in my winged armchair, flipping pages in my book as sunshine poured through the open window.

“I know,” I said meekly, but made no effort to rise.

“Come down to meet everyone tonight,” implored Comfort.

“I don’t want to,” I said, squirming. “I will wait until the wedding.”

“Well tonight isn’t about you!” Comfort snapped back. “It is about Mother and her husband-to-be. A fine outlook it would be if one of her own daughters didn’t even show up and stayed upstairs, pouting like a baby.”

I glared at Comfort. She met my gaze, unfazed. “You know it is the right thing to do.” She was extra annoying when she was right.

I humphed and turned away from her. “I will think about it,” I muttered.

“Great, I will see you there!” Comfort trilled, heading out to the corridor. “I still have things to set up.”

“I just said I would think about it!” I called after her. I hoped she heard me. She was probably ignoring what I said.

I had no interest in leaving my room. In being seen by anyone other than Mother or Comfort. I was curious to meet this mysterious Algernon and Cynthia, but shuddered to think what they might say when they saw me.

But Comfort was right. With all Mother had been through, it was the least I could do to put on a happy face for her for a few hours. Smile, congratulate them, and meet my new stepfather.

Stepfather. The word felt odd in my mind and strange when I tried to say it out loud. I really didn’t know much about this Algernon at all, other than that he was a merchant and had a daughter close to my age. I knew his wife had died during childbirth, but that was all. I supposed as long as he made Mother happy, it wouldn’t much matter what I thought of him.

I couldn't help but feel like Mother was betraying Father's memory a little. It hadn't even been a year since he passed away, and she was already moving on to another man? It felt wrong. Granted, I didn't want Mother to pine for Father eternally. But I had assumed she would stay single forever, never having a romantic relationship again, just reliving the memories she had with Father.

That was ridiculous, of course. I couldn't expect Mother to commit to a lifetime of loneliness. And I knew she was just as lonely as I was, if not more so.

I sighed aloud, dragged myself out of my armchair, and plodded over to the wardrobe. Every dress I had seemed wrong. Too bright, too gaudy, didn't have a veil to match. But I also didn't want to wear dark, mourning colors. This was supposed to be a happy occasion.

Glumly, I sorted through my outfits again. I finally selected a light blue dress with pale pink trimmings around the hems and wrists. It was a little brighter than I would have liked, but my hope was that everyone else would be wearing even louder colors than mine.

I then pulled out the new bag of cosmetics and began the lengthy process of applying them. It was my first time attempting it. I had to uncover my mirror; I had taken to leaving a blanket tossed over it to spare myself from my reflection. Now I studied my face critically. The red boils and peeling, thankfully, had ended months ago. But now I had to camouflage my pinched, taught skin to appear normal.

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I wasn't as talented as Mother or Comfort in this area. For that matter, I didn't consider myself talented at all when it came to these new powders, creams, dyes, and brushes. But I also didn't want to ask for their assistance when I knew they were busy with preparations for the festivities tonight. Besides, I needed to learn to do things for myself. I couldn't stay dependent forever.

My brow furrowed as I studied the tools in front of me. Slowly, I pulled out a cream and slathered it onto my face. Turning my head this way and that, I rubbed it in to moisturize my skin, particularly the burnt area. Then I used powders to coat on top of the cream, trying to create a smooth appearance. I snatched brushes at random, trying to blend the cosmetics to hide the disfigured part of my face.

An hour later, I stared at my reflection. My attempt to hide my disfigurement was an utter failure. I had tried to use faint pink dyes to tint my cheeks and lips, but had only succeeded in accentuating the ragged scars along my left cheek, making me look even uglier than I really was. The shading I had attempted on my eyelids had smeared, making it look like I had a brown and blue bruised eye. I hadn't selected a wig yet either. My natural hair only just reached the bottom of my ears. Still too short to forego a wig.

I checked the clock. No guests were due to arrive for a few hours yet. I would have to have Comfort help me. I left my room. I didn't even bother to wipe the caked-on goop off my face. Comfort would be able to tell me where I went wrong.

The house looked different. Friendlier. Sofas and chairs were set along the perimeter of all the rooms. Flowers in vases adorned mantels and side tables. A spot for an orchestra had been cleared, and tables were set up, ready for food to be laid on it. I

was reminded strongly of the balls that we had attended so frequently while living at the castle. I saw that a large area had been cleared, most likely for dancing.

I was glad for Mother—she missed dancing with Father so much. I hoped that this Sir Algernon proved to be a capable dancer. And I was sure Comfort would be thrilled to have a long procession of dance partners as she always had before.

“Comfort?” I called loudly. It was still amazing to me how large the manor was. We had multiple rooms that had no purpose at all, but all rooms would be needed tonight, to make space for the long list of guests.

“In the kitchen!” came her voice from far away. I headed that way, still admiring all the decorations on the way. Comfort and Mother had put in a lot of work.

Muffled voices floated out from behind the swinging door leading to the kitchen. I pushed open the door and came face to face with Cynthia for the very first time. I recognized her from the glimpses I had caught of her from my window as she and Comfort had headed to town together. I started to smile to say hello. This was my new stepsister, after all.

Cynthia squealed, leaping back from me as though I had a contagious disease. “Ooooh, your maid is hideous,” she sneered. “Get her out of here before anyone sees.”

I froze. I couldn’t even breathe. Comfort’s mouth gaped open, lost for words. Both of us were stunned into silence. Was this a joke? Certainly grossly lacking sensitivity if she intended it to be.

Cynthia made little shooing motions at me. “Did you hear me? Get lost, Ugly,” she said slowly, as though I was unable to understand her. “Go away! We don’t want you—”

“Shut up!” screamed Comfort suddenly. She seemed to have found her voice. “Just shut up, will you?”

I fled. I barely saw where I was going as tears sprang to my eyes. I could hear Comfort still screaming, berating Cynthia, defending me. But it was impossible to decipher any words over the pounding of my feet.

I rushed back to my room, bolted the door, and meant to drop into bed. But I caught sight of my reflection in the still uncovered mirror. For the briefest of moments, I stared at my scarred, ugly face. It was unbearable. I snatched up a clay ink pot and hurled it against the glass. The mirror and pot both shattered with a satisfying crash, splattering everything with dark black ink.

As if that wasn't enough, I wrenched the entire mirror's frame from the wall and flung it to the ground. The wooden frame splintered, and the small remaining fragments of glass were crushed into a powder. My hands were bleeding from the cut glass, but I didn't care. So what if my hands became as ugly as my face?

Sobbing, I curled into a ball underneath my covers. I didn't ever want to leave this room again. I didn't want to have my face anymore. I wished I could be someone, anyone, else.

CHAPTER 23

I must have cried myself to sleep, because a soft knock at my door woke me up. But I couldn't have slept long, because daylight still streamed in through the window. Globes of makeup clung to my pillow. Half awake, I called “Who is it?” and Mother's voice softly answered. I stepped out of bed, then gasped in pain as my foot was cut—the floor was littered with sharp shards of glass, splinters of wood.

“Just a minute!” I called, slipping on my house slippers to gingerly walk over the

crunching fragments of mirror. I was just about to unbolt the door when I had a sneaking suspicion, the memory of the afternoon hitting me like a cartload of brick. “Is it just you there, Mother?”

There was a pause. “No, sweetheart. Cynthia is here too. She came to apologize.”

“I am really, really sorry!” came a very embarrassed voice. “I didn’t know it was you when you came in, and I was just surprised is all.”

My humiliation and outrage came flooding back in full force. “Oh, you mean it is okay to mock people as long as you don’t know them?” I snapped waspishly through the door. The nerve of her, coming to see me right after openly ridiculing me.

“No! No, you are right, I shouldn’t have said that.” Cynthia’s voice was pleading, but I was too angry to care.

“No, you shouldn’t have said anything!” I shouted.

“I am sorry. I feel really bad,” Cynthia insisted.

“How do you think I feel?” I raged. “But no one cares about how an ugly girl feels, do they? Well, how dare I let your pretty little head experience even a tiny bit of feeling bad by not forgiving you the instant you come groveling!”

“Truly, darling, that is no way for a lady to behave,” Mother reprimanded gently.

“No, I forgot. A lady should forget her husband and run off with the first man she meets like you did!” I screeched. I knew I was being unfair. Knew I was being a self-centered brat. It was almost as though I could hear myself shouting those hateful words but couldn’t stop.

I was sick of it. Sick of being afraid to go out into public for the exact reason that Cynthia had brought to pass. Sick of being ignored by my family. Sick of having to hide from the world. I was done with dealing with people. Done with everything!

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There was a drawn-out pause. “Have a good night, dear,” was all Mother said before she and Cynthia retreated down the hall.

Still fuming, I kicked at the heavy wooden door. All it did was give me a stubbed toe. I ripped a pillow from my bed and flung it too, but it merely padded softly against the wall and plopped onto the floor. Much less satisfying than breaking my mirror had been.

Ignoring the disastrous mess, I flumped back down onto my bed and screamed into the rumpled blankets. I half-wished that Mother and my new stepsister had stayed outside my door so I could keep yelling at them. It had felt good to vent some of my anger into them and make them feel a tiny part of what I did.

I gazed, unseeing, at the ceiling. Mother’s engagement party was ruined because of me but I didn’t care. Give the guests something to talk about. We would be the gossip of the town, and then maybe Mother and Comfort would realize why it was easier to hide from the world. Easier to hide than face people who merely wanted a fresh rumor to discuss, who didn’t care about the people they were talking about.

I stared at the ceiling for a long time. I heard carriages pulling up to the courtyard now, a flurry of people entering the house, greeting Mother and Algernon. Let them make excuses for me. Or better yet, just pretend that Mother only has one daughter. No one here knew us anyway. No one would want to get to know me if they did know about me.

There was a smart rapping on the door. “Go away,” I growled.

“It’s me,” Comfort said in her no-nonsense voice. “I want to talk to you.”

“Go away!” I repeated. “I am not opening that door. And that is final.”

Surprisingly, Comfort left. But a short time later, a rope tumbled down past my open window, and Comfort descended, hand over hand, in a full corset and gown and swung herself into my room.

She stepped off the windowsill and down onto a bureau. “Nice redecorating,” she said drily, gesturing around at the chaotic interior of my room.

I shrugged. Frankly, I was impressed at her ingenuity in gaining entrance to my room. But I didn’t want to let her know that. Comfort stared hard at me. “You shouldn’t have said those things to Mother.”

I looked away pointedly. “I don’t care.”

Comfort’s gaze was shrewd. “Yes, you do.”

I picked at a stray thread on my sleeve. “What do you want?” My anger was starting to ebb away, but I still had some fight left.

“I want you to stop acting like a spoiled child and come down to the party,” Comfort stated.

I rolled my eyes. “Just like that, huh? Just pretend like nothing happened and waltz down to have more people laugh at me?”

Comfort shrugged. “What would feel better, letting Cynthia have power over your emotions or showing you that you can rise above any petty insult she could throw at you?”

I considered.

“I am on your side!” insisted my sister. “Let’s show that little monster that you don’t care about anything she says. Show that you are better than that.”

I hung my head. “But what about Mother?”

“You would make up for anything you said by being there and showing her you support her decision. Mother will understand. She always does.”

Slightly reassured, I weighed my options. Guests were arriving, I would have to hurry if I was to make an appearance. “I can help you get ready,” Comfort offered. “You will look a hundred times better than Cindersoot.”

“Cindersoot?” I asked.

Comfort smirked. “I tossed some ashes from the fireplace into her face and all over her gown after you left.” Then seeing my horrified expression, she hastened to add, “Cold ashes! Just old soot. So she had to rush back to her house to get ready all over again.” Comfort put her arm around me and hugged me. “Nobody messes with my sister when I am around.”

Emboldened, I nodded. “Okay.”

CHAPTER 24

In a flurry, Comfort helped me wipe off the ruined gunky cosmetic job I had attempted on myself and change my outfit. Comfort pulled my corset strings so tightly I could barely breathe until finally, my figure was deemed perfect. She then began the anxious affair of applying my cosmetics. Turning my head to and fro, she gently would brush on one powder than another, allowing some to set for a few

minutes before adding an additional layer. My eyelashes were plumped and darkened, my lips bathed in red. I still insisted on my wig being styled to cover most of the left side of my face, and to drape a veil from the center of my forehead to over my left shoulder. I knew it looked foolish, but I would rather people raise an eyebrow at my style choices than my face.

At long last, Comfort deemed me perfect and shooed me out of the door, ignoring the glass still shattered everywhere. For the first time in a year, I longed for a mirror, to see if Comfort made me bearable to look at, but there was no time to find the hand mirror that I had tucked away in a drawer somewhere.

A crowd of people milled around on the ground floor of the manor. Most had dainty glasses they were sipping from, some were swaying to the music provided by the orchestra.

I noticed immediately that, just like Comfort had claimed, the people attending our country party were very different from the royalty and noblemen I was used to at the castle. Girls wore garishly colored gowns with an inordinate amount of embellishments, large bows, frills and mountains of lace, their hats also bedecked with feathers, flowers, and lace. It hurt my eyes to just look at them.

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It seemed that most people were clean, just completely unaware of the concept of color coordinating clothes. I smiled politely and curtsied to everyone I met, and was immensely relieved to see that no one was staring at me. With all the visual distractions around us, I would have been impressed if anyone could find me at all in this crowd.

Comfort and I wound our way through the halls until we found Mother. She was standing next to a man I assumed was Algernon. For having such an unfortunate name, he was handsome enough. Much thinner than Father, slightly shorter as well. His mustache was well-trimmed and he had a good-natured face.

“Is this your other daughter, Lenora dear?” he asked when he spotted us. If he was surprised by my face, he didn’t show it. Comfort and I dropped quick curtsies.

“Yes, she is,” Mother said, smiling. Any memory of my outburst seemed forgotten. “You haven’t met Truly yet.”

Algernon inclined his head, and I dropped another curtsy. “Your mother has told me so many wonderful things about you. Youngest translator for the king, yes?”

“Not for the king,” I corrected. “It was mainly foreign dignitaries.”

“And how many languages do you speak?” he asked.

“Five, sir,” I replied, uncomfortably aware of the people beginning to take notice of our conversation. I heard someone say ‘Five! She speaks five languages!’ in an awed voice, and the message was passed throughout the crowd.

“Remarkable!” Algernon praised. “And what other hobbies do you enjoy?”

“Reading, archery, horseback riding, and attending musical performances,” I answered in a rush, eager to be done talking so I could seclude myself in a forgotten corner and fade into the background.

“What an educated young lady you are,” Algernon said. “Just like your mother and older sister, I see.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I hope you can help my own daughter develop some of those skills as well. Have you met my Cynthia yet? She has been so eager to meet you.”

So he didn’t know yet. I was glad my experience as a diplomat had helped me develop the ability to gloss over any sticky situations. “Yes, I met her briefly this afternoon. Unfortunately, we didn’t have much time together, but I look forward to getting to know her better.”

By now, a queue had formed of people waiting to congratulate Mother and her husband to be. I moved on, eager for someone else to take my place. All I wanted to do was stand in a dim corner and be overlooked.

My faint glimmer of hope was dashed, though. An older man approached me. “Pardon me, but did I hear correctly that you speak several languages?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And can you read and write in those languages as well?”

“Yes sir,” I repeated.

“Would it be too much trouble for you to assist me in translating a business proposal?” he asked, pulling from his satchel a lengthy scroll of parchment.

“Not at all! I would be happy to help,” I said eagerly. This was a perfect excuse to be removed from the festivities, and I secretly hoped that this older gentleman’s eyes were fading so he wouldn’t notice my face. I sat at a small table, and he sat opposite of me.

I spent the rest of the evening engrossed in meticulously copying his trade proposal into three different languages to be sent out to neighboring countries. My timing was good. I had finished just as Algernon was chivvying stragglers toward the door.

“My deepest thanks,” the elderly gentleman said, and pressed a silver coin into my hand. I hadn’t expected to be paid for my assistance, and tried to return the coin, but he insisted I had earned it, and left.

CHAPTER 25

The housekeeper stayed late, tidying up after all the festivities were over. Mother was making notes about who had brought which gift so thank you notes could be sent. Comfort was gathering up vases of flowers so the tables could be cleaned. Cynthia and Algernon were nowhere to be seen.

I began collecting the loose napkins and cutlery strewn about. As I carried them to the back of the house, I heard Cynthia’s raised voice. “But Dad, you don’t understand!”

“What is it I don’t understand?”

“She didn’t even accept my apology. She screamed at me and her mom—your future wife!”

“Well, I would be angry too, if I had been through what she has, then be ridiculed and called hideous by my new stepsister.”

“But, Dad, no one ever even told me what she looked like or why she looks that way! Nobody said anything about it, and she just waltzed right in with a messed-up face. Why is everyone mad at me for being surprised? Anyone would have been shocked. You should have seen her! It was like she was trying to look bizarre on purpose.”

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“Enough, Cynthia!” her father hissed. Then he sighed, “I may as well tell you. Lenora was hoping that Truly would open up to you and tell you herself, that it would be healing for her to talk about it, but under the circumstances...

“Truly and her father were in Avivia, delivering supplies to needy villages. But there was a mob that attacked their wagon train. Lenora’s husband was killed, and Truly was captured and they tortured her. They nearly burned her to death, from what I gathered. Half of her face and most of her hair was burned before the guards caught up and rescued her. It took her months to heal.”

I was still frozen in place. As Algernon summarized the story to Cynthia, images of the attack flashed in front of my eyes. I could still hear the screams and taunts and feel the torch being placed against my skin. Algernon’s voice brought me back to the present.

“So if she was attacked by a mob, disfigured, then her new stepsister calls her hideous, how do you think she is feeling right now?”

“Dad, you know I never would have said that if I knew it was her or if I knew all of that. It caught me off-guard, okay? She looked scary. I did go back and tell her how sorry I was!”

Algernon sighed. I knew I should move on. I knew it was wrong to be eavesdropping. I didn’t want to hear any more. But my feet seemed to be rooted to the floor. I couldn’t leave.

“Cynthia, some things can’t be fixed by a simple ‘I’m sorry.’ Lenora told me how

traumatized Truly has been since all of that happened. She has only recently started leaving the house. You have never had to deal with anything like that before. You will need to be patient and kind. I know you can be both of those things.”

“You are taking her side?” Cynthia’s voice came out strangled in her outrage. “Dad! You aren’t being fair. What about Comfort? Aren’t you going to tell her off for throwing ashes into my face and screaming at me?”

“I think everyone made some mistakes today,” Algernon sounded weary. “You shouldn’t have said what you did, Truly shouldn’t have said what she did, and Comfort shouldn’t have thrown anything at you or said the things she did. Let’s just go to bed. You will feel better in the morning. You and Comfort are best friends. You will make up.”

“We won’t! She and I will never be friends again!”

“Are you hungry? You get cranky when—”

“I am not hungry, Dad!” Cynthia snapped. “I’m not hungry, or tired, or anything like that! I am mad because you are choosing your new stepdaughters over me!”

“That is not true,” Algernon said quietly. “I couldn’t possibly love them more than you because you are my favorite and you always will be. Nothing ever can replace the love a father has for his own child.”

This seemed to momentarily pacify Cynthia.

“I am sure that Lenora and Comfort feel the same way about Truly,” continued Algernon, “She has already been through enough pain as it is and they want to protect her from any more. Let’s go to sleep, and we can talk about it again in the morning, okay?”

“Fine,” grouched Cynthia.

This was my cue to force my feet to move. I hurried away quietly, praying that they wouldn't know I had been there.

Emotions battled inside of me. On one hand, I wanted to hate Cynthia. For mocking me, for being so superficial, for tattling. But on the other hand, I mostly just pitied her. She hadn't known, had come soon after to apologize, and I had done nothing but throw back insults. Her best friend turned on her today for saying something she probably didn't mean. I knew my face could raise some eyebrows, and she had caught me at a particularly bad moment. It really wasn't superficial to notice other peoples' faces, especially if they looked very different.

My anger from earlier in the day dissipated completely. I needed to apologize...but not tonight. Things always seemed better in the morning. Maybe this would be something we could all laugh about later on. I couldn't imagine it would be, but I could hope.

CHAPTER 26

Mother and Algernon must have devised a plan overnight because early the next morning, Mother roused me at daybreak and told me that we would be spending the whole day with Algernon and Cynthia. I groaned.

“Do we have to?”

Mother pursed her lips. “I think maybe we all just got off on the wrong foot. What we need is some family fun.”

Family. Algernon and Cynthia were going to be family. I pulled the covers back over my head, but Mother snatched them back.

“Really, Truly, don’t be so dramatic. We are going to go on a walk around town and have a picnic and then play games later. It will be a wonderful day.”

A walk around town? “But...my face!” I squeaked.

Mother smiled compassionately. “That is why I am getting you up early!” She sounded chipper, but in aa forced way. “I thought maybe I could help you get ready so you are—” she stopped short, then continued, “So you feel as confident as possible.”

I could see the pleading in Mother’s eyes. Without saying anything, she was begging me to have a good attitude, to give my new stepsister and stepfather a chance. Mother had done so much for me. One day wasn’t much to ask.

“You’ll help me get ready?”

Mother nodded eagerly in confirmation. “Yes, you will be beautiful, as you have always been.”

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Memories of the last evening started bubbling to the surface of my mind, but I repressed them. I could grin and bear it for Mother's sake.

"Well, I hope Algernon and Cynthia are good at Charades because Comfort and I are a difficult team to beat."

Mother beamed. "That is my good girl."

I selected one of my wigs, and Mother carefully applied the powders and creams to my face, turning my head from side to side and concentrating deeply as she worked.

"There. You look perfect!" Mother declared at long last. "Do you want to see?" Her eyes roamed over the still shattered mirror fragments that littered the floor. "I can find a hand mirror if you want."

"That's alright. I trust you."

Mother beamed. I could see a glimmer of her former self shining through. No longer was she the sad, hollow person I had become accustomed to. She seemed younger now. It was a shadow of the Mother I knew when Father was alive, but it was there. I wanted her to be happy again.

"Mother?" I said humbly. "I am so sorry about what I said yesterday."

Mother wrapped her arms around me. "Oh, sweetheart, don't give it a second thought. We all sometimes say things we don't mean." She held me at arm's length. "And I hope you know that goes for Cynthia too."

I nodded, looking down at my slippered feet.

“She is a sweet girl. You will see.”

I forced a smile, determined to be positive. “Well, I have the whole day to find out, don’t I?”

Relief flooded Mother’s face. She hugged me again. “Thank you, Truly. You are a treasure.”

Then she nodded toward the mess on the floor. “Don’t cut your feet on the way out. I will let the housekeeper know to come and tidy up in here for you.”

CHAPTER 27

I had more fun than I anticipated I would that day. It was my first time since the attack being out in public, and I had been dreading the walk through town the most. But by planting myself in the middle of our little family cluster, I seemed to go unnoticed. The town was quaint. There was a large town square with a stream running through the center, flowers blooming along the banks. Footbridges had been constructed over the water at strategic intervals, and shops dotted the perimeter of the square. I saw bakeries, blacksmiths, glassblowers, hat makers, cobblers, and the tailor shop Comfort had told me about. And indeed, some of the ugliest ball gowns I had ever laid eyes on were proudly displayed in the show window. I caught Comfort’s eye and we quickly held our hands up to our mouths to stifle our laughter.

It was interesting to watch Mother and Algernon. They strolled through town, holding hands. Occasionally, Mother would point and exclaim, “Truly, you simply must try this bakery’s cakes. They are magnificent!” or Algernon would pull coins from his pocket and have each girl toss a farthing into the wishing well. They seemed like any ordinary, happy couple. If I hadn’t known her past and had seen those two on the

street together, I would have assumed that she and Algernon had been married for years.

Comfort bounced along beside me, cheerily waving to everyone. It seemed like everyone knew and liked her. The only one who looked like she wasn't having a good time was Cynthia. She gave off an air of indifference to our company, and lingered at the rear of the group, as if she was trying to match her physical distance from us to the emotional distance she was feeling. Perhaps she was still embarrassed about the day before. I certainly had no idea how to approach the awkward conversation.

The situation seemed very similar to the conversation I had had with Curtis nearly all that time ago. In both situations, an uncomfortable situation had occurred, one that was difficult to address. Perhaps an upfront conversation would clear the air between us, give us a fresh start. It had worked once before.

I waited for a time when Comfort was walking with Mother and Algernon, and I hung back until I fell into step beside Cynthia. I saw her watching me out of the corner of her eye. I could have cut the tension between us with a knife. I wanted this day to be a success for Mother, and I did genuinely regret what I had said to Cynthia the day before.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," I blurted out. This time Cynthia looked me full in the face. "I shouldn't have yelled at you, and I am really sorry. It was super nice to come apologize. If I had seen myself like that for the first time, I would have been shocked too."

Cynthia didn't say anything. So I rambled on to fill the silence. "Comfort has said a lot of nice things about you. She says you are a really good cook. Equal to any who worked at the castle."

Compliments didn't seem to be getting me anywhere either. She didn't respond.

We crunched through the pebbled walkway together, wending our way back toward our manor. I tried to find a topic of conversation. When I had apologized to Curtis, we recovered our friendship nearly instantly. Just from a gut reaction, I knew this would be a much more drawn-out recovery for a relationship. Perhaps because we couldn't recover what was never there. Perhaps boys and girls forgive in different ways. Cynthia finally spoke.

"Funny that your sister never mentioned anything about how you look."

"Well, I asked her about that, actually," I said, not sure if she was trying to be conversational or looking for yet another apology. "She said that she didn't want to spread around stories that weren't hers to tell."

"I just think it would have been helpful to have been told in advance."

I swallowed my annoyance at her frosty demeanor. I would have liked to snap back, but after all that Mother had done, after all that I had heard Algernon saying to Cynthia last night, I figured that I needed to do my best to start getting to know my stepsister.

"Okay, well how about we start over?" I suggested, and stopped in front of her. I resisted the urge to cover my face with my hand, veil, wig, anything to shield me from her penetrating gaze. She avoided looking at the left side of my face, and instead stared at my right shoulder.

I held out my hand. "Good morning, my name is Truly, and I am Lenora's younger daughter. You must be Cynthia. Comfort has told me so much about you."

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Cynthia nearly smiled, and quickly shook my hand. I pretended not to notice her surreptitiously wiping her hand on her dress after letting go.

“Pleased to meet you,” she said. It was the first thing she had said to me that could have been considered approachable.

“Well, tell me, Miss Cynthia. What hobbies do you enjoy?”

“I like cooking,” she said shortly, but then seemed to make a great effort toward being friendly. “My father and I cook all our meals together. We try recipes from all around the world. Each summer, we vacation in a new country and try to learn how to make traditional dishes from the locals.”

“That sounds fascinating. Which ones are your favorites?”

As she listed off several, I took inventory on Cynthia. She had long, wavy blonde hair, enormous blue eyes, and a very pretty face. Just the sort of girl that every boy liked to look at. Just the opposite of me. With my short, straight brown hair and hazel eyes, I wasn’t anything special. Naturally she would have been shocked to come face to face with me, dripping in poorly applied makeup with no wig when she was used to looking at herself in the mirror.

I realized she was waiting for me to answer a question I hadn’t heard. “I am so sorry, what was that?”

Cynthia repeated, “What is your favorite food?”

“Honey cakes,” I answered honestly. Curtis and I had snuck into the kitchen often to steal them. Any time I ate them now, it reminded me of simpler, happier times.

Comfort was waiting for us around the next bend. “Hey, sis!” she elbowed me in the ribs and completely ignored Cynthia. “Did you see that tree up there?”

I looked past Mother and Algernon. An immense tree guarded the path that led to the woods. It must be very old; it had massively thick branches that spiraled up to the sky, and the trunk seemed to be mostly hollow. A gaping hole loomed out of its center.

“The townsfolk say that this tree is enchanted, and that fairies live in it and will sometimes grant wishes to people who come and wish at the tree and reach inside. The Fairy Godmother Tree, they call it.”

I laughed. “No one really believes that, do they?”

Cynthia cut in. “Anything can happen.”

Still trying to be the peacemaker, I didn’t reply. But really—fairies giving people gifts from inside an old tree? What lunacy!

“So, what is the story behind the tree?” I asked.

Comfort glanced once at Cynthia, who was still keeping pace with us, and began the tale.

CHAPTER 28

“A long time ago, before this town was here, a huge forest stood in its place. In that forest, there was a poor woodcutter who lived next to a rich woodcutter,” began

Comfort. “The rich woodcutter could afford anything he wanted, but he never shared with the poor woodcutter. The rich woodcutter was a selfish, proud, and vain man. In contrast, the poor woodcutter was humble and honest, and had to work hard all day just to provide enough for his family to eat.

“One day, the poor woodcutter was out chopping wood and heard a tiny cry for help. He searched all around until he found a small fairy, trapped beneath a stone. “Help me, good man!” pleaded the fairy, “And I will grant you any wish you want!”

“And so, the poor, honest woodcutter freed the fairy. When the fairy asked what he would wish for, he said he had everything he wanted. Enough food to eat and a wife who loved him. The fairy saw that he had a good heart, and put a spell on a nearby tree. The fairy told the poor woodcutter that the tree would always grant any person who was honest and good the righteous desires of their hearts, if they would but put forth their hand to ask.

“The fairy disappeared, and the poor woodcutter wondered if what the fairy said was true. He wished for a new ax, as his own was old and dull. He reached into the tree, and pulled out an axe made of solid gold.

“He rushed into town and sold the axe for a great deal of money. He bought new clothes for himself and his wife, plenty of good food, and a new shiny steel axe. Then he brought the rest of the money home to his wife, and the celebrated their good fortune. From then on, any time that he or his wife, who was just as good as he was, wanted for anything, they would visit the tree and pull out whatever it was that they wanted.

“Now, the rich, greedy woodcutter could hardly fail to notice his neighbor’s good fortune. And instead of being glad for the honest old man and his wife, this wicked woodcutter wanted only to have their riches for himself. So, he went to his neighbor and pretended to be glad for their newfound wealth, and asked how it was that their

luck had turned at last.

“The honest woodcutter, suspecting nothing, told his neighbor all about the tree and how to get whatever he wanted by simply reaching his hand into the trunk to retrieve it. The rich woodcutter set off immediately, determined to procure riches even greater than his honest neighbor. He found the tree exactly where the old man had described, and reached out his hand, wishing to have more money than his neighbor.

“Unbeknownst to the woodcutter, the fairy had also put another spell on the tree. That whoever would stretch forth their hand but was wicked at heart and undeserving, would be cursed or killed. And so instead of the fabulous treasures he was expecting, the selfish woodcutter found only a deadly snake, which struck immediately and then slithered away as the man slowly died.”

Comfort ended the story.

“That sounds like a fairy tale Father would have enjoyed telling,” I said. I could imagine Father in my mind’s eye, acting out the story, imitating the facial expressions for the honest and hardworking woodcutter, and the greedy, self-centered woodcutter.

“I thought so too.”

“I think it a good story,” said Cynthia. I jumped. I had forgotten she was there. It had seemed like Comfort and I were gathered around with our parents for an evening of music and stories again. Cynthia’s presence was a sharp reminder of how much things had changed. “People should be rewarded for good deeds and punished for bad.”

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“That is a bold statement coming from you after everything that happened yesterday,” Comfort sneered.

Cynthia’s face crumpled.

“Comfort!” I said sharply. Just when Cynthia and I had finally had a positive interaction, Comfort had come along and ruined it.

“Forget I said anything then,” Cynthia said haughtily, and quickened her pace to walk beside her father.

“Comfort,” I implored. “Can’t you be nice? I thought she was supposed to be your best friend.”

“Not anymore!” Comfort’s voice came out much harsher than I was used to. “She thinks she is so much better than everyone else. Don’t you remember what she said to you?”

“I don’t think I’ll forget in a hurry,” I retorted. “But give her a break. Our parents getting married is a lot to process, and I don’t think she meant what she said yesterday. Admit it, the makeup job I did on myself wasn’t flattering.”

Comfort snickered. “Okay, you’ve got me there. It could’ve been improved.”

“A lot!”

“Yes, it could have,” she agreed. “But no matter what someone looks like, what

matters most is the person they are. It matters if they are kind and forgiving, like Mother. Or if they are funny and smart and helpful like you.”

“Just like in the enchanted tree story?” I teased her. “Are you saying I am a poor but honest woodcutter?”

Comfort laughed. “Precisely! And Cynthia is like the—”

“No she isn’t!” I cut off Comfort, knowing exactly what she was about to say. “Besides, maybe if we are really nice, maybe she will make us some of that flaming pudding you told me about. I wouldn’t say no to that.”

CHAPTER 29

That evening, we gathered in our family’s sitting room to play games. Charades had always been my favorite. Comfort and I seemed able to read each other’s minds as we acted out each word, and I was excited to play again. We hadn’t had a game night since Father died.

Mother was the referee. In hindsight, we should have had Cynthia or her father be the referee and time keeper; Algernon and Cynthia were both clearly inexperienced in Charades. Algernon made the best of it, laughing at his own incompetence. Cynthia was another matter though. Still hurt by Comfort’s disdain toward her, she only reluctantly participated in the game. After the first round, it was clear that our stepfamily was no match for Comfort and I.

“I know! Let’s switch up the teams!” said Mother cheerfully. Comfort and I exchanged glances. “Algernon and Comfort, you be a team, and Cynthia, you can be with Truly.”

Algernon and I switched places on our couches, and I sat next to Cynthia. Comfort

and Algernon were up first. Comfort was an excellent actress, and Algernon had more success with her as his partner than he had when paired with his daughter.

“A bird! Eagle? Falcon? Owl!”

“A boat? A...a stream? River? Oh, float!”

“Your head? Hair? A crown! The king!”

“Time’s up!” called Mother. Comfort and Algernon cheered and Comfort sat back down.

Mother turned to us. “Next!”

I looked at Cynthia and gestured to the front of the room. “Do you want—”

She shook her head adamantly. So I got up and picked up a scrap of parchment. “Reading” was my word. An easy one.

I nodded to Mother, showing that I was ready. I placed my palms together and opened them, pretending to scan the words on an imaginary book in front of me.

“Praying,” Cynthia said in a bored tone.

I shook my head and pretended to turn a page.

“Clapping.”

I shook my head again, licked my thumb, and pretended to turn another page.

“Tasting.”

For goodness sakes, how much more obvious could I be? This was such a simple word! Comfort would have guessed it immediately. I sat on the floor, pretended to lift a heavy tome onto my lap, and turn the pages.

“Sitting.”

“And time’s up!” Mother called out.

“Reading!” I burst out.

“Oh,” was all Cynthia said.

“That is okay,” I said, vexed but trying hard not to show it. “We will get the next one.”

But for the remainder of the evening, Cynthia and I had no luck in Charades. Algernon did propose a history quiz, at which Cynthia excelled. History had never been a subject that intrigued Comfort or myself.

It was difficult to like Cynthia, but I did get along with Algernon. He was easy-going and good-natured. He doted on Mother, and though he wasn’t as talented at storytelling as Father was, he had been to some fascinating places and loved to recount his experiences there. Mostly, I was just glad to see Mother happy again.

After games, everyone discussed wedding plans. Comfort and Cynthia wanted a

grand wedding, with everyone in town invited and lots of music and dancing. But Mother, after glancing at me, had refused the idea, saying that she would really prefer a quiet, simple wedding. That the engagement party had been enough, and no reception was needed. I wasn't fooled. I knew Mother was saying that for me. And I was grateful.

Then came more talk about living arrangements after the wedding, which was only two weeks away. Cynthia wanted to stay at her manor, but Algernon and Mother agreed that Cynthia and her Father would move here. At this point, Cynthia stood up in a huff, saying that she really needed to get home and was tired. She stood waiting for her father, but he forestalled her.

"You go on ahead. I will be there in just a moment."

Cynthia left, shutting the front door with an astonishing amount of force. I didn't suspect that such a small girl had so much muscle.

"I hope you will forgive my daughter," Algernon directed his comment specifically at me. "She really is a lovely girl. This is most unusual behavior for her."

"It is alright," I said automatically.

"And I would like to sincerely apologize most sincerely on her behalf for what she said yesterday," Algernon went on.

"It is really okay," I said, more earnestly this time. "I am sure she didn't mean it." I smiled at Mother. "People sometimes say things they don't mean."

Relief broke over Algernon's face. He took Mother's hand. "Lenora, your daughters are both remarkable."

Mother beamed at us. “I know they are. They always have been.”

CHAPTER 30

We were setting up for the wedding. Cynthia had made herself scarce in the past weeks, so I hadn’t had much opportunity to talk to her. But today, she was helping with getting everything arranged, and seemed to be making a special effort to be nice. She complimented me on my dress, and Comfort on her hairstyle. It seemed a little forced, but I was appreciative of the gesture nonetheless.

Mother and Algernon’s wedding was to take place at the top of a hill slightly beyond our garden. As all of us girls lifted our skirts to climb the long flight of stone steps, I caught a glimpse of Cynthia’s shoe.

“Your feet are tiny,” I exclaimed. “My goodness!”

Her shoes looked like children’s shoes, so dainty and petite. Just like the rest of her.

“Dad always told me that it was good for a girl to have tiny feet, so no one would step on her toes while dancing, no matter how clumsy her partner was.”

I thought of all the times Curtis had stepped on my feet and felt a little embarrassed by my large, manly feet. Cynthia didn’t need to know about that. I dropped my skirts to conceal my own foot size.

Just as Mother had said she wanted, the wedding was a quiet, simple ceremony. The priest came to marry Mother and Algernon in our garden, which we had all decorated for the few guests who attended.

The priest gave a short speech about love and unity and until death do they part, and they were pronounced husband and wife. Having never been to a wedding before, I

had imagined it would be hours of speeches and a lengthy ceremony. But no, a simple ring exchange was all. I applauded with everyone else.

I mingled with the guests that were milling around after the wedding. There weren't many. Algernon and Cynthia didn't have any remaining family, but did have a few friends that showed up. One lady was ancient, with powder white hair and wrinkles upon wrinkles. Upon introducing myself, I found out that she used to watch Algernon when he was small.

"What was he like as a boy?" I asked.

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“Oh, he was an adventurous lad,” reminisced the elderly woman in a voice that creaked as much as her bones did, “Always into something, he was, and I was forever turning frogs and snakes out of his pockets.”

I laughed, imagining a young sandy-haired boy running around with a toad peeping out of his pocket, bouncing along as the boy raced home.

“And tell me dear, how long since your father passed away?”

“A little more than a year,” I told her.

She peered into my face intently. “You miss him very much, don’t you?”

“Very much.”

She kept looking into my face with soul-searching eyes. Ancient eyes that held the wisdom of decades. “Well, you live in a way that would make him proud, won’t you?”

I thought. I knew Comfort and Mother had said before that we should live in the way Father wanted. But would Father be proud of the way I was living? All the time I was spending closeted in my room, hiding away from the world...he wouldn’t want that for me. Nor did I want that for myself.

I looked back at the old woman. “I will, ma’am, thank you.”

I left the conversation resolved; I didn’t want to be bitter anymore. I didn’t want to

hide anymore. What was I accomplishing by closing myself off and not living my life? Nothing. I was only hurting myself. Of course there would be times that someone would laugh at my face, but that was their problem, not mine. I thought of all the times Mother and Comfort had said that it was who you were that mattered, much more than what someone looked like.

Mother and Algernon were getting ready to run to their carriage for a honeymoon trip. I handed out bags of white rice to throw at them, and we showered them in rice as they ran to a white carriage. “Goodbye! Goodbye!” we all called. They waved from the window, and the carriage jolted into motion.

Mother and Algernon were to be gone for a week. After the wedding guests left, Comfort and Cynthia and I tidied up, cleaned up the decorations, stored chairs, and ate all the leftover cake. At one point, Comfort and I were alone, stacking the tables and chairs into a storage room.

“Comfort?” I asked.

“Yeah?”

“You told me before that it doesn’t matter what people look like.”

“Right.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“Sure I do!” she said. “There are tons of examples of why that is true.”

“Like what?”

Comfort thought for a moment, then snapped her fingers. “Do you remember

Bernard?”

I thought. Bernard? Then memories flooded into my mind. “The bard’s apprentice?”

“Yes! Him! What do you remember about him?”

I thought back fondly to the days before the bard had been dismissed. His apprentice, Bernard the Bard, as we always called him, was hilarious. “He was really funny. He knew just how to compliment everyone to make them feel good about themselves. He knew more jokes than anyone, even Curtis or Father.”

“Right. What did he look like?”

I strained my memory. He had had a large nose, ears that stuck out perpendicular to his head, very crooked teeth, and several unfortunately sized and prominent warts. I didn’t want to say those things. “Well, he was short, had dark hair, was skinny...”

“He wasn’t very handsome,” Comfort amended for me. “Was he?”

I shook my head.

“Now, who would you rather have had for a friend, Bernard or Hubert?”

“Bernard, of course.”

“Why? He is much uglier than Hubert.”

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That was true. For the first time since the attack, I began to see what Comfort had meant. She continued, “Hubert is very handsome. Tall, muscular, nice hair and teeth, all those sorts of things. But he had almost no friends because he is a tedious and self-absorbed bore.”

“Well, don’t say what you really think,” I teased her.

“But really! Even though Hubert is very handsome, people can’t stand him after talking to him for a few minutes. But Bernard—”

“Bernard the Bard,” I grinned.

“Yes. Everyone loved him, and once you got to know him, you really never thought about what he looks like. He is just...Bernard. It doesn’t matter what someone looks like; it matters who they are.”

That night, I went to bed determined to turn over a new leaf. No longer would I hide away from the world, but would embrace it. I wanted to live my life in a way that would make Father proud.

CHAPTER 31

I wanted to spend the week getting to know my new stepsister. Using my newfound resolution to be myself and not live in fear of what others would say about my scars, I suggested outings. To visit the menagerie, to go swimming at the stream, or for walks in the woods. I even ventured into town to visit the bookshop and was able to select several new volumes in different languages; my Latin was getting rusty from the

months of disuse.

It felt like waking up after a deep sleep as I began going out again. I had always loved talking to people, visiting new places, and having fun with my sister. Comfort, delighted with my sudden surge in energy and eagerness to be out and about, accompanied me everywhere, and introduced me to friends and acquaintances. I was still very self-conscious of my scars, but other than a few surprised looks, no one said anything.

The day before Mother and Algernon were due to return, I managed to convince Cynthia to accompany me on a walk to town. Comfort was off with some friends.

We walked along the path, unsure how to break the tension between us. I was glad that Comfort was not with us, given how she had ruined my last attempt at friendship with my new stepsister.

Sometimes it is easier to talk about something other than yourself. “Tell me about your dad,” I coaxed. “I still don’t know much about him.”

Cynthia shrugged. “He is just dad. He likes reading history books. And traveling. And cooking. He is very good at chess.”

“You know a lot of history too,” I said encouragingly. “You were incredible during the history quiz when we had game night.”

“Dad used to read the history books to me when I was little,” Cynthia said. She looked at me. “Your dad told you stories too, didn’t he?” then she hurriedly said, “But you don’t have to talk about him if you don’t want to.”

“That’s okay. I like remembering him,” I told her. “He was a wonderful storyteller and always told us fairy tales and legends from all over the world from his travels. He

used to tell us stories every evening.”

“You must hate Dad for taking his place.”

“No, I don’t,” I said truthfully. “He hasn’t taken Father’s place. And I am glad for Mother. She was so sad before. It is nice to see her happy again.”

“I don’t remember my mom,” Cynthia admitted.

“She died when you were a baby, didn’t she?”

Cynthia nodded. “Dad says I look just like her,” she smiled a tiny bit, then stopped walking. I imitated her.

Cynthia scuffed the toe of her tiny shoe against the dirt trail. “I am sorry for how I have been acting,” she apologized. “I know you are happy for your mom, to be with someone again. Dad and I have been together, just us, for so long. It is weird to have to share him with other people now.”

This was more honesty than I had hoped to get out of Cynthia. “It is okay. Lots of changes are difficult.”

We started walking again. It felt like the icy distance between us had melted a little. The tension between us shrunk a little. There was even an inkling of a friendship beginning.

“Didn’t you used to live at the castle?” Cynthia asked. “Comfort told me.”

“Yes, we did. Father was Chancellor of the Exchequer.”

“What is that?”

“He was in charge of taxes.”

“What was it like?”

“What, being in charge of taxes, or living at the castle?”

“Living at the castle!”

“Well, it was... wonderful.”

“Did you know the prince?” she asked eagerly.

“Well, there are two. The older one is Hubert and the younger is Curtis.”

“And you knew them? What were they like?”

For some reason, I couldn't talk about Curtis with Cynthia. It felt too personal. We didn't have that level of friendship yet. And any time I tried to examine my feelings for Curtis, hoping I felt more distant after more than a year, I was always disappointed to find that I missed him terribly. “Well, Hubert is the older one. He is just a year or so older than you are, and he is smart. Serious, very serious. He is a whiz at history too, but I didn't know him well. He excelled in jousting and swordplay.”

“He sounds amazing!” said Cynthia fervently.

“I suppose,” I said. I thought of my conversation I had had just a few days previously with Comfort. “He is handsome too.”

“If we ever go there, you should introduce us.”

Committed as I was to be myself and not hide away, I still hesitated to return to my old life. It was one thing to be brave and show my face around town, where no one

had known me before. But to reappear back at court, to see the people who had known me before, it still felt too intimidating. Perhaps one day. But not yet.

CHAPTER 32

The next few months that followed were relatively pleasant. Algernon often traveled for business while Mother, Comfort, and Cynthia entertained groups of people at the house. I had occasional jobs translating for local merchants, which I did mostly to pass my time rather than earn any sort of significant income. I lacked the extensive hobbies that my mother, sister, and stepsister enjoyed.

Occasionally, I would attend the cotillions that Mother and Comfort would host. Cynthia was an excellent dancer, and she and Comfort were the center of attention at parties. When Algernon was in town, he and Mother would lead the dances, and just like they had at the castle, people admired Mother for her grace and charm. I cheered on the dancers, helped the housekeeper keep the refreshment trays filled, and talked with our guests. I was rarely asked to dance, and declined every time I was asked. My only dance partners had been Father and Curtis, and a stab of pain went through me every time I imagined dancing with anyone else.

During one such party, I had descended from my room and was reading in a corner when a young boy happened to pass by. I glanced up, and he gasped in fright at the sight of my face and scurried away. I bit my lip, trying not to be hurt. He hadn't meant any harm. I had simply forgotten to apply my cosmetics that evening, and my face was still jarring at first glance.

Similar incidents happened occasionally, either with children or with adults nervously avoiding me, or else looking at me out of the corners of their eyes, hoping I wouldn't notice them staring. As an effort to live in a way that would make Father proud, I merely resolved to remember to apply my cosmetics daily. I had to get them specially ordered; cosmetics were expensive and difficult to come by. But fortunately,

Algernon often traveled to where he could purchase them with relative ease, and it became part of our regular routine.

I felt guilty for my dependence on the makeup. Guilty for the cost and work that went into procuring them for me. I was ashamed and embarrassed that my face was frightening to the people around me. But I didn't feel confident without the makeup. Comfort and Mother were constantly encouraging me to do the things that buoyed me up, to help me become more self-assured again.

Eventually, it became part of my daily ritual to apply the cosmetics after waking up. I still couldn't do as good a job as Comfort or Mother could, but for day-to-day use, I felt confident. Assured that I wouldn't scare any children or make people nervous.

We didn't have the family game nights or storytelling sessions that we did when Father was alive, but we did begin going on regular family walks. Algernon always encouraged us girls to stop by the Fairy Godmother tree on the last leg of our walks and reach our hands into the trunk's hole. It was a tradition he had developed with Cynthia when she was young, visiting the tree with her each week while they talked about her mother.

Invariably on these trips, we found something inside for each of us: a new book, a hair clip, or a bracelet. More than once, Algernon remarked that he thought fairies were formed from the souls of people we loved who had passed on, and that our father and Cynthia's mother were probably fairies watching over us and protecting us. I loved how Mother would smile adoringly at Algernon when he said these things. Of course we knew that it was Algernon putting those things there before our walks, but it made the legend of the tree seem all that more magical, even though we were far too old to believe in fairies.

Cynthia in particular seemed to love the idea that her mother was still watching over her and gifting her with presents. It made me feel horrible for mocking the idea of the

Fairy Tree when the legend had first been told to me.

A few months after Mother and Algernon had been married, Algernon came back from one of his business trips with a dreadful cold. He complained of aches, chills, and fatigue, and it soon developed into a hacking cough.

“Was there something going around where you were?” Cynthia asked, concerned as she pressed her palm against her father’s feverish head.

Algernon nodded weakly. “They said it was the gripe there. But most people don’t get it this bad. I must be a wimp.”

Cynthia smiled sympathetically and laid cool cloths across his forehead.

“I will send Truly for the physician,” Mother said, patting Algernon’s arm.

“In the morning,” Algernon said. “Don’t go to any fuss. It isn’t that bad.” But his words trailed away as he was taken over by a spasm of coughing.

“Are you sure, Dad?” Cynthia asked. “We can go get him right now.”

“No,” Algernon insisted. “I am just getting old. My body isn’t quite up to fighting off infections with the speed it did when I was a young sprout.” He wagged his finger at the three girls. “You appreciate your youth while you still have it.”

Mother laughed. “You aren’t all that old.”

“Yes, only half of your hairs are silver,” Comfort joked.

Algernon pretended to faint in horror. “Say it isn’t so!”

Cynthia giggled. “Get better soon, Dad.”

He pressed his fist against his chest like a soldier preparing for battle. “I wouldn’t dare not recover, with four beautiful ladies depending on me!” He coughed yet again, even harder this time, his body wracked with the deep hacking spasms.

“Algernon, I really do think we should send for the physician. You aren’t well.”

“Don’t worry, dear. I am sure it is just a cold. A couple of days of rest and I will be right as rain.”

CHAPTER 33

It wasn’t just a cough. By the next day, Algernon was unable to eat or drink anything, and was coughing hard enough to bring up blood. I ran to town for the doctor. Cynthia and Mother stayed by Algernon’s side, trying in vain to get him to sip fluids.

When I returned with the physician, Comfort met us at the door with a strained expression on her face. “You better hurry,” she told the doctor.

The doctor stayed all that day and night, and into the next day. Despite the doctor’s best efforts, Algernon was failing. He had a raging fever that would not break no matter what we tried. Then the hallucinations began. Algernon would talk endlessly to people who weren’t there. Cynthia remained steadfastly by his side the whole time, trying her best to talk to him and make sense of what he was saying.

Finally, the doctor pulled Mother to the side. “Madam, I must be frank. I have seen this illness only a few times before.”

“Has anyone recovered?” Mother asked quietly.

The doctor slowly shook his head. “I am afraid not, madam. I am sorry.”

Mother drew a shaky breath. “How long?”

“One day. No more. This is a fast-acting disease.”

Mother nodded, her chin quivering. “Thank you for telling me,” she looked past the doctor into the room where Cynthia was beside her father, placing cool cloths onto his forehead and listening to him jabber on, asking an unseen blacksmith the prices of horseshoes.

Algernon died the following morning. I had fallen asleep on the sofa outside Algernon’s room and was awakened when I heard Cynthia cry out, “No! No, no! Dad!” her strangled cry echoed throughout the house.

Cynthia burst out of the room, flew past me, and ran out the front door, sobbing. I looked into the room. Mother was there, sitting beside the bed, holding Algernon’s limp hand, tears pouring down her face as she silently wept.

I walked slowly into where Mother sat and began rubbing her back, but she gave no indication she even noticed me. “I’m so sorry.”

She didn’t move. Comfort bustled in and led me out, shutting the door behind us. “Let them have privacy,” she told me before chivvying me toward the front door.

“Where are we going?”

Comfort marched toward town. “We have to prepare his funeral.”

I didn’t know the first thing about preparing a funeral but Comfort did. I supposed she had learned after Father’s death. She took charge in the same commanding way she had done when Mother and I had fallen to pieces. It seemed that any time a crisis arose, Comfort rose to meet the challenge head on, never faltering, no matter how daunting the task seemed. We visited person after person, arranging for a priest to officiate at the funeral, asking women in town to donate flowers from their gardens, paying the tavern owner to board guests in his inn above the local tavern, and paying for the doctor’s time.

It seemed that the errands went on and on. One person needed to oversee collecting my stepfather’s body and another to carry out the cremation properly, another to go help Mother, and yet another to help with closing all of Algernon’s business accounts and settling debts, which were far greater than I had ever expected. By the end of the day, my feet ached, and I felt utterly exhausted, despite Comfort being the one who had done all the talking and coordinating.

I wearily trudged home beside my sister, who frequently bit her lip and fidgeted with the coin purse in her hand.

“Don’t tell Mother,” began Comfort. “But it took almost everything we had to settle Algernon’s business debts and pay for his funeral.”

A knot twisted in my stomach. We had never had to worry about finances before. “What will we do?”

Comfort set her jaw, determination blazing in her eyes. “We will cross that bridge when it comes. I will figure it out. Mother has enough to worry about right now.”

“You always figure things out,” I said encouragingly. But I saw the worry lines

etched deep into Comfort's face. "What about Cynthia?"

"Let her grieve," Comfort stated simply. "She will need some time, just like you did. But she will have to help when the money runs out, the same as us."

She sighed heavily then gave me a small, sad smile. "Don't worry too much, sis. We have a little left, and I can sell some things to keep us afloat for a few more months. No need to panic yet."

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We arrived home. I saw the men we had spoken with earlier in the day just leaving, carrying a stretcher with Algernon's body under a length of white linen.

Mother was just inside, sitting beside the fireplace and staring into the fire's depths, unresponsive as we walked past. Our housekeeper was bustling around making tea and cookies. Cynthia was nowhere in sight. I exchanged one last glance with Comfort before I plodded up the stairs to my bedroom, thinking all the time about what we could do about family's money struggles.

I didn't see Cynthia again for several days. I had no idea where she went, but she turned up again just before Algernon's funeral. Burrs were tangled into her hair, she was covered in dirt and grime, and just as Mother had after Father's death, it looked like Cynthia had aged years in just a few days.

Comfort and I hadn't known Algernon well enough to know what his final wishes were, and he had been in no state in his last few days to ask. His funeral was conducted in a similar fashion to Father's, so Comfort told me. Everyone who had known Algernon gathered around the stream in the town square, and after the priest spoke, we all told of our favorite memories with him. Once each person had finished telling what they remembered, they tossed a flower into the stream and watched as it was carried away.

Cynthia had scrubbed herself clean before the ceremony, but she looked transformed by her sorrow. She could barely speak as she told about her childhood memories with her dad, their travels together, his teaching her to cook, the times he would take her to the Fairy Godmother Tree and tell her that her mother was still watching over her. Everyone murmured words of condolences as they watched the rose she threw in

float downstream.

After the funeral was over, we walked slowly back home. The house seemed somehow emptier than it had when it was just me, Comfort, and Mother living here before we knew Algernon. Cynthia was the saddest sight of all, dragging her feet all the way back to the house. She hadn't had any family members that attended Algernon's funeral. Cynthia was all he had had. And now Cynthia had no one.

The housekeeper had laid out a lunch for us, but Cynthia didn't want to eat. She simply retreated back to her room and didn't emerge for days. I had the housekeeper set food outside her bedroom door, and I would leave different books and activities outside her door. I was sure she wouldn't have any interest in them, but I wanted to help her to feel better in any small way I could. I imagined this was how Comfort had felt after Father had passed away and she saw Mother and I consumed by our grief.

True to my word, I didn't mention our family's dwindling finances to Mother. She constantly sat in front of the fire, day after day, just watching the flames leap and dance about. I worked diligently with the few clients I had to earn a few more coins, which I would then turn over to Comfort. She spent increasing amounts of time poring over budgets and ledgers, calculating and recalculating expenses.

Cynthia slowly began moving about the house again, but very slowly, without the pep she usually did everything with. I hoped that our emerging friendship would blossom, and that I would come to think of her as a close sister, not just a distant stepsister. But she seemed too far away and detached to have any kind of deep conversation with her. I continued to try and do things for her, but was unsure what would be most significant. She didn't read any of the books I lent her, wasn't interested in the cross stiches or knitting supplies I left, and avoided her previous love of cooking.

I was at a loss. How was I supposed to help someone who didn't want to be helped?

The weeks crawled by, and I knew that it was only a matter of time before Comfort told Mother and Cynthia about our dire circumstances. Finally, that day arrived.

CHAPTER 34

“Family meeting,” Comfort called through the door. “Get down to the drawing room now!”

I trudged down to the sitting room. Cynthia was sitting huddled in an armchair, her face red and splotchy from crying. As they had done so often lately, my memories flashed back to after Father had died, and it seemed like Mother and I had done nothing but cry for weeks. But for Cynthia, the pain must be even worse, since she now had no family at all. She had lost the only parent she had ever known. She had no one left. No one but us.

My heart ached for her. While Comfort went to rouse Mother, I slipped into the kitchen and brought back a cup of hot tea for Cynthia, which I placed on the table beside her. She ignored it, or else was so overcome by her grief that she didn’t notice. I understood only too well.

Comfort marched Mother into the room, then stood by the fireplace, arms folded, looking at us with narrowed eyes.

“We are out of money,” Comfort announced.

This information visibly concerned Mother but didn’t register at all to Cynthia.

“Is everything gone?” I asked.

“Almost everything, yes,” Comfort stated firmly. “With Algernon’s funeral expenses, settling all of his business debts, and no income, our savings have been drained very

quickly, especially with paying our hired help. I dismissed the housekeeper today, and we need to find a way to earn some money.”

“Us? Find work?” Mother asked, as if she was testing out the sound of the words.

“Yes,” Comfort said the word harshly. I was forcibly reminded of the family meeting she had called after Father’s funeral, when she had insisted we leave the castle and forge a new life for ourselves. This felt very similar. Again, our lives had been upended.

Comfort turned her attention to me. “Truly, you are the only one of us that has brought in a steady income. Would you be able to expand your translating business?”

“I suppose,” I contemplated. “Small town merchants don’t pay much, but I could try.”

“Something is better than nothing. Mother? What are your ideas?”

Mother shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Comfort fell silent, pondering. I thought too. What was it that Mother was good at? Dancing, singing, decorating, organizing parties. None of those things would be profitable, unless...The answer suddenly seemed obvious, as if my mind had been working over the problem for the last several weeks. “Mother! You and Comfort can open a finishing school!”

Comfort nodded vigorously. “That is an excellent suggestion!”

“Teach?” Mother mused. “An interesting thought, but is there a market for it here?”

“Haven’t you seen these village girls?” Comfort scoffed. “They have no fashion

sense, no knowledge of etiquette, and yet all of the families want them to have advantageous marriages. This is a perfect plan for us!" I recalled the garish gowns that had been worn during Mother and Algernon's engagement party, and the ugly dresses featured in the tailor shop window. No fashion sense at all was right.

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“You could help the girls sew nice dresses, teach them calligraphy and to dance and sing and style their hair, teach about proper protocol, and you could host parties to show what they have learned!”

“A stroke of brilliance!” Comfort cried. “We can plan units on all the different topics that need covered, and girls can pay by unit or by month.”

She then turned to Cynthia. “And what are your plans?”

Cynthia finally looked up, her tear-streaked face in anguish. “My plans?” she repeated feebly.

“Yes, your plans,” said Comfort. I felt like this was overly demanding, the poor girl had recently lost her only remaining family member. “We have to band together to figure this out. We have to rely on ourselves, and that will require all of us pitching in the best we know how.”

Cynthia sniffed and pulled her blanket closer to her chin. “I don’t know. I don’t have any skills.”

“Comfort, dear, Cynthia doesn’t have to do anything. Give her some time,” Mother said kindly.

“Mother, do you want to know how close we are to starving?” Comfort snapped. “This is a time for action. We barely have enough to feed ourselves through the end of the month. Then we won’t have a single coin left.”

“Cynthia doesn’t have to find outside,” I piped up, doing my best to defend the stepsister I barely knew. When Comfort was in her no-nonsense mode, there was little I could do to dissuade her. I searched around for an answer. If only there was a way for Cynthia to not be required to leave the house, so she could grieve for her Father away from prying eyes. I knew how painful that was.

Then it hit me. “She could...do the housekeeping.”

To my relief, Comfort seemed to consider. “It is a possibility...”

“It would be a great option,” I said, anxious to keep Comfort thinking positively about the idea. “We will need a lot of help with keeping the house clean if we are going to open a finishing school, right?”

“Right.”

“We will still need to eat, and none of us know how to cook and keep house, right?”

“Right again.”

“But Cynthia does. She has done it for years for her father, and she is a fantastic cook. We would be able to focus on our work without the added stress of keeping house and cooking and without needing to hire out the work.”

“Hmmm...” Comfort pondered the idea.

I held my breath, praying she would agree. When I translated, it was like I was holding on to a bit of Father, a piece of the happy life we had had together. I hoped it would be similar for Cynthia. That she could find joy in continuing the hobby she had developed with her father when he was alive.

“Cynthia, dear? What do you think?” Mother probed gently. Cynthia shrugged. She was too depressed to care about anything.

“I will take that as an agreement,” Comfort said crisply, clapping her hands together. “Very well. There is not a moment to lose!” She and Mother left the sitting room, already deep in conversation, brainstorming ideas for the finishing school.

I looked over at Cynthia. She was so miserable and thin, chin quivering, eyes brimming with tears.

“I’m so sorry, Cynthia,” I said sincerely. “I was trying to think of the easiest thing for you. I remember what it was like after my Father died.”

She didn’t respond, only drew a shaky breath.

“If you teach me to cook, I can try to help you when I have time,” I offered. “I don’t want you to do any more than you absolutely have to, okay?”

Cynthia glared at me, her eyes overly-bright. “I don’t need your pity.”

I ignored the jibe. People always say things that they don’t mean when they are upset. Hadn’t I done the same thing when I had first met her? She was merely returning the favor.

“Just let me know how I can help.”

“I don’t need your help either!” she snapped. “I can manage fine on my own.”

I ignored that as well. I recalled the time when our family visited the seaside when I was a young girl. Comfort and I found a small dog that was injured and in pain. It had fallen into a briar patch and had thorns stuck all over its tiny body. But when we had

tried to assist it by pulling out the thorns, it growled and nipped at us. That was what Cynthia made me think of. She was just a lost, injured puppy who wasn't ready to accept any help.

Everyone grieved in their own way and in their own time. I arose and departed, pretending not to hear the sobs coming from the chair that held Cynthia.

CHAPTER 35

Spurred on by the looming threat of poverty overtaking our family, we dove into work. I mentioned to my regular customers that I was taking on new clients, and business began pouring in. I felt guilty for charging more than a single silver coin per scroll that I translated, even though my services were worth more. I knew most people couldn't afford any more than that. But at the same time, I also felt guilty for not charging more because then I had to work long hours to earn an adequate wage and had no time to fulfill my promise to Cynthia.

Perhaps it was for the better. Just as Mother and I had needed a change in our lives to help us climb out of our despair, it seemed like us needing Cynthia helped her to have a reason to get out of bed in the morning. She cleaned constantly, preparing the house for the opening of the finishing school.

Mother and Comfort drummed up several students in town. A finishing school in a town as small as ours was a novel concept, but many families had expressed great interest in enrolling their daughters. Mother, in particular, seemed eager to teach. She had always spoken of her finishing school days with such fondness. It was good to see her cheerful again, preparing yards of delicate fabrics in the dressmaking room, or arranging the furniture to have a dance floor available. Comfort pulled out her harp and could be heard practicing to get ready to teach pupils music and how to play instruments.

Mother asked me to teach a languages course for the finishing school, but I turned down the offer. Even though I no longer shied away from the prospect of a group of people staring at me, uncomfortable as it was for me, I had so much business that I

had no extra time to prepare and teach a curriculum to a classroom full of girls.

But finally, finally, our finishing school was open! Cynthia had scrubbed the entire manor, inside and out. Even our cobblestone path gleamed. Flowers bloomed in the front courtyard, and I watched from the upstairs window as a trickle of girls traipsed up the front path for their first day of school, giggling nervously the whole way.

All throughout the day, noises echoed up the stairs: screeching attempts at music, exclamations over stabbed fingers during sewing, and arguments about who had to pretend to be the boy during dance instructions.

All the hubbub made it difficult to focus on my task at hand—squinting to decipher the dreadful handwriting of a local business owner who wanted to post prices for his goods in different languages to draw in a wider variety of customers. It felt satisfying to know that I was contributing to our family's financial well-being and that I, along with Comfort and Mother, were going to make enough to support ourselves and Cynthia.

That evening, after all the students had gone home, Cynthia served up our supper. Mother and Comfort were so exhausted that they didn't even seem to notice what they were eating. "I don't think I ever sounded like those girls today," Comfort said, massaging her temples. "I thought they would hit the right notes at least some of the time."

"And we will need to scrub all of the dress fabric to get the blood spots off," Mother added. "There were so many pricked fingers. I should have started with an easier project."

"Yes, but an easier project won't replace those odious dresses they wear," Comfort said. "I can't wait for the day when I can walk to town without seeing a dress that is orange and purple with giant bows!"

Mother chuckled. “That is a popular color scheme around here, isn’t it?” She turned her attention to me. “Truly, how is your work coming along?”

“Fine,” I said, not wanting to reveal how much more difficult my work had become with my concentration being broken on such a regular basis. I would have to find a different place to work. “I should be able to start on those genealogy charts and stories tomorrow.”

“Cynthia? How has your day been?” Mother asked, smiling at her stepdaughter.

“I cooked and cleaned and cooked some more. Not much to report,” Cynthia answered dully.

“Well this is delicious!” I chimed in. “Thank you so much for cooking.”

“Yes, thank you!” chorused Mother and Comfort.

Cynthia sat down to her plate of potatoes, leafy greens, and chicken seasoned with thyme without saying a word.

The finishing school students continued to be loud, but by retreating up to the attic, I was able to adequately tune them out. For several months, I stayed in the attic for the majority of each day, poring over tiny print in the poor light and copying out translations meticulously. Together with the income from the finishing school, we were making enough to live on and a little extra besides. But to earn even that meager amount demanded that I work every minute possible that I could squeeze out of each day, and Mother and Comfort did the same to prepare lessons and diligently teach their students.

Supper became our only time for relaxation. I laughed as Comfort and Mother described different students’ escapades, like when one girl had accidentally burned

away a chunk of her hair when Comfort had been trying to teach them how to use a heated poker to style their hair, or when a sewing pupil had accidentally sewn her project onto the gown she was still wearing. With teaching, it seemed like there was never a shortage of humorous stories.

My day was never that entertaining, so I rarely had anecdotes to share. Cynthia expressed a similar sentiment. She would always state that nothing of interest had occurred, and quietly allowed Mother and Comfort to continue to talk.

CHAPTER 36

I was walking over to the glassblower Thomas's shop to deliver a letter he had requested to be translated. It had been a particularly difficult project. In his original letter, Thomas wrote to an Avivian glassblower asking about a new technique he had heard about, and there had been many technical words I had to search through dictionaries to find to ensure that I was translating them correctly. I entered the shop and waited behind two middle-aged women gossiping away happily. I distracted myself by looking at the blown glass trinkets that decorated the shop.

Thomas, the only glassblower in town, was very talented. It appeared that he could make anything out of glass, any shape at all. The only complaint anyone ever had about his products was that they would break, but what would they expect when an object is made of glass? The technique he had asked about in his letter was to help him resolve that issue. Supposedly, this Avivian craftsman had developed a way of making glass stronger. As I waited for Thomas to appear, a bit of the conversation the two women were having floated in and broke through my musings.

“Yes, word is that the older prince broke off his betrothal to that foreign princess. Quite an ugly affair, I heard. The king insisted that the younger prince take his place.”

Were they talking about Hubert and Curtis? Was Curtis engaged to Aria? I peeked

over at the women, eager to catch every word.

“Oh, really? And what will the older one do now? Isn’t he due to take the throne soon?”

“Well, word is that he will choose a commoner! Wouldn’t that be a spectacle to see?”

“No, really? That simply isn’t done!”

The first woman dropped her voice conspiratorially. “Gertrude, you know my Hilda is one of the serving girls at the castle, and she told me that when she was dropping off food to the Council, they were discussing having a ball so he could choose a commoner well-suited for him. Imagine! A prince marrying one of our own daughters!”

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“Excuse me.” I approached the ladies, fighting the urge to lift my fan to cover my face as I usually did when introducing myself.

“Yes, dearie?”

“You said that the older prince is no longer betrothed?”

“That is what I heard, yes! But his younger brother, Curdy I think, is betrothed to her now,” she turned back to her friend. “Honestly, all this fuss about that princess marrying into the royal family. I personally would favor keeping Avivians in Avivia.”

At that point, the glassblower’s apprentice asked if he could help me, which was fortunate. If I had stayed and listened to the conversation any longer, I may have fallen over. I handed him the letter with instructions to deliver it to Thomas and left in a daze. All this time, I had been so sure that Curtis would move on, find someone else. But now that he had, I couldn’t believe it. For that one glorious year, I thought we would be together forever. Somehow, I hadn’t ever thought that Curtis would love anyone else. I felt like I had lost him all over again. I stumbled back to our manor and fell heavily into a chair.

Why did I feel so betrayed? I had no claim on Curtis’ heart. I had deserted him, fled miles away, then had written that absurd letter. He owed me no loyalty. There was no reason for me to expect anything other than that he had moved on with his life. He should move on. He was a prince; he had to do what was best for the kingdom. I should be happy for him...

But I wasn’t.

Selfishly, I wished that his love for me had never faltered and that one day, he would find me and declare his undying devotion to me.

Again, these were silly girlish fantasies. I would never see him again. And didn't I have Mother as an example? She had been married to Father for decades before he passed away, and within a year she had remarried. Surely if someone would remarry after twenty years of marriage, a year-long teenage romance didn't have a chance of withstanding the test of time.

I couldn't get any work done that day. I tried to pay attention to the words before my eyes, but they wouldn't focus. I kept imagining Aria in a white dress, walking down the aisle toward a beaming Curtis.

"Truly?"

I tore my thoughts away from royal engagements and weddings. "What?"

Cynthia opened the door. "I was just wondering if you could make the dinner tonight. I wanted to go out."

I sighed. I had accomplished nothing yet that day except for the brief errand of delivering a letter. The news about Curtis had completely distracted me from the mountainous pile of documents waiting to be translated. "I don't think I can, Cynthia. I'm sorry, but I have so much work to do."

"I figured as much," she sniffed, and snapped the door shut. Great. Now my stepsister was mad at me too. Again. Could I never get anything right?

I had to focus, I had to! I couldn't keep dwelling on past relationships and hypothesizing about what ifs and where we would be now if Father hadn't died. If the attack had never happened. Curtis and I might have had a future together. My chest

ached with the knowledge of what I had missed out on. What good would it do to dwell on hypotheticals? The reality was that I didn't belong with Curtis anymore. I needed to move on. I bullied my brain into meticulously copying out a business proposition, but with each stroke of my pen, Curtis's face, still so perfectly etched in my memory, floated to the forefront of my mind.

For so long, I had trained myself to forget my past life. Now, I couldn't think of anything else. Why was it so hard to let go of what would never be mine?

CHAPTER 37

A week later, a messenger arrived from the castle. The poor man had to knock multiple times before we heard him above the screeching voices of the music students, all rasping a song about a nightingale. Mother and Comfort were teaching and couldn't answer the door, and I was upstairs, trying to transcribe a lengthy speech that had been given and needed to be converted into Islandrian. I could see the crest of the royal family on the door of the carriage, and looked straight down out of my window to see who was standing on our doorstep. By craning my neck, I saw Cynthia open the door, cloth tied around her hair and broom in hand, to accept a thick envelope from the messenger.

The messenger sprang back to his carriage as the footman cracker his whip and the horses trotted off. Before the carriage was even out of sight, I heard a hush fall upon the girls downstairs, followed soon after by the loudest shrieks and squeals that had ever been uttered in this house, even louder than the incident in which two mice appeared and darted through all of the swishing skirts.

What on earth?

I scrambled downstairs, hastily pulling my hair out of the knot on top of my head and letting it tumble down to cover my face. Ever since Comfort had announced our

financial woes, I had stopped ordering cosmetics. Our family couldn't afford the expense, so I had reverted to my earlier methods of using my fan or my hair to cover my burns.

The cacophony from the first level was overwhelming. All the girls enrolled in the finishing school leapt up and down, clutching each other and screaming their heads off.

"Girls, girls, settle down," Mother repeated herself several times before anyone obeyed. She held the heavy, opened envelope in one hand, a piece of parchment in her other. Now she fixed all of her pupils with a firm stare.

"A well-bred lady does not whoop and cheer," she chastised, "but waits for the other person to finish speaking before making herself heard."

A few of the girls hung their heads at the reprimand, but most looked too excited to care. Comfort shushed girls, and I barely noticed Cynthia standing inconspicuously in a corner, still clutching her broom. I was halfway down the stairs but had paused, not wanting to miss a word that Mother said. Whatever message that envelope held must be important.

Once the room was silent, Mother shook open the short letter and began to read.

By Royal Proclamation:

In honor of His Majesty, Crown Prince Hubert of Islandria, heir to the throne, all eligible young maidens are invited to attend a royal ball, held at the castle on the first day of the eighth month at sunset.

Signed,

King Edmont

There was an explosion of noise. Girls squealed in delight and were dashing about, eagerly asking each other what the letter meant, who counted as eligible, which day was the first of the eighth month, would the prince want to see her curtsy, and a hundred other things. Mother and Comfort continued to try and shush the girls but without any success. I returned to my work. The first day of the eighth month? That was only a few weeks away.

My heart thumped loudly. A ball that commoners were invited to? In honor of Hubert only. Did that mean the rumors were true? Was Aria engaged to Curtis? Did that mean Hubert was looking for a bride among his subjects?

That evening at supper, the entire conversation revolved around the upcoming ball. Mother and Comfort were anticipating the ball as eagerly as any of their students. Mother and Comfort were both thrilled to have an opportunity to become reacquainted with some of their old friends. They talked animatedly about which gown they would wear, which friends they thought would still be at the castle, which girls from their classes would be likely to attend, and a number of other similar topics.

“Truly, what about you?” Comfort inquired. “Aren’t you excited?”

I shook my head. I had known that Mother and Comfort would want to attend the ball. I assumed Cynthia would as well, but I just couldn’t bring myself to face Curtis again, especially now that he was engaged to a beautiful princess who could offer him much more than I could. It would be too painful to re-visit those feelings. No, it

was better for me to stay away. I had already written that accursed letter telling him to forget about me and move on. Now he had. No need to impose my presence where it wasn't wanted.

Cynthia left the table and started on the dishes. As I recalled how eager she had been to meet Prince Hubert, I made a mental note to ask her about her plans for the ball next time we talked.. She had been so excited at the prospect of being introduced to a prince, and now she had the chance.

PART 3

CHAPTER 38

Mother and Comfort taught nonstop. There had been an explosion of interest in etiquette classes in order to prepare for the upcoming ball. The house was now so noisy that I couldn't hear myself think above the clamor of girls, even if I plugged my ears in the attic. So, I sought the peace and quiet of the forest. I toted along all my work with me. Luckily, all I needed to bring was parchment, ink, and quills. Just beyond the Fairy Tree, hidden from the path, I found a small clearing perfect for my needs. I sat down, spread out my papers on a flat stone, and set to work.

After a few hours, soft footsteps approached. I glanced up, and from between the trees, I glimpsed Cynthia walking my direction. Now, how had she known I would be here when I had intentionally not told anyone where I had gone? I prepared to stand up but then hesitated. She wasn't coming exactly in my direction and didn't give any indication that she had seen me. Instead, she headed for the Fairy Tree. I watched her kneel, almost as if she was praying to the tree, then reached her hand inside, groping for something unseen, just as she had on those family walks. After a few moments of searching about, her shoulders slumped, and she retreated back down the path, back toward our manor.

My heart broke. How desperately lonely must she be to still be clinging to a childhood myth? She must have needed something to believe in after her father had passed away. Perhaps she truly did believe that the spirits of her parents were still watching over her. I had been so busy with my work, and Mother and Comfort were so preoccupied with the finishing school, that Cynthia had been neglected lately. It was such a struggle to keep food on the table that I had forgotten to check in on my stepsister. She must be feeling abandoned and forgotten, and to top it all off, I knew Cynthia was in dire need of a new dress and pair of shoes.

I racked my brains, trying to think of anything I could do to help, either with letting Cynthia know that we were there for her to lean on and with finding her new shoes and a dress. The tailor in town and the cobbler were both refusing any new orders—every girl in town, it transpired, had submitted orders for dresses and shoes.

After I completed the work I needed to, I walked to town. I delivered completed translations, collected payments, and picked up new projects. One such project was a thin book that the glassblower Thomas wanted translated. “It is about that new glassblowing technique I inquired about,” Thomas told me. “Supposedly, he can make any shape hard as stone. But the entire, blasted book is in Avivian, and I can’t make sense of the pictures without the words.”

I rifled through the pages. The book had an air of lengthy, difficult, technical jargon and hours of looking up complex words. The letter had been difficult enough, and this thin book seemed even more challenging. “Three silver coins,” I quoted.

His face fell. It couldn’t have been clearer that he didn’t have that sort of money. “Although,” I continued, suddenly inspired, “I do need a pair of small glass shoes, and if this technique works like you say, and they wouldn’t break when they were walked in, I would be willing to accept that as payment.”

Thomas’ face lit up. “How small of shoes?” he asked. I guessed at the length of

Cynthia's feet, and held up my hands.

"About this big? I can bring in a sample shoe if you need it before you start." Perhaps this way, Cynthia would be able to have some shoes for the ball after all.

Thomas nodded, brow furrowing as he sketched a rough high heeled shoe on a grubby piece of paper. "A woman's shoe like this?"

I nodded.

"It may take me a few tries to get it right," admitted Thomas. "With it being a new technique and all, and I won't be able to start until I get the translated book back."

"That is fine," I told him. "This way, I get my shoes and you get practice with a new technique."

Both pleased with the arrangement, I went on my way. I would need to stay up late to get this book translated if Thomas was to have it in time to make the shoes before the ball.

I got back to the manor just as the sun was beginning to set. Normally, girls would be leaving at this point. But instead, more girls were flocking into our house, as those who couldn't attend during the day were also eager to learn about poise and elegance in preparation for the ball. Mother and Comfort had begun teaching night classes as well for this knot of girls.

I hurried inside and deposited Thomas's book in my room, then went to the kitchen. Cynthia was inside, kneading dough while meat sizzled over the fire. "Hi," I called, tying on an apron. "I thought you could maybe use some help."

"I usually can, but I rarely get any," Cynthia said coldly. "Turn the meat."

I began turning the portions, making sure they didn't stick to the bottom of the pan. "I still need those cooking lessons!" I told Cynthia, in a feeble attempt to make conversation.

She grunted.

"Quite the racket they are making in there," I tried again.

"It has been like that all day."

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Once I had finished with the meat, I went to the sink to scrub dishes.

“So...a ball, huh?” I asked Cynthia, determined to have any semblance of a conversation with my stepsister. “Are you going to go?”

“And what would I wear to a royal ball?”

She had a point. Comfort and Mother regularly made dresses for themselves and their clients, but Cynthia and I had no new dresses, and the ones we did have were becoming threadbare and worn.

“I’m sure Comfort and Mother could make you one.”

“Right. In all their spare time.”

I sighed and glanced down at her feet. Her shoes really were very ragged. I wondered if she could wear the glass shoes Thomas planned to make for her, realizing that in my haste to barter for shoes that I hadn’t thought about how comfortable they may or may not be. At least they would be new. A few blisters the next day would be worth a night at a royal ball for someone who hadn’t ever attended one. I didn’t want to tell Cynthia about the shoes in case the technique didn’t work or the shoes weren’t ready in time.

“Well, I’m sure they could make one during their classes. They make them all the time. They could take your measurements and work on that while they are teaching the students.”

Cynthia continued pounding the bread dough and said nothing. “Well, if you did have a dress, would you go?” I pressed.

“You mean, if I had a new ball gown, shoes that actually worked, and gloves to hide my chapped hands from a prince? Then yes, I would go. But that all seems rather unlikely, doesn’t it?” She finished by slapping the dough onto a tray and shoveling it into the oven. “Do you think a pumpkin is going to turn into a coach to whisk me away to the palace?”

“I was just asking,” I mumbled, speaking to the pans I was scouring.

“What about you?” Cynthia asked in clipped tones. “Are you going to go off to the ball?”

Had she not heard me at dinner? Of course I wouldn’t be going. Why would I? All the other girls in Mother’s finishing school were constantly clamoring about becoming Prince Hubert’s bride. I certainly had no interest in that. Curtis was engaged to Aria, and I had rejected him. I didn’t miss dancing and social gatherings like Comfort and Mother did, so I had no reason to attend.

“No.” I finished scrubbing dishes while Cynthia swept the floor.

“Tell me about the prince again,” Cynthia demanded suddenly.

“Hubert? Or Curtis?” I couldn’t recall ever mentioning Curtis to Cynthia.

“Hubert, of course. I thought you said that you knew him growing up.”

“He is serious. Dedicated to his duties. He thinks more than he talks,” I answered. I looked over at Cynthia. “He would like you. You seem like the type of girl he would be attracted to.”

Cynthia flipped a stray strand of hair out of her face and looked up, intrigued. “Really?”

“Yeah. He is a good dancer. He likes history, just like you. And he is terrible at Charades too!” I wiggled my eyebrows at her, hoping she realized I was teasing.

“Well, it doesn’t matter, because I wouldn’t be able to go anyway.” This time, Cynthia said it petulantly, as though debating possibilities on how to get there.

“Tell me if you change your mind. I’m sure we could work something out.”

CHAPTER 39

I worked on the translation all that night, using up a third of my precious candle reserves. Just as I had suspected, Thomas’s book was dull and difficult to decipher, full of procedures and detailed mechanics on hardening glass. I only had a few hours of sleep before students began trickling into the house again, and the cacophony they arose made it so I couldn’t sleep even if I had the time. I snatched up the book and translations and left our house again.

I handed the translation and original book to Thomas when I reached his shop. “You were quick!” he exclaimed, thumbing through my neatly copied manuscript. “I wasn’t expecting this back for a week at least.”

“Well, I figured the sooner I finished, the sooner I could get those shoes!”

Thomas grinned. “I will tend to them at once.”

I left his shop, but then ran back as a thought occurred to me. “Thomas?”

“Yes?”

“When you finish the shoes, would you please keep it a secret? I want them to be a surprise for someone.”

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“Your wish is my command!”

I went back to the secluded grove of trees I had discovered the day before. I knew that if I returned to the manor, the clamor from the crowd of finishing school pupils would distract me from my work. I spread out more translations on the same flat stone and set to work.

After several more hours of work, I heard the approaching footsteps again. It was Cynthia, back to the Fairy Tree again. For the second time, I watched her kneel, clasp her hands as though worshipping, and then feel around in the tree’s hole. Again, her shoulders slumped and she walked sadly away.

How long had she been doing that? Did she come every day? I simultaneously pitied her naïve hope and admired her for refusing to give up.

Walking back into town late that day after delivering a letter and business proposal, I passed a shop window with elegant, elbow length satin gloves. Cynthia’s comment about her chapped hands floated to the forefront of my mind.

On an impulse, I went into the shop and bought the gloves. They were more expensive than I had anticipated and I knew that Comfort would be furious if she found out about my splurge. For all of her careful budgeting and meticulous counting of coins, here I was, blowing all of my day’s earnings on a pair of gloves when our family could barely make ends meet as it was.

That evening, I lied to Comfort and said that I had fallen asleep and hadn’t been able to complete any of my translations and because of that, hadn’t been able to get paid.

She sighed. “Don’t worry, sis. Mother and I have been taking on extra students.” She rubbed her hand on my knee. “I’m sure you needed the rest. You work too hard.”

I felt guilty for lying to my sister but I also knew she would disapprove of any frivolous purchases. “Actually, Comfort,” I began, “Could I talk to you and Mother?”

Cynthia had already gone to bed. Mother came into the room, and I drew a breath.

“I want to make Cynthia a ball gown.”

Mother nodded. “I have been thinking that too. Her dresses are looking very thin lately.”

“We can make it at night, so she doesn’t know, and then let her find it before the ball. But in secret, so she doesn’t know it was us.”

“Why in secret?” demanded Comfort. “She should know how much effort we are putting into this for her.”

“Oh, come on,” I wheedled. “Cynthia puts in a lot of effort too, with all of her cooking and cleaning and going to market. She needs something exciting to happen to her. I think she would feel like it is her dad watching over her, like he used to always say her mom did for her. And besides, it is fun to do things in secret like this!”

Mother was eager to participate. “Truly, what a wonderful idea! It was so thoughtful of you to think of ways to be kind. That is just like you,” she smiled at me. I could tell I had pleased her.

Comfort was still hesitant. “Why should we do something for her when Little Miss Cindersoot has been so snippy with us lately?”

“Well, it seems like I remember several times when I have been snippy, and the thing that helped me most was patience and kindness. We have Mother as an example for that.” Mother glowed at the compliment.

Comfort rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

We then spent a long time selecting fabric and debating which would look best on Cynthia. We finally decided on a light sky blue, which would bring out her eyes. We also knew it would be a dead giveaway if we measured Cynthia, so I snuck one of her old dresses from the clothesline, and we took measurements off that.

For the second night in a row, I stayed up late. My eyes itched and watered with tiredness, but this time, I had company. Mother and Comfort and I selected a pattern and began the dress. My contributions were limited to gathering seams for petticoats and stitching lace onto the hems. Anything that wouldn't be visible once it was completed was a good job for me.

We worked for hours, all giggling from giddiness coupled with drowsiness. Any time we heard the slightest creak of a floorboard or howl of the wind outside, we would instantly fall silent, hardly daring to breathe for listening, straining our ears to see if Cynthia was coming downstairs. Once we were unable to stay awake any longer, we concealed our progress in the attic room where I had been working, vowing to repeat the same procedure the following night.

CHAPTER 40

The next day, I hurried to the Fairy Tree early, worried that Cynthia might visit it before I had the opportunity to carry out my plan. I gently folded up the gloves, wrapped them in a small, old satchel I knew Cynthia wouldn't recognize, and placed them in the Fairy Tree hole. I then retreated back to my spot, where it was easy to see, but difficult to be seen, and waited.

I tried to focus on my work, but it was impossible. I kept wondering if Cynthia would come today, and if so, when. Armed with the knowledge that we were making her a dress, that shoes were being made for her, and that soon she would have gloves, I could hardly contain my excitement. I missed the fun Curtis and I used to have, preparing some prank for Hubert, then lying in wait for the moment of his arrival. But this time, there was no bucket of water that would be dumped on someone's head. This time, the end result was going to be wonderful! Perhaps this was how Algernon had felt as he hid trinkets for his daughter and stepdaughters in the tree, waiting for us to pull out our prizes.

Finally, I heard the familiar footsteps. Eagerly, I watched from between the trees as Cynthia approached the tree, murmured words I couldn't hear, then reached her hand into the tree. And this time, instead of her shoulders slumping and her walking sadly away, she froze. She pulled her hand out, clutching the small satchel.

She looked around. I didn't move a muscle, fearing that she would spot me spying on her. But luck was with me. Cynthia returned her gaze to the bag, and slowly opened it. She removed the gloves, one by one, from the bag, and held them up, marveling at her discovery. Then, experimentally, she tried them on.

I had guessed well; they fit her perfectly. She flexed her fingers and rotated her hands. Her face broke into the widest smile I had ever seen on her. It had a transformative effect. No longer did she look sad, aloof, and distant, but radiant with joy. She raised her face toward the heavens, speaking words I couldn't hear. But I understood the intent. I couldn't help but smile myself, warm not from the summer sun, but from the happiness I knew I had brought to someone else.

All that day, my work seemed easier and moved quickly. Once Cynthia went to bed, Mother and Comfort and I worked steadily on the dress. It became a routine, our eyes had dark circles because of the lack of sleep. But it was worth it. Ever since receiving the gloves, Cynthia's complaints decreased and she had a more cheerful demeanor.

One evening as we worked on the gown, Comfort asked why I wasn't planning on attending the ball.

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“You know,” I answered.

“No, I don’t!” stated Comfort emphatically. “Tell me why.”

“Because... I don’t have a bunch of friends from the old days,” I said evasively.

“You have Curtis.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Why do you say that?”

I hesitated. I had never confided in Comfort and Mother what I had written to Curtis.

“Because I wrote and told him we can’t ever be together.”

Mother gasped. “Oh sweetheart! When did you do that?”

I looked down at the hem I was sewing. “After he wrote me a letter when we first moved here.”

“Don’t worry about that letter. You should go.” Comfort sounded so casual, so uncaring that I had written off Curtis, that I gaped at her.

“Don’t worry about it?”

“Nope.”

“Why ever not?”

“Because it never got sent.”

Comfort’s pronouncement stunned me. Mother and I stared at Comfort as she continued to baste a sleeve onto the gown.

“What do you mean it never got sent?” I demanded.

Comfort snorted. “Oh please. You thought I was going to send that letter you handed me when you were all dramatic and emotional? You are such a terrible liar. I saw through it right away.”

I sat, mouth open. “You didn’t send it?”

“I waited until you had left and I opened it and read it.”

“That was private!” I said, outraged.

“No kidding. That is why I opened it,” Comfort said with a laugh.

I was shocked. “So... So... it was never sent?”

Comfort laughed again. “You keep asking that. No, I never sent it. I burned it.”

“But he never wrote back! If he hadn’t gotten a response, he would have written again!”

“I wrote to him.”

Now I stood up, unable to sit any longer. My needle and thread tumbled to the

ground. “Comfort! What did you say?”

Comfort looked at me appraisingly, as though sizing me up, to decide how much she should tell me. “I said that you needed a break, to give you time, and that you still loved him.”

Mother and I were staring, dumbfounded, at Comfort. “You had no right!” I said accusatorily, pointing at Comfort.

“I had every right to help my sister avoid the biggest mistake of her life,” Comfort said, unabashed. “Do you love him?”

“That doesn’t matter!”

“Why not?”

“Because he is engaged to someone else!” the words burst from me. I covered my face. “He is engaged to someone else,” I repeated the words quietly. For once, Comfort had nothing to say.

“Are you sure?” Mother asked. “How do you know?”

I gulped. “I heard someone say that Hubert isn’t engaged to Aria anymore...that he broke it off and Curtis took his place.”

“Oh.”

“So I still can’t go to the ball.” Tears began to trickle down my face and drip onto the fabric of Cynthia’s ball gown.

“He probably needs closure,” Comfort tried to say. “So do you.”

I shook my head. “I can’t do that. I just can’t.”

I picked up the needle and thread I had dropped. “I can’t do any more tonight.” I went back up to my room.

CHAPTER 41

The dress took a fortnight to complete. We didn’t talk about Curtis again, and Comfort didn’t bring up the subject of me going to the ball. Instead, we focused on

the gown we were making. We were determined that Cynthia would have the most beautiful dress at the ball, and the end product was stunning. The sleeves on the gown clasped at intervals, with the fabric trailing down to the floor at the end. The dress itself was form fitting and trimmed with light pink ribbon. Below the waist, the skirt flared, with a generous train.

“I already took care of the shoes,” I whispered confidentially to Mother and Comfort.

“How?” Comfort asked. “The cobbler has been booked for weeks out.”

I grinned mysteriously. “Thomas the glassblower is helping.”

Mother and Comfort stared at me. “Surely you aren’t giving her glass shoes?” Comfort asked. “She will be digging shards of glass out of her feet for weeks if she takes a single step.”

“We will see,” I said, laughing at their shock. Thomas had assured me that the shoes would be ready the next day.

“When are we giving her this dress?” Comfort asked.

“I have a place to leave it where I know she will find it.” I didn’t want to say the exact spot for fear that Comfort would ridicule her stepsister.

“Let’s leave it for her the day of the ball!” Comfort suggested. Though she had been initially against the idea of making the dress for Cynthia, she now seemed to be just as excited about serving her stepsister as I was.

“Very well,” Mother said, “Truly, would you leave the shoes for her tomorrow, and tell us how it goes in the evening?” She pressed her hands to her temples. “Heaven knows your sister and I have enough work on our hands.”

I knew it. It seemed like every girl in town was taking lessons. On dancing, poise, etiquette, singing, and any other subject that they felt might help them in the slightest for the ball. It was all any of them ever talked about. Each imagined herself leaving the small rural town we lived in, and trading that life in for one of comfort and ease at the castle, wed to the crown prince of the land.

“If they knew who the prize was, I doubt they would be this excited,” Comfort had snorted more than once, but only in private. During classes, Comfort became the model of ladylike grace that all of her pupils so eagerly tried to imitate.

True to his word, Thomas had finished Cynthia’s shoes when I went to pick them up the next morning. I picked them up and delicately inspected each shoe from every angle. They glittered like precious gems, catching the sunlight and seemed to be made of diamonds, rather than glass. They were tiny, the exact size of the shoes I had stolen from Cynthia’s room for Thomas to copy. I only hoped they would work for Cynthia.

“They won’t break,” Thomas assured me. He took one of the tiny shoes from me and hit it, hard, against the countertop. There was a delicate ringing vibration, but not a single crack or dent appeared in the shoe.

“That is amazing,” I told Thomas fervently. “Thank you so much! These will be perfect.”

“If they work out, let me know!” Thomas called to me as I exited.

I hurried to place the shoes in the Fairy Tree, double then triple checking to make sure I wasn’t being spotted when I hid them. Then I eagerly stepped away, hoping that Cynthia would find them.

Sure enough, Cynthia appeared right on time. I had figured out her routine in the past

two weeks of watching her. After cooking breakfast and cleaning up, she went on a walk around mid-morning. She would always stop at the Fairy Tree to pay her respects to her parents, and would reach inside. Today was no different.

I held my breath excitedly as Cynthia reached inside. The shoes looked blinding, dazzlingly bright in the morning sun. They truly looked as though they had been made by fairies. As she had done when she found the gloves, Cynthia looked all around to see if anyone was around. But she didn't search for very long; she seemed too eager to try on the shoes. She sat down and kicked off her old, worn shoes and tried on the glass slippers.

They weren't perfect. The right shoe seemed to be slightly larger than the left. But they did seem to fit well. Thomas knew his craft. I told myself that after the ball, I would spread the word about his abilities to get him more business. Cynthia tried several steps, and the shoes seemed to work just fine. I watched, smiling, as Cynthia tried to dance, twirling and spinning, waltzing with an imaginary partner.

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Finally, she changed back into her old shoes and hurried back toward the house, clutching the shoes against her chest.

That evening as we put the finishing touches on Cynthia's ballgown, I told Mother and Comfort all about the shoes, omitting the part that it was the Fairy Tree where I put it. I simply told them that I knew where she walked in the morning, and she had found it along her walk.

Mother glowed with pride as she watched me and my sister finish the dress and discuss how happy it made Cynthia when she had found the shoes. I described the shoes in detail, marveling how they wouldn't break and how they looked like something from a different world.

"What good girls I have," Mother gushed. "I am so proud of you two. For taking on the challenge of earning a living, for finding ways to serve your stepsister. You two are treasures."

That was what Father had always called us. We all hugged each other, then stood back and admired the gown that we would be giving to Cynthia soon.

CHAPTER 42

It was the day of the ball. Mother and Comfort had wanted to watch Cynthia find her surprise, but they were being inundated with requests from girls for last-minute coaching and preparation for the ball. Glad that the Fairy Tree's hole was so large, I bundled the gown in a large swath of fabric to protect it against the dirt and bugs on the inside of the tree. I had also added in a small leather bag of coins, my meager

personal savings. I had attached a note to it, with disguised handwriting, indicating that the coins were to be used for paying a coachman to drive her to the ball.

Cynthia had not confided in any of us that she now had gloves and shoes. Perhaps she still felt like she would be unable to attend because she still lacked a gown. In any case, she never said a word about her discoveries to me.

For the final time, I waited for Cynthia to arrive. She walked quickly this time, as if she knew today was the last chance she had to receive anything that would aid her in getting to the ball that evening. She didn't even have to reach her hand in to know that there was a large bundle waiting for her. It was visible from outside the tree. She shrieked with glee as she gently pulled the prize from the tree. She moved off the dirt path and carefully unrolled the dress.

She put her hands up to her mouth in awe. Comfort and Mother had outdone themselves. The gown was the best they had ever made. The level of work they put into that dress was beyond what they had ever attempted before. Cynthia held up the gown to herself, testing it to see if it was the right size.

I was gripped with the sudden fear that it wouldn't fit. We had no time to alter the dress now. It was too close to the ball. But Cynthia seemed to find it satisfactory, and she rolled it back into its protective cover, careful to keep it clean.

As she hurried back to the manor, I had a momentary pang of sadness that everyone else would be at the ball but me.

"Truly!" Comfort called to me from downstairs during the lunch break for the students. "Can you find another mirror? We are fixing the girls' hair for the ball, and we don't have enough mirrors down here."

Comfort and Mother had so many pupils now that it seemed like our house was

bursting at the seams. Girls were now flocking from towns over to prepare for the ball. It seemed like I had an extra mirror buried somewhere in my room, if only I could remember where it was.

I dug through drawers, hunted in dusty boxes, searched under the bed, until finally, as my fingers combed through a particularly dark drawer, my hand touched the smooth, polished surface of what could only be a mirror. It was stuck under a thick wad of papers. I heaved, but the mirror stayed put. Anxious about cracking it, I began shifting the stacks of parchment onto a nearby table.

Old copies of letters and business proposals I had translated, budgets, and then, a distantly familiar stack of unopened letters, all neatly tied together with a red ribbon. I knew these letters were important, but couldn't remember why.

Curiosity overcoming me, I forgot the mirror and sat on my bed, and pulled out one of the envelopes, and slit it open with my letter opener. Out fell a single piece of parchment, with untidy handwriting scribbled across it. Handwriting that I knew, though it had been two years since I had last seen it.

Dear Truly,

I don't think there are any words I could say to make you feel better, but please know that I am thinking of you constantly. I miss you. My arm and shoulder are still on the mend. I'm sure you are recovering much faster than I am; Hubert came in yesterday and gave a lecture on how I should have handled our situation more diplomatically, and that if only I was more like him, we wouldn't have been attacked.

I punched him. I am proud to say that even with my arm all plastered up and puncture wounds in my shoulder, I was able to land a pretty good punch. But now my recovery time is supposed to be longer and Hubert said if I hadn't just been attacked by a mob, he probably would have set one on me himself.

Anyway, now the physician (and Mother) have confined me to my bed and Hubert isn't allowed in my living quarters at all. All the better for me! And all the worse for everyone else who has to deal with his massively inflated ego. But he has a black eye, which made me feel a whole lot better about being confined.

Write back soon! All I have for company is a book Mother gave me. It is Hubert's old etiquette book about upholding a princely image and maintaining dignity. Lucky me.

Your best friend,

Curtis

Curtis.

As I read his letter, I could hear his voice perfectly. I could easily imagine him saying each word, as if he was sitting right beside me. I recalled with perfection his bouncing walk, endless chatter, his contagious laugh, his boundless energy. Just the thought of him, just reading his words on the page, made my heart pound.

I re-read the letter. His arm in a cast? Puncture wounds on his shoulder? I thought back, straining my memory. I usually tried so hard to reject all memories of that fateful day, despite the images being burned into my mind. Despite them haunting my dreams at night.

Concentrating hard, I did vaguely remember Curtis coming towards me right after I had been burned, blood pouring down his arm. I was stunned at my recollection. What a dreadful friend I had been, to not even inquire about his health! I had been so focused on myself and my own suffering that I hadn't even thought about Curtis. I supposed the puncture wounds must have been from arrows, but I never asked. Never even had anyone ask for me.

It was easy to imagine Curtis, arm encased in heavy bandages, still managing to punch stuffy, boring Hubert right in the eye. I smiled, envisioning the Queen scolding Curtis and giving him a dull novel about the mannerisms of a pompous, upstanding prince. Perhaps Hubert already had it memorized.

I reached for the next letter, eager to hear words that should have been read years ago.

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Truly,

Remember that book I told you about? It goes over everything from controlling my temper to arranged marriage protocol and how to select the proper colored doublet for different banquets. I tried to avoid reading it. I considered letting it accidentally fall into the fire, or out the window into the moat, or maybe even gouging out my eyes. But because of my little stunt with Hubert, Mother has all my tutors forcing me to memorize passages, and they are all teaching about etiquette and proper behavior now. Mother says it is the area of my education that has been grossly lacking, and it is time this error is remedied.

So now, my languages tutor is requiring essays on how to maintain a more dignified image... in three different languages! Any chance you want to write one for me? You would have to change your handwriting. Though I think you have a broken arm like I do, so it shouldn't be too hard to do. And then, make your perfect writing a tad messier, and our conspiracy will never be known!

My weapons instructor is trying to teach me how to sit stiff-backed and not bounce my head to keep my crown nice and steady while I parade down the corridors. It is actually the most amusing lesson—we just sit and stand and walk around my room (did I mention I am still not allowed to leave this infernal chamber?) while balancing books on our heads. I thought this was princess stuff. Maybe that is why Mother is making me do it—to make me suffer! If only I was a commoner and could get a whipping and be done with it! But no...

Hope your recovery is going better than mine!

Yours Truly (get it?),

Curtis

CHAPTER 43

I hungrily read letter after letter, regretting deeply that I hadn't read these sooner. I hadn't known about his broken arm. Or being confined to his room. His stories made me smile. These letters would have cheered me up so much if I had but stretched out my hand and opened them.

Dearest Truly,

I hope you are recovering quickly. I asked the physician about you several times, but he said he isn't allowed to talk about his other patients to anyone, and to stop asking or he would recommend me be gagged for medical reasons. I would threaten to have him removed as royal physician, but he would know it is a bluff. I have no more power than a scullery maid right now.

For your entertainment today, please imagine me walking around my chambers in naught but my woolen long johns, balancing my etiquette book and a cup of tea on top of my head while reciting a history of our noble country in Latin. Because that is what I was doing this morning. The tailor was trying to find a way to modify my clothes to fit this giant cast into my sleeve. That is also the reason the right sleeve of my long johns has been cut away and none of my other clothes fit. So in my long johns I stay.

Anyway, there I was, traipsing back and forth and telling about the construction of bridges during King Turk's reign, with a book and tea on my head and feeling utterly ridiculous, when my new mannerisms instructor, a woman, came in suddenly. I guess the sight of me in cut apart long johns with tea on my head and a tailor sticking pins

into me while having Sir Eugene listening to me prattle on was terrifying. So, if you heard shrieks reverberating off your walls this morning, that was my doing.

Sincerely,

Curtis

Truly,

It has been a week since I have been confined to my quarters. I hope you are getting my letters. I wouldn't put it past Hubert to be intercepting them as revenge. Hubert, if you are reading these, you will be getting another punching just as soon as my arm heals, I don't care how many etiquette lessons I get!

Truly, I feel like a toddler having to sit out of play time. I am so tired of staring at these same four walls. I wish I had a portrait of you. And these tutors have me working my fingers off with all the essays and recitations and history lessons. I am amazed that my fingers work at all anymore. You would think they could let me rest since I have a broken arm and was shot with multiple arrows, but I guess healing in peace isn't princely enough.

My tutors keep telling me that with great power comes great responsibility. What a joke! I don't even have power over how I can position my legs when I sit in a chair.

Yours Truly,

Curtis

Truly,

I was finally allowed out of my chambers. I saw Comfort today when I came to call

on you. She said you have been mostly unconscious and in a lot of pain. I was hoping to show off my arm all bound up in a splint and cast and have you swoon over my battle scars, but I guess that will have to wait. I left some flowers for you, along with all of my best wishes. I was very sorry to hear about your father. I didn't know until Comfort told me today. His funeral is tomorrow. I will tell you about it in my next letter if you aren't well enough to attend yet.

Sincerely,

Curtis

Truly,

Your father's funeral was today. Your mother said you are still unconscious and still very ill. She looked ill too. I can't imagine having a spouse pass away. I think that would break anyone. I hope your mother is able to feel some peace. I've always thought that after we pass on, we go to a place where there is no pain or suffering, and we can watch over the ones who we left behind. I'm sure your father is watching over you and your sister and mother now. I am sorry if my previous letters seemed insensitive at all, though you probably haven't been awake to read them yet. I hadn't known your father had passed away.

The service was sad. I mean, it was a good service—everyone liked your father and had nothing but good things to say about him. But sad because no one wants to see anyone die early, and your father was still young. People talked about his dedication to his country, his passion for his work, and the love he had for his family. Your mother said that he was the love of her life and a part of her died with him.

Comfort sang a song, but it was hard to hear the words because she was crying the whole time. They released some doves and scattered his ashes by the lake. Everyone who knew your father tossed flowers into the lake, and there must have been

hundreds of flowers all floating there just as the sun was setting. When it was my turn to place a flower, I told about the evenings I spent with your family, listening to him tell stories, and the fishing trips with him. I put in a flower on your behalf since you couldn't be there. It was a lily. Your favorite.

It was a sad funeral, but nice because we were able to remember all the good things about your father, and it was a beautiful place to be put to rest.

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Warmest regards,

Curtis

I blinked back tears rapidly. I had never asked for details about Father's funeral. At the time, it had been too painful to think about. But now, I had a letter telling me about it. I was glad Curtis had thought to place a flower on my behalf. He was so thoughtful. I couldn't stop reading the letters. I reached for one after another, desperate to hear everything Curtis had wanted to tell me.

Truly,

Comfort said you woke up finally! I am so glad! I have been very worried about you. I dropped off some chocolates for you and your family. Sweets always cheer me up. Which is probably why the pastry chef in the kitchens has her entire staff on orders to run me out of the kitchen any time they see me. I eat way too many!

My etiquette lessons have finally stopped. Hallelujah! Mother gave me a stern talking to about my behavior, and I had to promise to never, ever to punch the crown prince again, and to keep my temper in check. Hubert was smiling really smugly just behind her, so it was doubly hard to agree and stay composed. I think I will put itching powder in his bed tonight.

I am going back to most of my regular tutoring sessions now, and hope to see you in languages soon. I need the help! I will send lots of flowers and sweets (whenever I can sneak past the servants in the kitchen).

Affectionately,

Curtis

Dear Truly,

Get better soon! One of your little language pupils, Archie, was asking where you were today. I told him you were sick, and he said for you to get better soon because his new tutor is mean. I said that compared to you, everyone is mean.

I came to call, but Comfort said you aren't feeling well enough to accept visitors. Can you make an exception for me? I want to see you.

Yours Truly,

Curtis

Dearest Truly,

I miss you. I miss you asking about my day; you are the only one who ever does. I miss how you always smell nice. I miss you being a good influence on me. I miss just sitting and talking with you. I miss you being there to help me when I can't figure out how to conjugate Latin verbs. I miss your smile. I miss the feel of your hand in mine. I miss your ingenuity in scheming up new tricks to play on people. I miss our walks. I miss everything about you. I need you in my life again. Write back to me, please?

Forever Yours,

Curtis

Dear Truly,

I haven't heard from you at all yet. It has been several weeks. Were your eyes damaged in the burn? Comfort, if you are getting these, and Truly can't read them, could you please read them to her and write back her responses? I may go find the physician and force him to tell me how you are doing. I am getting very worried about you.

Your concerned friend,

Curtis

Dear Truly,

Mother gave me a lecture today about not pestering the physician. He went and tattled on me after I followed him around all day asking him over and over how you are doing and kept telling him I wouldn't leave him alone until he told me. He finally said he would tell me after I took my medication and he finished his rounds, but I suspected that he slipped in a sleeping draft. So I only pretended to drink it then dumped it into Hubert's grape juice when he wasn't looking.

When the physician came back, I was up and waiting for him. He told me that he couldn't actually say anything about your condition and that he had lied before. I told him he looks like a flabby toad and to try and figure out if I was lying or not and see how he likes it.

Your best friend,

Curtis

P.S. Hubert is still out cold. Don't tell Mother.

P.P.S. The physician really does look like a toad.

Dear Truly,

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I am feeling gloomy. Kind of a first for me. I wish you were here. I could use some company. Will you come save me?

I wanted to gather up a bucket full of toads to throw into the physician's living quarters because he wouldn't tell me about you. But I couldn't work up the energy. Without you there with me, it didn't seem worth it.

Your glum friend,

Curtis

Poor Curtis. There I had been, wallowing in my own grief, when my friend had needed me. Wanted me there. We could have helped each other, but instead I had become a recluse, hiding away from the world. I thought that would be the worst of it, but the next letter broke my heart.

Dear Truly,

I have been thinking. I haven't heard from you at all, and I feel like I need to apologize. Perhaps you blame me for the attack. I guess I am partially responsible for what happened to you. I saw your sister today and badgered her into telling me the whole truth. Comfort told me that your arm was broken, and your face was burned badly, and that you are feeling depressed. If it wasn't for me wanting you to ride beside me, you could have ridden with the guards and stayed safe. If I had gotten to you sooner after the mob came, you wouldn't have been injured.

I was lucky and got off easy with just few minor scars, but you got the worst of it.

Not just physical injuries, but on that day, I could hear the mob when they took you. I heard a lot of what they were yelling when I was trying to get to you. It still haunts me. I cannot even count the number of times that I have wished I had been the one taken instead of you. I would have gladly borne that if I knew it would have spared you even a moment of pain.

Please believe me when I tell you, I was trying my best to save you. I saw them dragging you away, and I was beside myself trying to cut down anyone who stood between us. There were so many in the mob. I wanted more than anything to protect you, but I couldn't that day. And I will regret that forever.

I am so sorry, Truly. I should have been there for you, but I failed. I hope you don't hate me. I couldn't live with myself knowing that you hate me. It doesn't matter to me if you look different now. I want to be with you. I can't imagine a future without you in it.

Love Forever,

Curtis

I sat with the letters clutched in my hands, gaping at the words written on the page. All these years, had he thought I blamed him for the mob attacking? Had he thought I was angry with him, was refusing to see him because of his actions?

I had to fix this. Even though it had been years ago, even though he was now engaged to someone else, I had to see Curtis again. To explain. To apologize. He needed to know it wasn't his fault. I didn't know exactly what Comfort had written to him in her letter, but it didn't matter. Now that he was engaged to Aria, it didn't matter what we felt for each other. I knew what I needed to do.

My body seemed to act of its own accord. I stood up briskly, threw open my bedroom

door, and marched down the flight of stairs, finding Mother and Comfort preparing for their next lesson, and Cynthia sweeping away the remnants left behind by the last class.

“I am going to the ball!” I announced loudly. They all jumped and stared at me. I handed Comfort the mirror she had requested, which she took, open-mouthed.

“Wh-what?” Mother stammered.

“The royal ball tonight. I will be attending,” I said authoritatively.

Cynthia rolled her eyes. “You do know that there will be people at the ball who will see your face, right?”

“Shut up, Cynthia!” snapped Comfort. She got up and hurried over to hug me. “Oh, Truly, I am so glad you are coming with us! It will be much more fun with you there! And don’t worry, Mother and I will fix your hair and cosmetics, and no one will notice anything.”

“Everyone will notice,” Cynthia griped, but we all ignored her.

Girls were beginning to arrive for their final ball preparations, so I retreated upstairs. I held the letters, reading them over and over. Memories flooded my mind, and this time, I didn’t push them away, but reveled in those happy, golden times. Playing pranks on Hubert. Racing horses across the fields. Staying up late and listening to the bard in Avivia. Dancing together at the balls.

I had to see him again. Nothing would stop me.

CHAPTER 44

Our driver turned into the castle grounds. Cynthia had insisted that we go on ahead without her and had still not said anything about her ball gown and shoes. The gates had been left wide open, and guards lined the cobblestone path, standing at attention as coach after coach swept in, and girls hung out of the coach's windows, gazing in wonder at the castle, ablaze with light.

I didn't look ahead at the castle with the others. I was beginning to feel ill. What had I been thinking, coming to the ball? I wasn't so much worried about everyone laughing at my scarred face. It would be difficult for anyone to notice; Mother had done an excellent, detailed application of cosmetics that afternoon, and I had borrowed one of Comfort's dresses, and a pair of her shoes. I was more worried about what Curtis would say after all this time of being away. If he had never received my letter, and had one from Comfort in its stead... But again, I reminded myself, he was with Aria. I was here to apologize and give closure. That was all. I smoothed my hair down. It had finally grown back. It cascaded down past my shoulders, nearly to my elbows.

Then, as if by habit, I pulled out my fan to shield my face. Gently, Mother tugged my fan away and tucked my hair behind my ear, putting my face on full display. She smiled warmly at me and nodded out of the window. "That grove of trees was where your father proposed to me."

Comfort and I stared out at the spot Mother had indicated. Among the trees, we could see a small pond, lily pads floating on top, and a stone bench by the water's edge. Flowers dotted the ground around it. It looked picturesque, and it didn't take much imagination to see a young Mother sitting on the bench as Father knelt in front of her.

I squeezed Mother's hand, noticing as I did that her chin was quivering. "It is beautiful," I told her, and Comfort nodded her agreement.

Mother blinked rapidly, and then gestured out the window again. "And over there," she continued, "is where Truly fell off a horse on her twelfth birthday."

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I smiled at the memory, recalling with ease the occasion—Curtis and I had been racing, and I had attempted to leap my horse over a hedge after Curtis. But my steed had stopped short, and I had been flipped out of the saddle and landed on my backside in the hedge's brambles, my arms and legs waving pathetically out of the top until I had been rescued by Curtis, laughing fit to burst.

Curtis. I would be seeing him soon. I tried to remember the lines I had been rehearsing. Preparing to apologize. Beg for his forgiveness for my having been such a terrible friend. For ignoring him when he needed me most. To congratulate him on his engagement.

Memories from my youth came flooding back as our carriage trundled up the path, clattering on towards the gleaming front doors. Music swelled louder and louder as we drew closer to the entrance. The carriage wasn't moving forward smoothly anymore, but stopping and starting again as we waited for girls in coaches at the head of the queue to exit and mount the steps.

My eyes drifted onto the faces of the guards lining the path, standing at attention. Most faces I did not recognize, though a few were familiar. I nudged Comfort and nodded toward one of the men, whom Comfort used to dance with in years past. She blushed but waved merrily out of the window at him, whose eyes stayed fixed ahead, staying stationary as guards were supposed to, no matter what.

And finally, it was our turn to descend the few stairs from our carriage and follow the other swishing skirts and corseted figures traipsing into the castle. Mother and Comfort ascended the front castle steps gracefully and swept inside ahead of me. I hung back, nervous about entering such a lavish celebration. For so long, I had

avoided social gatherings, embarrassed about my appearance. I knew just how large of a mass of people that would be cloistered in that ballroom. My nerves screamed at me to retreat, but as I reflected on the letters from Curtis, I knew I had to go through with my decision to come.

I drew as deep a breath as I could, with my ribs being constricted by my corset, and entered the doors. It was even more beautiful than I had remembered. Flowers in vases were set on tables at intervals along the long corridor ahead. Massive oil paintings of previous royalty, scenes from our nation's history, and of great battles hung on the walls. I had never appreciated the intricate detail in each unique piece of art before this moment.

My footsteps were soft on the purple carpet as I trailed after several groups of giggling girls, each expressing her eagerness for meeting Prince Hubert and hoping that she would be chosen for his bride. A faint smile touched my lips as I remembered Prince Hubert, unsmiling, stiffly leading his dance partners through a series of dance steps. But perhaps he had changed. After all, it had been years ago.

Then I wondered again if Curtis would be inside the ballroom that was looming closer and closer. Just before entering the doors, I hesitated, thinking of turning and talking a walk before forcing myself to have the conversation I knew I had to have, but another swarm of girls coming in from behind me pressed against me, and I was pushed inside.

CHAPTER 45

Mother and Comfort had already disappeared, eager to see old friends and make new acquaintances. I couldn't think of any friends besides Curtis from my years in the castle, and surely he would be attending to Aria or else managing a large group of giggling girls, intent on meeting a prince, any prince. I was surprised at how relatively few girls were there. It was still crowded, and I recognized many people

from my village, but it seemed to only be a couple hundred people in the castle, far fewer than every maiden in the kingdom.

I meandered along the perimeter of the room, listening to the orchestra, and watching all the dancing couples. I saw the king and queen, greeting an endless queue of people. I idly picked up a plate of grapes, cheese and pastries, and nibbled at the refreshments as I watched couples whirl by.

“Miss Truly?” a voice called behind me. I turned, and to my surprise found one of my former languages students, now a good foot and a half taller than when I saw him last. I only barely recognized him.

“Archie, is that you?” I asked incredulously. It looked like he was coming for a hug, but I wasn’t sure if we were going to hug or shake hands, and we ended up shaking hands at uncomfortably close quarters.

Fortunately, that was as awkward as it got. Archie, it transpired, had gone on to fill my seat as a court linguist. “All thanks to you and your endless patience during my boyhood!” he joked jovially.

There was no envy; I was genuinely glad for his success. I inquired about his family and travels as a delegate.

“How did you like the Avivian palace when you first saw it?” I asked, wondering if he had the same level of awe that I still recollected so well.

“Breathtaking!” he said fervently. “I never knew such beauty could exist in a building.”

“And how is your sister? Anastasia, right?”

He nodded. “She is very well, thank you. She still talks fondly of the day she helped you and Prince Curtis dig a pit, camouflaged it, and lured Prince Hubert into it.”

I laughed. I remembered that day too. “Give her my best wishes.”

“I beg your pardon?” The music was loud, and it was difficult to hear each other.

“I said, give her my best wishes!”

“I will!” Archie inclined his head to a door. “May we continue our conversation in the halls?”

I followed him, glad to have a reason to escape from the noise and crowd of people, most of whom were staring pointedly away from me and my ugly face.

“I heard Hubert broke his engagement to Aria,” I pressed when we were out in the halls. In truth, I now felt more like the pupil as Archie strode beside me, anxious as I was for the information he had.

“It was a mutual decision to part ways,” Archie said smoothly. I smiled inwardly, reminding myself of all the times I had to adjust my speech to make the ugly affair of royalty lives seem more glamorous and glossed over.

“So, an unmitigated disaster then?” I grinned.

“Ah, Lady Truly, you are wise beyond your years!” Archie chuckled. “Our country’s crown prince and Crown Princess Aria are... not soul mates.”

I laughed out loud at this point, and pitied whatever girl Hubert did end up marrying one day, if he did get married at all. ‘Although,’ I thought to myself, ‘there is many a girl who wouldn’t care what her husband was like, so long as she was queen.’ I

shuddered to think of a marriage like that. After seeing my parents so in love for all my childhood, I was in no rush to marry anyone who wasn't a perfect fit. A best friend.

I was just about to ask Archie about Curtis and Aria, but an official looking man with a curly beard stepped into the hall and caught sight of us. He looked down his nose to me, then turned, dismissing me from what he had to say to Archie, "Pardon my interruption, but His Majesty, the King requires your assistance." Archie inclined his head in thanks, suddenly much more business-like and grown up.

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“Excuse me, Lady Truly, but I must take my leave.”

I curtsied, and then strolled away down the corridor. I wasn't eager to rush back into the ballroom. I didn't want to be a shadow to Mother or Comfort, both of whom would be thoroughly enjoying this rare night of socializing. I wanted a mirror to check on my cosmetics, to be absolutely sure they were hiding my scars. I wondered if Cynthia had arrived yet, if she had managed to find a coachman able to drive her. I should search for Curtis and get the apology over quickly, but now I felt like I was losing my nerve.

The halls were chilly, and I folded my arms tightly across my chest. How could the castle be so cold when it was a warm summer night? Deciding to forgo the gloomy interior of the castle, I instead turned out into a quiet courtyard. The fresh air blew gently, and scent of the nearby rose gardens refreshed me, wiping away my anxiety. I could still hear the music of the orchestra, but it was faint, a soft background to the singing of birds and chirping of crickets. I sat on a stone bench, kicking off Comfort's tight, fashionable shoes and stretched out my large feet luxuriously. The moon softly glowed and stars were beginning to pop into existence. I felt more relaxed right then than I could recall ever being before.

I wondered what Mother and Comfort were doing. Entertaining large groups of people, undoubtedly, with their charm and wit and beautiful faces. I wondered if the rumors were true, and this was indeed a ball planned so that Hubert could choose a bride. Then memories began returning, just as they had when our carriage had entered the castle grounds. So many good memories from my childhood and adolescence had happened here.

Nearby, a figure passing a lit window caught my eye. Could it be?

I stood up to get a better look. “Curtis?” I whispered softly to myself. Then louder, unable to stop myself, “Curtis!”

The figure halted, then turned. With the light behind him, it was difficult to see his face, but he began walking slowly towards me. “Truly?” he asked, incredulously. “Is that you?”

CHAPTER 46

Self-consciously, I resisted the impulse to cover my face. “Yes, it is me,” I answered in a small voice. With his coming closer with each step, I now half regretted calling out to him. Was it a mistake in coming here tonight? Did he still think I hated him?

Now Curtis was right beside me. The lights from the windows fell across his face, and I caught my breath. He had changed in the few years we had been apart. He was even taller now, but more filled out and muscled, less gangly. His face looked more mature, his jaw more solid. But his mop of curly, unruly hair was just the same.

For a minute, we just stood, taking in each other’s changed appearances, unsure of what exactly to say. What do you say to an ex-boyfriend after years apart? Images from our childhood flashed across my mind—archery contests, lessons together, walks around the moat, our first kiss...

Remembering that he was royalty and I was a mere commoner now, I quickly dropped into a curtsy. “Your Majesty.”

The spell that had come over us broke. Curtis laughed, then pulled me up from my curtsy and hugged me hard. “Don’t start with all that protocol now, Truly!” I placed my arms around him, hugging him back. We broke apart and he held me at arm’s

length. "You look wonderful, milady."

Embarrassed, but really quite pleased, I smiled. Even if he was only saying it to be nice, it was nice to hear a compliment. "Thank you. And I didn't think you could get taller, but you proved me wrong."

Curtis laughed again. His bubbling energy was infectious. Just as I remembered.

"Walk with me?" he asked, gesturing to the open grounds.

I nodded eagerly, and started forward, but then remembered my shoes laying neglected under the stone bench. I hastened to put them on, squashing my toes into the tight shoes, and then caught up with Curtis. "Now you are taller too," Curtis joked. My heels were fashionably, and uncomfortably, tall.

"Is Aria here tonight too?" I asked, forcing my voice to stay calm.

Curtis seemed puzzled. "No, why would she be?"

"I was just wondering," I said. "Since you are betrothed to her, I thought that maybe—"

Curtis cut me off. "What?"

Now it was my turn to be confused. "Aren't you two betrothed? I heard—"

"You heard wrong," exclaimed Curtis. "We have never been engaged. She and Hubert were, but they broke it off."

I didn't yet dare to hope. "You... you aren't engaged? They said you took Hubert's place."

Curtis shook his head. “When Hubert and Aria broke off their engagement, Aria said that she didn’t want her rule to be hindered by a husband. They have a matriarchal monarchy, so the queen rules anyway. She never wanted to marry him. Or me. And I wouldn’t have wanted to marry her either.”

“Oh,” was all I could come up with. “Well, uh, I guess I don’t need to congratulate you then.”

“No, you don’t,” Curtis chuckled.

We strolled past the lit windows of the grand ballroom and peeked inside. We caught sight of Prince Hubert, rigidly dancing with a simpering girl, and I noted that it looked like he hadn’t changed his stuffy ways at all.

Curtis and I caught each other’s eye then burst out laughing. It was as though no time had passed. As though we were still sixteen years old and eager to spend every minute together. “Quite the charmer, isn’t he?” Curtis said.

“So is it true?” I questioned Curtis. “Rumor is in town that after his betrothal to Aria was called off, the ball was arranged so Hubert can choose a bride.”

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“How is it that these rumors got Hubert’s love life right and mine so wrong?” Curtis replied, pretended to be offended, but then added. “I think that is what our parents are hoping for, and Hubert isn’t having any luck finding someone on his own. They thought both Hubert and I would be married by now.”

“Both of you, huh?” I asked. I marveled at how easy it was to talk to Curtis. In my mind, I had imagined this conversation being the most awkward of my life, but instead, here we were, old friends once again.

“Yup. They keep telling us we better get a move on and get married and start having a plethora of children to keep the royal line alive and well,” Curtis rolled his eyes. “My sympathies to whatever girl that has to mother Hubert’s children.”

A vivid picture of Hubert marching along a corridor trailed by six or seven little stiff-backed boys with expressionless faces and monotone voices, all dressed in crisp suits popped into my mind. I giggled.

“Can you imagine Hubert trying to teach his sons how to catch a ball?” I asked, trying to imagine Hubert playing with children at all. “Or kiss an owie?”

“Or braid his daughter’s hair?” Curtis grinned. “He would have her sit on a little fluffy pink stool and say ‘Now Huberta, sit still while Daddykins fancifies your golden locks.’” His impression of Hubert’s voice was impeccable.

Tears were beginning to well up in my eyes from laughing so much. It seemed like I had laughed more with Curtis in this half hour since seeing him again than I had for the years since Father had died. We went on, hypothesizing all the different scenarios

that would come up for Hubert once he was a parent.

“What about you?” I asked later, hiccupping. “Your parents want you to get married and have kids too,” I added, “You will be a great father.” I could sincerely see Curtis teaching his children to ride horses and play dress up and pulling pranks on everyone in the castle. He would be the kind of father who took joy in the time he spent with his children, the kind who bragged about his daughter’s skill with a bow or his son’s prowess in chess.

“Pops is always telling us to get a move on. Hubert hasn’t found anyone who can stand him so far.”

“You didn’t answer the question,” I accused, but forcing myself to stare straight ahead, as if I didn’t care about his response. “Have you found someone, since the Aria rumor wasn’t true?”

“Why, are you interested?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

I didn’t respond, unsure of how to respond.

Curtis shrugged. “I am just the kingdom’s backup plan if Hubert isn’t successful in finding a wife, so I don’t have quite as much pressure. Honestly, I think nobody actually believes Hubert will procreate, which is why they keep reminding me to club a girl over the head and drag her back to my cave. If Hubert doesn’t produce an heir soon, then I have to.” Then lowering his voice conspiratorially added, “Though truth be told, I think any progeny of Hubert’s wouldn’t bode well for the kingdom.”

“I don’t think Hubert bodes well for the kingdom,” I returned.

“Milady speaks treasonously!” Curtis pretended to step back in shock.

“He is quite the diplomat,” I conceded. “And besides,” I added slyly, “None of the people he meets with never have to worry about him sticking honey buns on their seats.”

Curtis slapped his hand to his forehead. “I had forgotten all about that!”

I remembered only too well. When we were young, Curtis had snuck several sticky honey buns onto his father’s chair just before he sat down, and later when the king left the table, there were two honey buns stuck to the seat of his pants. I still could recall the horrified expression on the queen’s face with perfect accuracy, and how Curtis had tumbled out of his seat from his fits of hysterics, and then nimbly evaded the staff and sprinted out of the dining hall before he could be caught and punished.

“But surely,” Curtis said, “You found some romantic companionship in the couple years since...” He broke off, unsure of what to say next. Had he planned on mentioning the accident? Father’s death? Or was he eluding to the fact that we had been together before I left?

I shook my head. “No, nobody was ever interested in me.” Because of my face, I added in my mind. No one would ever want a girl with a face like mine. Add on the fact that I had just about become a hermit, and I should just as well have become a nun.

“That can’t be true,” Curtis exclaimed.

I wanted to respond but also didn’t want to draw attention to my scars. “Well how about you then? There are a whole host of girls who would love to be courted by a prince,” then added hastily, “just not Hubert.”

Curtis sighed and scuffed the dirt with the toe of his boot. “Plenty of girls, yes. But none that are interested in me. Just the title.” He gave me a sidelong look. “It seems

that I did have one girl interested in me a couple years ago though.”

Again, I was lost for words. I had practiced apologizing so many times, but now that I was here... I had been so devastated both by my father’s death and my disfigurement that I had refused to see Curtis when he had come to call, ignored all of his letters. And here he was, still being as friendly as ever. I stopped walking, and Curtis also came to a halt. I had to say what I had come to say.

CHAPTER 47

“Curtis, I...I want to apologize,” I stammered.

He looked surprised. “For what?”

My eyes dropped shamefully to the ground. “You were so sweet after...after that day. With Father, and my injury and everything. You came to visit me and even sent me letters after we moved. And I never responded. I only just read them today. I didn’t know your arm was broken, and that you had been shot. I was too busy feeling sorry for myself to think of you, and none of what happened was your fault at all! I want you to know that I am so, so sorry. You were such a good friend, and I wasn’t a good friend at all. You deserved better.” I hung my head, ashamed.

We were silent for a long moment. Curtis stepped closer and took my hand. Then he cupped his other hand under my chin and raised my face up. “Hey, you were my best friend. You had a rough patch, and I knew that. Of course I wished you wrote back, but I understand why you didn’t. You had a lot to deal with.”

I gently squeezed his hand. “I’ve missed you so much, Curtis.” I confessed softly. “More than you know.”

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“I’ve missed you too,” Curtis whispered. “I never forgot about you. I kept waiting and hoping you would come back. I loved you then and that never changed. I still do.”

“I love you too.”

We stared at each other. My heart began to beat faster. Was I crazy? I had come here to congratulate Curtis on his engagement and to apologize for being such a terrible friend. For running away when he had needed me. And here I was proclaiming my love for him!

“Truly, I know when I wrote that letter, I said that you are worth waiting for,” Curtis began.

“But?” I asked apprehensively.

“But I don’t think I can wait any longer. I need you in my life. I couldn’t bear it to lose you again.”

He knelt down and pulled out a ring. “Will you marry me?”

My mouth fell open. What? How could this be happening so fast? I knew that I loved him. Of course I knew. Just as he had said his love for me had never waived, neither had mine. All these years later, any time I imagined myself married, it was always Curtis beside me. It was as though I had been hoping all this time, for just this to occur, but now that it had, I didn’t know what to do. I just stood there, dumbstruck.

Merely twelve hours before, I hadn't even dreamed I would be attending the ball. My mind had already accepted that Curtis would never be in my future, even if my heart was still struggling with that concept. And then there had been the whirlwind of finding Curtis' letters, coming back to the palace, reuniting with him, and discovering Curtis still loved me... Was I ready to move forward?

Curtis winced, and I realized he had been uncomfortably kneeling while my thoughts had raced through my mind. "Curtis, I don't think you need to keep kneeling. You can stand up."

He didn't move. "You didn't answer my question. Will you marry me?"

"Curtis, I... I don't know."

Fear crept into his face.

"I'm not saying no!" I said hastily. "I just... I just need some time to process all of this. This afternoon I still thought you were going to be running off to Avivia to marry Aria."

He slowly stood up. "I guess that would be a bit of a shock," he conceded. "But you said that you loved me."

"And I do!"

"So marry me!"

I hesitated.

"Truly. When you left, it was like a part of me died. Every day since then, I have wished that you would come back. I need you back in my life. You make me a better

person. You give me a reason to wake up in the morning and be the best I can be. If you walk away tonight, I wouldn't be able to handle it. I can't live without you anymore. Marry me."

"But..." my thoughts were a blur. So many questions tumbled around in my mind, and finally I stammered, "H...how long have you had the ring?"

He held the ring up to catch the light. It was beautiful, a delicate golden band with diamonds cloistered at the top. It was a ring worthy of a princess. "I got it about the time that the ball was announced. I made sure to tell one of the couriers where your house was so that he would be sure to invite you. Just to be sure, we invited every girl in your town."

"I thought every girl in the kingdom was invited."

Curtis shook his head incredulously. "The castle would have been overrun!"

"But, the invitation said..."

"That was just another tactic from the Council. They had us pick out a few towns nearby, and we sent invitations exclusively to them. We couldn't possibly accommodate all the thousands of girls that would have showed up otherwise. So I picked your town, and Hubert picked another. I think he threw a dart at a map to pick."

I laughed, marveling that Curtis went to such great lengths to make sure I was invited to the ball. Now the smaller number of girls I had noticed milling around the ballroom made sense. He hadn't wanted every eligible maiden in the kingdom. He had wanted me. He still loved me. I had never been able to stop thinking about him, after all these years. I loved him too. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him.

“Yes,” I breathed.

“Yes?”

“Yes, I will marry you.”

Elated, Curtis slipped the cool band onto my finger. We gazed into each other’s eyes, lost in the moment. We were going to get married. I was going to be my best friend’s wife.

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Curtis bent toward me, his eyes lowering to my mouth. As he placed his hand at the back of my neck, I could feel how large his hands were. I placed my own palm against his chest, remembering all the stolen moments in the year before the accident, and knew what to do as though no time had passed. Curtis pressed his lips to mine, pulling me close and wrapping me in a tight embrace. My arms wrapped around him, wishing this moment would stretch on forever.

There was no stable boy to interrupt us now, no teenage worries at all about being seen, so we kissed again and again. I somehow felt like I was breathing too fast and not breathing at all, but it didn't bother me in the slightest. Nothing mattered except for this moment.

After a long time, we broke apart, but still looked at each other. "Wow, I really missed you!" Curtis said, and gently pecked my lips again.

I smiled widely. "And here I was thinking you would just replace me with the first pretty face that came along."

"There is no face prettier than yours," Curtis said fervently.

"You are very generous with your compliments."

Did he even know about my disfigurement? He must—he said in one of his letters that Comfort had told him about it. I bit my lip, unsure of how to begin. Curtis merely took my hand and began walking over near the lily pond where Father had proposed to Mother.

“What is it?” Curtis asked.

“I... I didn’t say anything,” I said, surprised.

Curtis looked shrewdly at me. “You always bite your lip when you want to say something.”

“Nothing gets past you.”

We walked on, arriving at the bench beside the pond. I sat down and kicked off my shoes again. Why had I ever decided to wear those infernal accessories? Then I remembered—Comfort chose them, not me. No wonder my feet were in agony! Comfort and Mother, finishing school instructors that they were, were always daintily stepping around in high-heeled, pointy-toed shoes that pinched their toes and gave them blisters. I had always preferred big comfy shoes that I could conceal under my skirts. Curtis pulled my foot up onto his lap and began rubbing it. His large hands putting pressure on my sore feet felt wonderful.

“Where did you learn to give foot massages?” I asked.

“Hubert likes his feet being rubbed,” Curtis answered nonchalantly.

My mouth hung open, horrified. Curtis looked at me then burst out laughing. “Got you!”

I let out a long breath. “Don’t you ever scare me like that again! Here I was, picturing you two having foot massage parties.”

Curtis chuckled. “Well, I would like to claim that I have an extensive education about this matter, but alas, I am just making it up as I go.”

He massaged my feet for a few more minutes. We listened to the frogs croaking, the crickets chirping, the occasional sound of a carriage departing from the ball, trundling off toward the main road. It was peaceful.

“In your letters, you said you had a broken arm,” I ventured, trying to find a tactful way to approach the subject.

“Oh yeah, it healed in no time. I still have the scars from where the arrows went in though.” Curtis said casually. “But it is okay, every man needs a good scar story. I am quite proud of mine.”

I hung my head, ashamed to say anything about my own scars.

Curtis gasped, “Truly, I am sorry!” He began to stumble over his words. “I know you have scars too, I just...I mean, I didn’t...I didn’t mean to make you feel bad...” he trailed off awkwardly.

I hastened to explain. “No! No, it isn’t that. You didn’t make me feel bad. I am just... embarrassed of my face sometimes,” I finished quietly.

Curtis nodded, “Comfort wrote me a letter after you moved. She told me about it.” He peered into my face, pulling my hair back to examine my features closely. “You really can’t tell.”

I felt ashamed now, like I had deceived Curtis. Tricked him into proposing to me until the false pretense that I was pretty. “I wear a lot of cosmetics.” I admitted as I indicated the left side of my face. “Here especially.”

Curtis looked hard at my face and rubbed away a small portion of the makeup “That is it?” Curtis asked after a moment. “That isn’t bad at all! I wouldn’t even be able to tell if you didn’t tell me where to look. The way Comfort described it in her letter,

you were almost unrecognizable.”

“I was at first,” I conceded. “Most of my hair was gone, and my face was red and swollen. It had blistered, and I had boils for a long time before they peeled off. If she wrote to you right after we moved, I was just getting over the worst of it then.”

Curtis put his arm around me. “I am sorry, Truly,” he said sincerely. “I should have been there for you.”

I leaned into his arm, let my head rest on his shoulder. “You were there for me, Curtis. You always have been.”

“And I always will be,” he finished.

We sat for a long time, not speaking, just drinking in each other's company. I had my best friend back.

CHAPTER 48

Hours later, hand in hand, Curtis and I walked back to the rose gardens. The music still wafted out of the open doors. I could see that people were actively leaving the party. It must be close to midnight. Surely Mother and Comfort would be wondering where I was. Curtis and I were just at the edge of the rose bushes when we heard a monotone voice.

"I am smitten with you. From the second I laid eyes on your beauty, my heart belonged to you alone," the voice droned. "Will you marry me and become my queen?"

My mouth and Curtis' fell open. We both knew that voice. I couldn't stop myself; I peered around the rosebush. There, on one knee, was Hubert. And in front of him, her hands covering her mouth, was Cynthia!

"Yes!" she squealed and flung her arms around Hubert. He stood and stiffly patted her on the back.

"Very well, we must inform my father at once," he said, and walked straight-backed to the open doors, Cynthia bobbing alongside him.

Curtis and I stood stunned, mouths still agape. Hubert and Cynthia? Hubert and Cynthia? I couldn't believe what I had just seen!

I turned to Curtis. “Did that really just happen?”

Curtis shook himself. “Just... wow. Wow! I know Father told him to choose soon, but I didn’t think it would be that soon. Who knew tonight’s ball would spark so much romance? Two engaged couples—the Council will be thrilled. But I’ve never even seen that girl before.”

I gasped. Of course he hadn’t met her. “That is my stepsister, Cynthia!” I cried out, a little louder than I had intended. I hoped that the new couple were far enough away that they didn’t hear me and realize we had been eavesdropping, even if unintentionally.

Curtis goggled at me. “You know her? Wait, you have a stepsister? Your mom remarried?”

I nodded. “And Cynthia hates me.”

“Well, well, well, what an interesting turn of events this evening has had in store.” Curtis was clearly amused. “Who knew Hubert had it in him?”

“You know, as much as Cynthia and I don’t get along, I’m not sure I wish that future on her,” I mused.

“Why don’t you get along?” Curtis asked, gesturing me to sit.

“Well, it is a long story,” I answered, again kicking off my shoes.

“I have time,” Curtis smiled at me. “I will always have time for you.”

I grinned. Curtis always made me feel so confident and important. “Well, after we moved, there was a widower who lived not far from our manor,” I said. “Cynthia was

his only child. She and Comfort used to talk a lot. That is how Cynthia's father and Mother became acquainted and eventually got engaged. Because of my injury, I didn't like to go out very often. I had only heard about Cynthia from Comfort. When we finally met, well, she said a couple things that... that...I am sure she didn't mean. She was just surprised by my appearance, I guess." I paused, using my toe to draw in the dirt, not wanting to look up. Curtis remained silent, waiting patiently for the rest of the story.

"Anyway," I continued, "Comfort got all upset that Cynthia said those things, and they aren't friends anymore, even though we are sisters now, and I think maybe she was too embarrassed to talk to me much. And then after her father and Mother married, he died not too long after."

Curtis let out a long breath. "I'm so sorry."

I shrugged. "I really didn't know him that well, to tell you the truth. But after he died, Cynthia just kind of broke. I think having both her parents die and leaving her nowhere else to go made her very bitter. She didn't want to stay with us but had no relatives."

"So she hates you because she said something mean years ago?" Curtis asked, a little confused.

"No, that isn't it," I replied. "After her father passed away, we had to find a way to support ourselves." It was a little awkward talking about our family's financial situation with Curtis, since he would never worry about such things.

"Mother and Comfort opened a finishing school for girls. Dance lessons, hair styles, fashion and calligraphy, that sort of thing."

"They would be good at that," Curtis acknowledged.

I nodded in agreement. “And I would translate for people writing letters and business propositions, but again, people aren’t able to pay a whole lot in a small town, so I was working all the time too. We didn’t have the money to afford household help, so the bulk of it fell to Cynthia. I guess she feels like a servant, doing a lot of the cleaning and cooking.”

I felt like I needed to explain myself. “That wasn’t what we intended, I swear! We were just all so busy working all the time that we didn’t have time, and Cynthia didn’t have any marketable skills, so we just figured it made sense to... You know, have her do the stuff that she could.”

Curtis remained silent.

“I think Cynthia really is a nice person. She does a good job with cooking and the house is spotless. She just has a lot that she has been through. So... that is why she hates us I guess. To her, I am just an ugly stepsister. I bet she will be thrilled to leave our house now and become queen.”

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I finished my story. Curtis sat digesting the information about his future sister-in-law, then slowly began to smile mischievously. His grin broadened until I could see every one of his teeth. I couldn't understand what was so funny until he burst out, "Hubert is marrying a MAID???" He began to laugh until tears leaked from his eyes.

"Curtis, no!" I cried. "You mustn't tease him about it. Cynthia would be so embarrassed!"

Curtis continued to laugh. I groaned. Just my luck to ruin the one good thing Cynthia had going for her. I grabbed Curtis' jacket front and held on, shaking him slightly. "Please Curtis, don't say anything about it. I don't want her to feel bad!"

Curtis wiped at his streaming eyes. "I dunno, I don't think I can keep quiet about that one! I wonder who will be the MAID of honor at their wedding?" and then he cracked up again, rolling around with hysterical laughter.

I rolled my eyes. Really. I had thought Curtis had matured over the years. But here he was, the same impish boy he had been when I had lived here.

I stood up, "I really should be on my way." I turned to leave, holding my shoes in my hands so I could walk more quickly.

Curtis stopped laughing. "Aw Truly, don't leave. Don't be mad! I promise I won't tease Hubert. Much."

"Curtis!" I reprimanded sharply.

“Fine, fine, I won’t say anything about it.” Curtis stood up too and took my shoes from my hands. Without my shoes on, he was a full head taller than I. “Will you stay?”

I couldn’t stay mad at Curtis. “I suppose. As long as you behave yourself!”

Curtis shot me back a calculating look. “Hmmm, behave myself. I’m not sure I can do that with you around.” He leaned forward and kissed me quickly. “Does that count as me behaving myself?”

I giggled. “I suppose.”

He kissed me again, longer this time. “Am I still behaving?”

“Less so than before,” I teased playfully.

Curtis let out a long pretend sigh. “Alas, milady, it is like I said—I cannot always behave myself around you.”

It was so refreshing to forget the life I had back at the manor, to have fun, to feel attractive. I hadn’t felt that since before the attack. Since Curtis and I had been together. “Well, as long as you behave whenever other people are around,” I teased.

Curtis made a show of looking all around at the concealing rosebushes. “Hmmm, I do believe we are very alone.” He stepped close to me, “Can I misbehave now?”

I leaned in for a kiss. “I suppose just a little.”

I felt Curtis pressing close to me, kissing me, and warmth flooded my body again. How I had missed this! Feeling wanted and desired, with nobody else but us in the world.

I stood on tiptoe, arms around his neck. His arms wrapped around my waist, which suddenly felt small and delicate in comparison to this new, muscled Curtis. I curled my fingers through his hair, reveling in the moment. Curtis tucked some hair behind my ear and traced my face. “You are beautiful,” he whispered.

I smiled, unable to help myself, and kissed him again. He responded enthusiastically, picking me up and twirling me around, then dipped me low, his lips still sealed against mine.

A sudden voice butted rudely into our private world. “Pardon the intrusion—”

Curtis snapped straight. I swiveled around and nearly choked. There stood an entire entourage of people! Mother and Comfort were at the front, looking delighted. But behind them were Hubert, with his usual expressionless face, Cynthia looking outraged, the king and queen, both looking amused, and several courtiers.

CHAPTER 49

My face blazed a bright red, my eyes wide and terrified. I was ready to crawl under a rock; I was so embarrassed. Curtis, bless him, stepped in front of me, shielding me from the scorching look I was being given from Cynthia. “May we help you?” Curtis asked casually.

“What were you doing?” Hubert’s monotone voice asked accusatorily.

“Kissing my girl,” Curtis replied with a shrug. “What did it look like?”

Several titters came up from the crowd, still blocked from my view by Curtis. I heard Comfort’s confident laugh, Mother’s gentle chuckle.

“That is highly inappropriate behavior for a prince,” Hubert declared solemnly.

“Would you prefer I kiss a boy?” asked Curtis, and the crowd laughed harder.

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“I would hardly call that inappropriate,” said King Edmont.

“And besides Hube, if you ever tried kissing a girl,” Curtis said in a stage whisper, “You may find out that you like it!”

Several gasps came from the courtiers. Comfort laughed again.

“My fiancé just knows the dignified public image a crown prince needs to uphold!” Cynthia’s crisp voice cut in. I could see enough of Hubert from behind Curtis to see his head bobbing up and down in agreement.

“Yes, Yes! Thank you!” Hubert cleared his throat dryly. “I have come to formally introduce you to my fiancée, and your future queen, Lady Cynthia Eleanora,” Hubert intoned. Cynthia swept into a beautiful curtsy. I recognized her utilizing several curtsy tips that Mother and Comfort regularly taught their students. She must have been paying attention when she was dusting. By now I had composed myself, still mostly hidden by Curtis, and waited to be introduced.

“Pleased to meet you,” Curtis said politely, stooping to kiss Cynthia’s hand. “I have heard so much about you.”

“From whom?” asked the queen sharply. “We have only met this young woman tonight.”

“Why, she is the stepsister of my fiancée, Lady Truly, one of our former Council linguists. You remember her, don’t you?” I stepped out into the dim light cast from the castle windows, and curtsied to the king and queen, blushing scarlet that Curtis

had referred to me as his fiancée.

“My dear!” cried King Edmont. He obviously remembered me. He came forward, brushing past Cynthia, and clasped both of my hands in his own. “How could I forget? It is marvelous to see you again! Curtis talked about you so often. And after your father passed, I wanted to express my condolences, but alas, you were still recovering yourself from that fateful day.” He clucked his tongue sympathetically, “but it brings me immense joy to see you alive and well.”

His eyes twinkled in Curtis’ direction. “Although, maybe not quite as much joy as my son feels.”

I blushed even deeper. “Thank you, Your Majesty,” I said, dropping another quick curtsy. Up close, I could see where Curtis got his curls from. Usually, the king’s wild hair was hidden, but tonight I could see it peeking through under the heavy gold crown perched atop his head.

Now the queen was holding both of my hands in her own, saying that she had always liked me, that Curtis had been simply devastated after I left, and how she was so glad I had returned. She then said that her sons must have a particular interest in my family, and saying how pleased she was the Curtis has reclaimed his love at last. My blush was now positively fiery, and even Curtis stammered and spluttered.

I could feel Cynthia’s angry stare even as I determinedly refused to look in her direction. What was her problem? She should just leave with Hubert and get to know him better. Strike that, if she got to know him better, she may break the engagement! Hubert had formally kissed Cynthia’s hand in farewell and headed back up to the castle.

Finally, Mother gently reminded me that we needed to get home. Eager for an excuse to depart, I politely bade goodbye to the king and queen, and Curtis pulled me in for a

hug, saying “I will see you again tomorrow. Don’t ever disappear on me again, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed.

Mother and Comfort started back toward our carriage, but I hung back, waiting for Cynthia. “Cynthia? Do you want to share our coach?” I asked.

“No,” she said flatly. She was watching Hubert as he marched back to the castle. The enormous castle clock began to dong, signaling midnight.

“We don’t mind if you come with us,” I told her. “You could tell us about—”

But Cynthia cut me off, suddenly shrieking now that Hubert and his parents was out of earshot. “Just leave me alone! Why is that so hard for you to understand? Just leave me alone, Ugly!” She started as if to slap me, but stumbled, her ankle twisting from her slightly too big right shoe.

“These wretched glass shoes!” she screamed, and bent down to remove one, and flung it in my direction. Curtis stepped protectively between me and my stepsister as the shoe bounced off his chest and tinkled to the ground.

“I think you had better leave,” Curtis told her firmly.

Cynthia turned and flounced back toward the sweeping front drive, her gait wobbly as she would step on one high-heeled foot than the other shoeless foot. Curtis watched her go, his mouth agape.

“So that is your stepsister,” he said. “Charming girl.”

I stooped to pick up her fallen glass slipper. I handed it to Curtis. “Here. You can give

this to your brother. He can rush it back to his blushing bride.”

“Poor fellow. I wouldn’t wish her on anyone.”

“She really isn’t so bad most of the time. That little tantrum was probably just because of nerves.” I was baffled by Cynthia’s rage—she had just gotten engaged to the Crown Prince of Islandria! She was set to become the next queen and would never have to wash or clean or scrub again. Wasn’t this supposed to be a happy time for her?

“Well, I will see you soon,” Curtis said, squeezing my hand in farewell.

I started back toward where Comfort and Mother were waiting beside our carriage. I couldn’t wait to tell them everything.

CHAPTER 50

I didn’t see Cynthia again for most of next day. I had tried to talk to her through her bedroom door, but she had just shouted to leave her alone again. I knew she was angry with me, though I couldn’t figure out why. She had just gone to her first royal ball and gotten engaged to the crown prince. She was all set to become the next queen, and all her problems would be gone. No more cooking, no more cleaning, a life of ease and luxury lay ahead! What was the problem?

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I found out that afternoon.

A knock rang through the house, and I hurried to open the door. Hubert stood there, glass slipper in hand, Curtis right behind him.

“I have come for Lady Cynthia Elenora,” Hubert intoned blandly.

I bobbed a curtsy. “Please, come in.”

Hubert didn’t move. I stood back a little, and gestured him inside. He still stood stock still. Curtis’ head poked up over his brother’s shoulder.

“He is waiting for you to address him properly,” he said and rolled his eyes.

Inwardly chuckling, I swept my finest curtsy and said very formally, “Your Royal Highness, Crown Prince Hubert of Islandria, would Your Majesty please grace us with your esteemed presence in our humble home?”

Hubert inclined his head. “Indeed.”

Curtis followed after him, still shaking his head. He gave me a one-armed hug as he passed and jerked his head toward Hubert. “What a doofus, am I right?” he said quietly.

I hurried off to get Cynthia. When I came to her bedroom, I knocked softly. “Cynthia?”

“I told you to go away!” she snapped through the door.

“Should I tell your fiancé to go away too?” I asked.

There was a long pause.

“Because he is downstairs waiting for you.”

“I will be right down.”

I went back to the sitting room. Hubert was sitting stiffly upright on a chair, the glass slipper clutched in his hand, and Curtis was reclined back on the sofa, the epitome of relaxed, chatting merrily with Mother. Everyone looked up when I entered, and I relayed Cynthia’s message. Curtis patted the cushion next to him, and I sat next to him. Curtis turned back to Mother, and continued to ask questions about the manor. Mother cheerfully told a story about her childhood here, one of my favorites. She and her sister had climbed out of an upstairs window and dropped things off the roof to see how quickly they would fall. One of the things had been a chicken egg, which landed squarely on the top of a maid’s head as she had opened the door, and she stumbled and dropped what she was carrying, which unfortunately, was the contents of a chamber pot. Curtis laughed easily and remarked that that sounded like something he would have done as a small child.

“Oh, you are limiting that to when you were a small child?” Comfort laughed. “It seems I remember Truly telling me about more than one or two pranks you have pulled in recent years.”

Curtis spread his arms out defensively.

“Pranks are childish and undignified,” Hubert contributed in his monotone voice.

“And fun!” retorted Curtis.

“Such juvenile tomfooleries are unbecoming of a member of the royal family.”

“Tomfooleries?” Curtis hooted. “What, are you going to call them shenanigans next? But no, such vocabulary would be too immature for the future king!”

Hubert looked aloof and gazed intently at the wall straight across from his seat. Mother nervously folded and unfolded her hands. She didn’t like any sort of conflict. Eager to break Hubert’s discomfort, she addressed him directly.

“So, Your Majesty, how is your mother? I wasn’t able to speak with her last night at the ball.”

“Very well, thank you,” said Hubert, and lapsed into silence. Comfort coughed.

“And your father?” Mother asked.

“Also well, thank you for asking.”

Silence loomed over our group again. Curtis stood and jerked the glass slipper out of Hubert’s hands. “This thing is tiny! No one can actually fit their feet into this, can they?” he bent down, slipped his own shoe off, and tried to wedge his toes in. His foot was nearly twice the size of the glass slipper.

“Give it back!” said Hubert angrily, swiping for the slipper. Curtis tossed it to me.

I caught it, kicked off my shoe, and tried to shove my foot in. I managed to wedge four of my toes in, then pretended to walk around in the shoe. “A perfect fit!” I cooed, and Comfort and Curtis snorted. Hubert was turning purple with rage.

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“My turn!” called Comfort, and tried to shove her foot into the slipper. “Ooh, cozy! If the slipper fits, does that mean I get to marry Hubert?”

“Oh, stop it,” said Mother gently. She took the shoe away from Comfort and returned it to Hubert, who gripped it securely in his hands and watched his brother suspiciously, wary of another attack.

Curtis grinned, then said, “Comfort, have you heard the joke about the ogre at the wedding?”

“No, tell me!”

“Well, there was once an ugly ogre who went to a human wedding long ago—”

“Ahem,” Cynthia had entered, still in her ball gown from the previous evening. She had obviously just done up her hair. She looked absolutely stunning.

Hubert and Curtis stood respectfully. Hubert stepped forward and held out the glass slipper. “You must have forgotten this when you left yesterday.”

Cynthia didn’t blush, but a faint pink tinge appeared in her cheeks. She half glanced at Curtis.

“I told him how your foot must have slipped out last night as you were leaving. You have such tiny feet,” Curtis remarked casually. I guess he hadn’t told Hubert about Cynthia’s outburst and was giving her a second chance.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Cynthia said, smiling winningly. She extended her hand for the shoe, but Hubert, taking me by surprise, knelt and guided her foot into the shoe.

He stood and said, “You may call me Hubert.” Then to everyone’s astonishment, he smiled! It looked painful for him, a mechanical upturning of his lips. Curtis and I exchanged shocked looks.

‘He is smiling!’ I mouthed to Curtis.

Hubert motioned toward the front of the house. “I have come to take you to the castle,” he told Cynthia.

“I will be there in just a moment, Hubert. I would like to speak privately to my stepsisters and stepmother before I go.”

As Curtis and Hubert left, Mother and Comfort gathered around Cynthia to congratulate her on her engagement, but Cynthia backed away to evade their embraces.

“I just wanted to say, you three have done nothing but bring me misery all this time I have lived here. Right as my engagement was to be announced, Truly was forcing herself upon my future brother-in-law, trying to upstage me and my moment. That was incredibly selfish of you, especially after all I have done—cooking and cleaning and slaving away for your every whim and wish. You should feel ashamed of forcing a parentless, penniless girl to be a servant for you while you did nothing but sit staring into mirrors, and talking about dresses and makeup and dancing. All three of you are the most vain, superficial, greedy, gluttonous people I have ever met!”

We sat, flabbergasted, unsure of how to respond to this monologue. I was shocked—is that what it looked like to everyone else in town? That we were forcing

an orphan to work for us as we lazily sat in our rooms, primping and preening?

“Cynthia,” began Mother, “We really never—”

Cynthia cut her off. “Furthermore, I will not be seeing any of you again, so I can be freed from your enslavement!”

Comfort broke in, more confident in handling conflict than either Mother or myself. “Really! We have tried our best to be nice to you! Where do you think that gown came from, missy? And your shoes? Did your fairy godmother magically give them to you?” her voice was dripping with sarcasm. “You are so eager to rush off to get married to a man you met not even two days ago, and Truly and Curtis dated for a year before we moved here! They have a reason to get engaged, and you are just chasing status! Who is the superficial one now?”

Now it was Cynthia’s turn to flush, lost for words. But she held her head up and picked up the bags she had brought from her room. “I have no time for peasants. Farewell!”

Stunned, we all watched her march down the hallway and give her hand to Hubert as he helped her up into the carriage. “She and Hubert deserve each other!” Comfort said fervently.

Hubert and Cynthia swept away in their carriage, off toward the castle. Curtis stayed behind. He walked back into the sitting room after he had instructed the coachman to come back for him later. Upon his entrance, he stared at all of our faces. Mother and I were still shocked by Cynthia’s outburst. Comfort was fuming. “What happened?”

“Our stepsister,” Comfort spat “was just giving us her last endearing words before she left to marry your brother.”

“I take it that it didn’t go well?”

Comfort huffed angrily. “I have half a mind to leave the country. There is no way I will let that brat be my ruler!”

Curtis came over and took my hand. “Let’s go for a walk,” he suggested mildly. I led him along the path Algernon used to always take us on. I wanted to show him the manor, the town, the Fairy Tree, everything, but I was too distracted by what Cynthia had said to me. How poorly she viewed us! I had never thought of myself as a bad person before now. Was that how people saw me? I had intended to allow Cynthia to quietly grieve her father’s death and not force her into public before she was ready. But it clearly hadn’t come across that way.

“Truly, wait,” Curtis pulled me to a stop next to the Fairy Tree. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“What did Cynthia say to you?”

I told him everything. He looked uncharacteristically serious. “I heard what Cynthia said to you last night too,” he looked at me steadily. “I hope you know that you are not selfish. One of the things I love most about you is how you are always looking out for others. You always have done that. Just because one person can’t see that doesn’t make it less true.”

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“And you are not ugly!” he continued. “You have never been ugly to me and you never will be. Those scars,” he touched my face, “show that you are loyal and brave and resilient. That you stayed and tried to protect others when you could have run away. You probably saved me that day. And I think you are the most beautiful woman in the world.”

His words were so sincere, I knew he meant them with all his heart. “Curtis, I can’t imagine life without you,” I said. It was true. A life without Curtis would be empty. Incomplete.

Curtis changed the subject. “There is another thing we need to talk about. If Hubert goes through with marrying your stepsister, and we get married too, you will be near Cynthia for the rest of your life.”

I nodded.

“Or,” and here he paused. “What would you think about staying here? We don’t have to live anywhere you don’t want to.”

“But, you are the prince!” I protested. “You have to stay at the castle.”

“I will give it all up in an instant to be with you and make you happy,” Curtis said automatically. “I’m not the crown prince. I can walk away if I want to. They wouldn’t like it, but I am free to do so.”

I considered the offer. As attractive as it was, I knew I would never accept. Curtis was too important. If it was left up to Hubert to care about the commoners, the

kingdom would fall apart. I would never allow Curtis to walk away from his country just because I would have some awkward interactions with his brother's wife. "No. The kingdom needs you. And besides," a sly smile crept across my face, "think of all the pranks we can pull on both of them!"

EPILOGUE

Curtis and I were married surrounded by friends and family in the town square. Cynthia did not attend. Thomas, the glassblower, made me a pair of glass shoes that I wore proudly, and wearing glass slippers became a popular fashion trend. Curtis was so well-liked that it seemed that the entire country turned up for our wedding. Everyone from the lowliest serving maid up to the king and queen came and sang and danced late into the night.

Mother and Comfort continued to run their finishing school, which quickly became the most highly sought-after education for young ladies. Curtis and I made a point to return to their home each week to have a dinner together, and we brought back game night. Mother never married again, though she had several offers. Comfort married a local earl who fell madly in love with her and her unwavering confidence.

Hubert and Cynthia seemed well-matched for each other, even though their marriage seemed far too formal for my taste. They did produce an heir, a son very similar to Hubert. Eventually, Hubert took the throne, but he was more of a figurehead than leader. Curtis was the one who ran the country and tended to all the needs of the subjects. He said it was much better that way; Hubert and Cynthia tended to the pomp and circumstance that Curtis disliked so much, and we were free to come and go as we pleased.

I regained confidence in myself. No longer did I consider myself ugly. When Curtis and I had children, we would take them each year to the Fairy Tree on the anniversary of the ball, and tell them the same story. It was about a girl who was forced to work for her ugly stepsisters and stepmother but was given a gown and

glass slippers and went to the ball and married the prince. They kept suspecting their Aunt Cynthia, so I decided to rename the girl in the story. I called her Cinderella.

And needless to say, we all lived happily ever after.