



Love Letters & Lemon Drops (Falhaven Castle #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Two royals, dozens of love letters, and a fast-approaching wedding.

Princess Solana has been writing to her betrothed for years, getting regular replies and falling more in love with each passing letter. But now the time has come for her to set off to her new home, and the prince waiting for her.

Arthur has been counting down the weeks until Solana arrives and the two of them can finally meet. But once she arrives at Falhaven Castle, he knows that he has to do everything he can in order to truly capture her heart.

Can the two of them solidify their bond before the wedding day arrives?

Love Letters and Lemon Drops is part of the Falhave Castle series. It is a cozy fantasy with a steamy m/f arranged marriage romance, love letters, and an adorable cat.

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I dip my pen into my inkwell while thinking about what I want to write to Prince Arthur.

After years of writing letters to one another, it's strange to think that this will be one of the last I send to him.

At least like this. In ten days, I'll arrive at Falhaven Castle and we'll start preparing for the wedding our parents have been planning for the past two years.

Even though I know I'll be seeing him soon, I still want to send a letter ahead of me.

Perhaps it's foolish of me, but I like the idea that it will arrive before me.

The letter flows from me. There's not much to say other than that I'm looking forward to arriving in Falhaven and hope that my journey doesn't take too long.

I sign my name at the bottom of the letter and blot the ink, before folding it up and closing it with a wax seal, wondering as I do whether I'm going to be replacing it with a different one once I marry Arthur and become a princess of Falhaven instead of a princess of Someil.

I push the thought aside. I'm certain that kind of thing will become evident soon.

I shouldn't devote too much of my time to it.

I place the letter in a box with a bag of lemon drops that the cook made at my request. They're one of my favourites, and I've been sending them to Arthur ever since he

asked me about my favourite sweets and then said he enjoyed them.

He'd sent me some candied cherries in return, which had been delicious, and made me look forward to the food I would get to try once I arrived in Falhaven.

The door opens, and I turn around in time to see my maid enter. She drops into a curtsy. "Your Highness, we didn't realise you were here. We have instructions to pack this room into a trunk for you."

I nod and get to my feet. "I'm done here, thank you, Maria. Would you please have this sent to Prince Arthur?" I touch the top of the parcel.

She nods, but not before giving me a slightly confused look.

No doubt it's because she doesn't understand why I'm writing a letter to someone I'm about to go and see, but that doesn't bother me.

People can be confused all they want, I know that this is the right thing to do for me and Arthur, and that's what's important.

I pick up a small box containing all of the letters Arthur has ever sent me.

Worthless to most, but meaning the world to me.

And in barely over a week, I'm finally going to be able to see the man who writes such sweet words to me in person.

We've met before, but that was years ago, it's going to be different this time.

I make my way through to my bedchamber, forgetting that there are people in here too.

Maids are packing my dresses into trunks and removing every trace of me from the room that's no longer going to be mine.

There's a part of me that feels displaced by it, but the rest of me is excited for the adventure to come.

The maids barely respond to me, probably because they're too focused on their tasks and I'm kind of just in the way.

I take my box of letters over to the bed and sit down, opening it up and running my fingers over the pages bundled there.

Maybe it's sentimental of me to have kept them all, and there's a part of me that worries Arthur won't have done something similar, but I don't care.

I know that what we have is real, even if it has only been via letter so far.

The bed creaks slightly and I turn to see my cat searching for the proper spot to sleep.

I'm surprised she's in here with how many people are coming in and out, she normally hates that.

With all the preparations going for the delegation coming with me when I leave, it might mean that her other safe spots are full of people and noise too.

I reach out to give her a scratch behind the ears and she pushes her head under my hand, purring loudly.

"We're going to be in our new home soon," I tell her. "It's colder than here."

She gives me an unimpressed look that might be because I've interrupted her attempts

to find a good place to sleep rather than anything else.

A scurry of feet and the sound of the doors opening makes me look up in time to see Mamá heading into the room. The maids curtsy as soon as she passes them, but she doesn't give them a second look.

"Solana," she says to me as she sits down, a solemn expression on her face.

"Mamá," I respond.

"It pains me that you're leaving us so soon."

"You were married when you were sixteen," I point out. "I would hardly consider twenty-two to be soon."

"Perhaps not." She reaches out to touch my face, a sad smile marring her features. "Do you have a moment?"

I nod, not really knowing how else to respond when she's already sitting on my bed and doesn't look as if she's about to move. I pick up Felicia and put her on my lap while I wait for Mamá to explain whatever it is she came here to talk about.

She clears her throat. "I wish you weren't being taken so far away."

"It's only ten days travel, Mamá. And most of that is by ship," I remind her.

"And Arthur is not the crown prince, we will be able to visit often.

He has said as much in his letters." My gaze strays back to the box.

It's strange to think that the feelings I have exist for a prince I've only met once, but

we've been writing to one another for years and I feel like I know him as well as I know myself.

"I know." She reaches out to cup my cheek in her hand. "But it will also be different. You'll be visiting as a married woman and not just as my daughter."

"I don't believe anything will change that, Mamá. I'm always going to be your daughter."

"Perhaps." She sighs. "You will write to me?"

"As often as I can," I promise.

"Good."

A servant approaches and dips into a deep bow. "Your Highness, a letter has arrived for you," he says, holding out a platter with an envelope placed in the middle.

"Thank you." The handwriting on the front makes my heart skip a beat. I pick it up, surprised by how heavy it is, like it contains more than just words.

As much as I love Mamá, I wish I were alone to open this. There's nothing for me to hide when it comes to the contents of Arthur's letters, but they still feel private, and like they're just for me. But I'm also aware that she isn't going to leave until I've opened it.

I flip over the envelope and run my finger under the seal of the Falhaven royal family. There's a satisfying snap as it breaks and I unfold the pages. Something falls onto my cat, making Felicia hiss and slink away.

Mamá leans in to pick it up before I can, holding out a delicate silver chain to me. I

take it from her, running my finger over a pendant of sapphires and diamonds.

"A snowflake," I whisper.

"You have always talked of seeing snow," Mamá says, smoothing some of my dark hair away from my face.

"Arthur has told me of it," I say. "He says there is often snow in Falhaven during the winter months. There might even be some next week."

"Let us hope it doesn't come until after you've safely arrived," Mamá says.

I nod, too preoccupied by the rest of what Arthur says in his letter.

"And?" Mama asks.

"He wishes me a safe journey and looks forward to my arrival at Falhaven Castle.

"I hold out the letter to her, knowing that she won't stop asking me questions about it until I do.

She takes it from me to read. I use the time to look at the necklace he sent me.

It's not the first time he's sent me a gift, but this is by far one of the most extravagant.

Before, he's mostly sent me sweets and other delicacies from his kingdom for me to try, and some of the same for Felicia.

I reach out to ruffle my cat's head. She seems to have forgiven me for the necklace falling on her, for which I'm grateful.

"You are lucky you had a chance to get to know your betrothed," Mamá says, handing the letter back to me.

"I know." I look over the words again, feeling the adoration for Arthur grow within me.

I shouldn't be able to feel like this for someone I've only met once, but he never misses an opportunity to write to me.

I would never have thought twice about not receiving a letter today, especially when I'll be arriving in his kingdom in just over a week, but the fact he has means the world to me.

I unclasp the necklace and put it around my neck, touching the pendant as I do and smiling to myself. I would be lying if I said I wasn't nervous, but there was something exciting about the prospect of starting the life I've been promised.

"The carriage will be ready in an hour," Mamá says. "Your aunt is to accompany you as your chaperone."

I nod, disappointed that she won't be coming with me, but knowing that it isn't something that's up for debate. Mamá hates to travel, and will do anything she can in order to avoid it.

But I'm not going to let that change the excitement I'm feeling about what my future holds.

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The carriage rumbles along the road, bouncing up and down in a way that doesn't make it very easy to rest. Not that my aunt is having the same issues.

She's snoring softly in the seat opposite and has been for over an hour.

It's a far cry from how she was on the ship, she spent most of the journey with her head over a bucket.

We were lucky to have a stateroom to ourselves, or rumours about the Queen's sister getting seasick would already be running rampant around Someil's fleet. They still might be.

The basket next to me shakes, and Felicia pops her head out of it, a curious expression on her face.

"We're almost there," I promise, though I'm not entirely sure if that's true. I don't know enough about the distance between the inn we stayed at last night and Falhaven Castle. I scratch behind her ears and she lets out a loud purr. "We're going to our new home."

She gives me a blank look.

"There'll probably be other cats to play with," I tell her. "And mice to catch. I'm not really sure. But Arthur said that there's a cat tree made for you with all kinds of toys and fluffy pillows. You'll be like a princess yourself."

It's probably my imagination, but she settles down at that, and I find myself smiling.

It's only going to be a couple more hours until I see Arthur again.

I'm not really sure what to expect. We were seventeen when we first met, and years have passed since.

I'd like to think the two of us got on well when we met, but there's no doubt that it was merely a meeting planned by our fathers in the hope that I'd find one of the Falhaven royals pleasing enough to consider marrying.

After that, we'd started sending letters to one another.

Formal at first, but slowly becoming more than that as we revealed more about ourselves.

When my father asked what I thought of an official betrothal two years ago, I knew what my answer was.

And luckily for me, Arthur seems to have felt the same.

I check on my aunt to make sure she's still sleeping and pull out the miniature portrait I packed in the box with the letters.

I trace my finger over his face, down the slope of his nose and the curve of lips, which seem to know how to smile.

I have no idea if he's looked at my portrait the same way that I've looked at his, but I certainly hope that I'm not going to be a disappointment to him when I arrive.

It's a needless worry. He knows what I look like, though I'd like to think that I'm a little different as a woman of twenty-two than I was in my much more awkward phase of seventeen. He liked me then, and I'm sure he'll like me now.

I sigh and lean back in my seat. I'm done with the journey.

It was exciting to finally be on the road to Falhaven Castle originally, but now I'm not as sure.

I want a proper bath rather than a quick wash in a luke-warm wooden tub, and a chance to sleep in a good bed.

But I know there's nothing that can be done about that until we get there.

I pull aside the curtain and look out, a little disappointed that there's no snow until I catch sight of a beautiful castle growing closer with every moment. Excitement rises within me as I realise that it's my new home.

Green forests stretch between us and the castle, with birds rising from them and flying up until they're spinning around the flags flying from the turrets. It's everything I want it to be and kind of nerve-wracking because of it at the same time.

I can't tear my gaze away as we grow closer, and it isn't until my aunt stirs that I remember I'm supposed to be acting like the princess I am, and more importantly, as the ambassador for Someil that I'm to be.

Even so, it's difficult to sit back and let the footman open the door of the carriage for me.

My aunt goes first, chuntering about something or other as she does.

I think she's complaining about the drive despite the fact she's been asleep for most of it and it's not something she had to worry about.

I grab the basket with Felicia inside it and thread it over my arm. "I know Arthur is

going to be pleased to meet you," I tell my cat, though she doesn't respond. I suppose that's her prerogative as a cat.

I pull my skirt to the side as I climb down from the carriage and walk with my aunt towards the three people waiting at the front of the castle.

My heart rises to my throat with nerves.

After so long thinking about this moment, it's hard to believe that it's actually here and I'm finally going to see Arthur.

Guards line the path up to the castle, making me a little nervous, considering that it's going to mean that the royal family are in attendance. I know of all of them from Arthur's letters, and I met all except for Prince Ernest when I visited before.

I take a deep breath and make the short walk up the stairs with my aunt beside me, and guards of our own behind. The rest of the wagons carrying my belongings and gifts for Falhaven are still rolling up to the castle, but they aren't necessary for my greeting.

The King stands at the centre of his children with his head held high. He looks like an older version of his son, with dark hair peppered with grey, and a bushy beard that puts my father's to shame.

Arthur steps forward and my heart leaps to my throat. He's even more handsome than my memory and his portrait have painted him, and I'm not really sure what to do with that.

"Your Highness," I say, remembering to switch to Falhavien at the last moment. I dip into a curtsy, but don't go too low. Arthur isn't the crown prince, and therefore doesn't outrank me.

"Princess," he responds, bowing to me. "Welcome to Falhaven Castle."

"Erm, thank you," I mumble, not really knowing what else to say.

I've been practising Falhavien for years, and I'm normally good at it, but my words are failing me now there's a little pressure.

"May I present my aunt, the Duquesa of Herodia.

" I gesture to my aunt who does a little bit of a clumsy curtsy, no doubt still feeling a little bit sleepy after her nap in the carriage.

"Your Highness," she says in broken Falhavien.

"It is a pleasure to welcome you to our home," Arthur says. "I hope you have had a pleasant journey."

"It has been satisfactory," my aunt says, regaining a bit of her composure.

Arthur nods. "Allow me to introduce you to my family," he says, gesturing behind him. "My parents, the King and Queen of Falhaven, and my siblings. Princesses Kathryn, Evelyn, and Veronica, and my younger brother, Prince Ernest."

He gestures to them all in turn, and each of them bows as to their status.

Most of Arthur's siblings match me in rank, save for Princess Kathryn, the heir to her father's throne.

It's strange to see it working this way.

In Someil, it doesn't matter that I'm older than my brother, he's still the one who

inherits.

"It is a pleasure to meet you," I say, dipping down into a curtsy of my own.

"If you would allow me to show you to your rooms, I can have the servants bring your things," he says.

"That would be most kind." I look at the man in front of me, trying to work out what to make of him.

Nothing he's said has been personal, or implied the connection the two of us have shared through our letters, but I suppose we are in the strange situation where there are a lot of people around and I don't know how much they know about our relationship.

One of Arthur's sisters heads down the steps and curtsies to my aunt despite not needing to. "Would you allow me to escort you, Duquesa?" She shoots Arthur a look that almost seems as if she's planned it this way on purpose.

My aunt nods and leans on the younger woman as she starts to make her way up the steps.

Arthur holds his arm out to me. "Your Highness."

I give him a tentative smile and slip my free arm through his, resettling my basket so that it isn't as heavy.

"Would you like me to get a servant to take that for you?" he asks.

"No," I say firmly before realising I shouldn't be shutting down an offer of help like that. "It's just that the contents of the basket are special to me."

"Felicia?" he guesses, his whole demeanour softening a little.

"Yes."

"I'm surprised she hasn't insisted on being introduced yet."

I laugh. "I think she'll probably be hiding because of the noise."

"I look forward to meeting her."

I relax a little. While this isn't exactly the greeting I've envisaged over the years, I have to admit that it is the most logical way for things to have progressed, especially as we have witnesses.

Hopefully, the two of us will get some time to connect before the wedding without people watching over our shoulders.

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It's only as we get further into the castle that I realise we're falling a little behind my aunt and Princess Veronica, who is loudly pointing out different features of the corridors we pass.

"Did the two of you concoct this plan on purpose?" I ask Arthur.

He laughs. "I believe Veronica came up with it all on her own. But I'm not above taking advantage of her generosity for a few moments without anyone to overhear us."

I nod, not really knowing what to say.

"How was your journey?" Arthur asks.

"It was good. Though there was no snow."

"I think that's probably a good thing, given that you were travelling," he says. "But I believe there should be some soon."

"In time for the wedding?"

"Would you like that?" he asks, looking at me with curious, deep blue eyes.

I swallow hard and look ahead rather than at him, watching my step as I move through the castle that's to become my new home. "I don't know what I would like," I admit.

"Neither do I. But there are a few weeks before the wedding, we can figure it out," he promises. "But that will have to wait, we're at your room."

He pauses for a moment, as if unsure what to do now.

"Your aunt is in the adjoining room," he says. "If you'd like us to wait for her so we aren't alone, we can do that."

I frown and look around. "Is it not improper for us to be alone?"

Surprise flits over his face, maybe that's not the answer he expected of me. "It's not considered improper in Falhaven. But if you would prefer that I get my sister to show you your rooms, then it can be arranged." He starts to step away, but I reach out to touch his arm.

"I'd like you to show me," I say quickly. "I just didn't realise that was an option."

He smiles and unlocks the door, holding the key out to me. "For you."

"Thank you." I take it from him, my fingers brushing against his as I take it.

He looks at me for a moment longer than he should, or maybe that isn't true considering that we are going to be married soon. He can look at me for as long as he wants. It's just longer than I'm used to from anyone else.

Arthur clears his throat and breaks eye contact and pushes open the door to my room.

"After you." He gestures for me to enter.

I'm a little nervous about what I'm going to find inside, even though it's not really going to be that different from what we have in Someil.

"This is our receiving room," he says. "For when either of us have guests that we want to entertain."

"These are our rooms?" I ask, looking around.

He nods. "They're yours until the wedding, and then I will be moving into them too," he says.

"Where are you currently?"

"In the same room I've always lived in," he responds. "It's not far from the nursery. All of my siblings have rooms there, but they're meant for children. Or at least, unmarried royals."

"I'm surprised your older sisters aren't married."

He shrugs. "I don't think any of them have found anyone they want to marry yet."

"You say that as if our marriage wasn't arranged."

"It was, but only after we'd written to each other for a few years," he points out. "And if either of us had said no, it wouldn't be happening."

I nod. "I suppose."

"If you decide you don't want this now that you're here, I can talk to my father. I'm sure he can work something out."

I blink a couple of times. "Cancel the wedding?"

"If that's what you wish."

I reach up to touch my necklace. I don't want to end our betrothal, though I have to admit to being a little more nervous now that I'm here and standing in front of the man I'm supposed to marry.

But I think that's just the natural feeling of being somewhere new as opposed to any doubts about Arthur or the wedding.

I'll feel better once I've settled in and have had something to eat.

Before I can think of what to say in response to him, Felicia starts squirming in the basket, almost knocking it out of my arms.

"I'm sorry, I need to put her down."

"Oh, I didn't think..."

"It's fine."

"You should come through here, then," he says, gesturing to another door.

I frown and follow him through, holding the basket with both hands to stop Felicia escaping before we're somewhere safe.

"This is your private sitting room," Arthur says, gesturing into the room. "It'll be for your use however you see fit, whenever you see fit. I'll only come in here if you invite me."

"But isn't this your home too?" I ask.

"It will be, but that doesn't mean you can't have a space to yourself. But that's not actually why I brought you in here today." He takes a couple of steps to the side and

gestures towards the towering cat tree.

I swallow hard. "Arthur..."

His face lights up at the sound of his name, and I realise it's because it's the first time I've said it since I arrived.

There's a small part of me that wants to tell him that I meant to say Your Highness instead, but that feels strange after so long calling him Arthur in my letters, and the way he reacted to me doing that just now.

I can't say anything else before Felicia pops her head out of the basket and lets out an annoyed meow.

Arthur chuckles. "I think we're being told off."

"A little bit," I say.

"May I?" He gestures to the basket.

I nod, though I'm a little worried about Felicia deciding she doesn't like him and giving him a scratch.

He crouches down and looks right at my cat. "Hello, Felicia. I've been looking forward to meeting you."

" Meow ."

He chuckles. "Would you like to see the cat tree?" he asks her.

" Meow ."

He looks up at me, and a funny feeling spreads through me. There is a prince on his knees in front of me. I know that it's because of my cat, but it still feels strange.

"Can I pick her up?" he asks.

"You can try."

He reaches into the basket and carefully picks up Felicia. He moves her over to the cat tree and puts her on one of the middle levels.

She stretches out her legs, shaking them off. She sniffs at the cat tree before running up to a higher level and settling on a cushion there.

"She likes it," he says, a wide smile on his face.

"It's wonderful, Arthur," I say. "Thank you for getting it for her."

"I wanted you both to feel at home."

"This is a lot more impressive than anything she has at home." I frown. "Had at home. That's going to take a while to get used to."

A concerned expression crosses his face. "I'm sorry you had to leave your home."

"It's fine," I say in response, but it's partly because I also don't know what else to say. "I've been prepared for this my entire life. I've always known my parents would want me to make a foreign marriage."

"That doesn't mean that it isn't sad. I'm glad you're here, but I also wish you didn't have to leave your home for our marriage."

I lift my hand and reach out as if to touch him, but think differently of it. We've been sending letters for years, but this is an entirely different thing. Especially as we're standing in the room alone, even though we shouldn't be.

Except that's not what Arthur said. It seems that some things are different in Falhaven already.

"Would you like to see the rest of the apartment?" he asks.

"Oh, yes. Is there much more to see?"

"There's your bedroom. And I suppose there's mine, but there isn't anything in it right now. An office that we can share, or you can use for yourself if you want..."

"What would you do if I used it for myself?" I ask curiously.

"I could find one somewhere else in the castle," he says.

"I don't want you to have to do that."

"Please don't worry about that, Solana."

My heart skips a beat as he says my name. Very few people have ever said it without my title in front of it, and even though I've read it in his letters to me, it's entirely different to hear him say it out loud.

"We will have plenty of time to work out those things."

I nod. "Yes, I suppose so."

He flashes me a winning smile that makes my stomach flip around in the best way. "I

should leave you to get settled. If you want anything, please let the servants know. I believe the kitchens are having meals brought up for you and your aunt."

"We're not eating with everyone else?"

"My father thought it might be too much after the journey," he says. "But there'll be plenty of time for that. You've arrived in time for the Solstice Banquet next week. And the Winter Fair starts tomorrow."

"That sounds lovely."

"We can go," he says. "If you'd like."

I nod, not really knowing what else to say.

I would like to go to the Winter Fair. We don't get snow in Someil other than at the very top of the mountains, and I've been looking forward to seeing it here, especially from the descriptions that Arthur gave me of the snow in his letters.

I know that the Winter Fair doesn't mean there'll definitely be snow, but it feels like it's one step closer to it.

"I have duties to attend to in the morning, but I hope I'll see you in the afternoon."

"Oh, yes." I'm a little disappointed that he won't be around tomorrow morning, but I suppose it isn't too much of a problem. He is a prince and does have things to attend to.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Solana," he says, hesitating before he heads to the door.

There's a part of me that wants to ask him to come back, but I don't know what I'd say

if he did. I hope these things are going to get easier the more time I spend here.

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It's strange to have this much space for myself. Back in Someil, I only really had my bedchamber and a second room where I would write my correspondence. I know I'll be sharing a lot of my new space with Arthur, but it still feels good to be able to walk around and know that it's mine in some way.

Felicia lounges most of the way up the cat tower he made for me, and I smile at her.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" I scratch my cat behind the ears, and she lets out a loud purr. "I hope this means you like Arthur."

She doesn't respond, which isn't a surprise. It's not like she really understands what's going on. As far as she's concerned, I put her in a basket in Someil, and now we're not there. It's not like she can tell that people are speaking a different language.

On the other hand, maybe they're not. I used to practice speaking Falhavien to her all the time.

The door to the private sitting room opens and my maid walks inside, still wearing her uniform from home. I should make sure to find out if that's considered acceptable here or if she's supposed to be wearing what the other maids working at Falhaven Castle do.

"Your Highness," she says, dipping into a curtsy. "Princess Evelyn and Princess Veronica are here."

I nod. "Please tell them that I'll be there in a moment." I check that my dress is perfectly presented, even though I know it is. I want to make a good impression on

Arthur's sisters, especially as this is the first time I'm actually going to meet them without an entire retinue in front of us.

I take a deep breath and head into the receiving room, noticing that my aunt has already made herself at home in one of the chairs and looks like she could fall asleep.

She's always had the uncanny ability to sleep wherever she's sitting, and it seems to have become more pronounced as she's grown older.

I'm not convinced that she's the best person to have sent to Falhaven as my chaperone, but that decision was one that was made without me.

The woman I recognise as Princess Veronica notices me entering and nods in my direction, nudging the other woman with her arm. I assume that must be Princess Evelyn, but I only got a brief look at her when I arrived yesterday.

"Your Highnesses," I say, dipping into a curtsy just as Princess Evelyn turns around.

"Princess Solana," she nods her head in response.

I give them what I hope is a friendly smile. "I wasn't expecting you this morning."

"Ah, yes. Artie, erm, Prince Arthur, asked me to give you this." Princess Evelyn holds out a letter to me.

There's a hint of excitement within me as I think about getting a letter from Arthur, even though we're in the same castle.

"Thank you, Your Highness," I say as I take it.

"I don't think there's any need for that," Princess Veronica says. "You can call me

Veronica, and you can call her Evelyn, or Evie, everyone does."

The other princess shrugs. "That's true."

"If you're sure that it's proper," I respond, not really knowing what to make of the two princesses in front of me.

"You are marrying our brother," Veronica says. "I think that removes any need for titles when we're in private."

I nod. "Solana." It's strange, especially given how few people have called me by my given name in my life, but I do believe it's something I can get used to. Especially as I plan on living in Falhaven for a long time to come.

I turn my attention to the letter, feeling a little nervous as I run my fingernail under the familiar seal and unfold the paper. The handwriting inside is familiar, but I'm not used to the correspondence being so short.

"He wishes me a pleasant day and hopes I will enjoy my time with the two of you," I say, folding the letter up and putting it in my pocket.

"I'm sorry he isn't here himself. There was an issue at the port that he needed to go and deal with. He didn't want to go, I think he'd much rather be here with you," Veronica says.

"That's all right, he told me as much yesterday." Though I'm a little disappointed, I'm not surprised. Hopefully, this isn't an omen of how things are going to be in the future.

"He asked me to show you around the castle," Evelyn blurts out. "Veronica said she'd come along."

"Because otherwise, you're going to spend three hours taking her on a tour of the kitchens and not get to any of the good things," Veronica counters.

"I would not," Evelyn mutters.

The other princess rolls her eyes at her older sister. "Well, you've got me too," she says. "And this afternoon, we can take you down to the Winter Fair."

"It's loud, and there are a lot of people, but Arthur thinks you'll like it," Evelyn says.

"I'm used to that," I promise. "I've been to plenty of banquets."

"There'll be plenty more here," Veronica says. "Including the Solstice banquet."

"Arthur mentioned that," I respond.

"Ah good, he was supposed to."

"Have you had breakfast?" Evelyn asks, looking around as if trying to find evidence of it.

"I have." I look over at my aunt. "I'm not sure about the Duquesa."

"We can leave her to sleep," Veronica says. "Some tours don't need chaperones, unless you want her to come."

I want to say yes, but I still hesitate, it's just so different from what I'm used to back in Someil. I'm sure there are guards waiting to follow both princesses outside the door, but there's no chaperone with them now. I suppose in a way, they probably act like that for one another.

"I think Arthur was hoping that we could get to know one another," Veronica says.
"You are going to be our new sister soon."

"That's true." And it's not like my aunt will need to have much of a tour of Falhaven Castle, this isn't about to become her home.

"I'm sure my aunt will appreciate the chance to rest after such a long journey.

" A wave of confidence follows my proclamation.

I don't need a chaperone to tour a castle with Arthur's sisters, nor do I particularly want one.

"All right, shall we?" Veronica gestures to the door, which I assume is my cue to follow her.

I touch the snowflake necklace around my neck.

I wish it were Arthur taking me on a tour of the castle, but I suppose there'll be plenty of time for that later, and there's nothing wrong with getting to know his sisters.

"Do you know much about Falhaven Castle?" Evelyn asks me as we exit the room.

"Only what your brother has told me."

"I can imagine the kind of things Arthur has deemed fit to talk about," Veronica says, more than a hint of affection in her voice.

"He told me a lot about the history," I say. "That your great-great-grandfather built the castle."

"Well, he built the west wing," she responds. "The rest of the castle was there long before that."

"Except for the stables. Our father built those," Evelyn says.

"Mmm, true. Do you have a horse?" Veronica asks me.

"No. I know how to ride, but I never had much chance to in Someil. I have a cat though, Arthur encouraged me to bring her with me." It's only as I say it that I realise I have no idea if everyone else knows about that.

"I'm not surprised, Artie loves animals," she says in response. "You should see him with his horse."

"Brownfoot?" I check.

"You've talked about a lot in your letters," Evelyn says.

"I suppose so." I let out a shaky breath, feeling a little bit more reassured that he's been genuine in his letters. It seems that his sister isn't surprised by the fact we've been writing to one another or that he's been telling me real things about himself.

"I'm sure he'll introduce you to Brownfoot soon," Veronica says. "He never misses an opportunity to introduce people to his horse."

"And you say I'm the one with only one interest," Evelyn mutters under her breath.

"I don't. Not that much, anyway," Veronica denies. "So, we can give you a tour of the most important rooms in the castle, and then head down to the fair for lunch now that we've lost your chaperone."

"We can't do that," I protest, thinking of my aunt who wasn't so much lost as actively left behind.

"Why not? We'll take one of the guards with us. I'm sure Frederick wouldn't mind, he's sweet on the blacksmith's apprentice and loves any opportunity to go flirt with him," Veronica muses.

"Is that why it took him so long to get back with my pan?" Evelyn asks.

"Your pan?" Veronica responds.

"Yes. It had a dent in it, so I asked Frederick if he could get it fixed for me, but it took him three days."

"I doubt he was flirting for three days," Veronica says.

I frown as I listen to them talk to one another, not entirely sure what to make of it. "What would your parents say about you going into the village?" I can only imagine how my parents would respond to me doing something like that.

Veronica shrugs in a very unprincesslike gesture. "They've never said anything about it. They're probably happy we're keeping out of trouble. Did you never go down to the village next to your castle with your brother?"

I shake my head. "I haven't seen much of my younger brother since he started training to become the next king."

"Ah, yes. I forgot that was how your kingdom worked. Kathryn has been the crown princess since she was born, Arthur's arrival didn't change that."

"I can't say I mind," I say. Though I'm not entirely sure if that's the real answer, or the

one I give because I feel like I have to. My brother has always been the one set to inherit. I don't think they even named me as heir temporarily.

But I am glad for it in one way. It means that I'm here in Falhaven and not at home in Someil with all of the pressures of trying to learn how to be a queen.

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Being outside the castle with only a couple of guards and the two princesses as company is an odd experience for me, but no one seems particularly worried about us being here, so I assume that it's fine.

It's just so different to how things are in Someil.

I've been longing for this kind of freedom for years and wishing I had the courage to act on it, so now I can, it's a little jarring, though I suspect I will quickly get used to it.

"Does the Winter Fair come every year?" I ask the sisters.

"Oh, yes. It's my favourite," Evelyn says. "Though I also like the Summer Fair. And the Spring Fair. Oh and the Autumn Fair, and the Harvest Festival."

"Is there any fair you don't like?" I ask.

Veronica laughs. "Not if there's a stall that has anything to do with baking," she responds. "When we find it, it'll be the last we see of Evie for the afternoon."

The other princess shrugs, seemingly not insulted by the implication.

"What would you like to see, Solana?" Veronica asks. "I believe there's a woman who makes things for cats, if you want to get her something?"

"Arthur already got her a cat tree, I can't spoil her too much."

"He built it himself," Evelyn says. "Just so you know."

"He did?" My heart aches for the man who isn't here.

"He said no one else could do it the way he wanted."

"Evie," Veronica hisses softly. "You're not supposed to say that."

"Artie didn't tell me that I had to keep it quiet," she protests.

"It's just not the kind of thing you're supposed to tell people."

"How am I supposed to know that?" The question seems to be genuine, but I don't know her well enough to be sure about that.

Veronica rolls her eyes, but turns her attention back to me. "Artie likes to make sure things are perfect, especially when there are animals concerned."

"But also you," Evelyn says. "He would always smile when one of your letters came."

"Evie!"

"His letters made me smile too," I say as I touch my necklace. I wish he was here so I could talk to him, but it is nice to learn more about him from his sisters, especially when the two of them seem to have a lot of interesting things to say.

"Look, Evie, there's the bakery," Veronica says, pointing it out to her.

"Oh, I must go over. Nate told me about a fascinating new technique for pastry in his last letter, maybe they have samples." She doesn't even wait for either of us to respond before she's gone in the direction of a table full of pastries.

"Is she going to be all right?" I ask.

"She'll be fine," Veronica responds. "Evie loves nothing more than baking. She'll find something to entertain herself. So what else would you like to see?"

"I guess everything," I say. "I've never been to anything like this in Someil."

"All right, then we should start..." She trails off. "Well, I think I'm going to go and check out another stall. You've got a better offer." She nods in the direction she's looking.

A little confused, I turn around, only for my heart to skip a beat when I see Arthur striding towards me. He's still wearing what looks like a military uniform under his cape, and his dark hair is tousled, presumably from the journey. He looks dashing, and truly like a prince.

I look behind me, but Veronica has already disappeared.

"You're wearing your necklace," he says, nodding towards where I'm touching it.

"Oh, yes. It's beautiful."

"I'm glad you like it," he says. "I had it made for you."

"You did?" I look down at it, appreciating it all the more.

"You said that you couldn't wait to see snow."

"I was a little disappointed that there wasn't any when I arrived," I admit.

"I saw some on my way back from the port," he says, stepping closer. "I suspect it'll

be here in a week, maybe less."

"Oh."

"I'm sorry I wasn't here this morning,"

"Your sisters said that you were called away," I respond, shuffling from side to side.

"I was. Sometimes, royal duties have to come first. I'm sure you know about that."

I nod. "Yes."

"I'm still sorry that it took me away from you today," Arthur says. "And if you'd allow me to, I'd be honoured to escort you around the fair." He holds his arm out to me.

Without even thinking twice about it, I slip mine through his, enjoying how close it brings the two of us, even with the winter capes we're both wearing.

Even though I was having a fine time with his sisters, I'm glad that I get to spend time with him now, which is what I always wanted. I just hope he feels the same.

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It's amazing how many things the woman who makes cat accessories has that Felicia doesn't need. And yet, I can't help myself from feeling drawn to the small mouse stuffed with some kind of herbs that cats actually like.

"Should I get it for Felicia?" I ask Arthur.

"Would she like it?" he asks.

"I'm not sure." I frown and consider everything in front of me, even as he digs into his pocket and pulls out a couple of coins, handing them to the woman.

"Consider it my welcome gift to Felicia," he says as the woman wraps up the little mouse and hands it to me.

"You already made her a cat tree, you don't need to do more for her."

"But I want to." He reaches out a hand as if he's going to touch me, but thinks better of it. "I want to keep her princess happy."

"She is," I assure him.

"Good."

There's something in the air that I'm not entirely sure I'm able to name, but there's something about it that makes me want to feel it more, and I know it's all to do with him.

There's something about Arthur that calls to me.

It's nothing like what I felt when I read his letters, though I can hear that person in his voice when he speaks to me.

Arthur clears his throat. "Are you hungry?"

I'm a little taken aback by the change in topic. "A little."

"Then we should find something to eat. There's a man who comes to the fairs who makes delicious roast pork, or a woman who makes a rice dish that's native to Rajaad."

"Isn't that across the sea?"

"It is, but a lot of their ships make port here. Well, not here, but in Porton," he says. "Some of the people have settled, and others come for things like the fair to share their wares and the food."

"Oh. I don't think I've ever had anything from Rajaad before."

"Isn't South Rajaad only a short journey from Someil?"

"I believe so, yes, but it's not something we serve at home. I think we were too inland to get much influence from the sailors."

"Ah, I see."

"Do you think I'll like it?" I ask, curious, but also a little wary.

"I'm not sure, but we could share?" he suggests. "If you don't like it, then we can get

something else."

"All right, that sounds nice." I try to give him a reassuring smile. It's strange to be standing in front of someone who I feel like I know very well, and not at all, both at the same time.

All around us, the villagers are enjoying the fair without a care in the world, and they don't seem to realise that there are any members of royalty among them. Or maybe they do. Arthur and his sisters all seem very relaxed to be here, so it can't be the only time they've done this.

Arthur offers me his arm again and I take it, using it as an excuse to step a little bit closer to him. I'm not sure what makes me do it, but I catch him smiling in a way that makes it seem as if he's noticed.

He leads me through the stalls, nodding to the occasional person and revealing that some of my thoughts are correct and that the villagers do know who he is. I suppose he is dressed like a prince, and we're only a short walk from the main castle and still within the main walls.

A delicious smell that I don't recognise meets my nose and I take a deep breath, letting it sink in. A woman is tossing some rice in a pan larger than any I've ever seen.

She looks up and smiles at us. "Your Highness," she says, dipping her head towards Arthur.

"Evening, Jiya," he says to her.

"I've not known you bring a guest to the fair before, Your Highness," she says, her gaze straying to me. She's speaking in Falhavian, but has an accent I don't recognise.

I assume it must be Rajaadi.

Arthur smiles widely. "This is Princess Solana of Someil, we're to be married."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I say quickly.

"The pleasure is mine, Your Highness," the woman responds. "How are you enjoying the fair?"

"It's wonderful," I respond. "I'm lucky that I have such a good guide to help me make the most of it."

Arthur's smile lights up his face and makes him look a little younger than before. Not that he ever looked old, he's very distinguished for twenty-two. "How are the lambs?" he asks the woman.

"They're good, Your Highness. Without your help, I doubt they would have been able to survive."

"It was my pleasure," he says.

I look at him. "What did you do?"

"Nothing much," he responds.

"He's being modest, Princess," the woman says.

"He came to the farm every day to help bottle feed the poor things.

Their mother broke her leg, and the stress made her lambs come early.

The village vet said that he thought the lambs would die, but Prince Arthur was having none of it. He has a way with animals."

"I've heard from his sisters." I put my hand on his arm and smile at him. It sounds like the same Arthur who has been writing to me, but also something new. He hasn't told me the details of his accomplishments at caring for animals. Perhaps he doesn't want to come across like he's boasting.

Arthur smiles. "I was hoping to share some of your food with Princess Solana," he says to the woman running the stall.

"Of course." She picks up a wooden bowl and stirs the large metal pan beside her. She scoops some of the rice dish into the bowl and hands it to Arthur along with a couple of spoons.

He digs into his pocket and takes out a coin, giving it to the woman.

"Thank you, Your Highness."

"We're busy with wedding preparations this week, but I'll visit the farm when I have a chance. Please send for me if you need anything," he says.

"Of course."

I watch with interest, wondering if my translation abilities are stopping me from understanding the nuances of the conversation, but both of them seem to be genuine with what they're saying.

Arthur turns his attention to me with a smile. "We should take a seat." He leads me over to where some wooden tables are set out, and we sit down. He places the bowl between us and hands me a spoon.

My fingers brush against his as I take it, making my breath catch in my throat.

No one has ever had an effect on me like this, though perhaps that's because I haven't given anyone a chance.

I was never much interested in anyone like that until I met Arthur, and even then, it wasn't immediately something I wanted to pursue.

At seventeen, he'd been kind and sweet, asking me to dance because it was what was expected of us.

It's only once we started writing to one another that my feelings started to grow.

Once I got to know the real person and not the prince he puts on show for the world.

Nervously, I dip my spoon into the dish and bring some to my lips. Arthur follows every movement a little bit closer than he has to, filling me with a deep sense of awareness in what I'm doing.

There's an explosion of flavour on my tongue, spices that seem both familiar and not at the same time. "This is good," I say to Arthur. "We have a similar dish in the south of Someil near the coast, but we make it with prawns and different spices."

"You should give the palace cook the recipe for that," Arthur says. "I imagine the kitchens will make it for you."

"I wouldn't want to cause more work for them."

"They want to," he says. "I've been giving them the names of the dishes you've talked about in your letters, and they've been excited to try them, I'm sure they'd like to hear about them from someone who has actually eaten them."

I pause with my spoon over the bowl. "You've been doing that?"

"I wanted you to be able to ask for food from Someil if you got homesick," he responds.

"Arthur..." My voice cracks as I say his name, hardly believing that he's being so sweet. "That truly wasn't necessary."

"I will do anything I can to make sure you're comfortable, Solana," he says softly. "I want you to have a home here."

"That's very sweet." I set down my spoon and reach out to touch him, a lot more purposefully than any of the previous brushes against one another we've done.

It feels right. After years of getting to know one another, it's taking longer than I thought to relax into the more physical part of our relationship, but I know it will come.

How can it not when he looks at me with those adoring eyes and reveals all of the thoughtful things he's already been doing for me?

If this is a taste of the life I have to come in Falhaven, then I feel like I'm going to be very happy here.

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A knock sounds on my sitting room door and my maid soon steps inside and curtsies.

"What is it, Maria?" I ask as I set down my embroidery hoop. It seems that the handkerchief I'm making for Arthur won't be finished today.

"Prince Arthur is here to see you, Your Highness," she says.

I nod. "Very well, show him in."

She does a double-take for a moment. "Would you like me to fetch the Duquesa?"

I'm about to say yes when I realise I don't want my aunt here. "No, I don't think that will be necessary."

"Of course, Your Highness." She disappears from the room, leaving me to marvel at how easy it is to adjust to the norms of how things are here.

Perhaps she's talked with some of the servants who have been working here for years and has been told what things are like.

I'm not entirely sure. Maybe I'll talk to her about it at some point. Or maybe not.

I cover my embroidery to protect it and nestle it safely in the box with my thread collection. As much as I want to finish his gift, I also want to spend time with him.

I get to my feet as the door opens again and Arthur steps inside. He's wearing a waistcoat and shirt under his jacket, looking very different from when he was in

uniform, but just as handsome.

"His Highness, Prince Arthur," Maria says.

"Thank you," I respond with a polite smile in her direction.

"Good afternoon," Arthur says.

"Afternoon," I respond.

"How has your morning been?"

"It was nice, thank you," I respond. "I took a walk in the gardens. My aunt complained about the cold the entire time."

"You should have Veronica show you around them," he says. "She knows the gardens well."

I nod. "That would be nice, if you think she would be amenable to it."

"I'm sure she would," he assures me. He puts his hand in his pocket and pulls out a small bag. "I brought this for Felicia."

"Another present?" I ask.

"A treat," he promises. "I also brought some marzipan for you." He pulls a small box out of his pocket and holds it out.

"You didn't have to do that."

"I did. I've wanted to send you some for years, but I always worried that it would get

damaged on the journey."

"That's very sweet of you," I respond. "Perhaps I could swap it for some lemon drops. I don't have many left, but I do have some." I take the box from him and hurry over to my desk where I'm keeping my own bag of sweets.

He takes it as a chance to head over to where Felicia is lounging on her cat tower. Her tail flicks back and forth as she studies the approaching prince.

"I have something for you," he says softly, not startling her at all as he takes whatever it is he's brought out of his pocket and holds it out to her.

My cat's eyes narrow as she studies the offering. She leans forward and sniffs it dramatically before batting it with her paw.

"Felicia!"

She completely ignores me, far too focused on what Arthur has in his hand.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Dried beef," he responds. "The stablemaster swears by it being the best cat treat."

"I don't think she's ever had any," I respond, coming over so that I can watch my cat.

She bats at the piece of beef again and Arthur lets go of it so it falls onto the cat tree for her. She pounces, her paws completely covering it.

"Now we're not going to see any of her at all," I joke.

"That's good, because I came to see you."

"And yet you went straight for my cat."

"I must apologise."

"You must not," I respond. "I can understand it. Would you like to take a seat with me?" I suggest, waving towards the chaise.

His face lights up and he nods.

"Do you have anywhere to be this afternoon?" I ask as I make my way over, making sure to collect the box with the marzipan and the bag with lemon drops before I take my seat.

"No, I am yours for the afternoon," he responds. "I did think of inviting you for a ride, but Veronica told me you didn't have a horse of your own."

"I never had much reason for riding in Someil. Mamá used to have me sit in the carriage with her." My skirts move around me, creating a barrier between us that I don't expect.

"Would you like to?" he asks. "Go riding?"

"I would," I say. "I learned how, and I enjoyed it when I did."

"Then we should head down to the stables tomorrow, and we can find the perfect horse for you."

"I don't know the first thing about horses," I say.

"Luckily, I do," he assures me.

"Does that mean I'm finally going to meet Brownfoot?" I ask, opening the bag of lemon drops and offering him one.

He takes it with a smile. "If you'd like to."

"You've met my cat, it only seems fair that I meet your horse," I respond.

"And eventually, you'll meet Evie's dragon too. I'm surprised she didn't have her with her at the ball when we met." He pops the lemon drop into his mouth and I find myself watching every movement with a little too much interest.

"I forgot she had one," I admit. "I haven't seen much of Princess Evelyn since I got here, just when she and Princess Veronica showed me around."

"You don't have to be so formal about naming them if you don't want to," he assures me. "You can call them Veronica and Evie."

"I know, they used Artie for you too. It just feels so informal, I'm not used to it."

"You can call me Artie if you want," he assures me.

"Artie," I murmur, trying it out. "It does suit you."

"It is my name," he points out. "And what my sisters have called me for years."

"Are you sure it would be acceptable for me to call you Artie?"

He reaches out and takes my hands in his. "You know me better than anyone ever has, you can call me whatever you wish to."

I nod slowly and bite my lip, drawing his attention there without meaning to. "I've

only ever been called Solana, and only by my parents and in private."

"Is that what you want to be called?" he asks.

"I don't know. What could it be shortened to?"

"Ana?" he suggests. "Or Sola? Or you can go by Solana. Veronica doesn't shorten her name."

"Ana doesn't feel right," I say. "But I think I like Sola."

"We can try it, if you'd like. It doesn't have to be for everyone, just for us."

"I think I'd like that." I smile at him, realising that I feel very comfortable with him around. Maybe it's because I know him already through our letters, and now I've been at Falhaven Castle for a few days, the realisation that this is the same Arthur I've come to know has really sunk in.

"Then we can try," he promises. "Sola."

A small thrill goes through me at the sound of my name coming from his lips. I look down, noticing our entwined hands and feeling something more within me. I can't explain the feeling inside me, or the urge to touch him more, but it's there.

Slowly, I pull one of my hands from under his and begin to trace patterns over his skin, revelling in every moment of contact between us. He doesn't say anything, just letting me enjoy my exploration. I've never done anything like this before, and there's something nice about it.

"How are you feeling being away from home?" Arthur asks.

"It's fine," I respond. "There are things I miss, and I know I'm going to be sad when I've eaten the rest of my lemon drops and I can't get more. But I like it here so far."

"I'm glad. Once we're married and winter has passed, we can go on a visit to Someil, if you'd like."

"I think that would be nice."

"I'm sure your parents will be pleased to see you."

"Mamá will be. She doesn't like to travel, so I don't think she'll visit us. It will be nice to introduce the two of you."

"Then that's what we shall do," he promises. "I shall get everything organised."

"I can help, if you'd like," I say softly. "I've not had much to do with that part of things, but I would like to get to know more of it."

"Of course. Anything you'd like." From the earnest expression on his face, there's no doubt in my mind that he's telling the truth.

"Thank you...Artie."

He beams at me, his dark blue eyes lighting up and the crinkles around them deepening. I want to make him react like this again. As many times as I possibly can, because I want to see him react like this at every chance I get.

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I'm a little nervous to be heading down to the stables, but at least I know I have the right clothing for it.

Knowing that Arthur enjoys it, I made sure to ask the royal seamstresses in Someil to make me a riding habit.

It's new, and a little stiff because of it, but I know that if I want to ride, I need to make sure I have the right clothing.

My hair is swept up and pinned with my hat, leaving my ears a little exposed to the cold.

It's not like anything I ever experienced in Someil, and the northern climate is certainly taking a little bit more getting used to than I expected.

Shouts come from inside the stables, but I ignore them until I come to the main entrance. A man wearing surprisingly few layers spots me and dips his head. "Your Highness."

"I'm looking for Prince Arthur," I say, probably a little needlessly. The castle isn't that big, and I'm sure everyone in it knows that I'm here to marry Arthur.

"Third stall down, Princess," he says.

"Thank you." I step inside, trying to ignore the strong scent of horses and hay. It's not something I'm used to, and it's a little overpowering.

I reach the third stall, stopping in my tracks when I see Arthur inside with his shirt sleeves rolled up and his jacket nowhere to be seen. My mouth goes a little dry as I watch his arms move as he grooms the white horse with a couple of brown patches on him, including a single brown foot.

I'm not sure what I expected when I came here, but it certainly wasn't this.

Arthur steps away from the horse and looks over in my direction, surprise written all over his face. "I'm sorry, I didn't realise you were here."

"It's my fault," I respond. "I didn't announce myself."

He raises an eyebrow, but I don't elaborate on my statement. I'm not entirely sure how to tell him that I didn't announce myself because I was busy watching him as he groomed his horse.

"I'm guessing this is Brownfoot," I say instead.

Arthur chuckles. "Yes."

"It's an inventive name."

"I was younger then," he says. "In Falhaven, it's unlucky to have a horse to have one leg a different colour to the others."

"So that's the horse you chose for yourself?"

"Yes. I didn't want to think about him being treated badly just because he has a brown foot. That's why I called him that," Arthur says. "I've been raising him since he was a foal."

"He's very handsome," I say. "And hopefully not unlucky at all?"

Arthur laughs. "Not even slightly," he assures me. "Would you like to say hello?"

I nod and step into the stable. My cape falls back over my shoulder as I reach out and pat the horse on the neck. "Hello, Brownfoot. It's a pleasure to meet you."

He gives a strange kind of rumbly sound in response and nudges his head against my shoulder.

"I think he likes you," Arthur says.

"Good, because I intend to be around for a while to come," I say to the horse, even though I know he probably can't understand me.

"Which means that we should probably find you a horse," Arthur says. "I've got a few suggestions."

I nod. "I'm not taking the horse from anyone, am I?"

"No, this is the royal stables. My sisters' horses are here, as well as Ernest's pony, but there are also horses that are unclaimed for if we have guests or anyone else who is in need of one."

"Ah." That's better than feeling as if I'm taking a horse from someone who it already belongs to.

Arthur pats Brownfoot on the side. "I'll be back, and maybe we'll go for a ride?" He looks at me, and it takes me a moment to realise that he's asking me because the choice is mine.

"I am dressed for it." I wave my hand down myself, only to realise as I do that I'm inviting him to look.

He doesn't linger too long, but it's enough to make me aware of his gaze. "Do you need a side saddle?"

"Yes. That's the only way I know how to ride."

"I can teach you to ride astride, if you want," he offers.

"Is that not considered improper?"

"Maybe in the dress you're currently wearing, but Kathryn prefers to ride astride. When she's in public, she wears a dress over both sides of her horse."

"And that's acceptable for the Crown Princess to do?"

"I assume so. She continues to do it."

"I will think about it," I respond. It might be a little bit too much to go straight to riding astride when it goes against everything that I've been taught, but I do like the idea. Especially if the lessons are coming from Arthur.

He shuts the door of Brownfoot's stall behind us and grabs his jacket from where it's hanging on a hook by the entrance. I can't believe I didn't notice when I came in, though I was a little distracted by Arthur.

"You said that you haven't ridden much, so I thought you'd do best with a calmer horse."

"He gestures for me to come over to the stall next to Brownfoot's."

"This is Chestnut. She's actually Brownfoot's cousin.

" He grabs some feed from the box by the stall door and holds it out to her. She gobbles it up quickly.

"She's beautiful," I say.

"She is. She's got a very even temperament, and she's very responsive to commands. She's not got much experience with anyone riding side saddle, though."

"Is that a problem?"

"I don't think so, though it might make Charcoal a better choice, he's an excellent learner." He gestures to the next stall along where a jet black horse is waiting. "He's a little younger, so not that calm though."

I step forward and repeat what Arthur did with the previous horse, letting out a small giggle when the horse's tongue tickles the palm of my hand.

The way Arthur looks at me makes my heart soar. The adoration is impossible to ignore, especially when it's clearly aimed at me interacting with the animals he loves.

"And your final option is Snowball, she's a little older, but she has experience with side saddle. Though if you don't think any of the horses are right, we can try some of the others."

I shake my head, already drifting towards the horse that I assume is Snowball. It's easy to see why she's called that. Her coat is mostly white with speckles of grey, looking almost exactly like what I imagine snow will be when I finally get a chance to see it for myself.

I reach out and slowly touch her nose, not wanting to startle her with sudden movements. She pushes it against my palm and I find myself smiling. "This is the right horse," I say. "But don't ask me how I know."

Arthur laughs and leans forward to pet Snowball. "Sometimes, you just know. Isn't that what it was like with Felicia? You said you found her a few years ago?"

"I did," I respond, a tingly feeling flowing through me as I realise this means he's been paying attention to my letters. "She'd been abandoned, and I couldn't stand the thought of her being on her own. I think everyone assumed that I'd leave her too once I was bored, but I never did."

"I'm glad you were able to bring her with you to Falhaven."

"Me too, I wouldn't have liked leaving her behind. I'm sorry if that's an issue."

"It's not even a small one," he responds. "I look forward to getting to know her, especially after hearing all of your stories over the past few years."

"I'm looking forward to you getting to know her too. I think you're going to love her."

"I already do," he murmurs, turning to look at me with an intensity that is hard to miss. One that makes me want to lean closer and find out if it will feel as good to kiss him as I think it's going to.

"Your Highness, I've brought the saddle you requested," a boy says.

I squeeze my eyes shut and let out a frustrated groan. I know that the middle of the stables isn't the best place to even be considering kissing Arthur for the first time, but the interruption is still unwanted.

Arthur clears his throat and steps back from me. "Would you get Snowball ready for Princess Solana to ride, Rob?"

"Of course, Your Highness." The boy dips his head.

Arthur smiles at me. "How confident are you at riding?"

"I'm decent," I respond. "I might have used our betrothal as an excuse to get more time learning. I told Mamá that you loved to ride and you'd expect me to go with you."

"I'd never have expected that of you," he says quickly.

"I know. But Mamá is a little overprotective at times, and I wanted a reason to be able to ride more. I've not had a lot of experience out of the fields surrounding our palace, but I'm confident in the saddle. The side saddle, anyway."

"Then I know just where to take us," he promises. "If you're comfortable with riding alone."

"I'm here without a chaperone, aren't I?"

He chuckles. "And how does the Duquesa feel about that?"

"I don't think she minds too much. I imagine she quite likes the peace of not having to traipse around after me."

"Then we shall go for a ride." He lifts my hand to his lips and kisses it.

Even though I'm wearing winter gloves, I can still feel the tingle that comes from being so close to him, and it really makes me wish that we hadn't been interrupted

before.

Next time I was presented with an opportunity, I wasn't going to let anything stop me.

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It takes me a moment to get used to being in the saddle again, but I love the feel of being able to travel on horseback.

Mamá might not like it this way, but I've always considered it to be quite freeing, even when side saddle and in a stiff riding habit.

Perhaps I should talk to Arthur's sisters and see if they have any advice on what I should be wearing while riding.

I haven't seen any of the Falhavien ladies on horseback yet, so I have no idea if my riding habit will be considered fashionable here.

Not that I particularly mind, but I do like to be comfortable.

"How are you finding Snowball?" Arthur asks as he draws Brownfoot alongside me with the ease of a practised rider.

"We're getting on well," I say, leaning forward and patting the horse's neck. I hope she feels the same way I do, it would be sad if my horse didn't particularly like me.

"I'm glad," he responds, swaying slightly as we walk the horses down the bridle path.

"I should have thought to prepare a picnic or something for us."

"That's really not necessary," I assure him.

"I know, but it would have been nice."

"Perhaps next time," I respond. "There's plenty of time for picnics.

I did bring the last of my lemon drops if you want one.

" I'm a little nervous as I move my reins into one hand, but Snowball reacts well, continuing at her steady pace as if I'm not doing anything.

It reassures me that she's a good choice of horse.

I dig into my pocket and pull out the bag of lemon drops, holding the bag out to him. For a moment, I fear I'm going to drop it, but he leans in to take it, showing a lot more confidence than I feel on horseback, though I have to assume I'll gain it if we continue to ride together.

He pops one of the lemon drops into his mouth and I take the packet back from him, taking one for myself. It's a shame that they're almost gone, but I've enjoyed having the little taste of home with me.

The lemon drop melts in my mouth and fills it with a burst of flavour. I've liked some of the sweets Arthur has sent me, but I'm yet to find my favourite here in Falhaven, but I'm sure I will.

"Do you want to pick up the pace a little?" Arthur asks.

I look at Snowball and consider my options. I'm not scared of a challenge, but I do worry about going too fast on a horse I don't know. But she's been responsive to everything so far. "I'd like to try," I say.

"Have you gone into a gallop before?"

I nod. "Only around the paddock where I learned."

"This is a good patch of the path," Arthur says. "But get Snowball to return to a trot when you get to those two trees." He points them out.

"All right." I take a deep breath. I want to try this, and Snowball has done everything I asked so far. I take my riding crop and pat her lightly on her flank.

She takes a moment to respond, but soon speeds into a trot and then into a gallop.

I grasp hold of the pommel of my saddle, holding on but reminding myself that I need to relax.

I sit up straighter, letting myself move along with Snowball's cadence, feeling much better once I do.

She moves well, and I lean into that, letting the exhilaration of the wind whipping past travel through me.

"Faster," I call out to my horse, even though I know she probably can't hear me. Except that it feels like she does, and her head leans forward and her gait seems more determined.

My hat flies off and several strands of hair fall into my face, but I don't care, the rush of the wind as I ride Snowball faster than I've ever been on a horse is too strong to care about anything as practical as a hat.

I let out a loud laugh, drawing Arthur's attention. He flashes me a wide smile, and even while we're moving, I can tell how happy he is to be out for a ride, especially as he races with me towards the trees.

This is everything I hoped coming to Falhaven would be like. The ability to do lots of the things I only ever thought about doing while I lived in Someil. I hope it's

something that can continue.

The trees Arthur pointed out come into view and I tug on the reins, giving Snowball the command to slow down. For a horrifying moment, I don't think she's going to listen, but she quickly slows to a trot, and then to a walk.

Arthur darts past, slowing down when he realises I have and turning Brownfoot around so he can come walk beside me.

"You'd never have known you'd only ridden in the paddock before," he says.

"I enjoyed my riding lessons," I respond. "I made the most of them. Hopefully, riding is something I can do more of now I'm in Falhaven."

"I know I would like it if you joined me on rides," he says. "It's something I hoped I could share with you, but I didn't want to say anything, especially as I know you haven't ridden very much in the past."

"I'm having a good time," I promise. "I'd like to do this more."

His whole face lights up and I enjoy knowing I've caused that.

A spot of wet catches on my face and I frown, looking up at the sky and noticing flecks of white floating down from the sky. "It's snowing," I say, letting go of the reins and holding out my hand to catch some of the flakes.

"So it is," he says. He directs Brownfoot towards a fence and clicks his tongue, bringing the horse to a stop. He jumps down with surprising ease.

"I might need some help down," I say.

He nods and comes over, reaching out to help me. I shift in the saddle and let him help me down. His hands graze against my waist, and even through the layers of clothing, I'm aware of every touch and every move of his fingers against me.

I slide off the saddle, bringing us closer together than I expect. I don't step away, and he doesn't remove his hands from my waist.

"Your hat," he murmurs.

"It's long gone," I say. "I think I shall need to find a stronger hatpin if we're going to continue riding together."

"I can ask in the stables if any of them have any recommendations."

"Yes," I respond. "That would be good."

He lifts a hand and I instantly miss the weight of it against my waist, at least until he uses it to brush some of the loose hair away from my face.

My breath catches in my throat and I wet my lips, thinking about what's coming.

There's no way for me to be certain of what he's thinking, but I know it deep within me, this is the moment.

"Artie," I whisper. "Kiss me."

He doesn't need telling twice and leans in, his breath fanning against my lips. Anticipation builds within me. I want to hurry this moment at the same time as savouring it.

Everything feels like it slows down around me as he slips his hand around me and

puts it on my lower back, pulling me closer to him. I reach out to touch his cheek.

Snow drifts between us, landing on his eyelashes and making the moment even more magical.

My eyes flutter closed just as his lips brush against mine.

They're soft at first, almost hesitant, as the two of us give in to something we've been thinking about since before I arrived.

It doesn't matter how cold the air around us is, the kiss itself fills me with a warmth I've never felt before.

Every part of me feels like it's responding to the kiss, including some ways that are new to me, and intense for it.

He tastes of lemon, the flavour familiar and yet not at the same time.

He pulls back, but only for long enough for us to both catch our breath.

I don't waste another moment and lean in to kiss him again, deeper this time and with more confidence.

I know that this is what I want. It feels like more than that at the moment, like something I need .

I didn't even realise it was possible to have someone make me respond this way.

One of the horses neighs, cutting through the kiss, but I don't pull away from Arthur's arms. It's going to take more than that to get me to move.

I let out a sigh and rest my hand on his chest. "I hope that's not going to be the last time we do that."

He chuckles, the sound vibrating through my hand where it rests. "Definitely not."

"Are we supposed to have waited?"

"I don't think so," he responds. "At least, not if you don't want to."

I lean in and press a swift kiss against his lips. "I don't want to," I assure him. "And I don't want to wait to do it again."

"You'll hear no complaints here." He pulls me closer and kisses me again, sweeter this time, and more certain. I can feel that it's the start of something, and there will be a multitude of kisses to come.

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I sit by the window, half watching the snow fall outside, and half focusing on putting the final touches to my present for Arthur. I wish it had been done before I arrived in Falhaven, but I want it to be perfect, and that has delayed some of my stitching.

I pull back my embroidery hoop and look at what I've done so far. I should add some snowflakes, especially after today.

I reach up to touch my lips, feeling the tingle that comes with the memory of kissing Arthur for the first time. I know that it's impatient of me to think so, but I'm hoping I'll get an opportunity to do it again soon.

A knock sounds on my sitting room door, taking me by surprise. "Come in," I call.

Maria steps inside and curtsies. "Prince Arthur is here to see you, Your Highness."

"At this time?" Dinner has already been served, and I thought we'd said goodnight already.

"I can tell him you've retired for the evening if you'd like."

"No, please don't. Show him in," I say.

She nods and disappears to do as I suggest. I don't think my aunt will still be awake, so it will be easy for her not to intrude while I'm with Arthur. Which is good as far as I'm concerned, because I have every intention of kissing him again.

I set aside my embroidery just as the door opens and Arthur steps inside. I make my

way over to him, realising that I'm not really sure how to initiate the kiss I want. I'm not used to this kind of thing.

He seems to realise what I'm doing, and leans in to press his lips against mine, kissing me a little deeper than I anticipated, and igniting something within me that I've only felt when alone in my bed.

We break apart, and I reach up to trace the planes of his face with my fingers, glad I'm not wearing gloves this time.

"I didn't expect to see you this late," I say.

"I can go if you'd like."

"No," I respond firmly.

"Veronica reminded me that the villagers are going to be setting off some fireworks tonight, I thought you'd like to watch."

"From the village?" I ask, glancing towards the window.

"No, from the balcony."

"There's a balcony?"

He holds out his hand, and I take it, wrapping my fingers tightly around his as he draws me out of the room and into the receiving room. He heads over to two large windows and swings them open, revealing a balcony. Cold air rushes in, but I'm too focused on what's outside to truly notice.

"I had no idea that was there."

"I didn't think much about it," he admits. "It being winter."

"Ah, yes, I suppose that makes sense." I follow him outside and lean against the stone balustrade so I can look down at the village below. A bonfire rages in the centre square and I can hear the shouts of the villagers as they celebrate.

Arthur steps closer and puts an arm around me, I lean back into him, amazed at how comfortable it feels for the two of us to be like this.

"It looks wonderful," I say.

"We can go back if you want," he murmurs, his breath tickling my ear in a pleasant way.

"Maybe tomorrow," I say. "It's been a long day."

"That's fair. My father had me working hard once we got back from our ride too."

"What were you doing?" I ask, twisting slightly so that I can see his face.

"Going over some of the details of the trade deal between us and Rajaad," he responds. "We're hoping to increase the trade for spices."

"Ah. I look forward to trying more of their food, it was delicious when we had some at the fair."

"The spices are popular here, we cook with them a lot at banquets. Though to hear Evie talk about it, we're doing it all wrong."

I laugh. "Your sister has a lot of opinions about food."

"It's mostly about things she can bake rather than food in general. Cakes, biscuits, bread, that kind of thing. But yes, she has a lot of opinions." There's a note of affection in his voice. It's clear to me just how much love there is between the members of the Royal Family here in Falhaven.

I run my hand over his arm, the affectionate touch coming more easily than I'd ever imagined it would. I knew that I liked Arthur as a person, but this is something more. It's like it's woken up a part of me that I didn't know existed.

"What are you thinking?" Arthur asks.

"About you," I respond.

"I'm not complaining about that."

I laugh and turn around in his arms, enjoying the way it feels for his hand to trail across my waist. "I don't have words to describe how you make me feel," I whisper.

"That feeling is mutual." He reaches out and brushes a strand of hair out of my face. "I thought your letters made me fall in love with you, but now that I have you here, I realise that barely even scratches the surface of how I feel."

"Arthur..." I reach up to touch his face.

"Yes?"

I don't have any words to say. Not that he hasn't already said. I go up on my toes and press a kiss against his lips. There's only light pressure at first, just like some of our other kisses, but then the urge to kiss him deeper comes over me.

I give in to it. Maybe I wouldn't have done when I first came to Falhaven, but I've

been here long enough to know that things aren't the way my mother described them to me.

More than that, I know I'm safe with Arthur.

It's not just because I already know he's going to be my husband, it's more than that.

It's how he's made me feel in the time we've spent together.

His hand splays against my lower back, pulling me closer. I trail my hand over his face and down his neck, feeling the collar of his shirt beneath my fingers. I want to feel more of his skin, even if I don't know what that really means.

"Arthur," I murmur against his lips.

"Yes?" He pulls back so he can look at my face.

"I've never wanted this before."

"Wanted what?"

I frown and consider how I'm feeling. "I don't really have words for it. But I can show you?"

He raises an eyebrow. "All right."

I chew on my bottom lip and lower my hand until it's at the neck of his shirt. The warm skin of his throat is just under my fingers, making me want to explore further.

Arthur's breath catches in his throat, but he holds very still, almost too still. "Sola..."

I swallow hard. "Can I?" I touch the ties of his shirt.

He nods, watching me intently with his deep blue eyes, the ones that always seem so full of thoughts and emotions.

My actions are fumbly as I undo the ties at his neck, pulling open his shirt.

It doesn't reveal much skin, especially as he's still wearing a waistcoat that's blocking me from doing much more.

I consider it for a moment, both nervous and bold at the same time.

I'm not really sure what I'm doing, I just know that I want to.

I slide my hand further down until I'm at the waistcoat and slowly push the silk-covered buttons through the buttonhole. My heart races and my mouth is a little dry as I manage to get each of them done. I push the fabric off Arthur's shoulders, letting it fall away from him.

"Sola." His voice cracks as he says my name.

"Yes?"

He leans in and captures my lips with his, kissing me far more deeply than I expect. Deeper than we've ever kissed before. There's a need in it, and something awakens in the pit of my stomach, desperate to get out and not knowing how.

With his waistcoat on the ground, it's easier to work with his shirt, and I tug at it until it pulls free. My fingers brush against the warm skin of his stomach and he sucks in a breath, even through our kiss.

"Tell me what you want," he murmurs, leaning his forehead against mine.

"To touch," I respond. "To be touched."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

He chuckles. "I'm not sure that's helpful."

"I don't know, Artie, this is the first time I've really wanted to do something like this."

"Then we can go slow," he promises.

"Have...you...?"

"No."

I pull back and look at him. "But you've told me that the Falhaven rules about being alone together aren't as enforced as those in Someil."

"Clearly," he responds, gesturing around us. "And yes, I'm not saying that I didn't have the opportunity. I'm saying that I've never been in a situation where I wanted to. I've been in love with you for years. Why would I want to sleep with someone else?"

A thrill goes through me at the admission that he loves me. I know it from his letters, but hearing him say the words out loud for the first time is something else. It holds a deeper meaning, especially with everything that's already passed between us.

"I don't think that would stop some people."

"I'm not some people, Sola. I love you, I don't want anyone but you."

Emotions well up within me and I don't really know what to do with them.

At a loss for any other ideas, I step forwards and kiss him, trying to convey everything I'm feeling in the gesture.

I need him to know how much his words mean to me.

To know he's loved me for so long, and that he's chosen to remain faithful to a relationship that was just in letters, means the world to me.

"I love you too," I whisper.

A loud bang cuts through our conversation, and we both jump, only to laugh as the first firework lights up the sky.

"I forgot about them already," I admit. "They're amazing."

"They're from Shengda," he says. "I've never seen anything like them from anywhere else."

Bright lights fill the sky along with a few more bangs. The lights sparkle like stars even as they shimmer and fall to the ground. It feels a lot like I do, and perfect for the moment I'm sharing with Arthur. Except that I don't want this to end.

"Arthur?" I whisper.

"Mmm?"

"You don't have to leave after the fireworks, do you?"

"Not if you don't want me to," he says. "But if you do at any point, just say the word."

"Stay," I respond, nestling myself back into his arms and watching the remaining fireworks. But no matter what I do, I can't stop thinking about how it felt to touch his bare skin, and wonder how long it's going to be until I can do that again.

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I don't even think about it as I draw Arthur through my sitting room and into my bedchamber. Should I be doing this? Not if I listen to all of the things Mamá told me before I came here. But if I listen to the way I feel, then this is precisely where I should be.

I tug him to me and kiss him just as deeply as outside on the balcony. My whole body is tingling, and it's hard to tell if it's just because of the cold, or because of the anticipation. I don't suppose that I care very much, all I want is to feel good.

Arthur breaks the kiss and turns me around, his lips nuzzling against my ear. "How complicated is your dress to take off?" he murmurs.

A thrill I don't recognise shoots through me. "Not too hard," I respond. "It's a day dress."

"I don't know what that means."

"There are ties at the back of my bodice."

"All right." He steps back, and the cool air rushes in. I miss his touch until I feel it tugging at the laces of my bodice. He's surprisingly patient, and he manages to get it undone.

I reach up and untie the sections of my sleeves attached to it, allowing me to pull them off. There's a lot more of my dress to go, even if it is a simple one, but I'm eager to get the rest of it off.

It only takes a few moments for my bodice to be discarded, and my skirts soon follow, leaving me in the thin shift I have underneath.

Arthur's hand presses against my stomach, pulling me back to him. He brushes some hair off my neck and leans in, kissing the soft skin there. My breath catches in my throat and the desire for more keeps growing inside me.

I break away, taking his hand and leading him over to the bed.

"What do you want me to do?" he asks, his dark blue eyes full of desire.

"I'm not sure," I admit. "Just, something that feels good."

He nods and gets on the bed beside me. I want to suggest that we get rid of more of our clothes, but I'm not sure if that's what he has in mind.

He cups my cheek in his hand and draws me to him, giving me a tender kiss that says that this is about far more than the physical need that's growing within me.

I take his hand in mine and place it on my hip. The warmth of his palm seeps through my shift and I'm almost desperate for him to do more.

He deepens the kiss as his hand drifts lower, finding the edge of the fabric.

I gasp as his fingers skim against the bare skin of my leg. No one has touched me there, not like this, and I want to feel more of it. He kisses down my neck and across my collarbones as his hand slips up higher. It's unlike anything I've ever felt before.

"What..."

"Here," I murmur, putting my hand over his and moving it higher, to exactly where I

want it to be.

A moan escapes me as his fingers brush against my entrance, which seems to give him the confidence to continue.

If I had any doubts about his assurances that there'd never been anyone else, they'd be gone now.

Unfortunately, I don't have enough experience myself to be able to guide any better than I already am.

"There," I say as he finds the right spot. "Keep touching me there."

He makes a sound that seems like agreement and does as I ask, making the pleasure curl up inside me. I reach down and grasp his wrist in my hand, hoping to keep him going.

"Sola?"

"Don't stop," I murmur. "Please, don't stop." My words are hardly out when the release crashes over me. My whole body begins to shake as pleasure courses through every part of my body. It's never felt like this before, even when I've done the same to myself.

He doesn't stop, prolonging the release for longer, until I collapse back on the bed, breathing heavily and trying to regain some semblance of thought.

Arthur shifts on the bed, sitting up.

I push myself upwards, wrapping my arms around his chest. "Are you all right?" I ask.

He nods. "Are you?" He looks at me with concern in his eyes.

"I'm fine," I promise. "More than fine. That felt better than when I've pleased myself."

He raises an eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

"Want to find out?" I ask, running my hand further down. I'm not really sure what to expect from this part, but it makes sense that I should be able to make him feel as good as he's done for me.

Arthur swallows hard, but manages to nod.

I shuffle closer, finding the ties of his breeches. He groans as my hand brushes against something hard, and a dull ache starts to build inside me in response. I fumble with the ties until I manage to get them undone, and his hard length springs free.

"Show me?" I whisper, not entirely sure what to do.

He guides my hand to his hardness and lets me wrap my fingers around him. He moves it up and down, giving me the right idea about what I should be doing.

He lets go of my hand, which I assume means I'm doing the right thing. I stroke slowly at first, causing a guttural sound to come from his throat. I watch intently, completely caught up with what I'm doing, and how good it feels to be able to give him pleasure like this.

"I'm close," he murmurs, his voice strained and his face screwed up with what I hope is pleasure.

"Do I need to do something different?" I ask.

He shakes his head as he thrusts into my hand and erupts, covering my hand. He closes his eyes and lets out a groan, leaning back into me as he empties himself.

"Do you have a cloth?" he murmurs.

"Yes."

"Where? I can get it."

"The pitcher by the window," I say, a little confused.

He nods and gets up to fetch it, bringing back the entire bowl. He pours water into it and soaks the cloth, slowly cleaning us both. He tucks himself away and shuffles back to rest against the wall, opening his arm so I can go to sit with him.

I lean my head against his shoulder and let out a satisfied sigh. "So, that was unexpected."

He chuckles. "It's not what I intended when I came to see you."

"But it was fun," I assure him. "And not the end of it, I would think."

"Certainly not." He turns and looks at me with an intense expression on his face that fills me with all kinds of thoughts and feelings I didn't know I could have.

I lean in and press my lips against his, kissing him softly and hoping he takes it to mean exactly what it does, that I care for him deeply and want nothing more than to spend a lot more time with him. In all ways that I can.

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I hum to myself as I make my way through to my private sitting room. It's still new to me to have a place like this that's all to my own, especially as the servants don't come in without asking, but I like it. And it is certainly one of the many advantages of moving to Falhaven.

The window rattles and I look over in time to see Felicia squeezing herself through the gap.

"Where have you been?" I ask my cat. "You're a castle-cat, not an outdoor-cat."

She gives me a look that says she's not impressed by my choice of address and continues to do a lap of the room, checking for anything of interest, though I'm not sure precisely what that might be.

I ignore her, knowing that it's best for me to wait for her to come to me when she wants fuss, and go to sit at my desk and write to Mamá instead. A streak of black and grey fur is the only thing I see as she jumps onto my desk, knocking over one of my ink pots as she does.

"Felicia!" I grab it, trying to stop the spread of the ink before I waste a lot of the paper.

She doesn't care at all and starts to walk across the desk, leaving a trail of ink footprints behind her.

"Oh, no, you don't." I scoop her up and grab a cloth so I can wipe off her feet. "How many times do I have to tell you not to walk over things when I'm planning on

writing?"

"Meow."

"I thought as much." I place her on the cat tower, much to her indignation, but she seems to like several of the cushions that Arthur put there.

I return to my desk and pull my chair closer, getting ready to write to Mamá.

I pause with my pen over the page, not entirely sure what I want to write. I know Mama wants to hear about how I'm settling in at Falhaven Castle, but all I can think about are the things she shouldn't be told about. Like the way it had felt to have Arthur's hands on my skin last night.

I shake my thoughts aside and focus on the letter I'm supposed to be writing. There are lots of things I can tell Mamá about my time in Falhaven that don't involve any impropriety on my part. I can tell her about my visit to the Winter Fair, and getting to know Arthur's sisters.

Except that no matter what I start to write about, I find my mind drifting back to last night.

Warmth fills me at the memories, and without even fully realising what I'm doing, I reach for a second sheet of paper and put Arthur's name at the top of it.

Something about writing his name like that opens the floodgates within me, and I start writing him a letter, describing all of the things we did last night in a surprising amount of detail.

A feeling I now recognise settles inside me, growing stronger as my words stray from memory into fantasy.

I find myself describing what it might feel like to feel his hand smooth under my skirt, his lips following the same path, and perhaps finding another spot, somewhere that could make me fall apart.

I swallow hard, my skin flushed and my thoughts racing. I'm not entirely sure what's possessing me to write all of this. The only thing I know is that I want it. I want him .

Something I need to figure out how to tell him that without him thinking that I'm wanton and not like the proper princess I should be. Except, he's not going to think that. I'm not the only one who lost control. He was with me yesterday, and he clearly feels some of the same needs I do.

I lean back in my seat, contemplating what I'm supposed to do now. There's been a feverish rush of words, and it's hard to distinguish some of them. And while it feels good to have put them to the page, I can feel the need inside me glowing hot and unanswered. I never thought I could feel this way.

A knock sounds on the door to my sitting room. I quickly cover the page with another, not wanting to risk anyone seeing it, not when I don't know how they'd react to what's written there. In reality, there's only one person I would even consider sharing them with.

"One moment," I call out, assuming it isn't one of the servants from the fact that they haven't just come inside. I get to my feet and smooth out my dress, almost as if I expect it to be wrinkled from the tryst I've written about, when in reality, they're completely untouched.

I head over to the door and pull it open, revealing the object of my desires standing in front of me.

"Good morning," he says, his voice welcoming in all the right ways.

I gesture for him to step inside. "I was writing to my mother," I say.

"Oh, then I shouldn't interrupt," Artie says.

"You can," I respond. "It wasn't going very well, about the only thing I've managed to write is a request for her to send me more lemon drops now I've run out." I bite my bottom lip without meaning to, drawing his attention to it.

"Is there anything I can do to help? Maybe I can read what you put..."

"Oh, erm..."

"Sola? Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine," I promise. "It's just...I was trying to write to my mother, but then I started writing about last night."

He raises an eyebrow. "I'm not sure that's the kind of thing the Queen of Someil would like to hear about."

"No, I don't think she would." Feeling bold, and knowing that he won't think badly of me for it, I return to my desk and get the letter, holding it out to him.

"Are you sure?" he asks before he takes it.

"Yes. I think. If you hate it, don't tell me."

"I've loved all of your writing," he says softly. "I doubt this will be any different."

"Perhaps not." Or perhaps he'll decide that he can't marry someone with thoughts like that.

I watch as he reads, his expressions revealing a lot and a little all at the same time. After what feels like an age, he clears his throat. "We didn't do some of this."

"We didn't," I respond slowly. "I suppose I was just thinking, and then I started writing. It's not the first time we've written something that we wanted to do together."

"Is that so?" His lips quirk up. "I didn't realise you thought about this kind of thing."

"I'm sheltered, not naive," I point out.

"Well, I'm sure we can arrange it." He steps closer, brushing a strand of hair out of my face, his dark blue eyes boring into me as he studies me intently.

I lean in, putting a hand against his chest even as he closes the gap and captures my lips with his. The kiss is deep and full of barely restrained need. As is something else that I'm now very aware of.

"Arthur," I murmur.

"Mmm?"

"We should..." I gesture towards my bedchamber. It's the middle of the day, but I don't think anyone is going to be looking for us. This is the perfect opportunity to spend some more time with him and to work out some more of my curiosity.

He searches my face, and must see what he's looking for, because he nods and takes a step back so that we can do that.

The door creaks open before we're able to move much further, and I close my eyes, letting out a groan. Given that I'm in my private sitting room, there's only one person who can come in.

"Solana..." My aunt stops in her tracks and looks between the two of us.

"Lady Aunt," I respond, with a curtsy. "Prince Arthur was just coming to tell me about this evening's banquet."

"Prince Arthur should not be here," she says in Someilian. "Your mother would be horrified to learn you're alone with him."

To Artie's credit, he keeps a remarkably straight face while she speaks and doesn't betray any of what we were talking about.

"It's his castle, Lady Aunt," I respond, switching to Falhavian.

"And you are still unmarried," she reminds me.

Arthur bows to my aunt. "I'm just leaving, Duquesa. I was too excited to tell Princess Solana about the Solstice banquet tonight, and didn't realise she would be unchaperoned."

"Hmm." She doesn't look convinced.

"I should return this to you," he says to me, holding out the letter.

I clear my throat. "You should keep it."

He raises an eyebrow. "If that's what you'd like."

"It's for you," I say firmly.

He folds it into a square and slips it into his breast pocket. "I shall keep it safe with the others."

"The others?"

"Yes, the other letters you've sent to me over the years."

"You kept them?"

"Of course." The way he smiles at me makes my heart flutter.

"So did I." My gaze slips to the box containing his letters and his portrait.

The expression on his face is easy to read. If we were alone, I believe he would kiss me. But with my aunt in the room, that isn't possible at all. Instead, he takes my hand and lifts it to his lips, placing a lingering kiss there.

It's surprisingly intimate and makes something spring to life within me. No doubt it's the reminder of how his lips feel when they're on other parts of my body. His gaze meets mine, and the thoughts only intensify, before I remind myself that we have an audience.

"I look forward to seeing you later," he says.

"I do too." I'm unable to take my gaze away from him as he leaves the room.

"They are entirely too bold in Falhaven," my aunt mumbles.

"Bold how?" I ask, stumbling a little over switching back to Someilian for speaking. It's strange how comfortable using Falhavien has already become.

"He should not have been in your room alone," she points out.

"He will be my husband next week," I remind her. "It hardly feels as if it's much of a

problem for us to be spending time with one another. Is it not a good thing for us to get to know one another?"

She huffs. "It is a strange kingdom. They do not care for what is proper, and Prince Arthur is not the Crown Prince."

"His sister is in line to inherit the throne," I point out. "With two other sisters in line between the two of them."

"As I said, a strange kingdom. Their girls can inherit over the boys."

"It isn't strange just because it's not the way we do things in Someil," I respond. "I quite like it this way." Especially as it means I'll have more freedom married to the current fourth in line, rather than the first. It sounds like it could be exhausting.

"I still do not understand it here."

I take a deep breath. "I suppose it's not for us to decide what is right or wrong here," I say.

"My parents want this marriage, as do the King and Queen of Falhaven.

That means that we have to abide by their customs." I don't add that I like that, or that I think that the way Falhaven is approaching things is likely better than back home.

I don't think she wants to hear it, especially when she seems annoyed about Arthur coming here.

"I suppose that is true," my aunt says.

"I was writing to Mamá," I say, gesturing to my desk and feeling grateful that I

decided to give Arthur the letter. I doubt my aunt would approve of the contents at all. "Would you like to send something with me?"

"I will likely be back on Someilian soil before the letter arrives," she says. "I should have a rest before the banquet tonight, I don't wish to be tired."

I nod, a little frustrated that she hadn't done that before, interrupting the two of us.

If she'd done that, then we could be in my bedchamber now and I'd have some answers to questions spinning around my mind.

But there's nothing I can do about that.

I suppose the fact that Arthur now has what I wrote and knows what I'm thinking about can still be taken as a good outcome for today, but the truth of that remains to be seen.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:50 am

Attending my first banquet in Falhaven is something of a surprise, though I'm grateful to find I'm sitting between Arthur and his younger brother.

Ernest isn't paying much attention to anyone and seems as bored as any ten-year-old is at these things.

I don't remember finding them particularly interesting at his age either.

The nobles of Falhaven have been taking advantage of the hospitality of the Royal Family, and I'm uncertain precisely how much wine has been drunk, but I know that it's a lot.

"How long do these events usually last for?" I ask Arthur.

"It'll go on until dawn," he responds, shifting his chair closer.

"Dawn?"

"We're not expected to stay the entire time," he promises.

"Evie is counting down the minutes until she can escape to the kitchens.

"He nods over to where his sister is sitting two chairs down.

Her back is rigid, and from what I've gotten to know of her over the past week or so, I've no doubt that it's because she's uncomfortable, she doesn't seem to be the biggest fan of crowds.

"What about your other siblings?" I ask curiously.

"Ernest will be taken to bed soon," Arthur responds. "And he'll sulk about it the entire time. Veronica will insist on dancing with whatever lady catches her eye as soon as it starts, and Kathryn will pretend to listen to Father's advisors while not retaining a word they're saying."

"What kind of dancing?" I ask, not really sure what to make of the rest of what he's saying.

"You're about to find out," he says, nodding towards the middle of the room.

There's a large space in the centre that's been cleared, and some musicians have already struck up a tune.

Several of the nobles are already on their feet, heading to the middle where they start to perform some kind of country dance.

Veronica gets up from the seat on the other side of Artie and picks up her goblet so she can finish her drink. She heads around the top table to where the nobles congregated.

Just as Artie said she would, she seems to catch the eye of a pretty blonde woman, and the two of them make their way to join the dancers.

The music is upbeat and makes me tap my fingers against the table as I listen. There's so much laughter coming from the dancers that it's impossible to ignore, but only in the best way.

Ernest disappears from my left, presumably taken to bed, as Artie said he would be, and Evelyn disappears a few minutes later.

"You know them well," I say to Arthur.

He laughs. "Or they're just predictable. I'm sure a lot of people here could tell you what each of us would do at a normal banquet."

"And what would you be doing?" I ask, leaning closer.

"It would depend on the day," he admits. "Sometimes, I join the dancing, other times, I retire to go read or do something else. When it's lighter and warmer, I might go for a ride, but that's not possible in winter."

"I'm sure you can ride in the dark," I say.

"I can, but it's best not to if I don't have to," he responds.

"So, what about tonight?" I ask, not really sure what I expect him to say, or what I want him to.

"I'm happy spending my evening with you."

I let out an amused laugh. "That's a good answer."

"And a true one," he promises.

My gaze strays back to the dancers, who seem to be having a good time.

"We can join them, if you'd like," Arthur says, noticing my attention.

"I don't know any of these steps," I say. "Or the tune."

"It doesn't matter," he responds. "Or it doesn't matter to anyone else, I can understand

if it does to you. Do you see the man standing with the musicians?" He gestures in that direction.

I nod. "Who is he?"

"He's the caller, he calls out the steps that the dancers are supposed to be doing."

"This is nothing like the balls I'm used to," I murmur.

"We have those too, but not for the Winter Solstice."

I watch the dancers, kind of wishing that I could go down and join them, but worrying about the fact I don't know the steps. "Are you sure it will be all right if I don't know the steps?"

"I'll be right there with you," he promises.

That's enough for me and I nod. "I'd like to dance."

He smiles widely and gets to his feet, offering me his hand. I slip mine into it, enjoying the touch and instantly having a reminder of how good it felt for him to touch me elsewhere.

I'm glad the banquet hall is already warm, because it hides my blush as I think about that.

Arthur gives me a look that makes it seem as if he knows what I'm thinking. And maybe he does. There's a chance he's thinking about it too.

Instead of saying anything about it, he leads me down to the middle of the room so we can take our place for the next dance. No one pays us any attention, as if it's

normal for one of the royals to be taking part. Which I suppose it must be, Veronica is already here dancing.

A bout of nerves springs to life inside me as the music starts and I realise I'm actually going to have to dance while not knowing the steps.

It's so different from anything I've done before.

My experience of dancing has been at formal balls, including the one where I met Arthur.

This kind of dancing is something the commoners do in Someil, but none of the nobility here in Falhaven seem to care.

The caller starts shouting out moves, and I realise I know some of them, but I'm not all that good at them.

"I need to spin you," Arthur says over the music, taking my hand and guiding me under his arm. It's not the same as when doing this during a formal dance, but I enjoy it, even if I stumble from trying to move so fast into the next move.

"I'm not very good at this," I tell him.

"You're doing great," he assures me, hopping around me like the dance asks him to do.

Even if I'm not sure I'm dancing the way I'm supposed to, I can feel the wide smile on my face, and know that my enjoyment is echoed on Arthur's face too.

I stumble through the next move, and he reaches out to steady me, a calming presence that I want to have around me more. Which isn't something I need to fantasise about,

it's my reality.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:50 am

I check the instructions in the letter Arthur sent me and turn the corner, heading down to the Falhaven Castle kitchens. I've no idea why he's asked me to meet him here, but it's fun to have him send me a letter and know that I'll be able to see him almost immediately after.

He's standing in front of a large wooden door when I turn the next corner, and I find myself smiling despite not knowing what he has planned. I suppose I don't really need to know, so long as we're spending time together, I don't mind.

I check around to make sure no one is looking and lean in to kiss him. He returns it immediately, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me closer.

"You came," he murmurs against my lips.

"You did ask me to," I say, holding up the letter.

"You might have decided that you didn't want to," he points out. "Or your aunt could insist on chaperoning you now that she caught me in your sitting room."

I laugh. "I think she's relieved about anything that's taking me outside the rooms for that reason alone.

I told her I was meeting you and she said she would take the opportunity to sleep.

If my parents wanted me to actually be chaperoned, they should have sent someone younger.

" And who cared more. Though maybe part of it is that there's nothing that can go wrong now. We'll be married within a week anyway.

"Fair enough. So, are you ready?"

"I can't say yes, I don't know what we're doing," I remind him.

"I'll show you." He holds out his hand and I slip mine into it, enjoying how warm and comforting it feels, even after a short amount of time physically in the same space as one another.

He pushes open the door, revealing the kitchens behind it.

Loud noises and shouts come from all around as Artie leads me inside, and I step closer to him, a little on edge about being here.

This is something that would never have been allowed in Someil.

My parents would have had servants bar my entrance, but Artie seems fairly at home, especially as he heads through the main kitchen and into what appears to be a smaller one.

"Are you sure we're allowed in here?" I ask.

Artie nods. "Evie said we could use it."

I frown. "What does your sister have to do with the kitchens?"

"Oh, well, this is her kitchen. Kind of. It's actually an extension of the pastry kitchen, but it's only used for big events, so most of the time, it's just Evie using it."

"I didn't realise."

He shrugs. "She loves baking. No one really questions it because it keeps her out of the way."

"Even the kitchen staff?"

"She used to bake with the pastry chef's son before he went away for training a few years ago. Now she comes down here alone most of the time."

I nod and run my hand along the wooden table at the centre of the room. It's a strange thing to consider. Evelyn's position isn't unlike my own at home. She's a princess, but not the princess. But here at Falhaven, she's allowed to come down to the kitchens and bake. With a servant, no less.

There's something comforting about that, even as it makes me question the lines of decorum that I've been taught my entire life.

Artie looks at me, concern written all over his face. "Are you all right, Sola?"

I bite my bottom lip and nod. "This is all just a little strange," I admit. "I had no idea what your kingdom was going to be like."

"We don't have to be down here."

I shake my head. "No, I'm interested in seeing what you have planned."

"I thought we could make some lemon drops," he says. "Evie left us all the ingredients..."

"Artie..."

"What? You said you didn't have more, and had asked your mother to send some."

"I did," I agree. "But that doesn't mean we have to make them."

"It might be fun. I want to see what all of Evie's fuss is about."

I laugh despite myself. "All right, that's a good reason. Do you have a recipe?"

He pulls a sheet of paper from his pocket. "I do."

"Where did you even get that?"

A sheepish expression crosses his face. "After I learned that they were your favourite, I asked every visiting dignitary if they had one."

"Did it work?"

"Not at all." His smile is infectious in the best way.

He's having a good time thinking about all the questions he's asked.

"Eventually, when I was in Porton, I encountered a sailor who knew about my knowledge of animals who came to find me about a ship's cat who was giving birth.

The Captain of the ship happened to be Someilian and I asked him if he knew the recipe.

He gave me it to say thanks for my help with the ship's cat. "

"That's quite an adventure, especially for a prince." And a little heartbreaking for me, because I know from talking to them all that his sisters also have similar stories.

He frowns and steps closer. "Sola?"

I sigh. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to sound so dismissive."

"You don't," he assures me. "You sound sad."

"It's just so different here. You and your siblings all seem to have your own interests, and your parents encourage that."

"I think it's more that they're resigned to it," he responds. "If they didn't let Evie bake, she'd never be able to make it through official functions."

"Perhaps not, but it's different from back home.

I don't think I've ever been able to choose an actual interest. I love embroidery, but it's not something I chose.

It's just what's acceptable for a princess to do.

It's not like you caring for animals, or your sister baking.

"I look around the room. Now I'm seeing it properly, I can see the evidence of Evie's presence, even down to the dragon bed on top of the oven.

"You can change that," he says, stepping closer to me. "You're here now, we're to be married in less than a week. You can choose to spend your time on whatever interests you."

"What if that is embroidery?" I ask, thinking about how much I've enjoyed making his handkerchief, even if I haven't given it to him yet. It's almost done, I suspect I should be able to finish it tonight.

"Then it is," he says. "There's nothing wrong with that. And if it is what you want, then I'm sure we could get the best lace makers in the kingdom to visit and teach you their tricks."

"Lace and embroidery aren't the same," I point out.

"Then I shall also learn from them so I don't get them mixed up in the future," he promises.

I laugh, realising that even if I don't have the answers, I actually feel a little better just from hearing him talk about this. "I want to watch that."

"It can be arranged."

I lean closer, feeling his breath fanning against my lips and feeling the desire to kiss him rise within me. My eyes flutter closed just as his lips brush against mine.

My whole body reacts in an instant, and I wrap my arms around him, pulling him closer and sinking into him.

There's something unbelievably freeing about being able to do this where we are.

When I set off from Someil, I thought Falhaven was going to be the same in so many respects.

My mother spent years teaching me the proper etiquette for what's expected of a princess, and a future wife, but not all of that seems to apply here.

It feels like in Falhaven, I can be true to my feelings rather than be stuck in the box my mother created.

I trail my hand over Arthur's arm, feeling the strength within them and marvelling at the care he's always showing when he touches me. I break away from the kiss, but don't pull back from him.

"How long has your sister given us in her kitchen?" I murmur.

"Not long," he admits, a hint of disappointment in his voice.

"We could always not make the lemon drops," I respond.

"Is that your way of saying you want to do something else?" he asks.

"Kissing you is fun," I say, placing my hand on his chest and feeling his heartbeat steadily.

"I'm glad you think so. I intend to keep kissing you for a long time to come."

"Other things are fun too." My voice drops even lower as I think about the other night, and how I'd like to experience that again.

His eyes darken and he looks as if he's about to say that we can forget all of this and run off somewhere to spend the afternoon alone. But I don't want to ruin the planning he's put into this.

I put my hand on his chest. "Maybe we should at least try to make the lemon drops," I say, reaching out and taking the recipe from him. It's been scrunched up a little bit. "Especially as you worked hard to get the recipe."

He chuckles, the sound vibrating through me pleasantly. "If you want."

"I do." I look at the list, surprised to find it's in my language and not Falhavien. "Can

you read this?"

"Of course," he says.

"But we always wrote to each other in your language."

"Not at the beginning," he reminds me. "But then you told me that you wanted to write in Falhavien because you wanted to practice before you came to live here."

"Oh, I'd quite forgotten about that. I suppose I didn't realise you could speak my language this well."

"I learned," he responds. "I wanted to be able to speak to you in your native language if you preferred it ." His accent is a little off, but the words are easy to make out, and they send a thrill through me. He learned how to say that for me.

"Thank you," I whisper, putting my hand on his chest.

He puts his own over it and smiles at me, a genuine look of adoration on his face.

"I know it isn't much..."

"You learned to speak my language for me," I counter. "It's a lot."

"You learned mine," he points out.

"Yes, but my parents would have made me regardless of what I wanted," I point out.

"It isn't the same."

"My father was happy to hear that I was interested in learning," he promises. "He said that it would make diplomacy easier."

"Mmm, well, your diplomatic skills with this princess have been exemplary so far."

"And I hope they continue to be." He flashes me a charming smile. "So, what do we need?"

"A pan and some sugar, I think. Do we have sugar?"

"Evie said it was in a jar on the left side of the table," he responds, looking over to where that kind of thing seems to be laid out. He lifts one of the lids and looks inside.

"Yes, this is it."

"Do you think this pan is the right one?" I ask him, lifting up a heavy metal pan. I don't know what I'm looking for, but it seems like it might be right.

"I actually have no idea," Artie says. "I should have asked Evie for more help."

"We can figure it out," I assure him. "It says that we need to put the water and sugar in the pan and then boil it. Any pan will do, right?"

"I think so." He reaches out to take it from me, setting it on the stove. He seems a little less clueless than he's claiming when he manages to get the flame going quickly enough. I'm certainly impressed. I've never used a stove in my life. Maybe that will change the more time I spend in Falhaven.

Artie uses a scoop to dump some sugar into the pan, following it up with some water.

"I think we should probably get the lemon ready?" I suggest. "It says we need to zest it. But what does that mean?"

He grimaces. "I really should have asked Evie to come supervise," he mutters.

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I wanted to spend time with you," he says in response.

"Oh." I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "I do like that."

"I'm glad. I want you to spend time with me.

" He leans in and presses his lips against mine.

It's a swift kiss, which it probably should be when there's fire in the room, but I enjoy it all the same.

There's something intimate about a stolen moment like this, and I want to experience many more moments like it.

We break apart. "Aren't we supposed to be watching the sugar?" I murmur, toying with the ruffle of his shirt and barely thinking about the sugar at all.

"Probably." He kisses my nose and leaves me to return to the stove. "Is it supposed to bubble like that?"

I shrug and head over to check out what he's looking at. The sugar certainly seems to be doing something . Whether it's right is a question I'm not sure I'm able to answer.

Footsteps sound and I look towards the doorway, disappointed to find Arthur's sister standing in the doorway. The tiny dragon on her shoulder lifts herself into the air and flies straight over to the oven, settling down in the bed on top of it.

"Oh, I thought you'd be done," Evie says, looking around the kitchen. "But you've barely started."

Arthur shrugs. "We don't have as much experience as you in the kitchen," he points out.

"That's clear." An acrid smell fills the air, and Evie's eyes widen. "What are you doing in here?" She hurries over to the stove, a horrified expression on her face as she looks at the pan.

"Did we do it wrong?" Arthur asks.

"Well, you didn't do anything right," Evie mutters, shutting off the burner and taking the pan away. "If you've destroyed my pan, then you're going to have to get me a new one."

"Doesn't it belong to the kitchen?" Arthur asks.

"Nate sent it to me from Gaullesse," she responds.

I look at Artie in puzzlement.

"Nate's the pastry chef's son I told you about. They're friends."

"Oh." I'm not sure that explains anything, but I don't need an actual explanation to understand that the pan is important, Evie's expression tells me as much.

"What are you trying to make?" Evie asks.

"Lemon drops," I respond, holding up the recipe.

The frustration disappears almost immediately as she eyes the recipe. "If you don't need to make them yourselves, I can do it for you," she suggests.

"I think that might be wise," Arthur says.

I hand over the recipe, almost glad to be rid of it, but also a little sad. It's sweet that Artie wanted us to make them together, but maybe better if we don't spend too much time in the kitchen.

"Now, leave, before you burn down the entire castle." She shoos us out of the room.

"Is that even possible?" I ask Artie.

He shrugs. "It's made of stone, so I'd think not."

"I'm surprised she can also read Someilian." I look back at the closed door.

Artie laughs. "There isn't a recipe Evie can't read. It's the only time she's good at languages."

"Ah."

"So, would you like to go for a walk with me if we're not allowed to be in the kitchen?"

"That sounds wonderful," I respond, looping my arm through his and letting him lead me out of the castle and into the gardens. It doesn't matter to me that we haven't gotten to make lemon drops, I'm just happy that I can spend time with him.

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The servants don't say anything as I approach the mountain solar, somewhat intrigued by finally seeing the room.

Arthur has talked about it a lot, not just since I got here, but in my letters too, but so far, I haven't had a chance to visit.

I pat my pocket to make sure I've remembered Arthur's handkerchief, even though I've already checked at least six times since I left my room.

I step inside and my eyes widen as I take in the huge windows, revealing the mountain beyond.

Flecks of snow drift past it, making it look even more magical than it already does.

It's beautiful, but I have to admit that everyone who said that I wouldn't want to travel in it was correct, and my aunt might have to stay at Falhaven Castle for longer than she initially planned if it keeps up like this.

I doubt she'll want to travel home in weather like this.

"What do you think?" Artie asks.

"It's beautiful," I respond. "I know you described it, but this is beyond what I expected."

"My sisters and I often have breakfast in here," he says, coming closer so that he can kiss me hello.

I lean in, enjoying the way it feels to be so close to him.

We break apart and I smile up at him. "I'd like to have breakfast in here sometimes."

"I'd like that too," he says as he wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me back to him so we can both watch the snow as it falls.

It's so mesmerising as it drifts through the air, almost like it's dancing across my vision. They're even more beautiful than the snowflakes I embroidered on the handkerchief for him.

"I brought you something," I say to Arthur, realising that I need to actually give it to him if I want him to have it. I pull it out of my pocket and hold it out to him. "I'm sorry it wasn't ready when I first arrived, I wanted it to be, but I kept thinking of things I wanted to add to it."

A confused expression crosses his face as he takes the folded-up square from him.

My heart races as I wait for him to look at it, and I realise how important it is that he likes it.

"It's beautiful," he says.

"Thank you."

"You're very talented." He runs a finger over the tiny embroidered horseshoe in one corner.

"I do enjoy embroidery," I respond. "Even if it was something picked for me by Mamá."

"That doesn't mean you can't enjoy it," he points out. "You added snowflakes?"

A blush rushes to my cheeks. "I added them after our first ride together," I admit. "And our first kiss."

His eyes light up as he realises what I'm saying. "It's beautiful. I shall treasure it, always."

"I'm glad you like it." And I can tell he does. I might only have been around him in person for a short while, but I can already tell when he's being genuine, which is most of the time.

"I do." He folds it carefully and slips it into his breast pocket, patting it while smiling so broadly, I think his face might break. "Would you like some tea?"

I nod. "Is that something else you're trying to trade with Rajaad for?"

"Yes, but this is actually from Shengda, we made a trade treaty with them shortly before we met.

Though when I say we, I didn't have anything to do with it.

No one has actually said as much, but I think the delegation were impressed that Evie managed to hatch the dragon egg they gave her, and that helped us secure the deal. " He guides me over to the table.

"There are four settings," I say as I sit down at the table.

"My sisters sometimes come here in the afternoons," Artie says. "I assume that the servants have set places for us every day too, in case we wanted to join."

"Oh."

He picks up the teapot and pours me a cup. The sweet scent of grass fills my nose, unlike anything I've had before. As far as I know, Someil and Shengda don't currently have a trade treaty, which means that we haven't had a lot of their goods in our kingdom.

Arthur sits down next to me, his knee bumping against mine. Unable to resist, I slip my hand under the table and touch his leg. It's the height of bad manners, but with only the two of us here, I don't see the harm in it.

"Would you like some cake?" he asks.

"Did Evie make it?" I ask.

"I don't imagine so, she'd be here to tell us if she did."

As if talking about her summoned the princess, the door to the solar opens and she enters even as Artie cuts the cake.

"Good afternoon," I say.

"Afternoon," she responds. "I brought your lemon drops." She puts a small box down in front of Arthur. There's a second one that has a letter on top that I look at curiously.

"Thank you," Arthur says with a smile. "I appreciate it, Evie."

"You'd better," she mutters as she takes a seat. "You should find yourself a confectioner to make them for you. I'm never making those again."

Artie laughs. "I thought you liked baking."

"This wasn't baking. Do you have any idea how sticky hot sugar is?" She shakes her head. "So yes, I'm never making them again. Enjoy these while you can."

"I think that's us told," Artie says to me.

I smother a laugh. "Thank you, Evie," I say, genuinely grateful.

"You're welcome," she says, already a little preoccupied with her slice of cake.

I'm not sure if she's looking at it like that because she's interested in how it was made, or if it's because she's disappointed in it, but eventually, she decides that it's acceptable to eat and cuts into it with a pastry fork.

"What's the other box for?" I ask, my curiosity getting the better of me.

"Oh, they're for Nate," she says, a slight smile lifting at her lips as she says his name.

"Nate's the pastry chef's son, right?" I check with Arthur.

He nods. "He's studying to be a pastry chef in Gaullesse."

"He's actually in Wafeland at the moment," Evie responds. "He's training under all of the best chefs." It's strange to work out what the tone of her voice means.

"And he's your friend?" I ask.

"Mmhmm. We met when we were children," Evie says. "We used to bake together until he went away."

"Will he come back?" I ask.

Arthur grimaces at the question, and I realise I might have made a mistake.

Evie clears her throat. "He says so in his letters, but there hasn't been a position for him yet."

I want to ask more about the situation, especially if she's writing to him and sending gifts.

It sounds a lot like what Arthur and I had, but all anyone has referred to them as is friends.

Maybe that's true, or maybe there's something between them.

I can only imagine the difficulties that would cause.

Being friends with a servant is already something that would be frowned upon in Someil, but a relationship would be a whole other level.

I pick up my tea instead of asking probing questions. I have a lot of time left in Falhaven, I'm sure I'll learn about the nuances of everyone's relationships at some point.

The door to the solar opens again, and Veronica walks into the room. Her gaze lands on Arthur and she lets out a sigh of relief. "Father is looking for you," she says.

"I told him that I wasn't working this afternoon," Arthur responds. "I have plans." He looks at me and smiles.

"He's still looking for you," she says.

Arthur lets out a frustrated smile and reaches out to take my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I'm sorry, I should go see what he wants. Will you be all right?"

"Of course. I have your sisters for company," I assure him.

"Good." He looks over at Veronica, as if debating whether or not to kiss me while the two of them are in the room.

Deciding that I should help with the decision, I lean in and kiss his cheek. "I'll see you later."

He nods and gets to his feet, saying goodbye to each of his sisters and leaving the room to go and find his father.

"Do you know what that's about?" I ask Veronica.

"I've no idea. Probably about one of the trade negotiations they're in the middle of," she says as she takes a seat.

"Is he the only one who works with your father?"

"No, we all have our roles to play," Veronica responds. "I work a lot with the treasury, while Evie does a lot of the planning for banquets."

"I thought you didn't like them much?" I ask Evie.

She shrugs. "Planning banquets and attending them are two different things." Ah, so it's the food she likes planning.

"Did you not help your parents with running things back in Someil?" Veronica asks as she helps herself to a slice of cake.

"No, it wasn't really the kind of thing they wanted me to do. I would never be given duties like yours."

"I'm sure you can have some now that you're here. Artie will likely want help," Veronica says. "And he'll do anything you want him to."

"He's been very attentive since I got here," I say. "I just wish I could do something for him."

"Then you should," Evie says.

"I'd like to, but I don't know what," I say. "I suppose it would be nice to have some time alone."

"You can just ask the servants not to disturb you," Evie suggests, picking up her cup and taking a sip.

"I was thinking more alone than that."

Veronica gives me a knowing look. "I think that can be arranged. There are some small lodges on the castle grounds that are sometimes used to house guests. We could help you put together a picnic. You'd like that, Evie, you'd get to bake for it."

Her eyes light up. "I could. What do you like? Or what do you not like? I can make all of Artie's favourites, and yours too."

"Thank you, I appreciate that. But I'm sure Artie's favourites will be good," I promise her.

Evie shakes her head. "He wouldn't like that. He'd want you to have some things you like too."

"Lemon tarts," I say. "They're one of my favourites."

"Nate sent me a recipe from Gaullesse for them, I've not had a chance to make it yet, but I know they'd let me have some lemons if I said it was for you."

"They'd let you have lemons if you just asked for them," Veronica points out.

"Well, yes." Evie leans back in her seat, clearly planning the menu in her head.

"Do you think Artie would like that?" I ask Veronica.

She nods. "He would."

"Good. And we can be alone? No one will disturb us?"

"We won't tell anyone else you're there," she promises. "So, I'm going to assume you want some accident tea?" she asks. She cuts a piece of her cake and eats it while she waits for my response.

"Accident tea?" I echo.

"So that you don't get pregnant. Unless you want a baby soon."

"Oh, no, I'd rather wait," I say quickly. I'm not against having children at some point, but I certainly don't want to think about one now.

"I don't see how accident tea is going to help avoid a baby," Evie says, apparently tuning in to the conversation enough to follow it.

Her sister just stares at her for a moment. "What?"

"Mama used to give me accident tea, it's to help against accidents ."

"What are you on about?" Veronica asks. "When did Mama give it to you?"

Evie frowns and considers. "Maybe five years ago or so. She stopped around the time Nate left. Maybe she thought I'd spend less time in the kitchen then."

Veronica groans and runs a hand over her face. "The accident she meant was pregnancy, Evie."

The other princess blinks a couple of times. "I don't see why."

"Because she clearly thought you and Nate were sleeping together," Veronica points out.

"We weren't."

"I know, you told me and I had to buy Artie a hat," Veronica mumbles.

I smother a laugh, but feel a little better about assuming there's something more between Evie and her friend, it seems like I'm not the only one to think that way. "I'd like some of the tea," I say to Veronica.

She nods. "I'll speak to the apothecary. And Mama, apparently, so she knows to be more explicit next time she gives Evie something like that."

"I appreciate it." I know there's going to have to be a bit more going into it, but this is a good start, and I'm going to make sure I have something wonderful waiting for Arthur so we can enjoy some time together.

I know we'll have all the time in the world after the wedding, but that isn't the same,

and I know this is going to be important for us.

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I'm not sure what I expected from the lodge Veronica and Evie suggested I use, but it's not this.

It's larger than I expect, with an entire table spread out with more food than the two of us can possibly eat.

I'm not sure what Evie was thinking, but she seems to have gone a little overboard with the whole thing.

A fire flickers in the grate, taking away all of the chill that comes from outside, and it's a nice contrast to the snow falling outside the windows. This could be like a perfect moment captured in a painting, not something that I'm actually living.

Footsteps crunch against the stones that line the path outside and I hurry towards the door, pulling it open even as Artie arrives.

"You got my letter," I say.

"I did." He smiles and steps closer to me.

I lean in and kiss him. His lips are cold from being outside, which gives the kiss a pleasant kind of tingle I don't expect.

"You should come inside and warm up," I say once we break apart. "There's a fire, and food. Everything we might need for an entire evening without anyone to interrupt us."

He raises an eyebrow. "And precisely what do you intend to do with that time?"

"Anything we want." I step aside to let him come in, helping him with his cape as he does. I hang it on the peg next to the door with mine, and shut the door behind us, locking it and giving us a true sense of privacy. I don't think I've ever been this alone in my entire life before.

Arthur looks around the lodge, his eyes wide. "You did all this?"

"I had help," I respond. "But I wanted us to be able to have some time together, uninterrupted by anyone."

"I'm sorry about yesterday," he says, stepping closer and pulling me back into his arms. "I didn't know that my father would need me."

"It's all right, I understand that your duties are important. Maybe one day, I can help with them."

"You can help in any way you want," he promises. "I would like that."

"I would too." I lean in and kiss him. "Are you hungry? We could eat, or we could..." I trail off, gesturing to the cushions and blankets behind me.

His expression changes instantly. "I'm not hungry."

"Good." I step back, taking his hand and drawing him over to the cosy spot, excited nerves dancing within me.

"I need to talk to you about something first," Arthur says, a serious demeanour crossing over his face.

"What is it?" I ask.

"I got something. A sheath."

I raise an eyebrow. "For your sword?"

"No." He clears his throat. "It's supposed to help stop you getting pregnant."

I know we're going to be married in a couple of days, so no one would think twice about it if you did, but I wasn't sure if that was something you wanted.

I figured it was probably better to be prepared than leave it to chance. "

"I want children one day," I say. "But not today."

He nods. "Understandable. I feel the same. We need time to settle into our life together before making more."

"Something like that," I say. "Even though our parents would probably be horrified to learn that we're thinking that way."

He laughs. "I don't care what our parents think. We're living our lives for us, not for them."

I reach out and touch his face. "We are. And Veronica gave me some tea that will help stop pregnancy too."

He raises an eyebrow. "I didn't realise you'd asked my sister for help with that too."

"She offered. Apparently, Evie was drinking the tea five years ago without realising."

"Nate?" he guesses.

I nod.

"Everyone thought it at one point or another, but she swears they're nothing more than friends."

"Do you believe it?" I ask curiously.

"I believe they've never done anything, and that they think they're friends," he responds. "But I think they're both in denial about how they feel."

"Ah." That makes sense, especially considering everything I've learned about their relationship since coming here. "But you know, I didn't invite you here to talk about your sisters."

"Oh? And what did you bring me here for?" he asks.

I step closer to him and wrap my arms around his neck. "Perhaps so we can put some of the things we've learned about to good use."

He chuckles. "Is that so?"

"Mmhmm. And you'll be glad to know that I put on my simplest dress."

"I shall be the judge of that." He spins me around and finds the ties at the back, the anticipation growing within me each time his knuckles brush against my back as he undoes them. Knowing how good it feels to have his hands on my body only makes it more intense.

My bodice comes undone and I strip it off, letting it drop to the floor.

I turn in his arms and start undoing the buttons of his jacket, pleased when I discover there's only a shirt underneath.

Not having too many layers will make the undressing process a lot easier.

I push it off his shoulders, and there's a dull thud as it drops to the floor, leaving him in his loose-fitting shirt.

I lose track of exactly what's happening, until most of our clothing is on the floor except for the very last layer. I don't feel the cold in the air, there's no way that's possible with the warmth radiating off Arthur and making me want to get even closer to him.

"Lie down," he murmurs against my lips as he kisses me.

I nod and step back, pausing to pull off my shift before I do, leaving me bare to him save for my stockings. I should feel nervous, but I don't. I know I'm safe, I know he wants this, and I certainly know that I do.

I lie back on the cushions, my heart racing and warmth already pooling in my belly.

He kneels down and reaches for the top of one of my stockings, pulling it down tantalisingly slowly. He drops my first stocking to the side and turns his attention to the second, repeating the motion until I'm completely rid of them.

"What was it you said you wanted me to do in your letter?" he asks, a wicked grin on his face as he looks at me.

I swallow hard. "I wanted you to kiss me."

"Where? Here?" He leans in and kisses the inside of my ankle.

"Yes."

"Where else?" he asks, smoothing his hand up higher. "Here?"

"Mmhmm." I don't think I've ever wanted something this much before. We both know precisely what's about to happen because he's doing what I wrote. He's doing this specifically because I told him I wanted it.

His lips graze the inside of my knee and a small moan escapes me. He's not even touching me where I'm desperate to be touched yet, and I can feel the release starting to build, I think it's just the knowledge of what he's doing that is making it build for me.

"Arthur," I murmur as his tongue traces patterns on my inner thigh.

He meets my gaze, and I don't know what to do about the sight. I let out a shaky breath, knowing that whatever I'm about to feel is going to be a lot more intense than it was before.

He continues upwards until he gets to my centre, his breath brushing against the sensitive skin and only sending my need higher.

I reach down and tangle my hand in his hair, wanting to urge him on, but also not wanting to rush this.

The moment his tongue touches me, thoughts completely disappear.

I tip my head back and grip tightly on the blanket beside me.

My release tightens inside me, and it's all I can do not to give in to it straight away.

As much as I want to feel as good as I possibly can, I also don't want to rush this, I want to enjoy it for as long as possible.

My breathing is coming out laboured and there's nothing I can do to stop the release from crashing through me.

I cry out, tightening my fingers in his hair and letting the pure sensation take over my entire body.

He doesn't stop giving me attention, and teases me until I realise that a second release is quickly following the first, but is somehow even more intense.

My whole body begins to shake, but I'm not aware of anything I'm doing.

I might be making noises, I might be holding onto him too tight, I might not be, it's impossible for me to tell.

The ability to think leaves me and everything goes a bit fuzzy as the most intense pleasure I've ever felt fills me.

Slowly, my awareness of the world starts creeping back in. The crackling of the fire, the scratch of the blanket under me, and the man lying beside me, a satisfied and concerned expression on his face.

I reach out to touch his cheek.

"Are you all right?" he checks.

"Yes," I murmur. "Oh, yes."

He chuckles and leans in to kiss me, long and slow, like it's building to something. I

can feel his length against my leg, making me feel far more hollow than I expect to. I want to feel him inside me, to know what it's like.

I reach for him without thinking, feeling the weight of him in my palm.

"Sola," he murmurs. "If you keep doing that, it'll be the end."

I nod and pull back. "Where is the sheath you were talking about?"

"In my pocket." He gestures to the abandoned jacket close by. I reach out for it, pulling it towards me and starting to search through the pocket. I pull out some fabric, surprised to discover it's the handkerchief I embroidered for him.

"You kept it?" My voice cracks as I ask.

"Of course I did," he responds. "You made it for me, and it's beautiful. Why would I not keep such a wonderful gift from you?"

I nod, tears pricking the corners of my eyes. I'm not sure why, but the whole thing is making me emotional.

"Sola, it's all right." He leans in and brushes my tears away from my eyes. "We don't have to do this."

"It's not about what we're doing," I promise. "You're just so much more than I expected. And I thought I knew what to expect."

He runs a thumb over my cheek and looks at me adoringly. "I hope I keep making you feel that way." He leans in and kisses me softly, full of emotion and caring. "We can stop if you want to," he says when he pulls back.

"No, I don't want to." If anything, it makes me want him more. Not just because I'm craving his touch, but because I want to feel the connection to him.

"Let me." He takes his jacket from me and finds the sheath, using it to cover himself. My mouth goes a little dry as I watch, and a small bout of nerves comes back. Not because I'm worried about what's about to happen, it's just because it's going to be the first time, and I want it to feel good.

Arthur leans in and kisses me again, his hand drifting over my arm and back between my legs. His fingers brush against my most sensitive spot, but he doesn't linger. Instead, he finds my entrance and carefully presses them inside.

I let out a gasp and arch into him. There's a slight pressure, but he's going slowly enough that it doesn't hurt. He curls his fingers up within me and I make a humming noise, not entirely sure how it's supposed to feel, but enjoying it all the same.

I let out a disappointed noise as he removes his fingers, making him laugh.

"Patience," he murmurs against my neck.

"I'm not sure I know that word right now," I respond.

He shifts so that he's between my legs and guides himself to my entrance. Anticipation fills me as he ever so slowly pushes into me. There's a moment's discomfort, and I grip hold of his arm a little too tightly.

"Give me a moment?" I ask.

"Are you all right?"

"It's just new," I respond through ragged breaths. "Now?"

He pushes further in and there's a moment of further discomfort which quickly gives way into a feeling of being fuller than I ever have been. Which isn't a huge surprise when I've never done this before, but it is when I consider how much I like it.

"More," I whisper, running my hand down his arm. "But slowly."

"Slow is good," he responds. "If I go any faster, I think it'll be over."

"Then definitely slow."

I shift my hips, making him go deeper without meaning to. He lets out a groan and leans his head against my shoulder. "I'm not going to last." His voice is barely audible.

"Then don't."

He nods, moving within me. I let out a gasp, realising that it feels good. He reaches out to touch my face and I let myself sink into the moment, feeling the connection grow between us in intensity. He pushes into me once more and his whole body tenses under my touch and he lets go.

Arthur collapses against me, and we lie there for a moment, covered in sweat and not moving.

"I'm sorry that didn't last longer," he says as he shifts off me and deals with the sheath.

"It doesn't matter," I promise. "We've got time. No one needs us until the morning, and we've got plenty of food here. And in a few days, we'll be married, then no one will disturb us at night anyway."

"So long as you don't want to run back to Someil now."

"Definitely not." I trace patterns over his bare chest. "So, you liked my letter?"

He chuckles. "I might have read it a few times. I wanted to make sure I could give you everything you wanted."

"You did. And more. That was better than I could have imagined it. Maybe I'll have to try that method again."

He laughs. "You should. It was very helpful." He trails a hand over my arm. "I want to know everything you desire."

"I think we're going to be just fine on that front," I respond, leaning in and pressing a kiss against his lips, a satisfied feeling deep within me.

Any worries I had about how this marriage would go have been left behind in Someil, because I have no doubt that marrying Arthur is going to be everything I hoped it would be, and more.

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The temple is similar to the ones we have at home, which puts me a little at ease as I walk inside with my aunt as a chaperone.

There are a surprising number of people here, and I imagine that a lot of them are here because it would be a political faux pas for them to decline an event like this, as opposed to being here because they want to see me marry Arthur.

I look to where the altar sits with a large golden cup at the centre.

Arthur is to the right, looking at me with an expression that can only be described as adoring, even from this distance.

My heart skips a beat and I have to resist the urge to hurry quicker towards him.

I'm certainly less nervous about the attention on me now that I have the reminder that I don't have to do this alone.

As I get closer to the front, I see other faces I recognise, including those belonging to Arthur's siblings. I nod to them, hoping it's the right thing to do, and wishing I'd gotten to attend more weddings over the past few years so I could have had some idea of what to expect.

His father waits near the front of the aisle and I pause in front of him, dipping into a curtsy.

"Your Majesty."

"Princess Solana," he responds. "Duquesa."

"Your Majesty," my aunt responds, curtsying herself, but wobbling a little as she does.

Veronica is on her feet in moments, helping my aunt to take a seat and not have to worry about standing longer.

Done with the greetings, I turn to the front where Arthur is waiting. He smiles when he sees me, and I light up inside, realising that I'm not even slightly nervous. There's nothing to be nervous about.

I slip my hands into his and the head priest and priestess of the temple step forward with a ribbon. They wrap it around our hands, binding them together. I don't take my gaze away from Arthur's, knowing how important this is.

"Prince Arthur, you are to recite the vows first as the host of the marriage," the priestess says.

Arthur nods and looks at me. "Princess Solana of Someil, I welcome you into my family. Here you will be loved, here you will be protected, here you will be cherished in the way that you deserve to be."

I know the words are just the standard ones of any marriage done in our faith, but they still send a thrill through me thanks to the weight Arthur himself is putting on them. To him, they are not just words, he means them.

"Princess Solana, if you would recite the vows," the priestess says.

I clear my throat. "Prince Arthur of Falhaven, I accept your welcome.

In this marriage, you will be loved, in this marriage, you will be protected, and in this

marriage, you will be cherished in the way that you deserve to be," I say, smiling slightly at the end of the words.

I'm glad he went first, even if that's only because his is the family I'm marrying into.

If we were getting married in Someil, and he was joining my family there, our positions would have been reversed.

"You are bound by the vows in the sight of the gods," the priest says as the priestess hands me a cup of wine.

I take it from her, though it's a struggle considering the ribbon around our hands, especially as it would be seen as bad luck for it to slip off.

"I offer you this cup as a sign of my devotion," I say, holding it to Arthur's lips so he can take a drink.

The priestess takes pity on us and helps us move the cup from my hands to Arthur's so that he can repeat the gesture to me. The wine is surprisingly good, though I don't drink much of it.

She takes it back and sets it on the altar before returning to stand before us. "May you be blessed by all of the gods and go forth in your bounty," she calls out.

"May the gods guide you, through your lives together, and through your duties to Falhaven," the priest says.

"May the gods guide us," we both repeat.

"Go forth from this place married, as partners in all things," the priestess says.

"Go forth, Prince Arthur of Falhaven," the priest says as he unwinds the ribbon from

around our hands. "Go forth, Princess Solana of Falhaven."

A strange feeling settles within me as I hear the words.

I've always known that I was going to be marrying into the Falhaven Royal Family, but now it is being said out loud, it feels more real.

Maybe it's not hearing it out loud, maybe it's because now I have a more concrete idea of what my marriage is going to be like.

Arthur takes my hand in his and leads me out of the main temple and into a small courtyard where there's no one waiting. Probably because all of the guests are still inside.

"That went well," I say.

"One thing could have gone better," Arthur says.

"Oh?"

"I could have gotten a chance to kiss my wife."

"You do now," I respond, stepping closer and wrapping my arms around his neck.

He closes the distance between us and kisses me deeply. I can feel how much he cares about me in his touch, and I can sense how much hope he has for the future, because I have it too.

"I love you, Solana," he murmurs against my lips.

"I love you too," I respond. "And I look forward to our life together."

"It's snowing," he says, holding out his hand and catching a couple of flakes on his hand. "That feels like a good sign for our wedding day."

"It does," I agree, watching the flakes settle on his eyelashes. I cup his cheek in my hand and lose myself in the deep blue of his eyes.

I hope to see many more snowy days at Falhaven Castle, especially when I get to see them with Arthur by my side.

Thank you for reading Love Letters & Lemon Drops , I hope you enjoyed it!