



The Queen and the Candle Maker (Honeywood Haven #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A frozen crown.

A forbidden flame.

A kiss that could melt a kingdom.

Queen Bessa has spent her reign buried beneath snowdrifts and diplomacy. With magic long gone and her advisors demanding a politically sound marriage, the last thing she needs is a distraction, especially one with broad shoulders, wax-stained hands, and an impossibly warm glint in his green eyes.

Ambrose, the kingdom's elusive new candlemaker, prefers shadows to attention, but his candles—strange, glowing things crafted with whispers of magic—have begun to stir more than old enchantments. One flicker and everything starts to thaw, including the fire buried deep inside Bessas heart.

He's not a noble.

He's not proper.

Yet the heat between them could set the whole realm alight.

When desire rekindles magic thought dead for a century, the secrets flare, power shifts, and Frostvale will never be the same.

Total Pages (Source): 39

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

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BESSA

By all rights, I should be the villain of this story. I certainly have the backstory and the name, a name horrifying enough to destroy magic and snuff out all hope, like two damp fingers pinching the lit wick of a candle flame. A name not muttered, not even by my mother or father.

Honestly, with my credentials, I should have laced candied apples with sleeping death or lured sailors to watery graves with my voice alone. I should have gained a reputation for stealing firstborn children from lovely, young couples. (Why does one need so many first-borns, anyway? What does one do with them on the road to villainy? Should I be taking notes?)

Villainous villains should do things with great fanfare, always seeking fame and adoration through terror. Villainous villains don't overthink. Yet, I slunk in the shadows most of my life, and I certainly overthought everything, including love.

Maybe I was one of those villains who didn't realize they were a villain. Everyone around me seemed to think so, even if I'd never contemplated any of the above acts. Last time I checked, I kept no vials of poison hidden under my lace ruff, nor did I boil frogs' legs for fun. I didn't even like cooking.

So, what was my name?

Well, it wasn't the Boogeyman. Or the Wicked Witch of the North. It was Bessa, the

chosen one's unwanted twin sister. But he disappeared, which was what people called a problem in prophecy-speak.

When the chosen one was born and magic made its brief return, I didn't rejoice with the rest of my frozen river village. I was too busy being born myself, arriving a few hours after my twin brother, just in time for the magic to sizzle out again. Was it my fault? Perhaps. It certainly wasn't a good coincidence.

Of course, my birth caused a bit of a shock. The prophecy never mentioned a second kid, and a girl to boot. So my father, the king, did the only reasonable thing.

He left me in the woods in winter and acted like I never existed. It was a story as old as time, but I hoped to give mine a happy ending.

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BESSA

“Bit drafty, don’t you think? Maybe we should leave it alone. Who needs a castle anyway?”

My sister Mika said this through chattering teeth and blue lips. She had a point. The castle was a symbol of my family, and they hadn’t been... well, they hadn’t been much of anything. Really, it was lucky my blood family hadn’t raised me. Mika’s family had. Otherwise who knew how horrible I would have turned out; scorching black earth and heads on pikes and all that. Let’s just say, my birth parents weren’t a nice bunch.

“We have to open the castle back up, otherwise it will all be for naught,” I reminded her. “It’s the symbol of Frostvale, not of my family, those lunatics.”

“We’re your family.”

“Of course. I meant, my other family. The one I never knew. The castle doesn’t belong to them, and we’re going to change its negative associations.”

“Into ambivalent ones?” she asked, carefully picking her way over a smashed gargoyle that had been thrown from the facade. Someone must have been really mad.

“No, of course not. Into a beacon on the hill. A source of hope for all.”

“Well, anything’s better than before, really.”

“Mika! This castle will no longer be a place of terror. It will be a place where anyone can come to get warm, be heard, eat. All the good things.”

Mika’s eyebrows rose in tandem. “Don’t you think you already have enough headaches dealing with your Council without trying to be beloved?”

“Beloved?” I shot her a wry smile. “I’m just trying to get a half-decent bath around here.”

“You don’t even remember warm baths!” Mika laughed. “I’m your elder, I remember the night of heat and warmth. The night we danced and magic returned, and I swear there were pixies in the village and fresh vegetables that grew right in the dirt. Oh, and there was dirt.”

“Not everything I say needs to lead to a story about that night, you know.”

“You only say that because you weren’t there.”

“I was there. It’s literally my birthday.”

“Yes, but you don’t remember. I’m your elder, and I?—

“Okay, okay, I get your point, and as your queen I command you to stop.”

Bundled in our furs, we walked through the shattered remnants of the castle, the seat of my kingdom. Frostvale.

I waved to the maids overseeing the laundry, scrubbing the sheets with cold, brackish water. Why was I determined to restore it for the people, especially when I wasn’t

sure if I could actually pull it off? Mika was right about that; I had enough on my plate without trying to make this into a seat of warmth for all to enjoy. But I wasn't stopping until this entire castle stood as a symbol of good.

"Fine, tell me again what it was like," I begged my sister.

"Is this my queen asking?"

"No, your little sister."

"It was the best night in the world," Mika said automatically, a smile spread across her face.

"Are you sure you're remembering right?" I pressed. "You were only two. Maybe you're recounting the memories of others. That happens," I told her seriously. "At this point, I almost feel as if I remember it."

Mika stopped our walk, her arms on my elbows as she stared into my eyes. "How could I forget the best night in the world?" she repeated. "The night you came home to us? You had red and gold hair like fire, and it was so warm out. It smelled... You know? Well, you can't know, but it smelled mossy and humid, like when the bellows waft the first scents of sourdough into the bakeshop."

"Yes, I know that smell," I said. It was the smell that had woken me up my entire life. That's what happens when you grow up in a bakery.

"You were carried by a unicorn."

"Maybe it was a horse."

"Horses don't have horns, and they don't shimmer," Mika said. "The unicorn left you

on the windowsill like a mince pie, all bundled in silken blankets. Mom shrieked when she touched silk for the first time, that I definitely remember all on my own, because she denies ever shrieking?—”

“Of course she does, she’s much too dignified for a shriek.”

As my sister spoke, I took the opportunity to send a little warmth into her body, not enough to make her notice, but enough so that her teeth stopped chattering and her lips weren’t blue anymore.

Mika smiled. “Clearly. But she shrieked and grabbed you. The unicorn was paler than moonlight on the ice, and it galloped away before we could touch it. Where its hoofs touched the ground, the flowers bloomed, and the moon became an opal tucked in a black velvet cloth of stars. Everyone stumbled out of their homes, shedding their winter wool, and there were tears. So many tears, and none of them froze on their cheeks.”

That was always my favorite part of the story. People cried for happiness, and it didn’t hurt them. “And?”

Mika sucked in a breath, her corset stays making her grimace. “Vegetables. They grew like feral creatures, all jagged edges and wild vines. I think it’s because they knew in their little cells they only had one night, and they wanted to make the most of it.”

“Carrots?”

“Sweet as first ice.”

My mouth began to water. “Peas?”

“Little orbs of spring.”

“Radishes, beans, cabbage?”

“Fresher than imagination.”

I sighed and left my sister’s embrace to stand at a broken window. It looked over the valley of Frostvale into the frozen river below where the nearest village stood. Our village, Honeywood Haven.

It was where our parents kept their bakeshop and the communal ovens hot. Where the only fresh food we ate before or since the night of magic—the night of my birth—was grown deep in the earth using some farming method that made very little sense to anyone who didn’t oversee it. The yields were low, and the vegetables, everyone agreed who lived through the night of warmth, tasted exactly as they were grown: as if they had never seen the sun.

For a hundred years, magic had been gone from all seven kingdoms that made up the Ilex Isles, but for that one night in Frostvale, my perpetually frozen kingdom, magic returned.

“Mika, that’s it,” I cried, inspiration suddenly hitting me. “That’s what we’re going to do.”

“What?” my sister asked, watching me suspiciously.

“I can’t believe I didn’t think of this before. It’s part of my story. How could I have not seen it?”

“I really have no idea what you’re talking about. At this point, you could tell me you’re flying to the moon, and I’d go along with it.”

“We’re going to have another night like that. For my coronation.” It was perfect. My arrival heralded the night of magic and warmth. Why couldn’t my coronation be its rebirth? Forget the stupid prophecy about my stupid twin brother. He was gone and I wasn’t. I was here.

“Ha! Going to the moon might be easier.”

I whirled around to face her, and I could feel the heat of my eyes already boring into hers, excitement swirling around me. “No, it won’t. We’re going to have a party with fresh vegetables and a feast so big it will make the night of warmth look like a regular Tuesday.”

Mika put a cold hand to my forehead. “Good Gelid. You were barely queen for a month before the delusions of grandeur set in. Is that a record? I’ll go check the library. I know most of the books didn’t survive the war, but a few did.”

Warily, I looked in both directions of the corridor. Maids and groomsmen who had served both my biological father and brother before their untimely ends tidied up the Great Hall. Our voices were no doubt bouncing off the stone walls and echoing for all to hear. For what I had to tell my beautiful, pragmatic sister—not even mine by blood, but more mine than my actual relatives—I needed the cold of the forest to muffle my secrets.

Except for her memories of the night of warmth, Mika didn’t bide by flights of fancy. She would have to see to believe. Luckily, she trusted me as much as I trusted her. “Come,” I said, and she followed.

Our breaths froze in front of us the moment we got outside, fur and thick damask barely enough to keep away the frostbite. The edges of the horizon wove a tapestry of gray, lighter at the horizon line where the sun slowly sunk away. The trees looked like stiff robed giants of men, their arms frozen above their heads at odd angles. Wind

couldn't even make them creak or shift, their casing of ice was so thick around their trunks. Forever upfront, frozen in time and place.

Ice crunched under our boots and tried to grow along the bottoms of our gowns, but I plunged us deeper to where the silence would hold our secrets.

Finally, I stopped in the middle of a copse of trees where I hoped the larch needles would muffle and protect our words.

Pulling back my fur-lined hood, I gently touched my neck with two fingers, cooing softly, and waited. Gently, my scarf began to move.

Mika's face performed a rapid set of maneuvers as she went from confused to shocked to absolutely thrilled. Her hand shook as she reached out to stroke my cloak, stopping inches away. "It can't be... Bessa? Is that what I think it is?"

I nodded and guided her hand closer to make her actually touch the fur. I could see the heat seeping up her arm.

"Oh gods, that was you in the castle who made me feel... warm."

"Not just me. I couldn't have done it without her." Only nobility was allowed to wear ermine in Frostvale, which worked out well for me, since my ermine fox scarf wasn't a fashion accessory. It was a living, breathing fire fox. And my familiar.

My magical familiar.

"Meet Eska," I said beaming.

BESSA

Bronze braziers the size of a stallion barely kept the chill at bay in the stone meeting chamber. With Eska tucked firmly around my neck, I took a few seconds to center myself before entering the meeting hall, matching my breath to hers.

In and out.

The Glacial Council enforced both the secular and the religious laws of Frostvale, and it was, unfortunately, one of my few inheritances—along with this crumbling castle and an assortment of villages haphazardly built along the frozen river valley. Some days, I wondered why I fought so hard for it. Why did I want to be queen when it meant putting up with these conceited fools?

But then I remember the way the villagers took up my call to arms after my twin brother had me imprisoned, and I knew I'd do anything to protect them. Even putting up with my council.

Upon my entry, the twelve council members stood. Not quickly, mind you. Each one took a few seconds too long, a beat shy of true contempt, before they lumbered to their feet. I could've called them out, but I already knew what they'd say—that it was their creaking bones and the brutal cold that made them so slow, not any thought of disrespect. But I knew better. I had seen how quickly they could move when the coffee and scones arrived.

When they thought I was out of ear shot, I could hear them muttering about peasants plucked from obscurity and didn't I have a rather plain face? An aquiline nose, to be sure, but the narrowness of my face prevented any pretense to true beauty.

Thank the old gods, I was spared pretense! And beauty! What a burden that would have been.

I chose to say nothing. Mom always said it was better to have a sore tongue from biting it rather than no tongue, although my mom, the woman who raised me and not the queen who birthed me, hadn't realized I was going to be the one in charge of cutting off tongues one day.

Still, I respected my mom, so I said nothing. Instead, I swept through the council chamber and stood at the head of the table. With great respect, I inclined my head at each one in turn, forcing them to stay standing until I completed the ritual. Thirteen of us could play that game. I said I respected my mom, not that I was a saint like her.

"Please, begin," I ordered, choosing not to seat myself. Eska's little nails dug into my shoulder blade, but I suppressed the giggle that suddenly bubbled up. If they only knew what was before them.

Magic .

The only source in all the kingdoms, and I'd have to be careful in choosing the right moment to reveal it. Honestly, I wasn't sure what that moment was.

Rune, one of the younger councilors, spoke first, a true testament to his soaring ambitions. "We have a few delegations willing to make the trip through eternal winter to meet with your majesty."

Of all the ministers, he was the least odious, but I still would not consider him a

friend to my crown. Not by a long shot. He was the youngest, having taken over his father's seat on the council shortly before I became queen, meaning both of us had been on the job only a few weeks. Still, despite his youth, he had glistening white hair that could blend in with the snow.

“They sent notice of their acknowledgment of my sovereignty?” I asked.

A few ministers shifted uncomfortably, while others rattled in their chairs in absolute glee. Which meant, no. There had been no formal acknowledgment by the other heads of state.

Rune, however, stayed steady. “No, they haven't, your majesty. Instead, they sent word they would need certain assurances of safety, food and warmth if they were to come to Frostvale for your coronation. If we are, indeed, to have a coronation?”

I simmered, my cheeks turning red as if to out me, the true fire burning in my belly. It was a slap in the face. Not only did they refuse to acknowledge that I was the queen of Frostvale, they were saying point blank they thought our land was a bottomless pit of frostbite and starvation. We struggled, but we survived. Everyone else should be keen to realize how strong survivors became.

“Send a bird to let them know their presence would be welcome, but not necessary. We wouldn't want to scare them with our backwoods ways.”

“So we are?” Cecil barked, which wasn't all that unusual as he was the senior member of the council and mostly deaf in both ears. “We are to have a coronation ceremony?”

“We are,” I replied firmly, my chin lifting.

“We can't afford the usual fanfare,” Cecil sniffed. “If you insist?—”

“I do.”

“Then it is for one morning,” he continued, pretending as if I hadn’t spoken, “A ceremonial anointing, benediction, prayer to the gods old and new, and that’s that.”

Filomena, a stout woman in charge of grain distribution, nodded primly. “We are going week to week with nothing to spare. If we expect to make it to the next deep earth harvest, there can be no extra expenses. The fat must be trimmed, the gristle eaten, as they say.”

I nodded. I was not unaware of our situation. “Continue working on the castle repairs. My family’s bakeshop is a fine enough place for villagers to get warm, but it’s certainly not big enough for the festivities.” That last word got a rise out of everybody, and a shared grumble passed throughout the room. “As I expressed before, part of the castle will be allocated to a new warming center. That should satisfy the other seven kingdoms should they wish to send delegates. Our castle may be in ruins, but they will not freeze to death.”

“What you need is to fool one of them long enough to consider offering you their hand in marriage. Any number of kingdoms would make an appealing alliance.”

“Thank you for that helpful advice, Councilor Cecil,” I smiled through gritted teeth.

He nodded in appreciation of my appreciation of his wisdom. “Rontu of Sunfalls could offer a more stable grain source. Gillian of the Violent Tides has straight access to the open sea’s hunting grounds. Culm of Skyfold Pass would be beneficial in overland shipping. Jarth de la Silverwood could supply the best, most supple yew for bows and arrows and citrus for scurvy. Zacan of Coalcrest has just discovered a new coal deposit. We can’t survive without coal and that’s a fact.”

“Of course, of course,” I said soothingly. “I know I need a king to help me rule.”

That seemed to unruffle some feathers, as difficult as it was to form the words and force them through my lips. Talk of marriage would be difficult to sidestep for long, but I hoped to have a little more time to get my kingdom in order. Everyone expected me to marry soon. For a woman to rule alone was unheard of. Worse, most found it barbaric. Coupled with our desperate need for resources, I knew I would have to bow to the council's wishes for a suitable husband eventually.

I had heard rumors of sovereign queens ruling alone in distant lands. No one had actually been to the seventh kingdom, where it was rumored their queens only took lovers, never a husband or a king. I won't lie, the thought had crossed my mind; if I could continue putting my ministers off and playing their preferred suitors against each other, of course. Not an easy feat, but I couldn't imagine giving over control to a man simply because he was a man. This was my crown, and I'd fought on the battlefield for it.

Suddenly, my neck tickled. Eska. I tried mentally calming her, but she vibrated again. What was she doing? I wasn't ready to reveal my mythical fire fox yet—or deal with the inevitable questions she would bring. Like, her role in my queenship.

“If you'll excuse me, I believe we all have much to do.” I stood, waiting as the ministers also rose so I could finally escape and see what had gotten Eska so worked up. They inclined their heads, but I could hear the grumbling under their breaths as I swept past them in their woolen broadcloths. They really weren't going to like any of my other grand ideas, but I had time before I informed them of my dream to make the castle a center of our community. A representation of our heart. And as warm as one, too.

Eska was practically vibrating at this point, and I just needed to escape. I walked one slow foot in front of the other until I reached the corner, then I lifted my skirts and ran. Eska bounded off my shoulders and hit the stone floor at a run.

“Eska!” I hissed.

She paused, one dainty black paw in the air. If I didn’t know better, she seemed to be sighing at me. She trotted back, nipping at my cloak, yanking me down the corridor as best she could. Her bright red bushy tail was like a beacon, one that was going to get us caught if anyone wandered this way.

“What is it, girl?”

She yipped once and wiggled through an arrowslit in the castle walls. I picked up my skirts and dashed to the hole only to see Eska off like a shot through the castle yard and down toward the frozen river. Panic thudded at my heart. That was where Honeywood Haven’s market was, and in the market, there were people.

AMbrOSE

Ambrose wandered the frozen river market in Honeywood Haven at his usual time in his usual way. His oiled goatskin bag bumped lightly against his hip with each step, his spiked shoes providing a small amount of traction on the deeply frozen river ice.

Each oak-framed house and shop he passed had a thick, double layer of packed snow covering it from top to bottom to insulate it, and it gave the village an almost ethereal glow. Each building looked like a little orb, and all together they were like pearls on a string, arranged around a giant's neck. Thanks to the insulating nature of snow, the homes inside were warmed to sixty degrees with body heat alone. While still chilly enough to warrant a constant layer of clothing, it was far from unbearable in a frozen kingdom. He'd lived in worse during his travels. Much worse. To be completely fair, he'd also lived in better, but Honeywood Haven felt like home.

Like everyone else who had spent at least forty-eight hours in the kingdom of Frostvale, he had heard about the night of warmth, and like everyone else, he had simply adjusted to the reality of the cold. The river had been frozen solid for exactly one hundred years, and magic had been gone just as long. Rumors swirled like snow eddies across the ice about the time before, a time of pixies and unicorns and even wyverns. About blue skies and blue flowers.

About magic.

No one actually believed the stories of old. That mushrooms dotted mossy logs on the

forest floor or that little fire bugs lit up warm, summer nights, or that wildflowers attracted pixies while trolls slumbered under bridges.

But then, for one night, exactly twenty-seven years ago, magic had returned. For one night, warmth suffused the village, and people started to wonder if the rumors held some truth. That Frostvale hadn't always been encased in ice, a barely-living sculpture. That magic might have existed and could possibly exist again.

Ambrose had heard how everyone looked at each other with bright eyes full of hope. And when the magic was gone the next morning, the people who had stayed up all night to celebrate looked at each other aghast. He knew exactly what that felt like, too.

Despair.

For the last twenty-seven years, Frostvale had lived in a mixture of hope and despair, praying in secret to the old gods to return another night of warmth, an infinite number of nights of warmth! But remembering to respect the new gods of cold since that was the reality of things, and to always remind oneself that the cold does not claim us.

But now there was something as powerful as hope or despair; there was gossip.

Ambrose first heard it in the stalls between Lorcan the fur dealer and Duskborne the mulled wine expert. They had their heads together, a not uncommon sight, but Duskborne had handed Lorcan a mug of his pomegranate mulled wine and he hadn't even haggled. He simply handed it over and rubbed his gloved hands together, leaning in close to whisper, "Did you hear?"

That got Ambrose's attention. He inched over, taking care to not be noticed. The statue in the center of the square was encased in a thick layer of ice, a perpetual woman with her arm outstretched, catching something. Something unknown.

Ambrose liked to think she was capturing the long lost sunlight. He leaned against the statue, keeping his head down.

“About the queen?” Lorcan asked, smacking his lips.

“No, she’s gone to the castle. Whatever she thinks she’s going to accomplish... pah. Always had her head in the gray clouds, that one. Out of my hands. No, I mean did you hear about the spontaneous seedlings?”

“What? Come in, come in, Duskborne. No, I most certainly did not. What were they? Where were they? By chance, you don’t have any more of this delicious mulled wine, do you?”

“Delicious, did you say? How kind...”

The two men slipped into the wooden stall packed with snow and pulled the furs shut over the entrance. Ambrose stood outside, stunned. The mere possibility of magic had turned their rivalry into... that?

The deep, unfathomable blue color of the river ice beneath his feet felt as unchanging and unyielding as a stone mountain. Everything they had created was born of a struggle. The food that nourished their village came from meager trade deals, ice fishing, and deep earth farming—a dangerous and dark task that took nearly as many lives as it nourished. Mostly, they relied on ice fishing, stringy, imported meat, and the hardier plants that survived deep under the earth. But seedlings? Where? And how?

The two girls rumored to have pixie blood in them flitted around the statue, jumping in the air mid-stride. They danced and twirled, mesmerizing anyone who got within eyeshot. The closest one tugged on his long jacket. “Half a goat, half a goat, and moonlight to light your way.” She held an empty vial between her gloved fingertips,

her pixie-like ears and blonde bobbed hair sticking out from under her wool cap.

“No thank you,” he said, but threw them a full groat anyway. It was gone beneath their gowns in an instant, and he wondered, not for the first time, if there was truth to that rumor as well.

He heard his name, “Ambrose! Join us!” and mentally reprimanded himself. As soon as he was spotted, villagers turned from their daily shopping and crowded him instead. Some wanted to touch his cloak, others asked after his shop, but most wanted to hear his thoughts on the new queen.

The villagers didn’t know his secret, but they felt drawn to him anyway, moths to his candle flame. As many times as Ambrose tried to downplay it, the heat of his candles drew them closer, bound them tighter. They were quickly making him into something he didn’t want to be. Someone important. Someone to be consulted. Someone in the spotlight.

As far as they knew, he was just an itinerant candle maker with a dream to visit all seven kingdoms. He’d never been to Honeywood Haven before, having only just arrived six weeks past. He wanted to keep it that way.

Of course, he could never deny a cold child or hungry family one of his candles. He merely slipped it in with their usual order of household tapers, and let the candle call to them when they needed it most. He couldn’t begin to explain how he knew what each person needed or how to tailor the magic just so, only that he knew when the time came what was best. He could only pray that they wouldn’t get suspicious and demand more candles than he could give or worse—be so frightened of him to run him out of Honeywood Haven for good.

Their questions flew at him faster than he could bat them away.

“What do you think?”

“Are the rumors true?”

“Did you see the seedlings yourself or is Duskborne playing us the fool to buy more of his ridiculously overpriced wine?”

“Has she come to see you yet?”

That last question came from his best friend Noll who ran the local tavern and inn, the Dancing Snowflake. He had his own oiled goatskin bag across his hip, filled with bread from the bakery. The baguettes had already frozen solid in the few steps from the bakery to the front of the Dancing Snowflake, and would need to be defrosted before he could serve them with the nightly pottage.

Ambrose shook his head. “If she needs candles for her fancy new castle, I’m sure she’ll have plenty of servants to do her bidding.”

Noll pursed his lips and nodded. “Maybe she doesn’t hear the same rumors up there in her ‘fancy castle’ that we do down here. If she did, she’d be clamoring for your special candles like the rest of us.”

“I don’t know what you mean. They are but simple candles, perfumed a bit, but nothing more.”

“Perhaps, but I swear to the old god of warmth Solnara that the last candle you gave me literally made me feel... euphoric. Like I was six and ice fishing for the first time with my dad. I could almost taste the ground acorn flour cakes my mother had packed for our lunch that day and the barley ale. It was also my first real swig of ale. I’ll never forget it. My dad clapped me on the back and declared me a man.”

“A lovely memory, Noll,” Ambrose agreed.

“Oh, it was, but here’s the real thing; the hearth was dying down to embers, but I swear I was nearly sweating standing next to that candle. Can you imagine?” he asked, his voice pure amazement still, even though the memory candle had been gifted months ago, at a time when Noll had sounded down about life.

Ambrose cleared his throat, happy that Noll had such a strong reaction to his candle, but praying he didn’t want to linger on it too long—or ask too many questions. “If she’s anything like her predecessors, she’ll hear the same rumors—and more,” Ambrose said. “I’m sure she’s gathering her spies right now.”

That got Noll back on track. The large innkeeper began walking back to the Dancing Snowflake. “I’m guessing you don’t have high hopes for our wee queen. Even though she was raised in Honeywood Haven as one of us?”

“And moved right back to the castle the moment she could,” Ambrose retorted.

“Aye, but she went with more of those high hopes of hers. Haven’t you heard all the grand plans? The maids can’t stop talking about it. Warming centers, thermal gardens, the works. We might not need so many of your miraculous candles with the queen in charge.” Noll elbowed him in the ribs. “Is that why you’re saltier than a cod fritter? You’re afraid she’ll put you out of business?”

Noll opened the door to the inn and ushered him inside. Ambrose paused, the inn-house troubadour’s notes drifting on the still air. It was a mournful song meant for a mournful day, and it didn’t quite seem to fit. “It sounds like you are the one with the high hopes, friend. When did you become the queen’s biggest supporter? Wasn’t it you, a mere six weeks ago, telling me to keep my precious thoughts about politics to myself? That a smart man was a silent man?”

“Aye, well, that was before I knew ya. And Bessa, I’ve known her since she was a wee thing and her parents longer. Her adoptive parents, I guess. Whew, that’s going to take some getting used to. Who would have imagined the fiery red-headed hellion in pigtails who used to get lost following crows into the woods was actually born a princess and is now our sovereign queen?” Noll shook his head in wonder, running a hand through his thinning hair, but he had a grin plastered to his face. “Imagine. Our Bessa. On the back of a unicorn on the night of warmth. Maybe she has some of that prophecy magic, too. Maybe that’s why she never got truly lost in those woods. Or frostbitten.”

“What are you suggesting, Noll?”

“I’m suggesting that things might actually change around here. Honeywood Haven might be something big. I might have to reopen some of the rooms at the inn.” He made a noise of amazement in the back of his throat. “A unicorn. Can you believe it?”

Ambrose resisted the urge to scowl. The last thing he wanted to do was alienate his closest friend, but honestly. A monarch that cared about change? Power corrupted. Absolute power corrupted absolutely. She might be their Bessa for now, but give her time. Give anyone a bit of power and a little time.

“You go on. I actually have some work to attend to,” Ambrose said in a light manner, declining the open door.

“Aye, of course you do. Being grumpy is a full-time job,” Noll said, stomping off as much snow as he could before walking inside the Dancing Snowflake. It was alarming, since when Noll stomped, icicles had a tendency to detach themselves at high rates of speed and shatter on the ground. He was rumored to have come from a long line of giants.

“You could have warned me,” Ambrose called.

Noll wagged his fingers through the fogged window and turned away, a grin spread from ear to ear. “The cold does not claim us.”

“The cold does not claim us,” Ambrose said back, repeating the traditional Frostvalen goodbye. He shook his head, a small smile playing on his lips as well, and continued his walk to the woods.

Due to the delicate nature of his creations, he had to forage daily, feeling for the special heartbeat of magical objects left frozen in the tundra and deep woods from centuries past. Wyvern scales, shed like snake skin. Phoenix feathers, dropped during immolation. Unicorn horn shavings, rubbed off during molting on thick tree bark. He also needed to check on his bees and make sure they were warm enough to produce honey. The previous chandler used tallow for his candles, but Ambrose hated the smell and anyway, animal fat wasn’t conducive for magic. Beeswax, freely given, was the best choice.

Twenty minutes later, he arrived at his best kept secret and bent down to his wards, muttering their magic words, *Primus. Secundus. Tertius. Quartus. Nox.*

With quiet murmurings, Ambrose approached his bee hives, throwing off woolen layers as he went. He’d found the deep vibrations of songs emanating from his chest, typically the lyrics his mother had sung to him as a child, worked as well as any other distraction at keeping the bees calm, perhaps better.

Even at a distance, he could hear the buzzing of a productive hive. The thin stream of bees going in and out of the wooden logs and wicker hives was a welcome sight. Ambrose had let most of the fallen logs defrost, and the bees had eagerly formed their own, wild and natural hive within the wooden cavities. He’d situated a few other queen bees in conical wicker baskets that he’d hung from low branches of apple trees

waiting to blossom. Now, they were clustered among a copse of hawthorn trees situated over a thermal draft. It hadn't taken Ambrose long to set up the hives, but it had taken a fair amount of time for him to plant the nectar-filled flowers for them to drink and to identify the place where they received enough light and warmth from the thermal vent. It was only recently he'd felt confident enough to leave the apiary for a few days at a time and not come back to frozen or scorched flowers.

Coming to his haven instantly melted the tension from his body. Ambrose felt his shoulders drop, and his cheeks relax as he unclenched his jaw. He took off his gloves and let his fingers run through the knot of purpletop vervain and grape hyacinth flowers, so bright and vibrant against a white backdrop. He especially loved the clusters of lungwort flowers that hung heavily from their stems and the fragrance of the lavender. He couldn't think of a better way to spend his afternoon than surrounded by flowers while feeling the gentle vibrations of bees buzzing against his skin. It nearly felt illegal. Maybe it should be illegal in Frostvale.

Guilt crept into his peaceful relaxation, knowing the whole town had never seen a flower, let alone spent hours in a flower's presence, feeling their soft petals and breathing their perfumed air. At least, not since the night of the warmth when grains dormant in the earth for decades sniffed the air for the first time and their tiny shoots and soft petals reached through cracks in the ice along the bank for one glorious night.

His guilt gnawed at him, pushing him to open his world to the rest of the village, but wouldn't that invite trouble? Honeywood Haven was one thing, but Frostvale was made up of many more villages, all ringing the bottom of the mountain where the new queen's castle sat. It would only be a matter of time before word got out, passing from village to village, until eventually even the queen knew about his garden. It could destroy everything, and Ambrose wasn't ready to move on. Yes, Frostvale was a tough, icy world, but he couldn't find it in himself to leave.

Not yet. He had unfinished business here.

5

BESSA

Eska bounded down the icy alley, her dusky fur ruffled in the breeze. Her long red-gold tail with a black tip swished back and forth as she ran. So far, she'd managed to avoid all human detection by slipping behind various objects, a slop bucket, a broken wheelbarrow, and a frozen pile of icicles stuck upright from where Noll, the Dancing Snowflake's innkeeper, had no doubt stomped his boots before entering his inn and sent them spearing into the ground.

I, however, was beginning to get annoyed.

"I have things to do, Eska! In case you don't remember, I'm the queen now."

Her little black paws skidded to a stop, but she wasn't stopping to chide me. She stared at a shop, her ears forward and flicking with intensity. A sharp bark escaped her mouth.

Furtively checking each direction, I scooped up my fire fox kit and arranged her around my neck. "Shh. You're supposed to be a scarf, you know. A dead one."

For my cheek, she nipped my ear once and then lay flat, instantly bringing added warmth. I stroked her tiny black nose before giving more thought to the shop. Why did she want me to come here? What was special about it?

It looked like a regular candle shop, one that had been here for years, albeit with an

odd golden hue it didn't possess under the previous chandler.

Everyone had long since packed their thatched homes and shopfronts with thick layers of snow for insulation. They hardly needed maintenance, as Frostvale never unfroze. If one trekked up the mountain and looked down, which I had many, many times, the buildings covered the whole valley in translucent pearls.

I started at the top, examining the candle shop. A thick fringe of icicles hung from the roof, and the snow was packed hard around everything except the door. It seemed exactly like the old one—but wait. My brow furrowing, I moved closer.

Eska yipped once and lifted her nose, her whiskers twitching as she inhaled deeply. “You’re right,” I murmured, realizing what she was getting at. The stench of rendered beef fat was missing. The new chandler wasn’t using tallow for his candles, but even more perplexing was the fact he’d managed to scrub away the smell after centuries of use. There was something else, too. Eska was positively vibrating, she was so excited. I could tell she wanted nothing more than to jump down and run in circles, chasing her tail and rubbing her chin against everything.

Carefully, I pulled my glove off and stretched out my fingers. I put my palm against the wooden door. It was cold, as expected, but still unreasonably... golden. Hmmmm.

Glancing over both shoulders again, I leaned my ear and cheek against the door. Completely quiet. It shouldn’t be strange, but it was. I could feel something. I had the strangest yanking sensation just under my belly button, as if a fishhook had embedded itself there and wanted to pull me forward. It felt utterly irresistible inside, and it made me desperate to get in. I wanted to bang on the door and pry the chandler from whatever workroom he had ensconced himself in.

Patience, I reminded myself, curling my fingers into my palm and backing away. Patience had always served me well. I would do a little research, learn more about

this new chandler, and then return. One thing was certain. He would have a lot of explaining to do when I came back for a candle.

I tapped my finger on my chin. A show of force, perhaps. It worked for most. I could ask my brother Wyot to don the old Frostguard armor he'd found in the dungeons and accompany me. He'd been a soldier under the king, but soured on it as a profession once the realities of war hit. He continued on for me, and I was forever grateful for that, but even I couldn't convince him to join my retinue as the head of my personal guard. Actually, I couldn't convince anyone, so I had nothing beyond myself and Eska for protection. As the Glacial Council had informed me at our first meeting, there wasn't a budget for a personal guard, and anyway, there were no more pretenders to the throne, and furthermore, who would want it?

They had a very good point.

I gave one last sharp inhale, breathing in the rich scents of the candle shop, before turning on my heel and making the trek back up the hill to the castle. I had some books to find and a chandler to surprise.

AMbrOSE

When the new queen entered his shop for the first time, Ambrose didn't bow. He didn't look up or acknowledge her presence, either. He was at the most sensitive part of candle making, and even queens must yield to the magic, whether they knew it existed or not.

To be fair, he wasn't aware it was the queen. Not, at least, until her solitary Frostguard shifted uncomfortably at the doorway, letting the cold and snow swirl into his shop. Ambrose dropped a frozen hawthorn twig into the warm wax mold. Still, no one spoke. The silence was as deafening as a cold winter's eve. Crystals of ice shot from the twig and began to envelope the mold. Hawthorn helped with frostbite, and he liked to make this particular candle available to all of the villagers of Honeywood Haven in their regular orders.

Ambrose's nose started to twitch. That scent, eddying in his shop... it must be coming from her. She smelled divine. Like new mossy growth and fresh borage with hints of honeysuckle. She smelled like the old gods. She smelled... impossible.

His head swam. His eyes began to water. He desperately wanted to see her face, to look for a hint. Finally, he couldn't take it any longer. He took his hands from the candle, abandoning it for the scrap heap. The magic was broken.

"What do you want?" he asked gruffly, shock rippling across his face when he realized who stood before him. To hide his reaction, he pulled a tattered dishcloth

from his apron strings and began the tedious process of pulling dried wax from under his nails, watching her all the while. Steeling himself, he looked directly into her gray eyes, half-hidden behind wisps of bright red hair peeking out from under her velvet hood.

For a second, her royal mask slipped, and he saw hurt flicker across her face. The mask slammed down quickly, replaced with anger, and he found it unfortunate, as her realness made her distractingly pretty. And her fiery anger made her interesting.

“Is that the way you address your queen, Chandler?”

Interesting again. Ambrose wished he could light a candle of emotion to see if he could work out why she reacted with pain first, rather than outrage, like any other royal person he’d ever had the misfortune to meet. Although he could probably guess why. She hadn’t grown up royal. That sense of innate privilege might have been in her blood, but it hadn’t reached her heart. Not that he was feeling generous toward her. Give her time.

“Queens and kings seem fairly interchangeable these days,” he replied. He held up his hands, calloused and full of small burns, at the sudden movement of her Frostguard. “No offense,” he added. “Can I be of service, your majesty?” he added, letting his voice play at the edge of impudence, although it occurred to him that it suddenly sounded nearly indecent. She filled his shop with the scent of summer, and he was grateful when she broke the gaze first.

The queen sighed, slowly picking her way through his shop, her voluminous dress of black velvet and her luxurious, ermine-lined cloak swished against his beechwood work table, over a century old from before the freezing. Her gloved fingers slid along the pots of herbs and flowers he used in his candle making. It was only when she’d gotten closer that he noticed the gown was moth-eaten and patched, as if it had been sewn for someone else a very long time ago. The thought oddly twisted at him. She

was probably minutely aware that she was merely playacting as queen, dressing up in someone else's clothes.

"I could go through the whole tiresome list of things I could do to you for that tongue of yours. It would be tedious, and frankly boring, and I still have so many things to do today."

He lifted his chin in wry amusement, unable to stop the movement. For a queen, she was as surprising as the spray of common freckles across her nose. Surely her father the king couldn't have abandoned her to the bakers because she was born with freckles. He wondered why the old king had done such a thing. No one could tell him. No one even knew who she was until the king and prince imprisoned her during the war.

"I'm sure they would be unpleasant, your majesty."

"Oh no. Not unpleasant. At least, not for me. For you, I suspect they would be brutal."

"Cutting of tongues and all that?"

"Obviously, but do try to be more creative. Like your candles. They really are a work of art, so I know you have talent."

Ambrose spread his arms, taking in his entire candle shop. "Only for pleasant things, your majesty. My artistry is limited in that regard. It doesn't extend to creative liberties with torture."

"Ah. You just haven't had the opportunity to... stretch yourself."

Ambrose tucked the towel in his waistband and stood behind his table with his arms

crossed. Now that he wasn't working magic, the cold was already seeping back into his pores. "A rack joke. Cute."

"See? Smart to boot. I haven't had the time yet to dust off my father's old dungeon devices, but I could always have Wyot find the time. Right, Wyot?"

The Frostguard said nothing, his silent presence much more ominous than words.

Ambrose stared at the woman, much younger than he imagined she would look after warfare to claim her throne. Her skin looked porcelain, although without sun in an eternal winter, that was nearly a given. Her red hair flamed defiantly, though. Like fire in a world of ice.

Finally, he broke the silence. "Are you going to tell me what you want or do I need to beg?"

"I thought it was obvious."

A heavy silence followed.

He lifted an eyebrow. "You want candles? Surely you have servants for that sort of thing. Ordering and lugging home crates of candles must be even more tiresome than thinking up new torture techniques."

"Ah, now am I the one that must beg?" she demanded softly, her voice a seductive whisper. "I don't want a crate. I want one candle, your best candle."

Ambrose stiffened. It wasn't a smell or a hunch. She knew about his magic, and that wasn't possible. No one knew about his magic. Even when he gifted candles to villagers in need, they never suspected. No rumors had stained his shop. Yet, this queen was about to change all of that.

He pointed a finger. “Out.”

Another flash of pain followed by outrage. “Chandler—” Her voice held menace, but something else. Pleading?

He crossed his arms. “You may be the queen, but this is my workshop. My rules. Do what you must. Cut off my tongue, break my fingers, tie me to the rack. It doesn’t change anything. My candles are not for sale to you.”

“So it’s true.”

Ambrose refused to answer, glaring instead. If the Frostguard had any notion of what was happening, he kept as silent and as still as his title. Frostvale was the only place Ambrose felt at home since his wanderings, despite the ice—because of the ice—and he wasn’t about to let anyone, even a very pretty young queen, get him to reveal his secrets.

“We have a saying here in Frostvale,” she said, her throaty voice churning in his chest, making him grow uncomfortably warm. “Ice eats pride. So you must feed the ice your pride before it gobbles you up for itself.”

Her voice lowered even farther. She leaned across the table, and Ambrose couldn’t tell if she did it to show off her cleavage or to assault him with her mouthwatering scents of spring rains and flowers—of hope. How did she smell like that? And why? Did she even know? She must. It must hold the answer to how she sniffed him out so quickly. Like an overflowing snowmelt lake, there was much going on beneath her icy exterior. Ambrose was sure of it.

“I must have a candle. Let us leave it at that. For the good of Frostvale, it is the only way.”

Ambrose found his mouth dry, but he managed some bravado. “That sounds like a you problem, your majesty.”

“No, it is ours.”

“Ours? How do you figure?”

“Clearly, I know about you.”

Ambrose froze. So, it was out in the open now.

“Yet,” she continued, never taking her eyes off of him, nerves of icy steel, “how many of our fellow Frostvalens also know? From your face, I see the answer is none.”

Ambrose crossed his arms and silently reprimanded himself. Clearly, he’d have to get better at hiding his true self around this one.

“I noticed you in the village. You seem to have made quite the impression since your arrival here, oh, eight weeks ago? Why is it that anyone, literally anyone in the entire Ilex Isles, would move to Frostvale? Maybe you haven’t noticed, but we have nothing to offer such an entrepreneur as yourself except for war and icicles.”

She must have truly loyal spies already to know how long he’d actually been here. Ambrose didn’t think even Noll knew that. Her knowledge alone was impressive. He would have to watch his movements around this new queen. Or... leave. He inclined his head. “Your majesty is well-informed.”

As he looked up, he swore he saw—his eyes tracked to her fur scarf. So, she was hiding something, too.

Had she noticed? He wasn't always the best at hiding his emotions. He had, as Noll put it, a gods-awful gamblin' face. The innkeeper very kindly took all his money that first month in town and then wouldn't let him sit at the tables again. Too honest for his own good. Too hotheaded to be honest. Either be honest and easy goin' or a hotheaded cheater—and a good one. But a cheater was something Ambrose couldn't abide.

But she was already talking again, going on about business. "I cannot pay you, Chandler. Frostvale has no money, you see. I can offer you a few jewels from the royal collection, whatever wasn't pawned or looted, but for what? If it isn't food or fire, it isn't worth much here. By the way, how much does a magical candle run these days or should I ask my old neighbors? I dare say I know them better than you, seeing as I grew up here and you grew up... Well. A mystery, isn't it?"

Ambrose suspected her bark was louder than her bite. She had no intention of spouting off to anyone, whether she grew up with them or not, but he admired the grit all the same.

From under his work table, he let his fingers feel his creations, rummaging through the boxes. Finally, he chose one, letting the cold wax comfort him. It was the only candle he could trust. Honestly, it was the only candle she'd need, if she was true.

He held it reverently between them, his shoulders relaxed and his eyes soft when staring at this candle, this magic. "This candle will neither fix your problems, nor slay your foes. It will only let loose any wellspring of courage you already possess."

She didn't take her eyes from it. "And if I have none?"

"It will be like you—merely pretty to look at."

A laugh escaped her throat at that, and her gloved hand flew to her mouth. Ambrose

startled. He hadn't expected a laugh. Maybe the rack, but not a laugh.

"Now, your majesty, I must be clear. There is no more magic in this land. This is nothing but a candle. But hope is a powerful thing."

"Yes, I'm sure that's exactly what you tell everyone you gift these to," she said wryly.

"I don't say anything, because no one has ever asked, nor accused me of magic craft. I don't know what rumors you're referring to, but it seems as though you're keeping a few secrets of your own."

Her chest moved sharply at her inhale, but she kept her composure. "I don't know what you're referring to, but you should be more careful when addressing your queen."

Ambrose lowered his gaze. "I go too far. True. It is a personal fault, and probably why I am doomed to travel so much."

The queen adjusted her fur scarf as if readying herself for a rapid departure, and Ambrose found himself torn. "If I give you this candle, will you use it?"

"If? I thought we understood each other."

When her eyes lifted from the candle and met his, Ambrose nearly staggered back a step. Her eyes glittered with a fire brighter than any of his candles, magical or not. Her cheeks glowed with warmth, and he thought for a wild second that if he reached out to touch her, he would burn. Maybe even scar. He gripped the counter until his knuckles whitened.

And then, she smiled.

“Why, Chandler, I believe you will have to have your own wellspring of courage. For you will have to trust me. Now, please. Hand it over.”

BESSA

Mika flung open the door, her eyes as round as the palace's chipped and cracked porcelain dinner plates. Her voice stuck in her throat as the bitter cold caught her in its throes. She gasped, trying to catch her breath.

Before she could ask, I lifted my chin, sharply. Shhh .

Her eyes went wider, if possible. Quickly throwing a cloaked arm around me, she ushered me inside.

Five women were huddled near a hearth with a meager fire, patiently hem-stitching the warps of a fine wool tapestry featuring a baby on the back of a unicorn with a golden crown on its brilliant horn. It was the sixth one in the series. Mika had insisted I needed some sort of symbol, so this unicorn and baby scene was to be mine. My very own origin story for all to see whenever I received state visitors. No mention of villains or being a prophecy-breaking twin. We needed to let that story swirl away in a snow storm if possible and focus on the unicorn, according to Mika.

She'd also wanted a baguette to be wrapped up with the baby in the blanket, an ode to our family business and a promise of full bellies, but I had to draw the line somewhere. My sister certainly had high hopes for my reign, which was wonderful for her. As for me, I simply had hope. It wasn't high, but it was something.

As we passed the women, working even as their fingers and toes froze, I sent out a

small burst of heat that would co-mingle with the coal fire and hopefully keep them warm for a few extra hours. I might not have heavy silver candelabras or fine porcelain plates with pretty pictures for dignitaries to uncover as they ate mountains of saffron cream over pickled peaches and fresh raspberries, but I could do this, at least.

“What did he say?” Mika whispered as we walked as regally as possible through the drafty corridors of the Great Hall to the library. It had quickly become our refuge as we adjusted to life in a ruined castle.

I felt my cheeks grow warm as I recalled the absolute audacity the man had standing there, denying his queen what she required. And the way his gaze had raked over my body so indecently. I couldn’t help but remember his hands at work, so sure of themselves in their delicate movements. In some ways, he had more relaxed confidence as a common candle maker than I had as a queen of thousands. In my defense, I hadn’t known I was royal for long. I knew better how to tell when sourdough was perfectly proofed than how to manage courtly intrigue. But if I could have one ounce of his poise... perhaps I could fake the rest.

“Courage.”

“Bessa, you’ve had more courage in the past five hours than most of your predecessors had to have in five years. Let’s not quip about courage.”

“No, Courage . The candle will enhance a natural wellspring of courage, apparently.”

“What a ridiculous—you already have courage! Look at you!”

“Thank you, Mika, but I’ll take all the help I can muster.”

She tapped a chilled finger on my forehead. “See? Courage and brains. You get that

from me.”

I laughed and did a little twirl, the fine dresses we’d found in a trunk in one of the old rooms untouched by the ravages of war. Some were rather old-looking, blue and white damask with rope lined bottoms, but others were gorgeous, and it was a joy to air them out and examine the fine handiwork of a generation past when our people had time for such things. With a little mending, they’d been brought back to life. “I have hope, Mika! And the candle shop... it was... warm.”

“It couldn’t be warmer than the bakeshop,” Mika reasoned, an eyebrow quirking up, as if nothing could get past her. “We had the warmest shop in the whole village. It felt a little obscene how warm our home was. He doesn’t even have an oven, right?”

“No, he doesn’t have any oven,” I confirmed carefully.

“What was his name, this candle maker?”

She was suddenly on to me, that I might have extraneous thoughts not related to candles about the candle maker. How could I explain that I didn’t mean warm physically, although it was also that. I meant warm and cozy, like a hot cup of mulled cider in front of a fire or Eska purring on my lap. Pure contentment. “His name is Ambrose. That’s the thing, Mika. He’s not native to Frostvale, so why end up here? And it was warmer. Somehow.”

“And with clear magic,” my sister murmured. “Do the villagers suspect anything?”

I had returned to musing over the candle, weighing it between my palms to see if it shifted or felt any different. “No, I don’t think so. From what Wyot gathered at the inn, he’s simply down on his luck, arrived from gods-know where, and took over the old candle shop six weeks ago. If it wasn’t for Eska sniffing him out, I would never have known.”

“And the rumors?”

“That’s another thing. There aren’t any rumors about his candles. He barter and trades them for all his supplies, and sometimes, he gives them away. But no one suspects a thing. They can’t all be candles of courage, so what else do you think he’s brewing in them?”

“I haven’t any notion.”

Absently, I stroked the soft fur of my fire fox, enjoying the gentle rise and fall of her breathing as she slept. I didn’t tell my sister my other suspicions. Chiefly, the odd feeling that Ambrose had sensed my fire fox and that was what had made him change his mind.

“He’ll need constant watching,” Mika said grimly.

Her canny way of analyzing any situation always took a minute to get used to after years with no bigger worries than survival. Which were, granted, quite sufficient, but political maneuvering, statecraft, and spying? Now those were new talents I didn’t know she possessed. I was immensely grateful to the gods for her, all the same.

She paused, looking thoughtful, a small crease between her eyes. “Mom and Dad are fine running the bakeshop. Age has barely slowed them down, and Wyot needs something to do. He’s getting bored at home, too antsy to make good bread, as Mom says. He’s scaring the sourdough, and that starter has been in our family for generations.”

“Mika, where are you going with this?”

“You could enlist him to help. He could befriend this Ambrose character and get closer to his candles.”

“You don’t think he’d see right through that?”

She shrugged. “Why? He just arrived and he needs friends, doesn’t he? Why not ours?”

“I meant Wyot. Even I can tell you’re trying to kill two birds with one stone. It isn’t subtle. Our brother will find his footing. Eventually. He doesn’t need us trying to find him a purpose in life.”

“Maybe, but everyone could use all the help they can get. He was a great soldier for you, but he’s worrying me now.”

“True,” I agreed reluctantly. Now that my throne was secure from internal rivals, Wyot didn’t have much of a role. It was the same old story, war was tough, but peace would be tougher for a man like him.

“Great. Let’s go talk to Wyot. His talents are wasted at the bakeshop, whether he knows it or not.”

“Oh yes, spycraft is a much better fit. No worries that he towers over most men and stands out in a crowd like a brown stick in the snow.”

“He’ll be fine.”

“Ambrose might recognize him. I took him along with me as my Frostguard.”

“Did you? And Wyot agreed?” Mika looked relieved. “There’s hope for him yet. But I wouldn’t worry about Ambrose recognizing him.”

“Why?” I asked.

She nodded at my chest. “If he had eyes, he wasn’t looking at anything else, dear sister.”

I winked. “All part of my evil plan.”

BESSA

For my next Glacial Council meeting, I carefully chose my gown made of silk and brocade thick enough to feel like armor. My hair hung down in loose curls as added warmth, the style not having changed in a hundred years. A simple band of gold encircled my forehead. Eska draped herself across my shoulders, her bright red tail curled over my left clavicle, blending in seamlessly with my own fiery hair.

“We’ve heard back from five out of the seven delegations.” Councilman Cecil adjusted his fur hat, narrowed his eyes, and looked back at me. “All five have agreed to attend your coronation festivities, your majesty. It looks as if the second part of your wild bid to be queen has succeeded. Congratulations.”

I wanted to shout and jump on the table and run circles with Eska. My body glowed with heat as if I were a coal-fired furnace and could light this entire castle up with my warmth. But I stayed primly seated and folded my hands in my lap. I was pretty sure that was proper queen etiquette.

“Wonderful.”

“We need to discuss your suitors, of course. The delegations will be sending their semi-best, mainly out of curiosity. Second-born sons, old kings needing a broodmare. Still, it is the best opportunity we’ll have to impress or bamboozle one for long enough to propose. Honestly, either will do.”

“Thank you for your candor,” I said, not thankful at all.

Rune stood and bowed at the waist before addressing me. “I think what Cecil means to say is that your majesty is a complete unknown. Not having grown up as an official member of the royal family, no one even knew your name until you stormed the battlefield claiming to be the lost twin of Philip and the rightful heir to Frostvale.”

“Claiming?”

“I am simply speaking from their point of view. No one knew, either, that he’d kept you imprisoned. For better or for worse, you’ve certainly got the kingdoms talking. Some might come out of pure curiosity and to see if the rumors of unicorns are true.” He sat back down.

“A rare feat,” said Filomena, the only woman on my council. I wanted to bring her to her feet and make her dance with Eska and me. Instead, I gave what I imagined a regal incline of my head looked like.

“Thank you for your thoughts, as they are always most welcome,” I said. Then, I added, “I know I’ve spoken to some of my councilors alone about my options, but my ear is always open to whatever my most esteemed ministers have to say.”

I watched in some amusement as the twelve ministers tried to hide their shock that others had gotten the jump on them. Was it bending the truth? Sure, but I had spoken alone to my most trusted counselor—Mika. With any hope, they’d get suspicious of one another and start actually coming to me instead of plotting together behind my back. Time would tell, but it was a good first step toward better control over them.

“We can discuss your choices soon,” I said, interrupting their murmurs, “but for now, if you wouldn’t mind, I thought it would be nice to start this session with a candle lighting of intention.”

I pulled Ambrose's candle of courage from under my brocade. There were a few raised eyebrows, but no one objected. It seemed they were the tiniest bit mesmerized by the thick pillar of beeswax. Hope flared in my heart. Maybe the candle was already weaving its magic around the room. I'd need all the courage I could get to enact the next portion of my wild plan.

Walking as solemnly as an acolyte of Gelid to one of the braziers, I put the wick to the flame, but paused mid-movement as a sudden thought needled into my head. What if the candle was indiscriminate in its offerings of courage? What if it gave courage to everyone in the room? No one would have any trouble standing up to me and rejecting my ideas outright. Worse, that would be considered open mutiny. Treason even. If someone gainsaid my father or brother in public, they wouldn't have hesitated to do away with them in every sense of the word.

I didn't need that kind of responsibility.

My hands began to tremble; I wrapped them tighter around the candle, remembering the warmth and cozy charm of the candle shop, the way it made me feel deep in my chest to be inside, surrounded by magic. Did Ambrose know what he was doing? Did he know he wove magic? Surely he did. I pictured his face, stony and above reproach. He hadn't thought I could do this. He thought I was weak when I needed to be strong.

Eska made a slight movement, a tiny nudge of encouragement. I took a deep breath and tipped the wick toward the flames, the heat pleasant against my knuckles. It caught immediately, a drop of melted wax falling into the coals and hissing loudly. Immediately, the room filled with some unidentifiable, earthy scent, and—was that a tiny tooth suspended in the candle?

I decided I did not want to know.

Reverently, I held it outstretched in front of me and glided back toward the long

meeting table, where I set it in the middle with a thunk.

“In this room, in my name, we will have the courage to help our people. We will commit to the difficult things that do the most good. We will be a source of hope, and we will return Frostvale to its glory.”

I had the room’s attention. They were spellbound in their silence.

I continued, my voice dropping a little lower so they all had to lean in to hear me. “First, we will ask all Frostvalens for their help in finishing the castle, and we will pay them to do so from the treasury. I had a count done this week, and there are enough half-groats for every man, woman, and child to receive three. It is vital that we finish this castle, not for my sake, but for theirs. For I don’t intend it to be a home for royalty, but an epicenter of community for all of Frostvale’s villages. It will be a symbol of what Frostvale could and should be. The entire southern wing will be available as a warming area where it will open up onto the royal gardens. We will use thermal vent farming to maintain not a pleasure garden as in the past, but a complete kitchen garden where any and all can come to pick fresh produce.”

Here, I started to get some pushback; I could almost physically feel it. I plowed ahead, beginning to pace around the room as an added distraction, so they had to follow me.

“We are to hold a great feast to celebrate. The entire kingdom is to be welcomed into the castle for a week of feasting and dancing.” I couldn’t get any more of my frankly preposterous plan out of my mouth before the council members shot to their feet, all pretense of slow, aching bones gone in their absolute outrage.

“A week!”

“Feasting and dancing? And who’s to pay for that?”

“How would it even be possible? Where would this food come from? It’s not in the budget! We’re barely making it week to week as is,” reasoned Filomena, which wasn’t wholly unexpected, and she probably had a very good point.

While my magical fire fox was (probably) a literal godsend, Eska made fire. Not food. I couldn’t explain it; with her appearing in my life, I felt I could do anything. Even conjure food from thin air. I meant it when I told Mika I would pull this off.

“We will figure it out. We have no choice. We must entertain these suitors. What would any other kingdom do?” I asked.

That quieted them down. They knew I was right. How was I supposed to obtain a suitor, negotiate treaties, and create fair trade agreements without prestige?

“They would do what they must to put on a good face. I expect the same out of every one of you.” I smiled. “Please, as I said before, don’t hesitate to see me outside of our scheduled meetings, but as you can probably tell, I am anxious to get started with all that we must do and prepare in the next month.”

Cecil pursed his sour lips. “Your father burned tree hearts for his baths. Now you wish us to burn ourselves with this absolute folly?”

With a deeply frightening smile, I replied, “I guess it’s a good thing he only bathed once a year... and that only one coronation will occur in your lifetime, Minister Cecil.” The look of absolute shock would stay with me for days. I had actually rendered them all speechless.

“The cold does not claim us.” Without fanfare, I abruptly swept from the chambers, not giving the ministers a chance to formally dismiss the proceedings or to insult me by pretending to amble slowly to their feet. I had too much to do and not enough time. The candle sputtered out on the table, spent.

For a moment, I couldn't gloat or worry. All I could do was picture the chandler and wonder if he would be proud. Or if he'd believe me at all.

As it turned out, that wasn't the biggest problem of my week. No, that would be the suitors.

BESSA

Only a few days later, the first caravan rumbled up the valley, getting caught in the grooved ice along the river bed and causing quite a stir in the village below, as if the suitor had sent his acceptance message and rode off on the same day!

The driver jumped out so stiff from the unrelenting cold that he fell face first in a drift, leaving an indent in the exact shape of his body. He spent a few minutes floundering before the villagers managed to haul him out. Everyone in his party looked like hibernating bears beneath their furs.

It took all my skills as an actress, scant as they were, to remain impassive as the driver announced his royal suitor, his highness, Prince Rontu of Sunfalls.

The prince bowed as best he could, foregoing a bit of the intended flourish in order to avoid tumbling over. A great first choice, since the suitor surely could not move more than two inches at a time, bundled as he was.

“Your majesty, Queen Bessa of Frostvale, I am Rontu, prince of Sunfalls. It is quite the adventure to be admitted into Frostvale,” he said with such boyish charm, I could hardly help being flattered.

I was only human, after all, and I wondered what he looked like, then scolded myself. It didn’t matter. I was no more choosing a suitor than I was choosing a star to pluck from the sky and keep in my chambers.

Rontu had so many layers tucked into his coat that I couldn't quite be sure where his neck ended and his body began, but I could see he had warm brown eyes and a shock of brown hair that covered his forehead. It was strange to see only the beginnings of a beard, no doubt from travel, instead of a full beard that every man in Frostvale adopted out of necessity.

"You are most welcome, Prince Rontu," I told him, returning a genuine smile. "I hope you'll find your stay is most invigorating. I want you to make yourself at home. Please, enjoy Frostvale as we do."

"I am looking forward to it, your majesty," he said, gallantly attempting not to shiver. His chattering teeth gave him away, however.

"The kitchens are the warmest spot in the castle," I told him in a conspiratorial whisper.

He nodded gratefully. "And I plan to fill those kitchens with the best Sunfalls has to offer."

I blushed. I couldn't help it. It sounded... suggestive, which of course it was. He planned to fill them with grain because they would be his kitchens after he had my hand in marriage, much as he presumably wanted to fill me. "Well, then you have two reasons to inspect them, for their warmth and to measure their capacity."

He threw his head back and laughed at my little comment, his shoulders shaking in a great mound. Maybe there was hope for me yet in this world of courtly graces. Best to get out on a high note.

"The cold does not claim us," I told him regally and turned on my heel to leave the Great Hall, passing the women still at work weaving behind me. They had nearly completed twelve tapestries, two more than we'd agreed on, but they had insisted the

castle would not be complete without every wall covered. I infused their numb fingers with warmth as I passed, resolutely not looking behind me, trusting instead in Mika and Wyot to organize the rushed reception for the prince of Sunfalls.

Without much else to offer the castle servants beyond a warm place to sleep and three square meals a day, I still managed to build a decent household staff. Noll from the Dancing Snowflake offered one of his two cooks, and a few younger women came forward to offer their services in the position of maid. Certainly, the women were a strain on their own homes, but I was still grateful. I knew how that was. I was also a strain, although my mother and father never hinted at it. Without a garden to tend, they had all the help they needed running the bakeshop, and I found myself wandering and wondering.

A lot.

I made sure the castle wing dedicated to the staff had been updated before any of the suitors' wings, but unfortunately, Rontu was early. He'd have to make do with no tapestries, no bed hangings, and no rugs. Honestly, he was fairly lucky to have a bed with sheets and a chamber pot at this point. Not all of the rooms did.

Filomena stopped me at the kitchens, her round face flushed with heat from the flagstone hearth, and she rubbed her hands in excitement. "This is a good omen, your majesty. Straight from the old gods. Sunfalls must be serious to be sending their young princeling already. They want a jump on the competition for your hand. A better grain deal would set us up nicely."

I pulled my top lip down to prevent a grin from leaking out. She was the first councilor to come speak privately to me, but hopefully the first of many.

"Rontu is your choice then?" I asked, inspecting a half-filled bag of wheat. It was the most precious of our grains and rarely used. Rye and barley were more suited to deep

earth techniques.

“Oh yes. The most viable by far. He’s young, handsome, and a second born prince, making him much more likely to move for his fortunes than an old king looking for a broodmare. Oh, and that charm! We could use that around here.”

“And the wheat?” I prompted.

“Of course, of course. Most importantly, Sunfalls is the breadbasket of the Ilex Isles. Our trade agreement now is meager. They only take enough to make their icy delicacies, and since they considered ice a luxury, it would be the first to go in times of want. Unless...”

“Unless the second born prince is married to the queen of Frostvale?”

Filomena tapped the side of her nose. “Precisely, your majesty.”

I clasped my hands around hers. “Thank you for sharing your thoughts. You’ve given me much to think about, Councilor.”

“My pleasure, your majesty. Now, I must inspect the offerings.”

“Offerings?”

“Gifts, your majesty. They sent six bags of grain. Can you imagine?” With that, she turned and sauntered down the hallway, a little bounce in her step. From our newfound intimacy, from the grain, from the presence of the prince? It was honestly impossible to say. Either way, it made my heart light to see.

I spent the rest of the day dodging councilors, keen to let them think I was too busy to listen to them. Let them hunt for me, work a little for my attention. It was good for

them.

Wytot had also recently found an old chapel from before the freezing. It had decaying frescoes covering the walls, depicting a sylvan scene with dryads and pixies and a bubbling brook. I'd taken to coming here to reset.

I put my hand against the crumbling egg-tempera paint so faded that it appeared the humans hardly had any faces. I couldn't make out any of the scenes, except for the cascades of ivy vines that hung down the castle spire with what appeared to be a young woman swinging on them. There was absolutely no evidence of vines in that very tower, because it was the first thing I went to look for after discovering the chapel.

There was another scene on the opposite side of the room that had minimal damage. It caught my attention immediately, probably because it was the first time I'd ever seen an actual depiction of the story told around winter fires, the legend of Frostine, goddess of winter.

She was made of living ice with lacy hoarfrost hair and bound to the old god of winter, Hiems. While walking in the mountains one day, she fell in love with a summer-born princeling who was out foraging for wild berries. Hiems killed the human, and where Frostine's tears fell in the snow, snowdrop flowers blossomed. She went into eternal slumber under the mountain, only waking right before spring to shed bountiful tears and recall her love, the summer-born boy. This half-faded figure was a woman with icy blue hair delicately painted like lace. A teardrop was on the tip of her nose, and she was surrounded by snowdrops.

"Frostine," I whispered, my fingers reaching out to touch her.

A throat cleared, and I spun to find it. Standing at the threshold of the ancient chapel and refusing to budge an inch, stood Rontu, prince of Sunfalls. He was holding a

steaming mug of something delicious smelling. His large smile and offered mug was the only thing that kept me ordering him out. I needed to be gracious. I needed to be the queen. I needed to not get caught up on myths.

In the relative warmth of the bowels of the castle, I could finally see his face, and he appeared as young as his voice sounded. Perhaps a year over twenty at most, and quite adventurous and rugged looking. As the second son of the king of Sunfalls, it seemed he didn't stay in his castle learning statecraft all day.

"I took your advice and you were right," he said. "The kitchens truly are a haven of warmth. I believe I can feel the tip of my nose again. It shall survive, for which I'm eternally grateful."

"I don't think I've ever felt the tip of my nose before," I said.

"You wouldn't, unless you're really scared to lose it," Rontu replied, a twinkle in his eye. He handed me a warm mug of the deliciously fragrant drink. Maybe citrus? I wasn't sure, since it wasn't common here. A trader once brought little yellow and orange orbs of fruit to my parents' bakeshop years ago, though, and it smelled like this.

"What is it?" I asked, accepting the mug.

"Lemon balm tea with dried orange rind. I gave a few additional items to the chef as compliments of Sunfalls," Rontu said, trying—and failing—to look modest. "Some dried leaves from our most fragrant trees, some sprigs of sun-dried herbs."

"That was very kind of you," I said diplomatically, trying not to swoon at the fresh taste exploding in my mouth. What I wouldn't give for lemon balm tea to wake me up every morning! Not that I could say that out loud. Saying that might as well be a marriage proposal in Rontu's eyes.

He finally stopped staring at me so intensely and looked around. “Whoa. Where are we?”

I turned, throwing my arms out. “An abandoned chapel. We think it depicts how Frostvale used to be.”

“Green?” he said, a hint of doubt in his voice.

“Yes, hard to believe. My sister Mika has started reading the legends surrounding our kingdom, and she found old tomes in the library that referred to Frostvale as Rosevale. It’s hard to imagine water flowing where we walk and woods so full of green as to be thorny,” I said, my voice wistful. “She thinks it also refers to the rulers here. My ancestors and their prickly personalities—a beautiful rose defending itself with thorny resolve.”

“You fell quite far from the thorn bush, then, your majesty. You are sweeter than any rose,” Rontu said with a courtly flourish that made me a little uncomfortable. I was not used to the flirtatious style of courts, and I hid my discomfort behind the curls of steam that wafted from the warm mug and by taking a large sip that went straight down my throat, making me cough.

I could feel Eska begin to stir in response. As powerful as she was, she was still a kit, and her natural, playful curiosity won out more times than not. Quickly, I rubbed her with my chin to help settle her.

Luckily, Prince Rontu didn’t need much encouragement to continue a conversation. “I heard your surrounding villages hold daily frost fairs on the frozen rivers. I had in mind to wander one, but it would be an infinitely better experience if your majesty could join me.”

“Oh,” I said in surprise. “I’m not sure I have the time today?—”

He got down on his knees and even without his thick coat, it took a few moments to get in position before holding out his hands to me in exaggerated supplication. “Your majesty, please indulge me. I promise not to take up too much of your time, but I’ll admit the stories of your land make for frightening bedtime stories where I’m from.”

“Frightening bedtime stories?” I asked in confusion. “Such as?”

Rontu attempted to get back to his feet, and I had to help steady him for a second. His face was inches from mine and his eyes, golden like his grain, were full of mirth. I realized he might be fun to have around. He was young and rambunctious, yes, but maybe that was what Frostvale needed. We were so stuck on survival. Perhaps less worry about starvation would allow Frostvalens to lighten their mental load and enjoy life. Rontu clearly knew how to enjoy everything life had to offer on instinct, a privilege of the well-fed.

Frostvalens could be well-fed with Sunfalls supplying our endless grain. We could have time again for things like art and beauty.

“Stories mothers told children about shipping them off to Frostvale if they didn’t listen. Is it true you have supplicants to Gelid, god of snow, who sit outside in the elements for days on end to gain his favor?”

“Not that I know of,” I said a bit stiffly. Although it was true that when the magic first disappeared and our kingdom froze over, people did all sorts of things to appease the winter gods, that was a century ago. It didn’t surprise me that the rest of the Ilex Isles still saw Frostvale that way. Backward and brutal.

“Forgive me, Queen Bessa. I can see I have scythed the wheat with no time to shock it.”

I stared at him blankly.

Rontu laughed. “It’s a Sunfalls saying. I have offended you. Trust me, it is of my own ignorance with no malice intended.”

I relaxed. I knew Frostvale’s world image, and I couldn’t take offense, not if I wanted a good marriage with a potential suitor. “I should make time to check on some shops in town, so why don’t I do that now? We can perhaps stop on the way to visit some stalls. Are you prepared to go outside?”

Rontu whistled and two manservants hustled down the corridor, loaded with more coats. They arranged them over Rontu’s doublet and tucked them into his boots. Rontu held his arms out and smiled. “Ready, your majesty.”

As we walked the short distance down the mountain, Rontu asked a million questions about Frostvale’s history and people. The village I was raised in, Honeywood Haven, sat at the bottom of the valley, the closest village to the castle, which was quite convenient for me. I could still visit my parents and the bakeshop whenever I wanted, although it was less and less lately. I could never seem to find the time.

“Rosevale is a name befitting a beautiful queen. I would be happy to bring it back.” Rontu said, then suddenly added, “I wish I could take you to Sunfalls.” If the first part of his sentiment was merely courtly graces, the wistful invitation felt genuine, making his courtship suddenly feel real.

“I would love to see it, sun-soaked as you are, although I fear I may go blind if I couldn’t wear my hood.”

Rontu nodded eagerly. “Yes, we have so much sunshine. Even our cold months only get wetter, and we never freeze.”

“It would be difficult for you to leave your home permanently,” I said gently.

Rontu stumbled on a patch of ice and windmilled his arms to keep his balance. “Oh that’s not what I meant, your majesty.”

I stopped his ramblings with a smile. “Take your time deciding what you want, Prince Rontu. It is your life, after all, and such a decision isn’t for fathers to make for their sons alone, even if one’s father is a king. Look at my father and his decisions. If he’d had it his way, I would have been left in the frozen woods at birth, exposed to the elements. Luckily for me, a unicorn scooped me up and brought me to the man and wife who raised me.”

Rontu looked every bit his age at this advice. “Thank you, Queen Bessa. I will think about what you said, and I want you to know that I have started to fall in love with Frostvale. It is so much more nuanced than those bedtime stories ever told.”

I took his thanks in stride, stopping at the first leather and fur covered stall. It was the ice fisherman, selling pike and handfuls of mussels in frozen blocks. Rontu gave him a groat and ordered his manservant to lift the heavy block of iced-fish over his shoulder. “For dinner tonight!” he said, giving me a gallant smile. Then nodded at the ice fisherman. “This damned cold doesn’t claim me!”

“The cold does not claim us,” the fisherman corrected, and I had to stifle a smile at his annoyed expression. Rontu and his retinue must have seemed completely over the top.

Rontu clapped him on the back. “Exactly, my friend. Exactly.” He seemed genuinely eager to get to know my subjects, even if he was like an excited puppy without any Frostvalen decorum.

I tilted my head, watching Rontu interact with the people of Honeywood Haven. Could he be one of them? Could he be happy in a frozen world? It was definitely a plus that he didn’t take offense easily.

He stopped at Lorcan's fur-filled tent to trade gossip next. Lorcan was busy talking about seedlings with Duskborne. They were both more animated than I'd ever seen them, outside of their weekly arguments about whose stall should go where, of course. In fact, they were being... friendly?

Rontu lit up, striding right up to the two men. "You've found green seedlings? In Frostvale?"

"Aye, seedlings."

"Could you show me?" Rontu asked eagerly. "Where?"

"I would, but they're gone. Like a dream." Lorcan's eyes crossed over Rontu's head as he stared in the distance, as if caught in a dream himself. Then he shook himself, his eyes refocusing. "I didn't see them myself, but I heard they were near the candle shop, then poof, gone."

At the mention of the candle shop, my stomach felt as if I'd taken a large gulp of hot soup and the heat extended down to my toes, my nerves tingling all through my body. My mind conjured Ambrose's steady hands delicately dipping candles and pouring others into molds.

"Like magic," Rontu said and put a finger to his nose, winking, setting me squarely back in the frost fair.

Lorcan pointed at him, his mouth cracking into a wide smile. "Aye, I see what you did there."

Suddenly, I felt a lurching beneath my feet. The ice... it was melting! Eska and I were melting it.

“Oh no,” I whispered, the tip of my boot gouging a huge hole in the surface. I couldn’t let Eska off my shoulders to suddenly come alive and streak like a falling star come to earth. That wouldn’t just be a rumor of magic. That would be proof, and I had no idea what sort of man Rontu was. He might try to propose on the spot! And be drowned in the melting icy river for his efforts.

Everyone might drown!

I began to panic, at a loss for what to do next. What I needed was magic. Besides Eska, only that damned chandler had ever shown signs of magic and I needed all the help I could get.

The mere thought of that man made my temperature rise higher, and I cursed myself for such a silly mistake as the pool of water around me started to grow. A few seconds more, and we’d all be in mortal danger. I needed to master my emotions.

A white blur shot out from the woods. Where I’d walked, something with four paws zoomed by, reforming the ice into solid blue plates of river water. It had only been a blip out of the corner of my eye. A white streak of lightning, a trail of glittering snow drifting in the breeze, unlike anything I’d ever seen. If it wasn’t for Eska’s sudden jolt on my shoulders, her whiskers twitching back and forth, faster than a scurrying mouse, I would have missed it. Or, at least, I would not have comprehended it. After all, I was not magic. I was merely a conduit.

“Snow fox,” I breathed.

“What?” Rontu shouted through cupped hands, then pinwheeled them, flailing around as he nearly lost his balance for the thousandth time. Through it all, he retained a giddy smile. Was he pompous? Yes, of course. He was a prince. But was he odious? Not by a long shot. And being young, perhaps I could guide him in ways that older kings, such as Culm of Skyfold Pass or Zacan of Coalcrest, would resist.

Of course, I would still delay as long as possible, but he wasn't a bad option if my councilors began to force the issue with any real teeth behind their threats. Rune in particular hadn't stopped pressing me for information.

"Snow flocks," I said, stuttering only a little. "We get lots of flocks of snow birds in Frostvale. I thought I saw one. They're rare and always a welcome sight for our hunters. But I guess not." And truly, I couldn't be sure.

"Shall I escort you back to the castle?" Rontu asked.

"Actually, I need to attend to a few things in the village."

"Of course. Will I see you at dinner? The pike, remember?"

"Absolutely. Thank you for an invigorating afternoon, Prince Rontu," I said kindly, but my mind was already thousands of miles away. Or, more precisely, my mind was exactly one mile away, to a certain candle shop.

While I wasn't quite sure about a magical ice creature, I could have sworn I'd seen the candle maker, watching us. I reached around and petted Eska, my eyebrow furrowed. "Let's go ask him, girl." I said.

But when I reached his candle shop, it was dark and cold. No one was there. And all the seedlings had already withered away, leaving only indents in the snow where they might have grown.

AMbrOSE

Ambrose unconsciously rubbed the ring around his thumb, turning it over and over. He wasn't one for castles or queens, but if he was to stay in Frostvale, he needed to know what sort of castle and what sort of queen he served. Mainly, after her little display on the ice, he needed to know if she had managed to light the candle.

He felt zero guilt for giving the queen a candle that would only light if her intentions were pure. All of his candles were crafted with that caveat. Of course, he felt a little guilty that he had neglected to mention that particular caveat, but only a little. She had nearly defrosted the entire frost fair with her fire fox, just by walking around. Either, she had no idea how to control it, or she was trying to get caught with magic? Was that her grand plan?

She hadn't come stalking down to his shop with the full force of her Frostguard demanding to know why his candle wouldn't light, but she also hadn't arrived full of glee with nothing but the burnt remains of a wick to throw in his face. Had she even lit it yet? Had she failed and was too embarrassed to admit it? He rubbed a hand over his stubbly chin. What had happened with that damnable candle?

"You there. Stop." A wispy tuft of an old man stood, his white beard and hair belying the vigor in his voice. "In the name of Gelid, from where do you hail? Servants of the suitors aren't given free reign. It may not look like much, but this is the castle of a queen after all."

Suitors? The queen already had suitors? Something cold and hard twisted in Ambrose's gut. She certainly hadn't wasted any time looking for her perfect king-in-shining-armor. It felt out of sync with what he knew of her. Although his knowledge of the queen was, admittedly, little. Mainly, he knew that she didn't need to rely on any man to help her win a throne or to harass small shopkeepers for their (secret) magical wares. Furthermore, it had felt as if she not only didn't need a king, but didn't especially want one.

"Greetings. I am Ambrose, your lordship." He inclined his head. "I am not a suitor, nor a servant, but a simple chandler. I've come to check on the queen's supply of ceremonial candles to be used in her coronation," he continued, thinking quickly, trying to peer around the small but ferocious man. From the sounds of the town gossip at the Dancing Snowflake, the queen had made the castle into a welcome place for all citizens, but he wasn't feeling that open spirit right this second.

"Pah. Candles do nothing for Frostvale but waste precious resources. We have coal fires to heat our hearths and whatever light they provide is enough. No one should be working past twilight as it stands. The dark is for sleep."

Hmm. He seemed charming. "Shall I make a meeting with the seneschal and be on my way?" He began to inch backward, wondering if there were other, not so obvious, entrances he could safely approach.

The man crinkled his eyes at Ambrose, apparently realizing that if he was not familiar and not a suitor, then he was a mystery and nothing good came from mysteries. "Who did you say you were? Ambrose the chandler? I don't know that name, and I don't know that face. Why are you in Frostvale?" he barked. "Better a frozen truth than a warm lie, son."

"I bought the candle shop in Honeywood Haven," Ambrose said patiently.

“Why!” The question was so forceful it was more of a barked comment than a true inquiry.

“For gainful employment,” Ambrose replied. “Not everyone shares your view of the dark. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll find the seneschal and be on my way. With the arrival of these suitors, I assume I will be quite busy preparing enough candles to impress her majesty. She, and Frostvale, will want to put her best foot forward, aye?”

The man eyed him suspiciously. “Aye,” he agreed. “Help enters at the back.”

“Help to the back?” Ambrose couldn’t stop himself from asking.

“That’s where help belongs, and all this faffle about equality is quite rich coming from—ah, just go around back, Chandler. Although I warn you that any expenses to be paid for the coronation will have to go through the council first, and we’re unlikely to be frivolous. Do not expect a large order. Feed the ice your pride, we don’t have time for it here in Frostvale.”

“Absolutely no frivolity. I understand, minister,” Ambrose said, dipping his head. Not a lordship, then, but a minister on her Glacial Council. It was his poor luck to bump into a horribly grumpy minister right at the castle entrance.

He made his way to the back where a grove of trees sat dormant under a thick layer of ice. Judging by the half-fallen walls, naked nymph statues, and labyrinth layout, this used to be the royal pleasure gardens.

He examined the crumbled plaster of the low garden walls, bending closer to touch the withered ivy encased in ice. He could still make out individual root hairs clinging to the mortar as if merely in hibernation and waiting patiently for spring to unlock them.

“Why, if it isn’t the magically grumpy chandler!”

Ambrose shot up, locking eyes with a woman completely covered in furs from head to toe, standing at the back portal.

The woman's eyes danced with mirth. “How goes the candle business these days?”

A lump of annoyance flitted in Ambrose’s breast. Had the queen told the whole castle about her ‘magic’ candle? To what end? Perhaps she thought it would reinforce her fragile legitimacy to the throne by acting as if she possessed magical objects. Ambrose was suddenly desperate to find her and the candle.

“How did you know who I was?” he asked.

“My, she spoke the truth. You are quite the grump.” The woman wore nicer clothing than a scullery maid, but didn’t seem old enough to be on the Glacial Council. “She didn’t say you were handsome.”

Ambrose kept his face frozen in neutrality. “I believe she wouldn’t want to lie.”

“It would be no lie!” the woman grinned. She stuck out her gloved hand. “I’m Mika, sister to the queen and sometimes royal advisor. I know everyone in the nearest village, but I don’t know you. And since you don’t have an entourage, you’re not a suitor. Cecil recently restricted their movements as is, although he really can’t enforce it. Thus, you must be the chandler.”

Ambrose kept his face neutral, he hoped, but that certainly explained a few things. He shook her hand, although his fingers were bare. “I was considering talking to your seneschal about candles for the coronation.”

Mika raised an eyebrow. “Is that why you’re here?”

“Why else?”

“You want to know if she lit the candle of courage. Don’t you? I told her she didn’t need it, but she seemed determined.”

“I need to see the seneschal,” Ambrose tried again, pretending not to be desperate to know this very thing. “I thought this was a castle for all, so if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be on my way.”

“Oh, it is. All Frostvalens, that is. Which, I don’t believe you technically are.” She gave him a piercing look, and for a moment, Ambrose felt as if he were on trial. “On second thought, perhaps I was a bit too hasty. Bessa does, after all, want this castle to be a positive thing. And not even ambivalent, like I suggested she shoot for.”

Ambrose blinked. That sounded like a longstanding argument, but Mika was still talking.

“I’m sure there’s someone around here that might answer to the name seneschal, although official jobs aren’t exactly sorted yet.”

She spun and swept back into the castle, which turned out to be the entrance to the royal kitchens. When the gardens were bursting with fragrant flowers and birdsong, this was probably the very best place in the whole land. She glanced over her shoulder once as she walked. “I was on my way to the library. It survived everything you know. I mean, sort of. Most of the books were burned long ago for fuel, but a few were kept under lock and key and managed to escape the conflagration. I’ve been pouring over them.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Ambrose asked. Despite there not being any ‘official’ roles yet, he saw plenty of activity. In fact, it almost felt like one of his beehives. For a second, he even thought he saw Duskborne helping sand down a table and Lorcan

heaving an armful of tawny furs over a chair. Was the whole village chipping in to help?

“I’m making conversation,” she replied airily. “There is a whole book of old prophecies they kept hidden. Did you know that? It’s quite remarkable. From the looks of it, unicorns and giants and pixies and the like used to be everywhere when Frostvale was named Rosevale. Can you imagine? This supposed prophecy that her twin brother from birth?—”

“Philip. The one who disappeared before the battle,” Ambrose said.

Mika scowled, actually stopping in the middle of the corridor with her hands on her hips. “We don’t like to speak his name around here.” She paused. “Well, I don’t. Anyway, yes, that one. Philip isn’t mentioned by name. Who’s to know what that prophecy-spouting unicorn was trying to say?” She shrugged her shoulders in indifference, dismissing the whole affair, and continued her walk.

“I know what you’re doing,” Ambrose called.

Mika didn’t slow down. “Am I doing something?”

“You really love her, don’t you?” Ambrose said louder, since the woman was still moving fast. “But can I recommend something?”

That got her to pause. “Go on.”

“I’m not one to disseminate gossip. You’re better off telling someone else about the prophecy. Or lack thereof.”

Mika broke into a real smile. “Thanks for letting me know, Chandler. Have fun on your tour of the castle. If you want to see what remains of the candle, the council

chambers are in the east wing. If you want to see what remains of any resistance to my sister's rule, the coronation is in two weeks."

Ambrose stared, mouth slightly agape, as the unofficial royal advisor flounced back down the corridor, her job complete. Was it true? Had Bessa lit the candle of courage and stood up to her advisors? What, exactly, was she standing against? She'd won the war!

Ambrose skulked like a dark mage's minion in the shadows, berating himself for needing to know so badly. It shouldn't matter to him. The queen had left him alone after getting what she wanted. If it worked, if it didn't work—it didn't matter to him. It shouldn't matter. His job was done.

But it did. He couldn't help it; he wanted to know if her intentions were pure.

Blindly, he wandered, one half finished room looking like the next. At this rate, he was never going to find it, and he was going to get kicked out of the castle. Eventually, he closed his eyes and let his senses guide him. When he stopped, he stood in front of a large room with cold braziers hanging from the ceiling by metal chains. A man-sized hearth stood at the back of the room, and Ambrose could still feel some ambient heat radiating from the stone.

But the thing that produced the most heat?

The candle of courage, burned to the wick. A thin wisp of smoke still spiraled up to the ceiling from the remains, even though the wax had melted and was completely... gone.

BESSA

I watched the chandler as the chandler watched my candle. He seemed perplexed. Eska had gone wild, nipping and yipping, jumping all over my shoulders and down my dress until I followed her away from the candle shop and back to the castle. Even if she couldn't speak, she still got her way, the feisty, little thing.

Somehow, she must have sensed the chandler lurking, because there he was. Lurking.

Well. Two could play that game. Quietly, we watched as he examined the remains of my candle of courage, running his finger through a drop of spilled wax, hardened on the scarred, wooden table. He brought it to his nose, and I saw one of his eyebrows quirk up. Then he turned on his heel and quickly left the council chamber, barely giving me enough time to hide in the shadows.

"What do you think?" I whispered to the fire fox. She lifted her nose to my face and licked my chin. "Just what I was thinking, too. Let's go."

We tiptoed after him, through the castle, out of the kitchen, and into the garden. Instead of turning toward the frozen river market and his candle shop, he headed for the woods. Throwing my hood over flaming red hair, I followed, Eska wrapped comfortingly around my shoulders. My mind whirled with questions.

The chandler plunged through the snow, seemingly unaffected by the rising wind and flurries that began to fall faster, until he disappeared through a particularly dense

copse of trees. I froze in my tracks, Eska's tail twitching manically around my neck.

"Stop tickling me," I hissed. "We're supposed to be spying. Where did he go, girl?" She yipped and vaulted off my shoulder, almost getting completely buried in the snow drifts as she hit the ground running. If it wasn't for the black point on her tail, I couldn't be sure where she was, although within seconds, every speck of snow around her fiery body melted.

She zoomed through the snow, leaving a wet mess as she went. For at least another half a mile, we searched to no avail.

"Come on," I scolded. "We've lost him somehow, and I've got a ton to do back at the castle."

But Eska wasn't ready. Only out in the woods could she be free. I knew the feeling. I think it was one of the reasons we'd bonded so quickly. We both loved the intoxicating feeling of being free. No one judged the trees, nor the wind. No one whispered about prophecies or birth parents or twin brothers who'd imprisoned you. No one cared at all. That was true freedom.

I threw out my arms, reveling in the ability to shed my cloak and use the magic of my fire fox to keep me warm, twirling in one dizzying circle after another. Eska leapt up and down, following my loop with her own happy leaps. The snow melted, revealing a thick sublayer of ice. Beneath its glassy clearness, I could see the forest floor, twigs and mushrooms, frozen in time and place. On a whim, I placed the palm of my hand against the ice where a colony of red and white dotted toadstools were clustered. Slowly, then quicker, the ice melted around my hand, leaving soft indents of my fingers. My fingertip brushed the top of a toadstool, spongy and real. "Eska, what if I could do this everywhere?" I asked in awe, plucking the toadstool from the ground. "What if..."

“What if what?” said a voice.

I leapt to my feet, spinning around with the toadstool hidden behind my back and the guilt written all over my face. It was the Chandler. “I thought you were gone,” I accused. He was standing right there, so large and so very male, out here alone in the woods.

He raised an eyebrow. “No, not gone. Simply slipping my pursuer.”

“I thought you hadn’t noticed,” I protested. “You didn’t act as if you were being followed.”

“Was I supposed to?” he asked.

“Oh you are so?—”

“Innocent of all charges?”

“Infuriating,” I finished.

Ambrose crouched down, his jacket dusting the snow as he sat on his heels and held out a fist. Eska, nose and whiskers twitching, put one paw toward him and then another. When she’d gotten within a few feet, he turned his fist over and opened it, revealing a piece of dried trout. In a snap quicker than human eyes could follow, she’d snatched it from his hand, swallowed it down, and jumped up to lick his face.

Ambrose fell backward in surprise, landing in a snow heap.

“Traitor,” I whispered to her, but she merely sat on a dead tree stump and began licking her paws.

“I think she likes me,” he said, a hint of mirth in his eyes. I wondered for a wild second what he looked like when he smiled, really truly smiled. And what it would feel like if I made that smile happen. Probably like winning a war.

I stood with my arms crossed tightly over my chest, however. “So? Are you going to tell everyone?”

Ambrose stood up, dusting the snow off his pants with bare hands. “I ran into your sister Mika. I’ll tell you exactly what I told her. I don’t gossip.”

“Is that a no? Because I think I could come up with some pretty interesting gossip myself to disseminate,” I said, staring pointedly at his bare hands, which didn’t seem the least bit frostbitten. They were large enough to wring a horse’s neck, if he wanted to, and calloused from years of physical labor. What kind, however, was harder to decipher, and it made me wonder about his history.

Ambrose tilted his head as if considering me, or perhaps he was revisiting his decision to stay in a kingdom ruled by a woman who clearly annoyed him. But all he said was, “Follow me.”

I cast a skeptical look at Eska, but the little red fire fox was already prancing behind Ambrose. After only one piece of lousy fish. He’d given me a whole magical candle, and I still didn’t trust him!

“Eska,” I hissed, trying to call her back, but she flipped her tail left and right, stoutly refusing to listen. “I’m going to make a real fur scarf out of you,” I threatened half-heartedly and then, sighing, grabbed my cloak and began to follow, too.

Ambrose left large footprints in the snow, and I had to hop to land in each one. His stride was as long as Noll the tavern keeper’s, and everyone knew Noll had ancient giant blood in him.

“Can you slow down?” I called, causing Ambrose to turn around and watch in some obvious amusement as I struggled.

“Why don’t you just melt the snow?” he asked.

I bit my lip. “So you did see that.”

He nodded. “Aye. I did. And I saw you melting the ice under the frost fair tents. It’s rather lucky Frostvale is so damnably cold that it refroze as soon as you stepped away. Isn’t it?”

I dropped the pretense. “Fine. Why don’t you tell me how you came to have a magical candle?”

“Who says it was magical? Courage is pretty subjective, don’t you think?”

“Are you telling me you gave me a placebo candle?” I demanded, but Ambrose put a finger to his mouth.

“Shh, we’re here. I don’t want you to accidentally scare them.”

“Them?” I whispered, my voice lowering to match his, although my heart had begun to race.

Ambrose reached out for my hand, his deep brown eyes, as nuanced as fertile soil, never left mine. I took it, and Ambrose pulled me behind him, guiding me toward a circle of trees. The ever-thickening pines suddenly thinned, as if by magic.

Even from a distance, I could feel the thermal vent’s warm embrace, the air full of life-giving heat. Somehow, he’d found another one in the woods. Everything in me strained to race to it, see what was hidden and try to understand. There was no dug-

out tunnel to the warm vents for deep-earth farming. There was something blurry around it. Something my eyes couldn't quite focus on. In fact, if Ambrose hadn't pointed it out, my gaze would have slipped right over it to the next copse of trees and the next.

"Do you want to see my secret?" he asked.

"Why would you share your secret with me? I thought you didn't trust me."

"It would be better to have the trust of the queen than not."

"I guess," I said, still trying to get used to the fact that, when someone said 'the queen', they were talking about me.

"And to gain trust, one must offer it first," Ambrose continued, as if trust were that simple. "And to be honest, I'll simply pack up and leave if things go south."

"That's quite the attitude."

He watched me closely, and I could feel my soul being flayed open and scoured clean like the sky after a blizzard. When his voice dropped, I leaned closer to catch his words. "Who says I don't trust you?"

"You did," I whispered back.

"Your majesty has lit the possibly-magic candle. I think you've earned a little bit of trust."

I couldn't tear my eyes from him. "What does that mean?" My words caught in my throat.

“Only those with pure intentions can light a candle of mine,” Ambrose said, drawing me deeper into the grove. “You must have passed.”

I was mesmerized by his voice. He must be one of the ancient blood, truly mesmerizing me under some spell. Frostine be praised, he was tall, his beard neatly cropped. Most men in our frozen tundra kept theirs long out of sheer necessity as an added layer of protection against our endless winter.

“I knew it was a trick.”

“I’d call it a test.”

“As the queen, I should be angry about that.” And yet, I wasn’t. Not much. He hadn’t been bound by any laws to tell me, and if true, it meant his morals were worth more than his life. That was most rare.

“You could be angry about that,” he gently corrected, his eyes piercing a veil within me. “You could also be angry that I found a thermal vent and didn’t immediately tell the Glacial Council so they could tap into it for deep earth farming or whatever else they deemed necessary. Instead, I used it for my own purposes.”

“Which are what, Chandler?” I asked, making my voice severe, although it was much more difficult to do when my body churned at his voice and the cheeky grin he gave me to counter my scowl.

“Flowers, of course,” he said, muttering the words I’d never heard of before in a language I didn’t understand but sounded intoxicating and ancient.

Primus. Secundus. Tertius. Quartus. Nox.

12

AMbrOSE

Ambrose threw a bit of caution to the winter winds, allowing himself a smile to counter her scowl, which only deepened at his impudence. She still smelled impossible—of moss and humid summer days, of sage and bee balm, of tall oaks and fresh spring water.

She scowled, that is, until she saw.

Her hand went to her mouth, and her gasp held some sort of magic of its own the way it made his chest expand and his mouth go dry and his heart grow two sizes too big. Of course, it wasn't only his heart growing too big, and how inconvenient it was for her to be so beautiful. How utterly annoying that she was turning out to be inescapably interesting. An accidental queen who rode in on a mythical unicorn and wept at the sight of a flower. Absolutely irritating.

There were still tears in her eyes when she finally tore them away from the garden long enough to look at him. They made her blue eyes bigger, more vulnerable, and Ambrose knew right there in that grove that he was the one lost in the woods. When she looked at him, he felt winded as if he'd been punched and he knew for the first time that he was truly seeing her and that it was only because she was allowing him to see her. She was allowing him to see that she felt vulnerable and grateful. It was a gift to watch her. When she spoke, her voice sounded gravelly, as if unused. "I've never seen a flower in real life."

For a second, he thought he might explode, because this wasn't his secret. This was only a taste. But this was what he knew he could safely show her without fear.

She looked frightened, and it was clear she was afraid to move, as if it might disturb the magic and turn everything back into frozen tundra.

"May I?" he asked, reaching for her hand.

She nodded and let her gloved hand slide into his own so he could lead her closer. "I have so many questions I can't even pick one," she said. "It feels different in here. Like... the air is thicker somehow."

"Thermal vents heating a small space."

"And the flowers?"

"My candles are magic, as you pointed out. Whether it is real magic or not is up to the discretion of the one who lights the candle, but I believe, much like many doctors and apothecaries believe, that flowers possess magic. Lavender to help relax," he said, bending down to pluck a stem bursting with velvety purple buds. "Their healing properties are known throughout the seven kingdoms. Red-veined sorrel for digestion," he said, plucking a green leaf with ruby-red lines running through it. "Peonies and chamomile for the head. Borage for coughs, violet for liver problems, and hyssop for healthy lungs. All of these herbal remedies also have the benefit of being beautiful flowers, perfect for distilling into tinctures, oils, and pressing dried into candles, which may or may not be magical." He said this last bit lightly as if teasing. Teasing a queen no less!

Ambrose watched the queen take it in, wondering if she too was more than a beautiful flower, but a queen that could change the fortunes of Frostvale for the better. He traveled all this way to find out.

Bessa had been holding the stem of the plucked lavender to her nose, watching him point out each plant as she considered him and his illegal flowers. “Your magic is nothing more than herbal remedies?” she asked, directly calling for him to confirm, something he knew he should not do. Could not do.

“Magic is in the eye of the beholder, your majesty,” he said, offering her the bud of a damask rose, still tightly closed but with its brilliant pink petals ready to burst open.

“You grow flowers,” she said, shaking her head in wonder. “Real flowers.”

“Aye.”

“Is this real life or a dream?”

“It’s real.”

“And this?” she asked, taking the bud. “What are its properties?”

“Damask rose,” Ambrose answered automatically, almost needed to squeeze his eyes shut at the sudden, unbidden image of the queen’s own rosy nipple buds and what they would look like bare before him, and what they would taste like, and how she would sound when he put his mouth over them. His voice came out only a little halting and rough as he thought about the cold, the river, the sky, iron chains, necks in nooses, anything to stop thinking about her rosy nipples. “Fragrance and beauty, your majesty. I admit, I took a few cuttings on my travels abroad and vowed I would have beauty for beauty’s sake once I found my home. When I discovered this thermal vent, the rose cutting was the first thing I staked in the thawed ground.”

“Your home?” she said in some surprise.

“There’s much to admire about Frostvale.”

“You must not feel the cold as bitterly as we do,” she quipped, and he was thankful for the distraction, even if her quick tongue made his pants stretch even tighter. He was starting to enjoy the tongue lashings.

“I feel the cold, but I have also felt heat, and I can appreciate what the grip of an endless winter can do to a strong people. Ice is thought to be inflexible, but we know differently. Ice can be many things, an insulator for our homes, carved into something beautiful, melted to make water. Art, warmth, life—ice is so much more than people realize.”

Bessa stared at him. He watched her swallow and turn away, and he wished he was a prince, a suitor to be so bold as to put his thumb on her chin and turn her back—to beg her to stare into his eyes a little while longer and give him truth.

“What’s keeping this barrier and this heat?” she asked suddenly. “I couldn’t see it at first. Your haven is perfectly hidden. Is it this yellow flower all around the edges?”

“That is tansy, and it’s known to repel pests, so it plays its part in protection. It’s also a nice bitter herb in a spring omelette after long winters of dried peas and salted fish.”

“The clusters of flowers look like buttons. How mesmerizing,” she said, her hand drifting toward a bundle of them.

“I wouldn’t touch them. They can provoke a severe allergic reaction in some people, and it’s said the old gods used them to make an elixir that turned their mortal favorites into immortal favorites.”

She gave a wry smile that made his body tense with pleasure. “Immortality is not a thing I’ve ever wished upon. But there must be something else to keep this so well hidden. Not that many come hiking this way.”

Ambrose nodded at a ring of candles along the outer edges of the grove. She walked closer, twigs getting caught in her long train, the only part of the forest floor visible in a hundred miles, except for where she had melted it on her way here. She knelt to run her hand over the tiny flame of the candle closest to her. He wasn't sure if she could see the light gold links flowing from candle to candle, but he guessed that she could not by the way she didn't trace their paths to the larger apiary he still kept hidden.

"So, you are magic," she said, turning to squint up at him. She wouldn't let it go. Couldn't.

"You are magic," he reminded her. "I am merely a warden of this place."

She shook her head dismissively. "I can't control it and it's not mine. Fire is so unpredictable. One stray spark can cause a catastrophe. It is warmth, it is life, but it is not living. This, flowers and herbs and even a bee, this is living. Where is that bee going? Where did it come from? How can it... be?" She reddened, laughing a little to herself as if embarrassed. A queen. Reddening in embarrassment. It made a surge of protectiveness spike through Ambrose's veins.

They both watched it flit from flower to flower. It ambled over to investigate her, no doubt smelling that ancient magic on her skin that so intoxicated Ambrose as well. More followed, curious enough to land on her for a second before searching for juicier petals. The bees had taken to her, clearly her ancient magic.

"At the risk of my tongue, on the contrary, my queen. Fire is extremely predictable. It's humans who aren't, and since you're in charge of your magic, you have to be the steadying force who wields it."

"Eska and I could accidentally set this entire grove on fire. Your flowers, your life's work would all be gone in an instant. Even just thinking that—" Her shoulders suddenly shivered violently as if an involuntary shudder ran through her. She made a

move as if to flee, just in case, and his heart cracked a little more. She would give up the good things to keep others safe. He was nearly certain of it now.

Ambrose held out his hands. She gazed up at him, not taking them yet, but holding still. As skittish as a forest animal. He moved them again, more insistent.

Sighing and letting the lavender drop from her nose, she leveled a look of mild annoyance at him that made his heart stir even more. He liked how her fiery exterior matched her fiery interior. Whether she grew up knowing it or not, she was made to be queen. Finally, she pursed her lips and took his hands, letting him help her to her feet.

“I guess if I trust you in here, that doesn’t mean much to you?” he asked.

“That’s not what I’m saying,” she began, angling herself away. When she moved, he could smell her smokiness, her womanliness, her intoxicating scent. He wanted to breathe her in deeper, but he couldn’t risk spooking her.

“Then what are you saying, your majesty?”

She opened and closed her mouth, her brow furrowing.

Although cautious, he wasn’t afraid to prod her. She was certainly strong enough to stand straight without bending or breaking. “You’re scared of your own magic.”

“Of course I am! It shouldn’t exist! I shouldn’t exist. Philip was the one—he should be here, helping his people.”

“From what I’ve seen, Frostvale is better off without him.” Ambrose wasn’t sure what he was trying to do. Goad a fire-possessed woman into anger in his sacred grove?

But instead of anger and flames, she shut down. Whistling between her thumb and index finger, she called her fire fox to her side. Eska jumped gracefully into the crook of her neck, curling her tail around her body to blend in perfectly as a stole.

Despite her sudden indifference, Ambrose noticed she did not give back the flowers, tucking them into a deep pocket of her gown. “I will keep your secret as long as it is in the best interest of Frostvale. But make no mistake, Chandler. If my people have need, I will take.”

Ambrose knew she was as good as her word; the candle of courage would not have lit otherwise. What he didn’t know? If that was a very good thing—or a very bad thing.

But if the queen only knew the truths hidden here, she would bring the might of her kingdom down on his head, and he would be forced to flee, again.

Fear crept up his fingers and settled in his chest, but when the queen turned to face him with shining eyes, her lashes a thick fringe against her cheek, her words and the soft curve of her lips against the letters of his name nearly undid him and everything he must keep secret.

“That was exactly what I needed most. Thank you, Ambrose.”

And he knew he’d given her false hope. He didn’t understand why that bothered him.

BESSA

When the first suitor, Prince Rontu, arrived a couple of weeks early, I thought nothing of it. He seemed as interested in snow games as love games, constantly trekking out each afternoon to play and explore, and staying up drinking ale all evening by the fire. When the next two suitors showed up one after another, all bearing gifts, I started to get suspicious.

Jarth de la Silverwood and Gillian of the Violent Tides arrived only a day apart in front of traveling retinues that put my entire castle staff to shame. I was starting to worry where to house everyone and wondered if Noll could be enticed to reopen long-closed rooms at the Dancing Snowflake. What would that cost the crown? I tried calculating it, but Jarth was approaching me rather than getting settled as Gillian opted to do first.

He bowed, presenting me with a beautiful wooden chest that smelled exquisite. “Silverwood is pleased to present to your majesty, Queen Bessa of Frostvale, a symbol of our support for your crown.”

As far as I could remember, Jarth was the nephew of the king of Silverwood and a small pawn on his uncle’s vast board of dominance. It behooved the king nothing to send his sister’s son. I couldn’t tell if Jarth was annoyed at his expendability or pleased to be useful.

He was pleasing enough with the customary silver hair and silver eyes of his

countrymen, although a little shocking at first. Only the royal family had both the true silver hair and silver eyes while everyone in his retinue possessed either one or the other.

Mika came forward to accept the chest and open it for me, revealing a velvet cushion and a lute. “If I may, your majesty?” Jarth asked, still in a low bow. He looked up from behind a shock of thick silver hair that hung across his forehead and even I could tell the effect was agreeable. I wished I could know how many women that worked on in Silverwood. I had a feeling his bed never wanted for warmth.

“Please,” I said, indicating the lute.

Jarth smiled, and began plucking the strings. A beautiful song burst from his lips about fair maidens and dancing dragons under the light of a milk moon.

We all clapped and it wasn’t just politeness. Mika was breathless. “That was beautiful, my lord,” she said and I nodded in agreement. But, you know, regally.

Jarth smiled and put the lute back. “I hope the lute will find a lovely home at your court,” he said, alluding to himself in that courtly way I’d come to expect from my suitors. “As you know, Silverwood is famous for its yew trees. Our current treaty focuses on longbow production, but I thought it might be more... timely... if I showed you what else yew is capable of,” Jarth explained, his words hiding layers of meaning.

“Extremely timely, as I have already won a war, my lord,” I reminded him. “So I am in need of other... capable things.” I hoped I was matching his seductive tone and not coming off as a great idiot.

“Indeed. Well fought, your majesty.” He looked around the shabby Great Hall and I tried not to wince. I had to own it. Frostvale was a tough country. We didn’t need

velvets and yew lutes to survive.

“Frostvale is much more beautiful than I had expected,” Jarth admitted, admiring the pine-covered mountain peaks as the last of his retinue was ushered in the great doors.

“What did you expect?” I asked curiously. What was the gossip about our kingdom in other lands? Sunfalls clearly used us as their monster myth, which was a little disheartening and a little invigorating. Let them all be scared!

“Oh, I didn't mean it like that,” he said, reddening. “Well, maybe I did. We all hear how cold and inhospitable it is and how the people are icy reflections of their land.”

“I see. And now?”

“Nothing of the sort!” he exclaimed. “My welcome couldn't have been warmer.”

“I'm glad to hear. Will you join us tonight for dinner?”

Jarth de la Silverwood nodded once, standing straight. “I am looking forward to it, your majesty.”

“The cold does not claim us.” I gave him a brief bow and took my leave, my mind already wandering. Ever since my visit to Ambrose's secret garden, it was hard to keep myself steady. When I wasn't pressing my gloves to my nose and inhaling the lingering scents of lavender—or imagining the bees trundling along the petals and flying heavily laden with pollen back to their hives—I was actively trying not to picture Ambrose.

He cropped up more and more in my imaginary garden wanderings, bent over his raised beds, pressing his fingers into the fertile soil, letting the bees land on his outstretched fingertips. It was infuriating. If the man truly wanted to help me, he'd

give me more magical candles without all the strings attached. He'd craft candles of real power, ones to bring my naysayers to their knees and ones to make all of these suitors go away. He might deny any involvement in magic, but I was no fool. I hadn't united an entire kingdom under my banner by playing the fool. There might have been a little bit of war weariness and a lot of bit of luck, however.

Filomena and Bram walked together, their heads bent in discussion, no doubt, about my suitor situation. Everyone would slowly but surely begin to show their hands regarding which suitor they preferred, and I would have to be careful not to offend any of my council with my choice. Choosing none of them didn't seem to be an option, but I would hold out as long as possible, playing one member off the other if I could. Such a tactic could buy months, maybe even years. The truth was, by choosing a suitor, I would alienate someone else. Many others, even. I might make the wrong alliance or miss a better one. By delaying and choosing no one, I would keep my autonomy. I would not die in childbirth and I would bow to no man. Frostvale's integrity would forever remain intact without foreign interference.

It was simple. I would have to continue sending out mixed messages. Would I? Or wouldn't I?

At the thought of all the political maneuvering, I suddenly felt weary. I could use some lemon balm tea and a comfortable chair. Tendrils of doubt crept in my mind as I watched the pair of councilors. Why did I ever think I could do this? Because a little fox came and sat on my lap while I was in a dungeon and made me feel warm? What a lark!

As if sensing my thoughts, or at least, my roiling emotions, Eska put her warm nose against the back of my neck where no one would notice, as if urging me to be on with it.

I called out greetings to them and gave my sister a look to send her on her way. She

raised an eyebrow but scattered. “Bram, you wanted to speak to me?” I asked pointedly. “I have time now.”

Bram had asked to do no such thing, but the mental seeds I had sown in the last council meeting had begun to sprout.

He quickly nodded. “Ah yes, of course. I would be honored for your time.”

We began a slow walk through the Great Hall amid chatter and merry work. Just the sense of things happening and people working around the clock managed to make the castle feel warmer, even if it was only mind games.

“The suitors and their retinues are making themselves at home,” I ventured.

“Yes, your majesty.”

“I’m glad of it,” I continued cautiously. “If I am to choose one soon, they will need to see what they are in for, living up here in the frozen mountains and valleys as we do.”

Bram nodded primly, his gloved hands clasped together as he walked. His small shoes clacked against the frozen stone, and his long robes made him look even smaller in stature. And he was quite petite, hovering around my height. “Quite a good practice, your majesty. They must know. Honesty is the best policy.”

I gave him a sidelong look, long enough for him to catch it. “And what else do you think, Councilor? Honestly?”

Bram’s cheeks reddened slightly as he realized I was seeking his advice and that was why I had pulled him aside in front of another councilor. To show everyone my respect for him.

“Honestly, your majesty? I would choose the suitor who has the most of what we have the least.”

I nodded as if considering his logic and made gentle noises of agreement. “Mmm, that makes sense, Councilor. Who comes to mind?”

“Sunfalls sent their suitor first, eager and agreeable no less, but to me, that makes it clear that their kingdom is desperate for some reason.”

I could barely hold in a laugh. Of course, they could think of no other reason why they might have put in their bid as early as possible. Well, it might be true. Sunfalls was a source of grain, and while we were never in a time of abundance, we weren’t starving. No more than any other kingdom in times of scarcity.

“So who?” I prodded him.

“The seas, your majesty. We must always have access to meat.”

I tried to pull the name of the prince of the seas from the recesses of my mind, which lately had been more preoccupied with wildflowers and candles than meat and coal. Probably not the best thing for a queen. I needed more focus in my life. Finally, I banished Ambrose from my mind and pulled up the name. “Gillian, prince of the Violent Tides. They worship the god of sea ice, though, which would be a bit of a stretch for our people.”

“Correct,” Bram nodded. “The worship of Nilas would be something to consider, but I didn’t know your majesty was so religiously inclined.”

“We do fine now, you know. Between our own ice fishing for pike and mussels in the river and our trade in ice for seal meat, it has sustained us since before my father took the throne. And to sell ourselves to the Violent Tides and Nilas...”

“It is not smart to rely so heavily on others for necessities. Trade agreements can always be upended, your majesty,” Bram said primly. “And we are on the unfortunate end of an uneven one for decades now. No offense to your un-sainted father’s policies.”

“But to have a king from a foreign land, would we still be Frostvale?” I mused as if more to myself. “Would a foreign king listen to my council as well as I do?”

“Hm...”

I pressed, just the tiniest bit more. “I can’t imagine they would consent during marriage negotiations to remain as my prince consort. They would want to be king, and a king always ranks higher than a queen.”

I let him think this logic through, watching in glee as the wheels began to churn. “Not nearly half as well,” Bram admitted, no doubt thinking specifically of himself and not the Glacial Council as a whole.

I clapped him on the back. “Just things I wonder at night, Councilor. That’s all.”

“Very wise, your majesty. Very wise. But we must choose a suitor.” Bram tapped the side of his nose with a finger and bent in as if revealing some quiet secret. “Perhaps one that’s more, shall we say, malleable than others, eh? Younger, eager. You know of which type I speak.”

I nodded, my eyes solemn and wide. “Oh, of course. Of course. Perhaps the coronation isn’t the best time to choose, even! Perhaps we should even force them all to come back for another ball down the line. Even a year from now, when Frostvale is in a better position to negotiate with future kings. Those who return will be most interesting to watch. Perhaps a second-son who would consent to being my prince consort only.”

“Now that’s not a bad idea, your majesty. A year? Certainly not, but another ball? Yes, why not? To throw two balls in a year in Frostvale? Why, we would be the talk of the whole of the Ilex Isles! The other kingdoms wouldn’t know what to make of us. First, a young queen ruling alone, next two balls!”

I smiled and left. A young queen ruling alone. Now that sounded exactly like what I had in mind. From his mouth to Gelid’s frostbitten ears, may he freeze in eternity.

I had a good feeling I’d gotten Bram over to my side. Rune was a bit harder to read. I had another good feeling he could see right through my flattery, but he seemed content to let me rule as I saw fit for now. Rune might trouble me or he might turn into my best ally. Only time would tell.

Obviously, it only took him until dinner that night to annoy me to no end, but first, I had to find a sister. A well-intentioned, yet thorn-in-my-side sister.

BESSA

Snow fell thickly outside, guttering and howling at the arrowslits that had yet to be covered by tapestries. The Sunfalls and Silverwood retinues shivered under mountains of furs, their feet practically in the hearth of the Great Hall. The Violent Tides seafarers were at least used to icy sea conditions and were dressed more normally as we did in Frostvale. Which, I guess was a good point for Violent Tides.

Ducking around a few scullions to avoid having to speak prematurely in the day, I looked for Mika in her quarters, the kitchen, and amongst the weary weavers in the Great Hall to no avail. I had a hunch as to why suitors were showing up so early and in such grand fashion and I needed to pounce on my intuition.

Finally, I found her in the library, where I probably should have looked first. It was her most recent escape from the many tasks of returning a castle back to its former glory, but she never actually relaxed in the library. She hunted.

Like a dog with a scent, she was determined to find my twin brother's prophecy, determined to make it say something other than what we all feared. Determined to make me Frostvale's greatest queen, by grit and sheer force of will. Honestly, her sheer will was probably enough. By her grace, I was here. But that didn't mean I should let her run roughshod through the Ilex Isles. The other six kingdoms wouldn't know what hit them.

I snuck up behind her, but she stopped me in my tracks. "Hey, Bessa. How's the

suitor situation?”

“How did you hear—never mind. Mika, have you been sending any messages lately?” I asked.

She didn’t look up from the piles of books and scrolls, her head barely visible. Her voice echoed slightly, like in a tunnel. “Messages? Why, surely. Messages are a great form of communication when sent by loyal pigeons. The dovecote is so calming, don’t you think? Sometimes I simply go to hear the cooing. It calms the soul.”

I waited, my arms crossed. Eska looked up once, decided it wasn’t worth it, and resettled herself on her paws around my neck. “Mika!” I threw up my hands. “Why are suitors coming so early?”

“Oh, that. Probably the messages.”

“Mika,” I said in a low voice that would have worried anyone else, but merely made my sister shrug.

“There are rumors flying all over the Ilex Isles,” she conceded, still flipping through lamb-parchment pages and unrolling scrolls. “Who’s to notice a few more?”

It took real queenly willpower not to grit my teeth. “What. Rumors.”

Mika finally looked up, her eyes as sharp as cut coal. “Only true ones, Bessa.”

I flopped next to her in the pile of bound books and ribboned scrolls, sending papers flying upwards and making her shriek. “Bessa! I had that organized a certain way.”

“I’ll help you if you tell me what you did.”

Shooting me a glare, she started shuffling things around, and yes, I helped. Marginalia littered some of the pages while others were more austere. I held out one piece of vellum that had wyverns walking on two legs up and down the left hand side of the text. It looked like they were walking into the sun, a golden orb hanging brightly at the top of the page. It was a book about the old gods, the gods of warmth and summer and other mystical things that had little basis in our reality. Much like wyverns themselves.

“Well, your Chandler gave me an idea.”

“Ambrose?”

“First name basis, are we?” she asked, even waggling her eyes and pausing in her organization.

“Mika!”

“Fine,” she said, bending to reshuffle and then reshuffle some more when I handed her my stack of unruly parchments. “Ambrose,” she said, emphasizing his name rather pointedly.

“You’re being obnoxious.”

“Ambrose,” she repeated even more obnoxiously yet, “informed me that he doesn’t spread gossip.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to follow. “That’s nice.”

“Well, at first, I’d only considered getting word around Honeywood Haven and the outer villages.”

“About?”

“About magic returning due to the power of your charisma.”

“My what?”

“Your charisma. Keep up. But then Ambrose informed me that he doesn’t spread gossip and just that word, spread, got me thinking. Why shouldn’t we spread it as far and wide as possible?”

My jaw dropped and I nearly dropped all the papers again. “You didn’t.”

“Oh, I so did and I’m still doing it and I’m going to keep doing it.” Mika looked fierce. As fierce as the time our baby brother Wyot fell into a snowdrift so deep, it was about to suffocate him and she didn’t think there was enough time to run for help, so she figured out how to rig a pulley around a tree out of a broken branch and our coats. We nearly got frostbite on our elbows, we were so cold, but he survived.

Adult Wyot poked his head around the corner of a moving bookshelf. “Found a few more in that hidden crawlspace you asked me to investigate. Oh hey, Bessa. I didn’t know you were here.”

I threw my hands up, letting papers fly. “And now you’ve got Wyot in on it too?”

“Finding this prophecy is a family affair now, Bessa. Better get used to it.”

“If you tell me Mom and Dad are back there somewhere, I swear I—I will think of something sufficient and it won’t be pleasant.”

“Of course they aren’t,” she waved my paltry threats away. “Today is bun day. One of the suitors brought exotic spices, including something he called cardamom, so

they're busy. You're welcome, by the way. Without my messages, we wouldn't be indulging in cardamom morning buns tomorrow morning with our equally exotic lemon balm tea. We should really keep stretching this suitor situation out. It's been so delicious."

"For us, that is," Wyot winked.

"Without your—what are you telling people?" I blustered.

"Only the truth," Mika insisted. "That odd things have been happening in Frostvale. Things you might have to see to believe."

"I thought of that last bit," Wyot added proudly.

"So let me be clear. You're telling all seven kingdoms in the Ilex Isles that I have magic."

"And if we could just find this silly prophecy, we could back it up," Mika said, already diving back into her piles of parchments. "You are magic, Bessa," she called, voice muffled again. "You were literally delivered to us by a unicorn."

"And what if it doesn't stick? What if this is all the magic there is? What then?"

"Then that's all the magic there is. Might as well get some good trade deals out of it," Mika said reasonably.

"And be stuck with a husband who takes over my crown? I think not! What happens when this new husband realizes I don't have strong enough magic to keep my castle warm, let alone save his kingdom, and that I'm not the prophesied twin. He won't be happy to learn that I won't be supplying him with an endless capacity of magic to destroy his enemies and turn everything he touches into gold? Hm? What then?"

“So supply him with a lot of heirs. Heirs make them happy, those simple creatures,” she said fondly. Wyot only rolled his eyes and walked away, too used to Mika’s ridiculousness to take offense at her man-maligning ways.

“Rumors only grow, Mika! I’ll be turned into a fire-breathing dragon before this is all done. Frostvale will be a laughingstock when we can barely keep real fire in our homes.”

Mika stood up, fierce again. “I hope they grow. Bigger and bigger and bigger. I have faith this is not some prophecy meant for men. This is for you. If you can’t have faith in yourself, then I will for the both of us.”

A knock on the large oaken doors stopped us all in our tracks. “Am I interrupting?”

We both spun on our heels, eyes wide and worried. Ambrose stood in the door, his wool cap in his hands, his left eyebrow raised.

“Chandler ! Why, Bessa, look! If it isn’t the chandler ,” my sister crowed, now saying chandler in the same tone she’d said Ambrose. I could have strangled her. But I didn’t. I still needed her. Instead, I smiled sweetly at both of them.

“In fact, you are interrupting. If there’s anything you need to discuss regarding our recent candle order, the servants’ quarters are located at the rear of the castle. I’m sure someone can point you in the right direction.” I turned back around, unable to meet Ambrose’s eyes after that little speech and unwilling to give myself and my churning feelings away. He’d been dismissed and surely he understood that.

“I am deeply sorry for interrupting such important work, your majesty,” Ambrose began, and I swear there was the deepest hint of not being sorry at all. I was just about to retort a response when Mika made a noise like a wounded duck. I whirled around to see her, eyes wide, staring at a piece of parchment.

“Gelid preserve us,” Mika whispered. “I found it.”

15

BESSA

“No,” I whispered as Mika stared excitedly. The entire piece of parchment trembled in her hands. Before she could accidentally tear it, I gently placed my hands over hers.

“The prophecy. It’s here. I can’t read it. Gods, I can’t read it!”

“That’s because you’re shaking it too much,” Wyot said. “Here, give it to me. I’ve got a steady hand.”

We all watched in silence as Wyot’s eyes skimmed the parchment, his eyebrows furrowing in a heart-sinking way. “Hm,” he finally said, dropping it carelessly. “I never was one for prophecies. Too limiting.”

I sank into a chair, my gowns deflating slowly into a crumple around me. “I take it there’s no wiggle room, eh?”

“Not so much ‘no wiggle room’ as no room to even breathe,” Mika admitted, rapidly reading it herself.

A throat clearing, like the crack of ice, echoed through the library with the force of an impending avalanche.

It was as if we’d all forgotten the Chandler was there. Mika jumped three feet in the

air, and I nearly bolted from the room. Only Wyot kept his cool, spinning around, his hand going to the sword at his waist. “What are you still doing here?” he asked warily.

“A few lines on an old piece of parchment. That’s what has you tied in knots?” Ambrose demanded, looking at each of us in turn.

When he got to me, his gaze lingered. The way he dragged his eyes up and down my body with an absolute look of contempt made everything inside of me want to ignite. Eska responded to my internal blaze with little manic movements under my hood, but I kept her hidden and calm. How dare he judge me? He didn’t even know me. If I was a real queen, I might even wonder how he dared to look at me so brazenly, but I found myself turning away instead, my stomach buzzing like a caught bee and the heat rising under my dress. His look was pure decadence in its intensity alone.

“You need a piece of parchment to tell you what to do? No wonder Frostvale has been frozen for so long.”

At the complete silence in the room, I was sure my siblings all thought of Dad. I certainly did. It was uncanny how very near to his mannerism Ambrose had emulated. Dad had no time for any nonsense. He raised three kids in a frozen landscape, fought in a war with his son for his adopted daughter, and still woke up every day to make his precious life-giving bread. He wouldn’t care a fig for prophecies, only the tangible. Like flour and salt and snowmelt water.

The candle maker continued as if our silence was assent. “What will you do? Hide that one forever? Forge a new one? The truth will get out. It always gets out.”

“But we could keep it hidden for many, many years,” Mika said viciously. She held up the small roll of parchment, no bigger than her palm. “See? It says right there.” Mika jabbed her finger at the lines and started reading, holding the curled page with

one hand to keep it flat. “The first born son of the seventh king will herald magic in the frozen world, bringing warmth to light on the night of his birth and thereafter. No one can see this!”

Ambrose refused to look at the parchment while Wyot stared in disbelief. “Are you really letting this outsider in on our secrets?” our brother asked.

“I thought you said you liked him,” Mika pointed out.

“That was before he was let into the circle of trust in less time than it takes me to blink,” Wyot all but growled, brotherly protectiveness seeping into his entire body.

I noticed Ambrose’s fingers twitch at that. Out of nowhere, he snatched the prophecy. Without further ado, he threw it into the nearest hearth fire. No one said a word or even moved, instead we stood frozen with shock. We all watched as the roll went up in flames with a whoosh, and blackened, curling in on itself until it was nothing but ashes.

Mika’s voice was a squeaky whisper. “What did you do!”

Ambrose wiped his hands on his pants as if the prophecy had stained him somehow. “With all due respect, your majesty, make your own destiny.”

AMbrOSE

Ambrose didn't have time to think about his actions, his clear treason, or even worry about his neck. He simply acted. It was the opposite of how he lived his life, his careful tending of the knot gardens, the winding pathways of herbs, the conical wicker hives of bees, all things that required a complete practice of patience, just like the way he slowly infused his candles with his magical calm. But this time, he struck on instinct, no time to consider or think.

Bessa would not be held back by some quill and ink penned long ago. If she were to make Frostvale successful, it would be on her own, not by the grace, nor interference, of some prophecy.

"What if Philip comes back?" Wyot demanded, his hand still hovering over his sword, his knuckles white at the effort to not draw it. Ambrose noticed that not one of the three siblings actually moved to save the prophecy from the flames. Deep down, they were probably relieved.

"That's what you think might happen? Her twin suddenly reappears after fleeing a battlefield in disgrace? What will he do? Demand the crown? Who would support him?"

The uncomfortable silence suggested that was exactly what they thought. Ambrose rolled his eyes. "No one is going to choose Philip over you. Not even with this ridiculous prophecy," he said, gesturing to the ashes that hadn't magically reformed.

“You have no idea what the people would do,” Wyot growled, his hand now resting on the sword. “You’re not even from Frostvale?—”

A knock interrupted their low back and forth. Councilor Rune stood in the hallway, watching. How long had he been there? The thought made Ambrose uneasy and even Wyot looked a little queasy.

“Your majesty,” Rune said, performing a deep bow. “If I may have a word?”

Bessa looked surreptitiously at the fire, the evidence in ashes. She nodded once. “Of course, Councilor. Please, come in.”

Rune remained ostensibly silent, and Bessa quickly added, “Ambrose is the town Chandler. He was just finishing up the coronation order. Thank you, Ambrose. The crown is most pleased to include your handcrafted candles for our coronation, free of charge. We look forward to lighting up a new era with your candles.”

Ambrose opened and promptly closed his mouth, noting the use of the royal we. “Of course, your majesty. It is my honor,” he said, barely able to keep it together as he watched the corners of her mouth curve up in a secret smile at winning one over on him, a slightly taunting smile that was as infuriating as it was sexy. She inclined her head at her victory and turned back to her councilor.

“What is it you wanted to discuss?”

Rune clasped his hands behind his back, rolling once on the balls of his feet. “Magic, your majesty. Not the existence of it, which as we all know has been gone from the Ilex Isles for near on a century.”

“Then what, Rune?”

“The existence of the rumors of magic.”

Bessa fluttered a hand as if to swat the rumors away. She played it very well. “I wouldn’t put much stock in them, Rune, but if certain suitors were to hear of them... well. What do you think?”

“About the rumors of dancing pixies or the peculiar shape of the snow trampled down near the river’s edge? You know they’re saying it was where a giant clearly sat for a moment in deep thought.”

“Is that what they say? How droll,” Bessa said.

To Ambrose’s ear, she truly sounded amused, and not wary as if she were keeping a secret of magic bottled up inside of her and Eska. Ambrose was impressed.

He left, subtly watching Rune as the young councilor considered her rather closely, and the stray thought occurred to him that Rune was half-in love with the queen, and the thought stirred a fire in his belly. He tried brushing it off. Why shouldn’t everyone be more than half-in love? Bessa was the brightest flame in this frozen world, sweeping in and promising hope. Of course others were intoxicated, and not just those drinking and talking at the taverns, but those working closely with her who could actually see the flame that was the queen. That was all it took for Ambrose. One glimpse of the queen with her guard down, one glimpse at the real her, and he knew he was doomed.

“Well, your majesty,” Rune said, his voice getting fainter as Ambrose hurried his speed, unable to bear the sound of them innocently discussing world affairs together. “I can’t imagine being the only kingdom with even a modicum of magic would be a bad bargaining piece. If we could perhaps show it and prove it...”

“Excuse me, sir!”

Ambrose bumped head on into a girl holding a stack of linens. Her white bonnet flew off her head, caught only by the strings around her neck, while the linens crashed in every direction.

Ambrose knelt to help her refold. He had to get his head on straight; the entire castle was filled with life again, and the buzzing of the people was as important as the buzzing of his bees. In a few short weeks, the castle had come alive. It hardly needed anything more than body heat and braziers these days to keep the chill at bay. Even a few months ago, that would have been impossible.

Ambrose paused in the middle of the organized chaos for a moment, considering. It was very possible Bessa had something to do with that as well. Or, her fire fox familiar, Eska. She seemed to be completely human, merely a chosen conduit for the magic sparking in Eska's veins. Good Gelid, if she knew. If she only knew... how she would loathe him for his secrets. Eventually she would understand, he believed, clinging to that hope. Although what it mattered when she was destined to choose a royal prince was altogether another question.

Duskborne and Lorcan jovially displayed their wines and wares to the suitors who were still shivering, nearly unidentifiable under their layers of furs, as if the marrow in their bones were beginning to freeze and they would never feel warm again.

Lorcan gave a wave as Ambrose approached. He wasn't sure how to say it delicately, but Lorcan seemed... hairier than usual. His usual scruffy brown and gray beard now went all the way up his cheekbones and down into his shirt. He was grinning ear to ear, however.

"Good Gelid! How are you, Ambrose?"

"It feels less like winter's death grip and more like spring festivities in here. Is Gelid the best god to invoke?" Ambrose teased. "Perhaps we need to resurrect the old gods

of spring and celebration. Why, there's even a jester in the corner!"

There was, indeed, a man who had come with the retinue of Skyfold Pass ahead of their prince's arrival. The entire retinue was bundled up, but Ambrose could see the traditional blue and yellow silks everyone wore over them, representing the blue sky and yellow sun of the silk and spice laden land.

The man in charge of the retinue had an odd familiarity to Ambrose and the tiniest frog that sat on his shoulder, only its head peering out of the oilskin traveling cloak. The frog's eyes were glazed over and surely spoke to his homeland's warmth more than anything else the retinue had brought, which included many warm things, indeed.

Every warm kingdom was determined to show off their relative wealth. There were dried flowers, specially pressed for the trip. Several maids swooned at the sachets of dried rosemary with grains of ambergris and nutmeg bound with beeswax and grains of musk, made to tie around their wrists and smell whenever they liked from Silverwood. The kingdom of Skyfold Pass showcased their lands and warmth, said to be nearly desert-like, and with direct access through various territories for overland shipping with spices and silks. It was surely a very intriguing prospect indeed to Bessa and her councilors, even if the king of Skyfold Pass was an old man who was rumored to be looking for more women to add to his harem. Exotic, icy women. He might not even be here for Bessa at all.

The scents in the Great Hall alone made guilt claw at Ambrose's heart from the secrets he kept in his grove but also relief. He couldn't deny that. He could show the queen more than a dried husk of a flower. He could give her the living thing. Surely she wouldn't swoon like a scullion over some prince's paltry pressed flowers.

"The word jester might upset the man," Lorcan confided, pulling Ambrose back. "Duskborne and I have been here for most of the day, and he's been the most ill-

mannered soul I've had the mispleasure of doing business with since the former king!"

"Or rather, the mispleasure of not doing business," Duskborne chimed in, coming up behind us. He was tall, and his skinny stature more apparent than usual with a few layers of clothes removed in the warmth of the castle. His clean-shaven, pale skin provided a sharp contrast to the hairy, stout man next to him. It was always comical to see the two men simply standing near one another. "Anything would upset that man."

Ambrose glanced over again at the jester, his eyebrow raised. Something was unsettlingly familiar about him. He just couldn't put his finger on what. The overall quality of him screamed for caution. He didn't like the idea of the man so near the queen when he was so far. "That is who Skyfold Pass sent?"

"King Culm will be here this week," confided Lorcan in the glow of gossip, his very favorite pastime. "I believe he doesn't cherish the idea of the cold and ordered his court magician to arrange things ahead of time."

"Court magician?" Ambrose was shocked that the kingdom of Skyfold Pass used such a word.

"That's what they call him, although the position is merely ceremonial after all these years. He performs simple magic tricks for the many harem women and their pups," Lorcan said. "Keeps them occupied when the king isn't there. Sleight of hand, card tricks, a coin from the air."

"Has anyone addressed the fact that our queen will have nothing to do with a harem?" Ambrose asked, barely able to keep his tone civil. The thought of some foreign prince pushing his suit had already begun to be grit under his skin, like an oyster tumbling in shallow surf. But a foreign prince that merely wanted to add her to his collection, like

a shining pearl among dull rubies? No, it was unimaginable.

“I don’t think he’s suggested that,” Lorcan continued. “If Queen Bessa were to marry King Culm, the harem would be dismantled for political purposes.”

Ambrose grumped. “Hmph. How very political of him. That means he’ll keep it intact for pleasure purposes. Our good queen Bess deserves much better than the likes of that.”

“Impressive.” Lorcan stared at him with mouth slightly open. “I didn’t know you had such strong feelings for our queen.”

“I forgot for a second you’re not even from Frostvale,” Duskborne admitted. “As much as I don’t care for gossip, I agree with all the points listed. King Culm might have the best to offer the kingdom, but he’s bottom of the list for me. I wish she could find some better alternative. Someone who understands us and all we’ve been through. No one can deny that Frostvale was hit the hardest with the loss of magic, but none of these other kingdoms fully understand what that meant.”

Lorcan dramatically sighed at this point. “To go from glorious green valleys and a swiftly flowing river... ah. Well, that’s what they say, isn’t it? We were as lush and fecund as a... beautiful woman.”

“Well put,” Duskborne agreed. “One of the most beautiful green kingdoms in all of the Ilex Isles, an emerald of a country. No one else was burdened with endless winter as well as their loss of magic. They got to keep their seasons!”

“With regret, I must go,” Ambrose said, attempting to back away slowly. “I was here on business myself, and with that concluded, I must begin my task.”

“Ah, candles for our coronation?” Lorcan asked.

Ambrose noted how the villagers had already begun to lay claim to Bessa and her coronation as their own, a very good thing. He also noticed which of the suitors perked up at the mention of a crowning ceremony. Prince Gillian, certainly, of the Violent Tides. And Rontu of Sunfalls. He was the prince that came early. Jarth de la Silverwood looked mildly interested, but not nearly as much as the magician of Skyfold Pass.

King Culm of Skyfold Pass had not arrived himself, so it was hard to say if his interest was on behalf of King Culm or just overall, general interest.

The last suitor who had sent acceptance of the coronation but still hadn't arrived was Zacan of Coalcrest where coal was rich and plentiful. An intriguing suitor, unfortunately, except for his rather advanced age. At forty-five, Zacan was by far the oldest of the suitors, and rumor had it he only wanted for one thing: a male heir. If Bessa focused only on duty, she could do worse than politically marry an older man and give him a child who would inherit both kingdoms. In fact, that might be her best option and the thought made Ambrose so sick to his stomach, he nearly retched on Lorcan's boots.

"What did you ask?" he said to the furry man.

"Candles. You took her order for coronation candles, right?" Lorcan asked, raising his eyebrow at Duskborne.

"Yes," he said. "Candles for the coronation." Then, quieter, he leaned in between the two men. "Keep an eye on the Skyfold Pass court magician if you will. I don't like the look of him, if I may be so bold."

"Of course. I never did, either," Lorcan said conspiratorially, his long fingers to the side of his nose. "We'll keep watch."

“Why a frog, do you think?” Duskborne muttered back. “That’s odd, right?”

“Extremely. Seeing as they are cold-blooded. I’m surprised it’s not in a complete stupor in Frostvale. Or nearly frozen solid itself.”

Ambrose took one last furtive look at the tiny frog sitting on the man’s shoulder. “An odd power move, to be sure. Subtle. As if to show off their exotic repertoire in Skyfold Pass, whereas we have none here in our frozen world.”

“That makes him more dangerous, in my opinion.”

“Agreed,” said Ambrose, clapping both men on the shoulder. “I will see you soon. For now, I have candles to craft. The cold does not claim us.”

“The cold does not claim us,” they both repeated back.

Ambrose went straight to his shop, letting the small bell jingle over the top as he entered, but immediately flipped the large lock. He would craft coronation candles, free of charge, just as she wanted. But he would infuse them with the magic that he wanted, that she needed, whether she knew it or not. Just as he had deftly switched out the roll of parchment he knew stood holding in his hands.

The prophecy.

A simple hearth fire would not have destroyed it, but Ambrose had quickly thrown some short poem in its place with his own sleight of hand. He stood staring at the damning vellum roll now.

Since taking over the dusty shop of the previous chandler, Ambrose had completely transformed it. He’d felt as if there were not enough hours in the day, trudging between the grove and the village, making himself known and available and, thus,

non-threatening. Slowly growing his flowers, enticing the bees to follow their queen to the depths of the earth and back, cleaning and gathering his tools. Now, he was rewarded each time he walked into his workshop with rows of organized shelves holding jars of dried botanicals and cases of beeswax, all ready to be transformed and given purpose.

Sage and rosemary had been especially hard to grow in this frozen world, but they were best for what he needed now. What Bessa needed now.

Protection.

And a candle powerful enough to destroy her twin brother's prophecy and let her forge her own future.

Ambrose took four fat candles and placed them in the four cardinal directions, touching his finger to the wicks to activate them, and whispering as he touched each one. Primus. Secundus. Tertius. Quartus. Lux. On his last command, they lit as one, enveloping Ambrose and his work in a shimmering veil of warded protection.

And then he began. And he didn't stop until it truly was ash.

BESSA

We were blissfully almost finished with yet another state dinner of barely edible pottage and peas with salted fish. Rontu regaled us with his elaborately long story of how he'd gone with the ice fisherman to catch the fried mussels we were eating with his own two gloved hands and had nearly fallen through the hole carefully sawed through the ice when Gillian of the Violent Tides simply couldn't take it anymore. He slammed his fists on the table, rattling all of the metal plates. The suitors, thankfully, had all brought their own silverware, since we hadn't found any in the kitchens or storage.

"Enough prattle, Prince Rontu," Gillian said. "I'd like to eat my meal in peace."

"Prattle? As if you could have accomplished such a feat!"

"You stood next to a fisherman who handed you his catch. This is what passes for a feat in your lands?"

"I will show you what our lands are made of," Rontu boasted.

"Perfectly put. I challenge you to a duel!"

I quickly rose to my feet, barely beating Rontu to his. Everyone froze, some staring open-mouthed, like Mika, and others with their forks halfway to their mouths.

Before Rontu could accept, I projected my voice loudly over the both of them. “I admittedly don’t know every single Violent Tides custom, but in Frostvale, we have outlawed dueling.”

“We have?” Wyot whispered, seated on my left.

“Yeah, I’m outlawing it right this second,” I whispered back.

“Ah. Good call.”

“No dueling in Frostvale,” I announced.

No one said a word. We only had the crackle of the fire in the hearths and a few nervous scraping of chairs on flagstone to guide us.

“Retract your challenge, Prince Gillian,” I said firmly. “Or retract your retinue from Frostvale. Those are your choices.”

“May I make a suggestion?” Rune asked, standing from his spot.

I shrugged. Why not? I mean, honestly. What did I have to lose from letting one of my councilors give their opinion?

Rune nodded. “I think this should settle the question of dueling, as it is, apparently, outlawed. Queen Bessa would like all of you to be aware that she will choose a suitor by her coronation in two weeks’ time.”

“I—what?” I exclaimed, startled. Apparently, I had a lot to lose.

Rune nodded emphatically. “Yes, Frostvale finds it prudent to hold our alliances close, and we hope to hear all the best offers by then. You’ll find Frostvale is so

much more than ice and snow,” he said craftily. In his hand was a cup, something green spilling out of it. “This was found near the candle shop earlier this week,” he said to an enthralled audience. “We don’t know what type of seedling it is, but I think the gods are clear. Frostvale is blessed.”

I felt, rather than saw, Mika’s hand slip into mine. She squeezed and whispered, “It looks like my time to shine, sister!” Clearing her throat, she announced, “As official court historian, I have been organizing the archives and discovered the old name of Frostvale. It was Rosevale, and the prophecy that began with the birth of Queen Bessa twenty-seven years ago, the famous Night of Warmth, has begun anew. While we cannot fathom the minds of the gods, it is clear we have their favor.”

Desperately woozy, I panicked. I’d never been good at keeping my mouth shut, but how was I supposed to know I would be queen one day and need to learn this very important skill set? No one trained me for rogue councilors and rampallian sisters at state dinners in front of royal suitors!

“How about, instead of choosing, I’ll just eliminate a few contenders by the coronation?” I suggested weakly.

That got everyone on their feet. “Is this a game to Frostvale?” I heard some of the Silverwood retinue shout. “We should leave now. This is outrageous. Magical favor or not. Maybe that’s a fake flower!”

“I agree with Silverwood for once,” a man dressed for arctic shipping said. “The Violent Tides is used to the fickle nature of the open seas, but we demand stability in our monarchy!”

Gillian was smiling, having backed down from his duel and seemed content to let his people voice his concerns for him. Smart. He held up his hands. “Now, now. I’m sure the queen didn’t mean it like that. Right? This is no game to the Violent Tides, and

Queen Bessa doesn't seem the type to trick, either."

"Nor Sunfalls!" piped up Rontu.

"Nor Silverwood," added Jarth.

"This is no game to Frostvale," Rune said. "To prove how serious Frostvale is committed to finding the right matrimonial partner, Queen Bessa would like to host a few competitions for our royal suitors to showcase their talents."

If my face wasn't set in ice, it would have shattered. "I...what?"

"Baking!" Mika shouted. "She wants you to bake."

"Baking?" It sounded like I had a fifty person echo as everyone repeated the same thing.

Her grin was so mischievous, any potential court jester should be taking notes. "Baking. Tomorrow morning, bright and early. See you in Honeywood Haven!"

Our rather large retinue wended down the ice-slicked roads toward Honeywood Haven, each suitor insisting on bringing their own people as some show of popularity or force. What followed was a farce, worthy of bards to sing about in kingdoms over. There was slipping. There was sliding. There was cursing.

Finally, we more or less made it in one piece to the bakeshop, where my mother was watching through the window with her hands cupped around her face, all the better to see. She broke into a wide smile and flung open the door, embracing me as soon as we got close. She gave Mika and Wyot hugs next, fussing over us before letting me introduce the royal dignitaries. My status as queen hadn't changed her an ounce.

“Mom, this is Prince Rontu of Sunfalls.”

Rontu, less dressed as a hibernating bear than when he arrived, but still bundled up tight, bowed and offered a sack of white flour to bake a manchet loaf, prized in the kingdoms as the softest, whitest flour available. She held the weighted sack in her hands, testing the softness of the flour with a fingertip. I could tell she was impressed by the quality.

“Milled with a hard stone, no doubt,” she said finally. “Grit from softer stones gets in the finished product otherwise.”

“Um, precisely,” Rontu said, clearly having no idea what she was talking about. “Hard stones only in Sunfalls.”

“I bet no one has ever introduced a parade of princes by saying, ‘Mom, I’d like you to meet’...” Mika giggled in my ear.

“You have only yourself to blame,” I said stoutly.

“Blame? Are you kidding? I’m having a grand time!”

Next came Jarth de la Silverwood, presenting her a bag of dried citrus rinds, which made my mother’s eyes cross. The floral scent even coaxed my dad to come out from behind the ovens to investigate, his eyes meeting mine first to ensure I was okay. “I’m fine,” I mouthed.

He nodded once and shook Jarth’s hand.

“And finally, may I present Prince Gillian of the Violent Tides?” Gillian took out his sword, brought it to his face and bowed. I wondered if I’d ever get used to their cultural customs, so different from ours. He handed my mom a bag of sea salt,

“Freshly harvested from our salt flats.”

It was pink! He pulled out another bag of salt. It was blue! And another one was purple!

“My salt keeper ensures me they are the very best of the pull we’ve had this year. The purple salt is my favorite.”

Mika, my mother, and I dipped a fingertip inside and put it to our tongues.

“It tastes juicy,” Mika marveled. “Like a fruit.”

“Plums,” said Gillian, his voice approaching something like honest pride for the first time.

“I’m very pleased to meet you all. I hope you’re ready to put your backs into some bread!” my mother said. “You’ll knead all those muscles!” she joked. Only Mika, Wyot, and I got it. And Dad, but he was used to Mom’s bad jokes and was already back behind the ovens.

Rontu looked positively giddy at the thought. “What are we making?” he asked, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

My mother gave each suitor an apron and a lump of dough, coarser and darker than the white flour from Rontu. “Let’s see what you can do with that.”

Jarth poked at it. “What, exactly, is it?”

Gillian looked inclined to agree, although it clearly pained him to admit it. He wouldn’t even touch it with his bare fingers.

Mika put her hands on my shoulders and turned me toward the door. “This is going to be a blind judging, so say goodbye to our queen!”

The three men stared slack-jawed, clearly full of complaints, but Mika was a force, and I was plopped out the front door and into the snow before I could add my complaints to theirs.

“You can’t really mean for me to wait out here alone?” I complained.

“Of course not. Ambrose should be here any minute. He’s our second judge. I thought it would be fun.”

“You thought it would—” but Mika was gone, waving merrily through the window before I could finish my sentence.

“I have a lot to do, you know,” Ambrose said as he turned the corner, his scowl apparent from thirty feet.

I held up my hands. “I’m not stopping you.”

Ambrose took up every square space of my whole being as he peered around me into the bakeshop, an even deeper scowl etched in his face. He smelled like pine needles and lavender and candlesmoke. He’d clearly been tending his little garden this morning, and the image of him kneeling with his hands in the dirt, his back muscles straining, that serious fiery look on his face, made my thighs tighten and my stomach flip. I could imagine his fingers digging into my skin, pulling my hips closer to his, his whole body straining to be near mine. Gods, I was jealous of a flower.

Would I feel this way about a suitor if he’d shown me a secret garden buzzing with bees?

With a deep sigh, Ambrose straightened back up and locked his green gaze on me. It held more fire than any of my suitors, more fire than a thousand of his candles, magical or not. “I’ll stay,” he said gruffly, and the way his voice pitched deep in the base of my stomach told me I would not feel that way about a suitor, not for a million bees.

Duty over desire. I kept repeating to myself until it was as engrained in me as any Frostvalen motto.

“I don’t need protecting, you know. The suitors are here to woo me. Not throw me over their shoulders like some marauding gang of bandits and whisk me away against my will. If anything, I’d be chaining them here against theirs.”

“They’re not worthy if they wouldn’t brave the elements to have you keep them warm at night,” Ambrose said, his voice low and rumbling. We both stared at each other, surprised, I think, that he’d said that out loud.

He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. I should not have?—”

“What? You didn’t mean it?”

“No. Yes. I mean, I just don’t think it’s appropriate?—”

“It’s certainly not appropriate, but I asked if you meant it or not.”

Ambrose stopped trying to explain himself and set his gaze on me. It was intense, a deep forest of green behind those eyes with no end in sight. I could be lost in those eyes, as lost as I was in the pine forests of Frostvale as a child, but this time, I might not find my way out.

Yet still, I waited to hear what he said. I couldn’t bring myself to say no, nevermind.

Forget it. Off with his head.

“I meant it,” he said finally and fiercely, and I believed him.

My face was still burning when we walked back into the bakeshop, and I could only pray to Frostine that no one noticed. I stared at the suitors, Rontu proudly displaying what I think was supposed to represent a sheaf of wheat, while Jarth tried to hide his misshapen lump behind some scraps of raw dough. Gillian, to his credit, didn’t bother hiding the fact he thought this was dumb and hadn’t even tried. Dumb? Sure. Funny? Absolutely.

This was supposed to be a blind judging but they just made it too easy.

Mika clapped her hands together. “And now, for our judges. What do you think?”

Steadily, I avoided all eye contact. It was all I could do not to burst into laughter, and I knew if I caught Ambrose’s eye—the way he raised his left eyebrow and tightened his mouth into a straight line—I’d completely lose it.

“For your efforts and enthusiasm—which have overwhelmed your lack of quality—I award you, Rontu, the victor in this royal bake off.” I sealed my declaration with a kiss on the cheek while Rontu fist pumped and danced around the bakeshop, careful to keep a good distance from Gillian.

Only as we were leaving did I dare look at Ambrose, his left eyebrow indeed quirked up and his mouth set in a mischievous grin. Making him laugh, even if only on the inside, really did feel like winning a war.

18

BESSA

A million things to do, a million worries in my world, and all I could think about was one: how to stop thinking.

Specifically, how to stop thinking about candles, because thinking about candles led to thinking about candle makers, and thinking about candle makers led to thinking about Ambrose, and thinking about Ambrose made my insides squirm and my brain deep dive into all sorts of things I'd never had time to think about before.

For instance, if Ambrose took his shirt off in his thermally heated grove to work in his garden. Or if he always bit his lower lip when he was in deep concentration, like that first time we'd met. And if he'd bite my lips, just a little, if we kissed and if it'd feel good. And don't get me started on the fire in him when he'd taken the prophecy and destroyed it without a moment's hesitation to protect me and the way he suddenly seemed so protective of me. He may not want me for himself, the thought probably had never crossed his mind, but he wanted to make sure I married a good man and not just a good trade deal.

Which was all, objectively, very bad.

I had way too much to do to worry about candles and their makers! I had suitors.

Honestly, Ambrose was probably just worried about the type of king I would bring to Frostvale, since it would affect him. Yes. That was probably it. I just didn't

understand why that thought made me so sad.

Despite appearances, my eyes were not on the papers on my desk, so I saw immediately it was Wyot before he'd even lifted his gloved hand to knock on the open door. "Bessa," he said, briskly entering the chambers and going straight to stoke the fire over the flagstone hearth. "It's so cold in here, how can you work?"

I tapped Eska, who was curled around my neck as usual, and sighed, standing up to stretch. I'd already told Mika, might as well let Wyot in on it. I'd wanted to spare him, let him think it was just the unicorn, just that once, and that all of Mika's messages were nothing more than misdirection. But he deserved the truth. He'd deserved a lot more, but the truth was all I had.

Eska hummed, stretching her tiny black legs and paws, trusting me that she could move even though someone new was in the room. Someone who didn't know yet. She balanced across my shoulders, her wet nose sniffing behind my ear, before yipping once. "Go ahead, girl," I murmured.

I watched in satisfaction as Wyot's eyes widened as my little fire fox pranced and wiggled around the room. A trickle of sweat ran down Wyot's temple as Eska heated the air around us, although I was immune to it by now.

He rubbed it away with the back of his wrist, probably not even aware he was doing it, he was so captivated by the creature. "Bessa..."

"I know. Mika had the same reaction. You two are basically mirrors of each other."

"I knew it."

I blinked. "Knew what? About magic?"

“No,” said Wyot, beginning to pace and sweat rather profusely, slamming a fist into his palm. “That Mika was keeping a secret from me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course. Magic is not the crazy part.”

“No, that’s plenty crazy,” Wyot said, now unbuttoning the top two buttons of his doublet. “I just knew she was keeping something from me, which never happens, but I thought she liked that new man in town, the chandler.”

“Ambrose?” I said, a little quickly. Shoot. Now I had to backtrack.

Wyot narrowed his eyes. “Okay. Which one of you likes the chandler?”

“Do either of us have to like someone?”

“I didn’t say someone. I said the chandler.”

“We’re trying to run a country that’s been frozen in the ground for a century. Maybe we don’t have time for romantic thoughts, dear brother. Not even about the chandler,” I said, lying probably to both myself and Wyot. Not my strong suit, so I turned my back to my desk and shuffled the papers like I was a psychopath or something.

“Right.”

Abruptly, I spun, my hands on my hips. “Magic fox of fire? Remember?”

“Uh huh.”

I groaned. Why did one’s family have to be so annoying? “Did you come for a particular reason or just to get under my skin?”

Wyt gave me a sour look, pursing his lips. “I came for a reason, thank you. A good one. Some of the suitors are getting antsy. They want to see you. Go on walks. Woo you. Submit their suits. You know how it goes. They are, after all, suitors. One little group baking project does not suit them.”

“And do we know which ones actually want to woo and which ones are only here because their sovereigns forced them or they’re looking to expand their harem?”

“Oh, you can be sure that all were forced. But some might actually be appealing, as far as arranged royal marriages go.”

I tapped my foot, hands still on my hips. “Well get out with it. Here’s where you say which one you want.”

Wyt bent down, still tracking Eska and shaking his head in wonder. He was only half-paying attention, and I could tell he was dying to pet her. Maybe even ask if he could borrow her every once in a while to play with. My brother was a giant kid at heart sometimes—until the war of succession hardened him. It was nice to see the relaxed side of him again. I relented and nodded my head. Eska bounded into his arms, licking his face all over.

“Oh gods, she’s so soft!”

“Focus, Wyt. Which suitor? You know I trust your judgement and Mika’s judgement infinitely more than any of my councilors’ judgement.”

“You shouldn’t even ask your councilors’ opinion on baked goods. Rune told me once he had no beliefs on croissants or cookies in general. Can you believe that?” Wyt asked, now rolling on the floor with the fire fox. “Zero beliefs on cookies. It’s absurd. How could you trust a man like that?”

“He once told me the silver lining of the frozen state of our kingdom was how healthy and frugal we ‘got’ to be. No extra sugar or chocolate, since it’s too expensive to import.”

We both shivered involuntarily at the thought. Our parents operated the bakeshop as well as they could, but the years had mostly been lean. Grains from our thermal farming gave us our meager daily bread with very little left over for sweets. Eska gave Wyot’s face one more lick, leaving a long red line that steamed lightly in the chilly air of my chambers. He sighed and handed her back to me.

“We can get back to the suitors in a second, but what are you going to do about all of...” He gestured up and down at me. “This?”

“Magic?”

“Yes, that,” he said, nearly too afraid to whisper the word, lest it would, like a forest creature, get spooked and go back into hiding forever.

“I have no idea,” I admitted, flopping back in my chair, Eska already curled around my neck again and snoozing softly, her breath a tickle against my skin.

“You have to show the people. Use it. There are so many rumors swirling about how you won the war. I’d always written them off, insisting you won by sheer grit and will.”

“I did.”

“I know. I was there. But if you could say you were endowed with this magic as the true heir of the prophecy...”

“And the original prophecy? It was pretty clear.”

“Yes, but now there is no evidence of it, thanks to that chandler that neither of my sisters have any feelings for.”

“You didn’t need to add that last part, Wyot.”

“Regardless, the point is that now we can say whatever we want. That you were gifted magic for winning the throne. I mean, it’s true anyway, isn’t it? Not the prophecy part, but all the rest.”

I moved my hands up and down like I was juggling two snowballs. “Um, basically.”

Wyot narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean ‘basically’?”

“I mean yes, we finished the war by sheer grit. But do you remember the night before the last battle?”

“How could I forget? Your biological brother had vanished, the villagers were in disarray, me included, and you suddenly came galloping in on a white horse. I didn’t even know you knew how to ride?—”

“I had bruises up and down my thighs for weeks,” I interjected.

“Right. And you announced you were Philip’s long lost twin sister and rightful queen, which, granted, made most of us laugh. Sorry about that,” Wyot said sheepishly.

“Apology accepted. But then?”

“We realized it was not a horse and actually a gods-given unicorn , just like the night you were brought to us. I don’t think anyone could deny you were the chosen one in the prophecy after that.”

“Right.”

“Except, you aren’t, and only Mika and I—and that blasted chandler—know you aren’t.”

“Exactly.”

“I can’t pretend to understand it all, Bessa, but you do have magic and that was a unicorn. Even if the prophecy mentions Philip by name and you not at all. You should reveal it.”

“Yes, well, it wasn’t a unicorn. It was fake.”

Wytot’s mouth dropped comically open. “You’re not serious.”

“As serious as the plague. But there’s more.”

Wytot looked green, but I kept going before he could stop me. “There was magic that night, but it wasn’t a unicorn. That is the night when Eska came into my life.”

“That’s how the fire started?” Wytot said in shock.

I nodded.

“So you never found an extra deposit of coal?”

“No, never. I started that rumor to convince the Frostvalens still fighting for Philip that I was blessed and I was the one the prophecy meant.”

“It wasn’t even magic from the unicorn?”

“Wyt. There was no unicorn.”

“I just... I can’t believe it.”

“No unicorn, it was Eska,” I whispered. “Eska and me. Philip had found me; he’d heard the rumors of my continued existence somehow and tracked me down and threw me in the dungeon. It was so cold... and dark. And none of you knew.” I shivered, picturing the thick ridges of ice on the floor that made it impossible to sit or stand in comfort. Death would have been slowly quick. “Then Eska came. She helped me melt the metal bars and escape. We rode on a horse that I stuck a stick on its head—a very convincing stick, mind you—and we rode into battle. Philip fled, we lit a big fire, and that was that. I gave my great speech about uniting Frostvalens and free warming centers at the castle and people were so cold and tired they basically just threw their weapons down and went home.”

Putting my palm to the back of his hand, I let curls of warmth slide down my wrist onto his skin. He jumped, nearly recoiling at the unexpected heat. “It’s not a rumor. Magic is back, at least for her. I’m not sure to what extent elsewhere. I channel it through Eska. If she were to leave me... magic would leave. I don’t think our people could bear to gain something so little, only to lose it again. So, we’re keeping it to rumors only. Little bits and bobs here and there. It gives them hope and gives me time to figure out what to do. If the unicorn from my birth actually did come back, it might be different, but she hasn’t.”

Wyt gaped a little, not saying anything. I understood. It was one thing to hear rumors of magic. It was quite another to feel its burn on your body. And not know how long it might last.

“What will happen if I show her to people? Show my true self?” I begged Wyt. “How will they react when they know I’ve been keeping this secret?”

“Why have you been keeping this secret?” Wyot asked.

I threw up my hands and let them fall dramatically. “Why does anyone keep a secret? Fear. What if other kingdoms got it into their heads that they could exploit my magic for their own ends? What if Eska gets hurt or leaves or is kidnapped?” Eska jumped up to nip my finger at that, rather hard. “I’m sorry, sweet girl. I’m just voicing the fears that plague my dreams.”

“Isn’t that what those blasted suitors are doing now?” Wyot asked reasonably. “Enough rumors have circulated about you that at least half of their interest is mere curiosity.”

“I know, and I think a little curiosity is good for Frostvale. It causes uncertainty, which we can use to keep our kingdom sovereign for as long as possible. As tempting as magic sounds, they’re not sure yet if I have it. A does she, does she not situation can serve us well. But what next? Do I have to choose a suitor and then reveal my magic? What if it’s only Eska, and without Philip to fulfill the prophecy, there is no great influx of magic, no great awakening? What if this fire I have, what if this is it, forever?”

Wyot got heavily to his feet, his sword tip scraping the stone floor as he rose. “Bessa, I can’t tell you what to do.”

“I thought that’s exactly what you came in here to do.”

He snorted. “Since when have you ever listened to me?”

“Since forever. I don’t always follow your advice, but I do listen to it and have a good laugh sometimes..”

He grunted. “No, I can’t tell you what to do, and I don’t want to. I only have one

thing to say.”

“What is it? You’ve finally picked your frontrunner?”

He shook his head, pausing at the door. “First, I think you’re underestimating your connection to magic. No one is that good at disguising a stick to look like a magical horn.”

“I don’t know... I’m pretty crafty.”

“No one,” he said firmly. “It was a unicorn. Has it ever occurred to you that it might have, I don’t know, changed its appearance to gauge if you were worthy? See what you would do? Bessa, magic was gifted to you for a reason. Blast the damn prophecy.”

“And second?” I asked.

He raised an eyebrow. “Second, none of them are good enough for you. Not as my queen, not as my sister. And you don’t have to choose. Magical unicorn, magical fire fox, unfulfilled prophecy, stick on a horse, or not.”

Wyt was too romantic. Wyt, who had once wooed a girl by learning to play the lute and then getting the pixie twins to accompany him singing down the street to a song he’d composed himself, thought I had a choice in the matter of royal suitors. That it was merely a question of my heart. He had no idea the pressures of queendom. I could no more never choose a suitor as I could never have an heir. Duty over desire forevermore. That was the price I had to pay for choosing Esha and choosing myself over Philip.

For me, there were no more choices, not really. I’d made the big one. I’d taken up the crown. Now, there were only delays. And I would delay, delay, delay. Perhaps

Ambrose could craft me a candle of perpetual postponement. That would be grand.

There he was again, the chandler. Popping up every moment in my mind. I decided to take a walk to clear my mind. Sucking in deep breaths of cold air usually helped with that.

Wyot gave me a hug, kissing my lightly on the forehead. He might have been the youngest of us three, but in some ways, he was the most solid, the most reliable. I trusted his advice on all things. That was the problem.

I gathered my cloak and left my room, my hair unbound. Just for one day, I'd love to not think about the prophecy, Philip, or Ambrose. One day! I'd rather focus on how many trade agreements I could wring out of each suitor with this idea of perpetual postponement.

I was so preoccupied by thoughts of magic and duty and actively trying not to think of the chandler, I nearly fell over when an actual suitor popped out of a suit of armor as I wandered the halls, my mind a flutter. I finally realized the suitor was the suit of armor, wearing a steel breastplate that depicted two standing griffins rearing to fight over an orb between them.

"Ah!" I squealed, a bit of warmth flinging from Eska larger than I would have wanted. The suitor could hardly notice, bundled up as he was. To be honest, I couldn't quite tell which one it was through all of the metal and furs. Not at first. It was only by the way he flourished a bundle of dried wildflowers, bowing low over them, one furred leg swept out in a deep lunge, that I knew who it was, although the effect made him look more like a lopsided bear than a courtly suitor.

The dried flowers had only retained a little of their fragrance, and I had to admit that even that would have made me swoon a week ago. Maybe even legitimately swoon, not just figuratively. But I had seen, touched, even smelled a real flower, my favorite

being the little purple ones that Ambrose called lavender. He said he put them in his candles for peace and relaxation, and I believed him. Just remembering their intoxicating fragrance put me at peace. I couldn't imagine the delight of breathing it in for hours. How lucky he was to have such magic to grow in a frozen world.

"Your majesty must be incredibly strong to withstand such temperatures in only a gown and cloak," said the suitor. I was fairly certain it was Jarth de la Silverwood, and since he had access to citrus trees, it stood to reason his land grew wildflowers, too. And griffins were said to have roosted in the yew trees when they existed.

"My stole keeps me warm, Jarth de la Silverwood," I said, inclining my head back. I continued my pace, however, and he kept up. "And you know the rumors of course," I said coyly, looking over my shoulder at him briefly.

"Ah, I didn't know your majesty spoke so openly of magic," Jarth replied, grinning as he tried to keep up without completely entangling himself in his clothes.

I laughed, tossing my hair. "Not of magic, those are rumors spread between bored villages. No, the rumors of those blessed with shades of red for hair. It's rare in Frostvale, and much like our tempers, it keeps us as warm as a furnace."

"Red hair is indeed rare in Silverwood, too. It is extraordinary," Jarth admitted. "I nearly touched it without permission when I first met you. Can you imagine? I can barely believe I'm admitting this to you now."

"Your honesty becomes you, son of Silverwood. Thankfully, an international incident has been avoided, but just so you know, I would have given you extremely nice dungeon quarters. Rest assured of that." I couldn't help but be charmed by this boy, although he had no business being here. I wondered why he was—and why so early.

Jarth let out a laugh, all of his furs trembling with it. When he was done, he gasped,

“I was worried you would be as frozen as the river you were born on, your majesty, if I may be so bold. But your graciousness in letting us stay has been illuminating.”

“Illuminating, you say? Including our meager nightly feasts and lack of courtly protocol?”

“As refreshing as the chilly baths.”

“And the deep earth turnip soup?”

“As invigorating as a simple walk to the privy every evening.”

I grinned and stopped walking. I couldn't believe he'd mentioned the bathroom in front of me. So it was with honesty that I said, “Thank you for coming, Jarth de la Silverwood. I agree. It has been illuminating. Perhaps you could illuminate me further as to why you are pressing your suit in particular? Does Silverwood truly need more ice and snow for their freezers?”

Frostvale's main form of currency was our endless supply of ice that we harvested in thick blocks and packed with snow and straw we processed from imported grain. Lovely to show off for the richer kingdoms, but not exactly essential.

“No, I don't believe so. We have enough from our current trade agreement,” Jarth admitted, not quite meeting my eyes. He put his hands behind his back as if to walk that way, but found he couldn't quite reach both hands together.

“Are you quite alright, Jarth?” I asked, trying not to laugh.

“Oh yes. Quite. I did mention invigorating, right? I'm thinking of going ice skating tomorrow. Would you care to join me? Imagine! Strapping a blade to one's shoe and firing oneself off across hard ice. It must be the most exciting thing in the world.”

I noticed the deft sidestepping, as if Jarth were performing an intricate dance move at a ball. He might be young, but he was more practiced in the ways of courts than I was. For the time being, I let him gracefully slither out of my question, mostly because someone began blowing a trumpet near the Great Hall.

“Whatever in the Ilex Isles...” I began, biting it off. More suitors. Of course. “Excuse me, Jarth de la Silverwood. I enjoyed our conversation, but duty calls.”

I heard him yell after me, cupping his hands around his mouth, “Tomorrow, then?” but I pretended not to hear.

Mika met me at the entryway where we both watched in fascination as trumpets heralded the entrance of the last suitor to respond to our coronation summons, King Zacan of Coalcrest. The king wore black velvet with the sleeves slashed to reveal ivory silk at the wrists. He walked slowly at the front of a large party, larger than I intended to house and feed for a couple of weeks. Behind him rolled literal oaken barrels, as large as a man with troll blood in him.

“The coal business looks to be booming,” Mika whispered, impressed against her will. Her face was going through a complicated set of maneuvers worthy of any court jester. “Are those... barrels of beer? And is that... a juggler dancing on them?”

Quickly, I scooted up to the official dais with a chair we were calling a throne for now. The Coalcrest delegates had spread through the room like a rolling veil of fog that had infiltrated the castle grounds. I wondered why the king would possibly entertain thoughts of a Frostvale marital alliance when he clearly wanted for nothing except an heir. Or was it also a show, similar to mine? Make them think you were rich, just long enough to impress upon everyone the very stupidity of ever thinking to invade—at least, that’s what I’d done. The Coalcrest countrymen were at least dressed more appropriately. They weren’t underdressed such as the Violent Tides, and they weren’t overdressed such as the desert-like people of Skyfold Pass and the

more temperate Sunfalls and Silverwood.

A few maids spoke quietly together, discussing the giant barrels. They were from different villages, but had all answered Mika's call for work at the castle and seemed to be meshing well so far. A Coalcrest man sidled up to them.

"They're full of champagne. Have you tried it? Drinking a glass of champagne is like drinking a bubbling brook. Oh wait, I don't believe you've ever seen one of those here, have you?" the man chortled. "Of course you haven't! How silly of me. Tell me, I've always wondered if the piss would freeze in a stream the moment it left your body. I can't say I'm not excited to try."

"You forget yourself," she said stiffly, swishing away. Another one lifted her nose, flouncing off, while the last just gave him a long look, long enough to be immodest, making even me twitch with uncomfortableness.

"I guess it's true what they say about the women of Frostvale—as cold as their world," he muttered loud enough for all to hear.

My hands fisted into my brocade gown. I sent a blast of heat to him so fierce, his face broke out into a rash and he ran off, no doubt to stick his face directly in a snowbank. I chortled, imagining his face melting the snow into a man-shaped hole of slush.

My sister, while impressed with the maids' gumption, had similar thoughts, however, on the offering. "Besides the colored sea salts he gave to Mom, Gillian only brought frozen fish. It was basically just a free sample of what we get in our annual trade, although the creature was quite an impressive species, frozen solid with its eyes wide and unblinking. Rontu's large loaves of bread and bags of grain were fine enough, but I really enjoyed seeing all of the scented sachets from Silverwood. What luxury! And a lute."

“Jarth of Silverwood actually gave me these just now,” I interrupted, handing Mika the bouquet of dried flowers. I watched in pleasure as her eyes lit up, and she brought them to her nose to inhale deeply. “Keep them,” I told her.

“I could never!” she exclaimed, but not taking them from her face, her eyes now closed in concentration as if imprinting the scent in her memory forever.

“Of course you could. Anyway, I can’t be seen choosing favorites so early. It would be better politically for you to take them.”

Mika peered over the tops of the dried purple and pink flowers. “Well, if you insist. Politically, of course.”

“I do,” I said, wishing I could show her Ambrose’s thermal gardens. Eventually, I would show my whole kingdom. I just wasn’t sure how.

“Don’t look now, but I think some of the suitors are getting antsy due to the newcomers,” Mika whispered conspiratorially.

Like a battlefield bombardment, suitors arrived from every direction, all jealous of each other and all desirous of my undivided attention. I had to escape to the only truly safe place—at least, from suitors that was.

AMbrOSE

She had engulfed his thoughts ever since she'd stormed into his shop with her brother standing in as her Frostguard. It revealed so much about her, whether she'd intended it or not. How close she was to her family. How close they were to her. How desperate her situation at the castle was and how little she had, although what she didn't have in royalty, she made up for in loyalty. That mattered; that was important. That was, perhaps, the most important thing about her.

And now she was storming in again, a wildfire dangerously close to burning everything he had worked for down to bitter ashes.

"Ambrose," she said, huskily, he might have thought, if he was the hopeful type. "What are you doing?"

"Making candles, your majesty. Did you come to finish yours?"

She looked guilty. "I came to escape," she admitted. When he raised an eyebrow, she clarified, "Suitors."

"Ah, well I was about to deliver candles to the villagers. I can wait, however, if you want."

"No, don't let me stop you," she said, her eyes lingering on his hands.

He tilted his head, watching her deflate in disappointment. “Would you like to come?”

She opened her mouth to decline, but then paused, nodding once, pleasure lighting up her blue eyes. “Yes. Please.”

Ambrose took her at her word, gathering the finished candles, their wicks white and shiny and magic shimmering throughout, although he wasn’t quite sure how much of it ordinary humans could sense. He handed her a wicker basket and they began setting the candles inside, stacking the pillars neatly in a pyramid shape until the basket was full.

“What are these?” the queen asked, bringing one close to smell. It was scented with wild frost roses and attuned with a single phoenix feather. With the feather, it would never burn down low enough to go out, although why this was so rarely occurred to the recipients. They never wished to question their luck or relay it to relatives in case it caused their own good fortune to go up in a single wisp of smoke.

Ambrose still had to speak carefully, although he was starting to wonder how long he could keep ‘omitting’ details of himself to the queen. Or how long he wanted to. “Some simply provide extra warmth when lit. They go to families whose homes aren’t as filled with warm bodies or those living alone, although there are a few houses whose outer shell of ice was damaged by winds in the last storm and they haven’t been able to pack more snow and ice on just yet, so I’ve made extra for them.”

“And the others?”

“They are for things I sense are needed. Compassion, guidance. I have a few candles that help provide enough of the right sort of light to grow food, even.” He picked one up that was mottled with bright yellow petals. “These have been helping some

families grow small green crops in their homes, which has been helping with certain illnesses. Man–nor woman–was meant to live on seal meat and deep earth farmed grain alone, your majesty.”

“Indeed not,” she agreed. “The coronation ball is in less than a week, Chandler. Are you confident in your ability to continue supplying the villagers with candles and finish my own?”

“Yes.”

“Well then. Let’s go.”

Ambrose changed nothing. He didn’t skip any houses or shy away from difficult customers who demanded extra candles even when Ambrose knew the first ones burned just fine, not too black nor too smoky or too quickly. He did, however, tell Bessa to stay back at these houses, although that didn’t work, either. She marched up right along with him and the mere presence of the monarch on the street in front of most houses was enough to slacken the jaws of even the most difficult customers, including the rather-russet colored looking fellow who was as hard as the rocks he cut and shaped.

Dropian answered the door with a scowl, his hands fisted at his hips before he realized who stood next to the chandler. Immediately, he dropped into a bow. “Your majesty is making house calls?” he squeaked. “Would you care to see some stone work I’ve been undertaking in my spare time?”

Bessa didn’t even look helpless. She blinked once and smiled. “Of course, Dropian. I would love to see it.”

And that’s how they ended up spending a quarter of an hour staring at man-sized stones in various stages of development as the man shorter than the stones he hewed

pointed out inane differences that most likely made a lot of sense to other stone workers, but not a thing to either of them.

Bessa politely extricated them both after the fifth carving of a water nymph pouring a jug of spring water over her body that was apparently meant to “lift the spirits” and “recall better times” in a way that made Ambrose fully appreciate what a consummate politician she was. He was oddly impressed as they purchased two crayfish and pike pies from a street stall, flaky and warm and full of brown gravy. But they jumped from the frying pan straight into the fire in no more than five steps down the valley road.

“Your majesty! Over here!” A ball of fur was waving wildly across the road near the Dancing Snowflake, flanked by four more balls of fur. Representatives of Sunfalls, no doubt.

Bessa gave him a bit of a helpless glance, before plastering a smile to her face and greeting the prince of Sunfalls graciously. If that young pup knew her even a little, he would have realized how fake it was. He didn’t, of course.

“Queen Bessa, I’m glad I caught up with you. We’ve been looking all over for you! The coronation is so soon and I feel as if we’ve barely had the chance to talk.”

“I’m sorry, Prince Rontu. It was never my intention to hide. I’m merely out and about among my people.”

“And what a good queen you are for it,” he said, voice thick with cold. “Gods, it feels as if my throat is closing up, trying to keep my tongue warm!” he said with some relish. “How can you stand it?”

“As we always have,” Bessa said. “The cold does not claim us.”

“Words don’t keep you warm, though. Do you suppose I might have a few minutes?” he asked. “I was hoping to try these out.” He held out a pair of skates, looking pointedly at Ambrose.

Ambrose bristled, but it wasn’t exactly ill will the young prince was pouring at him, not like Gillian of the Violent Tides. It was just the naivety of all royalty when it came to commoners.

“I’d be happy to join you now, Prince Rontu,” Bessa said magnanimously. “Although Jarth de la Silverwood has also suggested ice skating, so perhaps we should wait and make another group event.”

“Has he?” Rontu said lightly, as if he didn’t care. “Then we should absolutely practice first, one-on-one your majesty. Make sure we’re up to snuff. You agree, don’t you... who are you?” he cocked his head at Ambrose.

“This is Ambrose, the village chandler,” Bessa said quickly. “His work is magical.”

“Of course, your majesty,” Rontu smiled gamely, looking to the left and below where Ambrose stood, actively trying not to glower. They only walked for a moment before Ambrose could see her back stiffening in response to something he so gaily said. Ambrose felt his heartbeat, usually so steady, all the way in his fingertips when the queen turned around and strode over to him. Something was wrong. He could sense her rising anxiety.

“Are you okay, your majesty?” he whispered. “Are you afraid of Rontu? He’s a bit of an overexcited pup, but is there something else?” Ambrose twisted the ring on his finger, a nervous habit he’d never been able to shake. Especially not when a beautiful queen stood guilelessly in front of him, her eyelashes thickly fringed on her cheeks. Although, to be fair, this was the first time it had ever occurred. Queens didn’t typically stand in front of him, guileless or not.

“No, I just... I can’t stay long. You don’t have any real magical candles that keep rivers frozen, do you?” she whispered back. Louder, she said, “And you will be able to finish our royal order by next week, correct? Supplying the villagers is well and good, but this order does take precedence now.”

Ambrose gave a curt nod, understanding blooming in his chest like an ink blot on paper. “Yes, your majesty. I completely understand.”

“Do you?” she asked, her double meaning clear.

He nodded curtly, “I do.” Already, his mind was calculating a thousand scenarios, wondering how to help her. He’d seen her fire magic at work on snow; there was no telling what she’d accidentally do when ice skating. She might have guessed he had some communion with real magic thanks to her fire fox pointing her directly in his direction for the courage candle, but she couldn’t be sure. Ambrose knew it was not a good thing to reveal it, but one thing was certain, she wasn’t going to melt the whole river accidentally for some suitor’s sake.

Ambrose watched the happy couple as the prince was allowed to lace her skate, and heroically explain the mechanics of gliding on ice, as if she hadn’t grown up doing just that. He had his doubts, but perhaps there was a suitor up to the task of being good enough for Bessa. Perhaps one would be suited for a back-throne role and be truly content as prince consort.

Because Ambrose knew something in his bones, something he never thought would happen. His world had been shaken upside down and altered forever by just one glance—the way she’d looked at him in wonder in the gardens would be the last thing he knew he’d ever wish to see. He couldn’t possibly go on being the same man he was before. If there was going to be someone other than himself with Bessa—and there was, of that there was no doubt—then that man had better be worth it.

“Have you skated before then, your highness?” Bessa asked, Prince Rontu like a puppy at her feet, wiggly and excited.

“Oh no. It never gets that cold in Sunfalls. But the mechanics can’t be that difficult!”

Ambrose could practically hear her thoughts from a stone’s throw away. Oh really? her face seemed to say. Not that difficult! Please, do tell me how to do something I’ve always done!

Ambrose called up his forest friends, thankful for the thickening gray clouds rolling in overhead. Fat flakes began to fall, muffling the queen and prince’s voices, but also helping to hide what was surely going to be more magic than Rontu had ever seen.

Ambrose knew that what he was about to do had the ability to fracture their relationship, even possibly hurt her badly enough to make her turn away from him, order him into exile, but he knew he had no choice. She needed him and he had the ability to help her. Or, at least, his snow fox friend did. Qanuk wasn’t his, not in the way that Eska was hers, but like all forest creatures, the snow fox responded to his needs and was more responsive to him than a simple-minded chipmunk or quick-beaked sparrow. They were of an accord.

He hummed a deep, vibrating tune that reflected the noise of the burrows Qanuk hibernated in, coaxing him out, calling him forth. He could imagine the pristine white creature shaking off the snow first from his head, licking each paw, his tail beginning to twitch as his whole body woke up. Ambrose didn’t commune with Qanuk often, preferring to let the wild creature stick to his habits, but Bessa wanted her secret to stay hidden and this was the only way he could think of how to help. Within moments, the snow fox had answered his call, just as he had at the frost fair when Bessa had accidentally begun to melt the ice there. She was clearly feeling high enough emotions that she might melt the ice again.

Qanuk blended against the deepening white of the snow storm, bounding across the glassy river. Where his paws touched the softening ice, silver plates of thick ice appeared, the snow helping to hide his maneuvering. The river was a sparkling blue mirror where Quanuk stepped, eerie and beautiful, and completely safe for the queen to skate across. She glided with great, long strides, her legs eating up the distance and making Rontu look even more like an excited pup than usual in his choppy short steps that was his attempt to keep up.

“I’ve never seen so much ice before!” he kept shouting, his breath coming out in white clumps of cold air.

Ambrose had to turn his back finally, unable to stand seeing them, knowing in his heart that this was one of the suitors to fear—if he had any right to fear a suitor at all. He walked a ways into the woods, Qanuk working the magic, as he wanted to get lost in the swirling whiteness. There was something going on with the trees, however, something that demanded his attention. Ambrose, who could feel all the veins in a leaf, suddenly felt as if the entire forest was a super highway of movement.

He removed a glove and placed his hand directly on the icy bark of an oak tree, which wasn’t so very icy at this moment. He yanked it back, turning his hand over in wonder, before quickly biting off his other glove and placing both hands on the tree’s center.

He could feel its heart beat. The tree was waking up. Sap was running. Dryads were stretching. The entire forest was waking up.

20

BESSA

I didn't like the look on Mika's face, but it seemed I rarely liked the look on Mika's face these days. Still, I wouldn't have it any other way. She was only doing what she thought best, even if her methods left a lot to be desired.

She stood at the head of the banquet hall and... Was that an arrow in her hand?

"We may have outlawed dueling in Frostvale," here she shot me a look, "but we do still have weapons practice. In honor of the arrival of King Culm of Skyfold Pass and Zacan of Coalcrest, Sir Wyot and I would be honored to sponsor an archery shooting competition."

A cheer went up around the room, hiding my groan.

"Jarth de la Silverwood, would you like to showcase your yew bows?" she asked. Clearly, he was her frontrunner. I think she just wanted more of his citrus and flowers.

Jarth stood up, all dignity and honor, and nodded gravely. "I would be honored."

An hour later, a cup of brewed lemon balm tea in hand, Mika and I stood bundled in furs on the snowy bank of the old garden. I had to pretend to be cold, which was harder than it seemed, because shivering only made me hotter. A trickle of sweat ran down my back as Wyot set up targets near the far end of the garden walls. Faceless

straw dummies stared blankly back at us.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked.

“Aye. You don’t want a wimp as a consort, do you?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“You need someone strong. Capable. Like you.”

“I guess. And archery is how we’re supposed to determine such things?”

“Aye.”

The magician and the frog stood near King Culm of Skyfold Pass, who was dressed in furs with his traditional blue and yellow silk robes draped over the top, looking extremely annoyed, which tickled me for some reason. A marriage to Culm would mean the same as one to Zacan of Coalcrest—both would put me in a politically advantageous position with a strong kingdom where I would not have to leave Frostvale indefinitely. They were both older than me, Zacan by a lot, but as soon as I gave them an heir, I would be free to ensure the safety and growth of my lands. It would have to be an absolute requirement in the marriage contract—that I would spend the majority of my time in Frostvale.

So why did my heart sink every time I thought about it? Could they really be that odious if they were never here?

Mika elbowed me right in the ribs. “Go mingle.”

“Mingle? At an archery competition? You know you’re not next in line for the throne if one of those arrows accidentally goes astray. I’m leaving it all to Eska.”

Mika didn't even dignify that with an eye roll. She did, however, jab me again.

Scowling and sweating, I made my way over to the suitors. I smiled at their bows and allowed King Culm to kiss my knuckles, his movements mechanical and stiff, no doubt a consequence of being frozen to his core. "King Culm, I'm so glad you made it. I hope you didn't find the travel too hard from Skyfold Pass? The journey is long and fraught, I'm told."

Before the king could open his mouth, the magician stepped between us, his little frog looking dazed and lost on his shoulder. "He did, but my king is much too generous to admit it. Honestly, all this talk of competitions and contests is below a king. I am not even sure why we accepted the invitation to shoot. Perhaps King Culm's time would be better spent being himself. Indoors."

Culm held up a hand, silencing his magician, but added no more to the conversation. Perhaps the king was wearied by the travel, which was completely understandable. The climate alone would have been a shock to the system—he went down a dry, arid desert road of spices and silks to a land where his breath froze in his mouth.

I could give him the benefit of the doubt, certainly, but my gut was telling me something else was at play. Eska also reacted strongly, and I could feel the soft vibrations of her low growl on my shoulder.

Jarth strutted as proud as a peacock, his silver hair mostly contained by the outrageously large wool cap that flapped around his ears.

"Is everyone equipped?" I asked. "Very good. We will start at thirty paces. After everyone has had a shot, we will move the targets back another twenty paces and so on until the last suitor is left standing."

"Does your majesty want to try her hand at shooting?" Gillian asked, a small grin in

his voice.

It was hard for me to decipher. Did he want to give me an opportunity to show off, or perhaps he wanted me to prove I was as capable a war queen as the Violent Tides required? My reputation must have preceded me.

“The longbow is quite difficult without training, but we’ve heard such tales of your prowess in war. I think we should all like to see it first hand.”

Ah. Definitely the reputation thing.

“Of course. Although you are aware I fired no shots in our war.”

“Reports from Frostvale were partial at best. Muddled, I think. A unicorn was involved?”

“The very same one from her birth,” Wyot piped up. Please, don’t let him wink at me. My brother was a lot of things, but subtle wasn’t one of them. He was a six foot five walking, killer teddy bear. “She’s blessed.”

“Has the unicorn appeared a third time? Does it live in the woods here?” Rontu asked eagerly, peering through the trees to spot a white mythical creature against a backdrop of snow.

Mika shifted her weight. “We believe so,” she said, lying through her sweet teeth. “But unicorns are wild and free. We could no more call upon her as we could call upon Gelid or any of the other gods to grant us favors.”

“Finicky things, then, unicorns,” the magician sniffed.

“Bound by no man, I’d say,” Rontu retorted.

“Called only by a queen,” Jarth added for his one-up.

Before it went to fisticuffs, I decided to do something. Without a word, I strung my bow, pulled back, and arced the arrow up, up, up—and straight down into the straw dummy. It thunked into its heart and its head bowed, as if I had actually killed it.

For a moment, only the constant wind in the bare trees made any sort of noise, then a roar rose from the spectators. My people jumped to their feet, clapping and cheering. Rontu picked me up and twirled me around with unbound enthusiasm.

“Great shot, your majesty,” he cried, before coming back to himself and setting me down. “Forgive me, your majesty. That was brilliant, and I was excited.”

“It’s okay, Rontu,” I began, but my response got lost in the chaos.

“Foul!” a suitor cried. “No touching the queen without permission.”

“Unfair advantage!” cried another.

“I want to pick up the queen, next!” yelled yet another.

It took all of Wyot’s six-foot-five frame to get them back on track without a diplomatic incident, and they began shooting, one by one. King Culm even shot, although I wasn’t sure he could even see straight through his sleep deprived eyes.

I gave each man equal amounts of my time as they were eliminated, murmuring comments about the wind blowing their arrows off course at just the wrong moment or the sun appearing from behind the clouds to blind them at just the worst time.

Soon, it was only Gillian and Jarth, the favorite, left. Gillian’s bicep began to shake as he prepared to shoot at ninety paces. I could tell he wasn’t going to take losing

well.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ambrose walking up to the back door of the castle carrying a crate of carefully crafted beeswax candles for my coronation. His gait slowed as he approached, realizing something unusual was taking place in the gardens.

At that moment, Gillian's shot went wide, flying wildly toward the castle, hurtling toward Ambrose.

"No!" I shouted, but the arrow didn't touch him. Twenty feet from impact, something happened, something I couldn't explain. I gasped at such an open display of magic. It had been so unexpected and so far away that no one else noticed. Only Ambrose and me.

I hoped.

The suitors gaped in silence, then began to argue, accusing the other of being bad marks and incompetent fools. I could feel chaos once again approaching.

"You must have shot it so far into the woods, it won't be discovered in our generation!" I said, trying to break the tension with flattery. It was so sugary sweet, I nearly had a toothache, but I held the smile steady.

All of the suitors stared doubtfully at me, suspiciously even, but Mika—wonderful, beautiful, smart Mika—rallied them all together.

She clapped. "Frostvale will be in strong, capable hands with the likes of any one of you at the helm," she said, and I had to avoid gagging at the thought. No one but me would helm Frostvale.

“Why don’t we reconvene in the Great Hall? We’ll have refreshments and bone-warming soup,” she added. “The bards will sing of Frostine. They say she still slumbers beneath the mountain, waiting for spring and her summer-born lover. Perhaps this is a sign of her return.” She looked around her feet as if expecting to see snowdrops where a frost goddess’s tears splattered the ground.

There were mutterings, talk of sending for their own cooks from far-flung homelands, but I ignored them. It was certainly not our cooks’ fault that they had only salt fish and barley to work with on most nights.

“Go ahead,” I said. “I must ensure my subject is unharmed. I will join you in a moment.”

Ambrose set down the crate that looked to be as heavy as me. He’d been holding it this whole time, and with every step I took closer to him, I had to fight the image of him holding me in other ways. Ways that included a lot less clothing. Together, we stood over what the arrow had transformed into. Between our feet sat a tiny yew tree, barely a sliver, but planted firmly in the ground, a tiny tuft of branches reaching for the sky.

“What happened?” I asked, my voice trembling. In the name of Frostine, please let him think it trembled because I was afraid of the magic we just witnessed in front of witnesses and not because of him.

Ambrose raised that damnable eyebrow, the one that knew I was trembling for him, but he said nothing about it. “Doesn’t your majesty know?”

“How could I? That was not my magic on display in front of the whole kingdom.”

He shook his head no. “I did not turn an arrow back into a twig, your majesty.”

“Well I certainly didn’t!”

He stared at me with that cool gaze that saw everything and revealed nothing.

I repeated myself. “I did not do that.”

“And neither did I.”

We stared at each other, and I knew I was wondering if maybe, just maybe, we weren’t just lying to the other, but perhaps to ourselves, too.

“I don’t think I did it,” I whispered.

“I don’t think you did it either,” he replied.

I frowned. “Then what do you think happened, Ambrose?”

He bent down and hefted the crate of candles over his shoulder, a grunt coming from deep in his throat as he flexed and strained with his heavy load. He turned to face me while balancing it. “I think, with or without Philip, magic is returning. I think, your majesty, that you are fulfilling your own prophecy.”

BESSA

Sneaking into my home village by covering up my hair and slipping out of the kitchen doors felt as decadent as the morning buns I was about to sink my teeth into. I followed the sound of the early afternoon frost fair, sliding through stalls on thick, blue ice until I reached my parents' bakeshop. I found if I went quickly and didn't linger, I had more control over melting things. There was also something tied to my emotions, but I couldn't quite figure that portion out yet.

Before I even opened the door, packed thick with snow on either side, I could smell it. The scent of sugar sent me into swoon, unlike the dried bundle of wildflowers from Silverwood. "Oh my gods, that is amazing," I breathed. "I must try cardamom. What is cardamom? Do I care what cardamom is?"

"You do care," my mother confirmed, her long brown hair braided tightly and wound around the top of her head as she popped out from behind the large circular ovens. Little tendrils had escaped in the heat of the bakeshop, which she pushed behind her ears with the back of her wrist. That action left a trail of powdered flour along her rosy cheekbone, and it was as familiar to me as my own name. For a moment, I wanted to sink into my mother's hug and let her hold me. Maybe have a little cathartic cry. Just a teeny one. "You're just confused by all the suitors, which is normal."

"Your mother favored none of them," Dad said, "But I thought there was something to that Rontu boy. I mean, he is at least age appropriate even if he's never seen an

oven in his life, but sheer enthusiasm counts for a lot in my book. And he had nice hair, when you could see it from under the furs. That Silverwood hair... your children would have both the eyes and hair of the royalty, I presume? Silver... I'm not sure, Bessa."

"Sweetie, what's wrong?" Mother asked, immediately sensing my mood. She opened her arms, and I fell into them, completely turning myself over to her tight squeeze, which was very tight indeed after years of rolling out dough and shoveling coal into furnaces.

"Nothing specific," I mumbled into her thick apron that smelled like sourdough and rye. "Just..." I flapped my arms around, but not very high since I was still being squeezed.

"Life?"

"Basically."

"With great power comes great responsibility. You're doing a fabulous job, sweetie. Certainly the best queen I've ever personally known."

"I'm the only queen you've ever personally known."

Mother peeled me off but kept her hands on my shoulders to appraise me. She winked. "Still the best."

"What did you think when a unicorn dropped me at your door? I had to have been someone for all of that fanfare. Right? Didn't you think it was completely insane? Or maybe even that I was... I don't know. A cursed child?"

"We really had no idea, and we didn't care, but we never thought you were cursed,

darling. You must understand, it was chaos. At the time, everyone was running around shrieking about vegetables taking over their houses and people were dancing and laughing and crying, and really, in the grand scheme of things, a unicorn dropping a baby off wasn't that wild."

"But you found out later it was the same night as the prince's birth, the queen's death in childbirth, and the prophecy. At the very least, you must have thought the timing was odd."

"Aye," my father said heavily, shoveling more coal into the hopper. "It struck us as unusual."

"Why didn't you throw me to the wolves or leave me out in the elements? Why take me in? Magic was so feared and desired and scary. It must have been a huge burden to consider taking in a child that was clearly... different."

My mother wrapped her arms around me again. "We could no more stop baking bread than do such a thing. Babes are all innocent and good Gelid, the way Mika looked at you with such wonder. Wyot kicked up a storm in my stomach, and I knew he wanted my attention to give his approval. It was easily settled."

"We didn't even discuss it," my father added. "Didn't need to."

My mother's eyes were soft as she looked at my father. "You gave me a look and that was that."

I sat down, taking the warm morning bun my mother offered, inhaling the sugared, earthy smell of the new spice.

"Take a bite," she urged.

With a raised eyebrow, I did. And it was glorious. A sharp crispness gave way to a soft, sugary interior. “The inside is gooey, but I like the crunchy exterior the best,” I decided. I took another one, and another, finishing it in three bites.

Our parents never let us have first rights over anything at the bakery. Always, the townsfolk came first. Letting me have this bun first was their way of showing me our relationship had changed, and they wanted to honor that. I no longer lived at home; I lived in the castle. I was no longer the bakers’ daughter; I was their queen. But with a swift kiss on my forehead and a tight squeeze, I was still theirs. I hoped I could prove to be the best of both.

A blast of cold air shot through the room, the door opening and shutting. Ambrose froze on the threshold, as shocked to see me as I was to see him. He stared in the most treasonous way, as if he wanted to eat me up with a spoon. Then, all at once, he seemed to remember himself, bowing at the waist and lowering his eyes and murmuring, “Your majesty.”

My father raised a silent eyebrow, glancing between the two of us. Only I noticed his sly smile, but he quickly clapped his hands, clouds of flour mushrooming in the air. “What will it be today, Ambrose? Same seeded loaf? Or can I finally tempt you with some exotic spices?”

“Just the loaf, thank you, Baxter. Save your spices for the townsfolk who will appreciate them the most.”

“One taste and I’m sure I can change your mind,” my father said, trying one last time. He was serious about his sweets. As were most of the villagers, since they were so rarely traded over things like coal and grain. Ambrose, however, shook his head. Stoic to the end.

“Actually, I was going to forage for a few more items needed for my candles,” he

said. "I'll simply take my usual order to go."

"So, Ambrose ," my mother said, emphasizing his name while giving me a quick glance. Uncannily like Mika. "How's the Chandler business?"

"It's the usual, Terrina. I thank you for asking. A tad busier with the coronation order."

"Oh, an order from the queen."

"Yes, but it's nothing I can't handle, I assure you, your majesty."

My mother looked ready to make mischief. That could only mean one thing: Wyot had already been here, no doubt indulging in more than cardamom. Gossip. My brother loved to gossip.

"Well, I had better go see to... things," I said, jumping off the bench and trying to escape in a big ruff and gown.

"You didn't mention things when you arrived," my mother said in faux innocence.

"I'm a very busy queen, you know. Decisions to make," I said before adding to myself, and brothers to bury .

"Yes, I'm certain," Ambrose agreed. "But could you spare a few minutes of time to approve some of the foraged items for your candles?"

"I'm sure she would," my mother answered for me. "No queen is too busy to attend to her people."

I let out a deep breath. "Yes, indeed, Mother."

And with that, I gave my parents kisses and escaped. I swear I saw them laughing as the door closed, and I wondered in amazement at how fast Wyot had informed them about the chandler and their daughters. Clearly, they thought it was me, and I was already up to my ears in royal suitors! I didn't need one more, thank you very much. Even if this man actually knew a hard day's work and had the body to prove it.

Both of us kept fairly quiet as we wound through the village, and I marveled at all we had and how cozy it actually looked despite our struggles. Smoke curled over snow-packed houses, and golden lamps glowed through the iced windows, making the whole town appear like stars in a darkening sky, bobbing in the universe with each flicker of a flame. Up close, houses had delicate ice work, hoary frost lace, and dangling icicles, catching the light as the sun began to sink behind the river's banks, making the blue ice dark and mysterious.

"Why didn't you even want to try the cardamom morning buns?" I suddenly blurted. While it wasn't a 'safe' question, such as one about the weather—cold, always cold—it was safer than anything else.

So why did Ambrose look so very guilty? His forehead furrowed and his eyes made a downward slope, his mouth a thin line.

"Ambrose! You hurt my parents' feelings, and I assure you, they'll just continue thinking it's their baking skills. Not whatever the real reason is."

"It's not them."

"Obviously."

"Or even the spices or the sugar."

I stopped walking. "Then what is it? You have me truly intrigued." A chill breeze

swept through the trees, ruffling the bare branches, long since dropped of any leaves. “Ambrose, you look like I just told you I put your pet dog on trial and condemned it to the gallows. Surely taking a bite of a morning bun isn’t as serious as all that.”

“No, of course. It’s not that it’s serious. But, look.” He swept his arm across the frozen landscape. “We live in this. This cold, cold, unforgiving world where you can’t even stay outside for more than a few hours or you’ll freeze.”

“Okay?”

“So, when the kingdom has sugar or new spices to try, there’s a literal celebration, worthy of some saint’s day. How would it be fair of me to take what others should have? I do not have a sweet tooth, and I have more than enough beauty to make up for any loss of sugar.”

It dawned on me what was happening. “You feel guilty because of your little garden, so you perpetually deny yourself.”

He nodded his eyes locked on mine, his way of acknowledging the truth of my words. I waited for more, but nothing came. Nothing but a stare held a few moments too long.

“Ambrose, why do you want to be here?” I asked.

“I told you. We’re looking at the items I’ve foraged for your candle.”

“Not here with me. Here in Frostvale.”

“It reminds me of home.”

“You grew up in a snow bank?”

He smiled at that. “I grew up where life was hard and people appreciated what they had. Where people came together to help each other survive and squeeze what they could out of life.”

I opened my mouth and closed it again, meditating on his words. He described my people perfectly. There were kingdoms to the north said to be equally difficult. Veilstone came to mind or the bands of traveling gypsies.

“Why do you want to be queen?” he asked.

And I knew, as well as he, that my answer was important. It mattered what I said, and I cared that he knew some small part of me.

“I’ve often wondered that in the last year,” I replied quietly. “I don’t have much hesitation, not anymore. I want to be queen because I think I am the best suited. Do our gods put these fates in our hands to see us dance? Do our gods give us these desires? Or do our desires become our fate? What I mean is... Do our desires become our gods, which we worship and follow and the gods never existed in the first place?”

The edge of Ambrose’s mouth quirked up in tandem with his eyebrow. “That’s quite the blasphemy in some circles.”

“We’ve gone through the old gods and the new. The only thing that remains constant are man’s desires. Look at my father, sunk into his cups and his despair. Those things became his mad desires, his god to follow. So I take this throne and I don’t pretend that it’s destined for me or that I am meant to be queen, let alone a good one. I take this throne knowing full well that I want it, pure and simple. I have ambitions for myself and my country. If I want to be a good queen, it won’t be because the gods ordained it or a prophecy declared it. It is my own mad desire and possibly epically large hubris that makes me attempt it—for myself and for my people.”

“So you crave glory? Is that your god, your mad desire?”

“I guess I would be lying to myself to suggest otherwise. I would have stayed in that dungeon or not gotten on the unicorn with a pilfered sword, yelling about unity.”

“All that realization dawned from one little prophecy burning,” Ambrose said. “I should have burned it earlier. I would have, if I’d known about it.”

“Oh, you didn’t make me see things in a new light, although perhaps you helped shine a better light on myself.”

Ambrose grunted once, a deep rumble that echoed in the pit of my belly. He jerked his head. “Come on. Let’s re-introduce you to your people.”

My heart jackrabbited nearly as fast as when I realized it was Ambrose walking into the shop this morning. “I... can’t.”

“Life begins at the end of your comfort zone, your majesty. With all due respect.”

I bit my lip. “They’ll recognize me.”

“That’s the point. They’ll love you for it.”

“Wyot told me not to go. He said I needed to become someone else to the people. Someone they could look up. I had to... well, basically put myself on a pedestal and act the part. No more racing around the inn and wandering the frozen river stalls. I had to be someone they could admire and be proud of. I had to be different.”

Ambrose snorted. “And you think ignoring the people is the way to do this?” He snorted again, although this time, it sounded more like disgust than amusement.

I marched around to face him, hands on my hips. “So what? You think I should just swagger into the tavern and announce that I’d like a beer? Will that make them respect the girl who used to get lost for hours in the woods and now decides if we survive our endless winter?”

“Simply put?” he asked.

“Well, go on!”

“Yes.”

I opened my mouth and closed it.

Ambrose continued. “You want their respect? Be one of them. You are one of them. You always were, no matter whose blood runs in your veins. So be one of them. I mean, really be one of them. That’s your strength. That’s your redemption.”

“And why, Chandler,” I said, my voice low with a tone that most would recognize as dangerous but he seemed to either not notice or not particularly care, “would I need redemption?”

But Ambrose didn’t answer with words. He knelt in the snow, digging until he plucked a frozen petal from beneath the ground. I couldn’t begin to wonder how he knew it was there. He put a handful in the pouch around his waist before offering a full flower to me. It smelled like the honey his bees produced. The honey that gave him such joy and such shame that he couldn’t share it more widely.

“Same reason I guess we all crave redemption. Because we all carry guilt.”

AMbrOSE

Ambrose knew he had pushed the queen fairly far. She needed it, just as she needed someone who was willing to speak the truth around her in plain words. There was so much more Ambrose realized he wanted to do to her. Press her against him, feel their heat commingling, dip her backwards, and remove the queen from the woman, just for a moment.

Instead of any of that, he grunted again—he seemed to be at a great loss for words where she was concerned—and changed course. He led the way to Noll's inn, a warm shining beacon on the frozen river.

The Dancing Snowflake's sign had long since been scoured blank by the harsh winds of the valley, but there was a faint outline of where the name had been burned into the wood with an iron brand a long time ago. Ambrose found the metal ring in the center of the oaken door and yanked it open, swirling snow following them both inside the dimly lit tavern. Ambrose's heart nearly melted when he saw Bessa's fingers shaking. He knew it was impossible for her to feel cold—no, she was frightened.

Gently, he guided her to a corner table to let her get acquainted before she was spotted. Luckily, she'd already tucked her flaming red hair under her winter cloak.

The town troubadour played a flute in the corner while the twin girls who sold vials of moonlight and enchanted pebbles sang alongside him. Their voices were as sweet as syrup boiled from trees, and they danced from table to table in a swirl of ribbons

and the scent of cider. Of course, no one believed they actually could bottle moonlight or encounter enchanted anything, but since they were orphans, the village always came together to throw them a hot bun and warm bowl of soup each morning and night. The dancing was something no one could stop, and perhaps their feet truly were enchanted. Hadn't Ambrose seen stranger things?

"It's exactly as I remembered it from the few times I'd come with Mika and Wyot," Bessa marveled.

"I take it you weren't a regular?"

She shook her head, still staring around the tavern at the low wooden tables, scarred from over a hundred years in existence, rows of half-filled barrels of ale, and the thick pillar candles, offering warmth and convivial feelings, magically produced by Ambrose himself to prevent arguments over said ale.

"My parents ran the bakeshop. Remember? We were just there. It requires getting up in the wee hours of the morning. Honestly, the word morning is a bit generous when many patrons of the Dancing Snowflake were still awake from the night before when we rose to start our day. And then with the war and finding out who my real parents were... it's been quite a long time since I've been here."

Ambrose enjoyed watching her face as she took it in, her eyes dilating in the low light. She giggled suddenly. "What?" he asked, unable to help himself.

"Cecil will not approve."

"A suitor of yours?"

Her face was horrified. "Absolutely not. Cecil is one of my ministers on the Glacial Council. He hates the Dancing Snowflake, fun times, anything scheduled after four

p.m., and basically free will.”

“Ah, I believe we’ve met.”

“Did you? Sounds impossible. Did I mention anything after four p.m.?”

“Yes, you did. I happened to see him at the castle when I spoke to your seneschal. Did you know that candles are a frivolous thing?”

She giggled again. “No one should be out after dark,” she said, making her voice gruff to mimic her minister.

“Too true. I nearly agree with him there except in very rare circumstances.”

“Like tonight?”

Ambrose raised a devious eyebrow as the tavern’s proprietor arrived, a huge smile stretching from ear to ear, which was only a little alarming coming from the sheer size of Noll whose family was once rumored to be related to giants of bygone eras.

“Come for a foamy draught, your majesty?” Noll asked, removing his cap to run a hand through his hair. Ambrose saw his hand was nearly shaking as badly as Bessa’s had been. His friend was actually nervous to serve Bessa! It was quite something to see the way the people reacted to her presence, as if they hadn’t seen her every day of their lives at the bakeshop.

“Yes, Noll. Whatever you recommend.”

“Right away, your majesty.”

“Noll,” Bessa said, capturing his large, hairy arm with a hand. “No rush. Honestly, no

special treatment. It's making me feel like an outsider!"

He laughed nervously. "You could never be an outsider. Like I was telling Ambrose here, you're ours through and through."

Bessa shot Ambrose a glance, as Noll hurried away to grab a metal tankard and dip it into the barrel of beer up front. "Talking about me, were you?"

"It's hardly like all that. In fact, I find it hard to escape your name. It's on everyone's lips all of the time. You've certainly won the ground game, at least in Honeywood Haven."

Her eyes glowed. "Oh? Mostly good talk then?"

"You need better spies at your disposal if you want to know what's being said about you. I assure you, I would make a poor spy. No stomach for it," he patted his belly as if to illustrate some point and inwardly winced. No stomach for it? What a daft thing to say. He'd literally been held prisoner for years. He had the stomach.

Noll brought out a steaming tray with three bowls. Before Ambrose could even ask who the third bowl was for, he plunked next to him and began to eat.

Of course.

It was the usual Frostvalen fare, lentils packed and stored and brought in from other kingdoms, swimming in a watery fish broth. The metal tankard's thick handle was heavy, most likely crafted from before the freezing. The bread was soft and savory, Bessa's father's specialty, seeded rye bread with cumin and fennel seeds crusted on the top. Only during good harvest years could he barter for the extra seeds to use instead of saving all of them to sow. Despite it all, this had been a good harvest year, something Bessa and her sister had been sure to trumpet throughout the land.

Cunning, that queen.

“Noll, are the rooms of the inn close to inhabitable?” Bessa asked suddenly.

Noll tilted his head, thinking. “I’m sure they could be with a little work. As you know, we’ve had no need for an inn in decades. I haven’t been inside myself in years.”

“I’m hoping that will change,” Bessa confided. “Do you think they could be inhabitable... rather soon?”

Noll rubbed his chin, turning it this way and that. “Depends on how soon, I guess.”

“If it would help,” Ambrose said, “I can offer free labor. What needs to be done?”

“It will need a good cleaning, no doubt,” Noll replied. “Dust is probably knee-high to a dwarf.”

“Thank you both. I will keep you updated, and a village-wide announcement will be coming soon.”

“Of course, your majesty.”

She tilted her head, watching the girls dance to the lute as if mesmerized. “Oh why not. Let’s just announce it now.”

“Bessa?”

She stood up, her palms steadying her against the table. “People of Frostvale! I have an urgent announcement!”

Ambrose watched in amusement as no one listened. She noticed him trying not to laugh, and her mouth went in a straight line, her eyes so very serious it was nearly comical enough to make him truly burst out laughing.

“Everyone!” she shouted, a bit more desperate sounding. When that still warranted only a few sideways glances, Ambrose lumbered to his feet. Sticking his fingers in his mouth, he whistled loud enough to shake a few icicles hanging outside on the inn’s eaves and send them crashing to the ground. Inside, a few diners winced at the noise, but Ambrose merely smiled blandly back.

Bessa turned to him and gave a curt nod. “People of Frostvale,” she began again, her voice at normal volume. “We are going to have a ball. For my coronation. All of the villages are invited, but I wanted to hold a special place of honor for Honeywood Haven. My home.”

“Here, here,” someone shouted, slamming a mug on the table, frothy beer pouring over the lip. More choruses joined, and soon there was singing—they didn’t need, nor want to know the specifics. They simply trusted her.

“Your confidence in me and your bravery should not be overlooked, and I vow to be worthy of it as long as I have breath in my body. I am Honeywood Haven and Honeywood Haven is me.”

This was the Bessa the village needed to see and believe in. Not some distant queen who won a war. Not someone pretending platitudes of grace to appeal to the people and keep her head. They wanted a Bessa who showed real, genuine care for her people, because she was the people.

The cheers were a low rumble at first, a few clinked tankards that soon swelled like an avalanche, picking up speed and sound. Noll had to offer free tastings of ale to get it to die down. Finally, he came back to their table, still looking impressed. At the

response, at the ball, at Bessa, or all three, Ambrose couldn't be sure. He bet all three.

The town minstrel began playing in the corner, striking up a song he thought of on the spot about Bessa the good queen, the fairy queen. The bells on his legs made merry noise as he stomped in time to his music, urging the crowd to join in. For a moment, Ambrose paused. He shouldn't, but he wanted to. For her, he told himself. Not for him. He wanted her to be seen as the beautiful, benevolent queen that she was. He held out his hand, begging her with his eyes to take it.

Spinning her around, her dress ballooned left and then right, the cheers louder, the song faster, her body closer. Even Ambrose felt dizzy and lightheaded, enjoying the dance too much. He continued to turn her, watching in desire as she laughed so hard her breasts threatened to escape her bodice. Ambrose was so deliriously aroused. He could imagine secreting her away, kissing her soft and slow, devouring every first moment of newness with her. He wanted to run his fingers across her bare skin and watch her shiver in reaction, pull her in closer to kiss the silkiness of the delicate skin behind her ear, and he was nearly breathless at the smell of her—gods, it was so strong. It was beautifully ancient, divinely inspired.

Little flowers unfurled through cracks in the floor, purple and small, and no one noticed. No one, except Ambrose. Quickly, he stomped on them. No one could notice.

Fortunately, they withered the moment he let go of the queen. The moment his fingers unthreaded from the thick of her wild, untamed hair—and how did they get there in the first place?—the flowers shrunk back to their seed coats, their chance at life extinguished.

He twirled Bessa away and bowed deeply. It was a cowardly move, one to ensure he did not see her face. A move designed to pierce his heart and shackle his wrists more securely than ever before.

“We don’t seem to need much practice for a coronation ball,” he said lamely, looking to Noll instead.

“No, it seems we do not,” Bessa replied, and although he couldn’t see her face, he felt her confusion and tension in his sudden disregard and distance. “A ball will be grand.”

“Aye, a ball will be grand, your majesty,” Noll said, “But, excusing my ignorance, what does that have to do with my rooms?”

“Oh, that.” Bessa smiled. “How do you feel about some visiting dignitaries staying in your fine establishment? I don’t think the suitors and their immediate valets will stay here—they’ll insist on the castle—but the rather larger entourages would do best to mingle. We are simply failing at housing them at the castle, and I need to face facts. The rooms aren’t anywhere near ready at the castle and more dignitaries arrive daily. You could charge them, Noll. Put any upfront expenses on me. We’ll figure it out. Buy what you need from Lorcan for furs and extra wine from Duskborne. Outfit the Dancing Snowflake as befitting a queen’s ball.”

Noll bowed his head. “Aye, that will be grand, my queen.”

Ambrose watched as Bessa set up court at the scarred wooden table in the only tavern in town, accepting a curtsy, a bow, a small tidbit of murmured goodwill and good tidings from anyone who approached. Soon, there were more in line to say hello to the queen than there were to get food or drinks, and she stayed until everyone had their turn. He heard murmurings about how good she was, how beautiful, how perfect. He even heard a whispered conversation about the possibility that she truly was of the prophecy and even Frostine reborn, awoken after a century of slumber and waiting for her summer-born prince.

The villagers that were sure she was Frostine reborn were firmly on the warm climate

kings and princes. Culm, Jarth, even Rontu although he was more temperate. Then, there were also the murmurings of what might happen if she chose the wrong suitor, how it might be the ruin of Frostvale. Bessa was walking a very fine line.

Ambrose knew an entire kingdom was at stake and still, he wanted to confide in her, unburden himself. Tell her the truth, make their world about them. He wanted to give her the whole truth and let her decide what to do about it. But that was selfish and she was the queen. She had the power to ruin him. Or worse, hate him. And now that he was sure their touch ignited their magic, he knew they had the power to burn it all down.

BESSA

The next morning, I slipped out of the castle before dawn. Like an addict, I had to smell the flowers again before I dealt with the stresses of the day. I had to touch the velvety soft petals of the sage plant and feel the fuzzy heads of the sunshine-like chamomile. I had to immerse myself in Ambrose's secret world. Surely he wouldn't mind.

I lifted up my thick layers of silk and brocade and confidently stepped over the invisible line of protection candles Ambrose kept around this garden. There was a soft pulse followed by a gentle give as I went through them and entered his sanctuary. Well, I was queen, wasn't I? This was for the good of my people, so really, I was merely ensuring my kingdom was up to standards.

I thought it would be easy to visit the garden after the first time. I thought I wouldn't make a fool of myself, that the greens and purples and blues wouldn't make my legs weak and my mind like soup, but the moment I stepped through Ambrose's barrier, the endless variation of color tightened my chest, curled through my lungs like creeping vines, and took my breath away. Already, there were trees, some bearing blossoms that would soon bear some sort of fruit, small and hard at first but waiting for the opportunity to grow fat and juicy. And another bee! I spread my arms and spun. Somehow, even the bees had found their way home.

I should be thankful there was no one around to see me act so foolish, except for Eska who had already leapt ahead, melting snow as she ran. It only took a few moments

before I toed off my boots and sank my feet into the warm soil, gasping at the totally foreign sensation. It was so soft and loamy-smelling. Little mushrooms erupted around my fingertips, their gray caps more like velvet than any of my velvet gowns.

Someone cleared their throat, and I whipped around, my heartbeat pounding in the tips of my fingers and toes. Instead of slowing down when I saw who it was, it actually sped up, as I became acutely aware of my dirty feet and bare ankles. “Ambrose! I’m sorry, I...”

He crossed his arms, waiting, but I had no good response.

“You felt me break the wards, didn’t you?” I sighed. “Should have known.”

Ambrose echoed my sigh, coming across the wards as well, stopping for a moment to prune and pinch back dead buds and encourage new, more vigorous growth. “To be fair, magic is new to all of us. We don’t know what we don’t know.”

“I’m sorry for not telling you.”

Ambrose lifted an eyebrow, the opposite side of his mouth quirking up. “An apology from the queen. I’ll remember this day forever.”

“I’ll rescind it if you keep going,” I threatened. “Town proclamation even.”

He held up his hands in a surrender gesture, but the half-smile stayed put. “I would never dream of teasing your majesty. Not anymore, at least,” he amended. “And I would prefer if you came whenever you wanted or needed to come. It helps alleviate the guilt.”

“We’ll figure it out,” I said quietly. “How to bring it all back.”

“You keep the faith of the old gods?”

I shook my head, bowing down to smell chamomile or feverfew—I still couldn’t tell the difference. “Not exactly. I keep the faith of magic.”

“And I keep my faith in you,” he said.

We were both quiet, and Ambrose let me wander through the brilliant rows of purple, pink, and even blue flowers. I had never imagined such variety in one color. Never considered it before.

“I won’t stay long,” I replied, already moving towards my boots, but staring longingly back at the beds of flowers and hanging hives of activity.

“Whenever you need to go,” he answered. He clearly noticed my reluctance and slow progress at a simple boot buckle. “Did you know that bees prefer blue shades?” Ambrose asked. “They can’t see red.”

My eyes widened. “I never once thought about what a bee sees,” I admitted. “How did you learn so much? Did someone teach you? Was it your parents?”

I noticed the lines around his mouth tightened. “No, they didn’t,” he agreed. “But it was in their blood and mine, as well. I think my family used to keep bees, and when I started, that knowledge sort of seeped into my being.”

“I don’t think it works that way.”

“For some, it does. I merely started paying attention to what the animals were telling me. They never lingered long on reds or pinks, hopping right over to the cooler colors.”

“You’re very observant, then.”

Ambrose began to amble again through the rows. He ran his fingers over the clumps of lavender. “I have noticed a preference for the lavender lately, which is making most of the current batch of honey more earthy than floral. On my journey here, I went through Sunfalls and traded for a few apple seeds. I’ve finally found the perfect spot to plant them. I think their blossoms will add a certain sweetness to the next batch.”

He gestured to the trees I’d seen earlier, unsure at the time what sort of fruit they held in their buds. Apples. We traded for a lot of them, easily stored and easily shipped as they were. But a freshly picked apple? My mouth watered, but I masked it by saying stoutly, queenly, “You were in Sunfalls?”

“I’ve traveled a bit. But I am happy to be in Frostvale,” he said firmly as if the subject was closed. He was closed, shut as firmly as an iron door.

“I was merely curious, Ambrose. I don’t think you’re some spy.” Eska snorted. Ambrose didn’t respond. “Right?”

“I could no more be a spy than a sailor. I get seasick just thinking about the sea.”

He did appear a little pale around his mouth, and I had to stifle a laugh at his very serious expression. He seemed to ground himself by kneeling among the flowers and getting his hands dirty.

“It’s pure living magic, flowers,” he said, still weeding. “They’re not just some pretty thing to snip and set in a vase. Their petals could offer my candles so much life, the beeswax a clean source of light, and the honey... Well, I would love it...”

“What? What would you love?” I urged at his silence. “Tell me, Ambrose.”

“Okay,” he began slowly. “I hope to have enough soon that you won’t need a trade deal for our sugar source. That we can supply our own. It will certainly upend and disrupt the current climate, but I noticed our sugar trade partner didn’t even send a suitor. So perhaps that’s a good thing.”

“That would be a feat. Frostvale would certainly be the talk of the Isles after that. It remains to be seen whether it would be a good thing or a scary thing. We’ve been through enough wars that I fear I don’t have the stomach for any more confrontations.”

“I have complete faith that your diplomats will work to secure an advantageous trade without cause of war.” Ambrose stood up, dusting the dirt off of his pants. “Your brother wandered into my shop the other day.”

My head went up sharply. “Did he?”

“He did indeed.”

“Not for candles, surely?”

Ambrose barked a laugh. “That was his excuse, but no, not for candles. We ended up walking a bit to forage and he... well, it might be easier if I showed you.”

He beckoned me down a forest trail where they had clearly been walking through the shin-height snow, weaving a trail. “Wyot actually spotted these.” Ambrose knelt in the snow, a clear damp depression where it had inexplicably begun to melt, far from the warded vent, far from me, far from Eska.

I knelt beside him, my dress ballooning around me before I tamped it down around my ankles. The rest of the snow melted around us as I did, but it was clear what was already there. “I didn’t do that,” I whispered, afraid to scare the neon green seedlings

that had bravely sprouted through a crack in the ice, stretching for the sky.

“I know,” Ambrose whispered back, his deep voice vibrating in my sternum. “But something did, and I have no idea what.”

Urgently, I grabbed his arm, a jolt of awareness at what I’d done in touching him racing through me. “We have to protect them. What are they? Oh, I don’t care, I just want them to grow!”

Ambrose stared at my fingers wrapped around his bicep as if he wasn’t sure what to make of it—or me—but he pulled his gaze up to my face. “Ferns,” he said. “They will carpet the forest floor. See how they’re curled up in the shape of a shell?”

I nodded, wordlessly.

“Magic is melting the snow. And you are responsible.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Even if you’re not the one prophesied to bring back magic, you are still doing it. You’re making the opportunity for it to thrive and venture forth by sheer will. You are doing this. You just have to keep being you.”

“Ferns,” I said, trying out the word on my tongue. I liked how it made my teeth graze my lower lip when I said that, and from the way the chandler stared at me, he was also having some feelings about my lips. Self-conscious now, I stopped repeating the word ferns, which didn’t even sound like a word anymore, and pursed my lips.

I saw color flare under the collar of his thick, woolen cloak, and it made my own neck burn as hotly as when Eska wrapped herself tightly around me. I couldn’t help it. I peeped out, “Ferns.”

Ambrose looked as if he wasn't sure whether to laugh or not. I saw his hand move toward me, and I suddenly imagined it cupping the back of my head as he leaned me down for a kiss, but he gestured instead to the village. Perhaps, I had read too much into it. I was seeing things that weren't there.

He cleared his throat. "I have some orders to fill at the shop. Would you like me to walk you back? That is, if you've finished here."

"I think I better be finished. I can't put off seeing some of these suitors any longer, although Mika has gotten very creative at trying."

Ambrose jolted a step forward, a step I doubted he consciously meant to take. "If you need one more excuse, I might be able to supply one."

I turned my head, intrigued. "Oh?"

"Yes. Your coronation candles will be much stronger if you help make them. Infuse your magic into the wax and breathe your purpose into them."

"Me?"

"You are the queen, and it is your coronation," he said with a wry smile.

"I know that," I replied, a little short. "But I am not the master chandler. You are."

He beckoned me forward, the ground softening at our feet the longer we stayed. I watched as more green seedlings bravely pushed their way up and unfurled in our heat.

"We'll craft candles of calmness for the proceedings, prosperity for the realm, and protection. Is there anything else you'd like for your coronation?"

“Not courage?” I asked, gently needling him.

“I think you’ve proven you don’t need any help in that department.”

I felt my cheeks flame at the compliment. Unsure what to say, I turned around, keeping my shoulders straight and steady when I wanted to melt like one of his candles and collapse in his arms.

It was getting darker in the woods, and we reluctantly made our way back to his candle shop, happy to be wrapped in the soft silence that only bare woods full of snow in deep winter could bring.

The moment we arrived, I couldn’t help but breathe in and let it out with a sigh. I loved everything about this candle shop and what Ambrose had done with it. “Your shop is so homey,” I remarked, running my fingers along jars of solidified wax and dipping my hands into bags of dried petals and herbs, letting them cascade through my fingertips. “And it smells so good.”

“Are you fine with following me into the back room?” he asked. “I can bring everything else up front.

“I’ll follow you, Chandler,” I said, swishing past him and practically leading the way. “You may be twice my size, but you don’t have Eska.”

For her part, my fire fox chirruped once as if to laugh at me and that was that. It was clear she whole-heartedly embraced the man, despite all of his little omissions and half-truths. It was still hard to believe he kept flowers in a frozen kingdom, but I could hardly fault him for not blurting out his entire life story the moment I barged into his shop and demanded magic. Not yet, anyway.

“You’ll probably want an apron,” Ambrose said, giving me a long glance, his eyes

dragging up and down my body, making my pulse beat agonizingly against my throat. Could he see it from where he stood? It felt so obvious, like a thumbprint on frosted glass or an under-proofed loaf of bread.

“Thank you,” I swallowed hard, as if trying to swallow my heartbeat back down to my chest.

“Would you need help tying it?”

“I’ve managed without a lady’s maid my entire life,” I reminded him stiffly. “I think I can tie an apron string.”

“As you wish.”

I regretted it the moment I said it, since it meant the Chandler merely handed me the leather apron and walked away. Ambrose lit a fire in his hearth, adding extra logs and stoking it until ready. He placed a large iron pot over it, filled it with the solidified wax, then handed me a long-handled iron spoon. “Make sure the wax melts but doesn’t begin to bubble. It will blacken the end product if it boils.”

“I take it that’s bad?”

“Your Majesty is a fast learner.”

“And I’ll take the compliment.”

“As it was meant.”

Ambrose began cutting wicks and dipping them in the quickly melting wax to harden. He threaded them through the molds and tied off each end. “Okay, it looks ready. Pull the pot away from the heat with this,” he said, handing me a long hooked tool.

“Now what?”

“Now, we make magic.”

I watched in awe as he began choosing what to add and how much. Deftly, he dripped four drops of some pungent smelling oil, tore leaves off of a dried rosemary branch and rubbed them between his palms over a mortar, added purple lavender petals, and three dashes of grains of paradise, and a single damask rose bud before pounding it all together. He beckoned me closer. “Now, I want your majesty to take my place. Picture your kingdom and your coronation exactly as you want them. Breathe your magic into these ingredients. Embody your dreams and thrust them into your candle preparations. Everything here is from Frostvale’s own land, her own soil. You are crafting a pure Frostvalen candle with pure Frostvalen intentions.”

Swallowing with difficulty at his vivid imagery, I did as I was told. It was harder than I expected to concentrate solely on the nebulous future and not on the flesh and blood man standing right next to me, his voice deep and sure, his body taking up all of my space and all of my oxygen.

Together, we poured the wax into the molds, his steady, calloused hands over mine, swallowing them whole. His breath was warm against my ear and his body much closer than any man’s body had been before. My body felt like the one engulfed in flames, and had anyone ever been this warm before in the history of the world? And if so, how had they been able to stand this heat without succumbing to ashes? Was this the moment he would kiss me? What would it be like? Dark and urgent, a flurry of deepening desire that had to be met before suitors took over my life again, or would it be soft and unsure?

I couldn’t. I was queen. There would be riots. There would be diplomatic incidents. This was not some passing fancy to indulge and dismiss. This could not be.

Slowly, Ambrose set down the tools. My heart beat so soundly in my chest, I could barely hear the clunk of the metal on the table. Desperate for something to ground me, I picked up and squeezed a handful of bright petals I had no name for. Then, I turned around, my eyes half-closed, my lungs burning. I couldn't even manage to breathe. My grip tightened around the petals, my nails digging into my palms. He hadn't stepped back yet, still completely in my space.

With a single finger, he tilted my chin up to meet his gaze. My mouth was dry; I couldn't move, instantly becoming no more than a rabbit caught in a hypnotic gaze. His woodsmoke scent was deep and complex, his eyes a kaleidoscope of mossy shades of green.

When he spoke, his voice was low enough to vibrate the tools on the workbench and certainly my entire being. "Bessa."

"Yes?"

An urgent knock resounded through the candle shop, startling me and I pulled away from his touch. Ambrose had kept steady, but he also appeared surprised, a deep line forming across his forehead as he cocked his head, listening.

"Stay here, your majesty," he ordered me and I was inclined to obey for once.

With a backwards glance, his eyes dark, Ambrose went to the front of the shop, leaving me rattled and unsteady. I unclenched my fist, not having realized they were closed to begin with and the petals I'd been holding fell out, crinkled and broken. The bruising of the petals had released their sharp, perfumed scents, their own trial by fire making them sweeter.

I crept closer to the door, straining to hear the conversation. It sounded like a woman, but there was also muffled sniffing, like a child crying. I put my ear to the door and

closed my eyes to concentrate.

“He was just playing in the snow drifts when all of a sudden, it all melted. Snapped the tree branch in half and he fell. Couldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own two eyes, Chandler.”

“Broke the arm, I’m afraid. I’m not sure how I can help, however. You say the physician sent you?”

“Aye, he did. Told me I had to get your candle. You’d know the one.”

“Did he?” Ambrose said, although that was much quieter, as if to himself. “Let me see what I can find.”

I had to scramble very un-queen like away from the door as I realized he was coming back, my chest heaving as I made it to the work table. Ambrose merely lifted that devilish eyebrow again, but the smirk was enough to show that he knew I’d been eavesdropping. Still, he said for my benefit, “Local lad broke his arm falling on some ice. The village physician already set it, but I’m going to wrap it with spider web and give him a candle with feverfew to prevent infection.”

“Does everyone know the candles are infused with real magic?” I asked, watching him rummage deftly through his supplies before coming up with a light buttery yellow candle that smelled like daisies.

“I’ve never said they were.”

“Chandler.”

He continued as if I hadn’t spoken. “They only have the superstition that it works and the faith that it works well.”

“You mean, they have faith in you.”

Ambrose paused at the door, his eyes molten. The sight of him taking up the entire space in the doorway, the way he looked hungrily at me, made me wonder about every decision I had ever made. Finally, he nodded once.

“As you wish, Majesty.”

The shutting door clunked against my heart as surely as the wooden frame. I sank against the work table, upsetting vials and disturbing the precise work of his magic. That’s what I felt like. That I was disturbing his precision by barging into his life. But, I reminded myself, I hadn’t barged into anything. He’d come here. To Honeywood Haven. That had to mean something.

AMbrOSE

Ambrose barely felt the candles leave his hand as he offered them and their gentle healing magic to the worried woman. He wondered wildly for a moment if the mother could smell Bessa in his shop as he could, and he wanted to laugh just as wildly at the thought. Of course she couldn't. Bessa smelled of the old gods, of the sultry heat of summer, of grain ripening under a hot sun. It was nothing mere mortals could detect. That scent, that commanding performance—it all belied the real woman beneath the queen. Ambrose found all he wanted to do was uncover the real woman. That scent, her musky scent... it consumed him like a sweet ache.

He felt his hands go slightly numb as he walked back into the workroom, wondering how he could manage not to sweep everything off the table and place her on top of it. Numb. Yes. He merely had to make his whole self go numb. She knew her role; a queen never forgot, even an accidental one. Perhaps accidental ones even more so.

Bessa looked up from where she was examining the candle they'd created. "Ambrose, I..."

"Yes?"

She pulled at her lip with her teeth and turned away. "How many more candles should I have for the coronation?"

He cleared his throat, coming around the side of the table and instantly regretting it.

She was so close, her textured hair a wave of red down her shoulders, and he wanted to let its silkiness run through his calloused hands. To let strands get caught in their roughness, to pull on it, pull on her. He wanted to leave a mark so he'd know it was real, but he dared not. Not even a nibble, not a love mark just below her collarbone, easily hidden, not anything. He would not jeopardize her.

She wore a velvet gown the color of cream. Birds embroidered in silver threads flew across the bodice, and her sleeves were thick with seed pearls. She gleamed like the goddess Frostine, like midnight ice and moonlight.

“Chandler?” she asked, her voice quavering, and he got the distinct feeling that she'd said his title in order to steady herself. The thought she would need to do such a thing was heady, it was drunkenness, it was too much.

“A hundred more,” he said, each word an aching tooth being pulled from sore gums.

“That's a great many. We will have to spend a lot of time together in close proximity.”

“Aye.” He knew he would have offered a thousand if it had meant more of her presence.

“Then we must make the most of it.”

Repeating his words from the first time they met, their meaning laced with as many layers as before, he asked, “Are you going to tell me what you want or do I need to beg?”

Slowly, her mouth curved up in a smile, and she replayed her part as well. “I thought it was obvious.”

That look undid the last of his resistance. Slowly, his hand stretched out to touch her, to truly feel her. His fingers, so used to the delicate work of magical candlework, where not one rimed petal or dot of dust from a unicorn's horn could go astray, became suddenly clumsy and unsure as he began to untie the soft silk of her quilted corset. He had undone enough corsets to know the process, but a queen's corset... Did it matter that she grew up common or did it make it somehow worse? He couldn't tell, could only swallow thickly.

She reached back and took his hands, stilling them. "Ambrose." She pulled him in front of her. "Look at me."

He met her gaze steadily, although his thoughts were a storm. "Bessa. I'm sorry. I should have never—gods, forgive me. I don't want to leave Frostvale, but I will if you ask. Immediately. I will pack my things, no, I will finish your candles and I will pack my things straight after?—"

"Ambrose." His name was soft in the quiet of the candleshop. "Do not be afraid. I want to feel you next to me."

His world telescoped to pure sensation. Gone was his shop, his duty, his secret. Gone was the commoner and the queen. It was the simple pleasure that everyone felt, the simple pleasures that lust made of them all. It was the great equalizer of men. Warm skin, a yearning to touch and be touched, a glimmer of acceptance. It was intimacy in its most pure form, distilled to its essence. He could only think about one thing: her body, warm and living, in front of him.

Still, he would have to be careful. She was the queen and she had suitors. He could put all of Frostvale at danger, but if she wanted this—wanted him? Couldn't she, like any king of old, take what she wanted if he freely gave it? All of those suitors surely had mistresses. Why shouldn't she? And couldn't he be hers alone, entering the castle through some secret passageway the old kings had built for their mistresses?

And a small part of Ambrose felt a certain pride that his queen, so powerful, had chosen to take him for her own. And another part, the guilty part that refused to accept sweets, knew he was making excuses to take what he wanted. Her. As long as he did not enter her, perhaps it was fine.

And then he didn't think at all. Bessa whimpered, her mouth burning against his skin in the shape of her lips. There was nothing practiced about their passion, only want and need.

Her soft noises were hesitant at first, and it made breathing difficult, nearly impossible. It made self-control doubly so, and Ambrose prided himself on his self-control. It had seen him through long bouts in cells, wrists shackled together, and now he could only imagine wanting to be shackled to this queen for eternity.

Her bodice undone, he went to his knees, kissing her knuckles as he knelt, prostrating himself to kiss her legs, acquiescing to his queen forever and always. His hands were still shaking, but no longer clumsy as he rolled up the bottom of her gown, damp with snowmelt, and kissed the warm skin of her thighs, inhaling the musky scent of her. He realized no one else in the world had ever had this honor or this pleasure and it drove him temporarily insane to imagine any of the suitors' faces or fingers or anything else near her cunt.

What would become of Frostvale from this moment? Would this be the moment he looked back and knew he should have shown more restraint? He should have been strong enough, smart enough, brave enough to say no? To his queen? To his heart?

Then she sighed, sinking into his embrace, and he knew he was none of those things.

He put his hands on her knees and worked his way higher, nibbling the exposed flesh, tracing the contours of her freckles. She moaned as he got closer, and the sound nearly drew him mad with desire. She smelled stronger now, her arousal wetting his

fingers just at her entrance. She always smelled impossible, like summer in a world of eternal winter, but now that smell mixed with her desire and made him lose his head a bit.

He could feel the heat pulsating, as he inched his way around her slit, teasing her. If this was all they ever got to share, he wanted it to last. So, instead of sucking and licking, he kissed his way up her hips. Her back curled with want, and she rubbed herself on his belly.

Slowly, he helped her slip entirely out of her dress, exposing her breasts. Her nakedness before him felt like a crime, like an exotic delicacy in a harsh world where delicacies shouldn't exist. He hovered over her, taking in her curves, the soft pink of her nipples. They hardened under his gaze.

“Chandler?”

“Yes, your majesty?”

“As your queen, I command that you continue.”

He smiled at that and bent forward, his tongue working its way slowly over each nipple with the infinite care that he gave his candles. She groaned in pleasure again, her hands running through his thick hair. With each lick, he felt her grip tighten, and that simple gesture spurred him on, kissing and biting until finally she lifted his head and stared into his eyes.

“I want you inside me.”

Although his entire body ached for that release, he shook his head. “It is too risky. Wars have been fought for less.” Her face looked hurt, and he smiled, trailing a finger from her cheek, down her collarbone, to her slit where he slowly inserted one finger

and then another at her gasp. “But I will not deny you my adoration,” he promised.

With that, he began to work his way back down with his lips next. He kissed the gentle curve of her belly, impossibly soft in a world so hard. “I adore this,” he said. He kissed her golden-red hairs, which smelled as fragrant as one of his flowers. “I adore this.”

When his tongue finally parted her lips and tasted her, she gasped louder than before. In that moment, he was positive that he was the first person to ever lay with her. His queen had chosen him for this moment, and he would not disappoint her.

Deeper and deeper he licked in rhythm to her hip thrusts and moans. Her legs spread, laying almost flat against the wooden floor, and her ankles locked behind his knees for support, as if she were holding onto a plank in the middle of rough seas.

He felt her breath grow fast and shallow. Their eyes met, and she whispered his name. He had never seen anything so beautiful in his life as the O her mouth formed as she spoke it.

As his tongue worked, one hand reached up and encircled the point of her nipple. She grabbed his hand and pressed it into her flesh, the fullness of her breast filling his palm. He squeezed and kneaded.

She was close now. He could feel it, the heat building in her belly ready to explode, and the possibility of bringing her to the peak of pleasure made him want her more. He began at the bottom and licked long and sure in steady movements, his other hand massaging her pearl.

It only took a moment before she tensed, her mouth open and her eyes distant, lost in a world of pleasure. A world he had made for her. She screamed, loud enough for half the valley to hear, but he didn't care. Let them wonder at the sounds of joy

bouncing through the streets. The candles closest to them lit, and he stared in amazement as they cracked and sparked each time Bessa felt a new wave of release.

Finally, her back relaxed, and her arm fell to her side in happy exhaustion. A mysterious grin plastered her face. “So. That’s how bards write their songs.”

Her body still trembled softly as he curled up next to her, his belly against her back, his arm around her waist.

For the rest of the night, they took turns touching something new. Something they never considered important. “My earlobe?” she would giggle, the little laughs turning into gasps as Ambrose would pet her ear lobe before dipping his head and licking it, turning slowly to the shell of her ear, turning slowly to the line of her jaw, turning more quickly to her soft lips.

He feathered kisses over her cheeks and temples, delighted at waking in a lover’s arms. While he may have been with women over his travels, they were not like this. They were not affairs of the heart with a night stretched out before them and a shared history stretched out behind them.

Ambrose couldn’t help but marvel at the perfectness of a night spent in her arms, in his bed, yet only touching her skin. They didn’t even need a fire to keep warm, letting the coals die to red embers.

There was such simple joy in a complex moment. Before dawn broke, before reality intruded.

FROSTVALE

That night, Wyot woke groggily and picked up his lyre. His thoughts remained vague, like distant memories just out of reach, but he could feel the presence of a woman who smelled like mist.

He played for hours, songs to make a man weep and beat at his chest and sigh and settle, and when morning found him sprawled on his desk, the lyre's silk strings had snapped in half, curled up over the neck of his instrument. He couldn't explain why. He couldn't even remember getting out of his bed, and only the ashes in his hearth could recall the beautiful songs, if they could sing. He wasn't worried he would never utter them again, for he didn't even know he'd sung them in the first place.

Prince Rontu of Sunfalls found himself wandering to the kitchens, his mind unsure, the smell of yeasty grain ripening under the summer sun all he could think about. Was that magic? Was she magic? Was he in love?

King Culm of Skyfold Pass tossed under his russet furs, his layers of oiled leathers and swan-bellied feathered robes brought from home tucked too snugly, too surely. He moaned and sweated and wasn't it supposed to be frozen in this godsforsaken kingdom? But sweat beaded his forehead, and he couldn't quite wake from his fever dream, although he desperately felt like he should.

King Zacan of Coalcrest sat up, disturbing his bodyman, a local courtier plucked from the mines and elevated beyond his wildest dreams. "I love you," he said, and his

man responded, “I know,” and that was that. They had one night. Nothing could be done, nothing could be promised, nothing could be given. Only miracles could save them, and they didn’t traffic in miracles in the mountains. There were flowers under their windowsill, and still, they didn’t remember them in the morning. They weren’t even curious why.

That was that.

The prince of the Violent Tides stared at himself in a silver mirror, turning to glimpse his reflection and remember every crease, every line, every inch of perfection. He wondered if he would ever love anyone as truly as he loved himself, and the thought made him sad for himself. To be so unfortunate as to fall in love with another! What a horrible night!

During the night of love, every dried petal of every flower in every sachet brought by Jarth de la Silverwood returned to vibrant flowers, just for the night, before withering again in their sachets by dawn. In the morning, the son of Silverwood would be gone. He would leave only a note. Short and concise. “I’m sorry. I must go.”

But everyone would let their servants whisper and everyone would pretend not to be curious, and everyone would know that he came to his senses during the night of love, and he could no longer pretend. He wanted to be home among the marigold-colored cheeses and wood-foraged strawberries where warmth was taken for granted, and everyone would know that he wanted to be with the peasant girl with blue eyes that had captured his heart before he could even begin to understand that hearts had a greater function than sustaining life. That alive wasn’t really a word to be used when the heart was merely pumping blood. Alive had to be captured with both hands as one would hold anything dear. To be truly alive was to be magic.

The fur seller and the wine merchant met outside the tavern, their eyes wide and wondering. They had no preconceived notion of what they were doing, no answer if

anyone asked. They only dreamed of flowers, and when they awoke suddenly, they felt only one urge: to meet. So they did and where they sat, the wood of the walnut bench returned to its roots, and small saplings grew from their shared dream.

Lorcan said, “But didn’t you dream of flowers?” and Duskborne could only reply wonderingly, “A field of them.” And yet in the middle of the re-rooted bench was a single sprig of lavender, which they would have seen if they had stopped to look, although of course they didn’t. They were sleep-fumbled, love-fumbled, strewn about.

Across the kingdom of Frostvale, whispers of love echoed in bedchambers and thatched homes and down quiet corridors and through frozen fields and under thick layers of iced streams that used to run wild and free.

Where there was true love, there was magic. Perhaps love was the only true magic, after all. The grand magic, the gods of spring and the gods of summer, the queens who never married, the magic of old, the magic of a time when magic flowed like warmed sap, those were the stories.

And why did some remember the night of love and some did not? Was that not some sort of magic, too? Or was that something else, something closer to self-preservation?

BESSA

Bliss. I was in pure bliss. For such a large man, Ambrose had been so gentle, so sweet. His fingers had unlaced my bodice with such a delicate touch, setting it aside while watching me so intently. I had begged him to be inside, but he had refused. “Shhhh,” he had whispered. “Let me indulge you.” The release of not having to make every decision, question every bit of advice, be the final voice on all resolutions was nearly as intoxicating as the way Ambrose’s hand had kneaded into my left hip and my inner shift dress, my last layer of protection, before it dropped to the floor and I was bare before him.

The memory of it imprinted on me forever.

Outside, voices rose in shouts breaking our shared spell, and feet, even padded by the snow, thudded by. Doors opened and slammed shut again. Ambrose turned toward the window, his face creased with confusion, as if he’d heard a word that he couldn’t comprehend. Eska sat straight up and jumped on my half-clad shoulders, her whiskers twitching against my face in agitation as she tested the air. And then I smelled it, too. Smoke. A moment later, the worst was confirmed.

“Fire! At the castle!”

Ambrose and I stared at each other for a moment, a heartbeat too long, both thinking the exact same thing. Had I caused this? Had our passion been too much for a frozen kingdom to bear? If in my wild ecstasy, it made Eska go wild... how could I have

been so irresponsible?

I tore my eyes from Ambrose's face, lined with worry and tension, and threw on my cloak and hood. I started to run, dimly aware that Ambrose was shouting after me and begging me to wait.

It was no longer simply a feeling. I was engulfed in flames, and it wasn't just my body on fire with want. Ambrose caught me at the edge of town, and we raced all the way up mountainside to the castle grounds, where it was a hive of confusion. Thank the gods of ice, as my cheeks were indecently inflamed and warm to the touch. Now I had an explanation that didn't involve illicit lovers—running and fire.

I'd had no intentions of letting it go so far, so long, none at all, but I had. Now, there was an actual fire. Was it my fault? I had only wanted a little warmth, a little truth, something real before I had to choose my destiny. Before I chose my duty. And I had only wanted it with the truest person I knew, Ambrose. Now it was gone and worse, it had led to this.

Maids were crying, and the weavers clutched their tapestries and each other. My hair had loosened from its braid and was scratching my cheeks as I whipped my head around to look for Mika or Wyot. Good Gelid, please. Where were they?

As I took off, my arm felt like it was pulled out of its socket. I looked down to see Ambrose gripping my bicep. "Unhand me," I said, yanking and flailing to no avail.

"Don't," he said simply. "Others will put it out."

"I won't be hurt," I said through gritted teeth. "But Mika or Wyot or any of my maids might be in there. They do not have the same protections."

"And they might see some magic you don't want them to see," Ambrose replied,

pulling me closer so no one would overhear our hushed conversation.

I gave him a withering look. “I don’t care about that nearly as much as I care about them.” I shook myself free as his grip lessened and fled before he could stop me.

Inside the castle, chaos reigned, as entourages and suitors and villagers all fled the smoke and cries of “Fire!” rang through the courtyard. I saw Gillian of the Violent Tides for a moment, staring at me, and the so-called magician of Skyfold Pass with his sickly frog familiar running for the door. I wanted to scream at the magician to do something! Show off! That’s why he was here, wasn’t it?

With everyone escaping, it was nearly impossible to fight through the waves of people. “Eska, go find them,” I ordered, pulling my fire fox off of my shoulders. She bounded into the surging crowd, weaving expertly around legs and down the hall straight toward the flames.

“If you’re going to be so impossibly bull-headed, would you just wait!” Ambrose pushed through three of Sunfalls’s representatives and stuck himself to my side. “You shouldn’t go in alone. If, Gelid-forbid, someone set this fire deliberately, the chaos would be the perfect cover for a royal assassination. And even if no one did, the chaos is still an ideal cover for a crime of opportunity!”

His words spiked my heart and chilled my bones. I hadn’t thought of that, of course. I was too new, too unversed in courtly intrigue. I knew I had neglected my suitors and my councilors on purpose, but surely that didn’t rise to that sort of betrayal.

“You can’t withstand this heat,” I said stupidly.

“No, but neither should you appear to. So stay near me, and we’ll find a better way to search.”

“I sent Eska ahead.”

“Good thinking.” Ambrose tore off his cloak and threw it to the ground. Off came his shirt next, revealing his built torso and strong arms from all of the outdoor work he performed. If I wasn’t already hot, I would be scorching now as he ripped long strips from his tunic and tied them around our faces.

“I know you’re fine, but no one else does,” he murmured into my hair as he secured the knot. Then using his hand to cover his eyes from the intense smoke wafting into the Great Hall, he scanned the corridor. “It all actually looks more chaotic than it is,” he said. “I think the fire is localized this way.”

It was true. For all of the running and screaming and pops and crackles of the fire, we still hadn’t seen any flames.

“Follow me,” Ambrose said. “And stay behind, please, Bessa.”

I considered correcting him, but it was a crisis, and he was already gone, running down the stone hallway with only his pants on. What could I do but follow?

As we made winding twists and turns, the heat only intensified a little. My hopes rose. Perhaps it was only a small blaze, an unattended hearth, stray sparks, an accidental kitchen fire. The mass hysteria was just that—mass hysteria with no underlying danger.

Ambrose stopped suddenly as we reached the entrance to the library, fire licking under the frame. “Stay back,” he warned.

“Oh enough!” I flung myself at the library doors, kicking against the red hot door without fear and bursting it open. The entire library collection was going up in flames.

Jumping over the threshold, I tore a tapestry off the wall, not even waiting to see what it depicted, and started attacking the smaller flames closest to me with it. A ball of fire rose in the air and smashed to the ground. “Oh no!” Smoke spiraled onto the ceiling, already blackening what was once a beautiful, blue and silver star-filled spire.

Despite my efforts, the flames licked higher, consuming more and more of the library, almost as if my efforts had made it madder. These manuscripts had survived the long winter, they survived the war, but they couldn’t survive one night of our love. I continued trying to smother the flames, something that no Frostvalen was familiar with. We could never let the cold claim us, we could never let the fire go out.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. “Take a rest, your majesty.” Ambrose was trying to pull me back, his eyes focused on me when they should have been on the fire.

I shrugged him off. “No.”

“Bessa—”

I whirled on him, pausing my frantic attempts for a moment. “I said no.” My no echoed in the burning chamber, bouncing off the walls where tapestries were still aflame, already half-gone. I could only see the top of the baby’s head and the tip of the unicorn’s horn in one.

I could feel his eyes on me as I continued working, as if my queenly voice and command didn’t affect him. “You aren’t a god, and you can’t save everything.”

“Something could still be saved,” I insisted, not bothering to look up. “I’m not trying to save it all.”

He pulled at my arm. “You may be immune to fire’s effects, but you aren’t invincible.” His act had caught me off guard, and I sagged against his bare chest. His

muscles flexed with the effort of catching me. Both of us knew how improper it would be to be found this way.

Still, I didn't pull away. "How can I stop?" I asked, but it came out like a sob. "We caused this. I caused this!"

His voice was fierce. "When there's someone to blame, we'll point the fingers. Until then, take a few breaths, your majesty. My gods, there's enough blame to go around and not nearly enough oxygen!"

"But we must do something!"

He stood torn for the briefest of moments. Then, without warning, he ran to an arrowslit and whistled. The sound reverberated over the frozen roofs, echoing through the trees.

"Ambrose?"

Whirling back to me, he said, "If you must do something, seal off this corridor. Don't let anyone in."

I hesitated.

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Good, because I'm about to surrender my faith in you, too. Now, do it."

I ran to the corridor and yelled, "This is the queen. Do not come this way. There is far too much smoke." I waited, ready to flag anyone down who disobeyed me.

Then I heard it. The pitter patter of tiny paws, and the yipping of a young fox. “Eska?” I asked, but the scene looked all wrong. Either Eska had turned white, or another fox stood in the shadows, its eyes studying me warily.

Ambrose whistled again, and the snow fox answered his call, slinking around the corner and into the library. Within seconds, I heard the fire sizzle out, a cloud of steam and snow flakes ruffling my dress.

My own fox stood at my feet now, drawn by the whistle, perhaps. Her nose twitched wildly with excitement. She yipped and wiggled, eyeing me for assurance.

“It’s okay,” I said, approaching the library myself, certain that anything Ambrose called would not harm us.

The two foxes stood muzzle to muzzle, fire and ice, their two magics sizzling and crackling from the encounter.

“You have a familiar?” I asked.

“I have a friend.”

For a long moment, I couldn’t take my eyes off of the snow fox. Its fur, the soft markings around its eyes. Everything about it was beautiful, including the way it made Eska burn as bright as an ember. How could this not be a sign? Ambrose and I... were we not fated to be together?

Then I did look up, and I remembered the destruction of the library, its charred remains hissing and dripping. All of it, our fault.

AMbrOSE

Only a few strands were left of the recently re-woven tapestries. Clearly, that was where the fire had started, and Bessa could, indeed, somehow sense it. Ambrose watched her helplessly turn in circles at the charred remains of the books, feeling even more helpless than she. He went to stop her ceaseless turns, to put a solid, comforting hand on her arm and pull her out of her vicious cycle. They were alone; all he had to do was reach out and touch.

So he did.

The shock of it jolted both of them, sparks flying between their bare skin. Ambrose became suddenly aware of his near-nakedness. “You didn’t cause this. Nor did we. This wasn’t our magic.”

“How do you know?” she asked, but she didn’t pull away.

“I have been around magic a long time. I have learned to read its patterns.”

The only place on her face free of soot was where two tears had streaked down her cheeks. Ambrose put his fingers to the trail and followed it down to her chin before cupping her face in his hand.

She inhaled sharply and tilted her face up to his. “Would you kiss me? Would you finish what you started?” she whispered. “I want one true love before I’m married off

for the good of the kingdom. I've been a seed frozen in the ground, waiting for heat and light, and I have lived far too long without either. And you have a snow fox. You are like me. We can be together, we can figure it out."

"Bessa," he croaked, his throat full of smoke and his voice like ash on his tongue. There was something soft in her eyes, always so guarded, something that he had melted without any fire magic at all. A look that could launch a thousand ships and rally the stoniest men to fight. This look was killing him. He knew he should extinguish his desire in his hands later that night, away from here, while hopefully dreaming of someone else, because this queen was out of his reach, so he should put her out of his mind's reach as well. "We can't."

Another tear streaked down her cheek, following the progress of the first. It was no lie. He couldn't. He simply couldn't give her one true night together, because it wouldn't be just one. Their kisses in the candle shop proved as much. He wanted all of them. He wanted to cover her in kisses and lay her on a bed of wildflowers and let her silken red hair cascade through his fingertips forever. He wanted all of the things that no commoner could ever want of a queen. Just look at them standing here, her in cream and gold damask and he without a tunic, his legs protected with canvas pants waterproofed with boiled linseed oil.

She began pulling away, the hurt in her eyes unbearable to look at, but Ambrose made himself watch. Made himself look at her hurt.

Stomping boots echoed through the stone corridor. It was nearly impossible to walk secretly through the castle with so little cloth to dampen the noise, which, in this particular case, was a very good thing.

The foxes scattered, and Ambrose broke off, his chest heaving with the strain of not hiking the queen up on his knee and pressing her against the wall, taking her right there.

A second later, Prince Gillian of the Violent Tides strutted through the corridor. He didn't even have the decency to look worried.

"Your majesty! What are you doing in here?" the suitor asked, his tongue making a harsh h-sound indigent of the northern island region.

Bessa pulled herself together, only trembling slightly. "Prince Gillian, is everyone unharmed?"

Gillian looked around at the charred remains of the library, a tapestry hanging by threads and all of the chairs reduced to blackened wood and unidentifiable fabric. "So this was the source? But what was the cause?"

"If only I knew," Bessa said.

"Would you like to throw a few maids and serving boys in the dungeon and get some answers? I can see to it myself, your majesty."

Bessa's face barely contained her horror. "No, your highness, I will see to the investigation myself. Is everyone coming back inside?"

He shook his shoulders dismissively. "To be honest, I'm not sure. I was looking for you. We have not had any opportunity to discuss our future engagement, and I really must insist we do so."

Bessa stared at him. "Oh! You mean like right now? Because I'm standing in the remains of my library right now, your highness."

Gillian put his hand on her shoulder where her fire fox usually sat, and anger flared in Ambrose. He didn't like the audacity or the fake familiarity this prince was trying to breed. He was the one that had seen them having their tense conversation outside of

the castle. He was clearly feeling threatened by a commoner.

Good, Ambrose thought savagely. Let him feel threatened. Let him either show his true colors or be a better match for Bessa, because right now, Ambrose wanted nothing more than to throw him across the frozen river or worse—much worse.

Luckily for Gillian, Bessa pointedly stared at his hand causing him to remove it himself while it was still attached to his body. “I do not have time for frivolities right now, Prince Gillian. I have to make sure my people are all accounted for and my guests. I will have my councilors speak to your representatives about an appropriate time for courtship once that is done. Is there anything else?”

Prince Gillian narrowed his eyes before quickly turning it into a blink. “No. How prudent. I didn’t realize this little fire was of such importance to you, but that is my mistake. Do you need more books to fill your shelves? I’ll send for my own. The Violent Tides foster a love of learning, and we have enough scrolls and manuscripts to paper this entire castle.”

Bessa had been about to tell him to leave and never return, Ambrose was sure of it, but the glint in her eyes now said she’d changed her mind.

“Why, Prince Gillian. I didn’t know you were such an avid reader. That would be wonderful. Frostvale accepts your gift of books to completely restock our own, meager library.” She smiled at him blandly, offering her hand for him to bend over.

The prince opened his mouth and closed it, as if it surprised him she’d accepted his generosity so quickly, and without a promise of some sort of reciprocal arrangement. Perhaps that was not how it was done in other courts, but Bessa was shrewd enough to grab what she could when she could. Ambrose admired her more—as long as it didn’t mean she was beholden in some unseen way to the Violent Tides. No matter what the prince claimed, it was a violent island kingdom.

He took her hand, brushing a kiss over her knuckles that still made Ambrose want to hurl him across the charred remains of the room, and stood straight. “I shall write to my salt keeper and let him know a shipment should be sent. Salt keepers in our kingdom are similar to your seneschal here, and mine is an excellent leader.”

Bessa dipped her head, but did not reply. Gillian seemed to finally get the hint. He nudged a few blackened remains with his toe before turning on his heel to leave, the carbonized remains leaving long black streaks under his boot. “There will be a regularly scheduled dinner tonight, I hope?” he asked. “The rest of the castle appears untouched.”

“I’m sure they will go on as scheduled,” she agreed.

The prince clearly wasn’t leaving the queen alone with a commoner, and Bessa realized that as well. She picked up her skirts, stepping daintily over the smoking ruins of a rug, and strode for the exit. “If you’ll excuse me, I have much to do.” With that, she waited for neither of the men, but swept out of the library in a swish of fabric, leaving the smell of lavender after her.

The prince dropped his clearly painful facade and scowled at Ambrose. “What are you doing with the queen alone anyway? In my kingdom, we would tie you in a weighted sack and drop you off the backend of a shipping vessel for that.”

Ambrose merely raised an eyebrow, arms crossed over his chest. It was one of the bigger disappointments of his life to trade the beautiful oval, freckled face of the queen for the scowling, pointed nose of Gillian, prince of the Violent Tides. “You don’t have a tongue?” the prince snapped, “Got that cut out for impertinence, no doubt.”

Ambrose offered a straight lipped smile, waiting patiently for the prince to leave. In no world would he let Bessa marry this suitor. He would rather have his tongue

actually cut out or his neck in a noose than let this man anywhere near Bessa.

Prince Gillian let out a snort and stalked out.

Ambrose waited until he was certain he was alone, then dropped his arms and rushed over to examine something. He had been in the thrall of the queen's orbit, completely consumed by her, but the moment she left, he'd felt it.

He crouched down, sifting through remnants with a stick to avoid directly touching anything. When he found it, the smell was overwhelming. It was the remnants of a candle. Shockingly, it hadn't melted.

Pinching it between two covered fingers, he held it to his nose, smelling deeper. Animal fats. Agueweed. Witch's Bane. He had not crafted this candle. And it was not a nice candle.

28

BESSA

I knew he would say no and still I asked. How could he? Our one night had awoken a sleeping beast in my breast and I wanted more. Surely it hadn't been the cause of the fire. And if that was what Ambrose thought and if that was why he pulled away, why... I'd simply set the record straight and then...

Then what?

Choose him? The people would riot. I had to have a royal suitor. And then his rejection hit me fully. He'd said no. He'd said 'we can't.' And when he said something, the man meant it. In a whirl, I was spiraling. How dare he sit there and lie to me about his snow fox? It wasn't romantic! It was a lie of omission. He was right. It wasn't that we couldn't be together. We simply shouldn't. Besides, I had already told him it wasn't us. I had tried and he still said, We can't.

Eska came bounding down the corridor, shooting up my leg and settling into my hair. Her presence calmed me. Mika appeared next. The fire had been small and contained, but I still felt a flood of relief seeing her safe. "Mika!"

My sister's embrace was rough and full of worry. "You're okay?" she asked, her voice muffled by my hair. "You smell awful. Like burnt animals."

"Quite okay, thank you. And I probably smell that way because it was the vellum and parchment. Mika, I'm sorry, but the fire was mostly contained to the library."

Our mother might have been too dignified for a shriek, but Mika wasn't. She shrieked good and loud and pulled away. "Not the library! Oh for Gelid's sake, this is a catastrophe!"

"Prince Gillian has already offered to replace our small collection out of his own," I told her calmly.

Mika's eyes narrowed. "You haven't chosen, have you? The suitors have barely arrived—"

"I haven't chosen," I confirmed.

Mika put a finger to her nose. "Ah. Good for you. See, this is why you're the queen. You're smart."

"Thanks," I said dryly. "Is everyone accounted for from the fire?"

"Wyot is still helping in the yard, but people are beginning to filter back into the castle. I'm going to the kitchens next for dinner arrangements, although I already was going to ask if it's possible to send them all elsewhere for tonight? We're already hours behind."

"Elsewhere, yes. That's a great idea, Mika. I've already talked to Noll at the Dancing Snowflake and he can certainly take some of the load of suitors, perhaps permanently for the larger entourages."

"I can help organize," a young woman interrupted. "I'll send some of the girls over to the inn and we'll get the rooms cleaned up in no time. It'll be easier than keeping the castle rooms clean, what with them all being so far apart, and no offense, but the offerings are a bit meager here. Some of the suitors commandeer the best fixings for themselves, leaving the others with less."

I pointedly looked at the maid who had stopped behind my sister, head not down nor any sense of royal decorum present. No, she was gaping unceremoniously with her mouth open, instead, still talking.

Mika turned around and then put a hand to her forehead. “Right. Bessa, this is your new lady’s maid. As much as I love helping you dress, running your castle staff, and overseeing all the suitors, I need help. We need help. Cassia here is going to be your new shadow. Whatever you need, she’s your woman.”

“Would you like to be a lady’s maid?” I asked curiously, eyeing her rather large biceps. She had an earthy smell to her, comforting and strong.

“Yes, your majesty. I enjoy a good day’s labor.”

Mika whispered, “Curtsy,” and the girl attempted a clumsy curtsy and I nearly wanted to put her out of her misery, but it was probably for the best that she learned how to execute a good one, if for no other reason than to keep appearances in front of my councilors and suitors.

“You wouldn’t know who the pushy suitors were, would you?” I asked my brand new lady’s maid.

“Of course. Prince Gillian of the Violent Tides took most of Prince Rontu—”

“Thank you,” I said. “I think I can guess most of it.”

“Of course. Should I gather the girls and head to the tavern?”

“Yes, please.”

Cassia sketched another awkward curtsy and left, but I didn’t have a second of peace

after that, seeing as my sister was glaring at me.

“Bessa, she’s supposed to be your lady’s maid,” Mika said reproachfully.

“Neither of us have ever needed anyone to help douse our candles, empty our chamber pots, or undress at night. We’ve always had each other.”

“And we are no longer merely bakers’ daughters. We have bigger needs.”

“My lady’s maid is going to need to be multi-faceted. Like a gemstone,” I said. “Do you trust Cassia?”

“Yes. She was the one who told off the champagne suitor, and is extremely capable. I’ve checked her background.”

I relented. Mika was right. We already were on different paths, busy with different things at different times and I didn’t even want to think about the times I’d had to unlace myself or sheepishly ask Wyot for help when Mika wasn’t around. “Then I trust you. But don’t think this means we won’t still be close. Because you can’t escape me, sister.”

“Good. Because I’m ready to break down over the library, but I’m trusting you. One, that you haven’t already given your heart away to Gillian just for some books, even though that’s not your style at all, so maybe you’re just being pragmatic with his shipping lanes and seal meat and clear treasury he’s willing to splash around to impress you. Have we determined why he’s here, by the way?”

“Well, first, you can’t break down, Mika. You’re all I have.”

“Not true. You have Cassia now.”

“Second, I have done none of the above. I have a strategy, you know.”

“What’s that?”

“Delay, delay, delay.”

“Gelid help us all,” Mika muttered. She jerked her head toward where the maid had left. “More rumors are reaching more villages,” she said. “Cassia says a bad batch of sugared crabapples made her entire village dance from dusk until dawn. No one could stop moving their feet until they digested it all.”

“That doesn’t sound good. Or pleasant.”

“No,” she agreed. “Magic is unpredictable. It’s a double-edged sword. I think you’re right in keeping it a secret, but for how long?”

“Until Frostvale is in a politically strengthened position,” I said. “Imagine some of these kingdoms in the Ilex Isles realizing it is more than just rumor. Having the Violent Tides’ prince here has been nerve-wracking enough.”

“Would that be so bad to show them some power?” Mika wondered.

“If I had more, yes,” I said. “As of right now, what would I do if they threatened us overtly? Give them a heat rash? Make them itchy and uncomfortable? My magic isn’t mine, it’s Eska’s, and my only job as queen is to ensure the livelihoods of our people. Other kingdoms would complicate that. Most of them would just prefer to fold Frostvale into their own holdings and we would cease to be sovereign and become only a tribute state. Who would warm our soil and waters then? I fear no one would care once a king took what he wanted and we would be left in an even more precarious position than before without the money from our ice trade deals going into our own coffers anymore.”

“You paint a dreadful picture, Bessa,” Mika commented. “But you might be right. I guess we’ll continue showing small displays of strength, like this fabulous midwinter feast you’ve planned for your coronation, and delay, delay, delay. I only know one thing for sure, though.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t envy you.”

We reached the kitchens, already a bustling, warm atmosphere again, filled with workers preparing as much as they could for tonight’s dinner. I told them that from now on, most of the dinners would be for our immediate household as well as the suitors themselves and a small, more manageable entourage.

“Would your majesty like to try the barley soup?” a kitchen maid asked. She lifted a heavy iron lid with a long, spiked tool and the steam made her smiling cheeks ruddy and warm.

“Of course,” I said, pulling a spoon from a pile next to her. Barley was one of our most reliable cool-hardy grains along with rye, so it was hard to make it exciting anymore. Still, I dipped in, ready to give praise and encouragement.

The soup was flavored with onion and garlic, the barley unctuously chewy and the dark greens, hardy and tough, provided a thick base. There were plenty of carrots, too, and I was impressed at her ability to coax out each vegetable’s unique profile without muddying the flavor.

“What makes this different?” I asked, handing her back the spoon. “It doesn’t taste like the barley soup we usually have.”

“Ale from the brewer,” she said, dropping into a curtsy. “I thought it might go well

and I guess it has!”

“Very toasty and nutty,” I told her.

“Oh, and I toasted some spices from Skyfold Pass and it made them sort of nutty-tasting.”

“I see. Well there you go.”

Mika also took a sip, making mmm noises. “I love these new flavors. For little brown-colored powders, they’re all so unique and flavorful. It’s a shame Skyfold Pass’s suitor is so...”

“Boring?” I offered. Skyfold Pass’s suitor, King Culm, had barely spoken two words since the archery competition. His lips appeared clamped shut during every meal we’d shared together, content in letting the other suitors drive the conversation. More often than not, he preferred to let his famed magician speak for him, as if that showed me something. What it showed, I had no idea. I still hadn’t seen any actual magic from the magician. The coin he’d pulled from my ear had been hidden behind his other fingers! What was worse? Lying about your craft or being clumsy at it?

“Not exactly diplomatic of you,” Mika scolded, trying not to laugh. “Still. These spices might be worth it.”

“He clearly thinks he has a chance,” I said, my mouth quirking up as she took another sip. “Although I’ve seen more of that magician than of the king. It’s like they want us to connect on a magical level, but it’s an odd approach. I wouldn’t be marrying the magician after all and he’s not exactly been magical.”

“Why is he carrying around that weird little frog? The poor creature looks downright miserable.”

“Power makes people do strange things, Mika.”

“Strange indeed,” she murmured, going back for seconds. I tried not to grin as the cook slapped her hand away. At least, I didn’t let Mika see my grin as she clutched her red fingers to her chest.

AMbrOSE

In between picking apart every magical aspect of the nefarious candle that Ambrose was now convinced was the source of the library fire, crafting more coronation candles, and attempting to remember to eat and drink water, Ambrose was extremely occupied by one thought: Bessa.

He should have been focusing on infusing the right weight of wyvern scales to phoenix feathers and grinding into the wicks the perfect dosage of shavings from unicorn horns gathered at the base of trees where they rubbed up against. But all he could picture was her fiery stance when standing up to Gillian and the way her eyes blazed as hot as flames. Those were nearly bearable, but worse was when he pictured the curve of her shoulder and bared chest heaving with exertion as they worked ceaselessly to put out the fire or the taste of her on his tongue. She didn't just smell like summer; she tasted like it, too. She tasted like honey and roses. These memories were not nearly as bearable. The mental image of some suitor's meaty paw on her shoulder was abominable.

He went to the woods and his grove, trying to let the humming of his bees soothe him and center him. It had begun to help, but on his way back to his candle shop, Ambrose saw Rontu speaking with his retinue and he was all back out of sorts. He threw down his bag of foraged items, nearly impaled his hand on his iron tending fork, and even stubbed his toe. Next, Ambrose nearly pulverized a wyvern scale into powder without realizing it, the sharp edge biting into his hand and crumbling. And then, as if by thinking of her, he conjured her, Bessa strode into her shop, her arm

outstretched to knock, but he was already there.

“Your majesty?” he asked, bowing.

If looks could kill, he would have dropped dead.

BESSA

Ambrose's shop was as warm as it always was. It smelled of spices and smoke and so tangibly him . I couldn't believe he had kept something as similar and earth-shattering as a snow fox familiar from me. What did it mean? What was he? Were his candles more than a placebo? Were they really... magic? The rumors swirled around faster than any winter blizzard we'd had before, the sightings piling up like a snow bank and ready to avalanche against my kingdom. If magic came back only in Frostvale... I shivered. I hardly wanted to imagine what the seven kingdoms would do. I would be forced not only to pick a suitor, but the strongest suitor, immediately.

I took one moment to close my eyes and let the warmth of the candle shop envelop me like a worn glove, perfectly molded to my hand and fingers. The smell of damask rose buds nearly threatened to bring me to tears. It was my very favorite scent, and it was everywhere in his candle shop and his garden grove. It was in my special candles. It was for me. But Ambrose wasn't. He'd lied. If he thought I would shrink and hide away in my castle after he said, We can't , then he didn't know me at all.

Now that I'd had a moment away from the intensity of the fire and the fear and longing and emotional punches of the day, one thing was dawning quite clear: Ambrose had much more access to magic and understanding than he ever let on. No doubt it was his snow fox the day at the frost fair with Rontu and then ice skating. The magical creature had come to his aid again at the castle and I was just so happy to have saved us and wrapped up in the wonder of our night together that I hadn't stopped to question the implications.

That snow fox meant he lied to me. I tried to think back if there were any overt lies, but even one omission was more than enough to banish him from Frostvale and from me.

Ambrose opened the door from his back workshop, clearly having heard someone enter. While his step faltered slightly at the sight of me, it was clear from his face that he was expecting me on some level. He bowed his head. “Your majesty.”

My anger pricked at his words. We were back to ‘majesty’ and ‘decorum’ and everything else proper? Steeling my shoulders, I marched right up to him stopping just inches away, my head still only coming up to just beneath his chin, but letting all of my ferocity flare in the sharp angles of my arms on my hips. “Are you like me after all?”

His answer was swift, but not comprehensive. “No. I do not use Qanuk to channel ice magic or any other type of magic.”

There was a slight tremor in my hand that I wished to hide. I was the queen and not without powers. This man—or whatever he was—would not make me cower. I was not without my own powers. Eska hadn’t growled or nipped at him or done anything to show discomfort or unease. Now, she jumped down and bumped at him with her nose, although it honestly could have been for a piece of dried trout or a luxurious pet along her back. Ambrose immediately obliged both, even curling his fingers under her chin while she let out a shiver, her whole body shivering in pleasure at his touch. A sentiment I recently shared.

“Ambrose,” I said, choosing to use his full name and remind him of our closeness. I had let him put his fingers inside of me! And his tongue! “What are you? No more lies either, because if I had not come here today, asking questions, proving I’d seen your snow fox, you would still be lying to me. You would have still tried to keep whatever your secret is from me.”

He winced at the truth in my words and it took a lot to reign in my growing fury. So he would have continued lying if he could. He simply got caught.

“Will you allow me to show you something?” he asked. “Bessa, please.”

My head snapped to his. It was one thing for me to use his name, but for him? And the way he’d said please as if my answer might shatter his heart.

“You presume too much.”

Ambrose’s face fell and he said, “I’m sorry. I am sorry. Please, let me show you what I’ve kept hidden.”

“Bring it out,” I said, staying strong and revealing nothing. “As you once told me yourself, the truth gets out. The truth always gets out. This is your moment of truth, Chandler.”

Ambrose blinked, his eyes owlsh and deeply green, a mossy rock under clear waters. “It’s not in here, but in the woods. Near the thermal vent you found that day with Eska.”

The candle shop was silent. I honestly didn’t know what to say. Did he expect me to suddenly trust him and go along with him? I could take care of myself, but not against the unknown and whether I liked it or not, Ambrose was the definition of unknown.

I opened my mouth, intending to tell him just that when Ambrose beat me to it. “If you want me to give you instructions on how to get there, I promise to stay here and tell you how to break the wards without tripping some mental alarm that would bring me. In fact, I’ll go find Wyot and let him clap me in irons and throw me in the cold dungeon so you’ll feel safe. But I will want you to come straight back and let me

explain after you've seen it."

Eska yipped once and did something I'd never seen her do. Not even with my parents or siblings. She jumped on his leg and raced up his clothing, settling around his neck for one moment before leaping back across to me. "Eska!" I gasped, throwing open my arms to catch the red fox. She put her warm, wet nose against mine before curling into her customary spot around my neck.

"If I may continue to be so bold, I think your fire fox is not too afraid to see the truth."

"A mussel in a river doesn't fear a flood," I snapped. "And queens don't fear their land. Lead the way, Chandler. I'll be watching very carefully."

"I have no doubt," he said, putting a few candles in his bag and slinging it across his body. We exited town quickly and quietly, no suitors to interrupt our progress. As we wound up the frozen pathway, snow melting in clumps behind me to mark our progress, the sun had only just begun to set, its golden glow illuminating the very best of Frostvale. It felt different walking through the woods this time. Like each step had a heartbeat. The river sparkled deep blue in an undulating curve around the banks of three villages, my castle on the opposite hilltop. Even from miles away, from this vantage point, I could see people wandered in and out, making it their home. The dwellings packed in ice along the frozen river bank looked like pearls, almost as if some ice god had crafted them.

"Look, your majesty." Ambrose turned me around to face southward. There was some sort of shield, some energy beyond his pointing finger, deep in the primeval forest. He spoke the same words he had when he'd shown me his flowers weeks ago, except the boundaries he walked encompassed much more than a few feet. Much, much more. Primus. Secundus. Tertius. Quartus. Nox.

“I don’t see anything,” I said, my voice hushed. It felt sacred here, as if the old gods and the new might hear and they should never know of us.

“Look harder, your majesty.”

“My eyes are wide open, thank you, Chandler,” I said with a bit of huff until he drew me closer.

Any tremors of anger evaporated the moment I understood what it was Ambrose so persistently insisted I try harder to uncover. My heart pounded into my chest. I could not physically believe what I was seeing. This... this was magic. He was magic.

AMbrOSE

Ambrose couldn't imagine a more gratifying feeling than seeing the look of wonder on Bessa's face. Wonder that he'd induced. One moment, she was infuriating and confrontational, and the next...

They'd been standing in a frozen grove with only whispers of impending snow on the breeze, the bare trees reaching into the sky like ancient guardians. Along the way, he'd seen forest creatures beginning to repopulate the woods, snow beginning to melt. The ancient woods were waking up, although it would be nearly impossible for anyone to tell who wasn't a forest creature such as himself. Then, she'd finally seen .

"You have much more than a few flowers and damask rose buds. You have an entire world here. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I know what absolute power does."

"And what exactly does 'absolute power' do, Chandler?"

"It corrupts absolutely. First it would be a flower. Then a candle of courage. Then it would be a candle to uncover your enemies. Then a candle to subdue your enemies. Then, a candle to subdue all of the seven kingdoms. It would never end."

"You think that of me?" she asked, her eyes flickering with pain. To her credit, she hadn't said, "Could you do that?" as so many would, but Ambrose couldn't back

down now. He had his reasons. It was not unjust of him to stand up to a queen, to say she could not have, could not take. In fact, the seven kingdoms needed more of that. And did Bessa herself not do the same thing? Stand up to her biological family and demand they step aside?

“I think one candle taken under duress is a slippery slope.”

She scowled, crossing her arms and turning her head away as if to mask her real pain. “So now I’m the tyrant that took a candle from you unfairly, and it obviously means I’m going to try to conquer the world.”

“I’m only telling you what went through my mind. I didn’t know you.”

“You don’t know me now, either, Chandler.” Her voice was pain personified, despite her hard-edged words.

“I won’t argue with your majesty. In fact, I agree that I don’t know you. But what I do know is beautiful. I know how fiercely you love your family and how you consider the villagers of Honeywood Haven among them. I know how you treat those working for you in the castle and the warming centers you opened up. I know how it pains you to keep Eska and your magic hidden—I am all too aware of the pain that causes.”

He wanted to take her hand and show her everything, but she looked much too hurt to ask. Instead, he walked alone to the conical wicker bee hives hanging from tree branches. From this close, he could feel the vibrations of the bees, the living heartbeat inside the hives.

His voice was a whisper. “I know the true parts. The ones that matter. I didn’t even need magic to do it.”

“Tell me what you are and how you’ve done this,” she said in a quiet but firm voice. She still hadn’t taken her eyes from the rows and rows of flowers and trees he’d planted, all in blossom, all buzzing with bees. She couldn’t or wouldn’t stop drinking it down like a parched throat would gulp water.

“The queen bee is kept warm inside by the flutterings of a thousand wings of her closest companions as they constantly circle around her. They all help protect her through the chill that not even a thermal vent can quite dispel completely. Her drones sacrifice for her. That is how queenship works, whether you like it or not. Your people sacrifice for you. It’s not the other way around.”

Bessa planted her boots in the ground and blocked his way to the hives. “Tell me what you are. I should think you would be dying to explain yourself, Chandler, if you know me so well. Not give me lessons on queenship.”

“I am not human like you,” he began. Her head turned sharply at that, her gaze sharp. He felt like a bug pierced by a needle, but continued. “I am a Ghillie Dhu, and I belong to the woods. I wasn’t born knowing who I am. I didn’t find out until I was a young man that magic ran through my veins or that I could speak to seeds and understand the language of the bees.”

She took a step backwards, her face twisting into hurt. He barreled forward, his words tumbling. “I want to explain so much more, but please, let me show you.”

“What sort of magic do you possess? Speak clearly.”

“Deep forest magic. I knew exactly where to find the thermal vent and how to harness it.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of seeds. Then he held them out and nodded encouragingly at her. With a stone face that gave nothing away, Bessa opened her fist and he poured the tiny black seeds into her palm. “Scatter them along the edge of this row of summer savoury and dill.”

“What are they?” she asked, using her index finger to move them around her palm.

“Scatter, please.”

“You are annoying,” she said, dropping them into the soft earth where he’d pointed. She watched, her shoulders hunched with anticipation, as he covered the seeds with soil and let his own hands hover over them. Curls of green magic fed the seeds, and they instantly sprouted into long green onion scapes that he sheared off and handed to her. “This will help the plant focus on bulb production. If I let the scapes continue growing, they would produce beautiful purple balls of flowers and eventually more seeds, so I typically let only half go into seed production.”

“A Ghillie Dhu,” she repeated. “Earth magic.”

“Yes. I am deeply connected to the natural world and so Qanuk listens when I speak, but I could not possibly hope to command her or even form a strong personal bond as you do with Eska.”

“Let me see the honey,” she said, still perfectly stone-faced. For having grown up as a commoner, she was already well on her way to becoming an adept politician.

In response, he went to the hives, scratched off a wax cap, and pressed her finger against the glistening honeycomb. He watched as she held her dripping finger up to the dying light of day, the golden honey sliding down her finger. Just as it was about to reach her knuckle, she licked it off with one long swipe of her pink tongue, and instantly, her eyes widened at the delight of the raw honey.

“Ambrose...”

“Your majesty?”

“That was actually the most magical thing I’ve ever done.”

“I’m glad, your majesty,” he replied with a short bow, something he couldn’t recall ever doing in a sincere way before, and his body buzzed as insistently as his bees with pleasure. Her little fire fox, Eska, jumped up and down between them, a streak of red here and there as she pranced, no doubt sensing their emotions.

“Ah, now I understand the reason why you won’t take my parents’ baked goods. You do feel guilty, as you should, having all of this honey for yourself.”

“I let the bees have most of their honey and only take a taste now and then, but I still feel the guilt gnawing at me.”

Bees hummed throatily along their little paths, stopping laden with pollen from petal to petal in their search for sweet nectar. Bird song swelled in the leafy tops, and he watched her track their flight to their little nests hanging like ornaments in the branches. All of this was already created. All of these, he hoped to spread.

“It’s hard to see any evil in flowers and honey and fruit,” she admitted. “Although I am still very cross about your omission. I understand keeping it from me at first, but we’ve...” Bessa drew off, turning her head away. Angling away from him.

“We’ve been nearly as intimate as two can be?” he supplied. “Aye. I understand.”

Ambrose led her down the stone path he’d laid with such care, wending through beds of rosemary, lavender, and sage. He stopped to point out his favorites and let her smell the different varieties. “My candles would not be nearly so potent with magic alone. Flowers are magic all on their own.” He handed her the bundle, naming and pointing. Thistle, saxifrage, strawberry leaves, woodruff, columbines, cowslip, sweet briar, hollyhocks, marigolds, snap dragons, chamomile, daisies. A world of flowers she never knew existed. Her head spun more turbulently than when she drank two

glasses of Duskborne's pomegranate mulled wine.

"I can distill bee balm to fragrance your hair, or it can be medicinal for fevers and coughs. The flowers are edible and a magnet for?—"

"Bees?" she interrupted dryly.

He nodded.

"You keep bees. And so many flowers," Bessa said, shaking her head in wonder, her lips still slightly parted and glistening from where she had licked them. "You have honey."

"Aye."

"Is this real life?" she asked, just as she had the first time.

"Aye."

She was so silent, standing there in the heat of his sanctuary, that he started to grow worried. Then she reached down and put her nose in a tuft of mint. If he wasn't careful, the mint would take over, but he kept his rows neatly groomed and organized. He collected roots, herbs, and stored seeds. He created a sustainable ecosystem, lining the beds with his very own drip irrigation by funneling water from snow outside the wards to melt and drip as it traveled through hollow reeds into his beds. He'd created a haven, but he'd only let her see a fraction of it before.

"It's not only in here, Bessa. The rumors are true. Magic is returning, and we are its harbingers. You have the opportunity to get out in front. And while it's true that I have kept my involvement to a minimum, I have heard the trees beginning to yawn and stretch, their hearts beginning to wake up from a century of slumber. They are

beating, their sap flowing. Magic is returning.”

“What are you suggesting I do, Chandler? Juggle fireballs at my coronation feast?” she snapped. “Start tossing them at suitors who annoy me?”

“While that sight would be worth spending a few nights in your dungeon, no. I am not suggesting any sort of theatrics. Save the theatrics for Skyfold Pass’s magician. Show them the truth.”

“What truth!” she asked passionately. “I am human. I have Eska. I can create fire but I am no more powerful than a child given a match.”

He stretched toward her. “Take my hand.”

Her head snapped to his. “What?”

“Take my hand, Bessa, and see how powerful you are.”

Bessa bit her bottom lip, her ungloved fingers curled into her palm as she stared at his outstretched hand. Finally, she flexed them, touching his bare skin. The effect was nearly immediate.

One tree shook off its frost, branch by branch, slowly at first and then faster. The bark looked ashen, as if starved of oxygen. It gave itself a mighty shake, like a dog whipping off water. Creaking sounds erupted through the woods and then giant cracks! of the ice melting and snapping in long pieces. Bessa tiptoed closer to a sweet gum tree and watched as tiny, bright green leaves unfurled from branches and expanded, turning dark green as they grew into five pointed leaves like palm-sized stars. All around them, the frozen world melted away, revealing the splendor of nature beneath it. But Ambrose wasn’t looking at the trees. He was looking at her.

She flared bright red as if his gaze had provoked an unexpected response in her, and it turned his blood to fire. “How...”

“Your channeling of Eska’s fire magic supercharges mine.”

“Can it bring back summer?” she demanded.

“I don’t know. There’s no prophecy, no reason why it would.”

“And there’s no reason why it wouldn’t. Isn’t that what you told me anyway? To make my own destiny? What if I want to bring back summer? Forever. Or, at least, the right seasons for once. I want to make Frostvale as it used to be.”

Ambrose paused. He had been so excited to think about the possibilities of letting everyone see their magic together, to perhaps even prove why they could be together. He had run through a thousand courses of action since the fire, since he told her, We can’t . Praying to the old gods and the new that he could. That they could.

Well. He hadn’t thought it all the way through. He blinked hard, grimacing as he thought about the consequences. “Because I don’t think it works like that. Summer would only be brought back for as long as you and I were touching. What happens when we’re gone? Where would that leave future generations? Bessa, my parents died of a broken heart. I couldn’t do that to an entire kingdom of parents.”

“No,” she said, her eyes shining as she continued to run her finger over the softness of the new leaves. “I couldn’t give false hope. I just thought that maybe together... When we touched, I felt... magical.”

Heat unfurled inside of Ambrose at the thought of her skin and what it felt like to always touch it. That she had thought of what it might be like to always touch him. She had considered it and found it an acceptable alternative to royal suitors.

They were magic together, but they could be devastation. And she needed a royal suitor, someone who could offer military support, supplies, boring trade deals, things of national importance. Not magical candles that made her feel like she was touching the sun when all she saw was snow.

“Bessa, will you allow me to show you one more thing?” he asked, his voice raw. “After that, I will finish your candles and I will gladly place my fate in your hands. I will go if you ask. I will walk off a mountain if you ask. I will stay if you ask. Will you allow me this first?”

And she nodded yes, her eyes still filled with wonder.

BESSA

Ambrose pulled off the bag he'd strapped across his chest and rummaged through it on the sodden ground, snowmelt making everything damp and muddy around us, but he didn't seem to notice or care that it was seeping into the knees of his woolen hose. He came up with a candle that took my breath away, giving me a sharp stabbing sensation in my lungs.

The thin taper was black nacre, glittering darkly. Its wick was also black, and as thin as a thread of fate. I didn't see any of his usual additions, no dried herbs, nor flowers. It stood pure and unadulterated. It felt... menacing.

Ambrose laid it across his hands, holding it out to me as reverently as an acolyte of Gelid. "I want you to go somewhere quiet and light this candle. It will show you... everything. Me. Who I am and why. I didn't always know I was a Ghillie Dhu, but this candle should show you how. That's the last thing I'll ask of you."

I gripped the smooth candle, painstakingly hand-dipped instead of molded, Ambrose's fingerprints visible in the soft beeswax, and held it close to my chest. "Why can't you just tell me?"

His eyes were pools of uncertainty. "Because this is a memory-wick candle. It will show you much better than I can tell you." From his bag he pulled out another. This candle was the opposite of the first in every way. The thicker taper shimmered opalescent, like moonlight on a frozen river trapped in wax and waiting to be freed.

“Light this candle second and only after the first has burnt all the way down. Will you do that?”

I nodded.

“Thank you. And Bessa, there’s one more thing. The fire at the castle. It wasn’t an accident. I found the remnants of a candle crafted by another magician. There is magic in the land, stored in bits and bobs like unicorn horns and fire foxes and magic rings. Don’t be fooled into thinking it’s only us.”

“Who set it?” I demanded.

“I’m still trying to piece it together. I will let you know when I do. I swear it.”

And with that, he was gone.

My mind was still a-whirl two hours later when Cassia knocked softly to help me undress and brush out my hair for the night. “I can manage on my own,” I told her, shooing her away. “Go rest.”

She looked dubiously at my hair, a wild nest of red, and then at my chamber, where my fire was already low and smoldering.

“I’ll be fine,” I insisted, going to add a few more coals from the bucket hanging near my bed.

I secured the door and sat on the edge of my mattress, brushing and plaiting my hair, but mostly I stared at the two candles side by side, one black, one white. I tapped my toe against the cold stone of the floor.

“Well.”

Eska lifted her nose and sniffed the air.

“Well,” I repeated, “I guess I should go to sleep.”

Even if Eska didn’t speak words, I could tell exactly what she was saying. She was not impressed with my theatrics.

“Fine!” I threw up my hands and stood. “I’ll light them. Black first, I remember,” I said as she nosed the dark one. I couldn’t manage to light the wick, however, as my hands were shaking too violently. Eska jumped off my shoulder and stretched her warm body along the length of my forearm, calming and steadying me in equal measure. It was a work of art. A work of magic and art.

Gripping the base with one hand, I held the thin wick over the flames until it caught, taking nearly twice as long to catch as a normal one despite its thinness. Quickly, I dripped some of the pearly black wax into the base of a single candlestick holder before holding it steady to dry upright. “Now we wait,” I whispered to Eska, the moment feeling heavy and solemn.

For a few heartbeats, nothing happened, and I felt a stab of disappointment. Then, it happened all at once. My warm and cozy chambers smelled of something harsher, something damp and metallic with an acrid under note of burning incense and herbs. There was a steady drip, drip, drip of water nearby. The air itself thickened around me, pressing inward like the weight of buried secrets.

Then, the light expanded, and my walls dissolved into shadows. In their place rose a dimly lit chamber—a cavern of stone, its air stale with age and ancient magic. A dark-haired boy stood in the center bound in shimmering chains that pulsed with a golden light. His hands trembled, fingers clenched so tightly that his nails dug into his palms. I knew immediately who it was, his eyes the same intelligent, moss-green eyes he questioned me with in the present. It was Ambrose. But younger. Smaller. Afraid.

A boy on the cusp of being a man, but not yet.

A voice slithered through the air, sickly sweet and drenched in power.

“Magic is nothing but obedience, child. It is everywhere. Even within you. Let me show you.”

“Uncle, please, let me go. I want to go home.”

From the shadows stepped a figure draped in blackened silk, rings glinting on long, skeletal fingers. One ring in particular—a polished obsidian band carved with ancient sigils—gleamed as it was lifted toward the boy. Ambrose flinched, but the chains held him fast. The magician did not hesitate.

The ring slid onto his finger.

Instantly, the chamber shook. Cracks splintered through the stone beneath Ambrose’s feet. The air churned with dust as jagged spires of rock erupted from the ground, tearing through the floor like something long-buried clawing its way free. The magician laughed, stepping back as the boy gasped in shock, his hands outstretched, trying to suppress the force now roaring inside him like an earthquake of power.

“Yes,” the magician murmured, eyes gleaming. “Remember who you are, dear boy.”

Ambrose’s past self struggled, his breath ragged, his tiny boy muscles straining against the chains. But the ring burned against his skin, anchoring the magic inside him. Binding it. Bringing it forth. Reminding the magic in his blood, long dormant, of who he was. A Ghillie Dhu. A creature of the woods. A creature of the old gods as impossible as me.

The candle flickered, the memory wavered. But the scents of split open earth, of

damp stone, of magic burning like an open wound remained, lingering in the air, heavy with the weight of what had been returned—and what had been stolen: his boyish innocence.

Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the vision shattered like a falling icicle. The chamber faded, the scents dissolved, and I found myself back in the present, the flickering candle the only reminder of what had just unfolded.

And then even that flickered out.

33

BESSA

The shock stretched into minutes. The candle had made me feel like I was in that chamber with the evil magician. I had shrunk against the chains, just as the boy Ambrose had done. I'd felt their cold metal bite on my wrists.

Then, I thought of his hands as they were. His beautiful, calloused, working hands. He wore a ring. Sometimes, he absently played with it, spinning it around his thumb with his index finger. Was it the magic ring?

He was wrong; I had many, many more questions.

I got up, my nightgown wrapped tightly around me, intending to march into the night and track Ambrose down, armed only with my burning curiosity, when Eska nudged the second candle over.

The second candle. The one that smelled like freshly baked bread and spiced cookies.

"Thank you, sweet girl," I murmured, fumbling for another candle holder. I didn't want any taint of the first memory-wick to touch this one.

It lit immediately as if eager to be replayed, this one's light coruscated against the stone walls, throwing iridescent prisms of color around my chamber before dissolving the room again like mist. Even the glow was warmer, more golden. The acrid scent of burning herbs and metallic tang on my tongue softened to freshly turned soil, sun-

warmed wood, the sweetness of honey. Cinnamon and spice threaded the air. It reminded me of my parents' bakeshop; it reminded me of home. So how was Ambrose's memory so sharply scented of my home?

This time, the memory unfolded from an even younger Ambrose's viewpoint. The dark-haired, green-eyed boy could only have been eight or nine years old. He was bundled in a thick, hand-woven scarf, his hands and nose pressed against the frosted glass of a window as he stared into the shop. He left little rings of fog against the glass where his nose and mouth had been as he pulled open the door and slipped inside. A lantern glowed at the window, looking remarkably like the one I recalled from my childhood. A circular oven took up most of the room with loaves of bread all laid out according to each customer's order. Then, a woman emerged from the back, pushing a tendril of hair behind her ear and leaving a smudge of flour on her cheek in a gesture more familiar to me than my own hands.

Mom.

Ambrose was from Honeywood Haven. He had meant it very literally when he said he felt at home. Because he was home.

"Hello, Donahue. The usual?"

The boy nodded while I tried to assimilate this knowledge. He'd changed his name when he'd left. And no one seemed to remember the little boy. Why would they? It had been decades, and he'd grown into a man.

My mother bustled about the bakeshop, gathering the same bread he'd ordered when he'd found me there a week ago, the day he'd shown me the small patch of wildflowers. She slipped him a cookie and a smile.

He exited the bakeshop, skipping down the iced cobblestones with little fear or

tension in his young body, sliding across the iciest parts as all village children learned to do.

The pearly wax pooled in the candle dish before evaporating completely, its magic spent. For a moment, I sat huddled with Eska in my lap, my arms around her soft fur. I didn't want to be alone, but the man I wanted to be with was an impossibility. I could no more sneak out of the castle to see him than I could announce to all of my Glacial Council that I wanted to do so.

It was also abundantly clear why he didn't trust people in positions of power and why he was so guarded. But he had finally trusted me, even when I hadn't given him many reasons to do so. I'd been angry and defiant in his apiary, mad he hadn't given me all of his truths the moment I met him, as if he owed me. And still, he'd trusted me enough with these memories. I stood, my nightgown cascading down my legs.

"Come on, girl."

Eska curled around my neck, and we crept down the corridor to Mika's room. My sister was already asleep, only half waking as I slid my always-warm body next to hers and let her put her chilled toes on my leg.

"You okay, Bessa?" she murmured in a voice thick with sleep.

"I wanted to be near you," I said, my exhaustion finally taking over. "It's been a strange day."

"That's sweet." Mika rolled over, her eyes half shut. "Good night."

"Good night," I said, sleep already taking over.

"By the way, the frog can talk," she mumbled into her pillow.

34

BESSA

In the morning, Cassia found us curled together in Mika's bed. She flared open the curtains and stoked the fire. I woke slowly, then all at once.

"The frog talked?" I asked, feeling sleepy and stupid.

"Good morning to you, too." Mika sat up, rubbing her eyes. "Cassia, didn't you hear the frog?"

"Aye," the maiden said, bustling around the chambers much too cheerily for daybreak. "I almost peed my gown, I was so shocked. He said he was a prince. What a wee cute thing he was. Wanted me to kiss him and all."

"A frog wanted you to kiss him and turn him back into a prince?" Why was I not keeping up with this seemingly simple conversation?

Cassia laughed. "I gave his little head a rub with my finger and told him to go back home. Personally, I don't think the cook simmered all of that alcohol out of the barley stew before she served it last night!"

"No, I heard him, too," Mika said, motioning for Cassia to help tie her bodice. The dresses we'd found a few weeks ago were finished being tailored, and this one had acorns and oak leaves embroidered on its lace ruffs. "He wouldn't stop hopping after us, so I took him to the library. I couldn't find the book I was looking for, but I swear

I read about a prince turned into a frog by an evil witch a hundred years ago.”

I blinked, my brain groggy. “An evil witch? That’s strange. Yesterday, Ambrose gave me a memory-wick candle. It revealed him being kidnapped by an evil magician and I just realized something...”

“What?” Mika asked, concern tinging her voice. No matter how outlandish my claims, my sister always believed me.

“The evil magician looked remarkably similar to a certain magician from Skyfold Pass. But that doesn’t make sense. Ambrose of all people would have recognized him immediately. The magician tortured him as a boy! He kept him locked in gold chains.”

Mika and Cassia both gasped. “That’s horrible!”

“I know, and that’s not even the worst of it. Ambrose is from Honeywood Haven. He was kidnapped as a boy by the magician, who either claimed to be his uncle or really is his uncle, and he didn’t escape until he was an adult and found his way home.”

I let Cassia help me into a gown with delicate frost work woven into the lace, all the while urging my brain to wake up and think! “I’m going to find Ambrose and ask him about it. If there’s even a chance it’s the same man, I will expel the delegation from Skyfold Pass immediately. Culm hasn’t spoken one word to me beyond ‘hello’. And what need do we have of overland shipping anyway, I ask you?”

“Well, nothing for exports, but it would be nice to have cheaper imports,” Mika began. “Never mind. I agree. Evil magician first.”

“Aye, all good ideas, if I may be so bold, your majesty.” Cassia began brushing out my old stockings with youthful vigor. “You should also talk to Prince Rontu rather

soon. From what I've heard in the kitchens, he has no intention of proposing. In fact, he's planning on leaving."

"What!" I dropped the scented bag of rose petals and galingale that had been a gift from Rontu. Per his instructions, we tucked it into clothing in the morning to keep them fresh-smelling all day. It fell in a heap on the rest of my garments.

"That's what the servants are saying. He already has a marriage contract with a girl from a small southern outpost in the Salt Sea. No one nearly as fine as your majesty. Not in good breeding, tastes, or looks. In my opinion?—"

Cassia continued about the supposed chieftain's daughter, but I barely processed her chatter. I felt like I was being strangled. If there had been one suitor less odious than the rest, it was Rontu. Jarth de la Silverwood was already gone, King Culm had a harem, and now Rontu? Who did that leave? Zacan of Coalcrest, who only wanted an heir, and Gillian of the Violent Tides? Oh gods.

Not that I had any intention of actually going through with a marriage, but having Rontu on the hook could have given me at least a year of engagement talk. Delay, delay, delay. Now, the other suitors might get aggressive with my clear frontrunner out of the way.

"No," I said, even my voice coming out strangled. "Rontu would have said something."

"It's true. Your majesty! Wait! Where are you going?"

I threw on a brocade cloak, black and deep as midnight, my hair combed out for the day and falling in loose waves down my back, the net only half attached. I tore it off the rest of the way and threw it on my sister's bed.

“I’m going to find out. Mika, you find that frog.”

35

BESSA

I found Prince Rontu in the Great Hall, a procession of balls of fur and oiled cloaks following on his heels. He looked like a true prince of Sunfalls in his bearing, if not his clothing, and he had a sheepish smile on his face.

“Rontu,” I said, “the coronation ceremony is tomorrow.”

“Yes, which is why I must go today, your majesty.”

“So, the rumors are true. You are withdrawing.”

“The rumors speak true, but I wanted to thank you for your hospitality. It was never my intention to mislead you for so long. I thoroughly enjoyed my stay and the adventure of Frostvale. Honestly, I lost the thread a bit.”

“What was your grand tapestry before the thread unraveled?” I asked, sitting on the throne my father had left behind, feeling like someone playing pretend.

“Will you think terribly of me if I said I wanted a little adventure? A world frozen not only in ice but also in time... At least, those are the rumors in Sunfalls.”

I made my voice as severe as a winter storm, blowing and raging in the deep woods.
“You sought to sow wild oats. In our kingdom where we fight daily for survival.”

“I’m sorry,” Rontu said again, looking quite miserable.

“I should hope so.” Despite his youth, he still knew right from wrong. He had been selfish, but he seemed to have truly learned his lesson.

“As a thank you for your friendship, I would like to re-negotiate our trade deals when I return home. Between you and me, that deal is outdated with terms made for the previous king. I believe our councilors should revisit it. After all, we are the ones who must get along, we are the ones in charge of our lands and our people’s destinies.”

“Your father will allow this?” I probed carefully. It was all well and fine to speak big talk away from the throne room of Sunfalls, but back in his father’s orbit, well...

“If he wants me to marry the chieftain’s daughter of a minor southern outpost in the Salt Sea for her newly discovered mine of gemstones, he certainly will,” Prince Rontu said with unaccustomed savagery. “Who knows? Perhaps I will tell him how very beautiful you are and what a pleasure it has been here. It would be no lie, your majesty,” Prince Rontu said, bowing low. “Besides, it is no burden to forge closer ties with you. I know you might not have much trust left in me after I deceived you, but I swear it now.”

Rontu, all pomp and circumstance and youthful vigor, dropped to a knee, his hand over his heart.

“Oh stand up, Rontu,” I said. “Send me the new trade documents, and we’ll get along fine. Be sure to throw in a gem or two.”

The young prince lifted his head, his infectious smile hard to resist. “Thank you for your kindness, your majesty. I am sorry to have come on false pretenses, but I am not sorry to have come. My experience in Frostvale was eye opening.”

“Surely you’d like to stay for the feast and ball?” I blurted out.

“It’s time for me to grow up,” Rontu said, rising from his bow. “But may I speak frankly?”

I waved at him to go on.

“We have heard rumors in Sunfalls about the coal in Coalcrest. I don’t think it’s as plentiful as Zacan has made it out to be.”

“I see.”

“It’s no secret he yearns for a son. He has discarded at least three mistresses for failing to produce a male heir.”

“It would be a gamble then for him to marry. Let alone marry me. I have not produced anything except for questionable taste in decor.”

Rontu roared in laughter. “It would, but as I said. He’s getting old. Successful marriages have been built on less, of course, but I get the feeling that you would not be happy, your majesty.”

“Prince Rontu, you are a surprise. Your delegates from Sunfalls will always be welcome here as long as I am queen.”

The young prince had the audacity to wink, and I nearly had to clap a hand over my mouth to stop from laughing.

“Also, make sure you try the molded jellies. The one that looks like a castle. They’re my personal favorite.”

“I’m afraid there are no molded jellies,” I said, my eyebrows furrowed.

As if waiting for such a response, Rontu put two fingers between his lips and whistled. Banging through the door of the Great Hall came an even larger procession than the one he’d arrived with only a few weeks before. “I hope you won’t mind, Queen Bessa, but when I realized how meager our feast would be, I sent for my personal cooks and servants for your coronation, as a gesture of goodwill. I have brought all of my favorites. Potatoes, ham, brandied fruitcake, ginger for my favorite carrots and almonds, and enough white truffles to stuff a winter’s flock of pigeons. I hope you all feast and be quite merry.”

My jaw dropped. I couldn’t help it. Cassia squeaked next to me. Even Wyot looked impressed. “That’s a lot of food,” he whispered, unconsciously licking his lips.

Rontu grinned and wiggled happily, looking exactly how I’d always remember him, as overly excitable as a fox kit. I was cross at his deception, but it had recently occurred to me that people keep all sorts of secrets for all sorts of reasons—myself included. I could stay cross, or I could accept his gesture of goodwill and use it to my people’s advantage.

Rontu gestured for a servant to come forward, beckoning with a finger. He approached with an ornate silver chalice, and Rontu took it reverently, bringing it to me himself. “This, your majesty, shall top your sweet pies.” He lifted the lid with a flourish, revealing a mountain of lightly scented cream, streaked with beautiful red stems. “Saffron cream. Go ahead, try a little.”

I raised an eyebrow, making Rontu laugh. “I’m serious!” He took a big swipe, showing me how it was done in Sunfalls. “Delicious,” he confirmed.

I ran my finger across the peak of the cream and tasted it. “Soft and pillowy, almost floral,” I said, licking with pleasure.

“Enjoy, your majesty,” Rontu said with a last bow, leaving Frostvale on good terms.

As he exited the Great Hall, I noticed Ambrose standing to the rear of Rontu’s party, revealed now only by their departure. He’d been watching me, his eyes dark with unreadable emotion.

He certainly wasn’t neutral, but whether he was angry at the way I’d treated him for keeping his own secrets and his own council—or something else—I couldn’t be sure.

I leaned over to Wyot. “Can you delay my Glacial Council meeting? I need to take care of something.”

He looked at me sideways and then over to Ambrose. “Is that ‘something’ tall, dark, and full of requited angst?”

“Requited, eh?”

“Yes. I’ve finally figured out which sister it is.”

“Very funny, Wyot. Will you delay them or not?”

He waggled his eyebrows, hand on the pommel of his sword, both gestures completely at odds with one another. Wyot was so unserious at times, but I was glad of it. Glad the war of succession he fought for me hadn’t ruined him after all. Glad he was still here, ready to protect me and give me good natured grief, all in the same moment. Glad he was my brother, more truly than my twin. Glad he was for me, and I was for him.

“You already know what I think, Bessa. We Frostvalens have always survived. Even if you choose none of these suitors, we will still survive. To be honest, none of them even understand the definition of survival, not as we do. They would be unhappy

here.”

“I’m not running after him to confess my undying love, you know.”

Wyot’s eyebrows grew more exaggerated.

“Oh stop it. I’m not. I’m apologizing. As a friend. Because I was in the wrong. And that’s what friends do.”

“Hmmm. And do only friends also have odd clipped speech that is clearly defensive?”

“Who knows?” I shrugged grandly, already halfway down the dais. “I’ve only had siblings. Never only friends .”

I made it three steps before Duskborne and Lorcan accosted me. “Are the rumors true, Queen Bessa? Are you still picking a suitor tomorrow?” they shouted, practically in unison.

“I must,” I said simply. And it was true. I must still choose a suitor. It seemed King Culm of Skyfold Pass was suddenly my best option. No Rontu, no Jarth. Zacan’s lack of coal was an issue. And Gillian... I shivered. No. Never. If Culm would agree to let me live in my castle at Frostvale three weeks out of the month—and permanently after we produced an heir... He was my best option. We would have cardamom and cinnamon and black pepper and all sorts of spices. I could have Frostvale. My future child would inherit both. Frostvale would stay safe by hiding behind a stronger king and letting rumors of magic die down. It was my best option.

There was only one problem with my logic, and he was standing in front of me, his face so gentle and his look so intimate that it made me want to melt into his arms and become affixed. “Ambrose, I’m sorry you lived through that. No wonder you didn’t

trust me.”

“You didn’t know.”

“But I never should have assumed.”

I watched him watching me. I couldn’t stand the thought of not carrying out my duty as queen, but who made those rules anyway? Wyot was right. Frostvale had survived without new coal or grain agreements, and I’d proven I could forge my own path in diplomacy—without talk of marriage. If I wanted to kiss the chandler, maybe I should. And I so badly wanted to kiss the chandler.

Mika would not let me kiss the chandler. She rounded the corner, Cassia hot on her heels. “I found the frog,” she shouted.

“Good,” I said, my voice still stilted with desire.

“Not good. He says he’s your brother.”

I frowned. “Does Wyot know there’s a frog running around trying to impersonate him?”

“Not that brother,” Mika said. Her eyes were big again, her tell-tale sign, and my heart seized. “Your twin brother. Philip.”

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AMbrOSE

Bessa's face drained of color, and Ambrose thought she looked for a moment as if she was going to be physically ill. "Philip?" she whispered. "My twin?"

They must have been calculating a million scenarios.

"Philip," Mika confirmed.

"The Philip who is supposed to be the king, the one prophesied to bring back magic? The one that disappeared in the middle of a battle and is now reappearing at the very worst moment to demand his throne back and throw us for eternity in the dungeon if we're lucky and behead us if we're unlucky? That Philip?"

Wyot looked as venomous as a spider. "Would you like me to stomp on the frog? We can take care of this problem right now. In fact, forget I even said a thing. Go momentarily deaf and dumb. Mika, can I have a separate word? Bring the frog."

"You can't kill the frog!" Bessa exclaimed, her hair falling around her face from where it had been pinned back.

Despite the seriousness of the moment, Ambrose couldn't help but admire the way it made her look like she was in the center of a red corona. Except Mika's next words were even more unbelievable. She pulled the small, sickly looking frog from under her gown and held it up between the four of them.

Wyt's fingers twitched, but Mika held him protected in the palm of her hand. "Go on," she whispered to it. "Tell them what you told me."

When it spoke, they all leaned in to listen. "Free me from the magician's curse and I'll bring back magic. The old gods have been locked away in slumber, frozen under ice. I can set them free and bring back spring. Bring back magic. It was prophesied!"

"No thanks," Wyott scoffed. "Your father let all of us go hungry so he could have hot baths. Remember? Then he died in battle and you disappeared. Bessa stepped up, and she's done far better than you could have ever dreamed." He turned to Bessa. "Seriously, I'll step on him. He'll only croak once before he croaks for good."

"Can you craft me another candle to reveal the truth?" Bessa asked. "Sort of like the memory-wick but present day?"

"I could," Ambrose admitted, running a hand through his hair. "It would take at least two days to set properly. My magic is slow and methodical."

"A wonderful quality that I'm sure Bessa will admire if it translates to other areas of your life," Mika quipped and his queen flamed red, "But we simply don't have that sort of time. Bessa has to choose a suitor tomorrow night. They're already getting antsy, especially with Rontu and Jarth gone. Gillian is already undressing you in his mind on the bridal night!"

Ambrose felt an urgency flood him. "Bessa, I burned that prophecy for a reason. You don't need a magical candle to reveal the truth or let it make your decisions for you."

"You burned my prophecy?" the frog squeaked, trying to hop out of Mika's grip to attack Ambrose. They watched the tiny creature in some amusement until Wyt threatened to croak him again, and Mika tucked him in her gown pocket.

“What do I do?” she asked, looking at each of them in turn. “I can’t delay my coronation. I must be crowned if I’m going to keep my throne.”

“Delay!” came a peep.

“Best if you hush for now,” Mika told the frog, patting her pocket.

Bessa looked at him in a way that would have sent a weaker man to his knees. They wobbled as it was. “Please, do your best. I’ll worry about the suitors.”

“You don’t have to choose one. No matter what Rune or any other councilor announced. It’s your throne and your choice.”

“Not true!” came a peep.

Everyone ignored the frog, though.

“I do have to choose one. I have a duty to my people,” she said, a teardrop gathering at the end of those long lashes Ambrose so loved. “Can you help me, Ambrose? Can you craft me a candle and help me keep my throne?”

Everyone around them, her brother, her sister, the damn frog, it all faded until nothing in the world existed but Bessa and her plea. It wasn’t even a question, and he hated that she felt as if she had to beg, let alone ask.

“I would craft anything for you, Bessa.” And he knew it was true.

Her relief sank into his chest and the tear fell onto the ground. It sizzled the snow around their feet and where it dropped, a single green plant unfurled from the ground and stretched toward the sun.

Ambrose knelt to her feet, clearing more snow from around the plant. By the time he'd brushed a circle around it, six bell-shaped white flowers were visible and everyone knew what it was. It was a snowdrop.

"It's true," Mika said, her voice full of awe. "You are blessed by Frostine."

AMbrOSE

For the next thirty-six hours, Ambrose did nothing but craft the one candle Bessa needed. He called upon Qanuk to quickly harden the wax, remelting and reforming the candle over and over, softening and hardening it until it was something indestructible.

He poured his heart into the wax as he poured the wax into the mold.

Finally, his eyes as heavy as the iron pots in his work room, Ambrose finished his creation, his hands encased in wax. Before handing it over, he inspected the candle for flaws. He could find none. It was perfect. The thick pillar of beeswax from a hive that only visited the queen's damask roses vibrated slightly, as if it held memory of the bees. It emitted a low, golden glow, and smelled of her favorite flower.

He trudged to the castle, holding the candle between his palms like a beacon in the night. Qanuk came for a moment, sensing him from the woods, and bounded along his side before disappearing back into the wild.

When Ambrose entered the Great Hall, he didn't notice any of the pomp and circumstance of the coronation. He let his heart lead him, thumping against his ribs and announcing Bessa's location. As he followed his instincts, the music rose in waves, and when he finally caught sight of her, he felt as rooted to the castle floor as an ancient tree, never to be moved.

Bessa wore a gold and white satin gown furred with white ermine. Her fiery hair draped over her shoulders, long and loose, in waves netted with seed pearls. Just at the crown of her head, she wore a simple coronet of gold, and Ambrose could feel everyone in the room wondering the same thing. How did she look so much like a faerie queen come to life? She was Frostine herself.

A group of musicians played off-center in the ballroom while people from every village in Frostvale mingled with the royal retinues. The Glacial Council stood in their ceremonial blue robes stitched with white snowflakes along the borders, the ministers keeping their faces as impassive as a winter mountain.

Ambrose did not pause at the towering tables of food he'd never dreamed he'd see anywhere, let alone in Frostvale. He did not accept the mug of ale that Noll attempted to put in his hands or let himself be drawn into conversation with Dropian about the stonework, or Lorcan and Duskborne about the wine, or even Mika about the frog who was still peeping angrily from inside her dress pocket. He had tunnel vision, and everyone around the edges of it remained out of focus.

Bessa turned, her gown swirling around her legs as she felt him, too. Without a word, she picked up her dress with both hands, and they moved toward each other, the magician and suitors she was talking to left abandoned mid-sentence. Even the music faded to black. Ambrose felt the knot of dread in his stomach loosen a little upon seeing her freckled face.

Before he could hand her the candle, a loud noise rent the air. Someone paused the music, the lute making a strangled sound. It was her councilor Rune. He had a conflicted expression on his face. "Queen Bessa, the time has come," he announced. "As you approach your coronation, you also approach your hour of decision. Are you ready to choose your king?"

Bessa paused, dropping her dress. Her eyes begged him to do something, just as he

had during the fire or the frost fair. She wanted him to save her, and this time, all he had was a candle he'd made with his hands and his heart.

So he offered it up.

"I am close," she announced, a hint of sadness in her voice. "But first, I must light the way. It is a time-honored tradition in Frostvale to keep the faith, even in the darkest of winter nights, with light. In this way, the cold does not claim us." She lifted her chin. "Master Chandler, will you come forward?" she asked.

His steps were wooden and stiff, but her steady gaze kept him going. What else could he do? He'd crafted the only candle he could, the one the magic told him she needed, just as it told him when a family needed a little extra warmth or a memory needed to be reignited.

She didn't ask what type of candle it was or what it would do. She took it between her hands, the heat between them pooling for a moment in the wax. Then she leaned into the nearest brazier, the heat from its flame igniting the wick with a soft crackle.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

Could Ambrose save me? Could his magic light the way? I trusted the man completely, but even I had my doubts. What could the candle tell me that I didn't already know? I was queen, and I had my duties. My people survived, but they did not live. They needed grain and meat, they needed heat. My choice could give them these things. Conversely, if I angered every delegate in the room, it could ensure they never saw them again. That they would starve or freeze to death.

I could not let that happen.

Yet, I knew already where I stood, who felt right in my arms and in my heart. I had fought so hard to become queen, but now that I understood what it meant, what it truly meant in terms of sacrifice, I ached with loss before I had even made my choice.

The candle burst to life, the whole thing from flame to base turning golden in my hand. Wisps of light threaded through the room, and many in the crowd began to shimmer, taking on a veiled reality. I saw shifters and pixies and trolls glimmering over the surface of my subjects, who stood unaware of the magic working around them. The castle, too, looked transformed. A hint of green vines traced the walls and an echo of laughter clattered through the halls. No, that wasn't quite right. The walls themselves seemed to be laughing.

I turned to the suitors. They emitted a soft red glow. And was that the stench of... rot. Nothing too menacing, but a clear warning, like fish soup turned bad.

Finally, I looked back at Ambrose. He stood bathed in a halo of gold, it turned his eyes luminescent green. "What magic did you breathe into this candle?" I asked, amazed.

He looked confused at my confusion. “A simple revealing spell. It should show you the path to keeping your throne.”

“I think it’s revealing more than that,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

“Aye.”

“But it is showing you the path?” he asked.

“Aye,” I said, tracing the golden light with my eyes which seemed to shine down from the vaulted ceiling, capturing him in its ring. He pulsed with warmth, like the collective memories of that lost night twenty-seven years ago when magic returned. Could it be as simple as that? Simply choose my heart? What would it be like to belong, not just to a kingdom or to duty, but to a simple man who kept bees and crafted candles? To be wanted, not for my crown, but for myself. I thought it might be the best thing in the world, and it might be worth a kingdom to choose desire over duty.

But, at least according to the candle, that was the best part about it. I didn’t need to choose. Ambrose was also the best choice for Frostvale. How? I didn’t care. I simply trusted the magic Ambrose had crafted so carefully. I trusted him.

“I choose you,” I said softly.

The candle sparked harder, threads of gold now streaming out of it like banners, but I couldn’t bear to look away from his unfathomably deep, green eyes. I could hear the inevitable roar of dismay from suitors and their retinues and most of my council members, but there was also cheering from the Honeywood Haven residents, mostly Wyot and Mika.

He moved closer as if in a daze, his hand finding mine.

The moment we touched, the candle roared in our clasped hands, and a deep boom reverberated like a cannon shot in the air above us. It glittered for a moment before exploding into fiery sparks above our heads.

“What’s happening?” I asked, finally tearing myself out of the cocoon we’d woven around us.

“I think our magic is supercharging the revealing spell.”

A warm breeze slid through the arrowslits, like damp spring grass and heavily scented lily-of-the-valleys. It smelled like moss and humus soil and gray-topped velvet mushrooms. A vine curled down from the ceiling, a real one, just like in the frescoes of my forgotten chapel. Someone threw open a door and revealed the snow melting, drawing back into the woods and leaving the trees dripping wet.

I stared around the ballroom. “I think it revealed everything, Ambrose.”

Half of the residents of Honeywood Haven had begun their own transformation. Lorcan howled at the moon, fur rippling down his spine, his face punctuated with yellow, canine eyes. Duskborne’s fangs extended past his lips, and Noll grew until his shoulders scraped the ceiling.

Magic. Half of the population of Frostvale was magic!

Mika squealed as her dress pocket split down the side, and a frog prince tumbled from her pocket, transforming fully into a human. Philip collapsed on the ground, croaking a little before sitting up and rubbing his head.

The truth about the magician from Skyfold Pass was also revealed and whatever

magic he used to hide his identity fell away. It was the man from Ambrose's memory. "Get him," I whispered to my person, the man I chose. I had complete faith in him.

Ambrose strode forward, but the magician darted to Philip and grabbed my twin around the neck.

"I'm taking my hostage!" he squeaked, his voice breaking as he lunged. "This is the true prophecy holder and the real reason magic came back to Frostvale. If you hurt me, it will all go away—forever!"

Noll laughed and the sound was unnerving coming from such a large giant. It knocked the pixie twins off their feet and rattled all of the dishes, a tower of saffron cream wobbling and splattering on the ground. "Do you expect us to believe that?" he laughed.

"Oh we burned that prophecy. It's gone. So we definitely don't believe you," Wyot said.

"You can't burn it," the magician shouted. "It was made with wyvern fire. It's impossible to burn!"

My heart dropped. What? What did that mean?

Ambrose pulled something black and powdery from his pocket. "You mean this fireproof prophecy?" He let the pieces fall to the ground. "You yourself helped me release my magic and know better than anyone that I am quite capable of crafting a candle that can burn a ridiculous scrap of paper. Bessa made her own prophecy. She brought back magic."

The magician started to look truly panicked. "Rune, help me!"

My not-so-loyal councilor looked around, panicked. “Me?”

All at once, I understood why Rune wanted me to choose a suitor at the coronation and why he’d been pushing me toward King Culm. The length of time I’d have to be away from Frostvale would be the perfect opportunity for a savvy councilor to swoop in and lead behind the throne.

King Culm was slowly shaking off the perpetual sleepy fog he’d seemed to be under the entire time I’d known him. The candle had also revealed the spell the magician had put him under to enact his side of the plan—keeping the king under his thumb in Skyfold Pass.

To be honest, I didn’t even have to lift a finger to subdue them both. My whole kingdom did that for me. Quicker than a fleeting glimpse of Qanuk in the snowy woods, everyone angled their newly rediscovered magic at the pair of them.

The magician and Rune fell to the ground, all sorts of boils and warts and hives dotting their faces from an ungodly number of rogue magical spells thrown by rusty magical creatures.

King Culm stepped forward, still a little woozy. He bowed low, and I worried I might have to catch him for a moment. “I am sorry for my kingdom’s part in this deception, Queen Bessa. Please forgive me, but I am not searching for your hand in marriage.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for,” I assured him as Culm used his toe to roll over the twitching magician and scowled at him.

“He came into my employ only a few months ago. I assume this was his plan all along. I fear I must return home and see what other evil he has wrought.”

Ambrose bowed to the king of Skyfold Pass. “This magician stole me as a boy from

Frostvale and forced my magic to return with this ring.” He twisted the ring off of his thumb and held it up to the candle light. “He knew there was more here, and he’s been trying to coax it out ever since.”

Culm bowed in return, acknowledging Ambrose as my consort without saying a word. “I will take him back to Skyfold Pass and deal with him. Your councilor is all your own.”

I nodded. “Aye. He will have to pay for his treachery. There will be consequences.”

King Culm smiled. “Congratulations on breaking a century-old curse and restoring magic to Frostvale. I think I speak for all of the Ilex Isles in saying we look forward to seeing magic return to our lands. I suspect Frostvale will have a large role to play in magical diplomacy going forward. I see great things ahead of you, Queen Bessa, and I remain hopeful that our kingdoms will forge an even greater friendship.”

I started to nod my thanks, but something nudged me out of the way. Philip. Somehow, I’d forgotten about him.

“Yes, thank you, thank you,” he said. “It’s been an honor.” My twin straightened the ratty clothes he’d been wearing the last time I’d seen him, which was on the battlefield in disarray and shock at the sight of me. There was still a faint green tinge to his cheeks. “It hasn’t been easy to bring magic back, but I somehow managed it.”

I laughed out loud at that.

He held out his hand, though, in a gimme gesture, the audacity to demand my crown. “The only coronation happening here is mine.”

I wiped a tear from my eye. “You abandoned all claim to the throne when you abandoned your people. I am queen of Frostvale, and I have chosen my consort.”

Philip stomped his boot like a petulant child. “No. I am the firstborn and I am the son. Frostvale belongs to me!” He stared around at everyone.

One by one, the entire ballroom dropped to their knees in front of me, turning their backs completely to Philip, showing through their actions how little they thought of him. When Noll got to his knees, he smashed an entire table. Cream flung into the air and a bowl of custard landed directly on Philip’s head, who stood there too shocked to even sputter.

Story of his life.

Ambrose came to stand in between Philip and me. “If you do not renounce your claim, I believe there is an entire kingdom ready to do it for you.” He looked pointedly at where Rune was still moaning on the ground with a face full of painful looking boils.

Philip swallowed audibly in the crackling silence, and Ambrose stepped closer, seeming to grow taller with each step. It made my legs go weak at the knees and my stomach plummet pleasantly. “Do we have an understanding, Philip?”

Philip gave one last look around, the saffron cream and custard sliding down his neck. “You know, I think we do.”

“Good. Bend your knees and kneel,” Ambrose said, each word clipped and lethal.

Philip creaked to the ground, the bowl finally falling off his head. It was the only crown he’d wear.

Then all of a sudden, everything went silent. I only heard one thing, and it was impossible. The sound of hooves echoed on the stone floor. Slowly, I turned and came face to face with a unicorn.

Frostine be praised. It was a real, gods-given unicorn.

The iridescent creature put her muzzle on my arm and touched the tip of her horn to my crown. Her pearly white tail swished, smacking Philip in the face. She pawed the air once before disappearing back through the open door and into the forest. A cheer went up around the kneeling crowd and began like a groundswell of cacophony. I heard Wyot shout, “I told you it wasn’t a stick!”

Lorcan stared at Duskborne. “Did you know you were a vampire?” he asked.

Duskborne was feeling the tips of his fangs. He looked intent for a second and they popped back up into his gums and became human-looking again. Then he popped them out again. “I guess I did? But I sort of forgot about it. It’s been a century, and I was busy being human. Do you know how hard it is to be human?”

“Uh, yes. We’re still human,” said Wyot. “It’s very difficult, thank you very much.”

“Did you know you were a werewolf?” Duskborne asked Lorcan, ignoring the humans.

Lorcan pursed his lips and shook his head. “Completely out of the loop on that one. I mean, I remember now.”

“This should be interesting,” Duskborne said.

“Our disagreements will be even more lively.”

“Good point. I hadn’t thought of that.”

The whole kingdom was waking up, but it wasn’t just the kingdom or the people in the kingdom. Something tapped my shoulder; I looked up. It was a green tendril.

The castle sent one flowering vine of pink and red petals down from the ceiling. It curled around my waist and then spun outward and curled around Ambrose's waist. Together, the vine picked us up and deposited us outside the ballroom before scooting us up the stairs. Toward my bedroom.

"What in the name of Frostine is happening?" I asked him, protesting the castle.

Ambrose took my hand, engulfing it within his. "Our love has restored magic. I don't think I need to question it any further than that. Especially not if I get to take you upstairs right this second."

"Someone needs to watch Philip. I won't trust him any time soon," I said, attempting to turn back to the ballroom.

The castle vines made an X in front of me and shooed me toward the stairs again. I craned my neck and saw Noll, still in giant form, holding Philip up between his thumb and forefinger, hoisting him to eye level while Philip wiggled like a worm on a hook.

Ambrose raised an eyebrow. "I think you're covered there. Trust your people. And, apparently, your castle."

"And let you just sweep me off my feet?"

"That's the basic idea," Ambrose said as he picked me up as easily as his crate of candles and marched directly up the stone steps to my room. The hearth blazed to life as we entered and a sweet scent swirled around us.

"This castle is taking it a little far, don't you think?" I muttered when soft music began to play.

Ambrose gently put me on the ground before towering over me, his eyes already blazing more hotly than his fires. “I hardly noticed.”

“No?”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:22 am

He shook his head, moving a step closer. “No. In fact, I’ve found I haven’t noticed much when you’re in the room.”

He moved a step closer and a delicious heat ran down my navel directly between my legs. For once, I was able to shed the mantle of queen and all the responsibility that went with it. I could let myself be chased and eventually caught by a large man with mossy green eyes and black, shaggy hair that could as easily split a tree with his bare hands as he could nurse sick flowers and bees back to health.

Trying not to smile too widely, I backed up a step. “What do you notice now?” I asked.

Ambrose went forward, following me. “Fiery red hair, unbound and driving me mad.”

“This?” I asked, running my fingers through it.

He nodded, licking his lips. “Freckles I could spend a lifetime counting and kissing.”

“These?” I asked, touching my nose. I kept backing up and he kept following, stalking his prey.

“A curved shoulder peeking out of a fine dress. A dress too fine for hands like these to have any business touching, your majesty.” He held up his calloused hands, nearly as large as my head, and began unlacing his shirt. He pulled it over his head, and I watched as his muscles rippled in the low light of the hearth.

I put my palm on the bare skin of my low-cut gown, my fingers skimming the tops of my breasts. My chest moved up and down, faster and faster, as Ambrose stalked closer.

“Here?” I asked, still backing up. Suddenly, I bumped into something near the hearth. Something I swore wasn’t there when we entered the room. It was a small, round table set up by the fire.

“What in the...” I asked, giving Ambrose the opening he was looking for. He swept me up in his arms. I squealed as he began ravishing my neck with his tongue. It sent delicious shock waves through my body, but I still had questions.

“Ambrose, I’m serious, what is this?”

He set me down, his teeth grazing my ear and I shivered. He tilted his head. “Odd. It’s the beginning of a candle I was crafting for you. In case I had to leave.” He held up a vial.

“What is it?”

“Unicorn horn shavings. I wanted you to burn it to call the unicorn, and even if the unicorn didn’t come, its horn is renowned for protection and healing. It would have kept you safe.”

“I think the castle wants us to finish it.”

Ambrose paused. “Finish it?”

I nodded, more vigorously. “Together. Will you help me?”

“I would do anything for you,” he repeated.

“Like burn a prophecy made from wyvern fire?”

“I would burn down a kingdom for you.”

He moved closer, now that he had permission. I reveled in it. The thought of being wanted for no reason other than myself was so erotic that I began to pant. I put my hand on my chest to steady my heartbeat, but it was no use. I was too far gone with want—of him and his earthy smell of soil and moss and honey.

“I want you to be so satisfied, so full of me, that you can’t think of anything else while we’re together. I want you to be free with me, Bessa.”

“It’s already working,” I whispered. “I can’t think of a thing right now.”

Slowly, he turned me around, unlacing my coronation gown starting at the top. His fingers were cool to my warm as they brushed my skin. I felt his lips trail kisses down my spine as he slid off the gold and white satin. Slowly, I took off the gold crown and set it on the table, allowing him to turn me around, completely bare before him.

He stood staring, a look of appreciation on his face as he finally allowed me to reach for his breeches. It made me shiver to feel his erection already thick and swollen. Despite having let him put his mouth, his fingers, and even his tongue inside of me already, I had not felt him. He wouldn’t let me that night in his shop, only focusing on my pleasure. Finally, we were both bare before the candle.

“Show me your craft,” I whispered, turning to the table.

Ambrose came around behind me, his thick cock pressed between the curves of my backside as he put his hands on mine, bending over my shoulder. “Together, my queen,” he whispered in my ear before putting his tongue inside and making my whole body quiver. “That feels so good when you move like that,” he rasped, and he did it again, just to make me quake. Our bodies were fire and ice, pressed together to

make magic.

His hands were steady, but his hips were pressing me harder and harder against the table, his desire evident. I arched my back into him and felt the fullest satisfaction at his moan. I was so wet, my thighs were slick with my own want as I tried to steady myself and keep my knees from buckling.

Slowly, we added the shimmering unicorn shavings and chunks of honeycomb in a bowl, heating the mixture until it flowed. The whole thing smelled heavenly, like snowdrops.

“Careful,” he said, pouring the wax into the mold. A drop fell on my hand, but it didn’t burn. It slid off, hotter than when it landed, merely by touching my skin. I was immune now. I let the drop fall on Ambrose and it hardened immediately, already cold to the touch. He looked up at me with a devious look. “I think this is going to be very fun.”

Sweeping me up again, he laid me on the bed and spread my legs with his hands. He knelt over me, his cock hanging thick between us. He took the remaining wax and slowly dribbled it, drip by drip onto my soft belly, before taking his fingers and swirling them through the wax, hardening it instantly at his touch. My hands fisted the sheets, and my hips couldn’t keep still as I tried not to thrust upward, searching for him to fill me. It was torture, waiting. I ached and ached between my legs until I finally resorted to begging.

“Please, Ambrose.”

“Yes, Bessa?” he asked, his voice a light tease. His fingers swirling hot wax around my nipple, teasing it into a hardened bud that made me forget how to form words for a moment. “Now for the other one,” he said, spilling hot wax down my chest and swirling circles like art over my nipples.

“Please!” I gasped.

He finally took pity. “Guide me,” my candle maker murmured. “Take me inside of you, my queen. I want to kiss you until you’re wild and dizzy and feel your heart beating next to mine. I want you.”

Holding him with one hand and gripping his hip with my other, I put his cock right at my entrance and slid him up and down my slit, feeling where the tingles exploded the most pleasantly and how deliciously thick he felt in my palms. All at once, I felt as if I might die if I couldn’t have him inside me. I pulled him harder against my opening, but his hips resisted.

“Say it, Bessa,” he ordered.

“Take me,” I said. “I’m yours,” I promised.

He finally took a hold of my wrists and pinned them to the bed. I gasped as he pushed inside of me, the pressure of him immense, more immense than I could have imagined as he filled me completely. I couldn’t help but gasp again as pulled out, panting over the top of me before pushing himself in again.

And again.

And again.

Keeping me pinned to the bed, I did the only thing I could do; I thrust my hips up to meet him, taking him as deep as I could, needing to feel him pressed against every inch of me. The lingering heat of the wax was exquisite as it dripped between us, alternating between cold and hard and hot and silky every time it melted and hardened anew between our bodies.

My womanhood began to clench around him, and Ambrose’s eyes dilated in the

firelight. “Come for me, Bessa.”

I could already feel his own orgasm beginning, and it sent me over the edge. The feel of hot wax hardening on my stomach and his semen spilling out between my legs sent me over the edge again—or perhaps I was still climbing. I was in ecstasy. I couldn’t stop my moans from turning into screams even if I wanted to.

“Ah, Bessa. You feel so good.” He pressed a kiss to my lips, the tip of my nose, my forehead, and back down, before finally lying next to me, propped up on an arm. The moment was raw and vulnerable, the aftershocks of pleasure fading into something real—something meaningful—and I knew I had made the right choice of consort.

Rose petals rained down from the ceiling as my newly sentient castle showered us with its own love and affection. Ambrose threw a fistful in the air over my head as I laughed.

“I could get used to this,” I said, taking a petal to drag along my bare collarbone, over my breast, my nipple. I didn’t get much farther as he wrapped me in his arms, abandoning the petals for kisses.

“I love you, your majesty.”

I smiled, sinking into his wide arms. “And I love you, Chandler.”

In the end, the cold never could claim us. We burned much too hot.

And they lived Happily Ever After.

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To keep the new magic from misbehaving, Queen Bessa assigns her most trusted companion to Liora's side: her brother, Sir Wyot. A former knight without a cause, Wyot is loyal, brooding, and far too handsome for Liora's peace of mind. Worse, the castle's newly-simmering magic likes them together—enough to bind their magic in a tether that reacts to every spark of emotion.

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