



Ties of Dust (Tethered Hearts #8)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: A girl hiding in plain sight. A prince trying to save the peninsula. A very inconvenient enchantment.

Flora owes her role as a royal bodyguard to her ability to control Dust—the invisible magic created by movement. She doesn't precisely pretend to be a man. She just doesn't correct those who assume the Squalian princess's bodyguard must be a man...which is everyone. Including the delegation of the foreign prince to whom the princess is betrothed.

Prince Cassius's sole purpose in seeking a marriage alliance is to bring strength to the region before outside forces succeed in splintering the peninsula further. When a misunderstanding magically tethers him to the princess's scrawny bodyguard, he thinks his plan couldn't go more wrong. Until the bodyguard reveals herself to be far from the teenage boy he'd assumed—it turns out his plan can go much more wrong.

Flora and Cassius find themselves in an uncomfortable bind—especially as their own hearts become as great a threat to the proposed marriage alliance as the outside forces determined to prevent it. When Cassius's enemies emerge from the shadows, and their tether puts Flora in even greater danger than Cassius, both will have to decide what they'll fight to protect...even if it means choosing between their hearts and their kingdoms.

Ties of Dust is book eight in Tethered Hearts, a multi-author series of no spice fantasy romances. Each standalone story features a magical bond that forces the couple to discover how much they're willing to sacrifice for the sake of love.

Although it's a fully standalone story, Ties of Dust also serves as a prequel to Deborah Grace White's upcoming fantasy series Magic of Dust and Movement.

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Chapter

One

Flora turned her head as she held her own gaze in the floor-length looking glass in front of her. It was a beautiful mirror, the gilded edges proclaiming wealth without being showy. It was, in fact, fit for a princess. There was a rueful edge to the thought in Flora's mind, although the description was perfectly apt. The mirror belonged, after all, to Princess Miriam of Siquel. In whose royal suite Flora was currently standing, staring into the looking glass like she had nowhere to be, which was far from true.

She straightened, pulling her eyes from her face and taking in her attire. She was neat and orderly, everything in place for the journey ahead. She fixed a wayward strand of hair that threatened to mar the image she was creating, then gave a decisive nod.

"Are you ready, Flora?"

The princess's voice floated to Flora from the next room, and Flora turned.

"Yes, I'm ready. You?"

"Ready to leave for the border? No. Ready for you to help me do up this blasted gown like you promised? Yes."

"Whoops." Flora winced in apology as she hurried into the bedchamber where the princess waited. "Sorry, Mim."

Miriam waved a hand. Princess she might be, but there was nothing imperious in her reproach. She'd been Flora's closest friend since their years at the Ladies' Academy in the neighboring kingdom of Torrens, and their respective stations didn't enter into it.

"Stars above, you were right," Flora commented, as she wrestled with the buttons that ran the full length of Miriam's glorious, magenta gown. "It is absurdly fiddly. This is what you're supposed to travel in? It's a four-hour ride to the border, at least!"

Miriam sighed. "I won't be able to ride in this. We'll have to travel in the carriage, so it will take even longer. It seems that taking away my betrothed's breath with my extravagant wealth and beauty is more important than any practical considerations of travel."

"I think it's your breath that will be taken away," Flora said in a prosaic spirit. "I'm going to have to tighten your corset if we're to do these buttons up properly."

Miriam groaned, but it was a resigned sound. "Do what you must. Better you than the maids I kicked out earlier. They'd have my waist cinched in so tight I wouldn't be able to breathe. The life of a princess, I suppose."

"If you say so."

Flora said the words with a grin, the expression broadening as her friend narrowed her eyes in predictable irritation.

"One of these days, your impertinence will catch up with you, servant," she said.

Flora just chuckled, taking the quip in the spirit it was intended.

"I'd better get used to it," Miriam said, a wistful note to her voice. "In a matter of

weeks I'll be the princess of two kingdoms, so I don't think there's much reprieve from royal duties in my future."

Flora sobered at once, taking in her friend's somber air. "Are you nervous?"

Miriam shook her head, her mouth shut tightly. She'd been very unwilling to discuss her betrothal with Flora, which was uncharacteristic. It told Flora that Miriam wasn't even ready to face her emotions herself yet, let alone say them aloud. Flora felt the familiar discomfort squirm in her stomach. She hated that her friend was being pushed into marriage. It was, indeed, the life of a princess, she knew. It was all but inevitable. But she still hated to watch it play out.

"It could be worse," she said tentatively. "We've never heard anything bad about Prince Cassius."

"I don't know if you could say that," Miriam disagreed. "He's from Carrack, so I think we can safely assume that he's proud and haughty. In fact, I believe I have heard that said of him specifically."

"Better proud than cruel," said Flora, still trying valiantly to be positive. "I think we could still say we've never heard anything truly bad about him."

"High praise," Miriam said dryly. "But honestly, I'm fine." She contorted her features as Flora did up the last of the buttons. "It's a good proposal. Father was right to accept it. An alliance between us and Carrack will strengthen Siquel. We won't have to worry about the rumblings we're hearing from Torrens anymore—I can't see Torrens attacking in either direction when they're sandwiched between two allied kingdoms."

"I'm not convinced that Torrens would attack anyone," Flora said, critically surveying Miriam's elaborate hairstyle. "We were in the heart of their capital for

years at the academy, and I never caught a hint of aggressive policies.”

Miriam shrugged. “Things change, I suppose. Regardless, it’s a good alliance for Siqua.”

“It is,” Flora agreed slowly.

Miriam was repeating the official line her parents had hammered into her, but she didn’t sound convinced of her own words. And Flora’s agreement was spoken without much conviction. The alliance wasn’t a bad thing. But why must an alliance require her friend to tether her heart and life to a stranger? Surely there were alternative resources the kingdoms of Siqua and Carrack could trade other than royal sons and daughters. For a moment she grappled with the question, trying in vain to think of a non-human resource that either kingdom sorely needed from the other.

“Mim, there’s a loop of hair that just won’t stay,” she said, giving up her silent attempts. Voicing defiance wouldn’t change anything for her friend. “I’ve just made it worse with these clumsy fingers of mine. Hold still, and I’ll stir up some Dust to fix it.”

“If you like.” Miriam didn’t seem concerned either way.

Focusing carefully, Flora drew one hand back and began to wiggle her fingers. With the ease of extensive practice, her awareness latched effortlessly onto the insignificant amount of magic created by the tiny movement.

For a task as intricate as fixing hair, a minuscule amount of magic would be easier to manipulate than a torrent. She needed more magic than wriggling her fingers would create, but a small amount nonetheless.

Once she felt confident that she had iron control over the magic her movement was

creating, she swept her hand—fingers still wiggling—toward Miriam’s head, her senses full of the invisible Dust—or magic—stirred up by the motion.

Responsive to her silent direction, that magic molded itself into a shifting enchantment. It had very little power, but plenty of finesse, and it shifted Miriam’s hair into place perfectly, trapping it underneath the pin that Flora’s fingers had dislodged.

“There,” she said, satisfied. “My fingers will never be deft enough to have that level of control. But the Dust I can control, no problem.”

“Yes.” Miriam smiled encouragingly at her friend. “You’re a natural, Flora, not that you need me to tell you that. I’d say your talents are wasted on hair arrangement, except I’m convinced that it’s good to be versatile.”

“Of course it is,” Flora agreed. “It’s not as though fixing your hair is the only thing I do with my craft.”

“Thankfully for me.” Miriam laughed.

The princess reached out a hand, her fingers curled back toward herself before she extended her hand out in a graceful, flicking motion. Flora could feel the Dust stirred up by her friend’s movement—not with the blazing awareness of the magic that had been under her own control, but her senses still identified it. She didn’t attempt to take hold of it, of course. Trying to control the magic created by someone else’s movement was complex and dangerous. Not to mention illegal.

Instead, she watched as Miriam harnessed the magic herself, causing the ring she was reaching for—just out of range of her physical reach—to move slowly forward across the dresser to where she could pick it up.

“Pathetic, really,” the princess said ruefully.

“No, it’s not,” Flora scolded her. “You have more capacity for the craft than you think. You just have to apply yourself more.”

Miriam wrinkled her nose. “You sound like our instructors, all of whom thought their own subjects were going to be every student’s top priority.”

“Generally I’d agree with you,” Flora said, “but honestly, I can’t understand how the craft isn’t everyone’s top priority. Why would you not want to harness magic?”

“I do want to,” Miriam said reasonably. “But history interested me more. And literature. You don’t realize how strong your natural aptitude is, Flora. I did apply myself. A lot. It took a great deal of study and effort for me to achieve the most basic level of control over the magic of my movement. I got nowhere near being able to harness magic from other sources of movement. What I just did is the peak of my achievement—now, with significant effort, I can bring a ring a few inches across the table. It would be so much easier for me to just shift forward and get it.”

Flora shrugged. She couldn’t relate to the lack of motivation, but then again it wasn’t news to her that magic had always held more fascination for her than it had for her friend.

“I haven’t seen that ring before,” she commented, as Miriam slid the jewelry onto her finger.

“It was my mother’s,” the princess said, her voice sad and wistful as she stared down at the sparkling gem.

Flora stared at her. “Why do you sound so...forlorn about it?”

Miriam's woebegone expression disappeared into a grin as she looked up at her friend. "Because Mother has terrible taste in jewelry. And now I have to wear it, or she'll be offended. Although, to be fair, I think even she must have come to her senses and realized this one is ghastly, or she wouldn't have given it to me."

Flora considered it impassively. "It is rather ugly, isn't it? Her Majesty just can't say no to a persuasive jewelry vendor, can she?"

"Not to save her life," Miriam agreed cheerfully. She considered. "Or, more accurately, not even to save my reputation for good fashion."

"I doubt anyone will notice the ring," Flora said.

"No, they'll be more focused on the one Prince Cassius is going to put on this finger." Miriam raised her left hand, contemplating it thoughtfully for a moment before speaking in a rush. "I lied before, Flora. I am nervous."

Flora said nothing, her expression sympathetic.

"I don't want to marry a stranger, and I don't want to move to Carrack. But it's not just that. I don't trust the Carrackians. We haven't been on good terms with them for about a hundred years. I know everyone's whispering that it's Torrens behind the bandit attacks and suspicious disasters that have been happening in all the other kingdoms. But it doesn't feel right to me. Why would Torrens—who we've always been friendly with—turn against us, and Carrack—who we have a strained relationship with at best—be the ones offering an alliance?"

Flora frowned. It did sound strange when put that way.

"You think they might be playing us false somehow?"

Miriam shrugged. “I don’t know what to think. And I don’t dare tell my parents my suspicions, because they’d never believe it’s not a disobliging attempt to get out of the marriage alliance.” She twisted the gaudy ring with a distracted gesture. “I suppose I’ll just have to hope the proposal was in good faith.” Her next words were accompanied by a wry smile at her friend. “I won’t be able to harness enough Dust to defend myself if things go badly once I’m in Carrack.”

“You won’t be alone,” Flora said passionately. She knelt at her friend’s side and clasped her hand in a reassuring gesture. “I will keep you safe, Miriam, I swear it.”

Miriam returned the pressure gratefully. “You know I appreciate it, and unlike all the fools in the guardhouse, I don’t doubt your abilities. But the journey to the border is one thing. We’ll still be in our own lands when we meet the Carrackian delegation, and the betrothal won’t technically be formalized yet. We’re still very much under Father’s authority. But once I’m married, I’ll be subject to their king’s control. You may not be allowed to accompany me.”

Flora frowned, not liking that idea. “I’ll follow in secret if I have to,” she declared.

Miriam gave her a look. “I think you did enough sneaking around at the academy to last a lifetime. Don’t get yourself into trouble on my account.”

Flora had no intention of promising any such thing, but Miriam didn’t give her the chance to say so.

“You need to think about your own future,” the princess went on. “Your own life. You can’t spend it following me around forever.”

Flora shook her head. “Why shouldn’t I follow you to Carrack? It’s not as though there’s anything keeping me here in Sindon.”

“You’ve been invaluable, Flora, don’t sell yourself short,” Miriam said. “I’m sure there would be a prestigious role for you in the castle here if you wanted it.”

“No.” Flora almost laughed at that. “Your parents tolerate me because I’m useful to you, but there’s no way they’d offer me a role once you’re gone. And I wouldn’t want it if they did. ”

Miriam frowned, but before she could respond, there was a knock at the door. The sound elicited a sigh from the princess, and Flora rose to her feet. She stepped back as a veritable sea of maids and attendants poured into the room, subjecting Miriam to a final examination.

Flora bowed respectfully to the lilac-swathed figure who swept in behind them. The queen even smelled like lilac. She was wearing a rather chunky necklace that didn’t compliment the neckline of her gown at all, and her fingers were adorned with a dizzying number of rings, but she carried herself with enough grace to make observers inclined to ignore these lapses in taste.

“Miriam.” The queen beamed at her only daughter. “You look stunning, child. He’ll be smitten.”

Miriam gave her mother a look. “It doesn’t really matter if he’s smitten or not, does it? This is a political marriage—I didn’t think either my romantic notions or Prince Cassius’s entered into the decision.”

“Not into the decision, no,” the queen agreed sagely. “But into the marriage, yes. Take it from me, it helps if your husband is a little bit smitten from time to time.”

Flora hid a smile. It was hard to imagine Siquel’s stately and serious king being smitten over anything, but she’d have to take the queen’s word for it. She pulled her jacket tightly around her, raising the fitted hood that obscured much of her face.

Unlike Miriam, she hadn't dressed to stand out.

Miriam didn't reply to her mother's declaration. Her expression resigned, she rose to her feet. As she did so, the sweeping sleeve of her gown caught a glass jewelry stand and sent it toppling over the edge of the dresser.

Flora responded instinctively, her training rising to her aid. Her mind was always aware of movement in the area, and she didn't have to actually think about it in order to focus in on the magic stirred up, not by the movement of Miriam's arm or sleeve, but by the movement of the falling item itself. Flora's awareness latched on to the magic and directed it, creating a cushion that caused the glass stand to float softly to the ground, unharmed.

"Oh, clumsy me!" Miriam exclaimed. Her gaze flicked from the glass stand to her friend behind her. "Thanks, Flora."

"Ah." The queen eyed Flora with a more reserved expression. "You're here, are you? Very good. I understand His Majesty has approved you to accompany the princess to the meeting point?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." Flora bowed her head respectfully.

"Of course she's coming, Mother," Miriam said in impatience. "She'll travel with me all the way into Carrack. And I still don't understand why we have to go to a meeting point so far away. Can't the Carrackian delegation come here to the capital?"

"It's a show of goodwill to meet on neutral ground," the queen said. "And heaven knows we need all the goodwill we can get. There's already enough suspicion on both sides to make navigating this alliance complex. This is a small price to pay, especially given we will still be meeting within our own borders. I don't see why it need trouble you. Your betrothal ceremony will happen back in Carrack, but you will

of course return here for the wedding.”

Miriam sighed at the prospect but didn't protest. She just made for the door, her silken skirts swishing as she walked. It was a gorgeous gown, Flora reflected, as she walked behind her friend. Impractical, but gorgeous.

She noticed Miriam looking wistfully around her as they walked through the castle, and she felt a pang for her friend. Even though they would be back, it would only be for the wedding, after which she would leave Siquel for good. Even Flora felt the bittersweetness of the moment. She'd enjoyed her time at the castle. She would be sad to say goodbye to the place.

When they passed through the largest of the interior courtyards, Miriam paused near the huge central fountain, Flora alongside her. The fountain was a work of art, a chiseled stone pillar rising from its center and branching out at the top like the petals of a giant flower. Around the edge of the basin, the stone was carved into the shape of many anzu birds ringing the pool, some taking flight, some perched, some preparing to pounce. Water fell from various levels of the stone pillar, so that the room was filled with the musical tinkling of water.

Flora and Miriam both watched in silence as a dozen real, living anzu birds frolicked in the basin. They were curious creatures, about the size of a small dog. Their bodies were fully avian, with talon-tipped feet, and sleek feathers they delighted in grooming with their long tongues. But their heads were feline, reminiscent of the kitchen cats kept by the cook to keep the castle's rodent population at bay.

As they watched, one of the anzu birds spread its wings, soaring up to perch on a tiny stone spout that projected from an upper section of the pillar. Another followed it, settling on the spout below.

The first anzu bird opened its mouth, pausing to look around with its slit-like eyes to

ensure it had been noticed. Flora rolled her eyes, even though she couldn't help smiling. The castle anzu birds were incredibly domesticated and absolutely adored an audience. They were beloved—it was a point of pride that most of the Peninsula's anzu bird population was found within Siquál's borders.

Satisfied that enough people were watching, the anzu bird opened its mouth and mewed. The hissing, angry nature of the sound gave Flora a split second's warning of what was coming. Her eyes confirmed it as the anzu bird's meow turned smoothly into a small spurt of flame that issued from its open mouth.

At once, the other anzu bird began to purr, the sound growing quickly into a soothing mewl that—to no one's surprise—morphed into a spout of water. The water doused the flame in one go, putting out the bright spot and restoring the courtyard to its state of peace.

All the humans in the area clapped politely, as the anzu birds certainly expected them to do. After a moment's preening, they soared gracefully back down into the pond, where they kept their heads dry while expertly flicking water over their feathers.

“Come now, Miriam, what are you dawdling for?”

The queen's impatient voice drew them forward, eliciting a small sigh from Miriam.

“Such a shame they didn't have anzu birds in Torrens when we were studying,” Flora said, to lighten the mood. “The feel of the Dust stirred up by their movements is fascinating. I'd love to learn to harness it. The magic stirred by the flame and by the water is really different, too.”

“Maybe that can be your next project once you've seen me safely married,” Miriam said, her smile unconvincing.

When they reached the exterior courtyard, Flora was surprised that not only the king, but both princes were waiting. She'd known Prince Theodore was to accompany their group to meet the Carrackian delegation. But she hadn't expected to see Prince Xavier as well. The heir to the throne of Siquel wasn't known for his reliability. In fact, he was rarely where one might want him to be.

But it warmed Flora's heart that he'd shown up for his sister. Much as Miriam might complain about her brothers, Flora knew that their presence would mean a great deal to the princess.

"You look lovely, Miriam," Prince Theodore said kindly. His rather serious face was softened by a friendly smile. "We should get going."

"It's not too late to back out, sis," Prince Xavier said, coming up close to her.

She gave him a long-suffering look. "Only you would say that. It's not a question of whether it's too late. I was never given the option of backing out, as you put it."

He grinned at her. "You have to make your own options, Mim. If you want out, make a run for it when you get close to the border. Knock out the side of the carriage or something." He inclined his head to Flora with a conspiratorial wink. "I'm sure Flora could help you."

"I could," Flora confirmed, her voice matter-of-fact, but low enough not to be heard by the king and queen, who were conversing nearby. "And I'm perfectly ready to if you want. Just say the word."

Prince Xavier gave a delighted laugh, but Miriam shook her head.

"You're both being ridiculous." The rebuke, directed to both Flora and Prince Xavier, held a wistful note. Prince Theodore showed no similar sentiment as he backed his

sister up.

“You are,” he agreed. “And it doesn’t make it any easier for anyone, so stop it.”

Flora subsided, although the glint in Prince Xavier’s eye told her he wasn’t similarly cowed .

“It’s easy for you to be pragmatic, Theo,” Miriam pointed out. “No one’s asking you to make a marriage alliance.”

“Not currently,” he acknowledged. “But I think it’s highly likely that I’ll be expected to do just that in due course, if it makes you feel any better.”

Miriam sighed. “Maybe it should. But it doesn’t.”

Prince Theodore reached out, his hand hovering uncertainly for a moment over the lavish gown before he found a fairly safe patch of fabric on her shoulder to give a reassuring squeeze.

“I know it feels overwhelming. And we’ll miss you a great deal once you’re settled in Carrack. But I’ll be there alongside you, at least for the journey.”

“Small comfort,” Prince Xavier said dryly.

Flora eyed him silently. The older prince might speak more like his sister’s champion, but it was the younger prince who was actually going to be present to provide support. Even if that support probably wouldn’t go as far as helping his sister to run away if she’d wanted to.

Honestly, either brother’s support was better than any she’d be likely to get from her own brothers in a similar situation. In that regard, she considered Miriam fortunate.

“No sense putting off the inevitable, anyway,” Miriam said with determination as she moved toward the enormous carriage emblazoned with the royal crest of Siqua. “Come on, then. Let’s go meet my prince.”

Only Flora caught her muttered addition as she climbed into the carriage behind the princess. “And let’s hope he’s not planning to play us all false.”

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Chapter

Two

“At last. That process was unnecessarily tedious.”

The disapproving voice of Lord Armand sounded in Cassius’s ears as they moved across the broad stone bridge that marked the border. Torrens was behind them now. They were in Siquil.

“It was only natural for the Torrenese crown to send representatives to accompany us across their land,” Cassius told the other man, impatient of his wary mutterings. They’d encountered no reason for suspicion in Torrens, in spite of rumors. “I would do the same were a royal delegation passing through my own kingdom.”

Lord Armand didn’t look convinced. “Be that as it may, I’m glad to be out of Torrens, Your Highness.” He glanced up at the darkening storm clouds above them. “I’m ready to reach our destination.”

“As am I,” Cassius agreed.

Well, ready might be a stretch. But how did a man prepare to greet a stranger to whom he was about to become betrothed?

“You must be eager to meet the princess,” Lord Armand added. He smiled at the prince in an indulgent way that Cassius found irritating. “I have heard she is very beautiful.”

Cassius just grunted. He didn't object to his bride being beautiful, of course. He just hoped that Princess Miriam tended toward kindness as well. The alliance would be a bad bargain for him if he ended up with a shrewish wife. But it couldn't be helped. The whole marriage alliance had been his idea, and he wasn't going to back out of it based on the princess's personality. Not with so much at stake.

Worry once again tugged at Cassius's mind, adding urgency to the task ahead. It was imperative that they seal the agreement with the Siqualian delegation quickly, and get back to Carrack. He was uneasy about being away given his father's current frame of mind.

As expected, they were greeted by guards on the Siqualian side of the border. The meeting point was a further half hour ride away, but the delay at the border crossing meant they wouldn't make it before the storm broke. Rain was already pattering onto Cassius's shoulders.

"Is extra protection necessary?" Lord Armand protested, as a small group of guards from the border mounted up to accompany them the rest of the way. "I understood that Their Majesties assured us of order on their roads."

"Peace, Lord Armand," Cassius said, weary of the nobleman's argumentative presence. "We are all aware that Siqua has suffered the same increase in unrest as other kingdoms. It doesn't hurt to take precautions."

Lord Armand didn't take the rebuke silently, but Cassius had little patience for his earnest attempt to convince the prince that the honor of their kingdom was at stake. If it had been up to him, Cassius would never have included Lord Armand on the delegation. The older man was notoriously easy to offend, with a tendency to overreact to perceived slights, especially against their crown or kingdom.

That passionate loyalty was no doubt why the king had sent him. But for his part,

Cassius found it insulting that his father had thought it necessary. What grounds did the king have to think that his only son needed help to ensure Carrack was shown due respect? He felt all the pride Carrack deserved—their kingdom's position on the Peninsula was enviable, and the alliance was to Siqua's benefit.

But he hadn't argued about the choice of delegation members, instead focusing on convincing his father that the marriage alliance was the king's own idea.

Cassius watched out of the corner of his eye as Lord Armand twitched an eyebrow in concentration, and several buzzing flies were swept out of his face by an unseen force. He must have used the magic created by the insects' own motion to fuel the wind that had driven them away.

That was the other reason the king had been eager to send Lord Armand with the group. He was incredibly skilled in magic craft. Generally members of the court didn't train rigorously enough to excel in magic manipulation. It was seen as neither necessary nor dignified for the titled, no different from pursuing any other trade. But as the king's liaison with the Craftsmen's Guild, Lord Armand had more license. Cassius was fair enough to acknowledge that the nobleman had a strong natural aptitude. If they encountered conflict, Lord Armand would be useful in their defense.

As long as it wasn't his over-readiness to fight that created the conflict.

"I think I see the Siquan delegation ahead," Cassius said, cutting off whatever the nobleman was saying.

The guard in charge of the delegation's protection appeared at Cassius's side.

"The turn off is here, Your Highness. But it looks as though the Siquan delegation hasn't yet taken it. They're stopped ahead. I've sent someone to discover why."

“No need,” said Cassius, spurring his horse forward. “We can ask them ourselves.”

His guards flanked him as he approached the clump of carriages pulled neatly off the road not far ahead. The reason for the halt soon became clear—one carriage was listing to the side with a broken wheel.

“Could it be a ploy?” Lord Armand mused from just behind him. “To gain the upper hand somehow?”

Cassius threw an incredulous look over his shoulder. “I see no benefit to them.”

The nobleman’s face was grim. “Perhaps it is an accident, as it appears. But if it is an attempt to outmaneuver us, we will stand ready to defend the honor of yourself and our kingdom.”

Cassius slowed his horse, his voice stern. “I appreciate your fervor for Carrack, My Lord. But I would remind you that our aim is not to antagonize Siquel but to ally ourselves with it. It is for me to handle the discussion, not you.”

“With respect, Your Highness, I have my instructions,” Lord Armand said. “His Majesty tasked me with ensuring Siquel doesn’t get away with any foul play.” He glanced upward, his eyes narrowed against the now-pounding rain. “I must say, this downpour is convenient.”

“What do you mean, convenient?” Cassius had to fight to hold back a scowl at the nobleman’s dismissive attitude toward the prince’s instructions. Even from afar, his father’s overstimulated pride was hampering his efforts. “It seems blasted inconvenient to me.”

“The movement,” Lord Armand explained patiently. “The movement of the rain is generating a substantial amount of power. I’m well versed in the manipulation of

weather-formed power, Your Highness. If I need to craft an enchantment, I should have no difficulty accessing enough magic for a powerful one.”

“I trust that won’t be necessary,” Cassius said flatly.

They’d neared the damaged carriage, and Cassius could see that its occupants had alighted. They were attempting to shelter from the downpour under the branches of a copse of trees that stood on one side of the road. Cassius realized with a start that it must have been the princess’s own carriage that met with the accident. She was unmistakable in the midst of the group in a full, silken gown of a shade of magenta that was striking, if somewhat startling. Her hair was a deep brown, pulled back in a braid that still looked voluminous. Her brows were dark, perhaps a little heavy, but with her head lowered, Cassius couldn’t easily read her expression. She didn’t raise her eyes as Cassius dismounted and a man about his own age stepped forward to greet him.

“Prince Cassius.” The man inclined his head slightly, both his bearing and his attire proclaiming his affluence. “My apologies for the delay in reaching our intended meeting point. I’m Prince Theodore, and I’m delighted to welcome you to Siquel on behalf of my father the king.” He glanced to the side, where the princess was still regarding her own folded hands. “And to present to you my sister, Princess Miriam.”

She raised her eyes at last. Her features were beautiful, but the smile that crossed her face was strained. Cassius had sympathy for her. It was an awkward situation. But it was of his making, so he should do his best to reduce the discomfort.

“I am grateful for your welcome,” he said, trying to project both kindness and confidence. “And to meet Her Highness.”

With a hint of steeling herself, the princess moved forward. Another figure followed her movement, drawing Cassius’s gaze. The man, whom he hadn’t even noticed at

first, was dressed in a uniform of silver and black, with a fitted hood that made it difficult to see his face. Cassius was familiar with the type of uniform—his own guards wore similar ones, designed to make them seem less like individual people and more like a role embodied. They weren't supposed to attract notice, but Cassius couldn't help staring at the one in front of him.

The man's watchful demeanor and the way his every movement shadowed the princess seemed to confirm what Cassius had assumed from his attire—he was the princess's personal bodyguard. But he was a strange choice. In Cassius's experience, bodyguards were built like bears, tall and muscled with statures designed to intimidate. This man looked like a teenager. He moved with confidence, and his posture was one of readiness, but he was barely taller than the princess, and he was far too lithe to be described as muscled.

“You are very welcome, Prince Cassius.” Princess Miriam's voice was soft but clear, even over the sound of the rain on the branches above. “We are glad to—”

It was the sudden movement of the bodyguard that cut off the princess's words. Cassius didn't even see what had prompted the man to move, he just saw him leap in front of the princess. Cassius blinked in confusion as what appeared to be a cloud of dust burst over the man as he raised a leather bracer before his face. Cassius's eyes could barely follow quickly enough to catch the chunk of misshapen metal that thunked into the bracer before falling to the grass in front of him.

It was only as something whistled past his ear that he realized what had happened. The bodyguard had used magic to destroy an arrow mid-flight before it could strike the princess.

There was no time to be impressed by the man's reflexes and magic manipulation skills. By the time Cassius understood what he was seeing, the guard had repeated the performance four times in rapid succession, disabling a fresh arrow each time. The

moment the barrage stopped, he whipped a sling from his jacket and placed a small stone inside it.

Shouts from both parties showed that all the other guards—who clearly wouldn't have identified the threat until too late—had at last grasped what was happening. Prince Theodore drew a blade, moving toward his sister as each party's guards converged on their charges.

“Just as we feared!” Lord Armand cried from beside Cassius, seizing the prince's arm and attempting to drag him behind the shelter of a tree. “Foul play!”

“Don't be a fool!” Cassius snapped, yanking himself free. His guards had already formed a human shield around him, but he reached for his own blade nonetheless. “We're not the target.”

The princess's impressive bodyguard had taken no note of the bustle around him. By the time the other guards reached Princess Miriam, the bodyguard was swinging his sling expertly around his head. Deftly, and without even looking around, he shifted forward so the weapon didn't catch any of the converging guards.

“There! In that tree!”

Prince Theodore had found the source of the attack, but Cassius didn't follow his gesture, too fascinated by the smooth movement of the bodyguard's sling. He'd assumed that the purpose of the weapon was to take out the archer, but the bodyguard didn't release the stone. His posture was rigid with focus as he continued to whip the weapon around his head, his body still placed between the princess and the direction of the arrows.

“He's generating more magic!” Lord Armand cried, realizing the purpose of the sling just as Cassius did.

Cassius ignored the scandalized observation. The bodyguard wasn't a threat to them—a blind man could perceive that his whole focus was the princess and her protection. He still didn't release the stone, instead watching as one of the Squalian guards took aim with a bow of his own, squinting in the direction from which the arrows had come.

Cassius tried to dull his main senses and focus on the awareness of magic that had been part of his studies. The rapid motion of the bodyguard's sling was creating a steady stream of magic. Cassius could tell that it was tethered to the bodyguard, meaning the man had taken hold of it, but he didn't have the training to identify the exact shape the harnessed magic was taking. His best guess was that the man was using it to create a sort of shield around the princess.

Cassius pulled his attention back to his physical surroundings in time to see the archer guard let his arrow fly. A gurgling cry and a heavy thunk behind Cassius told him that the attacker had been neutralized. But the bodyguard didn't relax, and it was a good instinct. Just as several of the guards swarmed toward the fallen archer, something flew out of the trees in the opposite direction.

Cassius's warning cry died in his throat as the spear collided with an invisible wall of magic and fell, harmless, onto the grass. From his vantage point, he couldn't see whoever had thrown the weapon. But the bodyguard apparently could. He spun his sling around a final time, releasing the stone at last. It disappeared into the branches, and a moment later, a much larger shape than a spear plummeted through the foliage and hit the ground with a sickening thud.

Like everyone else, Cassius froze, staring at the lifeless body of the second attacker, who had another spear clutched in his hand.

“Move into the field, away from the trees.”

The sharp voice of Prince Theodore broke through the silence. Cassius turned to see him ushering his sister and her bodyguard across the road toward open space. The Squalian prince turned to his guards.

“Search the whole copse. Every tree, you understand?”

Half the guards spread out among the trees and, at a word from Cassius, most of his own guards joined them. The rest accompanied the royals from both kingdoms into the open space on the other side of the road. Cassius’s head was spinning, and dominant among his reactions was a vague feeling of uselessness, even shame. He wasn’t the only one whom the attack had taken by surprise, but that didn’t make him feel any better about his response to danger being put so thoroughly to shame by a teenager.

As he drew close to the Squalians, he saw that Prince Theodore looked equally shaken. Over the driving rain, Cassius could barely hear his voice .

“Without a doubt, you saved her life,” the other prince was murmuring to the bodyguard. “I hope you know that.”

The bodyguard inclined his head, his youthful frame still stiff with tension as rain hammered down on the hood he wore. He looked like he was struggling to hold himself upright, and no wonder. The energy his defensive magic had required would have been immense. Princess Miriam herself looked pale, her eyes darting around the open, grassy space in search of further threats. She was sticking close to her bodyguard, the only one standing alongside the royals. The rest had formed a protective ring that fully encased them all, a stone’s throw from their position, ready to keep the fighting away from them if another attack came.

But why had the first attack come? None of it made sense. Cassius was still searching for words to voice his confusion when Lord Armand strode angrily into the protective

circle. The nobleman was taut with fury, his face set in an expression of outrage that Cassius knew all too well.

“This is unacceptable!” Lord Armand raged as he neared the Squalian royals. “Carrack will know how to answer such an affront!”

“Peace, Lord Armand,” Cassius attempted, but he doubted anyone even heard him over the curt words of Prince Theodore.

“Affront? To Carrack? It is Squal’s princess— my sister—who was just attacked.”

“The attack could have killed any and all of us,” said Lord Armand, not mollified. “For you to invite Prince Cassius onto your lands, only to subject him to such danger without—”

“We did not subject him to anything,” Prince Theodore shot back. “If your bluster is intended to allay suspicion from yourselves, it will not save you.”

He clearly wasn’t finished, but Lord Armand’s theatrical gasp drowned out even the rain. “Allay suspicion? You mean to imply that Carrack orchestrated the barbaric attack on the princess?”

“Well, Squal certainly didn’t orchestrate an attack on its own princess,” Prince Theodore snapped.

“Prince Theodore,” said Cassius, curbing his instinctive anger at the insinuation. He had to think clearly. “Princess Miriam. I swear to you, we have no knowledge of those men or their intentions.”

To his intense annoyance, Lord Armand jumped in before the other royals could reply.

“Perhaps you did not orchestrate it, but neither did you prevent it.”

“Then your own guards are no less culpable,” Princess Miriam pointed out angrily.

“With respect, Princess,” Lord Armand’s tone wasn’t in the least respectful, “we are not culpable. We are on your land. We were assured our party would have safe passage across Siquial. Instead, we were very nearly caught up in a fatal attack.” He pointed imperiously at the bodyguard. “In fact, that boy’s quick thinking and—to say fairly—exceptional grasp of magic craft is the only reason we didn’t just witness an assassination.”

The bodyguard showed no sign of being gratified. In fact, he showed no sign he was even listening to the argument. He remained on high alert, hovering by the princess as he continued to monitor their surroundings.

“I’m very well aware that I owe my life to my bodyguard,” Princess Miriam said, the slightest quaver in her voice. “But why that occasions criticism from you, I can’t imagine.”

“My criticism is of the rest of your guards, Your Highness,” said Lord Armand crisply. “And indeed, of the state of your country.”

“Peace, Lord Armand,” said Cassius sharply, for the second time. He was no more impressed with the events than the nobleman, but he was sensible enough to recognize that, given Princess Miriam had been the clear target, it was unlikely the Siqualian crown was behind the attacks. He could even acknowledge that it wasn’t unreasonable for the Siqualians to suspect foul play from Carrack. “Accusations will get us nowhere.”

“Your Highness.” One of the Siqualian guards had approached across the grass. His brows were drawn together as he addressed Prince Theodore. “The trees are clear.

Both attackers are dead, and there is no sign of others.”

“Anything on them to indicate who they were or what their purpose was?” Prince Theodore asked, raising a hand in a futile attempt to shield his face from the rain.

“Nothing is immediately obvious, Your Highness,” the guard said. “Their bodies will be transported to the castle for examination. There does not appear to be any imminent danger.”

“So you claim,” Lord Armand scoffed. “It is very clear to me that lawlessness prevails in Siqua, and that not even the royal guards are capable of managing the risk of travel on your roads.”

“I beg your pardon, My Lord,” the head guard said in stiff tones, “but my men are perfectly capable of protecting—”

“They are not,” Lord Armand cut him off rudely, flicking moisture from his cloak. Pointlessly, since rain was still hammering down on it. “If it were left to your men, the princess would be dead right now, and quite possibly others of us may have followed.”

“The danger is past for the moment,” Cassius told Lord Armand firmly, not appreciating how the nobleman was speaking for their party. “Since it seems our meeting place was known, we will not continue toward it. I intend to set out back to Carrack immediately.”

“An excellent plan, Your Highness,” Lord Armand said. “And with additional protection.” He pointed at the young bodyguard. “I want that boy to join your guard detail.”

Instant protests arose from the two Siquan royals. The bodyguard said nothing, but

his head swiveled toward them, dispelling the illusion that he wasn't listening to their conversation.

"Lord Armand," Cassius said warningly. He didn't voice the rest of his thought, which was that he didn't need or want a stripling bodyguard to protect him, no matter how skilled the boy was with magic.

"It will be worth our while, Your Highness," Lord Armand insisted. "He used the movement of an incoming weapon to fuel that weapon's destruction. That is advanced defensive magic."

"I stay with the princess."

The bodyguard spoke for the first time. He sounded like he was trying to speak gruffly, but his voice came out strange, almost warbling.

"And the princess is not going anywhere with your party," Prince Theodore said curtly. "Not after the insults you've seen fit to level against our kingdom, and certainly not after an attack on her life by an unknown enemy. We will return to Sindon immediately, and if you see fit to return to Carrack rather than accompanying us, we certainly won't hinder you."

"Then we will take the bodyguard," Lord Armand insisted, the words muffled by the steady roar of the rain. "We will not tolerate being deserted to the anarchy of your roads while you return to your own castle with full protection."

"Your demand is outrageous!" the Siqualian prince growled. "I have stood in support of your kingdom's proposed alliance, but I am seriously reconsidering that position."

Annoyance flared in Cassius at the slight. "We will also need to reconsider our—"

“It is not for Siqua to renege on an alliance!” Affronted, Lord Armand once again cut him off. Prince Theodore’s declaration seemed to have been the final straw for the volatile lord. “You have everything to gain from a connection with Carrack. I will not allow our safety to be so compromised or our honor to be so insulted. I see you must be forced to fulfill your obligations to us.”

“Lord Armand, that’s enough.” Cassius’s own temper was raised now, as much by the nobleman’s liberties as by the attack. His carefully laid plans to strengthen relationships were in tatters—if the intention of the attackers had been to prevent the alliance, it appeared they may well succeed, in spite of the princess being unscathed. “You will desist, and that is an order.”

“I must apologize, Your Highness,” the nobleman said coldly, “but I have my orders clear from His Majesty. And I intend to see you back to our kingdom with your safety and Carrack’s honor intact.”

“It is for me to decide what Carrack’s honor requires,” Cassius said sharply. “And I—what are you doing, Lord Armand?”

The nobleman’s face was contorting strangely, the expression of great concentration distracting Cassius from his anger at the nobleman’s defiance.

Someone else recognized what it meant, however.

“What are you doing?” the bodyguard cried, in the same falsely gruff voice. “Princess Miriam, he’s harnessing magic—he’s crafting the movement of the rain into an enchantment!”

“Lord Armand!”

Cassius shifted angrily toward the other man, his voice mingling with Prince

Theodore's as the Siqualian prince also called out a sharp warning.

“That's enough! If you use magic against—”

Prince Theodore's words were cut off by a gasp from the bodyguard. The sound probably masked from the others Lord Armand's quietly spoken words.

“You are so bound.”

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Chapter

Three

Cassius opened his mouth in fury, but the bodyguard was faster than him in demanding an answer.

“What was that?” the young man cried.

Cassius didn’t need the bodyguard’s words to know that Lord Armand had done something terrible. Even with his limited skills in the craft, he’d felt the movement of significant magic in response to whatever the nobleman had molded.

“What did he do?” Princess Miriam asked, grabbing her bodyguard’s arm, her face a mask of concern. “I didn’t feel anything.”

“I did,” said the bodyguard, sounding shaken. Cassius could still see very little of his features, but the part of his face that was visible seemed pale, increasing the impression of his youth. “I can still feel it. He’s attached an enchantment to me.”

“To you?” Prince Theodore repeated sharply.

“Of course,” said Lord Armand. He spoke with dignity, but his form sagged wearily. It was an alarming sight to see how much the enchantment had depleted his energy, because it meant that the volume of magic he’d used had been immense.

“Whatever I think of today’s events,” the nobleman went on, “I am not so

unmannerly as to attempt an enchantment on a member of the Squalian royal family.” His gaze narrowed in on the bodyguard, his tone becoming significantly less respectful. “The enchantment will not harm you unless you or your masters intend to play Carrack false. You are tethered to Prince Cassius in body, and your safety is bound to his.”

“What have you done, Armand?” Cassius said furiously. “What does that mean?”

Lord Armand drew a slow breath, marshaling his energy to speak again. He was clearly unchastened by the prince’s tone. “Merely that this young man will dedicate his magical abilities to keeping you safe, Your Highness. He will not be able to go more than twenty feet from you until the enchantment has run its course, and if any harm befalls you, he will suffer twice the effect himself.”

Cries of anger went up from a number of the Squalians, although Cassius noticed that the bodyguard himself was regarding Lord Armand in horrified silence. Cassius was too blinded by his own anger to spare much attention for the other unfortunate party to this disaster.

“How dare you, My Lord?” he cried. “That is not your place! You will lift the enchantment immediately!”

“It’s not that type of enchantment, Your Highness,” Lord Armand said stubbornly, still trying valiantly to keep his weary form upright. “I crafted it and put it in place. I do not continue to uphold it, and it’s not in my power to remove it. It will remain in force until it runs its course.”

“And when will that be?” Princess Miriam demanded .

“When the marriage alliance is safely completed,” Lord Armand said.

Cassius clenched his hands into fists. “This is unacceptable,” he said, too mortified to look at the other royals.

It was humiliating that he had so little control over his own delegation. What a show of weakness! He cursed his former self for not fighting harder to exclude the overly reactive nobleman from the trip. And quite apart from his mortification, it was a blasted nuisance! He didn’t want some teenage boy hovering within twenty feet of him for who knew how many months.

“But a tethering enchantment is a form of compulsion magic.” The bodyguard had found his voice again. “That’s illegal!”

“Illegal unless expressly authorized by the king,” Lord Armand said smoothly. “And I have written authorization from the king to use whatever magic I deem necessary for the—”

“Your king,” Princess Miriam interrupted furiously. “But you’re in our kingdom now! And Father would never have authorized such a travesty of an enchantment. You absolutely cannot take Flor with you.”

Flor? Cassius felt a flicker of surprise at the informality between the princess and her bodyguard, but he didn’t let it distract him.

“You have taken a gross liberty with the trust my father placed in you,” he told Lord Armand tersely. “I will be expressing that view to him in the strongest terms.”

The response was weak, he knew. Far too weak for the situation. But the terrible truth was that there was no conviction in his threat. His father wouldn’t care about the inconvenience—or indeed the physical danger—to the bodyguard. Nor would he care about Cassius’s annoyance at having a stranger foisted onto him, not if that stranger was there for his protection and magically bound not to let him be harmed. Cassius

had a horrible suspicion that even the justified offense of the Squalians would be brushed off by his father. Over the months since an unexpected addition had joined his court, Carrack's king had become dangerously convinced of the superiority of his kingdom over the other kingdoms of the Peninsula.

But he couldn't get lost in his resentment toward the oily Sir Keavling now. That was a problem to be faced when he returned to Crandell.

Cassius drew a breath, trying to gather whatever was left of his dignity. It didn't help that he felt like a drowned rat—they were all of them saturated down to the skin after so long out of the shelter of the trees. To add insult to injury, the rain was just beginning to slacken. If only it had done so five minutes earlier, there might not have been sufficient magic from its movement for Lord Armand to form such a powerful and sophisticated enchantment.

It was no use wishing it hadn't happened. It had, and he needed to find a way forward.

"I agree with Her Highness that we have no right to expect her bodyguard to accompany us," Cassius began.

"It is no longer in my control," Lord Armand said maddeningly, leaning to the side and catching himself just in time to stop his shoulder from touching the prince's. "The bodyguard is tethered to you."

"You have grossly overstepped," Prince Theodore said, his jaw working. "You will all accompany us to Sindon to sort out this mess."

"Absolutely not," said Lord Armand, a flicker of feeling restoring some of his energy. "His Majesty's orders are very clear in this regard. We are expected back in Carrack in a matter of days."

Cassius ran a hand through his hair—sopping wet, of course—wishing he could wake from the nightmare.

“For my part, I would not object to diverting to your capital,” he told Prince Theodore. “But I’m afraid Lord Armand is right that we are expected back in our own capital imminently, and a failure to appear might cause significant problems.”

It was as openly as he could speak of his own father, and he hoped the other prince would understand the warning. Cassius hardly recognized his father lately—he didn’t trust the king to keep his head if he thought his kingdom had been slighted or his son compelled in any way. Even the imprisonment of his favorite advisor—a course Cassius wouldn’t blame the Squalians for taking if they got Lord Armand into their castle—might be enough to stoke his anger into a flame. And war between the kingdoms was the opposite of what Cassius was trying to achieve.

“I fear our only course is to each return to our own capitals until the nature of the threat can be identified,” Cassius went on. “Please be assured I remain as committed to the alliance as ever. We can resume arrangements once we are confident there is no continued risk of attack to Her Highness.” Any talk of reconsidering Carrack’s position had to be abandoned. His kingdom had wronged the other now—however little his father or Lord Armand might acknowledge it—and they needed to tread carefully.

Prince Theodore stared narrowly into his eyes for a long moment before letting out a short, tight breath.

“Very well.”

“Theo!” Princess Miriam sounded scandalized. “Surely you’re not going to let them take Flor with them! ”

“It seems none of us have any choice in that aspect of the situation,” the prince said, his tone conveying how strongly he disapproved.

“I refuse to accept it,” Princess Miriam said staunchly. “No one’s even tested it.” Again showing that startling lack of formality, she seized her bodyguard by the arm and dragged him away from the group.

Sure enough, when they’d gone about twenty feet—Cassius suspected exactly twenty feet—the bodyguard came to an abrupt stop.

Cassius knew why. He could feel the tug around his midriff. It was as though someone had put their arms around him and was attempting to pull him toward the bodyguard. But the pressure of the pull was about what he’d expect from the physical strength of someone the bodyguard’s size. That was to say, not enough to make his larger, stronger frame move at all. So he remained standing still, and the bodyguard was forced to come to an abrupt stop.

The princess and the bodyguard were looking back at him, and with a sigh, Cassius took three steps forward. They did the same, before the pressure again appeared, and the bodyguard came to a stop.

“So the enchantment is active,” Prince Theodore said heavily.

“I’m afraid so.” Cassius sent another angry look at Lord Armand.

The princess and her bodyguard rejoined them, neither looking very happy.

“Then we’ll come to Carrack, too,” said Princess Miriam. “Or at least I will.”

“You certainly will not,” said Prince Theodore sharply. “Someone just tried to kill you, Miriam, and we still have no idea why, or who was behind it. My first priority is

to see you safely back to Sindon.”

“But—”

The princess’s protest was cut off by the bodyguard.

“It’s all right.” The quiet voice was hard to catch, even though the rain had slackened enough that it no longer filled Cassius’s ears. “I mean, it’s not all right, it’s a disaster, but I’ll manage.”

“No.” The princess looked close to tears, her reaction making little sense to Cassius. “I can’t allow this.” She turned to her brother. “Theo, fix it! You have to stop this somehow.”

Prince Theodore stepped to his sister’s side. “We will fix it,” he assured her quietly. “As soon as we possibly can. But in the meantime, Flor will be fine.” He looked at the bodyguard, his face showing more conflict than his calm words conveyed. “Won’t you?”

“Of course I will.”

The reply was staunch, but again something in the lean frame of the bodyguard made him seem very young indeed. Cassius could have groaned. This whole mess was a responsibility he didn’t want to be saddled with. If he had his way, Lord Armand would be thrown in the dungeons the moment they got home. It was infuriating to think the king would more likely accept the nobleman’s account rather than his own son’s, and applaud Lord Armand for being the only one willing to take initiative.

“I’m tough, Your Highness, I’ll be fine,” said the bodyguard. “I’ll be more than fine. I’ll make myself useful. If Siquel is determined to proceed with this alliance, I will do my utmost to keep your future husband safe as I’ve been requested to do.”

There was perhaps a slight edge to the way he said requested , but Cassius disregarded it. He was too busy feeling humiliated by the earnest promise of protection from this lean young man who was little older than a child.

No one was particularly pleased with the outcome, but once the decision had been made, they all hastened into motion. Cassius's head guard naturally expressed confusion when the young bodyguard made to join their group. Cassius, his pride smarting from falling prey to Lord Armand's heavy-handed ways, merely told him that the young man would accompany them for now to provide additional protection. Further explanations could wait until he'd figured out how to recount the incident without painting himself as an ineffective sap. The guard looked baffled—and perhaps a little offended—but he didn't comment. He was no doubt eager to get his charge moving.

The leave-taking between the royals, while awkward, at least stopped short of open hostility. But when Cassius found himself back on the road, riding north in the center of a rotating ring of guards, the silent presence of the bodyguard riding behind him made him feel as though he'd stolen something from the Siqualian group.

The young man didn't seem inclined to talk. He wasn't brooding, and he showed no disrespect. In fact, any time he glanced back, Cassius saw him looking around with as much focus as the guards, as if in acceptance of his new role as Cassius's bodyguard. But he avoided eye contact with Cassius, and responded without words as often as possible when addressed.

Lord Armand, still depleted from crafting the enchantment, had wanted to ride in the carriage, but Cassius had insisted that he travel on horseback. Let the fool suffer the physical effects of his officiousness. Cassius and the bodyguard would be suffering them through no fault of their own.

He took vicious satisfaction from watching the nobleman's exhaustion as the head

guard pushed their group hard until well after they'd crossed the border. When Cassius caught a discussion between the leader and his second-in-command about whether it was safe to sleep in Torrens, however, he decided it was time to relent.

"We are absolutely not riding through the night," he said shortly. "It's been a long and frankly disastrous day, and we're all exhausted. I have no immediate fear for my safety. We should stop as soon as a suitable inn presents itself."

"Very well, Your Highness."

If the head guard disagreed, he didn't say so. At least someone on the delegation respected Cassius's authority, he thought, casting another angry look at Lord Armand.

The sun was dipping below the horizon by the time they finally stopped at an inn, and Cassius wanted nothing more than to collapse onto the nearest bed and sleep. But there was the small problem of his new tether. Still not eager to reveal his humiliating situation to all of his guards, Cassius sent Lord Armand to speak with the proprietor of the inn, telling the head guard merely that it had been decided that the bodyguard would accompany them all the way to Crandell, the Carrackian capital.

Soon enough, Lord Armand strode back, and Cassius stepped away from his guards to consult with the nobleman. Naturally, the bodyguard followed.

"I have secured three rooms," Lord Armand informed him. "It's all that they have available. One room will be for you, Your Highness, and one for myself. The third will be occupied by some of the guards, to serve as reinforcements on hand in case they're needed. The rest of the guards will camp in the open, from which group pairs will enter the inn to maintain a rotating shift outside your door through the night." He eyed the bodyguard, who was keeping his face lowered now they'd come to a stop. Perhaps it was part of his training, a sign of deference. "You will wish to guard the

prince's door throughout the night, I imagine, to ensure magical protection as well as the physical protection offered by the guards."

The bodyguard cleared his throat. "Yes, My Lord." The voice was wooden.

"Nonsense," said Cassius impatiently. "He can't stay awake all night. He has to be allowed to sleep."

The nobleman shrugged. "If you'd prefer to have the boy sleeping on the floor of your room, I suppose that's your affair, Your Highness. I wouldn't wish it in your shoes, but I suppose that's neither here nor there."

"Oh, isn't it?" There was acid in Cassius's voice. "I thought you believed your opinion to be the universal decider of every matter, My Lord. I have a better solution. You can camp with the guards, and he can take your room."

"Naturally, I would be glad to obey were it in my power to assist, Your Highness," Lord Armand said unconvincingly. "But I'm afraid that solution is impossible. The inn has only three rooms, and none of them are next to one another. If he were to take my room, he would be outside the twenty-foot limit of the tether."

"Curse your tether and your limits." The words escaped Cassius before he could get his temper under control. He drew a deep breath, feeling enough sympathy for the unfortunate young bodyguard to curb his tongue. "Very well. He will share my room. I trust that my guards will protect me without his assistance from any threat that arises in the night." He glared at the nobleman. "As they were capable of doing all along."

Lord Armand just bowed, apparently unchastened. Once he'd disappeared up the stairs of the inn, Cassius turned to his new companion. He couldn't help noticing that the boy looked very pale. He even thought he caught a tremor in the bodyguard's

hands as he tucked them behind his back.

“I don’t think I can face the public room tonight,” Cassius said, forcing a friendly tone that was in no way reflective of what he was feeling. “I’ll ask them to bring a supper to the room. You’re very welcome to join me.”

He flagged down a maid and requested food to be delivered, then led the way up the stairs. He could tell which room was his because there were already two guards stationed outside it. Nevertheless, the bodyguard made a point of preceding him into the room and checking it thoroughly.

“I see no sign of danger, Your Highness.”

“I’m sure my guards already checked.” Cassius closed the door on the corridor and sank wearily into a chair. “But I applaud your thoroughness.”

The bodyguard cleared his throat. “I will leave you in peace, Your Highness.”

Cassius flicked a strand of hair off his forehead, his brow wrinkled in confusion as he studied the bodyguard. The boy was standing stiffly, looking wildly uncomfortable.

“To go where? They’re bringing our food here.”

“I will eat separately from you, Your Highness.”

“Unnecessary,” Cassius assured him, waving a hand.

“I must respectfully disagree,” said the bodyguard. “I appreciate your consideration, Your Highness, but I am ready to guard your door with the others.”

“Absolutely not,” Cassius said sharply, straightening in his chair. “You’re clearly

dead on your feet, and we have a full day of travel tomorrow. If you pass out from exhaustion as soon as we set out, it will be a significant inconvenience for everyone. I insist that you sleep. I won't pretend I'm excited to share a room with a stranger, but it's the only option available to us, so we must make the best of it."

The bodyguard made no answer, his posture more rigid than ever. Cassius thought he saw the boy's lip quiver, and he barely held in a sigh. The whole situation was so ridiculous. Was common decency going to require him to soothe the boy's feelings on top of everything else he had to contend with?

All at once the absurdity of the situation broke over him—that this near-child, whom he felt the need to coddle so as not to upset him, had been Lord Armand's idea of indispensable protection for Carrack's crown prince. He should probably take note of what that said about the bodyguard's magical abilities—given magic craft was one area in which Lord Armand was truly knowledgeable, unlike diplomacy—but in that moment, he was more inclined to laugh.

He refrained from doing so, but the impulse softened his irritation and made it possible to give his new companion a genuine smile.

"Come, it's not such a disaster. I must be the only prince to ever fall into such a ridiculous mess, but I'm sure neither one of us will bite the other."

"We can't," the bodyguard responded unexpectedly.

"What?" Cassius blinked.

"The tethering enchantment," the boy explained. "That's what a tethering enchantment does. Well, this one does more than the basic, which is impressive, given even a generic tethering enchantment is a sophisticated form of magic craft. Lord Armand must be very skilled to have worked in such intricacies as the distance

limit, and the compounding and inverted safety restraint.”

“The compounding and...what?” Cassius felt like a dunce. Clearly the bodyguard had far superior knowledge of magic craft.

The boy’s tone was impassive as he replied. Too impassive. “The extra aspect of the enchantment that will activate if you suffer harm during the course of the tether, and will cause me to suffer twice whatever harm befalls you.”

“Ah.” Cassius winced. “That is the most regrettable part of this deplorable business.”

The bodyguard didn’t respond, instead pushing on with the original explanation. “As I said, this particular enchantment is impressive. But in addition to its extra features, it will function as a basic tethering enchantment. The fundamental aspect of tethers is that they prevent either party from raising a hand against the other.”

“Oh.” Cassius tilted his head to the side. “I see.”

It made sense. Lord Armand was seven kinds of a fool, but he did genuinely think he was protecting his prince. He wouldn’t have tied Cassius to someone who might use that access to hurt him.

“Well, now you know you’re safe with me,” he said, trying to lighten the tension. “I couldn’t harm you even if I wanted to. Not that I would wish to. To be frank, it would feel like hitting a child. How old are you? You look about fifteen.”

For a long moment, the boy didn’t answer. Then, to Cassius’s surprise, he abruptly dropped his formal posture and rubbed both hands down his face in a gesture of weariness .

“Your Highness, can I please implore you to allow me to stand guard out there?”

“You can.” Cassius leaned his elbows on his knees, fascinated by the bodyguard’s strange behavior. It was time to try to figure the boy out a little. “But I’m afraid it will fall on deaf ears. Whether we like it or not, we’re to spend a great deal of time in each other’s company. I think we’d best get to know one another a little. For example, I don’t even know your name.”

A knock on the door prevented the bodyguard from answering. He stood stiff and silent once again as Cassius received the food and thanked the maid who was delivering it. Once she’d withdrawn and the door was closed behind her, he turned back to his companion.

“Where were we? Ah yes, your name. The princess called you Flor. Do I take it your name is Florian?”

The bodyguard let out a long, slow breath. So long and slow, in fact, that Cassius half expected him to get light-headed. He seemed to be swaying slightly on his feet, at any rate.

“My name is not Florian,” he said, his voice free of the assumed gruffness for the first time. “You’re right, Your Highness, that we will be in each other’s company whether we wish it or not. And I don’t think I’m capable of maintaining the deception under prolonged scrutiny.”

“Deception?” Cassius half-lifted from his chair, his senses on alert. Had the boy lied about not being able to harm him?

The bodyguard swallowed visibly, but the voice that issued from under the hood was resolute.

“Yes, Your Highness. A deception that was never intended to have so great an impact on you, I swear. My name is not Florian. It’s Flora. And I’m certainly not fifteen. In

fact, my summers number twenty.”

Cassius could only watch in numb shock as the bodyguard lowered the hood at last, loosening a waving cascade of hair in the next movement. The features Cassius had previously only glimpsed were transformed by the effect, and he found himself staring speechlessly into a face that unmistakably belonged to a young woman.

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Chapter

Four

F lora tried to steady her breathing as she held the prince's gaze with what she hoped was a semblance of calm. The look on his face would have been comical if she'd been in a different situation.

Meaning, a situation other than being forced by a magical tether to occupy the same bedchamber as a handsome foreign prince.

Because Prince Cassius certainly was handsome. His hair, a deeper shade of brown than hers, reached his shoulders in a style that was customary in Carrack but not favored in Siqua. It suited him, though. It gave the slightest rugged edge to a bearing that was otherwise commanding and polished. His richly embroidered jacket sat well on him, and he moved with a casual grace that she found much more appealing than the stiffness of Prince Theodore's gait, or the hint of vanity that accompanied Prince Xavier's lope.

He'd also shown much more kindness than she would have expected given their unfortunate circumstances, and although he had the inevitable pride of a prince, in private conversation, he didn't seem full of his own importance.

In short, he would likely do very well for Mim. The marriage of alliance was looking much more promising than it had a day before.

Or at least, it would be if someone hadn't tried to kill Miriam and someone else

hadn't caught Flora off guard and hit her with an overpowered enchantment, landing her in this thoroughly humiliating situation.

Handsome prince, bedchamber, both trapped. That situation.

"You're..." Prince Cassius trailed off, his pale blue eyes—another excellent feature of his—showing something akin to panic as he stared at her. He tried again. "You're a..."

"A woman," Flora finished, taking pity on him when he again failed to say it aloud. "Yes, I am, in fact...that. Yes."

"But this...this is..."

"So very much worse than how incredibly awful it already seemed." Flora nodded. "Again, you are correct."

Prince Cassius stared at her for another dumbfounded moment before squeezing his eyes shut and lowering his head into his hand. The food sat abandoned in front of him, the smell making Flora's stomach ache in spite of everything.

It was the prince who broke the silence, his voice muffled from behind his hand. "What in the world am I going to do?"

Flora straightened her back. For some perverse reason, his consternation was making her feel more confident. She supposed they couldn't both fall apart, at least not at the same time. They would have to take turns, or their tethered existence would become a hopeless mess .

"Let me put this hood back on and stand guard outside?" she asked, a hopeful lilt to her voice.

Prince Cassius lowered his hand, studying her with a pained expression. “No,” he said at last, shaking his head. “That’s...that’s not really any better, is it?”

“That depends on your guards, I suppose,” Flora said reasonably.

The prince let out a breath that had the hint of a groan in it. “I can vouch for all of them in terms of loyalty to Carrack. In terms of how they’d respond to...” he waved a hand in her general direction, “this?” He shrugged helplessly.

Flora nodded. It was a fair response. Her time among the royal guards in Sindon had exposed her to plenty of comments and behavior that she could have done without. And that was in a situation where everyone was used to her role as the princess’s bodyguard, and the other guards were all aware that she was a woman underneath her intentionally vague attire. The shock of it would likely make it worse this time.

“What about you?” she asked boldly.

The prince seemed confused. “Me?”

Flora cleared her throat. “Can you vouch for yourself?”

Prince Cassius stared at her a moment longer before comprehension crossed his features. Before her eyes, his expression softened. The alarm ebbed, and something else took its place. Something which, fool that she was, made Flora’s heart flutter slightly.

“As for me,” the prince said steadily, “you will never need the restrictions of the tether to protect you.”

Flora nodded, some of her tension easing. Perhaps she was naive, but she didn’t doubt him .

“In that case, do you mind if I sit, Your Highness?” she asked, holding her knees steady with an effort.

“Of course.” The prince sprang out of the chair—the only one the room boasted—and offered it to her with a courteous gesture.

“No, no, you don’t need to get up,” Flora protested. “I can sit on the edge of the bed.”

“I insist,” said Prince Cassius firmly. “I don’t feel as though I can sit still another moment, anyway.”

“I understand what you mean,” Flora said, accepting defeat and lowering herself into the chair. “I’m in a sorry state myself.” She grimaced.

Something in her tone made Prince Cassius frown, his eyes raking over her before quickly flitting away. “Are you well? Were you injured during the attack?”

“I wasn’t,” Flora said. “I’m weary from the use of magical energy, but I didn’t mean to comment on my physical state.”

“What did you mean to comment on?” the prince pressed, far too interested in her idle remark.

“Nothing.” Flora ran a hand over her brow and wondered how her simple comment had managed to be so revealing. He was reading her too clearly. “I’m well.”

Prince Cassius’s frown deepened then, abruptly, he lowered himself into a sitting position on the bed. The room wasn’t large, and the movement put them face to face, his pale eyes searching hers with unsettling perception.

“I think you should tell me what’s concerning you,” he said, his voice deep and

earnest. “We’re tethered together—literally—so you must admit I have some reason to think it might affect me.”

Flora wished she’d kept her mouth shut. Her first instinct was to assure the prince that her issue wouldn’t affect him, but she paused. Was that true?

“It’s just...the man in the tree.” She swallowed, feeling vulnerable and hating it.

The prince’s expression softened. “A near miss like that can rattle even experienced guards,” he started.

She shook her head again. “It’s not that. I’m not distressed out of fear for my own life, or even the princess’s safety. The trouble is that I’m not an experienced guard. I’ve trained with the royal guard, and I’ve been acting as the princess’s bodyguard for over a year, but most of the time I don’t have to do much physical guarding. Her other guards are supposed to have it covered. I use my magic to protect her in whatever ways are needed.”

“I don’t understand what your point is.” The prince’s gentle tone prevented the question from feeling critical.

Flora steeled herself. “That’s the first time I’ve killed someone. And I confess it’s affecting me more than I thought it would.” She drew a deep breath. “I’m telling you because as a guard duty-bound to protect you, I feel I have an obligation to notify you if I’m in a condition that might reduce my ability to perform my role.”

The prince’s gaze was intense enough to make Flora drop her eyes from his face. She watched silently as he clasped and unclasped his hands twice.

“First of all,” he said, his voice still much kinder than he had any call to be, “you should not carry any guilt or regret for what you did. That man would have killed

Princess Miriam had you not killed him.”

“I know,” Flora assured him. “I don’t regret my actions. I believe it was justified, even the right thing to do. But for some curious reason, that doesn’t seem to help me stop my legs from shaking whenever I remember the sound of his body hitting the ground.”

Prince Cassius was silent for long enough that she let her eyes flick back up in spite of herself. He was regarding her silently, biting his lip in a thoughtful gesture. Flora felt her heart warm at the realization of how seriously he was taking her.

“He may not have been killed by the stone from your sling,” he pointed out. “Maybe it was the fall that killed him.”

Flora shrugged. “Maybe. But I caused him to fall, so I don’t see how that makes any difference. There’s no use dwelling on it. But it plays on my mind that we don’t know who he was or where he came from. Or his motive for attacking the princess.”

“That aspect plays on my mind as well,” the prince agreed heavily. His eyes searched hers one more time. “As for the rest of it...I wish I knew the recipe to resolve your distress, but I’m afraid I don’t.”

She nodded briskly. “Of course not. I wouldn’t expect it. I just thought you should be aware. I’m hopeful that in another crisis I would act instinctively as I did today, and wouldn’t be impaired. But I am not experienced enough to guarantee it.”

“You need guarantee nothing,” he said quickly. “That’s my other response to what you’ve confided in me. You are not duty-bound to protect me as you claimed. To speak freely, I’m enraged by the conduct of Lord Armand in tethering you to me. It was out of line, and I will be doing my utmost to persuade my father to sanction him severely.” He paused, a shadow crossing his brow before he continued. “And it was

unnecessary. I have confidence in my guards to protect me, and I don't consider you under any obligation to serve as my bodyguard."

Flora gave a twisted smile. "We can agree to disagree on that point, Your Highness."

His frown deepened. "But why? Why would you undertake a role as my guard when you don't have to?"

"For a few reasons," she told him.

When she fell silent, he raised his eyebrows in a silent prompt, and she continued with some reluctance.

"The first reason is that I wish for peace and good relationship between Siqua and Carrack. Surely an alliance could only benefit the whole Peninsula. What if someone orchestrated the attack so as to prevent the alliance, maybe even incite war between the kingdoms? I would stand in the way of that if I could, and I think an official guard of Siqua working to keep the Carrackian crown prince safe is a strong statement of goodwill."

"True," said the prince slowly. "What are your other reasons?"

A dry note entered Flora's voice. "You seem to forget very readily that any harm that befalls you will befall me with double strength, Your Highness. I confess I personally find it difficult to forget."

The expression that crossed Prince Cassius's face could almost be described as horror. "That requirement was monstrous even before," he groaned, running a hand through the disheveled waves of his hair. "It's heinous now."

Flora shrugged. "I have no doubt that Lord Armand considered it necessary to give

me incentive to apply myself to your protection. It's an effective strategy."

The prince was silent for a moment, his expression showing how much he disliked the prospect. She thought he would say more on that topic, so she was surprised by his next words.

"You said you had a few reasons. Is there a third, or only those?"

"Oh." To her intense annoyance, Flora felt her face heating. "I suppose the other reason is that you...well, you've shown me much more kindness than I had any right to anticipate," she said in a rush. "None of us knew what to expect of you, and you've made a favorable impression. I don't wish to see harm befall you." Her voice grew stronger. "As I said, I think the alliance would be a good thing for the Peninsula, and now that I've seen something of you, I think it would be a good thing for the princess as well. So I'm committed to keeping you in one piece until the marriage alliance can be sealed."

Prince Cassius said nothing, apparently unsure how to respond to this declaration. He still looked unconvinced, and after a moment, Flora found herself smiling.

"You're stuck with me regardless, so I may as well try to keep you safe," she told him. "I know I don't look strong, but my training in magic allows me to provide protection in ways traditionally trained guards might not. I can understand your reluctance. I don't think you'd be the only man whose pride might be bruised by having a young woman as his bodyguard."

"It's not that," Prince Cassius said austerely.

She gave him a skeptical look, and his face softened ever so slightly, the hint of a smile transforming his features.

“It’s not only that,” he amended.

Flora laughed, the sound light and releasing. She was still intensely aware of how much of a mess she was in, but she felt less distressed about it now that she didn’t have to hide her face or disguise her voice.

The prince reluctantly chuckled as well. “I suppose we all have our pride,” he said. “Although I try not to let mine rule me.”

There was a heaviness behind the words that she couldn’t interpret. Not that she tried very hard. She had enough troubles of her own to think about.

“Why do you pretend to be a man?” the prince asked her abruptly.

“I don’t precisely pretend to be a man,” Flora corrected. “I just don’t correct people’s assumptions that the princess would only have a male bodyguard. And yes,” she acknowledged, “I do make use of those assumptions when they suit me.”

“Well, it’s an effective illusion,” said the prince. “Especially with your hair and most of your face hidden. I confess I would never have guessed you to be as old as twenty.”

He fussed with some non-existent dirt on his jacket, giving Flora the sense that he was trying very hard not to look at her.

“If you’re referring to my shape,” she said matter-of-factly, “I’m wearing bindings. It’s just convenient.”

To her amusement, she could have sworn she saw heat rising up his neck.

“Convenient,” she went on, “but not at all comfortable. To tell the truth, I would be

very glad to get out of my uniform and into clothes more conducive to sleep, but that's clearly not going to happen."

"Yes." Prince Cassius cleared his throat. "Attaining privacy will be challenging in our particular circumstances. But we will have to find ways to manage."

"Privacy wouldn't help me on this occasion," Flora pointed out. "I have no idea where my belongings are. I know they were retrieved from the carriage back in Siquil, but I was too distracted by the accommodation arrangements to think to ask for them when we arrived here. I suspect they've gone to the camp with the rest of the guards. I'm going to have to attempt to sleep in this."

Prince Cassius looked her over, seeming relieved for an excuse to examine her form. "That won't be very comfortable."

Flora chuckled. "I don't think any clothes would make the floor comfortable, Your Highness. But I'll manage."

"The floor?" he repeated, as if she'd expressed a desire to sleep on the open ocean. "You're not sleeping on the floor. You're sleeping in the bed."

Flora hesitated, a fresh flush rising up her neck. "Your Highness...I have committed myself to protect you from harm to the best of my ability, but I really don't think that task requires such proximity as sharing the same bed."

"No, no, you misunderstand!" The prince tried to laugh, but the sound came out strangled. "I meant, of course, that I would sleep on the floor."

"Your Highness!" Flora protested. "I cannot allow that."

"You can't prevent it," Prince Cassius contradicted. "I'm a prince, remember. I'm

very used to getting my way.”

He said it with a casual, even amicable air, but something in his face made Flora pause. She had a feeling it wasn't entirely true. But that was neither here nor there in the current dilemma.

“I suppose I can't prevent you sleeping wherever you choose, Your Highness,” she said. “But I can refuse to sleep in the bed that's been expressly secured for your comfort.”

“Well, that would be a pointless sacrifice, since I won't be sleeping in it,” Prince Cassius pointed out.

“That's up to you,” said Flora stubbornly. “All I know is I certainly won't.”

The prince made an impatient gesture. “This is ridiculous. Just take the bed.”

“No.” For a moment she forgot she was talking to a foreign prince, her eyes narrowing in defiance like they might if she was bantering with either of Miriam's brothers. “If it's ridiculous of me, it's no less ridiculous of you. Give me one good reason why you shouldn't sleep in the bed your delegation secured for you.”

“Because me doing so would leave a woman to sleep on the floor!” the prince said, matching her tone.

“Don't think of me as a woman,” Flora suggested. “Think of me as a guard.”

His expression was incredulous. “Since you went to such pains to dramatically reveal to me that you are, in fact, a woman, I'm finding it a little hard to think of you as anything else.”

For some inscrutable reason, Flora's cheeks were feeling warm. "I didn't do it dramatically."

"You did," Prince Cassius contradicted. "The way you released your hair, with that big sweeping flick?" He mimed it with his arm, increasing Flora's embarrassment.

"That's just what my hair does when it's released from its bonds!" Flora protested.

"Well, when combined with a shocking revelation, the gesture is inherently dramatic," Prince Cassius said with maddening poise. "And believe me, it had all the dramatic effect you could wish. I am well aware of the dilemma we find ourselves in."

Flora sighed. "I have no argument against that, Your Highness."

"So you'll take the bed, then?" the prince asked optimistically.

Flora just sighed. "This is a fruitless conversation, Your Highness. The sooner we stop arguing, the sooner we can both sleep."

The prince stood. "Very true. I'll step outside for a minute, to give you some privacy. I'd like a word with my guards, anyway."

Flora hesitated, on the verge of asking him whether he intended to reveal her identity to the guards. But she decided she didn't want to know. The moment the prince stepped out of the room, she released a gusty breath and let her head hang forward.

What a mess.

But she couldn't afford to wallow in her discomfort. Solitude was likely to be rare for the next little while. She'd be wise to make the most of the respite she'd been given

to prepare herself for sleep. She was exhausted enough she thought she might actually be able to drift off on the floor. She sent the lightest of scowls toward the comfortable-looking bed. If she and the prince were to be tethered together, he may as well get her measure sooner rather than later.

He'd quickly learn that she was as stubborn as her word.

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Chapter

Five

Cassius would have liked a moment to compose himself after leaving Flora in the room. But as soon as he stepped into the corridor, the guards flanking his doorway sprang to attention.

“I wish to speak with Lord Armand,” he said tonelessly. “Fetch him.”

As one of the guards trotted away, Cassius leaned back against the closed door to his room and tried to gather his thoughts. Upon learning Flora’s identity, his first instinct—after the basic one of putting some space and a solid door between himself and the young woman who’d been forcibly tethered to him—had been to confront Lord Armand and throw the consequence of his meddling in his face. But as his first shock ebbed, doubt crept in.

Would Lord Armand be chastened, as he ought to be? Or would he, in his usual idiocy, interpret Flora’s hidden identity as another offense by Siquel against Carrack’s honor? It wasn’t as though Lord Armand would have any sensible solutions to offer regarding the immediate situation. No one would have a sensible solution because there wasn’t one. They could only make the best of things for the night, and sharing the truth in that moment would make the task harder, not easier.

“I’ve changed my mind,” Cassius said abruptly, pushing himself forward off the door. “I’ll retire.”

“Shall I send His Lordship in when he comes?” the guard asked.

“Certainly not.” Cassius greeted the suggestion with distaste. “As I said, I’ve changed my mind. I don’t wish to speak to him.”

“What...what shall I tell him, Your Highness?” The poor guard looked bewildered.

“You need tell him nothing,” Cassius said smoothly.

He withdrew back into the room, forgetting that politeness required him to knock, much as the action would have puzzled the guards.

He needn’t have worried. Far from being caught out by his entrance, Flora appeared to be asleep.

On the floor.

Cassius stood just inside the door, scowling at her inert form curled up in front of the fire. She looked like a house cat.

Was she feigning sleep? Perhaps not—it had been an exhausting day. She looked so slight, curled up on the rug. How had he ever been fooled into thinking her a man, even a young one? He was tempted to lift her into the bed while she slept, but after a moment’s reflection he discarded that idea. He knew she was safe from him, but he wanted her to feel safe as well. Waking to find him moving her sleeping form wouldn’t aid that cause.

He lowered himself into the chair he’d occupied earlier, his head pounding. Exhausted and infuriated, he longed for sleep, but that relief was far from him. Leaning his head back against the wall, he closed his eyes and tried to gather his thoughts as he ran one hand methodically through his hair.

The soothing motion had its effect, and he felt his agitation calm. The movement had another effect as well. Into the stillness of his mind came the faintest awareness of the magic being stirred up by the motion of his hand. He did his best to focus on the sensation, using the ability that he wished he'd developed more.

There it was. Faint but pervasive, he could sense it. The tether that bound him to the young woman sleeping by the fire. If he felt it, then she must feel it much more strongly given her advanced training in magic. Did it intrude even into her dreams?

Cassius opened his eyes, staring up at the ceiling as anger overtook him. How dare Lord Armand? The inconvenience was bad enough, but the humiliation was galling. Cassius was mortified at how weak Lord Armand's interference had made him appear. And that mortification brought anger in its wake.

What must the Squalian prince and princess think of him, a crown prince who couldn't even control his own delegation?

What would his father think?

That thought had a sting. He knew he shouldn't let his father's pride dictate his actions, but he hated to picture his father's response to his predicament. When he'd thought Flora a boy, he'd worried that the king might think Lord Armand's actions no great matter. It was much harder to predict the king's reaction given her revelation.

Briefly, Cassius toyed with the idea of asking Flora to don her disguise once again. Perhaps with his help, she could conceal the truth for as long as —

No. He cut off the train of thought. Maintaining the deception in a foreign court was an indignity he couldn't in all honor ask her to suffer. And he didn't relish the unscrupulous conclusions people would draw from his deception when the truth inevitably came out.

Cassius leaned forward, his eyes drawn to the figure on the rug. Flora was breathing deeply, evenly, as if she hadn't a care in the world. He was convinced now that she really was asleep. Silently, he stood and moved around her, allowing himself a better view of her face. Her features were at rest, her hair still flowing freely. It was brown like Princess Miriam's, but not as full. It lay limply over her shoulders, with the exception of a strand that had fallen across her face. He fought back a strange impulse to shift it and reveal her features.

It wasn't necessary. He could make out her high cheekbones, full lips, and straight brows. And the nose that turned up ever so slightly at the end.

Irritation spiked through him again. This was what Siqua called a bodyguard? This was the protector assigned to keep him safe?

But the annoyance couldn't last, not when she looked so very peaceful. In spite of his tension, he could feel weariness tugging at him as he listened to her steady breathing. Carefully, he moved away from the fire. He was still dressed in his stiff brocade jacket—not the most practical for travel, but designed to make a good first impression on the Siqualian royals.

Reassuring himself that Flora was sound asleep, Cassius divested himself of the jacket and hung it over the back of the chair. He cast one rueful look at the bed. He would sleep far better in it, but he was determined. He had to show Flora he wasn't going to be persuaded to treat her like a male guard. So he wouldn't be sleeping on the bed.

Of course, stretching out by the fire next to her wasn't really any different from sharing the bed. He bit back a laugh as he remembered the blush that had overtaken those high-boned cheeks when she'd thought he was suggesting they do just that. In that moment it had been hard to believe he'd ever bought her illusion.

Resigning himself to the chill of the air so far back from the fire, Cassius threw down a spare blanket at the foot of the bed and lowered himself onto it. It wasn't so bad. Or at least it wouldn't be if not for the thought that Lord Armand was no doubt sleeping like the dead on a comfortable bed.

Curse the nobleman and his officious meddling.

The unanswerable question of how to navigate his dilemma pushed back against the sleep he longed to sink into. He simply couldn't bear for his father—not to mention the rest of the court—to learn how much he'd been made a fool of.

A resolution, a little hazy around the edges due to encroaching sleep, formed in his mind. He wouldn't ask Flora to conceal her face or her form. But that didn't mean they had to make all the details of their predicament known. He would speak to Lord Armand first thing.

With that small sense of taking back control of the situation, Cassius allowed himself to surrender to his exhaustion, and drifted into sleep.

Cassius's sleep was unsettled, and he'd assumed he would wake first. It was therefore a surprise when he emerged from sleep to see an empty rug before a dying fire.

He cast his eyes around to see Flora standing to attention by the door, trying—at a guess—to look like she hadn't just been watching him sleep.

Well, he'd watched her sleep the night before, so he wasn't in a position to criticize.

"Good morning," he said. Her only reply was to deferentially lower her head. She looked tense, almost angry.

"Flora? Are you all right?" he asked, bemused.

She took a moment to answer, then drew in a breath. “You should have slept in the bed, Your Highness.”

Cassius grinned. Was that what was bothering her? If she’d hoped to prove herself more stubborn than him, she’d be disappointed.

“I told you I wouldn’t, so I don’t know why you’re surprised,” he said, propping up one elbow and resting his head on his hand as he studied her. “You woke early.”

“I’m a guard, Your Highness,” she reminded him. “It’s part of the training.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you, though? I was thinking during the night, and I still find it hard to believe the Squalian king and queen assigned the role of their daughter’s bodyguard to a twenty-year-old woman whose build is as slender as a cypress.”

There was that blush again. It was endearing, honestly. Cassius had to hold back a smile.

“I’m not Princess Miriam’s only guard. As you saw, she has much...burlier ones surrounding her at all times.”

Cassius chuckled. “Certainly no one could accuse you of being burly.” He studied her face. “Tell me the truth, Flora. Do Their Majesties know that you’re a woman?”

“Of course!” Her shocked reply convinced him that she was telling the truth. “They’re perfectly aware of it.” She paused. “They have their reasons for allowing me to fill the role of bodyguard.”

“No, don’t try to be aloof,” said Cassius. “It doesn’t suit you at all.”

He thought he saw her lips twitch, and he allowed his own smile to show.

“What are their reasons?” he pressed. “Given you’re my bodyguard now, I think it’s reasonable for me to ask for details.”

She gave him a pointed look. “I thought you said that you didn’t consider me bound to be your bodyguard, Your Highness.”

“And I thought you insisted on filling the role anyway,” he countered.

She was silent for a moment. He had her there.

“How about I step outside, Your Highness?” she said.

He straightened a little. “To go where? I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to show yourself to the guards until we have our stories straight.”

“But wouldn’t you be more comfortable to continue this discussion after you’ve had the chance to...freshen up?” She fought valiantly to keep her eyes fixed on anything but him.

Cassius glanced down at himself. His tunic was ruffled and fully unlaced at the front, and his hair, which came down almost to his shoulders, was no doubt in disorder. But it wasn’t like he was unclothed. Which made her reaction all the more entertaining.

“Not at all,” he told her. “I’m perfectly comfortable as I am.” He lifted his brows. “Am I making you uncomfortable?”

She released a breath, her shoulders lowering slightly. “Well, of course I’m uncomfortable, Your Highness. But it’s not you making me uncomfortable so much as the tether itself.”

Taking pity on her, Cassius pushed himself to his feet and strode over to the chair to retrieve his jacket.

“We’re in agreement there. Our situation doesn’t look much better in the daylight than it did last night, does it?”

“No, Your Highness,” said Flora forlornly.

“But it’s no worse, either,” Cassius went on. “I’ve given some thought to how to handle things, but first I want an answer to my question. Why in the Peninsula would Their Majesties assign you to be Princess Miriam’s bodyguard?”

Flora sighed. “If you must know, Mim convinced them.”

“Mim?” He raised an eyebrow.

Flora just shrugged. “We attended school together in Torrens, and we were friends long before I was her guard. At the academy, the students treat each other much the same regardless of status. Magic craft was my area of special focus, and when she returned home at the end of our two years, she convinced me to accompany her, then convinced her parents that I was a good candidate for the role of personal protector.”

“Huh.” Cassius thought all this over. “I didn’t know the princess had attended school in Torrens.”

“It’s not uncommon for royal children to spend some years of their education in another kingdom on the Peninsula to strengthen ties.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that.” Cassius couldn’t keep the amusement from his voice. “As you may recall, I was myself a royal child.”

“My apologies, Your Highness,” said Flora quickly, looking chastened.

“It’s all right,” he laughed .

He considered her, his mind going over her explanation of how she’d gotten her role.

“I’m surprised Princess Miriam had so much influence on her parents’ decision about guards.”

“Oh, well, as to that...” Flora’s eyes betrayed the grin she was trying to keep from her mouth, and Cassius’s interest was immediately piqued. “She had a little assistance. You’re right about her influence, but Crown Prince Xavier has a louder voice.” She really did grin at that. “In more ways than one.”

“How did she enlist his help?” Cassius asked, fascinated.

“That part wasn’t hard,” Flora informed him. “He’s always sympathetic to the desire for more freedom. The difficult part was figuring out how he could best make his argument seem his own, so that their parents didn’t realize it had come from Mim.”

“And that argument was...”

Flora’s eyes sparkled with mischief, giving a light to their dark brown that changed her features considerably. “That while rotating guards were fine, having a young and strong man as the princess’s personal protector was simply begging for him to fall in love with her, or her with him. That would be their nightmare, frankly.”

Cassius laughed aloud, surprised and impressed by the creative way the princess and her brother had gotten what they wanted.

“It’s a perfectly plausible scenario,” Flora shrugged. “She’s beautiful, and she has a

kind manner that warms people to her.” She gave him a smile that was almost timid. “I don’t think you’ll have cause to regret your marriage alliance, Your Highness.”

The assurance should have been welcome, but instead it made Cassius uncomfortable for some reason, so he changed the topic.

“Thank you for the insight. To return to our own situation, I propose that we don’t advertise the existence of the tether.”

Flora tilted her head to one side. “Is that feasible?”

“It might be, if we’re smart about it,” he said. He cast an eye over her. “But first we need to think of some more basic matters. Like getting the rest of your clothes.”

“That would be welcome,” Flora said, brightening. She cleared her throat. “I also need to...”

“Freshen up?” Cassius’s voice was rueful. “So do I. I suppose we’ll have to do so within twenty feet of one another, with what privacy we can.”

Flora winced. “This is going to be very awkward.”

“It is,” Cassius agreed, although strangely he felt increasingly less ill-at-ease. “But I’m sure we can manage. Can you afford to wait until we’ve spoken to Lord Armand?”

A shutter went down over her eyes at this mention of the architect of their predicament.

“Of course, Your Highness, I will suit your convenience.”

Cassius held back a sigh. As if any of this was even vaguely convenient for him. He strode to the door, opening it only enough to put his head out into the corridor. The guards on either side of the doorway sprang to attention, their eyes on him.

“Please summon Lord Armand to my room,” he said curtly. “I wish to speak with him immediately. And once you’ve brought him, go straight to the camp where the rest of the guards are waiting and bring back my new bodyguard’s belongings. ”

He closed the door without waiting for a reply, then turned back to Flora.

“Allow me to apologize in advance,” he told her.

She looked bemused. “For what, Your Highness?”

“For Lord Armand. He’s certain to be insufferable. I regret the necessity of you witnessing the conversation.”

She said nothing, and before long, a smart knock at the door announced the nobleman’s arrival. Cassius opened the door, ushering Lord Armand into the room swiftly in the hope that the guards outside wouldn’t yet catch sight of Flora.

“Good morning, Your Highness,” the nobleman started, sounding maddeningly well rested. “I trust you passed a pleasant—”

The words died abruptly on his lips as his gaze shifted to Flora, who was standing at attention in a very guard-like posture and studying him expressionlessly.

“Who? What—?”

The nobleman’s disjointed words sent a surge of petty satisfaction through Cassius. It wasn’t often Lord Armand was at a loss for what to say.

“What do you mean who ?” he asked smoothly. “Don’t you recognize Princess Miriam’s bodyguard, whom you tethered magically to me without seeking consent from either me or her, or in fact seeking any kind of authorization?”

“I...but, Your Highness, I...” Lord Armand’s eyes seemed in danger of falling from their sockets. “But he was a...”

“ She was a bodyguard, dressed according to her role.” Prince Cassius’s face was deadpan.

“She was dressed as a man,” contradicted Lord Armand. The shock on his face began to give way to anger. “A gross deception has been practiced upon us, Your Highness. It is an insult to—”

“Stop speaking.”

Cassius spoke the two words slowly and deliberately, his voice dripping with cold fury. Even Flora straightened her posture a little. It was a tone he didn’t use often, but it was past time for Lord Armand to learn that Cassius was no spineless, powerless puppet prince. He was the future ruler of Carrack, and he deserved his subjects’ respect and obedience.

Lord Armand fell silent at once.

“If you were about to invoke some imaginary offense to Carrack’s honor, you would be wise to think before you speak,” Cassius said dangerously. “The last time you claimed an imaginary offense, you responded by crafting an illegal enchantment.”

“Not illegal, Your Highness,” protested the nobleman weakly. “I had authorization from—”

“You had no authorization,” Cassius cut him off brutally. “Your actions were illegal, and you are well aware of it. My father’s authority in matters of magic craft is absolute within Carrack, but we were in Siqua. And you had the audacity to direct your enchantment at a member of the Siquan royal family’s guard. Whatever instructions my father gave you to defend Carrack and myself, I do not believe for a moment that he intended you to subject me to such embarrassment and inconvenience.”

“It wasn’t my intention to do so,” Lord Armand tried.

“But it was the result.” Cassius didn’t let him speak. “In more ways than one. Your illegal act forced my hand in withdrawing immediately from Siqua in order to protect you from arrest and incarceration which, quite frankly, would have been justified. You weakened Carrack’s position in alliance negotiations. And I need hardly add, in light of subsequent revelations, you have subjected me personally to incredible indignity. I don’t know what other name I can give to being forced to have a young woman shadow me through every aspect of my daily activities, not only surrendering my privacy but announcing to the world that Carrack considers her services necessary for my protection.”

Keeping his expression stern, Cassius stole the ghost of a glance at Flora. She was unsuccessfully fighting down another faint flush. She hadn’t asked for this debacle, and he knew the words were discourteous to her. But he needed to speak in a language Lord Armand would understand, and talking about the lack of consideration he’d shown a random Siquan guard was unlikely to discompose him.

Not that he was as discomposed as Cassius would have liked.

“Your Highness,” he said, a hint of wheedling in his voice. “You are understandably upset by this revelation. But there would be no great indignity if the Siquans had not intentionally deceived us about this girl’s identity by—”

“Intentionally deceived us?” Cassius repeated incredulously. “Do you mean to suggest they dressed her as a boy to try to bait us into abducting her by means of an illegal tethering enchantment? That suggestion is too puerile for even such an imbecile as you.”

Lord Armand looked like he wasn’t sure whether to be offended or mortified by the insult. Either way, it had reached him, which made Cassius think he should have dispensed with politeness much earlier.

“Make no mistake, Lord Armand,” Cassius went on, when the nobleman remained silent, “the fault is on our side. And my father will share my displeasure when he learns that your actions exposed his son and his kingdom to ridicule.”

The nobleman looked pale now. “Your Highness, I beg you to believe that was not my intention. I deeply regret the inconvenience you’ve suffered, and I implore you to believe that it would be a misrepresentation to suggest to His Majesty that my actions were motivated by anything other than the utmost loyalty to Carrack.”

Cassius regarded him, pretending to soften. “Perhaps we can simply forget the whole thing if you can lift the enchantment.”

Lord Armand threw an uneasy glance at Flora. “I wish I could, Your Highness. But I spoke the truth when I told you that the enchantment is now independent of me and will run its course regardless of my will.”

“It would endure even if the architect of the enchantment were executed?” Cassius wasn’t actually angry enough to seek Lord Armand’s execution, as he suspected the nobleman knew.

Judging by the way his face blanched, Lord Armand had a kernel of doubt.

Cassius didn't mind.

"It would make no difference, Your Highness," Lord Armand said quickly. "The enchantment is a force of its own now."

"Flora?" Cassius turned to her. "Does this align with what you know of tethering enchantments?"

"Yes, Your Highness." Her face was expressionless, like a true guard. It felt strange to Cassius, now that they'd shared such casual conversation...not to mention shared the same floor for a very uncomfortable bed.

With a sigh, he turned back to Lord Armand. "And its course will be run when the alliance is sealed?"

"That's correct, Your Highness," Lord Armand said. "I will devote myself to furthering that alliance. If we can seal your marriage to Princess Miriam swiftly, the enchantment will lift, and the matter will be resolved."

Cassius pretended to think about it. "Perhaps it would not be necessary for my father to know of the tethering enchantment if it was only to be of a short duration." He spoke slowly, as if the idea was occurring to him for the first time. "Unless the guards report it."

"None of them witnessed the enchantment, Your Highness," said Lord Armand quickly.

"I have not mentioned its details to anyone," Cassius mused.

"Nor have I." The nobleman was looking optimistic. "It is not my habit to gossip with guards."

“Perhaps it is possible.” Cassius frowned as if unconvinced.

“Leave it to me, Your Highness.” Lord Armand was delightfully ready to take charge. “I will make discreet inquiries and ensure that any hint of what occurred is dismissed as wild rumor.”

“Very well,” said Cassius austerely. “You are dismissed.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” On his way out, the nobleman cast a surreptitious look around the space, his eyes passing from the still-made solitary bed to linger on Flora with more speculation than Cassius would like. But in his chastened state—new territory for the overconfident lord—he asked no questions.

Cassius felt some of his tension leave with the nobleman, and he turned to Flora. She was letting out a long breath, her eyes closed. They flickered open to find Cassius looking at her.

“May I speak freely, Your Highness?”

“Of course,” he said. “In fact, you can consider yourself to have permanent permission to do so when we’re alone.”

She nodded in acknowledgment before saying, “You were right. He is insufferable.”

A laugh escaped Cassius. “He always is,” he assured her.

“And not nearly as smart as he thinks he is,” Flora went on. “I can’t deny that he’s incredibly skilled in magic craft.” She gestured between them. “He must be to have created this accursed tether. But like so many men of high position, his pride blinds him to how easily he can be manipulated. That’s hardly a sign of intelligence.”

Cassius was silent, considering her with lowered brows. Her observation was uncomfortably astute. For months past, Cassius had wrestled with the realization that his father's pride was a weakness that made the king easily manipulated by any who discovered it. Somehow it bothered him much more to hear it from Flora's mouth than from his own mind.

"I'm sorry if I offended with the implication that you were manipulating him," she said, her tone becoming more formal as she took in his expression.

"Of course I'm not offended," Cassius assured her. "I was absolutely manipulating him. Very intentionally."

"And very skillfully," Flora said, relaxing. "He's no doubt congratulating himself on convincing you to keep his actions quiet."

"Yes." Cassius frowned. "It does gall to have him think he's the one who conceived the idea. But being heavy-handed would have achieved less."

Flora shrugged. "What does it matter what he thinks? You know your own role in what happened. If the opinions of others can damage your pride in yourself, then there was something amiss with your pride in the first place."

Cassius could think of no reply to these words. This young woman certainly kept surprising him. He was curious about her story—she spoke as if her conclusions were based on her own experiences.

"I hope nothing too dire comes of it all." Flora muttered the words as if to herself, frowning pensively.

"What do you fear?" Cassius pressed.

She shifted her gaze to him with a sigh. “Thinking not just about Siqua’s interests but the wellbeing of the region, I can see the benefit in downplaying the tether and avoiding the diplomatic crisis it could lead to. But...” She wrinkled her face slightly. “But it would have made it much easier to explain why I’ll be always near you until the alliance is sealed. I suspect people will draw their own conclusions.”

Discomfort shot through Cassius as he took her meaning. “I’ll do all I can to protect you from any...malicious speculation.”

Flora gave him a wry look. “I appreciate the sentiment, Your Highness. But in my experience, attempts by royalty to quell rumors about themselves are generally pointless. If anything, they have the opposite effect.”

“Lessons gleaned from your time in Siqua, I take it.”

Cassius’s attempt to change the topic failed. Flora ignored the comment, instead letting out a sigh.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. I have no reputation to lose in Carrack, after all. As long as we don’t emphasize my connection to the Siquan crown too strongly, there shouldn’t be any great damage.” She glanced at Cassius. “Unless you think your reputation stands to suffer? I know nothing of how much integrity Carrackians expect of their prince in these types of matters. ”

“I’ve already given you my word that I’ll conduct myself with honor toward you.”

Cassius’s reply was a little curt, and he turned away on the words. The truth was he felt ashamed. When concocting his plan to hide the tether, he hadn’t considered the likely assumptions people would make about Flora as she shadowed him more closely than a guard should. And her practical response to the possibility of being slandered stood in painful contrast to his own reaction. Especially after what she’d

said about pride, he didn't want her to know the truth—that his plan wasn't intended to avoid a diplomatic crisis so much as to save face in front of his father.

He was grateful for the distraction provided by a knock at the door. Flora's belongings had arrived, and Cassius was quick to step outside to speak to his guards and give her some privacy.

When the door to the room opened, he almost did a double take, Flora looked so different. She'd changed into a simple brown leather gown that only went down halfway to her knees. Under it she wore a deep purple tunic with long sleeves and a hood, and sturdy leather breeches. Her forearms sported leather bracers as well, and he could see a blade strapped to one hip.

She somehow managed to look very much like a guard and yet surprisingly feminine at the same time. It was an unexpectedly captivating effect.

If Cassius was taken aback by Flora's altered appearance, it was nothing to the reaction of the other guards present. None of them managed to hold back their sounds of astonishment.

"Ah yes," said Cassius, recovering himself quickly and speaking with an unconcerned air. "My new Siqualian bodyguard will accompany us again today."

The guards continued to stare wordlessly. Cassius strode swiftly away, Flora tailing him closely and the other guards hastening to catch up.

He didn't blame the guards for their reaction. Flora looked like a completely different person, with her hair released, her face uncovered and her shape clearly that of a woman. She must have removed the bindings she'd mentioned. Was he a fool to think he and Lord Armand could pass off the whole disaster as a diplomatic transfer of a bodyguard?

Was he a fool to think he could navigate the whole complicated situation without catastrophe for either himself or his new companion?

It was going to be a long journey back to Crandell.

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Chapter

Six

F lora stood to attention next to Prince Cassius, ignoring the stares and mutters of the other guards as they packed up camp.

It was a skill she'd made into an art form. She felt much more relaxed now that she was no longer trying to hide her face and form. She would surely provide better protection for the prince without the distraction of trying to protect her identity as well. Not to mention that her mind was sharpened by the sheer relief of not wearing her bindings anymore. She'd never before worn them overnight, and she'd been in considerable pain by the time her belongings finally arrived and she was given freedom to change. She could only imagine how torturous it would have been if she'd tried to maintain her disguise all the way to Crandell.

All she had to contend with now was the sensation of the tether. It was honestly not unlike the restriction of bindings, although she felt it not with any of her physical senses.

“What’s the source of the confusion?” Prince Cassius was speaking to the delegation’s head guard, discussing the route they were to take. “Why would we take anything but the most direct route to Crandell?”

“Because doing so now requires us to spend two nights in Torrens, Your Highness,” the head guard replied. “Our initial intention was to spend last night in Siquil, and travel quickly enough through Torrens to spend only one night within its borders. His

Majesty's instructions were to limit our time in this kingdom as much as possible. If we take a slightly longer route through Dernan, it would avoid a second night in Torrens."

Alarm shot through Flora at this mention of the small duchy-turned-kingdom that occupied a space between Siquel and Carrack on the Peninsula's eastern coast. She'd never imagined their journey might take them through Dernan—the kingdom was famously reclusive and didn't allow people to move as freely in and out of it as the other kingdoms did.

She was surprised when the prince glanced curiously at her as he addressed the head guard again. He must have caught her sudden stiffening.

"Go through Dernan?" Prince Cassius said. "Would they even allow us passage?"

"They would not deny a prince of Carrack, surely, Your Highness," said the head guard. "If we pass through their territory, we can enter Carrack much sooner, and skirt the forest via the northern road. We wouldn't lose much time, and considerably more of our journey would be within our own borders."

"Perhaps," said the prince, sounding unconvinced. "Or perhaps our group would be invited to travel to Dernan's capital, and politeness would require us to accept."

This time he definitely caught Flora's reaction. He raised an eyebrow at her.

"We're still close to Siquel, so you're likely more familiar with this region than we are, Flora. Do you have an opinion?"

"It's not my place, Your Highness," Flora said quickly, observing that the head guard was none too pleased at her inclusion.

“On the contrary, it’s precisely your place to answer a question directed at you,” said Prince Cassius with a touch of impatience.

“Well, then...” Flora hesitated. “It seems unlikely that a group of this size and importance is at any great risk on the public road. And I suspect the proposed route would lose more time than anticipated. The terrain is much flatter and more passable in this part of Torrens than in any part of Dernan.”

“Do you have experience of Dernan, then?” Prince Cassius asked.

“I’ve been there,” said Flora. “But not for some years. Before my time in Torrens.”

“I see.” The prince studied her so thoughtfully that she had to fight not to fidget under his scrutiny. “And you think we would not be as safe there?”

“Oh, no, Your Highness, I didn’t mean that,” she said. “I don’t have any reason to expect lawlessness in Dernan. I just meant that it will likely be a considerable inconvenience for no great benefit.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” said Prince Cassius, speaking now to the head guard. “My father’s fears seem unfounded. We have encountered no problems in Torrens. It’s in Siquel that we were caught up in an armed attack. We will stick to our original route.”

“Very good, Your Highness.”

The guard’s wooden reply convinced Flora that he still resented her interference, so she tried to make herself unobtrusive once again. She knew that while normal bodyguards might reasonably have a say in comparing the safety of various routes as it affected their charges, it wasn’t really part of her role. They were all only pretending she was Prince Cassius’s bodyguard. At best she was a minor addition to

his already formidable squadron of personal guards.

Remembering why her skills had been wanted, she shifted her focus to the surrounding area as the prince and the head guard discussed the journey further. The camp was almost packed up, and they would soon be on the road. But there was no doubt their presence overnight would have attracted notice. If someone had wanted to do the prince any harm, they would have had plenty of opportunity to figure out where he would come in the morning.

Surreptitiously, Flora retrieved a band from her pocket and tied her hair back into a loose tail. Then, with a move she'd perfected with extensive practice, she started tilting her head back and forth. The movement of her head was minimal, but soon her hair was swinging steadily from side to side. Her sense of magic was well-developed, and she could easily detect the Dust stirred up by the small motion. And of course, since her hair was part of her own body, the magic generated by its motion flowed instantly into her reach. The process of taking hold of it was effortless.

It was only the tiniest stream of Dust, so it barely required any mental wrestling to shape it into an enchantment. The nature of the movement affected the power as well. A simple swish of hair was never going to provide fuel for a counterattack, not the way her sling might. But she didn't need a counterattack. She just wanted information.

She sent the power out from her, able to sense the progress of the Dust as it dispersed across the clearing. She saw Lord Armand look up from where he was speaking to a trio of guards some distance away. His gaze passed curiously to her, apparently able to sense not only that she was manipulating Dust, but that it was a benign enchantment, no cause for concern.

She would still happily have pushed the overbearing nobleman into a pile of horse manure, but she did have to respect his magic craft. Not only had his tethering

enchantment been sophisticated and sturdy, but he'd fueled it from the downpour of rain. Getting access to such a volume of magic from individual rain drops was advanced work.

Other than Lord Armand's interest, Flora's enchantment revealed nothing in particular. No other magic was currently at work, and there was no one the magic classified as hiding. When a guard led horses over shortly afterward, she waited at attention until the prince was mounted.

"Assist Flora to mount, please." The prince's simple command surprised Flora. Did he think she hadn't yet mounted because she wasn't capable of doing so without assistance? It wasn't as though she was riding side-saddle.

"No need," she assured the approaching guard, waving him off.

If the prince was inclined to consider her helpless, he'd do well to think again. Perhaps she was petty to make a show, but she wasn't afraid to be petty.

She swung her hair once more, simultaneously whipping out a metal hoop the size of a saucer and slipping it over her hand. She rotated her arm swiftly, and in a matter of seconds, the hoop was swirling so quickly that it became a blur. Between the motion of her own body—mainly her hair—and the movement of the hoop, enough Dust was stirred up to allow for an enhancing enchantment.

Flora placed her other hand on the pommel of her horse's saddle, then channeled all the power at her disposal into that arm. As she pulled herself up, she felt the brief surge of unnatural strength that allowed her to pull herself straight off the ground and onto the horse with just one slight hand.

The act of doing so caused her repetitive motions to cease, and the burst of strength was short-lived. But it was enough. Flora settled herself on the saddle, arranging the

short skirt of her over-tunic around her legs.

“Impressive.”

She looked up to see Prince Cassius watching her in fascination. “That was quite a maneuver.”

She smiled mechanically, not seeking or needing the praise. The whole thing had been swift. To an outside observer, she would have appeared to swing her arm as if commencing a dance, then leap lightly up onto a full-sized horse’s back, using only one hand for light support. She could imagine it might seem impressive. But to someone who understood the mechanics of how she’d used the Dust, it was actually a very simple trick.

She could have mounted the horse without magic, of course, and perhaps it had been foolish to use magic unnecessarily. But it was worth it. She’d proved her point to the prince—if it had been necessary—but she’d acted as much for her own benefit. There was something powerful about occasionally experiencing the physical strength that reminded her that, thanks to her magical capabilities, she was no longer as vulnerable as she looked.

The day of riding wore away at Flora’s resilience, but she did her best to keep her senses sharp. She sent out regular scouting enchantments to check for danger or active magic ahead. She didn’t even have to create her own movement to do it. Every clop of her horse’s hooves stirred up a neat little deposit of Dust, and once she felt confident of the animal’s goodwill toward her it was simple enough to harness that motion.

When the group stopped for the night, Flora was relieved beyond words to find that she’d been given her own room. She knew she didn’t deserve the consideration—had she been a male guard, she certainly wouldn’t have received it—but she didn’t

protest, so weary and desperate for privacy was she. She learned that the prince had sent a messenger ahead, determined to stop only at an inn that could provide adjoining rooms for the pair of them. No doubt he would be as relieved by the space as she was.

She slept soundly and woke ready to tackle another full day of riding. Apparently they were four hours from the border with Carrack. The first two of those hours passed smoothly. She rode just behind the prince, trying to be unobtrusive as a bodyguard should. It was strange how often she had to remind herself not to strike up a conversation with Prince Cassius, the way she might with one of the Siqualian royals, whom she knew well. She couldn't explain why, but she felt more comfortable with him than she had any right to. Where was the formidable prince rumor had called proud and haughty? She could see his pride—his manner with his underlings bordered on haughty—but she nonetheless didn't find him at all intimidating. Perhaps it was because he was never haughty in his manner with her, even though he had every reason to be.

It seemed that the comfort was mutual. More than once, Flora drew back a little within the group to discourage the prince from continuing a conversation he'd attempted to begin with her. It seemed that if she wanted to maintain appropriate distance, she'd have to do so on her own.

Her resolve was thwarted around mid-morning, when the road narrowed in order to pass through a medium-sized copse. She found herself riding right alongside the prince, who was quick to capitalize on the opportunity.

"Can I ask you a question?" His eyes were too piercing for her peace-of-mind.

"You need hardly ask permission, Your Highness."

He ignored her words. "Was it my imagination that you seemed very reluctant earlier

about the idea of going through Dernan?”

Flora hid a wince. How—and why—was he so attuned to her?

“I didn’t relish the idea, Your Highness,” she acknowledged.

He studied her. “Why not? Is there something I need to know about our neighbors? It’s no secret that the Peninsula is not as stable as it once was. If something is so amiss in Dernan that you fear entering its borders, I’d like to know about it.”

Flora felt herself relax. Of course he was focused on matters of state rather than her personal background.

“Oh no, nothing of that nature,” she assured him. “I’m sure you know Dernan’s reputation for reclusion as well as I do, but I don’t have any reason to suspect them of malice.” She shrugged. “At least, I didn’t when I was last there, although as I said that was some years ago.”

Prince Cassius considered her words for a moment. “None of which answers my earlier question of why you were reluctant to go through there.”

Ah. He was right .

“Well...” Flora hesitated over her answer. It was difficult to know how honest to be. “I went to Dernan before I knew Princess Miriam, and...let’s just say her friendship has been a stabilizing force in my life. When I was in Dernan, I behaved in such a way that I wouldn’t necessarily expect goodwill if I were to return.”

Prince Cassius raised an eyebrow, one corner of his lips quirking up along with it. It was an inconveniently appealing expression.

“How intriguing. Do you mean to tell me that I have a wanted criminal for a bodyguard?”

Flora laughed.

“I committed no crimes, Your Highness. I just didn’t endear myself.”

“An unconvincing answer,” he told her. “You must have done something. Did you perhaps steal a griffin?”

“Steal one?” Flora laughed again. “How would I achieve that when they’re supposed to be so rare humans never even see them?”

The prince raised an eyebrow. “So you think they’re real, then?”

She stared at him. “Of course they’re real! Do you really doubt it?”

He shrugged. “A lot of people in Carrack think they’re a myth. Perhaps a self-aggrandizing tale spun by the Dernan crown to increase its own importance in the Peninsula. Having a full monopoly on chameleon steel has been incredibly valuable for them. Maybe they thought that owning—so to speak—a magical species might increase their status even further.”

Flora only just stopped herself from making a scoffing noise, remembering in time that she was speaking with a foreign prince. She wasn’t sure what was more comical—the suggestion that the excess of chameleon steel was some formidable asset to Dernan, or the idea that griffins were made up by the Dernan crown for prestige.

“That’s far-fetched,” she told him frankly. “I don’t see how it would benefit them, either, given that humans never even interact with griffins.”

“Never?” Prince Cassius raised an eyebrow, the tug on his lips suggesting he was enjoying her indignation. “The tales say that if humans are intrepid enough to brave their cliffs, griffins may choose to befriend them, and if they do, the bond is lifelong and potent.”

“I’ve heard the same tales.” It was Flora’s turn to smile. “Although as to braving the cliffs, I doubt that’s a rare feat anymore. Since the chameleon steel comes from those cliffs, they’re probably crawling with humans.”

Prince Cassius nodded. “I suppose that’s true.” He smiled wryly. “Sometimes we in Carrack wonder if the chameleon steel is as mythical as we think the griffins. We’ve yet to see any of it. My father has been trying for years to negotiate with the Dernan crown to supply some. Who wouldn’t want chainmail that can change to camouflage the wearer depending on his environment? For Carrack it would be especially valuable, given one of our borders is lined by forest and another by snow-capped mountains.”

“Best of luck to him,” Flora said cheerfully. “Whether or not griffins are mythical, the legendary control of the Dernan crown isn’t. They keep a very tight hold on their one genuinely valuable resource.”

And for very good reason, not that she intended to tell the prince what she knew of that.

“Aha!” The prince was grinning now. “That’s what you did. You stole chameleon steel. Or perhaps you stole the secret of its refinement.”

Again, Flora couldn’t help laughing. “I certainly didn’t. I’ve already told you I’m no criminal. My bad experience in Dernan is of no import, and I wouldn’t wish it to affect your plans. With any luck they’ve forgotten all about me—it would be poor chance if the random border guards recognized me. But I truly meant what I said

about the other reasons not to go through Dernan.”

He nodded. “And I maintain that it was unnecessary. But that doesn’t stop me from being curious about your background. I realize I know very little about you. You must have an unusual tale to have gone from a prestigious school for titled girls to a role with the royal guard.”

Flora pulled out her arm hoop again, stalling for time as she slipped it over her wrist. The movement of spinning it was second nature, and she grabbed hold of the ensuing magic without thinking about it.

“If you mean to imply that my parents are titled, the school wasn’t just for titled girls. Some were daughters of wealthy merchants and the like.”

She sent out a scouting enchantment as she spoke.

“Are you the daughter of a wealthy merchant?” the prince pressed.

She shook her head, her focus split between the enchantment and the conversation. “No, my situation was unusual. I had no funds to cover my education. But I was determined—I was convinced I had significant magical potential, although I’d never had opportunity to explore it. I persuaded the mistress to give me a domestic role at the school, and then took every opportunity to show my magical aptitude. Fortunately for me, she was impressed enough to offer me a place alongside the paying students.”

“I’m impressed as well,” Prince Cassius commented. “You were obviously resourceful and persistent from a young age.”

Flora shrugged. “It did take persistence. It took two years of menial work to get there. That’s why I graduated with Princess Miriam but am older than her.”

“And what was your situation before you approached the school?” Prince Cassius asked.

Flora didn’t answer. Her scouting enchantment was communicating back to her, and it now had her full attention.

“There’s someone hidden in the trees ahead,” she said sharply, raising an arm to point. “More than one someone—maybe three?”

“How do you know?” Prince Cassius asked.

“I sent out a scouting enchantment,” she told him. “They might be there for an innocuous reason, but I’m suspicious. They seem high up, as if they’re in a tree.”

She was gratified when the prince asked no more questions, instead barking an order to the closest guard. In moments, half a dozen guards had peeled off to check the indicated area, while the rest of them increased their pace.

“I’ll go into the trees with—” Flora cut herself off with a noise of irritation. “No, I can’t, can I? That would drag you into the potential danger as well.”

“Stay with the group.” The prince sounded stern, and she couldn’t blame him. He was definitely safest to stay with the other guards.

Flora moved to put herself between the prince and the trees, her eyes fixed on the point her magic had identified. A moment later, a shout went up, and the guards who remained with the prince instantly moved to tighten the protective formation around him .

Flora, riding by his side, felt a sickening sensation as movement from the trees stirred a particular type of magic—a type too soiled to be used. She caught a flash of tan

leather as a body fell to the ground. Two guards leaped toward it as if to incapacitate the man. Could they not tell that he was dead? She'd sensed it at once, from the nature of the magic generated by his body's movement.

A sick feeling rose up in her as the image of the plummeting man from the day before filled her mind. She forced her mind back to the present, feeling cowardly for being glad that this time, some other guard had felled the attacker.

Because attackers they were. If there'd been any doubt, it was dispelled a moment later. It had all happened so rapidly, the group was still thundering past the spot where the guards were focused on something else in the trees. They'd almost cleared the area when Flora heard a whizzing sound followed by a grunt from Prince Cassius.

Her mind struggled to comprehend what was happening as she simultaneously saw an arrow graze Prince Cassius's shoulder and felt red-hot pain blaze into existence on her own shoulder. She clamped her lips shut, the pain intense but the shock helping her to keep it in.

"The prince has been hit!" A guard riding on Prince Cassius's other side shouted the words, and the group sped even faster as he leaned forward to try to take the reins of the prince's horse.

"I'm all right," Cassius said curtly. "I don't need assistance." He pulled the horse away, resisting the guard's efforts to take over its guidance.

Flora bit back the cry of pain threatening to erupt as the galloping pace jarred her shoulder over and over again. She gripped the reins tightly, determined not to pass out. She sensed the movement of magic from within the group and realized with relief that Lord Armand was doing what she should have thought of, and using magic to provide protection for the party. Nothing was required of her but to hold on until they were clear of the area, then they would surely stop to regroup.

They did so within a couple of minutes, the head guard approaching the prince as soon as they came clear of the copse, Lord Armand hot on his heels.

“Your Highness! Your shoulder!” The nobleman gaped at the prince’s tattered tunic and the blood seeping from his wound.

“I’m fine,” the prince said, with an irritable tone that hinted at the pain he was trying to deny. “The arrow grazed me, nothing more. Is the danger past?”

“Yes, Your Highness.” The head guard watched impatiently as one of his men approached on foot, clutching what looked like a medical bag. “See to the prince quickly!”

“Yes, sir.” The guard bowed swiftly to the prince. “If you would dismount, Your Highness...”

Prince Cassius did so, moving carefully. “Bind it if you must, but there’s no call for all this fuss. Give me the report, man.” The last words were directed, tersely, to the head guard.

Flora swayed in the saddle, clutching the pommel with the hand of her uninjured arm, and holding in the nausea that threatened by laying her injured one over her stomach. She was eager to hear the report as well, but it was hard to focus on anything given how the pain was swelling.

“There were two archers in the trees, Your Highness,” the head guard said. “The first was neutralized immediately, the second got an arrow off as the guards were trying to take him alive for interrogation. Unfortunately it was necessary to eliminate him as well, in order to prevent further attack.”

“What about the third?” Flora’s voice came out faintly, and if the head guard heard,

he gave no sign of it.

Prince Cassius heard, though. He glanced at her, frowning as he took in her posture.

“Yes, you thought there were three, didn’t you?”

She nodded. “I’m fairly certain.”

“How would she know?” the head guard asked impatiently, still not looking at Flora.

“She is the only reason we weren’t taken completely unaware by the attackers,” Prince Cassius said crisply. “Her scouting enchantment identified the attackers’ presence, something your human scouts completely failed to do.”

“Her magic craft is exceptional,” Lord Armand cut in, unexpectedly coming to Flora’s defense. “If she sensed three, there were three.”

The head guard cursed. “One must have escaped before my men reached them, Your Highness. I’ll send men after—”

“Do as you think best,” Prince Cassius said coldly. “But I ride for the border.”

The head guard looked chastened, and he was quick to marshal his men to their various tasks. Flora didn’t envy him as Prince Cassius turned pointedly away from him with a severe expression, his silence intimidating while the medic guard finished up his binding.

Princes and their pride.

Flora tried to remain silent. She didn’t want her injury to delay the prince further, especially with one of the attackers unaccounted for. They were still too exposed. But

she was struggling, and she found herself slipping sideways. She managed to right herself at the last moment, but the gesture wrenched her shoulder enough that she couldn't hold in a brief cry.

Prince Cassius's eyes flew to her, searching her more thoroughly this time.

"That should be safe to ride with, Your Highness," the medic guard said. "You were right, it was only a shallow wound."

The prince didn't answer. He was staring, horrified, at Flora instead.

"Flora! You're hurt!"

She shook her head, not trying to deny the injury so much as the attention.

"It can wait until we've reached a safer location."

"Don't be absurd," Prince Cassius said sharply.

He strode toward her horse, and it was a good thing he did. As a fresh wave of pain hit Flora, she felt herself slipping again. Still trying not to distract focus from the injured prince, she raised her good hand to gesture him off, forgetting that the task of holding the pommel was too much for the hand attached to her injured shoulder. Before her mind—made fuzzy by the throbbing pain—could process what was happening, she toppled sideways off her mount.

Closing the final gap with a surge, Prince Cassius caught her.

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Chapter

Seven

Flora's mind spun, the agonizing wrench to her shoulder warring for attention with the feel of strong, powerful arms closing around her. It seemed to her that the prince held on for just a moment longer than necessary. He steadied her swiftly on her feet, but for the next breath, his arms were still around her, as unyielding as iron bands as they held her pressed loosely to his chest.

She didn't resist his hold. In fact, in her weakness, she could have stayed there for hours. It was a sensation she'd never known before. No man had ever held her close and safe, not even her father. Especially not her father.

Then he released her, so suddenly she wondered if she'd imagined that the moment was prolonged. He had just one hand on her good shoulder now, as he held her at arm's length to try to see the wound. Her eyes caught the large splash of red on his tunic, and she winced.

"I've stained your shirt."

"Never mind that," he said incredulously. "I'm more concerned about the fact that you're bleeding everywhere! "

He flagged the medic with an impatient air, moving back to allow the other man access to Flora.

“What happened, Flora?” the prince pressed, as Flora submitted to the man’s examination. “Was there a second arrow?”

She shook her head. “No, the same arrow.”

“The same arrow?” Prince Cassius repeated. “What do you mean? Surely it didn’t nick you on the way past and then hit me as well?”

“Something like that.” Flora tried to communicate with her eyes, but he wasn’t getting it.

She gave up quickly, closing her eyes against the pain as the medic began to clean the wound. If the prince wanted to keep their situation quiet, he’d have to figure it out by himself.

“It certainly looks like an arrow wound,” the medic guard said, poking at it one last time before he started to bind it.

“Is she in danger?” the prince asked.

“I don’t think so, Your Highness,” the guard said. “It’s actually a very similar wound to yours, although considerably worse.”

“Twice as bad, perhaps?” Flora muttered wryly.

She snuck a look at the prince as she spoke and saw his eyes widen with realization. The expression that followed was harder to read. Whatever he was feeling, though, it wasn’t a pleasant emotion. She saw his eyes travel over her shoulder, and turned to see the focus of that stony gaze. It was Lord Armand, in discussion with a pair of guards further down the road.

“I think that should stop the bleeding.” The medic guard drew Flora’s attention back to his task as he finished binding her wound. “She should be able to travel.”

“Of course I can travel,” Flora said quickly, carefully flexing the newly treated shoulder. “We should get over the border as promptly as we can.”

Prince Cassius looked unconvinced, but his guards were quick to push the group forward again. They would all be easier once they were back in their own kingdom, no doubt. Even Flora would be happy to leave Torrens.

She once again rode behind the prince, clenching her jaw against the jostling of the horse’s gait on her shoulder. She was glad to be mounted, though, as it allowed her to eavesdrop when the head guard pulled his horse alongside the prince’s to make another report.

“We’ve been unable to find any trace of the third man’s flight, Your Highness. The bodies of the other two men have been thoroughly checked, and they carried nothing that would identify them. They had Torrenese coins, however.”

Flora could hear the prince’s frown in his voice. “That doesn’t tell us anything beyond the fact that they were currently traversing Torrens, which of course we already knew.”

“It was a significant sum, Your Highness,” the guard said. “Consistent with mercenaries.”

“You think someone hired mercenaries to kill me on my journey home?” Prince Cassius asked incredulously. “And they sent only three?”

“I don’t know what I think, Your Highness,” the guard said. “Other than that it was a very poorly planned attack, however you look at it.”

He glanced backward, not looking pleased to see that Flora was listening in.

“I’ve been notified that the arrow grazed the new guard before hitting you, Your Highness. Perhaps you were not the target. Given the last attack was directed at Princess Miriam, and you were intending to be traveling this route with Her Highness, it’s possible they thought they were taking aim at her.”

Prince Cassius shook his head. “I hardly think someone would confuse Flora for a royal princess, man.”

Flora made a wry grimace. It was a good thing she was thick-skinned.

“If someone had never seen Princess Miriam before, Your Highness—” the guard started.

“I’m not talking about her face,” said Prince Cassius impatiently. “I’m talking about her attire. She’s dressed like a guard. Did you see the impractical—dare I say startling—gown the princess was wearing when we met her delegation? She’d be in a carriage, not riding beside me dressed in breeches.”

Flora’s heart lifted a little. Fool that she was, it felt good to know he’d been speaking of her clothes rather than her when he’d been so dismissive of her being mistaken for anyone important. She dimly recognized the danger of her reaction. But it was hard to keep her thoughts in line when the memory of the prince’s arms around her kept trying to intrude.

“Perhaps you’re right, Your Highness,” the guard said. “We may learn more when we reach Crandell. Several of my men have stayed behind. Two will make their way by other means to Toleda to report the attack to the Torrenese king, and the others will use their horses to transport the bodies of the attackers to our own capital for further investigation.”

“Very good,” said Prince Cassius, his voice carrying that haughty edge that made him sound bored.

The guard recognized the dismissal, peeling off at once. Prince Cassius turned slightly and locked eyes with Flora. He seemed surprised how close she rode, and he hesitated for a moment, as if intending to speak to her. But with the next breath he’d turned forward again, urging his horse onward.

The group pushed on at a rapid pace until they crossed the border. Thanks to their scouts, the guards at the border were ready to receive them, and Flora felt the tension of the whole convoy ease once they’d cleared the checkpoint. Well, perhaps with the exception of Lord Armand. She saw the prince exchanging what looked like terse words with him at the border post, and she had a feeling her injury was the topic of their conversation. She didn’t approach close enough to hear for sure, but Lord Armand looked very subdued as they continued east toward the capital, Crandell, their numbers swelled by some extra men from the border post.

Whatever Lord Armand felt, the prince’s mood certainly seemed to have improved with their arrival in Carrack. Not long after they got back on the road, he pulled up a little so as to ride alongside Flora.

“How’s your shoulder?” he asked.

“It’s manageable,” she told him.

He gave her a skeptical look, and she smiled.

“I’d say it hurts about twice as much as yours does.”

The groan the prince let out was so low she almost missed it. He didn’t speak for a moment, then he abruptly changed the subject.

“Have you been to Carrack before? Since you’ve apparently had adventures in Dernan, I wondered if I need fear any guards recognizing you as a troublemaker in Crandell.”

Flora gave a faint chuckle, the best she could muster through the pain of her jolted shoulder .

“No need to fear, Your Highness. This is my first time in your kingdom.”

He nodded. “I imagine things will be tense given recent events, but I hope to find time to show you some of the beauties for which Carrack is famous.”

She raised her eyebrows at him. “Like the pantherines? I’d love to see those.”

He laughed at her mention of the winged snow leopards whose wings supposedly emitted movement that was already formed into specific enchantments. Not that the pantherines themselves could harness them.

“I’m afraid not,” he said. “They’re only to be found in the mountain range on the northern coast, a long way from Crandell. But it’s probably for the best. You wouldn’t be likely to see them so much as to never know what hit you when you become their lunch. They swoop from above, you know.”

“Shame,” said Flora prosaically. “Well, perhaps I could settle for a visit to a cobaltite mine.”

“A cobaltite mine?” Cassius repeated, taken aback.

“I thought Carrack had the largest cobaltite mines in the region.”

“We do,” he confirmed. “Almost all of the thus-far discovered cobaltite on the

Peninsula is found within our borders. I'm just surprised you've heard of the ore. It's not something that usually draws visitors. To be honest, it's not useful for very much."

Flora shrugged. "I studied more than just magic at school. I learned the main exports and imports of each kingdom in the region. And I always thought cobaltite was interesting, with how it retains its strength under such high temperatures."

"Yes, it's an unusual type of ore," Cassius said, his tone polite rather than genuinely interested. "At any rate, I hope our unfortunate circumstances don't prevent you from enjoying your time in Carrack. We're very proud of our kingdom, and although I'm not impartial, I think we have reason."

"Of course we do."

The interjection made Flora jump, and she thought the prince started as well. Neither of them had realized how close Lord Armand had pulled up.

"Carrack is the greatest kingdom on the Peninsula. The fact is indisputable."

Flora raised an eyebrow. Indisputable?

"Some might dispute it," said Prince Cassius, as if in acknowledgment of her thoughts. "I'm sure you have appropriate pride in Siquil. But I confess, I agree with Lord Armand."

Flora studied him thoughtfully, seeing that he was to be taken at face value. She was by no means blinded by loyalty to Siquil, and she tried to consider the matter dispassionately as they continued their ride eastward.

Carrack did have reason for satisfaction. It sat at the northern gate of the Peninsula,

connecting their otherwise isolated region to the continent. Carrack was not as vulnerable to the prejudice that made the rest of the continent look down on the Peninsula, but it still boasted the primary benefit of the region—namely its own stretch of accessible coastline in the kingdom’s south. The terrain further north meant that most of the kingdoms of the continent were blocked from any navigable coastline by impassable mountain ranges and rocky seas.

However, she wasn’t inclined to think that Carrack’s position was enough of an advantage to justify the level of pride the prince and nobleman were expressing. The benefit of being connected to the continent had to be balanced against the limited coastline. Torrens and Siqua both had exponentially more navigable coastline. Dernan...well, Dernan’s small stretch of coast was hampered by high cliffs, it was true. But as the little duchy-turned-kingdom placed no value on the high opinion of the other kingdoms, it was in a class of its own.

Not to mention those cliffs were riddled with deposits of chameleon steel, which was more valuable than accessible shoreline. Or at least, it would be, if the situation were different.

“I don’t know if anything is indisputable,” she said at last. “But as I said, this is my first time in Carrack. I’ll have to reserve judgment.”

Lord Armand looked unimpressed by her lack of enthusiasm, but it didn’t seem to bother Prince Cassius. In fact, there was a light in his eyes that almost looked like excitement.

“I’ll take it as my personal challenge to convince you, then.”

Flora bit her lip, not trusting herself to reply. Why did her treacherous heart lurch when he looked at her like that? How much of a fool could she be? This was the prince betrothed to Mim.

Not betrothed yet , pointed out a most unhelpful voice in her mind. Due to dramatic events, the formalization of the betrothal has been delayed.

She ignored this irrelevant observation. Prince Cassius was Miriam's intended, and Flora had better hope the betrothal was formalized soon. Because with it, the alliance would be sealed, and that was the only way the tether would lift. Well, that or the death of one of its subjects, she supposed, but that was hardly a desirable way out of the mess.

At least if she died, Prince Cassius would probably be free and unencumbered, she thought glumly. If he died...well, she wasn't sure how the magic of the tether would achieve its goal. She could hardly die twice as much as he did. Maybe twice as painfully?

"Is your shoulder hurting you?"

"What was that, Your Highness?" Flora looked up, embarrassed to realize she'd been so lost in her thoughts, she hadn't even noticed the prince watching her.

"Your shoulder. You were shifting it like it was hurting particularly."

"It's fine," she said quickly.

The evasive—and not entirely honest—answer was standard guard conduct. She wasn't sure why it felt uncomfortable to be false with the prince, but it did.

"I'll be glad to get off this horse," she blurted out. "As I'm sure you will also. The ride does jolt the wound, doesn't it?"

"It does," he acknowledged, his brows lowered unhappily. "I wish you weren't forced to suffer for no fault of your own."

She smiled at that. “Whereas you were shot by an enemy archer through your own fault?”

He shrugged his unharmed shoulder. “It’s not a matter of fault, I suppose, but it’s a danger that comes with royal position.”

“Oh, I know,” she assured him. “I’m a royal bodyguard, remember?”

She caught a frown from Lord Armand, and subsided. His unspoken rebuke was accurate—she was being too informal with the prince. She was happy to let the conversation drop, anyway. There was plenty else to focus on as the group moved east into Carrack. The capital, Crandell, was several hours’ ride from the border, and Flora felt her curiosity grow as they rode through rich and prosperous farmland. She knew from her geography lessons that the northern part of Carrack was colder and not as arable, but the area surrounding the capital was temperate. Greener than Siquial, and with much gentler terrain than Dernan.

The road they were traveling on was wide and well-kept, and they moved over it quickly thanks to the prince’s guards clearing the way before their delegation. Some time after crossing the border, Flora noted a row of low hills ahead, and before long, the road beneath her horse’s hooves was climbing steadily. When they reached the top of the hill, she drew in a breath.

The city of Crandell sat in the valley below them, and their vantage point provided an excellent view of the capital. Having lived in the Siqualian capital of Sindon and the Torrenese capital of Toleda during her time at school, she’d thought she knew what to expect. But neither of those cities compared to Crandell. In size alone, the Carrackian capital dwarfed them. But it was more than just the size of it.

“What do you think?” Prince Cassius’s voice, a trifle smug, broke into her contemplation. She hadn’t even realized that she’d pulled up her mount, and he’d

done so beside her.

“I think it’s enormous. And more beautiful than any city of stone and bustle has any right to be,” she said frankly.

“It is beautiful,” the prince agreed, his eyes straying to the city. “And it’s the largest city on the Peninsula.”

“By a lot,” she agreed. Her eyes roved over it. “What are those patches of green? They must be large if we can see them from here.”

“Those are the public parks,” said the prince. “They’re one of Crandell’s best features, in my opinion.”

“Public parks right in the heart of the city?” Flora was impressed. “Are they open for anyone to use?”

“Of course. I’ll take you to one. They’re beautiful, peaceful places.”

Warmth seeped over Flora at the promise, and she tried to hide it with humor.

“Well, you certainly won’t be going to any without me, will you?” She mimed yanking on a rope.

The prince laughed, the sound only slightly pained. “That would be true even without the tether. To tell the truth, I rarely have time for activities like visiting parks. But to give you the full experience of Crandell, I will make time.”

“Something to look forward to,” Flora said, smiling hesitantly. He was being far nicer to her than their situation warranted.

Her words made him sigh, and his gaze shifted to the gray and red castle that rose from the buildings near the city's center.

"There may not be a great deal to look forward to," he said abruptly. "I should warn you that things will become very tense as soon as we enter the city. An attempt was made on my life, and although my injury is negligible, it's still a matter that will be taken very gravely."

"As it should be," Flora agreed.

The prince gave a thoughtful shake of the head. "I still don't understand it. I can hardly imagine a less thought-through attack. Three men in the trees, no back up, hoping to manage a fatal strike through my squadron of guards? The fact that they actually managed to hit me is as surprising as it is alarming."

"It wasn't the most sophisticated attack, that's certain," Flora agreed, biting her lip. "The haphazard nature of it worries me. I'm no investigator, but even I can see the striking similarity between that attack and the one that targeted the princess."

"Yes."

Prince Cassius frowned, his eyes flicking to where she was still worrying her lip. She released it quickly, reminding herself she was supposed to be a capable bodyguard, and shouldn't be unnerved by threats to her charge's safety.

"Your Highness." The head guard had ridden back down the line to check on his charge. "Is all well? Is your injury worsening?"

"No, I'm fine," Prince Cassius said. "We merely stopped to admire the view of the city."

“Yes, Your Highness.” The head guard’s tone was as respectful as ever, but it didn’t hide his impatience with such frivolities. “I suggest we keep moving, however.”

“I am ready to do so,” the prince said.

The group began to move again, and Flora fell behind Prince Cassius as they made their way down the far side of the hill. Soon, they could see the city only from the level of the plain on which it sat. Its enormous stone walls were still impressive, but not as striking as the panorama had been.

Flora didn’t see how it happened, but somehow she found herself a few riders back from the prince, beside Lord Armand.

“A word of warning, child.”

She stiffened at the greeting .

“King Aelius will not take kindly to any liberties taken with his son,” the nobleman told her. “You would do well to keep some distance.”

Distance? She stared blankly at him, unable to find words.

“I am aware that you are in an uncomfortable position.”

How magnanimous of him.

“But twenty feet is not inconsiderable. It allows active monitoring of the prince, but it does not justify such presumptions as sharing a chamber at an inn. It is beneath the prince’s dignity to be exposed to the gossip of the guards.”

Flora drew a long and shaky breath, fighting with every ounce of her willpower to

hold back the hot retorts that were desperate to break free. She was a member of the guard, she reminded herself. She was not supposed to argue back, even if the nobleman's words were outrageously unjust.

"I am also shocked that you need to be reminded to address Prince Cassius as Your Highness at all times," Lord Armand went on.

Flora's brows drew together. He had her there. She'd never intended to dispense with the use of the prince's title. Had she really done so? It had become alarmingly easy to converse naturally with him.

"Yes, sir," said Flora woodenly, eager to bring the conversation to a close.

With a nod, Lord Armand urged his horse forward, leaving Flora to her reflections. The nobleman might be insufferable, but he was right. She was in an awkward situation—made doubly awkward by the prince's desire to conceal their tether—and she couldn't afford to put a foot wrong. Any inconvenience to the prince that arose from their connection would be blamed on her, however little she could control it. The nobleman's reaction to her and the prince sharing a room—a situation entirely of his own making—was an excellent example.

For the short remainder of the ride, Flora kept her mount further back in the group. They were expected at the city gates, and the group entered with much fanfare. As they were escorted through the city, Flora soaked in the new sights and sounds. Stone dwellings surrounded them, neatly kept and cheerful, with colorful flowers in every window box. The cobblestones were even and swept, and some of the thatched roofs had been painted bright colors. They passed through a number of lovely squares, with fountains tinkling merrily in their centers, and she caught a glimpse of green as they passed one of the public parks.

As for the castle, it eclipsed its counterparts in other kingdoms just like the city in

which it sat. It was made of the same gray stone as most of Crandell's buildings, but it didn't blend in. It rose majestically above the city, its turrets piercing the sky. What really impressed her, though, was the bursts of color. Trees rose up around the base of the castle, and flower boxes could be seen in many of the windows. Those splashes of green, white, and purple offset the intensity of the pennants, all of which were crimson. And they were everywhere. Pennants adorned the turrets and hung down from the battlements. Flags flapped from poles along the tops of the walls, and alongside many of the windows. They were all the same crimson, some with a white flower embroidered in the middle.

So this was Prince Cassius's home. It was quite something to behold.

She was starting to understand why Prince Cassius had such pride in his kingdom. From what she'd seen thus far, the capital at least was superior to those of the other kingdoms on the Peninsula.

Of course, the outside of a castle wasn't the most important part. Her true impression of Carrack's rulers would come from what she witnessed inside its walls. Life in a royal castle was not for the faint of heart. There was nowhere as vicious as a court inclined to be unfriendly.

She swallowed nervously. She knew nothing of King Aelius's court. And she was about to be thrust into its heart whether she wished it or not.

Chapter

Eight

Cassius had been glad to be home when he'd sat atop his horse, surveying the city from the crest of the hill alongside Flora. Her obvious admiration had been satisfying.

Actually entering the castle was less satisfying. He could tell from the tightness of the servants' eyes and the poorly concealed intrigue on the faces of passing courtiers that his father's state of mind was no more settled than it had been on Cassius's departure. And instead of returning with a clearly paved path to increase stable relations with their neighbors on the Peninsula, he was bringing back a crisis of his own.

Not that he intended for his father to ever learn the full extent of it. The tether would be his problem to manage and, ultimately, to solve. But the news of the attacks was bound to cause an uproar. He would have his work cut out for him to stop his father from doing something rash out of offense. The fact that he'd given Lord Armand reason to wish to keep his secret, and thus had found a way to enlist the nobleman's help to defuse rather than escalate the situation, would certainly help. But it was no guarantee that the king would be reasonable.

Most of the guards parted ways with the prince outside the castle. Only a pair of Cassius's personal guards, the delegation's head guard, and Lord Armand remained with him as he strode across the broad entranceway.

And, of course, his new bodyguard.

Flora trotted along behind the prince, her presence strangely potent in his consciousness even though she wasn't in his range of vision. He shouldn't be surprised, given her presence was in fact a tangible matter. At any given moment, if he stilled his senses enough to bring his awareness of magic into focus, he could sense the invisible tether, with her at the other end of it.

Cassius and his entourage moved quickly out of the public area of the castle. Both he and Flora wore visible bandages, and he didn't wish to encourage more gossip than was unavoidable. News of the attack on Carrack's crown prince would spread quickly enough as it was.

He planned to report to his father immediately and in private, before any exaggerated rumors could reach the king. When he inquired with the king's steward, he was surprised to learn that his father was in the armory. Why would he be there?

Cassius pushed back the premonition of trouble as he addressed the steward again.

"This young woman has joined my personal protection team," he said smoothly. "She is skilled in defensive magic and was sent with us as a sign of goodwill from Siquil. You will arrange for her belongings to be taken to the suite next to my own, to allow her to best fulfill her duties."

"The...the suite next to yours, Your Highness?" the steward repeated, his eyes moving between Cassius and Flora as he struggled to hide his surprise. "Would she not be better accommodated in the guards' wing?" He paused, perhaps realizing the impracticality of putting a female guard in a wing filled entirely with men, most of whom were required to share berths. "Or perhaps the servants' quarters?"

"No, she would not," said Cassius. "You will place her in the suite next to mine, as I said."

“Very good, Your Highness.” The steward bowed and made himself scarce. He at least could be trusted not to gossip, but that wouldn’t stop rumors from spreading like wildfire, Cassius knew. It couldn’t be helped, though, so he wouldn’t dwell on it.

Resisting the urge to cast a withering look at Lord Armand, Cassius turned back the way he’d come. The guards preceded him, with Lord Armand in their wake. But Flora waited for him to pass, presumably so she could walk behind him. Cassius tried to send her a silent encouragement, but she didn’t meet his eye, her face as expressionless as any guard’s as she scanned the path ahead watchfully. If not for her clearly feminine shape, she would look like a real bodyguard.

But she wasn’t a real bodyguard. At least, she wasn’t his real bodyguard. Thanks to their unusually candid interactions, he knew she had plenty of thoughts behind those uncommunicative eyes. He wished he could exclude her from the coming encounter.

They headed toward the armory through a maze of passages that Cassius knew well, although he didn’t often traverse them. As a teenager, he’d loved sneaking into the section of the castle dedicated to the royal guard. One of the senior guards in particular had taken pity on his desire to escape the tedium of his growing duties, and had encouraged him to spar with the younger trainees, even privately coaching him when his schedule allowed.

It had been a mutually beneficial arrangement. Cassius had learned to be a decent fighter, and the senior guard in question had in time won himself the role of heading up the crown prince’s personal guard. He hadn’t been part of the delegation to Siquil, however, so the joy of informing him that a young, slim, female bodyguard had been added to his command without consultation was yet before Cassius.

Not that Flora would be serving other duties in the squadron, or even training with the other guards. Not unless Cassius intended to stand around within twenty feet while she did so.

As they passed the training yard of the royal guard, Cassius glanced again at Flora. The thought danced through his mind that maybe he should do just that—it would be fascinating to watch her train. He suspected she would welcome the opportunity, given the interest with which she was studying the training area. But he didn't like the idea of her pitted against the burly members of his personal guard squadron, however good her grasp of magic was.

Flora looked up suddenly, not quite meeting his eyes before her gaze flitted away, continuing to surveil their path. Cassius frowned. Why was she avoiding his eye? He watched her for a moment longer, noting that she was walking with an extra bounce to her step that didn't match her somber expression at all. Suddenly he realized that the motion of her hair—the tight, brown tail swinging back and forth like a pendulum—was an intentional means of generating movement.

How useful .

He pulled his gaze away as the group entered the armory, his eyes searching the dim space for the king. Cassius heard his father before he saw him.

“Our military resources are unparalleled on the Peninsula, it's true.” The king's voice rang out clearly. “Torrens would be foolish to consider an open attack. But if we are to speak of the combined might of Torrens and Siqua...” His voice trailed off. “I will commission another shipment of weapons.”

Alarm raced over Cassius. Who was the king speaking to, and why was he bandying about casual suggestions of war on the Peninsula?

But Cassius had a sinking feeling that he knew exactly with whom the king was speaking. He rounded a ceiling-high storage shelf with one stride, his fears proved right as a pair of men came into view.

Sir Keavling.

Intense dislike rose up in Cassius, but he forced his expression to stay neutral as he greeted the two men.

“Father.” He bowed deeply to his father, then inclined his head to the foreign advisor.
“Sir Keavling.”

“Cassius! You’ve returned at last!”

King Aelius’s enthusiasm didn’t carry much warmth as he greeted his only son with a firm hand on the shoulder. Cassius didn’t doubt his father was glad to have his heir secure, of course. But his next words supported Cassius’s suspicion that he was more interested in gaining information on the attack than actually seeing Cassius.

“So you were met with treachery, Cassius.” The king’s eyes narrowed on his son’s bandages. “Did I not express my doubts about this alliance with Siqua?”

Cassius took a moment to calm his frustration before speaking. “Father, there is no reason to suspect Siqua of treachery. Their own princess was the target of the attack that occurred within their borders.”

“Something they should never have allowed to happen,” King Aelius said. “Surely you agree, Lord Armand?”

The nobleman bowed. “I certainly do, Your Majesty. And I told the Siquan prince so in no uncertain terms.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said the king. “I expected no less from you.”

Lord Armand inclined his head. “I do share His Highness’s view, however, Your

Majesty. I do not believe that Siqua is the aggressor in these attacks.”

The king acknowledged his words before turning to the delegation’s head guard. “Do you have anything to add?”

His tone was severe, and Cassius didn’t blame him. It had been a significant failure on the part of his guards that he’d been successfully hit by an archer.

“I am ready to make a full report to Your Majesty at your convenience,” the head guard said. “But in answer to your question, I agree with Lord Armand that we have no reason at present to suspect Siqua of involvement in either attack. Certainly none of the men involved wore any insignia or other uniform. Their appearances give little away, but if anything, they seem likely to be Torrenese.”

Cassius didn’t miss the pointed look that passed between King Aelius and Sir Keavling.

“We don’t know that they’re Torrenese,” he said quickly. “In fact, we know almost nothing.”

“A situation I trust will change after extensive investigation.” The king’s words, directed to the head guard, held a threat within them. “One might even wonder why the investigation has not already commenced.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. ”

The guard bowed promptly before withdrawing. Taking that as their cue, the two members of Cassius’s personal guard left the room as well, although they would no doubt remain on either side of the armory door. Lord Armand stayed where he was, as did Flora. Cassius could sense her trying to make herself inconspicuous as she hovered behind him. The king didn’t seem to have noticed her yet, but the more

astute Sir Keavling glanced at her from time to time. It bothered Cassius that the man was so perceptive and that he had Flora in his sights. There was no chance of the king remaining oblivious now—the uncomfortable moment was undoubtedly coming when Cassius would have to explain her presence.

“I hope we will know more after an investigation,” Cassius agreed with his father. “But in the meantime we should continue preparations for the marriage alliance between myself and Princess Miriam.”

Sir Keavling cleared his throat. “Surely that would be hasty, Your Highness.”

“I don’t believe so,” Cassius said coolly. “I was present during the attack on Princess Miriam. I am convinced that the Squalians were as shocked and dismayed by it as any of our group. There is no reason not to continue with the planned alliance.”

“No reason?” King Aelius’s brows were drawn together in a scowl. “You said yourself that we know almost nothing. Do you think I wish to go into an alliance blind? Of course we need all the information before we proceed.”

“The delay is unfortunate,” Sir Keavling said smoothly. “As you are aware, I’m in full support of the alliance, if Squal is truly innocent in the recent crisis. But surely a matter of a few more months will make little difference, to allow His Majesty to ensure he has all the facts. ”

In full support of the alliance, was he? Cassius held his gaze. And just what mischief will you achieve in those few more months? He didn’t speak the words aloud.

“I think it could make a difference,” he said instead.

The king raised an eyebrow. “Are you so eager to marry, Cassius? I hadn’t thought you motivated by personal interests in agreeing to the alliance. Am I to take it that the

princess is just as beautiful as rumored, then?”

Cassius held back his impatience. “Princess Miriam’s appearance has nothing whatsoever to do with the matter. I am thinking only of the security and standing of Carrack.”

“As you should be,” his father said approvingly. “But you must see that rushing into an alliance that may disadvantage us is not to our benefit.”

“With respect, Father, there would be no rush. We have discussed and considered this alliance for many months. If we do not believe that Siqua had any hand in the attacks, then nothing has changed. In fact, I feel that there is all the more reason for haste.”

“All the more reason?” the king repeated, frowning.

“If, as you seem to imply, Torrens is behind the attack, the most likely reason is a desire to stop an alliance between Carrack and Siqua. Would you give the attackers what they seek?”

“Your Majesty, I believe Prince Cassius speaks wisely,” said Lord Armand. “I also was outraged at Siqua’s failure to prevent violence during our arranged meeting. But with reflection, I have come to acknowledge that it is most unlikely that the attack on Princess Miriam was at their behest.”

“So you believe that we should proceed with the marriage alliance?” King Aelius asked Lord Armand .

“I do, Your Majesty,” said the nobleman. “And I agree with the prince that we should act expeditiously.”

The king considered him, and Cassius felt a trickle of optimism. The king had long been in the habit of listening to Lord Armand's advice.

But he'd reckoned without the king's new favorite advisor.

"You are wise, Your Highness." Sir Keavling's bow in Cassius's direction did not endear him. "But I believe there is an aspect of the matter you have not considered."

"And what is that?" Cassius asked, resenting the inclusion of this man in their discussion.

"Lord Armand has acknowledged that he was outraged at the incident. I must assume that the two delegations parted ways under tense circumstances."

"Of course we did," said Cassius impatiently. "How could it have been anything else?"

"Perfectly natural," Sir Keavling agreed. "But that was now some days ago, since which time an attack has occurred against you. If Torrens seeks to prevent an alliance between Carrack and Siqua, and failed to do so using violence, who knows what other means they may have employed since then? You say nothing has changed since your earlier deliberations regarding an alliance, but how can we be sure Siqua continues to be a safe ally?"

Cassius frowned. "You imply that Torrens has convinced Siqua to side with them against us? Why would Siqua cooperate with the kingdom that supposedly just tried to assassinate their princess?"

"You assume too much," said the king, with a derisive laugh. "Siqua's king is blind—his position at the furthest reaches of the Peninsula shelters him from understanding what's really going on in our region. I doubt he has any concept of the

subtle campaign of aggression the Torrenese crown has been perpetrating for months past.”

“And if the Torrenese are truly behind the attack,” Sir Keavling cut in, “they will be smart enough to try to convince the Squalians that it was orchestrated by Carrack.”

Much like you’re trying to convince us that Torrens is the aggressor, Cassius thought angrily. But accusing the advisor aloud would end badly. His father was too much in the man’s thrall. He cursed his own ineffectiveness. Leaving had been a mistake. If he’d returned with a solidified alliance, it would have been worth it. But he hadn’t—all he’d achieved was to give the advisor space to increase his influence with the king. It was already clear to Cassius that he’d made excellent use of the opportunity.

“All of this is a great deal of assumption,” Cassius said, directing the words to his father alone. “We don’t know Torrens was behind the attack. We have no reason to think they’re working with Squal now.”

“Which is why we must delay any further action on the alliance until we do know,” the king said. His tone was one Cassius knew well. The discussion was closed for the moment.

Cassius knew his father’s position made sense. Of course it was wise to have all the information. And in ordinary circumstances, the delay wouldn’t matter. But these weren’t ordinary circumstances. Returning to Crandell had only heightened his sense that Carrack was balanced on a precipice, and what they did next would have far-reaching consequences for the whole Peninsula. His father wasn’t proposing the delay for the sensible reasons he was saying. He was proposing it because he was being influenced by someone whom Cassius didn’t trust, and whose motivations for being there were unclear to him.

He didn't like it. He wanted to solidify ties within the Peninsula as a matter of urgency, and the marriage alliance with Siqua was their most concrete way of doing so.

Not to mention, pointed out an uncomfortable voice in his mind, you have a personal stake in formalizing the alliance that your father doesn't know about.

Cassius pushed back the unease he felt. Concealing the tether didn't change anything. Its existence was an unfortunate result of Lord Armand's meddling. It had nothing to do with the alliance itself, and it didn't change the excellent reasons Cassius already had for wanting to finalize that alliance.

"I will look forward to discussing the matter with you further in the days to come, Father," he said firmly. "But for now, I will retire to make myself presentable after my journey."

"An excellent notion," the king said. His face softened the tiniest amount. "I'm glad your injuries are not serious, Cassius. I know I need not assure you that those who dared to orchestrate an attack against you will be found and brought swiftly to justice."

Cassius tapped a fist against his chest, his heart not really in the gesture. "May Carrack live forever."

"May Carrack live forever," the king repeated, copying the gesture.

Lord Armand and Sir Keavling did the same, but as Cassius turned to leave, the advisor cleared his throat.

"You do not express loyalty to Carrack?" Sir Keavling's voice had a hint of sweetness that sent a prickle up the back of Cassius's neck. He followed the other

man's gaze to see that the question had been directed at Flora .

“My new guard doesn't know our ways,” Cassius said curtly. “I am confident no offense was intended.”

Flora inclined her head in acknowledgment, keeping her mouth closed as any sensible guard would do.

“Your new what?” The king was clearly incredulous, his brows rising as he noticed Flora at last.

“She is a gift from Siquel,” Cassius said, waving a hand as if the matter was inconsequential. “As a show of goodwill after the attack on Princess Miriam. As you have discerned, tensions were high. It was a gesture to demonstrate their continued desire to work together toward an alliance.”

He'd gone beyond stretching the truth now. He was mangling it. But having started down this road, he couldn't be half-hearted in following through.

The king continued to stare at Flora in astonishment. “They sent a young woman as a supposed guard?”

“Yes,” said Cassius blandly.

“And you took no offense at that?” A familiar storm was growing on King Aelius's brow. “Surely it is an insult.”

“If not worse,” interjected Sir Keavling. “Have you considered whether she is a spy, Your Highness?”

“Highly unlikely,” said Cassius dryly, “given it was Lord Armand's idea that she

accompany us as a sign of goodwill. If he hadn't suggested it, she would have returned to Sindon with the Squalian delegation, to continue her role as a bodyguard to Princess Miriam. She wasn't even given any opportunity to receive instructions from the Squalians after Lord Armand's request was made and granted."

"What?" The king turned to Lord Armand. "Make sense of this for me, My Lord, because I am at a loss."

The nobleman cleared his throat, stepping forward. "It is as the prince says, Your Highness. I understand that the situation is unusual."

"Unusual?" King Aelius repeated. "It's improper to the point of offense. You mean to tell me that the Squalian king assigned the role of his daughter's bodyguard to a woman? One who looks barely more than a child?"

He cast a look of dislike in Flora's direction, and Cassius had to bite back a retort that would have done no one any good.

"I also was surprised by the choice, Your Majesty," Lord Armand assured him. "Until I witnessed the attack on Princess Miriam. This young woman's intervention undoubtedly saved the princess's life. She is clearly not a traditional guard. But her grasp of magic craft is remarkable, and makes her a valuable addition to any protective detail. She demonstrated as much when she was the sole member of the party to identify that archers were hidden in the trees prior to the attack on Prince Cassius."

"Did she now?" The king cast a speculative glance over Flora. "She didn't prevent them from harming the prince, though, did she?" His eyes lingered on her shoulder, although he didn't deign to inquire about her injury.

"She's not to blame for that," said Cassius. "She provided a warning, and the rest of

my guards took over management of the matter.”

“Mismanagement, you mean,” the king said darkly.

“Yes.” Cassius didn’t hesitate to agree.

His father let out a long sigh before apparently deciding he was done with discussion of the Squalian girl.

“I still find the whole situation irregular and unbecoming,” he said. “But it is your affair whom you assign to your personal guard, Cassius.”

If only it was , Cassius thought wryly .

The king was giving a nod of dismissal. “You will have a real physician look over your wound.”

“Yes, Father, I will,” Cassius acknowledged. Was it pure optimism to search his father’s voice for a hint of true concern? He despised his own weakness in needing it.

With one last, shrewd look at Sir Keavling, Cassius turned away, Flora and Lord Armand following him as he left the armory. It felt strange to have the nobleman working with him to win his father over, but he was grateful for the other man’s aid. Galling as it was to admit, Lord Armand’s support had given him credibility in his father’s eyes. The king was used to thinking of the nobleman as being inflexible when it came to upholding Carrack’s honor.

“I will leave you, Your Highness,” Lord Armand said, once they were clear of the royal guards’ area.

Cassius nodded, eager to be rid of him. He would have been glad to be rid of

everyone and to have some solitude to think. But that wasn't an option just yet. He flagged down a passing servant.

"Arrange for the king's physician to be sent to my suite," he told the girl.

Her eyes darted between him and Flora as she bobbed a curtsy. "Yes, Your Highness."

She scurried off, and Cassius turned to Flora. "Come," he said. "I'll show you to your rooms."

"Yes, Your Highness." She didn't meet his eyes.

Cassius hesitated, confused by her stiffness. He hadn't seen her hold herself so rigid since before she revealed the truth about herself to him.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

"Of course, Your Highness."

Still bemused, Cassius began to walk. Flora followed a step behind, and the two guards who'd flanked the armory doors trailed behind her.

"Is your shoulder troubling you?" he tried again.

"No more than it has been, Your Highness."

Flora's face remained expressionless, and Cassius said no more until they reached the wing of the castle where the royal family slept. His own lavish suite stood on the northern side of the wing, with a view overlooking a pleasant garden and beyond it the northern district of the city. It was flanked by empty suites, occasionally used for

important guests.

Or bodyguards forced by magic to remain within twenty feet of him.

“This suite is for your use,” he told her, opening the door before his own.

The receiving room beyond it had been made ready, no sign of the holland covers that would usually shroud it when unoccupied.

“I’m sure you’re eager to rest,” he added. “But it would be efficient for you to first attend my rooms to allow the physician to consider both of our wounds in the same visit.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

The phrase grated on him, so woodenly was it spoken. Leaving the two other guards in the corridor to flank the doorway, Cassius strode into his own suite. He found two servants bustling about in his rooms, unpacking items from his trip.

“You can resume that task later,” he told them.

At once, they bowed and withdrew, casting curious looks at Flora on the way out. Cassius debated with himself for a moment, then strode forward and closed the door behind the servants with a snap. Privacy took precedence over propriety on this occasion.

He paused with his hand on the door, wondering why the room suddenly felt more full than it had before the servants had left. Flora’s presence filled his awareness, robbing the space of its usual sense of sanctuary.

Slowly, he turned, leaning back against the door and folding his arms as he took in

the sight of Flora standing ramrod straight, her eyes fixed on a space above his head.

They were genuinely alone, for the first time since that initial night at the inn.

Chapter

Nine

Flora kept her mind focused on one task—preventing her eyes from straying to Prince Cassius’s face.

“What’s wrong, Flora?” His words, unexpectedly gentle, instantly broke her resolve. Her eyes flew to him before she forced them away again.

“Nothing, Your Highness.”

He ignored her words. “You’re distressed.”

“No, Your Highness.”

“Angry, then? Come on Flora, communicate with me.” The prince was beginning to sound exasperated.

“I don’t know what you wish me to communicate, Your Highness,” Flora replied.

Prince Cassius made a noise of irritation in his throat. “Enough, Flora. Don’t you remember that I’ve given you leave to speak freely whenever we’re alone? In case you haven’t noticed, we’re alone.”

“I did notice, Your Highness,” she said, struggling to keep her eyes fixed on the wall. “But it’s not my place to speak freely. Now that we’ve returned to Crandell, the need

for me to respect your position has increased. ”

“I don’t know why,” the prince said. “I’m no more or less a prince here than I was on the road. But none of that explains why you feel angry to me.”

She frowned, her eyes moving reluctantly to his. What did he mean that she felt angry?

“Did the conversation with my father distress you?” the prince guessed.

Try as she might, Flora couldn’t keep her spirit at bay completely. “Not at all, Your Highness,” she said pleasantly. “In fact, I enjoy being spoken of as though I’m not in the room.”

Prince Cassius pressed his lips together in a thin line. “My father is not in the habit of considering the feelings of guards and servants. You must understand that as king—”

“I understand perfectly,” said Flora, cutting him off in a fine display of the free speaking he’d encouraged. “And I know of no reason why I would expect His Majesty to consider my feelings in how he spoke of me. He knows nothing of me, after all.”

The prince frowned, still not understanding. “So where is the source of the offense?”

“There is none, Your Highness,” Flora said. “It would be presumptuous of me to claim offense.”

“Flora.” A note had entered the prince’s voice that she hadn’t heard before.

“Yes, Your Highness?” she asked evenly.

“Enough of whatever this is,” he said, his voice stern. “Give me a plain answer.”

“You want a plain answer?”

It had been a long day—no, week—and Flora’s immediate future was uncertain at best. She was tired, she was hungry, her shoulder felt like it was on fire, and the worst of it was that, having no composure left, she couldn’t retreat to privacy. She had to stay within reach of the prince at all times, and somehow do so without falling apart in front of him. She met his eyes, her own full of angry fire.

“To give a plain answer, it was not His Majesty’s words or manner that bothered me. It was yours.”

“Mine?” The prince seemed genuinely startled.

“But it would be out of place for me to complain,” she said tartly. “Given I am nothing but a gift offered to you by the Siquilians.”

“I only meant—” he tried, but she cut him off yet again.

“I know what you meant,” she said acidly. “But what you said made me sound like some kind of concubine.”

“No one thought that,” the prince protested, unfolding his arms and pushing off from the door.

“But they will,” she said. “You know they will, and you also know that there’s nothing either you or I can do to stop it.”

Prince Cassius didn’t answer, which was as good as an acknowledgment as far as Flora was concerned.

“I’m here because I was forced to accompany you through the completely illegal exercise of compulsion magic by a member of your delegation. I came unresisting because I didn’t wish to cause Princess Miriam or Prince Theodore distress when they were powerless to prevent my captivity.”

She saw that the word captivity startled the prince, but she didn’t back down. That was what it was, plain and simple.

“My consideration shouldn’t be confused for acquiescence. I wish to promote peace on the Peninsula, and to that end I am committed to your protection. But I’m not your servant, and I’m not in the employ of your king. ”

She paused for a moment, trying to control her breathing. It would serve no one for her to truly lose her temper.

“I know this situation isn’t of your choosing, either, Your Highness,” she said. “I don’t blame you for it. But given we’re both to be subjected to the inconvenience of me being often in the room when I shouldn’t be, I would be grateful if you tried to limit the indignity I must suffer in being used by you as a prop to manipulate your father.”

The prince stared at her for a long moment. The silence was so loaded that Flora began to doubt herself. He’d said to speak freely, but he likely hadn’t meant that freely. She was debating whether she should have continued playing the role of a dutiful guard—whether she could still reclaim that role if she wound back her words quickly enough—when the prince started into motion.

He walked toward her with deliberate steps. The receiving room was spacious, but somehow he filled it. When he stopped, Flora found herself looking up into his face, the distance between them small enough that she couldn’t have raised a hand without brushing the brocaded fabric of his jacket.

“You’re right,” he said, his voice lower than usual, and his tone more intense. “You are not a servant, and you are certainly no one’s concubine. I apologize for causing you embarrassment.”

Flora swallowed. His apology had taken her completely by surprise, and she could think of no response. Not that he was waiting for one.

“I’m wise enough to know that I can’t stop the rumor mill,” he went on. “But if anyone offers you insult, you may be assured they will have to deal with me.”

“That’s...”

Flora’s voice came out hoarse, and she had to clear her throat before trying again. He was just so near. That commanding presence of his was having a strangely befuddling effect on her senses.

“That’s not necessary, Your Highness. I can tolerate gossip. It’s nothing new for me.”

“That may be,” said the prince, unyielding. “But I don’t intend to tolerate it on your behalf.”

“Please.” Flora was beginning to feel distressed. She regretted her outburst. “You’re going to have plenty to contend with. You don’t need to worry about me. I don’t expect consideration from the king, or from anyone else. It only bothered me because it was you, and I...”

She trailed off, feeling a traitorous flush. She was letting herself get flustered and saying too much. The prince didn’t need to hear how comfortable she’d felt with him during their journey. He didn’t need to hear that she’d felt dangerously as though she could trust him. Lord Armand was right—she was becoming too informal.

“And you what?” Prince Cassius prompted.

Was it her imagination that he’d somehow shifted even closer?

“I value your good opinion,” Flora said, speaking more evenly. “A guard can’t fulfill his duty without the trust of his charge.”

“I think you mean her duty,” the prince said, with the hint of a smile.

It was an inconveniently appealing expression on him.

“If you value my opinion, I’m honored,” he went on. “It’s high praise from someone who claims that the opinions of others shouldn’t have the power to damage her pride in herself.”

Flora blinked at him, too astonished that he’d remembered and quoted her words to think of a response. She didn’t have time to respond anyway, as a sharp rap at the door caused her to jump backward, feeling guilty.

“Enter.”

Prince Cassius didn’t seem to be similarly discomposed. He raised an eyebrow, apparently amused at her momentary panic, before turning to face the man who was now framed in the doorway.

“Ah yes, thank you for attending,” he said, speaking more warmly to the physician than Flora had heard him speak to anyone else at the castle.

“What trouble have you gotten yourself into this time, Your Highness?” The man spoke with a fatherly air that set Flora at ease. “I thought you’d outgrown your tendency to mischief.”

The prince grinned boyishly. “Almost. I wasn’t doing anything reckless on this occasion. I was merely shot with an arrow.”

“Indeed?” the physician said politely. “Merely that, was it?”

Prince Cassius’s grin broadened as he allowed himself to be waved onto an armchair. The physician put down a bag on a nearby table and rummaged through it. He cast an eye in Flora’s direction, his gaze lingering on her bandage.

“And who is this young lady? Another patient for me?”

“I’m afraid so,” the prince said. “Flora is a temporary addition to my personal guard, and she also ran afoul of an arrow during the same incident.”

The physician clucked his tongue. “Ah well, you young people will be taking risks.”

Flora met Prince Cassius’s eyes, finding it suddenly difficult to keep a straight face. The prince wasn’t even trying.

“We can’t help ourselves, you know,” he told the physician. “We become too bored with the ways of our elders.”

The older man chuckled as he examined Prince Cassius’s wound. “This is nothing drastic,” he informed the prince. “I’ll just re-dress it, and as long as you keep it clean and rest it for the next week or two, I don’t anticipate any problems.”

“Thank you,” Prince Cassius told him. “Now I just need to prevent my mother from hearing about it, and all will be well.”

“Ah.” The physician paused in the act of winding a clean bandage around the wound. “Her Majesty is aware. I was on my way to attend her when I received your message.

It was necessary for me to send an errand boy to inform her of the reason for my delay.”

Prince Cassius let out a low, pained groan. “That’s unfortunate. But I suppose she was bound to hear about it sooner or later.”

“You oughtn’t to keep secrets from your mother, Your Highness,” said the physician, the scolding tone just what he might use if the prince had been a young boy. “No good will come of it.”

“Easy for you to say,” sighed Prince Cassius.

Flora was bursting to know why he didn’t want his mother to learn of his injury, but she didn’t ask. The physician’s manner was comforting, but she was still no longer alone with the prince, and she therefore didn’t consider herself to have permission to speak freely.

The physician turned to her, his smile friendly. “Now, young lady, whom am I treating?”

“My name is Flora,” she told him. “I’m a companion and personal guard to Princess Miriam of Siqua, but I’ve been assigned to aid in Prince Cassius’s protection until their betrothal is formalized.”

The physician raised an eyebrow, his curious expression carrying no judgment. “An unconventional choice for a guard, aren’t you?”

“Don’t be deceived by appearances,” the prince commented from where he was still reclined in the armchair. “She might not look strong, but her specialty is magic craft. She can do a great deal with only a small amount of movement. And she has all these sneaky tricks for generating it, like flicking her hair around and such. None of my

other guards can do that.”

Flora stared at him. He’d noticed that? He’d been paying closer attention to her than she’d realized.

“Well, women do have their tricks,” the physician said. “There’s no denying that.” He sent Flora a wink. “I’ve been the king’s personal physician for twenty years, and I’m pretty well-respected around here. But my wife has me wrapped around her little finger nonetheless.”

Flora grinned, warming to the easygoing older man. His attention returned to the mangled skin he’d just exposed, and he clucked his tongue.

“This injury is worse than the prince’s, I’m afraid. And it’s been dressed much more poorly.”

“What do you mean?” Prince Cassius straightened in his seat, frowning. “The same medic dressed both at the time of the attack.”

The physician shook his head. “Well, he didn’t give equal care to both. This was a slapdash job, which is all backward considering it’s the worse injury. And I’m to understand you then rode horseback for hours? I’m guessing it’s been stinging something fierce.”

“It’s been sore,” Flora acknowledged.

From the way the prince’s frown deepened, she suspected he knew she was understating it.

“I’m afraid it’s going to hurt a lot more, because I need to properly clean it then completely re-dress it,” the physician said apologetically. “Otherwise we risk

infection.”

“I can handle it,” Flora assured him. “Do whatever you need to do.”

“Isn’t there anything you can give her to help with the pain?” The prince was on his feet now. He approached them with a concerned expression.

“There’s a magical remedy that can numb the effect of pain on the mind a little bit,” the physician said. “It’s meddling with the mind, though, so it requires the patient’s informed consent. I don’t usually offer it because most patients don’t have the requisite understanding of the magic involved to be able to properly consent.” He considered Flora. “But if you’re trained in magic craft...”

She nodded. “I know the enchantment you’re talking about. I never learned to do it myself, but I comprehend its function.”

“And its risks?” he pressed.

She nodded, narrowing her eyes. “I don’t know you very well, to be letting you meddle with my mind. I’ve heard the horror stories.”

There was a twinkle in the physician’s eyes. “I’d reassure you that I’m trustworthy, but that won’t carry much weight given the whole point is you don’t know me.”

“I’d trust him with my life, for what it’s worth,” the prince interjected. “In fact, I’ve needed to on occasion. I used to get myself into some serious scrapes.”

Flora considered him with interest. “I wouldn’t have guessed that you were a reckless youth, Your Highness.”

“I was bored,” he told her with a faint smile. “Once I was given official

responsibilities, everything changed.” There was the hint of a sigh in his voice. “Well, it had to change, didn’t it?”

“Hm.” Flora was skeptical. “You’re telling me that you’re less bored now that your time is filled with state duties?”

He laughed, acknowledging her point. “Why are we talking about me? We’re supposed to be cleaning your wound.”

She grimaced. “You’re right. Go on, then,” she told the physician. “Meddle with my mind.”

“Very well.” He cocked an eyebrow at the prince. “I trust you’ll be my witness of informed consent being given, Your Highness?”

“Of course,” said Prince Cassius.

The doctor nodded, rubbing his hands together in a businesslike way.

Flora could sense the Dust puffing out in tiny clouds from the movement. That wasn’t the magic he would use for the mind-altering enchantment, however. The type of movement was relevant to what the magic would comfortably do. He would need something more complex, not to mention something that would create more motion. Simple movement of limbs generated very little power.

She watched curiously as he pulled a scarf from his bag. It was silken and light, its colors a mesmerizing blend of red to purple to blue.

“That’s lovely,” she commented.

He smiled. “I’m glad you think so. It’s designed to occupy the mind. It’s part of the

enchantment, in a sense.” He narrowed his eyes as he stared across the prince’s receiving room. “It’s not as windy a day as I’d like, but I think it’ll do. Come, let’s move closer to the window. ”

They did so, the prince striding in front to helpfully open the window.

“Thank you, Your Highness.” The physician stuck his head out, assessing the breeze.

Curious herself, Flora put an arm out the window. They were on the third level of the castle, and a decent little wind swirled around her hand. She could feel its movement, the Dust slipping through her fingers and out of reach. The movement of the wind itself was harnessable, of course. But working directly with the elements was a skill that required not only a lot of finesse, but incredible energy. It was what made Lord Armand’s rain-based enchantment so impressive. Infuriating, heavy-handed, illegal...but impressive.

The physician likely didn’t have that level of skill in magic craft. And even if he did, he couldn’t afford to expend that kind of energy, not when he was about to perform a medical procedure.

“This will help,” the older man said cheerfully, seizing a hook-ended pole that was used for opening and closing high windows.

He knotted the scarf securely around it, then poked it out of the window. As the other two watched in interest, he flicked the pole neatly, so that the whole scarf poured out of the window and caught the wind. It danced before their eyes, weaving back and forth in a complicated rhythm that the physician had clearly used many times before.

It was effective. Flora could feel the Dust streaming out from the scarf in a complex spiral. The physician hadn’t yet taken hold of it, but he no doubt would.

“Focus your gaze on the scarf,” he told her. “Try to let the colors and the rhythm captivate your mind. Do you know how to let me in? ”

She nodded nervously. She understood in theory. In the same way that taking control of the magic created by someone else’s movement required wrestling it from them in a battle of magical will—and cost more energy than you would gain from the use of that magic—using magic to affect someone else’s mind required incredible strength and energy...unless they willingly let you in.

She was more practiced at keeping people out, but she was willing to try.

She stared at the scarf, letting her mind drift with its flapping waves and her magical sense be saturated with awareness of the Dust stirred by its movement. She could feel when the physician formed that magic into an enchantment, but she tried not to focus on the mechanics of it. Instead she stilled her thoughts in an effort to dismantle the natural protections that usually kept her mind safe from magical attack.

If her body was as easily shielded, she wouldn’t be in this mess, because the tether would never have happened.

The thought floated through her awareness as she felt the physician’s magic enter her mind. It was an alarming sensation. Trust was most definitely required in order to let anyone alter her awareness this way. She hoped she hadn’t erred in agreeing.

With the thought came a vicious jab of pain in her shoulder. She drew in a sharp breath between her teeth. She hadn’t even realized the physician had started his work.

“Are you all right, Flora?” The prince’s concerned voice entered her awareness.

“Try to lower your defenses, child.” The physician’s soft instruction made her realize that she’d unintentionally begun to fight his intervention again.

How could she help being tense? She knew nothing of the physician—in reality, it was the prince she was choosing to trust.

For some reason the thought calmed her. She tried to focus her attention away from the pain and back toward relaxing the will that wanted so badly to fight against outside interference. Slowly, she felt her mind go fuzzy again, the pain receding to a dull ache as the physician continued to poke and pull.

Flora's eyes drifted from the fluttering scarf on the pole—which she realized the physician was now holding between his knees so as to free his hands—to Prince Cassius's face.

“I hope I'm not wrong to trust you,” she said, studying his features pensively. “I have a lot of reasons not to want strangers poking around in my mind.”

“Do you?” The prince's eyebrows went up. “How about you tell me one?”

The physician cleared his throat. “I don't think so, Your Highness. You're here to ensure I don't take liberties with the access this young lady has given me to her mind. Part of my responsibility is not to allow you to do so either.”

“Sorry.” The prince sent the physician a smile that looked more boyish than usual. “You're right, of course.”

Flora took the words in, but her mind didn't make much sense of them. She was sure it was nothing she need worry about.

“That jacket really is very fancy,” she commented instead. “I admired it the whole way from Squal, when I was riding behind you.” She reached out a finger to trace a pattern of the brocade on the prince's sleeve. His arm jerked slightly under the contact, and she pulled her eyes to his face. “Your face is fancy, too,” she informed

him. “Are you aware that your eyes match the jacket perfectly? I suppose that’s why you chose it.”

“I...uh...” The prince’s expression suggested he was holding in laughter, but that didn’t seem right. She hadn’t said anything funny. She caught the physician sending the prince a warning look, which didn’t make sense either.

Something swirled in her mind, some awareness of something she should have said already but hadn’t. She grasped at it, her mind retreating further from the pain that sometimes breached her pleasant fuzziness of thought.

“I’m sorry,” she said suddenly. “That’s what I needed to say.”

“What?” The prince looked startled. “What could you have to be sorry for?”

She gestured toward his fresh bandage. “I let you get shot with an arrow. I’m supposed to be your bodyguard, and I didn’t protect you.”

“Flora.” His voice was gentler. “It’s not your job to—”

“Yes it is.” She shook her head in contradiction. “And I could have done more. But I was cowardly. I kept remembering about the other man falling from the tree. I didn’t want to get involved. I let the other guards do it all, and you got shot because of it.” She nodded to where the physician was still working. “I deserve this.”

The prince’s face was suddenly right in front of hers. He must have knelt down, but she hadn’t seen him do it. She blinked a few times, struggling to focus properly.

“Flora.” His voice was firm. “You do not deserve any of this. You’ve been treated abominably, and you’ve taken it with incredible grace. My injury isn’t your fault. None of this mess is.”

“Hm.” She flicked her fingers through the hair that sat almost on his shoulders. “I know it’s a mess, but I’m not entirely sorry. I should regret the delay to the betrothal, but I’m not sure I do.”

“I think you shouldn’t talk, miss,” the physician cut in suddenly. For some reason his tone was laced with discomfort and sympathy. “Just rest while I finish up. I’m almost done.”

“All right,” Flora said compliantly. She certainly felt weary.

“There we go,” the man said shortly afterward, leaning back and smiling at her. “You need to rest it, but you’ll be just fine.”

“Thank you,” she said, moving the shoulder gingerly. The numbness of her mind was starting to recede, much to her regret.

“My pleasure, child,” the physician said. He seemed to take in her grimace, because he added, “And yes, I’m afraid it’s going to hurt. I’ve let the pain-softening magic die away. I could set it up to last longer, but I’m expected elsewhere.” He cleared his throat. “And it would be irresponsible to leave you under its effects if I can’t stay to monitor you.”

“It’s no problem,” Flora said quickly. Her mind was becoming clearer by the second. The pain was uncomfortable, but much better than it had been before the physician’s attentions. Her words were sharper now as well. She felt like she was emerging from underwater. “Truly, thank you. It feels much better.”

“Yes, thank you,” the prince said, smiling at the physician.

Bizarrely, the older man responded by considering Prince Cassius with an expression of caution. “I thought you said you weren’t in any trouble, Your Highness.” The

murmur was low enough that Flora barely caught it .

The prince sent the physician a sharp look, but made no reply. A moment later, the physician had left, leaving Flora trying to put the pieces together.

Her mind went back over the last half an hour, unease seeping in.

“I felt very strange with his magic in my mind,” she said slowly. “Did I...did I say something I shouldn’t have?”

Prince Cassius shook his head, his expression unconvincing. “Of course not.” He ran a hand over the sleeve of his jacket, his voice becoming brisk. “It’s past time for you to be shown to your suite. It’s a mirror image of this one, but smaller. It should be almost entirely within twenty feet. Perhaps if we’re each at the far end of our suites—the respective bedchambers—we might push it. But the set up should allow us some measure of privacy.”

“That would be welcome,” Flora said faintly. “I assume you’ll be attending dinner soon, and of course I’ll need to accompany you. Do you think I can rest until then?”

“Of course,” he said quickly. “I’ll show you where to go.”

She waved her good hand. “No need, Your Highness. I remember.”

She’d almost reached the doorway to the corridor when the door flew open, and a silk-clad figure sailed dramatically into the room.

“Cassius! My only child! What’s this I hear about an attack on your life?”

The prince’s sigh was so soft, Flora almost missed it.

“I’m fine, Mother. No harm done.”

“No harm done?” the queen protested. “With that ghastly bandage on your arm?”

Flora stared, stunned, as the older woman made a gesture of despair. Behind her in the corridor, several well-dressed women of a similar age loitered. Flora’s eyes flitted to the prince, to find him watching her. With the slightest flick of the head, he seemed to say, go while you can .

It was all the dismissal she needed. She slipped past the newcomer and out the door. The queen didn’t seem to have even remarked her presence, but the women accompanying her certainly did. Flora kept her expression stoic as she walked past them, noting how they stared at her and whispered behind their hands.

So the gossip began.

Chapter

Ten

The most that could be said for his mother's visit was that it was brief. Cassius knew better than to take her overblown protestations over his safety to heart. Her main concern was the disruption to plans for the lavish betrothal ball that was supposed to be held within the week.

When she swept out as gracefully as she'd swept in—taking her usual posse with her—he collapsed onto an armchair and ran a hand through his hair.

The gesture drew his thoughts to Flora. More specifically, to the way she'd played with his hair while her mind was affected by the physician's magic. It had felt so casual and comfortable. So...intimate.

Danger lay that way.

He knew she hadn't meant anything by it. She hadn't even understood what she was doing. He would be wise to banish the whole interaction from his mind, difficult as that might be. It was his own fault for pressing her to avail herself of the pain relief, but he'd been unable to stand the idea of watching her go through more pain on account of his injury.

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Weariness tugged at him, heavier than it should have been. Why did it feel like the exhaustion was pulling at him from outside his body? From the direction of Flora's room. He tried again to focus on the presence

of the tether. It was faint and constant, and as he gave it his attention, the sensation of weariness increased dramatically.

It was Flora who was overwhelmed. Flora whose exhaustion he was feeling.

Cassius sat up with a snapping movement. The physician might have a point when he accused Cassius of being in trouble. The distance tether was bad enough. A direct link into Flora's emotions was a level of connection he couldn't afford. He was imagining it, nothing more.

If only he could climb straight into bed. But his mother wouldn't accept either arduous travel or arrow wound as justification for missing the spectacle that was a court dinner.

His personal preparations were frustrating and time-consuming. He had to ring for a servant to assist him thanks to his injury. But eventually, he strode out into the corridor, ready to face the ordeal.

He found Flora waiting for him, standing attentively in the small stretch of wall between the door to his receiving room and the door to hers. She'd been quick, presumably with no one to help her. He'd given her no guidance on how to dress, but she'd chosen perfectly. She'd replaced the ripped and bloodied purple tunic with one of a deep gray, similar to the color worn by the guards outside Cassius's door. It would allow her to blend into the stone of the castle wall. Other than that change, she was dressed similarly to before, with attire that had the appearance of a uniform but didn't actually bear the Siqualian insignia. She had a short blade at her side—again, proclaiming herself a guard—but wore no other weapons, appropriately for a dinner.

He studied her, disregarding the scrutiny he could feel from the guards outside his door. To Cassius's irritation, the departing servant who'd assisted him gawked openly at Flora as he scurried down the hallway.

As for Flora, she held herself rigid, but she looked weary. He had the impression that with the slightest release, her form would sag at once.

“How are you faring?” he asked her. “You’ll be glad to sleep, I’m sure.”

“I am fully ready for duty, Your Highness.” Nothing could be more formal than her tone and posture.

Cassius frowned at her stiffness. The more she tried to present the image of being nothing but a guard, the more absurd the whole situation seemed. They’d already shared far too much to classify their relationship as that of a prince and a random member of his guard. And he would never employ a female guard, anyway. It was one thing for Princess Miriam to have one. It would be inappropriate for Cassius for multiple reasons.

One of those reasons was the protection of her own safety and dignity, of course. The thought was uppermost on his mind as he saw how openly one of his guards was staring at her. The man’s eyes were a little too calculating as they raked over her form, and Cassius cleared his throat.

The guard’s gaze flew to him, then straight ahead, discomfited at being caught staring. Cassius sighed. The task of protecting Flora’s honor was one he didn’t want on his plate. But no one else was going to do it .

Deciding it wasn’t the time to argue with Flora about the appropriate level of informality between them, Cassius strode off in the direction of the largest dining hall. There was no way his mother would have opted for an intimate dinner when he’d just arrived back from a journey. Any excuse for fanfare was enough for the queen.

His two guards—and Flora—followed close behind him as he traversed the familiar

hallways and entered the dining hall. As expected, half the court seemed to be gathered, everyone determined to greet him and exclaim over the shocking attempt on his life.

Over and over he clarified that there was no evidence to suggest the involvement of either Torrens or Siquel in the incident, but he might as well have saved his breath. Gossip had spread quickly, and most people seemed to have already decided that the attackers were Torrenese, whether official or not.

He suspected he knew who'd directed the rumors that way. His gaze was dark as it rested on Sir Keavling, speaking casually with a duke on the far side of the room.

Only once in the tedious process of greeting other diners did he find himself at the boundary of the tether. Flora had been shadowing him very skillfully, staying in range yet out of the way, but the dining hall was crowded, and sometimes it was difficult for her to avoid being separated from him in the crush.

The tug around his middle felt so much like someone had slid slim arms around his waist and pulled that he spun around, ready to confront whoever was grabbing him. There was no one there, of course, and his eyes found Flora across the room as he realized what had actually happened. Her expression was tense as she tried to navigate the crowd while remaining inconspicuous. Cassius took a few steps in her direction to make her task easier. Casting a glance around the room, he felt a jolt of unease as he found Sir Keavling's eyes on him. The cursed man rarely missed anything.

The king took his seat soon after the awkward moment, and Cassius was relieved to be able to settle in one place. He approached Flora before he sat down.

"You'll be able to find a free seat near the end of that table," he told her, casting his glance subtly toward one of the long tables that were rapidly filling with courtiers. "It

should be close enough.”

“No, Your Highness,” she said quickly. “I will take my place with the other guards, of course.”

He made an impatient noise in his throat. “Don’t be ridiculous. You must be starving.”

“I’ll eat later with the guards and servants,” she said.

He gave her a look. “And how will you do that, exactly? Shall I come along and stand in the doorway of the guards’ dining area? That will make for a jolly mood for all of the men trying to enjoy a meal during their time off duty.”

She bit her lip, clearly not having thought it through.

“Perhaps I can take some leftovers to my room.”

“Or perhaps you can eat now with the rest of us.”

It was entertaining to see the battle on her face as she struggled to maintain her guard-like air through the frustration that wanted to seep out.

“I’m a guard, Your Highness. Look at how I’m dressed. I cannot sit down to share a meal with the nobles of your father’s court.”

She had a point there. In fact, their conversation was starting to attract attention. When Flora moved smoothly toward the line of guards standing at the wall behind the king’s table, Cassius gave up trying to stop her .

He took his seat beside his father, unable to banish his awareness of Flora standing

five feet behind him. It was unfortunate that she would be on her feet the entire meal when she was injured and exhausted. He would need to retire early for her sake.

He soon decided that leaving the dinner would be no great trial. He was outraged when his father waved Sir Keavling into the seat beside Cassius. Sitting beside the royal family? How had the man risen so much in influence during Cassius's brief absence?

"What do you think, Sir Keavling?" the king asked as a platter of roasted pheasant was cleared from in front of him. "Will the Siquarians attempt to withdraw from the alliance? Or use it to their advantage?"

"Only time will tell, Your Majesty," the advisor said. "For my part, I find it inconceivable that any kingdom on the Peninsula would hesitate to form an alliance with Carrack. Siquar's king would certainly be foolish to turn down the opportunity to ally himself with our kingdom before one of the kingdoms of the continent seeks to do so. Such a situation would make an alliance with Siquar unnecessary."

"No kingdom of the continent has ever offered us an alliance," Cassius said flatly. "On the contrary, their borders are closed to us. It is mere fancy to speak as if there is a competition for our favor between the continent and the Peninsula."

"You are ill informed, Cassius," King Aelius said. "You forget that Sir Keavling has spent considerable time on the continent. He has information of great interest."

The advisor inclined his head. "I know all too well how those on the continent look down on the region of the Peninsula. And regrettably the kingdom of Carrack is often classed with the less developed kingdoms to its south. But I can assure you that when those on the continent learn the true state of Carrack, they will hold my own view that it should always have been considered part of the continent, not the Peninsula."

“That’s nonsense,” Cassius said impatiently.

“My son.” The king spoke lightly, but Cassius recognized the rebuke in his father’s tone. “Even your short time in the southern kingdoms appears to have had an effect if you speak so rudely to a guest at our table.”

He chuckled to mark the comment as a joke, and everyone in the immediate vicinity laughed politely. But the mood was tense. The constant talk of potential conflict with the neighboring kingdoms was bound to create uncertainty. Suspicion toward the other kingdoms was nothing new. The suggestion of impending conflict was.

“Are we to speak of nothing but matters of state?” the queen scolded from the king’s other side. “Surely there are more pleasant topics.”

“My apologies, Mother.” Cassius pushed his chair back. “I am poor company tonight. Whatever other effect my time in the southern kingdoms may have had, the travel has succeeded in wearying me. I will retire.”

His mother didn’t look pleased, but Cassius was past caring. His head was throbbing, his whole body ached, and if he stayed much longer, he’d say something to Sir Keavling that he’d regret.

He took his leave and moved toward the door, Flora walking discreetly behind him. With a gesture, he sent back the guards who were following. Those on the night shift would be in position outside his rooms by now. He didn’t need a pair flanking him through the corridors.

As he neared the door, he heard Sir Keavling’s voice .

“His Highness desires to see the best in others, even the southern kingdoms. It is an admirable quality.”

Cassius scowled, but didn't turn around. In a few more strides, he was out of the dining hall and drawing in a long, steadying breath.

"I don't like him. At all."

Flora's frank declaration caught him by surprise, and the ghost of a laugh rose to his lips as he turned to look at her.

"That makes two of us." He kept his voice low. "Come on." He gestured to her. "Walk beside me." He saw her hesitate, and he pinned her with a long-suffering look. "Please don't be difficult, I'm too tired to argue with you."

She seemed to be fighting a smile as she moved forward to walk beside him as instructed. The halls became quiet as they moved away from the dining hall, where the activity of the castle was focused.

"Who is Sir Keavling?" Flora asked. "And why is he spouting nonsense about the history of our region?"

Cassius made an appreciative noise, glad once again of his request that she speak freely when they were alone. Her plain speaking was a balm to his soul.

"I don't know the why, but I doubt it's an innocuous reason. As for who he is, he's a recent addition to my father's court. Some months ago, he came into a title when his uncle died."

"His uncle was a nobleman?"

"Yes," said Cassius. "His holdings are far from the capital, and he'd never come to court that I'm aware of. His sister was Sir Keavling's mother. She married an untitled man from the continent and her family cut her off, with the result that Sir Keavling

spent a considerable part of his life outside of the Peninsula. As a result, my father takes his perspective on matters pertaining to the continent very seriously. He has rapidly become a favored advisor on certain matters.”

“I suppose he was able to prove his claim to the title?” Flora asked.

Cassius nodded. “He had extensive documentation. He speaks as though he is Carrackian, but...”

She frowned. “But you question his loyalty. I don’t blame you. Still, whichever side of the border he’s from, he has no excuse not to know the history of the region. The division between the Peninsula and the kingdoms of the continent has nothing to do with how primitive or otherwise our kingdoms are. It has to do with the war we fought two centuries ago over sea-based trade routes. Carrack is considered part of the Peninsula because it allied itself with the Peninsula kingdoms and fought alongside them, rather than with the continent.”

Cassius nodded his agreement. “And I have no doubt Sir Keavling knows it. If the inhabitants of the continent consider us barbarians, it’s an attitude they’ve adopted because it conveniently matches their existing prejudice. The question isn’t whether he knows he’s speaking nonsense. It’s what his purpose is in rewriting the history.”

Flora shook her head. “I think I’m beginning to understand why you were eager to seal an alliance with Siquel.” She sent him a quick glance. “Why you are eager, I mean.”

Cassius gave no reply, uncomfortable with his own conflicting thoughts on the marriage alliance he’d fought so hard to orchestrate. They’d reached the royal wing, and would soon be within earshot of the guards standing at attention outside his door.

“Good night, Flora. I hope you can get the rest your body must be craving. ”

She gave him a smile that was a hint rueful. “Put it this way—I’m glad I’m not on duty overnight, because I have a feeling I’m going to sleep like the dead until sunrise.”

Cassius chuckled, his own thoughts echoing the sentiment. He lingered to watch her slip through the doorway into her receiving room, then turned to one of his guards.

“Go to the kitchens at once, and request that a hearty meal be brought to her room as soon as possible.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” The guard bowed, then moved off.

Cassius cast one more glance at Flora’s door before closing himself into the sanctuary of his own suite at last.

Cassius woke to a servant pulling back his curtains. Sunlight streamed in, showing it was well past dawn. It wasn’t like him to sleep late. He hadn’t so much as dreamed all night long.

“Good morning, Your Highness.” His personal valet bustled into the room, his expression proclaiming his disapproval of the prince’s slovenly morning. “Are you aware that there is a young woman dressed as a guard standing outside your door?”

Cassius sat upright, clearing the last fog of sleep from his mind with a flick of his hair. Flora was already up? Had anyone thought to feed her? Probably not, as they would assume she had the option of eating in the servants’ hall.

“I wonder how long she’s been standing there,” he said aloud, feeling guilty over his extended sleep.

“I asked the same question, Your Highness, and she said she has been in position for

two hours.” The valet sniffed.

Cassius felt irritation swirl. His valet was painfully loyal, but it wasn’t the first time he’d had reason to resent the older man’s tendency toward being interfering.

“Why were you interrogating her?” he demanded, as he pushed himself out of bed and crossed the room.

The valet’s arched eyebrow conveyed a perfect blend of confusion and offense.

“Interrogating, Your Highness? Certainly not. It’s my role to see to your needs and your wellbeing. I would consider myself remiss if I failed to disperse loiterers about your door.”

Cassius didn’t reply immediately. A servant had just filled his basin with clear, warm water, and he took his time in washing his face, then splashing some over his bare chest. He would have preferred to have time for a full wash, but he didn’t want Flora to be kept waiting even longer.

“It is not your role to oversee my guards,” he said at last, his voice muffled by the towel with which he was vigorously rubbing his face and hair. “I’ll thank you to stay out of it.”

The valet looked wounded, a demeanor that didn’t move Cassius at all.

“Very well, Your Highness. I did not mean to interfere.” He held up a thick, embroidered tunic to Cassius to test the effect, his eyes sliding surreptitiously to Cassius’s face as he did so. “But you say she is part of your guard? She didn’t wear the uniform.”

Cassius was having none of his playacting. He pushed the tunic aside with a shake of

his head.

“Not that one, it’s too stiff. I’m thinking of going to the training yard. Something I can breathe in.” He nodded approval of the second option offered. “And as for the woman outside my door, I find it inconceivable that you haven’t heard through the rumor mill that she’s a Siqualian guard assigned temporarily to my protection as part of the pending alliance.”

The valet’s tone was reproachful now. “Your Highness, I would not so demean myself as to listen to the gossip of the serving girls.”

One such girl threw him a dirty look behind his back as she bustled through, clearing out the water basin. Cassius felt his lips twitch.

“And if I had heard such a tale,” the valet went on, “I would have found it difficult to believe, Your Highness. A young woman as a member of the royal guard?”

“It’s unusual,” Cassius acknowledged. “Perhaps less so given she usually serves as part of Princess Miriam’s protection.”

“But now she is on your protection, Your Highness,” protested the valet. “It is highly improper.”

Cassius stared silently at the older man until he saw the valet begin to wilt. Satisfied that the valet knew the subject was not to be broached with him again, he moved on.

“I wish to speak to my father as soon as I’ve eaten,” he said, striding out into his receiving room in pursuit of a pleasant smell.

“I will discover His Majesty’s whereabouts and send a messenger to alert you,” the valet said.

Cassius nodded, surveying with an approving eye the spread that had been left on a small table. It was more than enough for two.

“Excellent,” he said brightly. He nodded to a servant who was stoking the fire. “Please send in my new guard. She will not have eaten.”

“Your Highness!” the valet protested as the servant hurried to obey. “Surely you will not have her eat with you in your own rooms. A common guard? ”

“You may go now,” Cassius told him coolly, ignoring the comment.

Arguing with his valet in Flora’s defense would do her no favors. But if he’d been inclined to be open, he would have told the other man that whatever she was, Flora wasn’t a common guard. In fact, the puzzle of what exactly her life had entailed had been playing on Cassius’s mind. She’d perfected the manner of a guard, but it didn’t take much observation to see that she was playing a part.

It hadn’t occurred to Cassius until later how much she’d omitted from her tale about her studies with Princess Miriam. He’d assumed she’d been born into poverty before she managed to win herself a place at the school thanks to her talent and determination. But on reflection, he realized she’d never actually said that.

And the more time he spent with her, the less he was satisfied that her superior education was explanation enough for the subtle dignity of her manner.

In particular, her outburst the day before came to mind, when she’d called him to account for speaking of her like an item to be bandied about between crowns. Her manner of speaking, even the words she’d used...they didn’t belong to a common guard. Or a common anything. She’d been so poised, even in her anger, and she’d spoken to him like an equal.

He supposed that should have offended him. The secret, guilty truth was that it had exhilarated him. He'd been mesmerized, and he'd never felt more drawn to her. She had a fire inside her that a casual observer would never expect from her stoic exterior.

All this ran through his mind as the door opened and Flora walked in, the valet casting her a last disapproving look as he left the suite .

“You called for me, Your Highness?” Flora said.

Speaking of stoic exteriors...

“Yes, come in,” he said, gesturing to the pair of armchairs placed on either side of the small table.

Flora moved to stand behind one of them. Very guard-like.

“I gather you’ve been in the corridor for hours already,” Cassius said. “You must be hungry.”

“My needs are met, Your Highness,” she said uncomfortably.

Cassius sighed. She was impossible.

“That will be all, thank you,” he told the few servants still milling around. They didn’t seem to be actually doing anything. Anything beyond gathering gossip, that was.

Reluctantly, they all curtsied or bowed and left. Cassius strode to the door, closing it firmly behind the last of them.

“You know,” said Flora, before he’d even turned around, “sending out the servants

will only fuel rumors of something untoward. Better to let them overhear than speculate on what they're kept from hearing."

Cassius paused, grinning foolishly at the door for a moment before schooling his features and turning around.

"There would be nothing for them to overhear if I let them stay. You force my hand because you refuse to speak to me like a human being unless we're alone."

She looked unimpressed, but it only buoyed his mood more. She was natural when it was just the two of them— only when it was just the two of them—and he was rapidly becoming very attached to her natural self.

"I can't eat with you, Your Highness," she said. "It wouldn't be appropriate."

"It also wouldn't be appropriate for you to collapse from hunger," Cassius pointed out, dropping into one of the armchairs.

"No fear of that." She eyed him and, to his surprise, her expression softened. "Thank you for sending food to my room last night. That was very considerate."

"Yes, my magnanimity knows no bounds," he said wryly. "I am the toast of the land for my generosity in not forcing those under my care to starve to death."

"You're being dramatic, Your Highness," she said reprovingly. "And it doesn't suit one of your station."

He laughed. She said it very seriously, but he wasn't fooled.

"Come on Flora," he said comfortably, leaning forward to help himself to a pastry. "They're gossiping about us anyway, we may as well take the opportunity to eat

something while we discuss our situation.”

She unwound at last, moving around the chair and lowering herself into it with a feline sort of grace.

“I am hungry,” she acknowledged. “In spite of the dinner last night.”

“Yes, most of us aim to eat something every day,” Cassius told her innocently.

She ignored him, swiping the solitary spoon that had been provided for him and helping herself to a boiled egg.

“Please feel free to use my spoon,” he said politely.

“I will.” She was becoming more brazen by the minute, and he loved it. “I’ll take it as payment for your insistence on exposing me to the gossip of your servants.”

“There’s always gossip in a castle,” he informed her. “No matter how circumspect you are, it won’t stop people talking about the oddity of a female guard. I wouldn’t let it bother you.”

“That’s easy for you to say, Your Highness.” She sounded disgruntled. “I doubt you would suffer any real consequences—social or otherwise—even if everyone concluded you were having a dalliance with a servant. I’m the one who would be sanctioned.”

“You’ve told me in no uncertain terms that you’re not my servant,” Cassius reminded her. “And I’m wounded at your suggestion that princes think nothing of engaging in such... dalliances. Is that how the Siqualian princes conduct themselves?”

“I wasn’t commenting on the Siqualian princes,” said Flora with dignity.

“I could be excused for taking that evasive reply as confirmation,” Cassius pointed out.

That drew a chuckle from her. “I’d best give a plain answer, then. Prince Theodore, absolutely not. He’s far too honorable for anything clandestine. Prince Xavier...” She considered it. “He’d want you to think so. He certainly behaves with a great deal of license. But to tell the truth, in the year I’ve been serving Princess Miriam, I don’t think I’ve ever actually witnessed him doing anything scandalous. Or at least, not of that nature. He just wants to appear that way, I think.”

Cassius raised an eyebrow. “Why would he want to appear scandalous?”

“Oh, well...” A mischievous smile quirked Flora’s lips, the expression outrageously endearing. “I can understand it, but I’m not surprised you don’t. Not everyone wears the role of royalty as comfortably and capably as you do.”

Cassius blinked. “Was that...a compliment? It’s hard to tell with you.”

Flora just smiled more widely as she moved on to a piece of fruit. “Even princes need a bit of mystery in their lives. ”

“Especially princes,” he informed her. “My days are drearily predictable.” He thought about it. “At least, until I met you. I can’t say that being magically tethered to strangers is part of my usual predictable routine.”

“Or mine,” Flora agreed. “Which brings us back to the topic you claimed you wanted to discuss.”

“Yes.” Cassius leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “My first priority must be to seal this alliance. You’re intelligent enough to make sense of what you’ve already seen, so I’ll speak openly. I expect to have my work cut out for me to

convince my father that an alliance to strengthen the Peninsula will still serve our interests best.”

“Yes, he’s clearly partial to Sir Keavling’s views on the matter,” Flora said thoughtfully. “You won’t get anywhere with that man in the room.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Cassius nodded, pleased. “I’m awaiting a messenger to tell me where my father can be found, and I intend to speak to him first thing.”

She glanced out the window. “I think we’ve gone past first thing some time ago.”

A knock at the door halted the conversation.

“Enter,” Cassius called.

The door opened to reveal a young boy, who bobbed a bow before informing them that the king was in his study.

“Perfect,” said Cassius, standing. As soon as the messenger was gone, he added, “That’s a sufficiently small space. You’ll be able to stand outside the room without pushing the boundary of the tether. I’ll have most success with my father if we’re alone.”

Flora nodded, straightening her garment—a jerkin that extended into a skirt of sorts—and hurrying to stand behind him. Cassius paused, strangely reluctant to open the door and end their tete-a-tete. Giving in to an impulse, he reached out toward Flora, using feather-light fingers to touch the lumpy section of sleeve that indicated a bandage was hidden underneath.

“How’s your shoulder?” he asked. His voice sounded husky to his own ears, and he hoped she didn’t notice it as his hand hovered over her arm.

She didn't immediately answer, her eyes startled as they met his. She bit her lip, and it was all he could do not to follow the movement with his eyes.

"It's much better today, Your Highness," she said, the softness of her voice at odds with her guard persona.

He nodded, pulling his hand back. "You're not in pain?"

"Not significantly," she said. "Are you?"

"No." Pain was the last thing on his mind at that moment. "Come on," he said, wrenching his gaze away from her and seizing the door handle. He needed a clear head to manage his father.

Chapter

Eleven

Two guards were waiting outside the door, and Cassius dismissed one, not eager to have a trio trailing after him through the castle. Flora kept pace with the other guard, giving no sign that she noticed the whispers or the stares she was eliciting from everyone they passed.

Cassius noticed, though. And it bothered him much more than it should. He had to work hard not to glare darkly at every gawker. He knew the best way to take the power out of gossip was to ignore it. But it was strangely hard where Flora was concerned.

When he reached the king's study, he knocked once before letting himself in. The king was seated behind an enormous walnut desk, his brow heavy as he scanned a letter.

"Father." Cassius closed the door behind him, relieved to find the king alone.

"Cassius." King Aelius looked up, his expression not relaxing at the sight of his son.

"What brings you here? "

"I want to speak to you about the alliance," said Cassius, not one to beat about the bush.

"Did I not tell you yesterday that we must await the investigation?" his father said.

“Yes.” Cassius lowered himself into a chair. “But while the investigation proceeds, can we not continue preparations? Surely we wish to be ready to move forward quickly once we have all the information. I think we should communicate with the Squalian crown, at the very least. I don’t even know for certain whether the delegation made it back to Sindon without further mishap.”

“They did.” His father laid the parchment flat against the surface of the desk. “This letter is from the Squalian king.”

“What does he say?” Cassius leaned forward.

“It’s a strange letter.” King Aelius’s frown deepened. “I’m not sure I like his tone.”

“What do you mean?” Cassius asked cautiously. “Does he offer us insult? Does he believe we are behind the attack on his daughter?”

“It’s possible.” The king cast his eyes over the letter again. “He doesn’t say as much. But nor does he take responsibility for failing to prevent the attack from occurring on his soil.”

“What does he say of the alliance?” Cassius asked tensely. If Squal was determined to withdraw from it, it would be near impossible to fulfill the terms of Lord Armand’s cursed tether.

“He expresses willingness to continue negotiations,” the king said dismissively. “But I can see no urgency to do so.”

“Father, you must reconsider.” Cassius placed his fist on the polished wooden surface of the desk. “I believe it is of utmost importance to secure this alliance, and that we would be wise to act swiftly.”

“The weaker party to an alliance might scramble to secure it,” King Aelius said coolly. “We have no need to do so.”

“But, Father—”

“I found his mention of your new guard to be strange,” the king interrupted him.

The words effectively stopped Cassius’s protests. “Strange in what way?” he asked uneasily.

“He says he trusts the princess’s bodyguard is being well cared for, as befits a member of the Squalian royal guard. But then he says that he does not object to the transfer becoming permanent as a gesture of their willingness to continue working toward an alliance.” The king looked up at him. “As though we have need of the services of some scrawny Squalian girl!”

A trickle of something unpleasant went over Cassius. It took him a moment to realize it was sympathy for Flora. It seemed the Squalian king was perfectly ready to cast her aside. Perhaps he was not as convinced of the wisdom of a female bodyguard as Flora had made it sound.

The memory of her face as she accused him of speaking of her like an item to be gifted between kings flashed before his eyes.

“It’s a very strange sequence. One moment seeming to threaten retribution if the girl is harmed, the next telling us to keep her.” The king laid the letter flat again. “I begin to think the Squalian king is a halfwit, which does not endear me to the idea of an alliance with him.”

“He’s not a halfwit, Father,” said Cassius wearily. “I suspect he wants to simultaneously use her position with his royal guard as an opportunity to demand

Sigual be respected, and offer her services as a sign of goodwill in place of the apology he should have given regarding the attack on his territory.”

The king considered this. “You’re likely right,” he announced, his tone scornful.

Cassius shifted in his seat. He wasn’t right, he was making excuses he thought his father would believe. Much more likely the veiled threat about treating Flora well had been a reference by the Sigualian king to the fact that she was forcibly taken from the delegation without their consent. But Cassius had no intention of telling his father that. He could only be grateful that the Sigualian king hadn’t said it in as many words. The other king would have assumed that King Aelius knew about the tether, and would therefore have expected King Aelius to recognize the unspoken disapproval of it. It seemed Prince Theodore had taken Cassius’s hint and persuaded his father not to cause a diplomatic incident over the bodyguard’s unfortunate situation.

A situation which, in itself, the Sigualian king clearly didn’t care about. Not if he was ready to give Flora to the Carrackian crown.

Cassius winced. As if she was a gift to be given, just like she’d so furiously claimed.

“Is that all it says?” Cassius asked.

“More or less,” said his father. “Just other irrelevancies, like the princess sending her regards to her old guard.”

“I will inform her of it,” Cassius said.

“You will not.” His father frowned at him. “You are not an errand boy to the Sigualian king, Cassius, and I shouldn’t need to remind you of it.”

Cassius was saved the need to reply by a knock on the door. The reprieve was anything but welcome, however, when the new arrival turned out to be Sir Keavling.

“Ah, come in.” The king waved his new favorite in. “Your arrival is timely. We were just discussing the matter of the alliance.”

“Indeed, Your Majesty?” Sir Keavling bowed to both the king and the prince. “Is there new information regarding the attackers?”

“Not yet,” said the king.

“Ah.”

Sir Keavling’s politely furrowed brow perfectly conveyed his confusion at the topic being open in those circumstances. It was masterful, Cassius reflected bitterly.

He angled his body away from the nobleman, deciding to ignore him. “The preparations I mentioned, Father.”

“I told you, Cassius.” The king sounded impatient. “We have no need for haste. It is the Squalians who stand to lose if the alliance does not proceed.”

Cassius fought his frustration, struggling to think of a way to reach his father.

Again, his response was forestalled by Sir Keavling.

“I see your new bodyguard is on duty again, Your Highness.” The man’s voice sounded faintly amused. “She has remarkable stamina, it seems. Does she never have time off duty?”

“What’s that?” The king frowned at Cassius. “You mean to say she’s shadowing you

again today? Cassius, you cannot trust her. I know you don't think her capable of—"

"Capability has nothing to do with it," Cassius said impatiently. "She's not a spy, Father, she's a guard. And she's not always on duty, that's absurd. She wasn't on duty overnight."

"Wasn't she? "

The remark from Sir Keavling was said so politely, Cassius was sure his father wouldn't have picked up the insinuation. But he did, and it enraged him. He wouldn't be surprised to learn that Sir Keavling had been asking questions of the servants.

He longed to confront the nobleman as to why he was so interested in Flora, but focusing on the issue was the opposite of what he wanted. He stood.

"You will notify me as soon as there's any update regarding the investigation?"

"Naturally," his father said, not looking up.

Irritated, Cassius strode from the study, moving blindly down the corridor in a familiar route. He was most of the way to the training yard when he realized the problem. He came to a halt, turning to face the two guards keeping pace with him.

One of whom was Flora. A young woman. He could hardly take her to the training yard. And yet he couldn't go without her. It was all very frustrating.

"Is all well, Your Highness?" the other guard asked.

"Of course," said Cassius. "I'm in the mood for a bout or two at the training yard. Your services won't be needed there. You're both dismissed."

While the guard acknowledged the order and turned away, Flora stared at Cassius in silent consternation. At a pointed look from him, she started to walk away as well.

“Oh, Flora.” Cassius spoke as if the thought had just occurred to him. “Some instructions were received for you from the Siqualian king.”

The other guard checked his steps for only a moment before realizing that the words weren’t addressed to him and continuing on his way. Once he was out of hearing range, Flora spoke .

“I thought you’d forgotten. You’re a convincing actor, Your Highness.”

He grunted, but he was prevented from replying by the appearance of a pair of servants around the nearest corner. It would look strange if they stood there talking.

“Come on,” he said quietly, beginning to walk again.

Flora kept pace, her voice low as well. “I assume the talk of instructions from Siqua was just an excuse?”

“Actually, my father did receive a letter from the Siqualian king,” Cassius said. “Princess Miriam sends you her regards.”

“Poor Mim.” Flora smiled ruefully. “She’ll be worrying, and probably blaming herself.” She glanced up at him. “Was that all?”

“Well...” Cassius hesitated. He wasn’t eager to tell her the other message relating to her. But she had the right to know. “There was more. The king expressed his willingness for your change in role to become permanent.”

Flora cast a quick look up at him, and he caught a moment of distress before she

shuttered her features.

“I see,” she said quietly. “It seems my time serving as Princess Miriam’s bodyguard has come to an end.”

“I’m sorry,” Cassius said.

“Don’t be.” Flora shook her head. “I knew my time was limited once the betrothal was proposed. It’s not as though I have any reason to keep working in the castle in Sindon once Mim is gone, and it was always unlikely that I’d be allowed to continue guarding her once she—but wait!” Her eyes lit up. “That was before we knew anything of Carrack. Now I’ve met you, and you’ve seen me in action. It will be your decision, I suppose, once Miriam is your wife. Will you let me guard her once she lives here?”

Cassius’s heart jolted uncomfortably at the hopeful look in her eyes. He hated to disappoint her, but the answer rose unyielding to his lips.

“No.”

She looked hurt, and there was unfortunately no way to soften his response.

“I wouldn’t support that, I’m sorry.”

Flora lowered her gaze quickly. “I understand, Your Highness,” she said quietly.

Do you, though?

“Shall I take up a position at the far end of the yard?” Flora went on, her voice still formal. “Will that give you enough space for what you need?”

“What?” Cassius looked up, surprised to realize they were at the training yard. He hadn’t consciously decided to continue there after using it as a story to dismiss the other guard—his feet had simply carried him the rest of the way. “No, it’s all right. I don’t need to train now. I don’t wish to subject you to the training yard.”

“Subject me?” She raised an eyebrow. “In Sindon, I trained daily with the other guards.”

“Did you?” He was surprised. He’d imagined her spending all her time with the princess.

“You thought I was a lady-in-waiting pretending to be a guard,” she said, the accusation uncomfortably accurate. “You’re mistaken.”

She stalked away from him, her offended manner endearing, if he could ignore the real hurt he’d seen in her eyes.

Cassius followed, not eager to test the bounds of the tether. Flora took up a position on one side of the yard, leaving him free to speak with the senior guard currently supervising those in training. A large weapons chest stood between them, a separation Cassius was glad of. The constancy of their proximity was intense.

The trouble was, he remained painfully aware of her, which was why it was difficult to concentrate on his conversation with the head guard when he heard someone hail her.

“Hello, love. So you’re the new guard on the prince’s detail, are you?”

“That’s right.” Her cool response carried through the hush that had fallen over the nearest combatants.

“Fancy a bout with me, sweetheart?”

The man’s tone had Cassius frowning, and he turned around to see who was speaking so freely. The guard who’d approached Flora was young, shirtless, and handsome, curse him. It was clear from his manner that he hadn’t noticed the prince’s presence.

“A tempting offer.” As usual, Flora was perfectly in control of the situation.

“Go on, love.” The guard winked. “See if you can touch me with those pretty hands of yours.”

Cassius moved forward, his brow stormy, but Flora replied before he could intervene.

“If I must.” She blinked innocently. “You’ll go easy on me though, won’t you?”

The man’s grin broadened. “No promises.”

“Weapons?” Flora had become businesslike.

“Ladies first, of course,” her challenger said courteously.

His interest caught, Cassius melted back as Flora strode to the weapons chest. She considered her options with a serious expression before her face suddenly brightened. She dove in and emerged with a pair of matching poles, not much longer than her forearms, each ending in a long, slim paddle. They were carved of wood, and each paddle seemed to be one seamless piece.

Murmurs and chuckles went around the now-sizable crowd of onlookers. They grew in volume as the man opted to retain the sword with which he’d been fighting before.

“Don’t do it,” one of the watchers said. “Where’s the victory in besting a waif like

that? Leave the lass alone.”

“Nah, if she wants to prance around as a guard, she better fight like a guard,” another retorted.

Flora ignored both of them, her focus on her opponent. “Ready?”

“For you, love? Any time.” The man winked again.

The gesture wasn’t even complete when Flora sprang into action. She leaped not toward the guard but away, her hands moving like lightning as she swung the poles into motion. They were soon a blur, the paddles creating a breeze that lifted her hair from her shoulders and sent it streaming behind her.

“I’m not frightened of a bit of wood,” the guard told her with a grin, brandishing his sword.

“I’m glad.” Flora’s voice was tight with concentration, but her tone remained casual. “Fear isn’t much of an asset for a guard.”

The guard lunged, his sword flicking forward in a move that Cassius had to admit was neat sword work. He thought for certain it would get through Flora’s defenses, but he was wrong. She ducked down, one leg sliding out to the side to enable her to get low, as she thrust her head in the opposite direction, dodging the incoming blade.

Contrary to his expectation, she didn’t lose her balance—in fact, she was able to keep one paddle spinning, the hand holding it pushed out in the same direction as her head. The other pole was still, but as the guard lunged past her, she flicked it outward, catching him in the midriff.

He let out a grunt, but pivoted neatly, bearing down on the still-crouching girl.

Flora wasn't done. Before Cassius's eyes, a column of dirt rose from the ground between the fighters, shooting straight into the guard's eyes. He let out a curse and floundered. It was only for a moment, but it was all Flora needed. She sprang to her feet, sliding one pole expertly through her belt and plunging her free arm toward the other guard, all while the second paddle kept spinning. Cassius watched in horror as Flora closed her hand around the naked blade in the other man's hand and yanked it free with a strength that made no sense for her lean frame. She threw it behind her with a clatter as she took a stride forward and, almost too quickly for Cassius to see, hooked one foot behind the stranger's ankle.

Next thing Cassius knew, the guard was flat on his back on the dirt of the training yard, Flora's knee on his bare chest and the small blade from her side at his throat.

He stared in shock as she threw away her remaining pole, then flicked him—hard—right in the Adam's apple.

“And that,” she told him sweetly, as he made a choking sound, “is all the touch you will get from these pretty hands of mine.”

With the words, she was gone from her opponent, who was still staring stupidly upward. There was a hushed silence in the yard, into which his now-raspy voice issued.

“I think I'm in love.”

Roars of laughter went up from the onlookers, followed swiftly by cheers and whistles for Flora's performance. Cassius took a step toward her, but in a moment, he could barely see her as every guard in the area mobbed her .

“All right, all right.” He waded in, the men falling back as they realized who was approaching. “Leave her alone, she's supposed to be on duty.”

“My apologies, Your Highness,” Flora said quickly. “I thought you said my services wouldn’t be required while you trained.”

“You’re not in trouble,” he told her, exasperated. He seized her hand, lifting it and turning it over twice, confused to see unbroken skin. “But the blade...”

“Oh, I was using a cushioning enchantment,” she told him cheerfully. “Very temporary and very localized...but highly effective. Those paddles stir up a formidable amount of power.” She shot a cheeky grin at the guard she’d bested, who’d picked himself up by now. “When wielded skillfully, that is.”

The man’s eyes were shining as he approached. Flora held up a hand.

“No, I’m not going again, so—”

“No, you misunderstand,” he told her. “I don’t want to fight you again. I can acknowledge myself bested. Do you want to dine with—”

“No.” The refusal came from Cassius this time, his tone unyielding. “Absolutely not. Get back to your training.” He scowled. “And fire and blood, man, put on a shirt.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

The guard cast one more regretful look at Flora before complying. Cassius dismissed him from his mind, his focus on Flora.

“Point taken,” he told her. “You’re not a lady-in-waiting masquerading as a guard.”

Her gaze was a little too innocent. “I wasn’t trying to prove anything to you, Your Highness. Just defending my good name.”

He eyed her. “I suppose I can’t train here now, can I? We’re already too much of a spectacle.”

“No, of course you can, Your Highness,” she said, repentant. “I’ll stay out of trouble, I promise.” She sent him that swift, open smile he found so endearing. “I’ll be glad to. Fighting with magic takes a lot of energy.” She rolled her shoulder. “And I don’t think that constitutes resting my shoulder as the physician instructed. I got a little carried away.”

Concern flared within Cassius, but she didn’t give him a chance to express it.

“Speaking of which.” She frowned. “You shouldn’t be sparring either, should you?”

“I’m fine,” he said dismissively. “I suppose I should take you back to your room to rest, but—”

“But you need to let out some tension after what I assume was a very unproductive conversation with your father.” She nodded sagely. “I understand, Your Highness. I’m in no hurry to retire.”

She moved dutifully back to the wall, leaving him free to strip off his jacket and take up a sword. He was quick to accept the first guard willing to challenge him, and within moments he was in position. Normally he would remove his shirt, which after all wasn’t designed for fighting, but he didn’t feel he could do so with Flora watching. Particularly not after admonishing the other guard for it.

He and the guard were satisfyingly well-matched, and the bout lasted a solid ten minutes. Cassius took a few blows—at one point his opponent unknowingly slammed a shoulder into Cassius’s still-healing arm—but he gave as good as he got, and the man never managed to land a hit with the sword. Cassius didn’t mind the light bruises that would likely form. They were worth it for the release that came from a solid

bout, especially after so long on the road without the opportunity to practice.

He was donning his jacket again when he overheard the murmur of a man behind him.

“She’s very attached to His Highness, isn’t she?”

Irritation flared in Cassius, and he spun around to find two guards watching Flora with interest.

“The guard in question is no more attached to me than any other guard I’ve ever had. It is the role of a member of my personal guard to stick close to me when on duty.”

“I meant no offense, Your Highness,” the guard said quickly. “I’ve just never seen a guard react that way to you sparring with us here in the training yard.”

Cassius frowned, his gaze traveling to Flora. “What do you mean? React what way?”

“She sort of lived the whole bout with you, Your Highness,” the guard said. “She winced every time you took a hit.”

Something icy trickled through Cassius’s awareness with the words. He was a fool! Unforgivably so. Without another word, he strode over to Flora.

“Come on,” he said curtly, his throat strangely tight as he left the training yard, Flora in his wake. He walked all the way to his rooms in tense silence, stopping only once he’d ushered her inside and followed her.

“Is all well, Your Highness?” she asked, sounding alarmed.

“No, all isn’t well.” He rounded on her. “That was inexcusable.”

“I apologize.” She held herself stiffly, not sounding repentant. “I didn’t mean to offend you. I’ve just found that words aren’t very effective in silencing those who would seek to exploit the fact that I’m a woman. Showing them why they should take me seriously is much more useful.”

“What?” It took him a moment to comprehend. “No, I don’t care about you sparring. I’m talking about me, not you! Tell me the truth—did you feel pain every time I took a hit in my bout?”

“Oh.” She bit her lip, clearly not wanting to answer.

“Flora.” He could hear the warning in his voice.

So could she, apparently, because she deflated. “Yes, I did.”

Which meant she’d felt twice the pain he had. He closed his eyes for a moment. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“In front of all those guards?” He opened his eyes again to see her staring at him. “I thought you wanted to keep our tether quiet.”

“You could have sent me a signal, or...” Cassius trailed off, putting a hand to his forehead. “Why am I blaming you? It’s not your fault.” He looked her in the eye, wondering why it was suddenly hard to find his voice. “I’m sorry, Flora. Because I was only sparring and knew I was in no true danger, I didn’t even think about whether it would activate that part of the tether.”

He walked forward, putting a hand on her good shoulder. “The arrow wound, the exhaustion of using magic to fight, then this...you must be in a great deal of pain.”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle,” she said gruffly.

Cassius felt a growl escape his throat without his permission. “I don’t like it,” he said. “I don’t care what you can handle. You shouldn’t have to.”

She just gazed back at him out of eyes that he realized up close looked as weary as he felt. Cassius’s mind spun out of control as the events at the training yard raced through his memory. That fool guard, the offensive way he’d spoken to Flora...the admiration in his eyes when she’d put him in his place.

It had been impressive, but looking into Flora’s eyes now, Cassius hated all of it. It wasn’t what he wanted for Flora. He was convinced it wasn’t what she wanted for herself. He didn’t see a guard who was born to fight. He saw someone who was running, although from what he wasn’t sure. Someone who was playing a part, and suffering constantly for Cassius’s entrance into her charade.

The desire to protect her from the world rose up inside him, as overpowering as it was pointless. He was the chief cause of her griefs and hurts. And he couldn’t see a way to extricate them from their tangle. His father was stubbornly blocking the only way out.

And, more frighteningly, he found his own interest waning in sealing the alliance and freeing them both. He gave his head a shake. He couldn’t think like that. He had to move forward. For his sake, for Flora’s...for the stability of the Peninsula.

“You should go,” he said, the words gruff and abrupt. “Rest in your room until lunch.”

Flora didn’t ask any questions. She pulled away from him and practically fled the room, leaving Cassius alone with thoughts more tumultuous than he could ever remember them being in his life.

Chapter

Twelve

For the next couple of days after the training yard incident, Flora avoided private conversation with Prince Cassius. It wasn't difficult, given the prince was clearly doing the same. She could see even from twenty feet away that Prince Cassius was getting nowhere with his father, meaning that the alliance—and their liberation—remained out of reach.

Prince Cassius spent a lot of time in his suite or in his study, both locations that allowed Flora to wait at leisure in an adjoining room. She wasn't sorry for the rest. She'd downplayed it when the prince asked, but the pain of the sparring matches—particularly the setback to her injured shoulder—had been significant.

Of course she accompanied the prince to all meals, and during any meetings he had, she wasn't far away. It was unnerving on these occasions to note how often Sir Keavling was watching her. He seemed very fixated on her presence.

He wasn't the only one, and being an oddity was starting to wear on her. She'd thought her role conspicuous in Sindon. It seemed the idea of a female guard was even more shocking in Crandell. And she wasn't behaving like a normal guard. She was always with the prince, never off duty except when sleeping, consulting with him alone in his rooms...none of it was normal.

The attention wasn't all negative, which was a challenge in itself. The guard whom she'd bested in the training yard often hung around, starry-eyed, as if hoping to catch

her when she came off duty. He was out of luck, because she never came off duty. Once she could have sworn the prince noticed him on the way to lunch, then lingered over his meal for an inordinately long time. Flora had to stay with him in the large dining hall rather than standing alone outside his study door, as she would have done had he followed his usual routine.

Not that she minded. She was very happy to avoid her admirer, and any other curious onlookers from the general castle guard. She couldn't avoid the other members of the prince's personal guard, but she was growing used to their snide remarks and cold shoulders. She barely noticed the pointed looks they exchanged anytime the prince took her into a room with him when his guards would normally stand outside the door. The speculation was exactly what she'd expected, and she'd decided from the start not to let it bother her.

If she'd wanted to avoid controversy and spend her life courting the respect of people she had no respect for, she would have stayed home, not run away to school and certainly not become a female guard to Siqua's princess.

No, the guards she could handle. It was the ire of the domestic staff that threw her off balance. She quickly realized that she was deeply resented by most of the maids who tended to the prince's suite. By her observation, Prince Cassius didn't even notice them coming and going, but they certainly noticed him. None of them went so far as to make advances, but she could see at a glance that the serious, handsome heir to the throne was the object not so much of admiration as of obsession for most of the girls who worked in the castle.

She could understand why. She was no stranger to handsome princes, and she could say with authority that not all of them had Cassius's air. He was confident without being cocky, masterful without being domineering. And she had reason to know that he felt more concern for those under his care than many royals would.

He had perhaps a touch too much pride—for example her life would be easier if he hadn't felt the need to hide the tether from his father and the court. But she had sympathy for his position. He was clearly born to lead, and she could sense his frustration as his father increasingly treated him like an inconvenient interruption rather than a true heir. To admit to the tangle he'd fallen into would hardly gain him more respect. Flora guessed that he hadn't been sidelined so much before Sir Keavling came along and started saying exactly what the king wanted to hear, thereby forcing Cassius to be the unpopular voice of reason. Even Lord Armand, who at first had seemed such a promising support, had been lying low, trying to avoid notice in a way that Flora was sure was uncharacteristic. She wasn't sorry not to have to interact with him, but it meant that all the strain of trying to steer the king away from a bad course fell on the prince.

Cassius handled it with grace, but Flora had the luxury of much more insight into his private moments than anyone else in the castle. She could see the mortification he tried to hide when his father turned away from him at meals, or spoke over his very reasonable comments. She respected him for his restraint, even while she vicariously felt the awkward sting of his embarrassment. Sometimes it was almost as though she was literally feeling his emotions, so potently could she discern them.

Somehow, she doubted these complexities of Cassius's personality featured in the assessment of the maids. They simply basked in how close their roles brought them to the prince. And they resented her for sailing in and inserting herself even closer. And given guards and servants were in a similar class, they felt free to express their displeasure to her face, albeit in subtle ways.

It was something she'd never faced in her previous role. The maids didn't care if she was close to Princess Miriam. In fact, she and the princess's chief maid had been very friendly.

Her solitary attempt to be friendly to a Carrackian maid was disastrous enough to

bring down the ire of the castle's housekeeper.

It was three days after the training yard incident, and it all began when Flora encountered a familiar maid cleaning her own room. The girl was using a feather duster on the mantel, and Flora paused to greet her.

“Stirring up quite a lot of Dust there,” she said, giving her friendliest grin. “Impressive. And handy.”

The girl stared—or rather, glared—back. The silence stretched on for an uncomfortably long time before the maid gathered her duster and moved into the next room.

“Mim's maid loved that joke,” she murmured to no one in particular as she moved out into the corridor.

Flora had forgotten all about the encounter when, three hours later, she was standing outside the prince's door while he endured another visit from his mother. Flora had been privy to some previous ones. At first, she'd been encouraged that Queen Horatia seemed supportive of the alliance, but she quickly realized the queen was mainly interested in the lavish betrothal ball she would be called upon to host. She'd been bitterly disappointed when her son had returned without a bride.

If Flora hadn't known better, she would have thought the queen frivolous and foolish. But she was too familiar with the intricacies of castle life to be deceived by appearances. She quickly grasped that while Queen Horatia intentionally kept out of matters of state, she ran the social aspects of the royal family's life with absolute control. Her frustration at the cancelation of the ball wasn't about missing the chance for revelry. It was about the impact on various nuanced social situations tied to the ball. Perhaps she'd promised a hopeful matron that she would orchestrate her daughter opening the dancing with a wealthy, single duke, or perhaps she intended to

use the highly public event to corner someone into agreeing to something they wouldn't in private.

Flora had seen it all before, and although she had little interest in that world, she understood how a certain type of royal might live and die by these events.

Queen Horatia had adapted quickly to the change in circumstances and had somehow convinced the king that the safe return of their son was cause enough for a gala. The queen was fully occupied in its preparation, and Flora was soon as thoroughly bored of hearing about it as she could tell Cassius was. She was glad to wait out the current interview in the hallway, although she heard occasional catches. The queen hadn't succeeded in pushing the door all the way closed behind her. Not that it mattered—the interview was tedious, not sensitive. She could almost feel Cassius's impatience and frustration through the mostly closed door.

About an hour after Queen Horatia disappeared into her son's suite, a formidable woman approached the door. Flora had only seen her once or twice before, but the castle's housekeeper was an important enough person to be instantly recognizable. The middle-aged woman ignored the other guard, her sharp gaze focused on Flora.

"You are the prince's new female guard, I assume?" The woman's greeting wasn't friendly.

"That's right," said Flora cautiously.

The housekeeper lifted her head and studied Flora down her nose. "And I understand that you have a complaint regarding the cleanliness of your rooms?"

"What?" Flora frowned in confusion. "No, not at all."

"If your accommodations are not sufficiently grand for your needs, young lady, you

can easily be moved elsewhere. There are many available rooms in the servants' wing." She cast a look at Flora's companion. "Or with the guards—no place for a respectable young lady, but I daresay you would manage."

Flora disregarded the insult, too bewildered by the housekeeper's attack. Naturally the servants were resentful that a guard had been given a lavish guest suite. But for the housekeeper herself to come and make an issue of it, Flora must have really gotten under everyone's skin.

"I can assure you, I never dreamed of complaining about my accommodations," Flora said firmly.

The housekeeper narrowed her eyes, and continued as if Flora hadn't spoken. "My staff work tirelessly to keep the royal suites in the highest state of cleanliness, and I won't have them spoken ill of, especially not by a foreigner who doesn't know her station. "

Flora was about to defend herself when she suddenly remembered the earlier interaction. Was it possible the maid hadn't understood her joke?

"I think there's been a misunderstanding," she said. "If you're referring to my comment to the maid in my room earlier, I—"

"Yes, there has been a misunderstanding," the housekeeper cut her off. "You seem to understand yourself to be above the restrictions and responsibilities that apply to the rest of the guards. But you're mistaken. We don't consider guards to be foreign dignitaries, lass, no matter who they work for. So I'll thank you to keep a respectful tongue when—"

"Is there a problem here?"

The prince's smooth voice caused both Flora and the housekeeper to start. Flora hadn't even noticed the conversation ceasing inside the prince's receiving room, and she was very confident the housekeeper hadn't observed the prince's approach. She would never be speaking so freely if she had.

"I beg your pardon, Your Highness." The housekeeper sank into a curtsy. "I apologize for disrupting you."

"How about you apologize for berating my guard?"

Prince Cassius's tone was formidable, and Flora felt a flash of sympathy for the older woman. She felt more sympathy for herself, however, along with a healthy dose of irritation. Did the prince really think that humiliating the staff on her behalf would improve her situation among the servants?

"Your Highness, I was merely following up on a complaint made by this young woman regarding her rooms." There was definite resentment in the housekeeper's voice.

"The guard complained about her rooms?" The queen had appeared behind her son, one thin, sculpted eyebrow raised. "Bold, given the extraordinary degree of distinction she's been shown."

Flora bent her upper body in a respectful bow. "I can assure Your Majesty that there has been a misunderstanding. I have made no complaints regarding my accommodations, and I am fully aware of the undeserved honor I have been shown."

The queen didn't look convinced, but Prince Cassius stepped in.

"I find it inconceivable that Flora would complain about her accommodations."

“Flora?” The queen’s eyebrow seemed to be attempting to meet her hairline.

“Yes, Mother, guards have names,” Prince Cassius said impatiently. “This one’s name is Flora.”

Flora resisted the urge to wave a greeting. It wasn’t the time to be flippant.

“I didn’t complain, Your Highness,” she said instead. “I attempted to make a joke regarding Dust, and I think the maid didn’t understand.”

“It seems a strange matter to joke about,” the queen said coolly. “I am not surprised our housekeeper was offended.”

“I was referring not to literal Dust, Your Majesty,” Flora explained. “I meant power. Magic, you know,” she added, when everyone stared blankly at her.

“I fail to picture how you spoke to the maid about magic and she heard it as a complaint regarding the dust in your room.”

Flora looked helplessly to Cassius. “Well, because there’s dust and then there’s Dust...” she tried .

Understanding blazed into the prince’s eyes. “They refer to magic as Dust in Siquel, don’t they? I remember hearing as much, but I’d forgotten all about it.”

“Do...do you not call it Dust here?” Flora asked.

“Of course not.” The queen’s delicate features perfectly communicated disdain. “Dust? What a boorish term for something of great intricacy and power. Something which, as I understand it, is your only significant skill. Do I take it you are an expert in dust, then?”

Flora was suddenly struggling to keep a straight face as the humor of it all hit her. As titles went, dust expert didn't carry much dignity.

"I never claimed to be an expert, Your Majesty."

"This hardly seems a matter worthy of such fuss," Prince Cassius said with a note of finality. "I have other matters to attend to, Mother, so I'll take my leave of you."

With a respectful incline of his head, he left his mother in the doorway of his suite and strode off down the corridor. Flora and the other guard followed. Out of the prince's range of vision, the man kept shooting her sideways looks that told her the incident would be recounted to the rest of the guards at the earliest opportunity.

The next couple of hours consisted of a report regarding the investigation into the attacks in Siquel and Torrens—containing a frustrating lack of progress—and a meeting with disgruntled members of the Smiths Guild who wished to dispute a new tariff the king had applied. The other guard changed shifts with a fellow, casting a calculating look at Flora when she remained in place.

The new guard wasn't an improvement. They spent an hour standing outside the prince's study while he met with some influential earl. It wasn't a busy corridor, and the other guard took every witness-free opportunity to proposition Flora's attention in a way she found extremely unpleasant.

"Do you think you're above me?" the man asked eventually, growing angry with her expressionless silence. "Don't pretend innocence—we've all seen the way you've led Russell on."

This extremely unjust accusation regarding the guard whom Flora had beaten in the training yard almost broke her resolve to just ignore the man's words.

“Or are you hoping to land a bigger prize?” the man taunted. “You may be some kind of favorite with the prince, but it won’t gain you anything. You’re more likely to be thrown off the guard than—”

The faint sound of a chair scraping within the study met Flora’s ears, and the guard broke off. By the time the door opened, he was standing at attention, no trace in his manner that he’d been speaking a moment earlier.

“Well, Your Highness, I trust you will consider the matter further, because I am not satisfied.”

“I will, My Lord.”

Prince Cassius’s manner strongly suggested he’d been the one to cut the conversation short. Flora could only be grateful. She knew a moment of discomfort as the nobleman strode away, and the prince studied her face for several seconds too long. His searching expression had her concerned that he might have overheard through the thick study door. But it was surely impossible—the other guard had spoken quietly. After another moment, the prince turned away, releasing her from his scrutiny.

They crossed an internal courtyard and emerged near the guards’ area.

“You may return to your captain,” Cassius told the other guard. “I have obligations to Her Majesty for the next hour, and your services won’t be required.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” The guard bowed to the prince, who’d already turned away. After a dark glance at Flora, he marched toward a clump of guards near the entrance to the training yard.

“Why did he look at you like that?”

Cassius's voice had Flora looking up in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"The look that guard gave you as he walked away. It was venomous."

She shuffled uncomfortably. He noticed much more than anyone would guess. "That seems an exaggeration, Your Highness," she said.

Cassius was studying the departed guard as he spoke animatedly to the group of his fellows. A moment later, they all looked over at Flora. When they realized the prince was watching them, they withdrew their gaze, moving quickly into the training yard and out of sight.

"Exaggerating, am I?" Cassius asked her dryly.

Flora shrugged. "I don't think he likes me much, Your Highness. I wouldn't let it bother you."

"Oh, you wouldn't?"

She wasn't fooled by the mild response.

"Did he seem overly interested in you?"

"I..." Flora shifted her weight from one foot to the other, very reluctant to discuss the matter with him. "He showed...some interest."

Cassius frowned. "I should discover whom he was speaking with. I have some reason to think that Sir Keavling's been speaking directly to some of my guards, which is well beyond his authority. If I discover that my own guards are spying on me to report to a nobleman, I'll have them all dishonorably dismissed." His eyes were narrowed in the direction the guards had disappeared. "I'd best find out the identity of

each of those men.”

“It was nothing like that, Your Highness,” Flora said quickly, as the prince took a step in the direction of the training yard. “Truly.”

Cassius paused, eyeing her. “Then why could I feel your discomfort from my study? That’s why I cut the meeting short.”

“What do you mean you could feel my discomfort?” Flora asked, astonished.

“I don’t know,” said Cassius. “I can’t explain it. It’s not the first time I’ve suspected the tether connects us in other ways than we initially realized. I could tell he wasn’t having a friendly chat. I’d better find out more from the source—if he’s been asked to learn information about you, it could be important.”

Cassius’s expression was menacing as he turned toward the training yard again, and Flora reached out to grab his arm. His muscles tightened under her grip, and she released him quickly.

“Don’t ask him about it,” she said. “Please don’t. It will only make things worse for everyone involved.”

He turned to face her, giving her his full attention. “What do you mean? What was he saying?” When she didn’t reply, a warning note entered his voice. “Flora, tell me.”

“He’s just angry because I didn’t respond how he wanted to his...offers,” she blurted out. “That’s all. Nothing to do with Sir Keavling or anyone else.”

“His offers?” The prince’s voice was ominous. “What kind of offers? ”

She didn’t answer, and his brow darkened. Clearly he understood what she wasn’t

saying.

“Is that supposed to reassure me?” he asked, the quiet menace in his voice sending a strange thrill down her spine. “I’ll have him thrown from my guard within the hour.”

“That would be an overreaction,” she assured him. “He wasn’t the first, and he won’t be the last.”

“I’ll have every one of them thrown out.” He still spoke with the calm of submerged anger.

“What will that achieve?” Flora asked him. She hoped the exasperation in her voice hid the foolish satisfaction she took from his eagerness to defend her. “I won’t pretend to enjoy that kind of attention, but your guards don’t know how to react to me. And why would they? Our circumstances are so absurd, they’re a farce.”

She held his gaze in a silent challenge. His eyes remained stormy for a long moment, until suddenly he deflated. With a groan so soft she barely heard it, he ran a hand over his face.

“It’s certainly a mess,” he acknowledged.

“Which is news to neither of us,” she reminded him. “Now, don’t you have an appointment with Her Majesty?”

“Not precisely,” he said, although he turned away from the training yard at last. “I have an appointment for my mother.” Taking in her confused expression, he sighed. “A fitting with the tailor. For tomorrow night’s ball.”

They rounded a corner, and Cassius glanced at her.

“You’ve had a busy morning, haven’t you? You’ve managed to antagonize both the servants and the guards.”

Flora chuckled, the sound a little pained. “I don’t think the courtiers are too fond of me either. I don’t have much success at making friends, do I? ”

“No one knows where you fit,” Cassius said. “You’re not a servant, not a guest, not anyone’s idea of a guard...”

“My position is awkward,” Flora conceded. “But I manage.”

“You manage very well,” Cassius agreed. “But that doesn’t make me feel better about the position you’ve been placed in.”

Flora disregarded this. “Do you really not refer to magic as Dust in Carrack?” she asked.

“No, we don’t,” he said. “I’m not sure I understand the logic of doing so.”

“Oh, you know, it’s because of...” Flora made a sweeping motion with her arm. Cassius just raised an eyebrow, so she added, “Movement stirs up Dust the way a puff of breeze might stir up literal dust. Just then, for example, I could sense the tiny cloud generated by the movement of my arm.”

“I suppose I can see that,” Cassius said doubtfully.

“It’s not just Siqua,” Flora told him. “Torrens and Dernan both use the term as well. I don’t know about Pulau, I suppose.” She named the island kingdom to the west of Torrens.

“Well, we don’t use it in Carrack. We just say power.”

“Hm.” She gave him a look. “Maybe your kingdom isn’t naturally grouped by customs with the rest of the Peninsula after all. Maybe your father and Sir Keavling are right that it should be considered part of the continent.”

Cassius made a disgruntled noise in his throat. “Not you, too.”

Flora grinned at him as they reached their destination. To her surprise, he waved her into the tailor’s room with him.

“Your Highness.” The tailor bowed, his eyes drifting to Flora then brightening. “Ah. This is the young lady in question, I take it?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Cassius confirmed.

Flora looked warily between them.

“Allow me to check your garment first, Your Highness,” the tailor said.

“Certainly.”

Flora tried to melt into the background, averting her eyes as the tailor assisted the prince out of his brocaded jacket and into the most lavishly embellished tunic she’d ever seen. It was a muted yellow color, and small suns were embroidered all over it. Tightly fitted long sleeves showed from underneath, but the tunic itself puffed out over the upper arm. The skirt of it flared out slightly over his leggings, and a thick chain of gold sat around his hips.

It was an excellent effect, and she had a feeling he knew it. He certainly didn’t show any sign of discomfort at her presence.

“That’s almost perfect, Your Highness,” the tailor said, satisfied. “I’ll fix that sleeve

and have it delivered to your rooms.”

“Thank you,” said Cassius, shrugging carelessly out of the garment. He turned to Flora, perfectly at ease with his chest clad only in his tightly fitting undershirt. “Your turn.”

“I don’t think it will suit me as well, Your Highness,” said Flora lightly.

He gave her a look. “Very funny. I’ve ordered a garment for you as well.”

“What for?” she asked, startled.

Cassius was impatient. “For the ball, of course.”

“I’ll fetch it now,” the tailor said brightly, bustling from the room .

Flora spoke quickly into the privacy. “A new garment is unnecessary. I’ll wear my uniform.”

“No, you won’t.” Cassius shook his head. “You haven’t seen the grand ballroom yet, have you? It’s enormous. It would be near impossible for you to stay within the tether and still maintain the role of a guard. If you’re dressed more appropriately for a guest, you can try to blend in with the crowd.”

“Blend in?” Flora stared at him in disbelief. “Weren’t we speaking just before about how I’ve managed to antagonize half the castle? You think they won’t notice that I’m masquerading as a guest?”

“Better than you trailing between the dancers as a guard,” Cassius said.

“Can’t you just stay near the edges of the room?”

“I cannot.” The prince sounded genuinely regretful. “This event is being hosted by my mother, which means it will be beyond my power to avoid dancing with a string of hopeful young daughters of the court.”

The tailor re-entered the room, a young female assistant in tow, and their conversation ceased.

“It’s still very rough,” the man said to Cassius. “Without her exact measurements, I could only do so much. But it will be my top priority to get it done in time.”

“I appreciate it,” the prince said. “I know it’s outside your usual role.”

“It’s my pleasure.” The tailor cast an eye over Flora. “You are lovely, my dear, and very conveniently proportioned.”

“Thank...you?” It was perhaps the most unusual compliment Flora had ever received, and she could see Cassius grinning in the corner of her eye.

The man clicked his fingers, and the woman beside him unfurled a bundle of bright blue fabric she was holding in her hand.

“Come along, miss,” she said. “I’ll help you try it on.” She chivvied Flora into a small adjoining room and gestured for her to remove her garments.

Feeling incredibly vulnerable, Flora did so, eager to receive the dress when the alternative was being uncovered with this stranger. The girl helped slide the gown over Flora’s head and settle it around her, pulling the skirts into position.

“The sleeves are too loose,” she said. “But that can easily be fixed. The bodice isn’t too far off. Come on, then.” She made another chivvying motion.

“Back out there?” Flora asked nervously.

“Of course, miss,” said the assistant with a touch of impatience. “We can’t work in this cramped space.”

More self-conscious than she’d ever been in her life, Flora lifted the skirts and walked back into the tailor’s main room. Cassius’s eyes roved over her new attire before landing on her face. She caught the sparkle in his eyes and had no doubt he could sense her disapproval of the whole exercise.

“It’s a very nice color on you,” he said in mild tones.

Flora sent him as close to a glare as she dared, and saw his lips twitch appreciatively. She responded by flicking the voluminous skirt with unnecessary violence, swiftly harnessing the resulting Dust and using it to cause the prince’s hair to aggressively flatten into his eyes.

His chuckle suggested he was undaunted, although her actions earned Flora a scolding from the assistant who was trying to put pins in the gown.

“Yes, the coloring is excellent,” agreed the tailor blithely. “Let me see these sleeves. They’re not quite right. ”

He seized her shoulders and positioned her in front of a tall looking glass, giving her a clear view of the gown. Its neck formed a V, the edge surrounded by a thick band of embroidery. The bodice was very fitted, with sleeves that puffed out over the top half of her upper arms, then sat close against her skin the rest of the way down. The skirt, however, was fuller than anything she’d worn in years. It spread out around her like...well, like a tent, but that was because the hemming wasn’t done.

“Beautiful.”

The declaration brought her eyes flying to Cassius's. He held her gaze for a moment before clearing his throat and transferring his attention to the tailor.

“Beautiful workmanship. It will do perfectly.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.” The tailor beamed at the praise. “We will have it ready, never fear.”

The assistant hustled Flora back into the adjoining room and allowed her to change back into her normal clothes. Flora felt only marginally less exposed when she and the prince finally left.

“No good will come of this,” she predicted as they made their way down the corridor.

“Of what?” Cassius asked.

“Of dressing me up like a guest of the royal family and setting me loose to mingle with the real courtiers.”

Cassius didn't seem daunted. “Setting you loose? You make it sound like you're a pantherine we've managed to cage, that might eat all the guests if you get free.”

“Only if they provoke me,” Flora said solemnly.

Cassius laughed. “I might actually enjoy the ball if you were to let yourself loose in response to being provoked.”

“You don't expect to enjoy it?” Flora asked curiously .

His eyes were unreadable as he considered her for an unusually long moment before responding.

“I don’t usually.” Something in his deep voice made her heart sputter strangely. “But I have a feeling tomorrow night might be the first time I do.”

Chapter

Thirteen

Cassius straightened the cloak-like robe that sat over his lavish tunic, following the movement in his looking glass. He couldn't remember the last time he'd taken such care with his appearance prior to a ball. He didn't ask himself why this time was different.

He wasn't in the mood for merriment. It had been a frustrating day, with the expected report into the investigation never coming. Even worse, every single time he'd tried to speak to his father, Sir Keavling had somehow been at hand.

Cassius had been watching the nobleman carefully, and there was no doubt he was manipulating the king. But Cassius still couldn't figure out his motivation. From the inquiries Cassius had made into the nobleman's new holdings, which were in the north west of Carrack and not particularly close to the border with the continent, he couldn't see how Sir Keavling would benefit from Carrack reopening trade and diplomatic relations with the kingdoms of the continent. But that didn't reassure him, because he didn't accept the nobleman's claim that he sought to increase the wealth and standing of Carrack more generally. Being ignorant of the nobleman's true motivation made Cassius uneasy.

Equally unsettling was the interest Sir Keavling took in Flora. The man's eyes passed often between Cassius and his so-called bodyguard with a gaze far too shrewd for Cassius's liking. He also suspected that Sir Keavling had been speaking casually with his guards.

It would be inconvenient if the nobleman discovered the tether. Cool logic told Cassius that it would only be disastrous to his pride, but he didn't quite believe it. Every time he saw the other man's eyes resting calculatingly on Flora, he felt his stomach tighten in apprehension. The man was dangerous, he just didn't yet understand the nature of the danger. He did understand, however, that he didn't want Flora in its path.

"Your Highness." His valet appeared behind him in the looking glass, faintly disapproving as always. "You wished me to inform you when it was time."

"Yes," said Cassius, settling the folds of the cloak one more time and checking that his dress sword—a mainly decorative item—was secure at his side. "Thank you."

He strode into his receiving room, the valet at his heels.

"It's not necessary for you to be so punctual, Your Highness," the man told him. "You ought to arrive once all the guests are assembled."

"This is when I wish to arrive," Cassius told him.

He stepped out into the corridor, casting a glance toward Flora's room before moving down the hall in a leisurely manner. For once, she wasn't one of the two guards following in his wake.

He'd given some thought to Flora's protest that she'd never be able to blend in with the other guests. It would be much less conspicuous if they didn't arrive together, but their hands were tied. His best solution was to set a precise time to leave their rooms. He would go first, and she would follow immediately after, hopefully giving the illusion of coincidence.

The tether didn't pull him up short, so she must have been ready at the assigned time.

When he entered the ballroom, his heart sank a little. The room was even more enormous than he remembered. So much larger than twenty feet across. It was going to be an awkward evening.

His eyes caught Lord Armand in the crowd, and narrowed slightly. The nobleman had been very little help in promoting the marriage alliance to the king. The sense of urgency Cassius had managed to create on the road had faded once they were back in Crandell. Lord Armand had likely guessed that Cassius had his own reasons for keeping the tether quiet and wouldn't hurry to expose the nobleman's actions in order to have him punished.

Irritatingly, he was right.

It was good that Cassius had arrived so early. Fewer people were present to take note of the bottleneck Flora's entrance might create. Cassius hovered near the door long enough to hear the expected protest from the master of ceremonies.

"Excuse me, miss, you are..."

"She's here at my invitation," Cassius said carelessly, half turning his head.

"Of course, Your Highness." The master of ceremonies bowed to him, moving back and allowing Flora free passage.

Cassius didn't let his eyes properly latch on to her form, instead turning and making his leisurely way around the edges of the room. If he stopped within twenty feet of one of the overflowing refreshment tables, perhaps Flora might actually get the chance to enjoy herself while he was being subjected to the tedium of a ball.

Flora had the sense to stay back while Cassius greeted his parents, although he could feel her presence as he moved along to claim Lord Armand's attention. He still hadn't

properly looked at her, hoping to allay any suspicion that their coordinated arrival had been no coincidence.

“Good evening, Your Highness.” Lord Armand bowed deeply.

“Is it, My Lord?” Cassius eyed him coolly. “For some of us, it is a more restricted evening than for others.”

The nobleman shuffled his feet, at least having the decency to look uncomfortable.

“It is regrettable that progress on the alliance has been so delayed, Your Highness.” He cast a glance at the row of guards standing against one wall, his face crinkling in confusion as he saw the distance at which they stood. “Did you find a way after all to...”

He trailed off, one eyebrow rising eloquently. Cassius followed his gaze and at last found himself looking properly at Flora.

He’d been wise not to do so in front of his parents or the master of ceremonies. Surely they would have seen how, having once laid eyes on her, he was finding it difficult to look away.

He’d thought seeing her during the fitting would have prepared him for the effect, but it hadn’t. As the tailor had promised, the gown had been finished to perfection. It hugged Flora’s slim torso like a glove, tightly encasing her arms all the way to her wrists. At her waist, it flared out into a full skirt, the fabric the color of a bluebird’s wings. His efforts in sending a maid to her room hadn’t been wasted, judging by the elegant way her hair was braided into a crown that perfectly graced her head.

There were no words to describe how different she looked dressed for a ball compared to the understated, practical guard attire she usually wore. She looked

like...well, like the beautiful, elegant, young woman she was.

It struck Cassius that once her usual trappings were stripped away, there was nothing of the guard in her. Her eyes were alert and watchful as she took in the room, and he didn't doubt her capability to respond to any threat that arose. But she didn't stand with the posture of a guard or move like a soldier. She was graceful and poised, much more like a noblewoman than a bodyguard. It was as though in casting off her costume, she'd also discarded the act that went with it. He didn't think she was even aware of having done so, which convinced him that for whatever reason, playing a part was second nature to her. Why, though? Why did she pretend? What past was she hiding, perhaps even running from? And how was it possible that she could be more confident in herself than anyone he knew—to the point of being impervious to the idle opinions of others—and yet be living her life playing a role designed to hide who she really was?

All of this ran through Cassius's mind as he took in her calm and self-possessed demeanor. As she moved gracefully around the edge of the room, her full skirts stirring up little puffs of power that he could sense if he focused, other things struck him forcibly as well. But he refused to put words to them, even in his mind. He couldn't let himself feel the things he was feeling when he looked at Flora. He simply couldn't afford to.

But there was no denying she was beautiful. That much he could surely be allowed to admit, given it seemed widely accepted by those in her vicinity. He caught a few flashes of surprise, as if the onlookers were amazed to recognize the prince's new guard in this unexpected setting, but most looked curiously admiring. They were no doubt wondering who the new courtier was.

For the briefest second, Cassius's imagination broke away from the firm hand that usually held it in check. What if she had been a courtier? What if he'd been allowed to court her?

It was a question better not asked, and he took hold of himself as he turned back to Lord Armand.

“No,” he said shortly, the turmoil within him increasing his anger at the nobleman as he very belatedly responded to the question the other man had never fully formed. “We have not found a way around your enchantment, as you must surely know. We are forced instead to mold circumstances around its restrictions. Something which is highly inconvenient to us both.”

Lord Armand winced. “Your Highness, I can only say that I deeply regret the—”

“You can do better than that by saying nothing,” Cassius cut him off. “And instead helping me promote the alliance that will untangle the mess you created.”

“Of course, Your Highness.” The nobleman looked at something over Cassius’s shoulder. “I have made inquiries on that front, and the results are not encouraging.”

Cassius glanced back to see that the other man was watching the king. Predictably and infuriatingly, Sir Keavling was by his side. As Cassius watched, a familiar figure approached his father. The senior guard was the one who had been assigned to lead the investigation into the attacks on Princess Miriam and Cassius. It was his report they’d waited for in vain all day, and he bore every appearance of having just arrived from travel.

Cassius waited a moment for his father to look up and seek him across the room. Surely the king would call his heir—the target of the attack—to receive the report alongside him. But to Cassius’s anger and mortification, King Aelius didn’t even look up. Nor did he send Sir Keavling away as the guard bowed and began to speak.

Balancing speed and dignity, Cassius abandoned Lord Armand and strode around the room. He had to dodge some attempts to approach him, but most guests were

occupied with the food. He sensed rather than saw Flora trailing an appropriate distance behind. When Cassius reached his father, she hung back out of hearing range, surreptitiously joining a clump of guests who were receiving chalices from a serving man.

“Do we have a report at last?” Cassius asked his father as he drew alongside him.

“Ah, Cassius.” The king looked him over vaguely. “It seems we do.” He waved a hand at the guard. “Go on.”

The guard bowed to Cassius before continuing. “As I was saying, Your Majesty, my investigators have succeeded in discovering the identities of the attackers. The two groups do not appear to be linked.”

“But they must be,” the king said impatiently. “You tell me that the attack on Princess Miriam and the attack on my son were unrelated? Implausible.”

“I agree, Your Majesty,” the guard assured him. “But it does not seem that the different attackers were known to each other, or shared a common cause.”

“Where did they hail from?”

The question came from Sir Keavling, and Cassius barely held in a scathing rebuke at the inappropriateness of the nobleman inserting himself. It would get him nowhere, given his father had taken it in stride.

“They were Torrenese, My Lord,” the guard said.

“All of them?” pressed Sir Keavling.

“Yes.”

The king and Sir Keavling exchanged a pointed look that raised Cassius's ire again.

"It seems the treachery of our neighbors to the west runs deeper than we guessed."

"Indeed, Your Majesty," Sir Keavling said gravely. "Clandestinely funding disasters and criminal activity within their neighboring kingdoms in order to increase their own prosperity is bad enough. But an open attack against your heir?"

Cassius could scarcely believe his ears at the brazen words.

"You repeat wild gossip as if it's established fact," he protested. He turned to the king. "Father, there is absolutely no proof that the Torrenese crown had any hand in the attacks. A group of strangers unknown to each other and with no shared cause doesn't suggest loyalty to king and country. It suggests loyalty to money. They were most likely hired mercenaries."

"Who's speaking speculation as fact now?" his father replied.

Impatient, Cassius turned to the guard. "Do you have more information for us?"

"Yes, Your Highness." The guard cast a cautious look at the king. "I agree with His Highness that what we've learned of the men in question bears all the marks of mercenaries. In fact, at least one of the men who attacked the Squalian princess was known to be a mercenary for hire. Rumor painted him as highly skilled and deadly. "

"So highly skilled that a young woman with as much strength as your little finger was able to intercept his attack and kill him without the princess receiving so much as a scratch?" the king said skeptically.

Cassius glanced around, his eyes landing on Flora not far away. She certainly didn't look deadly, her hands folded calmly in front of her as she watched the musicians

taking up their places on the far side of the room. But his father couldn't be more wrong to characterize her as weak and unskilled. Cassius remembered the attack on the princess perfectly. Flora had been efficient and decisive. She'd saved the life of Princess Miriam, and probably others as well. The would-be assassins had managed to infiltrate the trees without any of them noticing, and their aim had been true. They'd come shockingly close to success.

"What about the men who attempted to waylay me in Torrens?" he asked abruptly.

The guard's brow was furrowed. "They are more puzzling, Your Highness. They were much easier to track down, hailing from very near where you were attacked. We found no evidence that they were trained or skilled in combat, or that they had a history of mercenary activities. They were, however, both extremely desperate for money. I would be astonished to learn that their motivation was anything but coins, plain and simple."

Cassius considered this information. It was a very different account from the first attack.

"What about the third man?" he asked. "The one who got away? Any leads on his identity?"

The guard shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Your Highness. If there was a third player, he hasn't been identified. The two dead men were from the same small community, and had been missing since the evening before you were attacked. It was no great surprise to anyone to learn that they'd gotten themselves into trouble. But there was no one else missing from the town, and every man who could reasonably be a suspect was accounted for at the time of the attack."

"That's odd," Cassius mused.

“Not so odd,” said his father, frowning. “No doubt the other townsfolk are covering for the culprit. We cannot let that stand. Whoever he is must be found and pay the penalty for attempting to harm Carrack’s crown prince.”

“Agreed, Your Majesty,” said Sir Keavling. “It’s an insult not to be endured.”

King Aelius nodded. “Round up every man in that village if necessary.”

“Father, think what you’re saying,” said Cassius quickly. “The village in question is not in Carrack. Your guards have no authority to seize anyone within the borders of Torrens. We must tread with care if we wish to investigate without provoking war.”

“Don’t be naive, Cassius,” said the king. “If the Torrenese didn’t let the fear of war prevent them from mounting an attack on you, we cannot let it hold us back from responding appropriately.”

“They didn’t mount the attack, Father,” Cassius said. “The report suggests that the men were mercenaries.”

“Mercenaries are hired by someone,” the king said.

“Why would the Torrenese king have need of hiring mercenaries?” Cassius demanded.

“To cover his tracks so that if the attack failed, as it did, it would not be tied to the crown,” the king said, frowning. “Do not speak as though you are the only one who understands the precarious nature of our position, Cassius.”

“You don’t seem to,” Cassius argued. “Do you really believe that any king would hire inept and inexperienced assassins for such a delicate plan?”

“Inept, were they?” The king raised an eyebrow. “I seem to recall you returning bandaged from an arrow wound.”

“The more I learn of the situation, the more I’m inclined to think that was sheer luck on their part,” Cassius said. He drew a breath. “Father, I don’t agree with your assessment of Torrens’s likely involvement. But if that is your view, don’t you think it’s all the more reason to seal the alliance with Siqua as soon as possible?”

“Only if Siqua can be trusted,” said the king. “And I am not convinced it can.”

“They did not attack their own princess, Father,” Cassius said in frustration.

Sir Keavling interjected at this point, his deferential tone grating on Cassius. “No one is suggesting it, Your Highness. I wish as much as you do to trust the Siquans. But if Torrens has been playing us all for fools this entire time, we must consider the possibility that they will have laid plans from the beginning to blame the attack on Carrack. Can we be sure Siqua won’t have believed it? For all we know the sloppy attack against you was a poorly planned attempt to retaliate.”

“It is not credible that the Siquans could have been persuaded of our perfidy and decided to act swiftly enough to catch me still on the road,” Cassius said. “That suggestion is ridiculous.”

“No one is claiming to have all the answers, Cassius,” his father admonished him. “The point is, there is reason to be cautious and suspicious of both Siqua and Torrens at present. If we were to rush into an alliance, we might be giving them precisely what they want. ”

“That’s the whole point of an alliance,” Cassius said. “For both parties to get what they want!”

“My dear, moderate your tone.” The queen had appeared at her husband’s side, her reproachful gaze fixed on Cassius. “We are at a ball—a ball in your honor—and it is your role as host to make the occasion festive.”

“Mother, there are more important matters on my mind than festivities,” Cassius said in frustration.

“Your mother is right,” the king said. “This is not the time or the place. And there is nothing more to be done at present. I must consult with our ambassador to Siqua before any further action is taken.”

“A wise course, Your Majesty,” said Sir Keavling.

“You haven’t even made contact with the ambassador yet?” Cassius’s protest over the inevitable further delays was cut off by his mother.

“It’s time to open the dancing, Cassius. You will oblige me by dancing with the eldest daughter of the Duke of Norven.”

“I’m in no mood for dancing.” There was no conviction in Cassius’s words. He knew he wouldn’t be able to avoid the necessity. The musicians were already tuning their instruments.

The young woman in question wasn’t difficult to locate. She’d been hovering nearby, the honor clearly expected. It took all Cassius’s willpower to be passably hospitable as he led her onto the large space that was clearing in the center of the ballroom. His eyes strayed to Flora as he passed her, and he caught the flash of alarm that said she was having the same realization he was.

The ballroom was just too enormous, and the dancers were taking up positions in the center of it, far from the spectators along the walls. There was no way Flora could

stay within twenty feet of him without being on the dance floor itself.

Cassius's mind froze, his gaze still locked on Flora's as he struggled to find a way around the obstacle. But she'd gotten there more quickly. She tore her eyes from his and moved with casual grace toward a pair of young noblemen standing nearby.

Cassius couldn't hear what passed—Flora didn't seem to say a word to the men—but the next moment her hand was claimed by one of them, and the pair were following the prince and his partner into the throng.

Something strange and unreasonable stirred within Cassius. Some impulse that, while perfectly understanding the necessity, loathed the sight of the other man holding Flora's hand in his.

With difficulty, he pulled his attention back to his own partner, hoping she hadn't noticed his distraction.

There wasn't much opportunity for distraction in the lively movement of the dance. Cassius's partner didn't talk much, her attention mainly focused on ensuring her friends and rivals were observing her dance with the prince with the open envy she wished for.

Flora moved gracefully through the dancers, her blue skirts constantly catching the edges of Cassius's vision, tormenting him with the discipline it took to keep his gaze forward. They were sometimes close in the dance, sometimes far, but never threatening the twenty-foot boundary.

After the duke's daughter, there were no fewer than five more damsels awaiting attention thanks to his mother's complex social machinations. By the time each song began, Cassius had already forgotten the face of the previous song's partner. It took all his attention not to follow Flora's progress as she was also forced to enter dance

after dance .

It should have been a relief that Flora seemed to be having no difficulty securing invitations to join each dance, so that their tether wasn't tested.

It should have been, but it wasn't.

By the time Cassius finished the sixth dance, and his mother mercifully showed no sign of looking up from her conversation to pin him with another silent stare of command, Cassius was exhausted. He would have been glad to spend the next dance by the refreshments.

There was no reason he couldn't. One glance in Flora's direction showed that she was attuned to him, watching to see what he would do. There was a hopeful looking young squire edging toward her, so she wouldn't have difficulty joining the dancers again if Cassius's movements required her to do so. But if he stayed put, she would decline the offer. She would have to, or they would have the opposite problem of her dancing away out of range while he watched on.

It was a curious sensation, knowing how completely he could control her movements without ever activating the tether. He might chafe at the restrictions, but he still had far more control than Flora did, because she'd chosen to lay aside her own interests to help him keep the tether private. She must feel like a piece of baggage, tugged this way and that by his whims and responsibilities.

It would be out of place for me to complain , he heard her voice again in his mind, given I am nothing but a gift offered to you by the Siquilians.

Cassius found himself moving forward. The only thought in his mind was that he'd treated her with far less respect than she deserved. The poised and beautiful woman who was drawing him to her like a moth to a flame deserved more than respect.

More, even, than mere admiration.

He didn't dare name what she deserved, because it wasn't something he could give her. He could, however, ask her to give him one dance. There might be consequences, but he didn't care. He wanted to be the one to take her hand in his this time.

“Dance with me?”

His voice came out so low and gruff, it was no wonder Flora did a double take before meeting his eyes. Her own were uncertain, not like her normal, confident self.

“Are you sure?” Her voice was soft, but he didn't miss the way she was already shifting toward him, as if her body was disregarding the warning her mind was trying to give it.

“Dance with me.” This time it wasn't a question—Cassius held out his hand with the air of a royal command, and Flora didn't hesitate as she slid hers into it.

Chapter

Fourteen

As Cassius felt Flora's fingers find his, warmth erupted from the contact, shooting across his skin and up his arm. It was like she'd started a fire with her touch, but no fire had ever burned so much and hurt so little.

A moment before, Cassius had felt hemmed in by the bonds of the tether, but any sense of restriction fled as he led Flora into the dance by his side. They wouldn't have to be careful of their movements, half their attention focused on making sure they stayed within their allotted distance, because they would be together for the whole dance. Their movements would be the same, their tether unnecessary. It flashed through his mind that this was freedom...not being cut loose from the bond that tied him to Flora, but transcending it by merging into one purpose, one mind, one dance.

It was an illusion, he knew, but he would embrace the sensation of oneness for as long as the song lasted.

He didn't speak, and neither did Flora. But his eyes never wavered from her face as he led her through the dance. She moved with the grace of a swan, never missing a step, her touch light on his arm and her hand steady in his. It was hard to maintain the loose hold the dance required. The impulse to tighten his grip, to pull her flush against him and slide his arm around that tapering waist, was frighteningly strong.

He'd thought she had nothing of the guard in her earlier, but this was a new level. The woman in his arms was the most beautiful, elegant, comfortable person he'd ever

encountered. She was as captivating as a bejeweled princess would be to a peasant boy, but she also had all the familiarity of a trusted friend. He'd never experienced anything like it, and he couldn't make sense of the fact that with Flora so close, he simultaneously felt safer than he had with anyone in his life and yet knew himself to be in a previously unimagined level of danger.

And the most intoxicating part of it all was that when he looked into her eyes, he didn't see a part she was playing. It was her real self he held in his arms, no mask up between them.

The musicians picked up speed, and Cassius spun Flora in a circle as the dance required. It was no casual folk dance, and she knew the steps intricately, but any curiosity about that mystery was lost in the sensation that swept over him. As Flora moved in an arc, she used some mysterious flick of her hips to send her skirts cascading out in the most extravagant flourish—and a moment later, something akin to a hot wind swirled around their joined hands.

It seemed to press Flora's hand closer into his, sealing them in an embrace of fingers before it passed up Cassius's arm, raising goosebumps along his skin. He felt it ruffle his hair in a gesture that felt, in some inscrutable way, like Flora.

She was using the magic created by her skirt's movement.

His eyes met hers in silent awe, and she took it as encouragement. With the next spin, he felt something even more curious, this time around his feet. It wasn't like a wind, more like an invisible cushion had slid under him, buoying him up so that his feet left the floor by the tiniest margin.

For a breathless moment, they were both weightless, dancing on winged feet as they glided across the floor more smoothly than their normal steps could ever manage.

No one else would even see the difference, but to the pair of them, the sensation was marvelous. It somehow made physical what his heart had been experiencing throughout their dance.

The power petered out, their renewed steps feeling clumsy by comparison as the musicians gently closed out the song.

Cassius was left still and silent, staring into Flora's face as her breaths came rapidly. He felt breathless himself, and it wasn't just from the exertion of the dance.

"That was...the most magical magic I've ever felt." He sounded as green as that squire who'd so presumptuously hoped to dance with his Flora.

She smiled, the expression softening every feature, all the way to her eyes.

"It's not a useful trick. But it feels like how dancing should feel. At least, I don't know how else to say it."

"You said it perfectly. And you dance beautifully."

He was aware that his voice was too low and intense, and also that he should have released her by now. But his hand was refusing to draw back from its position around her waist, or to unclasp the fingers still tangled through hers. She wasn't pulling back either, her form sagging a little, most likely worn out by the exertion of the magic as much as the physical effort of so much dancing. The energy cost of wielding magic was a chief reason so few people pursued excellence in the craft. It required a type of physical and mental strength that was very different from the strength of hand-to-hand combat. And Flora had it in spades.

"Thank you," Flora said. "For all of it, I mean." She looked around, breaking their moment of intimate focus. "I know you'll pay a price for lowering yourself to dance

with a guard.”

His grip tightened, but she wasn’t done.

“But I confess I was glad to not feel like a guard for a while. I enjoyed feeling like...well, like a princess.” She sounded surprised at her own words, but they were apt, in Cassius’s opinion.

You are like a princess. He didn’t say the words aloud. Instead he released her waist, keeping hold of her hand as he led her away from the dancers who were starting up for the next song.

“There is no price that I regard,” he told her instead. “If anything, I should be thanking you. Believe me, that was the first dance I’ve actually enjoyed all evening.”

She gave him a crooked grin as they neared a table. “Magic does enhance the experience, doesn’t it?”

It was on the tip of Cassius’s tongue to say that it wasn’t the magic, it was her, but he never uttered the words. Flora’s gaze flew over his shoulder, and she withdrew her hand from his. Before he knew what was happening, she’d taken a step forward and seized her skirts in both fists.

Quick as lightning, she swept the fabric violently from side to side, her eyes narrowed in concentration as Cassius spun around in response to gasps from behind him.

He blinked at the sight of a tall cake stand—made of metal and towering above his head—resting at an impossible angle, its edge inches from Cassius’s face. By the time Cassius grasped that Flora had used another cushioning enchantment to prevent it from falling onto the back of his head, two serving men had hurried forward to stabilize it.

As soon as they had hold of it, Flora stopped moving. Her cushioning enchantment disappeared, and a number of small cakes tumbled onto Cassius before hitting the floor, as the serving men pushed the stand upright.

“Are you unharmed?” Flora asked the question with concern in her eyes, in spite of the fact that her form now drooped visibly.

“I’m fine,” Cassius said quickly, waving off the sputtering apology of the clumsy serving girl who’d knocked the tower with the same unconcern with which he was brushing crumbs from his clothes. “You’ve overdone it, haven’t you, Flora? You look exhausted.”

“I didn’t channel the ideal amount of the power to my own energy,” she acknowledged, relaxing as she saw that he was unhurt. “But I can’t have you being crushed by a metal cake stand on my watch, can I? I’m still your bodyguard, remember.”

Cassius gave her a look, silently calling out the exaggerated use of the word crushed . But his attention was claimed by others before he could speak—his guards and the head server had arrived, and all looked intent on making a much bigger fuss than the minor incident called for.

As Cassius reassured everyone involved that there was no cause for concern or further apologies, Flora moved away a short distance. It made little difference—her presence was seared in his awareness, his mind tied to her every movement. The tether had never felt more tangible.

Clearly it wasn’t obvious to those around him how attuned he was to her, because the trio of courtiers standing just beside Flora spoke with all the confidence of believing themselves unobserved.

“Did I hear her say she’s still his bodyguard?” The words, issued in a tone of scorn and accompanied by a nasty titter, were obviously intended for Flora’s ears, even if not addressed to her. “Does she expect people to believe that?”

“Bodyguard, pah,” another chimed in. “I could find a less discreet word for it.”

Anger stirred in Cassius, and he turned his head to look at Flora. She was staring stoically ahead, her mask back up as she scanned the area like an actual bodyguard would.

“There is nothing more embarrassing than a servant—of any kind—not knowing her place,” a third courtier chimed in, this one a man. “Do you think she hopes to be accepted as a legitimate guest? I wonder she keeps her position after so brazenly arriving on duty dressed like that .”

His tone would make anyone think Flora was prancing around in her undergarments instead of swathed in material from head to toe. Wearing something becoming was its own offense in the eyes of the jealous.

“No one would confuse her with a legitimate guest,” one of the women retorted. “Not when she conducts herself with so little dignity.”

Cassius had heard enough. He strode away from the still-apologizing head server, his frame quivering with anger as he approached Flora. The fact that she was taking the undeserved insults with silent grace only made the offense worse. She’d been put through so much through no fault of her own, and for anyone to accuse her of a lack of dignity was outrageously unjust. He longed to tell the trio of courtiers what he really thought of their manners.

“Thank you for your intervention,” he told Flora instead, his voice carrying. “I’m grateful that you attended tonight as I requested.” His eyes passed over her shoulder

to settle on the trio of listening courtiers. “To elevate the company.”

Flora shifted, and looking back at her, he saw that her shoulders had tightened, tension written on the line of her jaw. She was weary, and she wasn’t hiding it as well as she thought.

“Come on,” he said. “We’re leaving.”

She frowned in confusion. “Already? It’s not necessary to leave your own ball on my account, Your Highness.”

“I’m ready to retire,” he told her firmly. “So I’m afraid you have little choice.”

Flora stopped arguing, but he could see that she wasn’t satisfied. It confused him—he’d been sure she would be glad to leave the ballroom.

Cassius could feel his mother glaring at him, but he didn’t give her the chance to reprimand him. She would be furious he’d danced with Flora, and even more furious he was leaving the ball so early. But that price could be paid later. Tonight he was too worked up—both from the moment with Flora and his anger at her treatment—to deal with his mother.

Followed by the usual pair of guards, he left the ballroom, Flora walking alongside the guards with a subdued gait.

The queen wasn’t the only one watching him. As they moved away from the table and the unstable cake stand, Cassius felt eyes on him. He turned his head to see Sir Keavling standing near the table they’d just left. Had he been there the whole time? Cassius hadn’t noticed him, but if so, he was close enough that he might have heard the exchange with the courtiers. And yet he’d stayed unobtrusive rather than putting himself forward as he usually did with the king.

Cassius didn't like it.

The prince and his companions moved out of the ballroom swiftly, walking in silence through the halls. It was peaceful, with most of the castle's usual inhabitants clustered in the ballroom. Once they reached the royal wing, Cassius dismissed his guards. He didn't miss the way their eyes slid over Flora, still hovering, as they moved down the corridor. He waited until they were out of sight before speaking to her.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

Her stiff manner was so far from the warmth she'd shown as they danced. The memory of that kept Cassius lingering. How did he get her to drop her mask again? He craved it more than was wise.

"You've overextended yourself, haven't you?" Cassius asked, frowning.

The sound of footsteps forestalled her answer, and a moment later a pair of maids rounded the corner.

Once they were out of sight, Cassius tried again.

"What's wrong, Flora? Tell me."

"Nothing is wrong," she said firmly.

Cassius didn't miss the cautious way she watched the corner ahead.

"Come inside," he said, pushing open the door to his receiving room. "We can't talk here. "

She hesitated for a moment, but followed him in. Cassius's chest tightened strangely, and he told himself he was being absurd. Thanks to the impracticalities of their tether, she'd been obliged to step into his receiving room many times. This situation was no different.

"Tell me what's wrong, Flora," he said, as soon as the door closed behind them. "I heard what those ill-mannered fools said about you. But don't let it—"

"I don't care what they said," Flora cut him off. "You should have stayed out of it."

He paused, searching her eyes. Why was she angry with him?

"No, I shouldn't," he contradicted. "They were saying vile things about you for doing what I asked you to do. Was I supposed to let that pass in silence?"

"Yes," she said promptly. "That's exactly what you were supposed to do. You're a prince, Cassius, and you're not supposed to expose yourself to conflict every time one of your guards gets into trouble."

"You've done nothing to get yourself into trouble." Cassius felt his brows lower.

"I don't expect you to make life fair," Flora told him earnestly. "No one can do that. Do you think I've followed you around this long without seeing the strife you're already in? Don't increase it on my account! First the guards, then the housekeeper...now your own court. You can't pick a fight with everyone who makes a snide remark about me."

"I can, and I will," said Cassius stubbornly.

"You'll make your life so much harder than it needs to be!" Flora protested. "Do you think arguing with the staff over me will increase your standing in your father's

eyes?”

“That’s my affair,” Cassius told her .

“It doesn’t help anyway,” she insisted. “If you defend me to their faces, it will only make them hate me more. The best course is to stop intervening.”

Cassius let out a quiet growl. “I can’t do that.”

“You want to protect me, but I don’t need your protection.” The words burst from her, as if she could hold in her frustration no longer. “I’m supposed to be protecting you, Cassius! I’m your bodyguard!”

When had she dispensed with his title? He hadn’t noticed it happening—he didn’t think she’d even realized what she’d done. But he found he liked it. In fact, the sound of his name so casually on her lips was dangerously close to intoxicating.

Cassius stepped forward, his eyes holding hers in an iron grip as he formed every word with deliberate care.

“It’s not that I want to protect you, Flora. That would imply I want to see you in danger so as to have the satisfaction of being protector. Nothing could be further from the truth. But when I see you under attack, I find it impossible to simply stand by. Call yourself my bodyguard if you wish—it won’t change a thing.”

Her eyes flickered, and he saw her swallow nervously. Did he make her nervous? Did her heart start to race as he took yet another step closer?

His seemed determined to double its pace.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I was in no danger,” she said at last. “Was I being

unjustly criticized? Maybe. But—”

“I don’t like that either,” Cassius said darkly. “You’ve shown nothing but integrity and capability—you don’t deserve to be maligned.”

“What does it matter what strangers think of me?” Flora said simply. “I know who I am, I don’t have anything to prove to them. You do have something to prove, and you won’t prove it by defending the servants.”

Cassius ran a hand through his hair in a gesture of hopelessness. A week ago, her words would have hit uncomfortably close to home, but now he couldn’t find it in him to care about any of it. She spoke of herself as a servant, but she’d never been that to him. How could he make her understand that he was perfectly aware that defending her was against his interests and that he simply didn’t care?

“Don’t ask me to stand by while you’re insulted and abused,” he said flatly. “I won’t do it. I can’t. Your capability deserves to be recognized.”

Flora’s face was hard to read—he almost thought he saw her lip quiver. He couldn’t be sure since he forced himself not to let his attention linger on that feature.

“What is it?” he pressed, when she didn’t speak. “What are you thinking?”

“Only that those are strange words coming from you.” Flora’s face was still a mask. “I thought you didn’t need my services as your guard specifically because you consider me incapable of fulfilling the role to your satisfaction.”

“What?” He stared at her. “That’s not true.”

“Isn’t it?” She folded her hands—he had the distinct impression it was to stop them shaking. “You claim to admire my capability as you put it, but you wouldn’t even

consider letting me continue my role as Princess Miriam's personal guard after your wedding. You dismissed me as inadequate immediately."

"Is that what you think?" Cassius found himself suddenly towering over her, although he didn't remember stepping closer. His legs brushed against her full skirts, so different from the practical clothes she usually wore. She was so near that he could feel the heat of her body, and her eyes stared up at him in a way that was incredibly distracting. "Your capability has nothing to do with it."

She swallowed, her voice fainter as her eyes remained fixed on his. "Then what?"

"You," he said simply. "You're the problem."

"I'm the...problem?"

Nothing seemed to move but her lips as she repeated the words. She was immobilized, her form inches from his. He couldn't tell if it was because she found his nearness as intoxicating as he found hers, or because she was frozen like a wary rabbit in the sights of a hunter.

"You're wrong that I didn't consider the idea," he told her, his voice gruff and low. "When you asked me about being the personal guard to my...wife," he stumbled slightly over the word, "I pictured it clearly. Me, married to Princess Miriam, and you, always near..." He trailed off, struggling for words that would make her understand without being too revealing. "I couldn't agree to it, Flora. The image was...unbearable."

She said nothing, her dark eyes as deep as wells.

Cassius found himself leaning even closer. Flora didn't do anything to close the distance, but she didn't pull away, either. After a charged moment, she lowered her

eyes, staring at his embroidered jacket instead of his face.

Ignoring the voice of wisdom, Cassius reached out and slid one calloused finger along her jaw, tilting her head back up until his eyes captured hers once again.

“Tell me the truth, Flora.” His voice was a gruff murmur now. “Would that life be sustainable?”

“I...” She hesitated, her chest rising and falling a little too quickly. “I would never seek to cause you trouble, Your Highness. ”

The tiniest growl escaped him at this renewed use of his title. “For me, you are trouble, Flora.”

He dipped his head ever so slightly downward, drawn by a magnetism he knew was unwise but he couldn't seem to resist.

Flora was stronger than him, apparently. Or perhaps the pull simply wasn't as powerful for her. Because a moment later she'd stepped swiftly backward, leaving chill emptiness in her wake, and forcing him to slowly lower his hand.

“I regret that I've caused you trouble, Your Highness,” she said, her voice not natural. “I truly only ever meant to help.” Her hands were definitely shaking this time as she folded them behind her back with a rustle of fabric. “Do you need further assistance, or may I retire for the night?”

Cassius swallowed the absurd desire to grab hold of her shoulders and tell her that he needed her assistance every hour of every day.

He straightened his back. What was wrong with him? He'd spent all his youth and adult years avoiding the attempts of women in the court to ensnare him. How had he

allowed himself to be so bewitched by a woman who clearly wasn't trying to bewitch him? So many times she'd told him she didn't need or want his help, and yet he was still determined to rush to her side. He was embarrassed by his own weakness.

"Of course you may retire," he said, glad to hear that his voice was now steady and impassive. "I will not be returning to the gala tonight."

With a half-hearted attempt at a bow, Flora fled from the room, almost tripping over her dress.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Cassius buried his face in one hand. What had come over him? How was he failing so dismally to keep to the high standard of behavior necessary for one of his position? He should never have allowed himself to share such an intimate moment with the Siqualian guard. He should never have danced with her.

But he couldn't bring himself to regret any of it. Not when he remembered how her stiff form had relaxed as her eyes looked up into his, or the softness of her skin when he'd touched her jaw. And the dance...never in his life could he remember feeling so connected to another person.

He was in trouble, there was no doubt about it. A kind of trouble that lifting the tether wouldn't solve. In fact, it would only make it worse, given that the tether could only be lifted once his betrothal to Princess Miriam was made official. Quite possibly it wouldn't even lift until the marriage had occurred. He didn't know how rigidly the enchantment would define the marriage alliance being sealed.

A servant appeared shortly after Flora left, expecting to assist the prince to prepare for bed. Cassius sent him away. He didn't want anyone hovering around him. The faint sensation of the tether stretching through the wall and into the next suite was unsettling enough.

He stripped off his finery and climbed into bed in his long undershirt and leggings. He just wanted to reach the oblivion of sleep as soon as possible.

He'd barely settled under the covers, however, when he felt a light touch around his middle. He drew back, about to throw off the blankets to search for a rodent or other unwanted guest. But as he shifted, the pressure disappeared, and he paused.

He slid back along the bed, moving away from the door that led into his receiving room. Once again he felt it, feather light but distinct, as though hands had slid gently around his middle.

He recognized the sensation—he was at the end of the tether. He stilled, looking over his shoulder at the wall on the far side of his bedchamber. The bed sat against the outside wall, with a window on each side of it, meaning that it was perpendicular to the corridor. He knew that Flora's suite was a mirror of his own, so their two receiving rooms—not connected by any interior door—both stood between the respective bedchambers. The beds must be only just within twenty feet of one another. Had she been sleeping right on the near edge of her bed all these nights so as not to push the boundary of the tether?

She wasn't doing so tonight. In fact, as Cassius shifted carefully toward the outer edge of his own bed, the sensation of the tether intensified. It wasn't just him moving. She also was maneuvering herself so that the tether could be felt.

It was so much like her arms were around him. It wasn't like a rope, or an iron bar. It was like a woman's arms, slim but strong, just as Flora's were, knotted loosely around his midriff. Did it feel to her like his arms, thicker and more muscled than her own?

When he tugged, he could feel the whole tether move slightly in response to his greater physical strength. He could drag her if he chose, not that he had any desire to

control her. Feeling foolish, he slid a hand along his stomach, almost expecting to feel something there.

But of course there was nothing.

It was all an illusion, created by Lord Armand's infuriating, outrageous enchantment. Cassius was alone with his burdens, as he had always been, and there was no one beside him. He had no reason to ever expect anyone by his side, other than a stranger, tied to him for political reasons.

It wouldn't be Flora.

It couldn't be.

But was this how it would have felt if they'd abandoned propriety and shared the bed that first night in the inn?

He closed his eyes, a yearning ache filling him and overwhelming him with its intensity. What wouldn't he give to have her beside him in all legitimacy? To have the freedom to put his arms around her and hold her close?

Foolish thought! There was a great deal he wouldn't give— couldn't give—for that outcome. The wellbeing of his kingdom, for a start, not to mention the stability of the whole Peninsula. And, a confronting voice whispered in his mind, the respect of his father. Cassius shuddered to think of the king's reaction if he knew his son's thoughts.

But his father didn't know his thoughts. No one could. And the burdens of tomorrow couldn't be solved tonight. There was no one and nothing to stop Cassius from surrendering himself to the sensation of Flora's arms around him, however illusory it might be.

He stopped all movement, lying on his back and focusing his mind on the magical sensation of the tether. He could feel it when he really tried, an invisible line that ran out from him and into the emptiness of his receiving room. Flora must still be inching along, because the grip around him was growing tighter and stronger.

He pictured her face as it had looked when her eyes had been held captive by his. He saw again the way her lip had quivered ever so slightly when she accused him of thinking her incapable and unnecessary. He remembered the feel of her jawline under his hand, strong but soft, just like she was. All of those memories were so much more potent when he could physically feel her hold at the end of the tether.

But as the pressure remained steady, the question burned inside him. Was she pushing the boundary of the tether tonight because she, like him, craved the sense of nearness? Or was it the opposite...was she trying to escape it, wishing she could pull free of it, back to the independence that had been forcefully taken from her?

No answer to this crucial question emerged from the darkness of his room.

Chapter

Fifteen

F lora woke the morning after the ball with a pounding head and a very confused heart.

The first thing she noticed was the absence of the pressure around her waist. The memory made her cheeks burn. Cassius must have felt it, too. What would he think? It was the first night she'd allowed herself to settle comfortably into her bed without thought for the edge of the tether. She'd noticed the first night that the two beds were barely within the twenty-foot limit, and she'd hoped that by sleeping right on the edge, Cassius wouldn't notice. Had her actions last night forced him to sleep right on the edge? Had he wanted to flirt with the limit of their tether, or had he been frustrated that he couldn't get comfortable, free from her invisible touch?

Whatever his feelings about it, for her it had felt like falling asleep with his arms around her, strong and comforting.

And all kinds of confusing.

Just like their dance had been. No one had forced him then. He'd been the one to ask—no, insist—that she dance with him. Not that she'd been against the idea.

It was all overwhelming, and if she had her way, she would hide away and avoid dealing with it by not seeing him all day. Perhaps for several days. But that wasn't an option, so she needed to stop being a coward.

With a groan, Flora pushed herself out of bed and pulled the curtain open. She was taken aback by the light that streamed in. The morning was well advanced.

It was no wonder she'd overslept. Her head still ached, and her limbs felt sore and heavy from the exertion of the previous evening. Neither of the enchantments she'd done had been too substantial, but the movement she'd used to create them had been minimal, and it had taken significant effort to achieve the effects with such a small amount of magic.

Magic craft was incredibly taxing on the body and mind, and generally it was necessary to use about half the power created by movement to replenish the user's own energy, so as not to pass out from the effort. It was all a matter of proportions—the more movement, the more power, the greater the potential use. But the more substantial the enchantment, the more energy it cost...exponentially so.

The magic generated by the movement of her skirts in the dance—and later, when she used them to stir up enough Dust to stop the cake stand—was insubstantial. She hadn't wanted to be conspicuous by making more obviously orchestrated movements, so she'd disregarded good practice and put almost all of the magic toward the frivolous display with the dancing.

It had been a foolish decision, born of a lax mindset that they were in no danger at a ball and she therefore didn't need to marshal her resources. But she hadn't reckoned on falling cake displays and the need for further magical exertion, and she was paying the price now.

She soon learned that she wasn't the only one paying a price. Once she'd speedily washed and dressed, she made her way out to the corridor, feeling guilty for her tardiness. She assumed he had also slept late, or surely her presence would have been demanded earlier.

But almost as soon as she'd taken up position outside her door, a stately figure issued from the prince's receiving room. The queen was impeccably dressed, and she moved with her usual dramatic air. But her attendant ladies were notably absent.

One glance at Queen Horatia's face confirmed that she was irritated. She paused as soon as she caught sight of Flora, her glare leaving Flora in no doubt of her standing in the royal's eyes. It took all her focus to keep her eyes straight and fight down the flush attempting to flood her face.

Whatever the queen might think, Flora knew that she'd done nothing wrong.

Well, dancing with the prince had maybe been a little bit wrong. But after all, he'd insisted.

The queen stood for an uncomfortably long minute, regarding Flora in the silence of outraged majesty. But she seemed to decide it was beneath her dignity to address her grievances to the guard directly. At last, with a sweep of skirts, she took off down the corridor, leaving Flora to let out a silent breath and release the tension in her shoulders.

It returned a moment later, as one of the prince's guards addressed her.

"Stories of your magic craft have been understated."

Flora looked at him cautiously, not committing herself to a reply. She doubted he was complimenting her protective enchantment at the ball.

"We're all well aware that you have the prince wrapped around your finger," the guard went on, an unpleasant glint in his eye. "But I'd like to know what magic you use on the head guard to avoid losing your position with the way you carry on."

“Getting the prince in trouble is usually a dismissible offense,” agreed the other guard. “Seems you’ve worked your charm on a lot of people to avoid consequences the way you do.”

“Trouble?” Flora repeated, ignoring the slights against herself. “What trouble is the prince in?”

The first guard snorted. “You just saw the queen, what do you think? She’s been in there scolding the prince for two straight hours.”

Flora winced. No wonder her presence hadn’t been missed earlier. Cassius hadn’t been free to go anywhere.

She said nothing, and the guards showed every sign of wanting to needle her until she gave them a response. Thankfully the prince chose that moment to appear, his eyes holding Flora’s for one heartbeat before quickly flitting away. He didn’t greet her, just started down the hall, trailed by the three guards.

What remained of the prince’s morning was spent in the king’s study. Flora, positioned outside, couldn’t hear what passed between them. But she would have bet all her meager belongings that Cassius was trying again to persuade his father to move forward with the alliance. In the short moment when her eyes had met his outside his rooms, she’d read the same tension she felt after the events of the night before.

Their current situation was untenable. Something had to change, and judging by the length of time he spent in his father’s study, the prince was determined to change it. Meanwhile, Flora stood in the corridor, enduring unpleasant comments from the other guards. By the time the prince emerged for lunch, she was hungry and far more weary than the short morning of duty justified. There was a reason it wasn’t normal for guards to be on duty all day every day without pause. It was difficult to maintain a

sharp edge.

The king left his study along with his son, both men seeming frustrated.

Mercifully the meal was a quiet, private affair, with only the prince and his father, along with a senior nobleman whose meeting with the king had been delayed by Cassius's prolonged interview, and who had been invited to eat with the royal pair instead. The servants were casting more looks Flora's way than usual, silent questions behind their eyes as they saw the newcomer transformed from ball guest back to guard.

Flora did her best to ignore them, her stomach protesting as she stood along the wall behind the table while the prince ate. It was a tiresome business, being obliged to act like a normal guard. If she happened to be on duty with Miriam over a meal, the princess would often choose to have food brought to her room so that they could eat together. Here, Flora wasn't even free to come off duty and go the guards' mess for food.

She hadn't been listening much to the conversation, but when it veered toward the investigation into the attack, her attention was caught. The nobleman had nothing of use to say—he just agreed with whichever royal had spoken most recently. Flora thought it was a victory for Cassius when the nobleman affirmed his suggestion that an alliance with Siquel would help protect Carrack from any Torrenese aggression, but the king didn't seem impressed. Flora could see—and share—Cassius's outrage when the king instructed a servant to summon Sir Keavling to support his point.

“Father.” Cassius's protest chased the servant from the room. “You have no need of his counsel here.”

“It's not for my own sake, Cassius,” said the king. “You need to hear the latest theory we have discussed.”

Sir Keavling materialized quickly, his benign manner making Flora bristle.

“Sir Keavling,” the king said. “Tell Prince Cassius what you told me yesterday.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” The nobleman bowed to Cassius. “I have been thinking on your wise words, Your Highness, when you’ve pointed out that the evidence against Torrens is inconclusive. I still feel wary of our neighbors, but I followed your example and turned my mind to the possibility that Torrens is innocent.”

“Did you?” Cassius didn’t sound impressed by the seeming support.

“And naturally that led me to consider who else might be behind the attacks. It is possible we have suspected the wrong country.’

“We were too quick to dismiss Siqua from suspicion,” the king agreed.

“You imply that Siqua staged the attack on their own princess so as to avoid suspicion for the attack on me?” Cassius said, incredulous.

“It is a possibility we must consider,” King Aelius said. “What better way for Siqua to allay suspicion? Princess Miriam suffered no harm, did she? No one in the Siquan delegation was injured at all. ”

Indignation burned within Flora. Miriam had almost died—it was infuriating that King Aelius used her near miss to paint her as suspicious. And had the king forgotten her own presence in the room? Flora would have needed to be heavily involved in any such scheme.

She was scanning the table stonily, and she sucked in a breath as she found Sir Keavling’s eyes fixed on her. He at least hadn’t missed either her presence or the implications of the king’s words.

But she didn't think he believed the tale he was spinning. He had an ulterior motive.

"They weren't injured thanks to quick action and skilled defense," Cassius said. "This is nothing more than a tall tale."

"Perhaps," said King Aelius. "Or perhaps there is a scheme of which we are unaware. It's enough reason to hesitate on the proposed alliance. I have lost trust in both Siquel and Torrens."

Flora, standing right behind Cassius, saw his hand clench into a fist where it rested on his knee under the table.

"And what have you gained in place of that loss?" the prince growled. His eyes passed to Sir Keavling. "These tall tales haven't come from your own mind, Father. They've been spun for you."

"There is no spinning involved," the king said crisply. "I am considering all aspects of the situation." He stood abruptly, and everyone else at the table hastened to copy, abandoning their partially eaten meals.

"You've taken up my morning, Cassius," the king said to his son. "But I'm afraid I cannot give you my afternoon. There are matters of urgency requiring my attention."

With a gesture of the head, he summoned the other nobleman, and the man hurried out of the room in the king's wake.

Leaving Cassius directing a hard stare at Sir Keavling.

"Your Highness." The nobleman bowed before turning toward the door.

"A moment, Sir Keavling."

Cassius's voice carried a note of unmistakable command, and Sir Keavling stopped mid-stride, seeming to resent his own instinctive obedience. As he turned to face the prince, Flora tensed, her hand slipping into her pocket to close around her sling. It was foolish, in a well-protected room within the castle, with numerous other guards around. But she didn't trust this man. It would not have surprised her to learn that he meant Cassius harm.

"Understand one thing, Sir Keavling." Cassius's voice still carried that authority that made Flora's skin prickle. "I see you. Whatever you've been whispering in my father's ears, I will stand against any alliance with the continent to my last breath. I am the future of Carrack, and our future is the Peninsula."

Sir Keavling studied the prince in silence, his dark eyes calculating and cautious.

"I do not seek to be your enemy, Your Highness."

"I'm not interested in what you seek," Cassius said, his own eyes narrowed. "Don't be fooled into thinking my trust as easily won as others' might be. I've never been one to be charmed by snakes."

A flash of anger crossed the nobleman's features before he could contain it. It wasn't the anger that sent a shiver up Flora's spine, however. It was the way it transformed Sir Keavling's face, and the speed with which the fire disappeared from his eyes again. The man was most definitely wearing a mask. She knew the signs better than anyone.

"Perhaps, Your Highness," Sir Keavling said smoothly, "you would be wise not to make an enemy of me."

Cassius shifted forward, his taller frame towering over the other man. "Is that a threat?"

“Of course not, Your Highness.”

Now that she'd seen his mask, Flora couldn't see anything else. Every word was false—she had no idea who this man really was.

“Watch yourself, Sir Keavling,” Cassius said, his form stiff with tension. “I will certainly be watching you.”

“Words I would only expect to hear from a man who has nothing to fear from close scrutiny himself.” The nobleman's words were spoken quietly, sleekly.

Flora didn't miss the way his eyes flicked to her and then meaningfully back to the prince. She stared stonily at him, knowing his interest in her was only in how she might provide leverage against the prince. But the nobleman would be disappointed. Cassius might prefer their situation not to be discovered, but it wasn't such a dire outcome that he could be blackmailed through threat of it. She doubted Cassius would even care about the idle warning.

She was therefore surprised when the prince immediately bristled.

“You come dangerously close to crossing a line,” he said darkly. “You overstep your position, and your determined attempts to influence policy have been noted.”

“I wish only to serve Carrack, Your Highness.”

By way of reply, Cassius turned on his heel and stalked from the room. Flora could feel Sir Keavling's eyes on her back as she moved smoothly into the corridor.

“You're not needed.” Cassius's words, directed to the other guards, held the hint of a growl.

Flora saw them exchange looks before they bowed and withdrew. She, of course, couldn't be dismissed, so she followed the prince in silence as he strode with agitated steps through a maze of corridors she hadn't traversed before. They walked for some minutes, but when they emerged into a well-tended garden, Cassius didn't seem to have calmed down much.

He moved down the rows of flowers and into a decorative spiral of hedges that reached the height of his head. After he'd traveled well into the spiral, he stopped and turned, the movement so abrupt that Flora actually walked into him.

Cassius's arms shot out before she could stabilize herself, gripping her shoulders and holding her steady while he searched her eyes.

"Are you all right?"

"What?" She blinked at him. "Of course I'm all right."

"He was threatening you, Flora, don't you understand that?" Cassius's hands tightened on her shoulders, his pale blue eyes intense.

"Calm down, Cassius," she said firmly. She placed her hands over his in a reassuring gesture. His fingers were tense and strong. "He was threatening you—I can't imagine he has any interest in me."

"He does." Cassius's voice left no room for argument. "I've seen how he watches you."

Flora hesitated. She'd seen it too. "Maybe he suspects the tether."

Cassius didn't respond. He pulled suddenly away, turning to the side and lowering his brow into one hand. He seemed to realize he needed to pull himself together. Flora

had sympathy for him. If she was reeling from the previous night's events—not only their dance at the ball but the illusory embrace they'd shared as they slept—he must be as well. She understood perfectly how difficult it was to have no privacy from the person you most needed it from.

Hesitantly, she moved forward. The prince's hair, usually swept back from his brow, had fallen over his face, making him look disheveled and more...human. With a featherlight touch, Flora slid her fingers under it, shifting the hair from his face. He stilled, his eyes closing in an expression that was somehow both guarded and incredibly vulnerable.

“Don't worry about me, Cassius,” she said softly. “I'm much more resilient than you realize. I'm a weathervane. Worry about your kingdom and your alliance. That's what Sir Keavling is really threatening.”

“I do worry about my kingdom.” Cassius opened his eyes, raising his head to look her in the face again. “Constantly. But I can't seem to help worrying about you, too.”

“You don't need to,” she assured him.

He didn't look convinced. “What do you mean, you're a weathervane?”

“Oh.” She laughed lightly as she took a step back. “It's a nickname I gave myself during my studies. I might let myself be blown this way and that, but it doesn't bend me out of shape. Weathervanes are designed to be blown about, they don't suffer any harm for it.”

“Why must you be blown this way and that?” Cassius pressed, his voice low and far too captivated. “Why can't you have a settled home?”

“Never mind that,” Flora said quickly, wishing she'd never mentioned it.

She'd done well so far in preventing Cassius from digging too deeply into her own life. She shouldn't invite his scrutiny now, with more important matters at stake .

"The real question," she went on, "is why Sir Keavling is set against the alliance with Siqua."

But Cassius wasn't to be so easily distracted. His eyes remained fixed on her face, and he took a step nearer to her.

"Yes, that's the question, but it's nothing new." Unexpectedly, he put a hand on her shoulder again. "I'm sorry you're caught up in this mess, Flora. I'm sorry the stalling of the alliance has such a personally devastating effect on you."

"Why are you apologizing?" she asked. "None of this is your doing."

"But I failed to stop it," he said. "I was responsible for my delegation, and I was too weak to keep control. And you're paying the price for it."

"You're not weak, Cassius," Flora said, alarmed by what she saw in his eyes. "No one thinks you're weak." Barely conscious of the gesture, she wrapped one arm around her waist, where the tether could be felt if they tested its limits. "I won't deny that our situation is awkward. But to describe it as devastating is...well, a little unflattering."

She sent him a crooked grin which he didn't return. Instead he stared into her eyes with an intensity that made it hard to breathe.

"It's devastating me," he said, the words so quiet she couldn't tell if he was speaking to her or himself.

Flora swallowed. His hand was heavy on her shoulder, and she was finding it hard to

properly fill her lungs.

“Stay away from Sir Keavling as much as you can,” Cassius said abruptly. “Don’t let him draw you into conversation.”

“I won’t,” she assured him. “I’m good at being discreet, Cassius. I won’t give our tether away. ”

He shook his head in frustration. “That’s not what I’m worried about.”

“Sir Keavling is what you should be worried about,” Flora told him firmly. His demeanor had distracted her, but she suddenly remembered her observations from the dining room. “He’s not who he’s pretending to be, Cassius. I saw his mask slip back there. The real him came out for a moment.”

Cassius nodded. “Yes, there’s no doubt that he’s been putting on a front to convince my father of his sincerity.”

Flora shook her head. “It’s more than that. He’s not just being careful with the impression he makes. He’s playing a part. Wholly and completely. It’s not the same thing. I don’t know how to explain it better than that, but you have to trust me. I don’t think he’s who he says he is.”

Cassius frowned at her, his hand still on her shoulder for some reason. “I do trust you, Flora.” The words were so sincere, they brought the hint of a flush to Flora’s cheeks. “I have a feeling you have your own experience with what you’re describing.”

That brought out the rest of the flush. Flora dropped her eyes quickly, unable to stand the strength of his focus.

“I’m not hiding any nefarious schemes, Your Highness,” she tried.

“No, don’t you dare reintroduce my title,” Cassius said. “Your mask won’t work on me anymore, Flora. We’re tethered together, remember? I know you better than you think.”

His words woke a powerful ache inside her, one so potent it surprised her. The thought of being truly known was...tantalizing.

“I wasn’t accusing you of anything nefarious,” Cassius added. “I just meant that I take your words about Sir Keavling seriously.”

“Good,” said Flora. “You should.”

The prince bit his lip, his fingers gently kneading her shoulder in a gesture that seemed unconscious to him, but that made her insides melt into a puddle. How was his touch so soothing?

“I think I’ll launch an investigation of my own,” he said, his eyes unfocused. “A very quiet one. I want his papers examined by an expert. I want to know more about the death of his uncle.”

“That’s a good idea,” said Flora eagerly. “If there’s someone you can trust with the task, we should set that in motion immediately.”

“Yes.” For some reason, her words made Cassius smile. “We should.” He drew his hand back, taking a breath and assuming his more formal princely demeanor. “And we can’t do so from within this garden. Come on.”

Flora followed him out of the hedges, finding it harder than ever to play the part of guard. She caught herself in the foolish thought that she wished they could stay in the privacy of the garden forever, just the two of them, with Cassius’s hand on her shoulder.

Thoughts like that would bring her no peace.

Chapter

Sixteen

The days following passed interminably, the constant need to be on duty wearing Flora down further and further. She was embarrassed by her lowered capacity, especially when the prince caught her out, on the third day after their conversation in the hedge.

“Flora?” Cassius actually had to wave his hand in front of her face to bring her out of her reverie.

“Your Highness.” Flora gasped, embarrassed at her inattentiveness. “I apologize deeply for my distraction. I—”

“Relax,” he told her, with more warmth than she deserved. “You can dispense with the formalities. Look around, we’re alone. The audience has finished.”

Flora cast her eyes around the small meeting room, her face flushing with mortification when she saw that he was right. She hadn’t even noticed the two members of the Merchants’ Guild leaving.

“I truly am sorry,” she told him in a more natural voice. “I’m a disgrace as a bodyguard. I suppose we just have to be grateful they didn’t intend to harm you.”

Cassius leaned back in his chair, perfectly at ease as he surveyed her. “If I considered them a threat, I wouldn’t have invited them to meet with me privately. I don’t usually

have guards in the room with me during every meeting, you know.”

She didn't reply.

“You're too hard on yourself, Flora,” Cassius said. “No one could keep their edge for this many days in a row without a break. I don't expect it for a moment. You're here because you have to be, through no choice of either of ours, not because your presence as a bodyguard is indispensable.” He waved a hand at the seat next to him. “Sit. You must be eager to get off your feet.”

Flora eyed him. “I don't think that's a good idea, Your Highness .”

Cassius's answering smile had an edge of smugness which made it hard to remember the need to retain the demeanor of a guard. If she was free to respond however she wished, she would have rolled her eyes at him for baiting her when she was on duty and unable to return the favor.

“Why is it not a good idea?” Cassius asked innocently.

“I'm sure you have other duties awaiting your attention.”

“Let them wait,” Cassius responded, his voice light.

He put his hands behind his head, watching her with far too much confidence. He was in a better mood than she'd seen in a long time. It reminded Flora of his infuriatingly relaxed manner when he'd woken on the floor of the inn that first morning after the tether was imposed. She distinctly recalled him lounging at his ease, in stark contrast to her fidgeting and not knowing what to do with her eyes while she waited for him to properly dress himself.

She couldn't really be annoyed, though. Now that she knew him better, she secretly

enjoyed this manner. It was a balm to her soul to see lightness on his brow for once, instead of the heaviness and frustration it usually wore. The meeting must have gone well—she'd been paying no attention to its contents, so she wouldn't know.

“You're so stiff, Flora.” The prince's voice cut into her thoughts. “I could be excused for thinking you're afraid to be alone with me.”

“I'm not afraid of you,” she told him, rising to the bait at once. “I just have more decorum than you do.”

Cassius leaned forward, his eyes pinning her. “Do you? I'm not sure I would call it decorum when you wound your magic around my hand at the dance. Some would even consider it brazen.”

Flora flushed in spite of herself, not missing the answering grin that crossed the prince's face when he saw it. He was deriving far too much enjoyment from teasing her.

“You didn't object at the time,” she said defensively.

His smile broadened. “I don't object now.” But a moment later, his expression became abruptly more serious, and he swiveled on his chair to face her.

“I think you are afraid of me, a little.”

“I'm not.” Flora's protest was immediate. “I never have been.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Not since that first night at the inn, anyway,” she insisted. “You told me I didn't have anything to fear from you, and I believed you. I've never doubted it since.”

He considered her for a moment before answering, his gaze so warm Flora had to fight another flush.

“I’m glad,” he said, and he clearly meant it. “You can believe it with confidence—I would die before I intentionally harmed you.”

The words weren’t spoken dramatically, but with simple sincerity. Nevertheless, Flora suddenly found it impossible to meet his eyes.

“But that’s not what I meant,” Cassius went on. “There are different types of fear. I can’t think of any reason for someone to hide if there’s no fear involved.”

“Hide?” she repeated warily, bringing her gaze back to his face.

Cassius held her eyes with his, his expression still calm and uncomfortably penetrating. “Surely you don’t intend to deny that you’re hiding, even from me.”

Flora said nothing, her mouth suddenly dry. No one had ever seen through her as completely as Cassius had. It was the tether at work. It must be.

Suddenly, the prince was on his feet, his air still relaxed and his steps confident as he moved toward her. Flora found herself shifting backward, forgetting that she was standing against the wall, like a guard was supposed to. Her back connected with the stone, and she stopped, trying to keep some shred of her poise. It didn’t help that she was seized by a desire to reach out and grip the prince’s tunic with both hands when he placed one forearm along the wall next to her head. He raised his other hand to brush his thumb gently against her jawline.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” he said softly.

“Wouldn’t what?” It took her two tries to get the words out.

“Hide from me.”

His voice was low, with just a hint of huskiness, and it made Flora’s knees feel absurdly weak. Some guard she was—more like a fainting damsel. She was overcome by an impulse to pour out her heart to him, tell him all her history. But what would it achieve? It wouldn’t change their current situation, and it would make it impossible for the dynamic between them to go back to the way it had been.

Still, his nearness made her feel bold, and she lifted one hand, her eyes following its progress as her fingers traced the embroidery at the throat of the prince’s tunic.

“Haven’t you ever wanted to hide from the life you were born into?”

“Yes.” His answer was immediate. “But I don’t have that luxury. I have no choice but to face things head on.”

Flora bit her lip, refraining from pointing out his inconsistency. She understood why he was hiding from the tether rather than facing it head on, and it would give her no pleasure to make him feel like a failure for the decision.

“What will you do?” Cassius asked abruptly. “Where will you go when the alliance is complete and we’re free of the tether?” The intensity of his gaze made it impossible for Flora to look away.

“I...I don’t know.” She was struggling to gather her thoughts.

“Back to Siqua?” the prince pressed.

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. Not if Miriam isn’t there.”

He frowned. “Then where?”

“Maybe to Torrens,” she said vaguely. “There may be a role for me at the academy. Or the mistress may have useful contacts to help me find a position.”

The furrow on Cassius’s brow told her he didn’t like it. But they both heard the unmistakable sounds of the door being opened, and the prince straightened quickly.

Flora schooled her features as he stepped back and a servant girl entered the room. She had a broom in her hand, and she stared uncertainly between the prince and the guard.

“My apologies, Your Highness,” she said. “I thought the room was unoccupied.”

“It’s about to be,” he assured her casually. “I’ve just concluded a meeting with guild representatives, and was on the point of leaving.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” She bobbed a curtsy as he strode around the table.

Flora’s thoughts were reeling as she followed the prince out of the public area of the castle. Her main conclusion was that she was a hopeless cause. She found it impossible not to respond when Cassius was in a mood of anguished frustration over his various dilemmas. But it seemed that the lighthearted, casual version of him was equally irresistible to her.

It was a mess, that much was certain.

“What were you thinking about?”

“What?” Flora started guiltily.

The prince was walking just ahead of her, his gaze flicking back to where she followed.

“During the meeting, when you weren’t paying attention to whether the guild representatives were actually assassins in disguise,” he explained lightly. “Where were your thoughts then?”

“Oh.” Flora relaxed. “I was thinking about Princess Miriam, actually. If I know her—and I do—she’s been very distressed all this time, probably blaming herself for my...”

“Predicament?” Cassius offered, and she nodded.

“Yes, that. I wish I could send her a message to tell her I’m all right, but...” She glanced around to make sure no one was hearing their conversation. “But I don’t think it’s wise for me to send messages to Siquil through the royal courier.”

“Probably not,” Cassius agreed thoughtfully. “But I don’t see the danger in sending one through a normal courier service, outside the castle.”

She gave him a pointed look. “Except that to do that I would have to go outside the castle, which isn’t an option.”

“It is if I accompany you.” Cassius seemed enthusiastic about the idea. “Didn’t I promise to show you some of the beauties of the city?”

“You did,” Flora said cautiously. “But can you be spared?”

“I’m the crown prince, I can do whatever I want.”

A grin escaped Flora at the highly inaccurate statement, and Cassius’s answering chuckle told her that was how he’d intended it to be received.

The offer was irresistible, and Flora wasted no time in penning a note to Miriam.

Before long, they were riding out of the castle gates, four other guards in tow.

“There’s a market not far from the castle,” Cassius told her, as their horses traversed the cobblestones at a walk. He was clearly as delighted to have a change of scenery as she was. “And a posting house just next to it. You can send your message, then we can buy something to eat at the market and take it to the nearest park. You said you wanted to see one of those.”

“I’m supposed to be on duty as your guard,” Flora reminded him. “You don’t need to buy me food—in fact, you shouldn’t.”

“I brought a full complement of guards so that you wouldn’t need to be on duty,” Cassius corrected her. “I want you to just enjoy seeing some of the city.”

She hesitated, and his pale blue eyes took on a hint of entreaty. “Please, Flora,” he said quietly. “For my sake if not your own, can you please try to just enjoy my home?”

Unable to resist the appeal, she felt her shoulders relax.

“I wouldn’t be averse to some food,” she acknowledged.

Cassius’s smile was blinding, and Flora’s foolish heart did yet another flip. She was unwise to so desperately crave being the one to bring the lightness back to his brow. But she couldn’t help it.

The letter was easily dispatched, and Flora felt more relaxed than she had in a long time as she followed Cassius into the markets. One of the guards stayed with the horses, the other three following them through the throng. The prince’s presence quickly attracted notice, and Flora enjoyed seeing the easy way in which Cassius wore his position. He didn’t show much warmth, but neither was he cold or aloof. He

acknowledged the attention with steady grace, everything from his gait to his alert gaze proclaiming strength and confidence.

He took her to a series of stalls, apparently in no hurry as she admired beautiful fabrics, exotic flowers, and even a stall that featured a few wolpertinger pelts.

“They’re expensive, aren’t they?” she commented, running a finger over the soft fur.

She could still make out the squirrel-like shape of it, and she saw that feathers from wolpertinger wings were also for sale, along with a few of the antlers that graced the small creatures’ heads. She lowered her voice so the salesman wouldn’t hear.

“Is it a scam, do you think? Do people think that these items retain magical properties? They don’t, from what I understand.”

Cassius shook his head. “No, there’s no deception. They’re not marketed as containing magic. They’re just very rare, since it’s illegal in Carrack to kill wolpertingers.” He raised an inquiring eyebrow. “As I assume it is elsewhere?”

Flora nodded. The creatures were found in the woodlands of both Torrens and Siquel, and they were protected in those kingdoms as well. They couldn’t be bred, farmed, or hunted. The potential for misuse was too high, given their movements generated a disproportionately huge amount of magic.

“Vendors must prove that the animals died of natural causes,” Cassius went on. “Each dead wolpertinger must be registered intact and cause of death must be determined by an expert before the pelts can be harvested. All of which makes them a rare commodity. Doubly rare since the creatures are so infrequently seen in the first place.”

“I see.” Flora turned away, sniffing hopefully in the direction of the next stall. It was

selling some kind of honey-dipped pastry.

“This is a Carrackian delicacy,” Cassius told her enthusiastically. “You must try one.”

Flora hung back as he purchased two of the pastries, her eyes scanning the area. She knew that the prince had said she wasn’t on duty, but being in a crowd ignited all her guard instincts of alertness. She noticed one man in particular who was watching the prince with intense focus. He was making his laborious way past a nearby fountain, leading a horse that pulled a cart of goods. He saw her looking and hurriedly averted his gaze, but Flora’s attention was caught.

She received the pastry from Cassius with a word of thanks, her focus still half on the stranger.

“What do you think?” Cassius asked, as they moved toward the fountain .

“It’s delicious,” said Flora, holding the delicacy with one hand.

“We should find a vendor selling cobaltite goods,” Cassius said. “I remember you were interested to see it up close.”

“Yes,” Flora said. “I would like that.”

She spoke mechanically, her eyes on the man with the cart as they passed by him. She was distracted the whole time they were looking at the polished, dark stone, and Cassius picked up on it.

“What’s wrong?” he asked quietly.

“Maybe nothing.” Flora searched, but the man was no longer in view. “But I feel

watched.”

The prince frowned, following her gaze around the market square.

“We’ve seen enough of the markets,” he said. “Let’s head for the park.”

Flora nodded, and out of force of habit, she fell into position behind Cassius as the group moved out of the markets. Just as the prince left the market square, a horse pranced past, forcing Flora to stop and separating her from the rest of the group.

She waited impatiently for the creature’s owner to get it under control. She couldn’t even see the prince anymore, and her tension rose as she wondered how far they were pushing their twenty-foot boundary. Just as the horse was finally moving along, and Flora was able to start forward, the man leading the horse stepped back in front of her and gripped her arm.

An angry protest was on Flora’s lips, but it died when she looked up and realized whose hand was around her arm. It was the man from near the fountain. He’d unhooked his horse from the cart, and like a fool, she’d been too focused on catching up with the prince to recognize him.

“I’m sorry, Miss,” the man said before she could speak. “I didn’t mean to hold you up. My horse is spirited, Miss, it was just an accident.”

“Yes, all right, no harm done,” she said tightly, her spare hand drifting toward her dagger just in case.

Up close, the man didn’t seem at all threatening, but there was still something suspicious about his manner. She tried to pull her arm away, but he held on tenaciously.

“I saw you were with the prince, Miss, one of his guards or servants or something,” the man rambled on. “I won’t get in no trouble for holding you up, will I?”

“Not if you stop holding me up,” she said flatly. “Let me go.”

“Oh, so sorry, Miss!” he declared again. He released her arm, but still blocked her way, his horse positioned in such a way that it was near impossible for her to get past. “I meant no disrespect by it.”

With the words, Flora felt the sudden pressure around her waist that told her Cassius was now twenty feet away. His stride was strong, and she stumbled sideways a step before the pressure eased. He must not have realized she wasn’t right behind him until the tether pulled him up.

“I must go,” she said curtly.

“Wait.” The man grabbed her arm again, still looking anxious.

“I’ve asked you not to touch me,” she said through gritted teeth, pulling herself free.

The pressure had started again, and it was difficult for Flora to make the movement inconspicuous as she was dragged awkwardly sideways. The prince’s guards were probably trying to urge him onward .

All at once the pressure stopped, and she let out a breath. She side-stepped the still talking man, about to pass him when Cassius came into view, his face forbidding.

“Why are you accosting my guard?” Cassius demanded of the man, entering the conversation with unnecessary aggression.

The man quailed under the harsh question. Flora cut off his stuttering apologies.

“All is well, Your Highness,” she told Cassius. “Apologies for delaying you.”

Her eyes conveyed the unspoken message, let’s go. She was eager to get away from the exposed position of the market. As they at last left the square behind, she glanced backward and froze.

“What is it?” Cassius, more attuned to her this time, paused as well.

A group of people was passing, and when her view cleared again, Flora stared at the fountain. The figure was gone.

“Flora?”

She looked at the prince. “I thought...I thought I saw someone. Back where that man with the horse was before.”

“Who?”

“I can’t be sure, it was only a brief glimpse, and he’s gone now. But it looked like...” She glanced up to make sure the other guards couldn’t hear. “It looked like Sir Keavling.”

Cassius stiffened, his eyes flying to the fountain in question, to search fruitlessly for the nobleman.

“Come on,” he said, his tone dark. “We’re leaving.”

He placed a hand on the small of her back, ushering her toward the guard who still watched their horses. Flora didn’t miss the way the other guards looked from the prince’s hand to each other, but she didn’t pull away. She didn’t want to get separated again.

Her stomach was in knots as they rode back to the castle. Had it been Sir Keavling, or had her suspicion of the man caused her mind to put his face on some unimportant stranger with a similar build? If he had been present, it felt sinister.

When they reached the castle, she was relieved to see Cassius make for his suite, and didn't protest when he ushered her inside.

"I'm sorry," she said, sinking into a chair as soon as they were alone. "I shouldn't have allowed myself to get separated from the group."

Cassius made a noise of protest in his throat. "You have no need to apologize."

"I feel that I do," she contradicted. "There was something off about that man. I noticed him at the fountain earlier, and I think the way he blocked me was intentional. If he'd been seeking to harm you, I made you vulnerable by forcing you to come back to—"

"Stop!" The passion in Cassius's voice drew her up short. "Stop, Flora, I hate it when you talk like that, like you have no thought for your own safety, only mine."

"Cassius...I'm a guard. Putting your safety before mine is my entire role."

He wasn't listening, striding up the length of his receiving room and back. "I don't like it," he said. "Any of it. Do you really think it was Sir Keavling you saw?"

"Yes." Flora folded her hands on her lap, trying to stop her leg from jiggling with her nervous energy. "I can't prove it, but I think it was. I feel uneasy, Cassius. The incident with that man and his horse, it felt like..." She hesitated. "Well, like someone was testing our tether."

"Curse the man, why is he always there, always watching?" Cassius muttered.

He was still striding up and down the room, almost as agitated as he'd been when they'd entered the hedge. Abruptly, he turned, dropping to one knee in front of where Flora sat.

"I'm sorry that happened, Flora."

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes it does," he contradicted. "When I realized we'd been separated, and I saw that man grab your arm to keep you trapped...I can hardly explain the anger I felt."

He'd reached for her with the words, and his hand now sat on top of hers where it rested on her knee. The contact was making it hard for Flora to keep her thoughts in order.

"I can."

Flora's hand shook a little under the prince's, but her voice was steady. It was time to say what had been circling her thoughts since the last time he'd showed such a disproportionate level of distress, during their encounter in the hedge spiral. It wouldn't be easy to get the words out, but it needed to be done.

"What do you mean?" Cassius demanded.

Flora drew in a slow breath before answering. "I mean that I think there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for the strength of emotion you might be feeling." Her eyes flicked to his hand on her knee, then back to his face. "For any emotion you might be feeling where I'm concerned."

Cassius's eyes searched hers, the silence so tense she could taste it.

“And what explanation is that?” His voice was deep, the words spoken slowly and clearly.

“The tether,” Flora blurted out. “It’s the tether fooling you into thinking that you have stronger emotions than you do.”

“What?” Cassius said it as though she’d lost her mind.

“It’s true,” she insisted. “We’ve both observed that it’s not just a physical link. There’s an emotional connection of some sort, although I doubt Lord Armand intended it. It amplifies things, and...and connects us. How could it not...addle the way we think about each other?”

Cassius stared at her for a long moment. “Is that truly what you think is happening?”

Flora nodded, trying to swallow the lump in her throat. The words had hurt to say, but she needed him to hear them, to see that she was right. Before things went further, and she brought down more trouble on him.

He looked like he had a response, but a rap at the door prevented him from uttering it. He stood, Flora also rising and taking a guard-like position behind a chair as Cassius ran a hand through his hair in irritation.

“Enter.”

The prince’s valet appeared, ready to assist with preparations for dinner. Cassius looked irked, but Flora slipped from the room before he could protest, eager for a few minutes in her own suite before she would need to accompany him to dinner. Her thoughts were all in a jumble. She felt relieved at the interruption, but also regretful. She wanted to know the silent thoughts that had been in the prince’s eyes when he’d asked her so solemnly if she thought the connection they felt was due to the tether. It

had been hard to read his reaction to the idea.

Her time alone didn't bring much clarity, and soon enough, she was walking with the prince along the now-familiar corridor, in the direction of the smaller dining room .

"You look tired," Cassius told her softly, when they found themselves in an empty stretch of corridor. He'd dispensed with his other guards again. "I wish you could rest in your room and have food brought to you there."

"A kind thought," Flora said with a touch of weariness. "But not possible." She flicked her eyes around their still-empty area. "I confess I'd be grateful not to have to stand behind your chair for all of dinner. Do you think perhaps I could take up a position in the corridor instead?"

"If you prefer it, of course," said Cassius. "The private dining room isn't large. We shouldn't have an issue."

Flora nodded gratefully. She wouldn't have to endure a whole meal of silent glares from the queen.

When they reached the dining room, Cassius nodded his approval, and Flora took up a position outside the door as he disappeared into the room. There were no other guards present, so presumably the king's guards were in the dining room with him. Flora settled into position outside the door with a sigh of relief. She could afford to relax—no particular vigilance was required. The food was taken into the dining room through an interior door, so although the occasional servant would probably pass by, she knew it wasn't a heavily trafficked route.

One person did approach the dining room from the corridor, entering with confidence about half an hour into the meal. She recognized the man as the head of Cassius's personal guard, and her curiosity was piqued.

Only a few minutes later, a large food trolley trundled up. It struck her as odd, given that there was a more efficient way for the food to reach the royal dining table. There was no one else around, only the solitary servant who pushed the cart, and suspicion tickled at her mind. She slipped a hand into her pocket, closing it around her sling as the cart came to a stop outside the door.

She wasn't quick enough. She'd only half drawn the weapon when a sudden flash of movement—or rather the Dust it highlighted to her senses—gave her only a second's warning before the servant leaped forward and struck her a blow to the head.

Flora was too shocked to cry out, her head spinning and her thoughts fuzzy as she tried desperately to generate motion with her sling. How had she let herself be so easily caught off guard?

She'd just grasped hold of a tendril of magic when a second man—also dressed like a servant—poured out of the bottom space of the covered food trolley. Flora reached for the small blade at her side, but she was still dazed, and he struck with the speed of a viper. Before she could properly raise the blade, he was on her, wresting the weapon from her hand and covering her mouth with something.

She thrashed for only a matter of seconds before she felt her already befuddled senses slipping away from her.

Chapter

Seventeen

Cassius couldn't focus on his meal. He was too occupied with thinking over Flora's words.

Did she really think that his behavior toward her was somehow orchestrated by their tether? Was there any chance she was right? His every instinct rebelled against the idea, but he wasn't sure whether to trust his instincts anymore.

She wasn't wrong that his emotions were unsettlingly strong where she was concerned. He didn't think he'd ever experienced such passion about anything. The anger that filled him anytime he saw Sir Keavling studying her, his anguish whenever she blamed herself for some imagined failure toward him...the absolute despair when he admitted to himself, as he tossed and turned in the early hours of the morning, that he had no way to extricate her from the mess he'd landed her in.

The only way out was to formalize his marriage alliance to Princess Miriam, and not only was the alliance stalled, the prospect was starting to seem unbearable to him. He still thought an alliance with Siqua was the best future for Carrack. But a marriage to the Siquan princess?

The food tasted like ash in his mouth.

When Cassius heard the door into the corridor open, he turned quickly, thinking Flora may have decided to enter after all. But it was a different guard entirely who entered

the room, his eyes finding Cassius at once.

Cassius stood, drawing his mother's attention.

"Cassius?" The queen's voice held a reproach as Cassius stood to greet the head of his personal guard.

"Just some pressing business, Mother," he told her. "It won't take long."

He motioned the guard toward the far side of the room, where they could speak in low voices without being overheard.

"Well?" Cassius asked softly. "What have you found?"

His head guard looked grim. "Something, Your Highness. I don't have conclusive evidence yet, but what I've seen is enough to convince me. There's a problem with Sir Keavling's papers."

"What's the problem?" Cassius pressed. "They were considered valid by the royal archivist when he first arrived at court."

"They're very good forgeries," the man said with a nod. "I'm not surprised they passed as genuine. But I went over them in painstaking detail, like you instructed, going back four generations and comparing them against papers of those with shared ancestors. And there was a discrepancy in one of the names about two generations back. A minor one, that wouldn't usually raise concern. I decided to follow it up, and I found that the exact same error had appeared in prior versions of the other records, but none within the last century. It had been corrected in all current versions."

Cassius frowned. "What are you saying? You suspect the documents he presented were copied from inaccurate ones acquired more than a hundred years ago?"

“I suspected it at first. Now I know it. I’ve spent some time learning the history of the Keavling line. Generations back, during a famine, they attempted to emigrate to the continent. They were driven out by the ruling clan of the area, and returned within two years. They were forced to flee, leaving all their effects behind.”

“And someone had the foresight to archive their documents rather than destroy them,” Cassius said thoughtfully.

“There’s more,” the guard said. “The death of the last title holder, so-called uncle of the man claiming to be Sir Keavling, is very suspicious. I rode out to the estate myself, and no one was aware of the late nobleman’s nephew existing until he showed up shortly after his uncle’s death.”

“He’s an imposter,” Cassius growled. He felt some anger, but at least as much relief. He would be able to expel the man now, and end his influence with the king.

Should he raise it with his father at once, though, or wait for concrete evidence? He was silently grappling with the question when he started at the sensation of slim arms being slid around his middle. He didn’t look down to see who’d grabbed him this time—he’d come to recognize the feeling.

Flora.

Cassius turned his face toward the door, frowning. What was going on? Was she just stretching her legs within the tether, or was she actually trying to leave the area?

He seemed to have his answer as the tug became more insistent. For a moment, he stood rooted, his greater physical strength holding the ground as her movements continued to tug at him. This was no accidental brush with the edge of their boundary.

Cassius took a step forward, the pressure easing momentarily then returning.

“Your Highness?” The guard was watching him with furrowed brow.

“Thank you for your report,” said Cassius, taking another step toward the door. “I will consider what’s best to do next.”

“Are you well, Your Highness?”

The guard looked concerned, and for a split second Cassius considered telling him what was happening. He trusted the man more than anyone else on his guard. But he’d gone too long without betraying the tether to do so lightly.

“I’m fine,” he told the other man. “I need to attend to something.”

He was moving toward the door as he spoke, the pull too strong to resist, but he asked one final question.

“Was my Siqualian bodyguard outside the door when you entered?”

His head guard nodded, bemused as the prince kept moving away from him. “She was standing to attention just outside, Your Highness.”

Cassius nodded, trying to seem regal as he practically jogged across the room. She’d only just started moving, then.

“Where are you going, Cassius?” his mother demanded.

“A quick matter, Mother,” Cassius assured her. His father was also staring at him, and he tried not to look ridiculous as he opened the door, his movements jerky. A flash of frustration passed over him. What was Flora playing at? “I’ll be back in a

moment.”

Ignoring their protests, he moved out into the corridor, casting his eyes around vainly for Flora. The area was completely deserted. Cassius’s skin prickled, his annoyance lanced with concern. But he was in his own castle, and Flora had been standing there moments before. She obviously hadn’t gone far. And thanks to the tether, it wouldn’t be difficult to find her. She was moving slowly and steadily, not running as she undoubtedly would be if she was in danger.

He strode forward, following the tug of the tether. As he moved into a busier part of the castle, any fear was allayed. If Flora had moved through the area at a sedate pace moments before, she couldn’t be in too great a crisis. When he rounded a corner and found himself looking down a long corridor, however, he paused. Surely the hallway was more than twenty feet long, and yet he could see no sign of her. Plenty of others moved through the space, a pair of guards heading in the direction of their barracks, a group of maids, a servant pushing a trolley.

Cassius was tugged forward once again by the tether, frowning now as he increased his speed. He was surprised when the invisible lead took him through a door and into the garden where he and Flora had snatched a moment of privacy within the hedge spiral. Darkness had fallen, but he could still make out the hedges up ahead. He stood just inside the garden, waiting for another tug.

None came. Flora had come to this garden and stopped. She was somewhere nearby, still mysteriously out of his sight. The only place within twenty feet that she could be hidden was in the hedge spiral. Had she called him here to be alone, away from the prying eyes that were always watching inside the castle?

The thought made his heart lurch, and he stepped forward again. Unease still tugged at him, and his hand tested his side, reassuring himself that the hilt of his sword was in easy reach.

“Flora?”

He spoke softly as he entered the hedge and moved cautiously through its spirals. Relief flooded him when he caught sight of her partway around the first bend.

“Flora.”

He could only see a sliver of her, but he’d know her anywhere. She was sitting on the ground with her back to him, her head leaned back against the hedge, looking up at the starry sky above. When she didn’t respond to his greeting, Cassius strode forward.

“Flora, what—Flora!” Alarm raced over him as he reached her at last, only to find that she wasn’t staring up at the sky at all. Her eyes were closed, and her face was deathly pale.

Cassius knelt down, panic overtaking his better sense as he grasped her shoulder. The contact sent her toppling sideways, the movement masking another one behind him. He knew nothing except a brief moment of blinding pain on the back of his head, then blackness.

Cassius woke to an agonizing headache and an unsettling sense of restriction.

He forced his eyes open. The light was dim, and the air horribly stuffy. He couldn’t seem to move his limbs at all. The disorientation was intense, and for several long moments he couldn’t make sense of where he was.

Then his eyes fell on another shape in the gloom, and ice seized his heart as the events of the evening came rushing back. He’d been so easily manipulated. Someone had discovered not only the tether, but his determination to hide it, and no more had been needed to draw him into a trap like a fool.

And as always, Flora had paid the price for his weakness. Doubly so. While he was bound hands and feet, with a thick rope attaching him to a ring on the wall, Flora was much more brutally restrained. She was upright, ropes binding her to a narrow wooden beam so tightly that her breaths were shallow and labored. Even her head was strapped back. There were no obvious injuries on her, but her eyes were closed, and her lips and cheeks were colorless. In addition to whatever means their enemies had used to subdue her, she would have suffered twice the impact of the blow Cassius took, even if she'd been unconscious at the time and unable to feel it happen. It was a wonder she was still alive.

“Flora!” It came out as a rasp, Cassius struggling against his bonds.

To his relief, her eyes flew open at once. He could see the panic in their dark depths, and he willed her to keep her gaze locked on him, to find an anchor there.

“It’s all right, Flora. I’m here. We’ll find a way out of this.”

She didn’t respond, and peering through the dimly lit space, he realized that on top of everything else, she had a thin gag threaded around her mouth.

He swallowed the rage he was feeling, knowing that cursing and swearing vengeance wouldn’t help her right now.

“Do you hear me, Flora?” he said firmly. “Don’t give up on me, all right?”

A single tear leaked down her cheek, sending a metaphorical dagger through Cassius’s heart. But she kept her eyes on his, and he could see her gaining control of herself.

“Did you see who’s behind this?” he asked.

She strained a little, but it occurred to him that bound as she was, she couldn't even nod or shake her head.

Cassius let out a hiss of frustration. "They don't want you moving at all," he realized. "They don't want you to have access to any magic to harness."

He looked around the space, which appeared to be a root cellar. That must be why the air was so still.

"I'm not as tightly bound," he mused. "I can move around some. Can you harness the magic from my movement?"

His words were hopeful, but it only took one glance at her sagging form to remind him that she was in no state for advanced magical feats. He remembered something from his studies about it requiring incredible strength to wrest magic from someone else's movements, akin to the mental version of battling them with your bare hands.

Flora was again unable to answer his question with words or head movements, but she flicked her eyes backwards and forwards, which he took as an attempt to shake her head.

"Don't worry," he told her quickly. "You don't have to do anything. Just let your body rest as best you can. I'll figure something out."

His words had the opposite effect to what he intended. He saw familiar determination blaze into life in Flora's eyes. Already some color was returning to her as he mused aloud about their situation. How long had she been awake and alone, succumbing to panic in the gloom of the cellar?

Flora's eyes darted around, taking in the small space. There wasn't much they could use. But as Cassius watched, one of her shoulders started to shift. It wasn't much

movement, but from the determined way she kept doing it, Cassius assumed it was stirring up something. A tiny movement caught his eye, and he gestured to it with his head.

“Look! A beetle. You don’t have to fight animals to harness their movement, right?”

Flora didn’t answer, but her attention was bent on the insect in a way that confirmed his question. Cassius watched, hypnotized by the rhythmic motion of her shoulder and the intensity of her focus on the beetle. Sweat began to bead on her forehead, and before his eyes, the rope around her moving shoulder loosened ever so slightly. He could tell because the movements of her shoulder became more pronounced. It seemed her plan was to use what little magic she could gain to free herself inch by inch, each new step allowing greater movement that would compound the effect of what she was doing.

Judging by how minimally the rope at her shoulder had loosened, it would be a long and tedious process. Did she have the strength for that?

“Don’t overdo it,” he said anxiously. “Don’t put all the magic to the task instead of using half for your own energy. In fact, maybe you should just use it all for your energy until you’ve recovered some strength.”

Flora didn’t respond, but the set of her jaw communicated stubbornness, and Cassius’s alarm flared .

“I mean it, Flora. Don’t kill yourself trying to get free, what would be the point? If you manage to create enough movement to harness magic, use it all to replenish your energy.”

She gave a muffled grunt, and he realized that her expression wasn’t defiant so much as frustrated.

“That’s not right, is it?” he mused, thinking back over what he’d said. He tried to recall his studies in magic. “You can’t use magic that way.”

Flora couldn’t nod any more than she could shake her head, but she looked less frustrated, so he took it as a sign that he was on the right track.

“I recall now,” he assured her. “Magic can be used as energy to fuel its own activity under the hand of the one harnessing it, but it can’t be turned into pure energy, to just be absorbed or held by someone.”

He looked down at his own bound hands. “Would it be easier for you to free my hands first? Then maybe I could use them to get my feet free, and I could try to reach you and—”

He cut off abruptly at the sound of approaching footsteps. Flora froze as well, watching the door warily. It flung open, and a burly man Cassius had never seen before appeared in the frame.

“Awake, are we?” The man grunted as he moved into the room. “You’ll come with me, then.” His words were directed at Cassius, and he ignored Flora completely.

“Do you understand what you’ve done?” Cassius’s voice rang through the stuffy space. “Do you think you can abduct and imprison a prince of Carrack with no consequences? You will all be hanged, every one of you.”

“Inclined to be difficult, are we?” The man gave a whistle, and another thickset captor appeared. He loomed menacingly over Cassius as the first man untied him from the chain on the wall.

“Don’t think to lead me about like a dog,” Cassius spat at the man’s feet. “We are not animals, and we will not be treated as such.” He inclined his head toward Flora in an

imperious gesture. “Unbind her at once.”

“Not likely,” scoffed the second man.

The first one had unfastened Cassius from the wall. “Now are you coming willingly, or do we drag you?”

“I’d like to see you try.” Cassius forced the words through gritted teeth, his outrage at the insult not just to him but to his kingdom almost robbing him of the ability to speak.

“I don’t think you would like to see it,” the man told him matter-of-factly. “It wouldn’t be pretty.” He jerked a thumb toward Flora, who was watching wide eyed but immobile. “Our orders are to run her through if you won’t cooperate. Apparently we don’t strictly need her anymore.”

Rage, more potent than anything Cassius had felt in his life, lanced through him. But he had to keep his cool. He couldn’t show them how easily they could manipulate him by threatening Flora.

“Your orders, are they? And who is giving these orders?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” the man said. “That’s why we’re here for you.” He grinned unpleasantly from where he was squatting, freeing Cassius’s feet. “You’ve been summoned by the boss.”

Cassius threw a final glance at Flora, trying not to let the men see how much he was motivated by fear for her. Those dark eyes stared back at him, their expression raw and intense.

With an effort, he pulled himself away, his heart thudding in his chest as he followed

the men from the cellar. They emerged into some kind of abandoned dwelling, dilapidated and dirty. The room above the cellar contained a table and two chairs and nothing else. Biting back the anger he longed to vent, he allowed himself to be shoved into one of the chairs, his legs swiftly tied to its base and his hands untied from in front of him before being swiftly retied behind his back.

He felt no surprise at the lean figure that strolled into the room, but a growl still issued from his throat, long and low, when the self-titled Sir Keavling seated himself across the table.

“Your Highness,” he said pleasantly, his accent nothing like the one he’d been using in Crandell. “So nice of you to join me.”

“You will die for this,” Cassius said, his voice vibrating with passion. His thoughts were on Flora, tied up below.

“I don’t think I will,” Sir Keavling said. “Dying isn’t a part of my plans.” He leaned forward. “And my plans are very carefully laid.”

“What do you want from me?” Cassius spat.

The other man leaned back, interlacing his fingers. “What I did want was your cooperation. Or even your passivity. If you’d just stepped out of my way, we wouldn’t be in this situation. But instead you took great pains to make it clear that I would not succeed in my goals until I had removed you from the picture.”

His eyes were keen as they considered Cassius’s face. “It’s an inconvenience I didn’t wish for, but don’t let it concern you. It won’t be wasted. I’ve found a way to make your disappearance serve my purposes perfectly.”

“And what purposes are those?” Cassius growled. The audacity of this man was

staggering, thinking he could order the future of Carrack according to his whims. “Why do you care if we ally ourselves with Siqua?”

“The kingdoms of the continent have other plans for Carrack, that’s why,” the imposter said idly. “There’s absolutely no need for you to know what they are.”

“You were behind the attack on Princess Miriam, weren’t you?” Cassius said. “You were willing to go to any lengths to stop an alliance between Carrack and Siqua.”

“If one has a cause,” Sir Keavling informed him, “one must be fully committed to it. One must lay a careful plan, and follow it to the last detail.”

Cassius raised a scornful eyebrow. “You haven’t done so, though, have you? Your attempt to prevent me returning to Carrack failed dismally.”

The other man shook his head. “You wrong me, Your Highness. I had no designs on your life until you declared yourself my enemy. The unfortunate incident with the arrow to your shoulder was an accident. I must thank you for bringing it up—I hoped for the opportunity to clear my name of such clumsiness. The whole situation was regrettable.”

“You placed archers in a tree on my route by accident?” Cassius asked, the man’s falsely benign tone chafing at him.

“Their presence wasn’t an accident,” Sir Keavling assured him. “Merely the unlucky shot that hit you. They were supposed to fire on your party and miss. I was still hoping you’d be more use to my cause alive, you see. All I needed was to show that Siqua wasn’t the only target of attack. From my man’s report, it seems that one of the archers was fool enough to accidentally let an arrow fly while himself being shot down from the tree. The fact that it penetrated your defenses and found a mark is nothing short of extraordinary. If the man weren’t dead, I would hardly know whether

to congratulate or censure him. It's no matter, however. The attack on you was sufficiently offensive to your father to assist in my cause."

"Your cause is hopeless. Carrack will never bow to any authority from the continent." Cassius's every muscle was strained in his anger. "Carrack always has been and always will be part of the Peninsula. And we will resist to the last breath any attempt by the continent to interfere with our autonomy."

The other man's smile was unnerving. "We'll see." With a flourish, he pulled two folded pieces of parchment from his pocket, followed by a pen. "Now. If you'll kindly copy out this letter in your own hand onto the blank parchment, I won't need to waste any more of your time."

Cassius's brows drew together as he scanned the neat writing that filled the first page. His breath caught in his throat as he took in its substance—a letter from him to his father, stating that he'd been abducted by Torrenese royal guards masquerading as bandits, and was being treated like a prisoner of war. Apparently he'd been very quick-witted in finding a way to sneak the letter to a sympathetic peasant.

"Absolutely not," he said flatly, pushing back from the table. "I will never write that."

"Try to be reasonable," Sir Keavling said, with the long-suffering voice one might use to an overwhelmed child. "It's really such a simple task."

"A simple task that will plunge Carrack into war," said Cassius. "Never."

Sir Keavling sighed, then gave a nod to one of the burly men now flanking Cassius's chair. The next thing Cassius knew, the man had sunk his fist into Cassius's stomach.

He doubled over in pain, a grunt escaping him as the air was knocked from his lungs.

“I urge you to reconsider.”

Cassius raised his head, glaring at the pseudo-nobleman. “No.”

Another blow, this one from the henchman on the other side. Cassius slumped in the chair, pain radiating from his middle. And behind the pain, something else tugged at his awareness. Some additional layer of agony.

Hot, sick realization dropped into his stomach, infinitely worse than the effects of the blows.

Flora.

Every time he was struck, she was feeling the same pain. But twice as potent.

“Stop!” he cried.

The man ignored him, the next punch landing squarely on his jaw.

On Flora’s jaw.

The same one Cassius had so boldly traced in that meeting room hours before this nightmare began, relishing the softness of her skin against the pad of his thumb. He pictured her face as he’d seen it minutes before in the cellar, pale and drawn, holding the panic back from her eyes only by the sheer force of her will.

And now this pain that slashed across his face had been added to her sufferings, only much worse.

It was unendurable.

“Stop!” he said again. One of the men moved closer, and Cassius spat at him.
“Enough!”

“Enough already?” Sir Keavling’s tone was one of polite surprise. “So cooperative.”
He held out the pen.

Cassius strained against his bonds, trying to master the rage that filled him as he realized how powerless he was.

“Your Highness?” His captor gave him a meaningful look. “Are you ready to comply?”

“You know I can’t do that,” Cassius growled.

He couldn’t start a war. If he wrote the letter, Sir Keavling would kill him, and make it look like Torrens had assassinated his father’s heir. War would be inevitable. Many would suffer, many would die.

“Not so cooperative, then.”

The words were barely out of Sir Keavling’s mouth when the world spun as the first man kicked Cassius’s chair out from under him, sending it—and him—crashing to the floor. A grunt of pain escaped him as his shoulder and hip bore the brunt of the impact.

Flora’s shoulder. Flora’s hip.

Cassius tried fruitlessly to struggle up before he was incapacitated by a kick to the stomach. The pain that blossomed was nothing to the silent cry of agony that reached him through the tether.

“STOP!”

The word came out as a roar. He barely felt the pain in his body anymore, and was barely aware of the blood that trickled from the corner of his mouth. His mind was completely consumed by Flora. The knowledge that she was alone, bound, and being beaten by an invisible assailant on account of him...the agony of that was impossible to endure. That pain might just kill him.

“It will stop as soon as you write the letter,” Sir Keavling told him.

“There must be something else you want,” Cassius panted, trying to force his frantic mind to think. “Something else, anything else. Please, stop. Just stop.”

There was a moment of silence, then Cassius heard footsteps, and the other man’s face suddenly appeared down at his level.

“ Please? Is the prince of mighty Carrack begging? But where is your pride?” His voice took on a mocking edge. “Isn’t your kingdom the greatest force in the region? Shouldn’t we all bow before you?”

Cassius glared back at him, consumed with hatred for the man. But he said nothing, his chest heaving with his ragged breaths.

“Beg, prince.” Sir Keavling’s voice was soft now, and dripping with malice. “I want to hear you beg for mercy.”

For a moment, Cassius wrestled with himself. Could he bear to demean himself to this vile man? Not so long ago, he would have thought he’d rather die than do it.

But things had changed in that short time. Everything had changed.

It was his pride that had dragged Flora into this nightmare, and he couldn't let his pride be what killed her.

Sir Keavling drew back, putting his foot against Cassius's neck. Slowly but inexorably, he pressed down on it, the pressure making Cassius splutter for breath.

"I can't hear anything," the other man prompted.

Cassius's mind latched on to the awareness of the tether, the thin strand in his consciousness that connected him to Flora. He gripped it like a lifeline.

"I beg you," he forced out.

The words were more bitter than the blood in Cassius's mouth. Lying on his side on the ground, bound to a chair, with the other man's foot on his throat, was the most humiliating position he could imagine. And yet, he didn't regret his words.

Sir Keavling removed his foot from Cassius's neck. The prince relaxed marginally, only to tense again as the imposter delivered one more swift kick to his midriff.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

Cassius's muscles strained against the bonds, but he forced himself to keep his head. It wasn't about him. It was about Flora, alone and trapped and suffering each blow twofold. The thought was more unbearable than any loss of pride.

"I beg you to stop."

His voice was clear and precise, and Sir Keavling drew back at last. He knelt down, his face a mask of disdain as he took in Cassius's bruised form.

“You are pathetic. Is this all the strength Carrack has? You called me a snake once—that last blow can be recompense for that. But you are nothing more than a cowardly worm. And your kingdom is no better—a backwards tribe of barbarians, who relegate magical study to the lower classes and surrender their dignity in a vicious scramble of every man for himself. Your pitiful begging won’t save you or your kingdom. We will crush Carrack, and your fool father won’t even know it’s happening until it’s done.”

“Sir.” The sharp voice came from outside the room. Cassius couldn’t see the speaker.

“What is it?” Sir Keavling snapped, clearly not appreciating the interruption to his moment of triumph.

“An urgent express has come for you.”

The imposter stood, irritation clear in his frame. “Bring it here.”

The man brought him a sealed billet, which he broke open and scanned rapidly. He let out a quiet oath, his eyes settling angrily on the two men flanking Cassius.

“You clumsy oafs, you raised suspicion when you grabbed the girl. If it’s necessary for me to return to Crandell before it’s time because of your ineptitude, your lives will be forfeit.”

There was a moment of tense silence as the imposter considered his options and Cassius lay prone on the floor, his head spinning and every inch of his body aching.

Then Sir Keavling folded the parchment with a decisive flourish.

“I need to speak to the scouts.”

He squatted down beside Cassius, his tone still businesslike.

“We’re not finished, Prince.” The last word was an insult. “You will do what I need you to do. I’ve enjoyed watching you break, just as I will enjoy watching your conceited little kingdom be smashed into splinters. But I’m afraid we don’t have unlimited time for pleasantries. Once my current business is complete, we’ll bring the girl up for an interview with my associates.”

Cassius stiffened as Sir Keavling’s eyes flicked to the two men whose fists had left Cassius battered.

“I have a feeling you’ll be more cooperative then.”

Sir Keavling rose with the words, moving toward the door. He jerked his head toward the silently seething prince.

“Throw him back in the cellar. We’ll finish this later.”

Cassius found himself seized and the bonds around his feet slashed free of the chair, although his hands were left bound. The men frogmarched him the short distance to the cellar, then threw him in. He caught the fall as best he could, trying to minimize the pain it would cause him and therefore Flora.

As soon as the door closed above, he scrambled to his feet, his heart hammering as his eyes found her. She was just where he’d left her, and she didn’t appear to be conscious.

Cassius ripped his arms back and forth, determined to break the knot that bound his hands behind his back. They’d tied it hastily, and he’d been knocked about since then, enough to loosen it a little.

To his relief, the rope started to give. Working quickly, he disentangled himself until he was able to pull the bindings away completely.

Dull pain radiated from his whole body thanks to the beating he'd received, but it was the least of his concerns. He sprinted to Flora's side as soon as he was free, placing his hands on either side of her pale face.

"Flora!"

Her eyes flickered open, recognition lighting them as they fell on his face. Cassius ripped the gag from her mouth, and she drew in a shuddering breath.

"Cassius."

The whisper broke him all over again. There was a bruise along her jaw, and her breathing was even shallower than before. His own aches told him how much pain she must be feeling, and a silent scream rose inside him, the rage all the more ferocious for its futility.

At least his hands were free now. He withdrew them from her face and circled behind her, assessing the ropes that bound her to the beam. It took several minutes, but he managed to loosen one of the ropes enough to rip open the knot. One of Flora's arms flopped free, her lack of response to the change alarming. She hadn't said a word while he worked, and she remained silent as he tugged at the next section of bindings. The task became easier the more of her he freed, and soon enough he was able to yank the final rope from around her midriff. The freedom at last propelled her into motion. She stumbled away from the beam and straight into Cassius's arms.

He closed them around her, his chest heaving as he held her flush against him. He was too overwhelmed to speak, and he had no words to say to her. How could he ever look her in the eye again?

Cassius wouldn't have blamed Flora if she'd hated him after what she'd endured on his account, but nothing in her demeanor suggested it. On the contrary, she laid her head on his shoulder, sending his heart sputtering into double time as she buried her face in his neck. She seemed to sink in his arms, her legs quivering as she tried to regain her footing after so long bound upright. Cassius tightened his grip around her waist, his hold strong enough to take her weight, and wordlessly, she gave up the attempt to stand. She was collapsed against him, his arms all that kept her on her feet.

Panic barreled through his mind with deadly force, making it hard to think straight. Sir Keavling had been clear—if he couldn't find a way for them to escape, they would beat Flora next, probably kill her if Cassius didn't help them start a war. He wasn't sure whether the imposter knew the effect the prince's injuries had on Flora, but it was abundantly clear that Sir Keavling knew that she was Cassius's vulnerability.

Being free of their bonds was a start, but it wasn't enough. They were still locked in a cellar, and Cassius had no way of getting them out. Even if he did, they wouldn't get far with Flora too weak to move.

Cassius wished he was strong enough to be her stability, but slight though she was, his own arms were already shaking. His body was in a state of shock on its own account. He hated his weakness, but he accepted that he couldn't hold her up forever. Shifting carefully backwards, he found the wall and lowered himself down it, Flora still clasped against him.

She drew in a sharp breath as he repositioned her, and Cassius froze.

“Are you all right?” What a stupid question. Of course she wasn't. He tried again. “I didn't mean to—”

“It wasn't you.” She shook her head. “It's just...everything hurts.”

The words were spoken almost pleadingly, and Cassius felt again that terrible, powerless rage. He gathered her up on his lap, running one hand over her hair in a mechanical loop. It was a selfish action as much as it was for her sake—he needed to touch her, to hold her close. And he was unsure where else was safe to place a hand.

Flora seemed to appreciate the contact. She curled into his lap, closing her eyes and laying her head against his shoulder again.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered into his ear.

Cassius stiffened. “What?”

“I’m a poor protector.” Her voice was so faint, he could hardly hear it. “I tried to get free, to find some Dust, anything. But I couldn’t do it.”

“Flora, stop.” The words were choked out of Cassius. “Don’t apologize, I can’t bear it. I can’t bear it!”

She stilled in his arms, confused at the passion in his voice.

“It’s all my doing, all of it,” he went on, the words catching in his throat. “My pride did this to you. My arrogant, selfish determination to save face made you vulnerable. I’m the one who—”

He broke off abruptly as Flora reached up, silencing him with gentle fingers on his lips.

“It’s not your fault,” she told him. Her voice was still dropping, but not as though she was too weak to talk. It was more like she was drifting toward sleep, which was probably the best thing for her body. “You didn’t do this to me, Cassius. You’re allowed to have weaknesses. We all do. It’s not your fault when someone evil

exploits them.”

Cassius swallowed, silenced as much by the sensation of her fingers on his lips as by the turmoil in his mind.

“I’m just glad you’re in one piece,” she informed him, her head heavier on his shoulder by the second. “Knowing what they were doing to you and being unable to stop it was the worst of it all. But now you’re here...with me. Now it will be all right.”

The words had barely left her mouth when Cassius felt her body relax at last, her breathing now slow and unlabored. She had succumbed to her exhaustion, leaving Cassius alone in the dim cellar, clutching her battered form in his arms and wrestling with the agony of his mind.

Chapter

Eighteen

Flora woke slowly, her senses flooded with two very inconsistent sensations.

The first was pain. Dull rather than sharp, but pervasive. Every inch of her hurt.

The second was comforting warmth and safety.

She wasn't on a bed. She was curled up on something harder than a mattress but much warmer. It took her groggy senses a minute to recognize the sensation of arms around her. She still hadn't opened her eyes, but she breathed deeply, taking in a familiar, masculine scent, like polished wood.

"Cassius?" She murmured the name softly, almost afraid to open her eyes and dispel the illusion.

The arms around her tightened, and she heard his breath catch.

"Flora. You're awake."

Flora eased one eye open, surprised to see how dark it remained. She looked carefully around, the cellar difficult to distinguish in the gloom but still hideously familiar from the hours of fear she'd endured when Cassius was unconscious.

They weren't safe at all. They were still captives, still battered. But the feeling of

security lingered. She'd gotten her bearings enough to realize that she was perched on Cassius's lap, his arms keeping her upright against him.

"It's nighttime," she said absently.

"Yes."

Cassius's face was so close to hers, his breath tickled her cheek as he spoke.

"You've been out for a few hours. No more than five. I would guess it's two hours past midnight, but I have no way to tell for certain."

Flora let her eyes drift closed again, assessing her own strength. The constant, nagging pain aside, she was enormously improved compared to when she'd collapsed against Cassius. Sleep had worked wonders.

"Have you slept?" she asked him.

"I'm not sure." His deep voice created vibrations in his chest, against which one of Flora's palms seemed to be pressed flat. His jacket had ripped open at the front, and his tunic underneath it was in ruffled disorder. "I don't know if I can discern actual dreams from this living nightmare."

Startled, Flora raised her eyes to him at last. There was a small window high above, and a shaft of silvery moonlight slanted through it, crossing Cassius's face. She drew in a sharp breath. She'd never seen such a haunted look on anyone. It cut her to the heart.

"Are you all right?"

"Me?" Cassius spoke in disbelief.

“Yes, you.” Flora straightened a little, her hand creeping up from his chest of its own accord, until it rested against his throat. “Are you in a great deal of pain? ”

His eyes blazed with anger, but it didn’t seem to be directed at her.

“You know how much pain I’m in,” he said, his voice choked. “It’s half of what you’re feeling, and I deserve no sympathy.”

“Cassius...”

He cut her off. “No, I’m not all right. I’m despicable. I deserve everything I’m feeling. I will never forgive myself for what I’ve put you through.”

“Cassius, don’t speak that way,” she said, distressed. She sat up, half turning in his lap to face him, both hands flat against his jaw now. “You are not to blame for any of this. Be angry, but direct your anger to the traitors who’ve put us here. Not to yourself.”

“Perhaps they would have succeeded without my contribution,” Cassius said bitterly. “But we’ll never know, because my pride made our capture the easiest task imaginable. And my inability to control my reactions where you’re concerned put you squarely in the target. Sir Keavling knew he could use you to get to me, and you’re the one who paid the price.”

“You paid the price as well,” Flora reminded him, running two fingers over a bruise that spread over his cheekbone. “Don’t add guilt to what you’re already suffering. Sir Keavling is the one who deserves your anger.”

“There’s plenty to go around,” Cassius reassured her. His arms tightened, and she didn’t resist as he pressed her—gently but firmly—against him. “I’m angry at you as well, you know.”

“Me?” She pulled back enough to raise her face and search his eyes. They looked anguished, not angry. “I know I was a fool to let myself be so easily taken back at the castle...”

“No.” The word was forcefully said. “You can’t think I’d blame you for that. I’m angry with you for what you said before.”

She stared at him, confused but also fascinated by the passion rising in his voice.

“I’m angry with you for the sacrilege of saying that how I feel about you is some trick of the tether. How could you think that, Flora? How could you think this isn’t real?”

“Cassius, I...” She trailed off, her mouth suddenly dry.

“It’s the most real thing I’ve ever experienced.” One of his hands had moved up her back all the way to her head, his palm warm against her scalp as his fingers splayed through her hair. “You are the most real thing in the world. Do you think I don’t know my own mind?” His voice was thick with passion. “It’s madness to suggest that the tether made me fall in love with you. You did that, Flora. You. There’s nothing and no one in my heart but you.”

In...love?

For a heartbeat, the words hung in the air between them, their eyes locked in the darkness. Then Flora raised an unsteady hand, tracing the lines of his face with her fingertips.

“You’ve invaded every corner of my heart.”

Her whisper fell into the charged silence. Abruptly, Cassius seized her fingers with

his free hand, interrupting their exploration of his face to press his lips to them with a tenderness bordering on reverence. She raised her face in an invitation, and he drew her head gently closer. When his lips touched hers, every ache, every fear, every memory of the terrible ordeal they'd just suffered fled before the glorious feel of him.

Flora twisted her free hand through the fabric of his tunic, clinging on desperately as she returned his kiss. Cassius was right—the tether couldn't manufacture what had happened to her heart. She'd never dreamed she could let anyone in as far as she'd let Cassius in, and yet she didn't feel vulnerable. In fact, his touch, his kiss, his arms enfolding her, made her feel complete.

The embrace was no quick peck—neither was in a hurry to draw back. But even so, Cassius kissed her gently, carefully, his hand cradling her head with such sensitivity that she knew he couldn't forget what she'd suffered, even in the midst of this moment. A moment they'd both craved, but Flora had never let herself believe would come.

...made me fall in love with you...

The words danced blissfully across Flora's memory as her lips moved against Cassius's. His hold might be gentle, but he wasn't tentative. He held her with the same confidence with which he did everything. She was his, and if he hadn't known it before she kissed him back, he could have no doubt of it now.

And somehow, against every expectation, he was hers as well.

Flora pulled back at last, trying to catch her breath as she clung to Cassius's shirt. He rested his forehead against hers, his own breathing far from steady.

"I've made a mess of your plans," she murmured.

“I don’t care about my plans,” he told her, his voice ragged. “Flora, all I care about now is keeping you safe. We have to find a way out of here before Sir Keavling comes back. And not just for our own sakes.” The hand on her neck quivered with his tension. “They’ll hurt you to get to me. They’ll kill you. And I’m very much afraid I’d start a war just to prevent it.”

Flora pulled her face away, frowning at him. “Start a war? ”

He shook his head. “I can explain later. We have to find a way out of here. I didn’t expect to be left to ourselves even this long. I don’t think we can count on being safe until morning.”

“No, nighttime would provide better cover for an escape anyway,” Flora agreed. She flexed her shoulders, wincing as her muscles screamed in protest. “What did they hit you with?”

“Their fists,” Cassius said, the anguish back in his voice. “But for you, it was doubled, remember?”

“I’m not likely to forget.” Flora disentangled herself from his lap, a pleasant thrill shooting through her at his reluctance to let her go. “But never mind that. I’ll recover. And I’m free from the bindings now, which is a huge improvement. Surely I can stir up some Dust.”

She pushed herself cautiously to her feet. Pain met her every movement. If she was somewhere safe, she would have been taking to her bed to rest for a week before attempting anything at all. But she wouldn’t reach somewhere safe unless she pushed herself hard.

“That window is our best option,” she said, studying it in the dim light. It was open to the outside world but for the metal bars. “Do you think you can squeeze through it if

we can get up there? Your shoulders are much broader than mine.”

Cassius followed her gaze as he also rose to his feet. “I can make it work,” he said. “The bars will be our problem.”

“Leave the bars to me,” said Flora, growing more confident the more she moved around the room. She squinted up at the window. “A large stone would help. I could try to break off a chunk of the wall, but actual destruction takes so much energy. It would exhaust me even if I could do it. It wouldn’t leave much energy for the bars themselves. ”

“You can’t destroy the bars altogether?” Cassius asked hopefully.

She shook her head regretfully. “I doubt it. They look like iron. Too strong. It would be a struggle for me even with my usual energy and with unlimited sources of movement. Neither of which are remotely true right now.”

“I understand,” he said quickly. “I don’t mean to push you. I wouldn’t have even thought it was an option except that I saw you reduce to splinters the arrows that were fired at Princess Miriam.”

“Wood is much easier,” Flora explained. “Stone is a stretch, but it’s doable. You probably didn’t notice, but when I destroyed the arrows, I only destroyed the shafts. The arrowheads remained intact. I was conserving energy. Besides which, I was using a weapon to stir up the Dust for that exercise. Weapons generate the perfect type of magic for destruction. Here, I’ll have to get more creative.”

“I’ll work on getting us up there,” Cassius said. He gathered up the ropes he’d pulled from Flora hours before and began knotting one end.

“That’s perfect,” said Flora, snatching it from him as soon as he’d completed the

knot. She spun the rope around her like a lasso. Her movements were jerky as her muscles protested, and she saw Cassius leap quickly out of the way.

“Sorry,” she told him, with the closest thing to a smile that had crossed her face in many hours.

Once confident he was far enough back, she closed her eyes, letting her magical sense focus on the Dust that poured from the rope as it swung. Her mind was so weary and her body so overwhelmed that even the simple task of harnessing the power was a strain. But she forced herself to take hold of it, stubbornly resisting the impulse to use half of the magic to create energy to fuel whatever activity she set it to.

Instead she coated almost all of the magic onto the knotted end of the rope as she let it fly up toward the barred window. When the rope reached the top of its trajectory, she forced the magic to take hold of the object, guiding the knot through a gap in the bars and back through the next gap over.

Even that was a serious cost to her energy. She let the enchantment drop immediately, carefully feeding the rope through so that gravity did the job of making the knotted end drop back down into the cellar. Cassius grabbed hold of it as soon as it was within his reach, firmly pulling it down.

“That was amazing,” he said, turning to her. The admiration on his face turned quickly to alarm as he took in her demeanor.

She’d stumbled back, leaning on the post to which she’d been tied as she tried to catch her breath.

“Flora!” Cassius placed the rope carefully on the ground where it couldn’t possibly slide back through the bars, and hurried to her side. “Are you all right?”

“I’ll be fine,” she told him, puffing a little. “I just need to catch my breath.” If only every movement didn’t bring with it so much pain.

“You’re overextending yourself,” he scolded. “Flora, even I know that you can’t use all the magic for the task. You have to use some to sustain yourself. Your body can’t handle continuing to manipulate magic with no source to replenish the energy, especially not in the state you’re in.”

“It’s a good principle, Cassius, but we can’t afford it,” Flora told him, her eyes closed as she willed her energy to recover itself. “If I follow good practice with the allocation of power, we simply won’t be able to escape. There’s no source of movement great enough for me to do both simultaneously, and there’s no way for me to store up the power.”

“I don’t like it,” Cassius said, clenching and unclenching one fist in his agitation.

Flora opened her eyes, her voice stern. “Then you should have applied yourself in your studies and tried to acquire the craft.”

“I wish I had,” Cassius replied bitterly. “But it’s considered beneath those of high rank in Carrack. Just as with any craft, my parents would have been ashamed for me to apply myself to the level required to master it. I was expected to focus my energy on matters of state and leave practical trades to the tradesmen.”

Flora smiled faintly at the regret in his voice. “I know, Cassius. Every kingdom on the Peninsula has the same attitude toward the craft. Probably the continent, too. I was teasing you.”

Cassius didn’t reply at once, frowning over something. “I’m not sure the continent does have the same view,” he said slowly, his eyes unfocused. Then he gave his head a shake and his gaze cleared. “What’s next?”

Flora pushed herself upright, determined. “Next I need to get up there and see what I have to work with.” She moved forward and took hold of one end of the rope, tossing the other to Cassius. “Help me?”

He grabbed it obediently, waiting while she knotted her end loosely around her middle. Then Cassius reeled in the rope, his strong arms encountering no difficulty in pulling her weight as she walked up the wall. When she reached the top, she managed to prop her elbows on the edge of the tiny window, her feet trying to find purchase on the wall below.

Her arms were far too weak and sore to hold her up. Then she felt something steady under her boots and looked down to see that Cassius had placed his shoulders underneath her feet, allowing her to stand without effort. The rope was tightly wound from shoulder to elbow on one side of him. She could see the muscles in his arm tightening against his jacket as he continued to hold the rope taut while also supporting her weight with his shoulders.

“This is beneath the dignity of a prince,” she informed him.

“I’ve never been able to maintain my dignity when you’re around,” Cassius replied. “I’m not sure why you think I’d start now.”

She chuckled softly as she looked back to the window. Squinting through it, she could see a moonlit scene.

“I think we’re in a forest,” she said.

“Do you see anything that can help us?” Cassius asked.

She scanned the darkness carefully. “There’s a log over there, but I don’t think that’s strong enough to—aha!” Hope bubbled in her chest. “I see a boulder. It’s probably

about the right size.”

She glanced back over her shoulder into the dim cellar. “Can you toss me another section of the ropes?”

She gripped the bars with her hands and braced her feet against the stone while Cassius ducked out from under her feet, returning quickly with the rope. As soon as she took it, he grabbed her feet one at a time with his free hand, placing them carefully back on his shoulders.

Flora balanced precariously while she spun the rope around, forcing her mind to harness the magic. She sent it toward the boulder, but the effect was disappointing .

“It’s a little too large,” she murmured. “I don’t have the willpower in this state for carefully channeling the Dust. I need it to come in a raw form that matches better.”

She looked down at Cassius, who clearly had no idea what she was talking about but was doing his best to follow along.

“Take off your jacket,” she instructed him.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “I don’t think you can afford distractions right now, Flora.”

She rolled her eyes, although secretly she was delighted that he’d recovered his equilibrium enough to be mischievous.

“Just do it. I’ll use what little willpower I have left to resist being overwhelmed by your chiseled chest.”

His chuckle was low and throaty, and in spite of what she’d said, Flora did find her

focus wavering as he stripped off his jacket, accidentally pulling his tunic momentarily from his chest in the process. Chiseled was no exaggeration.

She snatched quickly at the garment when it was offered to her, pulling her eyes from the prince as she swirled the jacket in a rotating pattern. It wasn't the most practical of items for the purpose—far less effective than the scarf used by the physician, for example. But it generated some magic, and the shape of the magic was broad enough to encompass the boulder she was trying to shift. She imagined the jacket encasing the boulder and pulling it along, and tried to move the garment consistently with that task.

Of course the jacket wasn't touching the rock, and even if it had been, it wouldn't have been strong enough to make it move. But that was where the magic came in. She could feel the shape and strength of it in her mind, and she grimaced. It wasn't very impressive.

"I'm going to have to use all of it, Cassius," she told him. "It can't be helped—even so, it may not be enough. But if it works, you'll need to take over. I'm probably going to be completely incapacitated for a little while."

"Wait."

Flora ignored Cassius's warning. If there was a safer way to do it, she would have taken it. But their lives hung in the balance, and by the sound of it, so did the risk of war. There was no time for lengthy protests.

Flora seized hold of the magic, harnessing every last bit of it and throwing it all toward the boulder. She could feel her energy draining rapidly as her overworked mind focused on molding the magic to her purpose. It wrapped around the rock like a garment and tugged. Slowly, painstaking, the boulder began to move.

Sweat beaded on Flora's forehead and tears pricked the corners of her eyes at the pain that engulfed her arm as she kept swirling the jacket with all the vigor she could muster. The boulder was almost at the bars.

When it finally rolled into the bars with a dull thunk, she dropped the jacket, her shoulders sagging in sheer exhaustion.

"Flora?" Cassius sounded anxious, and she flapped a hand in reassurance.

"I just need a minute, then I'll continue. Can you give me that rope again?"

He passed it up, squeezing her ankle bracingly in the process. Taking heart from his support, Flora swapped hands, letting her favored arm have a rest from the agony of movement while she swung the rope with the other hand .

The rope naturally had greater force than the jacket, so was better suited to the next part of her task. It took more effort than ever to harness the magic, and a whimper escaped her at the thought of what it would cost her physically and mentally to shape the magic into a strong enough enchantment. Cassius's hand flew up to grip her boot at the sound, and she pulled herself together. She would just have to do all she could, and trust him to see them the rest of the way.

She applied the magic to the boulder, forcing it forward against the bars. It strained into the iron with unnatural force. Her breaths came in pants as she poured all her effort into it, modifying the enchantment to strengthen the rock so that it didn't give way before the bars did.

Her persistence was rewarded. With a groan, the iron gave way, bending before the inexorable passage of the boulder. She kept pushing the rock, forcing it all the way through until it started to teeter on the edge of the window opening.

It had left a boulder-sized hole in its wake—hopefully it would be enough. She was wobbling dangerously, unable to hold herself up any longer. With an intake of breath, Cassius jumped backward just as the boulder fell.

Flora fell, too, but strong arms caught her and held her as she passed in and out of awareness.

“You did it, Flora. Flora?”

Cassius’s voice sounded like he was on the other end of a long tunnel. She heard him just fine, but she didn’t try to respond. That would be beyond her.

The next half an hour was very hazy for Flora. She didn’t fully lose consciousness, but her mind was foggy and her body as useless as a rag doll’s. She followed only vaguely as Cassius made use of the rope still threaded through the bent bars. There was an extremely uncomfortable patch where she seemed to be upright and felt herself scraping along stone, and at one point an invisible pressure threatened painfully to crush her shoulders even though she was nowhere near the bars. But soon after, she was breathing in the fresh scent of a wooded night, cold air touching her face.

She felt herself gathered into Cassius’s arms again, and they were moving. His chest rose and fell laboriously under her cheek, and she allowed her eyes to drift closed, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart right beneath her ear. The warmth of him cut through the chill night air.

She wasn’t sure how long had passed before they came to a stop, and she heard a knocking sound from the other end of the tunnel. She barely followed the exclamation and shocked conversation that came next, but she did notice when warmth enveloped her, and the breeze disappeared altogether. Cassius stumbled forward and laid her on a chair, his breaths coming rapidly.

Blearily, she watched him conversing with a stunned farmer in his nightclothes, and saw the prince hand over a golden chain for some reason. She longed to sleep, but didn't dare to when Cassius disappeared from her view. She felt that she should go after him, but she couldn't. The smallest exertion made her mind scream as much as her body still did, and she knew instinctively that she would put herself at serious risk of harm if she tried to use any energy. She simply had none.

Within minutes, Cassius returned. He collected her into his arms again, and they made their way back into the night air. She found herself being placed carefully on a horse, the prince springing up behind her. They lurched forward, his arms reaching around her to grasp the reins. Relieved, she leaned her head back against his chest and let herself succumb fully to sleep.

When Flora came to, the sun had risen. They were stopped in some kind of clearing. She was still atop the horse, but Cassius was on the ground alongside the creature, attempting to ease her off.

She stretched her limbs, trying to shake the fog from her mind.

“Good morning.” There was a smile in the prince's voice that instantly lifted her spirits.

“We're alive,” she said.

“We are.” His voice was solemn, but his eyes danced.

“We're free of Sir Keavling and the others.”

“Yes.”

She eyed him, holding on to the last delicious trickle of the dopiness that had carried

her through the last several hours.

“You carried me a long way. You’re very strong.”

His face broke into a grin. “I did. And I like to think I am.”

“But seriously.” Flora straightened in the saddle before allowing him to slide her off.

“You must be exhausted and in a great deal of pain.”

She landed neatly on the ground, trapped between the horse’s flank and the prince’s powerful frame. Fortunately the mare was a placid creature, not bothered by their proximity.

Cassius ran a hand through her tangled hair, his palm coming to rest on her cheek and his eyes impossibly captivating as they held hers .

“I’m well,” he said. “You’re safe, and that’s all that matters.”

Heat crept over her, pleasant and tingling. She slid a hand around his neck, pulling him in.

Cassius was happy to oblige, lowering his head and claiming her lips greedily. Flora didn’t know where they were or where they were going, but she couldn’t imagine why it would matter. Not much of anything seemed to matter except the fact that she was being thoroughly kissed by her very own prince.

But the moment of abandon couldn’t last forever, and she pulled back with a sigh.

“I’m glad we’re safe, but it’s not all that matters, is it?” she said. “Sir Keavling won’t stop just because he failed to kill you.”

“No, he won’t.” Cassius’s face had become serious. “He didn’t tell me everything, but he told me enough to understand that at least one of the kingdoms of the continent—possibly a coordinated group of them—intends to annex Carrack under the guise of forming an alliance. And they no doubt have plans for the rest of the Peninsula as well. I don’t think he can be the mastermind. He’s just an emissary. But I got the sense he has the resources to make his plans happen. We’re in Torrens now—we must have been drugged for longer than I realized when they brought us here, because we’re a long way south of the crossing near Crandell. It will take us some time to get home, but we can’t delay—we must convince my father not to commit himself to any co-operation with the continent. If he believes that I’ve been abducted by Torrenese forces, he will be furious enough to do something rash. But that could be disastrous. The need has never been greater for the kingdoms of the Peninsula to stand together.”

Flora hesitated, her eyes searching his face. “You’re talking about the alliance with Squal.”

“No.” Cassius shook his head forcefully. “I mean yes, but not the way we first intended to do it.” His voice softened as he pushed a strand of hair behind her ears. “I couldn’t marry Princess Miriam, Flora, not now. It would destroy me. We will have to find another way to seal the alliance, because I won’t have anyone but you.”

Her heart swelled at the declaration, and she permitted herself to lay her head against his chest.

“I will be yours or I will die alone,” she said simply.

Cassius’s arm snaked around her and pulled her close, and she could hear his heart pick up speed. He lowered his head to murmur in her ear.

“It would be a crime for you to be alone. I cannot allow it.”

A pleasant shiver went over her at the warmth of his breath.

“What about the tether?” she asked. “It will only lift when the marriage alliance with Siqua is sealed.”

“I will do all I can to find a way to free you,” he told her. “But I would rather live with its restrictions all my life than marry someone who isn’t you.”

Peace filled Flora with his words, determination following close behind. He truly was willing to tie himself to her, for no reason but love for her. He’d accepted her without even knowing who she was. The reasons for hiding herself—if they’d ever been valid at all—were long gone.

“Did you say we’re a long way south?” she asked.

“Yes.” He released her. “We’ve been traveling east, but as soon as we cross the border into Carrack, we’ll turn northward.”

“We shouldn’t.” Flora stepped back, giving a decisive nod. “We shouldn’t return to Crandell. Not empty-handed.”

“What do you mean?” Cassius studied her face. “Do you have a plan?”

“Yes.” Flora smiled at him, already resigned to the necessity of what she had to do. “Or at least, I have an idea. And it doesn’t involve going north. It involves going south. To Dernan.”

Chapter

Nineteen

“ A ll right. Let’s do this.”

Bemused, Cassius looked from Flora’s determined face to the border crossing. Why did she look like she was preparing for battle?

“What exactly are we doing?” he asked.

It had taken a whole day to travel to the border, and Flora had been mysterious and uncommunicative throughout. Of course, that may have just been her physical state. Her energy was still depleted, and he could see from the way she moved that she remained in significant pain. Even he was struggling, and the knowledge of how much worse her state was than his own kept threatening to send him back into a spiral of fury and despair.

He was keeping it to himself now, however. It wouldn’t help Flora for him to burden her with the depths of his regrets.

“I’m doing something I swore to myself I never would,” Flora said with a sigh. “Returning to Dernan.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Just what did you do last time you were there? ”

She grinned, the expression not bringing him as much pleasure as it would if her face

wasn't so bruised.

"I ran away."

She strode forward, a confused Cassius following as she passed through the Torrenese checkpoint and approached the border guards on the Dernan side.

"What's your business?" one asked gruffly. "The border is closed to regular traffic until further notice."

"Yes, but I'm not regular traffic," Flora said matter-of-factly.

"Why is the border closed?" Cassius asked, frowning.

The guard looked him over, in all his disheveled finery. "Who are you, and what's your business?"

"He's with me." Flora's voice was commanding, something in her tone Cassius hadn't heard before.

"Is he now?" The guard leaned on his spear, unimpressed. "And you are?"

"You really don't recognize me?" She tilted her head to the side. "I recognize you. I can't remember your name, but I'm sure you used to work at the castle. Did you offend Endrin to get yourself banished out here?"

The guard stilled, his eyes widening as they roved over her face.

"Endrin?" The other guard repeated the name—which meant nothing to Cassius—cautiously. "How would you know the head of the royal guard?"

“I used to be the bane of his existence,” Flora explained. “I’m guessing he hasn’t missed me.”

“Princess Floriana?”

The astonishment with which the first guard said the words was nothing to what Cassius felt.

“Princess?” he repeated, the ground reeling beneath his exhausted feet as he stared at Flora .

“Yes, it’s true,” she told him. “At least, I was born Her Royal Highness Princess Floriana Marigold Berthe of the royal house of Dernan. But it could be argued that I renounced my title when I ran away five years ago. That was my intention, anyway.”

“I...you...you can’t be,” Cassius said dumbly.

“Oh, but I am.” Her eyes twinkled. “And let it be a lesson to you not to lord it over seemingly humble strangers.”

Cassius felt his lips twitch, unable to resist the mirth in her eyes.

“Our orders are to take you to the capital immediately if ever you reappeared, Your Highness,” the guard said, glaring at Cassius as he stepped forward. “Their Majesties are anxious for your return.”

“If you say so,” Flora replied ruefully. “We’re ready to go.”

“We?” The guard eyed Cassius again. “Who is this man?”

“He’s my bodyguard,” Flora said blithely.

Cassius choked, hardly able to comprehend what was happening. Flora was in her element, at her most outrageous and her most irresistible.

“He hasn’t done a very good job.”

The second guard’s interjection sobered Cassius at once. The man’s eyes were lingering on Flora’s bruises, and he must have noted the stiff way she moved.

“He has, actually,” Flora said quickly. “It’s only thanks to his efforts that I’m alive.”

Cassius said nothing because there was nothing he could say. But when Flora glanced at him, he held her eyes, and he could tell that she saw the ghost of his agony in his gaze. He didn’t think he’d ever be able to forgive himself for what had happened to Flora because of their tether. How long would it take before he no longer saw her pale, seemingly lifeless face before him every time he closed his eyes?

“Well.” The guard sounded reluctant to be responsible for any decisions regarding the returned princess. “We’ll arrange transport to the capital at once, Your Highness. In the meantime, come into the guardhouse.”

Cassius followed Flora into the building, his mind spinning. The guard ushered them past half a dozen of his off-duty fellows and into an empty study.

“You’re not Siqualian,” Cassius said as soon as they were alone.

“No.”

“You’re from Dernan.”

“Yes.”

“And...” He struggled to get his mouth around the words. “And you’re a princess.”

Flora nodded. “I am, strictly speaking.”

“So all those times you insisted on giving me the deference due to my station...all the times you stood behind my chair during a meal...”

“I wasn’t trying to be false,” she said quickly. “I wasn’t in Carrack as a princess, Cassius. I was there as a guard.”

“Why didn’t you tell me the truth?” He couldn’t quite keep the hurt from his voice.

“Try not to take it personally,” Flora said with a pleading edge. “It was my intention to never tell anyone. Well, except Mim.”

“Princess Miriam knows?”

She nodded. “I confided in her back at school. She’s the only one, though. The mistress never knew—she would never have let me work as a servant or take a charity position in the school if she did. And the rest of the Squalian royal family have no idea.”

Cassius ran his hand through his hair.

“But why? Why hide it?”

“Because I didn’t want the life that had been laid out for me,” said Flora. “I know it sounds selfish and irresponsible, but you don’t understand, Cassius. I know you have a great deal of restrictions, but your movements are much more your own than mine ever were. And arranged marriages notwithstanding, Miriam has a level of freedom that I could never have dreamed of. I wasn’t allowed to have my own interests, my

own desires, my own ideas. I was a resource to my parents, not a daughter. Every happy memory of my childhood is from a day when I escaped what I was supposed to be doing and paid the penalty afterwards. And the older I got, the harder it was to give my minders the slip. I couldn't live that way. It was killing me. I had to escape."

Cassius searched her face, his sympathy stirred by the desperation in her eyes.

"I'm sorry your life was like that," he said gently. "You were not made to be caged. But I still don't understand how I didn't know that a princess of Dernan was missing."

Flora gave a bitter laugh, the sound unlike her usual chuckle. "They would never have advertised it. My defection would be a humiliation in their eyes." She shrugged. "I'm the ninth of ten children, and my absence wouldn't be as conspicuous as you might think. I imagine they made up some story for the court." She glanced at the closed door between them and the rest of the guardhouse. "Clearly the guards had instructions, however. I suspected as much, which was why I was reluctant to pass through Dernan on our first journey together. I doubt I would have been recognized at the border with how I was dressed then—I've been gone five years, after all. But if we'd been forced to divert to the capital, I would have been lost."

"Lost?" Cassius raised an eyebrow, his mouth quirking into a small smile. "You make that sound very dramatic."

She didn't respond, didn't even return his smile. Cassius frowned, wondering if he'd been wrong to assume she was exaggerating in memory the frustrations of her fifteen-year-old self.

"Why are we back here now?" he asked abruptly. "If you were so determined never to return?"

“Because I want to help,” she said. “And I have an idea for how I can.”

The door opened, and the guard from earlier appeared.

“We will escort you to the nearest town via horseback, Your Highness,” he said. It took Cassius a moment to realize the man was speaking to Flora, not to him. “From there a vehicle can be secured to convey you the rest of the way. With an escort of guards, of course.” He glanced at Cassius but didn’t address him. “Your companion can make his own way to the capital if he chooses.”

“No,” Flora said flatly. “He comes with me, or I don’t go at all.”

The guard fidgeted uncomfortably. “Your Highness, you are in no position to decline to attend the capital. We have our orders from Their Majesties, and we will carry them out, forcefully if necessary.”

Cassius raised his eyebrows, incredulous of the man’s audacity.

“This is how you speak to your princess?” he said. “This is how she is welcomed home after an absence of five years?”

“This matter doesn’t concern you, sir,” the guard said gruffly.

“Actually, it does.” Cassius moved calmly toward the man, letting all the authority of his position bleed into his voice. “She doesn’t go anywhere without me.”

The guard hesitated, thrown by Cassius’s manner. As a member of the royal guard, he would have learned to recognize authority when he saw it.

“As you wish,” he said, with the air of one washing his hands of the consequences. “But I make no guarantees about your safety or your welcome in the capital.”

“Home sweet home,” muttered Flora.

The day was too far advanced for them to travel all the way to the capital, so they stopped for the night in the nearest town. Fortunately Cassius and Flora were able to secure rooms next to one another, so that the tether could go unnoticed. Guards accompanied Flora everywhere she went, two standing outside her door all night. They seemed more like wardens than protectors, and Cassius slept uneasily, not trusting her to these strangers.

The following day’s journey was smooth and swift. Dernan was considerably smaller than the surrounding kingdoms, and they were comfortably able to reach the capital of Dernanford before nightfall in spite of the increasingly rocky terrain. The air was cold all day—the weather had been mild and sunny in Torrens, but in Dernan, the sky was overcast.

Not just the sky. The closer to the capital they got, the more subdued Flora became. By the time they rode into Dernanford, she hadn’t spoken for at least an hour, and the bruises on her face stood out starkly against her pale cheeks .

“Are you all right?” Cassius asked as they were led up the castle steps.

She nodded. “I’m fine.”

It wasn’t convincing. Cassius had never seen her self-conscious about her attire before, but he noticed her smoothing out the skirt of her unusual guard uniform, and trying to rub dirt from the long sleeve of her tunic.

He knew that a messenger had gone ahead of them, and he’d expected the king and queen to greet them at the entrance to the castle. But instead, they were met by a servant and shown into a small audience chamber. Two guards took up positions in the hallway, but once the door was closed, they were alone.

Flora met Cassius's eyes with a strange expression then abruptly lurched toward him and grabbed the flaps of his jacket. She pressed her lips to his with a definite flavor of defiance. Cassius pulled her close, not about to reject the gesture, confused though he was.

"Just in case," Flora told him when she pulled back.

He frowned in bemusement. "Just in case of what?"

The door opened, and two men and a woman strode in, their steps agitated.

"Mother, Father." Flora's barriers were up again, perhaps even more than they'd been when Cassius first met her. "And my dear big brother. You look very heir-like."

"Floriana." The younger of the men eyed her coldly. "You've returned, then. I confess I didn't think you would."

"I didn't plan to," she said frankly. "And I won't be here for long. I'm going to live in Carrack."

The simple words sent a shot of satisfaction through Cassius, but they didn't have the same effect on the others in the room.

"You are certainly not." The woman, presumably Dernan's queen, spoke with no more warmth than her son had done. "You will remain here, where you belong. Your flight was unacceptable behavior." She paused, then, with the air of one making a great concession, added, "But you made the right decision to return."

"Have you missed me, Mother?" There was a wistful note to Flora's voice that made Cassius's heart ache.

“I have missed having the support of a dutiful daughter,” the queen said.

Not a yes. There had been the smallest flicker on the queen’s face before she spoke, but it wasn’t enough to soften Cassius’s thoughts. He found his indignation growing on Flora’s behalf.

“You have certainly grown, Floriana,” the king said, his voice long-suffering as much as disapproving. “But apparently not in wisdom. You appear to have come to us immediately after some kind of brawl.”

“It’s a long story,” Flora said. “I’m injured, it’s true, but I don’t think there will be any lasting damage.”

“If only the same were true of your reputation,” her mother said, her tone pained. “We shall have a great deal to repair.”

“I’m not interested in repairing anything,” Flora said tensely. “As I said, I’m not staying.”

“You are fortunate indeed,” the queen continued as if she hadn’t spoken, “that the earl to whom you were betrothed has not yet taken a wife. It is possible that he will be willing to honor our original agreement.”

Cassius shifted forward, scowling his disapproval at anyone who might look his way. No one did.

“That would open a whole section of the northern cliffs to us,” the crown prince was saying excitedly. “The mining efforts in that area have been seriously hampered. ”

“I’m not marrying the earl,” Flora said, her face still paler than Cassius was used to.

“You will do as you’re told,” her brother informed her. If the king and queen held a hint of hidden softness for their erring daughter, the prince showed no sign of sharing it.

Flora didn’t back down. “As a matter of fact, I won’t.”

The prince eyed his sister with disfavor. “You’re too old for these antics now, Floriana. Have you still not learned decorum? What are you wearing? She ought to change at once, don’t you think, Mother?”

“Absolutely,” the queen agreed. “Some of her old gowns may still fit her. I will invite the earl for a private dinner once Floriana is presentable, and—”

“Did you always speak of her as though she’s not in the room?” Cassius demanded. “No wonder she ran away.”

The three royals bristled, paying him attention for the first time.

“Who are you? The so-called bodyguard?”

“I am the man who intends to marry your daughter,” Cassius said. “So I’ll thank you to stop mentioning this earl, whom she clearly does not wish to marry.”

“Absolutely not,” the king said, his gaze outraged as it passed over Cassius’s ripped and stained attire.

“Come, Floriana.” The Dernan prince spoke in a voice of command, stepping forward to seize Flora’s arm.

“No!”

Cassius heard real panic in Flora's voice, and it propelled him toward her.

"Let go of her," he said furiously. He noticed that Flora had begun to flick her hair back and forth purposefully, the movement a little frantic.

"Don't you dare try to use magic on me," her brother said sharply, distracted from Cassius's advance by Flora's actions. "Your tricks won't help your cause."

"I think you'll find my tricks have grown as much as I have," Flora said mulishly. "You wouldn't let me study magic here, so I found a school where I could. I'm skilled enough now to find employment with the craft."

The queen gave a low groan. "Like a common tradesman."

Cassius felt foolish for how helpfully he'd explained the restrictive view his father took on magic for the titled. It seemed Flora knew that attitude much better than he did.

"Like a highly skilled and respected expert," Cassius contradicted. "Your inability to value your daughter as she deserves reflects poorly on your wisdom as monarchs."

"How dare you?" the prince gasped. "Who are you to speak to your king and queen in such a manner?"

"They're not my king and queen," said Cassius coolly. "And as for who I am, I am Cassius Leopold Detwold Tristan of the House of Renmark, the son and sole heir of my father, King Aelius of Carrack."

There was a moment of stunned silence—into which Flora mouthed Leopold? with laughter in her eyes—before his audience of three gave vent to noises of disdain.

“You are as outrageous as ever, Floriana. What benefit do you hope to derive from this charade?”

“It’s not a charade,” said Flora. “He is Crown Prince Cassius. I’ve been serving as his bodyguard for some time now. Prior to that I served as bodyguard to Her Highness Princess Miriam of Siquel. And I can categorically say that the way we do things in the castle here is the worst approach in the entire Peninsula.”

“You expect us to believe this?” the king demanded. “That the heir to the throne of Carrack is wandering about the country with you, in torn and bloodied clothes and with no other attendants?”

“I have never yet had need of proving my identity,” Cassius said in his haughtiest voice. “But I am perfectly ready to do so should the need arise, Your Majesty. As for our condition, we have narrowly escaped from enemies of Carrack who abducted me from Crandell. Flora, on duty as my bodyguard at the time, was caught up in the attack as well. Were circumstances different, I would apologize to you as her parents for the injuries she suffered in the course of her role, but given you’ve shown no sign whatsoever of caring about her wellbeing, it doesn’t seem that it would be appropriate.”

There was a moment of silence, and Cassius could almost see the king and queen hesitating, wondering if there was any chance his shocking tale was true.

“Father, remember the news we heard this morning,” the other prince said in an undertone. “Could it be...?”

“What news?” Cassius asked sharply. “News of my kingdom?”

Flora’s brother stared at him, uncertain. “It was not an official missive. It was a rumor. That Crown Prince Cassius is being held as a prisoner within Torrens,

betrayed by a spy sent by Siquel to aid in the Torrenese scheme to..."

He trailed off as his eyes came to rest on Flora, and he put the pieces together. Flora shot Cassius a rueful look.

"I suppose we should have expected the tale to go something like that." She frowned at her brother. "What else do the rumors say?"

"That..." He seemed to be struggling to gather his thoughts, his eyes still fixed on Cassius. "That Carrackian troops are mustering near the border, preparing to attack To rrens. Supposedly they will receive support in the effort from one of the kingdoms of the continent."

Cassius growled under his breath. Sir Keavling had been very busy. "None of that is going to happen."

"No," Flora agreed. "Because we're going to fix it." She eyed her family members. "And you're going to help us."

Chapter

Twenty

Cassius watched the other prince's face as he frowned at Flora. Then he abruptly turned and strode for the door. They heard him speaking quietly to a servant in the corridor.

"He's always friendly like that," Flora informed Cassius.

"You will speak of your brother with respect," the queen said sharply.

"I was just trying to be humorous, Mother." Flora sounded weary.

"Humor has no place in the conduct of a princess," the queen declared. "What will your disrespectful ways make our visitor think of our kingdom?"

Cassius eyed her with disfavor. Life in the castle in Dernan really did sound unendurable. Especially for someone as vibrant as Flora.

"I will refrain from expressing my impression of your kingdom, Your Majesty," he said with chilling politeness. "But I have no hesitation in telling you that my impression of your daughter is that she is the most capable, selfless, honorable, and appealing woman I have ever met, with beauty to match her pure heart."

Flora beamed at him, which was all the affirmation he needed for his declaration. He didn't even pay attention to the queen's response. The prince had just re-entered the

room, his bearing still cautious.

“I don’t understand, Floriana,” he said. “Tell me how you came to be a...what did you call it? A bodyguard?”

“Through my magical abilities,” she told him. “But don’t worry about your precious pride. Neither of the royal families I served knew my identity.”

No one looked very reassured, but they gave no reply. A servant opened the door, and a middle-aged man walked in, looking confused.

“You summoned me, Your Highness?” He addressed the prince.

“Why do you look familiar?” Cassius asked, frowning at the newcomer.

“Yes, I summoned you.” The prince of Dernan cast a quick glance between Cassius and the new arrival. “I wish to know if you recognize this—”

“Your Highness?” The man looked Cassius over, his eyes widening. He bowed swiftly to Cassius, then looked back at the other royals. “Your Majesties, this is Crown Prince Cassius of Carrack.”

“You served as ambassador for Dernan in my father’s court.” Cassius’s memory finally came to his aid. “A few years ago.”

The man bowed. “I am honored that you remember me, Your Highness.”

“You weren’t there very long, were you?” Cassius mused. “My father discouraged the existence of the position once he realized you wouldn’t negotiate the export of any chameleon steel.”

The man's expression was rueful.

"I'm glad you mentioned that," Flora said. "It brings us nicely around to the reason we're here."

"Never mind that, Floriana." Her brother metaphorically brushed her aside, his eyes eager as he moved toward Cassius. "Your Highness, please accept my apologies for the manner of your welcome. We did not expect you, or you would have been more appropriately received. Please, allow us to accommodate you in a suite befitting your station."

"Indeed." The queen joined her son. "We will host a dinner in your honor this evening, Your Highness, and—"

"We don't have time for all that, Mother," Flora interjected. "We're here for our own reasons, and—"

"You have exposed yourself and your kingdom quite enough, Floriana," the king said crisply. "Your rooms are ready for you, and you will benefit from a period of quiet reflection while His Highness settles in."

Flora moved to Cassius's side, slipping her hand through his arm as if seeking reassurance.

"I'm not going to my rooms."

No one was listening to her, however, the queen already issuing orders to the servant who'd fetched the former ambassador.

"Cassius." Flora was looking up at him anxiously, her quiet words tumbling over each other. "Don't let them separate us. Don't let them hide me away somewhere, or

they'll never let me back out."

"Flora, they can't, remember?" He squeezed her hand, his voice as low as hers. "It's not physically possible."

Realization came into Flora's eyes, and he felt her relax against him. She'd actually forgotten. It seemed that being reinserted into the environment she'd fled from had made her forget a lot of who she'd become in the intervening five years.

"I never thought I'd be grateful for the tether," she murmured.

Cassius gave a tight smile. "It doesn't matter," he assured her. "Even without it, I wouldn't let them separate us."

It was time to assert himself.

"Please do not make preparations on my account," he said loudly. "I'm not interested in accommodations or state dinners. I'm here because Flora wished to come, and I accompanied her. But I need to return to my own kingdom urgently, to prevent the schemes of the men who abducted me—men who were not representatives of either Torrens or Siquel," he added for good measure.

"Floriana, what were you thinking to interrupt the prince's journey?" scolded the queen.

She nodded to a servant, who moved forward to whisk Flora away. Flora clung stubbornly to Cassius, and he drew her fingers through his arm and into his hand.

"Let me speak more clearly." His voice was cold and austere. "Flora is my affianced wife and the future queen of Carrack. I will not allow her to be bullied."

The queen looked offended, but the king cleared his throat before she could speak.

“Your Highness, we were not aware that Carrack sought to make a marriage of alliance with Dernan. We are willing to discuss the possibility, but naturally negotiations will be necessary to establish terms.”

“Naturally,” Cassius agreed coolly.

“We are not in a position to offer our daughter Floriana’s hand,” the king continued. “But we have another unmarried daughter who would be more fitting for the honored role you propose.”

Indignation swelled within Cassius, but Flora jumped in before he could say something he might regret.

“No.” She was scowling at her parents. “Alianora can’t have him, because he’s mine.”

“Floriana, try to behave in accordance with your station,” the queen hissed.

But Cassius was fighting down a laugh. “She’s entirely right,” he said. “I have no interest in a marriage alliance with Flora’s sister. My interest is solely in her.”

The three other royals stared at him, apparently struggling to believe that the foreign prince could really want to marry the thorn in their side.

“It seems the advantage of an alliance would be all on Carrack’s side, then,” the king said dryly. “We have something you want—two things, I imagine—but I’m yet to discover what Carrack would offer Dernan in the alliance.”

Cassius took a moment to compose himself. His anger was flaring, both at the slight

to his much more powerful kingdom and at the way they spoke about Flora. She hadn't exaggerated when she called herself a resource rather than a daughter. But losing his temper wouldn't help.

"What's the second thing?" Flora asked her father. "Let me guess—chameleon steel?"

"We are aware that the Carrackian king has been eager to get his hands on our stores for some years," her father said coolly.

Flora gave a mocking laugh. "Well go on, then. Show Prince Cassius what he has to gain from an alliance. Give him a tour of your large stores of chameleon steel. "

"Floriana." Her brother's hiss caught Cassius's interest. He sounded alarmed as well as disapproving.

Cassius looked between Flora and her family. "What is it?"

"A private matter, Your Highness," the queen said firmly. "If you truly wish to form an alliance around a marriage between yourself and Princess Floriana, your father will undoubtedly make contact with us once you return to your home. In the meantime, the princess will of course stay here, where you can be sure she will be well cared for."

"I flatly refuse to stay here without Cassius," Flora said. "And we don't have time for proper process. The Peninsula is on the edge of a crisis. Cassius and I wish to marry." She glanced up at him and corrected herself. "We're determined to marry. But Dernan can't offer the military support Carrack needs if the continent is planning aggression. What Carrack really needs is an alliance with Siquel. And that's what we're here to broker."

Cassius blinked, trying to look as though he was part of this plan.

“You’ve come to the wrong kingdom then, Floriana,” her brother said dryly.

“No, I haven’t,” she contradicted. “King Aelius needs more incentive to form an alliance with Siqua. And Dernan is going to be that incentive.” She must have seen her brother’s indignation, because she hurried on. “It will be very much to Dernan’s benefit, don’t worry. Carrack and Siqua together have what Dernan sorely needs, but they need a unifying factor to bring them together and point out the benefits of a three-way alliance. My marriage to Cassius will be that factor.”

“How so?” The king was frowning .

“Yes, how so?” Cassius asked, fascinated.

“The chameleon steel,” Flora said. “It’s time to stop pretending.”

The royals stiffened, their eyes flicking to Cassius, but Flora pushed on.

“I’m not the traitor you think me. I haven’t said a word all these years, but it’s time to be candid.” She turned to Cassius. “Dernan has a vast amount of unrefined chameleon steel, as you’re aware. But you’ve been led to believe that they trade it sparingly purely to control the resource and retain its high value. What no one knows is that the real reason is Dernan can’t keep up with the refinement process. Almost all of what’s been refined has been traded. Dernan has very little arable land, and desperately needs the income.” She glanced at her family. “At least, that was the case five years ago.”

“Thanks to Dernan’s innovation, the refinement has doubled in the last five years,” her brother said tightly.

Flora shrugged. “So it’s a slightly larger small fraction of the ore that’s being turned into chameleon steel.”

“Floriana, you disgrace your position by turning on your own kingdom,” her father said angrily.

“I’m not turning on Dernan,” Flora said with a flash of fire. “I’ve had no interest in claiming a position here for years, but I still don’t wish ill on the kingdom. Dernan needs the wealth chameleon steel can bring. It’s your pride that has harmed the kingdom, by refusing to let anyone in on the secret of the refinement, meaning that you can’t barter for the help you need.”

“Pride is something you would do well to have more of,” her mother told her.

“I hate your pride!” The words burst from Flora with a passion that took Cassius aback. “I’ve always hated it. Your pride is what made my life a misery before I escaped, and your pride is what kept me from coming back. I can’t stop you from being ruled by it—I can’t stop Dernan from suffering from your excess of it, either. But I can refuse to be ruled by it myself.”

There was a moment of silence, no one knowing how to respond to the outburst. Cassius felt a heaviness in his chest as he thought of the role his own pride had played in Flora’s considerable suffering. If he hadn’t been too proud to tell his father about the tether and his loss of face in front of the Squalians, she would never have been so vulnerable. The gossip of the servants and the mistreatment by the court had stung him because, deep down, he knew he was to blame.

And yet somehow, not only did she forgive him, but she loved him in spite of it.

He didn’t deserve her, but he wasn’t going to turn away his good fortune. Whatever plan she had to make their union possible, he was behind it without reservation.

“What is the limitation in the refinement process?” he asked, when it was clear none of her family would respond to her accusations about their pride.

“A couple of things,” Flora said, turning to him in relief at the topic change. “One is space. The chameleon steel has to be refined at very high temperatures, but the influence of fire destroys its magical properties. It has to be sunlight. Sunlight can be channeled through magically enhanced glass panes in order to be hot enough. But the area of Dernan that gets sufficient sun for the exercise is very small. And it can’t be dedicated solely to refining the ore. It’s the kingdom’s most arable land and is needed for farming. Thus the refinement process is slow.”

“You share our secrets very freely for one who claims no belonging to Dernan,” her brother said through clenched teeth.

“Cassius can be trusted,” Flora told him. “He won’t use the information to exploit you. If you would put aside your pride for five minutes, you’d see that cooperation with the other kingdoms will drastically increase the benefit Dernan derives from the chameleon steel stores.”

Cassius considered her words. “Do you suggest that Carrack offers use of a patch of land as part of the alliance? It could be considered, but it won’t be a large space. Our sunniest regions are also our primary farmland.”

Flora shook her head. “No, Carrack’s land isn’t needed. I’ve given it a great deal of thought over the years, and there’s a perfect solution. The desert in Siqua’s northwest. It’s very sparsely inhabited, with huge swathes of unused land. And it gets near constant sun.”

Her father opened his mouth, paused, then closed it again.

“Carrack has put in a lot of work already towards an alliance with Siqua,” Flora went

on. “They will be in a better position to negotiate an agreement. But that’s not your only role.” She smiled up at Cassius, who was watching her with intense focus. “We also need your cobaltite.”

“Our cobaltite?” he repeated, startled. “But it’s not a valuable ore at all.”

“That’s because its full potential hasn’t been explored,” Flora informed him. “The chameleon steel, once melted by sunlight, has to be poured into a stone mold. Don’t ask how we know it has to be stone, it’s been a tortuous process to figure it out over the years since chameleon steel was first discovered. But the stone requires certain properties, including a high level of resistance to heat. Most molds break after one use, which, again, makes the refinement process incredibly slow. Based on the research I did at school, I think cobaltite would be able to withstand the refinement process without breaking down. But Dernan has not a speck of cobaltite to be found within its borders.”

She turned to her parents. “The way I see it, if Carrack brokers a deal with the Squalians to use their land, and agrees to provide cobaltite for the refinement process, Dernan will be doing very well for itself out of the alliance.”

“Naturally Carrack and Squal will both expect a significant increase in the import of the refined chameleon steel,” Cassius chimed in. “But we will be willing to pay a fair price for it, and I imagine Squal would as well.”

“Dernan’s prosperity could only increase,” Flora informed her parents. “And,” she added innocently, “you would be rid of me forever, in a very respectable way.”

Her father didn’t look impressed by that last comment, but his expression told Cassius he was considering the proposal.

“I don’t see why any marriage is necessary to the proposal you’ve made, Floriana,”

the queen commented.

“It is absolutely necessary,” Cassius said. His tone was brutally frank as he added, “I had no interest whatsoever in pursuing an alliance with Dernan before learning Flora’s identity. The chameleon steel would be a welcome import, but it is not sufficient to form the basis of an agreement. As Flora said, our marriage would be the centerpiece of the alliance. Without it, Carrack will withdraw from the arrangement altogether.”

The king and queen exchanged glances, and Cassius continued.

“The circumstances are irregular, but it cannot be helped when my kingdom is on the brink of war. Details can be finalized later, but I need an answer as to whether Dernan is open to the proposed alliance.”

“We are willing to consider it,” the king said with dignity. “But I will not commit my kingdom to a war.”

“No one expects that, Father,” said Flora. “Dernan’s army isn’t tempting anyone into an alliance. It’s Squal’s army Carrack needs.”

“If we act swiftly, my hope is that it won’t be necessary for any armies to gather,” Cassius said. “All I ask from you now, Your Majesty, is a letter to my father, bearing your royal seal, indicating your willingness to consider an alliance upon mutually agreeable terms relating to the export and import of cobaltite and chameleon steel, and formalized through a marriage between myself and Princess Floriana of Dernan.”

It was too much to hope that the king would immediately pen the required missive. But by drawing on all his diplomatic skills and feigning a patience he didn’t feel, Cassius was able to persuade the king to open negotiations with King Aelius. Many questions had to be answered first, and a formal lunch endured, all while Sir Keavling

made who knew what progress on his plans. But finally, just before the dinner hour, Cassius had the desired letter in hand.

“Given the lateness of the hour, you will of course spend the night with us,” the queen said graciously.

“I can’t afford to delay,” Cassius said. “I must return to Crandell immediately.”

Flora laid a hand on his arm. “I know you’re eager to stop Sir Keavling,” she said. “So am I. But we can’t take half a plan to your father. We need to be able to tell him that Siqua is on board.”

Cassius groaned. She was right, but it would take so long.

“There’s something else.” Flora had stepped closer to him, her murmur low. “Something I didn’t mention.”

“What?” He searched her eyes.

“If we can get formal acceptance from the Siquan king to enter into the alliance...”

His breath caught as he took her meaning. “You think it might be enough to break the tether?”

“Maybe,” she said. “The terms of it were an alliance with Siqua, weren’t they?”

He considered it. “I think the terms were specifically a marriage alliance.”

Flora shrugged. “We’ve just said that our marriage will be the centerpiece of the alliance.”

A smile grew slowly on Cassius's face. "We won't know until we try." The lighthearted moment swiftly dimmed. "I wish we weren't going to be so delayed returning to Crandell, though."

"Actually, we might not be." Flora grinned. "I have another secret up my sleeve."

Cassius eyed her uneasily. "I'm not sure how many more I can take."

"You'll like this one," she told him. "I promise." She turned to her parents. "Well, we'll be leaving now."

Her mother protested. "You can't ride out an hour before dark. It makes no sense, Floriana."

"We won't be riding," she said. "Or at least, not a horse." Her face was brighter than Cassius had seen it since they entered the kingdom. "This is exciting. It's the one thing that made me sometimes feel sad about leaving Dernan forever."

She seized Cassius's hand and strode onto the balcony of the room where they were gathered. He watched, bemused, as she began to twirl her hands in a graceful rhythm.

"What are you doing?" Cassius asked.

"I'm going to magically enhance my whistle," she said. "It doesn't require much magic. It's about the intricacy, not the volume of it."

Next moment, she let out a high-pitched, melodious whistle. Her eyes were fixed on the sky, so Cassius looked that way as well, feeling apprehensive.

Within minutes, an enormous shape appeared in the darkening sky. It hurtled toward them, requiring Flora to jump back as it came to a graceful landing on the stone

balcony.

Cassius drew in a sharp breath. “Is that...”

“A griffin,” Flora finished, beaming at it. “My griffin.”

Cassius stared at the creature before him. It had the back half of a lion, complete with swishing tail, and the head and taloned legs of an eagle. It was folding its enormous wings, its mismatched feet prancing forward so it could nudge Flora with its beak.

“It’s...bigger than I expected,” Cassius said faintly.

Flora nodded, idly fending off the griffin’s beak as it pushed her backwards in its enthusiasm.

“Yes,” Flora agreed sagely, “people talk about griffins as lion eagles, but they’re far bigger than either of those creatures.” She beamed at the half-bird, half-feline. “I’ve missed you, Griffy. It’s been a long time.”

“Griffy?” Cassius raised an eyebrow.

“In my defense, I was ten when I first found him at the cliffs and started befriending him,” Flora said. “They don’t trust you quickly, griffins. It took close to five years before he decided to recognize me as a friend. But once they accept you, they’re loyal to you for life. ”

“Is this how you fled last time?” The indignant question came from Flora’s mother.

“Sure is,” she said cheerfully, stroking the creature’s feathers as it craned its neck for a better angle. “He carried me all the way into Torrens. He didn’t much like it, though. They prefer to stay within Dernan, I think. I did once try calling him from

Sigh, but I could tell that my whistle didn't reach him."

"I knew we shouldn't have allowed you to accompany your brothers on all those surveying trips to the cliff-top mines," the queen said in frustration.

"It was the only freedom you ever allowed me," Flora agreed. "And it was enough for me to unlock my cage." Her boldness was returning as the prospect of departure neared. "See you when it's time to finalize the alliance, I suppose."

With that heartfelt farewell, she climbed onto the railing of the balcony, using it to scramble onto the griffin's back.

"Come on, Cassius."

"Surely it can't hold us both," he said, staring at it uncertainly.

"Of course he can." Flora's hand was extended in an invitation. "He's a magical creature, Cassius. His strength and speed don't follow the normal rules of the animal kingdom. He'll get us where we need to go." She flashed him a grin. "Just don't fall off."

On those encouraging words, Cassius seized her hand and hoisted himself up onto the griffin's back. Ignoring her family's vehement protests, Flora murmured to the beast, and a few moments later, it had launched itself back into the sky, carrying the two humans southwest at an impossible speed.

Chapter

Twenty-One

Flora's heart felt as light as one of Griffy's feathers as they hurtled through the air. The sensation of Cassius's arms around her was delicious, even if his grip was more alarmed than comforting this time. She didn't mind. She was in no need of reassurance on her griffin's back. Especially now that she'd escaped the castle in Dernan so smoothly.

"It's quite something, isn't it?" she called over the violence of the wind. They were moving at a speed that made her eyes stream like miniature rivers.

Cassius just grunted, and Flora found herself grinning into the wind. After all, it wasn't every day one got to show off one's secret pet griffin to a foreign prince. The release Flora felt at revealing her true identity to Cassius bordered on euphoria. His attempts to figure her out had woken such desperate longing in her. She'd been surprised by her desire to be known.

And now she was. Fully and without fear.

The trip to the Squalian capital would have taken days by horseback, but riding the wind with the magical propulsion of a griffin, it was only a couple of hours. Darkness had fallen by the time Griffy started to dip into a descent. Flora was cold and weary, her battered body in full protest, but she felt triumphant. She'd wondered at times if she would ever make it back to Sindon.

At her direction, Griffy carried them all the way to the castle courtyard. Flora watched nervously as the archers on the walls primed their bows. She raised her arms and waved them frantically in a warning and thankfully no one fired. They did, however, find themselves surrounded the moment their feet touched the cobblestones.

“We’re not a threat!” Flora called, raising her hands in a gesture of peace.

“Flora?” One of the approaching guards squinted at her in the lantern light. “Is that you?”

“Yes, it’s me,” she said. “And I’ve brought Crown Prince Cassius of Carrack with me. Plus Griffy,” she added, introducing the griffin as an afterthought. “I really need to speak to Princess Miriam or one of the princes.”

The guard’s mouth had fallen open, but another more senior one stepped forward. His eyes were on Cassius, clearly wondering whether he could really be who Flora claimed.

“Come inside, Sir, and we will notify—”

“No, we can’t,” Flora cut him off. “We need the griffin to carry us again, and he won’t stay unless I stay with him. I’m afraid the princess will have to come to us.”

“The royal family are eating dinner,” the first guard protested.

“If you tell Miriam that Flora is here, she will come,” Flora said firmly. “I guarantee it. And you should tell Their Majesties that the missing crown prince of Carrack is also here. I think they’ll all want to speak with us. ”

Her predictions proved correct. The guards sent two of their number with the message, and it wasn’t long before Miriam came running from the castle with unladylike haste, her parents and Prince Theodore following close behind. Prince

Xavier was nowhere to be found, as usual.

“Flora!” Mim’s cry of relief was so high-pitched, it was almost a shriek.

Flora gladly received her friend as Miriam slammed into her.

“You’re alive!” Miriam’s voice was shaking. “When we heard the prince might have been taken hostage, I was so afraid for you, because I knew that of course you would have been dragged into it, too, and—”

“I’m all right,” Flora cut the other princess off. “I’m not so easy to get rid of.”

“Be gentle with her,” Cassius said in a voice of authority as Miriam squeezed Flora in a bear hug.

“He’s right,” Flora said. “I’ve taken a sort-of beating and I’m still very sore.”

“What?” Miriam drew back, distressed. But the other royals had reached them, and Flora gave her friend an apologetic look.

“There isn’t time for me to tell the whole story right now. But it’s been dramatic since I left you, to say the least.” She looked at Cassius for a moment, then drew a deep breath. “To whittle it down to the main points...firstly,” she bowed to the king and queen, “you should know that I haven’t been honest about my identity. I was born a princess of Dernan. I ran away at fifteen, and my parents had no idea that I went to school in Torrens or that I was serving as a guard here.”

The king and queen said nothing, their faces blank with shock .

“The next key piece of information is that an imposter has infiltrated King Aelius’s court and is manipulating the king against the proposed alliance and promoting war within the Peninsula. He orchestrated the kidnapping of Prince Cassius—from which

we've recently escaped—and is painting it as an attack by Torrens with the assistance of Siqua. I believe I've been given the role of Siquan spy sent to lure the prince into a trap."

A noise of protest escaped the king's throat, but beyond that, everyone still seemed too stunned to speak.

"We need to return to Crandell to prevent war," Flora said. "Immediately. But we need your help first. We have a proposal, and we think that if you provide official confirmation of your willingness to consider it, that will convince King Aelius that the best path forward is to stabilize the Peninsula with an alliance. A three-way alliance between Carrack, Siqua, and Dernan."

"It's not likely, Flora," said Prince Theodore. "I mean," he started to correct himself, "Princess—"

"No, no," Flora cut him off. "Flora, please."

He gave a curt nod, too sensible to be distracted by quibbles. "The advantages of an alliance between Carrack and Siqua have been mutually acknowledged for some time as we've prepared for the marriage alliance. Dernan is a different matter. The only circumstance in which an alliance with Dernan would be beneficial would be one centered on the trade of chameleon steel. And as we all know how closed Dernan is to increasing its exports—"

"Not anymore." Cassius raised the parchment he'd received from Flora's father. "Flora has negotiated a deal with her parents which will significantly increase chameleon steel exports."

"It does hinge on one final detail." The look Flora sent her friend was mischievous, at odds with her apologetic words. "I'm very sorry, Miriam, but I've stolen your betrothal."

Miriam let out a miniature squeal that was drowned out by the queen's voice.

"You go too quickly, Flora. To be frank, your claims are shocking, and this conduct is highly irregular. We are of course delighted that you and His Highness are safe, but if you will come inside, there is no doubt a great deal to discuss."

"I'm very sorry, Your Majesty." Flora bobbed a curtsey. "But we simply can't afford to delay."

"What if I step inside with Their Majesties?" Cassius suggested. "We will need to remain within twenty feet, of course. But you could stay with the griffin, and I could explain the situation, hopefully to Their Majesties' satisfaction."

He gave Flora a look that said, let me take it from here, and she was quick to nod her approval. The king and queen would speak more freely when they were no longer in the courtyard and no longer grappling with the fact that the princess trying to negotiate with them was the bodyguard who'd been protecting their daughter for minimal wages for a year.

"I'll stay with Flora," Miriam declared. "I'm not interested in the politics."

Flora ran a reassuring hand down Griffy's neck as the others left. The poor creature was fidgety. Griffins enjoyed movement, and she knew he would fly great distances in her company in a heartbeat. But staying still in a foreign environment so far from his home was making him uneasy.

Miriam turned to Flora the moment her parents were gone. "Tell me everything."

There wasn't time for everything, but Flora didn't waste a second of what time they had. When she'd recounted her progression through attraction, denial, trust, and finally what she called unashamed adoration, Miriam's eyes were shining.

“I’m almost jealous,” she said. “It sounds like you’ve stolen quite a prize from me.”

Flora gave a pained laugh. “You say it jokingly, but I really have cut you out, Mim. I feel bad about that.”

Miriam’s laugh was much more natural. “Don’t. I’m not really coveting your prince. I’m delighted for you, Flora. Although I will miss you.”

There was no time for more. Cassius was returning, deep in conversation with Prince Theodore.

“That was quick,” Flora said. When the men reached them, she raised an inquiring eyebrow at Cassius.

“The Squalians are very ready to negotiate an alliance as proposed,” he told her. “The king has written a letter to my father confirming as much. They have also graciously released me from the proposed marriage of alliance that we had previously discussed.”

He glanced at Prince Theodore as he said it, but Flora didn’t press for details about who had helped convince whom of what. There was no time—everything but the essentials would have to wait.

“We should be off, then,” she said.

“It’s already dark, Flora,” Miriam said anxiously. “Are you sure you can’t sleep here and leave in the morning? How much difference will a few hours make?”

“Days’ worth of difference,” Flora said regretfully. “Because we would lose our magical means of transport.” She buried her fingers in the lion-like fur on her griffin’s back. “But we’ll see each other again before long, Mim.”

Miriam enveloped her in another hug. “I’m glad you’ve reclaimed your position as princess,” she told her. “You deserve it.”

Flora smiled at her friend. “I would have taken that as an insult when we first met. But now...” Her gaze passed to Cassius. “I’m inclined to think it’s a good thing after all.”

Cassius was already holding out his hands to boost her onto the griffin’s back, impatient to reach his home and stop the impending disaster. Once Flora was settled, he followed her on, locking his arms around her and placing his mouth next to her ear so she could hear his words.

“Will he know where to go?”

“He will when I communicate with him,” Flora said. “The journey will be longer this time, Cassius—twice as long.” Her abused muscles screamed in protest at the thought, but she steeled herself. “I was teasing you before, there’s no way Griffy will let us fall. We should both try to sleep if we can.”

Cassius said nothing as the griffin took to the skies again. Flora could feel his doubt, but she suspected he would succumb to sleep soon enough. She was utterly exhausted, and he couldn’t be far behind.

The wind whipped through her hair, cold and unpleasant. Focusing her weary mind, Flora harnessed a fraction of its movement, converting the magic into an invisible blanket of warmth that settled over her and Cassius. It wouldn’t last long, but it was certainly nice. She felt herself beginning to drift...

Flora came to as the griffin began to descend. She was relieved to see the Carrackian capital ahead. She hadn’t intended to sleep the whole time and leave all navigation to Griffy. But he’d managed beautifully. It was fortunate that griffins were drawn by concentrated magic. He would have had no difficulty recognizing the presence of a

city by the signature of refined and active magic inside it.

At her urging, the griffin soared gently over the city, too high up for archers to target him. She didn't steer him toward the castle. She prompted him to descend in a spiral and drop them in one of the city's celebrated parks. They would walk to the castle rather than arriving dramatically by griffin this time.

"Thank you, Griffy," she murmured to the creature once they'd both dismounted. "I owe you more than I can repay. I hope we will meet again."

The griffin rubbed its beak against her shoulder, then abruptly took to the sky. In seconds it was invisible against the inky blackness.

"Will he fly all the way home now?" Cassius asked. "He must be exhausted."

"I imagine he is exhausted, but he has little choice," Flora said. "Griffins can't sleep anywhere but their own nests. It's why they don't like to go so far afield."

She was already walking toward the castle as she spoke, and Cassius kept stride. The cobbled streets were deserted, the hour well past midnight.

"I suppose everyone is in bed now," Flora said.

Cassius shook his head. "My father won't be in bed."

She raised an inquiring brow, and he shrugged. "I'm supposedly abducted, and war is looming. He won't be in bed—he'll be in his war room, planning how best to crush those who are threatening me." He sighed. "My father isn't the warmest man, but he cares in his way. As your parents' atrocious conduct reminded me."

Flora grimaced, not eager to talk about her family. "Well, if your father is up, it makes our task easier."

Even if the king had been sleeping, their arrival would have roused him. They caused a sensation when they approached the barred and guarded door of the castle.

It was convenient, Flora reflected, as she jogged along the corridor in Cassius's wake, that here they didn't have to convince anyone of the prince's identity.

Cassius proved to be correct about his father's location. They burst into the council chamber that Cassius had referred to as a war room, to find the king bent over a map with advisors huddled around him.

"Father!"

Cassius strode into the room, his presence at its most commanding despite his ripped and bloodied clothes and the generally disheveled air of travel.

"Cassius!"

King Aelius hastened to meet his son, the relief on his face softening Flora to him slightly. It seemed he did care. The king clapped his son on the shoulder, his eyes searching the prince's form.

"You're injured," he said darkly. "Who did this to you? They will be crushed."

His eyes slid past Cassius, hardening as they landed on Flora.

"The spy! Seize her!"

The guards at the door surged forward, and Flora found herself roughly seized. She was taken by surprise, and a gasp of pain escaped her as their hands closed over her bruised limbs.

"STOP." Cassius's voice was so terrible, even Flora felt a thrill go down her spine.

“Unhand her immediately.”

“Cassius, you don’t know everything,” the king told him. “She has been working against you all this time. She’s—”

“You are misinformed, Father,” Cassius said. “And I know by whom. I—”

“Your Highness.”

The loathsomely familiar voice made Flora freeze, and Cassius stopped mid-sentence, his face going pale with fury. They both turned, and outrage rose in Flora as she saw Sir Keavling, moving forward with casual grace from the corner where he’d remained unnoticed.

“What an incredible relief to see you safely returned!”

The imposter spoke smoothly, but his eyes glittered with a new light as they rested on the prince. His audacity was breathtaking—he was walking right up to Cassius, one hand on his heart as he spoke. Flora struggled with the guards, every instinct protesting the sight of the murderous imposter coming so close to Cassius. She cast frantically around for a source of movement—hampered as she was, she could find nothing better than the pendulum of the great clock that hung on the wall behind the king. She snatched desperately at the Dust it was stirring up, ignoring her own energy stores as she threw the magic indiscriminately at the guards holding her.

With startled cries, they pulled their burning hands back. Flora lunged toward Sir Keavling just as Cassius squared up to the traitor.

“You vile—”

Cassius’s words were cut off by Flora’s scream of warning. Sir Keavling, carefully positioned so that his body hid his hands from the king and his advisors, had yanked a

short blade from his belt. As Flora leaped forward, he plunged it toward Cassius.

Flora's movements weren't enough to allow her to magically destroy or even block his weapon. But after all, she had received regular guard training as well. She threw her shoulder into the imposter, knocking him sideways and sending the blade clattering from his hand. There was a brief and frantic scuffle, during which his hands found her throat, then the next moment, he stilled.

Flora extricated herself, struggling up to see that Cassius had acquired a blade—presumably from one of the guards—and was holding it to Sir Keavling's throat.

"If you touch her again," he told the man calmly, "I will run this blade through your heart before your next breath can pass your lips." His eyes passed to Flora. "Are you all right?"

She nodded shakily, moving to his side. The guards didn't attempt to seize her again.

"What is going on?" King Aelius demanded, appearing alongside Cassius and gripping his shoulder as if to reassure himself his son remained uninjured. "What just happened?"

"What happened," Cassius told him, "is that Flora undertook a final act as my bodyguard and prevented Sir Keavling from plunging that blade into me." He kicked it with his foot, sending it further from the downed imposter.

"But...I don't understand."

King Aelius was looking from his son to the man on the floor. To Flora's disbelief, he looked like he was still grasping for an explanation where his favorite advisor wasn't at fault.

“I do,” Cassius said in a hard voice. “He didn’t produce the blade until Flora leaped forward to my defense. I have no doubt he intended to kill me and make it look as though she had done it. You would not have believed her testimony, and he would have been free to continue spinning his lies.”

There was hatred in his eyes as he stared down at Sir Keavling.

“It is not your first offense against her, but it will be your last,” he said, still deadly calm. “I wish I could kill you myself. But my position restricts me. I will see you hanged instead, after you have told us everything you know.”

The man laughed disdainfully. “I will tell you nothing. Do you think I will break as easily as you did?”

“Cassius, I don’t understand,” King Aelius pressed. “There must be a mistake. Why would he attack here, in my own—”

“To prevent me from telling you, as I was about to do, that it was he who orchestrated my abduction, and planned to kill me to start a war between Carrack and the rest of the Peninsula. A war that would require you to turn to the continent for military aid and thus pave the way for full annexation under your very nose.”

“Cassius, what madness is this?” Whatever his words said, King Aelius sounded uneasy.

“It’s not my speculation, Father,” Cassius told him. “It is the simple truth. This man—who is not now and never has been the true Sir Keavling—is the one who attacked and kidnapped me. He was personally present when his men beat me in an attempt to force me to sign a letter accusing Torrens of my abduction.”

“Yes.” Sir Keavling clearly knew his charade was over—Flora even suspected he was glad to drop the mask. His expression and voice were instantly altered as he sneered

at the prince. “And you begged for mercy like a whipped dog. You have no honor, you or your insolent kingdom. ”

“How dare you?” King Aelius gasped in fury. “My son would never demean himself to beg.”

Sir Keavling’s cackle dripped with scorn. “Oh, but he did, Your Majesty . It told me all I needed to know about the weakness of your kingdom, and how easily it will be subdued when the time is right.”

The king was pale with rage, his fists shaking as he turned to Cassius. Flora winced at the expression in his eyes, feeling the color drain from her own face. If it was true that Cassius had begged for mercy, she had a feeling she knew why. And it was nothing to do with his own capacity for withstanding pain or pressure.

“Cassius, tell me you did nothing to bring dishonor on your kingdom,” the king ground out.

“Readily.” In sharp contrast to his father, Cassius was cool and unemotional. “It is Sir Keavling’s actions that dishonor his kingdom, not mine. I know what actions I took, and I know why. My reasons were irreproachable—to have allowed my pride to lead me to act differently would have been the greater dishonor.” He sent a fleeting glance at Flora. “If the opinion of a man like Sir Keavling could damage my pride, my pride was at fault in the first place.”

She smiled back at him, her heart swelling at his words. She hadn’t blamed him for the pride he carried—her own experiences had made her assume it was an unfortunate inevitability for those with royal responsibility. But she had never been more proud of him than she was now, seeing him rise above it.

She wasn’t sure King Aelius was equally impressed, but he said no more about it. Instead, he barked an order to his guards to throw Sir Keavling in the dungeon and

place him under triple watch. He seemed unable to look at the man, his own unchecked pride no doubt wounded by the realization of how duped he had been.

Sir Keavling was unabashed as he was hauled to his feet. He addressed his next words to Cassius.

“You have only delayed, not prevented what is coming. I regret nothing—it is you who will feel regret.”

His hand flashed into motion with the words, but the warning died on Flora’s lips. Before she could even utter it, he’d whipped a vial from some hidden, interior pocket, and downed its contents. Before her eyes, he seized and then dropped in a heap, going immediately still on the stone floor.

“Poison!” one of the guards exclaimed.

“He didn’t want us to learn what he knew.” Cassius’s voice held angry frustration rather than the sick shock Flora felt. “Which means he knew something of value. Probably many things. We never even confirmed which of the continent’s kingdoms he came from, let alone whether he acted in an official capacity and what his leader plans to do.”

His agitated gaze fell on Flora and softened at once.

“Did you worsen your injuries?”

She shook her head. “I’m all right.”

He stepped closer, running his fingers down her filthy, cold cheek. “And he will never hurt you again.”

“Cassius.” The king’s sharp voice told Flora that he’d finished giving orders about

the removal of the dead man's body and had turned this attention to them in time to see his son's caress. "You will refrain from a public dalliance with a servant."

"Actually, Father, I won't," said Cassius calmly. "I intend to engage in the most public dalliance possible and marry her. But she's not a servant, you know."

"Cassius!" The king sounded scandalized now. "I don't have time for absurdities at present. We must fortify our borders. If Torrens was truly uninvolved in the attack on you, then they will be offended by the actions I have already taken. Even if we pull back, we should expect an attack."

"I don't think so, Father," Cassius said quickly. "Torrens would be foolish to attack us."

"No, they would be strategic," the king snapped. "I would do the same in their situation."

"It wouldn't be strategic to attack us if we were allied with both Siqua and Dernan," Cassius said.

His father waved an impatient hand. "Enough about the alliance, Cassius. It is less a possibility now than it ever was. Do you not realize how these events will sour relationships further? Our best course will be to withdraw and fortify our own borders."

"Isolating from the rest of the Peninsula will only leave us vulnerable to being manipulated again by players from the continent," Cassius said firmly. "This is a strategic moment, Father. We must seize it to secure our future. And Flora has found the perfect means of doing so."

His father stared at him like he'd lost his mind. "You are taking advice on matters of state from this peasant masquerading as a guard?"

“She has been masquerading,” Cassius acknowledged. “But in the opposite way from what you imagine. She’s not a peasant, she’s a princess. Specifically Princess Floriana of Dernan. It is with her I will form a marriage alliance.” He pulled from his pocket the two billets, each bearing the royal seal of a different king, and slapped them onto the table. “I can explain it all to you in detail, but let us adjourn to my room for the purpose. Then Flora can go to bed in her suite. You see, she can’t go further than twenty feet from me, due to a magical tether imposed on us by Lord Armand when he was in a more than usually interfering mood.”

A movement drew Flora’s eyes, and she realized for the first time that Lord Armand was among the advisors present. He was squirming uncomfortably, and she didn’t hesitate to glare at him. Cassius, however, took a different approach.

“Yes, I see you there, My Lord.” He stared the nobleman down for a moment before he let out a sigh. “I’ll deal with you tomorrow. I know I’m furious with you, but for the moment I can’t remember all the reasons why. I’m too conscious of my gratitude for the connection you created between Flora and me.”

He turned to the king, who was standing motionless, struggling to comprehend all his son had just disclosed.

“Come, Father. It’s time we remembered how to work together.”

Cassius held out his arm to Flora, who was only too ready to lean on him for support as they moved from the room.

“It’s over, my darling,” he murmured as they entered the hallway. The endearment blazed over Flora, holding the fog of her exhaustion at bay. “You’re safe, and you can relax now. Consider yourself off duty.”

She smiled wearily up at him. “Yes, Your Highness.”

A month later, Flora traversed the same corridor, this time toward the throne room. Cassius walked about fifteen feet ahead, to preserve the formality of separate arrivals. It was foolish to make such a fuss about following the rules—it was to be the barest and most practical of betrothal ceremonies.

That fact hadn't stopped the castle's inhabitants from gathering to watch her go past. She'd braced herself for ire from the servants once her true identity was revealed, but they'd surprised her. As Flora neared the throne room, a group of maids sank into curtsies, eyes alight with excitement. Among their number was the very maid who'd been offended by her joke about Dust. Apparently they all liked her better as a princess than as a guard. On reflection, Flora suspected that the idea of a lowly servant, like them, winning the prince's heart and then being discovered to secretly be a royal princess had captured the imagination of every serving girl in the castle. They'd no doubt retell the story in their minds—each girl replacing Flora with herself as heroine, of course—for years to come.

The guards had reacted differently, but their demeanor was equally free of antagonism. Those who'd behaved most distastefully when she was among their number were the most dutiful and proper in her presence now. They no doubt feared recriminations, and although she didn't intend to cause anyone problems, it didn't bother her at all to let them squirm in their discomfort for a while.

The court was more mixed in its reaction. Some of them had been eager to meet her in her new guise, full of fascinated questions about her unusual story and her native kingdom. Others had kept more distance, a hint of censure in their eyes when they watched her from afar, no doubt drawing their own conclusions about all that had passed between her and their crown prince. Then there were those who whispered more openly, some of them genuinely offended by her masquerade, others just jealous she'd secured the position they coveted.

They would no doubt be even more annoyed at the proper wedding, where the real pomp and frills would be found. That event would take much longer to prepare than

the simple betrothal ceremony. The hope was that she would be free in the intervening period, perhaps even to return for a stretch of time to Sindon, to properly farewell her friends and the life she'd lived there.

And the next time she came to Crandell, it would be to make it her permanent home. She would become Carrack's crown princess.

It was hard to take in. She'd discarded her life as a princess so long ago, and vowed never to take it up again.

But that vow hadn't accounted for Cassius. For him, she was ready to put back on the mantle of royal responsibility. With him by her side, she wasn't even troubled by those among the court who disapproved of her. Choosing not to overvalue the opinion of strangers had been essential to her escape from her first role as a princess of Dernan. The return to royal life didn't have to mean accepting the same shackles she'd worn in her parents' castle. If it had, she didn't think it would be tolerable. But Cassius didn't expect her to bow and scrape to the offended nobles. He assured her that he knew her behavior had been honorable throughout everything they'd endured, and that the gossip of those who didn't know her was beneath her notice as a princess just as it had been beneath her notice as a guard.

He was very attractive when he spoke like that. It turned out that princely pride wasn't always vain and self-important. Sometimes it could be used to excellent effect.

And she was eager to discover how much good a crown could do when on the right head. Together, she and Cassius would help Carrack to prosper, and protect it from any interference from whoever had sent Sir Keavling to start their destructive work. It would help that they would have the support of the alliances they were about to formalize. Further negotiations had remained promising with both Siquel and Dernan.

Torrens was a different matter. They had refrained from attacking Carrack, but tensions remained high. There was now little doubt that Sir Keavling and his

mercenaries had been behind the various attacks and disasters that had made the other kingdoms suspect some foul play from Torrens. But that knowledge wasn't a magical cloud of Dust that could clear the effects of all the tension that had been building for over a year.

The future with Torrens was unsure.

Flora couldn't find it in her to worry about it, however, not on such a glorious day. She entered the throne room behind Cassius, walking with her best, most stately princess manner up the length of the space. The event hadn't been widely advertised, and yet, somehow everyone knew. The large room was almost full.

Flora ignored them all. She only had eyes for Cassius as she joined him before his father's throne, slipping her hand into his offered one.

"Are you ready?" he asked softly.

She nodded, contentment swirling through her.

"I know this isn't our wedding yet, but it is a legally binding agreement for our kingdoms," he reminded her. "No backing out after this."

"There's no fear of me backing out," she told him, her eyes laughing at the somber look in his. "I've become quite accustomed to being tethered to you."

That brought out a smile, the one that held the tiniest hint of smugness. The one that Flora found particularly irresistible, although she didn't intend to admit that to Cassius.

"There's no way out of this tether, though," he said. "And I won't be dancing around the edge of it, either. I can tell you right now that I will not be sleeping on the floor once we're married."

Her cheeks heated, the sensation very pleasant. “I should hope not. Shocking behavior from a prince.”

Cassius’s chuckle faded as the official stepped toward them, speaking the formal words needed to seal the betrothal. The ceremony was brief, consisting only of the public speech and the signing of the preliminary alliance agreement by King Aelius and representatives from both Dernan and Siqua.

Brevity was apparently no barrier to the magic. As soon as the last signature was on the page, Flora let out a gasp. The sensation of power that had tied her to Cassius for so long had suddenly snapped.

“The tether is gone,” she said, turning to him with shining eyes.

“Yes,” he agreed. He studied her face for a moment, then pulled her into his arms, disregarding all the gathered onlookers. “Am I a fool for missing it already?”

Flora laughed. “If you are, then we’re fools together.”

“That’s all I ask.” Cassius’s murmur was for her ears only. “Wise or foolish, proud or humble, strong or weak...as long as we fight our way through it together.”

Flora pushed up on her toes, her heart full as she whispered back. “I tie myself to you, Cassius of Carrack. In every season, forever. My heart is tethered to yours, and no magic can ever break it.”

With an expert flick of her hair, she summoned a single puff of Dust, sending it to hover like a warm cloud over Cassius’s heart. To the delighted cheers of those in the crowd who just loved a good spectacle, she pressed her lips to those of her betrothed.

She didn’t know what the future would hold, but one thing she did know. Their love was a tie stronger than magic, stronger than kingdoms, malice, or pride. Stronger

even than death.