



Ties of Legacy (Tethered Hearts #1)

Author: *Melanie Cellier*

Category: YA&Teen

Description: A merchant girl with a life of freedom.

A young man who just wants to settle down.

A journey through three enchanted kingdoms.

As a roving merchant—or peddler, as many call her—Avery lives a life of freedom that few ever experience. She can navigate the enchanted landscapes of six kingdoms, and she’s an expert at finding unique items and matching them with the right customer. If her traveling lifestyle means she doesn’t have any close friends, at least she can help communities in need. And it’s worth it not to be tied down. She might be alone, but that doesn’t mean she’s lonely.

Elliot would love to be tied to his birth kingdom like most people. Such a restriction might be limiting, but it would be better than being bound to a candelabra—especially once that candelabra gets stolen. With his life on the line, Elliot has to find it—or whatever is left of it.

The last thing Avery wants is a pesky stowaway on her cross-kingdom rescue mission—especially not one who claims he’s bound to one of the items in her cart. Elliot is equally unhappy to be trailing her through the kingdoms—he’s sick of traveling and ready to put down roots. But Avery has promised to help free him from the ties binding him, and he’s willing to make a final journey if it means being free of the candelabra. He’ll just have to make sure his heart doesn’t form its own tie with his beautiful traveling companion. Should be easy, right?

Ties of Legacy is book one 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.

This standalone story is set in the world of Melanie Cellier’s Kingdoms of Legacy series.

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Chapter 1

Avery

A very walked up the incline, dust puffing out with each step. The summer heat had made a reappearance, clinging desperately to the end of the season, and her trusty mare had already been pulling Avery's cart since early morning. Nutmeg didn't need the extra weight of Avery herself, even if the hill was barely steep enough to warrant the name.

On any other day, she would have already stopped for the evening. But she was too close to Henton not to push on. The village might have been modest in size, but it was still going to afford her a better bed than a makeshift camp by the side of the road.

They crested the small rise and paused, horse and girl's motions in sync after so many years of shared travels. As Nutmeg rested, Avery gazed at the village before her in satisfaction. She had wanted to rush straight to Henton six months earlier, but there would have been no point arriving before her allotted time. Instead, she had busied herself in Stonyfell and Oakden while she waited. But now, after traversing three kingdoms, she had finally reached her main destination.

Her eyes caught on a steady stream of thick smoke rising from the largest chimney on the main street, and she smiled. It wasn't actually Henton she was seeking, but Henton's smith.

Avery clicked her tongue, and Nutmeg resumed her forward progress, the cart

lurching behind her. It already carried a nearly full load, but that didn't matter. The item Avery had come to Henton to acquire wasn't going to take up much space.

They reached the flat ground at the bottom of the small hill, the first buildings of the town just ahead of them. Nutmeg stopped again, and Avery patted her neck, crooning softly to her.

“Are you tired, girl? You can have oats tonight after all your hard work.”

“Oh!” A startled exclamation from the crest of the rise made Avery look back. A pretty, golden-haired girl stared down at her with wide eyes.

The girl hurried forward, her face bright, and Avery smiled in response. She looked around Avery's own age of nineteen—or perhaps a couple years younger—but any similarities between them ended there. Avery's hair was dark and her eyes gray, but the true differences ran much deeper than physical appearance.

Avery had met many girls her own age in her travels, but none of them had understood what it meant to live a roving life, always moving on to new places and new horizons. Just as Avery couldn't fathom what it meant to have a true home—a life forever rooted in one place with no opportunity for escape.

“You're a peddler!” the girl exclaimed breathlessly as she stumbled to a stop beside Avery's cart. “Aren't you?” She gasped. “Are you Avery? I've heard about you!”

Avery laughed at the girl's infectious enthusiasm. “I prefer roving merchant.”

“But you are Avery?” the girl asked, undaunted.

Avery nodded. She was used to people knowing her name. There were few true traveling merchants among the kingdoms. Most merchant trains stopped at their own

kingdom's border, exchanging goods there with matching merchant trains from the neighboring kingdom. And of the few roving merchants who did travel across borders, Avery was the only one who traveled alone. Of course, she hadn't always been alone, but two years of solo travel as a young woman had been enough to ensure her reputation preceded her. Especially since she had a knack for acquiring items that were unusual, useful, valuable, or all three.

"I'm Olivia," the girl said, still breathless from her dash down the hill. "I heard a rumor you'd be visiting here soon, but I wasn't sure it was true. Nothing interesting ever happens in Henton."

Avery grinned at the girl's dissatisfied tone. Maybe she and Olivia were more alike than she'd initially thought.

A youthful shout interrupted their fledgling conversation. Both girls turned back toward the hill to see a younger boy of about ten with similar coloring and features to Olivia. He stared down at them from the top of the hill, his hands resting on an enormous pumpkin which stood almost as tall as he did.

"Olivia!" he shouted again. "Who's that? Is it a peddler?" He was panting as if he had just rolled the pumpkin up the far side of the hill, but even so, he seemed more excited at the sight of Avery than Olivia had been.

"Careful, Laurie!" Olivia shouted with more alarm than seemed warranted.

Her brother took no notice of her warning, however. Abandoning his awkward burden, he took off running toward them. Immediately two things happened.

Laurie, showing more speed than coordination, tripped over his feet and fell. Carried by his momentum, he tumbled down the hill without pause. At the same time, the pumpkin shifted, unbalanced at the top of the incline without Laurie to hold it. It

tipped forward and rolled after the boy, gathering speed.

Avery and Olivia threw themselves into motion simultaneously. As Laurie finally reached flat ground and tumbled to a stop, Olivia leaped toward him. He groaned, stirring feebly and showing no awareness of the danger rolling toward him, so she threw herself protectively over him, bracing her back against the coming boulder-like threat.

Avery, however, had launched herself uphill toward the pumpkin, her mind working as fast as her feet. If she threw herself in front of it, she was going to be the one to be flattened. But she didn't need to stop it completely, just avert its course from Olivia and her brother.

Without time to think of a more sophisticated plan, Avery threw herself sideways at the pumpkin, her shoulder colliding with it as it rolled past. The pumpkin felt solid—more solid than a vegetable had any right to feel as far as Avery was concerned. Why couldn't it have been a giant lettuce?

The force of the collision sent Avery ricocheting to the ground. She landed hard, curling instinctively into a protective position that prevented any serious injury.

The pumpkin wobbled precariously, veering sideways and tipping onto its stalk. It bumped and bounced, sliding across the ground for a few more yards before coming to a stop not far from the closest fence.

Silence fell as Avery, Olivia, and Laurie all slowly raised their heads. Laurie stared at the pumpkin, his eyes widening.

“Boy, am I lucky!” he exclaimed. “If the pumpkin had hit the fence, Farmer Hawthorne would have killed me!”

“You’re lucky the pumpkin didn’t kill you!” Olivia cried, scrambling to her feet in disgust. “I told you not to bring it.”

“But Mistress Thatcher said she’d bake Jimmy and me a pie if I rolled a pumpkin in for her!”

Avery climbed to her feet, rubbing her sore shoulder and eyeing the pumpkin, which now lay at an odd angle a few yards away from them. “That pumpkin would make a lot of pies.”

Olivia sighed and hauled Laurie up. “Which is why Madam Thatcher keeps wheedling the local boys into bringing her one. She makes them a pie or two?—”

“Or three!” Laurie interjected.

“And she’s left with a pantry full of pumpkin jars,” Olivia finished.

“I’d rather have a finished pie than the job of cutting up that monstrosity,” Avery murmured.

Olivia paused. “You know, when you put it like that, you’re right. Maybe I’ll help you push it there, Laurie.”

Laurie grinned, his spirits already recovered from his tumble. “Mistress Thatcher likes you better than me. She’ll probably bake you a whole pie of your own.”

He dashed over to the pumpkin and tried to push it back onto its side, struggling to get it out of the divot it had made in the dirt. Olivia sighed and walked over to assist him. Together they got it rolling again, directing their path toward Avery.

“I don’t know why I’m complaining,” Olivia muttered as they drew near. “This is the

most interesting thing to happen in weeks.” Her expression brightened as she looked in Avery’s direction. “Other than your arrival, of course. Have you really been to all six kingdoms?”

Avery laughed. “Yes, I have. I grew up traveling the kingdoms.”

Olivia’s eyes widened. “Imagine that! How fascinating.” She spoke as if Avery was some incomprehensible oddity, but Avery just smiled.

For most of the inhabitants of the kingdoms, she was an oddity, so she’d long since got used to it. Some people romanticized her life, but more felt sorry for her, unable to imagine that anyone could truly want to spend their life on the move. But Olivia’s air of dissatisfaction seemed to indicate she was one of the few who disliked a settled life.

“Do you really want to leave Henton?” Avery asked her curiously. “Have you ever been traveling?”

“No, but I’m considering moving elsewhere,” she replied. “My extended family are famous for moving around.”

“Really?” Avery looked at her more closely. Was Olivia from a remote line of roving merchants?

It would explain her wanderlust. And it would also mean she and Avery were distantly related in one way or another. Every one of the roving merchants shared at least some blood. It was the only reason they had been able to maintain their nomadic lifestyle through the generations.

“Most of my family have only traveled within Sovar, of course,” Olivia added, and Avery’s momentary excitement waned.

Most people were content to remain where they were born, but for the more adventurous among the general population, there was always the option of traveling within the borders of their home kingdom. People moved for jobs, or for love, or for climate, or to join family—there were all kinds of reasons. But they didn't move to other kingdoms.

“Not all of my relatives stayed in our kingdom, though,” Olivia added with a note of pride, reminding Avery that there was always the occasional person who didn't fit the normal mold. “While my grandfather picked Henton of all places, his brother moved to Glandore. I have cousins there. For a while I even had a cousin in Oakden.”

Avery's eyebrows rose. Family in three kingdoms was impressive. Her interest pricked again. Did the Legacy treat Olivia's family lightly? Was that what made them so mobile?

The Legacies were the forces that shaped each kingdom around its unique history—weaving the elements of those founding stories into the environment, the animals, the plants, even the people. And the Legacies didn't like people leaving their birth kingdoms. If Olivia did ever choose to leave her kingdom, the Sovar Legacy would enact a price. No one could predict in advance what it would be, but she would suffer a burden for living elsewhere.

Every person born in the kingdoms was bound by their kingdom's Legacy—everyone except those who shared Avery's bloodline. Their freedom was what had made them roving merchants, and it was what kept them in that profession through the generations. Avery liked her life and valued her ability to travel, but she had always known her family's freedom was a bond of the Legacy in its own way. If they hadn't spent their lives traveling, her parents might never have contracted the wasting fever that had killed them both. Avery might never have found herself alone.

She brushed aside thoughts of her parents, focusing back on Olivia. “Are you

thinking of following your great-uncle's example and moving to another kingdom?" she asked.

Olivia laughed. "I'm not that reckless. But I am considering moving to the capital." She rushed to continue, as if afraid Avery might laugh at her. "My father has cousins there who run a successful business. They wrote that if any of us wanted a job, we would be welcome to join them."

"You should go," Avery said. "You clearly want to." If she'd been heading toward the capital herself, she would have offered for Olivia to travel with her. She didn't often feel inclined to take on a traveling companion, even a short term one, but Olivia had shown she had the potential to become a friend.

Avery wasn't heading southeast to the capital, though. As soon as she received her order from the smith, she would be returning in the opposite direction. Her commission had already been delayed by six months, and she couldn't delay it any further. Lives were depending on her.

It was better that way anyway. If she did spend more time with Olivia, and they became friends, it would only make it hard to say goodbye. Avery had freedom, but she didn't have many friends. Her lifestyle didn't allow it.

Still, she couldn't entirely shake the fellow feeling she had been surprised to discover in Olivia. Acting on impulse, she rummaged in the back of her cart, pulling out a small, wrapped item. She couldn't offer the Henton girl a journey to the capital, but perhaps she could help her in another way.

She offered the item to Olivia with a smile. "I hope you do decide to go to the city. And if you do, maybe you'll find this helpful."

Olivia unwrapped the item with a quizzical expression, almost as if she was uncertain

she would like whatever was inside. Avery glanced at Laurie, who was watching with an avid expression. From Olivia's response, Avery could guess she had a long history with unwelcome surprises presented as gifts. She probably had more brothers at home than just Laurie.

When the soft material fell away, Olivia held up a tiny mirror with an elegant silver frame and handle. She gasped.

"It's beautiful!" she said at the same moment her brother cried, "It's tiny!"

She gave him a stern look, and he shrugged.

"What? It is tiny. I've never seen such a small mirror."

It was true that the mirror was too small to reflect Olivia's entire head, but she could see most of her face, and she stared down at it, rapt. Avery wondered what she saw.

"It comes from Auldana," she said lightly, and Olivia immediately gasped.

Tearing her eyes from the mirror, she stared at Avery with shocked eyes.

"Auldana?" she cried. "I can't accept something so valuable." But even as she said the words, she clutched the mirror against her chest.

Avery chuckled. "I think you already have."

"What does it matter where it was made?" Laurie was already losing interest in the gift now that he'd seen what it was.

"Don't you ever pay attention in school?" Olivia scolded. "I know your class learned about the other kingdoms' Legacies. The Auldana Legacy lets the Auldans make

mirrors with all sorts of fantastical properties.” She looked up at Avery. “What does this one show?”

“When it reflects a person’s face, it shows their true emotions rather than their actual expression,” Avery replied.

She’d never felt the need for such an item herself. In a lifetime of travel she’d been exposed to countless people, and her parents had taught her to read the subtle shifts of their expressions and to hear the truth behind their words. But Olivia had spent her whole life in one village. If she was going to move to the capital, she might need the extra help.

Olivia pulled the mirror away from her chest and peered into it, eyes wide. Avery wanted to ask if she saw any shift in her reflection, but she remained silent. When Olivia began to sputter her gratitude, she cut her off, however.

“Don’t thank me too quickly,” she said dryly. “I’ve been carrying that around for over a year, and there’s a reason I haven’t sold it in all that time. It was made by an apprentice, and it doesn’t always work.”

“That doesn’t matter to me,” Olivia breathed. “I’ve never received a gift like this in my life.” A determined light filled her eyes. “I am going to go to the capital. I’ll have my father write to his cousin tonight.”

Avery smiled, her satisfaction shot with only the slightest hint of concern. After encouraging her to go, she hoped Olivia didn’t meet with disaster in her travels.

She shrugged the nebulous worries aside. Olivia was going because she wanted to go. If Avery carried the worries of everyone she met, her mind would be too full of worries to function.

Her mother had warned her many times against getting too attached. Avery had always been allowed to play with the local children, but she'd rarely stayed anywhere long enough to form true friendships. Only the cousins she'd traveled with had ever qualified for that title.

Avery took Nutmeg's lead rope and called a cheery farewell to Olivia and her brother. The two had begun squabbling—Laurie demanding Olivia's help with rolling the pumpkin, and Olivia protesting that she had to protect her new gift—but they broke off to ask if Avery needed directions.

"I think I can find the smith on my own," Avery said, her emotions hovering between amusement and sadness. She'd always wanted a sibling.

Nutmeg began walking, and Avery kept pace with her. As they went, she shook out her arm, wincing at the bruise that was already forming. It reminded her again of her parents. They had been half-proud and half-concerned over Avery's penchant for throwing herself into danger. She'd resolved a hundred times to be more cautious in the future, but she couldn't see someone in trouble and not respond. And most dangerous situations called for quick action—there wasn't time to sit around thinking through all the options. So what else could she do?

It didn't take long to reach the source of the thick stream of smoke. As expected, it originated from a large, open smith's workshop. The clanging of metal on metal rang down the street, clearly heralding the building's purpose.

Avery slowed as she approached, her new acquaintances forgotten in the anticipation of the moment. She had been waiting six months to meet Henton's smith.

Olivia had said nothing interesting ever happened in Henton, but for an unremarkable village in the middle of Sovar's extensive grazing lands, it was unusually famous. Knowledgeable sources all knew that the most remarkable smith in six kingdoms had

chosen to settle there. No one knew why, and Avery could only conclude he must have wanted peace and quiet.

But if he had hoped to avoid attention or customers, he had failed. Few customers visited him personally—they would have to travel to do that—but traditional merchant caravans were always eager for his wares. He had a list of commissions that stretched months into the future—thus why Avery had been forced to wait.

Avery didn't usually accept such direct requests from her customers. She preferred the freedom of choosing where she traveled and when. But the townsfolk of Bolivere had been desperate—too desperate to put an order through the traditional merchant systems and wait the extra time that would require. They needed help as soon as possible, and Avery had been concerned enough to assist. Her subsequent six months of travel had been more unsettled than usual, her thoughts always circling back to northeastern Glandore and the isolated town of Bolivere as she wondered how many more had died.

Nutmeg arrived at the smithy, and Avery secured her rope to the post provided for the purpose. As she straightened, her gaze caught on a figure on the far side of the street. He wore a travel cloak covered in dust, and he leaned against the side of the building directly across from the smith, his intense gaze on the smithy.

The young man didn't even seem to notice Avery, his focus on the forge beyond her. But Avery stood for a moment, struck by something she couldn't articulate. He was good-looking, with wavy brown hair and eyes so blue she could see their color from across the street, but she had seen good-looking men before.

Was it his single-minded focus that was out of place in the setting? Or was it the haggard cast of his features? He looked as if he had only just recovered from an extensive illness and was upright only due to the assistance of the shoulder he had propped against the wall. And yet his focus didn't waver.

If he had been waiting outside a healing clinic, it might have made sense. But while the Henton smith made remarkable objects, he didn't work with anything that had healing qualities. Avery was there to save lives, but her situation was unique.

She stilled. Was it concern for someone else and not his own health that had affected the man's countenance so dramatically? Could he have come from Bolivere? Had the situation there worsened in Avery's absence?

Without thinking, Avery stepped toward the man, drawn irresistibly in his direction. She would ask him if?—

Her approach finally pulled the man's attention away from the smith, and for a moment, he seemed as struck by her appearance as she had been by his. But a second later, his face was wiped clean of expression, and he pushed himself off the building. Walking with more strength than she had expected from someone who looked so weak, he hurried back between the building that had been supporting him and the one beside it, quickly disappearing from sight.

Avery took several hurried steps after him before stopping. What was she doing? If the man had been from Bolivere, he would know about her mission and would have recognized her, not run away.

He had struck a discordant note in his surroundings, and it had made her curious, but she couldn't lose her focus. Her father had always warned her that curiosity could get her in trouble. She would never see the young man again, so she had to shake thoughts of him off, just as she had with Olivia and Laurie.

Avery turned back to the smithy and strode inside without looking back. A burly man with heavily muscled arms looked up from beside the fire and slowly raised his brows.

“I’m Avery,” she said. “I’m here for the enchanted lamp I ordered.”

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Chapter 2

Elliot

Elliot leaned against the wall, appreciating the extra support after so many hours on his feet keeping watch on the smithy. His strength had mostly returned, but he could still feel the effects of his recent weakness. He needed to get closer to the smith's stash before he could regain his full strength.

And if the smith didn't leave his forge soon, it was possible it would never happen. Elliot shuddered at the thought. The last two weeks had been sufficiently bad that he refused to even consider the possibility of his current state continuing indefinitely. He would recover his candelabra—and consequently his health—no matter what it took.

Villagers came and went down the main street, but Elliot's eyes remained on the smith. The man was enormous—too enormous for Elliot to consider raiding his smithy while he was still there. And the man didn't even leave his forge at night, sleeping laid out at the front of the smithy.

Elliot had attempted approaching him as a customer, of course. But the only thing the man would grunt at him was that there was a waiting list. Apparently, you couldn't just walk in off the street and purchase from this particular smith. And if you were from out of town, he was taking bookings for six months away. Six months!

Elliot couldn't possibly wait six months, which was why he was reduced to considering petty theft. Not that it would be true theft. The candelabra was his and had been stolen from him in the first place. It wasn't as if he was stealing one of the

smith's own works. And he would even leave a fair price behind. The candelabra might have been his by right, but the smith hadn't been the one to steal it.

Not for the first time, he cursed the original, unknown thieves. By the time he had woken up and realized it was gone from his makeshift camp, he had been too weak to have any hope of catching them. As it was, it had taken him two weeks of trial and error to track the candelabra to Henton. And by then he was too weak to care about justice for the original theft. He just wanted to retrieve his property.

It wasn't as if the thieves had known what they were doing. Who would ever have suspected that Elliot needed an ordinary brass candlestick in order to put one foot in front of the other? Some days he still couldn't believe it himself, and he'd been carting the thing everywhere he went for twenty-one years.

Elliot's focus on the smith had grown so intense that he barely noticed the periodic movement of others around him. Even when a cart approached the smithy, he didn't break his stare. But when the owner of the cart started across the main road toward him, he blinked and finally took in her appearance.

She was young—a little younger than him, he would guess—but she carried herself with confidence beyond her years. And she definitely didn't come from Henton. That much would have been obvious even if he hadn't grown to recognize all the town's inhabitants. She was the kind of woman it was hard to look away from—the kind who must command the attention of kings as easily as smiths.

But what was she doing approaching him? Elliot shook himself. In a normal situation, he would have welcomed the opportunity to talk to her. But what if she was connected with the smith in some way and was coming to ask the purpose of his suspicious lurking? He didn't have a reasonable answer, so it was better to avoid the conversation altogether.

He slunk back between the buildings, disappearing from view as quickly as possible. When he paused to check behind him, he breathed a sigh of relief. She had abandoned the pursuit.

Circling the building, he approached the main street from the other side, moving more cautiously this time. Her cart and horse were still tethered outside the smithy, but it took him a moment to find the girl herself.

She was just inside, talking animatedly with the smith. But the smith was giving her little in return, just as Elliot remembered in his own attempts at conversation with the man.

The girl seemed disappointed by whatever he did say, but she accepted his words much more quickly than Elliot had. Consequently, she walked out on her own feet, avoiding being forcibly ejected and forbidden to ever return.

From the look of their interaction, his earlier fears had been misplaced. She definitely appeared to be a customer rather than an associate. But in that case, why had she attempted to approach Elliot? The question was of far more interest to him than it should have been. He couldn't afford to indulge curiosity when he was in such dire circumstances.

He watched her untie her horse and cast a final, longing look at the forge before moving off toward Henton's one small inn. Elliot wished he could follow. And not just because he wanted to talk to the girl. He envied the fact that she would get a meal in the inn's dining room and a night sleeping in one of its two guest chambers. His own night would be much less comfortable.

His meal consisted of simple rations from his pack, and he slept as usual in the shadow between the general store and the bakery, directly across from the smithy. And as before, he slept only fitfully, waking periodically through the night to check if

the smith had left. He never had.

The first light of morning had barely begun to rouse Elliot when the sound of hooves brought him to full alertness. He scrambled to his feet and identified the cart and its owner, shaking his head when he did so. He knew from experience that the smith's mind wouldn't be changed by a good night's sleep. The girl would have no more luck in the light of morning than she'd had at the end of the previous day.

But to his astonishment, the smith greeted her with acceptance, if not actual warmth. He handed her a small package, already wrapped, and gestured for her to examine the haphazard stash of items he kept piled right at the back of the smithy. It was the stash Elliot had spent far too many hours staring at from afar.

Frustration boiled up inside him. The smith had told him six months' wait! And yet this traveler had been welcomed back in only a day. She had been permitted to waltz in and browse the smith's wares only hours after her arrival. But the smith couldn't sell Elliot a single measly candelabra? It wasn't even an attractive candelabra.

He let the emotions wash over him and roll away again as he watched the girl. Just like in the street, it was hard to look away from the elegance of her movements. Who was she? If the smith hadn't forbidden him entry, he would have been tempted to follow her inside just to ask her name.

She retrieved an empty wooden box from her cart before picking through the smith's wares, selecting some to pack inside the crate. Elliot leaned to the side, trying to get a better look at what she was purchasing. Her body blocked his line of sight, and he stepped further and further into the street in an attempt to get a clear view.

The girl swung around—calling something inaudible to the smith—and Elliot pulled quickly back. But as he moved, he caught a passing glimpse of what she held in her hand. His heart contracted.

A candelabra. She was holding a candelabra with three familiar branches.

He surged forward, forgetting about concealment in his need to confirm what he'd seen. But she was already bending over, packing something into the crate. Was it the candelabra? She had just been holding it in her hand, so it seemed a reasonable assumption. But what if it hadn't been?

His fists clenched with the desire for immediate action. But what could he do? Barge in there and try to grab the candelabra from her crate? He didn't need another look at the smith's muscled arms to know that wasn't going to succeed.

Suddenly his curiosity about the mystery girl's identity didn't seem so foolish. He was sure he'd never seen her before her arrival in Henton, but her cart and even the crate she was packing suggested she was a roving merchant. He'd met far more roving merchants than most people. He was one of the few people in the kingdoms to travel as much as they did—him and his unfortunate candelabra.

But even among the roving merchants, it was unusual to see someone traveling alone. How had she ended up on her own? And where was she going?

It didn't really matter where she was going, though. It only mattered that she was leaving Henton.

Excitement built up inside him, making it even harder to keep still. He didn't know why she wanted his battered old candelabra, but it would surely be easier to retrieve from her cart than it had been from inside the smithy.

His momentary dismay at seeing it in her hand had turned to elation, and he couldn't wait for her to finish her transaction and leave with the candelabra. She took several more minutes, however, selecting more items from the pile to fill her crate.

Elliot used the extra time to strategize. He could always approach her and ask to buy the candelabra, but the debacle with the smith had left him wary. If she refused, she would then be on her guard against him. And while she might not look like much of a threat, anyone who traveled alone through the kingdoms with a cart of valuables shouldn't be underestimated.

It would be better to take the candelabra while she was camped for the night. He would leave enough coin behind to cover its value three times over, of course, as he had intended to do with the smith. He didn't like that he'd been reduced to thievery, but with his life on the line, he couldn't afford to make another misstep.

But first he needed to check that she really had selected the candelabra. Fortunately—or perhaps unfortunately—he had an easy way to confirm the location of his stolen possession. He just had to wait until she took to the road with her new wares.

She finally finished selecting her items and handed over a pouch of coin. The smith bounced it twice on his palm and grunted, nodding that their business was complete. Elliot had been surprised the first time the smith had done something similar, but he had seen it several times since. Along with being taciturn, surly, and lacking in basic human compassion, the man added the talent of measuring the value of coins from their weight alone.

At least the smith's charming nature meant Elliot didn't have to wait while the girl made any polite small talk with him. With their business completed, she left immediately. He was a little concerned she might have further business in the immediate vicinity, but she mounted onto the simple wooden bench at the front of the cart and clucked at her horse. The chestnut mare responded instantly, pulling the cart down the street.

Elliot forced himself to remain still, his muscles taut at his lack of motion. His body

was screaming at him to run after the cart, but he forced himself to wait. He had to be sure.

His eyes were the only thing to follow the cart's course, staring after it with an intensity that suggested it would disappear if he so much as blinked. He needed to wait, but he also couldn't afford to lose track of the cart. He already knew how painful it would be to track the girl down if that happened. He had experienced that joyful experience once, and he didn't intend to repeat it.

His breathing rasped in and out of his lungs, and his legs trembled. But it hadn't been long enough. He couldn't be sure the symptoms weren't a result of his tension. He had to be sure.

Another minute passed. And another.

A surge of bile rose up in his throat, and it was all he could do to stop the contents of his stomach from being violently expelled. His head spun, something pounding against his skull. He took a step forward, and his knees nearly buckled.

The response was even worse than last time. The effect of separation from the candelabra was getting more extreme. Brilliant. That was all he needed.

But at least it answered his question. His days spent lurking across the street from the smith's had returned him almost to full strength. There was no way his candelabra was still in the forge.

He tried to run after the cart but could only manage a stumbling walk. He had been worried about the girl noticing him trailing her, but apparently that shouldn't have been his main concern. He had already lost sight of the cart.

He gritted his teeth and forced his legs to move faster. If he could just close the gap

between them, it would get easier. He needed to find the perfect distance to tail her—close enough that he could still move freely but not so close as to catch her attention.

He shuffled faster. At least the horse had been moving at a slow walk—a sustainable pace rather than a sprint.

Gradually his stomach settled, and the pounding in his head dropped to a light pulse. But he didn't fully breathe easily until he rounded a bend in the road and saw the cart ahead. He immediately pulled back, relief filling him.

He wanted to rush forward and lift the symptoms entirely, but he could endure some discomfort until night fell and the roving merchant made camp. She would have to sleep beside the road. At her current pace, there were no towns or villages close enough to reach in one day.

It might have been different if she had taken the southeast road toward the capital, as he had expected. But instead she had returned the way she'd come, taking the northwest road back toward the river that marked the border between Sovar and Oakden.

There weren't enough regular travelers to require a vast network of well-maintained roads in the kingdoms, so he knew all the major routes by heart. Her current path would take her to the riverside city of Marleston, a much larger settlement than Henton. It didn't matter what her final destination was, though. Once he'd retrieved his candelabra, they'd be parting ways. As soon as he had it in his hands, he only needed to know which direction she was traveling so he could go the opposite way.

Since they were moving through grazing lands, there wasn't a lot of concealment along the road. But thankfully someone had planted a screening row of trees to provide shade and mark the location of the road. Their shelter provided just enough

cover for Elliot to stay close to the cart throughout the day.

It wasn't a comfortable journey, but there was satisfaction in the movement after so many days spent in stillness, watching the smithy. He finally felt like he was moving forward.

The merchant girl stopped earlier than he expected, veering off the road when she spotted a familiar marker. There might not have been many roving merchants, but the skeletal network of main roads were also used by the traditional merchant caravans who did business within the borders of their own kingdom. And all travelers made use of the public rest stops placed strategically along the more frequented routes.

The marker stood at a crossroads where a larger stand of trees provided shelter beneath the cover of the leaves. Elliot lingered beside the road, giving the merchant time to set up her camp. If she was going to be moving around among the trees, he didn't want her blundering into him by accident. Not that she looked like the type to blunder anywhere.

He shook his head. He had to shake his strange fascination with her. The moment he became a thief, he would need to avoid ever running into her again.

Finally he couldn't wait anymore and crept into the trees. He moved slowly and soundlessly, having spent years practicing the skill. As expected, she had set up camp beneath the simple, three-sided wooden shed. She had already fed and watered her horse, and from the soft one-sided conversation she was having with the creature, the mare was the reason for her early stop. The girl seemed to feel bad about having started so early that morning after a long day of travel the day before.

"But how could I delay after the smith turned me away yesterday?" she asked the mare, her lilting voice making the complaint sound pleasant. "You would think after waiting six months, it would have been easy to wait another night—but I think last

night was the hardest one.”

Elliot shifted slightly. So she hadn’t just waltzed in after all. She’d waited to reach the top of the smith’s list of commissions. And, as promised, when that day came, he had permitted her to browse the discarded items piled at the back of the smithy—the items that had come out faulty in some way or been rejected by the prospective purchaser. According to the smith, he only did business with customers collecting an order.

“And now, finally, we can go back to Bolivere,” the girl continued, making Elliot freeze.

Bolivere? She was not only going north toward the kingdom of Glandore but actually heading all the way to Bolivere?

Ice trickled from his scalp down his spine. But there was no reason for that news to hit him so hard. He was already planning to head in the opposite direction to the girl. That made it a good thing she was heading to the last place he wanted to visit.

Smelling her cooking fire—or more accurately the meal she cooked over it—was torturous, but Elliot reminded himself that the whole ordeal would soon be behind him. He would head toward the Sovaran capital and stop at the first decent inn he found on the way. He was still dreaming of a hot meal and soft bed when dark finally fell, and the girl settled into her bedroll for the night.

He waited even longer, letting her breath become slow and even as she slipped into deeper sleep. Finally, it seemed safe enough to creep into the light of the banked campfire.

Despite the season, she had lashed a waterproof canvas over the cart’s contents, and it took him some time to quietly work several of the knots loose. Thankfully, the crate

containing her recent purchases was near the back of the tray and relatively easy to access. He had only uncovered the first section of cart when he caught sight of it.

His heart beat so fast, he worried it might beat out of his chest as he pried open the lid. Any minute now he would have the candelabra in his hand again, and the whole nightmare would be over.

Inside the crate, he found a number of items made with different kinds of metal. He nestled a small pouch of coin among them, the action assuaging the guilt he already felt over his theft—even though he was only taking his own property.

The smith had left his discarded wares piled carelessly on top of each other, but the merchant girl had packed her purchases carefully in straw, and apparently she'd put the object he was seeking at the bottom. Consequently, it took Elliot some time to dig through and find the candelabra. He worked carefully, but as his hand closed around one of its three branches, a shot of excitement made him momentarily careless. He jerked it upward, causing several of the items to knock against each other with the clear ringing sound of metal striking metal.

Elliot fell backward, his fingers still clamped around his quarry. He had originally intended to put everything back in place, hoping the girl wouldn't notice the robbery until she was many days down the road. But he could already hear movement from beside the fire, and the sharp whinny of the mare. Panicked, he jumped down from the back of the cart and fled into the surrounding trees.

It wasn't the multi-day head start he'd been hoping for, but the girl was wrapped in her bedroll, which gave him an advantage. And he was significantly taller than her as well. With the candelabra in his hand again, he was back to full strength. He could outrun her.

Except that he wasn't growing stronger. Each step took more effort than the last. He

spotted the edge of the trees and tried to put on a burst of speed. Instead, one of his legs buckled completely, and he stumbled, nearly falling.

He flailed, trying to restore his balance, and halted all forward progress. He had only just managed to prevent a fall when something grabbed at him from behind, tugging and then releasing and sending him stumbling in the process.

This time he couldn't save himself, and he landed on his back. Partially winded, he stared upward into the snapping teeth of a horse. The merchant might have been slowed by her bedroll, but apparently she didn't secure her mare overnight.

Gasping for breath, he shook his head, trying to clear it and make sense of what was happening. He had even bigger worries than nearly being bitten by a horse. Why hadn't his sickness eased now that he had the candelabra back?

He rolled into a sitting position, wheezing and coughing. The horse whinnied a protest, but when he didn't move further, she refrained from seizing his vest in her teeth again.

Ignoring her, he peered at the candelabra. Had it been damaged? Was that the problem? But as he stared at it—getting a good look at what he held for the first time—horror spread through him. He was holding a candelabra, but it wasn't his candelabra. He had grabbed the wrong object.

He was still staring at it when the merchant girl burst through the trees behind him and slid to a stop. She patted her mare on the neck, looking down at him with an expression that slowly changed from smug satisfaction to surprise and finally disappointment.

It shouldn't have mattered to him, given the far more important disaster of the candelabra, but her disappointment still hit him directly in the chest.

“It’s you,” she said slowly, her mouth twisting. “You’re a thief.”

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Chapter 3

Avery

The clanging pulled Avery out of a deep sleep. But even as a child, she had always woken quickly. It was a valuable skill on the road.

It still took her a moment to scramble out of her bedroll, though, and by the time she had, both the intruder and Nutmeg were gone. She glanced at the cart, noting the opened crate before she sprinted after her horse.

She hadn't gone far when she raced between two trees and nearly collided with the mare. Nutmeg had managed to catch the thief much more quickly than she'd expected. She patted the horse's neck approvingly as she moved forward to get a good look at the man on the ground.

She expected to find an angry, aggressive thief looking up at her, but instead the young man on the ground was staring at the three-branched candlestick in his hands, his expression shocked. Avery's eyes narrowed as she tried to make sense of the situation. Who was he?

The man finally looked up, meeting her eyes, and she blinked in surprise. "It's you."

The disappointment spearing through her was irrational. She had no reason to be disappointed that the blue-eyed young man from Henton was nothing more than a common thief. He must have been scoping his next target and decided she was an easier mark than the smith. Surely it wasn't disappointment in him but in her own

failure to recognize his intent. She wasn't usually so obtuse.

"You're a thief," she said, her words tinged with disgust. If there was one thing merchants disliked, it was thieves.

He stared up at her, apparently shocked into silence. She expected him to make another attempt to bolt, but he remained seated on the ground. As the moment drew out, her brows furrowed.

If he was a thief, he was a bad one. He'd only stolen a single item, and probably the least valuable one in the crate. Did he know something about the candelabra she didn't?

Avery wanted to interrogate him, but his appearance stayed her tongue. If he'd looked like a recovering invalid the last time she'd seen him, he looked like an active one now. His face was dangerously pale in the moonlight, and she suddenly had the feeling he was still sitting because standing was too difficult a task.

She had to suppress an instinct to ask if he was all right and to offer help. Effective thief or not, he had still stolen from her. She had not been the one to make them enemies.

"Does that candlestick have some marvelous property of which I'm unaware?" she drawled, affecting nonchalance.

He looked down at the brass object and then back up at her, surprising her with a rueful laugh.

"Not to my knowledge, no. It appears to be a perfectly ordinary brass candlestick."

She met his eyes, reminding herself that the piercing intensity of their color told her

nothing about his character. Even when he smiled at her, heightening the effect of his eyes, she refused to be moved.

“I’m Elliot, by the way,” he added.

“Out of all the items in my cart, you made an interesting selection,” she said, ignoring his attempted introduction.

He sighed. “I’m in desperate need of a candelabra.”

Desperate. It was the word that had come to mind when she had first seen his expression. But the words made no sense. If it wasn’t the middle of the night, she would have suspected him of being sun-addled.

Elliot put a hand to his head, as if attempting to push back a splitting headache. Avery sighed. He might be a petty thief, but she didn’t have it in her to come down hard on someone who looked like he might collapse at any moment.

“If you need one so desperately, you can have it,” she said. “It didn’t cost me much, anyway.”

He shook his head, as if attempting to clear it. “Money isn’t an object. I can afford to pay...” His voice trailed off as his look of pain intensified.

Avery frowned down at him, her instinctive sympathy still battling with her indignation. “If money isn’t an issue, why did you steal it?”

“I...didn’t...steal...it,” he rasped out, his eyes tightly closed.

Avery’s eyes widened. He really must be addled. Maybe it was the pain. How could he sit there with her candelabra in his hand and claim he hadn’t stolen it?

But if he was addled with pain, there was no point arguing with him.

“All right, then,” she said. “You’ve got your candlestick now, and we can even say you didn’t steal it, if that makes you feel better. Just don’t come near me or my cart again.”

“I don’t...want it.” Elliot pushed the candelabra along the ground toward her, the words sounding forced out of him.

Avery gaped at him. Maybe she hadn’t woken up at all, and the whole encounter was a dream. A flush crept up her face as she remembered that the blue-eyed man had made a brief appearance in one of her dreams the night before as well.

The people and experiences of the day often wove themselves into her dreams—all in fantastical and nonsensical ways, of course—but she didn’t usually dream repeatedly of someone she’d only seen briefly in passing.

She leaned over and picked up the candelabra, still flushing. If she was in a dream, it was time to wake up.

“Do you have...any...others?” Elliot gasped out.

“Other candelabras?” She shook her head as the conversation descended further into farce. “You want me to let you steal a better one now?”

“Not...steal,” he rasped out his protest again.

Avery remembered her determination not to argue with him. “It doesn’t matter because I don’t have any others,” she said. “I only purchased this one on a whim because it was cheap. I usually focus on more unusual items. I can’t carry too much weight in my cart, so I have to choose my wares carefully.”

She stopped herself. She didn't need to explain her business model to the thief any more than she needed to argue with him.

"If you don't want this one, fine." She picked it up, brushing off the dirt. "Just remember what I said about staying away from me in future. I won't be so understanding next time. If I so much as see you in the same town..." She gave him a stern look. "If you hear the merchant Avery is visiting a village you're in, turn right around and head back out again."

"Wait—" Elliot made as if to lunge in her direction and toppled over instead.

She hesitated, looking down at him with another well of sympathy.

"Are you sure?" he whispered. "You don't have any others? Not even one? You must have one more somewhere."

Avery closed her eyes and breathed slowly. If she was in a dream, shouldn't she have woken up by now?

"I'm sorry," she said firmly, "but I don't have any others. I know every item in my cart."

She turned to go, one hand in Nutmeg's mane. But as she walked away, her conscience gave a pang. She stopped, glancing back to see Elliot struggling back to a sitting position. What if it wasn't a dream?

"Are you going to be all right?" she asked reluctantly. "You don't look well."

Elliot's shoulders slumped. "If you really don't have the candelabra I need, you can't help me."

Avery frowned, but after another moment's hesitation, she turned away again. She wasn't a healer, and she had already done more than obligation demanded. Besides, she was still half-convinced she was going to wake up in her bedroll at any moment.

But as she walked back through the trees with Nutmeg, she didn't wake. And when she reached the rest stop and her cart, she had to acknowledge that it didn't seem to be a dream.

She looked back through the trees. Should she go back and find Elliot? Would he still be sitting where she had left him?

But before she did anything, she needed to pack up the mess he had made. The candelabra had been at the bottom of the crate, and he had managed to scatter a number of the other items in his haste to pull it out. As she placed each item safely back in the straw, her ire rose. He had been the one to invade her camp and steal from her. How did she know his sudden illness wasn't feigned? It had come on conveniently quickly. Maybe it was an act he pulled to escape the consequences of his thievery.

She put the candelabra in last, closing the crate and lashing the canvas back down over everything. The whole situation was odd, but that was only more reason to stay out of it. When she had told her aunt and uncle that she meant to continue traveling alone, they had warned her against getting involved in anything too big.

"Don't forget you're on your own now, Avery," her uncle had told her.

"Nutmeg will watch my back," she'd told him with youthful confidence, and the mare had proved herself a faithful companion several times over. But there was still wisdom in her uncle's words.

Whatever was going on with Elliot, Avery couldn't be the one to fix it. Ignoring her

instinct to go back for him, she climbed into her bedroll and tried to settle for the remainder of the night.

But despite her resolution not to get involved, when she left camp the next morning, she couldn't help taking a path through the trees that led her past the place where she had left him. Her mind lightened when she saw no sign of a collapsed body. He must not have been as ill as he looked.

Now she just needed to forget the strange young man and his obsession with candelabras.

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Chapter 4

Elliot

The symptoms were definitely getting worse. The stabbing pain in Elliot's head was so bad he could barely see, and talking was difficult.

He looked up and realized the merchant girl—Avery, she had called herself—and her vicious horse had left without him even noticing. She had taken the candelabra with her, but that didn't matter, since it was the wrong one.

But how could it be the wrong one? He struggled to think through the pounding in his head.

He had been only mildly uncomfortable all day as he trailed close behind the cart. It was only when he ran away from it that the pain had set in. His candelabra had to be there.

He couldn't think it through properly with his senses spinning so badly. He needed relief, and apparently that meant getting closer to the cart.

He tried to stand and staggered, collapsing back onto his knees. Walking was out of the question, then. He flattened his hands on the dirt and crawled forward instead, inching back toward the cart. It took two minutes of slow progress before he noticed a change. But the lessening pain and dizziness allowed him to move faster, and the symptoms began to decrease rapidly.

He was so relieved by the freedom from pain, he nearly crawled right into the open space in front of the wooden shelter. He caught himself just in time, though. Slumping against a tree trunk, he tried to think the situation through with a clearer head.

The evidence of his symptoms told him his candelabra was in Avery's cart. It had to be. And yet she had claimed she didn't have any others.

It was possible she was lying, but she had seemed astounded and indignant rather than duplicitous when she had assured him it wasn't there. And he had searched the whole crate himself to find the one he had taken. There hadn't been a second candelabra.

That meant the one he'd glimpsed in her hand at the smithy hadn't been his. And yet, she had to have taken his candelabra. If she hadn't, he wouldn't have been able to leave the smithy, and he wouldn't need to be near her cart now.

There was only one possible answer. He had watched the smith night and day since his arrival in Henton, but there had been a gap between the thieves selling the smith his candelabra and Elliot's arrival. During that time, the smith must have already melted down the candlestick for its brass and reshaped it into something else.

His stomach twisted. After lugging the thing around with him for his whole life, he'd thought he hated it. But the thought of it being destroyed and made into something unfamiliar hit him hard. As much as he detested being tied to it, the candelabra had been a part of him.

He leaned his head back against the tree trunk and closed his eyes. How had he reached the point where he had an emotional connection to a candelabra? His mother had a lot to answer for.

His stomach tightened further. He already knew about his mother's faults, and he didn't want to think of her. He had enough worries in the immediate moment.

His emotional reaction wasn't what was important, his physical response was causing him trouble enough. Apparently, the process of being melted down hadn't destroyed his tie to the brass that formed the candlestick. Instead, it had strengthened it. With the added complication that he now had to retrieve an unfamiliar item instead of one he knew better than his own hand.

Avery had warned him not to come near her again, but somehow he had to test every item she had bought from the smith. Should he just take the whole crate?

It wouldn't be as easy to do now that she was on alert. And he had no idea what the items had cost her. If customers were willing to seek out a smith in Henton and wait six months for their orders to be filled, the smith must be unusual. Who knew how much his creations cost? Elliot probably didn't have enough coin to reimburse Avery for the whole crate. His coin had been steadily dwindling for a long time, and he had already left more than was comfortable in the crate for Avery.

There was also the question of how to succeed at such a theft. He didn't like his chances. If he couldn't get away with a single candelabra, he wasn't going to outspint the horse with a heavy crate full of metal.

Which left him where?

He would have to follow Avery, of course. He had no choice but to stay near her cart. Should he try to explain the situation to her?

He groaned. Despite his failure with the smith, he should have approached Avery openly from the beginning. Now she would never trust him. She must have thought him odd and untrustworthy at best, and it might have been worse than that. He wasn't

sure what he'd said to her through the haze of pain earlier. Any story he told her now would seem like a ruse to get his hands on her wares.

He would have to trail behind her until the next town. Both Avery and her watch horse slept beside the cart on the road, but Avery had disappeared into the inn at Henton. When she next reached a town, surely she would rent a room and put her horse in the stables. That would provide him an opportunity to access her cart.

In the worse case scenario, he would just have to wait until she sold the smith's creations. If someone departed with the item Elliot was tied to, he would know almost immediately. And then he could offer to buy it off them for three times as much as they'd paid—even if it cost all the coin he had left.

He groaned. He'd seen a couple of items in Avery's cart that had to be from Auldana, and she couldn't have been there anytime recently. What if she didn't sell his item for another three kingdoms?

His mother had celebrated that his tie to the portable candelabra allowed him to travel freely, but Elliot was sick and tired of roaming the kingdoms without friends, roots, or stability. He was ready to settle down, and he'd selected the capital of Sovar as his future home. He'd been on his way there when the thieves had struck.

And now?—

He sat upright, his eyes flying open. Avery had said she was going to Bolivere. If he had to follow her, that meant...

He groaned. Of course she would be going to the one place in all six kingdoms he had determined never to visit.

But it didn't matter how much he didn't want to go to Bolivere. He couldn't be

separated from the cart—especially now his symptoms had worsened. For all he knew, it was possible he would actually die if he got too far from it.

He eventually dozed against the tree trunk, but it was a restless sleep, and the night passed slowly. He was woken by the sound of Avery packing up camp, murmuring to her horse while she did so.

She checked the canvas over the cart suspiciously before setting out, but she seemed satisfied that the knots hadn't been touched while she slept. He expected her to head straight for the road, but when she turned in his direction instead, he had to scramble back through the trees to stay out of sight.

At least he was back close to full strength and could walk instead of having to crawl this time. He was able to follow silently beside her as she retraced his route of the night before. When she reached the place where the horse had caught him, she stopped and looked at the trampled and crushed detritus on the ground between the trees.

He stared at her, fascinated. She looked almost...relieved. Had she been worrying about him?

A bubble of hope filled him. Maybe if he explained his situation, she would believe him after all.

But she shrugged, her expression hardening, and the hopeful thought was quenched. She might have been glad he wasn't dead, but if he revealed himself now, appearing perfectly healthy, she would think his illness the night before had been a trick. Any sympathy she had for him would disappear.

He needed to stick to his plan from the night hours. He would follow her for as long as it took. He didn't have any other choice.

Chapter 5

Avery

Forgetting Elliot turned out to be easier said than done. More often than she wanted to admit, Avery found her mind wandering back to the young man as she wondered what had happened to him. His disappearance from the trees lent weight to the idea that his weakness had been feigned. And yet, he had been incredibly convincing, and she couldn't quite shake the guilt of abandoning him among the trees. She would have feared he had been taken by predators except they weren't exactly prevalent in Sovar. They had unnervingly large mice and enormous pumpkins, but they didn't have wild animals that preyed on humans.

So Elliot had to be all right. Didn't he?

It didn't help that she couldn't shake the unnerving sensation that someone was near. Ever since the attempted robbery, she kept catching movement out of the corner of her eye that turned out to be nothing, or thinking she heard something only to conclude she was imagining things. She had been the target of attempted thieves before, both with her parents and with her aunt and uncle—and even while traveling alone—but she had never been so badly affected. She could only conclude it was the lingering guilt that stopped her from shaking off the encounter.

Or at least that's what she told herself until just before she arrived at the next hamlet on the road to Marleston. When she twitched at the flick of movement on the edges of her vision, she turned quickly enough to catch someone's arm disappearing into the trees.

She stiffened. She hadn't been imagining it! Someone was following her.

And if someone was following her now, that meant she probably hadn't imagined the previous occasions either. Someone had been on her tail since her first night out of Henton, and that led to only one conclusion. Elliot.

She ground her teeth together. And to think she'd been feeling more and more guilty about abandoning him! The trickster had been faking it all along.

Her instinct was to chase straight after him, but she stopped herself. As angry as she felt, what would she accuse him of? He had returned the stolen goods and made no further attempt to approach her or raid her cart. It was possible he was just heading in the same direction and was scared enough of her threats to want to keep out of sight.

She snorted. Not likely. But he could easily claim as much. She sighed and forced herself to face forward again. If she wanted to deal with him properly, she needed to set a trap.

Avery had been looking forward to a night in a proper bed in the hamlet. It wasn't big enough to have an inn, but she knew at least two families who would offer her hospitality. But she would have to refuse their offers.

Sure enough, after they had enthusiastically browsed her wares, they both offered her a bed for the night.

"I won't take a bed this time," she said to the couple with the larger barn. "But I'll sleep with Nutmeg in your barn, if that's all right?"

The couple both laughed.

"You get more attached to that horse every time we see you," the wife said, making

Avery smile. Nutmeg might not have been her motivation on this occasion, but it was true that the mare had become her closest companion.

She led the horse and cart into the cavernous barn and positioned the cart carefully before unhitching Nutmeg and rubbing her down. She secured her inside the closest stall and climbed up to the hay loft above.

Avery lay down on her stomach, where she could watch the door without being easily seen. She didn't know how long it would take Elliot to appear, but she had no doubts he would come.

She nearly fell asleep twice before the slight creak of the barn door finally sounded. Elliot stood frozen half in the door and half out, moonlight illuminating his frame. As Avery had suspected, there was no sign of the illness that had incapacitated him on their last encounter.

After an extended moment of stillness, he seemed to conclude that if she was inside the barn, she was asleep, and his arrival had escaped notice. Slipping all the way inside, he hurried straight for Avery's cart.

He was no longer looking around, his attention on the closest knot, so Avery pulled herself into a crouch. She stayed there, poised in position as she waited for the perfect moment.

As soon as he had undone the first knot and peeled back the canvas, she pounced. Dropping from above, she landed on his hunched back, cushioning her own fall as she sent him sprawling against the straw on the barn floor.

She pushed herself off him easily, trying not to notice that he was more muscled than she had suspected at their previous meetings. She had no business noticing the muscles of a thief.

Elliot groaned and rolled over, his eyes widening as he finally realized what had landed on him.

“Were you waiting for me?” he gasped. “You’re supposed to be asleep!”

“Of course I was waiting for you,” Avery said, indignant. “You’ve been following me, and now you’re attempting to steal from me—for the second time!”

“I’m not stealing!” he protested, although he looked sheepish as he said it.

Nutmeg whinnied loudly, reaching over the half door of her stall and undoing the latch with her teeth. When she trotted out to stand beside Avery, Elliot’s eyes widened.

“That is not a normal horse,” he muttered.

Avery put a hand on Nutmeg’s neck. “Don’t insult her. She’s worth far more than thieves like you.”

Elliot finally made it to his feet, stepping warily away from the horse. “For the final time, I’m not a thief!”

Avery raised her eyebrows. “What are you, then?”

Elliot ran a hand through his hair and groaned. “It’s a complicated story.”

“I’m sure it is, but I’m not interested in your excuses. I told you not to let me catch you near my cart again.”

Nutmeg huffed and, at a slight prodding from Avery, stepped forward. Elliot immediately backed even further away.

“Just let me have a look at the items you got from the smith,” he pleaded. “I’m looking for something made of?—”

“You must be joking,” Avery cut him off indignantly. “You think I’m going to let you anywhere near my wares? You need to leave this hamlet now. And if I see you again, I’ll let Nutmeg kick you.”

Elliot’s eyes widened, so apparently he knew how much damage a horse’s hoof could do.

“And don’t think she’s my only defense, either,” Avery added. “I may be traveling alone, but I’m not an easy target. You have no idea what weapons I’ve picked up in my travels.”

She kept her face stern and her eyes hard. Elliot must want something in her cart badly to have followed her so far, and she needed to make it clear she wasn’t easy pickings.

“I just—” Elliot began, but Nutmeg huffed and stepped forward another step, baring her teeth threateningly.

Something skittered behind Elliot, but he was too focused on the horse to notice. He stepped hastily back and tripped over the small creature behind his feet.

He fell backward, barely catching himself with his hands, and the cat-sized mouse ran across the barn floor away from him. Elliot and Avery gave simultaneous shudders.

“Why did I ever think it was a good idea to settle in Sovar?” Elliot muttered.

Avery’s eyes flicked back to him. What did he mean by that? Was he not Sovaran?

She had encountered thieves in every kingdom, but never one who moved between them. The people who traveled like the roving merchants were few indeed and not taken to thievery.

She wanted to ask him what he meant and where he came from, but she bit down on her tongue to keep the questions from escaping. She had convinced herself it was her guilt fueling her thoughts of Elliot, but now that he was in front of her again, she couldn't deny the fascination she had first experienced on glimpsing him in Henton. She would not give in to it, however. She was Avery of the roving merchants, and he was a petty thief who didn't deserve her curiosity.

“Go!” she said sternly, pointing at the door.

Elliot looked at her hopelessly, his expression tugging at her heart. She frowned in response. She wasn't going to make a fool of herself over a pair of piercing eyes.

His shoulders slumped, and he slipped back out of the barn, giving a final look of distaste at the place where the giant mouse had disappeared. As soon as he was gone, Avery shuddered again herself.

She liked Sovar for the most part, but she felt the same aversion to enormous mice that Elliot displayed. There were some things the Legacies would do better not to keep recreating.

Although apparently it could be worse. Her grandmother used to tell stories about seeing mice as big as horses in areas where the power of the Sovar Legacy was particularly concentrated. Avery could only consider herself lucky to have avoided such places.

She sighed. “Do you think he's really gone this time, girl?” she asked Nutmeg.

The horse whinnied in response, but Avery didn't know whether to take it as agreement or disagreement. Elliot had shown unusual determination and focus, but he had also seemed genuinely wary of her mare, if not Avery herself. Hopefully she and Nutmeg had shaken him off for good this time.

She returned the horse to her stall and made herself a bed of straw beside the cart. She needed to get some sleep, but she wasn't going to leave her cart. She didn't trust the strength of her threats that much.

The next day she departed the hamlet, the local children trailing behind her and calling out shouts of farewell or requests for the wares they would like on future visits. She waved in response, her spirits lifted by their enthusiasm and by the bright sun in the blue sky.

Her spirits rose even further over the next two days as she found no trace of anyone following her. Or at least she told herself they were rising. In reality, she felt strangely flat. She had seen with her own eyes that Elliot was unharmed, so there was no need for her to feel guilty. And yet still he lingered in her thoughts.

She was just angry, she told herself. And confused. Their third encounter had explained nothing of his strange behavior. All she'd learned was that despite his earlier weak appearance, he had muscles hiding behind his shirt and vest.

She immediately flushed at the thought. His muscles had nothing to do with anything. Her entire extended family would be launching an intervention if they knew how much time she was spending thinking about a thief. It didn't matter if his behavior was inexplicable. She would never see him again, and that was a good thing.

That curiosity could get you in trouble one day, her father's voice repeated in her mind, and she resolved—for the twentieth time—not to think of Elliot again.

Avery approached another hamlet, the road running parallel to a stream that had branched off the main river that ran south from Marleston to the sea. Before reaching the houses, she pulled Nutmeg off the road, stopping to fill her waterskins and give the mare a drink.

It was better to take care of the tasks before reaching the collection of homes and the enthusiastic children who lived in them. They had mobbed her when she passed through on her way to Henton, and they were likely to do the same on her way back.

She filled up the waterskins, stashing them in the cart before returning to the stream for a drink herself. She was just bending over the water when she heard several cries of delight. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw she had underestimated the enthusiasm of the children. They had already seen her coming, and a group of them were rushing down the road toward her.

Amused, she bent back down to quickly finish drinking and washing her face. From the noises behind her, the children had gathered around Nutmeg and the cart, several of them petting the horse, who was always particularly patient with children.

But two of the voices continued toward her, the bickering marking them as brother and sister.

“Even if she did bring back a lamp from across the mountains, we can’t afford to buy it,” the boy said in a superior voice.

“How do you know?” the girl cried indignantly. “Ma has been saving up her coin. We can’t afford a comm...commpissioned one, she said, but we might be able to buy a discard.”

The boy made a scoffing sound in response, and Avery glanced back in time to see his sister shove him in response. She shook her head. Maybe siblings wouldn’t have

been as much of a blessing as she had always thought.

She straightened, but she had only made it halfway and was still unbalanced when the brother retaliated by shoving his sister in return. The young girl stumbled backward straight into Avery.

Avery's body tipped back toward the stream, and she flailed her arms wildly in an attempt to right herself. The stream wasn't wide, but it was deep and filled with rocks, and the current moved quickly.

But there was nothing to catch to stop her fall, and to her horror, one of her arms tangled with the girl's arm. She only had enough time to register that the girl was falling with her before they both hit the water with an enormous splash.

Her hand reached for the girl, but she had already been wrenched away. Rushing water surrounded her on all sides, the temperature so cold it made Avery suck in an involuntary gasp of water.

Her arms pinwheeled through the stream as her feet sought the creek bed. She finally found it, thrusting the top of her body out of the water and coughing violently. But the force of the current ripped her feet from under her again, and she hadn't fully expelled the water from her lungs before she was tipped sideways.

Her spinning vision caught the cluster of horrified-looking children on the shore but no sign of the girl who had gone into the stream with her. She pushed through the water again, still coughing as she once again found the bottom of the stream.

When she got another look at the shore—this time sucking in a needed breath of beautiful air—there was another figure with the children, this one towering above them.

She didn't have time to register any more before the man kicked off his boots, shed his pack, and dove into the stream. Strong arms grabbed her waist just as the current caught her again, and she was pulled against a man's chest. Apparently he was having more luck than she was in keeping his feet firmly planted because she was able to gasp in several breaths without being tipped back into the water.

She looked around frantically and finally caught sight of a tangle of brown curls which was all she could see of the girl.

"Put me down! Put me down!" she cried, squirming in the man's arms. "I can swim. But a girl fell in with me."

"What?" The man responded instantly, setting her on her feet and spinning away to peer upstream. "Where?"

"There!" She pointed at the girl's hair, and the man sliced through the water, moving toward the girl with powerful strokes.

Avery tried to follow him but nearly lost her footing again. Biting her lip, she changed her goal to the stream bank. She wouldn't help anyone by getting carried further downstream.

She didn't dare take her feet off the bottom and attempt to swim, but she managed to make it step by step to the shore without being swept away. It helped that she was no longer confused, in shock, and coughing up water.

As soon as she had scrambled onto the bank, water streaming off her, she ran toward the children, her legs wobbly beneath her. She arrived just as the man strode out of the water, the girl hanging limp in his arms.

The children parted before him except for the girl's brother, who was sobbing.

“I didn’t mean to push her in,” he cried. “I didn’t mean to!”

The man laid the girl down on the ground and bent over her, his back to Avery. She hurried forward, but the boy grabbed at her legs, halting her progress.

She nearly shook him off, but one look at his terrified face made her stop. She forced herself to take a breath and respond calmly. The girl looked only about five, but her brother wasn’t much older.

“I know it was an accident,” she said calmly. “But you must let me check her. She might still be all right.” Avery desperately hoped it was true.

“We swim in the stream all the time,” the boy sobbed. “Why didn’t she come back up?”

Avery finally untangled herself from him and made it the rest of the way to the girl. The man was kneeling beside her, pumping on her chest, and just as Avery arrived, the girl spasmed, coughing as she expelled a rush of water from her mouth. The man slumped back.

“Oh, thank goodness,” the man breathed, and Avery froze. She recognized that voice.

He glanced over his shoulder, blue eyes meeting hers and confirming his identity.

“It’s you!” she cried, at the same time as he said, “She’s breathing again.”

Avery immediately flushed. She should have been focused on the injured girl, not the identity of the girl’s rescuer.

Hurrying forward, she knelt beside him, confirming the girl’s breathing for herself. A gash near the girl’s hairline was sluggishly bleeding, so she must have hit her head on

a rock going into the water. It explained why she had remained so limp when her brother claimed she could swim.

“I think she was briefly stunned,” Elliot said, “but it doesn’t look like the wound is too severe. Now that she’s coughed out the water, she should recover. But it would be best to get her to a healer as quickly as possible in case there are further injuries we can’t see.”

Avery nodded silent agreement, and he rose onto one knee, scooping the girl up before rising fully to his feet. Avery slowly stood beside him, still in shock herself. Both of them were sopping wet, but he wasn’t paying it any mind, so she was determined not to either.

He strode over to her cart, stepping up onto the seat without hesitation despite the girl still cradled in both his arms. When she didn’t immediately follow, he cocked a raised eyebrow at her. She closed her gaping mouth and hurried after him. Of course they needed to use her cart to get the girl to her parents as quickly as possible. And since Avery would need her hands for driving, it made sense Elliot needed to come along as well.

She jumped up beside him, shaking her head. Of all the scenarios she had pictured for the day, none of them had included her driving her cart into the hamlet with Elliot seated beside her.

“Here!” one of the older children said before Avery could signal to Nutmeg to start moving. The girl shoved Elliot’s boots and pack underneath the cart’s seat.

“My thanks,” he told her with a charming smile that made the girl blush.

“We’ll bring him,” the girl said, indicating the brother, who was still crying.

Avery nodded and flicked the reins, signaling to Nutmeg to start walking. The mare responded immediately, clearly aware something unusual was going on.

Elliot leaned over the girl, murmuring reassuringly to her. She seemed dazed and confused, but at least she was conscious and hadn't dropped into sleep. Avery cast a sideways glance at Elliot.

"You were still following me," she stated. There was no other explanation for his sudden appearance.

He grinned at her, the expression half-repentant, half-mischievous. "Sorry about that."

Avery closed her mouth and looked forward again. She could hardly threaten him while he was cradling an injured child he had just rescued.

Saving a small child from drowning was admirable—but most people would do as much, surely. Avery stole another sideways look at him. It was true Elliot had saved the girl, but he hadn't known about her existence when he first dived into the stream. It was Avery who he had seen flailing and coughing, and yet he hadn't hesitated to rush to her rescue. Had it even occurred to him that if she drowned, he could take anything he wanted from her cart?

From the first moment she'd seen him, she'd thought there was more to him than a petty thief. Apparently she'd been right.

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Chapter 6

Elliot

Elliot's arms held the girl as steadily as possible given the bumps of the road. He kept up a steady stream of reassuring murmurs, knowing he needed to keep her awake. But he hardly knew what he was saying.

He kept shooting sideways glances at Avery. She was drenched from head to toe, but was she injured? Nothing in her manner suggested injury or pain, but he'd been trailing her for days, and she was tough. From her reaction in the water, he suspected she would hide any injury of her own while there was a child in more immediate danger.

They had almost reached the hamlet, children trailing behind them, before it occurred to him that he could have abandoned her and left her to rescue herself from the stream. If he'd done so, it would have given him several clear minutes to access her cart. It probably would have been the smarter move.

But she had looked as if she was in trouble, and he wasn't willing to leave someone to drown just so he could reclaim his candelabra. He didn't want to exchange his life and future for someone else's. And it was a good thing he had acted so promptly since he hadn't seen the girl. Avery would probably have rescued herself eventually, but would she have done so in time to save the girl? Quite probably not.

He looked at her again and caught her sneaking a look at him. He quickly turned away. Could she tell he'd just been considering abandoning her in a stream so he

could rummage through her cart?

He was closer to the cart and its contents than he'd ever been, so why did he feel a little dizzy? Looking at Avery was almost as disconcerting as stepping too far from the remains of the candelabra. He was sure he looked like a drowned rat, but somehow she looked even more arresting while soaking wet than she did dry.

At least she was no longer looking at him like something she wanted to scrape off the bottom of her boot. Although that might have been due to the shock. Should he be talking to her as well as the girl? You were supposed to talk to someone who'd just been through a traumatic incident.

But what could he say? When he'd seen her in the stream, he'd revealed himself without thinking, but now that his brain had caught up with his actions, he was in trouble. Once the girl was safely handed over, Avery was sure to go back to threatening him. Given he'd been following her for days and had attempted to steal from her twice, it was possible she might even turn him over to the closest guards.

Water dripped from his hair into his eyes, and he shook his head, spraying it in all directions. It hit both the girl in his lap and Avery, making them gasp, and he winced.

"Sorry," he murmured.

Avery nodded silently in response, not giving him any opening for a conversation.

He sighed. Could he blame her after how strangely he'd been acting? He kicked himself for the hundredth time for not approaching her openly in the beginning. The kind of girl who worried about the health of thieves and rejected rescue so someone else could be rescued instead might actually have heard him out.

The first houses appeared, and several adults caught sight of them, raising a shout as

they noticed the three wet passengers. Avery continued deeper into the hamlet, and by the time she had stopped and Elliot had carefully climbed down, a crowd had formed.

The parents of the girl fell on him with more shouts and cries, and he reassured them that she was breathing and conscious. He was glad to hand her over, and only once she was safely transferred did he notice how cold he was.

Someone draped a warm blanket around his shoulders, and he turned to smile his gratitude at an older woman. Looking around to check that Avery had also received one, he found her in earnest conversation with the girl's parents. She didn't even seem to notice that she was shivering as she spoke, making her words shake.

Removing the blanket from his shoulders, he placed it around hers instead. She drew it close, not looking up to see him.

He stepped back. He hadn't seen the girl fall in, so Avery could give the parents more information than he could.

Another blanket settled over his shoulders, and he gave a second grateful smile to the same woman.

"Thank you," he said, and she beamed at him.

"Broke my heart to hear that girl was traveling alone," she said. "I'm glad Avery has someone she can rely on now."

Elliot immediately flushed, stammering over his reply. He hadn't considered how their arrival might have looked to the villagers.

"Oh no," he said. "It's not...I mean, we're not..."

The woman patted his shoulder. “Modest—as a hero should be!”

“Hero?” a light voice asked from behind him. “Perhaps.”

He turned to see Avery, an expression on her face he couldn’t read.

“She’s with the healer now,” she told him. “But it sounds like she should be fine. Thanks to you.”

He shook his head instinctively. “You’re the one who directed me to her.”

The blanket lady sighed sentimentally. “Does my heart good to see the two of you.”

Avery stared at her in astonishment, and Elliot quickly put his hand on her arm, steering her back toward the cart. There was no need for Avery to hear the woman’s theories. He was almost certain they would put her back up—if it was possible for her to turn any further against him than she already had.

“What are you doing?” Avery asked suspiciously. Her eyes narrowed as they neared the cart. “I’ve already warned you about getting anywhere near my cart.”

He instantly stopped, letting his arm fall. He hadn’t been thinking about their destination, just about getting her away from the villager.

But even though he said nothing, an uncomfortable look passed over Avery’s face. “Not that—I mean, I know you’ve already...That is to say...Thank you for your assistance at the stream.” The last words were delivered stiffly, accompanied by a pained look.

Elliot smiled broadly. “You’re welcome.”

“Since you saved that girl,” she continued, still stiff, “I’m going to assume you weren’t following me but just traveling in the same direction.”

“Actually,” Elliot said quickly. “About that?—”

“You can travel where you like,” Avery continued determinedly. “But if I fall in any more streams, don’t worry. I can swim.”

She climbed onto her cart and retrieved the mare’s reins.

Elliot put his hand on the horse’s neck. “Avery! Wait.”

She froze at the sound of her name, and he held his breath, hopeful. But after a moment of silence, she flicked the reins. The mare began to move, ignoring his presence, and he had to step back or be knocked down by the cart.

“Avery!” he called after her. “Please let me?—”

But there was no point calling after the back of the cart. She clearly wasn’t coming back.

“Blast.” He heaved a sigh, his shoulders slumping. His brief hope hadn’t lasted very long.

Already he could feel the pull of symptoms, and he knew he would have to start following her if he didn’t want to end up incapacitated. A light breeze brushed against his wet clothes and made him shiver.

He looked down at himself and then after the retreating cart. He shook his head and chuckled. The girl did know how to make an exit. She was as wet as he was, but you wouldn’t guess it from the way she’d taken off.

He gathered the blanket she'd left behind on the road and folded it neatly with his own. He left them in a pile at the nearest doorstep. He needed to get moving before the villagers tried to stop him and accidentally brought disaster. He just hoped Avery would stop soon and find a place to change. When she did, he would?—

His eyes widened as he looked around at the empty road. He couldn't do the same thing because his pack was still in her cart. Along with his boots.

He wriggled his toes, grimacing. It was going to be a painful trip.

His head spun, and the beginning of a headache drummed against his right temple. He started walking. Boots or no boots, he couldn't linger any longer while the cart got further away.

He had hoped Avery might have stopped at the first stand of trees beyond the hamlet, but something was driving her forward. His feet were battered and sore by the time he finally felt the lessening of his headache—his first indication that he was closing the gap with the cart. She must have stopped at last.

He didn't even try to be subtle as he limped off the road into the stand of trees that appeared in front of him. Without boots, he had fallen far enough behind that she should have had time to complete her clothing change before his arrival, and he was too tired and sore to stop for niceties.

The cart came into view, the mare still hitched to the front, and his eyes went straight to the empty bench. The children had put his boots and pack underneath, and they were probably still there.

He had nearly reached the side of the cart when someone grabbed his arm, spinning him around. He caught a glimpse of Avery's scowling face as she twisted his arm and slammed his back against the wood of the cart.

“Enough!” she hissed. “Why are you following me? If you can’t give me a convincing answer, I’m going to have to take measures to ensure you can’t follow me any longer.”

He felt the prick of a dagger point against his right leg.

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Chapter 7

Avery

A very had left the hamlet on impulse. She told herself she just wanted to get away from undeserved thanks and praise from the villagers and to distance herself from the thief before he made another attempt to rob her. But she knew the truth was more complicated.

Elliot confused her. She didn't want to hear whatever smooth explanation he produced in case it confused her further.

She should have stopped quickly to change out of her wet clothes, but the discord in her mind spurred her on for too long. Eventually she scolded herself for foolishness and directed Nutmeg into a clump of trees. By the time she was in dry clothes, she felt a lot more settled. She should have changed sooner.

But as she walked back toward her horse, a figure limped between the trees. She watched open-mouthed as Elliot approached the cart with single-minded focus.

For the first time, fear overwhelmed her confusion, her curiosity, and even her indignation. Who was Elliot, and why was he so fixated on her and her wares?

Before she'd formed a conscious plan, her dagger appeared in her hand. Springing across the space between them, she grabbed his arm. Twisting it, she spun him against the side of the cart.

Chest heaving, she leaned in until there was no space separating them.

“Enough!” Her eyes narrowed. “Why are you following me? If you can’t give me a convincing answer, I’m going to have to take measures to ensure you can’t follow me any longer.”

She pressed her dagger into the side of his thigh, to show it wasn’t an empty threat. She’d never hurt someone who wasn’t physically attacking her before, but if Elliot refused to stop following her, she had to do something to make him. There was a healer in the hamlet they’d just left, and she’d make sure he could make it back there, at least.

Elliot froze, his eyes on hers and his breathing quickening. They remained frozen there, the tension building until Avery felt as if she might snap.

Or perhaps it was Elliot who was going to break. His muscles leaped beneath her grip, reminding her that he was stronger than he had first appeared. She had a dagger against his leg and one arm in her grip, but she was suddenly unsure that was enough to hold him.

Her breath caught at the awareness that he could turn the tables on her, but he didn’t move, continuing to look down into her face. She licked her lips, making his eyes drop to them. She immediately let him go as if scalded, jumping back to put distance between them.

He looked at her, his eyes just as wide as hers and his pupils dilated. She needed to get herself together before she entirely lost control of the situation.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded.

A slow smile spread across Elliot’s face, lighting up his eyes and throwing her off

balance. When he looked down at his feet, her eyes followed.

She closed her eyes, embarrassment filling her as her muscles relaxed. How had she made it all this way without remembering that all his possessions—including his boots!—were in her cart?

“Apparently I’m not the only thief in this clearing,” he said, making her eyes snap open again.

His smile was a mixture of smug and amused, and she wanted to groan. Instead, she answered with as much dignity as she could muster.

“I apologize. I didn’t realize they were still there.”

“That’s what you say,” he replied. “But how do I know you’re not just a thief? Maybe that’s why you hurried off so quickly.”

“What? No! I—” She broke off as she saw that his eyes were laughing at her. She narrowed her own.

“All I’m saying,” he said with surprising gentleness, “is that sometimes there are reasons for things. Sometimes there’s more to a situation than the most simple reading suggests.”

Avery adjusted her hold on her dagger, not quite ready to put it back in her belt.

“Very well,” she said. “If you have an explanation, let’s hear it. I suppose you’ve earned the right to a hearing, at least.”

“Do you mind if I get changed first?” he asked with exaggerated meekness.

She nodded and gestured toward where his pack was tucked under the cart's bench. He grinned and walked over to it. She winced at his limp. He'd followed her all that way without shoes while she rode in comfort? After his earlier rescue, the idea left a sour taste in her mouth.

He disappeared into the trees, and she busied herself unhitching Nutmeg and lighting a small campfire. The afternoon was turning chilly, and they could both do with the extra warmth after their ordeal.

He reappeared, his face turning appreciative as he caught sight of the flames.

"Thank you." He slipped down to sit beside it, holding his hands out to the warmth. His hair still glistened with moisture, but the rest of him was dry, and his feet were shod again.

Avery twisted her own wet hair behind her, the movement catching Elliot's attention. His eyes lingered on her movement until she met his gaze, making him quickly look away.

"You're the strangest person I've ever met," she blurted out and immediately flushed.

She hadn't meant to say that. It felt too revealing because what she really meant was that her reaction to him was the strangest she'd ever experienced. She was usually good at reading people, but all the signals she got from him were muddled and wrong.

She expected him to be either offended or annoyed, but instead he dropped his head into his hands and groaned.

"I'm well aware," he said in a muffled voice. "And believe me, you have no idea."

Her eyebrows rose. “Enlighten me, then.”

Elliot straightened and sighed. “Just promise you’ll listen with an open mind. I swear that everything I’m saying is true.”

Avery tried to hide how intrigued she was, staring at him as coolly as possible from the other side of the fire.

She must have succeeded because he sighed again.

“You’re a roving merchant, so you must be well aware that everyone born in the kingdoms is bound to their birth kingdom. With the exception of your bloodline, everyone pays a price for any time they spend beyond their kingdom’s borders.”

“Of course I know that. I may not have gone to a regular school, but I still received an education.”

He nodded, ignoring her snippy tone.

“And I’m sure you’ve met enough people to know that the Legacies keep most people content with that situation.”

“Most, but not all,” she said softly, reminded of Olivia.

“Right.” He nodded. “For some people, their desire for new and different—or their love for adventure—is so strong that it can’t be satisfied within their own borders. The Legacies aren’t enough to stop those people, but they all pay a price for their wanderlust.”

“And that’s you?” she asked, unconvinced. She had met people like that, and he didn’t have the air of one of them.

“No.” A weight seemed to settle over his shoulders. “That was my mother.”

“Your mother?” Avery looked thoughtfully into the fire and then back at his face. She had seen children who paid the price for their parents’ desire to travel, but she still didn’t know what that had to do with Elliot following her.

“You do know I’m interested in an explanation for why you’re following me, not your whole life story, right?” she asked tartly.

He winced and laughed. “Sorry. But the reason I’m following you started twenty-one years ago.”

“Considering I wasn’t even born then, that’s impressive,” she said dryly before gesturing for him to continue.

“My mother always resented being trapped in one place, and she was determined her child would be free to travel. She and my father lived near the mountains, so when it came close to her time to deliver, she crossed over the border to have me in the mountains.”

“You’re a mountain baby?” Avery had met a lot of people in her life, but she’d never met one of those. “I’ve heard people avoid giving birth in the mountains since the results can be...unpredictable. The few expectant mothers in the remote mountain communities travel into the kingdoms to have their babies. But you’re saying your mother did the opposite?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Avery leaned forward, eyes glistening. She had been curious about Elliot from the first moment she saw him, but her curiosity swelled at his confession.

“So?” she prompted when he didn’t immediately speak. “What happened?”

“I’m not tied to any one kingdom, just like my mother hoped,” he said. “I can travel freely—sort of.”

“Sort of? What does that mean?”

He braced his arms on his knees, his hands dangling down between them and his head drooping in the same direction.

“The Legacies didn’t bind me to a particular kingdom, but neither did they leave me completely free. I’m told the birth was very painful, and the birth attendant who had accompanied my mother gave her a candlestick to hold. It was the easiest item at hand of the right shape, and she gripped it like a lifeline to keep herself from breaking my father’s hand with the strength of her grip.”

“Let me guess—it was a three-branched candelabra?” Avery asked slowly, her eyes widening.

Elliot dropped his head all the way into his hands. “Yes,” he whispered.

“Sorry, what was that?” Avery asked, leaning forward in an effort to catch his subsequent words.

He looked up and spoke more forcefully.

“Yes. I’m the butt of the Legacies’ worst joke. I’m not tied to a kingdom; I’m tied to a candelabra. Instead of being confined within borders, I’m punished whenever I get too far from the candelabra.”

“Being away from it makes you weak and sick?” Avery asked, remembering the way

he had looked in the trees and how quickly he had seemed to recover.

“Dizziness, nausea, a splitting headache, weak legs—everything,” he said glumly.

Avery frowned. “I know everyone responds to leaving their kingdom differently, but I’ve never heard of a reaction that strong—or that painful. It’s usually described more as a discomfort, but one that can start to feel unbearable as time passes.”

“Well, that’s for people tied to an entire kingdom. Apparently concentrating the bond into something the size of a candlestick amplifies it.”

Avery winced. “So you can go where you like, but you have to have the candelabra with you?”

He nodded. “My mother thought it was wonderful. But I’m sure that if you imagine me as a boy, you can work out how I felt.”

Avery thought what a gang of children would think of a playmate who carted a bronze candelabra with him everywhere he went and winced.

“But you must have explained it to your friends?”

Elliot shook his head. “You’re the first person I’ve ever told. My mother made me promise to keep it a secret. She was worried someone could use it to control me.”

He stated it matter-of-factly, but Avery felt the weight of the confession. He must have endured teasing—and sometimes pain and illness—for years. And not only had he been alone in it, but he’d done it all with the added burden of knowing the situation could easily become worse.

But he was telling her. Which meant he was desperate.

Or it was all a lie.

She shifted uncomfortably at that possibility. She had spent her life traversing kingdoms that contained talking birds, giant pumpkins, shifting landscapes, glass that bent as easily as cotton, and mirrors that could reveal a person's true emotions. But Elliot's tale was the most nonsensical one she had ever heard. Why had it taken her so long to question its veracity? Why did all her instincts tell her to believe Elliot?

"You're telling yourself it can't possibly be true, aren't you?" he asked ruefully.

She flushed at being caught out.

"That's the other reason I don't tell people. It sounds like something I made up in a fever dream."

"But you didn't," she said softly, sure of the words as she spoke them. "I'm good at reading people. I don't think you're lying."

He stared at her across the flames, a look in his eyes that made her own drop away.

"Thank you," he said softly.

She didn't know how to reply. She didn't think he was lying, but that only meant he believed his own words. And it didn't mean he was a trustworthy person.

She cleared her throat. "But how did I get involved in this? If you're saying the candelabra I have in my cart is the one you're tied to, why did you return it to me? Stealing it only seemed to make you more sick."

"That's because it was the wrong one." He rubbed at his temples. "I only got a glimpse of you holding it back at the smithy, and I just assumed...And then when I

was retrieving it from the crate, you interrupted me before I got a proper look at it. It was only when the weakness hit that I realized it wasn't the right one."

"But it's the only one I have," Avery protested. "So why are you still following me?"

"Because if I get too far from your cart, I'm in so much pain, I can barely move," he said simply.

"So you think...what? That someone hid it in my cart, and I don't even know it's there?" she asked. "What led you to think it was at the smithy in the first place?"

"Because my camp was raided one night, and a bunch of valuables were stolen while I was sleeping. Thankfully, I slept with my main coin purse on my person, but I had foolishly left the candelabra in my pack. By the time I woke up and realized it was gone, I was already too weak to have any hope of catching them."

"So what did you do?" Avery asked, feeling more concern for him than she wanted to admit.

"Did you ever play that game Hot and Cold as a child?" he asked. "You know, the one where someone hides something and then guides a searcher to find it by giving instructions on whether they're getting warmer or colder?"

Avery nodded.

"I was basically stuck in the kingdoms' worst version of that game. Except instead of someone telling me if I was getting hotter or colder, I had to judge for myself based on whether my symptoms got incrementally better or worse."

Avery winced.

“It took a long time,” he continued, “but I eventually tracked the candelabra to the smith in Henton. But he wouldn’t deal with me as a customer unless I joined a six-month wait list for a commissioned piece and returned on my allocated day.”

Avery grimaced, knowing that part of the story was indisputably true. The smith was famed for his inflexibility. It was the only reason she hadn’t gone straight to Henton six months ago and pleaded Bolivere’s case on their behalf. He’d even turned her away when she arrived a few hours early for her assigned slot. She knew the smith had already finished her lamp—she had seen it—but he had still made her return the next day.

“So, what? You decided to rob the smithy?” she asked with a laugh. But the expression on his face made her falter. “Oh. Right. That was what you were planning.”

He sighed. “Believe me, I had no desire to become a thief, but what was I supposed to do? I only wanted to take back my own property. Except I couldn’t even do that. The smith sleeps in his smithy every night! And did you get a good look at the size of him?” Elliot shook his head.

“So you were lurking outside the smithy waiting for a chance to rob it. Did it ever occur to you that your presence might have been why the smith never left?” she asked wryly.

Elliot looked up, an arrested expression in his eyes.

“No, to be honest, it didn’t.” He laughed. “Apparently I’m not a very good thief.”

“I did notice that,” Avery said with a grin.

He rolled his eyes. “Why doesn’t that feel like a compliment? It should be one.”

“Did you ask the villagers?” she asked.

Elliot shook his head. “I’m pretty sure they thought I was a desperate customer who was hoping to change the smith’s mind. And, if not, that I intended to camp out there for the full six months. I avoided any proper conversations because I was afraid of accidentally saying something that might tip them off about my true intentions.”

“You looked desperate enough to be planning to camp there for six months,” Avery agreed.

Elliot grimaced. “After a game of Hot and Cold like mine, you would have been, too.”

Avery fell silent. An accident of birth had freed her to travel without any of the difficulty that weighed on Elliot. She had always been thankful to be born to roving merchant parents, but she had rarely felt that relief as strongly as she did while talking to him.

“But if you were wrong about me taking the candelabra,” she said after several moments of silence, “shouldn’t you still be stuck outside the smithy? You said you get sick if you go too far from my cart.”

“Exactly. My symptoms are sure proof that you did take the candelabra.” Elliot paused, his jaw tightening. “Or what’s left of it.”

“What’s left—oh!” Avery turned to look at her cart. “You think he melted down the brass and made it into something else?”

Elliot nodded. “And the process seems to have strengthened the symptoms. If they’d been as bad when the candelabra was first stolen, I would have been too weak to have any chance of tracking it down. I think if the same thing happened again, I might...”

He trailed off, clearly unwilling to say the final word, but Avery could fill it in for him. Die. He was afraid that if he was separated from her cart, he was going to die.

If that was true, she could instantly forgive him for trailing her for days despite her warnings. He must have been terrified.

“But why didn’t you tell me all this as soon as I left the smithy?” she asked. “I’m a merchant, after all. You could have just asked to buy it.”

Elliot sucked in his breath. “Well, yes. That’s obviously what I should have done. It seems quite clear in retrospect. But at the time, I was afraid you would dismiss me as a madman, and I would only succeed at putting you on your guard.”

He shook his head. “It wasn’t a totally foolish plan. If it really had been my candelabra—and if it hadn’t been for your unnatural horse—I would have gotten away that first time. Everything would have been fine.”

“For you!” Avery said indignantly. “I know you’re claiming the candelabra is rightfully yours, but I wasn’t the one who stole it from you. I bought it from the smith in good faith.”

“I know that,” Elliot said impatiently. “That’s why I didn’t steal it back from you. I’ve been saying that from the beginning. Surely the amount I left was enough to cover its purchase price at least twice over, if not thrice.”

“What are you talking about?” Avery asked.

Elliot cocked his head and glanced toward the cart. “I left you a pouch of coins! Don’t tell me you didn’t find them?”

Avery bit her lip, not wanting to admit she’d never even looked. He had said he

wasn't a thief, but she'd assumed that was standard blustering. It hadn't occurred to her to dig through the crate when she had stuffed all the items from the smith back inside.

Elliot grinned, crossing his arms. "No wonder you kept threatening me."

"I didn't keep threatening you," Avery protested. "It was only once or twice."

Elliot laughed. "Oh, right, just a couple of times. Silly of me."

Avery rolled her eyes and stood up, dusting herself off. "I acted perfectly reasonably in the circumstances. Are you going to continue to make a big deal out of nothing, or are we going to get on with testing?"

Chapter 8

Elliot

“Testing?” Elliot asked blankly, staring up at Avery. “Testing what?”

Avery looked impatient. “I can’t sell you the item you need unless we know what it is. Will you recognize it just by seeing it? I assumed we’d need to test each brass item I bought one by one.”

Excitement shot through Elliot. Was it really going to be that simple? Even after everything, Avery would help him test each item and then sell him the one he needed? He wouldn’t have to sneak around or follow her any longer?

He brushed aside a strange pang at that thought. He could finally get back on the road to the Sovaran capital. There was nothing melancholy about that future. After years of traveling, he would finally be settling in one place. The connection he felt to Avery was a shadow caused by deprivation. He had been trailing her—thinking about her, tracking her, watching her—for so many days that of course he would feel as if they’d forged a connection. But soon he would be able to build proper connections and relationships in his new home. He would forget all about Avery.

He hoped.

He scrambled to his feet. “How should we do it? I guess I should just take each item away, one at a time, and see what happens.”

“I don’t think so,” Avery said firmly. “I’ll do the taking away.”

Elliot’s belly gave a tiny flip of disappointment. Avery believed him, but she didn’t yet trust him.

“Given how weak you got back there, I don’t think you should be the one trekking around,” she said. “You can sit by the cart, and that way when you get weak, you won’t need to walk.”

Elliot nodded, pretending he believed that was the only reason for her strategy. The important thing was that she was helping him.

He tried to assist Avery to untie the canvas over her cart, but she brushed him aside, making much quicker work of the ropes than he’d managed. She was obviously extremely practiced at it.

But when she went to lift the crate down, he jumped in and took it in her place, lifting it down to the ground.

She gave him an amused look. “I can carry a single crate, you know.”

“I know.” He smiled at her. “I saw you lift it into the cart at the smithy. But you’re helping me, so you have to let me do something to help you—however small.”

Avery raised her eyebrows. “Help? I believe you mentioned paying three times the item’s price. I am a merchant.”

Elliot smiled, his good mood not dented in the least. “It’s already paid.” He gestured at the crate.

Avery hesitated for a moment before giving in to whatever instinct she was fighting.

Kneeling, she dug through the chest, emerging with the pouch he had left behind.

She weighed it in her hand as the smith back in Henton had done, not meeting his eyes. He grinned triumphantly. She couldn't call him a thief again now. If she did, he would call her one straight back. She hadn't even left money for his pack and boots.

"The candelabra was the only normal item I took," she said warningly. "The rest of them have special properties, so you might need more coin."

"I'll pay whatever you think is fair," he said promptly, noting the rueful quirk of her lips.

Roving merchants were an unusual group, but they were small enough in number and tightly enough knit to have strong codes of honor. He had taken a risk in revealing the truth to her, but he hoped she wasn't going to use her knowledge to extort him.

If she did try, he would have to give her everything he had. He wasn't going to physically fight her for the object, and he was literally unable to leave without it.

"Let's get started, then." She drew out the first object—a metal lantern. "You sit there and call out to me if you start to get any symptoms. I'll come straight back if you do."

Elliot sat obediently on the back of the cart, his legs dangling off the side.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll let you know straight away. You won't need to go far for me to feel the effects."

Avery backed up a few steps before changing her mind and spinning around. Facing away from him, she moved faster, soon disappearing into the tree trunks.

Elliot counted to five but didn't feel even a trace of dizziness or pain.

“Nothing!” he called loudly and listened for a response.

Avery didn’t call back, but she soon reappeared, jogging in his direction. She deposited the lantern in the back of the cart without saying anything and selected the next item from the crate. She jogged away with a brass candlesnuffer in hand, but he was soon calling for her to return.

The same thing happened with a brass lamp, a single candlestick, a small coal shovel, and an oddly shaped bowl. Avery carted item after item into the trees without effect. When she pulled out the final item—another lantern, but this one tiny, they both looked at it.

“Of course it would be the last one,” she said, amused.

He examined her face. Was she disappointed it was the tiny lantern? And did that mean it was a valuable or inexpensive item? He couldn’t tell from her expression.

“I suppose we had better confirm it,” she said. “Just to be thorough.”

Before he could reply, she started off between the trees once more. Elliot braced himself for the coming pain, but nothing happened. He waited longer, blinking against a moment of dizziness. But no, he had imagined it. His mind was still clear.

He waited longer and longer. Surely it was going to set in any minute now? He hadn’t had to go far from the cart for it to start the last time.

But still nothing came.

Avery eventually reappeared, frowning. “Did I go too far? How sick do you feel?”

“Not sick at all,” Elliot said, bewildered. “It didn’t do anything. Are you sure there’s

nothing else in there? Not even a little spoon or something?”

He jumped down himself and rummaged through the straw left in the crate. But it didn't take much effort to ascertain that it was empty of all metal items.

Avery snorted. “A spoon? The smith in Henton doesn't make spoons.”

“Why not?” Elliot asked. “With a wait list of six months, I'd hope he makes whatever his customers request.”

“He probably does.” She put the lantern down with the other items and started carefully repacking them into the crate. “But who in the kingdoms would wait six months for the Henton smith to make them a spoon ?”

Elliot shrugged, his confusion making him ornery. “Spoons are very useful.”

Avery laughed, but the sound died when she peered up at him and saw his expression. She straightened, a look of wonder on her face.

“Did you really spend days camped across from his smithy, watching him constantly, and you don't know what the Henton smith is famed for?”

Elliot shrugged uncomfortably. “He didn't exactly have a sign explaining it, and you may have noticed he's not the chattiest of fellows. And I already told you I avoided getting into conversations with anyone else.”

Avery shook her head. “There's a reason your thieves sold him a candelabra of all things. That smith isn't from Henton. He isn't even from Sovar.”

“So?” Elliot stared at her, confused. They'd already established that some people chose to travel despite the price their Legacy enacted.

Avery lowered her voice, although there was no one anywhere near them and he doubted she knew any secrets about such a taciturn man.

“He doesn’t come from any of the six kingdoms on this side of the mountains,” she said.

Elliot brows drew together. “He’s a mountain baby like me?”

“No!” Avery sounded frustrated. “He comes from one of the kingdoms across the mountains!”

“The Henton smith was born in one of the kingdoms on the other side of the northern mountains?” Elliot clarified, struggling to believe it.

It might not have been common for people to travel between the southern kingdoms, but it happened. No one ever crossed the northern mountains, though. A few had tried it in the distant past, but almost none of them had made it back. The mountains were too difficult to traverse for there to be any proper passes, and the treacherous waters in that section of both the eastern and western seas made bypassing the mountains by ship a foolhardy endeavor. The southerners knew only the barest details about the kingdoms on the far side of the mountains—snatches of information passed down about the unfamiliar Legacies that shaped their landscape.

“He not only came over the mountains,” Avery proclaimed, warming to the topic, “but he managed to do it with his anvil in tow.”

“He lugged that thing across the northern mountains?” Elliot stared at her, mouth hanging open.

Avery nodded eagerly. “He’s unique in all the kingdoms. He comes from the northern kingdom where their Legacy affects lamps and anything else that creates light. And

since he lives in Sovar, the lingering affects of his Legacy somehow combined with the Sovar Legacy. You know how their Legacy allows the Sovarans to make almost anything out of glass. Well, this smith can do similar remarkable things but with brass instead of glass. Of course he does the most impressive work with items like lamps or lanterns or candlesticks. He can make items no one else can.” She gave him a triumphant look. “So no. No one is asking him to make spoons.”

Elliot shook his head. “Impressive,” he murmured, looking down at the now refilled crate. “But that doesn’t explain what happened to my candelabra. Are you sure you put everything you bought from him in this crate? It looked like you did, but maybe?—”

He stopped, looking at Avery and reading in her stricken expression that she’d just had the same thought as him.

“You didn’t put it all in here!” he exclaimed. “There was that first package the smith handed to you.”

Avery’s eyes flicked to the leather satchel tucked in the back of the cart—the one she usually kept close to her person.

Elliot reached for it. “It must be whatever was in that parcel!”

“No!” Avery leaped in front of him and snatched up the satchel, holding it against her chest. “It can’t be this. I’m sure it’s not.”

Elliot frowned at her, dread creeping over him. “But it wasn’t anything in the crate. We just tested all of it. So what else could it be?”

Avery shook her head stubbornly, her arms tightening even further around the satchel.

They remained staring at each other in silence until Elliot finally sighed.

“Let’s at least test it. If you’re right, and it’s not whatever is in there, then we can easily confirm it. Just take the whole satchel with you.”

Avery still hesitated, but finally her shoulders slumped, and she started off silently into the trees. Elliot watched her go, wondering how he would tell the symptoms apart from the swirling that had already started in his belly. What was in the satchel that it could provoke such a strong reaction from Avery? It had to be the item she had commissioned from the smith six months earlier, and she was obviously horrified at the idea that he might be tied to it.

But she had barely disappeared into the trees before it became obvious that there was a clear distinction between the churning of concern and the symptoms of separation from the item he was tied to.

He gritted his teeth as his head began to pound. Fisting his hands, he let his fingernails bite into his palms as he tried to hold back the nausea. He would hold out as long as he could. He had to be completely sure.

But he didn’t last long.

“Avery!” he croaked, his voice far from its earlier loud call. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Avery! Come back!”

The cry was still quieter than he would have liked, but the symptoms quickly began to lessen, and within less than a minute, Avery reappeared among the trees.

Elliot slumped back against the sack behind him, closing his eyes and breathing a sigh of relief.

“Was it so bad?” Avery asked in a neutral voice he couldn’t read.

His eyes flew open, and he examined her face.

“It was bad,” he said, wishing he knew what she was thinking.

She was clearly unhappy with their discovery, but was she also...suspicious? He took a slow breath. Why did it have to be the item she had commissioned? It must have been the most expensive by far. What if he didn’t have enough coin to pay for it? His rash declaration that he would pay triple its value seemed foolish now.

“How much?” His voice came out rough. “How much is it worth?”

Avery shook her head. “This lamp isn’t for sale.”

Elliot stared at her, the blood draining from his face. “What do you mean it isn’t for sale?”

He slipped down from the cart, stepping toward her and gripping her upper arms. His eyes held hers.

“Avery. You know I need that lamp. What do you expect me to do? Die?!”

Avery swallowed convulsively. “And what if selling it to you means someone else will die?” she asked softly. “Maybe more than one.”

Elliot stepped back abruptly, staring at her. What was she saying?

He turned and strode away, but he didn’t get far before he spun and strode back. He stopped a single step away from her.

“It’s just a lamp! There can’t possibly be someone else tied to that exact lamp! That’s nonsense. Just tell me how much it cost. Whatever it is, I’ll find a way to pay it. Double or triple if I have to.”

If it came to it, he would even return to...But no. He shook his head. It wouldn’t come to that. He would find another way to raise the funds if needed.

She stepped toward him, her hand raising in a comforting gesture. But he stepped sharply back, and she let her hand drop, sighing.

“Elliot, I’m sorry. It isn’t about the lamp’s monetary value. I swear to you that if I could possibly sell this to you, I would. But I can’t.”

“Ask the smith to make you another lamp with the same properties,” he said desperately. “I’ll pay for it. He just needs to use different brass.”

Avery was already shaking her head before he finished speaking. “If I commission another one, I’ll have to wait another six months. I can’t do that. The people of Bolivere need it too much.”

“Bolivere?” Elliot stared at her. “What does Bolivere have to do with this lamp?”

Avery hesitated. “That’s not my story to tell. They swore me to secrecy. But it’s a life and death situation, I promise. I wouldn’t withhold the lamp for anything less.”

His eyes dropped to the satchel clasped in her arms, and her hold tightened around it in response. When his eyes jumped back up to hers, she was looking at him with an expression that was half-afraid, half-determined.

She knew he’d been considering whether he could take the lamp by force, and she was determined to fight him if it came to that. He was taller and stronger—although

possibly less well armed—so he might be able to take it, but he wouldn't succeed without hurting her.

The thought turned his stomach. He was desperate, but he didn't think he was that desperate. Not yet.

“Please, Elliot,” she whispered, and he thought he heard the faint edge of tears in her voice.

He stumbled back, gripping his head with both hands.

“Give me a minute,” he gasped. “Just...give me a minute.”

Chapter 9

Avery

A very watched Elliot pace the limits of their makeshift campsite. Why did it have to be the lamp out of all the possible items? She would have sold him anything else in her cart. She would have given him anything else.

Watching his distress was painful. But even more painful was the lingering splinter of doubt in the depths of her mind. It was awfully convenient that his tie—a tie that could only be confirmed by Elliot’s own sensations—was with the lamp. What if the whole thing was an elaborate drama to bypass the smith’s waiting list?

Avery didn’t think Elliot was that good an actor, but what did she really know about him? Only what he’d told her himself.

Eventually he stopped pacing and came back to stand in front of her. His manner was calmer, although his eyes still stormed as fiercely as they’d done before.

“Can I at least see it?” he asked in a carefully controlled voice.

Avery gripped the satchel, and he sighed.

“I won’t try to take it. I won’t even touch it. I just want to see it. To confirm...”

Avery was pretty sure they didn’t need further confirmation. But she also couldn’t deny the only request she could agree to.

She carefully extracted the lamp from the satchel, unwrapping it from the soft material the smith had wound around it. When it was revealed, she held it up with one hand, her other hand resting warily on the hilt of her dagger.

But Elliot made no attempt to approach closer. Instead, his eyes examined the lamp from where he stood, tracing over the elegant handle and the curve of the spout. The design was unusual for the southern kingdoms, but that was to be expected given the smith's origins. Other than the rounded shape and single spout, it appeared to be an ordinary brass lamp—although it was a well-crafted one.

Elliot's expression of defeat deepened, however. "That's definitely it," he said in a flat tone. "I can feel it. Which leaves us where? You won't sell it to me, and I can't be separated from it."

They looked at each other, the realization hitting them both at the same time. For as long as Avery had the lamp, Elliot would have to stay with her.

"Will you allow me to travel with you?" Elliot asked.

She blinked, pressing her lips together as her eyes darted all over the clearing. Elliot wasn't a roving merchant, and he didn't know what he was asking of her.

Apart from anything else, the prospect was daunting. She hadn't traveled with another person in nearly two years. Could she really allow a perfect stranger to accompany her?

But what was the alternative? Leave him to die?

"You'll have to come with me," she said quietly.

"To Bolivere, I suppose?" he said in a hard tone she hadn't heard before. "Whether I

want to go or not.”

She nodded slowly, wary. She hadn’t been expecting excessive thanks for making the offer—he couldn’t have known what it meant to her—but neither had she expected him to be offended by it.

“It turns out my mother was right,” he said in icy tones that cut. “She always said that if anyone found out about my link to the candelabra, they would use it to control me.”

Avery’s hand tightened around the handle of the lamp.

“You don’t have to come,” she snapped.

He laughed—an empty, humorless sound. “Don’t worry. I’ll follow obediently to Bolivere. My life depends on it, after all. So tell me,” he added in a mocking tone. “What are your commands? Will we camp here for the rest of the afternoon, or will we push on?”

Avery swallowed, unable to imagine sitting next to him on the cart for several hours.

“I think we’ll stay here for today,” she said shakily.

He bowed mockingly. “Your wish is my command, oh master.”

“Don’t!” she snapped. “I don’t want this any more than you do.”

He straightened, his face softening a little. For a moment they looked at each other, and then he sighed.

“I can hear the stream from here. I’m going to gather some water.” His eyes settled on the lamp. “I think it’s close enough that it shouldn’t cause me much of a problem.”

Avery nodded. He clearly wanted to get away from her, and it was best to let him, as far as was possible. They both could do with some space.

When Elliot disappeared from sight behind the closest trees, she sat down abruptly, taking several long breaths. It was earlier than she would usually make camp for the night, but it had already been a long day. Had her tumble into the stream only been a few hours earlier?

It was one thing to accept a traveling companion, but it was another to accept a companion who was both furiously angry with her and possibly untrustworthy. Could she really travel with Elliot?

But it didn't matter how much she considered the matter or how much she disliked the idea, the basic facts remained the same. She couldn't give up the lamp, and she couldn't leave Elliot to die.

She eventually stood and busied herself with activity. After a life on the road, she could set up camp in her sleep, but she was used to setting up a solitary camp. This time it would look a little different.

Elliot's bedroll was attached to his pack, and she took the liberty of setting it up on the opposite side of the fire to Nutmeg. She laid out her own roll underneath the cart, only feet from her horse. She usually liked to sleep in the open—preferably with a view of the stars. But she sometimes used the cart for shelter if she was caught in the rain. And on this occasion, she wanted Nutmeg between her bedroll and Elliot's. She might not trust Elliot, but she trusted that her horse would give her a warning before he got anywhere near the cart.

As she worked, she kept the reassuring weight of the satchel strapped to her back. And when night came, she intended to sleep with it inside her bedroll. The satchel wouldn't be leaving her side until they reached Bolivere and she handed over the

lamp.

When Elliot finally reappeared, a loaded waterskin over his shoulder, he stopped on the edge of the campsite. Taking in her preparations, his whole posture deflated. He didn't comment, though, placing the waterskin in the back of the cart and running a hand through his hair.

When he turned to her, she spoke quickly. "I've heated up some food. Neither of us have eaten since before our adventure in the stream, so why don't we start with a meal?"

He hesitated but eventually nodded and joined her by the fire. When she handed him his portion, he accepted it silently.

Sitting on separate sides of the fire, they ate in continued silence. Only when Elliot was halfway through his meal did he finally speak. "This is good."

Avery managed a smile. "You don't have to sound so surprised."

"Most people I meet on the road aren't good cooks," he said. "Myself included."

She shrugged. "My mother taught me."

"Would you be willing to do the cooking, then?" he asked hesitantly. "I have food supplies to contribute, of course."

"Since you just told me you're a bad cook, it's in my own interests to agree." Avery softened her words with a smile. "You can wash up, though."

He nodded, chewing in silence for another minute before putting his plate down and sighing.

“I’m sorry, Avery.” He met her eyes, sincerity in his voice and gaze. “My reaction earlier wasn’t fair. As frustrated as I am with the situation, I know it isn’t your fault. And I know you’re not trying to control me.”

“No,” Avery said indignantly, “I’m not. I never asked to have a traveling companion forced on me!”

Elliot winced. “No, you didn’t. Which makes my reaction worse. It’s just...” He sighed and looked into the banked fire. “Ever since I can remember, my mother has drummed into me that if anyone found out my secret, they’d use it to control me. And when I finally told someone, it was like all my worst fears immediately came true.”

Avery’s remaining resentment drained away. The force of his reaction had concerned her, but when he put it like that it made perfect sense. The situation was inconvenient for her, but it was far worse for him.

“Bolivere is the last place in the kingdoms I want to go,” he added. “But you have no reason to know that. You’re not going there because of me. It’s just—it’s bad enough that I’m forced into further travel at all, but it makes it worse to be going backward. I’ve spent years traveling, and I’m sick of it. I want to settle down. To have a proper home and neighbors. That’s where I was headed when I was robbed. I was going to move to the Sovaran capital.”

Like Olivia, Avery thought pointlessly. Would the two meet there?

She pushed the thought aside. It didn’t matter where Elliot settled or who he met. It had nothing to do with her.

“That’s unfortunate,” she said softly. “But I can’t delay my return to Bolivere—even if it is in the opposite direction to the Sovaran capital. And a delay wouldn’t ultimately help you anyway.”

She hesitated, her brows pulling together. “I can’t give you the lamp, but perhaps the townsfolk of Bolivere will. Once they’ve finished using it, that is.”

Elliot looked into the fire, his expression tight. “Or maybe they’ll run me out of town,” he murmured.

Avery frowned. When she had last met the people of Bolivere, they had been desperate, but even that hadn’t dented their usual consideration. She’d always found it a pleasant town.

“I’m sure they won’t do that,” she murmured, wishing she sounded less uncomfortable and more comforting. But it was obvious Elliot had some sort of issue with Bolivere and its inhabitants. She couldn’t ask him to tell her about it, though, not when she was refusing to talk about her current mission for the town.

Elliot pulled off one of his boots, wincing as he did so. A stab of guilt hit Avery as she remembered he’d been forced to follow her wet and barefoot.

“Even if Bolivere does give you the lamp,” she said slowly, “it’s only a temporary fix. What if it gets stolen again? Or someone else finds out about your tie to it?”

“I’m aware of the problem,” he said dryly. “I have literal nightmares about the possibility.”

“So we shouldn’t be convincing Bolivere to give you the lamp,” Avery said, warming to the topic. “We should be finding a way to cut your tie to it completely.”

Elliot froze halfway through taking off his second boot. “Is that even possible? I’ve never heard of someone breaking their tie to their birth kingdom, so I don’t know why my tie would be any different.”

“I’ve heard of it happening,” Avery said cheerfully. “My ancestor.”

Elliot’s eyebrows rose. “The first roving merchant? I always thought he was born without a link to any of the Legacies. I guess I assumed he came from over the mountains or something.”

Avery shook her head. “If that was all it was, his children would have been tied to whichever kingdom they were born in. According to family tradition, our ancestor was born in Halbury, but he managed to cut his tie to the Halbury Legacy at some point in his adulthood.”

Elliot leaned forward, his painful feet forgotten.

“How did he do it?” His blue eyes were fixed on Avery with painful intensity.

She pressed her lips together. “I don’t actually know,” she admitted.

He slumped back, disappointed. “Are you sure it’s not just a family legend?”

Avery straightened. “If it was just a legend, how do you explain how every one of his descendants can travel freely through the kingdoms?”

Elliot finally pulled off the remaining boot, standing it carefully next to the first one.

“I don’t know why I haven’t put more thought into it before,” he said. “If there’s a chance of cutting my tie to that lump of brass, I’d willingly cross all six kingdoms again to manage it.”

“I’ll help you,” Avery said impulsively. “You travel with me to Bolivere and let me give your lamp to the townsfolk there. And then I’ll help you find a way to break your tie to it. We’ll find and interview every member of my extended family if we

have to—even the ones I’ve never met. Someone has to know what happened.”

“It was a long time ago,” Elliot said warily, but he looked hopeful.

The hope in his eyes wormed its way into Avery’s heart, making it thump painfully. She couldn’t abandon someone who was so desperate he’d cling to any tendril of hope he was offered.

“My parents were never interested in the family history,” she said, “but one of my distant cousins is the family historian. I’ve only met Matilda once, but she has written records of every generation of roving merchants. She has to know more than I do.”

The hope in Elliot’s expression flared brighter.

“Thank you,” he said, all his earlier anger and frustration utterly extinguished. “If you can find a way to free me from this tie, I’ll pay you every coin I have. Or I’ll repay the favor! Tell me your greatest desire, and I’ll help you find a way to fulfill it—however difficult or frivolous.”

Avery chuckled, his eagerness making it impossible to be offended by his talk of payment, even though she’d never asked for any.

“I didn’t offer because I want payment.” She stood. “I’m going to bed. I recommend you don’t come near the cart—unless you’d like a horse hoof to the chest.”

Elliot also scrambled up, wincing as his weight transferred to the bottom of his feet.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you. I only said it because I would be so grateful.”

Avery gave him a stern look. “Merchants take payments very seriously.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated so meekly that she narrowed her eyes suspiciously at him. Was he laughing at her?

“I promise never to offer you coin again,” he said with a grin that confirmed it.

“Just go to sleep,” Avery grumbled. “We’ll be leaving early in the morning.” She patted Nutmeg’s neck on her way past, calling over the horse. “And don’t come near the cart!”

“I wouldn’t dare!” Elliot called back, and Avery smiled to herself.

Her uncle had recommended she travel with a large guard dog or two, but Nutmeg was as good as any dog. With the horse untethered beside her, her new traveling companion wouldn’t cause her any loss of sleep.

But as she lay in her bedroll, trying fruitlessly to drift off, it wasn’t concern about Elliot that kept her awake. It was concern for him. Had she promised more than she could deliver? She had liked seeing the hope in his eyes, and she didn’t want to see disappointment and betrayal take its place.

Chapter 10

Elliot

Even the throbbing in his feet wasn't enough to keep Elliot from sleeping. Just thinking about a future where he wasn't tied to the candelabra was enough to send him straight into slumber.

Except it wasn't a candelabra anymore. He needed to start thinking of it as a lamp.

He woke to birdsong and morning light. Avery had woken before him, and she must have noted that he was sleeping deeply. He hadn't moved from his bedroll all night.

She still seemed wary around him, however, and by the time he had gotten in her way for the fifth time, he could guess why. Avery worked smoothly, clearly used to the pack up procedure, and when Elliot tried to help, he only tripped over her efforts.

When he backed away from her only to step on a rock large enough to be felt by his tender feet even through his boot sole, he yelped, and she gave a huff of frustration.

"Just go sit on the cart and rest your feet. It will be easier for me to finish on my own anyway."

Elliot wanted to protest, but his feet were hurting worse than they had the day before, and he couldn't deny he was disrupting her rhythm. It still stung, however. He wasn't new to travel any more than she was. He had set up and packed down almost as many campsites in his life as she must have done.

He had never traveled with a cart, though, and he had limited experience with horses. He would have liked to ask Avery to teach him how to care for Nutmeg, but he didn't dare. If he showed interest in the horse, she might suspect him of an ulterior motive. Yet another pitfall of having a guard horse.

The morning was still young when they got back on the road, munching on a cold breakfast as they traveled.

"This reminds me of a morning in Stonyfell," Avery said, gazing up at the clear blue sky. "The sky was just like this, and I was sure it was the sort of day where nothing could go wrong." She laughed. "I was seven, mind you. I know better now."

Elliot narrowed his eyes. He hadn't started traveling until well after seven, so she had him beaten there—as she must have known.

He kept his tone light, though, despite his disgruntlement. "I'm guessing everything didn't go to plan?"

Avery laughed again. "Does it ever?"

"Rarely," Elliot said. "Although it has been known to happen from time to time. Mostly to other people."

Avery laughed for a third time, and Elliot glanced at her sideways. Maybe he'd been unfair, and she really was in a good mood. Maybe any sense of competition between them was only in his head.

"We stopped for a rest break, and I wandered off." Avery's lips curled upward. "I found an abandoned tree house high in some branches and decided to climb the ladder nailed to the trunk and have a look inside."

“In Stonyfell?” Elliot shook his head.

“I was seven, remember!” Avery cried. “It was the first time we’d been there in two years, and I barely remembered our previous visit.”

“So you got trapped, of course,” Elliot finished for her.

The Halbury Legacy loved trapping people. The locals all knew not to end up alone anywhere either remote or high up. He was betting Avery had been the first child to ever climb into the tree house on her own.

“The ladder just disappeared!” Avery cried. “And I could have sworn half the branches did, too. It was easy to climb up, but climbing down...” She shook her head. “I was stuck there for three days.”

“Three days?!” Elliot laughed before quickly stifling it and throwing a guilty look sideways. “You must have been scared.”

Avery was still smiling, though. “I actually liked it. There was a rope and a bucket, and I suggested using the rope to climb down, but my parents said the Legacy would probably make it snap. They told me to use it to send the bucket down for supplies instead. I didn’t argue because I secretly liked being up there.” She smiled reminiscently. “Normal children pretend to run away from home and go on adventures. I played at setting up a house. I made that tree house into my own cozy home.”

Elliot smiled, imagining seven-year-old Avery happily settling into the tree house while her parents ran around in a panic working out how to rescue her. He had never considered the idea that a roving merchant might dream of settling down, but he liked the idea that Avery might feel that way.

“Just because you can travel freely doesn’t mean you have to,” he said aloud. “If you like the idea of settling down, have you considered finding a place to do so? Or is that frowned upon for roving merchants?”

“Oh no, not at all. In fact, most settle eventually.” Avery paused, her thoughts clearly far away. After a moment she sighed before turning back to him. “My mother was the one who was born a roving merchant, and traveling with her meant my father had to endure the burden of being away from his home kingdom. His symptoms were light compared to many which is the reason they made it work. But not all roving merchants fall in love with people who bear with travel so easily. And even those who have a light burden from their Legacy usually end up tiring of the constant travel eventually. After my parents died, I traveled with my aunt and uncle and cousins for a couple of years, but they settled in Glandore two years ago.”

“So you started traveling alone after that?” Elliot asked softly. He hadn’t realized she was alone because her parents were both dead.

Avery nodded.

“Were you not welcome to stay and live with them?” Elliot asked even more gently.

“What?” Avery turned slightly to look at him, her expression puzzled. “Of course I was welcome. They’re my family. I was the one who had no interest in settling down.”

“Oh.” Elliot frowned down into his lap. She had been offered the opportunity that had been ripped from him, and she had rejected it.

“They bought a house in Glandore because my aunt was sick of traveling,” Avery continued. “She endured it for twenty years for the sake of my uncle, and now he says it’s his turn to sacrifice for her. One of my cousins begged to be allowed to come with

me, but I was already young to go off alone at seventeen, and she's two years younger, so her parents insisted she stay with them." She smiled brightly. "She'll probably join me in a year or two, though."

"And what about your other cousin?" Elliot asked, trying to keep his own feelings on the topic from leaching into his voice.

"He was perfectly happy to settle in Glandore," she said in a tone that implied she couldn't understand his choice. "Like you said, just because someone can travel doesn't mean they want to."

"I wish someone had told my mother that," Elliot muttered, earning a curious look from Avery. But just as he hadn't asked further questions about her parents, she didn't push him to explain himself. Circumstances had forced them together, but they were still virtual strangers.

Silence fell between them, and he spoke abruptly to fill it. "Getting stuck in a tree house is nothing. The first time I visited Halbury, I was fourteen years old, and some of the youths thought it would be amusing to give me a 'local drink.'"

Avery gave a gasp that transformed into a giggle halfway through. "It was actually a hair tonic, wasn't it?" she asked.

Elliot ran a hand through his hair, adopting an expression of exaggerated pain. "Of course it was. I was way too trusting back then, and naturally I drank the whole thing."

Her eyes widened and another giggle slipped out. "The whole thing? So you were...I can picture..." She dissolved into proper laughter while Elliot sat in dignified silence, feeling secretly pleased with himself.

“Are you done?” he asked her eventually. “Or do you intend to laugh at my discomfort all day?”

She sobered, although her lips kept twitching. “I’m sorry.”

She pressed her lips together to still them, glancing up at him from under her lashes in a way that made his heart thump. With annoyance at her laughter, obviously.

“Did it grow all the way to your feet?” she asked in a slightly strangled voice.

He sighed heavily. “It was past my feet every morning. For a month. My mother would cut it off, of course, but it would be well past my waist by lunchtime. We blunted at least two pairs of scissors before the effect wore off.”

“You’re only supposed to have a sip of those hair tonics, you know,” Avery said. “Every child knows that.”

“Maybe every roving merchant child,” Elliot said defensively. “But I had a perfectly adequate amount of hair in childhood, so I hadn’t come across Halburan hair tonics before the unfortunate incident.”

Avery nodded comfortingly. “It’s a perfect lovely head of hair. Or at least...” She suppressed another laugh. “It is now. But maybe that’s the lingering effects of the tonic?”

Elliot put a hand to his wavy brown hair. “This is my natural hair, thank you very much! The tonic’s effects did eventually wear off.”

“My mistake.” Avery sounded like she was still trying to stifle laughter. “So does that mean I should ask you to braid my hair if it starts getting in my way? You must be an expert.”

Elliot grinned back at her. “I am rather talented, now you mention it. I’m happy to be of service anytime.”

She stared at him for a moment, her laughter fading. An emotion less easy to name than amusement started to grow between them until she abruptly turned forward and cleared her throat.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

His lips twitched, and he watched her surreptitiously out of the side of his eyes. She might have had a lifetime of travel stories, but he had plenty of years of them himself. She would find he could match her tale for tale.

They talked on and off for the rest of the day, often riding in silence for long stretches. Elliot worried it would be awkward, but the quiet between them was surprisingly comfortable. When he thought about it, it made sense. Two people used to traveling alone had to be comfortable with silence.

Avery continued to insist that he sit and rest his feet while she set up camp each afternoon and packed it away the following morning. After the first occasion, he didn’t argue, using the time to watch her closely.

By the time his feet had healed enough that he insisted on joining her, he had learned every detail of her routine. She seemed impatient with his desire to help, but by the time the camp was set up, she no longer looked disgruntled. He grinned, silently congratulating himself for fitting seamlessly into her efforts.

The feeling of working as a team—so different from traveling alone—still had him elated when he woke the next morning. The feeling was exactly why he was sick and tired of the traveling life. He wasn’t interested in being a ship in the night anymore. He wanted to be known by those around him and to know them in return.

With his assistance, they filled the waterskins, prepared breakfast, and were on the road quickly. But since the road took a gentle but extended uphill path, Avery decreed they needed to walk beside the cart to lighten Nutmeg's load.

Elliot had been working on the mare, but she still treated him with suspicion, only letting Avery care for her. He'd never seen such a loyal horse, so he could understand why Avery took such good care of her.

Avery also seemed to be in a good mood—perhaps his previous unhelpful presence had been weighing on her more than she'd let on.

“We'll be in Marlestone tomorrow,” she crowed when they stopped to eat their midday meal. “Hot baths and proper beds!”

Elliot laughed silently at himself. Of course her mood didn't have anything to do with him. How arrogant to assume it did.

His false assumption didn't dent his good mood, however. He was as pleased as Avery at the prospect of staying in an inn. Before his candelabra had been stolen, he had been counting down the days until he finished sleeping on the side of the road forever. Every extra night heading in the opposite direction had been adding insult to injury, so he rejoiced at the prospect of a proper mattress.

He unwrapped the bread and cheese they had prepared that morning before breaking camp. It should have looked unappealing with the idea of a proper hot meal at the front of his mind, but even the two-day-old bread was given a pleasant glow from his good mood.

“Do you haf a favrut inn a' Marlestone?” he asked with his mouth full.

Avery gave him a disapproving look.

“What?” he asked with a grin, extending both arms sideways in an exaggerated expression of confusion. “I’m just excited.”

A sudden tug pulled the hunk of bread out of his extended hand, the cheese falling to the ground.

He twisted to see the culprit and toppled backward with an embarrassingly high-pitched screech. Avery burst into laughter as he scrambled inelegantly to his feet, growling. He would never get used to those blasted Sovaran mice! No mouse had the right to be that large.

A second cat-sized mouse darted forward to snatch up the abandoned cheese and both took off between the row of trees that lined the road. Incensed, Elliot sprinted after them.

“Leave them be!” Avery called from behind him. “It’s not like you’re going to want to eat it now.” She sounded like she was trailing him, her speed hampered by laughter.

He ran faster. His lunch might have been useless now, but he didn’t mean to let those brazen thieves have it!

On the other side of the trees, the mice ran through a large paddock, the grass short from the efforts of whichever flock or herd made use of the pastureland. Elliot dashed after them as they rounded a clump of rocks on one side of the paddock.

Circling the rocks, he caught the flicker of tails disappearing into cracks too small for him to follow. He slid to a stop and considered sticking his arm in after them.

But as he stepped closer, something slithered out of the rocks. Something that wasn’t a mouse. Something with scales, four legs, and large reptilian eyes.

He shouted in alarm, backing away as unreasoning panic set in. Long before he'd started traveling at fourteen, there had been a cave system near his hometown. The local children had all been fascinated by it, but the older youths had loved to regale them with tales of the fire-breathing dragon that lived inside and ate children for breakfast.

He stumbled backward, his eyes fixed on the miniature dragon in front of him. The one in the cave had been rumored to be the size of a bull, while this one was closer to a large dog. But childhood terror was crowding out rational thought, and he only wanted to get away from the creature.

The pastureland changed, beautiful flowers filling the field and catching his eye with bright colors in every direction. It wasn't enough to break his terror, though. Even Avery's distant shouts couldn't do that.

"Elliot!" she cried, her voice becoming more and more alarmed. "Elliot! What are you doing? Stop! Stop!!"

Dimly he was aware he was making a fool of himself in front of her, but he couldn't seem to stop his feet. The dragon lunged forward, and he stumbled backward with several rushed steps.

His foot came down on an uneven bit of ground, his heel sliding away from him. He cried out, thoughts of the dragon consumed by more immediate panic as his arms pinwheeled in an attempt to catch his balance. But it was too late. Dirt slid out from under him, and he fell backward off a precipice.

Chapter 11

Avery

“E lliot!” Avery shrieked, dashing toward the flower-covered field. Had the man lost his hearing and sight? How could he stumble backward through a flower field, of all places?

Her heart thundered as she sprinted forward, trying not to think how high the cliff might be. She clutched the strap of her satchel as it bounced awkwardly against her side. She had only followed him in the first place to keep him from going too far from the lamp. In his initial indignation, he had clearly forgotten about his need to stay close to it.

Now she could only be glad she had followed. She just hoped it wasn't too late...

She dropped to her knees beside the crumbled section of cliff where Elliot had gone over. She held her breath as she peered cautiously over the side.

Please be alive. Please be alive, she chanted in her head.

Her breath whooshed out when she saw the slim gorge was only two body lengths deep. Elliot sat at the bottom looking dazed, his head in his hands.

“Of all the foolish things,” she called down to him, relief giving way to amusement. “Don't you know better? Didn't you see the flowers?”

Elliot looked up at her and winced. From his expression, his pride was hurt worse than his body.

“Flowers? I was too busy looking at the dragon!”

“Dragon?” Avery stared at him before glancing reflexively over her shoulder.

The two mice must have been off enjoying their ill-gotten meal, but the lizard had laid himself out on the rocks to sun. She looked back down at Elliot.

“Are you talking about the lizard? I thought you were planning to settle in Sovar. Don’t you know they have enormous lizards as well as enormous mice? You should have known that if there were two mice around, there was probably a lizard hidden somewhere nearby. They’re usually found together.”

“Lizard,” he said slowly. Groaning, he dropped his head back into his hands.

Avery knew she shouldn’t enjoy his discomfort, but she couldn’t help her lips twitching. “And what about the flowers? You can’t have thought they were natural!”

She glanced around at the incredible display around her. The bright colors of a multitude of different flowers shone in the sun, clustered together in this spot although there were none in the surrounding grasslands. It was a classic display by the Sovaran Legacy. But in Sovar, unnaturally beautiful spots were always accompanied by a cliff. Avoiding those areas was one of the first things she’d learned from her parents as a young child.

“I barely noticed them at all,” Elliot admitted.

“Can you climb out?” Avery asked.

Elliot pulled himself to his feet, and she surreptitiously watched as he checked himself over. He seemed to conclude that he was, indeed, unharmed, and she breathed a soft sigh of relief.

He reached up, trying to find purchase on the sides of the narrow gorge. But as soon as he caught hold of anything, it crumbled at his touch, as it had under his foot at the top. After several tries, he gave up with a grunt and looked up at Avery.

“I don’t think I’m getting myself out of here.” He sounded rueful. “Can you fetch a rope?”

Avery nodded. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

She crawled backward away from the edge before scrambling to her feet. The last thing they needed was for both of them to end up down there.

But she had only taken two running steps through the flowers when she stopped. Her hands tightened around the satchel as she glanced back at the almost invisible gap in the ground.

From their experiments, she knew the cart was too far away for her to take the lamp without causing him to suffer. She could leave it there among the flowers, but what if that was his plan? What if he had faked not being able to climb out, and?—

She shook her head at her paranoid thoughts. He hadn’t even mentioned her leaving the satchel. Surely if this was all some scheme of his, he wouldn’t have left it to chance and her good nature.

She slipped the satchel off and laid it on the ground. She would just have to return as quickly as she could.

She ran full speed back through the flowers, past the sunbathing lizard, and between the trees that shaded the road.

Nutmeg whinnied, prancing in place as Avery appeared beside her, panting.

“Don’t worry, girl,” Avery said between gasping breaths. “We’ll be back soon.”

She rummaged through the back of the cart to find a rope, her organized storage making it easy to locate. Almost no time had passed before she was racing back toward Elliot.

Her breathing was still ragged, but her heart began to slow as soon as she saw the satchel untouched where she had left it. Elliot might still prove untrustworthy, but his fall hadn’t been a ruse.

As she stopped a safe number of steps back from the small cliff, Elliot must have heard her because he called out cheerfully.

“That was quick!”

She didn’t respond, concentrating on securing the rope around her own waist and getting a firm grip on it before she tossed the end down to him. He called a thank you and then she felt several tugs on the rope as he presumably prepared to haul himself out.

After a moment, the rope went still, the pressure against it growing firm and steady. He called up again.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes,” she called back. “I’ll start moving backward, if I can, but you’ll have to pull

yourself up mostly.”

“No problem,” he replied, and it occurred to her to be doubly glad he wasn’t injured. She would have had a difficult time pulling him up on her own with an injury to consider.

As it was, she staggered and almost fell when the pressure on the rope suddenly increased to the full weight of a person. She leaned backward to try to counterbalance it, managing one staggering step backward.

It probably did little to help, but thankfully Elliot’s hands appeared over the lip of the crevice, and within moments he was hauling himself all the way over. When he finally dropped the rope, he looked at her with concern.

“Are you all right? That didn’t hurt you?”

Avery immediately stopped rubbing at her waist where the rope sat.

“I’m fine,” she said quickly, untying it and winding the rope up, pulling the end from out of the crevice as she did.

“Thank you for coming to my rescue.” Elliot ran an embarrassed hand over the back of his neck. “I can’t believe I was such a chucklehead.”

He glanced toward the sunning lizard, and she caught his shudder.

“You do know dragons don’t actually exist, right?” she asked him with a grin as she looped the coils of rope over one arm, resettling her satchel into its place.

“Of course I do,” he said with dignity, but he still gave the lizard a wide berth on their way back. “I just don’t know which part of Sovar’s history made their Legacy decide

to start producing cliffs everywhere. None of the histories I studied included anyone falling off a cliff.”

“A metaphorical one, perhaps?” Avery said lightly. “But there’s still debate on that one. At least the lizards don’t do any harm—unless you’re a fish or a small animal. I’ve never heard of them harming a human.”

“I’m sure they’re perfectly lovely,” he said stiffly. “But lizards have no business being that large.”

“Neither do mice,” she pointed out. “But that’s Sovar for you. Maybe you should pick somewhere else to settle.”

“They don’t have the giant mice—or lizards—in the capital,” he said. “Or at least not as many of them. The people have driven them away.”

She conceded the point, refraining from teasing him further as they neared Nutmeg. Although he seemed unharmed, his body must have been surging with nervous energy after the scare. Hers was, and she hadn’t been the one to go over the cliff backward.

“You’re lucky you didn’t get hurt,” she said softly.

He smiled. “I missed the lesson about flowers and cliffs, but I got into plenty of fights in my early years of travel when I was still foolish.” A shadow crossed over his face. “It took a while before I started winning any of the fights, but at least I learned how to fall well, so it wasn’t all wasted.”

“A useful skill,” Avery said, her mock solemnity covering the sudden pang in the region of her heart.

Elliot seemed so easygoing and levelheaded. What had provoked his younger self into so many fights? Who had he been protecting?

“I had to learn a lot of useful skills for traveling very quickly,” he said. “You would have thought me useless if you’d met me back then.”

“You’re certainly a seasoned traveler now,” she said. “Do you really want to leave the road? Won’t life in a normal house in the middle of a city seem boring after a life of adventure?”

“It sounds splendid to me. Idyllic boredom.”

Avery shook her head. She couldn’t understand it. Who wanted to be bored? She let the topic drop, though. There wasn’t anything to be gained by the two of them arguing over it.

Elliot had claimed to be fine, but she watched him through the afternoon and as they set up camp, and he was obviously more bruised and battered than he wanted to admit. He still did his part, though, making no attempt to claim special privileges from injury.

She heard him tossing and turning at several points in the night, and she couldn’t imagine the ground was kind to his sore muscles or bruises. From the look of him as they climbed onto the cart the next morning, he was feeling it even worse than he had the day before. At least he would have a soft bed that night.

The road grew busier as they neared the riverside city, and although she and Elliot didn’t talk, a buzz ran between them and the other travelers. Avery grinned. She loved this part of approaching larger cities. They had a bustle to them that she always missed after being in the countryside for a while.

Marleston was a sprawling, relaxed city without city walls or gates, and the traffic flowed smoothly inside. It did seem busier than usual, and from the way Elliot was looking around, he had noticed it as well.

“It must be market day,” he said brightly, peering up at the lowering sun. “If we hurry, we should be able to get there before it closes for the evening.” He glanced at her. “Were you planning to have a stall here before we leave?”

Avery shook her head. She enjoyed visiting larger cities, and she had valuable connections in many of them, but she didn’t make use of their markets. Stalls were for those who specialized in particular products.

“I’m more of an individual merchant,” she told him. “I match people to their perfect wares, whatever they may be. I’ll take specific requests from my contacts in cities, but I do most of my business in the countryside.” She smiled. “Countryfolk have more need of my services than those in cities. And on this trip, I won’t be lingering anywhere for sales. I need to get to Bolivere as quickly as possible.”

His face went dark at the mention of the northern town, and she looked at him curiously. He said nothing, though, so she continued.

“I enjoy markets as a customer, however, so I’d be happy to visit this one. I always go to the Fox and Crow in Marleston, and the staff there know me. We can drop the cart and Nutmeg at their stables and sort out our rooms in the inn later. If we do that, we should be able to get to the market square in sufficient time.”

Elliot’s face cleared, his good humor returning at the prospect of visiting the market.

“I haven’t stayed at the Fox and Crow,” he said. “I’ve always frequented one of the inns on the western side of the city, but I don’t mind where we stay.” He rubbed his side and winced. “As long as they have a proper bed.”

Even with the extra activity in the city, it didn't take Avery long to navigate through the streets to the Fox and Crow. As she had claimed, the staff in the inn's courtyard immediately recognized her and called a greeting. She handed Nutmeg's reins over and after a short conversation with an older groom returned to Elliot.

"He'll let the innkeeper know that we're here and we need two rooms," she told him. "Are you ready to go?"

He nodded eagerly, and they set off on foot for the central market square. They could hear the sound of the crowd before they arrived, the calls of stall keepers rising above the general buzz of voices.

Elliot's smile grew wider and wider, and Avery felt her own anticipation rise in step with his. She had grown somewhat blasé about markets since traveling alone—they weren't nearly as much fun to visit on your own—but being there with Elliot brought back the sense of excitement she'd always felt as a child. Who knew what treasure you were about to find or what delicious food you might try for the first time?

They stepped into the square and paused for a moment to take it in. Stalls lined the sides, and crowds strolled through the open spaces, or lined up in front of the more popular food vendors.

Avery's eyes fell on a stall selling spiced buns, and her eyes lit up.

"Come on!" She grabbed Elliot's arm and hauled him through the crowd to join the end of the line.

"These are my favorite," she said at the exact same time he did.

They looked at each other and laughed.

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” she said. “I think they’re the favorite of every roving merchant child. My cousin certainly tried to steal as many of mine as he could.”

“My mother always bought them for me,” Elliot said, “because she knew that no matter how angry I was with her, I could never turn down a spiced bun.”

Avery’s curiosity spiked at his mention of his antagonistic relationship with his mother. What had happened between them? Had Avery and Elliot become comfortable enough with each other that she could ask him?

The person in front of them stepped away, revealing the stall holder. Elliot ordered a selection of buns, handing over the necessary coin and accepting the bag he was offered.

When Avery started to speak to the stall holder in turn, he grabbed her arm and pulled her to the side.

“Don’t be silly.” He held open the bag to show the generous contents. “I couldn’t possibly eat all these myself. They’re to share.”

Avery peered inside. “I’ve seen you eat. Are you sure you couldn’t eat them all yourself?”

Elliot chuckled. “Possible or not, I have no intention of eating them all. Choose whatever you like.”

Avery took him at his word, selecting the plumpest-looking bun and happily taking a bite. He followed her example, and they strolled along the stalls, eating bun after bun.

“I’m not going to need a meal this evening,” Avery eventually groaned after her fifth bun. “Why did you buy so many?”

“You’re the one who was talking about them being your favorite!” Elliot protested. “I had to buy enough to be sure there were some left over for me to eat.”

There was no heat in their light-hearted squabble, and Avery grinned. This was what was missing when she visited markets on her own. She could—and did—buy herself spiced buns, but it wasn’t as much fun to eat them alone.

She slowed as they walked past a stall with brightly colored wrapped sweets. They looked so cheerful all laid out in lines, and she ran her hand lightly down the closest row.

“Avery?” the woman behind the stall asked suddenly, making her freeze.

She looked up into the beaming face of an unfamiliar middle-aged woman. She smiled back easily, used to being recognized by people she didn’t remember.

“It’s years since I’ve seen you,” the woman continued, “but I’d recognize you anywhere. Don’t tell me you’ve settled down! Or are you just passing through Marlestone?”

“Just passing through,” she confirmed. “I don’t think I have it in my blood to settle.”

The woman gave a comfortable chuckle. “The same as always, I see. Your father used to marvel at your adventurous spirit.”

Avery’s smile slipped a little, and the woman’s face fell as she realized what she’d said.

“A fine man,” she said. “And sorely missed by all who knew him.”

Avery nodded, mustering a grateful smile despite the wave of sadness.

“We’ve developed a new product in the last few years,” the woman said, quickly changing the subject. “And right proud of it we are.” She gestured along the rows of sweets.

“They must be popular with children,” Avery said, speaking almost at random as she fought back memories of what it had been like to travel with her parents, back when she didn’t pay too much attention to their many contacts across the kingdoms.

“Exactly!” the woman exclaimed, as if Avery had hit on the most relevant point. “Extremely popular they are.” She picked one up and pressed it into Avery’s hand. “Take a sample.”

She winked at Avery. “I’ll be betting you’ll be back for more once you experience their popularity for yourself.”

Avery thanked her, used to being offered samples by people who hoped she would help spread their products throughout the kingdoms. With a single small sweet, she wouldn’t even have to feel bad if it wasn’t something she wanted to stock.

She stepped away from the stall as Elliot came in behind her to peer at the sweets. As she moved away to give him space, she stared down at the bright wrapper in her hand. More memories flooded through her. How many times had her father snuck her an extra sweet at the markets?

Tears filled her eyes, and she blinked them away. Idly her hands began to move, unwrapping the sweet slowly and popping it into her mouth. She had just started to suck on it when Elliot’s sharp cry cut through the air.

“Avery! Don’t eat that!”

She stared at him in astonishment, her mouth flooding with sweetness and an odd

aftertaste she couldn't place.

“Spit it out!” he ordered, striding toward her, but the edges of the world were blurring, her vision going dark as everything faded away and her body collapsed.

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Chapter 12

Elliot

Elliot stepped up to the stall, curious for a closer look at the stall holder more than her wares. He had traveled for years, but people didn't recognize him the way this woman had recognized Avery. Did she have interactions like that everywhere she went? Being a roving merchant was obviously quite different from being a simple traveler.

The woman groaned, resettling herself on a stool behind her wares.

"I'm getting too old for this," she grumbled, and Elliot looked up, catching the slight hint of a burr in her words that he associated with certain regions of Oakden.

"Have you come from across the river to the market?" he asked, curious.

"Aye." The woman gave him a weary smile. "Quite a few of the stall holders do, but it's a young person's game, or should be. Sometimes I feel so weary the entire time I'm across the border I can barely lift my arms."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Elliot said politely, his eyes dropping to the sweets again as he caught a faint scent he hadn't noticed before.

"Wait." His eyes flew back to hers. "So these aren't just sweets?"

She chuckled. "Bless you, no. We're herbalists, not confectioners. We used to make

sleeping potions in the same way all the other Oakdenian herbalists do, but then our son got sick, and the doctor had the worst time trying to get him to swallow the stuff! That's how we came up with this idea." She gestured proudly at the sweets. "We didn't predict how much demand there would be. Doctors across Oakden and Sovar are clamoring for them, so it's all we make now. I'm hoping Avery might want to take some stock with her and share them with doctors in the other kingdoms." She smiled in a satisfied way.

Elliot's eyebrows rose. "They look like sweets, though. Don't people worry the children might get into them and eat a dangerous number?"

The stall holder laughed. "It's a small dose, so we have to make it potent. Don't worry, no one gets the chance to eat a second one." She chuckled again.

Elliot glanced over to Avery to see if she was interested, but she had stepped away and clearly wasn't listening. She had unwrapped the sweet to examine it, and as he watched, she raised it toward her face to smell it.

But instead of lifting it to her nose, she popped it in her mouth, her gaze distant and distracted.

"Avery!" he shouted, almost knocking someone over as he rushed toward her. "Don't eat that!"

She looked up and met his eyes, clearly confused by his words and the panic on his face.

"Spit it out!" he ordered, but her eyes had already lost their focus, her limbs going weak.

He lunged forward, scooping her up just as she collapsed. He pulled her against his

chest.

“Avery! Avery!” He shook her slightly, but she didn’t wake. Instead, she gave a soft sigh and snuggled against him, laying her cheek against his chest.

He froze, his heart beating painfully as he gazed down at her peaceful face. Several strands of her dark hair lay across her full lips, and he wanted to brush them aside, but both of his hands were already occupied holding her close.

He tried not to think about how it felt to hold her warm body against his chest. There were much more urgent issues to consider.

He strode back toward the stall holder who had leaped to her feet, a hand over her mouth and her eyes wide.

“What did she go and eat it for?” she cried.

“Are you sure she knew you were from Oakden?” Elliot asked. “Oakden is the only place that grows sleeping herbs, so if she thought you were Sovaran, she would have assumed they were ordinary sweets.”

“Oh dear!” The stall holder wrung her hands together. “I assumed she recognized me! Her parents used to buy my sleeping potions, and she even stayed at my house as a child.”

Elliot sighed. He might not know as many people as Avery, but he had experienced meeting adults who knew him from childhood but who he didn’t remember at all. Avery must have been too polite to let on that she didn’t know the woman.

“Silly girl,” he murmured, gazing down at her. “Oakden is only across the river. You should have been more cautious of anything you found in this market.”

He should have felt triumphant to have the tables turned after all the times he'd embarrassed himself around her so far, but he only felt concern.

"How long will it last?" he asked the woman.

She winced. "The sweet will have dissolved in her mouth by now, so she'll have had the full dose. Of course it's intended for children not adults, so I'd guess only a couple of hours."

Elliot frowned, but at least it was only a sleeping potion. She might be as good as unconscious, but the experience wouldn't harm her. At least not as long as he got her somewhere safe and comfortable to sleep it off. If he hadn't been there to catch her, she could have hit her head when she fell.

He gave the stall holder a stern look. "I recommend you warn anyone who takes one of your sweets in the future. Don't go making assumptions."

"Of course, sir," she said quickly. "It was an honest mistake. Usually we only sell to doctors or to merchants who supply doctors, so they all know what they're buying." She looked at Avery in his arms. "She'll be all right in a couple of hours, though." She glanced uneasily at the small space behind the stall and then at the setting sun. "Did you want to lay her down back here?" she asked reluctantly.

Elliot shook his head. The stall holder would be packing up soon, eager to get back across the border to her own kingdom, and it wouldn't be a comfortable space for Avery anyway.

"No, I'll take her back to the inn," he said, and the woman instantly brightened.

He barely refrained from rolling his eyes, saving his energy for navigating the crowd. Thankfully, most people parted before him, whispers following him as he strode from

the square.

He smiled grimly. He must look a dramatic sight, striding along with a beautiful woman asleep in his arms.

Thankfully, Avery had taken them to an inn near the market square. He could never have carried her all the way back to the inn where he usually stayed. As it was, his arms were shaking with the strain by the time he made it into the inn's courtyard.

The groom exclaimed in horror at the sight of them and hurried over.

“Has something happened to Mistress Avery?” he asked, staring down at her just in time for her to give a little snoring grunt.

He blinked as Elliot chuckled tiredly. “She ate a sweet from the market without checking what it was first.”

The man's eyebrows shot up. “One of the Oakdenian sweets, I take it.” He examined Elliot from under bushy brows. “You're the young man who arrived with her.”

Elliot nodded. His arms felt like they were about to give way, but he couldn't bring himself to brush off the man's concerned scrutiny. He was glad someone cared enough to check that Avery was safe.

“Well,” the man said at last, “if she was traveling with you and skipping around markets with you, she must trust you.”

Elliot smiled weakly. He wasn't so sure the man was right. He didn't know what had pushed Avery into accepting his company. But in this context it didn't matter. Whether Avery believed it or not, she was safe with him.

“I passed on her message,” the man continued. “You’ll find two rooms waiting for you.”

Elliot nodded his thanks and finally continued into the inn. If Avery was awake, he knew she would want to check on Nutmeg, but that was beyond his ability in the moment. He needed to deposit her in her room and see the door safely locked behind him.

The innkeeper bustled forward as he walked into the main room of the inn, exclaiming over Avery. But like the groom outside, he seemed to accept that any traveling companion of Avery’s was worthy of trust.

“We’ve got two rooms already prepared for you,” he said, gesturing to a young woman. “She’ll show you the way.”

Elliot gritted his teeth and locked his arms as he carried Avery up the staircase behind the woman. He only had to make it a short way further.

When they reached the top, the girl gestured at the second door on their left.

“That’s one of them,” she said before pointing down the corridor. “The other is the last door on the right.”

Elliot stared down the long corridor. “The rooms aren’t next to each other,” he said blankly.

The woman gave him an odd look. “It’s market day, so we’re almost full. We don’t have two free rooms next to each other. Does it matter?”

“I—” Elliot fell silent. It did matter, but he couldn’t explain why to this stranger. “Never mind,” he said instead. The important thing was putting Avery down before

his arms and shoulders gave way. “Would you mind opening the door for me?”

The woman complied, watching him curiously as he walked inside. He glanced back at her, still standing there staring at them, and used his foot to close the door behind him.

Grunting, he almost fell forward to the bed and dropped Avery onto its surface. She bounced slightly, lying in an awkward position. Immediately repentant, he straightened her out on top of the covers, tucking a spare blanket over her.

Gazing down at her, he saw that her hair had fallen across her face again. This time his hands were free, so he smoothed it out of the way.

When he finally stepped back, he shook out his arms, stretching first one and then the other and groaning as he did. When he’d finished, he collapsed into the chair beside the small fireplace.

What was he supposed to do now?

He looked across at Avery, taking in the peaceful stillness of her features. It was all fine for her—dreaming away without a care in the world—but that just left him to make the difficult decisions.

For some reason it had never occurred to him that their rooms might be so far apart. In the past—when he was still tied to the candelabra—it might not have made too much of a difference. But the bond had become more potent since the brass had been melted down and reformed. He couldn’t spend a whole night so far from the lamp.

He gazed over at Avery again, noting the lump of her satchel beneath the blanket. She always kept it strapped to her and even kept it at her side while she slept. But knocked out by the sleeping potion, she wouldn’t notice if he removed the lamp or

even took the entire satchel. If he had the lamp with him, he could go sleep in his own room.

But staring at her peaceful face, he was haunted by the thought of how she would feel when she woke up. If she awoke alone in the room with the lamp gone, she would assume he had taken the opportunity to steal it and run. Just imagining her panic and horror made him sick to his stomach. Such potent feelings of betrayal would likely linger even after she discovered the truth.

Better to intrude on her privacy by remaining at her side than to leave her to panic when she woke. And it would make him more comfortable as well. He didn't like the idea of leaving her alone in the room while she was under an enchanted sleep. Even when doctors were the ones to administer a sleeping potion, the patient usually had a trusted caregiver sitting with them at all times to monitor their health. Avery might not have been sick, but he wasn't leaving her alone.

Elliot leaned his head back against his chair and sighed. He just hoped Avery woke up sooner rather than later.

Chapter 13

Avery

The first thing Avery noticed was that she was lying on a comfortable mattress with a blanket tucked around her. And yet she had no memory of returning to the inn for the night. She frowned, her eyes still closed, and the memory of the strange sweet returned.

She sat bolt upright, gasping. The blanket slid off her, and she clutched at the satchel, her eyes scanning the room.

Elliot turned toward her from where he had been gazing out the room's window. The early evening light behind him obscured his features, but she thought he was smiling.

"You're awake." He sounded pleased. "I wasn't sure how long you'd be sleeping. Even the stall holder wasn't sure."

"You're still here," Avery said, ignoring the issue of the sweet for the moment.

Elliot stepped toward the fire, his features becoming clearer. He looked uncertain.

"Sorry," he said, "but our rooms aren't next to each other."

"What?" Avery asked, feeling unusually dense.

"I just assumed we'd have rooms next to each other," he said. "But mine is all the

way down the hall. So I had to stay here. You were asleep so I couldn't ask what you'd prefer, but I thought..." He trailed off, looking at her satchel.

"Oh," she said, finally realizing why he was apologizing.

She could feel the shape of the lamp inside the satchel, but there had been no need to check it was still inside. Elliot's presence proved that. While she had been worrying he might have stolen the lamp and left, he had been concerned about her privacy being violated by his presence in her room. He was busy considering her feelings while she doubted his integrity.

"What happened?" she finally asked.

"Those weren't just sweets," he said with a grimace. "That stall holder had come across the river from Oakden."

"Ohhh," Avery said, feeling foolish. "I thought it had an odd taste. I should have recognized it."

Elliot grimaced. "Even if you had, it would have been too late. But you had a child's dose, so you've only been out for a bit over an hour."

"She knew me." Avery sighed. "She must have thought I knew who she was."

"She was very apologetic," Elliot offered. "If that helps at all."

Avery nodded, but her mind had already moved onto the second, more pressing point. Elliot's room was at the end of the hall.

"Did you ask about a room next to mine?" she asked.

Elliot took the change of topic in stride. “Yes, but she said they’re busy because it’s market day. She said there aren’t two rooms next to each other.”

Avery sighed. Yet another pitfall she hadn’t considered.

“How did I get back here?” she asked, swinging topics yet again.

“I carried you.” Elliot said the words simply, but her eyes widened.

It had been far enough from the market to the inn to make that a more impressive proposition than Elliot’s bland words suggested. And he had already been sore from his tumble on the road.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I should have considered how many traders come across the river for market days.”

She had felt so superior after Elliot’s mistakes on the road, but she’d just been reminded that for all her experience, she could make them, too. It was never a good idea to get complacent when you were traveling. As soon as you got too comfortable, something unexpected happened. It was one of the things she loved about her life.

“It was an easy mistake to make,” Elliot said. “But it seems no harm was done.” He hesitated. “But about tonight...”

She sighed. “You’ll have to stay here with me.”

“I could take the lamp to my room,” he said hesitantly.

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. On the one hand, if he wanted to take the lamp and run, he could have done it while she was asleep. But on the other hand, maybe he had stayed on purpose to gain her trust. If she handed over the lamp now, he would have

all night to put distance between them before she realized he was gone.

He had caught her in the market and carried her all the way back here, and then he'd watched over her while she slept. She didn't think he was untrustworthy. But still that kernel of doubt lingered, and it was enough to make her hesitate.

"Well, I guess it's sharing a room, then," he said, not showing the offense he might have legitimately claimed. "It's not really any different from sleeping next to the same fire. And I'm guessing you'll want to check on Nutmeg, so I'll use that chance to fetch my bedroll. That rug should be no less comfortable than the ground we've been sleeping on recently. Probably softer, in fact."

Avery winced. Elliot had already been sore when they'd arrived, and his muscles must ache after carrying her so far. He had been looking forward to a proper bed, and now he was going to be back on the ground.

"You should take the bed," she said quickly, sliding off it. "You need it more than me."

Elliot shook his head, a stubborn set to his mouth. "I'm the one who foisted myself on you for this trip. My tie to the lamp is my problem, so you shouldn't have to give up your bed." Something in his expression softened. "I know you've been looking forward to it."

Avery opened her mouth to remind him of his sore muscles, but there didn't seem much point. He wasn't likely to have forgotten about them.

"We'll share, then," she said instead.

"What?" Elliot stared at her, his eyes wide, before slowly looking at the narrow bed.

Avery flushed. “I mean, we’ll take turns. We’ve both been looking forward to a proper bed, so we should both get a chance to enjoy it.”

“Oh. Right.” Elliot nodded forcefully. “That makes sense.”

Avery smiled triumphantly. “Since I’ve just had a turn, you can go first. Then, halfway through the night, we’ll swap.”

Elliot looked like he wanted to insist she go first, but she didn’t intend to budge. She was betting that once he sank into that soft mattress, he wouldn’t wake up until morning. And by then it would be too late for him to protest.

“I suppose we both need to bring our bedrolls in, then,” he said, apparently recognizing the determination in her eyes.

She nodded. “And I want to check on Nutmeg.” Her stomach gurgled, and she patted it. “And find some food, apparently! As if I hadn’t just eaten far too many buns.”

“Actually it’s been a while since we ate those,” Elliot said. “A meal would be welcome.”

They ate together in the inn’s dining room, and the food was almost good enough to make up for missing out on a night in a proper bed.

“I would usually visit the women’s bathhouse next,” she murmured after she’d polished off the last bite of food.

Elliot looked up in alarm. “Please don’t make me lurk awkwardly outside the women’s bathhouse! Someone will run me out of town, and I’ll end up so far from the lamp that I’ll drop dead—and it will be all the fault of your cleanliness. Do you really want that on your conscience?”

Avery stifled a laugh. “Fine, then, I’ll give up the hot bath as well.”

Elliot instantly looked contrite. “If you really want to go, I can try to find somewhere unobtrusive to lurk.”

“You do know that would make it worse, right?” Avery said with a gurgle. She led the way up the staircase. “I can survive without a visit to the bathhouse. We’ll be back on the road tomorrow, and I can wash from the stream like I usually do.”

“You should at least let me sleep on the floor first,” Elliot said as they entered the room. “To make up for missing the bath.”

Avery shook her head. “It’s your turn, remember?”

Again Elliot looked like he wanted to argue, but he shot a look at her and remained silent. They didn’t talk as they laid out their bedrolls side by side on the floor, Avery climbing into hers while Elliot slipped into the invitingly soft bed instead.

Avery told herself it would be perfectly easy to fall asleep because it was no different from previous nights in her bedroll with Elliot across the fire. But despite her glib mental reassurances, she couldn’t seem to settle.

She rolled over for the sixth time. Did four walls really make such a difference?

A carriage rolled into the courtyard below bringing late arrivals to the inn. She listened to the stomp of the horses’ hooves and the creak of the wheels and realized she felt exposed without the cart above her and Nutmeg beside her. Between her accidental enchanted sleep and the fight over who would take the bed, she hadn’t considered that being in the inn meant sleeping without Nutmeg’s protection. No wonder it felt different.

Maybe she wouldn't be able to sleep at all. If part of her didn't trust Elliot, she wouldn't be able to relax enough to drift...

She stirred slightly, not properly awake, but conscious enough to know an unknown length of time had passed. The fire hadn't yet burned low, but faint moonlight came through the window.

Strong arms scooped her up, holding her close against a firm chest for the few steps it took to cross the room. A distant part of her brain registered that she should protest, but she was too delightfully sleepy to rouse enough for speech.

As she was placed gently on the bed and blankets were tucked around her, she recognized the sensation. It was the sleepy peace that came with warmth and safety—and knowing you could truly relax because someone else was there to watch over you.

She hadn't felt that feeling in a long time.

But, no, that wasn't quite right. If she hadn't felt that feeling in years, why had those arms been so familiar? She couldn't remember being carried by them before. She couldn't remember ever being cradled like that—at least, not since small childhood. And yet, she couldn't shake how familiar that sensation of sleepy peace while held in safe arms had felt.

And the rumble of Elliot's voice above her felt equally familiar. "Sleep, Avery. It's your turn in the bed. I'll be here in my bedroll."

Drat, she thought as sleep pulled her fully back under. I thought he wouldn't wake up.

Avery woke to bright sunlight and an empty room. She stretched luxuriously before freezing as memories from the past day and night washed over her. Where was

Elliot?

Her panicked hands flew to the satchel, but it was still there, the lump of the lamp inside. She scrambled out of bed, a new source of panic gripping her. What had happened to Elliot? The evening before he had joked about being forced away from the city, but what if?—

She cut off her frantic thoughts. How could someone have seized him from their inn room? From her hazy memories, she had slept embarrassingly deeply the night before, but she never slept that deeply.

The door opened, and she spun toward it, her hand reaching for her closest dagger. But it was only Elliot strolling through with a cheerful smile.

“I fetched a fresh wash jug.” He held up the heavy pitcher in his hands.

Avery frowned, noting the less obvious lines of strain around his mouth and eyes. “Did you have to go far?”

Elliot shrugged. “I can endure a little discomfort, you know. I just can’t sleep through a whole night of it.”

His bright smile returned, and Avery quickly turned away to pack up her bedroll, her cheeks flushing. Apparently she could sleep through more than him because she was pretty sure that when he’d carried her to the bed during the night, she’d snuggled into him. Snuggled!

He whistled as they packed the few items they’d brought up to the room. Apparently spending a chunk of the night on the floor—she strongly suspected it had been more than half—hadn’t dented his mood at all.

“We’ll cross the river here,” Avery said as they ate a final meal in the inn’s dining room. “That way we can use the Marlestone ferry. It’s one of the best ones on the river.”

“If we’re crossing over, I assume our next destination is Ethelston?” Elliot asked.

Avery nodded, her mouth full. Swallowing, she added, “I have some good contacts there. I’ll store the cart and most of my goods with one of them, and we can take a boat upriver most of the rest of the way to Bolivere. We’ll move faster without the cart, and my priority is speed over trade now.”

She was glad Elliot didn’t quibble over that comment when she immediately followed it up by asking him to wait while she dashed out to the cart to retrieve a commission. It was hardly delaying them, however, given the intended customer was the cook at the inn.

Avery tried to complete the sale subtly, but Elliot trailed behind and watched it from the doorway to the inn’s kitchen. Observing the delighted surprise and gratitude of the cook hopefully made up for any impatience he might have been feeling.

“What was that all about?” he asked as they finally hitched Nutmeg to the cart and led her through the streets of Marlestone toward the river.

Avery shrugged. “Last time I was here, I congratulated the cook on an excellent pie, but she was bemoaning that it didn’t taste the way she remembered from when she was a girl because she couldn’t get the right spices. They only grow in Auldana, and the regular merchants that stock Marlestone no longer source them. I was in Auldana a few months ago, and saw some in a small market, so I bought a packet for her.”

“As a gift?” Elliot was clearly surprised.

Avery raised an eyebrow. “No. Didn’t you see her pay for them? I am a merchant, remember.”

“Of course, how foolish of me,” he said lightly, but he didn’t seem to be judging her. Instead, he looked thoughtful.

“My specialty is noticing what wares will be appreciated by which people,” she said proudly. “It might not have been an official commission, but I knew she would want to buy them, and I was right.”

“Impressive,” he said, his voice hard to read.

She watched him out of the side of her eyes as they walked. What was he thinking? She was tempted to ask, but another cart swerved in front of them, nearly causing a collision, and she gave up on the idea. The streets of a busy city weren’t the place for probing questions.

Thanks to Avery’s sleep-in and her small piece of business, they were hardly the first to arrive at the ferry for the day. They found it already in mid-crossing, but Avery didn’t mind waiting. There was always something interesting to see on the Marlestone stretch of the river.

“I love the river,” Elliot said, echoing her thoughts. “It brings people together.”

Avery looked sideways at him. She’d never thought about the river borders in quite those terms, but he was right. Since each bank sat in a different kingdom, the powers of both Legacies swirled in the water, allowing the citizens from both sides of the river to use it comfortably.

As if on cue, a gaggle of giggles erupted, pulling her eyes back to the water. A fleet of small orange boats floated downriver toward them, each captained by a child,

some with a smaller passenger on board.

Elliot broke into laughter. “Are those pumpkins?”

Avery grinned but didn’t take her eyes from the miniature fleet. When the hollowed-out pumpkins bobbed past them, the children called out and waved. Avery and Elliot both waved back enthusiastically.

“I think my childhood would have been happier if I’d had a pumpkin boat instead of a dragon in a cave,” Elliot said wistfully.

“They’re harder to use than they look,” Avery said. “We visited when I was nine, and I was determined to captain one on my own. The local children weren’t sure, but one of them finally loaned me his boat.” She paused, her eyes crinkling as she remembered the experience. “I promptly rolled it and got tipped out. I had to swim for shore.”

“Did the locals help you?” Elliot asked.

Avery chuckled. “No. After I reached the bank, the other children made me turn around and swim back out to retrieve the boy’s pumpkin. Since I was the one to lose it.”

“Harsh,” Elliot said, respect in his voice.

Not much past the ferry landing, the child in front called out a command to the boats behind him. Paddles flashed through the air as the children retrieved them from inside the pumpkins and leaned over to thrust them into the water. With a few skillful strokes, they steered their makeshift boats to the shore.

Within two minutes, a line of children were making their way up the bank, each

pulling a cord attached to their pumpkin. The pumpkins bobbed along in a row, pulled upstream by the children.

Watching them approach brought an old pang to Avery's heart. She had loved traveling with her parents, but she had always regretted not being part of a group of children.

She glanced carefully at Elliot. He had hinted at unhappiness in his past, but he rarely gave any concrete details. Did he have siblings? Had he grown up as part of a happy group like this?

Nothing in his current expression of indulgent amusement gave any indication of an unhappy past. Maybe she had read too much into his comments?

She would have preferred not to be curious about his past. But she had never been good at suppressing curiosity. And it was even worse with Elliot. Perhaps it was because the longer they traveled together, the more it started to feel like they were a small version of the children's cheerful gang—as if they were a true team.

She clamped down on the thought. The previous night's events had been a warning. Avery couldn't afford to get too comfortable in Elliot's presence. Not only were the inhabitants of Bolivere at stake, but her own comfort was as well. If she grew too used to traveling with a companion, how would she go back to traveling alone when Elliot was no longer tied to her by the lamp?

Chapter 14

Elliot

“ I wonder which child first came up with the idea of pumpkin boats,” Elliot mused.

“Probably the first Sovaran child to notice that pumpkins float,” Avery replied as she guided Nutmeg several steps backward, giving the children plenty of room to pass. “I’m pretty sure every child raised on the river wants a boat of their own.”

Elliot nodded. The town where he’d grown up only had a stream, and he’d still wanted his own boat.

The ferry returned, ringing a bell that sent the children scampering faster upstream. The ferry master called grumpily after them, and the smallest child turned back from the end of the line to stick her tongue out at him.

He narrowed his eyes in her direction, looking as if he meant to hop down from the ferry, but Avery spoke quickly.

“How much to take my cart across?”

Elliot gave her a knowing look. Avery of all people would be familiar with the ferry fare. It wasn’t difficult to see her true purpose in distracting the ferry master.

He’d already noticed that Avery struggled not to intervene anytime she saw someone in trouble. The children hadn’t done any harm, so of course she would step in to

shield them, even though they were total strangers. At the beginning he had been a little surprised that she traveled the kingdoms alone, but he wasn't any longer. She must have left a trail of friendly faces wherever she went. Who would dare threaten someone with that much goodwill across every kingdom?

The ferry master—his attention successfully diverted—engaged her in conversation while the passengers from the Oakden side unloaded. He even helped them walk Nutmeg on board and secure the cart in place.

Elliot had never made a ferry crossing with a cart in tow, but the process was surprisingly smooth. Within no time at all, they were stepping onto Oakden soil.

Avery was watching him surreptitiously, as if a part of her still didn't believe he wasn't tied to Sovar. But she would soon learn that everything he'd told her was true. He was as free to travel the kingdoms as she was—as long as he took the blasted lamp with him.

Marleston was so large that there was only a small village on the Oakdenian side. Neither Avery nor Elliot wanted to waste a whole day's travel for the sake of staying there, so they set off upriver immediately.

Enough foot traffic frequented the river that there was a comfortable road for them to take, and they passed other travelers going in both directions. It was a more lively environment than the road through the center of Sovar, and he enjoyed calling greetings to the other travelers they passed or watching the boats—real ones or lines of pumpkins—sailing past.

To his surprise, though, he felt a little sad as well. On the previous road, it had felt like he and Avery were in their own world. With all the activity around them in Oakden, they didn't need to chat together to fill the empty hours like they'd done on previous travel days.

But as they moved further away from the city and the ferry, the activity slowed, and by their second day, it was easy enough to ignore an occasional passing boat.

Avery still seemed reserved and closed off, though, and Elliot wracked his brains to try to work out what he might have done to upset her. Was she angry that he'd cut his turn in the bed short and put her into it instead? He'd seen straight through her plan to leave him in it all night and had been determined not to fall into her trap. But maybe she was angry about it?

She didn't seem angry, though. She didn't even seem annoyed with him. Just...guarded.

He even tried to gather a bouquet for her when they stopped for the midday meal on the second day, hoping it would lift her spirits. But when he pricked one of his fingers for the fifth time, he gave up on the idea. The Oakden Legacy was far too fond of thorns. He'd never be able to pull them all off, and Avery would likely end up more annoyed with him than she had been before the flowers.

They resumed their travel and were starting to think about finding a good place to camp for the night when something in the air caught his attention. He lifted his nose into the breeze.

"Do you smell smoke?" he asked Avery at the same moment she pulled Nutmeg to a halt.

"Did you hear something?" she asked, ignoring his question.

He tipped his head sideways straining to listen.

"Grandfather!" called a childish voice from behind a copse of trees. It was faint enough that he nearly didn't catch it.

Avery sprang down. “Nutmeg, stay here!”

Elliot leaped down after her, following as she raced toward the sound. The scent of smoke was stronger now, growing clearer as they ran toward the cry of distress.

Avery didn’t hesitate, however, plunging through the small stand of trees and bursting out the other side. Elliot kept at her heels, pulling up beside her as they both paused to take in the scene before them.

A single home stood beside a small lake that was fed by a tiny offshoot of the river. It must have normally been a large, pleasant home with gables and climbing vines, but smoke was pouring from several windows, and he caught a flash of orange flame.

A woman stood waist deep in the water, a baby strapped to her chest, a small child on one hip, and a slightly older boy hanging onto her other hand, only his head and shoulders above the water. An older girl stood closer to the shore in shallow water. Her eyes were trained on the house, and she was the one screaming for her grandfather.

He and Avery both looked from the girl to the burning house, and both sprang into movement. But whereas Avery leaped forward, sprinting toward the house, Elliot lunged sideways. He knew Avery well enough to predict her reaction, but his reaching arms came up short. He had reacted just a second too late to catch her and hold her back.

“Avery!” he shouted, dashing after her.

He had longer legs, but she was fast, and she didn’t hesitate as she plunged through the open front door and into the burning house.

Shouting her name again, Elliot followed with only the briefest hesitation. Everyone

knew not to run into a burning house, but Avery's nobility was going to get her killed, and he couldn't just stand by and watch it happen.

He put his arm over his mouth and nose, trying to block some of the smoke as his eyes immediately began to sting.

"Avery!" he called again, his voice already rough. "Where are you?"

The haze inside was strong enough that he could barely see where he was going.

"Grandfather!" Avery's call was broken by a violent coughing fit that made Elliot's insides seize. Where was she?!

"Grandfather!" Her voice came again, and he located it this time.

Lowering his head, he hurried right. Ducking through an open doorway, he reached a section of the house that was a little clearer of smoke. Keeping his arm over his mouth and nose, he looked around, catching a flash of Avery's dress.

"Avery!" he shouted, and she paused, looking back at him in surprise.

"Elliot?" She sounded pleased. "Quick!" She gestured for him to follow her, and with a growl, he obeyed. As soon as he got close enough, he was throwing her over his shoulder and carrying her out of the fire whether she wanted to come or not.

She reached the closed door ahead of her before he did, reaching out cautiously to touch the metal of the handle with a single finger. He strode the rest of the way to her side, and seized her around the waist with both hands.

But before he could catch her up, she thrust the door open, revealing the room on the other side. It was a vast workroom, the walls lined with shelves and dried herbs

hanging from the ceiling.

An old man with long gray hair stood by an open door that led outside. He wasn't escaping, though. Instead, he was wrestling with a large, complicated object attached to the wall.

He looked up in surprise at sight of them.

"Shut the door!" he barked. "Quickly!"

Elliot's hands had gone loose in surprise, and Avery darted forward out of his hold. Grabbing his wrist, she pulled him into the room after her and shut the door. They both drew in a deep, relieved breath. The air still reeked of smoke, and he could taste it on his tongue, but neither of them were coughing.

"Hurry!" the man said, gesturing to the item still attached to the wall. "You have to help me!"

They both reacted instinctively, running toward him. Elliot gently bumped the man out of the way and lifted the contraption down. It was heavy, but its odd shape was the bigger hindrance.

Avery came up beside him, helping him balance it and scooping up the strange, flexible hose that hung off one side.

"Bring it to the lake," the old man said, leading the way out the open external door.

When they came into view of the watchers in the lake, both the girl in the shallows and the woman exclaimed in relief, the girl starting to cry.

Elliot dumped the contraption beside the water, looking toward the man.

“It’s a pump,” he said gruffly.

Avery’s face lit up in understanding, and she seized the end of the hose, dropping it into the lake water. She gestured to the older girl who splashed eagerly over.

“You hold that in the water,” she said. “Don’t let it come out.”

The girl nodded seriously and seized the hose with two determined hands. Avery took the other end, working with quick, deft fingers to untangle it and stretch it out.

“You work the pump,” she commanded Elliot.

He had been staring at the pump, trying to work out how it functioned, but at that, his head snapped up.

“You are not going back near that fire!” he said firmly.

“I won’t go inside,” she promised. “But you’re stronger than me. You need to pump.”

“Hurry, hurry,” the old man cried. “We can’t let the flames reach my workshop.”

Elliot wanted to snap at him, too—to tell him there were more important things than his workshop. But he swallowed his words and began pumping instead.

The old man seized the other end of the pump, and the metal creaked and groaned as it slowly drew up some of the lake water. Elliot’s arms strained as he pumped, using all his muscles. But as the flow of water established itself, the effort required lightened a little, and he was able to look up.

Avery had pulled the hose back toward the fire and was directing it at the workshop, which appeared to be an extension on one side of the house. Once she’d thoroughly

soaked the roof, she ventured toward the open workshop door.

Elliot watched her with eagle eyes, ready to drop the pump and run for her if she showed any sign of going inside. But she flashed him a reassuring smile and stood outside, directing the stream of water through the open door.

Elliot expected the man on the other side of the pump to protest at the watery destruction of his workshop, but he seemed relieved.

After what felt like an agonizing length of time, Avery stepped back from the open door and dragged the hose toward the front of the house. Elliot wanted to call a warning—the fire inside was too far gone to be put out from the outside. But Avery seemed to realize the limitations of what they could do.

She circled the house, drenching the outside, especially the roof and the ground around the walls. Every time he saw her arms tremble and the hose lower, he saw her grit her teeth and haul it up to her shoulder again. She was clearly determined to contain the flames.

“That’s a smart girl you’ve got there,” the old man grunted. “Keep a hold of her.”

Elliot remained silent. He was torn between admiration and frustration with the merchant girl, and the clarification that Avery wasn’t his tasted like ash on his tongue.

Finally, when his arms were burning even worse than they had been after carrying Avery from the market, the old man called a halt to their efforts.

“It’ll smolder a while yet,” he said, “but it’s contained.”

Avery dropped the hose and ran back to them, her face strained, but her eyes bright.

Elliot took one look at her and whirled on the old man. “What were you thinking going back in there! Better the whole house burned than you lost your life—or someone else’s!”

The man sank slowly down on the bank, clearly exhausted, while the older girl helped the woman bring the younger children out of the water.

“Do you think I cared about the house? I was doing it for my family.” He gestured at the woman and children. “If the fire had gotten loose...” He shook his head. “A forest fire can spread terrifyingly quickly—especially in Oakden. We have our system well organized. My daughter’s job is to get the children into the lake, and mine is to get the pump and douse the workshop. But I injured my leg a few months ago, and it’s still weak. It kept buckling when I tried to lift down the pump. I should have made a new plan when I was first injured, but I got complacent. I’m an old fool.”

“You’re too hard on yourself,” Avery said softly. “We succeeded. Everyone is safe.”

The man ran a hand down his beard. “Thanks to your arrival we are.”

“I don’t understand the significance of saving your workshop,” Elliot said, the residual fear for Avery making him gruff.

“I’m a herbalist,” the man said simply. “Half the plants in there are sleeping herbs.” He gestured toward the workshop as Avery gasped.

“What happens if you burn a sleeping herb?” she asked.

“That depends on how much of the smoke you breathe,” the man said in a shaken voice. “But even one breath will make you drowsy, and it doesn’t take much to put you to sleep. Burning that many refined herbs at once could put half the region to sleep.”

“And your daughter and the children in the lake...” Avery broke off, clapping her hands to her mouth.

The old man nodded. “If the fire had taken down my workshop and spread into the trees, we couldn’t have sought shelter in the lake for fear of drowning. We would have had to stay on shore, which would have left our sleeping bodies unprotected from the flames. You saved all of us—and who knows how many others besides. The wind would have driven the smoke ahead of the flames, and anyone trying to flee the fire would have dropped asleep.”

Elliot sank slowly to the ground, putting his head in his hands. He had reluctantly followed Avery’s lead with no idea how close they’d been to disaster.

He looked up. Avery had been right to help, but she shouldn’t have charged straight in, risking her own life without thought.

“Why did you run into the fire?” he asked in a rough voice. “Do you have a death wish?”

He couldn’t hold back the words, even knowing she would likely be offended. But instead of jumping to her own defense, she winced, her face suffused with guilt.

“I’m sorry. I keep forgetting about the lamp. That was unconscionable of me. I would never have forced you to run into a fire after me if I’d remembered I had it.”

Elliot’s mouth dropped open. The lamp. Who knew what would have happened if she had been caught by the flames and the lamp had been melted a second time. It might well have killed him, too.

Avery clearly thought his tie to the lamp was the reason he had followed her into the house and tried to haul her away from the fire. And yet, the thought hadn’t even

entered his mind. He had completely forgotten about the lamp until she mentioned it.

He snapped his mouth shut. He couldn't tell her the truth. He was still sorting through the strength of his reaction to her being in danger himself.

The man looked between the two of them, his brow creased. He clearly had no idea what they were talking about. But his daughter and grandchildren swamped him before he could ask, all of them crying and exclaiming with relief at the arrival of rescuers.

Elliot stood and stepped back with Avery, giving the family some space.

“Actually,” he said more lightly than he felt, “I wasn't thinking about the lamp. I was wondering why you didn't just go through the workshop door and avoid the flames and smoke entirely.”

Avery winced. “Yes, that would have been better. But when I see people in trouble, I have a bad habit of jumping in without weighing the risk.”

“I noticed,” he said dryly. “You must have been a delight for your parents.”

She grinned. “Every traveler's dream child.”

A reluctant laugh escaped him. Maybe she was so headstrong and confident because she was also the most capable person he'd ever met. She didn't even hesitate in the face of fire. It was no wonder he'd started to dread the thought of her handing the lamp over to the people who had commissioned it.

Elliot didn't want to be bound to anyone but Avery.

Chapter 15

Avery

They retrieved Nutmeg and the cart—thankfully still where Avery had abandoned them—and stayed for two nights with the herbalist and his family. She knew she shouldn't have let anything distract her from getting to Bolivere, but after more than six months, it was hard to believe that two more nights would make a difference. And she couldn't bring herself to leave until they knew the last of the fire was out.

Elliot helped the man and his daughter examine the house, salvaging as much as possible while Avery played with the children. Elliot had insisted she take the job of occupying the children, staying away from the burned building. He seemed to feel guilty for something, although she couldn't imagine what. His help had been necessary and invaluable in stopping the fire.

His fear had made him gruff in the moment, but with the immediate danger past, he returned to his usual friendly cheer. The family all took to him immediately, especially the older girl. She followed him around with stars in her eyes, something Avery found amusing and Elliot awkward.

"Where's your devotee?" she asked him when he came down to the lake to collect water with her on the third day. "I can barely recognize you without your loyal duckling."

He gave her an unimpressed look that made her laugh.

“I don’t know what your issue is,” she said. “You make a charming mother duck.”

“Watch out,” he said with a playful growl, “or I’ll throw you in, and we can see which of us is more akin to a waterfowl.”

Avery skipped away from him, her eyes gleaming. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Just try me.” He stalked toward her.

She laughed, retreating further back. Her heart rate picked up—at the prospect of being dunked in the cold water, of course—but she was still laughing.

“You’re not a mother duck,” she said placatingly. “I don’t know how I ever saw the resemblance.” She grinned cheekily. “You’re clearly a mother goose. Those creatures are vicious.”

Growling again, he lunged forward and caught her around the waist, swinging her closer to him. She giggled and tried to pull free, and his hold tightened.

He pulled her all the way to him, stopping when she was only inches from him and looking down at her with a threatening frown and laughing eyes.

But Avery’s laugh fell away, her breath catching. He had caught her around the waist like that during the fire as well, but she had been focused on finding the missing grandfather and had only been thinking of breaking free and continuing her search. Now she could feel burning warmth where his hands touched her—and this time it had nothing to do with actual flames.

“I should have caught you as soon as you tried to run into the fire and thrown you in the lake then,” he said, showing his mind had gone to the same place as hers.

Avery wanted to remind him of the good they'd done putting out the fire, but her throat had stopped working. She could barely breathe, let alone speak.

Elliot's hands shifted, moving from her sides around to her back, and she was certain he was about to pull her all the way to him, closing the gap between them.

"Elliot!" The youthful voice called from the other side of the house. Her second call sounded closer. "Elliot?"

Avery and Elliot sprang apart as if they were once again fleeing flames. Avery's abrupt retreat sent her stumbling into the shallow water on the edge of the lake, soaking her boots. She gasped and tried to jump out of the water, only succeeding in losing her balance.

She grasped fruitlessly at the empty air around her as she tipped backward. But just as she was past the point of no return, Elliot's hand shot out and clasped her wrist, stopping her fall.

She hung there, her body angled precariously backward as their eyes locked, both of their chests heaving.

"Did you save her from falling in?" the girl asked from right beside Elliot, her voice almost a squeal as she gazed at him adoringly. "How romantic!"

At her final word, Elliot flinched, his whole body recoiling. His fingers slipped off her wrist, and with a wild scream, Avery resumed her fall.

She landed in the water with a splash, the shock of the sudden cold robbing her of breath. She sat on the shallow lake bed, both hands braced behind her.

"You!" She glared up at Elliot.

His eyes widened, and he looked down at his hand, as if unable to believe it had let go.

“Sorry?” he gasped.

The girl wrinkled her nose. “I don’t think it’s supposed to be a question.”

Avery rose to her feet, the shock giving way to amusement.

“Look at that! Your duckling is all grown up,” she said to Elliot.

“Huh?” The girl looked between them.

Elliot turned firmly away from Avery. “You’re right,” he said gravely to the girl. “Apologies shouldn’t be questions.”

She nodded, her eyes gleaming at him again.

Avery snorted. “And she’s back,” she muttered.

Elliot gave her another stern look, but she refused to be reprimanded by someone who had just dumped her in the lake.

“I’m getting into dry clothes,” she said. “But then we should think about getting back on the road.”

“Leaving!” the girl cried, dismayed. “You’re leaving?”

Avery didn’t wait around to see Elliot smoothing her ruffled feathers. The family had gathered everything they could salvage from the house and would be leaving soon to stay temporarily with relatives. They didn’t need Avery and Elliot anymore, and

Avery was getting jittery. She wanted to be back in the relative privacy and solitude of the road.

It wasn't anything to do with wanting Elliot all to herself, she told herself as she trudged toward her pack, her boots squelching with each step. She wasn't the type to be jealous of attention and time given to ducklings.

"My granddaughter tells me you're leaving." The herbalist joined Avery at her cart where she had been busy checking everything over, ready for their departure.

"I think it's time," she said with a smile. "I believe you'll be off yourselves soon?"

He nodded. "We've just finished packing everything we can salvage." He paused, and she watched him patiently. Was there something else he wanted to ask of them? If so, he seemed unsure about making the request.

"Is there something else you need?" she asked, giving him some encouragement.

"No, I'm already in your debt," he said quickly. "In fact, that's why I want to give you this." He held out a bundle wrapped in soft leather.

Avery took it from him with eager curiosity. She made it her mission to seek out interesting and useful items across the kingdoms, but she had learned that many of the most precious items weren't for sale—they only fell into her hands if someone chose to gift them to her.

Unwrapping the leather, she stared down at a small pile of carefully crafted miniature daggers, each in their own scabbard. They were beautiful pieces and so tiny she would be able to slide one into her boot, which was an advantage. But that also meant they were too small to present much of a threat.

She looked questioningly up at him, wondering what had inspired him to gift her daggers of all things—and more than one, too.

“Officially I shouldn’t be giving you these,” he said quietly. “But after what you did for us, I trust you. I can’t send you away empty-handed, and they’re the only thing of value I can spare.”

Avery’s eyebrows slowly rose as a possibility occurred to her.

“You mean, these are...” She breathed the words quietly, but even so, she trailed off without actually saying it aloud.

The herbalist nodded.

“Thank you!” Avery said, still in hushed tones. “I’ll treasure them.”

“I just hope they might help you one day when you’re in dire need, as you helped us in our moment of need.”

“I’ll keep one in my boot,” Avery said. “And sleep all the better for it.”

The herbalist smiled. “Then it’s a worthwhile gift. I wish you safe travels from here.”

“And you,” she replied. “I hope you find a comfortable home with your relatives until you can return here to rebuild.”

The sound of the others approaching made her quickly wrap the scrap of soft leather back around her new possessions. Most Oakdenian herbalists used Oakden’s unique sleeping herbs to create sleeping draughts that were sold to doctors throughout the kingdoms. But some used the herbs to create a different, more potent substance—one that could be infused into the blades of weapons. Such weapons could send someone

to sleep with the smallest prick, and their value was so great that Oakdenians were forbidden from trading either the substance itself or the weapons it created to outside merchants.

Once again, Avery had received a gift she could never have purchased. And she had no intention of getting her benefactor into trouble by advertising his gift.

The final goodbyes were completed quickly, and she and Elliot were soon on the road again. They didn't hurry, taking it slowly for the final days into Ethelson. It made sense to pace themselves as they shook off the lingering effects of the smoke exposure—a fact Avery was ready to explain to Elliot when he questioned their slow pace. Except he never did. Instead, he gave every indication of being content to be back on the road and perfectly happy with their meandering progress toward the next large town.

They had fallen into such a comfortable rhythm with both the actual travel as well as setting and packing up camp that Avery sometimes forgot they hadn't been traveling together for long. But despite the new comfort of company on the road, she was still pleased to see Ethelson appearing in front of them. It wasn't as big as Marleston, but it was still a bustling town, nestled in the major fork of the river. And best of all, she had a friend there who would host them, which meant she and Elliot were both guaranteed a bed.

“In Ethelson, the men's and women's bathhouses are right next to each other,” she said enthusiastically as Nutmeg pulled them through the first streets of the town. “If we both stay on the side of the bathhouse closest to the other building, we could manage a visit. Don't you think?”

Elliot smiled down at her with a warmth she had grown used to seeing in his eyes.

“I'm sure we could make that work.”

Avery immediately frowned. Would he tell her if it was painful, or would he suffer in silence so she could have her hot soak? She caught sight of a familiar street and shook off the worrying thought.

“It’s just down here.” She directed Nutmeg to the large house she had stayed in many times before. The owner, Lorne, had been friends with her grandparents, and her mother had grown up with regular visits to his home just as she had.

The house was a comfortable size with room around the back for both the cart and a basic shelter for Nutmeg. Avery fell silent as she made the tricky maneuver down the lane beside the house and into the enclosed space. She had no sooner come to a halt, however, than a voice called her name.

“Avery! Welcome!” A short man with snow white hair and a slightly bowed back stepped out the back door.

Despite his obvious age, he moved with vigor, and his eyes were still bright and keen. He beamed with welcome at Avery, but as his eyes fell on Elliot, his brows shot up.

“Well, well, well,” he said jovially. “Who do we—” His words cut off and his eyes closed, his chin dropping onto his chest.

Elliot stared at him as Lorne swayed slightly but remained upright. He turned concerned eyes on Avery, but his growing consternation seemed to ease when he saw she hadn’t paused in her climbing down, her smile unwavering.

“Just wait a minute,” she said as she began to unhitch Nutmeg.

“—have here?!” Lorne sputtered awake, his head jerking upward. He blinked at the sight of Avery now at Nutmeg’s head instead of up on the cart, but he didn’t miss a beat, sidling over to her and adding in an audible whisper, “He’s very good-looking,

my dear. Wherever did you acquire him?"

"He's not my latest ware, Lorne," Avery said with a laugh. She stopped what she was doing to embrace him.

"Is he not?" Lorne asked with a wicked glint in his eye.

"I'm Elliot," Elliot said stiffly, clearly not sure what to make of Lorne's unconventional ways.

"Lorne." The man extended a hand. "A pleasure to meet you. I've been saying for the last two years that Avery needed to find someone to travel with, so I'm most pleased to meet?—"

He once again cut off, his chin falling forward.

Elliot stood in front of Lorne, looking lost, but Avery returned to unhitching Nutmeg.

"Are you going to help?" she asked, snapping Elliot out of his confused daze.

"Is it safe to just leave him like that?" he whispered. "What if he falls and hurts himself?"

"He never does, thanks to the Legacy." Avery detached Nutmeg and led her toward the shelter which was already piled with fresh hay. "In his younger days, he was one of those whose desire for adventure was stronger than his Legacy's influence. He traveled the kingdoms for many years, which is how he met my grandparents. Eventually the effect got too much, and he had to settle down, but he chose Ethelson since it's on the intersection between three kingdoms."

"But he's from Oakden originally, right? Now that he's back, should he still be

affected like this? I know the Oakden Legacy makes the pace of life slower here, and that Oakdenians are famous for sleeping, but this seems extreme.”

“—you!” Lorne barked as his head whisked back up. “Most pleased, young man.”

Avery turned to the older man and put her hands on her hips. “I haven’t seen you this bad for a while, Lorne, have you been across the border again?”

“Just a little trip, my dear,” he said guiltily. “You can’t expect a man to always stay in one place!”

Avery laughed. “Well, I’m certainly the last one to expect it, but your daughter might disagree.”

A crafty smile spread over Lorne’s face. “She’s in the capital at the moment. Took the whole pack of grandchildren with her too for some ball or other. So don’t you go giving me away!”

Avery turned to Elliot, who looked even more confused. “He spent so long out of the kingdom that the effects still linger when he’s back in Oakden. But they get better the longer he’s here. The only problem is that he keeps insisting on popping over the border again, which always makes the symptoms flare back up.”

“Now that my grandchildren are all grown,” Lorne said, “my daughter has been traveling more. It gives me itchy feet.”

“Why don’t you travel with her, then?” Avery asked. “I’m assuming she stays within Oakden?”

“Precisely!” Lorne cried. “And what’s the fun in that?”

Avery laughed again, while Elliot shook his head, clearly taken aback at Lorne's eccentricity. It was rare for anyone in the kingdoms to have such a love for travel, although he had once mentioned his mother being such a one.

Avery gave him a sideways look. Was that the reason for his stiff reaction? He had seemed to resent his mother's inclination for travel, so did he disapprove of Lorne?

Lorne's head dropped a third time, and Avery used the chance to sidle closer to Elliot.

"He had already been traveling for twenty years before he met and married his wife. She's passed away now, but she was a lovely woman. She traveled with him for a year or two, but as soon as she got pregnant, they moved back to Oakden and have been here ever since. He never pushed his traveling ways on his children or expected them to bear the burden of leaving their home kingdom."

The stiffness in Elliot's shoulders relaxed, and Avery smiled as she stepped away from him. She had guessed correctly, it seemed.

Lorne woke again with a start, helping Elliot to push the cart out of the way. Elliot tried to protest, but Lorne brushed him off with a laugh.

"I've still got some strength in these old arms and legs, young man," he said. "Don't try to consign me to a rocking chair just yet."

"I wouldn't dare," Elliot said, looking as awed as most people were when they first met Lorne.

Avery unloaded the packs they would need to take inside, and Lorne scooped one up, leading the way through the back door. Elliot took one on each shoulder and went to follow him, but Avery stopped him with a hand on his arm.

He stilled instantly at her touch, looking down inquiringly into her face.

“Lorne has as much experience and knowledge as a roving merchant,” she said softly. “More in some cases. If anyone might know a way to help you break your tie to the lamp, he’s a good candidate.” She hesitated. “What do you think about telling him the truth of your situation and asking for help?”

Elliot stiffened, and she held her breath, waiting for his response. After a long moment, he deflated.

“If you trust him, then I’ll trust him, too.”

Moisture pricked at Avery’s eyes at his statement of trust in her. “Thank you,” she whispered. “I know how hard it must be for you to start telling people your secret after holding onto it your whole life.”

“I’ve kept it a secret for twenty-one years and nothing ever changed,” he said. “I think the time has come to take a different approach. I’m ready to be free.”

Avery smiled and nodded, but she turned quickly to collect the remaining pack before the expression wobbled. It hurt more than she expected to hear Elliot speak of his eagerness to be free of her and their forced journey together.

Maybe she’d been selfish to travel so slowly the last few days, using the excuse of the smoke inhalation. She was losing focus on her mission, and she wasn’t doing Elliot any favors. She should have been moving northward as quickly as possible.

Lorne reappeared, but halfway through his gesture for them to come inside, his head dropped forward again, a light snore sounding. Avery stared at him, her mind whirring.

They were in Oakden! Why hadn't she thought of it before? She hadn't examined the reasons for their slow travel too closely because she had thought they were emotional—emotions she didn't want to examine too closely. As a result, she hadn't even considered the likely true reason. With the excitement of the fire, she had forgotten how easy it was to fall into the rhythm of doing everything more slowly in Oakden.

She shook her head. She hadn't been the cause of their slow progress after all, and neither had Elliot. But she should have realized what was happening and driven them on faster. She would have to do better for the short time they had left in Oakden.

Lorne jerked awake, his smile unbroken, and insisted on taking Avery's pack from her.

"Elliot has two, you know," she said with a shake of her head as she relinquished it.

Lorne smiled conspiratorially at Elliot and lowered his voice as he spoke to Avery. "Yes, but he needs the chance to show off those muscles. I couldn't deprive him of that."

Elliot laughed and even winked at Avery, and she relaxed. Apparently he had adjusted to Lorne's more outrageous qualities already. She wasn't surprised. Most people liked Lorne.

She just hoped he knew something that would help Elliot. Even if Avery didn't like the idea of breaking the tie that held them together, she couldn't forget the promise she had made to him. Elliot's future hung on breaking the bond with the lamp, and Avery intended to help him do it—even if that meant saying goodbye.

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Chapter 16

Elliot

Lorne was nothing like anything Elliot had been expecting, but he liked the old man. He could tell his affection for Avery was genuine, and he spoke of her grandparents and parents with real grief. He also seemed to know a startling number of her cousins. But given the decades he had spent traveling the kingdoms, Elliot shouldn't have been surprised. He just hoped Lorne also knew something that would prove to be of help in Elliot's situation.

When they gathered around the fire in Lorne's study that evening, Lorne's manner was reassuringly serious. But even so, Elliot struggled to open his mouth and start the story. His eyes met Avery's, and she gave him a reassuring smile and a small nod.

He drew a deep breath. He had told her that it was time to try a different approach, and he had meant it. Now he had to follow through. He gripped his knees with his hands to hide how his fingers trembled and began.

His first few words were hesitant, but as he continued, the tale of his birth and his connection to the candelabra flowed more naturally. The trembling stopped, and by the end he was breathing easily.

Lorne considered his words in silence for a moment, and Elliot glanced around at the bookshelves while he tried to contain his impatience. The shelves covered every available inch of wall and held the accumulation of decades of travel through the kingdoms. Surely there was something in there that could help him.

“Let me get this straight,” Lorne said at last. “Instead of being tied to a kingdom, you’re?—”

He broke off, his head slumping.

Elliot let out a shaky breath and glanced at Avery. “I think having already told you made it easier. But that was still difficult.”

Avery smiled encouragingly. “I’m sure it will get easier each time.”

Elliot winced. How many people was he going to have to tell?

“—tied to a candelabra?” Lorne finished, reclaiming both of their attention. “What a remarkable tale!” He beamed at Elliot, appearing as unaffected by his mini sleep as ever.

“Lorne.” Avery leaned forward, her voice reproving. “I know you would have loved to be tied to something portable, but it’s been a nightmare for Elliot. He doesn’t want to travel. He’s only doing it now because he’s stuck with me.”

“Stuck with you?” Lorne’s brows rose, and he looked questioningly at Elliot.

Elliot frowned, not looking at Avery. “I wouldn’t put it quite like that.”

“But it is like that,” Avery said indignantly, and he tried not to feel offended.

She kept her eyes on Lorne. “It was bad enough when he was tied to a candelabra! But then someone stole it and sold it to a smith who melted it down and made my lamp, so now he’s stuck with me. And he suffers dreadfully if he gets too far from the lamp. Think how vulnerable that makes him!”

Elliot shifted uncomfortably. Nothing in her words was untrue, but he didn't like thinking of it in quite those terms.

"It's a lamp now?" Lorne looked a little confused. "Then why don't you sell it to him, Avery? Don't tell me the issue is coin? You may be a merchant, but your parents taught you better than that."

"Of course it's not about the coin," Avery said hotly. "But I waited six months for that lamp. It came from the smith in Henton."

From Lorne's expression, he knew the significance of the Henton smith. It made Elliot wonder why he hadn't heard of the man before his unfortunate encounter with him. He obviously hadn't known as much about the kingdoms as he thought he did.

"I can't give the lamp up," Avery concluded, "because it was a special commission for...for someone who needs it desperately."

Elliot didn't miss the sideways glance she gave him, although he'd been doing his best to look nonchalant and not desperately interested.

"It's a matter of life and death," Avery told Lorne, who looked almost as intrigued as Elliot felt. What had happened in Bolivere that they had such desperate need of a lamp made by a smith from across the mountains?

"That sounds like a whole other story," Lorne said, sadly not pressing Avery to tell it. "But I see that it makes the present situation difficult."

He steepled his hands and rested his chin on them, looking at Elliot with piercing eyes. "I think we can accept that it is a matter of import that you break your tie with this lamp. And with any luck, when you do, you'll find yourself completely untethered—just like young Avery here."

“You think it’s possible to break the connection, then?” Elliot watched him carefully, hoping the man wasn’t just speaking empty sympathy.

“Most enchantments can be broken,” he said. “We just need to find the key.”

“But the Legacies can’t be broken,” Avery protested, despite the fact she had been the first to suggest they break his bond.

“Not broken, no,” Lorne said, “but bent a little, perhaps?” He chuckled. “You’re hardly the first to find a way to turn the Legacy’s original intent in another direction.”

“Yes...That’s true.” Avery’s hands tightened on her satchel, making Elliot’s mind race.

Had the people of Bolivere commissioned the lamp in order to resist some aspect of the Legacy’s power? What was it going to help them do? He could ask Avery about it—he suspected that if he told her the full truth about his history, she would give him the details about her mission for Bolivere. But he had sworn to forget his own history, and he had no desire to dredge it up for Avery and Lorne. Dealing with the present was hard enough.

“We know the power of your tie can be transferred in some way,” Lorne said to Elliot, clearly more focused on the matter at hand than Avery’s secrets—as Elliot should have been. “It was transferred between the candelabra and the lamp without issue.”

“Well...not entirely without issue,” Elliot said. “The connection has gotten stronger. The ramifications of moving too far from the lamp are worse than they were for the candelabra. I’m not eager to try melting the brass into something else—I might end up needing to keep it strapped to my body at all times.”

“Hmmm...” Lorne’s eyes slid out of focus as he considered Elliot’s words. “It’s true that despite the transformation, the connection remained with the brass—which isn’t what we want to achieve. But what if we don’t try severing the connection, just moving it out of the brass?”

“What good would that do?” Avery asked with a frown. “It would just transfer the same problem to a different object. Admittedly there are objects that would be easier to keep on his person than a brass lamp, but it would still be at risk of being lost or stolen.”

Lorne gave her a smugly satisfied smile. “That’s assuming the connection is transferred to an object. I was thinking more like a person.”

Elliot’s eyes flew instinctively to Avery, a flush stealing up his neck. Did Lorne mean Avery? Did he want to tie Elliot to Avery permanently? He knew he should be horrified by the idea, but it was hard to muster up the reaction. The idea was almost...appealing.

He shook his head at his own foolishness as Avery stared at Lorne, clearly as appalled as Elliot should have been.

“What are you thinking?” she cried. “That would be much worse! Elliot would be at significantly greater risk than he is now with the lamp.”

Lorne chuckled softly. “What have I always told you, girl? Look at things from all angles—don’t always leap to the first conclusion.”

Avery sat back, her brow furrowing. Suddenly her eyes widened, her face lighting up.

“Oh, of course! How silly of me. That would be the perfect solution!”

Elliot cleared his throat, apparently the only one in the room who was still at sea. “I don’t understand.”

“The person Lorne wants to move the connection to is you,” Avery said triumphantly. “It would be the perfect solution. You can’t separate from yourself or leave yourself behind. Even if someone steals you, you’ll still be there.” She chortled to herself at her own humor.

Elliot blinked. “You want to bind me to...myself?”

“You have a body made of physical matter just like the lamp, so I don’t see why it wouldn’t be possible,” Lorne said. “And it would solve all your problems. The trick, of course, is working out how to move the bond.”

“A small matter,” Elliot said dryly, refusing to get his hopes up. It would be too cruel if he allowed his hope to run away with him only for them to fail.

“Yes, that is the true trick,” Lorne murmured in agreement. He clapped his hands together, his voice turning brisker. “But we have to start somewhere. Avery, please fetch that book for me. The red one on the sixth shelf.”

He indicated a leather-bound red book that had been piled sideways on the shelf beneath a tall stack of other books. Avery shot to her feet to retrieve it, but standing on her tiptoes, her fingertips could only just reach the book in question. She began to wiggle it back and forth, inching it out of place.

“Caref—” Lorne started a warning only for his head to drop before he got a full word out, his body relaxing into upright sleep.

Avery didn’t appear to hear Lorne’s partial attempt at a warning, continuing to inch the book out from underneath the others. As the pile above it wobbled, Elliot leaped

to his feet. In two strides he was behind Avery, reaching her just as the books above the red one toppled forward.

Reaching above her head, he caught the books just in time to push them back onto the shelf. Avery whisked her book free, and the books Elliot was bracing steadied.

He breathed a sigh of relief only for the breath to catch in his throat as Avery turned to face him. His hand was still raised to the books, and she was wedged between him and the bookshelf, practically in his arms.

His arm dropped, but he didn't step back. He wasn't sure he was even in control of his legs.

She looked up at him, a look in her eyes he couldn't interpret. If she was surprised at his sudden proximity, she didn't indicate it, and neither did she attempt to push him away. Instead, she remained frozen in place, as if her limbs had also forgotten how to move.

Did they also burn the way his did—lit on fire by her nearness?

“Avery—” he whispered, but he didn't finish the sentence. He didn't know what he wanted to say.

Her expression turned almost hopeful, and something in his chest wrenched, squeezing and turning. What did she want him to say? What thoughts were locked behind those luminous eyes?

“Careful of the books above...” Lorne's warning trailed off. “Oh,” he said as he absorbed the change in Elliot's position. And then, in a knowing tone, “Ohh.”

Elliot backed away hurriedly, his legs colliding with a small table and nearly

knocking it over. He twisted, awkwardly catching it and nearly falling again in the process.

When he finally straightened, he tugged at his vest, smoothing it out as he resumed his seat. He tried not to look at Avery, who was resuming her seat in a much more elegant manner, a small smile on her lips.

“The books nearly fell on her head,” he said with attempted nonchalance.

“Mmmm,” Lorne said in noncommittal agreement. “I should have asked you to fetch the book for me since you’re taller.”

Elliot agreed, but he had no interest in drawing out conversation on the topic—not when Lorne was watching the two of them with knowing amusement in his expression.

“What’s in the book?” Elliot asked instead, trying to get back on track.

It didn’t matter how much he responded to Avery—it didn’t even matter that he hadn’t minded the thought of being tied to her. He and Avery were incompatible at the most basic level. Avery was a roving merchant who loved spending her life on the road, and Elliot wanted nothing more than to settle down and build a true home. The tie between them was temporary, and his heart had no business getting involved in the matter. He was only setting himself up for pain.

“It’s a history,” Lorne said, replying to the question Elliot had already forgotten asking. “I just want to refresh my memory on something.”

He hummed and muttered to himself as he flipped pages, skimming his knobbly finger down paragraphs. Avery and Elliot exchanged glances, their earlier tension lost in shared amusement at the stereotypical absent-minded scholar appearance Lorne

presented.

“Ah ha!” he exclaimed, stabbing his finger at a passage and looking up at both of them with bright eyes. “I found it. I wasn’t remembering wrong.”

Avery stiffened, leaning slightly forward. “You know a way to do it?”

“Ah, no,” Lorne said apologetically. “I should have clarified. This is an account of someone else who achieved it—or rather, a passing mention of them. It doesn’t go into detail, but it should steer you in a helpful direction.”

“Oh.” Avery sat back, clearly disappointed.

“You are the key, in fact, my dear,” he said, making her sit upright again. “Or rather your ancestor is. Most people believe the original roving merchant managed to break his tie to his kingdom. But according to this old account—a rare one, by the way, this is the only copy I’ve ever encountered—your ancestor didn’t break his tie, he transferred it to himself. And he passed that trait on to his descendants.”

“It’s really been done before?” Elliot asked, excitement finally rising in him. He turned to Avery. “You mentioned that your family keeps records. Surely they have a more detailed account of how he did it?”

“The roving merchants do have detailed records,” Lorne agreed. “Ones they don’t allow anyone but their own family to access.” He chuckled. “And I’ve tried many times, believe me. Just think what a fascinating read those records must be!”

“But I can read them,” Avery said with as much excitement as Elliot felt. “And the cousin who’s the current family historian lives in the capital of Glandore. That’s upriver from here so it’s on our way to Bolivere. We would have stopped there anyway, so we can visit her and check the records.”

She turned to Elliot, her grin blinding. He locked eyes with her, equally excited. But as their gazes held, something else wormed its way in to sour his hope. He should have been delighted at the idea of breaking his tie to the lamp so soon and avoiding the need to travel all the way to Bolivere. But that would mean leaving Avery. He had gotten used to the idea that they would be together at least as far as northern Glandore.

Did he dare hope it was the same realization that caused Avery's face to fall, her eyes darkening as the silence stretched out?

A light snore from across the room made them both start and chuckle, as much from relief at the broken tension as amusement at Lorne's timing. Lorne woke with a start and smiled at them both, obviously happy to have shed some light on Elliot's problem, however minor.

A yawn burst out of Elliot, almost making his jaw creak with its intensity.

"Sorry," he said, embarrassed. "I'm not usually so tired at this early hour of the evening."

Lorne chuckled. "That's the Oakden effect. We have a slower pace of life here."

As soon as he said it, Elliot felt foolish for not realizing the source of his tiredness for himself. And even more foolish when he thought about their journey to Ethelson. He'd even entertained the idea that Avery might have set the pace for an unspoken reason of her own. Ridiculous to have considered that possibility when he should have known it was just the Oakden Legacy all along.

He surged to his feet. "I'd better get to bed, then. Especially if we mean to leave first thing in the morning."

He looked inquiringly at Avery, who nodded. Lorne tried to protest, but Avery insisted they needed to keep moving. Elliot knew it was because of her mysterious mission for Bolivere, but he was still grateful. Now that they had learned the first puzzle piece of how to separate him from the lamp, he was eager to learn more. The sooner they were on the river, the better.

Chapter 17

Avery

Securing places on a barge heading upriver was simple, especially without the cart in tow. She had picked a vessel designed for passengers rather than goods which meant it even had comfortable stabling for Nutmeg.

Lorne had offered to keep the mare until Avery returned for her cart, but she didn't want to be separated from her faithful equine companion. Plus, as she told him with a grin, she was used to walking long distances, but she had no desire to do so carrying a heavy pack. With two of them, there was no question of riding, but that didn't mean Nutmeg wouldn't be of use.

"Ahh," Avery sighed with pleasure as she joined Elliot at the rail to watch the shore pass by. "River travel suits the Oakden Legacy's slower pace of life."

"I always loved it when my mother and I would travel on one of the rivers," Elliot said. "When I was sixteen, I made plans to travel to the coast and sign up as a sailor on one of the merchant ships."

"What stopped you?" she asked, trying to imagine him as a sailor. She didn't like the idea—perhaps because they would have never met.

"My mother." He said the words shortly, his tone loaded with a mix of negative emotions. "She's an expert at guilt and manipulation."

Avery's eyebrows rose. It was more than he'd ever said about his mother—other than about her love of travel.

“She likes new and exciting.” He kept his eyes on the riverbank. “But she isn't nearly so keen about work. So it suited her very well to have a traveling companion to do all the tasks she didn't want to do herself.”

“Where is she now?” Avery dared to ask, hoping her question wouldn't shut down the conversation.

“I have no idea. And I don't want to know.” He gave a sharp laugh. “Nowhere near Bolivere, that's for sure.”

Avery's eyebrows disappeared into her hairline. What did Elliot's mother have against Bolivere?

“You did leave her eventually,” Avery said. “But not to become a sailor.”

Elliot sighed. “She convinced me I had no choice but to stay with her until I became an adult. And when that time came...” He trailed off, something dark crossing his face. “All I wanted by then was stability,” he concluded eventually. “Not a new form of transportation.” He turned to look upriver. “But I do like the water. That's why I decided to pick a capital city to settle in—since they're all built on the water in one way or another.” He finally turned to look at her, his smile back. “Since I love pumpkin, Sovar seemed the right choice.”

His unexpected comment surprised a laugh out of Avery. But behind it, her heart hurt. She had learned to love travel in the company of her warm and caring parents—she hadn't needed stability or a proper home because they were her stability and her home. But Elliot had been forced into travel by a selfish parent who had apparently weighed his well-being as unimportant beside her comfort. No wonder he

didn't want to travel anymore.

For a brief second she considered what it would be like to settle down herself. To have a regular house and tend a garden. To make friends with the neighbors. And to sit at night by the fire, with Elliot at her side.

But the image wouldn't stick. She could see the value and comfort in such a life, but she couldn't imagine herself in it—no matter who was beside her.

Thankfully, Elliot knew nothing about her silent imaginings, his attention still on the shore. And though their histories and future dreams made the two of them incompatible, she could still enjoy their shared journey in the moment. Her parents had always encouraged her to live in the moment, rather than falling into the trap of always dreaming of somewhere more amazing that she might visit in the future.

It took three days on the barge to reach the bustling capital city of Glandore, but it only took two days for Frank to find her. She heard his caw before she saw him, followed by the ringing, familiar words.

“Merchant girl! Merchant girl!”

She laughed, turning to greet him as he swooped in. His bright plumage was brilliant in the sunlight as he perched on the barge's rail.

“Frank! I was starting to think something had happened to you! We crossed the border into Glandore nearly two days ago.”

“Water!” the parrot barked, swiveling his head, his eyes peering everywhere with equal distaste. “Filthy stuff!”

“It's actually very clean, nicely flowing water,” she said with feigned innocence.

“Filth!” he snapped. “Utter filth.”

“Frank?” Elliot asked in a strangled voice, apparently recovering from the momentary silence brought on by the bird’s dramatic entry.

“He’s an old friend,” Avery said affectionately. “He normally joins me as soon as I cross the border into Glandore. Unlike me, he doesn’t like to leave his home kingdom.”

“I’ve heard that when people try taking Glandorian parrots across the border, very little of the Glandore Legacy’s effects remain. They become almost the same as regular parrots.”

“Who are you?” the bird cawed rudely, training one of his beady eyes on Elliot with an unnerving expression of disgust.

“I’m Elliot.” Elliot held out a fist, like you would for a dog to sniff, only to think better of it and drop his hand.

Avery was glad he had because she wouldn’t have put it past Frank to peck him.

“He’s a little surly,” she explained.

“Clearly!” Frank said. “When is he leaving?”

Avery gave a snorting laugh. “I was talking about you, wretch. And I’m afraid he’s not leaving. He’s my current traveling companion.”

“What?” Frank took off, launching into the air and flying circles as he cawed his displeasure. “The horse is bad enough.”

“I know you love Nutmeg,” Avery said with a grin as she settled back on the rail.

“She can’t possibly love him ,” Elliot muttered.

Avery chuckled. “It’s probably more accurate to say they both tolerate each other.”

“While both loving you,” he murmured. “Why am I not surprised?”

Avery flushed slightly, turning her head away in case he noticed.

“Throw him back and eat him too,” Frank shouted down at them.

Elliot’s mouth dropped open. “Is he trying to say…Actually, I have no idea what he’s trying to say.”

“I’m fairly certain he doesn’t either,” Avery murmured. “He’s particularly bad at well-known sayings and expressions.”

“Frank,” she called firmly up to him, “you don’t have to like Elliot, but no pecking.” She directed a stern gaze at him as he circled past. “If you hurt him, you won’t be able to travel with me.”

“Outrage! Insult! Sacrilege!” Frank turned, flapping away over the river.

“Don’t worry. He’ll be back,” Avery said.

“Oh, I wasn’t worried.” Elliot shook his head. “So did you name him Frank, or did he come with a name?”

“That was me.” She grinned. “It fits, doesn’t it?”

“I could think of a few better-fitting options,” Elliot muttered.

“You’ll get used to him,” Avery said placidly. “I did. Now I would miss him if he didn’t show up when I’m in Glandore.”

“Yes, but he likes you.” Elliot grimaced. “I think Frank is an acquired taste I could do without.”

By the time the city arrived, Frank had returned, flapping his wings in distaste and muttering to himself. Avery and Elliot both ignored him, however, caught up in the excitement of unloading.

When Nutmeg was led out of her stall and down the gangplank, she whinnied, tossing her head and prancing as if happy to be free. Her lively stepping slowed, however, when Frank flew down and landed on one of the packs strapped to her back.

She turned her head to look at him, whuffing out a breath that might have been a greeting or instructions to be gone. Avery hugged the mare. She always missed Nutmeg when they weren’t together.

Avery had only visited the distant cousin who kept the roving merchant family records once with her parents, so it took some effort to remember the way. But eventually, after several backtracks, and one particularly lengthy detour, they arrived at a door she recognized.

“Are you sure this is it?” Elliot asked, gazing up at the multi-story house that appeared almost identical to the row of houses on either side.

“Yes, this is the one.” Avery spoke with confidence. “Now that we’re here, I definitely remember it. Plus, look at that.” She pointed at a small symbol etched into the wood of the door above the handle. It was subtle enough to be barely noticeable,

but she easily recognized the branching arrow symbol of her people.

Elliot must have been familiar with the symbol too because he accepted her evidence, stepping back slightly to allow her to undertake the initial greetings. She knocked energetically, listening for the sound of footsteps from within. But the door flew open without warning.

The woman inside looked older than Avery remembered, the odd gray hair dotting her otherwise thick dark hair. But she had to be only twenty-five or so years older than Avery, younger than her aunt and uncle.

“Avery! This is an unexpected visit,” Matilda said, catching Avery by surprise.

“You know who I am?” she asked.

Matilda snorted. “Naturally. I wouldn’t be a very good family record keeper if I couldn’t even keep track of the current family members! Besides, you look exactly like you did when you were younger. I couldn’t possibly mistake you.”

Her face darkened. “Allow me to offer my condolences. Losing your parents was a great misfortune for the whole family, but for you...”

“Thank you,” Avery said, trying to remember if Matilda had always been so direct.

Matilda peered over Avery’s shoulder, her eyebrows rising. “Now that is a face I don’t know.” She looked back at Avery. “Should I know him? Has he joined the family? Is that what you’re here to report?”

“What? Oh, no, we haven’t—That is to say, we’re not—” Avery stumbled over her words, blushing furiously.

“Well it wouldn’t be a crime if you had,” Matilda said with a chuckle. “About time you stopped traveling alone if you ask me.”

“I don’t think she did ask you,” Elliot said coolly from behind her, and a different type of warmth diffused through Avery.

She didn’t feel alone when she traveled—she was always meeting new people, and she felt connected to the network of roving merchants scattered across the kingdoms. But it had been a long time since she had felt like part of a team. She had forgotten what it was like to have someone who was specifically hers and who would have her back, even with her family.

She only hoped Matilda wasn’t offended. Avery appreciated Elliot’s instinct to stand up for her, but since they’d come to ask Matilda for a favor, it didn’t seem like a good idea to start by putting her back up.

But Matilda nodded at Elliot approvingly. “That she didn’t,” she said. “If there’s one trait our family shares—other than our love for travel—it’s our instinct to meddle. Well said.” She turned to Avery. “It’s good to pick one who can stand up for you within the family. I could do with that myself now and then.” She barked a laugh. “Although can you imagine someone blunter than me?”

“Actually,” Avery said quickly, before Matilda could make any more insinuating comments. “Elliot and I are just temporary traveling companions because—well, actually it’s a bit of a long story to tell out here on the doorstep.” She glanced up and down the street. “Could we come inside?”

Matilda stood back, clearing the way. “It’s a bit unusual to allow someone who isn’t a member of the family into our hall of records. If any of the family elders were here, I would be taken to task for even considering it.”

“Do you need me to wait outside?” Elliot asked in a tone of obvious reluctance. “I could stay with Nutmeg...” His eyes met Avery’s, clearly pleading with her to find the answers they needed for both their sakes.

“Oh goodness, no!” Matilda said. “I’m far too curious for that. I’ve barely gotten a proper look at you yet. Plus, I strongly suspect that whatever is going on here will soon be a new record on my shelves.” She rubbed her hands together in apparent anticipation. “Just put Nutmeg into the shed around the back before you come in.”

Chapter 18

Avery

A very and Elliot were soon following the record keeper through a long hall and into a spacious room at the back of the house. It was far larger than an ordinary sitting room, and most of the space had been turned into a library with rows of shelving running down the middle of the room.

The ordinary city home wasn't the sort of house that would usually include a library, but the record keeper's residence had been owned by the roving merchants for generations. Some distant ancestor had transformed the inside of the building, turning most of the bottom floor into a record room.

"Wow!" Elliot's eyes widened as he took in the volume of books. "Are all of these roving merchant records?"

"Not all," Matilda said with a pleased smile, "but a good portion. I have an extensive collection of other relevant texts as well. Plus some just for fun, of course."

"I wasn't expecting anything half as impressive," Elliot admitted.

Matilda looked pleased. "They originally chose to set up the record keeper's hall here in Glandore because the Glandore Legacy loves libraries. Sometimes new volumes appear on the shelves despite my never having acquired them."

"That's funny because it looks smaller than I remember," Avery said with a grin,

knowing full well that it was she who had grown bigger.

“Thank you for allowing me to see it, Matilda,” Elliot said gravely, running his hand along a row of books.

“Please, call me Mattie.” She gestured for them to gather in a section of the room that had been equipped with the sort of furniture usually found in a sitting room.

“As well as providing new books, the library is very resilient,” Mattie said as they both sat down. “I once knocked a candle over onto a pile of parchments. I thought the whole place was going to go up in flames. But it went out without even a puff.”

“That is a very handy feature,” Elliot said. “Well worth putting the library in Glandore just for that.”

“The Legacy can be wonderfully protective if your circumstances are right,” Mattie said.

Avery shifted uncomfortably. Her cousin’s words were true, but that aspect of the Legacy sometimes went awry.

Elliot looked over at her, clearly catching her discomfort, and she straightened, stilling. He already saw too much.

An insistent tapping at the door made Mattie heave herself back to her feet. “Another visitor?” she exclaimed. “That’s unusual. Is there a family gathering I’m unaware of?”

She hurried off, leaving Avery to exchange a worried look with Elliot. It was going to be hard to share their story with Mattie if other family members showed up.

A loud cawing made them both start, and a bolt of blue, red, yellow, and green shot into the room. Frank circled overhead cawing indignantly.

“And here I was, hoping you’d managed to shake that thing off,” Mattie said, reappearing in the room with a scowl.

“You even remember Frank?” Avery asked.

“He’s a hard creature to forget.” Mattie watched his flight with narrowed eyes. “Just make sure he knows that if he destroys one of my books again, I’ll start plucking his feathers.”

“Bitter old woman!” Frank cried. “Nasty nincompoop.”

“I see the years have made you even more pleasant.” Mattie propped her hands on her hips.

“And I see they’ve made you gray,” Frank rasped back, in a voice that still startled Avery with how human it sounded, despite the subtle tone that set it apart.

Mattie’s arms dropped, and she laughed. “How does a bird know how to hit you where it hurts?” She resumed her seat and looked at Avery. “I feel compelled to remind you that traveling with that bird hurts the dignity of all roving merchants. The creature is a menace.”

“What do you want me to do?” Avery asked innocently. “I can’t stop him flying where he wishes.”

Mattie regarded her balefully. “I did an even better innocent expression when I was your age, Avery, daughter of Magnolia. You might be fooling this handsome young man here, but you aren’t fooling me.”

“What handsome young man?” Frank scoffed. “Are you far-sighted? He looks like a bad egg that will rot the barrel.”

Mattie stood up, her expression completely calm, and threw a well-aimed cushion at Frank. He barely swerved in time to miss it, immediately flapping down to the far end of the library to perch on the top of a bookshelf and mutter angrily to himself.

“Excellent,” Mattie said matter-of-factly. “Now that creature is taken care of, it’s time for tea. I assume you both drink tea?” She looked at them with an expression that dared them to say no. Neither of them were so foolhardy.

“Would you like tea that calms you down, tea that wakes you up, tea that helps your hair grow, tea that makes you chatty, or tea that improves your hearing?” she asked.

Elliot stared at her, so Avery answered for both of them.

“I think we’ll go with tea that wakes us up.” It seemed the safest in the circumstances. She glanced at Elliot who still looked taken aback. “Mattie may not do the roving part herself, but don’t forget she’s a roving merchant. She has access to every enchanted herb that grows anywhere in six kingdoms.”

“She’s nothing like I expected,” Elliot said in a slightly awed voice the moment Mattie left the room.

“Let me guess,” Avery said with a smile. “You were expecting a dusty, white-haired scholar, peering at us through his glasses?”

“I don’t think a speck of dust would dare settle in here.” Elliot stood and wandered along one of the shelves, staring at some of the more peculiar titles.

Mattie reappeared bearing an enormous tea tray. It carried a huge teapot with several

chips, a tray of assorted cakes and slices, and three large mugs, each wrapped in a knitted jacket, complete with a fluffy white collar and bright buttons. There wasn't much chill in the air of the capital, despite the arrival of Autumn, and yet even so, Avery still itched to snuggle her hands around one of the mugs.

"Don't even bother trying to find anything on your own," Mattie told Elliot. "I've been informed by reliable sources that my organizational system is unique."

"Like these?" Elliot gestured at the books in front of him.

Mattie didn't need to approach closer to read the titles. With only a glance in his direction, she reeled off a list.

"The Unique Effect of the Auldana Legacy on Snow and Ice, An Examination of Albino Mice, The State of Sea Foam and What It Tells Us About Ocean Health, How to Cultivate Daises..." She started unloading the tea tray onto a low table, a feat she could only perform after ruthlessly ejecting several piles of books. "But surely you don't need an explanation for why those are grouped together? That section, at least, is obvious."

"Is it?" Elliot looked helplessly at Avery.

For a moment Avery felt as blank as he looked. But Lorne had told her to think creatively, so maybe she needed to see it from a different angle.

"It's about color?" she guessed, despite how ridiculous it sounded. "They're all related to things that are white?"

"Precisely!" Mattie beamed at her. "I don't know why so many of the family complain about my system."

“Things that are white?” Elliot protested. “But—” He cut himself off, clearly realizing how pointless it would be to protest.

Returning to the table, he accepted his cup of tea from Mattie, even allowing her to stir in a spoon of sugar.

“Don’t worry,” Mattie assured Elliot comfortingly once they all had their drinks, “you’ve always got your looks.”

He choked, only just avoiding spraying tea across the closest pile of books.

“Traveling with you is doing wonders for my ego,” he murmured to Avery when he finally finished coughing.

Avery felt a pang of guilt, although she was fairly certain he was joking. Wanting to do something to ease the day’s shocks, she suggested he go and deliver Nutmeg’s afternoon feed.

“I can fill Mattie in on our problem,” she told him with a significant look. “And then, when you get back, we can discuss potential solutions.”

Elliot still found relating his story difficult, and saving him the stress of telling it himself was a small thing she could do for him.

“That sounds like the most efficient plan,” he said with gratitude in his voice. “I won’t take long.”

As soon as he disappeared from the room, Mattie leaned forward with an interested air.

“Got a problem of a sensitive nature, has he?”

Avery grimaced. “It’s hard to overcome a lifetime of secrecy.”

“I’ve always thought it was a cruel thing to ask a child to keep a secret,” Mattie said with a nod.

Avery hid a grin at the thought that it must certainly have seemed so to the sort of blunt child that Matilda must have been. But her smile fell away as she remembered the tale she had to tell. At least she was full of energy to tell it. The tea had worked better than she had expected, sending a jolt of alertness through her.

“It’s really Elliot’s problem,” she admitted, “but I’ve managed to get embroiled in it, and I can’t turn my back on him now. So that means it’s a family problem now, too.”

She quickly related what she knew of Elliot’s history and his tie to the lamp, finishing by saying how Lorne had sent them on to Mattie.

“Lorne?” Mattie scoffed. “Of course that old sweet talker would send you here. I can’t tell you how many times he’s come sniffing around our records.” Her expression turned thoughtful. “I suppose he wants Elliot to transfer his bond to his own body—like us.”

“So you know about that?” Avery asked. “I had no idea.”

Mattie shrugged. “Most people don’t question something so central to their existence. But I’ve spent decades studying our family. Believe me, there’s nothing Lorne knows about us that I don’t!”

“Then do you think it can be done?” Avery asked eagerly, too impatient to wait for Elliot’s return before posing the question.

“As to that...” Mattie heaved herself to her feet, heading toward a bookshelf near the

library door.

Avery also stood, too excited to remain stationary when they might be so near to answers. But she hadn't taken any steps toward Mattie when the door of the library burst open.

Three men poured inside, and for half a second she thought they must be roving merchants, although Mattie hadn't mentioned any others currently staying with her.

But the first of the newcomers, a rough-looking man with a stern expression, seized Mattie, twisting both her arms behind her before she realized what was happening.

"Is she the one?" a second man asked, looking from Mattie to Avery with a frown. "Or is it that one?"

"Don't know, don't care," the one holding Mattie snapped. "Take them both."

For another half second, Avery was frozen in shock. They were being abducted? From the record hall of the roving merchants? If only the Glandore Legacy protected the librarian as well as the library.

Her mind sped up, leaping from her predicament to Elliot, presumably still out the back with Nutmeg. Her hands tightened around the satchel that was strapped to her as always, and she leaped into motion.

There was no hope of going for the door—all three men stood between her and it—so she fled between two tall bookshelves instead. Within a second she was out of sight, although it wouldn't last for long. There was nowhere in the room that would allow her to truly hide, but she didn't need to keep out of sight for long.

She darted between bookshelves, finally choosing one near the back of the room to

stop. Crouching down, she frantically started pulling books from shelves. She could hear the men talking as they methodically searched between shelves, clearly aware she had nowhere to run.

As soon as she had cleared enough space, she pulled the wrapped lamp from the satchel and thrust it to the back of the shelf. There wasn't time to put the books back properly, so she shoved them in front of the lamp in a pile, hoping it would be enough.

The soft rustle of feathers alerted her as Frank glided over to join her.

“Get back out of sight,” she whispered urgently to him. “And as soon as you can, go find Elliot. He'll come after us.”

Being a bird, Frank didn't always show a lot of sense, but he knew enough to stay quiet, merely bobbing his head in acknowledgment of her words, his wings twitching.

“And tell Elliot this is here!” she added, pointing at the hidden lamp. “It's very important that you tell him about it!”

Frank took off, flapping out of sight just as one of the men rounded her row of shelves. Avery stood and took several steps toward him, distancing herself from the hidden lamp.

The man gave a shout and broke into a run. She had just enough time to seize a book from the closest shelf and smash it over his head. The man staggered but managed to keep his feet. She tried to use the opportunity to retrieve the herbalist's dagger from her boot, but her attacker seized her wrist before she could reach it, wrenching her arm behind her back. She cried out in pain, but he didn't loosen his grip.

“Don't be trying any more silly tricks,” he growled, dragging her back toward the

library door.

Avery didn't struggle, knowing it would do little good. If she wanted to escape, she needed to wait for a more opportune moment. Her earlier resistance had only been to distract from her true purpose among the shelves—and to vent some of her fury.

When she reached Mattie, the two women's eyes met, both assessing the other for injuries.

"I'm afraid I hit him with one of your books," Avery said apologetically.

"Good girl," Mattie said approvingly.

"Shut it, both of you," the first man warned. He had handed Mattie over to the third man and was peering down the corridor outside. "Try anything or start yelling, and you'll regret it."

Avery had every intention of trying something the second they were out in public, but the man holding her arms behind her back suddenly seized her and threw her over his shoulder. Startled, she instinctively tried to kick at him, but it did little good.

Mattie and Avery were carried together down the long hallway and out the open front door. A covered cart waited on the street outside, making Avery suck in her breath. It would be a lot harder to attract attention from inside a cart.

Mattie was pushed into the cart first, her captor climbing in with her. Avery heard the hiss of drawn steel and winced. It wasn't going to be as easy to escape on the street as she had hoped.

The man carrying her dumped her on the back of the cart. When he stepped away, she felt a surge of hope, but the man deeper inside the cart's tray spoke menacingly.

“Try anything, and I’ll slice her.”

Avery gulped, staring into the darkness inside the cart to make out the outline of the man and the knife he was holding against Mattie’s skin.

The man who had been carrying Avery closed the back of the cart, leaving only a small gap to see through. Avery felt the dip as he climbed onto the front with the leader.

For the first time, the shock ebbed enough to allow true fear to rear its head, making her tremble uncontrollably. She peered out the back as the cart’s wheels began to roll across the cobblestones, her eyes trained on the side of Mattie’s house.

Finally she caught movement as Elliot emerged from down the side. His eyes flicked idly toward the cart, catching on her face. He stopped, his mouth dropping open and his expression hardening.

“Stop!” he shouted loudly, sprinting toward her. “Stop!” His boots pounded against the stone as he drew nearer.

But the driver cursed, and the cart lurched into faster motion. Already underway, its momentum quickly increased, the gap between Elliot and Avery lengthening again.

The two horses harnessed in front of the cart couldn’t keep up the pace indefinitely, but Elliot would tire before they did. Already he was flagging.

Avery’s eyes widened as she realized it wasn’t exhaustion causing him to stumble. The further he followed them, the further from the lamp he got. He had no hope of catching them, so he needed to stop before he was completely incapacitated.

Avery leaned out the back of the cart, gesturing wildly. “Stop!” she cried. “Go back!

Go back!”

She was trying to wave him off, but at first he only looked more determined. But when he stumbled again, his feet appearing to give way beneath him, he finally slowed.

He sank to the road, his anguished gaze still locked onto Avery.

Find me! she mouthed at him. And again, Find me .

As they turned a corner, she pulled back away from the rear of the cart. She couldn't risk Mattie by leaning out again. Elliot had seen them go, and Frank would tell him the rest of the story, nonsensical as it was. She would trust in Elliot's ability to track them down.

She certainly didn't doubt that he would try. That thought never even crossed her mind.

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Chapter 19

Elliot

Elliot sank onto the cobblestones, nausea and weakness overwhelming him. His mind screamed at his body to get up and run. Avery was in trouble, and he couldn't remain on the ground. But his body didn't respond.

Worst of all, it was only going to get worse as the lamp moved further and further away from him. Soon he wouldn't be able to move at all. How long before even his breath stopped? Elliot would die on the road outside Mattie's house. What would happen to Avery then?

Cold waves washed over him at the thought. He had to find a way to get back on his feet.

Or perhaps the cold waves were from the lamp's increasing distance. Was he feeling the first creeping fingers of death?

With a surge of determination, he rose to his feet. If death was coming for him, he would meet it upright, at least.

But the weakness didn't increase, and gradually the pounding of his heart softened. The churning in his stomach continued, but he hadn't actually been sick yet.

"Fool boy! Fool boy!" An already familiar voice called for him from the air as Frank swooped toward him from Mattie's house. "What are you doing out here? Are you

daft?”

The parrot flew circles around his head, cawing loudly.

“They took Avery,” Elliot ground out.

“And the gray one too,” Frank cawed. “Both gone!”

Elliot ground his teeth together. He hadn’t collapsed again yet, so perhaps if he focused all his effort, he could?—

“Come and see!” the bird called stridently. “Come and see!”

“They’ve taken Avery,” Elliot ground out through his teeth. “And you want me to go sightseeing?”

“Merchant girl said to show you. Said it was important,” the bird called, still flying in circles.

Elliot froze. Avery had left the bird a message for him? To go and see something?

It felt utterly and horribly wrong to move in the opposite direction to Avery. And he wasn’t sure he would make it far before he collapsed. But if Avery had wanted him to see something, she must have had a good reason for it. Perhaps it would provide a clue for how he could find her.

He stumbled toward Mattie’s front door. Several people passed him, but all of them eyed him warily, giving him a wide berth. He ignored them, forcing one foot in front of the other, until he arrived at the open door.

He blinked as he stepped almost easily into the house. Was his sickness and weakness

lessening? How was that possible when he was moving in the wrong direction?

He gasped, leaning against the nearby wall as the truth crashed over him. He hadn't grown weak because the cart was getting further away from him but because he was running away from the lamp. Avery—who never let it out of her presence—had left it here in the house.

“This way!” Frank croaked. “This way!”

Elliot hurried after him, his strength returning as he entered the library. He expected to see a scene of chaos, but other than a single pile of toppled books, and a chair that had been knocked onto its side, it looked just as he had left it. There was even tea still sitting in the mug he had abandoned.

But Frank was still gliding ahead of him, so he ignored the rest of the room, following where the parrot led. It took him almost to the far corner of the room, landing on the ground and pecking at a shelf. Elliot dropped to his knees beside the bird, pulling away an unevenly stacked pile of books.

Behind them, a wrapped object had been stashed by someone who must have been in too much of a hurry to properly return the books. Avery.

Elliot retrieved the lamp with trembling hands. Avery had somehow escaped her abductors, and in his hands was the proof she had spent those few precious moments thinking of him. She had known what was about to happen, and instead of looking for ways to escape, she had used that time to hide the lamp. For him.

He surged to his feet, his hands tightening around the rounded brass. She had thought of his safety, and she had trusted him. All this time she had held onto the lamp because somewhere a kernel of doubt had lingered. And he hadn't judged her for that. It was only natural.

But now she had chosen to put her trust in him. As someone dragged her away, she had called for him to find her. She had trusted he would do so, even knowing she had given him the tool that would allow him to walk away and never look back.

But the days of his walking away being possible were long gone. Elliot still didn't have any way to reconcile their opposing perspectives and goals, but he knew that he would do whatever it took to find and rescue Avery.

"What did she say?" he asked Frank, the words rough in his throat. "What else did she say?"

"She said to go find you. She said you'd come after her. She said to show you this. Nonsense! She should have run."

Frank took off, flying frantically around the room, his frenetic movement indicating the level of his worry.

Emotion rose in Elliot, but he fought it back. It was time for action. Energy filled him, not only from his determination but from his closeness to the lamp. He hadn't been so close to it since it had become more potent after its reshaping.

Rummaging through the packs they had brought inside, he found a small bag he could use to secure the lamp to his side, echoing the way Avery always wore it. He didn't want to linger any longer, but he knew he would regret it later if he ran out of the house with nothing but the lamp.

Fishing through their packs, he tossed things to either side, choosing only the basic necessities as he put together a smaller pack he could sling onto his back. Frank was no help, flying around the library in a continued frenzy. When the bird had been back and forth between the sitting area and Elliot twice—knocking over the teapot in the process and spilling tea all over the floor, Elliot gave up further packing and stood.

He closed the front door securely behind him as he left, heading for the yard behind the house. Nutmeg neighed as he approached her shed, sensing something was wrong. Frank swooped down and landed on her back, and she turned her head to look at him, whinnying.

When she turned back to Elliot, she lunged forward, her teeth snapping.

“Whoa! Whoa!” Elliot stumbled backward out of her reach. “I’m not the problem, all right? Someone has taken Avery, and I need to rescue her. But I need your help for that.”

Nutmeg turned to look at Frank again, and the bird gave a reluctant cackle.

“The fool boy is telling the truth. Surprisingly.”

Nutmeg settled, and Elliot snorted. “You believe the parrot over me? Really?”

But he was already moving, folding a blanket and putting it over Nutmeg’s back. Thankfully, Mattie had a saddle hanging in the shed, and Nutmeg allowed him to place it over her back and secure it in place. He didn’t know if she’d been trained with a saddle, but she was the smartest horse he’d ever met, and she loved Avery. Clearly she was willing to help.

“Frank,” he said, as he secured the last of the straps. “You’ll be able to move much faster than I can, especially in the city. And you’ll be able to cover greater distances, too. Check each of the city’s exits and see if you can spot the cart carrying Avery and Mattie—or a suspicious-looking boat on the river. If you spot them, come straight back and tell me which direction to take.”

He only hoped the cart had headed straight for one of the city’s gates. If they had holed up inside the city itself, it would be a lot harder to track them down.

He swung himself into the saddle, watching Frank wing away without a word. He would worry about how to search the city once he knew they weren't on a road or boat out. If it came to that, he would rouse the city's guards to help him. The only reason he hadn't done it already was his suspicion that their abductors intended to leave the city immediately. The dusty cart had looked as if it had traveled a long way in the last few days.

His secondary hesitation was due to the question of why the women had been taken. If the abductors were after knowledge that Mattie possessed, the roving merchants might not want him to involve any of the kingdom's guard forces.

He directed Nutmeg out onto the street and along the road in the direction he had chased the covered cart. He had seen it turn the first corner, taking the path leading directly to the city's eastern gate. He trotted toward the gate himself, staring at everything around him as he passed, but he could see nothing out of the ordinary.

He had made it only halfway to the gate when a flash of color appeared in the sky. Frank swooped down toward him, landing neatly on the back of the saddle.

"East Road," he cawed. "Out of the city and heading east already."

A band around Elliot's heart eased. He had a direction and something to aim for. And if they were still on the move, it was unlikely Avery or Mattie had been harmed—at least not yet.

The cart had been harnessed to two horses, and it had a head start, but Elliot and Nutmeg would be faster. There wasn't much light left to the day, but he hoped to be able to close the gap between them before night fully fell.

Elliot urged Nutmeg through the streets as quickly as possible, weaving between the other traffic until they reached the East Gate. They passed through without pause, and

Elliot was finally able to give Nutmeg her head.

But after a short period of galloping, he reluctantly drew her back to a slower pace. As much as he wanted to sprint the whole way, no horse was capable of keeping up such speed indefinitely. If he didn't want to harm Nutmeg and leave himself stranded, he would have to alternate between faster and slower paces.

The hours wore on, and he had to ignore his increasingly painful muscles. It had been too long since he'd ridden, and he was out of practice. But to his dismay, despite moving as fast as he dared to push Nutmeg, the sun had set and night had fully fallen without any sign of the group they pursued.

He could barely see even Frank's bright feathers as the bird glided toward him after yet another scouting trip.

"Lanterns!" he cried. "They have lanterns."

Elliot ground his teeth together. In his hurry to leave he had tried to think of anything essential, but he had forgotten a lantern.

"They're not stopping for the night, then?" he asked the parrot as Frank landed in his usual place on the saddle.

"Tied themselves in a line. Lots of horses," Frank said, and Elliot expelled an angry breath.

He didn't need more explanation from Frank to know what that meant. With lanterns to light their way, and their horses tied in a line, his quarry could continue on through the night, taking turns sleeping on horseback. And with enough mounts to swap between, they could give the horses rest breaks from carrying the weight of a rider.

They wouldn't be able to move fast in that arrangement, but they could keep moving all night. Whereas he needed to stop—not only because of the danger of riding in the dark but because he and Nutmeg would eventually need rest. They couldn't keep going endlessly, just the two of them.

Elliot slid down, and took Nutmeg's halter, leading her forward. If his quarry had swapped their cart for horses, they must have abandoned their cart not too far ahead. He would at least lead Nutmeg that far in the hope they had left items of use behind.

But when they finally stumbled onto the cart, it was completely empty. It certainly didn't hold a stray lantern as Elliot had hoped.

Admitting short-term defeat, he took off the saddle, rubbing Nutmeg down before he climbed into the cart and stretched out to sleep himself.

Frank, who had been sleeping on the saddle since his last report, stirred, and Elliot addressed him sternly.

"If I sleep past first light, wake me. No matter how little light, I want to be back on the road."

But he didn't end up needing the parrot's services to wake. After a few hours' sleep, he bolted awake and sat alone in the darkness as the minutes ticked by toward dawn.

When he woke Nutmeg and the parrot, he expected Frank to protest. But the bird and horse had formed an alliance in Avery's absence and even extended their temporary truce to Elliot. He could only assume it indicated the extent of their worry about Avery.

He did catch Frank muttering, "Useless landlubber," in his direction at one point, which was a senseless insult he found strangely reassuring. Frank was the only one of

them to have actually seen Avery since her abduction, and if he was muttering insults at the man trying to rescue her, he must not have been as worried as Elliot was.

Unfortunately, with his quarry now on horseback, and with their head start lengthened by their night travel, catching them was no longer a foregone conclusion.

He once again pushed Nutmeg as hard as he dared, but another day passed without sign of Avery, Mattie, or their pursuers, beyond the occasional piece of dropped detritus.

Frank still flew scouting trips, but his journey to Avery and back was taking significantly longer now than when they had first left the city. At least he continued to report that Avery appeared unharmed, and that the abductors were only three in number.

He had been half expecting two such redoubtable women to escape without his aid, but according to Frank they had been given sleeping potion. From his description, it sounded as if they had been secured to special saddles that allowed them to remain in place despite riding unconscious.

At least it meant they weren't enduring constant fear and torment. But it also left them without any possibility of escape. Elliot was their only chance, and he spent the hours devising countless possible methods—each more ridiculous than the last. In truth, he couldn't come up with a serious plan until he finally caught up to them and saw where they were and the state they were in. As much as he was ready to charge in when that moment came, shouting and waving a weapon, he would need to scout the situation carefully. He was only one man against three, and there was no backup coming.

But before he could strategize a rescue, he needed to continue on, enduring his one man-one horse marathon across the width of Glandore.

But eventually the day came when Frank left on a scouting mission only to return substantially quicker than usual.

“Did something go wrong?” Elliot asked. “Couldn't you find them?”

“They’ve stopped!” Frank called with a noticeable lessening of his usual irritation. “They’ve reached the sea and stopped.”

Elliot urged Nutmeg faster on instinct, his breath quickening. He finally had a hope of catching them!

“Was the sea their goal, then?” he mused aloud.

“No.” Frank swooped in to land on Nutmeg’s saddle. “They’ve only continued east all this time because they know someone’s pursuing them.”

“What?” Elliot reined Nutmeg to a stop, twisting to stare at the bird. “Have you known that this whole time? Why didn’t you mention it earlier?”

Frank took off, putting some distance between them before he muttered, “Why mention it? Pointless! They were going east. That’s what you always asked.”

“Why, you useless—” Elliot broke off, pulling at his hair. That was what came of having a bird as an ally. He shouldn’t have been raging at Frank, who clearly knew no better.

“I’m outnumbered,” he said tightly, “so I was relying on the element of surprise. And now you’re saying I don’t have it? That is absolutely relevant information!”

“Nonsense,” Frank cawed, but it didn’t have his usual heart behind it.

He flew in close, moving cautiously, and hovered beside the saddlebags. He pecked at one several times before flying away again.

“Just use that,” he said. “I’ll take it to them. Avery will rescue herself.”

“What?” Elliot stared at the pack. “What are you talking about? There aren’t any weapons in there. And you said she was unconscious. Are they waking her up?” He wasn’t sure whether to be excited or nervous about that prospect.

“They said to let it wear off,” Frank cawed. “They’re sick of running and want to ask questions. But it will take hours. They won’t be expecting that .” He dipped toward the pack again, bobbing his head in its direction.

Elliot slid off Nutmeg’s back to pull open the pack in question, digging through it. They had kept their stops as short as possible, only stopping for significant lengths of time when it was dark, so he still hadn’t sorted through the haphazard items he had packed on the day of the abduction. He was sure he would have remembered packing a useful weapon, though.

Rummaging through, his hand made it all the way to the bottom of the pack, where his fingers brushed against something unfamiliar. He grasped it, pulling out a small, silk pouch. One he had no memory of packing.

As he opened it, a scent wafted out, hitting him in the face and making him cough. He quickly closed it again, but a burst of energy filled him in response to the aroma, sending his mind racing even faster than it had before.

“The tea to wake you up?” he asked, staring at the pouch. “From Mattie’s house. But how did it end up in here?”

“Thought it might be useful,” Frank said impatiently. “I was right.” An unspoken as

always lingered at the end of his words.

“You put this in here!” Elliot stared at him. “You didn’t say anything about that either.”

“It wasn’t relevant,” Frank said. “But now it is. I’ll take that to Avery. She’ll rescue herself.”

A grin stole over Elliot’s face as he held up the pouch so Frank could swoop down and grasp it in his claws. He wasn’t leaving Avery to rescue herself alone, but if the two women were awake and able to take their captors by surprise, that would give them even numbers.

He swung back into the saddle. The time had at last come to let Nutmeg gallop freely. They needed to arrive in time to help Avery.

Chapter 20

Avery

Something bright and insistent and unpleasant shot through Avery. She was warm and sleepy. She didn't want sharp awareness to pierce through her cozy cocoon of unconsciousness. Not when it brought irritating sound and aching pains in seemingly every muscle.

"Nuisance bird!" an angry voice shouted nearby.

The mocking laugh of a parrot responded, moving through the air above her. Was that Frank?

She pried her eyes open a slit, still not willing to move. Who was yelling at him? It didn't sound like Elliot.

"Worst part of Glandore, those awful birds," a male voice muttered. "Even worse than the infernal roses everywhere."

Awareness flooded in, increasing her aches. Avery barely bit back a groan. The name of the owner's voice came back to her—Clyde. Or as she thought of him, the thickest of the three abductors. They had seemed thrown by ending up with two women instead of one and had debated what to do with her and Mattie for long enough that she'd learned their names. The other minion was Ty—also known as the lazy one—and the leader was Rene. She had not, however, learned why they had been abducted.

As soon as sleeping potion during the ride had been suggested, she had known it would turn out unpleasantly. But even so—how long had she been flopping around on horseback to feel this achy?

She subtly sniffed the air. Was that salt? Had they made it all the way to the sea? No wonder her body was protesting. There was a limit to how long you could keep someone unconscious with sleeping potion, so they must have ridden night and day to reach it so quickly.

She stirred slightly, keeping her movement small and her eyes slitted. To her surprise, she didn't feel any bonds. Apparently they trusted in their sleeping potion more than they should have.

She moved her head slightly and caught a whiff of something that drove off the last of the fog in her brain. It almost smelled like...tea! It took everything Avery had not to sit bolt upright at the realization.

There was a sachet of Mattie's tea lying on the ground near her face, half-hidden in her hair. But where had it come from? Was Mattie awake?

But if Avery moved her head slightly, she could see Mattie lying still on the ground beside her.

"Incompetent fools!" a familiar parrot voice called from the distance—apparently the bird was getting in one last insult as he flew away.

"Frank," she breathed, finally realizing where the tea must have come from.

He had dropped it by her head, thus enabling her to wake up earlier than expected. Did that mean Elliot was nearby?

Her blood quickened at the idea of allies. But Frank flew faster than Nutmeg could run—at least for any sustained length of time. So further help might still be some way off. She had to assume she was on her own.

She wiggled her toes, flexing her right leg in her boot. It pressed against something hard, and she bit back a smile. Secure in the efficacy of the sleeping potion, their abductors hadn't even bothered to give them a thorough search for weapons. Or perhaps they had thought that anything hidden in someone's boot was too small to be a danger.

She tried opening her eyes slightly wider and was momentarily distracted by the sight of the ocean. It was all she could do not to gasp. She had seen it before, of course, but its vastness always struck her afresh every time.

Apparently, her three abductors were equally taken with the water. It wasn't yet dark, but they were sitting on the sand in a loose semi-circle around a small campfire, all three of them facing toward the sea. The sand continued for only a short way behind them before turning into grass. They had hobbled the horses on the edge of the green, the packs and the two unconscious captives dumped with them.

Avery smiled. She still had no idea why they'd been abducted in the first place, but finally something was working in her favor.

She wiggled around slowly and carefully, ready at any moment to freeze and feign sleep. Finally she managed to grasp the small pouch of tea in her teeth. The scent wafting from it made her eyes sting, but at least she was no longer in the slightest danger of falling back asleep.

She flung her head, tossing the pouch the short distance toward Mattie. Her aim was off, and Avery held her breath as she waited to see if it was close enough. Slowly, however, Mattie began to stir, catapulting Avery into action.

Up until that point, she'd been holding her basic position in case any of the abductors turned around. But with Mattie on her way to consciousness, it was better to seize the element of surprise in case Mattie woke more noisily than Avery had done.

Sitting upright, she retrieved the herbalist's dagger in a single, smooth movement. Despite her speed, she tried to move quietly, not wanting to give herself away earlier than necessary.

None of the abductors noticed her small movements over the sound of the waves, and even a series of sighs from Mattie didn't rouse them.

Avery shook her head. They had hurried too fast to the coast and must now have been nearly as sore as, and more tired than, she was.

Mattie's eyes flickered open, and Avery stared at her, a dramatic finger pressed to her lips in a gesture of silence. Mattie's eyes widened, and she nodded.

Avery rolled into a crouch, creeping toward the fire and the men around it. With the herbalist's dagger, she only needed to get the smallest scratch on each of them, and their roles would be reversed. But as soon as the men realized what was happening and drew their swords, getting that scratch with her tiny dagger would prove difficult. She could throw it, but the moment she did that, she lost control of it, so that was only a last resort.

The loud crash of a particularly large wave made her flinch, but it also covered the final sounds of her approach. Rene was sitting in the center, and she approached behind him, plunging the tiny blade into the back of his right shoulder.

Rene gave a shout, surging to his feet, but he didn't make it all the way. His cry died, and he sank back down to sit in the sand again. Two breaths later, he keeled over sideways and began to snore.

But Avery's advantage was well and truly lost. Both Clyde and Ty had leaped up with outraged cries, drawing swords from their waists.

Avery swallowed, shifting her grip on her tiny dagger. Her eyes flicked between the two men, unsure which to tackle first or how to approach them.

The two stalked around the fire from opposite directions, closing in on her. She backed away, her mind racing but no solutions presenting themselves.

Loud, angry cawing made them all flinch and look up. Frank shot toward Clyde in a blur of yellow, green, blue, and red. Avery cried a warning as Clyde swung his sword at the parrot, but Frank was already pulling away.

As soon as Clyde turned back to Avery, however, the parrot dove again. Seeing her opportunity, Avery ran toward the distracted man. He was bellowing and cursing, waving his sword wildly through the air as he tried to fend off Frank's beak and claws.

As Frank plummeted again, Avery also dove forward, the hand with the dagger extended. As Clyde slashed through the air, trying to cut Frank, she stabbed the tip of the dagger through his clothing into the side of his calf.

Clyde gave a bellow that slowly lost force. He swayed, trying to slash at both her and Frank with the sword and failing at both due to the unsteadiness of his hand. Avery spun, knowing her focus on Clyde had left her back open to Ty.

But when she turned, Ty wasn't looming over her. Scrambling to her feet, she found him laid out, groaning, on the sand. Mattie strode over to join Avery, a look of satisfaction on her face.

Avery raised her eyebrows at her, and Mattie grinned. "If they didn't want a braining,

they shouldn't have left their pots lying around so handy."

Avery laughed as she caught sight of a black saucepan in the sand near Ty's head. Apparently Mattie was an excellent throw.

"Thank you," she said.

"Actually, I want to apologize," Mattie said. "You've had to go through all this just because you visited me at the wrong time. Besides, I think you're the one we have to thank." Mattie looked from the two sleeping men to the dagger in Avery's hand, one eyebrow rising.

"It was a gift," she said. "From?—"

Mattie held up a hand to stop her. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know. The official roving merchant policy on Oakdenian treated blades doesn't apply until I have definite information. And I'm fairly certain both of those men just thought this was a good moment for a nap."

Avery's lips twitched. "Indeed. An understandable mistake on their parts." She paused, her smile escaping a little as she looked at Mattie. "Do you think Ty might also be feeling sleepy?" She raised the dagger's blade and wiggled it a little.

"You know," Mattie said contemplatively, "I think he might be. He has just ridden a long way almost without break, after all."

"I'll just make sure he's comfortable." Avery moved toward him, making sure to kick his sword out of his reach on the way.

But as she crouched over him, the thunder of hooves reached her ears. She paused, looking up. It was possible Rene and his men had stopped here because they were

meeting someone, but she hoped?—

Elliot and Nutmeg streaked into view, and she beamed, some of the tension that still remained in her shoulders melting away. They were all together again, as they should be.

She blinked at the thought, unsettled by it. She was Avery—the solitary roving merchant. She couldn't feel alone and incomplete without a companion by her side—let alone a companion who wanted nothing more than to buy a house and live in it for the rest of his life.

But there was no sign of anything settled or boring in Elliot's face as he leaped from Nutmeg's back while she was still moving, landing on his feet and sprinting toward Avery. His expression blazed with a combination of relief and warning, and for a heady moment, Avery thought he was going to sweep her into his arms.

But as he dove to his knees, sliding through the sand toward her, his hand came around her wrist, halting the progress of her dagger toward the still-groaning Ty.

“Wait!” he cried. “Don't stab him.”

Avery frowned at him. He'd dashed in to protect her attackers?

Before she could grow too irritated, he continued.

“Unless you already have all the answers we want, keep one of them awake.”

Oh. Avery pulled her hand back. She should have thought of that herself.

“They must have some rope,” Elliot called to Mattie. “See if you can find me a length.”

He hauled Ty to his feet, keeping the man's arms in a restraining grip behind his back. Ty protested weakly but from the way he staggered and shook his head, he was still confused from the direct hit he'd taken.

Mattie had no trouble locating rope, and they soon had all three of them securely bound, including the still sleeping Rene and Clyde. Avery had no idea how long they would remain asleep, but the dose from the dagger's blade couldn't be strong, so she wasn't taking any risks.

As soon as he had finished tying the last of them, Elliot stood and strode toward her. The fire was back in his eyes, and she nearly backed away. But Avery of the roving merchants wasn't a coward—even when it came to emotions she wasn't ready to acknowledge.

Elliot didn't break stride until he was close enough to wrap both arms around her and pull her hard against his chest. He held her against him with one hand, cradling the back of her head with the other as he rested his cheek against her hair. Despite the tension between them, and the strength of his hands, she felt him relax, breathing out a deep sigh.

"I was so worried," he murmured. "Are you hurt?"

Avery let herself sink into his embrace, trying to blink back the tears that pricked at her eyes. Was this moment what she had hoped for when she told Elliot to follow them? When had his arms started to feel like the safest place she could imagine?

"I'm a bit sore from the pace of the journey," she said softly. "But I'm all right." She drew back, suddenly wanting to see his face. "But what about you? You must have ridden just as hard to keep pace with us on your own! Is Nutmeg..." She looked toward the grass, glad for an excuse to escape the intensity and warmth in Elliot's gaze.

“She’s fine,” he said. “I pushed her hard, but we were equally eager to find you.”

Nutmeg gave a loud whinny in time with his words, making Avery laugh weakly. Her mare was either following their conversation, or she was rallying the other horses.

Her gaze moved back to the sand, catching on Mattie who was watching them with amusement but not an ounce of surprise. Avery’s arms shot out, pushing Elliot back as she quickly stepped away herself.

She cleared her throat, considering possible excuses. But they all sounded too weak to be uttered aloud, so instead she raised her head and turned toward Ty.

Elliot stepped forward before she could say anything, however, and shoved Ty, sending him stumbling backward until he lost his balance and sat down hard in the sand.

“Unlike you, I have no interest in hostages,” he said in a harder voice than Avery had ever heard him use. “But I’ll take some if necessary and see how you like being dragged across a kingdom. Or you could tell us why you broke into the record keeper’s hall and kidnapped two women. If I find your answer convincing, we’ll leave you and your friends here and ride away without looking back.” He leaned in, his face threatening. “Which is an outcome to be hoped for, believe me.”

“That sounds too soft to me,” Mattie said. “Are you sure it’s a good idea to just leave them here?”

She was staring at Ty with narrowed eyes, and the man seemed more intimidated by her than he was by Elliot and Avery combined.

“String him up and throw away the key,” Frank squawked, making Ty flinch again.

“I think you mean...” Avery gave up on her explanation. They were never well received by the bird.

“We were paid,” Ty said, not even attempting to put up any resistance. “Same as why we always do things.”

Elliot leaned over and seized his collar, pulling him up slightly. “Paid by who?”

Ty shrugged. “That I don’t know. Rene might know. Or he might not. I don’t ask for details. All I know is that we were supposed to stop the merchant woman from returning to Bolivere. I don’t even know which woman is the one we wanted.” He looked at Avery and Mattie, but his eyes didn’t hold much interest. Clearly he thought the trouble of the job had overtaken the pay.

“Bolivere!?” Avery looked apologetically at Mattie. “My apologies, it looks like we had it wrong. You’re the one who has suffered because of me.”

“How intriguing.” Mattie looked at Ty with disgust. “And what were you planning to do to us to prevent Avery returning to Bolivere?”

“No need to look like that,” Ty said, disgruntled. “We weren’t going to kill you or nothing. We could have done that just outside the capital, if that was our plan.” He shook his head. “I don’t hold with killing, and neither does Clyde.”

For a minute Avery wondered if she’d slightly misjudged him, and then he added, “Brings too much attention from the guards. No amount of pay is worth being locked up for the rest of our lives—what good would the money do then, hey?”

“No good at all,” Mattie said dryly.

Elliot stepped away from Ty, drawing the two women in for a quiet exchange out of

earshot of their captive.

“We’re not near any villages or towns out here. We could try to take them with us, but three captives is a large number for only the three of us.”

“They’ve already lost their pay,” Mattie said decisively. “Leave their hands tied, and set their horses free—with their packs tied to their backs. They can get an experience of the discomfort they handed out to us.”

Elliot looked at Avery, clearly thinking that the two abducted women deserved the final say.

“Seems reasonable to me,” she said cheerfully.

Ty’s manner had been convincing, and if they weren’t setting the men free to go murdering their way across the kingdom, she didn’t want to be saddled with them any longer.

“Gut the lot of them!” Frank squawked, making Ty edge backward in the sand.

“He’s a very bloodthirsty parrot,” Elliot said with a frown at him. “But I’ll admit he earned his spot in your rescue. He was the one who packed the sachet of tea.”

“Well, color me surprised,” Mattie said. “I always thought he was a useless bag of feathers. It’s good to keep learning new things, though. Keeps you young.” She brushed her hands together, clearly done with the whole situation. “Shall we be on our way, then?”

Avery nodded quickly. “I have no desire to talk with either of the other two. Let’s leave before they wake up. If we head north, we’ll find the hamlet where my uncle and aunt now live. After what Ty said, I don’t want any more delays reaching

Bolivere, so I don't think we should backtrack to the capital and the river." She sent Mattie an apologetic look. "But Uncle Ewan and Aunt Sylvia will be able to put you up comfortably and organize safe passage back to your home. They might even accompany you after what just happened. The roving merchants will want to look into how the abductors broke into the record-keeping hall so easily—and how they even knew I was there in the first place."

"You're not curious about either of those things?" Mattie asked, sounding as if she already knew the answer.

"Of course I am," Avery said. "But I'm more concerned about Bolivere right now. My aunt and uncle will also be able to give me and Elliot fresh supplies, so we'll all benefit from a visit to them."

Elliot looked interested at the prospect of meeting her family, and Mattie expressed relief at getting to the closest roving merchant home as quickly as possible, so the three of them set to work.

Elliot and Mattie selected mounts from among the hobbled horses, keeping them to one side while they secured the abductors' packs to the backs of the remaining horses before setting them free and driving them off in all directions.

Ty attempted to protest but was reminded by Frank—in grisly detail—of what his fate could still be instead. The list of possibilities effectively shut down any further protests.

The three of them were soon riding away from the beach together, Frank soaring overhead. Even keeping to a sedate pace, they made much better progress on horseback than they would have on foot and had soon left the abductors far behind.

Part of Avery felt concerned about leaving the men free, but Elliot had made a good

point. It wouldn't have been a simple matter for the three of them to handle three prisoners, and neither would her aunt and uncle's hamlet be equipped to detain them.

The risk from leaving them free was worth it not to be delayed further. Knowing the men had been hired to keep her from reaching Bolivere only made her more anxious to get there, and their unplanned trip to the coast had taken them far off route.

Chapter 21

Elliot

Elliot should have hated finding himself back in the saddle so quickly. And certainly his muscles had something to say on the matter. But riding with Avery unharmed beside him made everything else fade into the background.

He only had to close his eyes, and he could feel her in his arms again, the reassuring solidness of her body telling him that she had survived the abduction.

It went against the grain to just leave the men to go free, but his concern for Avery and Mattie outweighed his desire for vengeance. If they had tried to keep the men prisoner, they might have ended up escaping or overpowering them, and Avery or Mattie could be hurt in the process.

As soon as they all felt far enough away to be safe, they stopped and made what camp they could for the night. There were no bedrolls to make it comfortable, and the food was basic, but both women ate ravenously.

“I’ve never been so hungry in my life,” Avery said through a mouthful. “I don’t think they can have fed us once.”

“Not while we were sleeping,” Mattie agreed. “The sleeping potion negates the necessity—but they pushed it to the extreme of its limits. Any longer and we might have been in serious trouble.”

“Just don’t eat too much,” Elliot warned them both. “You’ll make yourselves sick if you do that.”

Avery reluctantly put her remaining food down, rubbing her stomach. “Do I want to know how you know that?” she asked in a soft voice, but there was something darker in her eyes.

Elliot shrugged. “I’ve never gone days at a time without eating if that’s what you’re worried about. But my mother has never been a very...consistent person. Sometimes she forgot to prepare food, and sometimes we ran out of both food and coin. But when she did remember, or she found a source of wealth again, she liked extravagance.”

Avery’s face turned thunderous. “But you were just a child!”

“Don’t worry,” Elliot said with a smile, trying to keep things light. “It wasn’t so bad when I was little because my dad was the opposite of my mother—he was stability personified. Meals were regular affairs in my early years. And once it was just me and my mother on the road...” He shrugged. “I was basically a youth by then, so I learned to find odd jobs where I could and to hide the coin from my mother. That way I could always source food for us when we needed it. I learned how to cook, too.” He smiled ruefully. “That’s probably why my cooking is so terrible.”

“Elliot, I’m so sorry,” Avery’s gentle voice was almost too much for him, and he cleared his throat.

“Those years are long behind me. I haven’t traveled with my mother for years. For obvious reasons. There’s no need to feel sorry for me.”

“I think I’ve heard of her,” Mattie said, her eyes narrowed in thoughtful concentration. “Is her name Opaline?”

Elliot's mouth went dry. "Yes," he said stiffly, "it is."

Mattie nodded. "There's a reason Lorne knows so many roving merchants. There aren't many like him and your mother, and we always end up crossing their paths." Her lips pursed. "Your mother doesn't have Lorne's reputation, though. I wouldn't call her a merchant friend."

Elliot held his breath, his heart thudding in his chest, but Mattie didn't say any more. After tutting a few times, she returned to her food. Elliot's shoulder slumped as he let out a quiet breath of relief. If Mattie did know more about his mother's history, she was apparently going to keep it to herself.

Avery gave him a questioning look, but he turned away from her to look into their small fire. She didn't press him, but his earlier relief weighed heavily in his belly. Avery had secrets as well, but it no longer felt the same—not when her secrets were to protect others while his were to protect himself.

He still remained silent, however. How could he tell her about a past he still hadn't made peace with himself?

The next morning, they were back on the road early, all eager to reach the hamlet as soon as possible. When it finally came into view, nestled on some hills overlooking the ocean, they pushed their horses to a faster pace without needing to discuss the matter.

Avery led them to a comfortable cottage on the fringe of the hamlet, surrounded by a bright garden full of different colored roses.

"Aunt Sylvia!" she called before she had even dismounted. "Uncle Ewan! Dahlia! Ash! I've come to visit!"

Four people poured out of the cottage as she slid to the ground—a girl and boy a similar age to Avery, followed by a middle-aged man and woman. The four of them surrounded her, all exclaiming joyously as they engulfed her in a group embrace.

Elliot could almost see Avery's stress lifting, and he tried not to feel jealous. He wasn't sure if he wished he held that role in her life or if he just wished he had an equally loving family to return to.

"What are you doing here?" her aunt demanded, once they all separated again. "Don't tell me you've come to stay permanently?" She sounded hopeful.

"Don't be ridiculous, mother," the girl said. "Avery wouldn't do that." She was gazing at Avery with an adoring expression, reminding Elliot of Avery's long ago words about her younger cousin who loved to travel as much as she did.

"Mattie!" Avery's uncle—Ewan she had called him—finally spotted the record keeper. "What can possibly bring you out to these parts? Why didn't you let us know you were coming?"

"Of course you're always welcome, with or without notice," his wife said with a reproving look at him.

"But of course, of course," he said, undaunted. "Mattie knows that. There's not a roving merchant home in six kingdoms that isn't open to her—just as her record-keeping hall is always open to us."

Mattie slid off her horse and shook herself down. "I'm sure I would have sent warning ahead if I'd had any intention of visiting," she said. "I didn't leave home voluntarily."

Ewan's eyebrows rose as he threw a look at his niece.

Avery held up her hands in protest. “It wasn’t me who forced her out.”

“I think this is a story that might be better told inside,” Elliot said, suddenly reminded of their arrival at Mattie’s house in the capital. It already seemed infinitely long ago.

“What happened?” Sylvia drew closer to her niece, placing a concerned and protective hand on her arm.

“Have you had an adventure?” Dahlia asked, a note of longing excitement in her voice.

“If they have, I’m betting it was unpleasant,” her brother drawled.

“Yes, it was,” Elliot responded shortly. “And so I would like to get the ladies somewhere more comfortable. We’ve all been on horseback for days.”

“And who are you again?” Ash looked Elliot up and down, not giving away his opinion of the new arrival on his face.

“This is Elliot,” Avery said. “He’s traveling with me.”

“Traveling with?—”

“Not together like that,” Mattie interrupted, the laugh clear in her voice. “Isn’t that right, Avery?” She gave Avery a knowing look.

“Yes,” Avery said defiantly. “That’s right. But he’s just ridden for days to rescue us, so he deserves consideration from all of us.”

“I didn’t end up doing much rescuing,” Elliot said. “It was mostly the parrot.”

“Of course it was.” Frank preened himself from his usual perch on Nutmeg’s saddle.

“Is that mangy thing still with you?” Ash peered at Frank in disgust.

Frank turned a half circle on the saddle, flicking his tail at Ash. “Mangy boy,” he croaked. “Full of fleas.”

Ash flushed a dark red and started toward the parrot.

“Oh don’t start that again.” His mother caught his arm and hauled him toward the cottage door. “You know how Frank is. But there’s no separating him from Avery.” She threw an amused look over her shoulder. “We tried hard enough when she was traveling with us.”

Elliot grinned sympathetically in return, although his antagonism for the parrot had significantly receded since the bird’s pivotal role in Avery’s rescue. Elliot was well aware he would have struggled to even track them without Frank.

Inside, the cottage proved just as cozy as the outside. They didn’t have nearly as many unusual teas as Mattie, but the kettle seemed to boil non-stop, and Elliot’s cup was never empty.

Even better, it turned out that both Sylvia and Ewan were excellent cooks, and the spread that was soon before them left nothing to be desired. Not that you would guess it from watching Dahlia. She picked at her food and sighed, too busy alternating between casting longing looks at Avery and hopeful looks at her mother to eat much.

But from the stern looks Sylvia was sending back, she still didn’t consider Dahlia old enough to leave home and go traveling with her older cousin. And Elliot didn’t think the story they were about to tell was likely to soften Sylvia.

Sure enough, Avery's family were just as horrified by the tale of their recent misadventures as he had expected. Sylvia's response seemed to be to ply them all with a variety of sweet food, a form of sympathy he was happy to accept.

Mattie and Ewan went into a long conversation about the security of the record-keeping hall which went largely over his head because he was too busy watching Avery. She was clearly happy to be reunited with her cousins—the closest thing she had to siblings—and the three of them talked almost too fast for him to follow, catching each other up on the various happenings since they were last together.

"It can be a bit overwhelming, can't it?" Sylvia murmured to him with a look of half exasperation, half affection. "But you get used to it eventually." Her warm smile invited him into the family circle, and he remembered that she had been the one to marry into the roving merchant clan. And now she was looking at him like a fellow outsider being brought into the fold.

She seemed to have misunderstood his and Avery's situation, just like Mattie had done. But he couldn't protest when she'd given him nothing more than a look of shared sympathy. And the more he watched Avery's family, the less he wanted to protest. Apparently Avery's uncle had loved traveling just as she did, and yet here he was, settled with his family. Perhaps Avery would also have a change of heart?

"I don't know how you do it, Mattie," Ewan said from the head of the table, his voice catching Elliot's attention. "We've only been here for two years, and I've had to take up running to try to soothe my itchy feet." He chuckled, but there was clearly real discomfort behind it.

He looked over at his wife, his face softening as he watched her clearing dishes. "She endured the discomfort of travel for my sake for twenty years. Now that it's my turn, I don't know how she did it!" He sighed heavily. "It's only fair, of course. And I would rather have her and our beautiful children than travel, but some days it feels

even more stifling than I feared.”

Elliot quickly faced back toward Avery and her cousins, his brief hopeful thoughts dying. How could he ask Avery to join her life with his, knowing that sooner or later, she would have to sacrifice the thing she loved most?

The cottage suddenly felt stuffy and overly warm, a cage around him. He had just experienced a short period without Avery at his side, not knowing if she was safe. And he had only truly been able to breathe again when she was safe in the circle of his arms. He couldn't imagine a lifetime of such days.

But where did that leave him?

He wanted to get up and walk out—to find some release in the cool air outside. But before he could take action, Avery turned abruptly from her conversation and called down the table to Mattie.

“Thanks to Rene’s interruption, you never did answer our question back at your house. Do you know how our ancestor transferred his bond from his kingdom to his own body?”

Elliot froze, his attention successfully diverted and all thoughts of a walk forgotten. How could their purpose at the record keeper’s hall have slipped his mind?

“Why do you want to know that?” Sylvia asked, turning back to the table. “Do you think there’s a way for other people to do it?”

The obvious hope in her eyes hit Elliot hard, reminding him of an infinitely purer version of his mother’s dream.

Avery looked at him questioningly, and he shrugged, giving her family a basic

outline of his situation. It should have been difficult to tell four virtual strangers at once, but somehow it wasn't. They were Avery's family, and they were a unit built on love and trust in a way his family had never been. She trusted them, and he did, too.

"A lamp?" Dahlia asked, fascinated. "Of all the strange things! I've never heard of such a thing."

"No one has," Elliot said dryly. And he usually made sure to keep it that way.

Avery gave him a private smile of encouragement, slipping her hand into his and squeezing it gently. His earlier tension melted away at the feel of her hand in his, despite the fact that he had no new answers. He kept their fingers wound together, as they all turned questioning looks on Mattie.

The record keeper leaned back with a smile that indicated she was pleased to have an audience.

"It's not something the histories spell out explicitly," she said. "But I've spent years studying the issue and piecing together what happened from mentions in various accounts."

"And do you think you've found the answer?" Avery asked eagerly.

Mattie's face lit up, swept away in the topic. "Yes, actually."

"Well?" Elliot asked, unable to keep himself silent.

"The first roving merchant—our distant ancestor—was from Halbury."

Avery nodded, so clearly that was general family knowledge.

“That’s undisputed,” Mattie continued. “But most people assume he was one of the rare individuals whose desire to travel and find new horizons was so strong that it overwhelmed the Legacy’s tie to his home kingdom. But from what I’ve read, I don’t think that was true at all. I think he was someone who loved his hometown and was perfectly content to remain there. It was only after the tie was broken that he became interested in travel.”

“What?” Avery stared at her. “How is that possible? Why would he ever have broken the tie in that case?”

“Exactly!” Mattie sounded triumphant. “Most of our family are interested in the more recent histories—the accounts of the various regions that can be of use in their own travels. But I discovered a mention of our original ancestor’s personality before the tie was broken, and I was so surprised and curious that I combed through all our oldest records, looking for clues.” She paused dramatically. “And my conclusion is that he didn’t want to break the Legacy at all.”

“You mean someone else did it to him against his wishes?” Elliot asked. “But why? And how?”

“Don’t forget he was Halburan,” Mattie said.

“You mean a bargain?” Avery eyes widened, as if she was picturing the scenario playing out.

Elliot sucked in a breath. The Halbury Legacy loved bargains. But it also required stakes of real value. If you wished to make a bargain in Halbury—one with the weight of the Legacy behind it—you had to be willing to put something valuable on the line.

“So the tie wasn’t something he wanted to give up, it was a price someone enacted

from him. His sacrifice was breaking his tie to his beloved home.”

Mattie nodded. “And it was only after it was broken that he developed any interest in travel. Even then, he didn’t actually leave his home town until his wife passed away. After that, it was too painful to stay there, so he began traveling—and discovered he loved it.”

“Did she die very young?” Elliot asked, surprised.

Mattie shook her head. “Younger than him, but it’s another mistaken idea that the tie was broken when he was a young man. He was already married with grown children before the crucial bargain.”

“So his children had their tie broken at the same time—not when they were born but as adults?” Dahlia asked, sounding fascinated.

Mattie nodded. “There are several mentions that confirm it.”

“So you’re saying his love for his home was false?” Sylvia sounded unexpectedly frosty. “That anyone who doesn’t want to live a life of travel would feel differently if only they were freed? Don’t you think it’s a bit insulting to suggest that anyone who thinks differently from your family is just a puppet of the Legacy who doesn’t know their own mind?”

Elliot looked down at the ground. Part of him wanted to defend Avery and Mattie, but another part of him agreed with Sylvia. The two of them were in the same unique position—they had traveled for years because of a family member and found the experience wanting. Although Sylvia seemed to find some appeal in having her tie to Glandore broken.

Perhaps she wished for a future where she and her husband could alternate between

periods of travel and periods of being settled, all without any ongoing discomfort from the Legacy? Would such a life be bearable for both parties?

His mind had wandered to a possible future with Avery again, but Mattie's vehement response drew him back. "No, no, I'm not saying everyone loves travel deep down."

Elliot expected her to be apologetic, but instead she fixed Sylvia with a stern eye. "You know me better than that, Sylvia. Who was it who advised Ewan that the time had come to settle down? You know I don't think your feelings invalid. I'm merely making the point that most people aren't free to make an informed decision. They've never tried traveling or visiting new places because the pull toward their own kingdom is so strong they can't see past it. When our ancestors were freed from their bonds, it allowed them the freedom to make up their own minds. The bargain maker had two daughters and a son. One of the daughters and the son joined him to become the original roving merchants. But the other daughter's heart never turned from her home. She visited her siblings and father on occasion, but she remained living in their original town until the day of her death. There are lots of reasons why people want to put down roots. I'm just saying that the Legacy's pull makes it hard to know either way. It can mask some people's underlying interest in travel."

Sylvia sat back, nodding. Her eyes flicked between her children—the living embodiment of both extremes.

"So to break his tie to the lamp," Avery said slowly, "Elliot would have to travel to Halbury and make a bargain?" Her mind was clearly not on her aunt and cousins.

Her face was tight, and she was carefully not meeting Elliot's eyes. He could guess why. Their path to Bolivere was northwest, heading back to the river, to the top corner of Glandore—which happened to be almost as far as possible from the kingdom of Halbury.

Avery was even more desperate to get to Bolivere since Rene's attempt to stop her, and she wasn't going to divert her path to Halbury first. Which meant she was going to ask him to return the lamp to her—and then she was going to hand it over to the people of Bolivere. She had promised to help him find a way to break his tie afterward, but could they guarantee the townsfolk would give it back?

"I'm not sure if that's the only way," Mattie said slowly, making Avery's eyes brighten. "It's something I'm continuing to research."

Elliot's shoulders slumped. If there was another way, Mattie didn't know it—at least not yet.

"If it's that simple," Dahlia said, apparently having reached the opposite conclusion on its difficulty from Elliot, "then how come others haven't worked it out in all the years since then?"

Despite her false idea of the simplicity of the matter, it was a good question. Elliot's own mother was an example of someone who would pay dearly for instructions on how to break her tie to her kingdom. As would Lorne, presumably.

But instead of Mattie answering, it was Avery who spoke, her voice thoughtful. "Because the people who've tried to break it are the ones who don't think of their bond as something to be sacrificed. While the ones who would consider it a sacrifice aren't trying to break it. All these years, everyone has been approaching it the wrong way."

"Exactly." Mattie nodded approvingly. "Most people are so busy pursuing what they want that they don't stop to consider what they should sacrifice. If you ever want to apprentice to me, Avery, you'd make a good future record keeper."

Avery shuddered. "No, thank you. I have no desire to settle down, even if it did mean

managing a spectacular library.”

Mattie chuckled. “Well, if you ever change your mind...”

Elliot shifted uncomfortably. He had known from the beginning that Avery loved to travel, so there was no reason for it to hit him harder every time she confirmed it.

“So the Legacy is the real villain here.” Dahlia wrinkled her nose.

Mattie’s approving expression faded as she looked from Avery to her younger cousin. “I know you’ve never been to a regular school,” she said sternly, “but I also know that roving merchants teach their children better than that. The Legacy doesn’t have a consciousness. It’s not a person. It’s just a force that works to run each kingdom according to that kingdom’s history. It isn’t punishing anyone.”

“It feels like a punishment,” Dahlia muttered.

She clearly still hadn’t made peace with being forced to settle down. In a strange way, Elliot could relate. He didn’t know if he would ever make peace with his mother for forcing him to travel, and for?—

He cut off his thoughts. He didn’t want to dredge up old history, not with everything else going on.

When Ewan started talking to his daughter in a quiet voice, Avery tugged at Elliot’s hand.

“Come on,” she whispered. “Let’s go for a walk and get some fresh air.”

Chapter 22

Elliot

They were further north than the capital, meaning the air had some bite behind it with the sun down. But it felt cool and refreshing to Elliot. Inside the cottage, the future had felt stifling and impossible, but out here, it stretched before him, full of possibilities. Or maybe that was because Avery was at his side, and they were alone again for the first time in days.

He couldn't shake off Sylvia's ember of hope or the spark of a future it had planted in him. Was it possible that two people of differing tastes could find enough of a settled home to give them roots while still traveling enough to keep that life from feeling closed off and stifling? Would Avery ever consider such a compromise?

His hand brushed inadvertently against hers, sending a different sort of spark racing through him. She turned to smile up at him, the last of the day's light glinting in her eyes and dancing through the waves of her dark hair. His gaze traced her perfect face, and it was a struggle not to linger on her full lips. She had never looked more beautiful to him than in this moment, when the tantalizing possibility of a future between them—no matter how tenuous—danced before his eyes.

She stopped, turning toward him, and placed a light hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry, Elliot," she murmured, and his heart clenched. "If there was any way I could avoid asking for the lamp back..."

She looked close to tears, but he felt light with relief. He had gotten ahead of himself

in his mind. Avery was thinking of the lamp and asking for it back as he had known she would.

“It’s all right.” He smiled down at her. “I knew you didn’t give it to me to keep.”

She smiled tremulously. “I hope you know I meant what I said at the beginning. Once I’ve completed my mission with Bolivere, I will help you. It’s unfortunate that our best hope lies in Halbury, but we can easily travel there after Bolivere.”

“If the people of Bolivere are willing to give up the lamp,” he said lightly, unable to feel his usual fear at the question.

Avery was standing so close, the sunset rays dancing over her, and his mind was too full of her to focus on anything else. He took a small step closer, and she didn’t pull back. She didn’t even seem to notice, despite her hand still resting on his arm. Her mind was elsewhere, and she bit down on her lower lip. He swallowed.

“Elliot, I—” She looked up at him, her words dying as her eyes widened.

Had she finally noticed how close they were, or could she read everything he was feeling in his eyes? He took the final small step that closed the distance between them, and her eyes darkened.

She licked her lips and tried again. “Elliot?—”

His name sounded different on her lips the second time, a world of meaning behind the simple word. Looking into her eyes, he saw his own heart reflected back at him. His heartbeat crescendoed, robbing him of breath—or perhaps that was the way Avery shone in the last of the day’s light.

Without thought or intention—as naturally as if breathing—he lowered his head to

hers. She tilted up to meet him, her hand tightening on his arm as his wound around her.

It was the perfect kiss, their lips a perfect match. Soft, but with a hint of passion—the beautiful weaving of hope and desire. His heart soared in his chest at the confirmation that she was drawn to him as he had been to her from the very beginning.

After a long moment that was both timeless and too short, she drew back slightly. He rested his head gently against hers while his chest heaved with the effort of steadying his breath.

“Elliot,” she whispered, the name somehow carrying yet another layer of meaning.

“Avery,” he said back, a smile in his voice. He could have said the musical syllables of her name a hundred times.

Avery’s cheeks tinged pink, and she stepped away from him. He couldn’t bear to completely let her go, however, keeping hold of her hand. She smiled down at it, as he wove his fingers through hers.

Tugging her gently along, he led her to a carved wooden bench at the edge of the cottage’s garden, pulling her down to sit beside him. The bag at his side bumped against the seat, and with a jolt he pulled it off.

He draped it over one of her shoulders, smiling down at her. “Your lamp, my lady.”

She stroked the length of the bag, her eyes suspiciously moist. “It means everything that you trust me with this. Thank you.”

“Of course I trust you,” he said. “You trusted me first, after all.”

She nodded slowly, her eyes still on the bag. But drawing a swift breath, she looked up at him.

“You don’t have to worry about what happens after Bolivere,” she said. “The townsfolk have a particular need for this lamp, but they’ll be willing to sell it to you afterward.”

“After what?” he asked, not really thinking about the words. His mind was still too full of their kiss.

“After they kill the beast,” she whispered.

“What?” His head whipped around, and he stared down at her. “What did you say?”

“Not a Glandore Legacy Beast,” she hurried to say. “This one was never a person.”

He relaxed slightly, but the new knot in his chest didn’t entirely unwind. The Glandore Legacy had an unfortunate habit of turning young men into Beasts, but if it wasn’t the Legacy’s work ...

“This Beast is a vicious, dangerous creature that lives in a cave just outside of town,” Avery continued, her voice gaining confidence now that she had committed to telling him the full story.

“It came from across the mountains—a true beast fueled by a foreign Legacy. I don’t know how it found a path across, although perhaps it was in less of a maddened state then. Maybe it’s the separation from its home Legacy that has turned its mind so vicious and feral.”

“This creature is killing the people of Bolivere?” Elliot asked, horrified. Had it taken people he knew? His mind ran through the many possibilities. “Why haven’t they

banded together and fought it?”

Avery winced. “After it took the first man, they tried to do just that. That’s how it got the second man. The problem is that the creature isn’t one that should exist in Glandore, and its presence has confused the Glandore Legacy.”

Elliot’s breath quickened. In Glandore, the Legacy protected Beasts.

“We’re not sure what is a remnant of its home Legacy and what is the work of Glandore’s own, but it’s proven impossible to catch.”

“Then they need to storm the cave!” Elliot said, his voice rising as he thought of the threat to his home town.

Avery shushed him, looking back toward the cottage. “Of course they’ve tried that, too. But the cave where it dwells is pitch black, and any light source they take inside is instantly extinguished.”

“The lamp,” Elliot said, understanding at long last.

Avery nodded. “Precisely. They commissioned me to purchase a lamp that is also fueled by two Legacies—one that combines the properties of both Sovar and the kingdom over the mountains and that won’t go out, no matter the circumstances.”

“I can see why you’ve been so anxious to get back,” Elliot said. “But I don’t understand the need for secrecy. Or why anyone would hire Rene to prevent your return.”

Avery worried at her lip before sighing. “Their desire for secrecy relates to something else entirely. And it might be the same reason someone wants to keep the town in a state of unrest and uncertainty. The townsfolk want to keep from drawing any

attention because...because the local lord is dead.”

Elliot stiffened, his mind going blank at the unexpected mention of his father. His father had been dead for three years already. How could it still be a secret?

“They didn’t kill him,” Avery hastened to reassure him, misunderstanding his tension. “He died of a heart attack. But he was an incredible man and did a lot for Bolivere. In particular, he was a famously effective negotiator, and over the years he arranged all sorts of advantageous deals for the town. It had reached the point where he didn’t even need to be present when agreements were being made—any agreement entered into under his name was automatically given with good terms. So when he died, the people banded together and decided to keep his passing a secret. To the rest of the kingdoms, Bolivere is still under his guidance and support.”

Elliot drew a shaky breath. The whole town was maintaining a charade that his father was still alive. Was that why he hadn’t received his proper inheritance? Had his father been the one to hatch the plan before his passing? An ache started deep in his chest, and he hunched over, rubbing at it.

“Are you all right?” Avery disentangled her hand from his to place it against his forehead. “You don’t look so well.”

“I’m—” His lips formed the word fine, but his body wouldn’t let him say it.

He wasn’t fine. He hadn’t been fine since the day word had arrived that the father he hadn’t seen in nearly five years was dead. The message had arrived the day before his eighteenth birthday.

He had already made his plans and packed his bags before it reached him. When morning dawned—bringing with it his birthday—he was going to start the journey back to his home. Back to Bolivere. Back to the father who loved him.

That had been the deal. His mother had claimed that since his father had already had the first thirteen years of Elliot's life—and thirteen of her years alongside him—it was only just that she be given a mere five. Elliot had even left Bolivere with her willingly at first—if reluctantly—determined to stand as her protector. But by the time he reached eighteen, he had long since learned the true nature of her selfish character—the character his father had previously shielded him from.

The lesson hadn't come from the black eyes he received from the various groups of local youths whenever he attempted to defend her honor, but from her own mercurial and callous treatment of both Elliot and the string of people she leached off. Whenever one protector or town began to see through her string of lies—their admiration for her beauty and charm turning to disgust—she moved on to the next sympathetic target.

By the time he neared eighteen, he was counting down the days until he had completed his time with his mother and could return to his father. Except when the day finally dawned, his father was already gone.

In her never-ending selfish quest for new levels of excitement and admiration, his mother had robbed him of his father's final five years. Elliot had endured for years in the knowledge that he had a home waiting for him and at least one parent who truly cared for him. But in one message that had all been stripped away.

The blow had been almost enough to fell him on its own, the words of the short letter swimming before his eyes. His father's steward must have changed sometime after Elliot left Bolivere, because the one who wrote to him had possessed only enough courtesy to pen him a short missive with the most basic fact of his father's passing, not even bothering to sign his name. Perhaps he didn't want to take responsibility for the changes Elliot's father had made before his death—the news of which was a further blow that crushed Elliot almost completely.

The details of those changes had been delivered by his mother. The note to Elliot had been enclosed in a longer missive to the woman who had been his legal guardian at the time of his father's death. To her, the steward had written of the terms of her husband's will. Elliot's note had mentioned a pouch of coins to be used for travel expenses, and the pouch was opened in his presence by his mother and solemnly handed over to him in its entirety. She didn't even mention the indignity of her own complete removal from the will. Even his mother understood better than to meddle with an inheritance.

Elliot had raged, some of his fury directed at his mother and some at himself. If only his misguided youthful honor and loyalty hadn't led him to leave his home without a struggle. If only he had expressed his true feelings loudly and clearly, so that his father never doubted where Elliot's heart really lay.

Elliot's mother had thought he would stay with her after the news—had seemed to think it the only possible course. She had even attempted to comfort him with the reminder that his father couldn't disinherit him from the title, at least, even if he could do as he liked with the estate. And she had begun to talk of how the coin might benefit them both.

But Elliot had ignored her, leaving that day as planned. All he had cared about was going somewhere far from his mother—anywhere as long as it wasn't Bolivere.

His mother had walked away from her marriage with far more coin than her husband had been obligated to give his deserting wife, and she had no claim on any of the remaining wealth that had originally come from Elliot's paternal grandparents. Without his mother's extravagant spending, the coin his father had left was enough to sustain him for three years as he mindlessly wandered the kingdoms, trying to forget the home that was no longer his. But it was nothing compared to the wealth of his father's full estate.

Not that it was the loss of his fortune that hurt so badly. Elliot hadn't dreamed of his old home because he cared about being lord of the manor one day. He had treasured thoughts of Bolivere because it was his home, and he had believed himself to be valued there. He wasn't surprised his father would want his fortune to benefit the town, but it hurt that he no longer believed Elliot could be entrusted to steward the wealth for the benefit of Bolivere as he himself had done. Even worse was the mention of travel expenses—as if his father had thought Elliot wanted to keep traveling. As if he hadn't known Elliot intended to return home as soon as possible.

For three years Elliot had stayed on the move, fleeing the pain that came whenever he thought of his childhood home—the place that was home no longer, the place that hadn't wanted him back. Even when he could no longer bear life on the road for another week, he had chosen a new home far from the echoes of his father.

Elliot had never asked what had happened to the house. The money would have been used to support town improvement efforts—re-doing the retaining wall around the small dam to the northeast would have been top of the list, he guessed, and he didn't resent that. But they must have sold the house, and it pained him to picture a new noble family with no tie to the town moving in, erasing the heart and spirit of the home along with the memories of Elliot's childhood.

Occasionally he had even imagined the old manor house derelict and empty, falling into disarray—as if the townsfolk would rather see it rot than have Elliot living there. The one thing he had never imagined was that it could be exactly the same as it had always been, maintained under a facade of normalcy—still running in his dead father's name.

Shame squeezed him. The people of Bolivere were sheltering behind a masquerade, hounded by brigands like Rene, and picked off in the shadows by a beast that dwelled in the cave that had never really held a dragon. And yet they had chosen the path that led them there over Elliot's leadership.

Sweat beaded on his back. He had resented the fact that one youthful mistake—made with good intentions—had been enough for both his father and the town to judge and reject him. And his resentment had made him run from the pain of his father's death instead of confronting it as he should have done.

By the time of his father's death, his eyes had been opened to the extent of his mother's callous selfishness, so could he really blame any of them? Wasn't it natural that people who hadn't seen him for years would fear he might have been tarred with the same brush? Especially when he hadn't returned in so long. At sixteen, when he had considered turning sailor, he had allowed his mother to convince him to stay with her. Instead, he should have left her and returned to his father. He should have given his father—and Bolivere—a chance to see his true character.

It had been Elliot's choice not to do so, and even if Bolivere had subsequently misjudged and rejected him, he should have returned to pay his father his final respects and to check that the community his father had loved was doing well. He could have shown them they were wrong about him—he could have created a future for himself among them, even if it wasn't as lord of the manor. But instead he had run, and now it turned out the people of Bolivere had been dying.

"Elliot." Avery took one of his hands in both of hers. "What is it? What's wrong?"

He shook his head, still unable to speak. He had made a mistake three years earlier, and he had been continuing to make it every day since. But Avery was guiding him back to where he belonged. He didn't need to put down roots somewhere—he already had roots. He had just been too afraid to face them.

The pain and fear washed over him in waves, and he let them come until they began to recede, each wave a little smaller than the one before—Avery's grip an anchor in the darkness.

But when the ocean inside him had settled, leaving behind new determination, her fingers, which were wrapped around his, began to burn. He leaped to his feet, pulling away from her.

She stood as well, her brow creased with concern and hurt in her eyes.

“Won’t you tell me what’s wrong?” she asked.

He forced a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “We should head back. The others will be wondering where we are.”

“I don’t care about the others,” she said with her usual determination. “I care about you.”

His heart tried to leap at her words, only to crash back down, caged and restrained. It hurt him all the way to his core to be causing her pain, but the brief glimpse of a possible future together had been doused in the cold waves of an ocean. Elliot wasn’t free to set up home wherever he liked, moving through the kingdoms with Avery.

It would take him years to be half the man his father was, and he was already late starting. He had rejected his father’s legacy—which was the people his father had loved, not his father’s money or his house—for too long already. He would return to his roots, and Avery would return to her wings. There was no future between them once he broke his tie to the lamp.

He had let his emotions sweep him up, his kiss suggesting a future he could no longer create with her. He had already wronged Avery, and the faster he returned matters to how they should always have been, the better for her.

“I’m flattered,” he forced himself to say in a carefree tone. “But we’ll freeze if we stay out here much longer.”

He started toward the cottage, not waiting for her agreement. He could tell her everything, of course, but his mouth still wouldn't form the words. Not yet. It would be hard enough to admit his mistakes to her, or the way his own father had rejected him as flawed, but how could he confess when it meant admitting the irrevocable truth that he would soon have to separate from her?

He had already endured as much pain as he could take in one evening.

Chapter 23

Avery

A very's eyes followed Elliot around the cottage, no matter how much she tried to stop them. She was almost certain he knew it, too, although he was always careful not to meet her gaze. She kept trying to steal a moment alone with him, determined to ask again about what was wrong, but he deftly avoided any such opportunity—an effort that was aided by the number of people in the small dwelling.

She consoled herself that he wouldn't be able to avoid her once they were traveling alone again, but when morning arrived, Mattie surprised them all with an unexpected announcement. Instead of Ewan's offered escort back to the capital, she intended to travel on with Avery and Elliot.

"I may not be the traveling type," she said complacently, "but I'm still a roving merchant by blood. Every now and then I need to get out of the library and see something of the kingdoms." She cast a knowing look at Avery and Elliot. "And something tells me traveling with the two of you won't be dull."

Avery could barely school herself to give the necessary words of welcome. After the dizzying heights and suffocating depths of emotion she had experienced the evening before, she was struggling with her usual composure.

She had never imagined a kiss like the one she had shared with Elliot, but something in her words afterward had made him close himself off from her. It had to be something she had said about Bolivere, but as much as she wracked her brains, she

couldn't think what might have warranted such an extreme reaction.

She wasn't even sure it had anything to do with her at all. She had seen the pain in his eyes before his walls came up, and she suspected he was shielding himself from something. But it still hurt that he wouldn't share his pain with her.

When he had taken her in his arms, a whole future together had unfurled before her. But how could they ever share a life if he couldn't be honest with her?

Her initial reaction to Mattie's declaration had been disappointment, but perhaps it was a good thing they would have company on the road. If she and Elliot had no future, it was better if she started distancing herself immediately, and traveling alone together wouldn't help with that. Of course it would also be easier to create some distance if her mind wasn't determined to replay their kiss every time she closed her eyes.

They left the cottage much as they had arrived—three people and a parrot on the back of three horses. But their saddlebags were much better provisioned, they had proper bedrolls, and all of them were better rested after Avery's family insisted the guests take the good mattresses so they could have at least one solid night's sleep.

"I'm glad you had family like Ewan and Sylvia to take you in after your parents passed away," Elliot said softly as they rode away. "I can see they think of you like one of their own children. They seem like good people."

"They are," Avery said confidently. "Uncle Ewan and my mother were the only two siblings in their family, and they were close growing up. Even when my parents were still alive, our two families would sometimes travel together."

"I have no extended family on my father's side," Elliot said, surprising her by initiating talk about his family and his past. "And my mother always refused to talk

about hers. They were estranged, and she always claimed they treated her badly, but I suspect it was the other way around. She was always full of tales of how she had been wronged, and when I was young, I believed them. But eventually she began telling tales of situations I had witnessed for myself, and her tales always bore little resemblance to reality.”

“I wish you’d had an Uncle Ewan and Aunt Sylvia,” Avery said.

“I just wish I still had—” Elliot cut himself off, leaving Avery to wonder what he had been going to say.

“Are we going to cut northwest directly for Bolivere?” Mattie asked, stopping Avery’s thoughts from turning endlessly around Elliot’s unfinished sentence.

“More or less,” she replied. “We’ll reach the beginning of Glandore’s northern forest soon, so we’ll have to stick to the roads if we want to move quickly. That means we can’t go in a totally straight line.”

“Hmmm...” Mattie gazed off into the distance. “So we’ll go through Thebarton, then?”

Avery nodded since it was the obvious route. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to stay in the town, though,” she said reluctantly. “Whoever hired Rene might have hired other teams of mercenaries as well.”

Elliot frowned. “Maybe following major roads isn’t a good idea?”

“I can help with that,” Mattie said. “Northern Glandore has a network of old roads that get little traffic. The newer roads are the ones they maintain, so regular travelers prefer them, and the old ones should be deserted. If we had the cart, the old roads might prove difficult, but on horseback we should be fine. They’ve deteriorated, but

the trees haven't reclaimed them yet."

Avery and Elliot exchanged a look, and Elliot shrugged.

"I usually always have my cart with me, so I'm not familiar with the old roads," Avery said. "But I'm happy to use them if you can guide us."

"I didn't even know they existed," Elliot said. "My mother and I didn't spend much time in this region."

Avery frowned. Exactly what had happened to Elliot's mother in Bolivere?

Mattie led them unerringly to the closest road in the abandoned network. It was lumpy and full of potholes, but it was also empty.

"Sorry, girl." Avery patted Nutmeg's neck. "We'll be back to the normal roads soon, don't worry."

"Better safe than wrong," Frank squawked, taking off from the back of her saddle to stretch his wings.

"Does that bird ever get anything right?" Mattie asked with a scowl toward the streak of color above her.

"Yes," Elliot said, surprising Avery by jumping in to defend Frank. "He was the one who rescued you. It didn't even occur to me to pack your wake up tea."

"Ugly and foolish," Frank called from above, apparently not out of earshot.

"I'm not saying he's not a menace," Elliot added. "He definitely is. Just that he does occasionally get something right."

“Well, I suppose of all the times for him to get it right, that was the one,” Mattie said. “But I’m not sure how I feel about finding myself beholden to one of those parrot pests.”

“Are they all so obnoxious?” Elliot asked. “I don’t remember them being so bad.”

“Some are worse than others,” Mattie said. “And Frank is a particularly bad example.” She turned to look at Avery. “I don’t know why you put up with him.”

“Most people assume I saved Frank from something,” Avery said. “And that’s why he’s so loyal to me. But it was actually the other way around. He saved me.”

Mattie’s eyebrows rose. “So he’s appalling in ordinary life but exceptional when it comes to a crisis. I suppose there are worse animal companions.”

“There are certainly better,” Elliot muttered, his new appreciation for Frank only going so far.

Avery just smiled. She would never accept a person behaving the way Frank did, but his mind didn’t work like a human’s. She couldn’t hold him to the same standard as a person when he didn’t have the understanding of one. She’d traveled enough in Glandore to grow used to him, and these days the things he said mostly amused her.

She had hoped that even with Mattie’s company, she would find a way for some proper conversation with Elliot. But it turned out to be even harder to do on the road than it had been in a crowded cottage. With the intimacy of only three of them, it would have been too pointed and rude to attempt private conversation without Mattie. Avery and Elliot might have succeeded at arranging it subtly if they were working together, but Elliot showed no interest in maneuvering their way into a private setting, and Avery couldn’t bring herself to obviously exclude Mattie.

Not that Elliot's manner was obviously cold or standoffish. He helped with the practicalities of their travel in the same way as always, making it a simple matter to set up and pack down their camp each morning and evening, and to prepare the food. But the old warmth in his eyes had been replaced by flashes of pain, always quickly laughed away with a laugh that didn't sound quite natural.

Avery no longer needed to sleep under the cart, so all three of them positioned themselves comfortably around the fire each night. Mattie turned out to be an excellent storyteller, as well as a keeper of written records, and she filled the evenings with tales of the various adventures and misadventures of Avery's distant family.

She had always loved hearing about other roving merchants. When she had started traveling alone, it had made her feel connected to know they were all out there somewhere and that she could run into some of them at any time. It was a connection she had craved after the loss of her parents.

Between Mattie's stories and Elliot's assistance, the travel itself was easy, but Avery still regretted having to bypass Thebarton. A night in a comfortable bed and a hot bath would have been welcome. She was dreaming of a meal from the excellent kitchens of the Mortar and Pestle when the sound of boots and male voices caught her attention.

"Rats in the barn!" Frank screeched, flying overhead and disappearing into the trees.

Avery, Elliot, and Mattie turned their mounts as one, following Frank off the road and among the trees. They had yet to encounter anyone else on the abandoned roads, and none of them wanted to meet whoever was coming their way.

They didn't go far, however, stopping among the trees where they still had a partial view of the road. Several men walked past, their appearance making Avery shiver. There was nothing obviously wrong with them, but they had the same feel as Rene

and his men. If she'd been asked to make a guess, she would have confidently pegged them as mercenaries.

"Are they after us, do you think?" Elliot asked.

Avery slowly shook her head. "If they are, they're incompetent. They won't get far on foot."

"Unless they have a camp somewhere nearby?" Mattie suggested, sending a shiver of unease down Avery's spine.

But once the men had disappeared down the road, the three of them continued on their way with no further sign of any fellow travelers, mercenaries or otherwise.

They camped in the trees not too far out of Thebarton, but Avery slept fitfully. Whether because of her dreams—far too many of which featured Elliot—or the men they had passed, she wasn't sure.

She was awake before dawn and decided to rise since there was no point lying awake in her bedroll. She prepared for the day as quietly as possible, taking pains not to wake Mattie or Elliot who had both slept better than she had.

She was just repacking her saddlebags when a distant commotion met her ears. She looked up, lines appearing between her brows as she tipped her head to the side, straining to hear.

Someone else was definitely in the forest with them, and whoever it was seemed to be in the middle of a noisy dispute. Curiosity tugged at her. Was someone in trouble?

Or was it the men they had seen earlier? If she could find their camp, would she learn anything about their intentions?

Acting on impulse, she stashed the lamp behind her bedroll and took off into the trees. The noise could stop at any moment, and they were far enough away that she needed to move quickly or risk losing track of the noise's location. There wouldn't be any danger to her as long as she stayed out of sight, and her mother had taught her to move silently through forests when she was only a girl. The potential intelligence that could be gained was worth the small amount of risk.

After all, she had a parrot on her side.

Chapter 24

Elliot

Elliot woke slowly at first and then quickly as he absorbed the sense that something was wrong. He didn't know what, but he felt it as certainly as anything.

He sat upright, looking around their small camp. Mattie still lay peacefully sleeping inside her bedroll on the other side of the fire, but Avery was gone. And not just gone from her bedroll. The entire thing was gone as if Avery had never existed.

He bolted to his feet, his heart hammering as he looked around the small clearing they had chosen for their camp. Nutmeg still stood with the other horses, and a flash of blue and red pinpointed where Frank slept in a nearby tree. But there was no sign of Avery.

He scooped up his sword from the ground, drawing it from the scabbard. The action was an instinct rather than any logical thought, but taking action of some kind calmed him enough to notice details he'd missed on first examination.

Avery's bedroll was gone from the fire, but it was rolled up neatly beside her saddlebags, not vanished completely. She must have woken up early and decided to start packing. There was every chance she had merely stepped into the trees to complete her morning's preparations—an idea that was strengthened by the fact that he hadn't been hit by any weakness or illness yet. She had to be close.

But as the minutes drew on, his confidence waned. He examined her saddlebags and

bedroll more closely, his heart sinking when he found the lamp stashed behind them.

She had left the lamp behind once before when she was abducted, but the same scenario made less sense in their forest camp. If she'd had time to stash the lamp, she would have had time to wake him and Mattie. The logical conclusion was that she had left by choice, knowing she was going too far to take it with her. But where would she have gone?

He would have to wake Mattie and Frank and initiate a search of the surrounding forest. But even Frank wouldn't be much use with the tree canopy blocking his line of sight.

Shouts and the crashing sound of running footsteps met his straining ears. He dashed toward the noises, not getting far before his knees weakened. He'd forgotten to grab the lamp.

Reluctantly he stopped and backed into the clearing again. If it was Avery he could hear, she sounded as if she was running toward them. He needed to wait for her where he had the strongest position.

He darted behind a tree only to change his mind and step back to the center of the clearing. If someone was pursuing Avery, he would show them that she wasn't a weak target.

Avery dashed headlong between two trees, panting from her run. She slid to a stop, her head swiveling until her eyes fell on Elliot.

"Oh good!" she exclaimed between pants. "You're awake."

Elliot reached her in two strides, sweeping her behind him just as two rough men burst into the clearing in pursuit. The first staggered to a halt at the sight of Elliot and

his sword, the second colliding with his back.

The second peered over his comrade's shoulder, his eyes widening. "Who are you?" he asked. "You aren't a Beast."

Struck by the absurdity of the situation, some of the tension in Elliot's frame unwound.

"Evidently." He raised a single brow. "Is that significant in some way?"

"It's not her," the first whispered over his shoulder to his comrade. "She's not the one the boss wants."

"What are we doing, then?" the second demanded in strident tones. "I didn't sign up for all this running!"

"Fools! Donkeys! Amphibians!" Frank burst from his branch in a flurry of inanity.

Both men took a wary step backward.

"My apologies." The first man attempted a bow and nearly tipped over.

"Didn't mean to disturb your sleep!" the second man said in alarmed voice as Mattie launched to her feet from full sleep with a roar, her hand clamping around the saucepan that she now kept beside her whenever she slept.

Before Mattie could settle on the source of the disturbance, the two men had turned tail and fled. Avery immediately bent double, and Elliot stepped toward her in concern, worried she was winded—or worse, injured.

A laughing wheeze escaped her, and he stopped. She was out of breath from laughter,

not pain or exertion.

“Stand down, Mattie,” he said flatly. “It’s just Avery causing trouble.”

She straightened at that. “I wasn’t the one causing trouble! Those men were mercenaries just like we thought.”

“Where have they gone?” Mattie stepped forward, the saucepan held in front of her like a sword and a deadly glint in her eyes.

“They were awfully quick to run away,” Elliot pointed out dryly.

“That’s because they might be mercenaries, but we aren’t their target,” Avery said, wiping tears of laughter from the edges of her eyes.

Understanding made Elliot sigh. “And let me guess, your blasted curiosity sent you off to investigate, and once you were there, you decided to single-handedly rescue their actual target, thus drawing their attention?”

Avery looked over at him, clearly struck. “Yes, actually! That’s exactly it. How did you know?”

“Because I know you,” he muttered, finally replacing his sword in its scabbard, although he made sure to buckle it firmly at his waist. “Did you consider the danger for even a second? Someone is after you, remember!”

“Of course I did,” Avery said airily. “But I couldn’t leave Rosalie tied to a tree! I’ve met her before in Thebarton, and she’s not the sort to be engaged in shady dealings. Cutting her loose was worth the minor risk.”

“Minor—” Elliot broke off with another sigh. Avery had been traveling alone for

nearly as many years as he had, so it would be presumptuous to start lecturing her on safety—even if the thought of her going after a group of mercenaries alone made his skin crawl.

“I notice Rosalie isn’t here professing her great thanks,” he said instead.

“That’s because she had somewhere important to be,” Avery said airily, apparently considering that normal. “There was some sort of time pressure. Hopefully she’ll tell me the full story next time we pass Thebarton.”

Elliot was struck silent by her casual use of we , as if she thought of him as a part of all her future travels.

“I figured I always had Frank if I needed help,” Avery said, oblivious. She turned accusing eyes on the bird. “But he was here sleeping the whole time.”

“I suppose I should just be grateful you didn’t need him.”

“Grateful is as grateful does,” Frank cawed, flying in to land beside the pack that held the food. He pecked at it, clearly unbothered by Avery’s recent close call or his absence.

“That bird...” Elliot muttered, but he went to open the pack and prepare them all some breakfast. The two men had been eager to be gone, but he still wanted to get back on the road as quickly as possible.

After the excitement outside Thebarton, the rest of the journey proved uneventful. But that didn’t stop the tension rising in Elliot with every mile closer to Bolivere. He knew both women—but especially Avery—could tell he wasn’t himself, but he didn’t know how to describe the tumult inside him.

If he'd been alone with Avery, he might have brought himself to confess everything. But with Mattie there as well, the words kept clogging in his throat. They would both find out the truth soon enough.

If the people of Bolivere were watching for Avery's arrival, they must have been looking west, toward the river. Entering from the east, Avery, Mattie, and Elliot arrived in the town without fanfare.

It looked tired and subdued compared to Elliot's memories, with none of the added shine he had been expecting given the distribution of his father's wealth. The crack in the retaining wall of the dam—the same one he remembered from his childhood—made his hands clench into fists. What exactly had his father's funds been used for?

As they walked the streets, the sight of the houses and buildings shook Elliot just as he had feared they would, flooding him with memories of his father. The familiar views cut at him, the small changes emphasizing how much time had passed since he had last walked the streets of his hometown. He caught sight of several missing buildings, but none of the new construction he had been expecting.

As they wound toward the center of town, he caught a glimpse of the manor where it perched on higher ground just north of the town. For an unthinking moment, his heart swelled with joy, and he was gripped by an unreasoning certainty that his father would be waiting for him around the next corner.

But reality returned, and his second sight of the stately home made his stomach sour. The happy years he had spent there were tainted by memory of his loss.

A youth running past slowed to look at them curiously. Elliot watched him cautiously, wondering how old the lad would have been when Elliot left Bolivere. Would he recognize Elliot?

But the boy's eyes caught on Avery. They widened as his whole face lit up. Almost tripping in his haste, he turned and fled without a greeting, his voice calling the news of Avery's return through the town.

People flooded out in response to his cries, converging on the travelers as they arrived in the central town square. Elliot had been planning to hang back as far as the lamp would allow—possibly even hiding himself between some of the buildings—but the crowd that surged around them made escape impossible. Quickly gathering the reins of the three horses, he positioned himself behind the two merchant women, grateful that Avery was the center of everyone's attention.

"Has anyone run to the big house?" he heard several voices calling.

"Yes, two boys have gone," one faceless person replied.

"I saw Corbett in town not twenty minutes ago," another chipped in. "He's probably still here. Has anyone seen him?"

Corbett? Elliot frowned at the familiar name. Why were the townspeople searching for the mischievous youth who had been the first to tell him the tale of the dragon in the cave?

But eight years had passed. Of course Corbett would no longer be a youth. He hadn't truly been a youth even when Elliot left.

Elliot searched his memory and dredged up an old recollection. Just before he left Bolivere, his father had mentioned his steward's plans to retire—and his intention to appoint Corbett in the man's place. Elliot had been surprised to hear it—Corbett had been barely twenty-two at the time, and Elliot had pictured stewards as aged, solemn people.

He hadn't protested, though. At thirteen he hadn't involved himself with running the estate. And even he would have admitted that Corbett had steadied significantly since he had first told a four-year-old Elliot to be wary of the dragon.

But Elliot had forgotten his father's words in the intervening years, and when Avery had shared the truth of Bolivere's situation with Mattie around the campfire the previous night, he hadn't thought of his old acquaintance. She had mentioned doing business with the steward without mentioning his name, and Elliot had pictured the ancient man who had served throughout his childhood.

Before he had adjusted to the thought of Corbett in such a position of authority, a man stepped forward, the crowd parting before him. Elliot stared at the face—at once familiar and unfamiliar.

There was no mistaking his identity. Despite the years, Elliot could clearly recognize Corbett. But his face held lines of age that hadn't been there when Elliot left. Like the three buildings that had been pulled down, and the new front to the bakery, Corbett's face reminded Elliot of all the years he had missed.

His gaze roamed over the rest of the crowd as he finally allowed himself to focus on each face. He found familiar person after familiar person, each with the same juxtaposition. Everywhere he looked, he saw recognizable features overlaid with new lines of age and maturity. Much had changed, and yet he knew these people. He recognized more than half the crowd, although he couldn't have put a name to them all.

A strange sensation passed through him. It had been eight years since he had stood in a crowd of people and known more than a small handful of them.

"Avery!" Corbett exclaimed. "We thought we would get advance warning of your coming, but even so, we've been watching the river. But you came from the east?"

Avery smiled. “My journey didn’t go to plan.”

Corbett’s expression tightened. “But you got the lamp?”

Avery nodded, pulling it from her bag with a flourish. “As promised.”

Corbett relaxed, relief washing over his features as Avery held the lamp out to him. He took it carefully, gazing down at it for a moment before turning to the crowd.

“This scourge ends tomorrow! We will finally face the creature in its den and defeat it.”

The crowd cheered, their voices loud although the faces Elliot saw showed a mixture of relief and terror. They hadn’t forgotten that the battle was still ahead.

Corbett turned back to Avery. “I see you came with companions this time. You are all welcome, of course, and I’ll have rooms prepared for you in—” His words died as he turned his welcoming smile from Mattie to Elliot, shifting slightly to get a proper view of him.

His face paled momentarily, his eyes widening, and Elliot tensed, waiting for the words of condemnation and rejection. But instead, something that looked remarkably like joy and relief swept over Corbett’s face.

“Elliot?” He stepped between Avery and Mattie, the merchants forgotten. “I mean, Your Lordship!”

Chapter 25

Elliot

Corbett gave a shallow bow and held out his hand for Elliot to shake, his broad smile still in place.

Elliot stared from Corbett's hand to his face, struggling to make sense of the steward's response. Elliot had barely been more than a child when he left, and Corbett had never treated him with so much respect. He certainly hadn't expected to be greeted with joy after both Elliot and the town had abandoned each other in turn.

Corbett's face started to fall at Elliot's frozen response, so Elliot quickly thrust out his hand and shook the steward's. Around them the crowd burst into frenzied whispering, their voices growing louder as they pressed in closer, each craning for a proper look at Elliot.

"Your Lordship!" The ancient mayor was the first to step out of the crowd, offering Elliot a deeper bow. "Welcome. Your return has been long awaited."

"Lordship?" Avery stared from the two men to Elliot, her face blank. "What are they talking about, Elliot?"

"Don't be slow," Mattie said. "Isn't it obvious? Last night when you kept talking about the steward, I did wonder what had happened to the old lord's son since I was sure I remembered him having one. It looks like we have our answer." She shook her head. "I just can't believe that none of the stories I heard about Opaline ever included

this little tidbit! So she was married to the lord of Bolivere before she started traveling.” She turned a calculating look on Elliot.

“Snake in the trees!” Frank cawed from Nutmeg’s saddle as he stared at Elliot from one beady eye and then the other.

But Elliot couldn’t focus on anyone except Avery. She was staring at him as if he had just declared his intention to take up a life of crime instead of having just been revealed as the heir to a noble line.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, but any further apology was cut off by the crowd surging forward and jostling Avery so badly she nearly fell.

Elliot tried to leap forward to assist her, but Corbett seized his arm, slowing him, and Mattie reached Avery first.

“We need to get you up to the manor,” Corbett murmured. “We can talk further there.”

The mayor stopped frowning at the crowd to exchange a look with Corbett. He had managed to create a small bubble of space in his immediate vicinity, and the rest of them sheltered inside it as the two men exchanged quiet words.

“You’ll see the ladies settled in their rooms at the inn?” Corbett asked, and the mayor solemnly nodded.

“Leave it to me. It’s best to get His Lordship out of the open for the moment.”

Corbett signaled at another man to take the reins off Elliot, and before Elliot could protest, he was being whisked out of the square in the direction of the manor. He tried to pull back, looking over his shoulder for a glimpse of Avery, but Corbett’s grip on

his arm was firm.

“The mayor will take care of the ladies,” Corbett said in a voice as firm as his hand. “The best thing we can do for them is to get you out of there before it becomes a crush and one of them gets trampled.”

Elliot stopped resisting, but dismay surged through him. He had known the truth would eventually come out in Bolivere, but he hadn’t expected such a dramatic reception—or to be immediately separated from Avery. He hadn’t even had a chance to?—

What? A chance to explain? He’d had days—weeks—to do that on the road. He should have seized his opportunity when he had it. Avery would certainly think so, and she would be right. He had allowed his resentment and pain to silence him about his past, and he was already paying the price.

Part of him still wanted to break away from Corbett and run back to Avery. But she had already been caught in the crowd once, and he couldn’t risk her being injured.

With a start, he remembered that he couldn’t leave Corbett, even if he wanted to. He had become accustomed to thinking of himself as bound to Avery, but he had never actually been bound to her. She had just been the one holding the lamp—a lamp she had just handed over to Corbett.

The realization shook Elliot. Avery had completed her commission for Bolivere, and now she had discovered that Elliot had been hiding things from her. If she felt betrayed enough to leave, despite her earlier promise to stay with him, there was no longer anything holding them together. He wouldn’t even be able to follow her—not as long as Corbett had the lamp.

“This is incredible!” Corbett marveled, unaware of Elliot’s internal turmoil. “Avery is

even more exceptional than I realized. Some of the townsfolk were uncertain about entrusting our commission to such a young roving merchant, but she's certainly proved herself beyond any possible expectation. She not only brought us the lamp but you as well! How ever did she find you?"

The silence stretched out long enough to make it obvious the question hadn't been rhetorical. "It's a long story," Elliot muttered, unsure how much more to say.

Corbett shook his head. "I can imagine. And it's a tale I would like to hear. But that can wait. The important thing is that you're here. We've all been counting down to Avery's return, but I didn't realize it would prove so momentous!"

Elliot stopped abruptly just inside the manor grounds, waiting until Corbett also stopped before speaking.

"I don't understand," he said. "If you were so eager for my return, why did you send me away in the first place?"

"Send you away?" Corbett's brow creased. "What do you mean? I wrote to you myself and even sent coin for your travel expenses to hasten your return."

Elliot stared at him, uncomprehending.

Corbett's expression of concern deepened. "Even if my original letter went astray, what about the other ones? When you didn't return after your father's death, we sent letters through all six kingdoms, following in your mother's wake. I made sure to re-explain the situation in every one of them, just in case. Surely at least one of them reached you? Isn't that why you're here now?"

"I haven't seen my mother in more than three years," Elliot said shortly, still struggling to understand the rest.

Corbett's eyes widened. "Then why didn't she write back and say so?" he exclaimed hotly.

Elliot sighed. "You do remember my mother, don't you? When did she ever expend energy on something for the benefit of someone else?"

Corbett bit back a curse, but Elliot's own fury was rising as he began to grasp the fullness of his mother's perfidy.

"You needn't hold back on insulting her for my sake," Elliot said darkly. "She and I have parted ways completely. But apparently we didn't do so soon enough. You say you wrote me a letter explaining everything and asking me to return? All I received was an unsigned note and a pouch of coins."

"Unsigned?" Corbett asked sharply. "Impossible. I wrote that letter myself, and of course I signed my name."

"You wrote it to me?" Elliot asked, needing direct confirmation. "Not my mother? And you asked me to return to take my father's place and claim my inheritance?"

Corbett's eyes tightened slightly. "Of course. I realize it didn't follow strict procedures, but I calculated that you would likely have turned eighteen before my letter found you, and I preferred to deal with you directly rather than involve Opaline in any way."

Elliot groaned, his anger burning almost as brightly toward his own past foolishness as toward his mother. Why hadn't he insisted on reading the full letter—the one she had claimed was addressed to her? He had been so shocked by the news of his father's death, and so shaken by his apparent rejection, that he had blindly accepted her claims. He should have known better.

“I only ever saw the first page of the letter,” he admitted, feeling fresh shame as he related his foolishness to his father’s steward. “It ended abruptly after mentioning coin for travel expenses, and she told me it had been a note enclosed within her own letter. Since I was a minor when my father died, it seemed—” He cut himself off.

He shouldn’t have tried to excuse his foolishness. He had known the inherent selfishness of his mother’s nature, and he should never have assumed she would consider inheritance sacred.

“Are you saying you never received the rest of my letter?” Corbett asked, his own tones full of anger. “I know Opaline was always a heedless, selfish woman, but why would she go to such lengths to conceal my plea for you to return?”

Elliot tried to remember back. He had been in such a haze of shock and pain at the time that he could barely recall the couple of days following his receipt of Corbett’s note. “I think she thought that with my father dead, I would stay with her,” he said slowly. “She must have known that if I left, she would never see me or a single one of my coins again. But why would she have lied about my inheritance?”

“Your inheritance?”

Elliot nodded, his thoughts still on that long ago interaction. “Surely she would have liked to get her hands on the whole of my father’s wealth and not just the pouch you sent to me?”

“You were young,” Corbett said in a dark voice, “and vulnerable. I know my duty, and I certainly wouldn’t have allowed Opaline to siphon off any of your estate’s wealth.”

Elliot nodded. “Yes, she must have known she wouldn’t be welcome in Bolivere. If I’d still been a boy with stars in my eyes for my charming mother, it might have been

a different story. But I was utterly disillusioned by then. She must have guessed that her only hope of gaining anything was to cut me off completely and keep me chained to her.”

“Cut you off completely?” Corbett sucked in a breath. “Are you saying she denied you your inheritance? What did she claim was in my letter?”

“She told me that my father had changed his will and cut me out almost completely. She claimed that pouch was the full amount of my inheritance while the rest had been left to Bolivere. I understood you actively wished me to stay away and was imagining the town in a state of prosperity. But it didn’t look that way when I came in.”

“Prosperity?” Corbett winced. “We’ve been barely keeping everything together since your father passed.”

“I only discovered the true state of things when Avery told me the truth about your situation.”

Corbett gave a dark laugh. “She doesn’t know the half of it.”

Elliot’s eyes shot to his, his eyebrows rising.

Corbett hesitated before shaking his head. “Not here. I’ll tell you everything, of course, but let’s continue for now.” He gestured ahead into the manor grounds.

As they began walking again, he couldn’t stop shaking his head. “I think I need a moment to recover from this revelation. How could she do something so terrible to her own son? It’s beyond villainous.”

“She no doubt found some way to excuse it in her mind,” Elliot said with a hard edge to his voice. “She always does.”

Corbett's face tightened. "Your father was a very wise man, but I never understood what he saw in her."

"He saw her beauty, I think," Elliot said as they walked side by side through the outer edges of the estate. "And her charm and affection. I have enough memories of my very early years to remember she used to be affectionate—back before she grew bored of playing the pampered mistress of the manor. Even now she's good at charming acquaintances—although their opinions always change in the end."

He shook away the memories that crowded his mind. "My father would have done well to look for signs of her character rather than her charm. But she was always his greatest blindness."

They followed a bend in the main drive, and the manor house appeared before them. If the earlier nostalgia had seemed strong, it was nothing to the wave that hit Elliot as he reached his childhood home.

He walked forward in a daze, only to be brought up short by a grizzled older man who stepped into the path in front of them.

"Master Elliot!" he cried with delight. "I mean...Your Lordship." He chuckled at his own forgetfulness, offering Elliot a hand which Elliot shook more speedily than he had Corbett's.

"You're still here!" he exclaimed, remembering the gardener who had always let him take a turn with the pruning shears.

"Aye, My Lord," he said with a grin. "I'm not gravebound yet."

Elliot flushed. "I merely meant that you might have retired by now."

“But who else remembers how you like the garden kept?” the man asked with a wink.
“O’ course none of us were going to leave before the young master returned.”

“None of us?” Elliot repeated, looking toward Corbett who shrugged and nodded.

“Master Elliot! Master Elliot!” Several people came running down the path from the house, puffing with the exertion.

When they reached him, the matronly lady in front threw her arms around him and burst into tears.

“We’re saved! We’re saved!” she cried.

The others stood back a little, but they looked no less relieved.

“It’s Your Lordship now, Cook,” the gardener said, and the woman finally released Elliot and stood back, mopping at her eyes.

“Why, so it is, and foolish me,” she said, beaming at Elliot. “I’m just that pleased to see you again, young master.”

Elliot smiled uneasily back at her. He remembered her fondly—largely because of all the spiced buns she used to sneak him. But he didn’t want to take credit that belonged to Avery.

“Actually it’s Avery, the roving merchant, who brought the lamp to save you,” he said.

Cook stared at him blankly for a moment before glancing at Corbett.

“Oh, that creature in the cave, you mean? Yes, we’ll be well pleased to see him gone.

No one's been able to set foot outside at night without fear ever since it took old Hubbard. And the children can't play in the forest at all. Supplies are hard to come by too, since that merchant train got attacked. No merchants will come near this region at the moment, so you'll find we have a meager table, I'm afraid. We're scraping by on what we grow and make ourselves, but some of the younger ones are talking about getting up a supply chain of our own, it's getting that desperate—" She broke off when Corbett cleared his throat meaningfully, although he was hiding a smile as he did it.

"Well, never mind all that," she said. "I hope I can still put a decent meal together, whatever the restrictions. But I wasn't meaning that creature—as glad as we'll be to see it gone. I meant us here at the manor are saved."

"He didn't get any of our letters," Corbett said. "He doesn't know about Clarence."

"Not a single one?" the gardener cried. "But my son went after Her Ladyship himself when we didn't hear back after the first two letters. He tracked her down and swore he put it into her hand himself. She promised to pass it on."

Elliot ground his teeth together. What must they have been thinking of him all this time? And who was Clarence to have them so concerned?

He turned to Corbett with a look of inquiry. The steward had said there was more to relate, and Elliot was growing more and more impatient to hear the full tale.

"I think I need to hear what's been going on here in my absence," he said.

Corbett quickly nodded. "Why don't we go inside and use your father's old study? It's untouched."

"Except for the cleaning, of course," one of the women behind Cook chimed in. "You

won't find any dust." She sounded proud.

"Thank you," Elliot said, unsure what else to say to this collection of loyal people from his past. They had been the background of every memory of his childhood, many of them kinder to him than his own mother. He had pictured them scattered and gone since his father's death, but they were all still here, just as they had been then. He should have returned much sooner.

The original staff's presence made it seem almost impossible that his father wasn't waiting for him in that study, working behind his large desk or consulting a book on one of the shelves. But his father would never sit in that room again. Elliot waited for the pain of that truth to cripple him. But the grief that came was manageable. It hurt, but it didn't strike him down. He had been convinced that the old, familiar environments would make the pain infinitely worse, but somehow it was the opposite.

The familiarity of his old home didn't just remind him of his father's absence, it also reminded him of all the years they had shared. His mother had robbed him of nearly five years with his father, but he and his father had shared thirteen years before that. Stepping into his father's study—untouched by the passing time—made those first years feel far more real than the shadowy years that had followed them.

Elliot sank into an armchair near the window as he realized something both wonderful and horrifying. He had longed to find a proper home and put down roots, but his roots had still been there in Bolivere all along. He had thought he lost his home when his father died, but it had always been waiting for him. Why had he wasted three years longing for something that was already his?

Corbett hovered awkwardly near the other armchair until Elliot realized he was waiting for an invitation to sit. He flushed and gestured for him to do so. It felt strange to see the older, and more competent, man deferring to him.

He didn't dwell on it, though. His new realization had only energized his desire to understand what was going on.

He leaned forward. "Who is Clarence? What's been going on here?"

Corbett's brow creased. "You don't remember your uncle?" He sighed. "But I'm forgetting you were only a baby when your father banished him from Bolivere."

"I had an uncle who was banished?" Elliot stared at him. How could he not have known that?

"He was your father's younger brother, but the two were nothing alike. Whereas your father worked tirelessly for the town, Clarence used his position to steal from and cheat the townsfolk. Your father was ashamed to call him brother, and after Clarence was sent away, your father forbade any mention of him. He even had him expunged from the family trees."

"But he's back?" Elliot asked, still trying to wrap his mind around the existence of an unknown uncle.

"Not currently," Corbett said, sounding relieved. "At least I haven't had word of anyone seeing him recently. But he's been here several times since your father's death. As far as Avery knows, we've kept your father's death a secret because it was advantageous to the town, but that was only a secondary reason. Our main purpose was to keep Clarence away. If you failed to claim your inheritance in five years, it would go to the next heir, and unfortunately that's him. Since we didn't know where you were or what had happened to you, we've been trying to put off that clock starting."

Cook stepped into the room, bearing a heavy tray loaded with spiced buns. Catching the end of Corbett's words, she gave a dramatic shudder. "None of us would work in

a house under Clarence. And it would break all of our hearts to be forced to leave only to watch him destroy everything your father built.”

“We explained all this in the follow up letters,” Corbett said, “which only heightens your mother’s betrayal. I would have put it in the first one informing you of your father’s death, except it never occurred to me that you might not return immediately.”

“If she even bothered to read any of the subsequent letters,” Elliot muttered.

He waited for his anger against his mother to flare again, but he had long known who she was and how little she regarded anyone but herself—even Elliot. She had already betrayed both her husband and her son, and he had come to peace with her absence from his life. He had chosen not to let anger against her rule him, and he refused to let her new crimes change that.

“If only I had returned immediately,” Elliot said heavily. “None of your charade would have been necessary.”

He stood, bowing deeply to first Corbett and then Cook. “Please accept my sincere apology. I am deeply grieved to have caused you all so much concern and anxiety. My not knowing the severity of the situation is little excuse. I knew how much my father loved Bolivere and you all, and I should have hurried straight here.”

“See,” Cook said to Corbett, “that’s what you’d never catch Clarence doing. Looks like he’s still his father’s son to me.” She looked pleased, which seemed like far more than Elliot deserved.

“You’re too kind to me,” he said. “You always were.”

Cook laughed. “Nonsense! You can’t be too kind to a child. And you were always a likable youngster.”

She fussed about with arranging the tray on the low table between the armchairs before bustling back out of the room.

“I truly am sorry,” Elliot said less formally to Corbett.

“After the lies your mother told you, I don’t blame you,” Corbett said. “You must have felt deeply hurt and rejected. I hope you know your father was always proud of you, and he talked often of your return. He was convinced you would come back as soon as you turned eighteen.”

Emotion swept over Elliot, and he was silent for several long moments as he fought them back. Eventually he cleared his throat.

“Thank you,” he said. “That means a lot. But in the meantime, it seems you’ve borne the brunt of keeping the facade alive. I suppose you must have been claiming that my father refused to come out and see his brother?”

Corbett nodded. “Clarence was becoming suspicious, though. I was almost certain he had realized the truth after his most recent attempt. I’ve been holding my breath waiting to see what he’ll do next. I’m only surprised he’s been gone so long.” He gazed out the window, his lip curling in disgust. “He calls himself Rene now, and he travels with a nasty crowd.”

Elliot’s spiced bun fell from his hands.

“Did you say Rene?”

Corbett’s gaze flashed back to Elliot, his eyes keen. “You’ve encountered him?”

“He and a couple of mercenaries abducted Avery and her cousin from the roving merchants’ records hall. He was trying to stop her reaching Bolivere.”

“What?” Corbett’s hands clenched around the arms of his chair. “He abducted Avery? But he didn’t get the lamp?”

“No, it was with me,” Elliot said. “But the abduction was the reason we didn’t come by river. He took Avery and Mattie all the way to the coast before they got free.”

“He didn’t recognize you?” Corbett shook his head. “You look uncannily like your father.”

“Actually, I don’t think he ever saw me.”

Corbett whistled softly. “So he never saw you, and he didn’t know about the lamp. It sounds like we had a fortunate escape. One of the innkeepers was certain Clarence had heard some things he shouldn’t have in the taproom on his last visit. But the man swore that while he’d heard about Avery being crucial to destroying the beast, no one had actually mentioned the lamp.” His expression turned grim. “He apparently did, however, learn that his brother was already dead, and that if we couldn’t deal with the creature ourselves, we were going to have to ask for help from the capital, thus exposing our ruse in the process.”

“Has it been so bad here?” Elliot asked.

Corbett ran a tired hand over his face. “Bad enough. The creature killed an older resident first, so we tried to go after it. It mortally injured one of the group who attacked it—a young, strong man—and so we didn’t dare try again without the lamp. We instituted curfews and kept the children close to home, thinking we could wait for Avery’s return, but then it went after a merchant caravan like Cook said. It killed two of their number, and now no travelers will come near our region. If you had tried to come by boat, you would have had trouble finding one to take you.”

Elliot shook his head. If they hadn’t been avoiding all the towns and keeping to the

unused roads, they would probably have heard the rumors about the dangerous beast in the woods around Bolivere.

“But how are you surviving without any trade?”

Corbett winced. “I won’t deny that folks have been hurting, both in lost income and in a lack of supplies. Our medical necessities in particular are running low, and if Avery hadn’t turned up by the end of next week, I was going to escort our healer downriver to resupply myself. We’re desperate to have this matter dealt with so we can properly restock and have a chance to trade before winter.”

“So my uncle would see people harmed or even killed for the sake of stealing an inheritance that was never his,” Elliot said. “I can see why you don’t want him in my father’s place. But if he knew the truth of my father’s death, why didn’t he report you himself?”

“From what you saw, did he seem like the type to inspire trust?” Corbett asked wryly. “Especially among guards or nobles. Without any official position, he would have had to make a big fuss to even get a hearing, and I suspect he was afraid that making a lot of noise about Bolivere’s inheritance would bring you out of the woodwork. He wants that five-year timer to begin, but he doesn’t want to attract too much attention in the process.”

“But now that I’m here, claiming my inheritance, any danger from my uncle is passed?” Elliot clarified.

Corbett nodded, and Elliot breathed out, trying not to think of how close he had come to never returning. A home had been waiting for him—one that needed him—and he had nearly missed it because he had let hurt rule him.

He wouldn’t do so any longer, though. He would prove to the people who had

faithfully waited for him that he could be worthy of their trust. The group going after the creature would have the lamp with them, so he had always known he would need to accompany them, but he hadn't thought of it as his fight. Since entering Bolivere, however, that had changed. He would lead the attack, not hang back at the rear. He would repay his people for the stress he had caused them.

Only one thing marred his determination. Returning to his true place had led him inevitably to the end of his road, and he was a little afraid that Avery would have already reached the same conclusion. Despite his momentary fear earlier, he didn't really believe she would flee. Avery would feel bound by her promise, regardless of his lack of openness, and she had promised to help him free himself from the lamp. She was far more likely to insist on facing the monster at his side than she was to flee.

Elliot had a responsibility to Bolivere, and he couldn't abandon it to travel with her. But neither could he bear to see her get hurt for his sake.

"What's the plan with the creature?" he asked Corbett. "When will we be going after it?"

Corbett smiled at his use of we . "The chosen fighters will be gathering mid-morning tomorrow."

"The plan is well-known throughout town?" Elliot asked. When Corbett nodded, he continued. "In that case, I'd like to request a small amendment. But this time, let's keep the change quiet."

Chapter 26

Avery

With Elliot's disappearance, the crowd calmed enough for the mayor to lead Avery and Mattie to the inn. A buzz still filled the air, and everywhere groups of people stood in excited conversation, their eyes constantly turning toward the manor. Avery had expected the townsfolk to be enthusiastic about finally receiving the lamp, but the lamp seemed to have taken a secondary role in the celebratory atmosphere that pervaded Bolivere.

"So Elliot is the son of the late lord?" Mattie asked the man leading their horses alongside them.

He sucked in a breath, giving her a disapproving look.

"They don't talk about their lord's death openly," Avery muttered to Mattie, who raised her brows.

"But surely it can't be kept a secret now that the son has returned," she said. She looked innocently at the mayor. "That was the reason it was secret, right?"

Avery frowned, but from the expression of both the mayor and the man with their horses, Mattie was right. She had once again seen straight to the heart of the issue while Avery had been left in the dark. And she prided herself on reading people well.

Looking back, there had been more than enough clues. She should have guessed the

truth given everything Elliot had told her about his past, including the timing of his father's death and the way he reacted to any mention of Bolivere.

The only conclusion was that it had been willful blindness. She had closed her eyes to any suggestion that Elliot had a home and a reason why he couldn't live a nomadic life. Even when she had wanted to distance herself after his reaction to their kiss, she hadn't really meant it. On a deeper level she had trusted that whatever was wrong with Elliot, it wasn't about her or even them. Because Elliot was tied to her.

It didn't matter if there was a temporary misunderstanding. She had been secure in the knowledge that the two of them would have time to sort it out. Even if he wanted to walk away, he couldn't.

Except he just had. She had made the fatal mistake of forgetting that Elliot wasn't tied to her but to the lamp she carried, and from the moment they arrived in Bolivere, the lamp was no longer hers. Elliot wasn't tied to her any longer. The lamp was in Bolivere and so was he—and apparently Bolivere was where he belonged. He could remain here forever, without need of her assistance. There was nothing stopping them from becoming strangers again.

The idea was incomprehensible, and it shook Avery's self-confidence in a way that not even her abduction had. Elliot had just walked away, and though she would presumably see him again the next day, her mind couldn't shake the image of his retreating form as he walked away and left her behind.

Logically, she knew that when their true parting came, it would be her walking away while Elliot stayed behind. But that knowledge didn't change the image that replayed over and over in her head.

She wanted to tell herself that Elliot would stay by her side, but she wasn't delusional. He was the missing heir. Even if he was willing to consider leaving, she

couldn't ask it of him.

So where did that leave her? Could she bear to stay in Bolivere?

Avery lay on her bed in the inn, her mind whirling as she considered the question. She had never once considered settling down before—not seriously. Even when her aunt and uncle had bought their house and invited her to join them, she hadn't hesitated. She liked her life. She loved to travel—to meet new people and see new places. And even more she loved the satisfaction of matching people with the right item for them—the item that could change their life for the better.

Could she give that up for the mundanity of seeing the same people and doing the same thing day after day? Would she end up taking up running like her uncle only to one day keep going and never come back?

The idea scared her almost as much as agreeing to settle in Bolivere. Her parents had taught her that her word was her bond. If roving merchants weren't trustworthy, they would soon find they were no longer welcomed in their travels. Avery refused to stay in Bolivere if it meant she might one day walk away from the people who loved and needed her, like Elliot's mother had done.

Knowing that, could she risk committing in the first place? She wanted to say no, but every time she did, she saw Elliot walking away from her. She had traveled alone for two years and never been lonely, but lying alone in her room at the inn, she had never felt so isolated. Staying in Bolivere felt impossible, but she had grown used to having Elliot beside her. She liked feeling part of a team with him, and returning to a solitary life seemed even more difficult to imagine than staying in Bolivere.

Eventually, she tossed and turned her way to sleep. She had fruitlessly hoped Elliot would reappear that evening, but she would definitely see him in the morning, and hopefully the sight of him would bring clarity. Even if he wanted to avoid her, he

couldn't because he had to stay near the lamp, and the lamp was going with the expedition to the cave. As long as Avery was there at mid-morning when they departed, she would have a chance to speak to him and find out his plans.

Despite her late night, Avery woke early. From the look of the light outside her window, it was barely dawn. But her disrupted mind and heart made returning to sleep impossible.

She rose instead, dressing for the day and heading down to the inn's dining room in hope of food. She would arrive at the square early so she wouldn't be caught in the crowds that would surely gather to see the warriors off.

No other guests had descended at such an early hour, but several of the inn's staff were bustling about. Avery wasn't surprised to note an extra buzz in the air. The whole town had to be eager to see the beast that had been terrorizing them vanquished. And anyone who had relatives among the warriors going to face him had to be anxious as well.

"Do you know anyone going to the cave?" she asked the serving girl who brought her a steaming mug.

"Yes, my older brother!" The girl clasped her hands together, her face strained. "I don't think I'll have a peaceful moment until I see him come back unharmed."

"I'm sure they'll succeed this time," Avery said as reassuringly as she could. "Will you be going to see them off from the square?"

"Oh, but they've already left," the girl said, making Avery's hand jerk so badly she dropped the mug.

Hot liquid spilled over the table, and she jumped to her feet.

“Oh dear!” The girl began wiping it up, the mess distracting her from Avery’s response.

“Sorry about the drink,” Avery said quickly. “But what did you say? They’ve already gone? I thought they were leaving mid-morning?”

“They were.” The girl continued to mop up the spill. “But last night word came from the manor that they were leaving at dawn instead.” She finally realized what she was saying and looked guiltily up at Avery, the overly full cloth in her hand dripping steadily back onto the table. “I wasn’t supposed to say anything, though. Corbett asked it to be kept quiet. You won’t mention it to anyone? They’re hoping that when everyone gathers in the square later, they’ll discover they’re welcoming the fighters home instead of seeing them off.”

“The fighters have already left?” Avery asked, her numb lips making the words feel strange in her mouth. “You’re sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. I saw my brother leave with my own eyes.” The girl gave Avery a strange look. “Are you all right?”

Avery didn’t answer. She’d barely even heard the girl’s final words. Abandoning her untouched breakfast, she ran straight out of the inn.

Chapter 27

Elliot

Corbett had promised that the members of the expedition would be gathered at dawn, and he was true to his word. Thanks to the town's masquerade, the steward had been the sole voice of the town's leader for more than three years, and the townsfolk clearly respected Corbett and his leadership.

Elliot had expected to find the chosen fighters nervous. But their air was one of grim determination. The group had clearly been selected for their temperaments as well as their skill with a weapon. His respect for Corbett increased even further.

In the cold light of morning, Elliot's own determination to lead the attack seemed foolish. He had learned many things while traveling, and he knew how to use a sword, but he had never faced a Legacy-fueled monster. Some of the men with him had been part of the previous attempt, and he'd be wiser to let them guide him rather than attempting to take the lead himself. But hopefully he could still prove some worth by standing bravely at their side.

Corbett also seemed to recognize his strengths lay elsewhere because he handed the lamp to the oldest of the fighters, a tough-looking man about a decade his senior. Or maybe Corbett was just listening to his wife, who had seen them off from the manor before dawn after extracting a promise from Corbett that he wouldn't take any unnecessary risks. Given the young boy at her side and the toddler on her hip, Elliot couldn't blame her for prioritizing the return of her own husband.

The troop of men formed into two lines and marched out of town with little fanfare. From their manner, Elliot suspected they preferred the dawn start without the crowds to see them off. They could worry about crowds when they came back successful.

Elliot and Corbett walked just behind the man with the lamp who led the way. The path to the cave was one Elliot remembered well. The children of Bolivere had been equal parts fascinated by and terrified of the dragon in the cave.

“Do you remember telling me about the cave when I was four?” Elliot asked Corbett as they walked.

Corbett frowned. “Were you only four? I don’t remember that.”

“Of course you don’t,” Elliot answered morosely. “You weren’t the one who got nightmares from it.”

Corbett winced—probably thinking of the curly-haired boy he’d left behind. He had looked about four.

“And now there’s a real dragon,” Corbett said. “Perhaps it’s my punishment.”

Elliot looked at him with a frown. He’d almost sounded serious.

“I hope you don’t mean that,” Elliot said. “From everything I heard at the manor yesterday evening, you’ve been working tirelessly to conserve and protect my inheritance as well as to watch over the town. This creature hasn’t come to punish you.”

Corbett smiled. “My thanks. I wasn’t serious.” He paused and then spoke more stiffly. “I’ve been careful not to give any more aid or support to the townsfolk than what your father was accustomed to giving on a regular basis. Your fortune wasn’t

used to fund any large projects, as you saw yourself with the dam. But maintaining the facade required keeping the day-to-day life of the town as normal as possible. However, I realize that you have the right to question even that expenditure given the standing orders came from your father and not?—”

“Stop!” Elliot raised a hand in alarm. “I have no intention of criticizing the care you’ve given either the estate or the town. I’m very well aware that if anyone is deserving of criticism, it’s me.”

“I’m merely relieved you’ve returned in time,” Corbett said. “I, too, have no intention of casting criticisms.”

The man in front of them held up a hand for silence, and they both went still. They had nearly reached the mouth of the cave, and he gestured for them all to gather into a group.

“There’s something to be said for attacking now, even though it’s not yet as bright as it will be later,” he said. “If we move now, we have some hope of catching the creature while it’s still asleep. We’ll attack in formation as practiced, keeping Corbett and His Lordship in the center.”

“No,” Elliot said quickly. “I didn’t come here to create a weakness. I don’t know how much help I’ll be, but I know how to wield a sword, and I don’t need anyone protecting me. Protect yourselves, and make sure we finish the job we came here for. If anything happens to me, the consequences are also mine.”

The leader hesitated for a moment before nodding. “Very well, then. Men, you know the plan.”

They all drew their weapons as quietly and carefully as possible. The one holding the lamp was joined at the front by three bowmen, each with an arrow already nocked.

Behind them, the remaining men formed into two rows of swordsmen, with Corbett and Elliot in the second row. Keeping in formation, they all advanced toward the pitch darkness beyond the cave mouth.

“If the Legacy wasn’t interfering,” Corbett breathed, “we could have had archers in the trees, waiting to take the beast down when he next emerged from his cave. We could have dealt with him months ago. But the arrows never land.”

“So why do we have...?” Elliot trailed off, nodding toward the front row.

“A distraction,” Corbett said simply before falling silent.

Elliot would have liked to know if it was a distraction for the creature or the Legacy, but he stayed quiet as they stepped into the cave. All his senses were on high alert in the dimly flickering light from their single lamp.

At least its light hadn’t gone out, and from the sighs of relief around him, that wasn’t something to be taken for granted. The people from Bolivere had waited six months for the lamp, but they still hadn’t been sure it would work.

His respect for anyone who had entered the cave without a light went up enormously. Even with the light, the place was full of flickering shadows that made him twitch and jump at every step. It smelled dank in a way he didn’t remember from his childhood. Back then, it had always seemed dry and dusty, and the change had his instincts screaming at him to run.

He locked his legs and forced himself forward. He couldn’t lead the townsfolk into battle, but he could at least avoid fleeing in fear.

A rasping sound made them all freeze, their ears collectively straining as it came again. Was it the sound of the creature’s breaths?

Elliot peered hopefully ahead. Had they really caught the creature while it was sleeping?

The men in front started forward again, and Elliot followed in step with his row. The rough stone walls of the natural cave widened into a cavern, the air inside it unnaturally dark and tainted with a rotten stench that nearly overpowered him.

The archers reached the cavern first, carrying the light of the lamp with them. Elliot managed a single glimpse of something large and furred sprawled across the floor before the first arrows were released. Every one of them was aimed true, gliding straight toward the sleeping creature. And every one of them curved, landing uselessly on either side of the beast or coming up short.

Corbett gave a disappointed exhale as the creature sprang instantly from sleep to growling wakefulness. Elliot had been picturing something akin to a bear, but the creature looked like a wolf, although it was closer to a bear in size. Its fur was matted and coarse, its form twisted, and the look in its eyes was just as crazed as the reports had claimed.

It lunged at the archers, snapping its teeth. They were already scattering to either side, though, revealing the first row of swordsmen. The man holding the lamp stepped back to join their number, keeping the light trained on the wolf.

It seemed confused by the flickering glow, flinching whenever it tried to train its eyes on the group of men. The second row raised their weapons in a solid line of steel and began to advance again. Elliot stepped forward with them until he realized his line was stationary. He moved back to his place, glancing at Corbett.

“We’re guarding the way out,” he murmured. “In case the creature breaks past the others.”

The beast lunged again, growling when the row of steel blades didn't waver. Gathering its weight on its hind legs, it snarled and leaped into the air. Its size and powerful limbs sent it soaring all the way over the heads of the row of swordsmen. The leader with the lamp shouted a warning, but the creature had already crashed down almost on top of Elliot's row.

Chaos ensued as everyone scattered to either side, the formation lost. Elliot sprinted instinctively forward, heading for the lamp—not because of the light it provided but because of his own connection with it. He couldn't afford to grow weak while in the cave.

Shouts and cries and the ring of steel echoed through the cave, the noise driving the creature to new heights of fury as it snarled and snapped, lunging toward first one man and then another.

Elliot heard orders shouted from all directions, but he couldn't hear any of the words clearly over the noise. One of the men tried to back away from the approaching creature only to trip over some loose stones and fall hard on his back.

The older fighter with the lamp immediately strode forward to stand protectively over the fallen man, lamp raised in one hand and sword in the other. But holding the lamp compromised his fighting stance, so Elliot rushed to stand beside him.

Being so near the lamp gave him an extra surge of strength, and he held his ground as the beast approached, quivering and howling. It swiped at the lamp holder, enormous claws extended, but at the last moment it swerved away, aiming for Elliot instead.

Bringing his sword up to parry like it was a club, he hacked into the beast's leg. The creature howled in rage and pain and spun on the spot, lashing out in all directions. Elliot was knocked flying while the lamp holder was flung the opposite way. As he fell, the lamp was flung from his hand, arcing high into the air as it soared away from

them.

A clump of swordsmen rushed forward to defend the men on the ground, and Elliot knew his attention should have been on the beast still thrashing around dangerously near him. But instead his eyes were on the lamp.

Lying flat on the ground, his eyes were on the same level as the lamp, and he watched it, time seeming to slow as it bounced between the feet of the fighting men before being kicked even further into the cave.

Even so, the lamp didn't go out, and in the complete darkness of the cave, its effect was enough to make a difference, even from a distance. Casting a faint but discernible light, it lay where it had been kicked while the men kept their focus on the beast, not able to seek for it.

Elliot felt the familiar nausea surging through him. He tried to climb to his feet only to stagger and crash back to his knees. Why was he so weak? Had his first fall already weakened him, and thus exacerbated the symptoms, or had the lamp been damaged in some way, making its hold on him stronger? Either way, he needed to get closer to it, even if that meant crawling. He would fetch the lamp and bring it back to the fight. In that small way, he could aid his comrades, at least.

But before he could move, an archer seized him under the arms and started dragging him back toward the cave mouth, away from the lamp. He tried to struggle and protest, but his symptoms intensified as he was moved further away from the lamp, making his protests look like foolhardy bravado.

The fight had moved to one side of the cavern where the remaining swordsmen had formed a ring that gave the beast no retreat. Their move had opened a window for the archers to drag any wounded from the caves, and they were wasting no time in completing their task.

“Please,” Elliot cried, his voice coming out hopelessly weak, “I need to get further inside.”

“Peace,” the man dragging him said. “You drew first blood, you know. There’s no need to prove your valor further.”

“No.” Elliot shook his head, trying to clear it enough to think clearly. “No, I need to get to the lamp.”

“They’ve light enough to see,” his rescuer assured him. “The fight is going well. It will be over soon.”

“No. Please.” Even to his own ears, Elliot’s weakened pleas weren’t convincing.

He was only serving to make himself look foolish. But the further away he was dragged, the worse his symptoms became. He could barely see, his head was spinning so badly, and if he went any further, he would be sick all over the cave floor.

He shuddered to think what would happen then. They would likely take it as a sign of the extent of his injuries and attempt to carry him straight back to town. If that happened...

Elliot thrashed as they neared the cave mouth, his fear fueling a last burst of renewed strength. He should have confided his secret to Corbett, at least. No one here knew what was wrong or the danger they were putting him in by removing him from the lamp. If someone didn’t?—

“Elliot!” A beautifully familiar voice screamed his name from the cave mouth.

With the light shining behind her, Avery was little more than a silhouette, but he would have recognized her in an even more confused state. Avery had come. He was

saved.

She ignored the shouted warnings of the other archers and ran into the front of the cave, dropping to her knees beside Elliot.

“Where are you hurt?” she gasped, and when he didn’t immediately answer, she looked up at the archer who still had him under the arms. “What happened? Where is he hurt?”

“I’m not sure,” the man said, clearly thrown off balance by her unexpected arrival. “He was knocked down and is too weak to stand.”

“Too weak? He’s not bleeding?”

“Avery...” Elliot managed to say, wondering why his voice was only a whisper.

She looked down at him, her eyes meeting his before widening and looking further into the cave.

“The lamp,” she breathed, and he managed to nod.

“Leave him right here,” she commanded the archer. “Don’t move him any further out. Don’t touch him at all until I return.”

“Wait, merchant, you can’t...” The archer put Elliot down, trying to catch at Avery’s arm, but she evaded him and fled into the cave.

Elliot propped himself on one arm, staring after her as a whole new burst of fear flooded through him. Avery had come! How had Avery come? What had he been thinking? He should have stopped her from running straight into the midst of the battle.

But it was too late to do anything but watch in fear as she skipped first to one side and then another, ducking through the battle that was raging from one side of the cave and back to the other.

When the creature lunged in her direction, she ducked, barely escaping one of its claws as she scuttled onward. The archer who had been dragging Elliot stood watching her, mouth agape, and another of the archers came to join him, full of questions. Apparently, none of them knew Avery well enough to expect her to behave recklessly if someone else was in danger.

A flash of movement in the corner of Elliot's eye suggested someone else was lurking close, clothed in shadow. But when he turned his head to look more closely, he couldn't be certain there was really someone there. None of the archers had reason to hang back out of sight, and he had seen no sign of any townsfolk trailing behind to spectate the battle.

He shook his head. Paranoid hallucinations were a new level of symptom and not a welcome one. His eyes flew back to Avery.

She had reached the back of the cave and the abandoned lamp. Elliot's breath caught as she scooped it up with a cry of triumph, turning back toward him. But her voice—higher-pitched than the men in the cave—drew the creature's attention, and it lunged toward her.

Elliot called out in wordless horror as a brightly colored flash streaked past his head.

"Mangy canine!" Frank squawked as he flew straight at the beast's head, pecking at his eye.

The creature spun, his claws flashing through the air as he tried to slice the parrot. But Frank was far too quick for him, darting out of the way, only to dive in toward

his other eye.

“Weak as noodles!” the bird squawked, making Elliot want to cheer.

“I think he got that one right,” he said to no one in particular.

But his breath caught in his throat again as Avery ran forward. Every step brought her closer to him, and his symptoms lifted slightly with each second. But his legs were still weak and helpless when she paused her progress toward the cave mouth to wave the lamp over her head.

The beast turned toward it, snapping and snarling, distracted for a moment from Frank. The bird instantly dove again, causing the creature to twist back on itself, growing more enraged and less coordinated with each turn.

Avery shouted again, darting to the side as she waved her lamp and called the beast’s attention back to her. As it turned yet again, Corbett gave a shout, and the remaining swordsmen drew short spears that had been strapped to their backs and threw them in a coordinated movement.

The tips pierced the creature from all directions, and it slumped forward, giving a horrible high-pitched whine. Two of the men ran forward with their drawn blades, bringing the creature the quick mercy of death.

Stillness fell through the cave as they all stared at the felled beast, only panting breaths able to be heard. Then someone shouted triumphantly, and the rest took up the cry, their jubilation ringing off the walls of the cave.

Elliot managed a smile which grew in strength as Avery resumed her path back to him. They had succeeded in bringing the creature down, and from what he could see, none of the men had been killed in the process. It was a victory all around.

The archers ran forward to join the jubilation of the swordsmen, all except one who seemed to be lurking in the shadows of the cave mouth, presumably to keep an eye on the wounded in the clearing outside. But Elliot was no longer among the wounded's number, not with the lamp so close.

He jumped to his feet, his full strength restored as a beaming Avery reached his side. She didn't stop, however, instead seizing his wrist and dragging him with her out of the cave.

"I need to get away from that stench." She wrinkled her nose. "I'm surprised that creature wasn't felling people from smell alone." She turned to Elliot, a hint of concern creeping into her face. "But are you really all right? You weren't injured?"

Elliot shook his head. "I was just dazed for a moment." He looked significantly at the lamp. "But I'm fine now."

Avery beamed before her face suddenly darkened, and she turned a glare on him.

"It was you, wasn't it?" she demanded. "You're the one who changed the time of the expedition and told them to keep it a secret?"

"I was trying to prevent you throwing yourself into the middle of battle for my sake." Elliot gave her an ironic look. "I can't imagine why I feared you might do that!" But he couldn't hold his stern expression for any length of time. "But on this occasion," he said with a grin, "I'm glad you did."

She smiled back before her eyes fell on the lamp still in her hand. She frowned again. Hurrying back into motion, she moved away from the two injured men outside the cave and the celebrating throng inside, dragging Elliot with her by the hand still clamped around his wrist.

He let her pull him along, his mind jumping to the last time they had been alone. After the terror of seeing her face the beast, he would be happy to have her in his arms again, even if only for a moment.

Chapter 28

Avery

As soon as they were mostly out of earshot, Avery turned on Elliot.

“What happened back there?” she asked in hushed tones. “The lamp wasn’t that far away, and yet you seemed excessively weak. You looked like you were about to die!”

Elliot blinked, looking disappointed. What had he been expecting her to say? Or hadn’t he been expecting her to say anything at all? Had he thought she might throw herself into his arms?

A flush rose up her cheeks, but she managed to keep her expression calm and expectant as she waited for his answer.

“It was thrown through the air,” he said, “and then kicked by multiple feet. Did it get damaged? I don’t know for sure if that would affect the bond, but after what happened when the brass was melted down by the smith...”

He was still talking when someone burst from the trees and sprinted the final few steps to reach them. Avery turned toward the newcomer but hadn’t gotten a proper view of him before he snatched the lamp from her unsuspecting hand and retreated again.

She tried to reach for it, but it was gone from her grasp before she had properly realized what was happening.

The thief didn't go far, however, stopping several yards away—far enough to be safe from their immediate reach, but close enough to converse. Avery gasped. It was Rene.

Her abductor had followed them all the way to Bolivere, and now he had the lamp. What was he doing there?

“If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I don't think I'd believe it,” Rene said wonderingly, staring from the lamp to Elliot.

Avery gulped audibly. What exactly had Rene seen? She tried to remember what she'd just said and what he might have observed.

“The person in the shadows was you?” Elliot asked disbelievingly. “You were there at the cave mouth, watching the battle?”

“No,” Rene said with a disturbing smile, “I was watching you.”

Avery's flush receded, leaving her pale. Rene had seen what none of the archers had noticed. He had seen Elliot weaken and then seen him regain his strength when Avery brought the lamp to him. And then her own words had confirmed it.

She was going to be sick.

Elliot gripped her arm, pulling her slightly to the side and behind him, as if to shield her from Rene.

“I don't know what you think you saw,” he said in a creditable imitation of nonchalance, although Avery could feel the tension in his arm. “But I want no more of your nonsense than my father did. Don't think I'll give you clemency just because you're my uncle.”

Avery's jaw dropped. Rene was Elliot's uncle? Why had he never mentioned that?

"Sorry," Elliot whispered as if on cue, although he didn't take his gaze from Rene. "I only just discovered it myself yesterday."

For some reason his reassurance comforted her. He had been keeping secrets about his past, but he hadn't been concealing a known connection with her abductors.

The smile on Rene's face didn't falter, however.

"Clemency?" He laughed. "I think it will be me granting you clemency, not the other way around. If I feel like it, of course. And only if you do what I tell you. Whatever I tell you."

"Do I need to speak even more plainly?" Elliot asked, his voice steady although his hand trembled. "You are not welcome here. It's time for you to leave."

"Oh, really?" Rene raised his eyebrows. "I can leave if you like, but I think I'll take this lamp with me. Its purpose in Bolivere has been served now, so you can't begrudge me something so small."

He started backing up, his eyes still on Elliot. Avery felt the tremble in Elliot's hand spread through his body, and she cried out involuntarily.

"No! Stop! Don't go any further."

"So, it is like that," Rene almost purred, making Avery bite down on her tongue.

She should have kept her mouth shut. But, on the other hand, if he'd kept retreating, he would have seen the truth with his own eyes soon enough. Elliot's mother was a deeply flawed woman, but she had been right about the risk of someone discovering

his secret.

“Don’t worry, nephew,” Rene said. “I’ll let you stay close to me. And in return, you’ll finally let me back into my childhood home. I could kill you, of course, but that Corbett has made it clear he’ll go to any lengths to keep me from taking my brother’s place. I’m told my brother’s public repudiation of me would give grounds for a legal challenge to the inheritance. I might be mired in legal challenges for years. This way will be much better. No one can protest your inheritance, or any orders you may choose to issue—including the reinstatement of your uncle. The town will soon see how inseparable we’ve become, and they’ll have to accept me eventually.”

He gave an oily smile that told Avery exactly what he intended to do with Elliot when that day eventually came.

Elliot’s tremors returned, except maybe it wasn’t him trembling but Avery doing so, the shaking running up the hand he still had protectively on her arm.

“Elliot?” Corbett also stepped out of the trees, smiling when he saw Elliot on his feet and appearing unharmed. But the moment his eyes fell on Rene, lightning shot across his face.

“Clarence!” he thundered, stepping toward him. “I’ve told you?—”

“That my dead brother was still alive?” Rene asked acidly before the earlier unsettling smile crept back over his face. “But the truth has been revealed, and now my nephew is in charge. He’s just been telling me that he intends to give me a second chance and welcome me back into the family. Isn’t that right, Elliot?”

Several more men appeared at Corbett’s back, a rumble spreading through them as they spotted Rene.

“Elliot?” Corbett asked. “What is he talking about?” He looked mostly confused, but Avery caught a whisper of uncertainty at the back of his eyes, and it made her heart twist.

He was wondering if he’d misjudged Elliot, and she couldn’t bear to see Elliot lose the trust of his father’s steward because of a monster like Rene. She would explain everything, and...

But the lamp had disappeared from Rene’s hands. He had hidden it away somewhere on his person, and Avery could imagine how delusional she would sound if she started babbling about Elliot being tied to a lamp. It might have been a little more convincing coming from him, but he said nothing.

With every moment that he remained silent, Corbett’s concern visibly grew while Rene’s satisfied smile stretched wider. Avery stared pleadingly up at Elliot, willing him to say something—do something.

But if he saw her, he gave no indication of it. His eyes were trained on Corbett, as if he held answers Elliot had been seeking.

Finally he shook himself and turned to Rene. “You can use that lamp to threaten me, Rene, and there’s little I can do to stop you. But you can’t use it to access my father’s wealth or power.”

Rene’s smile didn’t falter. “I think you’ll find I’m the one in control now, nephew. Unless you’d like to explain the situation to all these men?” He seemed certain Elliot wouldn’t want to expose his weakness to so many.

But Elliot didn’t flinch. He raised his voice to be heard clearly by everyone present. “All of you can bear witness to my declaration. I hereby gift my manor at Bolivere, its associated wealth, and the authority that comes with it to Corbett, my current

steward.”

Silence greeted his words, but he gave a satisfied smile and turned back to Rene. “So as you see,” he finished, “it doesn’t matter how you threaten me. I can’t give you what isn’t mine.”

Avery gaped at him. He looked...happy. Or perhaps that wasn’t quite right. He looked lighter, as if he’d finally released a heavy burden. Could that mean he was truly pleased about what he’d done?

“Nonsense!” Rene blustered, his anger betraying his fear. “You can’t do that. If you don’t want your inheritance, it passes to the next heir. The manor and the family fortune are mine.”

Elliot raised an eyebrow. “I think you’ll find this has nothing to do with inheritance. I’ve already accepted my inheritance, and I can produce any number of witnesses who will attest that I ate at my father’s table last night and slept in the master room at the manor. And now, having received my inheritance, it’s mine to do with as I will. Including gifting it to my worthy friend, Corbett.”

“Are you serious?” Corbett finally found his voice. “You can’t be.”

Elliot’s determined expression didn’t change for Corbett any more than it had for Rene. “I’ve never been more serious. The person who has been protecting Bolivere in my father’s place isn’t me, Corbett, it’s you. Unlike me, you’ve earned your place as leader of this town, and you should have the house and resources that go with the position.”

One of the men gave a cheer, and the others joined in, silencing the protests Rene was still trying to make. In the face of their response, he must have realized Bolivere would accept Elliot’s declaration. His face turned ugly.

“You should have taken my offer when you had the chance, nephew,” he said. “Because I believe in repaying one dirty move with another.”

Before Avery realized his intentions, he dashed into the trees, racing away from Corbett and his men. She pushed Elliot in his direction, finally breaking Elliot’s grasp of her arm.

“Quick!” she gasped. “Run after him. It’s your only...” Her voice trailed off as Elliot remained in place, smiling down at her.

She grabbed both his arms, ready to steady him if he stumbled and fell. But he remained straight, his face calm and his color normal.

“What’s happening?” she cried, utterly confused. He had reacted so strongly in the cave, how could he still look so healthy now? The sounds of Rene crashing through the underbrush were growing fainter and fainter.

Corbett signaled several of the men, and they took off after Rene. Avery didn’t even see them go, her full focus on Elliot.

“I felt it,” he murmured to her. “When I turned my inheritance over to Corbett, I felt something inside me shift. I guess we didn’t need a bargain after all, just a sacrifice.”

Avery swallowed, her mouth dry. “You mean...your tie to the lamp is gone? It’s really gone? You’re not going to be affected no matter how far Rene goes?”

Elliot nodded, his smile growing bigger and brighter. “I think so. I feel fine so far.”

“But that means...” Avery trailed off, not sure what she wanted to say. The maelstrom of emotions inside her were far too contradictory.

The joy on Elliot's behalf was strong, of course, as well as relief that the immediate crisis was averted. But her promise to help free him from the lamp had been the only bond left between them, the only tie holding them together beyond Bolivere. And he had just achieved it on his own.

"What now?" she whispered, looking up at him, her heart in her eyes.

He stepped closer, drawing her into his arms despite the men who still remained nearby.

"Now, I'm free," he murmured, staring into her eyes before his gaze dropped to her lips.

Those two words had been a dirge in her mind, but he transformed them into a victory shout and a confession. Nothing had ever sounded sweeter.

He lowered his head to hers, and her breath caught as his lips hovered just above hers. He spoke, the words causing his mouth to brush against hers in the lightest of touches.

"I'm all yours now, Avery."

She rose onto her toes, pressing her lips hard against his. He responded instantly, tightening his hold on her waist and deepening the kiss.

The old ties that had bound them were gone, but new ones wove around them as their lips joined, the new ones weaving through their hearts.

Chapter 29

Elliot

Elliot pulled away from the kiss reluctantly. Distant sounds of cursing and movement reached his ears, suggesting Corbett's men were dragging Rene back. Sadly, he couldn't keep kissing Avery indefinitely.

Rene reappeared, each arm held firmly in the grip of a grim-looking townsman. Elliot gazed at the man who was apparently his father's younger brother and tried to think of him as Uncle Clarence. He failed. Rene looked every inch the rough and unprincipled mercenary he had first appeared to be.

"This has proven an unexpected morning," Corbett said with bemusement. "I won't even attempt to comment on..." He cleared his throat and looked uncomfortably away from Elliot and Avery's embrace. "That."

Elliot laughed. "You weren't expecting the expedition to the cave to include any declarations of love, Corbett? I can't imagine why not."

From the corner of his eye, he caught Avery glowing up at him, and he barely restrained himself from kissing her again.

"I don't pretend to understand most of what's just happened," Corbett said, "but it seems obvious that you were protecting Bolivere when you handed your family's legacy and inheritance over to me. I hope you know that I stand ready to return it, as is only right. I won't hold you to your words."

“Don’t say that!” Elliot said promptly, surprised at how easily the words came out.

He had felt the ties cut the moment he had verbally handed everything over to Corbett—his tie to the lamp and by extension Avery, and his tie to the home he had only just rediscovered. And in that moment, he had seen his own heart clearly. The only tie he had truly grieved was his lost bond to Avery. And that was a bond he could take back up by choice.

“What are you doing, Elliot?” Avery whispered. “Bolivere is your home.”

Elliot smiled fondly down at her. From the enthusiasm of her kiss, he knew she shared his feelings, and yet even so, she was arguing against her own interests, consumed by worry for him.

“Bolivere is my roots,” he said. “And roots are important. When I tried to pull them out, I was left alone and untethered. But the stability those roots provide comes from my history. I don’t need to stay bound by them in order for them to feed my future. The manor will always be my childhood home, but it’s not my current home. I don’t want to settle down and live there forever.”

He smiled across at Corbett. “There’s already a family there giving the manor new life.”

“But Elliot,” Avery murmured, “are you sure? All you’ve wanted all this time is to settle down.”

Elliot shook his head. “No, what I wanted was a home. And I’ve finally realized that what I want isn’t to wake up every morning in the same place. That was just the consolation prize because I didn’t have what my heart actually craved—a person who truly knows and loves me. Bolivere isn’t my home any longer, Avery, you are. And wherever my home goes, that’s where I want to be.”

Avery's eyes turned moist as her heart shone through on her face, even while she seemed to struggle to absorb his words.

"Do you really mean that?" she murmured. "Are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure about anything." He shifted, turning fully toward her and wrapping his arms around her.

But before he could lower his head to hers again, Corbett cleared his throat. "I think once was enough for all of us," he said dryly.

"Don't tell me I missed it!" Mattie cried, puffing slightly as she strode from between the trees. "I sleep in one time, and I miss everything." She surveyed the gathered people with interest, her gaze skimming over the able-bodied warriors and her brows rising as she saw Rene being dragged away by two of them. But her attention didn't settle until her eyes rested on Avery inside Elliot's arms. She smiled smugly, making Avery step back and put a little distance between them.

"It took you two long enough," she said. "I was starting to think I needed to knock some sense into both your heads. I was strategizing how to lure you back to my library."

"Do you have some good books on knowing your own heart?" Elliot asked with a barely suppressed chuckle.

"No," Mattie said, "I just have a lot of books that are a good size for whacking people over the head."

Corbett snorted, and Mattie turned her assessing gaze on him. "One of your men directed me here from the cave. He let me take a look at the creature—you're right about that thing coming from Mardella, north of the mountains. I have no idea how it

made it over here, but their Legacy is the only one that makes wolves that enormous. There isn't much written about the kingdom, but all the records agree on that."

Corbett shook his head. "I have no idea how the Mardellans deal with such beasts on a regular basis."

Mattie shrugged. "I don't think they're usually so twisted or so blindly aggressive. I wonder if it was the journey over the mountains or the Glandore Legacy that affected it so badly?"

Her manner assumed a scholarly air that reminded Elliot of her natural habitat—a library full of ancient records. Corbett, who hadn't properly met Mattie before, was staring at her with bemused fascination. When she noticed, she didn't look offended, and only peered at him more closely as if Corbett rated slightly above the deceased creature on her scale of interest.

"The man who showed me into the cave was going on about you being the new lord," she said.

"Apparently I am." Corbett still sounded a little dazed at the morning's unexpected turn.

"I'm most disappointed," Mattie said, making Elliot frown. "You have a fascinating wolf-creature to study back there, but you're all out here talking about who lives in the biggest house."

He relaxed, barely holding back a laugh.

"Rabid nonsense," Frank cried, swooping in to land on Mattie's shoulder.

To Elliot's surprise, she made no attempt to shoo him away.

“I’ll forgive you on this occasion,” she told Corbett, “since you appear to have captured the man who abducted me. I hope you mean to punish him to the fullest extent of the law.”

“I certainly do,” Corbett said grimly, the topic of Rene shaking him out of his bemusement.

Mattie nodded, seeming satisfied, before turning on Avery with a forbidding look. “Since my cousin failed to wake me, it was left to the bird to do so. I’m not sure whether to be offended or glad I wasn’t entirely forgotten.”

“Sorry,” Avery said guiltily. “I left in a panic. I wasn’t thinking about much, if I’m honest.”

“When do you ever in a crisis?” Mattie asked. “Even as a child you were like that. If you saw someone in trouble, off you’d go.” She looked at Elliot. “I hope you’ll be able to guide her into better sense in that regard after the wedding.” She looked between them. “When is it to be?”

“Wedding?” Corbett’s brows rose. “That moved quickly.”

“Quickly? Ha! You wouldn’t say that if you were in my shoes.” Mattie gave him a scolding look. “And don’t try to distract from the question. If you can forget about that cave beast to talk about houses, we can pause for a moment to discuss the far more important topic of Avery’s upcoming nuptials.”

Elliot shook his head. “There are no upcoming nuptials.”

Several startled and disapproving eyes turned on him, and he hurried back into speech. “I need to ask her first! I haven’t had the chance yet. Perhaps if you could all...” His words trailed off as Avery burst into giggles.

His brows drew together in confusion as he looked into her laughing face.

“Sorry,” she giggled. “I don’t mean...It’s just that...Actually, you already did ask me. Weeks ago.”

“Weeks ago?” Mattie stared at them both. “Then what in the kingdoms have the two of you been dancing around for the last—Oh!” She gave a bark of laughter.

“What are you talking about?” Elliot asked, utterly bewildered. “I’m fairly sure that’s not something I’d forget.”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t take it seriously.” Avery smiled up at him, rising onto her toes to press a fleeting kiss on his lips, apparently amused by his continued expression of bewilderment.

He happily accepted the kiss, but he still had no idea what she and Mattie were talking about.

“He was very bold,” Avery said to Mattie with a wicked twinkle. “He asked me straight out if he could travel with me after our first proper conversation. It was only the third time we’d met!”

“I’ll make sure to note that in the records,” Mattie said gravely. “A romance for the ages.”

“I had to travel with you,” Elliot protested. “You know that. But I still don’t know what that has to do with me proposing.”

“Roving merchants have a few customs of our own,” Mattie said, finally taking pity on him. “And one of them is the wording of our marriage proposals. If an unmarried man asks an unmarried woman if he can travel with her, he’s proposing marriage.”

Elliot's eyes widened, his face turning red as he remembered their first conversation after the river rescue. Avery had seemed flustered by his question, but it had never occurred to him that there might have been any reason beyond the obvious one.

Avery laughed again. "There's no need to look so horrified. I knew you didn't mean it the first time. The second time just now, however..." She grinned. "If you try to claim that wasn't a marriage proposal, I'll be appropriately scandalized." Her smile and voice both turned soft. "Especially since you once promised that once you were free of the lamp, you'd help me fulfill my greatest desire."

"Since marrying you is my greatest desire, my recent request to travel with you was certainly intended as a proposal, even if I didn't understand the significance of my words," he replied promptly, earning another kiss.

"Steady! Steady now," Mattie said quickly. "Bolivere's new leader is full of good sense. Once was quite enough for all of us."

"It wasn't enough for me," Elliot whispered, earning the reward of Avery's arms slipping around him.

"My wife, Marilla, and I would be honored if you would be married from the manor," Corbett said.

Elliot looked hopefully down at Avery, and she nodded.

"That would be lovely, thank you," he said to Corbett. "We'll just need to wait for Avery's family to travel here from the coast."

She gave him an extra squeeze, and her beaming expression was worth a short wait. They couldn't be married without her uncle, aunt, and cousins.

“But I’m not waiting for every roving merchant in six kingdoms to gather,” he said warningly.

Avery’s lips pressed together as she tried to fight another laugh. “That’s perfectly acceptable,” she said, “since I don’t want to wait either.”

Elliot gave a contented sigh. The travel that had once seemed so tedious now filled him with anticipation. He wanted to show Avery every place he had been, and to see all the places she had traveled in return.

And when they got tired of endless nights on the road, they could visit Mattie’s records hall, or their aunt and uncle’s cottage, or Elliot’s childhood home. Their roots would always be there for them while they built a new home in each other.

AVERY

“Are you sure you’ll be all right?” Avery asked Mattie as they lingered on the bank of the river. “You’re not nervous about living alone now?”

“Hardly—given I’m not alone,” Mattie said wryly. “Surely you’ve noticed the constant stream of relatives coming through my hall since we returned. Or did you think they were all coming to congratulate the newlyweds?”

Avery grinned. They had certainly received a great many well wishes from the constant visitors to the record keeper’s hall—along with some bemoaning about the impatience of youth. Apparently Elliot had been right, and every relative, no matter how distant, had wanted to be there for the ceremony.

“Come on,” Elliot said good-naturedly. “Leave poor Mattie be. I know the one you’re truly sorry to leave is Frank. But I for one, am ready to cross the border and get a break from his...” He broke off at Avery’s glare, quickly amending his sentence. “Ahh...loving temperament.”

“Goodbye and good riddance,” Frank barked from Mattie’s shoulder.

“He’s gotten a lot better at those,” Elliot mused, “but somehow it isn’t an improvement. He’s a source of constant amazement.”

“You must admit he’s even better than a guard dog, though,” Mattie said. She smiled affectionately at him. “When I said I wanted a companion even blunter than me, I’ll admit, I wasn’t thinking of a pet parrot. But he’s already learning a lot from spending

time in the library.”

“Pet?” Frank squawked, clearly horrified. “Useless paper lady!”

Mattie just laughed. The record keeper had taken an unexpected shine to the irascible bird, and it comforted Avery to think of the two of them together.

She embraced Mattie one more time before finally letting Elliot pull her onto the waiting barge that would carry them and Nutmeg downriver to Ethelson to retrieve her cart. From Ethelson, they would travel west, visiting places along the way that both of them had enjoyed in the past.

They didn’t intend to hurry, so Avery didn’t know how long it would take, but eventually they would reach Halbury. Although Elliot hadn’t needed a bargain, it still seemed the best place to start their investigations.

Mattie had provided them with a list of suggestions, and Avery had a few of her own as well. It was possible it would take years—generations even—but it was time for the roving merchants to find a way to share their gift with the rest of the kingdoms. Elliot had found a way to shift his tie from the lamp to himself, so there had to be a way for others to shift their ties as well.

Elliot and Avery just had to find a more reliable method than sacrificing your full inheritance because she didn’t think that was a strategy that was likely to prove popular.

But that was a problem for the future. For the moment, she was merely happy to be on the road again—this time with Elliot by her side for good.

He guided her to the rail, resting his arm around her shoulders. She leaned her head against him and sighed happily.

“And finally it’s just the two of us,” Elliot murmured.

“For a lifetime,” Avery replied, earning a kiss and the unspoken promise of a lifetime’s more to come.