

DEANNA ORTEGA



RUINI
&
ROSES

RUIN & ROSES

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TW//CW: Violence (Graphic), Death, Mature Content, Mature Language,
Sexual Content, Mental Abuse, Physical Abuse, Misogyny, Suicide
(Mentioned), Sexual Assault (Mentioned), Death of a Parent, Child Abuse,
Animal Death//

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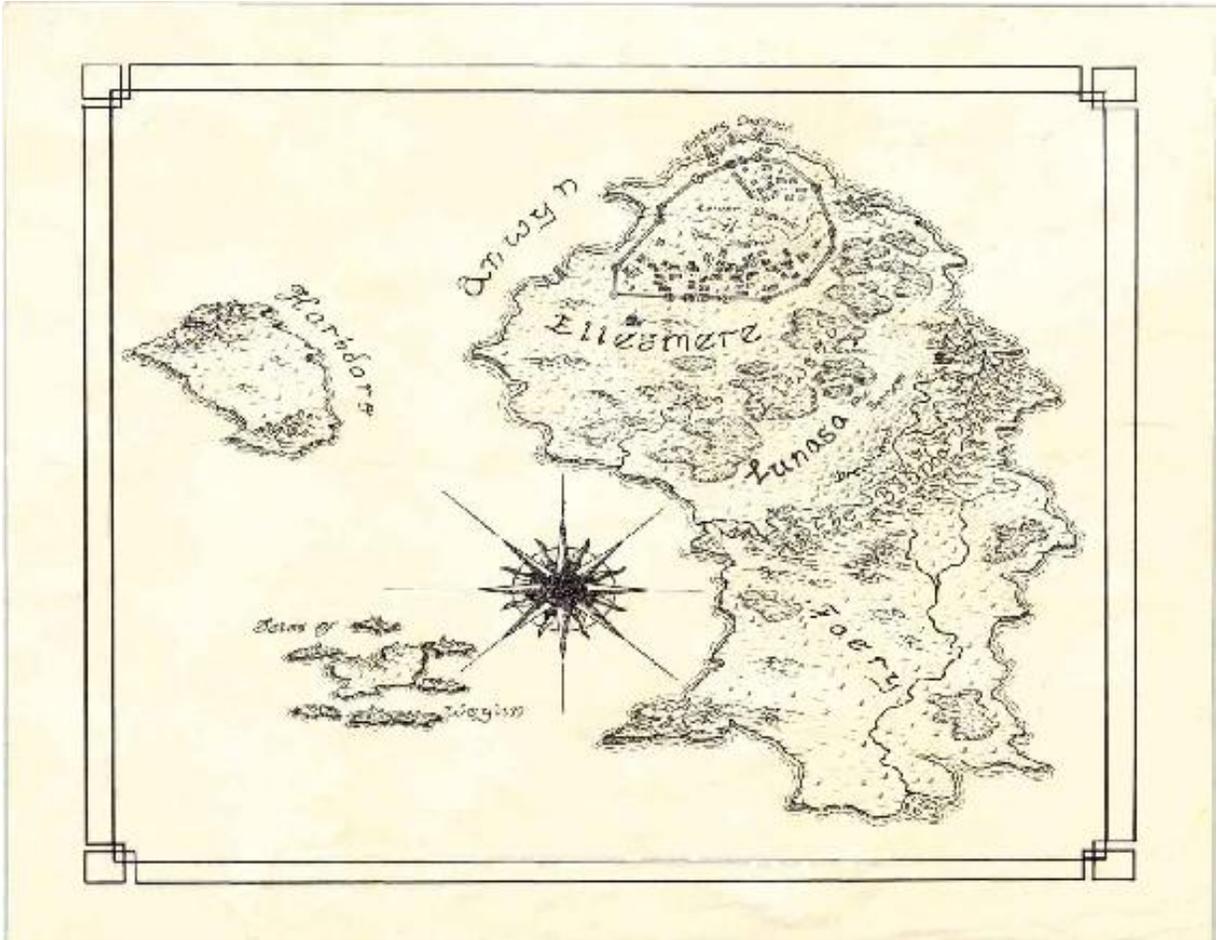
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The tinted glass of the skylight nipped at my fingers. A cloud-peppered sky shadowing my reflection stared back at me. I looked like a fucking idiot. An absolute moron. One that would punch Baltazar in his smug face for calling this a simple mission.

A supposedly simple spell would solve both of our problems and make me better at my job. But no—here I was on a turret, risking life and limb for King Maveri's blood crown.

Squinting, I narrowed in on my target. It sat in the middle of the treasury, rubies glimmering even in the low light. Fragile cases and trunks—containing the kingdom's most treasured heirlooms and jewels—surrounded my mark.

The guards wouldn't be in there, they were busy scouring the palace for explosives. A diversion that had taken me days to cultivate. Baltazar didn't see fit to teach me how to magick my way into and out of a building, but his seemingly useless lessons on changing my voice worked.

One whisper into the right ear, in the right hall, at precisely the right time...and you have a bomb threat, at the exact moment another royal

family was set to visit.

Visit—I thought dryly. That was my mind oversimplifying at its finest. It was more fitting to call it what it was, a transaction. But regardless, a breach of safety was terrible for politics.

"*The devil is in the details,*" Baltazar responded when I suggested the plan to him. "*You can't have a bomb threat without an explosion.*"

He was right, of course—he was always right.

The clock tower gonged in the distance. My pulse thundered in my ears. "Three..."

Cinching the rope around my waist and thighs, my muscles tensed. "Two..."

I pressed my aching palms against the glass, scraped and cut from scaling the stone wall. Rubble spilled into the treasury. "One—Ruptus." *Break.* I felt the glass splinter.

The window gave way and I was plummeting. The cord fibers ripped into my hands as I slammed to a stop. My shoulders screaming, and my teeth grinding together, I looked down at my feet. The mirrored image of my dangling soles above the marble floor, mocked me while my heart battered my ribs.

I was inches away from shattering my legs.

The thudding of my boots echoed around the chamber as I dropped down.

Shattered glass and the dangling hawser were the only sign that an intruder had entered. I gazed down at my hands, ripped open from my descent.

"*Inritum facio.*" *Undo.* The glass shards floated up to the ceiling, clinking one by one into place, repairing the damage my previous spell had wrought.

The rope coiled back around my waist, tucked neatly under my cloak like it had never been used.

Dipping my head to appreciate the valuables that surrounded the crown, I groaned.

Baltazar ordered me to break into the most heavily guarded castle in Anwyn, and it wasn't even to steal away with riches.

His instructions had been clear, "*Remember, Jane, take nothing else.*"

Dread clawed at my gut. If he found out what I did with my cut from each job, or that I sometimes took extra there would surely be consequences. Though, even that was shading it lightly.

Concentrating on the task at hand, instead of a possible future that may not come, I pushed a weighted breath through my nose.

Focus, Jane. Get the crown and get out.

Maveri was a paranoid lunatic, if you asked me. The sigils etched around the room marked the place to detonate if a person not of the royal line decided to paw the king's favored things.

Huffing a sigh, I eyed the wards. Leave it to the mad king to prefer his precious items destroyed rather than in the hands of another.

Reaching for the dagger I kept tucked in my boot, I mentally recited the spell Baltazar taught me just before I left Lunasa.

My mentor rarely explained why he was teaching me a new incantation but I long since learned that he trained me as the need arose. His need, not mine. Surely. My eyes darted to the now-fixed skylight high up above and my cruel mind imagined what sound my body would have made if I cut that rope any shorter.

Baltazar's voice filled my head as if he was in the chamber with me, chastising me while I cursed him. *You rely highly on magic for someone*

who was born without it.

Gritting my teeth to silence the reminder, I split open the drying wounds on my palm with my dagger. "Illusio."

I needed to believe—to imagine—the illusion of the mad king of Ellesmere was sliding around me, clinging to my skin and clothes. Skin tingling, as my hips spread wider, my frame drooped to the ground. My dagger felt weighted suddenly, feeling far too heavy in my shorter and fattened fingers, which were free from calluses or marks of any labor at all.

My lip curled back from my teeth at the thought of the man I embodied and I stifled the disgust, nearly forcing me to recoil out of the illusion.

Focus. I could drop the spell as soon as I got out of there, but why hadn't Baltazar told me exactly how real it would feel?

I suppressed a shudder as I moved forward and the stomach that hung well over my buckle jiggled.

No wonder the mad king was known for having his own line of executioners. I was sure he struggled to get up from his throne, let alone be able to wield a weapon. It didn't make him any less fearsome, what with his penchant for bringing death upon an indiscretion as simple as an insult.

"My King?" My back was to the prince, but the voice had haunted me in my dreams since he came to visit my family's home. The fact alone that he called his father only by his title and not something more endearing, spoke volumes.

Why was he there? I pulled my dagger closer to my chest, praying to the lost gods that he didn't see it.

"Arius." The king's voice rumbled from my lips, not bothering with the same formalities his son used. Maveri respected only his own title. "Why have you come?"

"You asked me to pick something for my *betrothed's* arrival," he spat the word. If I was not already disgusted myself, I probably would have been offended by the way he wielded it like a curse.

"I wish to be alone with my riches. Come back another time." No dismissal, no niceties, a clear command that was designed to be spoken by a man that thought he was everyone's better.

"Your soon-to-be family certainly *is* that pompous." The voice changed as he spoke, the pitch deepening and I turned, realizing why.

Oh, Gods...

Curly, raven-colored ringlets and eyes like chips of silver greeted me as his one annoying dimple popped up with his full lipped grin.

Liam, Baltazar's second in command and younger brother, stood before me.

Of course, it had to be him. My day hadn't been trying enough, now the gods were punishing me for some unknown slight. I would much prefer they just strike me down at that point.

My face flushed at his nearness, and his ability to deceive me, despite my training. I swallowed down all the words that came rushing up when he was around. He would only laugh, that pitiless laugh of his, and mock me for them.

"You can't be here" I hissed, my voice seeping into the king's as his presence unraveled my hold on the spell.

I could feel my body lengthening, no longer standing in Maveri's stout frame. It was a relief, but also terrible because I wouldn't be able to redo the spell. My leathers settled over my skin replacing the feeling of the king's fine silks. I hated Liam with every ounce and every fiber in me. I hated him.

But gods dammit if his eyes roving over me didn't make me want to tear his clothes off.

My fist clenched at my side to avoid just that.

Liam's narrowed eyes tracked the motion, but his gaze stayed fixed on my left hand—no, to the glittering ring there.

"*He* wanted to ensure you didn't mess this up." His eyes finally lifted. Seeing my face fall in disappointment that my spell had faded, his lips twisted into a cruel smile. "He always seems to have the foresight that you will."

It was part of the strategy Baltazar had created for everyone—even his second—to think that I was still generally useless. But really, I was his hidden weapon, his defense. But the smug look on Liam's face threatened to have me unraveling carefully laid plans.

My rage boiled nearly out of control within me, even as I kept my lip in a pout. "You'll get us both in trouble."

"How boring." He tilted his head to the side, his silver eyes examining me. "Is that the human in you?"

He wanted a reminder to rush over me of the time before, when he hadn't cared about my breeding. But I shoved the memories, along with the inevitable feelings they would raise, away.

"You're a bastard." It was true. A cheap shot, but true. Both he and Baltazar were the sons of some absent duke and—if rumors served—his maids. They came to Lunasa when Liam was only a boy, back before Baltazar reached his position in society. Before my mentor's frankness impressed my father, and he quickly ascended the ranks of society.

Liam's lip curled back from his teeth at the mention, before settling into a dangerous smile. "Perhaps, but bastard as I may be... My parents are both

alive."

Even though my jaw felt like it was grinding to dust, I coached my shoulders to relax and my eyes to roll. "You do know your way around a nerve, don't you?"

A smile tugged at his lips as his eyes darkened, raking down my front—slowly—as if he were trying to paint a picture of my curves in his mind. "Good of you to remember."

My breath caught while a curling sensation rolled low in my stomach.

"Get out of here, Liam." I ignored the flash of heat that coursed through me, the indecent thoughts threatening and rippling the edges of my mind.

Choosing to focus instead on how his name tasted like bile on my tongue and there was *nothing* I could do about it. Not without exposing myself, but I imagined it. The look on his face the day he realized I wasn't worthless. But I had to let him believe it, even if I no longer wanted to pretend.

"No. That's not how this works." His smile was laced with arrogance that turned his eyes into pools of molten silver. "I'm here to clean up your mess and retrieve the crown."

With one word, one word I could shatter his bones. But that wouldn't do. It would blow my cover. To the world, I was Jane. Just Jane. Plain Jane. Mundane Jane. The clumsy, part mortal Jane. It didn't matter how much harder I studied in private. How much stronger and faster I had become. What mattered was their perception of me, whether I had a choice or not.

And I already guaranteed Baltazar the blood crown, from my hand, and mine alone.

Baltazar would tell me to *think*. To use the human part of my brain to outwit my opponent without them knowing they lost. Liam's being there complicated the mission, but didn't prevent it.

I pulled in my shoulders, knowing the movement would pull the attention there.

My chin dipped into my chest and I let out a gasping sob. *Too much, reel it in.*

Feigned tears cast a watery filter over my vision. "I—I need this win. Especially before...before I have to marry him." There it was. The card I had against Liam, the one thing that should have made him back off.

"No."

It took me a moment to process the word and the hollow, unfeeling laughter that followed. My eyes met his and I saw something there. A flicker of true amusement as the corner of his mouth twisted slyly to a grin.

Liam knew, somehow...he knew that was a scam.

What would Baltazar have me do—further destroy my cover or allow Liam to steal my triumph?

Liam reached for the talisman hanging from his neck.

Neither.

My nails bit into my palms and warmth seeped underneath the crusted blood there. His lips parted in a chuckle, before he took over the heist I spent weeks carefully crafting.

His mistake.

Under the cover of that laughter, I whispered, "tempus moderato." *Time control.*

The amusement on his face paused.

Liam still stood with his hand gripped around his charm and a mockery of his laughter echoed in my ears, but the room was silent.

My heart echoed steadily, beating in my ears. The migraine from not using enough blood to maintain the spell already clanged around my skull

and white spots burst over my eyes. I was one party-trick away from passing out, unless I got some rest.

I regarded the jewelry, weapons, and finery around the space knowing I couldn't chance taking anything else. Nausea roiled through me and the corners of the room went fuzzy as I pressed my hand against the case.

"Ruptus."

The case shattered, imploding slowly, almost imperceptibly. The ground beneath my feet trembled and I prayed that when the room went up, it would force the detection spell to falter.

Shards scraped against the back of my hands and up my arm as I grabbed the crown. I yanked it off its cushion just as an inferno sparked up in the back of the room. The floor beneath my feet splintered, then widened, and my eyes went wide.

The case stand began to spin, dislodging stones and hurling them around the room. I dodged them, tucking the crown deep within the folds of my coat. A bead of sweat licked its way down my face at the fire, burning hot enough to devour jewels and bones.

Trunks of gold turned molten and bubbled over, the wood of the casing splintered and ignited. Gems disappeared in the white flames as the glass and stone from the skylight pummeled us from above.

Liam's mouth twitched—I needed to move faster. The spell would run out soon. His grating laughter was cut off by a gasp, just as time started up again. "What the—" "Go." I shoved both of my hands into his chest, propelling him away from the doors just as they were engulfed.

His arm wrapped around my waist before gripping his talisman and the blinding blaze around us disappeared. Darkness wrapped around us in a sulfuric gale. Bursts of starlight danced in my vision as a droning filled my

ears. Far—he was taking us too far away and it wasn't controlled. The fire must have thrown him off course. My hair whipped around me as the breath was stolen and returned to my lungs. It felt as though we were careening through the worlds.

Nothing—but then warm light seared my eyes. We tumbled from the sky through gnarled tree limbs. Still bleeding, my hands gripped the fabric of Liam's shirt while I screamed. My ribs slammed against a branch and pain lanced up my side into my back. With my vision faltering, my body crashed into the earth and I heard Liam huff out a breath below me. My eyes adjusted to the light leaking in from the trees of the Elwood. I saw my fingers first, still knotted in fabric, blood soaking through the white material. I felt a heartbeat that was steady, and as familiar as my own.

I tilted my head to see Liam's features lined with fear and staring at me. Checking my face, seeming as relieved to hear a second heartbeat as I was. But that didn't make sense. And when his eyes narrowed, they confirmed it. "Get the hell off me."

"Uh...yea. Okay." It hurt to move and a whistling sound swept through my body when I breathed. I need to get to Baltazar. He would be with my father's traveling party. He would heal me.

"You're injured," he said simply, like he was stating it was a warm day. But he stepped closer and pressed his fingers under my coat. The opposite side to the crown, thankfully. And while the air filled with the smell of sulfur again, my lungs felt lighter and ached less when I breathed.

"Thank you," I whispered, not realizing I spoke until he stepped away again.

"My brother will be disappointed that you failed." There it was, proof that he didn't realize I won. His belief in my ineptitude so thorough that he

probably would think it was an illusion if I presented him with the crown right then.

"Why?" I wasn't sure why I asked it, or even what I was asking, necessarily. Why had he healed me? It was probably on orders of Baltazar's to protect the weak human from dying. Why did he hate me? That one I was certain he would never answer.

"You have an engagement party to prepare for," his voice had grown cold. Devoid of even satisfaction. Then he turned on his heel to walk away.

It was like time had slowed again, watching the trees and shadows devour his silhouette. I wished, only for a moment, that I could tell him that it was my father's plan and not my own.

Then I wanted to go after him and punch him in his arrogant, careless mouth.

But the mission *was* successful. I patted the welt pocket of my jacket, appreciating the curvature of the crown there.

My temper settled as I once more wondered, *why this?* It didn't matter though. Not really. It wasn't my job to ask questions, only to deliver. And it was a milder job, even with the encounter with Liam. No matter how he made my blood boil, he was no match for an ogre guarding the last phoenix egg.

No—that was the gig. Danger. Stealing. Lying when the need arose. Using magic that others thought I couldn't grasp.

When you're the only part-human born into a family of witches, they don't know what to expect. At least once a day, either one of my siblings or my father would ask if there had been any sign of magic. Though my father tried to be much more polite about it—even if it came off condescending. With my father's curse, Lunasa's traditional magic had been drained down

to its husk. Nothing more than parlor tricks. But each time they asked or prodded, I would evade their questions or come up with a quick lie.

I was their puzzle. The mistake my father made with my mother. But she was gone now and only I lived on as the memory of that mistake. And for that, my father doted on me—favored me even.

More so worried over me, I thought dryly. I wasn't sure what he would do if he ever discovered what I was doing instead of preparing for my new life. But in fairness, I hadn't wanted it. Even if I was fulfilling my duties as a princess, I hadn't been given a choice.

Some princess—I bit down on a humorless chuckle. There I was, traipsing through the shadows with a stolen crown from my impending father-in-law's treasury.

My father would probably collapse in shame if he knew. But I silenced the guilt gnawing at me. He didn't deserve it. No...there was much worse he could be suffering. My remorse was better served on our people who starved and what happened to my mother.

Baltazar would say to use my humanity as a weapon, but like a weapon, I needed to be wary of wounding myself with it. Of every word, every detail of advice he had given me over the last year—that was the one I clung to.



CHAPTER TWO

After seeing one of the markings I had left on the trees surrounding my camp, it hadn't taken long to figure out Liam had dropped us about half a mile away from it.

I hadn't flinched when Baltazar tasked me with stealing the crown. It was easy enough. Not the simplest task I was ever given, but not impossible. Plus, my father felt so much guilt for what he was doing, he hadn't questioned me much when I refused to caravan, instead choosing to ride ahead of our party. The trip was hard on horseback and I had to push my mare to ensure we would arrive before everyone else.

I was exhausted, and though Liam had healed my injuries, my body was still sore. The magic I expelled hadn't helped, and the walk back was excruciating. I could feel the thrum of my pulse, like a lullaby willing me to sleep.

My father would be arriving by late day, and I was expected to meet up with him at the outskirts of Luhne. There I would be bathed and dressed before the rest of the journey. But first, I had to meet with Louisa.

Jett, my favored mare, whinnied with excitement as I approached—surely hoping I had nabbed her a snack on my ventures. The empty patch of soil surrounding where I roped her to the tree proved though, she had eaten her fill.

My cloak was torn and muddied, and my breathing labored by the time I reached her. The hopeful gleam in her eyes diminished as she realized my hands were devoid of treats. She let out a derisive snort and kicked up dirt around her like a petulant child throwing a tantrum.

"Sorry, girl." Another huff of resignation followed me as I pulled the parchment with my sketches of the treasury from my torn pants pocket. I unfolded them, looking over the plans one last time. Examining the contours of the walls, wondering if I missed anything, and hoping I hadn't.

In theory, the magic I used shouldn't have left a trace...hopefully. I studied the king's sigils and each ward. They were meant to track talismans and the imprints that one might leave behind.

Tossing the pages in the embers, I watched them ignite the same way the room had— slowly, then all at once.

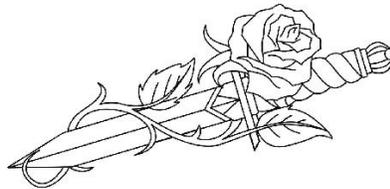
When they turned to ash, I worked to cover my makeshift fire pit with dirt and break down camp quickly.

I strapped my bedroll and satchel to Jett's saddle, and emptied the rest of my wine from my canteen into my mouth. If I was going to go through with my journey, I sure didn't want to be sober. I gripped the length of the horn, placed one boot into the stirrup, and threw my other leg over her.

Traveling that way instead of a carriage was hard, but I preferred it. The ache in my legs for days after, no matter how long I had been riding, was worth feeling the wind on my face. The beat of Jett's hooves jolted through my body as she pushed on faster, trampling the ground beneath us.

I think she fancied it too, the freedom over being kept in the stables. It was the only time we weren't both made into show ponies, strutting about to impress those gawking in Lunasa and the other kingdoms.

The trees of the Elwood were thinning, and I could see billowing smoke and smell the savory meats being cooked by my father's traveling party. They wouldn't stay in Luhne, of course, but on its outskirts. My father *would* prefer a tent to the wasteland that was our Kingdom's capital. I made sure to keep far away enough that we wouldn't be heard or seen over their revelry as we passed. Once we were outside the Elwood, it wasn't much further to reach Luhne.



The cobblestone streets of the capital were a chaotic hell of poverty.

Babes cried out for food that wouldn't come, peddlers shouted about wares they sunk the last of their savings into obtaining, and courtesans begged for company when really, they only craved a night in a warm bed.

I clung to the familiar comfort of the shadows. Tucking my change purse deeper within the folds of my cloak, I was under the guise of trying to shield myself against the bitter cold. The smell was one I didn't know how anyone got used to, with waste bins of trash spilling over in the streets.

Lunasa was dying, rotting from deep within the earth, and it left food and even something as simple as firewood, in short supply for commoners. When the nobles relocated—away from the towns and cities within their control and supposed care—they took with them their attention and their

ability to answer their citizens' pleas for help. My father did nothing to prevent it, and with the castle sequestered so far away in the mountains, many of them couldn't make the trek to complain.

Because I didn't want to notice any faces that would be missing the next time, I let my eyes go unfocused and kept them to the ground. Only when I got closer, did I fix them on the alley that led to the back entrance of the dilapidated pub house.

The door groaned open, and the smell of stale wine filled my senses even as the darkness gobbled up the thin streams of sunlight warring against the clouds.

Each time it made me uneasy, having nothing to cover the squelching sound of my boots on the tacky floor. I would never get used to being out in the open. Bodies crammed into the place, sucking away the oxygen, making my cloak unbearably warm. And though their bloodshot eyes were probably unseeing, a boozy film distorting sight and sound, I couldn't risk being seen. Not even there.

I couldn't bring myself to judge the men and women who spent their nights there, running up tabs they could never pay. The place provided a retreat from reality and enough ale and body heat to stay warm. It wasn't my place to judge when I wanted for nothing, and couldn't empathize with just trying to survive.

Louisa hummed as she wiped down the bar with her tattered rag, never looking directly at me but always knowing when I arrived. Her ribs showed through her threadbare dress, even in the darkness. She twisted to a part of the bar cleared of the drunkards who inevitably would pass out on top of it.

"Drink?" She never looked up from her task, and I never met her eye.

"Golden ale."

A nod.

Careful not to rattle the coins, I untied the heavy satchel at my waist and handed it to her across the stained and rotting bar.

She nodded, still looking through me, and slammed down a glass, splashing me with a skunky smelling liquid before turning away. It wasn't personal, the way she dealt with me. No, quite the opposite, she was the closest thing I had to an ally in Luhne, and the lack of communication served as a form of protection for us both.

Louisa would give the gold to those that were most in need, and I would keep providing it to her. A man whose illness could be cured with the right poultice, a mother whose children wouldn't make it another night without food, and so on.

Sucking down the glass to the dregs, I did my best to stifle a gag that bubbled to my throat at the rancid taste. When there was only the sheen left of condensation, I stared into it—not wanting to focus on anything, allowing the stupor to seep down into my veins.

Only once my limbs were numb with it, and the warmth of the bar caused sweat to lick at my skin, I stood and stumbled back into the street.

It was a hours' ride back toward the royal camp, and before that I had to make it to the smattering of trees outside the courtyard where I left Jett grazing.

Carts lined the square, some with busted wheels barely attached to rotting wood. Others who traveled further distances, and sold in more fruitful locations, had banners, marking them as the ones to buy from. Their meats were fresher, typically caught and killed on their journeys, their fruits shiny, polished as if newly plucked. While the stench of perished foods mixed with the smells of Luhne from the older, more worn-out carts.

It was quiet though, for a market day, but I supposed that's what happens when you try selling to the poor. One doesn't try very hard.

"Vegetables!" One peddler tried as I walked past but quickly went back to flipping through the book he was reading when he realized I wasn't biting.

A boy and a girl, him no more than ten and her looking at most fifteen, were shoving each other near a busted cart. The thing sat on one bent wheel. Based on the weeds bursting through the pavers, and growing up around it...the hobbled cart had been there for a while. There were a few carrots dusted with dirt, some potatoes, and a bag of grains. But even over the stench of the street, I could smell fresh bread.

The girl noticed me first. A scrawny thing that reminded me of a twig with all of its newly grown leaves plucked off. Her hair was plaited, nearly meeting her thigh, her face was dirtier than the boy's, but I could see her brow bending in suspicion. "Whaddaya want?"

"Gwen, mama warned you about scaring people off." The boy, only as tall as his sister's shoulder, whined and nudged her shoulder. His hair stood in all directions as if it were trying to run away. His face still had the roundness of a babe, even though I could see how bony his frame was under his torn coat.

"Is that bread?" I asked, aware that the sister—Gwen—looked ready to attack me for bothering them. Surely, she thought I was going to haggle them.

"Made fresh this mornin'." The boy bared his missing front teeth in a smile. "And the veggies are from our garden. They won't grow very big here."

His smile fell a bit and Gwen straightened her shoulders, gaining another inch. "Biggest and freshest you'll find grown here."

I tapped my chin as if I were thinking it over, already sold on helping them as much as I could without drawing attention. They looked near starved and possibly like they were trying to sell the only options they had for a meal. "I'll take a bread roll and a carrot."

Gwen was already shaking her head. "We don't trade. We only take gold. The real stuff."

Louisa had most of my gold, but I kept a few pieces just in case. More than what a lump of bread and a palm-sized carrot were worth. Gods knew, they needed it more than I did.

I reached in my pocket, lumping the six coins together in my fist, and held it out to her. Her eyes went wide at the weight, but then settled back as she turned, and I watched her bite a piece.

"Go on and serve the lady!" She hollered at her brother, deciding the gold was real while she quickly placed the rest of the wares back in a basket.

The boy took a bit of cloth and wrapped up the largest carrot and a piece of bread before placing them in my hands.

He gave me another gap-toothed grin and whispered excitedly, "I think mama will cook tonight."

A sharp whistle echoed around the nearly empty space as the pair of kids ran off. "Meat pies! Fit for a king!"

I took off in the opposite direction, quick as remaining in the shadows would allow, toward the outcropping of trees.

Offering Jett the carrot, she ate greedily while I loosened her reins from the tree.

I waited for her to finish while I swallowed the lump of bread and distracted myself with the view. The peaks of the mountains framing Luhne

were dusted with dirt and patches of stubborn yellowed weeds that were barely alive.

My siblings used to tell stories of when the lake the rocks guarded was so clear you could see the sapphire-like gems at the bottom, smoothed by time alone. But now, time and rot had filled the lake a putrid brown, leaching out its very essence. To the point that I had a hard time believing it was ever anything other than ugly. A testament to how far the kingdom had fallen.

The clouds above were festering with the bitter rain that would soon pour out of them. My father often likened it to them weeping over his lost magic. My lip pulled away from my teeth in disgust at the thought that the lands gave a shit about him, or his magic.

The smell of sulfur thickened, letting me know I didn't have much time.

Looking at the black expanse of Jett's back and its sheer distance from the ground, I leaped. My leg barely made it over as land blurred beneath my feet. I regretted it each time I drank, never heavily enough for my body to grow accustomed to the way it made my insides burn.

The ride back was excruciating, and if I hadn't known any better, I would have thought the stubborn mare was making things more difficult for me. The liquid in my stomach sloshed around with each movement of her legs. I noticed her veering in the road to the bumpier sections or hopping over a fallen log more than once. The pounding of her hooves seemed louder too as if she wanted me to be personally afflicted by my behavior.

But what she didn't seem to grasp was that I didn't care. Part of me wished to be thrown from her, injured in a way that the prince wouldn't want me. I hadn't asked for him, and being the youngest, I surely shouldn't be marrying first. But my father had the match in his head years ago, when I turned sixteen.

We could run. Jett and I could take off in the opposite direction and distance ourselves from everything the way my mother had always wanted to before...

But where would I go? My allies consisted of Louisa and my horse. And I was pretty sure the barmaid only tolerated me for the gold I gave her.

And what about Baltazar? Could I abandon him without a word? Even as I thought it, I was shaking my wine fogged head. I knew too keenly what that felt like.

I needed to stay even as everything in me begged to run.

My chest slammed into Jett's neck as she came to a skidding halt at the edge of some ivy-coated rocks, overlooking the travel-beaten road to Ellesmere. I clenched my jaw to bite back on the curse I wanted to bark at her.

She nickered while I slid from her back and mismeasured the distance to the ground. Mud splattered my face as I caught myself with my hands.

I wiped them on the sullied fabric of my cloak and ushered her toward the path as the surrounding earth shook with the grumbling thunder rolling above.

Hopefully, my father's party was ready to leave soon—though I wasn't excited about our destination, I damn sure didn't want to get stuck out in the storm brewing.

Wheels were grinding against stone and the patter of hooves signaled that my father's traveling party was near.

I directed Jett to the meeting point, both of us tired of traveling. I knew my father had requisitioned his woodworkers to make pullable stables so that the horses could rest in rotation. She would be comfortable with all the treats she desired.

We looked down on all-white horses, with lavender and yellow roses braided into their manes, pulling seven, gold-lined carriages. Four guards wearing chest plates inlaid with gems flanked each.

My siblings, who undoubtedly wanted to be there as much as I did, were probably within the confines of their own rides or fawning over my father.

Sitting proudly in the center of the gaudy display, was my father's royal carriage. Carved from raw amethyst—thinned and hollowed to be light enough for the horses to pull. Even still, the carriage alone had six horses hooked to it, the largest from our stables. A plume of peacock feathers flared off the back as if it were meant to take flight. Carvings of Lunasa's castle were etched into the shining exterior of the walls.

My father made sure to bring only the best. The best-looking carriages, the best-looking courtiers, probably the best-looking servants and courtesans too. I huffed a sigh through my nose which Jett copied in solidarity.

Even the horse knew my father was pretentious.

The fires had been covered, the tents had already broken down, they were apparently only waiting on me.

A stable hand in a cloak of cream and silver darted out to take Jett's reins, only after bowing deeply.

"Gods, Alec. The only one you should be kneeling for is Gemma. Get up." I ground my teeth together even as he tried to tuck his head deeper into the hood of his cloak to hide his scarlet cheeks. I pulled my bags from her saddle.

"I'm to inform you we will be leaving as soon as His Majesty Oliver returns." No sooner had he spoken, than he was turning and nearly dragging Jett away as fast as his booted feet would take him.

Right, okay. Where had my brother gone off to? I wondered as I looked at the line of carriages. Quickly any thoughts of Oliver were replaced by thoughts of which one would be suited for the king's favored keeper. My father would want him close, so he would surely be there. But Baltazar would want to keep his dealings private.

There. At the back of the procession, beyond the rolling stable was a carriage carved of pine. Each of the top corners was coated in gold and marked with spirals, Baltazar's sigil.

"She's busy?" I heard Baltazar's rumbling voice, even muffled by the fabric lined, the very timber made my body ache. It was as if I was being drawn forward at the thought of being nearer to him. It had been days since I saw him in person.

Over the sound of my heart thudding in my ears, I heard another voice. "The blood crown was lost."

Liam?

"I told you to simply *distract* her." Baltazar's words were punctuated by the echoing sound of a blow landing on skin and the hiss of a surprised in drawn breath.

"I'm sorry, brother. I will not disappoint you again."

Distract her? What the—My chance to process was cut short by the sound of footsteps.

I was sure I wasn't supposed to be privy to whatever it was they were discussing. I worried about being caught.

"Wait." Baltazar didn't often fail to dole out punishments for missteps. I could tell by his tone I could expect no less.

Considering the way Liam paused, it seemed I wasn't the only one who recognized that. "Yes?"

"Break your hand." At Baltazar's command, my own hand flew to cover my mouth to repress the gasp threatening at Baltazar's words. I would have thought it a cruel joke save for the lack of laughter. The lack of...really any emotion at all.

Baltazar wasn't an easy to please man but that was...cruel.

"Wh—what?" Liam's voice cracked.

"You've broken something that is mine." I could picture my mentor. Placing his hands behind his neck as he leaned back and propped his feet up. A look of cool indifference would mask his face except for one eyebrow would be cocked just a bit higher than the other. "Now you break something that is yours. Surely you remember our father's rule."

"Baltazar." Liam sounded already in agony—as if he had already experienced the pain. The chair groaned as Baltazar leaned forward. "Either you do, or I will."

I expected a word to be my warning, but of course, he was using traditional magic. There was only the sound of bones crunching. Then a muffled scream, as if something had confined the sound. I glanced around to see if anyone else had heard or had noticed what was happening.

Should I have stopped this? Would I have been able to?

My flustered mind's questions ceased to matter when Baltazar spoke again. "You're dismissed."

Presumably, Baltazar's eyebrow was piqued, and he had settled back into his chair.

Footsteps grew louder, closer and the brass knob on the door began to spin. I had nowhere to go. My heart beat a furious rhythm in my chest.

I dashed around the carriage and crouched, so I could see Liam's boots as he stepped onto the rocky trail. I waited until the crunching sound of gravel

faded behind the sounds of clopping hooves and snuffs coming from the stable before moving to the door.

"I didn't think you'd come back—" Baltazar's words paused when I swung the door open and clicked it shut behind me, feeling the rough wood rubbing against my clothes. "—So soon," he finished smoothly.

But of course, I wasn't supposed to know that. He was exactly as I expected him, lying on a velvet, green chaise, one eyebrow peaked and his hands in a resting position just underneath his neck. It was his way of putting others at ease, so they would be in *their* most relaxed state when, inevitably, they disappointed him.

I tried not to let my distaste for the putrid smell of traditional magic show. "There was a small hiccup."

"Don't tell me you weren't able to retrieve the item?" His slanted, honey colored eyes narrowed on me while he used the same tone he used with Liam. The one before he made his brother break a hand. Anger, laced with frustration. And it made me wonder, how much was a façade? He already knew what Liam knew. That the crown was destroyed in the treasury.

I pulled the blood crown from my coat. Despite what I just heard, I smiled, pleased with myself at his widened eyes even if he immediately composed himself. "I always deliver."

"You most certainly do." He stretched and rolled off the chaise, a corner of his mouth lifted. "Then what, may I ask, was the *hiccup*?"

Your brother and second in command I thought brazenly. But the nearer he got to me, the faster my thoughts muddled, my heartbeat quickened. The smell of tobacco and cedar wrapped around me. My neck heated, and I was sure, if I looked in a mirror, they would be pink. He was several years my senior, but witches aged...very well.

Baltazar is your mentor, I reminded myself as his rough hand slid around the side of my neck and a thumb stroked my cheek. It threatened to unravel me—to do away with any secrets I was withholding and loosen my tongue, which was exactly his goal. He had to know the power he held over me.

How much do you know? He seemed to ask without even speaking, meeting my eyes. A crooked grin flashed. Long enough to show me he was pleased before taking the crown from my hands and pulling away.

It was like ice water had been splashed in my face. I grappled for words that wouldn't give me away. I needed him to think I didn't know about his brother. If he was keeping it from me, and probably the others...there was a reason. "Liam. He distracted me. Or tried to."

"Ah, but you were not so easily swayed by a pretty face?" His expression was a cold emotionless mask again. I should have asked why he wanted me to be swayed by his brother, especially since he had been the one to set up the encounter. But I had a feeling that if I mentioned it, Baltazar would be furious. And at the center of my emotions for him, at the very core of it, lay a bit of fear.

Every lie must be grounded in truth, I heard the lesson in my head. "At first, yes. But he underestimated me."

Baltazar dragged a hand through his white hair while watching my mouth, feeling the weight of my words as I said them. "Do you fancy the boy?"

"What? No." I hadn't thought about Liam like that in years...

Was that why Baltazar sent him to distract me? Had he wanted to test me?

He waved his hand. "Go."

"Excuse me?" I asked, my voice cracking while my stomach hollowed out. He hadn't even asked me to give him my report... He was supposed to offer me a drink while I gave him the details of my heist.

My mentor schooled his expression into a blank, unreadable stare and went back to lounging in his chaise, eyes closed. "You're excused."

A dismissal.



CHAPTER THREE

Stepping from the carriage was agony with my insides figuratively set ablaze.

He dismissed me. Why did he care if I gave a shit about Liam? I didn't of course, though I could recognize his cruel attraction. But I put that to rest years ago, and my focus was only on the plan, Baltazar's goal which he needed *me* to fulfill.

gooseflesh spread along my skin at the thought. The white-hot flame that licked its way up my arms and neck just thinking of him.

I suppose he would miss it with his duties as my mentor. *Or maybe*, my mind whispered, *it's because you're human*.

No. I thought, even as my heart thudded against my ribs. He had never cared about that. *But neither had Liam*. I banished the treacherous thought as my fingers brushed my cheek where his thumb had been. He so rarely touched me, even in lessons, that he may as well have branded me.

"Jane." Gods, I hated that name.

My mother once told me the name was the mortals' most plain name. I asked her why then? Why name me that way? And she paused as if wanting

to snatch the words back, to avoid that conversation.

"Because Janie," my mother had nervously looked around the library, looking for the spies she swore watched her. "I hate magic."

"But you're magic. I'm magic." I touched the charm on my necklace to hers. Our talismans.

She gave me a wicked smile she used to save just for me. "Maybe you won't be."

Then she died, I thought, bringing me back to the present. Leaving me torn between hatred for the magic that was my birthright and my desire to succumb to it in all its danger and beauty.

"Jane..." My sister, Driata, huffed a breath as if she sprinted all the way from the castle...but it couldn't have been more than a few yards. "Meeting...messenger... Ellesmere," another gasp of air. But I knew what she was going to say. "Under attack."

My eyes widened, I pulled from the real emotion I was feeling to make it more believable. I *was* shocked that they had figured it out so quickly. I obviously knew the treasury had been robbed. But under attack? Now they would never suspect me. Plain, mundane Jane.

"We have to go." Driata gripped my wrist, and her free hand grabbed the ruby dangling at her throat. Even if he was less than twenty feet away, she would use magic—like she was rubbing it in my face. "Father is furious."

I closed my eyes; the rotten smell of sulfur filled the air as her magic surrounded us. She didn't need words. No, she only needed her talisman. Mine—the one my father gifted me on my sixth birthday—was a dud...or I was. Baltazar had to teach me a different way to use magic. His way was cleaner he had said, which was proof enough in that the putrid smell of traditional magic didn't follow the incantations I used.

I opened my eyes and tried to squelch the urge I had to empty the contents of my stomach. They were all there, all five of my siblings. There was Oliver and Olivia, twins and two halves of one whole, partners in malice by far the worst of all my siblings. Then there was Driata, who had more suitors lined up than the rest and entertained each one with cunning and a coy smile. Ciaran, desperately aspiring to be like Oliver and would fall on his own blade to prove it. And Gemma, who didn't care for any of us.

It was hard when they were gathered like that not to notice how similar they were, born of the same mother from different times. Sure, Oliver and Olivia's cheeks were sharper, Ciaran's nose a bit broader, Driata's skin a tinge more bronze, and Gemma's cheeks rosier, but ultimately the resemblances to their mothers were uncanny, with our father's genetics barely pitching an effort. I had the same red hair as them, though mine was fairer, but my eyes were green where theirs were hazel, my frame wider and shorter while they were all tall and lean.

I looked at Driata's auburn hair pinned to hide her ringlets, which she claimed hating to tame, and wondered how the gods must laugh. Wherever they were—it had to be one of their grandest jokes to make six people look so alike but think and act so differently.

Peering at the frail vessel of my father sitting on his makeshift throne, his face showing his years, the bones of his body jutting through even the layers of clothes he wore to stay warm; it was a task to set my features to neutrality as he smiled at me. But was that kohl under his eyes? Rouge on his cheeks? Had he done it to make himself appear less far gone?

The curse would wear him down until the next reincarnation of my grandmother was born, aged, and remarried to him. Part of me wished he

turned to dust before then. I didn't want another reminder of my mother, another sibling to torture me, though it was by their own father's mistake that I was born.

My father stood using Sefar, his favored sword's scabbard, as a cane. Then stepping forward. "My children. There has been a great defilement of Ellesmere."

He didn't *look* furious, though I wasn't sure he had the energy left in him to be angry. He motioned for Oliver to step forward, his eldest son, his heir. My brother held a piece of crumpled parchment that after a deep bow, he handed to my father.

I could hear the first smattering of raindrops pelting the carriage roof as my father cleared his throat. "We received a message from King Maveri, stating Ellesmere's attack. The treasury is in shambles, as well as one of his castle towers. He has invited us to visit but has requested to postpone the premarital celebrations."

"The prince probably did it himself to avoid his engagement to Jane."

"They're already engaged, idiot."

"Though I'm not sure it was a fair match."

"I'm not staying in a demolished castle, father!"

"Certainly not for *Jane*."

"The scandal this sham is causing already."

"This attack makes the mad king look weak."

"Are you sure you would want to be allied with him?"

I looked out the window as my siblings spoke over each other and watched the edges of the glass begin to fog. Whatever we were going to do, we needed to decide quickly because these roads would be flooded soon.

"Enough." Though like him, his voice was frail, it still managed to echo around the cab. "We honor our commitment and aid our ally as they have us." He narrowed his eyes and looked each of his children in the face. His expression softened when it fell on me.

If looks could maim, the one Oliver was giving me, would have flayed me alive. "Father, I have taken upon myself to requisition more servants for our journey. Maveri's letter mentions several of his are indisposed with the cleanup."

"Level-headed and always thinking ahead, my son." My father patted Oliver's shoulder and allowed a small smile before resting his head back on the wall. Slowly as it was, we all knew what it signified. We were released until someone had more information. My siblings began to magic themselves away and my nose scrunched.

I didn't know if I could ever get used to it. I didn't know how they seemed so unfazed. The scent, especially when so many people used magic at once, was overpowering, and nauseating. My stomach turned and my head began to throb.

Needing to get out of there and wanting to find my carriage, I reached for the door. Once I got there, I could go over everything that had happened.

"Janie." My feet felt leaden. He wasn't supposed to call me that. It was my mother's pet name for me. But nothing stopped him. Not me demanding that he stopped, not the names my siblings tortured me with in response.

Slowly, I turned back to face my father. His eyes, set into the hollow sockets on his face, twitched to the left of me where Oliver still stood. "Leave us."

Oliver looked as if he wanted to protest, but he simply raised his hand to his talisman, a crow carved from emerald hanging on a studded chain.

He vanished, but the smell of magic lingered as if in a warning.

"I have things to attend to." I didn't want to play the game. My palms still burned from the rope that had bitten into them. I dug my nails in any way. He tapped Sefar's scabbard on the floor. "You have plenty of time."

Shrugging, I inched closer to the door.

"Still no magic?" He leaned forward, hoping I would tell him my powers had come overnight. Perhaps it gave him hope for his own.

My lip curled away from my teeth. Despite his gentleness with me, I could never forgive him for what he had done and for what he caused. "You understand the devastation of being powerless, so there's no need to discuss it further."

"Do you think you need a new talisman?" He fingered the owl pendant at his throat, a near copy of the one he had made for my mother.

He was already speaking again as I shook my head. "Perhaps, I can have one made before you move all the way to the other side of Anwyn."

The only good part about my arranged wedding was that I would be permanently on the other side of the continent.

"No."

"It's been three years since—" I stopped listening already knowing what he would say. I wouldn't have him blaming my acting out on my mother's death. Spinning on my heel, my mind already whirled with all the ways he could punish me for leaving. All the ways he would have if he weren't a shell of the man, he once was in a time before I knew him. I stomped from the cab, ignoring him as he shouted for me to wait.

Desperate for escape as I was, I ran straight into Oliver before I saw him.

"What could the king possibly need to speak with you about?" He grabbed my chin in his hand and forced me to look up at him.

"Magic. Always magic." It would never change. Well...perhaps that wasn't exactly true. He would probably lose his focus on me when he took a new wife.

His lip curled, no doubt thinking how pathetic it was that I still wasn't presented with the craft. "He's not suggesting you call off the wedding?"

Coaching my face neutral, I reminded myself there was no chance of that. When my father had his mind set on something, he saw to it. "Why would he?"

"You remember that cheap replica your mother had made for him?" His lip curled away from his teeth at the memory.

A glass sword. A miniature replica of Sefar. It sat amongst gold and gems in an aged trunk in our own treasury back in Lunasa. Cast away and aside. My father hated the replica, saying its mere existence had blasphemed Sefar's existence. Which was exactly why my mother had it made.

"I'm trying to keep up, dear brother, but I can't fathom where you're going with this." A muscle in his jaw ticked as I spoke. Perhaps because I mentioned our familial ties. How could he have a family member so insignificant?

"Father said the Sefar replica was a mockery of the real thing," his nails dug into my cheeks as he spat each word. "But I think you—a spiteful child—know what it truly is. A mockery of the fantastic. A spitting image of something magic. Like you. You look like us, but you will always be ordinary. Uninspired. Useless, like that wasted piece of glass."

My face began to bruise under his grip. I wanted so badly to spell him, but I could barely move my jaw.

Don't let him win but let him think he has bested you. Baltazar's voice echoed in my mind. I bowed my head, every bit the fragile human my

brother believed me to be.

"Get out of my sight." He shoved and my shoulder slammed into the wall of the carriage. My nostrils flared and I bit down hard enough on my cheek to draw blood.

Not now. Not yet.

The rain splashed onto my face and my boots squelched against the muddied ground as I walked away. I hated them all.

Three carriages behind my father's sat an all-white carriage save for its gold door. A cursive J was framed by carved feathers.

Mine then.

Never mind the fact that only one of these carriages could probably feed the entire populace of Luhne if it was sold. That didn't matter to my family, and I supposed it wasn't supposed to matter to me. My mind wandered to the pair of children I met that day in the square. Dirty, hungry, the girl so young to have her trust in the world broken. The boy still had a light in his eyes, that I hoped he would fan the flames of. But I feared just as quickly that it too would diminish with time.

The golden handle was chilled from the wind of the rising storm. I pulled the door open and stepped into the lavish cab. The air was warmer, with coals burning low in a metal tray by the door. Though curtains darkened the space, lanterns hung from the ceiling at different lengths casting almost a feigned starlight on the walls. Straight ahead was a copper tub, steaming with water and smelling of fresh lavender. Clearly just drawn and heated by one of the servants. Towels and soaps lined shelves and bars that circled it. Draped over a rack, near a floor-length mirror was a silver gown. No doubt it would be as extravagant as everything else my father had brought for the trip.

My eyes widened when they landed on the bed where Liam was propped up and examined me like he was a starved viper, and I was a mouse. Heat spread from my chest, up to my neck. What was he doing there? He was casually sitting amongst the decorative pillows my father had ordered on my bed.

I looked back out the door before swinging it closed behind me.

He couldn't be there. In case anyone had seen him—no, I wouldn't think about that—he had to go. Now.

"You—" My hands clenched into fists at my sides.

He pulled one of the white, fur throw pillows into his lap and pulled at the threading absently. "I take it the wedding is still moving forward?"

"Of course, it is."

"I just assumed since the bride-to-be blew up several parts of the castle," He shrugged as if the words he was saying weren't damning. "The princeling may have reconsidered."

"Keep your voice down." I hissed, trying to listen for sounds around the carriage over the rain.

"What's with the worry, Princess? We're alone." He shrugged again, and I tried to tell myself that meant nothing.

Alone. The word thudded around my empty mind. I tried to summon an ounce of the courage I saw Driata use when she dealt with suitors.

Explosives? Sure. A heist on my future family's treasury, yea. But I didn't know how to react to the man being in my bed...again. How had he even gotten there without being noticed? I began to wonder but the thought fell short. He wouldn't have had to use the door.

"Liam." I wanted to match his unfeeling tone. But his name came out as more of a question. "Tug on your talisman and get the hell out of here."

"What happened to your face?"

"What?" My fingers touched my jaw and then my cheeks, the blood had dried in half-moons where Oliver had grabbed me and his nails dug in.

"What happened to your face?" Each word was clipped, the anger underneath them like a sharpened blade.

What happened to your hand? The words were there at the edge of my tongue as I glanced down at his curled, disfigured fingers. But he wouldn't answer and I already knew.

Instead, I told myself I was protecting Oliver from Liam, not the other way around. I drew my shoulders inward. "It must have happened in the heist."

He cleared the space between us almost faster than I could blink. Pillows were scattered on the floor in his wake. I could smell the spice of bourbon on his breath. "You think I wouldn't notice if something had marred your face?"

His thumb brushed the blemished skin on my face. Somehow, he knew I was lying. He could always tell, despite my training. Despite my multiple attempts to keep him out of reach, he was always there. Watching. Knowing.

Fuck.

"Who did this to you?" His face was inches from mine, body pinning me to the door, as if he could see the fingerprints left by my brother if he only got close enough. "Baltazar? Oliver?"

"A branch—It must have been a branch on my ride." Lie. He knew it too if the flash of rage in his eyes told me anything.

Another lie—one I was telling myself? That I was breathless because he was crushing me against the door, not because he was that close.

"You don't want to tell me? Fine." He thrust away from me. "I might remind you that we have eyes everywhere. And it's my family's pockets that pay them."

I could tell he would leave, and his anger had shifted from the person who harmed me, now directed at me instead. "Liam, wait."

"When I find out who did this...he'll die." He lifted his hand to his talisman, but his eyes never left me.

"I never even said it was a man." He left me gasping, and I thought he would go before I got out the words. But as soon as I said them, I wished I could take them back. To him, it was more a confirmation than if I just kept my mouth shut.

Liam nodded, even as his silhouette faded. "Your cut is on your nightstand."

It was as if I had imagined the pine and spice scent of him and the way his body had touched mine. It was as if he had never been there at all.

My knees nearly buckled, and I told myself it was from the adrenaline of the heist or the ride. But that's the funny thing about lies... they don't work as well when you tell them to yourself.

I dragged myself toward the bed, not bothering to pick up the discarded pillows, and kicked off my boots before climbing under my heavy covers. I wasn't expecting to get much sleep that night, but when I closed my eyes, I dreamed.

"No." My voice was raw, dripping with fear as the word slipped free from my tongue.

Blood. Bright, crimson colored blood. There was so much of it, coating the ground, splattered on my cheeks. Caked underneath my fingernails. My mother's blood. Her life's blood had confettied out of her, like some sick

pinata. I tried to run, to push off the pavement, to scream. But I had been screaming for what felt like hours. No help came.

Taking a rasping breath, I pressed my scraped palms against the cracked concrete and lifted my chin. My eyes narrowed, and my jaw hurt where I had been grinding my teeth together. "If you're going to kill me, do it."

"I never wanted it to come to this, Darling." "I don't even know you. Stop calling me that."

"Elyse. You know me, as I do you. You must feel them—the memories washing back over you as they have in the centuries before."

"I don't know what you're rambling about. My name is Kore."

Throwing my hands up, I blocked the red light flashing from the arms of his robes, searing my eyes. "Who are you? What are you?"

His voice vibrated against my skull as he grew nearer. "You may be repressing your truest self here, in the lands of the mundane, in a world of mortals. But you'll remember when I bring you home." "I'm not going anywhere with you." My jeans frayed at the knees as I scrambled backward. "You're a murderer. A lunatic."

The light pulsed, blurring everything, and scattering the darkness before it consumed me whole.

Gasping breaths of the jasmine scented night air felt like jagged glass in my lungs and throat. Sweat coated my forehead, and as I stretched my back, I noticed my tangled sheets. Rubbing the back of my shaking hand against my drooping eyelids, I tried to collect each fading piece of the fragmented dream.

That my mother's stories still haunted me was unsettling, but what bothered me more was my inability to retain more than small pieces each time I opened my eyes. She had always favored the dark over the lovely.

She never told me stories about the princess being saved by a band of dwarves or a kindhearted prince. No, she told me one story on repeat, about a crazed king who killed his queen and married her daughter.

gooseflesh rose on my skin, and I realized that sometime during the night, the lanterns and the coals must've burned down.

I stepped into my boots and walked to a lantern on my shelf. I turned the knob and it cast an orange-tinted filter around the room.

My stomach let out a low rumble, reminding me I hadn't eaten dinner. The swaying I felt reminded me exactly where I was. In a carriage, bound for Ellesmere. The rain had died down, but in the quiet, I could hear the sloshing sound of the wheels rolling through puddles. The hooting call of an owl searching for its prey. I sat on the end of my bed and readied myself for a long night.



Just before sunrise, the carriage jerked to a stop.

I drew back the curtains hours before, far too alert to sleep. A knock on the door sounded and I glanced at the sack of coins Liam had left beside my bed the night prior. Grabbing them, I stuffed them in my satchel, standing.

Twisting open the door, I couldn't move my feet as panic coursed through me. Three women stood below the step, looking at me. Two I didn't recognize—who stumbled over each other in deep curtsies—one with greyed hair and crinkles around her eyes, the other with a sharp nose and a whiskered chin. The third was *Louisa* with her brown hair braided neatly over her shoulder.

None wore talismans, marking them as commoners. Nobles and royals were the only ones allowed to wear the magic-wielding jewels.

My eyes widened, in shock and in question, but it was the older woman who turned to me with a smile. "The crowned prince and guards came to Luhne for new workers."

The younger one gave me a wide-toothed grin. "Offered us more gold daily than we'd make in a year."

Ah. "And what are you doing *here*?" My eyes flicked to Louisa, but she was focused on the plant on my nightstand.

"We're your new handmaids." The old woman smoothed her tattered skirts and looked at the floor.

"Sent by Oliver?" Two bobbing heads and Louisa turning to me with brows drawn and a tight frown was my answer.

Spies.

"Alright." I could've sworn I heard the elderly woman sigh as I agreed. "What are your names?"

Louisa cleared her throat. "I'm Lou. I'll be your seamstress."

It was the most I ever heard her speak, causing me enough surprise that I forgot there were others around. "You sew?"

"Yes, *Your Royal Highness*." Her words were curt, followed by a stiff, but dramatic curtsy.

Lou and I never shared pleasantries...so much so that I didn't know she preferred the name, Lou. And she thought that I was simply a thief. I never told her my title, but in fairness, she never asked.

"Edera and this is Agatha. Kindly met, Your highness." I noted the younger woman, Edera, spoke with more confidence than Agatha.

I walked to my desk, and sat in the cushioned chair, heaving a sigh before speaking. "Please, call me Jane."

"We couldn't—" Agatha started, but I held up my hand.

"I won't respond to anything else."

Another nod.

"Your Highn—Jane," Edera corrected herself, even as her shoulders pulled inward. "We're supposed to see that you're ready."

"For what?" I straightened. Even as I asked, I knew.

An exchanged look between the two as if they were pulling straws for who would tell me.

Agatha lost. "You'll be the head of the royal procession today."

For a moment, I saw red. Focusing on a blank stone, I worked to control my breathing. It wasn't their fault, any of theirs, that I was being forced to go through with it. It wasn't their fault I didn't want to. Though, in fairness, had I put up much of a fight? *No, because my father gets whatever he wants—never mind what he deserves. My mother was proof of that.*

My breathing steadied, and I looked down at my clothes that were still in shambles. "I do need to bathe."

"We'll draw you a bath." Agatha smiled, and though she was his spy, I could see the pride there. The seemingly silent promise that she would not shirk her responsibilities, that she wanted to earn her living.

They needed the money, probably to feed their families, maybe to pay their tabs. I didn't know, but I wouldn't stop them from earning it.

I would have to be more careful, but them being there didn't change anything. And though the thought of being waited on and watched made my stomach clench, I would give them bits that they could give back to Oliver. Nothing I couldn't afford to lose, but enough that they would be thanked generously by the crown itself.

After the women stripped me of my clothes and threatened to toss them into a raging fire, they plucked and scrubbed, filed, and rubbed and primped some more. Agatha sucked in a breath when she saw my hands and rubbed a burning salve on them before rinsing them away. I hissed at her like a

feral cat but the pain in them subsided quickly taking away the sting of an almost infection.

Only after my body was pruned, and smelling like jasmine on the night air, did they declare that they worked their own form of magic and allowed me to step out.

I stepped into a silken robe that Agatha held out, trying to tell myself that everything was okay and that it was normal. But with six eyes on me, I felt my neck heat and tugged the straps closed even tighter.

"You two may leave. Only one of us needs to tie the ribbon." Lou made a shooing motion with her hand.

Agatha and Edera only looked between each other, then at me. "Go, I'm sure Oliver has other tasks for you."

It was cruel, taking even the slightest joy in the way they scurried from the room like they were mice and I caught them while holding a broom. But they *were* spies.

Not very good ones either by the way, their whispering voices slid right through the door like it was made of parchment.

"What do we do now?"

"Speak with the prince."

"About what? She's done nothing but soak."

"Yes, but did you see the state of her when we walked in?"

"As if she'd been romping in the woods with brutes."

"One minute Jane," Lou shouted right in front of me, throwing her voice to the door. "I forgot my pins. I'll just run out and get them."

My hand slapped over my mouth to hide my laughter until I could no longer hear the pair running away from the carriage.

The barmaid turned seamstress spun on me, all pleasantries and smiles were forgotten as she drew her face inches from mine. "What are you trying to do?"

"What—nothing? What are you doing here?" I whispered, hoping she would take the hint.

"Me?" Her voice raised higher, and my eyes darted to the door considering the handmaids could walk back in. "Tell me, *Princess*, how many years would you serve for treason?"

"Lose your business? The pub? You're risking it to be here?"

"I risked it by helping a thief. One that I thought cared about the people when she stands in her tower smelling like petals, wrapped in silk."

"I'm not—*I do*." I grappled for words, for anything to explain that I did care. But my fumbling mouth settled on, "Why are you helping Oliver to spy?"

"The *money*, Jane!" She threw her hands up as she screamed. "The gold you give helps but isn't enough. It's never been enough. The money could feed the people who come to the pub. Warm their bellies with more than just stale, watered-down ale."

Feeling like she slapped me, I realized she was right. Of course, she was. It was the reason I let them stay. They needed the gold he was offering, and it was more than even I made in a year, surely.

Lou seemed calmer now, resigning herself to believing she hadn't been found out. Our secret—and very illegal—dealings remained just that. Her shoulders sagged as she pulled a cushioned pedestal into the center of the room. "Stop standing there stupidly and let me do my job. Give me something I can tell him."

Embroidered gems stabbed into my bare feet as I stepped up. "I can't. There's nothing I can give you that won't put the little I'm able to do under scrutiny."

"What about your clothes? Why *were* they torn?" Lou rifled through a trunk by the door, before apparently finding what she was looking for. She stood carrying a stiff piece of folded fabric.

"I don't wear corsets." My ribs ached just imagining the bruising from the first and only time I was forced to wear one.

"I've been informed you don't have an option." Lou grimaced clearly as pleased as me when given orders. "The gown won't fit otherwise."

"Pants are preferable anyway." I pulled the ribbons on the robe tighter around my waist, feeling the smooth fabric riding up on my thighs.

She shrugged her shoulders and a frown tugged at her lips. "No one packed you any pants."

I forced my fingers to loosen on the fabric and sucked down a deep breath. Probably my last one of the day. "Alright."

The barmaid turned seamstress walked over with her face scrunched in thought. "Why they're forcing you to go to all this trouble when he'll see what's underneath on your wedding night, escapes me."

"Because by then, it will be too late." I hadn't thought much of the wedding when I could avoid it, let alone the wedding night. It wasn't that I hadn't been with a man, I had. And there were jobs that had taken me out of Lunasa and I had encounters that meant nothing at all. But how could it mean nothing if we were married?

Lou yanked the laces on the back of the corset, and I sputtered a cough. Just as I caught my breath, she tugged again. "Just another deep breath."

"I can't retract my rib cage." As it was, my breaths were short, labored.

"Right, okay." She grunted while securing the ribbon. "You never answered me though. Give me something I can tell the prince."

Avoiding looking at her, I glanced down at my midsection, but I could barely see my feet over my breasts spilling out of the top. Gods, why was that considered the only way to be beautiful? All I could think of was how my bones would be aching by the end of the day.

Lou lifted the silver gown over the steam from the tub and shook it out before crossing back over to me while pulling pins out of the front pocket of her stained apron. The same one I saw her wearing each time I went to the pub.

In that lighting though, I could tell where the white was browning and frayed. How the pocket was close to coming off and had been restitched with colorful threads and patches of fabrics. Clearly, she fixed it with whatever she had on hand.

"You should tell Oliver that Agatha and Edera are right." She gave me a questioning look as she gestured for me to step into the fabric. "I took a half wild lover, and we've been rutting in the woods like animals."

She sucked in a breath that turned into a heaving, snorting laugh and I nearly fell from the stool when I joined her.

When she righted herself, she went about fastening buttons and securing the bodice with thread. "That wouldn't bother you? The thought of your family thinking you a whore?"

I shrugged, gaining another prick to my arm. "It's better than the alternative."

She gave a sharp inhale and placed her hand on her chest. "That they think you're *celibate*?"

Unable to bring myself to laugh at her joke as the weight of my answer settled on my chest before I even spoke the words, I met her eyes. "That they know I've been robbing them and giving the money away."

Her head jerked in a nod. She knew the dangers, and she would be implicated if I was ever followed.

When she finished dressing me, she stepped back and scrunched her nose. "I didn't make this one."

I didn't even cast a glance at the mirror. Frankly, I didn't want to know. I gestured my thanks, and opened the door to the carriage, stepping out in the sunlight.

The bodice on the gown paired with the corset was so tight, I could barely breathe let alone bend in a natural way. I stumbled when I reached the ground and sputtered when my lungs were unable to fully refill with air.

If I died because of a gown, I would consider it a personal slight from the gods. I stomped towards the royal carriage, readying myself to see my father...and the others. I would never understand why my siblings worshiped my father the way they did.

They treated him as though the life he cursed us all to was normal. My siblings, as full witches, would live longer lifetimes, each suffering through their mother's death. But how were they okay? I would never understand how someone could accept such a loss even in old age.

Five lifetimes. My father had been alive for five lifetimes. Far longer than most, but had he really lived at all, when he was cursed to lose his queen over and over? The first queen died at the youngest. My father and his original wife had cast their spell when they were twenty-five years old. She died the very next day.

My grandmother was the only other incarnation to pass before her time, at only thirty-eight when my father killed her. His ignorance to aging in the mortal realm apparently created confusion when he fell upon my grandmother and her nineteen-year-old daughter. Or perhaps it was only wishful thinking that fueled his lunacy, when he struck down his true bride.

I shook my head to ward off the memory, I couldn't think of that when I was about to be dealing with *them*.

The door swung open and Driata offered me a small smile that I didn't bother returning. She knew I didn't want to be there, marrying a man I hardly knew.

It could be worse, she offered before she let me leave the stables with Jett five days prior. *Arius was crafted of a maiden's wet dreams.*

"In those dreams, are they being wed against their will?" I threw my leg over Jett's back, not wanting her answer.

"Some women fantasize, I'm certain." A small, knowing smile tugged at her mouth.

Not me. "I'm the youngest of four sisters far more suited to this arrangement. Why not one of you?"

"Father wanted to see that you were taken care of with your magic...and after—"

I ushered Jett on and ridden off, not wanting to hear the excuses again. It was political, and unwise politics if anyone had cared to ask me.

"We're waiting for you." She waved her hand towards the interior of the carriage, and I pulled my lip between my teeth.

If I climbed in, that was it. We would be heading to Ellesmere and the engagement would be official.

"Come along *Jane*." Gemma whined from within. "You may as well finally show us the ring."

Leave it to the hopeless romantic to not care that I was proposed to, but care about the ring.

Ciaran mock whispered. "He didn't even offer it to her, he sent messengers with it. Probably worried that her hideous face will make him run off with the help."

"That feels self-deprecating given that you all look alike." Liam's voice was gruff, as if he was waking.

Driata offered her hand again, and when I took it, she hauled me into the carriage. I only realized my mistake in giving her my left hand when she started squawking about the size of the ruby. She waved my arm back and forth at our siblings and my father like it wasn't attached to me.

I looked up in time to see my father's beaming smile, though it wasn't directed at me but the man sitting next to him.

Baltazar sat between my father and Liam, staring at the rock on my finger with narrowed eyes. No doubt he was trying to figure my way out of it.

"In all the years you've been my advisor, this is by far the grandest idea you've ever had." My father's words directed at my mentor sucked the air out of my lungs, and left the cab stifling.

Baltazar simply nodded his approval before turning his focus to a scroll he had in his hands.

"Have you and the prince talked about children? You'll be the first of us." Gemma's voice held a touch of dreams, and an ounce of bitterness, but they bounced around my skull.

I couldn't breathe. I was a pretty bird, with a painted beak, bred for breeding. While it was political, I hadn't considered it had been Baltazar's suggestion. What was his goal? Why had he kept it from me? We kept secrets from others, sure, but not each other.

A warm hand grasped mine, but my eyes were still on Baltazar's tilted head, on the crease in his forehead that told me he was deep in thought. Whatever was on the scroll was awful important at that exact moment.

"A ring fit for a queen." Liam's voice was soft, almost imperceptible as the pad of his thumb ran along with my fourth finger.

Snatching my hand from his, my eyes darted around the space. I moved to steal a seat nearest the window on the other side of the cab, smoothing my shaking and sweating hands over the skirt of my gown.

"The servants prepared breakfast. You should eat something." Driata offered me a silver plate with eggs, bite-sized bits of meat, and a bread roll.

"If I eat that, I'll explode from this gown." It was harder still to breathe while sitting, but I took the plate and sat it in my lap.

"Yes, and Gods forbid the princeling knows you breathe," Liam sighed while looking out his window. "The horror."

Baltazar looked up finally, glancing at my gown, then the plate in my hand. "I think she'll be fine without the extra food."

And just like that, I was no longer hungry though I hadn't eaten since the day prior. He was right of course. There would be plenty of food in Ellesmere.



CHAPTER FIVE

It wasn't long before the screeching sound of metal filled the cab as the gates into Ellesmere palace were opening.

"Remember children..." My father began, trailing off for us to finish his thought.

"Presentation is key." We chorused. Though each of us seemed to wish we could jump out of the carriage for opposing reasons.

He looked us each in the eye as he spoke, a clear warning in his tone. "This engagement will bode well for each of you when it comes time for matches and it would serve you all well to remember that."

He looked nervous. I couldn't recall a time his posture was so rigid, or his jaw that tense. Gemma patted his arm absently proving she could sense it too. Perhaps he was worried my siblings' hatred of me would cause them to make a mockery of the meeting.

Truthfully, I had never hoped for anything more.

It wasn't fair to Arius that I hadn't given him a chance. I understood that. He could have been the perfect gentleman—and he had been the one time we met before.

The day I turned fifteen, Maveri Alistair and his son had come to my father's blessings ball—the celebration dubbed such, due to my mother and me sharing the same days of birth. Arius had asked me to dance, I had accepted, and Liam had pummeled him afterward. You can't really beat the shit out of a prince without consequence.

That is, unless you were Baltazar's brother.

The pair sat so close and yet looked like the forest we rode through had grown directly between them. They dressed up, both in black suits with satin lapels. Baltazar's had a pin with his swirling sigil, marking him as my father's right hand.

In contrast to their night-colored attire, my family was outfitted regally, all in shades of gold. The gowns my sisters wore were glittering, possibly with shards of it. And my father and brothers looked as if their seamstresses had spun the thread from thousands of coins.

Looking out the window, I saw the canopy of trees casting a feigned twilight upon the drive. Moss curtained down above and magically kept a carpet of marigolds in bloom along the path no matter how many wheels or boots tracked across it.

Like everything else the mad king did, it was extravagant.

My *visit* had taught me that the palace lay at the end of the tunnel sitting tall on a cliff overlooking where land met the sea.

"Don't be nervous," Driata whispered as if we weren't crammed in the cab with too many other ears.

"Everything's fine.." I released a breath through my nose as the corners of the cab blurred. Perhaps I should have opened the window to allow some fresh air. *Maybe I wasn't fine...*

"If I were you, I would be worried the prince had found a stone more entertaining." Ciaran snorted a laugh while glancing toward Oliver and Olivia. When their stiff faces gave way to no amusement, the laugh quickly turned to a feigned cough.

The twins decided to ignore their eager devotee, for some reason, and they had been quiet for the ride which was surprising to say the least. If I looked closely enough, I thought I could see some slight purpling on the peak of Oliver's cheek, but it could have been the lighting.

"I don't think he'll have trouble with Jane amusing him." Gemma tilted her head to the side as she spoke. "That dress makes her look like a lady of the night."

My father choked out a cough in surprise, his cheeks turning ruddy at the implication. He wouldn't correct her though. Of course not. Even as she insulted me, she was doting on him, fixing the cuff of his sleeve.

What would he think of his sweet daughter when he found out about Alec the stable hand?

"Funny you should say that." Liam offered with a chuckle, pausing to tip a glass flask to his mouth. The brown liquid sloshed inside as he twisted the cap back closed and leaned around his brother to look at Gemma. "I was going to ask you if the gown was yours."

My brows rose in shock, even as a muscle ticked in Baltazar's jaw, and he snatched the container from Liam. "Apologize."

"For what exactly?" Liam offered his brother a tight-lipped smile, managing to almost look genuine in his curiosity.

My father cleared his throat, clearly tired of waiting for Baltazar to step in further. "I do believe you just called a *princess* a *whore*."

"Apologies, Your Majesty. But I do believe she called a *princess* one first." Liam leaned further forward, propping his chin in his hand managing to lean out of Baltazar's eye line.

"Baltazar." My father clicked Sefar's scabbard on the floor of the cab, seemingly to get his keeper's attention. "You told me he would not become a problem. Did you not?"

"Forgive him. It's been a long journey. The boy must be tired." I found myself not watching Baltazar as he spoke, but instead Liam, whose mouth was twitching as if he had more to say.

He seemed to give up altogether, huffing a sigh. Then his silver eyes met mine. For once, there was no cruelty in his face, not even a witty smile. His mouth pulled down in a frown and broad shoulders sagged down.

I wanted to force my eyes away, feeling the tension growing thick within the cab. The silence was a deafening drumbeat as no one spoke. Not even Ciaran, with his incessant need to hear his own voice.

An arm, wrapped in black fabric, reached around Liam's back, making it seem as though Baltazar was comforting his drunken brother. But I knew what it meant. He spoke out of turn, perhaps even embarrassing Baltazar, and that wouldn't do. A lesson in etiquette was coming.

I glanced at Liam's lame hand, curled in his lap, having not been healed. Why hadn't he healed it? And more importantly, why would I care?

My thoughts were silenced as the carriage rolled to a stop.

"Princess." Baltazar's voice cut through me as he nodded in my direction. It was always strange hearing him use the title. I much preferred the sound of my given name when spoken from his lips. "—escorting your father."

"What?" Heat spread from my neck up towards my cheeks. What was it he said?

"You will exit with me first, Janie." And as if I had been splashed with ice, the use of that cursed name by my father washed away any of the thoughts I was having about my mentor. "Your fiancé is supposed to greet us."

I unfolded myself from the seat. Dread was pooling in my gut. There was no backing out now, nowhere to run.

Hands smoothed my copper-colored coils from behind and I heard Driata murmur, "Smile Jane. You're so beautiful when you smile."

I was overly aware of my face. Too conscious of the grimace that formed on my mouth. I looked to Baltazar, hoping to find a smile of his own. One I could mimic. I only had to pretend. How hard could that be? I did it all the time.

But what I found was him turned to Liam, his fist white-knuckling the back of his brother's jacket.

Bony fingers pulled at my wrist as my father wrapped my arm through his while using Sefar to balance.

Sunlight washed over the cab as the door swung open from the outside. A servant dressed in shades of cream and silver offered me a hand.

I smoothed down the front of my skirts and tucked my fingers into the servant's hand, all the while standing straighter.

Prince Arius' head of sandy blonde hair and eyes the color of cinnamon met me. He had grown and kept a beard since I had seen him last, maintaining it trimmed at his jaw. He looked like a man now, though I met him when he was just under eighteen. Driata had been right, he was handsome. But I couldn't help comparing. He stood almost as tall—though with less broad shoulders—as Baltazar, who was only normally challenged

in height by Liam, who had out-paced my mentor in height and width by the time he turned sixteen.

Dipping into a curtsy, I fluttered my eyelashes at him. I allowed my mind to wander to the first time Driata had tried to give me *the talk*. I thought of how mortifying it had been that she hadn't known my mother had given it to me years before. Or really that she was speaking on it at all. The thoughts made my cheeks flush with embarrassment. The prince would think it was modesty, perhaps even nerves. If he was like most men I knew, he would attribute my blushing to his own good looks. Good.

I knew the part I had to play, the role I was supposed to paint on my skin. He couldn't possibly know that I was bold enough to even consider running. The match was more to my benefit than his own.

"Merry meet, Princess. The rumors of your beauty do not disappoint." As he spoke, I offered him my knuckles and tried not to think of the hike I would have to make on foot if I took off right then.

"You're too kind, Prince Arius. Thank you for allowing my family and I to visit your home." If I didn't focus on it, perhaps I could forget the taste of bile in my throat.

He's being polite, I reminded myself. It's only fair if you give him a chance.

But I had been called beautiful before, and it ended in a broken heart.

"After a bit of an inconvenient occurrence, the palace is under...*renovations*. I would like to extend the invitation for you to join us for a late lunch." My stomach chose that moment to rumble its need to their entirety of the courtyard and Arius only smiled, offering me his arm.

It didn't matter that I hadn't eaten any food in a day and a half, I wouldn't be able to fit anything through the corset and bodice of the gown. And

despite my comment in the cab, I thought it would probably be frowned upon if I found myself bursting from the dress.

Praising myself mentally for only pausing for a moment before tucking my hand into the crook of his arm, I offered him a demure smile. "Do you often greet all of your guests personally?"

The prince barked a laugh that seemed genuine, and I found myself gazing sideways at him, taking in his strong jaw and the smattering of freckles on his nose.

"I felt it was only right to see my ring on this delicate hand of yours since I was unable to be there to offer it to you in person." His fingers grazed mine, nestled against his forearm and skimming the ring I wore.

"Ah. And what was it that kept you from proposing yourself rather than sending a messenger to do your bidding?" I couldn't keep the bitterness completely out of my tone, but I swatted his arm playfully as if it were our own inside joke.

He paused, his body stilling for an almost imperceptible moment before seeming to decide to turn down a different path. "Allow me to assure you, I would have given anything to be there with you at that moment."

My slipped feet padded on the grass with the turn as we had veered off the cobblestone path and veered toward a white, ivy coated arch ahead.

It was so strange, seeing such vibrant greenery in Ellesmere, in comparison to Lunasa and witnessing nature flourish and undulating in a gentle breeze. Our gardens thrived at the castle through the sheer will and magic of the gardeners, though my father had to change his own laws to allow each of them talismans.

"There were matters more pressing?" It was an assumption, but it felt like he was avoiding the point.

He stopped us at a fountain of two lovers locked in a passionate embrace. My back stiffened, not even at the statue's nudity, which put the couple's bodies—ample breasts and asses—on display for every passerby, but instead because of the white rose bushes surrounding the trickling fountain. His sun kissed cheeks dimpled as he gave me a full smile, one that I'm sure was meant to melt hearts and give him the skeleton key to chastity belts, but I was no maiden, and though I gave him a small smile back, I was unimpressed.

He plucked a rose from the bush and began snapping off the thorns quickly, as if without a thought, and my heartbeat hammered in my ears. "I was traveling to Weylin in preparation for your surprise."

He mentioned the rocky island passively, dismissing the ships that had been splintered against its shores in the thousands.

"You prepared a surprise before you proposed?" It took every ounce of will in me not to step back. Not a choice, looking at my family who had followed us and to Baltazar and Liam standing just behind them. Baltazar was busy aligning his cuff sleeve, but Liam's eyes were boring into me. No. Past me, at the prince's hand raised to tuck the rose stem behind my ear.

I tilted my head to the side, and down as if too shy to have him touch me but allowing him access all the same. His fingers trailed down my jaw and cupped my face, intimate enough to feel as if we were alone.

But we weren't and I heard Driata sigh dreamily as Arius finally answered. "I had a feeling you would say yes."

Of course, he had. And really, what choice did I have in the matter? No one would suspect I was any more than the role and even if they had, they would find a way to squeeze me back into it.

He smirked, taking my silence as agreement, and placed his hand on the small of my back. Turning me away from the fountain, the roses, and even my court, we walked toward a curtain of marigolds that hung over hidden bronze doors that allowed us into the palace.

We entered through an alcove that could have been a service entrance, and I wondered why we hadn't been received in the main hall, and really, why Arius had bothered greeting us at all.

Was he being genuine when he said he wanted to see me wearing the ring? Or was I right to believe there was something wrong there?

My teeth sliced into the inside of my cheek as I silenced my thoughts. There was no reason to assume Arius was anything less than a gentleman, and perhaps he was less pompous than I thought if he would be seen in the service parts of the castle.

That would be a surprising and welcome difference from my father and even his own gold glutton of a king.

Maybe it wouldn't be as awful as I thought.

We passed through corridors with intricate carvings of the royal crest, a boar's head donning a crown of flames and rubies.

The blood crown. So named for the king's penchant for violence—including the massacre of his father and eldest brother so that he could take the throne.

As tasteless as his rise to power had been, Maveri had been my father's strongest ally at a time when the rift between Ellesmere and Lunasa had been great. Maveri's father, Rikerd, sought to have my father dethroned for the spell he and the First Queen had cast all those years ago. It was a defilement of nature, and even with the curse running rampant in Lunasa

and in my father's veins, Maveri's father thought Lunasa deserved a better king.

Maveri, of course, stopped that when he allied with my father to seat himself on the throne of Ellesmere.

Arius' voice pulled me from my thoughts. "What are you thinking about?"

"Hmm?"

"You've been gnawing at your lip and staring off at vacant walls for the entire walk." He stopped us in front of another carving—one of a hog reared up on its hind legs. The more I looked at the image, the more its features seemed more human, its chest more defined, its legs thickening...

Magic. There was magic in the carvings.

"Your grandfather." I should have lied, perhaps even tried to save face, and pretend I was admiring the castle's stonework. But I was curious, and though I had been instructed by my father not to bring up our kingdoms' pasts, I wanted to see what the man thought. The way his mind worked and if he supported his father's ways.

"My grandfather was a politically minded man." Arius said, though it seemed to be a half-thought.

"I can't tell from your tone if you approve of that or not." I glanced to where my family stood, far enough away to give the new couple their privacy. I wondered if they could hear us.

He paused. One blink, then a second while he stared at me, his head slightly tilted as if he were trying to figure me out too. "Who am I to stand here and tell my almost bride that her people would have been better off if her father gave up his kingdom?"

"And who would I be to ask if you think it's wrong that your father butchered his own blood?" I should have kept walking. That was not an approved topic. The weather, my travel, the flowers, and tapestries, yes. But *that...no.*

"My father was able to get Lunasa access to ports again, and help feed starving villagers." My breathing hitched as he paused to touch the rose he had tucked in my hair. That was the moment where he would show his undying loyalty to his king. Murderer or not. "But he bathed in blood for that, and I'm sure there was another way."

What? Had I been so judgmental to assume he was like his father?

Words evaded me, my normal quick wit had run off with my tongue.

I settled on a nod, turning away and pacing forward as if I had a clue where he was taking me.

He seemed to accept it, joining me in my silence and lacing my arm through his.

It was strange. The feeling that in a few months-time Ellesmere was supposed to be my home... I wasn't certain I ever had one, not really. Not since my mother *left us*. That was what everyone called it. Too afraid of the curse that was the word death.

Death was final, unchanging. Save for the people who survived you, those who loved you that would forever be changed.

I looked at the gold spun tapestries and ornate lanterns lining the stone walls, the polished marble floors. I breathed in the smell of meats that permeated through the halls despite the flowers hanging from all the walls and sitting on every intricately carved wooden table we passed. It made me think of Driata and her choice years ago to abstain from meat. She must be

in agony there. Smelling what she would call the rotten odor of unnecessary death.

I glanced back at her, and her lip was curled back from her teeth while she fanned her face with a kerchief.

Her eyes widened in signal as she met my eyes as if asking how I could handle it. I gave her a small shrug in offering.

Did it smell like the kitchens overflowed with animals? Yes.

But she knew Ellesmere was known for their seasonings and their meats. The Elwood was rife with hunters willing to kill for their king. It's how Maveri maintained enough riches to control the ports. And the reason why the alliance between our two kingdoms needed to remain firm.

Baltazar and my father would have already coached her on how to act, how to pretend she was enjoying the foods they offered...but she needed to get in control of her face.

My attention was taken over by our entrance into a great hall.

An aged butler dressed in a suit with a fluffed collar announced our arrival to the several people already milling about. Flutes of champagne raised in greeting while the frilly nobles hoarded small plates of skewered meats and cheeses in their hands. "Prince Arius Alistair and his betrothed Princess Janai Serpen of Lunasa."

I cleared my throat, though it was much louder than I intended as the overwhelming crowd stopped clapping. "I—uh. It's Jane."

The butler turned to me, his soft blue eyes framed by a delicate web of lines and wrinkles. "My apologies, Your Highness. Would you like me to reintroduce you?"

"No!" My voice echoed around the room. I sighed, quieting my tone as the man flinched again. "I'm sorry no. That won't be necessary."

I felt a tug on my arm and moved out of the entryway.

"King Certis Serpen of Lunasa is accompanied by his five eldest children: Prince Oliver Serpen, Princess Olivia Serpen, Princess Driata Serpen, Prince Ciaran Serpen, and Princess Gemma Serpen." My siblings swept in with my father, and the butler paused. Then, "Lord Keeper of Lunasa Baltazar Tellyk and his brother Liam Tellyk."

"You don't need to apologize to the help." Arius' voice was a whisper in my ear. Barely loud enough for me to hear.

"I didn't mean to yell at him."

"He got your name wrong." Arius swiped a flute from a tray as a masked waiter walked by and placed it in my hand. "It's not as if he has very many tasks to excuse it. Now come. There are some people you'll need to meet."



I had never met the other royals.

They weren't fond of my father, but that didn't stop him from trudging into the room gripping Sefar's scabbard for dear life and grinning like he wasn't a walking skeleton.

Perception is key.

He had to pretend like his Kingdom was on the line, and maybe it was. They were firm supporters of Maveri's father in ousting him.

The nearest to us was a man with women and men alike fawning all over him, tipping back flutes of champagne and offering him bites of meat and cheeses. I figured from descriptions I had heard of his size alone, that he had to be the King of Karhdaro. But it wasn't his supporters, dressed in the thinnest pieces of lace, that caught my attention, it was that he dressed in such contrast to the fine gowns and suits that everyone else in the room wore.

His *shorts* were nothing more than briefs, barely concealing his bulging manhood and his tanned and inked chest was on display for the entire room

to see. His thighs and tattooed arms rippled with lines of muscle that easily measured the same width as my waist.

As Arius escorted me toward him, one of the king's scantily clad admirers whispered in his ear something that made his chest heave with laughter that bounced around the room.

Nearer, I could see his thick, dark hair met his shoulders and framed an exquisite face. In fact, the closer I got, the more details I noticed. The way his full lips held an easy smile and his eyes were the color of the sea glass found on beaches after a storm. He was a precise kind of beautiful, and it was no wonder his hangers-on flocked to him in the dozens.

"Merry meet, Princess." He aimed those eyes at me, and his mouth curved up in a slow smile that had my fingers itching to reach for pencils and paper to sketch him. His flock of followers parted enough for him to bridge the gap between us as he stooped low in a bow that was beneath his status. My hand was lost in his as he placed a kiss atop it. "All I've been told of your beauty...does you no justice."

His accent was thick, and one I so rarely heard on the continent that it gave me pause. I did my best to quickly recover, dropping in a curtsy and giving him my most demure smile. One that I knew my sisters didn't have to pause before giving. One that was a natural extension of their faces.

Even Olivia had mastered it early in age.

"You're too kind, King Blair," I managed finally, as I straightened. The foreign monarch still had a hold of me and pulled me close to his chest. "Merry meet."

"I imagine you have had your share of admirers." He whispered, feigning a kiss on my cheek. "Why you chose this one is beyond me."

He leaned away, dragging me instead into his gaze. His face was young, tinted by the sun, and pinched with a worry that couldn't be for me. Heat rose from my neck into my cheeks under the intensity of that stare. Bowing my head, I felt the curtain of curls fanning my cheeks and hoping one shade of red would hide the other.

"Come." Arius' voice was harsh in comparison to the dulcet tones Blair had spoken, but I took it as an invitation to escape the king's too heavy stare.

He led me toward large glass paneled doors that I hadn't noticed though they dominated nearly the entirety of the back wall.

The smell of salt on a chilled breeze greeted me and cooled my too hot face. I wanted to soak it in, and I wished for fewer clothes so that I could feel the sun competing with the sea air for space on my skin.

The view was breathtaking. We stood on a balcony constructed of an aqua colored glass, which distorted the rocks jutting from the side of the castle. The bright noontime sun hung high in the sky and reflected its blinding light off the calm sea, whose waves lapped at the sand far below.

I squinted to try to separate the cloudless sky on the horizon from the boundless sea, but the colors blended almost perfectly together. I never knew such calm or such beauty. If I had any breath to spare in the too tight, hard boned corset, it would have stolen it away.

"Do not think you will receive such warmth from me, daughter of death's deceiver." The voice was cold, feminine, edged with ice.

I turned to find a woman wearing a crown of... ivory bone? Or a very good replica. Her face had such gaunt angles that my mind trailed to the harsh strokes of my pencil I would use to recreate her image on paper. Her silver hair whipped out behind her as though the briny breeze was a storm,

she alone controlled. My eyes trailed down, to a gown that looked to double as armor, glinting turquoise in the sun. It looked to be composed of scales of some sort...

"Orabelle—Queen of Weylin." Arius introduced her as though they were old friends, and though I hadn't taken my eyes from her, I could hear the smile in his voice. "Orabelle, Jane. Jane Orabelle."

"Jane," her mouth formed my name as if it were foreign, and her lip curled as if she got a taste of something bitter. "How...plain."

I straightened further, keeping my cool, unfeeling mask in place. "If you would like to insult me, you'll have to come up with something far more creative than my father's indiscretions and my boring name I'm afraid. Neither was a choice I made."

Orabelle's mouth twitched up at the corner as if I had made a joke. "And would you have chosen differently?"

It felt as though she switched topics without informing me, and I didn't know how to react. My stomach twisted with nerves. "It will never matter what I choose."

The queen of the isles smirk vanished. "And here I for a moment thought you were more than a delicate, plucked flower."

"She certainly would be the most enticing in a garden though would she not?" Arius chuckled in my ear, and it was everything I could do not to jump. How had I forgotten he was there? And why did his confirmation of her words make my skin crawl?

"I'd like to think of our princess as something far more interesting." Liam's voice carried out over the balcony. "Perhaps a poison?"

May the gods smite me where I stand. The man was everywhere. I turned to him where he stood only an arm's length away from Arius whose face

held barely concealed annoyance.

"And who might this be?" Orabelle's voice was much huskier than she'd used with me or even Arius. Sounding like a cat that was content with a belly full of mice.

Liam brushed past me, not flinching at the jolt of pure static that seemed to pour through us at the contact.

Maybe he hadn't felt it. But I had, and it seemed to wake me up and make me more aware of each of his movements. The slight stumble in his gait. The way his hand hung limp at his side. The way his blue-black curls were mussed as if someone had ripped their fingers through them.

Orabelle's icy eyes met mine, and then tracked back to Liam as he strode toward her. She gave him a toothy smile, and I was struck again by how severe her features were even as they softened before my eyes. Her cheeks looked less gaunt, her lips fuller and pinker. Her icy eyes widened and were framed by impossibly darker and longer lashes.

What the—?

Liam bowed at the waist, and grasped her hand in what felt like a near intimate gesture and glanced up to meet her stare as he placed a kiss on the back of it.

"Isn't that a friend of yours?" Arius asked, his breath brushing the arch of my ear.

"No." Yes. Definitely not. Maybe. Nope. I worried my teeth would be ground to dust before the interaction was over.

"Then you need not tell him that Orabelle has gained the most notoriety for feasting on her lovers after they bring her pleasure."

Excuse me, what? "I'm sure that can't be true."

And it didn't matter. Liam wasn't going to *sleep with her*. Had he not seen her morph in front of his very eyes by the work of some strange magic?

"The bones in her crown are from the only husband she's ever taken." The prince let out a soft chuckle. "Picked clean on their wedding night."

"And you find that rumor to be amusing?" My eyebrows arched. The only fraction of my true emotions I would let show on my face as I stepped back through the door while downing the champagne in my glass and exchanging the empty for another on a server's tray.

That one followed the former into the scarce contents of my stomach. Only then did I grab a plate filled with bite sized bits of buttery fish and garlicky beef, though there wasn't much room in the dress I would find a way.

The bubbles felt heavy in my stomach, even as the rest of me felt lighter. I picked up the joke of a fork that was no larger than my forefinger and plopped a piece of crab into my mouth.

Delicious. I followed that with a bite of cheese. Sharp. Dry.

I felt the presence near me before I had a chance to react. Oliver crowded my line of sight.

"That fiancé of yours has grown bored already then?"

"Prince Arius is entertaining guests." I ducked around him, only to be met with a wall of bodies created by none other than Olivia and Ciaran. *Gods above, have they got nothing better to do than follow him around?*

"Can I help you?" I laced my voice with sugar to douse away the bitter thoughts. I may not be excited to marry, but I was certainly not complaining that I had to see the three of them less often.

"I'm not sure you can," Olivia said, her eyes narrowed and looking over my gown and the crumbs of bread I hadn't noticed had fallen on the bodice.

Brushing them from my chest, I made my hands shake, so it looked like I was wrecked with nerves. "Then I should go find Arius."

"On a first name basis, are you?" Oliver's voice was too close behind me. And while I was sure I could get out of the situation with little violence and no injuries on my part, Baltazar would want me to maintain my guise.

My chin dipped toward my chest as I lowered my eyes. "He's to be my partner. Am I supposed to call him by his title?"

"You need not forget you barely hold a position yourself, *sister*." Olivia spat the last word as it pained her.

"You would be better suited ending things like your mother." Ciaran may as well have struck a physical blow. Wincing, as though he had, I wished for the conversation to end.

Gods, the moment I was given permission I would gut him.

"No," Oliver said, his mouth a cruel line. "She would much rather pretend to be one of us."

"And pretend we would ever let her wear even another kingdom's crown," Olivia added, flicking my nose.

"We would sooner see you dead." The threat was there. Even when Oliver moved away and the others followed, it hung over me still. He didn't realize I didn't give a shit about a crown.

I didn't even understand why he let himself get so excited, obsessed really, with the idea of one. There wasn't really a point in being an heir if our father was apparently never going to die.

More wine, something to wet my mouth. I aimed myself toward another server, but Blair intercepted me with a heavy arm around my shoulders. "Hello there, sweetness. It looks like you could use some fresh air."

"Not on the balcony," I grumbled, prepared to battle my way through bodies to get myself away from everyone.

"Of course not." The sulphuric scent of magic hit my nose and the bubbles in my stomach rose as we tumbled into nothingness.

We landed on a plush carpet of grass and pine needles, and I heard the soft nickering of horses. My eyes began to focus as the ivy coated white stables came into view nearby.

Blair plopped down a few feet away from me gesturing to the ground that he wanted me to do the same. I crossed my legs as I squatted and finally made it to the ground...despite being unable to bend my torso.

"Did one of those boys do something to you?" The timbre of his voice lowered, and a fit of uncovered anger pinched his brow.

"What do you mean?" I looked to the stables to avoid meeting his eye, trying to think of Jett, and wondering if she was in there. "No, of course not."

He clicked his tongue, clearly not believing a word I said. "One leads you out to the balcony, and the next follows. Then you're draining down booze like it's a lifeline and you're quickly sinking."

"And you care because?" I couldn't hide the irritation in my tone, though if Baltazar knew I let my control slip, he would be furious. But what was I supposed to do? Keep acting forever? I felt as if I were a dam fit to burst and I wouldn't be the only casualty.

"That's a question I've been asking myself." There was a question there, in the pitch of his voice and his raised brows. As if he were surprised to admit it. "But I also saw through your façade the moment you stepped into that hall."

How could he know? I had everyone else fooled. Even the ever-suspicious Oliver couldn't prove anything he suspected of me. But the man sat there half-naked and accusatory.

Shit. "I'm not sure—"

"Don't do that." He cut over me with his palm outstretched. "You are quite clever, but my clan are rather good at detecting bonds between people."

"So...you can tell I don't care for Arius." I shrugged, trying to pull back together the torn shreds of my cover. "A lot of wives don't care for their husbands."

He shook his head vigorously, trying to clear my words from the air. "You've got to ask the right questions."

"What do you want from me?" I was half tempted to get up and run away back to the castle, but I was worried—if not also a bit curious.

"There are certain things at play, pieces I'm unable to move." He steeped his hands together between us. "But if *you* were to move one, I would be forced to move too."

His eyes were wide with honesty *or maybe lunacy*.

"My fiancé will wonder where I am." I don't know why I said it, though I knew it was true. And it would not do for him to think I was out on his grounds romping with another man.

"Who worries about Arius fucking Alistair?" The king dragged his fingers through his hair and expelled a heavy breath.

Uncertainty flooded me, even as I stood and dusted grass from my gown. "I don't have a choice." The strange conversation sobered me and made me wonder what *questions* I was supposed to ask.

"Your secret is safe, and the image of your chastity remains unsullied." He waggled his eyebrows, losing the grave face that had plagued him only moments before. "I assumed the task of escorting you to your surprise."

"That itself isn't inappropriate?" I asked, not really caring and the king smiled in turn.

"I can do as I wish," He winked, "Ellesmere needs what I provide."

He didn't elaborate, and gave no impression that he would so my brain trailed back to the *surprise*.

In all the chaos, I forgot Arius had said there would be a surprise. But I assumed and hoped it was lunch. Wasn't all of that strangeness enough? "There's more?"

"The boy prince seems to be under the assumption that you'll enjoy the spotlight. He would never guess you thrive in the shadows." Blair winked at me, his smile making him seem younger somehow as he yanked the white rose from behind my ear and crushed it under his boot.

He offered me his arm and as I looked down at the crumpled petals, I wondered if maybe he did know more than he could say.



CHAPTER SEVEN

It was a pleasant surprise when Blair didn't immediately whisk us away using his carved talisman. He explained that he found more peace in nature than if he were to go rushing from place to place.

"Are you going to tell me what the surprise is?" I asked, hopeful that he wouldn't be vague in all things.

His eyes shone with amusement even as a muscle feathered in his jaw. "I was sworn to secrecy. And a man is only as strong as his word."

I couldn't fault him for it, though I wasn't sure why it was so easy to speak with him—To hear the truth in his words. "Why do I feel like I'm going to hate this?"

"Because you most certainly will."

I let the silence grow between us, never becoming a tempest beast, but instead a comfortable companion as we walked. I took my slippers off and carried them in my hand to feel the soil, so rich compared to Lunasa and the grass—thick and verdant with life under my feet. The sun was lowering in the sky and had cast a tangerine and fuchsia glow around us.

Blair led us onward, over a hill past the east side of the castle and away from the sounds of the horses and their handlers. We reached a hedge three times in height taller than the monarch at my side and seeing as how I got a neck ache each time I met his eye from looking upward, that was saying something.

It was lush, with vibrant red flowers and green leaves it may as well have been a stone wall for all you could see through it. "Is this the part where you actually decide to murder me? Just as I think we could become friends?"

Blair chuckled, the sound low in his throat. "Sweetness if I wanted you dead, I would have done it in a room full of people."

"That's..." My eyebrows raised as I craned my neck to look at his toothy grin. "Comforting."

"I've no doubt you go down valiantly." He *shrugged*. The gesture showed how little he meant his statements, but also proved he might, as he tugged me through the arched flower-coated hedge.

Musical notes floated toward us on the sea breeze, and I sighed. How many times have I had an opportunity to run away? But there we were, walking into a hedge maze toward what sounded like a party though I was content with no celebration. Especially not one to commemorate a rock I wore on my finger and a contract that would sign away any future or hope I had of freedom.

"Do you think I should go through with this?" It didn't make sense, asking a near stranger if I should play my part. But he was a monarch—an unbiased one it seemed—and I had a feeling he would answer to his ability.

"I think if you had a choice, you would have ridden off today and not looked back." His words startled me and when I didn't respond, Blair

continued. "But you're here, and the cards have been dealt. Your only option is to play."

"Talking in code like that makes you seem like an asshole." I laughed, realizing how strange it was that I was so unguarded with him.

But there they were, hanging between us as the giant king doubled over in a fit of laughter. Then, through gasping breaths, "You would fit in well in Karhdaro. All of them are over my bullshit too."

"Then give a straight answer for once."

"Straight is boring. Look at the predicament you're in."

"I already told you, I have no choice in the matter."

"The day you realize that's a lie, I'll make sure I'm in the front row to watch you burn it all down."

Why did it feel like I had known the man for years?

Hearing the music draw nearer, the notes louder and more distinguishable as a flute, a harp, and so on, I reminded myself of my place. I relinquished the king's arm and fell into step a bit behind him. And while I kept my back stiff, my chin dipped.

That was what Baltazar wanted. *Let them see you as feeble, make them believe you are nothing but grateful for this opportunity.* But how could I pretend to feel grateful as I wanted to crawl out of my own skin and slither away?

It only got worse as we stepped through the final arch leading to the center of the hedge maze. It was a massive glass atrium lined with copper and gold arched high above, filtering in the waning sun. Dozens of people milled about while faces blurred together and my heartbeat pounded in my ears to the beat of the music.

I was not meant to be a spectacle, not when Blair was right, my place was surely secured in the shadows. But there I was—framed in white roses of all things, I realized as I recognized the scent and looked around.

Blair hissed under his breath, just loud enough for me to hear. "Too late to run now." The bastard leaned back to shove me forward with his massive paw of a hand.

I stumbled, but he caught me by the back of my bodice, and I sucked in a jagged breath as it pinched my ribs. Rude.

"Princess Jane. I would like for you to meet my father, my King." Arius' voice rang out over the soft music and I wanted to scream, to duck back through the maze until I found Jett and never look back. But Baltazar had a plan. He had to, which meant I had to keep my part.

I looked up in time to see the blonde walking past a group of courtiers fanning themselves and giving him bright, too white smiles, hopeful for a glance their way no doubt. And while I couldn't care any less if he looked, he apparently only had eyes for me. Dear Gods.

Further beyond him, a throne carved of citrine and latticed with blooming jasmine stood tall amongst the people in attendance. But lounging, with his rotund stomach on display and a grease coated leg of some poor animal hanging from his maw...the mad king himself. King Maveri Alistair.

His wife Aurina was absent, though I hadn't really expected her to be there. The queen had never been seen outside of their castle, had never been painted or carved or molded. Some said the mad king had made her up altogether, others said she was magnificent, and he was far too selfish to share her with the world.

Unfortunately, the *rare beauty* was missing and alone sat her disgusting king.

I would sooner feed myself to river hags than approach that man for no reason. But I had a reason. The plan—Baltazar's plan. What was the plan again?

Right. Meek, timid, thankful.

The small portions of food I ate were turning in my stomach. How hadn't I thought of the heist all that day? What if he knew it was me?

What if the elaborate party was his web, and I was the helpless fly he was about to devour? My gaze trailed around the faces in the darkening atrium. Servants, still wearing their unadorned masks set to work lighting sconces and mini fires around what seemed to be a flower-strewn dance floor. The music had picked up its tempo while men and women alike swung their partners in twirls of fabric.

But around the room, almost imperceptible were stoic faces of men who looked uncomfortable in their evening wear. More likely used to the armor they would wear when they wanted to be conspicuous. One, a sandy haired man tugged at the collar of his shirt while a grimace tugged at his mouth.

Guards.

Baltazar would have warned me...if we had—I had been caught. Right?

I hadn't realized I faltered back until I was pressed against the hard stomach of Blair and couldn't manage to move until I felt his hands come down on my shoulders as a deep chuckle from that very chest rumbled through me. "Sweetness, that's your cue."

Overly aware of my face, I pulled my lips into a smile and wished for one of the masks the servants wore to cover my creasing brow. But none of the guests had them on. I supposed that's how they were distinguished as *the help* as my fiancé called them. Gods, that was awful.

Arius crossed the distance between us and intertwined his fingers through mine. His hands were clammy, and I stifled my urge to cringe away. No, my mask couldn't slip...not tonight.

He guided me through the dancers, who—though lost in what seemed to be their own world of music notes and flirtations—still managed to part for us as though it were their duty. And maybe it was. Maybe the prince had hired them for just the task because I was certain we did make quite the spectacle. Traipsing across a bed of reblooming flowers with fabrics of silk and lace framing us as though it was our wedding night, and the performers were forming our aisle.

I would perish. I would certainly pass away from my heart stopping mid-step if that was what the man had planned.

We reached his father who didn't deign to look up at us as I curtsied. Who really cared that my lungs were near collapsing at the movement?

"My King." Of course, Liam was right and that was how Arius addressed his own father. "I would like to introduce you to my fiancé, Princess Jane Serpen." Gods, that name. The title. I think I preferred being named Plain.

"Merry met King Maveri. Might I express my absolute pleasure at my future as your daughter-in-law." Drool dripped down the king's chin as I spoke. It plopped onto his hair-coated chest as he licked and sucked the grease from the meat off his fingers.

A snort of laughter rang out in the silence of the crowd as even the musicians stopped playing.

The remainder of my life flashed before my eyes as I waited for the gluttonous king to speak. Arius and I would perform a fertility spell—the only way our peoples could conceive—and we would have three potbellied children. They would take their height from their father, their thighs from

me, and their stomachs from their grandfather. They wouldn't be particularly athletic, and each would die in increasingly embarrassing ways.

The first, choking on bones he's inhaled at dinner, the second in an asthmatic attack, and the third would sink to the bottom of a spring while attempting to catch his own dinner for spite. Arius would start shrinking in his grief and morph into the very image of his father sitting before me today.

I was brought out of the terrifying daymare at the sound of the king clearing his mucus-coated throat. "Jane," he smacked his lips together around my name as if tasting it and then finally dragged his eyes along my body up to my face. "I can't tell if under all those clothes you have the hips to bear me grandchildren."

"She's built like a prized boar, father." Arius' smile was proud and beaming and I wanted to break every single one of his too-white teeth. How was that considered a compliment? "Speaking of prized boars." He waved his hand, and two masked servants came strutting up the dais holding a leather strap tied to the largest pig I had ever seen. Its squeals of terror echoed through the atrium and my spine clenched.

"What is this?" Surprise, fear, confusion. One of those emotions took hold of my voice as it raised to an octave, I never imagined I could reach. My façade was slipping, no...running away as the pig stared two black beady eyes in my direction while thrashing its neck back and forth against its captors.

"Our dinner for tonight. A roast fit for the future Queen of Ellesmere." As Arius spoke, a shriek cut out over his voice and the pig's cries.

"No. Have you lost your mind?" Bodies swarmed toward us, while Driata barreled through the crowd. "This! This is to be your dinner? Why don't you

just cut one of your guests open and watch them bleed? He has a heart." The last word was caught up in a sob as she threw herself over the pig, shielding his eyes from the devastating fate and offering herself up as sacrifice instead.

"You do realize boar meat has provided us with the fortune that supports your kingdom in their troubled times?" King Maveri was spitting mad as he seemed to attempt to lift himself from his throne.

Driata ignored the king, turning pleading eyes on Arius instead, who surprisingly offered her a kind smile. "What would you have us do with him instead?"

"Keep him." She stood, seeming for the moment content that she saved the thing. And even the boar looked calmer as she grasped Arius' hands between her own. "What a thoughtful gift it would be to Jane."

Excuse me? *Has she seen that thing?* "Uh—"

I couldn't speak fast enough as the prince silenced me by caressing my chin like he hadn't just compared me to the five-hundred-pound hogtied up before us. "That could be lovely, giving us something to care for together."

I would rather die, not that he asked me.

"Then it's settled!" Driata clapped and threw her arms around Arius who returned the hug as if they had known each other since they were babes. He should marry her. They would be much better suited for each other and could raise the pork to be a fine young gentleman.

"Take him to Jane's rooms." Arius used not one please, no thank you—and my what? That thing was going *where?*

"Um...thank you." My words were weak and even I didn't believe them, but Arius beamed as if it had been his idea all along.

The music swelled once more while my *new pet* was dragged off to sully my rooms. You'll be going home in a few days, I reminded myself. Not soon enough though.

"Would you like to dance?" Not likely. But I fluttered my lashes at the too-charming prince anyway. Play the game. Master the part. Demure. Controlled. Docile.

"It would be my pleasure." I dipped into a curtsy while offering him the back of my hand, and he swept me into his chest. He led, which obviously was customary for him, and I followed despite wanting to rip out of his arms.

I was dizzy by the time the smell of cedar and tobacco wrapped around me like a blanket as Baltazar stopped us mid-spin with a pat on the prince's arm. "May I cut in?"

Arius' laugh seemed empty and his eyes darkened as he took a step away. The clammy touch of his hand on my lower back lingered, even when Baltazar stood in his place. I looked up at the brown eyes of my mentor as he pulled me in close and the tempo of the song shifted and slowed. He tucked his head closer to my ear and as he whispered, I felt the caress of his breath. "Excellent job, if I didn't know any better, I would think you're enjoying yourself."

Excellent. Any praise was high coming from a man who was so easy to disappoint. But excellent? It was...unusual.

"I would rather be anywhere else, but apparently you wanted me here." I managed to keep my voice low and speak into his chest, but I knew at least he had heard me with the way his posture stiffened.

"It was a necessary step."

"*Of course*, it was. It always is." My voice sounded bitter even as tears burned the backs of my eyes.

"Come to my room at half-past midnight." There was no way I heard him right. Was he inviting me to his bed? No.

There was no time to ask because he flung out his arm to twirl me and I landed square against a substantial and bare chest. "Sweetness, I'm offended you're giving so many others your attention." "And just when I thought I had seen enough of you, you pressed my face into your nipple." The words came out muffled against skin that smelled like grass and salt, like the earth after it rained.

His laughter rumbled through me, and my toes curled in my slippers. "There are other things I can press against you if you like."

"*King Blair*. Are you *drunk*?" It was the role of a lifetime not to burst into the fit of laughter that was threatening at his insinuation.

"Just Blair, Sweetness. Please, you insult me with titles." He sighed as he swayed, and I did indeed feel the press of him against my stomach. "And I don't need libations to be liberal with my love."

At that, I did laugh and sneak a peek up at the king's aqua-colored eyes and catch a glimpse of the smile he was giving me. It was an open smile, but as he licked his lips, I realized his offer was genuine.

What is going on with the men at this party? Except for Arius, my fiancé, I reminded myself. *You know, the one who called you a pig.*

When I didn't answer, Blair spoke again. "There are many guests at this event that may be more open to speaking due to liquid courage and its enticing abilities."

"I would rather go to bed." It didn't matter that it was just after sundown and that the revelry seemed to have just begun.

"Leaving so soon?" He asked as he pulled away a bit to see my face.

My head bobbed in a nod. "I'll have to sneak away if I can and find my rooms."

"I hope you won't be offended if I stay and don't escort you?" He asked, sounding as if he would change his mind if I even hinted, I wanted the company.

"I'm sure I can find my way." Patting his arm, I pulled away, but he held my hand.

"Causing distractions is one of my strongest qualities." He winked and let me go. "Take a left when you exit the atrium."

Metal tinkling sounded as Blair ripped free his shorts which were apparently clasped together at the sides with tiny buttons. His tanned ass was on display for everyone to see. "Who wants to see how we celebrate nuptials in Karhdaro?" He bellowed as he strode through the crowd. I watched a woman faint, simply fall over as she caught sight of the front side of him.

Gods. Okay, to the left.

I walked as quickly as I could without drawing attention to myself, though I wasn't sure anything was taking attention away from the naked king.

Finally, I reached the rose-coated arch and darted into the darkness of the hedge maze. Every few feet there was a dim lantern casting shadowy light on the cobbled path.

How I was supposed to remember my way out of there when others had certainly magicked their way in... I wasn't sure.

Perhaps I could find a servant.

No sooner had I thought it, a suited man in a mask came barreling around the corner tipping a flute of champagne to his lips. I wasn't sure the servants would be allowed to drink. But I was no one to stop him.

The man stumbled, and the glass shattered against the stones splashing its last remaining drops on the skirt of my gown.

Fuck's sake, I wanted the night to be over.

He didn't speak, didn't stoop to clean up the glass though someone, perhaps the naked and frolicking Blair himself would surely get hurt. Instead, he just stared at me—trapped in the darkness between lamplights, and lunged.



He smelled like pine and spice. Like a forest, if it had been soaked in bourbon. And a sharp branch bit into my back as he pinned my hands in one of his above my head against the shrubs.

He dropped my hands but trapped them between our chests as he reached behind himself and freed a silver dagger.

It was only as he spoke, and I recognized the sultry whisper, that I realized why he had only used one of his hands. "I've grown tired of watching you take half breaths."

Liam dragged his blade down the fabric of my gown, slicing through cloth and the cording of my corset. My breasts burst free, my nipples peeking at the chilled night air. I sucked in my first full breath of the night as I worked to cover them with my fabric trapped arms.

He hadn't stepped away, and barely an inch lay between him and my exposed skin as he used his blade to push up his mask. His wide eyes caressed and devoured me as they trailed from my neck down to the gown pooling at my waist.

"You're drunk." I inched backward, the brambles of the hedge digging into my curls and flesh.

"Drinking," He murmured, sliding the flat edge of the blade over the curve in my breasts. "But not drunk."

The cold metal bit my sensitive skin, and I dragged in a ragged breath. What had gotten into everyone tonight? And I worried that it only spoke ill of me that I didn't want it to end. I had spent far too many nights with my own hands gripped between my thighs thinking of the way the man used to bow on his knees and worship me.

"How do you manage it?" I asked while my heart thumped erratically as Liam glided the point of his blade between my breasts. Maybe I should've been scared—terrified even, but gods dammit, he was so close and smelled euphoric. Yet somehow every fiber of me knew he wouldn't hurt me. Not physically at least.

He paused, the blade resting there and driving me absolutely to madness as he pressed his body closer against me, his hips aligning with my waist. I couldn't surrender another step, there was none to give as the smooth material of his suit teased me and gooseflesh spread all over.

"Manage what?" He said finally, an afterthought.

"Being alright after...well everything." I would not react, and I would not rip the man's clothes off despite every thought in my traitorous mind.

"I'm meant to protect you. But only you can protect your heart." The freezing blade was removed and tucked away, and he gripped my arm as darkness stole away everything.

We tumbled into a room before I even noticed the smell of sulfur and realized he magicked us out of the hedges. He dropped my arm as if the contact burned him and I found myself wishing it had.

How was I supposed to move on if he was always right there? It was torture. I was readying myself to say just that when he spoke instead, "Half-past twelve. The rooms are across the hall to the right. The final door."

It felt as if I had been doused with a bucket of water. Business then. It was always business.

An animalistic squeal sounded behind us and I saw Lou trying to wrestle the pig into a pile of orange and gold linens clearly designed to be his make-shift bed.

"The princess and I are having an affair." The lie Liam told was callous and meant for Lou who had clearly overheard the given instructions. It was also thrown together rashly, considering she probably knew the rooms Liam gave me directions to were Baltazar's. It didn't stop him from leaving without another word.

But it did prevent me from explaining that the seamstress knew about my illegal activities. Not that it would spare her if Baltazar suspected there was a witness. However, knowing Baltazar, she was probably already in his pocket along with the other spies that Oliver had hired.

Only when my back slid along the door, and I felt the wood on my skin did I remember that I was indeed still half naked.

Louisa let out a low whistle between her teeth. "You want to talk about that?" Looking up, I saw that she was pressing her lips into a tight line as if having to physically restrain herself from laughing.

"Can you just tell me where my things are, so I can grab a robe?" There. I acknowledged my nudity. But that was all, no more no less.

"Agatha and Edera have already run you a bath. You'll want to hurry. They'll be back any moment." She motioned toward the back of the room toward one of two arched ways.

Given that the room contained ornate rugs and tangerine embroidered settee, and a circular table accompanied by two chairs. It seemed like it was for sitting. It was strange and in such contrast with the unadorned tower I took over back home. My father had wanted me closer to everyone else, and when I declined had offered to at least have it decorated, but I had refused that too. Lest he think it freed him of his guilt.

In Ellesmere, it didn't seem I had a choice.

I stripped the gown off and tossed it to Lou who tucked it under the sleeping boar, blending in somehow to his coarse body and the fabrics beneath him. The door to my guest rooms creaked and I sprinted to the bathing room. The water scorched against my skin as I splashed in, smelling like eucalyptus and sage.

"She sounds like a ton of bricks." Agatha huffed from the sitting room, already sounding annoyed. "What's she doing in there?" Edera added. "Learning to swim?"

I looked around at the white marble tiles, and the smattering of red brick that made up the bathroom, paired with the curved ivory tub I sat in while they gossiped about how early I left my engagement party.

"Must have upset the prince."

"You'd think she would be grateful for the opportunity."

"And her sister! That pig would feed a lot of us through the worst of the year."

Lou was quiet through the exchange, even as they got closer to the bathroom.

"Your highne—Jane," Agatha corrected herself. Her tone already softened the moment she walked through the tiled arch. "I'm told it was a lovely party."

"Quite." I bit out, keeping my tone and face neutral. The fact that these women scoffed behind my back wasn't new to me, but it was alarming how quickly she could switch. It would make Baltazar proud, really.

Edera trailed in behind her, the squeaking wheels of a cart full of lotions and soaps dragging along behind her. "And he got you a pet. That is rather romantic."

"It's a bit committal for someone who doesn't know whether she's nurturing or not," Lou said as she brought in a silken black robe draped over her arm and a stack of towels.

"Oh, I'm sure the princess will make a fine mother."

My stomach clenched at Edera's suggestion and the image of three rotund boys flashed in my mind. I never considered bearing children, though I think there was always some part of me that knew it would be part of my responsibilities. But to *actually* think of the role I would play in rearing a child and for what? So I could eventually be driven mad like my mother?

I was driven from thought as Edera and Agatha hauled me to stand and smacked at my hands as I attempted to grab a towel to dry off. They patted me down, even as my body—already rosy from the heat of the water—flushed more with embarrassment and I stepped out and into the robe, Lou held waiting.

Edera coiled my hair into braids that hung damp at my back while Agatha tucked my feet into fur-lined slippers. "Is there anything else we can do for you?" They asked in unison which gave me pause.

"I'm still hungry actually." And as soon as the thought crossed my lips my stomach grumbled at the acknowledgment.

"We'll leave a tray by the door." Agatha—clearly having assumed she was in charge—nodded at the door in dismissal of Lou, Edera, and herself.

The latter two curtsied and Lou pressed two fingers to her forehead in salute as they departed and I looked around the sitting area and let out my first, full sigh of the day.

I could breathe. What a weird thing to be so excited about. But then I thought of what Liam had done. Then his words, as I dragged the tip of my forefinger between my breasts where his blade had touched me. His tanned fingers, even wrapped around a blade so close to my skin...

Those icy eyes focusing only on me... *fuck*.

My thighs clenched together at the very thought as a familiar ache built low in my stomach and crept lower.

A burst of knocks pulled me from the building fantasy, and I crossed over to the door, hoping it would be anyone except Agatha and Edera. The nosy women were starting to drive into my nerves and despite my better judgment, I wasn't sure how much longer I could go before snapping.

But to my surprise when I opened the door it was only a cart holding a silver hooded tray and a bottle of leftover champagne that greeted me. I glanced both ways down the hall, expecting one or both to be spewing their nonsense about me.

Silence.

I could get used to that. I thought as I wheeled the cart through the sitting area, looking only once at the oak table before passing on it and continuing to what must have been my room.

The pig snuffled and snorted in his sleep as I passed, and I tried not to think about the implications of such a thing. *We could raise it together.* I winced as Arius' words played back in my mind.

The bedroom was double the size of the rest of the chambers. Its walls were a pale gold color, with smatterings of orange blossoms delicately

dancing over the walls. Gigantic wooden posts held sheer curtains covering a pillow-laden bed. They billowed in a breeze coming from the open balcony doors letting in the night air. The furniture and rugs all held the same notes of gold and orange that was quickly becoming a theme. I hoped the guest room was naturally like that and someone had not told Ellesmere castle's staff that these were colors I enjoyed.

I removed the tray's lid and saw yellow and white shades of cheese, several types of bread, and an assortment of meat pies and shellfish cakes. Not a fruit or vegetable in sight.

But what was most interesting, was that sticking out under the platter, I noticed a bit of white and thin cylinders of black. Someone had stuck pencils and a sketch pad there.

I plopped a few bits of cheese in my mouth. *Could I? Should I? Did I have the time before my meeting?* I seized a meat pie and the drawing supplies and made my way out onto the balcony.

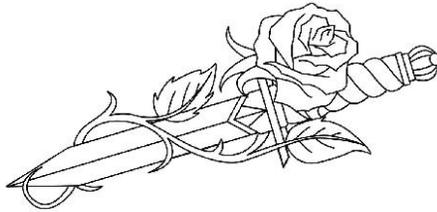
Wide, wooden-backed chairs surrounded a fire pit that burst to life by some sort of detection spell. An iron railing edged the expanse of the long space that allowed one to overlook the waves crashing against the royal docks.

I could surmise the difference between Orabelle's ships, and Blair's, simply between looks alone. Hers was cold, unpainted steel meant to survive the treacherous rocks that surrounded the Isles of Weylin. Blair's simple structures appeared to have never actually had much time out to sea. They were made of wood, with great, velvet textured sails.

To my left, I heard the swell of music, much faster paced than when I left it and not meant for proper dancing at all. The music was seductive in its thumping, thrumming, pulsing beat and I could only imagine the men and

women in their evening wear being drawn to Blair in flocks as they shed their clothes and inhibitions and just let the night take them away.

My pencil started sketching out the sloping planes of the ships in the sea even as my eyes grew heavy and eventually fell closed.



The heavy tolling of a clock tower shook me from the world of dreams.

shit. What time was it? I glanced at the ground where my papers and pencils lay scattered, and at the drawing that I intended to be of Blair and Orabelle's ships. Instead, it was a perfect replica of Blair's ass. Shading and all.

I crumpled the paper, stuffed it deep into the pocket of my robe, and made a break for the sitting room door that led into the hallway.

Sleep coated my eyes as I yanked open the door wishing I could silence the creaking. But the carpeted hall was empty.

Careful of where I placed my feet, I began my dimly lit excursion down the hall. I found myself wishing I thought to change, even as I tugged the ties to my robe tighter and yanked the folds of fabric more firmly around my chest.

Night was my favorite time, I didn't need to stick to the shadows because the world was made up of them. I was careful to keep my feet on the cushioned rug to avoid making any noise.

The silence of the hall was interrupted by the clinking of iron and grunting coming from further down. The archway to the training room was lit up, the door propped open.

Looking around the training room, I noted how superior it was to the one we had back home, and even the makeshift one Baltazar had created below our dungeons. The floor was padded for sparring, and there were enough weights for a militia to throw around. My eyes moved to the back of the room, where punching bags and... Liam.

He was shirtless, his broken hand—his sword hand—was pinned behind his back. Muscles rippled as he swung, over and over landing perfect blows. Sweat glistened in the magicked lights hovering around him. He flexed and parried invisible attackers.

My face felt hot, and my heart hammered against my ribs. I was mortified but I couldn't look away. He shifted, and I tucked my body behind the wall, breathing hard. Metal scraped, and I peered around the corner to see that he grabbed one of the long swords. He extended his arm and rotated it slowly, letting the weight of the weapon settle in his muscles and his bones.

"He will not break me." He whispered to no one.

I pushed myself off the wall, and passed the doorway as quickly as possible, wishing more than anything I hadn't seen that. I couldn't help but feel like I just witnessed something meant for no one. My face flushed again.

I reached the final door in the hall and the door creaked when I pushed it open and I heard a steam whistle from a tea kettle. My eyes darted up and to Baltazar sitting, half undressed, sleep mussed hair tumbling in his face. His

muscled shoulders were hunched over a desk, as he scribbled something with his quill.

Was there a clothing shortage I had not been made aware of?

His room was much smaller than mine, consisting of only a bed, a kitchenette, and a desk. It was the chamber of a man who didn't want to be waited on. Or perhaps, for some, too lowly to be served. I had no doubts that he arranged to have it that way.

Turning to the kitchenette, I focused on distracting myself from his bare chest with the prospect of food. Baltazar would be pissed if I was late, but I hadn't waited to hear the rest of the clock tower's peals to know. Who knew, maybe I was early?

I barely hid my surprise when I saw one of Baltazar's trainees, rummaging through the cupboard. Fox, named for the shape of his face and not his quick wit. I supposed Baltazar must have brought him along.

But if he were there, it confirmed I misread my mentor's invitation to his rooms when I thought he was making a pass...

The scrawny trainee pulled away with a roll of sweet bread hanging from his maw, and a pile to be eaten in his arms. He saw me and flinched, sending the rolls flying.

"Clean it up," Baltazar shouted, without looking up from his desk.

Fox scrambled around the small room, picking them up. "On it, Boss."

I nudged one toward him with my foot and went to the abandoned cabinets. I grabbed a teacup, and the last roll, shooting daggers at Fox over my shoulder. The boy was at most fourteen, Baltazar's newest recruit, and he ate like an animal.

"I heard about the explosion today. Riva said that was you."

"Yea," I said, not really listening, or caring what he said. Riva was another recruit, to be a spy and hadn't yet been given a name. I grabbed the canister of tea from the counter, scooping some into the cup.

"That's legendary." He bobbed his head and more rolls spilled from his arms onto the floor.

The scent of chamomile filled my nose as I poured the boiled water over it. I watched the color deepen and the leaves as they expanded, refusing to move my eyes from the cup. I knew where I would look if I did. When it finished steeping, I walked carefully to the table, I broke a piece off the roll and let it melt in my mouth as the tea cooled. A few more bites, then I could gulp my drink down.

Fox plopped down in the chair across from me, apparently done with his task. "I actually have my first trial run, with Scoot coming up."

Ah, Scoot. Not one I would have paired a trainee with. Earning his name from vanishing at the sign of trouble during a mission.

"We're going over the boundary." Fox had quieted his voice. With good reason, but he had only caught my attention.

"What do you know about the fae?" I asked, taking another bite of my roll.

"They're dangerous." His fingers tapped nervously on the table. Good. He should be scared.

"Jane." Baltazar still didn't look up when he crooked a finger. Instructing me to have a seat at his desk.

"Take the devil's nettle with you, tuck it in your shoes. And if a faery glamours you—and you by some chance realize it—rub salt in your eyes." I finished my roll, lifted my cup in salute to the trainee, and walked carefully away.

Baltazar pushed around some papers to give me room and finally looked up.

The muscles in his shoulders flexed, and my mouth went dry. I grabbed my teacup, gulping down the liquid, leaves, and all even as it scorched my throat. It was all I could do not to cough it back up as I sat the cup on the desk.

"Fox was about to be sent for you." His disappointment with my tardiness was palpable.

I focused on a spot in the center of his forehead, coaching myself not to look down.

He steepled his hands. "I have a job for you."

"So soon?" He normally gave me a few days before a mission.

"Tonight."

"Of course, what is it you need from me?" I knew better than to question him though I normally had a few days to plan. And there was the small problem that Louisa said I had no pants...

He folded the piece of paper he was scrawling on and sealed it with wax. "I need you to deliver the blood crown to the King of Karhdaro's main ship."

"Blair was your client?" So much for knowing better.

"No." His answer was simple, curt. A warning really for me to tread lightly and consider who I was talking to.

So, I was supposed to plant it. Which meant we were framing Blair or one of his clansmen. Baltazar had given the job a hundred times—to his spies. "Isn't there someone better suited to this task?"

Blair had been so kind to me. I had been able to feel like myself for the first time in such a long time and dammit if I wasn't tired of pretending.

"Since when do I not know what suits you?" His brow knitted, and I knew without looking that his mouth had formed a line. That his jaw would be clenched.

My eyes met his, and I lost every inch of will I had when I thought about what was beyond that. The expanse of uncovered muscle, probably tightening with anger. *Don't you dare look.* Forcing a smile, I nodded. "Where do you need me to plant it?"

"Good girl." I could hear his satisfaction and the flutter of paper as he stretched his arm out and placed the paper on the desk in front of me. "Somewhere he won't notice it, but it'll be easily discovered. He leaves at dawn, so be sure to see the task completed tonight."

My fingers curled around the bottom of my seat, hard enough, I thought the wood may splinter, even as I bobbed my head in a nod.

Baltazar pulled a black canvas bag from a drawer within his desk. Unlocked of course. He was confident no one would ever betray him. "There are supplies here too. Rope and two daggers."

Entering another king's ship to frame him for stealing a liberated crown, with only *two daggers and a rope*? Was he *trying* to get me killed?

Nodding again, I uncurled my fingers from the seat and stood, dragging the satchel with me. "On it, boss."

"Oh, and one more thing."

I hummed, barely listening over the ringing of my own death knells in my ears.

"When you can't sleep, I'd much rather you train, than eat."

Not tonight, I thought, and it was all I could do not to rip the door off its hinges before it could close behind me.



The realization that the armoire in my chamber held nothing—save for elaborate gowns with complicated straps, ties, buttons, and more frilly robes—was crushing.

A glance into the canvas satchel told me what I already knew. Two, gorgeous daggers one hilt carved to look like a bear's head while the other, with a mountain range adorning the hilt. One, long, wrapped-up piece of rope and the blood crown whose rubies shone in the moonlight streaming in from my balcony. Of course, nothing that would cover my ass.

My bag from my travels wasn't in my room either, meaning Baltazar probably had someone take care of anything that could implicate me in the explosions and the burglary that followed.

Shit.

Dropping the satchel at my feet, I tore through the clothes again, hoping for something thicker than the silk I wore. I found a black robe with fur-lined cuffs and tugged it from the armoire that was above a drawer filled with slippers and lacy nearly nonexistent underwear. I huffed a sigh and

dressed quickly. I glanced in the mirror and lifted the strap of the bag over my shoulder and my neck, so it fell between my shoulder blades.

The length of the robe would be problematic, hanging just about mid calf. But I didn't have time to worry about it as the clock tower tolled. That time, I would pay attention to it.

I darted for the balcony, knowing it was the fastest and most unfortunate way to the docks. I lifted myself onto the iron rail on the balls of my feet.

The bell pealed for a second time. Thankful to be wearing slippers instead of boots but angry at myself for having nothing but the housecoat, I slid my feet down and gripped the ledge with just my hands. My palm scraped on jagged stone and I bit down on my cheek hard enough to draw blood. I couldn't find a foothold but I managed to dig my fingers—nails breaking into a crevice in the stone brick.

These chambers were only on the third floor. I could manage.

The thought of looking down filled my stomach with lead, so I kicked off my slippers and heard them rustle into the bushes below. It wasn't *that far* of a fall. The muscles in my arms screamed as I let go with one hand and reached, trying to find another handhold. The stone face was smooth. The clock tower gonged a third and final time and the silence echoed out around me, as I realized the music from the party had stopped.

Okay. I could do it. I let go of the wall just barely, and let my hands slide down the stone. There. I reached out, nails scraping against the wall— until they held.

Letting go again, I landed in the bushes. Brambles tangled in and ripped the fabric of the coat, as I searched for my shoes. I grabbed them and hung close to the wall and then into the shadows until I reached the open expanse between me and the pier.

I adjusted the strap in the bag where it rested between my breasts, the weight of the crown weighing me down. Place the crown—don't think about the implications of framing a would-be friend and get out of there. Simple. But then, why didn't it feel simple at all?

Banishing the last bit of the thought, I made a run for it. Eating up the distance between me and the shadows. The fabric of my robe tangled between my thighs and the cool night air nipped at every inch of exposed skin as I moved.

When I reached the creaking wood of the docks, I gathered the differences in the ships were even more imposing up close. Orabelle's armada was slimmer and sleeker, crafted to destroy and consume any ships that dared to venture near it in the sea. Blair's appeared cobbled together by hand and I truly didn't know how it could even stay afloat.

Thinking about it, I was reminded of Lou's apron, homespun and patchy. Not even knowing the king that well, I felt as if he had a story for each marking and every hole. I gnawed at my lip, trying to reiterate to myself that the two conversations I had with the man didn't mean we were friends.

But it didn't stop me from feeling like what I was about to do was betrayal. And the act itself, feeling treacherous didn't stop me from having to do it. My loyalty was to Baltazar, the man that had picked me up from the shattered pieces I was after my mom died, and gave me a purpose. And if that was part of his plan then it was necessary.

I yanked the satchel around and pulled out the dagger with the carving of mountains on it, feeling its weight in my hand before pushing the bag back behind me.

Slicing the blade against my outer thigh, I worked to reveal any detection wards the king may have put on his fleet. "Reperio." *Detect.*

Nothing happened—which meant I had either done the spell wrong, or the king trusted his allies enough to not have any. Which after what had happened to King Maveri's highly protected treasury and given what I was about to do—probably wasn't such a good idea.

Normally, I would have much more time to plan it out. I would have time to figure out where to stash bloody clothes and weapons, map out an escape route, etcetera. But apparently, the task would be on the fly. As my blood dripped into my fur-lined slipper and soaked into the material of my robe, I realized I was probably going to have to ditch my clothes in the sea. Which unfortunately, meant I would have to dash back to my room naked. Especially with Agatha and Edera there to inspect me and watch my every move.

Great.

I was one gust of wind away from showing my rounded backside to the whole of Ellesmere castle. *Get it together Jane.*

Pulling the rope from the bag, I fastened it around the end of the dagger even as I slunk deeper into the shadows cast by the ship's side. I needed to work quickly and quietly. If I got caught—oh Gods, if I got caught breaking into a foreign king's ship with the stolen blood crown—no I couldn't think that way. I had until dawn to get in, place the damn thing and get back to my chambers. Loosely looping the rope in large circles, the dagger hanging free, I let my hands get used to the weight. The salty air coated my nose as I worked to slow my breathing and observed the ledge high above me. I shook out my shoulders and stepped back, allowing the unweighted end to fall under my shoe.

The rope whipped out as I swung my arm, once, twice a third time before letting it loose, and heard the clunking of metal on wood. Tugging the rope

to test it, I began making a mental list of all the things I needed to forevermore have on my person as I started my ascension.

A grappling hook for starters, though that could draw attention. I could really use some gloves—the rope ripped through my calloused and scarred palms. A weathered board stuck out, and I pressed my slipper onto it. Boots, the list definitely needed boots. The robe parted as I lifted my leg higher, gripping the rope to hoist myself. Pants—speaks for itself, really.

How the boat kept itself together in the sea was a mystery in and of itself. The wood was riddled with water worn holes and dents larger than me. What were they running into out in the sea?

Finally, I reached the top rail of the boat where I was met with a life-sized, wooden carving of a naked man, his back arched as he met the ocean breeze. Blair was strangely liberated for a king—I bet he would have no objection to a woman wearing pants.

And, yet I was about to frame him or one of his people for a crime that would surely end in someone's death.

"I was sure you would be too busy thanking Arius on your knees to come for this mission." Liam's voice at my back startled me, but I only yanked up the dagger from where it stuck out of a plank and turned.

Elbows propped on the wall of the ship, Liam gave me an arrogant grin. "Though by the looks of it, you must have just finished."

His eyes trailed down my front, tracking every inch of the ridiculous fabric I wore. They were much clearer than they were before and reflected the stars in the night sky. My thoughts trailed to what I saw of him in the gym...nope not going there.

"I wasn't given much of a choice in clothing." Did his eyes narrow a bit at my words, or was I imagining that? I hadn't slept with Arius, especially

not to thank him. For what? Calling me a pig, or gifting me one? No, thank you. *But* maybe my words didn't outright deny it either. What did Liam expect—the man was my fiancé, my duty.

"Too busy *squealing* for him then, were you?" Liam asked, casually, though a muscle flexed in his jaw.

"You're an ass." I started to brush past him, hoping to get the job over with, though the thought of what I was doing set my teeth on edge. There was no reason to ask him why he had come. He always popped up, even when his presence was a surprise to me.

"I'm an ass, you're a boar. Between us, we're halfway to a petting zoo." There was a smile in his voice as he mocked me. I don't know what came over me then, but my hand lashed out and made a sickening sound as it contacted his mouth.

"When did you become so cruel?" I spat, even as I backed away from him, my fingers tightening around the strap of the bag.

Get in, get out, get back to your room.

His tongue dragged over the bead of blood on his lip, even as he cracked a lopsided smile. "Well, alrighty then."

No surprise, no shock. Baltazar was going to kill me for showing my hand. Weak, feeble, a general fuck up. Then why did my mentor constantly test me by pairing me with *Liam*.

I huffed a breath through my nose and turned my back to him. *Stupid, inconsiderate, intolerable, ass.*

I looked around the empty ship, taking in the wooden beams, the busted sail dangling from the mast, and yet...there was something. Memories painting over the fading mahogany. So different were the old planks, in comparison to the Orabelle's pristine silver fleet I could still see nearby.

If anything, it looked like a fishing ship more than one fit for a king. But Blair hadn't acted like a king either. A pang of guilt hit me, even as I tucked the dagger away in my bag with the rope and pulled open the creaking door to the lower level of the ship. He had been strange, but kind. And yet...there I was. I never felt guilty stealing, spying, or even killing in the name of Baltazar's cause. Never even questioned him that I didn't know the specifics of said cause. *A better world.* But even as much as I wanted that, I wanted what he had given me more.

The walls had pictures pinned on them of Blair with many cheeky grinning faces. They blurred as I walked down the stairs and remembered the day I met Baltazar for the first time.

I met him on one of my family's outings to the square, during one of our trips my father would force his children to go on each year to demonstrate strength. He said it was to display kindness, and in truth, the *blessings* we bestowed were always generous donations from the very treasuries I now stole from. But each of his children knew the truth, the trips were a grandiose display of his power even without his magic.

I had been to years of training and lessons before I met Baltazar on that trip. My brothers and sisters had been tormenting me about my magic. Threatening to leave me with commoners that would still reject me for my mortal blood.

In truth, I thought about disappearing into the crowd long before he mentioned it, but staying was far more spiteful.

Because of that spite, Oliver, my eldest brother, beat me and magicked me through a wall, into a musty pub house. I was still kneeling in spilled ale when Baltazar walked in.

Heat rushed to my cheeks at the shameful thoughts I had when I first saw him. His hair had fallen in his face as he leaned down over me to offer me a hand. His lip curled at the sulphuric tang of magic that still lingered around me. "Let me buy you a drink."

Sitting at the stained and chipped bar, he whispered that he could make sure no one ever used magic on me against my will again. I helplessly agreed after just a sip of a burning cocktail a red nosed waitress had handed me at his request.

I thought he might take advantage of me. Or worse, try to exploit the fact that I was a princess and maybe he didn't realize how little power I wielded, magic or otherwise. Instead, he taught me to wield my humanity as seamlessly as he trained me to wield magic.

Echoing footfalls behind me brought me out of the memory and I turned to lose it on Liam—

Blair. The king—once more wearing his too-small shorts— stood behind Liam looking all too amused. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

shit on it. We were so screwed.

Liam turned, a feline grin already forming, and his dimples on full shine. It seemed I wasn't the only one with a mask in place. "Ja—the princess and I were looking for some fun." Some...what? Blair's eyes darted over Liam's shoulder. The tight stairwell felt as if it were shrinking. His eyes drank in my robe and then my exposed thighs, moving to the curve of my breasts that showed how much of nothing I was wearing underneath it. "Is that so?"

Liam gave me my new role without any direction. I refrained from pulling the material closed and let my posture relax, even more so, as I let my lashes fan my face and plastered on a sugary smile.

I hadn't even managed to speak when Blair's eyes narrowed, and he glanced between Liam and me. "What are you really doing here?"

"The truth is..." Liam began as he held his palms up toward the king. *Right. Here is where it all goes to shit. No one would come to my funeral. Or perhaps my father would make my siblings show up for the public eye.* "Jane is a fantastic fuck and I thought you should experience that before you leave."

The thought of breaking his spine crossed my mind only twice before I swatted it away. His first compliment in *years* and that was what he went with? *Better than being called a hog.*

"Sleep evaded me when I thought about your offer." I not so subtly shoved Liam against the wall as I walked up the steep stairs and more faintly jammed my elbow into his rib cage. "Maybe I shouldn't have come."

Making sure the material rose higher and higher on my thighs, as I walked and batted my lashes. It was easier to color my cheeks red, I only had to think of what I was implying.

How far would I go to see the mission complete? Gods, would I sleep with him? More jarring still, why did I know I would enjoy it?

Blair's hand rose, the back of his fingers brushing over the curve of my jaw, then down and gooseflesh raised on my skin even as his hand rolled and grazed my shoulder through the thin material of the robe. "What's in the bag?"

What?

"Toys!" Liam blurted, sounding like he was holding in a fit of laughter. "I told her not to bring hers that you'd have plenty. Let me just take—"

Faster than my eyes could track, Blair ripped through the strap of the satchel and backed away, already undoing it.

"Hm...daggers. Not usually something I'd bring to the bedroom, but I'll try anything once. Funny thing is... I had one just like this made for my guard...and the other one's identical to the one I misplaced when I got to Ellesmere. Rope. Fun. And would you look at this?" He let the blood crown dangle from his index finger, and I thought my heart was going to explode from my chest.

If Blair didn't kill me and I managed to survive, Baltazar surely would end me for trying to rip his skin off. *The King of Karhdaro's stolen daggers?* Smite me now.

Blair rapped on the wooden door at his back three times and the ship lurched in the tide. I stumbled down a step before warm hands and a solid body caught me. But Blair used the distraction and Liam's busy hands to his advantage. The king lunged at him and snapped the cord on his talisman.

I steadied myself as he motioned at the darkened stairs below us with the dagger before pointing it at me. Turning to Liam, I saw that he was already descending. The cool, pointed tip of the dagger pressed at my spine.

As surely as I knew my name, I was going to die there. Slowly, painfully in some sort of hellish dungeon while the careless king bled me out. Probably in a room splattered with the transgressions of others who sought to wrong him in the past.

But I had nowhere to go, no one to save me, and no choice but to begin the trek down.



CHAPTER TEN

No one spoke as we walked. The only sounds were the crashing waves, our footfalls on the steps and the thundering sound of boots on the deck, rattling the picture frames on the walls.

That must've been the members of his clan readying the ship for sea. That far down and away from the castle, I couldn't hear the clock tower to tell how far off we were from dawn.

If they set sail before Liam and I managed to get off the boat... Gods, I couldn't think like that. My eyes darted around the darkened stairwell as I tried to find anything to prevent what my brain was certain was about to happen. I blocked out the images of carnage while I noted the lanterns bolted into the wood paneled walls. Those wouldn't do. But what about the frames with the painted, smiling faces? Faces that seemed to mock us as we walked down to our execution.

Could I shatter the glass? Blair pressed the tip of his blade into my robe like he heard my thoughts and was giving me a warning. *Don't do it, don't think about it.*

What chance did I stand anyway? The monarch was massive, crowding the space behind me. And for every three steps I took, one of his cleared the same distance. He was much bigger than me and definitely stronger based on the width of his arms. And he had my dagger—well his dagger, that Baltazar had given me.

I wished desperately for a different reality, one in which the job had been easy, or Liam hadn't shown up, or that I had altogether refused Baltazar's request. Or at the very least, that Blair hadn't taken my only weapons. I didn't want to die in a frilly robe at sea.

My jaw clenched as I forced myself to *think*. I couldn't fight him hand to hand. But I could probably outrun him. *And just where would I go?* My mind taunted, thinking of the men above us and the one right behind me. *Down?*

We had no weapons, Liam's hand was still broken, his talisman gone and there was nothing to draw blood—making my magic useless. Even if I managed, the blade at my back was a warning—if I tried anything Blair would surely end me. We were going to die there.

Our echoing steps banged around my skull like gongs. They sounded final—thunk, thunk, thunk. The sound our coffins would make as they nailed them shut. That is, if he didn't just dump us at sea.

I could talk my way into and out of any situation. I just needed to play the right role. Then again, what was it he had said at the party? *If I wanted you dead, I would do it in a room full of people.*

How had I found that funny only the night prior? It was lunacy.

Liam reached the final step and turned, and worry pinched his brow. He looked over my head, exchanging some glance with Blair before the king spoke.

"Final door at the end of the hall." The king's voice was gruff, maybe because he was straining against his pressing anger by putting off the inevitable.

Sighing, Liam turned on his heel and continued his slow pace. We followed, the knife not budging—even as I felt Blair nearly fold in half, to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling when he ducked out of the stairwell.

We passed rows and rows of wooden doors before reaching the final one, standing alone on the far wall. It wasn't marked in any way—but somehow, even closed—my mind couldn't stave off the images of a torture chamber below the worlds.

"Go in." His words sent my heart hammering against my rib cage. I was going to die. Blair—as nice as he had been at the party—was going to kill me.

The door creaked as Liam opened it and though I couldn't see much around his torso, I saw the four posts of a very large bed.

Blair nudged me in after Liam, and I grew even more confused. I noted the silk sheets and pillow covered bed that took up most of the space, though the ceiling reached up far higher there. Coals burned low in a grated fireplace off to the left side of the bed. Someone had obviously tended them before our arrival to keep the room warm. A wide pipe stuck out its top and reached up to the ceiling, releasing the smoke somewhere outside of the ship. There was a metal trunk at the foot of the bed that Liam had already sat down on.

Thick curtains layered the walls, which I had seen in seedier buildings in Luhne and knew were meant to muffle sound. So many questions pinging through my head caused my slow reaction when Blair pulled the dagger away and closed the door between us.

The thick wood muffled his voice as he spoke. "I'll have to delay departure." It sounded like he chuckled. "Don't go anywhere."

A click told me what wriggling the knob confirmed. It was locked from the outside. I placed my forehead on the smooth door for one slow breath, and then turned to Liam.

He was shucking off his jacket and cuffing the sleeves of his white shirt, before finally tilting his head back onto the post nearest the fire.

I moved quickly, assessing the room. First, I checked behind the curtains—just in case. But the walls were only smoothed wood, no windows, and no means of escape. The grate covering the coals was bolted shut, and while it was obviously someone's chambers, there were no trinkets or baubles that would be of use. Even the dimly lit lanterns were far too high up to do me any good. I doubted the fluffed pillows would serve me against Blair or his men.

My heart began a furious beat in my ears. I couldn't let my emotions get out of control. I had to keep a close rein on my panic, even though it felt like it was creeping into my veins. I had to *think*. To get us out of there. Then what?

Liam smirked at me then and I realized I was pacing like a pinned animal. The familiar gesture weighted my feet to the stone and my chest tightened. "How did we let this happen?"

"My guess would be the robe." He shrugged as if his words meant nothing, the grim look on his face pinched his brow. "It's...distracting."

I gritted my teeth against my quick retort. We couldn't fight. Unfortunate as it was, if we were going to get out of there, we would have to do it together.

When I didn't respond right away, he let out a weighted sigh and seemed to forcibly relax his face. "Anyway, you should rest."

Panic rose, tightening in my chest and warm tears stung the back of my eyes, despite me urging myself calm. "No one will come for us."

And it was true. Baltazar wouldn't risk exposing himself, not for me or his own brother. I knew him well enough to know that.

"Jane," The way Liam said my name, made me think he had said it more than once. "I swear to you, we will do whatever it takes to get out of here."

My feet depressed slipper-sized imprints into the layered rug as I paced. "He's going to kill us."

"Blair is not going to hurt you." I could feel his eyes tracking me as I moved.

"How do you know that?" I wrung my hands in front of me, feeling wholly helpless for the first time in years. "We tried to *frame* him. He's at least going to get Maveri."

"He's not."

"He's probably on his way right now to fetch the guards."

The door swung open behind me as I spoke and Blair entered the room. He clicked it shut behind him as I rounded the bed to put distance between us.

The dimly lit lanterns and the low burning fire, cast an apricot hue on his tanned skin. He shot me a wicked grin. "I much prefer to do my own dirty work."

I scanned his body for weapons but didn't see any. There wasn't even a sign of my bag. His chest was bare, save for his own carved talisman.

Gods, he filled up the small space of the room so fully that I was grasping for a dagger at my thigh, I had already forgotten it wasn't there.

Despite the warmth from the fire, gooseflesh spread all over my skin as his eyes trailed over me. Slowly, the aqua colored flecks in his eyes seared the flesh from my hairline to my chin. They dipped lower, to the parting panels of fabric that made up the damned robe.

My fingers rolled into fists at my sides and I pressed my fingernails into my palms. But despite the pressure, Agatha and Edera had trimmed and filed them so thoroughly that they didn't bite in, so no blood welled.

Fuck.

"Since neither of you want to admit what you were really doing here." The king turned narrowed eyes on Liam. "How about you tell me exactly what Baltazar ordered you to do?"

"Nothing. We just so happened to be on the ship..." My panicked lie trailed off, when Blair held up his hand, clearly not buying it. How had I not thought of a backup plan?

Because Baltazar sprung this mission on me, and yet again Liam wasn't supposed to be there. And despite his continually being a nuisance, he had never made me fail.

There we were though, obviously about to be slaughtered by a foreign king.

Assessing the king, I noted Liam's amulet resting on Blair's knuckles. The smoky quartz seemed dull, like it needed polishing. But Liam kept it...how had I not noticed it was the same one I gifted to him, after his last one broke in training? I picked it for the color—the same shade of his eyes in the dark.

The cord was wrapped tightly in Blair's palm. Was there some way I could get it back? Then Liam would have hope of magicking us away...

"Now Liam," Blair said, interrupting my sure to fail plans. "Tell me exactly what orders Baltazar gave you." Every step the king took, the trousers he wore tightened and loosened around his thighs.

Liam glanced at me, his eyes widening in panic. "I...can't."

"Tell me the parts you can share in front of our Jane."

"I'm to keep you on our side."

Blair moved once more, standing chest to chest with Liam. The breadth of the king's shoulders was wider than his, but they were nearly matched in height.

I had no doubt the king's clan were not far away on the deck, if they weren't in the hall right outside the door. There was no way we could fight our way out.

If I could just reason with him...he was so friendly at the castle. But of course, that was before he caught us planting evidence on him.

"King—" I began, as I closed the distance and wedged myself between the pair.

"Blair. I told you to call me Blair." He spoke over me, then turned my body away from him. His hard chest was flush against my back and the too thin fabric of my robe gave way to the heat of his skin.

Focus, Jane. "Blair...okay. I know this looks bad, but I can explain." No. I could not. And if I didn't come up with something soon, I was sure the situation would only end in bloodshed. Mine and Liam's.

"I want Liam to explain how he was ordered to keep me docile if you were caught." Blair's thick accent was sultry though there was no trace of his calm arrogance or riddles.

"By doing anything to keep her safe, even if my life was forfeit." Liam didn't waver, even as he shared breaths with the large king.

My brows nearly met my hairline with my shock.

Clean up my messes and ensure I didn't become compromised, that was his mission—but to trade his life for mine? There was no fucking way Baltazar ordered that. Liam would have never agreed to it.

"Would you say..." Blair rested his chin on the crown of my head and twirled a lock of my hair around his finger. It rested against Liam's talisman, still cuffed around his knuckles. "That is the command that takes the most precedence right now. Above all others?"

"Yes. I have to protect Jane." Liam's voice was strained, sounding physically painful to him to even admit the words. And of course, it was.

Why would Baltazar task Liam with protecting me when he knew our history? It was awful enough that he was always there, in hopes that I fumbled.

Not for nothing either, I was *usually* perfectly capable of defending myself. "We wouldn't even be in this situation if it weren't for you."

"Sweetness," Blair placed his inked hand around my throat. His thumb brushed against my lower lip, and he clicked his tongue in disapproval. "I haven't asked you to speak yet."

The warmth of another body in front of me was overwhelming, as Liam moved closer to grip Blair's wrist. "What are you doing? Blair, you're not going to harm her."

How was he so sure?

"What will you do?" The king squeezed my neck, and Gods above—it was too much. The gentle pressure and being pinned between the two men. "With no magic and a broken hand. What *would* you do to save the girl?"

I knew that I should have been fearful of the threat of death, but instead, I was squeezing my thighs together. Wishing for friction to ease the growing

ache there.

"Anything. I'll do anything." Liam's voice was desperate as he worked to pry Blair's fingers off my neck. But the king moved faster, and soon had Liam's hand pinned beneath his own, pressed into my skin.

Blair turned my chin and tilted it up to Liam. "Kiss her."

Wait, what? A strained laugh escaped me, sounding all wrong.

He wouldn't. He would sooner let me die. And Blair...he was my *friend*—or could have been. Was it all some game to torture us, then kill us later?

A muscle flexed in Liam's jaw when he looked down at me, and there was a war in his darkened eyes. The calluses of Blair's palm scratched the sensitive skin at my jaw.

My instincts told me I should fight. Fight my way out or die trying. At least there was honor in trying. But...part of me was curious, dammit. What would he do—how far would he go to keep with Baltazar's orders? And maybe there was a part of me that wanted him to want it. To ache for it and crave it the way I so desperately did.

Those thoughts needed to be suffocated, but I couldn't stop them from flooding in and I let my posture loosen. Shaking off the impulse to fight.

The pine and rain scents of them encased me, caressed my skin, and sunk through my flesh, down into my bones. I didn't need the king to urge me further, I angled my head to meet Liam's silver-colored gaze.

I still wanted him to have a way out, even as the curling low in my stomach increased and pulsed in time with my short breaths.

My throat ached against their rigid grips. Even more so when I forced out, "no one will fault you if I die here. You can let me take the blame."

"I don't want you to die."

"Because of Baltazar's orders?"

"No."

Then, why?

I hadn't spoken the words, but they hung between us, nonetheless. Maybe I should have asked. Maybe given the circumstances, he would have told me.

His eyes darted between mine and my lips. If we hadn't been so close, I wouldn't have heard him whisper, "do you want this?"

Wedged between the two of them, I nodded. "Do y—"

Before I could finish my response, his lips found mine.

Lightning struck our bodies, undoing and re-piecing back together all that we were. Blair loosened his grip and Liam slid his hand behind the nape of my neck, knotting his fingers in my hair to pull me closer.

The king shifted behind me, the hard length of him pressing into my ass. He tugged down the fabric covering my shoulders and tasted the skin there. Liam didn't falter, didn't pause with another man's hands on me.

Did I hate that? Not really. It felt as though my body would combust with my growing need. Liam seized control of my mouth with his tongue and any thoughts, regrets, or concerns, drifted out to sea.

I wanted to taste and explore him. To remind myself why he had such power over my desires, even after all those years. Heat stirred at the center of me.

Blair's hand still around my neck and Liam's in my hair...it was too much and not enough. I moaned into Liam's mouth as his tongue swept over mine. I tugged at his belt and the smooth leather slid free of its clasp.

Liam explored the planes of my skin, my shoulder, the curves of my breast, my waist, over the dip in my navel. Then lower still, and my

stomach twisted and tightened when he shifted to instead grip my ass. He hoisted me so my legs hooked around his hips.

Thighs spread, I whimpered, my slick center grinding against the bottom ridges of Liam's stomach.

Blair steadied me with his chest, his decadent chuckle rumbling through me. The king's bicep wrapped around my chest and the pads of his fingers crept down, trailing over my entrance.

I gasped as the king teased me, feathering over my core, but not filling me. I rocked against his hand, frantically urging him on.

"No panties?" Blair asked, his teeth grazing my ear. "Maybe Jane did come to play."

I bit at Liam's lip as my back arched, willing him to touch me too. He dipped his head in response, his teeth closing around my nipple through the thin material of the robe.

Fuck.

Blair yielded at last—swiping his thumb once, twice, and a third time over the sensitive bundle of nerves at the apex of my thighs, before plunging two fingers into my aching body. With his other hand, he ripped off the ties to my robe. "Do you want us to fuck you, Princess?"

Liam bit down harder, cupping my bare ass and my only answer was to moan again. He lifted his silver eyes—darkened even in the well-lit space—and gave me a villainous grin. "I'm going to need to hear you say it."

The breath left my lungs as he looked at me so intently, those smoke colored eyes filled with his own desire. I couldn't speak if I wanted to, I cried out and rode Blair's hand. Liam smacked my ass, then gripped the delicious hurt.

Suddenly, his hands were gone and Blair slipped his fingers out of me. I squirmed while Liam sank to his knees.

The transition was so smooth, I didn't know what was happening. The king lifted the back of my thighs and splayed them.

Liam's tongue and teeth explored the skin on my upper thighs. He moved higher and higher, licking, and nipping before finally, he met my center. I cried out, my whole body buzzing and throbbing. I bucked my hips, rocking against his mouth, and he slipped in two fingers without warning.

"Fuck," Liam groaned, his teeth grazing over my clit. "You taste better than memories."

Blair leaned closer, nibbling and sucking my shoulder while stroking his rough palms along the backs of my thighs.

I cried out, gripping his hair in my fists and rolling my hips while I ground down against Liam's face. I held him against me, even though it was so all-consuming that I could hardly breathe.

Climbing...reaching...crashing... I gasped an unintelligible string of curses and came undone for them. Pleasure rushed through me as my head fell back on Blair's shoulder.

The pair flipped my wrung-out and trembling body. My knees thudded on the plush rug as Liam's pants rustled, and he positioned himself under me. His muscled forearm created a vise against my breasts as he tugged my back into his chest.

Liam's voice was no more than a growl. "*Say it.*"

He was right there, the proof of his arousal pressed into my ass cheek. If I said one word all of it would end. But fuck if I wanted it to.

"Beg for it," Liam whispered, tempting me to fight him. "Beg us, and we'll make you cum."

Stringing thoughts and words together as my legs shook and my chin tilted, so I could look at Blair—who was ripping free of his pants—was a task, but I managed, "please."

I wasn't sure it was enough, but I couldn't give them any more than that—wouldn't. It was all they needed to hear though. Liam buried himself inside of me. I was panting at the size of him filling up my already pulsing core, while he rubbed my clit. I moaned, anticipation washing over me once more.

My eyes moved to Blair, as he stroked his hard dick while watching us—watching me, bounce on Liam—as if he too was gaining from it.

The king stepped forward and I braced myself, taking his length in my hand. I rolled my thumb over the bead of precum on the head of his thick cock, and licked the divet in the tip. Sinful, he tasted positively sinful.

Slowing his pace, Liam settled inside of me, and I ran the pad of my tongue up the bottom of Blair's shaft and slid my lips over the head. I worked him with my hand as I lowered my mouth.

Liam chose that moment to stop holding back. He grunted, surging into me, and I steadied myself as I moaned and screamed around Blair. With every thrust of Liam's hips, Blair went further into my throat.

"Look at me." The king commanded, and I lifted my eyes to meet his gaze while he shoved himself deeper still and let out a growl. "I want you to see what you do to us."

Watching him, I noted the swallow that had his throat bobbing while his teeth sliced into his lower lip.

Blair grunted, an immoral smile tugging at the corners of his mouth while his eyes traveled over my head to Liam. "How wet has she gotten from sucking my cock with that beautiful mouth?"

Liam's groan as he slipped out of me, punctuated his response when shoving back in. "She's drenched, dripping. There's nothing she loves more than being on her knees."

Bouncing my ass in time with Liam's pounding thrusts, I stroked the king to his base. I pulled back and flicked my tongue over his head to catch my breath before taking all of him back in. He drove his hips forward, slamming into the back of my throat making my eyes water.

"Gods dammit, Princess," Blair murmured, the sound itself threatening to push me over the precipice. "That tongue is going to get me in trouble."

My nails bit into the king's firm ass and his dick thickened in my throat as he thrust deep and came hard, his cum rushing out. My cheeks and throat tightened around him while he groaned my name.

Licking the evidence of him from my lower lip, my eyes followed as Blair backed away. His smile self-sure and full of male arrogance, he stared at my bobbing breasts through hooded lids. On shaking legs, I lifted off Liam, who grunted in protest.

"Down." Not taking my eyes off the large king, I pointed to the bed in front of us. He laid down, while I climbed up to kneel over his throbbing dick. Leaning forward, I met his mouth as I arched my back to offer up my pussy to Liam once more.

Liam didn't waste time. He raked his hand down my spine and lined himself up at my entrance, before slamming into me.

Blair's mixture of a groan and a chuckle against my mouth nearly sent me tumbling over the edge once more. "You'll pay for making him wait."

Just as the king spoke, Liam dragged himself out of me to the tip and volleyed into me again. His hand clapped my ass, knocking me down on

Blair's chest. The king fisted his already rising dick and rubbed the tip of it against my clit.

My thighs quaked while pleasure rocketed through me and stars danced in the corners of my eyes. Every muscle in my body went taut as I panted and begged them not to stop.

"Do you know how good you feel, Jane?" Liam's words were warmed leather, sliding across my skin.

I cried out a combination of their names, while Liam yanked my head back by my hair—exposing my throat to the king, who propped up to drag his teeth along it.

gooseflesh spread along my skin and I plummeted over the ledge of ecstasy, not sure how I would ever recover. I clawed at Blair's shoulders, his dark laughter, and my orgasm tumbling through me.

Gasping and blinded by the overwhelming pleasure, it was all I could do to keep myself braced on my elbows and knees as Liam's grip tightened on my hips.

My muscles constricted around the base of him, and he spilled himself inside of me, with a grunt.

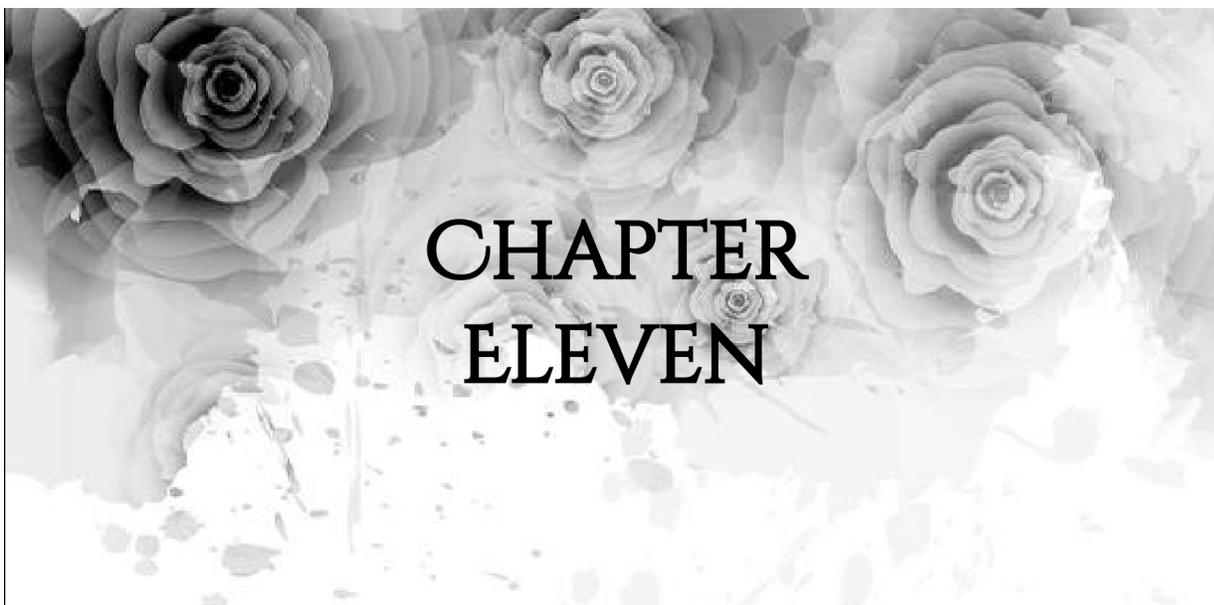
He placed a kiss at the base of my spine and pulled out, while warmth seeped out of me. My inner thighs twitched and I nearly collapsed on top of Blair.

Eyes heavy, the king tucked me into his side, while my legs clenched and shook. His laughter reverberated through me as he whispered, "I was told we would have the use of toys."

"The first time is meant to be gentler." Liam offered as the bed dipped with his weight, and he slid in on my other side.

It was strange how I managed to be embarrassed, in contrast to the confidence I only just displayed. But my face grew hot with it anyway. I wondered what the appropriate length of time would be for me to wait, before killing Liam after he just shattered me so delightfully.

But one more time couldn't hurt—I bobbed my head in a nod, wondering what I had done to deserve such sinful torment.



Gulls squawked on a salty breeze as I woke from the deepest sleep I had ever been given. Chilled, silky sheets tangled around my legs while I instinctually stretched my deliciously sore body in search of—

Memories of what Blair, Liam, and I had done well into the night, coloring my cheeks scarlet as heat rebuilt in my core. But I cracked my eyes open to take in the empty expanse of the bed surrounding me. Then beyond the wooden and amethyst posts of it, to the low burning fire... I realized I was alone.

With that aching realization came others drenched in doubt. What had I done? I had come to the ship on the night of my engagement party and slept with a foreign king and—Liam. Oh, Gods, I had the most brutally glorious sex of my life. And judging by the coldness of the bed—they left?

As doubts plagued me, and embarrassment flooded in, so too did a tinge of anger. I grappled with the slippery fabric covering the bed and tugged it around me while I climbed out of the bed, and it pooled on the plush rug at my feet.

Walking over to the oak door, I was reminded of the look on the king's clansman's face when he served us. It took an effort to force myself to think only of the delicious pastries he presented us, rather than the naked scene we were displaying. I shook away the thought as I tugged open the heavy door.

The rugs underfoot concealed my steps as I walked on, looking at an open door up ahead.

When I reached the room and stepped inside, I told myself I wasn't snooping— only looking for Liam or Blair. Small, pretty lies. Though what I was looking for, lie or not, vanished as I stepped into the space that felt all too private.

It was spotless, not a speck of dust so much as floated in the air in front of me or tainted a single piece of paper in what was one of the most beautiful art studios I had ever seen. Though it was clean, it felt unused. The papers and sketch pads flipped open with pencils and pastels in every section, just waiting for a touch of inspiration to hit, so they could be of assistance.

The far wall of the room was made up of curved glass that looked out on a still sea and was accompanied by an easel propping up a large and empty canvas.

Blair's booming laughter pulled me from the trance the room had placed on me.

I followed the sound out of the peaceful space and further through the hall and down three steps. The walls and ceiling parted overhead to allow me a glimpse into a dome-shaped room. That part of the ship appeared to be chiseled from the stump of an ancient tree. I could see veins and swirls in

the white wood and fragments of light shone through cracks that had been sealed over with a clear polish.

Liam lay in the center of the space, face down on a small bed with his arm extended while Blair—his back to me—held a buzzing tool over the new ink he was infusing into Liam's skin with magic. More confusing though, were the lines and swirls of the dark tattoos that already peppered Liam's body—even from a distance—so similar to the ones I had seen on Blair's skin.

I ducked back, pressing against the wall where they couldn't see me, and peeked in.

"You don't think I could take a wolf in a fight?" Liam grunted as Blair moved the humming needle on his arm.

"We're talking about without magic."

"I'm aware." Liam lifted his muscled shoulders in a fraction of a shrug "and I'm saying I could do it, a swift kick to the chest as it lunges for my throat."

Blair's chuckle echoed throughout the room. "What about a bear?" The boom of laughter deepened, sounding a lot like a growl.

"Maybe I'm not walking away from it, but I'm taking the bear down—" Liam's words cut off as a hiss of pain left him.

Blair's large palm slapped against the back of Liam's head. "Sit still."

"You really shouldn't have healed it." Liam's mended hand, flexed and I realized someone had righted his bones.

"I didn't. I'm aware of the rules" the king lifted the needle, pausing his work. "Besides, what will you do now? Re-break it?"

The pair locked eyes as Liam lifted his head. "I may not have a choice."

Gods, why would he do that to himself again?

"The pain was a nuisance." The buzzing started again as Blair flicked his tool back on and resumed inking Liam's arm.

"It'll be far worse if he finds out," Liam whispered, but I heard him all the same. Who were they talking about? Baltazar? Would he be pissed to find out his brother had figured out how to heal his hand before he thought the lesson had been learned?

Blair's fingers tightened around Liam's arm, his knuckles turning white. "He can't know."

"She's going to read into this." I blinked hard as Liam suddenly changed the subject, still trying to wrap my head around everything I was seeing and hearing.

"Why shouldn't she? I performed gloriously." The king let out a dark laugh that had desire curling low in my stomach with the memory of that sound between them.

"She has to know it means nothing. I was only trying to protect her." My gut bottomed out as Liam spoke the words. "Thanks for that by the way."

I bit down on the inside of my cheek, hard enough to taste the copper tang of my own blood. I was a reckless fool. How could I have trusted him again?

"Blair wouldn't have killed me." I don't know why I said it—I wasn't even certain I believed it.

"Mm...hello Jane." The king dropped the tattoo needle and stood, clearing the gap between the center of the room and where I stood at the corner of it as I gripped the edge of the sheets. He said my name in a way that made me like the sound of it. Nope, I was *not* going there. Not again.

"I'd like to be taken back to my rooms now." That stopped his movement toward me. I would not allow them to look at me like I was some love

struck fool, not after only one night and a few gasps of their names. Pleasure was pleasure, nothing had to come from it.

I coached my face neutral, hoping they didn't ask how long I had been standing there. Praying they wouldn't ask me what all I heard.

"Princess, surely you can't be wanting to leave while your bare flesh is still tangled in the material of my sheets." Blair offered me a smile, handling his surprise.

"I would be in clothes if you hadn't managed to tear through mine." Trying to keep my eyes above the planes of his chest, and the lines of muscle pointing down to what lay beneath his cotton pants was hard. But I was trained in masking my emotions and I managed.

Liam strode across the rich carpet, the inking on his body had vanished. His mistake was that I knew they were there, and if I squinted, I could see past the concealment he placed. Why had he covered them up? I would figure that out when I wasn't surrounded by the two imposing men...preferably when everyone was wearing more clothes.

"Blair would have killed you and it serves you to remember that. He could have snapped your neck." His eyes were narrowed as they bounced between me and the king. Blair looked at him then, seeming to attempt to convey some silent knowledge, but Liam ignored him as he looked at me.

"If the king was going to kill me, he would have done it while my back was bare to him, and his name was on my lips." I squared my shoulders, wanting for some desperate silly reason to make him see that he had a choice even as bile rose to the back of my throat and humiliation burnt my face.

"I saved your life by fucking you."

"And what were you doing the fourth time then? Because I very well could have choked on your dick and died." I couldn't pluck the words from the air—they left me and filled the surrounding space with my hurt. But dammit he shouldn't have that power over me. He couldn't.

Blair snorted a laugh, finding something funny in that. But the more I thought about it, the more vindicated I felt. Perhaps the first time was to *save* me. Though, even that felt untrue. But what of the others, and when I was worn out, my body throbbing and aching as Liam had curled next to me on the king's giant bed and I fell asleep in his arms. What danger had I been in then?

"You've never been a disappointing fuck, Jane. Forgive me if I ran away with your feelings." Liam's mouth was a cruel line that I wanted to slam my fist into, but I refrained if only because my hands were the only things holding up the gods damned sheets.

"I feel nothing for you." Lies. I was a liar, and he got under my skin, but that didn't stop me. "Don't let an orgasm fool you, I've been capable of giving them to myself for years."

"I'd like to see that." My eyes cut to Blair, who despite the palpable tension in the room was grinning like a child in a room full of sweets.

Squaring my shoulders and ignoring Liam's jaw grinding, I looked only at the king. "I would like to go home. My fiancé is probably wondering where I've been."

"Understood." His smile vanished, but he bobbed his head in a curt nod. "You will tell no one of what we have done, I hope. And I will keep the crown and pretend I know nothing of your involvement in it."

He looked at Liam then, the pair sharing a glance I had no hope of understanding before Blair spoke again. "Go retrieve clothes for her and her

bag. I would sooner carve out Arius' eyes than let him see her this way."

My stomach flipped at the suggestion even as Liam said nothing and exited the small room.

"It's not strange?" Old insecurities slipped into my voice as I spoke, and I hoped that Liam had gone far enough to not hear me. "What we've done here?"

"I felt as if I had you to myself," Blair smirked and reached in his pocket. He pulled free the dagger with the bear carving on it, the thing dwarfed in his hand. He held it out to me in offering. "Keep this. It will make whatever story you choose to tell more believable."

Thinking of denying him and seeing on his face that it would do me no good, I accepted it, keeping one hand firmly holding the material of the bedclothes over my breasts.

"I snooped." Unsure of why I admitted it but apparently feeling brazen enough to do so, I continued. "I saw your art room."

"If you like that one, I would be delighted to show you the much bigger one I have in Karhdaro." His smile was a slow, nearly edible thing—like he knew something I didn't. "You could come back with me."

Ignoring the last part and focusing on the first, "Do you draw?"

Thinking of the marks he had been inking on Liam, I thought of how ridiculous my question was, but then his answer confused me. "No, of course not."

He hadn't said it in a silly joking manner and my nose scrunched with confusion.

"Here." Liam returned fully dressed and practically tossed the soft clothes in my face. I ran to the back of the room and yanked them on, leaving the sheet in my wake, but the clothes made little difference when I

realized I was swimming in them. They were clearly a man's clothing and judging based on the rain-soaked earthy scent of them, they were Blair's. *Great. More evidence to destroy.*

Not to mention, I would surely have to lie to Baltazar. Which I had never done. And that lie would have to match up to whatever Liam was going to tell him, even though the last thing I wanted to do was speak to him. *Grand.*

"We dropped the anchor when we were out of sight, your magic should be strong enough." Blair clapped a hand down onto Liam's shoulder.

"Anchor?" I asked like the confused little parrot I was.

"My people advised us to sail out," Blair explained, and my eyes shot wide. "Otherwise, it could have looked suspicious and that would have foiled our fun."

I crossed back over towards the men that had brought my body to ruin while I was supposed to be on my mission. *Focus Jane.* "Our magic doesn't work like the other kingdoms. It's not as strong, what if we can't make it back?" Panic started working through me. Not to mention, how distracted could I have been to not notice the ship setting sail?

"Liam's is plenty strong enough, I assure you." Blair winked at Liam while the latter scowled in turn.

"Right." Though by my tone it was obvious I didn't agree as I turned to Liam. "What are you going to tell Baltazar?"

He paused, a muscle in his jaw flexing. "We'll tell him we were successful though we were nearly caught, and we had to lie low until we were certain the king left."

While I didn't want to agree with him, I couldn't deny the quality of his plan. "We can say we stayed in the servant's tunnels because we saw one of Maveri's guards."

"Your father-in-law's men *are* all over the palace after the burglary." He agreed easily, but his silver eyes cut to Blair's aqua ones. "One more thing though."

My arms crossed over my chest, willing it to be done. "Well? Out with it."

"You need to break my hand."

"Absolutely no—" Blair started even as I cut in, my voice a screech.

"Are you out of your mind?"

"He'll know. I wouldn't have fixed it, and Jane hasn't learned how." He flexed his fingers, so recently repaired, like he was saying goodbye to them.

But he was right. Of course, he was right. Baltazar would know and the whole plan would go to shit. I looked at the dagger Blair had gifted me.

If I did it...there was no going back. Blair would see me use blood magic, and that alone had its own set of consequences. "Why can't one of you do it?"

"Blair won't." Even as Liam said it, the king was already agreeing by backing away with his arms crossed. "And my way is...much more painful. You try to hide your abilities, but I've seen you make clean breaks in glass."

I barely hid my shock at his knowledge of my skill. *Has nothing ever gone to plan?*

His eyes pleaded with me, and worry creased his brow. No doubt thinking not just of how badly we would be punished for failing but how much more he would be if Baltazar realized his hand was okay.

"Why do you look like you're about to do it?" Blair's deep voice had increased an octave. "Fuck's sake. You are. Okay well, I'm going to see about breakfast. Jane, it was truly a pleasure. Come for me anytime." He

winked, even as his tanned skin paled a shade, and he backed out of the doorway.

That solved the problem of him seeing the blood magic. Who knew the large man could be taken out by the thought of someone else in pain?

I released a breath and grasped the hilt of the dagger tighter and took Liam's rough hand in my own. Slicing the back of mine while he cradled it, I thought of the tiny bones in his fingers, connecting to the ones in his palm. "Ruptus." *Break.*

A roar of pain echoed from out in the hallway as Liam flinched away from me, agony streaming from his mouth.

I'm sorry, I thought, but I didn't say it. Maybe I should have, but my lips stayed sealed even as tears blurred my vision. I scrubbed my hand over my face, wiping them away.

My heart broke further when Liam stepped forward once more, the hurt I just caused him lining his face.

He grasped his talisman and touched it to my wound and it sealed over. "Let's get you back to him."

He meant Arius, or perhaps Baltazar despite everything that had happened on that ship and as the sulfuric tint of magic filled the air and transported us back to Ellesmere, I couldn't help but think I was leaving a piece of me on the sea.



Liam's face was still pinched with pain when we landed in my guest rooms, and it took effort not to ask him if he was okay. Obviously, he wasn't alright. I broke his damn hand.

I adjusted the loose clothes and instead of thinking of the pain I caused him, I forced my mind to him telling Blair that I was a fantastic fuck on the ship and then to him telling me I have never been disappointing at it. Anger seethed in me then, and it was everything I could do to refrain from breaking his other hand.

"We should—" He began, but I held up a hand to silence him.

"Get out." Blair's pants hung low on my hips. I tugged them up, gripping the fabric to avoid them falling, moving toward the armoire that stored my clothes.

He shook his head no.

"If you don't leave, your hand won't be the only bones I break today," I whispered furiously, pointing the dagger at him.

A second head shake answered me, and I pushed him into the wall by the balcony. The tip of the blade pressed into his throat and a droplet of crimson

formed as the weapon nicked him.

"If you wanted me pressed against a wall all you had to do was ask." His voice was too loud even as he murmured with that ridiculous smirk still in place.

"I don't want to be around you." I spat. *Because then I'll have to think about what we've done. And how much I enjoyed it.*

"Be angry if you would like, but we need to see him." Liam shrugged as if it didn't matter...but Gods, did it.

Every other thought flew out of my head at that.

I had to lie to Baltazar.

Running to my armoire, I tossed my dagger under my lacy underthings before Liam grabbed my hand again, and I closed my eyes against the nothingness that filled the space.

"Where have you been?" Baltazar's smooth voice wrapped around me like a blanket, even though my fear of him at that moment should have made it much less comforting. "And what the fuck are you wearing?"

Oh, no. My eyes snapped open, and I looked down at the clothes Blair had lent me.

"She had no pants for the mission, so I loaned her clothes," Liam answered when he noticed my mouth apparently didn't work. "So unprepared."

I found my voice and added, "And we were spotted, so we had to hide while sweeps were being done."

"But we handled the guard who saw us." I refused to look at Liam as he spoke and focused on staying still while making eye contact with Baltazar.

Handled. Was he implying we killed a guard? Surely Baltazar would look to see if any were missing.

"Very well." Baltazar nodded and stood, crossing over to the door that led into the hall. "You two obviously need more training if you can't do something as simple as this without being caught."

"Yes sir." Liam nodded as if Baltazar wasn't being condescending and his tone alone hadn't implied he probably didn't believe us. But I forced myself to nod along too.

Baltazar cast a silencing spell around us.

The absence of sound was startling. I couldn't even hear my own heartbeat though I could feel it kicking up its pace in my chest. My eyes felt wider, trying to compensate for my other lost senses.

His mouth moved in a mockery of speech as he sliced open his hand. The blood glistened in the lamplight before creating a crimson-hued light of its own that dribbled down and around the door, taking its shape.

I looked at Baltazar as he stepped away from the now fully glowing door, he waved his hand and sound rushed back in. The flicker of the lanterns' flames, my heavy breaths, my heartbeat. It was too much and too sudden.

"Go ahead," Baltazar said and I nearly jumped from my skin.

He held out his hand for Liam to heal. It was a ridiculous notion. Especially since I knew Baltazar was fully capable of healing the cut himself. A demonstration of power was all that was. And Liam went through with it. Pressing the fingers of his—still ruined—hand into his brother's and the wound stitched itself back together.

Baltazar's eyes narrowed on me, and I realized I hadn't yet moved closer to the door. But truthfully—he was pissing me off. Plus, a glowing door just didn't scream a fun time.

Quite frankly, it looked like something that old fae tales warned against, but perhaps I needed to prove myself worthy.

Reaching forward, I kept as much distance between myself and the door as I could. The creaking of it swinging wide resembled faint screams and my stomach twisted. It opened to nothingness. A swirl of black darker than the night sky and even less fathomable.

"We're going in there?" I kept my tone cool, despite the rising confusion I felt gnawing at my insides.

"Yes, Jane." He enunciated it slowly as if I might not understand. "We're walking through the portal."

It was mental, really. My ability to do everything he asked. He owned my mind, body and actions. Even when I began to feel like what we were doing was wrong.

My mind flashed to Blair's ship, and the lie I told him about my time spent away.

I stepped forward despite my pressing thoughts and cigar smoke filled my lungs. The blackness faded into a grey haze, which receded a bit to reveal a lounge. Velvet settees circled around a small table where someone had spilled a deck of cards. A dark stained wooden bar wrapped around the back wall and was draped in shadow so thick. I couldn't see the faces of those that had taken up residence on its stools.

Magic, I realized only when two more patrons came chiming in through a door framed by giant bay windows that seemed to filter in light. I couldn't make out their faces either.

"There's a cloaking spell in place that protects everyone who steps into the businesses in this plaza." Baltazar's voice came from behind me, but it sounded...off. Different but still recognizable to me.

"I can tell who you are." My voice was garbled and deeper like I smoked the cigars being puffed by the bar my whole life.

"Because I want it that way." He walked ahead, not motioning for Liam and me to follow.

The lounge was so different from the seedy bar in Luhne that it was shocking. It was clean for starters—even with the tobacco smoke, and not over-crowded with nearly lifeless bodies. I crossed over to the large windows thinking I wouldn't be able to see beyond them given how little light they let in. But when I got to them, they were so clear that I reached up with my fingertips to touch the glass and check that it was actually there.

Cold, hard glass pressed back against my fingers. The same cloaking magic that guarded people must have coated the outside of the window. Strange.

My eyes wandered at the perfectly placed orange and white tiles that made up the streets and not that far in the distance—the marble gates of the castle. A plump woman in a pale blue gown who raced by the window and a man in a fitted black suit racing after her holding an arm's worth of shopping bags. Young children weaved around the couple pretending to fly fluffy stuffed animals and a wooden horse. I couldn't hear anything though I could see the man smiling broadly as if he were laughing along.

A pang in my chest twisted like a blade and I spun away before I could keep staring. Baltazar—cloaked in thinner shadows than everyone else, including Liam, who I lost sight of—tapped the bar. Once, twice, and a third time, before the barkeep pulled on a chain hanging by the shelves of liquor behind them.

Under the faint hum of music, I heard a groaning as a part of the shelving slid away, revealing a plum-colored curtain. Baltazar waved his hand, and I moved toward him, noticing a body shuffling through the—now neat—cards, stilling and placing them down before doing the same.

My mentor pulled back the curtain to reveal a winding staircase that led downward. Lanterns lit the narrow steps and the iron railing as Baltazar guided us forward. We descended quickly, though the steps seemed to go on forever, and we were finally met with a curtain that matched the one above.

Baltazar flicked it open and strutted inside, his footsteps sure.

He led us into a giant chamber three times the size of the room I saw above. Weapons of all sorts lined the stone walls—everything from maces and gauntlets to bows and quivers of arrows. The floor beneath my feet was squishy and padded. Grunting came from different areas of the room where shadowed people lunged forward with swords, daggers—weapons of all sorts and their fists in combat.

Baltazar cleared his throat, and the fighting abruptly stopped as all the shadowed fighters turned. Thumping echoed on the stone walls as they all slammed their fists against their chests and dipped low in bows. Then the people launched right back into their practice drills as if they hadn't stopped at all.

There had to be hundreds of them.

Sweat licked the back of my neck as I realized they were bowing before Baltazar, the apparent king of criminals. I'd never seen so many of his workers in one place. Back in Lunasa, I had only met a handful. And they bowed?

A door I hadn't noticed swung open at the back of the training room, and a giant shadowed body stepped out. Movement at the person's feet made me look down to see a chubby orange cat walking on ridiculously short legs at the person's heels, meowing.

The person thumped a fist over their chest but didn't bend in a bow when they reached Baltazar. "Merry meet, Lord Tellyk."

Only then, they turned toward me. "You're with me today, kid."

"And you are?" I asked, trying to see through the enchantment.

A raspy chuckle from a voice I didn't know. "A bit offended you don't recognize me."

"Your face is literally shielded by shadows."

"Lux has quarters in all of my strongholds." Baltazar cut in. "He's simply indispensable."

It was almost funny how I hadn't known based on size alone. A mountain of a man—the biggest I ever met. With shoulders broader than Jett's and standing taller than seven feet. Lux had chosen his own code name. Which was good because the one we picked out for him was either going to be Ogre or Troll. His size wasn't the most intimidating thing about him though, it was his eyes. Though I couldn't see them now, when I could they were so dark brown they almost looked red.

Though the men were sure to not see it—I felt a smile tip the corners of my mouth at Baltazar's third in command and my trainer since I joined the ring.

While my tasks were typically of the stealing variety—I went on one mission with him early on. His were...of the finishing and information gathering sort. Needless to say, he killed three people on that mission and tortured a fourth. I still wasn't sure what information had been important enough for Baltazar to send an assassin, but that was the job. No questions.

Now he had a fat little pet trailing his every move. I crouched down and scratched the thing's chin. That close I could see that half the cat's tail was singed, and she had two different colored eyes, one green and the other blue. Her legs *were* short for her body and her gut sagged.

"This is Ginger. Her last owner became..." Lux paused and clicked his tongue as if thinking of the right word. "Unavailable."

The sweet name was comical, given that Lux was a massive sword-wielding assassin and potential psychopath. And the fact that he most definitely had killed Ginger's last owner.

"It's good to see you." I stood, clapping Lux on the bicep in greeting before turning on Baltazar. "But I—I can't train here. There are too many people, even with the concealments."

My eyes subconsciously moved to Liam, who had never seen me train, but had a strange amount of knowledge of my skills that no one besides Baltazar and Lux was supposed to have.

"No one knows who you are." He gestured at my face shrouded in shadows.

"But—"

He held up a hand to silence me. "You can't stay hidden forever."

But I had to. Not only would it be essential for my duties as princess...but I was his secret weapon. That was my importance to him.

"Is this because of the wedding?" My heart pounded in my ears. "I'm of no use to you anymore?"

"This is not the time or the place for a discussion." The shadows around his face thickened, as if shrouding him from my growing anger.

If not now, when? We hadn't really had a chance to speak since I found out and things were changing too quickly. "You're the one who arranged it."

"That's enough." He started walking away, dragging Liam by the collar of his black tunic toward another group of fighters.

"You've kept me hidden but kept all of this from me as well." I waved my arm to encompass the space, the weapons, and his followers. How had he

kept all of that from me?

"It's only now become essential for you to know about this location." His voice grew quieter as he continued to walk away.

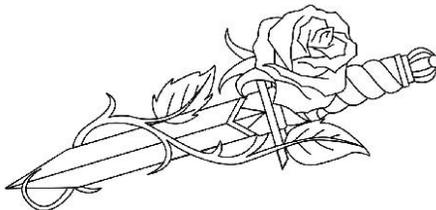
The sound of Lux humming caught my attention and I turned back to him and noticed he was gesturing to my clothes. "That won't do."

Looking down, I was suddenly very aware of still wearing Blair's clothes. The ones I told Baltazar I borrowed from Liam. The ones I was swimming in due to them being far too large. "I've got nothing else."

Without responding, he walked to the left of the room to another curtain hanging between weapons. Rows and rows of clothes lay behind it. Starched maid's uniforms, guard's regalia, formal gowns, aprons. Everything one would need to go unnoticed in a castle's setting and beyond.

Rage simmered through me. I had gone on my last mission in a gods damned *robe*.

"I'll wait here and make sure no one enters," Lux said, barely pulling me from the depth of my anger. "Choose whatever you like that fits."



The tunic and pants I chose tightened and loosened around my limbs, while I stretched-out on the far side of the room. Lux examined one of the weapon-filled walls, trying to decide just how to torment me.

He never used magic, and I wouldn't be allowed to use it during training. He had even refused Baltazar's lessons and broken his own talisman—saying it wasn't as reliable as a blade.

When he returned, he held two long sticks that resembled spears, save for the fact that they were rounded at each end.

"We're working on disarming today." The staff flew through the air when he tossed it and I caught it just as he lunged forward and jabbed me in the ribs. "Fatal."

"I wasn't ready."

"An opponent isn't going to wait for you to finish braiding your hair."

My nostrils flared as I rubbed my hand against the forming bruise. I leaped aside as he swung at my ankles. Anger caused me to throw my whole weight behind my attack at his midsection, but he brought his staff down hard on my shoulder and I went crashing down onto the padded floor.

"Dead." There was no trace of humor or exertion in his voice when he leaned down to offer me a hand.

I kicked my foot out and it cracked against his knee as I slammed the staff up into his chin. "Dead."

He chuckled as he stretched his jaw. "Foul play."

"You wouldn't help an opponent up." I was already moving, rolling out of reach as his staff stabbed into the ground where I had been laying.

From a squatted position, I circled around him. I lunged—staff aimed to strike—but he met the blow with his own.

The power behind it rang up my arms and made my teeth clack together as I released him and took a step away. He followed me, and though I couldn't see the entirety of his face, I could feel his eyes locking on his prey. "Stop fighting with your emotions. Use your mind, calculate the best way to attack."

He spun the staff in his hand, speeding it up so it blurred. But I was used to his vicious games. It was a distraction. His booted foot kicked air and I

used my staff to propel over the attack. I spun, and smashed the wood into his shin, and then up into the wrist holding his weapon.

Lux bellowed a curse as the sound of cracking bone splintered the air and his staff rolled along the floor.

I couldn't contain the bubble of surprised laughter that popped out of me as Lux smiled. "Well done, kid."

Pain flared through my back, and I fell forward before I realized someone else had struck me. Rolling, I heard the wood crack again into bone, and saw Baltazar standing there in front of Lux with the assassin's fallen staff in hand.

"What the fuck?" I spoke before I really thought it through, though Baltazar's eyes never left Lux as he responded. "Coddling the pretty bird will do her no favors."

Baltazar had hit me. The thought was vile, and it felt like I was going to be sick.

Lux's words were strained, and the shadows around his face had deepened though I could see blood dribbling down onto his tan shirt. "I wasn't—"

Baltazar gestured for Lux to stop talking and turned to me. "She isn't capable of disarming you."

"Yes sir." The darkness around Lux's head bobbed in a nod.

Had Lux...let me win? Why?

"Get up." He wielded the staff like an extension of his arm as he motioned for me to rise. I did as he said, using the staff to help prop me, my back aching from the blow.

"I don't understand why you're angry with him." *Or why you struck me,* I tacked on silently. He had never—

"Your failures are unbecoming." He shrugged and tossed the staff from one hand to another.

"I was successful in both my mission and in disarming Lux."

"Why is it that Liam goes with you on missions?" His head tilted, and I wished more than ever I could see his face. Maybe then I would understand what he wanted from me.

Because the gods hate me. "For safety?" I offered, instead.

"Because I can't trust you to be competent without supervision."

"That's bullshit." More and more heads turned our way as I lost control of my temper. Were we part of an act I wasn't made aware of?

"Attack me."

His casual stance was so at odds with the aggression in his tone. And—I couldn't hurt him. I couldn't imagine a world where I would want to. But I also never refused him.

Which was why when I spoke, the word shocked me.

"No."

My mentor blinked. The sluggish response was the only sign that I had shocked him.

"I had allotted more time for your training, but it's now time for you to leave." Baltazar's voice was devoid of emotion as he dropped the staff to the floor. "Go through the gates so it appears you've been enjoying the town in your absence."

Baltazar didn't give me a chance to respond, or even process anything that had just happened. He simply walked away.

What had I expected? Anger? Disappointment? Either really, or maybe both...but nothing?

Lux offered me a small wave, before picking up Ginger who I hadn't noticed had rejoined us, and he exited the room, quickly.

I wasn't sure if it was embarrassment from the encounter with Baltazar, or the fact that Lux hadn't thought I could win on my own merit, but my cheeks burned as I made a quick exit and nearly sprinted up the stairs and out the door of the lounge.

The magic tingled as it settled over me, and I turned back to the door to see that it appeared to have boarded up windows from the outside.

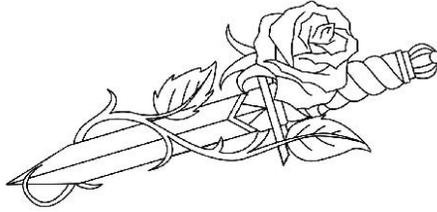
Strange.

Turning, I noted the imposing marble gates and made my way toward them. It was strange seeing all the polished windows of bustling businesses so close to the gates. Lunasa's capital was a several days ride from our castle and our gates were almost always closed.

I supposed Ellesmere being able to feed and sustain its people played a role in that. They didn't have to bar citizens from the castle if they didn't have to worry about an attack caused by desperation and anger.

As I got closer, I noticed there were guards patrolling the grounds but not stationed at the gates. Instead, there were iron benches on either side. On one of them sat an elderly woman tossing corn kernels to a swarm of birds.

Ellesmere's people were so well-fed they could literally toss it away. My people begged and died in the streets. I reminded myself of that sickening thought as I dodged guards and servants—while trying not to get lost on the way back to my rooms.



A door sounded in the sitting room and my eyes widened in fear as I looked down at my casual clothes that could very well have been a man's.

Agatha and Edera's muffled voices carried through the door to my bed chambers.

"I have it on good authority that her fiancé has been looking for her."

"Her whole family has been looking too."

"Surely she's run off."

"Prince Oliver sent their brother to check the stables, and her horse is still there."

"Half the guard is looking for her."

Their voices jumbled as they put more distance between themselves and the door, the soft squeals and snuffles of the hog eating told me they must be feeding it. What did that thing even eat?

"He's got quite the temper, hasn't he?" Agatha sounded like she was right outside the door now.

If they took one look at me in my chambers like that...word would spread through the castle, probably all of Ellesmere by midday.

I yanked a robe free from my armoire, while stepping out of the training clothes. Pulling on the paisley-patterned fabric, I ran to the fireplace and tossed in the evidence of my outing.

As the fire flared up and grey smoke puffed out of the fireplace consuming the clothes, Agatha stepped into the room with wide eyes and a

handful of crisp sheets. "Your Highn—Jane. You're back."

I turned my nose up, acting every bit a royal bitch. "What do you mean?"

She dropped the sheets on the bed, still looking like she had seen a ghost while she wrung her hands over her apron. "We—everyone has been looking for you. Your father and fiancé are in a tizzy."

Well shit. What did I do when I didn't know where they already looked?

Baltazar had told me to come through the gates. Gods, when could I stop acting? It was exhausting and Edera and Agatha were gossips, but they didn't deserve to be talked down to by me because of a title and my breeding.

I huffed an indignant sigh, making certain it was heavy with the stress of my position and pinched the bridge of my nose. "I told Baltazar where I could be found."

"The keeper?"

"The Lord Keeper."

"Ahhh. He had mentioned you were curious about the town." She didn't seem convinced and it seemed that had become the second part of my mission.

I thought of the things I noted on my walk. "I find it fascinating the castle gates are left open."

"Oh." The crease in her forehead relaxed and I let my heart rate settle.

At least Baltazar had covered for me...kind of. He probably regretted that now that he had seen Liam and me. And suspected us of...what? Hopefully nothing close to the truth.

"—Run you a bath if you'd like?" I hadn't realized Edera had followed Agatha into the room, likely drawn in by the sound of my voice. "We already have the pails heated by the fire. Just in case you came back."

"No, that won't be necessary." I waved them off with my hand, thinking of the bruises marking my body that I hadn't had time to heal. Gritting my jaw against the rosy flush that was no doubt coloring my ears and my neck, I turned away from the two nosy handmaids. "Someone should tell my fiancé I've returned."

The two women clamored over each other at the opportunity, and I could hear thudding footsteps, curses and a near brawl as they each attempted to reach the hall first.

Hearing the exterior door when it closed, I peeked out into the empty—save for the giant hog—sitting room and dashed for the washroom. The stark tiled room was warmed by a marble fireplace with silver pails sitting in front of it.

Making quick work of dumping them into the tub and glancing at the unlabeled bottles of soaps, scrubs, and herbs on the cart. I grabbed a handful of what I had seen the chatty pair grind into my skin and splashed into the heated water with a sigh.

I looked at a yellow paste that Agatha had put on my previous injuries and rubbed it along the marks on my arms, the curve of my ass, my thighs, my hips...anywhere that fingers had grabbed, and teeth had bitten and the newer ones from the staff. But each touch took me back into the embrace of the two powerful men who had dominated me and then soured with the weight of Baltazar's blow.

The marks healed with the magic laced in the salve and I wished that with each dissolving ache, the magic could erase the reminder of each touch. I scrubbed at my skin and hair furiously hoping the scent of citrus and rosemary would cast the smell of them from my mind.

How was I supposed to look Liam in the face again after what had happened? How was I supposed to focus and get through each day leading up to my marriage? How was I supposed to marry a man like Arius when the memory of Blair's and Liam's hands and bodies were trapped in my skin?

And I had to pretend like everything was okay when it felt like my world was crumbling.



As if my thoughts had summoned him from the depths of the castle, Arius' voice boomed through my rooms. "Princess?"

Climbing out of the tub and into my robe with my hair still dripping, and the water leaking through the fabric, I closed the distance between myself and the open door.

"There you are." His smile was a slash of white teeth as he gripped my arms in each of his strong hands. "I've looked everywhere for you."

"I had no intention to worry you." My eyes widened, the guise of caring if he were mad at my absence sliding into place.

The prince ate it up, giving me a reassuring smile. "Had you wanted to see the town, you could have told me and I would have swept you away."

"I wanted to see it without frills and finery."

"You deserve no less than that which you were born for." He paused, and his face scrunched in contemplation. "You didn't go to the lower district did you?"

"Lower district?"

"A place that a fine lady like yourself should not go, lest you have to mingle with the undesirables." He tucked a lock of hair behind my ear.

Had I seen only the frills and finery? I pulled my lower lip between my teeth. Was there more to how his people were living than the cheerful, wasteful people I saw?

Making a mental note to find out more, and changing tactics, aiming for distraction. I dropped my gaze and allowed pinkness to spread into my cheeks. "It's unladylike of me to have you here without a chaperone."

"You're no less mine now than you will be the day we sign the contract, so who cares what people think?" The way he said it and the slide of his hands down my arms made me want to rear away from him, but I kept my feet locked in place.

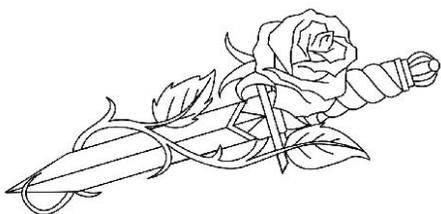
"While that's true," bile coated my tongue. He was so polite...but Gods, there was something about the man that made my skin crawl. "I worry your honor would be tainted by mine if it fell."

"Then we shall go take a stroll in the grounds." He locked his fingers in mine as he tugged me toward the door. "I want you all to myself on your last day."

"Let me dress." I yanked away from him and almost forgot to add a girlish laugh, so he thought I was being playful. *Smite me where I stand, this is going to be a long day.*

"I'll send servants up to have you fitted in orange." He winked. "It's my favorite color."

Nodding, I held my breath until he left the room, and only then did I groan. A long day, indeed.



It was an overwhelming relief when Lou burst into the sitting room—alone and out of breath—looking as if she sprinted the whole way.

When I raised my brow at her in surprise and question, she shifted my bag from behind her. "I took your things to be laundered but Aggravating and Exaggerator were on their way down."

"And you look like you've been chased because?" I cast a glance toward the closed door behind her wondering if Agatha and Edera—whom I was assuming she was referencing—were following her.

"*Prince Arius*," she said the name with more distaste than she had when speaking about the handmaids. "Was looking for them but I intercepted him. I figured you'd want my company more than theirs."

"Well praise above for your swift feet." I loosened a breath of laughter as she shooed me towards my room to shuffle through the clothes there.

Lou pulled out a garish orange gown the color of a ripened fruit and my nose wrinkled with distaste. She turned, letting me see the thing, so much tulle and ruffled fabric that I couldn't discern her beyond it.

"By the gods, this is the ugliest thing I've ever seen." Lou's voice was muffled by the layers of material covering her face. "And that's saying something. My uncle's rumored to have been sired by a troll."

She snorted a laugh, though the laws of our kind were clear about crossbreeding. It simply wasn't done. Vaguely remembering a time when a woman had been brought in for questioning regarding her son—a shifting boy with bark for skin in the city of Luhne. My stomach clenched at the

memory. My father beheaded her while my siblings, mother, and I watched. Even as my mother begged my father for mercy for the woman's sake. Even as I tried to run toward her son and Oliver had nearly broken my arm to hold me back. The boy had died that day, no older than seven years old.

Lou stumbled, bringing me back to the present as she walked straight past me and tossed the gown into the flames. Ripping an iron poker from the mantle she jammed it at the beast of the dress while the flames devoured it.

"Well, this is interesting." Driata's voice was too loud against the crackling flames.

"It fell," I said too fast, far too fast for something to be innocent.

Lou pulled away from the fire with the poker still wrapped in her knuckles. She seemed unfazed by Driata's presence. Even if my sister chose to wear her tiara like a second skin. The barmaid didn't care that she was in the midst of royalty.

"I'm only scheduled to dress Jane today." Her eyes roved over Driata's body, and my proud sister, the one who had been known to bring multiple suitors to their knees, was the first to look away. "But I can make time for you."

"If the scraps you're wearing are any indication of your worth as a seamstress...I'll pass." But despite the cruelty of her words, there was no menace in it. Like whatever she saw in Lou's assessing eyes snuffed out her bite.

Lou seemed to note it too as she chuckled. "Suit yourself, Highness. But if you ever find yourself in need, let me know first."

Driata's mouth gaped open. "I need to speak with my sister—alone. You're excused."

If Lou could rattle the rest of my family the way she so effortlessly had Driata, maybe her being there wouldn't be so bad.

She exited without so much as a curtsy which sent Driata into a huffing rage. "Oliver has hired *heathens*. Absolute heathens. What is this about?"

What would happen if I told her they were spies? Would she be angry? Relieved? Melt into a puddle of her own fear-riddled tears? More likely, she wouldn't believe me and would go directly to Oliver.

"Morale?" I shrugged. Not a complete lie, I was sure his image did benefit from the new jobs he created.

"You're not stupid, Jane." She sighed and flopped on my bed. "Oliver is up to something."

Stepping toward my armoire, content with dressing myself, I crossed my arms. "Is this what you've come for? To gossip about the new servants?"

She paused and her eyes went to the door. "No... I wanted to talk about your absence, the night of your official engagement. You were barely present and then you went missing. It's all very upsetting."

Anger had my hands fisting at my sides. "Well, if that's all."

I took a step back, so she had a clear view as I motioned toward the door. I didn't want to deal with any of it. Not then, probably not ever. She would inevitably tell me I wasn't grateful enough for my position and I would have to care enough to pretend.

That was Driata's niche, making those around her fall at her feet.

"I'm sorry you don't want this, Jane." She didn't move from where she was lounging on my bed. "It's not that I don't understand why you wouldn't want to go through with it."

My eyes narrowed. "If you understood it, and had taken my side, I wouldn't be here."

"Not that long ago, you had far different plans for your future. And you've never had the classiest options in your life." She held up her hands in surrender, even as her words stripped me bare. "I get that. But your magic hasn't presented itself and after your mother...well father just wants to protect you."

"Do you hear yourself?" I didn't bother to make my voice pleasant or to acknowledge the second part of her statement even while it ripped through me. She didn't understand. Not at all. "That's why you think I don't want this? I'm not classy?"

Maybe it was my tone or the way my jaw clenched in a way she couldn't ignore, but Driata straightened. "I just meant—"

I held up my hand. "You meant what you said. *Get out.*"

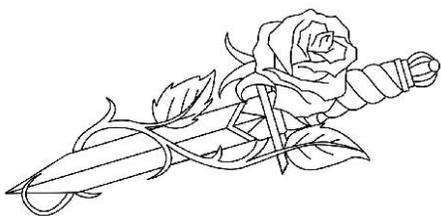
"Jane..."

"*Out.*" I have never screamed at her. Not at any of my siblings, despite how they acted, but of all of them, she was the one I was closest to. She was the first to come to me after the night my mom died. She was the one who held me even as the others spat their cruelty. But all that, and she thought I just wasn't classy... Of all the ridiculous...

Her eyes were wide, shining with tears even as she grabbed her talisman. And at that moment, I saw the realization hit her as she vanished.

Waiting until the last hint of sulfur faded, I dressed quickly. Managing to find the simplest gown in the wardrobe and nearly snapping my arm to lace the ivy-colored fabric myself.

If I had to marry a man I didn't love... I was going to be the best damn bride Ellesmere or Lunasa had ever seen.



Arius was waiting for me in the entrance hall.

I nodded my thanks to the servant who found me wandering about, lost and a bit frantic, and brought me to the sweeping staircase. It dominated the space made of marble with rivulets of gold that looked almost liquid. The steps were kept so polished that I could see the reflection of my gown as I walked down them, being careful not to slip.

The prince greeted me with a smile that didn't seem to reach his eyes. "Did I not mention the orange?"

"There was an accident with the dress," I shrugged, not feeling like it was that big of a deal.

"I'll have it cleaned so you can wear it for our departure." He laced his fingers through mine.

"It burned—" It took me a moment to hear and process what he had said. "Wait...our departure?"

"I'm coming back to Lunasa with you until the wedding. No one has informed you?" He tugged me toward the doors that two stern-faced guards dressed in gilded leathers were already opening.

Shaking my head, I thought of the trouble that would cause me. Having the freedoms I had in Lunasa without my fiancé there was something I hadn't wanted to give up. It's why I had agreed to visit so that I could ease any tension caused by me not moving to Ellesmere immediately. But now, the man had offered to uproot himself and what was I supposed to say? No?

"There will be no more disappearing, though." He chuckled, the sound low in his throat and I forced myself to giggle in turn even as tension wound its way through my gut. "I'll be keeping track of you from now on."

"What is a woman, if devoid of mystery?" I offered, trying to piece together the scattered remnants of my secret life. How could I shut it down?

"You no more need mystery, than I want it." He said as we stepped out into the grand drive; flower petals scattered on a gentle breeze as we followed a footpath that Arius knew by heart.

Which—of course, he did. He grew up there. But he had only been to Lunasa once. Could that work in my favor? I could evade him and give him enough of my time that he thought he had all of it. But that would be easier said than done. And if I could stall him coming...even better. I glanced around, committing to memory every stone we passed and each shrub that was groomed to look like a boar, a bear, a rabbit, and so on, every curve in the path that led to and from the palace, so I could sketch it out when I returned to the guest rooms.

"Are you doing it now?"

I hummed, barely hearing the words he spoke as he said them, wishing I could skip out on his company and get to work in planning.

"Trying to be mysterious?" My thoughts halted and I realized I had been suspiciously quiet along our walk.

"Apologies, my Prince. You make me so nervous if I'm being truthful." All lies should be based on truth. And he did make me nervous, but not because he was irresistible, and instead because he was as nosy as Agatha and Edera.

"Understandable really." He squeezed my fingers within his own. "How often are you granted this much attention?"

He was right. And at the same time, he wasn't. Most of my siblings didn't pay me half a mind, but I grew accustomed to my own company. Then there was Baltazar, and his ring of criminals. They became a sort of second family to me, or a first depending on how it was regarded. Working on magic and learning to fight had bonded us in a way that only my mentor had power over. He picked each of us for our abilities to fade into the background.

And now...that all felt as though it was fake too. How much was he hiding from me? Did he care at all?

"Rarely," I answered despite myself. If only because I knew it was the answer he would want to hear.

He clicked his tongue at that. Like it displeased him even though he was the one to bring up the line of conversation.

We talked nonsense while we walked, with him time and again directing the conversation to me. He asked me about my favorite things from food to my favorite day of the week. Having that much focus on me was uncomfortable, and it felt like he was trying to prove some point. Though, to who—it was only the two of us walking together—was a mystery.

I noted a crack in the outer wall of the castle, where small pebbles of stone had chipped away. It was surrounded by a smattering of apple trees which I found most interesting since I hadn't seen a single bite of fruit since arriving. Guarding the small orchard was a statue of a beheaded King Rikerd, a quite grotesque display that Arius said his father had commissioned straight after he killed the fallen king.

Arius reached up to pluck a ripened apple and polished it on his sleeve before continuing our stroll. "Have you named our pet?"

Don't let him realize you're disgusted by it. Humor him like the simple-minded princess you are. "My Prince, I thought you deserved that honor."

He chuckled as he turned into me. The length of his body pressed against mine. "I suppose it'll be good practice, for when I name our children."

Merciless Gods above. Maybe Driata was right, maybe I just wasn't made for courting. Perhaps I should have asked her how she kept such a straight face when men stroked their own egos right in front of her.

A small smile and widened eyes met his gaze. Like I was in awe of him. My head was an empty vessel for his thoughts to reside. "You'll be naming the children then?"

"It is how things are done." He shrugged and tapped my lower lip while I did my best not to recoil. "We wouldn't want them to have frilly, useless names."

Right, I nodded. *Leave the big thoughts and big ideas to the strong and competent men.* I tilted my chin downward, allowing color to fill my cheeks. Too shy to be touched that way. On cue, the Prince backed away with a frown.

Leave it to men to be easily manipulated by wide eyes and a dumb smile.

"Winston." He said with shoulders pulled back in a proud stance as he handed me the shining apple. "A strong name for an exceptional beast."

"I would have chosen Boaris. Or perhaps Wilboar. Though Hogry and Theoboar, would have been contenders too." My laughter died on a cough when Arius stared at me straight-faced, with one eyebrow raised in confusion.

"Probably best if you leave the names to me then."

Well... I would call the pig Swineston in private then. I nodded. "Of course, my Prince."

"Your Highness!" A guard sprinted through bushes coated in blooming violet-colored flowers toward us. Arius turned from me and steadied the man by the shoulders.

He wasn't a very tall guard compared to the others I had seen posted at the doors and patrolling the castle. Still, a bit taller than me, but had to crane his neck to make eye contact with Arius. His gilded leather vest had a baldric strapped over it that held two short swords. Was he not strong enough to hold a full-sized sword or was it a preference?

"Commander Jenson, how can I help you?"

Jenson sucked in a breath as if he thought it may very well be his last and his eyes darted to look at me. "There's been a development with the intrusion."

My attention piqued at that, though with little difficulty, I managed to maintain a bored expression as I took a noisy bite from the juicy apple. Crisp, tart. Not like the sweet ones we imported back home.

"Well, out with it. What's this development?" If I wasn't mistaken, I was sure Arius' voice had deepened. I slowed my chewing to stifle a smile that tried to creep into my face.

The commander cleared his throat. "Apologies Sire, but your father has asked that this only be discussed with you and him."

A long sigh left Arius, and he seemed to cool his temper with that one exhale. "Very well."

Part of me wanted to object so that I could be privy to whatever the *development* was. But the other—more logical part, understood that it would only stand to raise suspicion.

Arius turned to me and brushed his knuckles over my sun-warmed cheek. "I'll take you back to your rooms."

"I'd like to stay—if that's okay. And explore my new home." Asking for his permission made me want to sever my own tongue, but I did need to know as much about the grounds as possible to work out my plan.

Arius' smile and nod told me all I needed to know, agreeing to allow me the freedom of the grounds. He placed a kiss on my hand before stepping back to grip Jenson's wrist. "I'll come back when I've finished."

I didn't let the smell of sulfur dissipate before I was jogging back the direction we came, searching for the apple trees and behind them, the fracture in the wall.

Rustling and panting carried over the afternoon breeze. Gooseflesh spread across my body as recognition flooded through me—because I knew the voice the same way I knew my heart was shattering all over again.

But I crested the hill against my better judgment. The cement wall was coated in honeysuckle vines. Though the garish orange flowers were being crushed by Liam's back and his head tilted up toward the too blue sky. Kneeling in front of him, in the dense grass was a girl wearing a saffron-colored dress, her red hair bobbed as she sucked his dick, and for one horrifying moment, I thought it was one of my sisters.

But she looked up at him—her voice husky like he had been fucking her throat for hours, "Are you close?" And luckily, her voice wasn't one I recognized.

Liam looked down, and his lip curled back from his teeth. "I asked you not to talk."

He moved to rest his head back once more, except his hooded eyes seemed to focus for a moment...on me. I stumbled back a step, even as that icy gaze locked, and a wicked smile tugged at his mouth. "It's your lucky day."

"Hm?" She asked, around the length of him.

My mouth was dry and my nails bit into the flesh of the nearly forgotten apple. I wanted to be anywhere else, but my feet were rooted to the earth. Liam leaned down and lifted the woman up so her legs gripped his waist. Her girlish giggle cut into me all the while he continued to meet my eye.

I opened my mouth—to what? Object? Liam winked at me and thrust into her as she gasped his name.

Her white apron flipped over her head marking her as some type of servant. She writhed and wriggled while moaning loudly as he plowed into her with reckless abandon.

"You like that?" He mouthed my name and my thighs clenched. Dear Gods, what was I doing?

"Yes." She dragged the word out in a groan of ecstasy, but she couldn't see his face. She couldn't see the expression of hunger as it bored into mine. My skin heated as I watched her come undone for him.

"What is wrong with you?" My voice was too loud when their mingling breaths and grunts of pleasure had been the only sounds in the space.

The girl screamed and clamored away from him, adjusting her dress and panting. "Your Highness, my Gods. I apologize for the indecency."

Her face was like mine, but different. Her cheeks were a tinge sunken, and her skin was a bit paler. I twisted to gape at Liam, hoping against reason that he would answer my question and tell me what *was* wrong with him. He only shrugged as he buttoned himself back into his pants. Like he wasn't bothered by me walking up.

He owed me nothing. Perhaps he was in a relationship with the woman, and I owed her an apology for what we had done with the king of Karhdaro. That didn't stop my hand from rearing back while I still clutched the apple.

It didn't stop the apple from launching through the air. And it didn't stop the poor servant girl from jumping in front of the jerk to protect him.

The crack of her nose echoed over the distance. It started pissing blood through her fingers, as she howled like a cat in heat. The magic woven around her face dropped away, and her curly red hair turned to stringy, blonde waves.

"I—I'm sorry. I was aiming for him—" The woman's sob cut off my words as she sprinted away clutching her face.

He *laughed*, glancing at where the servant had so abruptly departed. "You were enjoying the view enough to let me finish."

My teeth ground together, and I wished the damned apple had found its mark. "Did you conceal that servant to look like me?"

"She didn't look like you."

"Liar."

"You're not the only woman in the world that has red hair, Jane." Liam crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back into the wall.

My nails sliced half-moons in my palms as I coached myself not to cross the distance and punch him in his face. "Look me in the face and say the words then."

"If I wanted to fuck someone who looked like you, I'd simply choose one of your siblings." He shrugged. "They all hate you enough to do it."

My mouth fell open on a gasp. "You prick."

"At least I don't pretend to be something I'm not."

"What are you talking about?"

"Prince Arius! I'm a vapid, insecure, damsel who needs your particular protection." He held up his hands in surrender as he did an imitation of my voice. His stupid magic made it perfect.

"I'm doing what is required of me." I wasn't sure if I was telling him or myself at that point.

"No." His eyes narrowed as he kicked off the wall and closed the distance between us. "*I'm* doing what's required of me. You're extinguishing yourself before you've had a chance to burn."

"You don't know what you're talking about." The words were barely a whisper as he stood so close, I could smell pine and spice.

"I can't wait for the day you realize how much power you hold." When he vanished, it felt like he took my breath with him.



Finding my way back to the castle was much easier than I thought, and I was thankful I didn't need to wait for Arius to show up and save the day.

I wasn't the damsel I pretended to be. It was a role required of me and no more than that. Who cared what Liam thought?

Obviously, me. My traitorous mind whispered in rebuttal.

Walking quickly past the guards at the doors as I could without drawing suspicion, I made my way to the extravagant staircase. Three flights of stairs, a left, two rights, and a long hallway and I would be back to my rooms.

I could sketch and strategize all I needed in private. So long as the meeting kept Arius away long enough. Then hopefully my plan would keep him away from Lunasa for a while too.

Rounding the third turn, I ran into Lou's stiff chest. "Oh! I was just coming to fetch you."

"For what?" My tone was sharper than I meant and it didn't escape her, as she raised her brow in question.

Shaking my head, I gestured for her to get on with it. It wasn't her place to worry over my hurt feelings.

"*He* has requested your presence." She said in a hushed voice. And I couldn't imagine which '*he*' she was talking about. Liam, my father, Maveri, Arius, Oliver? How many men could she be referring to... All of them, really.

My face must have given away my confusion because she mouthed the name of the one person I hadn't suspected. "*Baltazar*."

One mention had my heart and my stomach switching places. I considered, but hadn't confirmed he would put any useful spies in his pockets. I nodded, and she turned on her heel, not waiting to see if I followed. She knew I would. If Baltazar hired her, he would have only done so after demonstrating the consequences of disappointing him. Like he had with me earlier that day.

We made it to his chambers in half the time it would've taken me to get to mine, even though they were a bit further.

I cast my eyes up and down the hall to check if we were clear before I swung open his door. But what I saw made no sense. The room hadn't changed, but who I saw, and the clap of magic I felt filling the space was altering any sense of normalcy and reality I had ever held dear.

Driata stood, holding Baltazar's bloody wrist while the crimson-stained the sleeve of her gown. Why would he be initiating her?

"What the fuck?" Only when my sister jumped did I realize I'd cursed in front of her for the first time.

Baltazar gave me an easy, all-knowing smile. "The princess and I got to talking over lunch and I think with the proper training she could prove to be quite an asset."

He had blown it. My cover, my life, my secret. In one breath, he damned it all.

"No." It wasn't her I was objecting to. Or maybe it was. But it was more important that he was replacing me. He crafted a new life for me to marry Arius—who was no more exciting than watching plants die—and he found the next available princess to trade for me?

"Excuse me?" I knew the tone; he was an inch away from losing his temper and a punishment would follow.

"You heard me. No." My words were clipped as I squared my shoulders and closed the distance between us and prodded him in the chest. "You are not to recruit her."

His hand gripped my finger nearly to the point of pain. A threat and a warning. "I will swear in every member of your gods damned line if I see fit."

I snatched my hand away from his and narrowed my eyes. "You can't."

He dipped his face so it was only an inch away from mine and I felt his warm whiskey-scented breath on my face when he spat, "I can do whatever I please. Especially when the spare I have can't complete a simple task without going missing for a day and a half."

His words cut into me, especially as I realized it was a punishment in and of itself. Maybe not for failing, but for not succeeding fast enough. For not coming to him straight away. And if he suspected what really happened...no. That penance would be much worse.

"If you do this, I'll never forgive you." I whispered it. Even as hot tears burned the backs of my eyes and I willed them away. Even as my throat clogged with emotion.

"That's where you're confused, Jane. I don't need your forgiveness. I only need you not to fail me." He turned, and I felt the coldness of his words and his distance sweeping through me. I felt them climb deep within me where my soul resides and take up quarters there.

"Driata." He said her name casually as if he had never called her anything else. "You'll be shadowing Jane for the foreseeable future. Where she goes, you go. When she trains, you learn, and so on, am I clear?"

"Yes sir." My sister chirped at my mentor like a happy little bird. Clearly not seeing that my world was exploding, and she was at the center of the blast.

Loosening a breath and squaring my shoulders, I reminded myself that Driata would have to be the next day's problem. Right then, Arius coming back to Lunasa was the biggest threat to my way of life there was. I knew what he was having her agree to. Driata couldn't out us. But Arius sure would grow suspicious if I was disappearing for days on end regularly.

"I need a potion." Abrupt, to the point, and looking Baltazar square in the eye.

"What type of potion?" His brow raised as he stepped back, realizing I calmed myself down.

"A potion, or the ingredients for one." I rubbed my hands together, as my plan started unfolding before my eyes. I was itching to sketch it out, to see the images before me that were in my mind.

Baltazar scratched his chin, recognizing the excited gleam in my eye and knowing it meant I was readying for a mission. "What's the potion for?"

"A distraction." I shrugged, even as I bounced on the balls of my feet. "My fiancé is planning on traveling with us back to Lunasa. I can't have that—not yet. I plan on creating a reason for him to stay here."

"Jane." He said my name like a caress, placing his hands on my shoulders. "What kind of potion is it you need for this distraction?"

"An explosive one." The grin that slashed across my face was manic, and if I concentrated, I could pretend I hadn't heard Driata suck in a gasp. Like it was just me and Baltazar, planning...even though it definitely wasn't.

But he didn't return my smile—in fact, his face pinched with a feeling I couldn't decipher. "I can't allow that."

"Why?" Gods, I was trying so hard to keep my emotions in check, but the day was getting the better of me.

"Because it's not part of the plan."

"And yet, part of the plan is bringing Driata into the fold." I crossed my arms over my chest to trap my hands. Not that I would strike Baltazar...right? Right.

He released a long-suffering sigh. "The decisions I make are none of your concern."

I took a step back, so his hands fell from my shoulders, and looked between Lou and Driata. The pair seemed concerned. Though their only concerns should have been focused on why they were still standing there. "Then the things I do when I'm not working for you, are none of yours."

His mouth pursed. "You're always working for me."

"I'm doing this, Baltazar." Uncrossing my arms was a task, but I had to prove to him and myself that I could stay calm. "So, you can help me, or you can get out of my damn way."

"So be it." He gave me an abrupt nod and spun on his heel to walk toward his desk. A few moments of him rifling through the drawers filled the room with awkward silence.

I could hear Driata shifting from foot to foot and Lou patting the pockets in her apron, the contents rattling in the desk—

"Ah. Here." Baltazar swirled a glass bottle of chalky liquid and the contents mixed, giving off an iridescent lilac-colored glow. He held it out to me in offering and I took it, carefully. "Break this bottle where you want your blast."

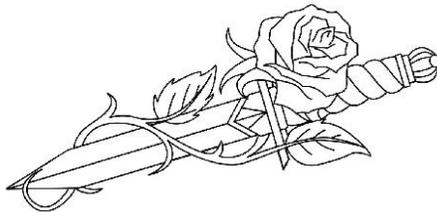
"Thank you." A copper tang filled my mouth before I realized the bite I took from the inside of my cheek. But I barely noticed it. He was standing beside my sister while she nodded along like his good little lap dog.

Oh...are they fucking?

"You only have ten minutes to get away once it's oxygenated."

"Fine." I turned, not having anything left to say and not wanting to see Driata standing in my place next to him any longer than I had to.

"And Jane..." He called after me as I grasped the doorknob—*inches* away from freedom. "When this fails, I expect you to never question me again."



Avoiding a probing fiancé, even in a castle as grand as Ellesmere's, for the remainder of the day didn't prove easy. It did, however, give me the opportunity to do as I said and explore what was going to be my home.

I drew in my sketchbook everywhere I went, tucked behind hedges, in the crook of a bent and ancient oak, by a crystal-clear lake I found past the apple trees and lastly feeding some crisp apples to Jett in the stables.

The insatiable mare was crunching through her fifth apple—core and all—as I sat atop a bale of hay. I knew my legs would burn with the itch of it

later. There was something so peaceful about sitting in the quiet stables with only the soft stomping of hooves and snuffing of horses to keep me company.

Careful of the potion that was tied securely to my thigh, I adjusted my skirts as I gnawed on the back end of the pencil I was using to sketch out the crack in the wall. The split in the foremost tree marked the spot, low at the base of the castle's infrastructure. Vines coating the wall nearly concealed it—but my eyes had been trained to see the little things.

Like the way Liam's legs had parted right above the fracture...and how pollen and bruised petals had scattered over his shoulders where he rested them. How the servant girl's hair had been the same shade of orangey-red as the dress Lou had burned. He hadn't quite gotten the shade right, just like her face had been off too. But that was the risk one took when using magic to look like someone else. Nothing would ever be spot on.

Jett snorted at me and I tossed her another apple, which she caught between her teeth with a chomp. "You're going to get fat."

She flipped her mane at me and turned her head away.

"The gods know I won't miss a meal if I can avoid it." I held up my hands in surrender. "I'm not judging."

I glanced down at my sketch, and I was filled with abject horror. My imagination had led to a wandering hand. There, sketched in finite detail was a pollen and petal dusted Liam pinned against the very wall I was trying to plan to destroy. Except for that time the girl he had lifted, her curls fell in a pattern I couldn't help but recognize. A head tilted back in lust revealed heavy lids covering what would only be my green eyes. And the stonework and flowers of the building had turned into a silky texture that I gripped in my hand.

Pressing my knees together, I worked to banish the feeling of silk sheets slipping between my fingers. To eradicate the smells of earth and pine that washed over me like they owned me and kill off the lingering aching emptiness I felt in my core since I left Blair's ship.

The jarring sound of the page ripping from the binding of my book and the shredding and tearing that followed were the acts of a lunatic—a woman being driven mad. I jumped up, kicking hay and sawdust over the scraps of paper.

Sex couldn't be mind-blowing enough to make you lose your actual mind...could it?

No. And I wouldn't think about it anymore. I would file the thought away, the same way I had the creeping feeling that my sister was sleeping with my mentor. It was the only thing that made sense really—though it also made no damn sense at all. *Why her?* I wanted to scream...but the why made perfect sense. I wasn't blind, nor was I stupid. Plain and unappealing weren't things that accompanied thoughts of Driata. I tucked my sketchbook, now empty of any evidence under my arm, and caressed Jett's proud face. "We get out of here first thing tomorrow, girl."

I could've sworn for just a minute that she huffed a sigh, and I couldn't have agreed with her more. But for now, the sun was dipping and my stomach was rumbling that I only fed it the fruit Jett was willing to spare—which wasn't much. It was time to face everybody and put on one of my best acts yet.



Having an explosive potion strapped to your thighs probably wasn't the best way to show up late for dinner. But I reminded myself that no one knew. Well except Driata—who was hovering as close to me as she could get, despite the bodies I kept trying to wade through to get away from her. Also, Baltazar who was paying no mind to me at all.

Starving for his attention had become a pastime and I tried not to let it get to me. I always put him first and made his word my own strict law. What had that gotten me? A giant rock paired with a commitment as large as most of my family's egos.

It was strange how the Alistair's took their meals standing, though I did wonder if it was different when there weren't so many people. While Blair and his clansmen had left early morning the day prior, Orabelle's small fleet had stayed behind. Though—for the life of me—I couldn't figure out why.

Driata cleared the appetizer table—managing to hide her flinch over the meat for the most part—but I ducked around two servers and one of Maveri's guards, grabbing rolls and shrimp along the way and plopping them into my mouth.

Could I avoid her forever? No. But could I avoid her until tomorrow when she would sit her ass in a plush carriage and I would ride Jett back home? Yes. It would be several days before I had to deal with her again. All I had to do was evade her tonight.

She stomped her foot like a child and walked briskly to where Gemma was sitting with our father, gathering food from trays for him. Gemma acted as if she had to be his caretaker when it was he who sealed his fate for himself.

Conversations swarmed around but fell on deaf ears. Baltazar would've wanted me to listen. To spy. *You're always working for me.* But that night, I didn't care what he wanted. His mission—that I blindly followed—had made me a pawn. Only for him to find a replacement as soon as it suited him.

So, I ate until I was fit to burst, psyching myself up for the task ahead. Until a freckled, angry-looking face popped into my line of sight.

"Hello, my Prince." He was preening like a peacock at the title, but his pursed lips hadn't settled.

"Where were you?" He asked, with his voice a harsh whisper, meant to not draw attention, as he nudged me toward the back wall.

Not answering right away, I chewed on my lip but that seemed to work him into a fury. His fingers gripped my forearms, tight enough to bruise. "I said no more disappearing."

"I'm right here." *What would his face look like if I slammed it into the bowl of cocktail sauce just out of reach?*

"What did I say? I'll be back for you." His nails bit in now, close to drawing blood through the sheer sleeves of my gown. "I *looked* for you."

Maybe I had lost my mind, because that was the most interesting the prince had been since I arrived. "You didn't look hard enough because I'd only gone to the stables."

Tempting fate, was I? Maybe I should have stayed away. I was in no mood to play my part. The role had never benefited me anyway. Perhaps I had lost my head because right then, as his nails drew dewdrops of blood, I knew I could hurt him. Perhaps I wouldn't live. But neither would he.

Anger unfurled in my core. Hot putrid, rage like I had never felt. Why was I being trained to fight if I was always to play the simple, helpless princess?

"Were you with him?" His eyes were bouncing between my own, hoping he might be able to detect the truth there.

"Who?" But I already knew what he suspected. Liam and I's history preceded us. Gods, Liam had broken Arius' nose over a dance.

"Lord Baltazar's bastard brother." He spat, though every eye in the room weighed on us as they watched the barbaric display.

"I told you. I went to see Jett." My jaw clicked as my teeth ground together hard enough, I wondered if they would turn to dust. "You actually gave me the idea to take her apples."

Oh. He didn't say it, but I could see the word in his face and in his loosening posture. I could feel in the exhaled breath on my cheeks, in him letting go of my arms. He took a step back.

I straightened my spine, still playing my part even if that was now the pissed-off princess. Tugging at my sleeves as if I were self-conscious of the spectacle he made us into—though I knew the crescent moons could be seen—I stepped away from him and into the swelling crowd.

A clinking sound came from the side of the room where my father had been sitting. The group, made up of Maveri's supporters and Orabelle's, were so embarrassed and disgusted by the display between Arius and me that they let me pass through easily.

Normally if my cheeks hadn't heated naturally, I would have forced them to do so, another symptom of the feeble character—

My father's raspy voice butchered my line of thought. "I have wonderful news."

The crowd quieted if only hoping for fodder to mock him with later.

"Queen Orabelle has decided to bless us with her union to my heir. They set sail later today to announce this new alliance to the people of Weylin."

Hushed voices raised to deafening until Arius shouted above the commotion. "Wondrous news, indeed. It seems love is contagious. My future bride and I extend joyous congratulations."

Was it not him who told me the queen's last husband was eaten *by her*? And *love*? I didn't think that love had anything to do with what was going on. But despite my feelings on the matter, Arius' words had calmed the confusion. Glasses were raised, the marriages were toasted, and a revelry commenced.

I had half a mind to warn Oliver what he was getting himself into but quickly dismissed the notion when Olivia announced she would be traveling with them. Was I hoping they were consumed? No, of course not. But it would be nice having two of my tormentors across the sea for a bit.

Not to mention, with the celebrations at foot, I had the perfect exit strategy. Fade into the crowd, execute my plan, then pop back in as though nothing happened.

With every pat on the back that Arius and Oliver received, I moved closer to the arched doorway. It seemed to become a competition—a pissing competition of masculinity and royals. Who could receive more praise and who could boast the loudest of their love? *One doesn't fall in love in a day or two, so I'm certain neither of them could win that.*

"I told her it would bring potential for you and your siblings." My father chuckled as I swept past them in a flurry of bodies that had swarmed him.

"You did, father." Was it just me, or did Gemma look less enthralled than normal? The swell of support that our father was receiving did nothing to amuse her, which surprised me. I would have thought she would be overjoyed.

"First the heir and then the spares." Ciaran was clapping Oliver on the shoulder. "How it should have been all along."

Had he just called us all spares?

I shook my head, realizing Oliver's back was turned away from the exit.

That was my moment. Ducking into the hall, I was plunged into my comfort place of shadows.

Dodging guards would have been easier if they weren't posted in every part of the castle. Probably due to the last *incident* I caused. It was fine though. Arius had taught me the way through the service tunnels that first day.

Couples had split off from what had quickly become a revelry, sneaking into alcoves and dimly lit corners to shower their partner with affections. Good for them, I supposed. Though with less alcohol, they would have come to the realization that they weren't *that* well-hidden and the vulgar fountain I now passed had less ass and breasts on display than I saw when walking through the halls.

"Jane! Wait." Driata yelled when I made it past the garden entrance. The gods had either forsaken me or laughed at my misery.

I could continue, but that risked her hollering some more. I turned sharply and waited for her to catch up. Her loud-winded breaths alone told me how well the night was going. "Go back to the party, Dri."

"Baltazar told me to stay with you." Her hands were on her hips, shoulders back. The way she stood when dealing with the mouthy nobles, or a suitor who didn't want to take no for an answer.

"And I'm telling you that you're meant for the light." A low throbbing began in the base of my skull.

My sister shook her head and I looked at her, trying to see a world in which it could work. She was wearing a pale pink gown that puffed out at the waist. Her perfect, straight hair was braided down her back and her nose was pointed at the star-filled sky.

"No more puffy gowns. They're too loud and too unreliable." I whispered to her. "Tonight, if you must follow me, you'll watch to make sure no one catches us."

She bobbed her head, surprising me already by not complaining about the dress comment. "Who am I watching for?"

"Anyone. Guards, servants, nobles, stray animals. And don't make another sound unless you see something."

"But what if—"

"No."

I turned, not giving her another opportunity to speak as I moved across the night-coated grounds. She was probably going to try to connect with me, but honestly, she could save the bonding for Baltazar. Which I certainly wasn't going to let myself obsess over.

We reached the apple trees quickly and only passed a handful of nobles that had spilled into the gardens and surrounding grounds. They were plenty far off though, well within the torchlights just outside the castle and the drive.

To the unsuspecting eye, Driata and I were just two more nobles taking a moonlit stroll.

"Stay here." I motioned to the farthest trees and grabbed an apple from the lowest branch to hand her. "If you see anyone, say '*what a marvelous night to celebrate love*', loudly."

"Is that all? You don't want me to tussle with them?" She held up her manicured and polished hands in front of her, rolled into little fists. I choked out a laugh before I realized she wasn't joking.

My eyebrows rose almost to my hairline as I shook my head. "No. Don't *tussle* with anyone."

Pulling up the skirt of my gown, I untied the glass vial and walked back toward the crack in the wall. The honeysuckle had already righted itself from being crushed and if I hadn't been so busy committing a crime—I would have been more fascinated by the gardening magic that kept the flowers there in bloom.

I reared my hand back to toss the bottle at the center of the fractured stone.

"What a marvelous night to celebrate love loudly." Driata's voice was quiet, and I scolded myself for not being more concise with my wording.

Crouching low and monitoring my footfalls, I approached her station.

"You're not scared of being out here all alone?" A deep voice I recognized as Commander Jenson asked.

"I—I'm not alone."

Dammit Driata.

"Right, because I'm here."

"No, I'm here with a suitor." Her confidence was unwavering. "We're playing cat and mouse."

"And are you the predator or the prey?" Something about the way he said it made my skin crawl.

"I'm the mouse, and I must insist you go." Bitchy princess entitlement dripped from her every word. "You'll spoil it if he sees you here."

But I needed to *think*. He had seen her now and my plan hinged on not being seen. I should have made her hide or stand further away.

"Well, I've gone and found you. Do I get a prize?" My stomach turned. He would never speak to her like that if there were someone around.

"Sir! Do not touch me." My heart hammered in my ears as I sprinted through the trees.

When I reached them, Jenson's back was to me, but I could see that he had Driata pinned against a tree. Pink fabric puffed around him, and she let out a garbled scream.

"Get your hands off of her." I gripped the back of his leather vest and slammed my foot into the back of his leg.

His knee buckled as he cursed and fell into Driata. Before he could right himself, I yanked the buckle fastening his baldric and his swords clanged to the ground. The commander turned and his features warred between shock and anger as he saw me standing there.

He lunged for me, but I ducked low and threw my fist into his stomach.

"Bitch."

"That's no way to talk to a lady." Driata popped out from behind him with her face pinched in outrage. She flung out her clenched fist, but I noted how

her thumb hung loose as her knuckles smashed into his cheek. I heard her suck in a breath, the sound of cracking bone echoed in my ears. I saw her thumb was now jutting out at an angle.

Oh—that was a nasty break.

"Driata, get out of here," I said through gritted teeth as he spun on her, and I tightened my grip on the vial. I could not let that thing shatter. Not yet.

"He ripped off my talisman." She whined, clutching her broken hand to her chest and diving away from him.

"Then *run*." I wanted to shake her.

How could she allow herself to rely so thoroughly on magic?

I kicked upward that time, planting my foot at the apex of Jenson's thighs, and he grunted a curse, pitching forward and cupping himself.

Relying on magic is a weakness, Baltazar had said. That's why you're at an advantage because you've survived without it all these years.

It was why he refused to teach me any, except in stages. *You learn how to disguise yourself, then you learn how to defend yourself if you're caught. You learn how to defend yourself by learning to fight and wield a weapon. Then and only then, do you learn how to escape.*

"Why?" I asked, angry that he wouldn't teach me something that would make my missions easier.

"Because" He had said with a crooked, arrogant smile. "If you need magic to escape then you've failed your other lessons."

A sharp pain stole my breath away and I realized my mistake a moment too late. Driata screamed as blood soaked through the bodice of my gown. Jenson slowly, as if in shock, pulled his short sword from between my ribs.

"What the fuck?" Liam's voice was a gut punch on top of what was already a shitty night.

"They attacked me." Jenson was shouting, though it sounded pretty quiet over the pounding of my heart.

"He *stabbed* her." Driata was sobbing and was kneeling in the grass looking for...something. Warm hands grabbed me as the ground swelled up toward me. Or was I falling? I coughed, but it was wet. Thick. Red. Blood. That was not a good sign.

"I have you." Liam. Grey eyes. Storm clouds. His eyes looked like storm clouds.

"Can't let you heal—" Jenson leaped toward Liam and I raised my hand to—what? Glass shattered in my hand as it slammed into his temple.

Liquid splashed over Liam and me, as the commander slumped to the ground. My brain was running too slow, even as my breathing became easier and less stunted.

Not good. I sat up, nearly slamming my forehead into Liam's face.

"Lie down." He tried to push my shoulders back into the grass. "I haven't fully healed you."

"Bomb." I flexed my now empty hand, feeling the splinters of glass in it. "Ten minutes."

"Jane. He's covered in it. You're covered in it." I looked at Driata as she spoke. Her index finger wobbled and her eyes brimming with tears as she pointed to Jenson.

He was unconscious next to us and the same purple liquid clinging to mine and Liam's clothes were splattered all over him from face down. His forehead was dripping blood from where I smashed the bottle.

Shit. "We have to move him."

Liam lifted the commander easily and carried him through the trees, at my direction, and tossed him down in front of the fractured stone wall.

"What now?" He tried to wipe his hands on his pants but the potion was sticking. Grabbing his arm, I hauled him toward the lake I saw that afternoon, running faster than I had ever run. The water was icy, and I ignored Liam as he protested, dragging him deeper and deeper until even our heads were fully submerged.

I opened my eyes and watched a tiny stream of bubbles float out of his mouth and tried to memorize the planes of his face as I pulled off my soiled gown and kicked it away from me. My legs tangled in the fabric even as I began ripping at the buttons of his shirt. He caught on quickly and tugged off his potion-soaked pants.

If it didn't work—no, it had to. I didn't see any more potion on him, letting my eyes roam over him, and then myself.

His fingers brushed my ribs and finally the pain of my wounds caught up with me. My hand throbbed, but my side felt like it was on fire. I wasn't sure how much longer I could hold my breath even as his healing magic flowed into me.

A low rumble sounded as the water around us began to vibrate. My ears popped from the pressure. I looked at Liam and looked down at myself. Giant bubbles steamed from my lips as I breathed a sigh and kicked off the rocky floor and breached the surface.

"You're alive." Driata bounced from foot to foot excitedly at the shore as she scrubbed her hand over her tear-streaked face.

Plumes of black and grey smoke billowed up toward the sky beyond her and angry white and orange flames ate up the trees and licked up the side of the castle.

Guards and people shouted in the distance. They wouldn't be long now. I didn't think about what the explosion meant for Commander Jenson, as I motioned for Liam to follow me ashore.

Driata threw her arms around my shoulders and wept into my slip

"We have to get out of here."

Wishing I asked Liam not to bring me to Baltazar, I knew it was unreasonable. But it was only as my mentor paced in front of me like a caged animal, that I understood the gravity of my error.

"If you didn't need me, why are you standing in front of me covered in blood?"

"It's done, isn't it?" Sweat pooled at the collar of my shirt. I had never spoken to him like that.

"You *killed* a *guard*, Jane." His eyes never left my face, even while the tap, tap, tap of his shoes echoed around the room. "He has a wife, children, and a dog."

"He tried to assault my sister."

Baltazar twisted so he was standing in front of me. "And what about the others who were injured in the blast?"

"There was no one else around." I shrugged. *Shrugged* at the leader of a seedy group of criminals. Maybe I had a death wish.

His eyebrow rose a fraction. "In the building?"

"That side of the castle holds Maveri's trophy rooms. The only things harmed were the carcasses of dead animals he collects." My shoulders reacted at the words as I said them aloud. I had triple-checked that part of the building. It was six floors of creatures the king had claimed to kill.

"How are you so sure?" A muscle ticked in his jaw.

"I obviously checked." There would be no one left to mourn me if he killed me for my insolence.

He strode towards his desk and sat, like putting himself behind it would give him back power over the conversation. Over me. "What's gotten into you?"

The question rocked me more than I thought a physical blow would have been capable. Because what *had* gotten into me? Was I only angry about Driata? If I was being honest with myself... I had been angry for days. He was the reason I was being forced into a marriage I wasn't interested in. I met one good person since being in Ellesmere, who gave a damn about having a genuine conversation with me, and Baltazar made me plant evidence on him that could get him killed. Then—as if that all wasn't enough—I was nearly certain he was having an affair with my sister. And even if he wasn't, he brought her in on the one thing I had to myself, that my siblings couldn't touch or taint.

"You're giving me away." My voice broke and I didn't care even as both of Baltazar's brows shot up to his hairline.

"Excuse me?" His brows pinched and the mask snapped back down.

"Don't give me that." My fingers gripped the edge of his desk as I leaned into his face. "You're the one who coordinated the wedding. Why?"

He didn't respond and flicked his eyes pointedly behind me. But I didn't care who heard. I wanted to hit him, to force him to show something—anything—other than his cool, unaffected stare. "Whatever game you're playing at—it ends now. I'm *done*."

Baltazar's hand shot out and grabbed my wrist as I went to turn, holding me in place.

"Go." But the word wasn't directed at me. I heard the creaking sound of wood and rushed footsteps when Driata and Liam rushed out of the room.

Cowards.

Baltazar stood, never lifting his hand from my wrist, and walked behind me. He lowered his mouth. His fingers trailed up my arm and wrapped around the base of my throat as he tilted my head back. So close that I could feel his breath on my neck and at the curve of my ear when he spoke. "It is a game, Jane. And we aren't done playing yet."

No words came to me, but he spoke before I tried.

"You are mine." He stepped closer, pinning me between his body and the desk. My breathing hitched, and he was near enough that I knew he could hear it. "No bauble can change that."

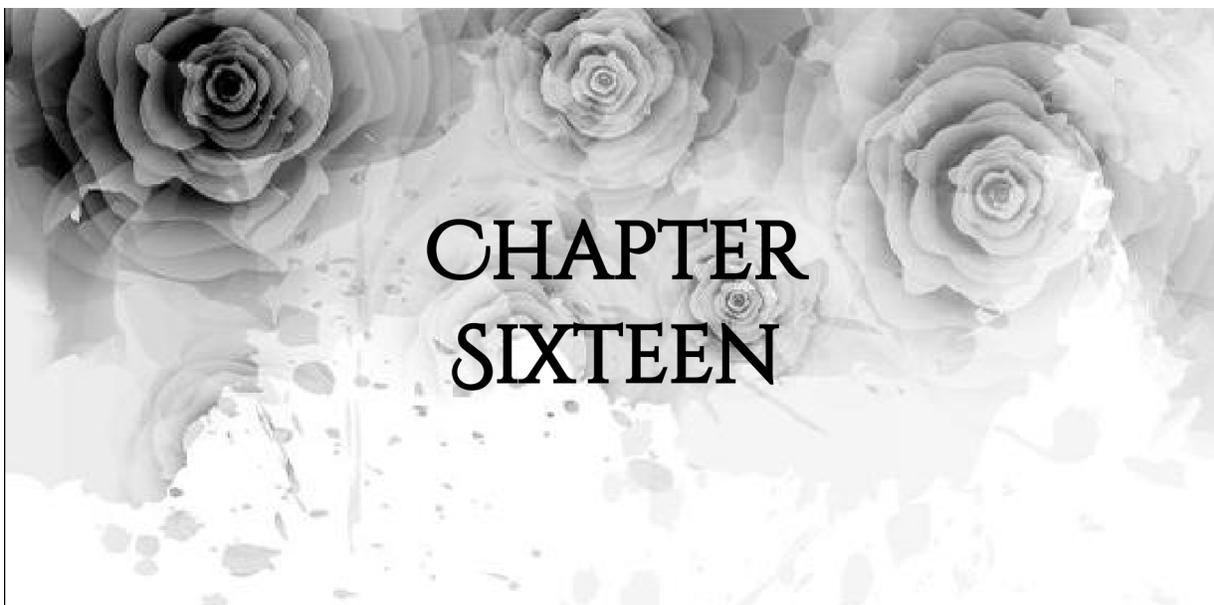
"What?"

"You're playing a part. One that you've played well up until tonight. But never forget who owns you." His words were clipped, and I could feel the vibration of his voice, rolling over my skin, down my body, to my center.

I leaned forward to suck in a breath of air that didn't smell like him, but he pressed firmer still. I lost track of everything but his touch, each place his body met mine. "You."

"Good girl." His words threatened to undo me like the last bit of rage left my body and there was only need, desire. How was his voice so calm when I heard my own heart beating in my ears?

Baltazar stepped away. That one careless move and the cold air descending where his warm body had been allowed a chill to creep up my spine. It was the first time I had realized my mentor was manipulating me.



The king didn't understand, not until I told him my mother's name. And then he was consumed with grief. He shouldn't have been allowed to mourn her because it was his blade she fell on. Sefar. So, I told him what I wanted to do each day since he had killed her—what I was left holding back for years. He didn't love her, he didn't lament for her. The loss he felt was his magic. And instead of longing for her, he waited for the day he regained his magic, his eternity.

Waking was always disorienting after I dreamed of her. I lost sense of time—days, months, years, always half expecting her to be sitting there on my bed patting me awake with a wicked gleam in her eyes.

That morning was no different. My eyes squinted open against the morning light, and I reached for her readying myself to tell her that dawn was far too early. And she would respond by saying that the flowers were their most glorious at sunrise.

But my arms came away empty. She was gone. She wasn't coming back. There would be no more morning strolls through the gardens. I slipped into my robe. I couldn't—wouldn't think about her.

There was too much for me to do since that morning I was meant to trade one type of purgatory for another. Ellesmere for Lunasa. The unknown enemy for the backstabbing friend.

"Oh good," Lou said at an octave that was much too chipper. "I was afraid I'd have to wake you."

Fabric rustled at the foot of the bed, as she tossed something there. I adjusted the pillows so that I was sitting up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. Pulling the small pile of clothes toward me, I winced. "What's this?"

"Clothing." She enunciated it slowly as though I was incapable of understanding. "While you're always in states of naked...normal people do often cover up in public."

She gestured to the slip I was wearing when I arrived at my rooms, the night prior.

Lacing my hands in front of me, I bit back a smile at her rudeness. "Why are they on the bed and not being packed?"

"I've fixed them."

"And what was wrong with them?"

"You had so many useless dresses." I snorted at her assessment, and she continued. "But I figured you could spare some. So, I turned a few into pants."

I leaped from the plush confines of the pillows towards the pile and pulled each pair up and examined them. They were practical and feminine...and pants. How those three things fit so well together made me feel Lou had some of her own magic.

The first pair had been made from a sapphire gown and I stepped into them without waiting to look at the others which were cream-colored and grey. She managed to cinch the waist. I still had a figure in them—and

didn't look like a dumpling the way I looked in men's pants—but my legs were completely mobile.

"Thank you." I could've kissed her, but I settled for a hug. When I pulled away though, she was trying to hide a frown. "What's wrong?"

"They're gifts." She pointed to the pair I was wearing, then the two on the bed while her teeth worried her cheek. "Farewell gifts."

My face scrunched. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Prince Oliver left for Weylin. But before that, he told us we'd all been less than useful and not to bother being there when he gets back." Lou shrugged as if it weren't a big deal. "Agatha and Edera left with the others last night to travel back home."

"Isn't this job helpful to you?"

"I don't want your pity, Jane."

"Good thing I don't pity you." I placed my hands on my hips. "Is the money you're making helpful to you? Or is being away from the pub an issue?"

Picking at the frayed end of the apron, she wasn't meeting my eye. "It's helping keep the pub running. I send the money straight home anyway."

"Then I'll pay you. So long as you keep making it worthwhile." I kicked back a leg in a pose to show her how versatile and fabulous her creation was.

Lou smiled then, showing me all of her teeth, before running to the armoire and pulling out the last thing hanging in there, as well as my canvas bag. "I helped the servants pack this morning, so they didn't rifle through your things."

She tossed me a coat and I slung it on, buttoning it up to my collar sternum, while I tucked my slip into my pants like it was a blouse.

When she spoke next, her voice was barely a whisper. "Now, do you want to tell me what happened last night when you blew up half of the building?"

"Barely a quarter." I double-checked my bag. Sketchpad, old dagger, new dagger—thank you, Blair—and a set of worn-out men's clothes. All there. "And everything would have been fine had that guard not shown up."

"Driata told me he got handsy with her and you took him out."

"You talked to my sister?" Since when were they on a first name basis?

"Princess?" His voice was muffled through the door, and I coached myself calmly like I hadn't just been talking about the role I had in the explosion.

"Yes, my Prince?" I was already crossing toward the sitting room and made sure to close the door behind me, so he didn't see Lou or the bag I left open in there.

"A servant told me you had gone to bed last night, so I wanted to be the first to tell you what's happened." His face was grim, so I didn't bother pretending it may be good news.

"Is everything alright?"

He shook his head. "There's been an attack on the castle."

Drawing on a bit of my residual panic, I widened my eyes. "Is anyone hurt?"

"We've found no injuries yet, but the west wing is in shambles."

I touched his arm gently, with worry. "I'm so sorry someone has done this to your home."

"Our home." He corrected me while dragging angry, frantic fingers through his sleep-mussed hair. "It was to be a surprise, but that was going to be redone as a nursery."

The thought of the death-drenched animals in that wing hovering over one's newborn babe was enough to turn my stomach. I grimaced and hoped he would see it as pain over the delay and not for the disgust it really was.

"There's no way I can travel right now." He sighed and his honey flecked gaze met mine in apology.

Not excited, I coached myself silently. *Saddened. Slumped shoulders, shaky breath. Pop that lower lip out a little further.* "I understand."

"You could stay." His hands slid around my waist, and I felt his fingers lock together behind me.

"No offense, my Prince." I offered him a soft smile that I tried and failed at meeting his eyes. "But I don't exactly feel safe here while the castle is under attack."

Arius' lips pursed together, sending a tick through his jaw as deep lines formed between his brows. He said nothing, hadn't even moved. But I knew. The anger and hurt in his face betrayed that he didn't believe me. Something I said or done, maybe not even that day, but since I had arrived.

My toes sunk into the plush rug, so I could gain the height needed to reach his face. I used my fingers to smooth the lines on his forehead and I watched as his face softened at my touch.

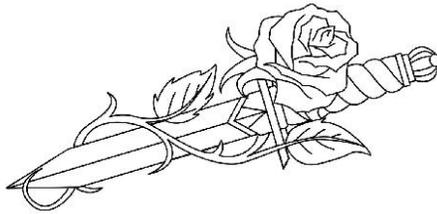
His grip on my back tightened to lift me and when our lips met, I hadn't even had a chance to close my eyes—but his had opened even further. It was like he was assessing me, watching for cues of my reaction. I slammed mine closed and moved my lips against his mouth and tried to ignore that scratching of his beard and forget the memory I was already creating.

It was wrong to compare, but my mind was automatically reminding me of the difference between his soft, unmarred hands and Liam's calloused ones.

I tried to pull back for a breath, but he reeled me in and used my open mouth as a gateway for his tongue. His teeth clicked against mine and I wanted to scream. gooseflesh spread over my skin at every point he touched while he explored my torso and I had never been so grateful to be wearing so many clothes.

His tongue wandered around my mouth like it was checking for hidden crevices and I strangled the urge to bite down. When his arms dropped to give him access to my ass, I pushed off on his chest and stumbled back with what I hoped was a breathy chuckle. "Until we meet again."

"Right." He grinned, and the skin by his eyes crinkled. "Save some mystery for our next meeting."



Liam was pacing in front of an already saddled and bridled Jett when I reached the stables.

His dark curls were mussed like he spent all morning trying to pull them out. He didn't wait for me to question his presence before he was babbling. "Scoot and Fox left last night."

"And?" While my stomach pinched with worry for the young novice, I wasn't all that close to him, and I didn't think Liam was either.

"They dressed as servants and joined those that were fired for travel." He took a step closer to me, but his hand was raised as if in his defense.

My brows lifted and I shrugged. It was a pretty good cover.

"Baltazar sent Driata with them." His words echoed through my skull and a clanging hammer of fear and anger bounded through me.

"Driata is being sent to faery?"

He nodded, "Baltazar wasn't going to tell you, but I thought you should know."

While I attached my bag to the saddle, I ushered Jett forward and threw my leg over her back squeezing my thighs. She trotted forward and I leaned down offering Liam my hand.

"Get on the horse." I shook my hand, steeling myself to leave without him. "We don't have time for you to saddle another horse."

He grabbed my forearm with his good hand and hoisted himself behind me with a grunt. I squeezed my calves together.

Liam's hand closed around both of mine as it tangled around Jett's coarse mane. The wind ripped at my braid as the tie flew from my hair. Her hoof beats, clacking, and crunching sounded like battle drums as we sped away from Ellesmere castle.

We had to cut them off. I had to stop her. Driata was in no way prepared for that mission. What was Baltazar thinking? My only hope-filled thought was that we had one horse, and though they left before us, their party was much bigger.

I tried to focus my mind, not on the events of the morning or the night prior, but instead on keeping my mount even as my thighs burned. But the day moved forward, and the wind picked up around us, shrieking in an echo of my internal rage. The afternoon sunlight was dimmed by grey and black rumbling clouds that promised an unforgiving storm. The raindrops seethed as they pelted my face, my hair, and my clothes. The wind bit through my

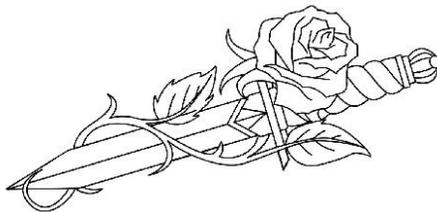
sodden clothes and set my teeth to chatter even as my muscles tightened to stay astride.

Liam's voice was muffled when he spoke. "What now?"

"There's a cave by the river near Nera." I knew the area near the great river well and I knew that the cavern was our nearest source of shelter. The trees of the Elwood were dense beside us on the trail, but they would only provide temporary reprieve. The storm grew colder, and the lightning and thunder warred for dominance in the sky. If we could just travel a bit further...

Jett cleared a stone and nearly threw me from her back. Liam must have felt me grip him tighter, because he brought his arm around me higher, trying to fasten us to Jett's back.

I tried not to recoil. Get to the cave, I thought. Then we could reconvene and go save Dri from her own stupidity.



After a day's travel, I should have heard the rushing water of Nera. But we had left the cover of the trees behind, and the storm had ripped open a flood from the sky. Lightning crackled, and the earth was cast in a watery, grey haze. Jett threw mud as she ran, not stopping, not slowing down. Her back and sides were slick with rain and sweat.

Just a little farther.

She let out a snort that I could feel in the muscles of her neck practically in response to my thoughts.

We finally crested a hill, and I could see that the normally night-black water of the river was full of white, frothing rapids.

The cave was on the other side.

I yanked back on Jett's mane, but she was already slowing, and her hooves dug into the mud-caked ground.

"Where's the cave?" Liam pulled away and slid down, offering me his hand. I brushed it away and slid, the mud sucked my boots into the earth. My legs and ass felt numb, yet somehow still sore, from the long ride.

"Behind the falls." I pointed to the jagged rocks at the other side of the river and the water plummeting over them feeding into the river. It looked as if the mountain itself wept for my failures. I bit down on the inside of my cheek hard enough to draw blood. "There's a passage."

It was narrow and formed of rocks that would be soaked and slippery from the rain. But there was no need to tell him that, he would see it for himself.

We scanned the area and the edge of the river as the rain assaulted us. Falling so hard, I was sure it would leave welts.

As we neared the bank of Nera, Jett stopped moving, digging her hooves into the sopping ground. I patted her face. "We've done this a thousand times over, girl. Would you rather stay in the storm?"

She gave me an indignant huff as if she would most certainly rather risk getting struck by lightning.

Liam looked between me and the water crashing on the rocks warily. "I'm with the horse."

My hands balled into tight, determined fists at my side. "If you both are going to let some rocks scare you, that's fine. But I'm going."

Not the rousing speech I thought it was, neither moved. Determined to prove them both wrong, I turned on my heel.

Crouching to level my center gravity, I stepped out onto the rocks. My boot slid, I put my palms on the stones, worn smooth from ages of water beating against them. The rock was cold, and my fingers went numb searching for a handhold.

Twenty feet, I had to make it twenty feet. Thunder and lightning crashed overhead.

Fifteen. The guzzling water slammed up and into my ribs, pinning me to the rocks. I gasped out a breath, the water washed away and I dragged myself back to my knees, crawling onward. Nine.

Purple and white light flashed, blinding me as a boom reverberated in my ears. I lost track of my hands, shoulders, and then my head under the bubbling water. My vision fogged as the water-filled my eyes. I splashed and battered the water around me.

I coughed as the black water filled my mouth and nose, but a gulp went into my lungs. I kicked my feet down, trying to find the bottom, a rock, anything to drive my head to the surface. My mouth opened in a scream. So *stupid*, I thought as more water rushed into my mouth and I let out another cough. My body felt weighted, as if the stones I had been searching for were in fact, tethered to my feet. My lungs burned and my vision began to spot. Flashes of white and black danced before my shutting eyes.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

My eyes fluttered open, still bleary from water leaving a film over them. Had I drowned? Was I dead? I should probably have been alarmed, but I was exhausted. My body wrecked, after being slammed into the rocks. Did you feel pain when you were dead? That seemed punishable. I could still hear the rapids rushing and the storm as if it mocked me.

"Drink," Liam's voice was gruff as he pressed a canteen to my lips. The liquid was sweet—too sweet and it burned my raw throat. I choked some down but most of it pooled out of my mouth.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness and I realized the sound of water was from the back half of the falls. "How did we..."

I could hear him smile. "I convinced the horse to help."

What?

Jett let out a spiteful snuff somewhere to the side of me, her dark coat blending in with the shadows as if to say it was the last time.

Why would he go through all the trouble?

"We're even." There was no emotion in his voice at that time.

Ah.

I didn't respond, the edges of my vision swam as I began to feel my fingers and my toes. Heat seeped into my soggy limbs from somewhere to the side of me. He must have started a fire. Smart. I was warm. So deliciously warm, even in my soaked clothes.

The sounds of rustling paper, fabric, and chewing filled the space, beyond the sound of crackling wood. It was all loud—too loud being that close to the rapids and the rumbling storm that brewed behind the booming of the falls.

Lightning struck as I rose, and it illuminated the scene in front of me. Liam eating berries, pawing through my things with reddish, purple-stained hands.

"What is all this stuff?" He ran his fingers along with the front cover of a leather bound journal.

Mine, I wanted to say. The things I started storing thereafter...after she died. But I couldn't find the words. When I discovered the place, I had started fantasizing about running away. As far away as the river ran. Doing what my mother had always dreamed of. I met Baltazar a year later, and I made no move to leave. Other than placing my things there bits at a time. When I joined the ring, it only became a good place to regroup, to stash things, and to take a breather after a mission. No one knew about it. Except for Jett, who often accompanied me on my travels. And now Liam...

But I couldn't speak, my mouth felt dry. I looked at the purple-stained canteen sitting in his lap. Then to the berries, he was plopping in his mouth.

My eyes went wide. "Blister berries."

He didn't seem to notice me talking.

My throat was numb, and there was a sugary taste coating my tongue. "Is that what you poured in my mouth?"

"Yea. You're welcome by the way." He smiled as he flipped a page in my journal. I couldn't think of that though.

"Shit." I had two water skins in the cave. One I kept religiously clean, and the other I purposely marked with berry stains.

Blister berries were a powerful antiseptic. Good to have on hand—especially crushed into water, to dilute them—for cuts or gashes. But they were also a delirium-inducing toxin when ingested.

"How much have you eaten?" My voice was shrill.

The idiot had poisoned us both.

He grabbed another berry. "No need to be greedy. There's plenty more."

"Blister berries," I said again, speaking slowly. It felt like my tongue may get stuck to the roof of my mouth as I reached to smack his hand. The berry rolled across the stone and into the fire. "Poison."

The berry popped, and the flames hissed, turning white, then settled.

"Who..." He let out a chuckle like I told the funniest joke he had ever heard. "Who keeps poison just *lying* around?" The fit of laughter overcame him.

The hallucinations would start soon. A giggle bubbled from my lips at the thought, and I covered my mouth, trying to push it back down.

"What's so funny?" His eyes narrowed and he cleared his throat. A look that reminded me of Baltazar.

Baltazar. My mentor. My friend. My...more? But he had gone and ruined it. Everything always got ruined. My skin felt hot all over, too hot. The sheer ridiculousness of it sent me into another bout of hilarity.

"*You're Baltazar's brother,*" I whispered as if it were a secret he didn't know.

Liam's eyes went wide, and his face paled as he crawled backward away from me, scattering a pile of berries...that reminded me of something. Something important that tugged at my memory.

Why were berries so important? They did look delicious.

"He'll kill her." Liam groaned, his fingers tugging at his hair. "I'm sorry."

What a strange thing to say...

I stood, but my legs wobbled. And I barely caught myself before my face hit the ground. My hands were sticky from berries that squished beneath my hands. Their purple juices coated and stained my fingers and my palms.

"Blister berries," I remembered, but I hadn't had as much as him. Who knew how much the glutton had eaten? The hungry little piggy. Giggles filled my head. Wilboar. How had Arius not found that hilarious? I coached myself to stand even as the cave walls seemed to lengthen, then sucked inward. The mountain was breathing.

We had been eaten by a mountain while the sky pissed around us. The anatomy of the world was too funny. It was going to kill us all.

My head shook. Left. Right. Left again. I could do it—beat the berries.

Blister berry thorns. The antidote was in the stems that nurtured the berries. Where were they? I always had some there. But he rummaged through my things. I looked at the scattered sea of trinkets and items sprawled around him.

Liam let out a low, keening wail, and slammed his head against the stone. I would save him from his own idiocy and then I would kick his ass for going through my stuff. He said we were even. Not a chance.

The stone beneath my feet disappeared, and I was falling. It took me a moment to realize Liam had barreled into me. My right side was in agony

where his shoulder had connected. A giant burst of stars exploded in my vision. The cave contracted. He was pushing his weight down on me.

"Is this what you wanted, Brother?" His nostrils flared with his heavy breaths. The overly fragrant smell of the berries threatened to turn my stomach. That close, I could see his lips were stained. He leaned in toward me and gripped my chin and neck in his hand tilting it up, so I was looking above him.

Liam's eyes were wild, the beast in him bursting free of his skin and I ran my fingers through his hair. Even damp, it felt luxurious. I would give anything for him to never stop touching me.

He groaned and I felt his body stiffen against me, the hard ridges of him pressing against my soft skin like there were no clothes between us. His face lowered against my neck, and he inhaled.

"You found me." His whispered words ripped me from the toxin-induced trance.

"Get off of me." I ground out. "Liam, I'm trying to help you."

"Help me?" He let out a humorless laugh and brought his lips to my ear. His words were barely a breath. "You're *destroying* me."

Enough of that. I brought my knee up and slammed it into his groin. He wailed and rolled off me, gripping himself.

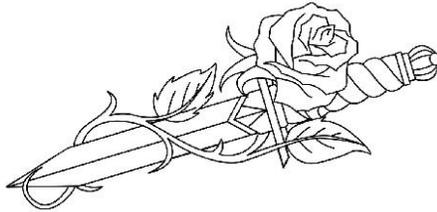
My vision tunneled, and the shadows lengthened into reaching, grabbing claws. Focus. I needed to find the satchel I kept my herbs in.

There. Amongst my extra clothes. I rummaged through the bag. Spilling its contents onto the floor and pushing around vials and clothing, until I found the leather bag. I undid the string with one hand and grabbed my dagger with the other. I used the flat end of the blade to crush the thorns into a fine powder. Scooping a bit up and dumping it into my throat. I

gagged and choked as it coated my tongue. The powder thickened into a paste that I struggled to swallow.

I carried the leather carefully to where Liam lay, screaming. Seeing some horror his brain had concocted. I gripped his chin and funneled the leather, pouring the dust into his mouth.

He coughed and lashed out, but finally went still and silent.



Letting him sleep off the effects, I went to righting my things. Making a mental note to gather more blister berry thorns, I carefully tucked the berries into the discarded scrap of leather. I bagged them with my herbs. They would spoil, so I would have to get more of those too.

I was gathering my notes and the pages that had fallen out of my journal when I saw a browned bit of aged vine tied into a circlet, just large enough to fit my finger. I leaned forward to pick it up, hoping he hadn't seen it lying pressed into the center of my journal. At some point, I forgot I had put it there.

It must have been the aftereffects that dragged me into the memory, but more likely it was aided by my being there with him.

It was my birthday, one I shared with my mother. Each year my father threw his silly little party to commemorate the event. That night, there would-be suitors. A long line of them that my father hand-selected for me to wed one day. Even though the most pressure was on Oliver, as the newly

crowned heir. My father expected each of his children to take suitors that would benefit the crown.

I didn't want to go. But my mother had encouraged me, a rare moment of lucidity for her when she wove my hair into braids atop my head. I looked in the mirror. Seeing the tiara and the dress woven with gems, and the finest fabrics my father's gold could buy, I had told her I looked ridiculous.

"Careful, Princess, it would only take one experienced jewel thief and you'd be lost forever." I hadn't seen him come in, but Liam was leaning against the frame of the door in a suit, his lips parted in a smile.

"Go now, Janie." My mother shooed me out the door. "I'll catch up."

"Do we have to go?" I whispered as soon as I heard the door click closed.

"Let's go for a walk first." He always knew, of course, how much I wanted to be away from my siblings. I returned his smile, and we walked out into the gardens.

The moon was full, casting his eyes a molten silver. I found myself staring at him, instead of the flowers. Drinking in the beauty of him, knowing that the gardens couldn't compare. "The only thing I like about this place."

He ran his finger down a night darkened stem of a rose. "Hmm?"

Though I knew how he felt about me, my stomach always twisted when we spoke about it aloud. "You."

"Lunasa is like this rose." I saw a flash of his teeth while he used both hands now to pluck the thorns from the stem. "Ready to draw blood if you don't remove the thorns."

It made me think of my father, and how even a day of the year meant to be special for my mother and I, had become a ruse to keep power.

Carefully, he plucked the stem, pulling the flower free from the bush. He pushed my hair back behind my ear, stroking my face with his thumb before tucking the rose there.

Liam laced his fingers in mine, pulling me deeper into the gardens. Far away enough that I could no longer hear the music from the ball. Then further still, before he stopped in front of a trellis of jasmine and broke off a bit of vine. "It's not a true ring. But it's a promise of one."

He grabbed my hand and pulled me into his chest. My stomach sank even as my heart swelled. He knew about the suitors then. And knew he wouldn't be an option if my father had a say. His brother had controlled their funds since they had arrived.

My hands wove in his hair. "I don't care for jewelry."

"I will always find my way back to you." He had kissed me then like the world was ending like it was the last time. As if I was his final hope for air.

But when we untangled and made our way to the ball, the music ended and the revelry stopped. My father's face had grown pale, weary. Whispers wove through the gathered crowd.

I thought perhaps there were brambles in my hair, or dirt on my gown from rolling in the gardens. How worried had I been, but my fears proved insufficient.

While I was avoiding the party and my family; my mother had thrown herself from the balcony and Liam vanished and took his love with him.

He left me alone, at the time when I needed him most. When I thought I would never live through my grief, my anger. And the next time I saw him, he had changed. Became one of my tormentors. Laughing just as heartily with my siblings when I failed.

Then Baltazar had found me, and he taught me how to control my magic, harvest my grief, my humanity. How to pluck the thorns from roses, but more importantly how to become a thorn.

A log snapped in the fire, startling me back to the present. My eyes blurred. I rolled the ring carefully between my fingers. Felt the ridges that had once housed flowers and leaves.

Sitting there, staring into the fire until tangerine bursts danced around the edges of my vision, I let the tears fall. Possibly the first time I had truly cried since that night.

"I can't believe you kept that." I don't know how long he stood there watching me. But his words stoked a rage I thought long cooled.

My fingers curled into fists, and I stood, pushing past him. I didn't want to look at his face, to see the taunting smirk that would have followed his words.

Once the storm let up, we could go our own ways. I didn't need his help to protect Driata, I could do it alone.

"Jane, I—"

"Don't." I walked to the fire, wishing I could burn away the images of that night—wishing they could be forgotten. That the years we spent together before that could be erased. "We've both changed."

I tossed the last piece of that night into the flames.



I had grown impatient with the storm—after it raged through the night and thunder echoed on the stone walls—to the point of pacing. Our firewood was running low and any that I would be able to scavenge was likely to be sodden and useless. Even when on a mission, there were things to do. To plan. To see.

Liam sat by the fire, silently watching me as I walked back and forth, flipping my dagger in my hand. "You're making my head hurt."

He hadn't responded to what I said or done. He only sat there, first gazing into the fire, then observing me. I ground my teeth together. "Then stop staring at me."

"I can't," his words hung in the air. A confession or just boredom? I wondered until he cleared his throat. "Don't you have anything to eat here, that won't drive me mad?"

"Do you see any food?" I gestured around the cave. "I haven't eaten either."

He looked around, but his eyes landed on the mare, and he gave me a toothy grin. "The horse."

My lip curled away from my teeth. "I'd rather eat you."

Jett let out a derisive snort.

"My," He made a noise low in his throat and his eyes darkened. "What a *wicked* mouth you have."

My heart sped up, surely the boredom was getting to us both. I was too hot, stifled in my still damp clothes. "You should have let me sink to the bottom of that river."

He huffed a breath. "Perhaps."

Turning away from the fire, I walked to my satchels. I pulled out dry clothes and warmer, waterproof boots.

I moved to the back of the cave when the fire's light couldn't quite reach. The dark walls were tighter back there, with less room to move around. I kicked off my sodden shoes.

Shuffling sounded behind. I twisted to see that Liam still hadn't risen but turned to face me. And though it shouldn't have been possible in the darkness, he seemed to look right at me.

His eyes bore into me as I refaced the stone. I took a steadying breath and gripped the hem of my shirt, trying not to notice my hands shaking. I pulled it off and tossed it on top of my boots, tugging on a long-sleeved tunic. I set to work on quickly shucking off my pants to replace them with fresh ones. I stepped into my new boots and turned.

Liam made a show of absently prodding the embers with an errant stick, but his knuckles had gone white. "No clothes for me?"

Shrugging, I placed the last of our logs on the embers.

His hand flexed, and I was sure the stick would snap. "Wouldn't you love for me to try getting into your pants?"

"You're more than welcome to strip and string your clothes over the fire." His eyes lit with the challenge. I used all that I learned from Baltazar to keep the emotion from my voice. Uncaring, unfeeling, unbothered. "It won't affect me at all."

He jumped up, and for one panicked moment, I thought he may have taken me up on the offer. But he paced to the break in the falls. "I'm going to look for food. Any requests?"

"Anything but berries." I grimaced, still tasting the remnants of the bitter thorns. "And don't eat anything until I tell you it won't kill you."

He ducked into the rain and Jett's hooves clicked against the ground, and she let out a snort before following him out.

Traitor.

"I wasn't the one that threatened to eat you," I shouted after her.

Waiting until the storm devoured the sounds of boots and hooves, I allowed myself one shaking jagged breath. Something twisted inside me. We hadn't spent that much time alone since that night. My heart ached even as I tried to shove the memories away.

That would not break me. I couldn't allow it. Driata was out there, on her way to certain death. I could only hope the storm had stalled their travels as well. Crossing Nera was something that a large group wouldn't be able to risk. They would have to go in smaller groups near the mountain where the river thinned.

Footsteps and splashing water had me stuffing down my emotions. "That was fast, are you sure you're cut out for—" My voice caught in my throat as I looked at the fall.

It was Lux, tapping the back of an axe against his palm.

"A bit obvious for you, isn't it?" I motioned toward the axe as the parting water poured over his cropped hair. It wasn't a quick or clean weapon.

"Had to blend into the woods." He shrugged his massive shoulders.

"Chop down any trees?" I was rambling...stalling.

"I was planning on chopping down Baltazar's pretty-boy brother, then...the funniest thing happened." He paused and swung the axe as if testing its weight. "Looked like the boss' favorite pet was runnin' away with the lad."

A new problem...great "No. That's not what—He's helping me."

"Helping you scratch an itch?" The axe sliced through the air again.

"No—my sister. Baltazar sent Driata over the boundary."

"Tell me something," His breaths were coming in rasps as if he ran the whole way, but I knew the look in his eyes, he was locking in on his target. "What do you think Baltazar had to say when you ran away with Pretty Boy?"

"I didn't run away with him." But I had. Temporarily.

"Then he told me to carry you back if I had to."

"Plans change." I could reason with a murderer. Sure. "I'm protecting my sister. He had to know I would do this. That's why he hadn't told me."

"His plans don't change." Lux let out a deep laugh that didn't register with his eyes. "He told me to get you there. He didn't specify the condition I leave you in."

"You call me his pet and yet it's you that barks when he says fetch." I tightened my fingers on my dagger.

Lux growled as he lunged and I scraped my boot against the embers, sending them flying toward him. He covered his eyes with his arm, and I dove for his ankles. Hoping to knock him off balance.

He stumbled but didn't fall and his arm arched down. Metal sang as the axe slammed into stone, barely missing my leg.

Pain ripped through my knees and arms as I skid across the ground and my dagger slipped from my hands. "Dammit Lux, listen to me."

"I've been doing this a long time, kid. A lot longer than you, and I've known Baltazar twice that time." Sparks flew as he dragged the blade on the floor, ambling toward me. "He always gets what he wants."

He aimed the blade at me and motioned with it to the falls. I backed up a step, further into the cavern. "What if what he wants gets her killed?"

A dry chuckle, but his pace was slowed. "And you know better than him?"

I couldn't outfight him, not like that. Maybe not ever. No, my best bet was to keep him talking. How long had he been out there, watching, waiting for one of us to leave? Was Liam alive?

"So what? You're just going to kill Baltazar's brother. Harm me? How does that play out for you?"

"The orders had nothing to do with the boy." Did that mean he hadn't hurt him? Or that he had?

My shoulders pulled inward, and I let my lower lip quiver as I slowly moved towards where my dagger had fallen. "I'm just trying to do the right thing."

His nostrils flared, and something flashed in his eyes, but it was gone. "There's no such thing."

Something hard and rounded shifted under my foot. Dagger.

Grunting, Lux brought up his axe and sliced it toward my middle. I flinched back and kicked the handle under my boot. My dagger flew up and I snatched it from the air. He swung again, gaining ground. Metal screamed

as the blade of the axe met the dagger. Pain flared down my arm and to my shoulders, but I held.

My foot lashed out and slammed into his stomach. He staggered, and his arm fell back.

His axe is much longer than the dagger, and he has far more reach, but you are smaller, lighter, faster. It was as if Baltazar was standing in the cave, behind me whispering in my ear.

I darted forward slashing at his chest and retreated bent at the knees, as he righted himself twisting the hilt in his hand.

Catching the wood just below his blade, once more I shoved my arms up, throwing back his weapon. Grunting, feeling the weight of the axe and his arms bearing down on me, I knew I couldn't win that way.

Lux must have seen something in my face because he charged with a snarl, slamming the handle of the axe against my wrist. My blade tolled like a death knell as it fell away.

He tipped his weapon down, pressing it into the base of my throat. "Try to speak one bit of magic and I'll cut first."

I relinquished one step, then two. He was too far away to reach with his arm extended. Three. Four. Cold stone bit through my tunic.

The giant man tilted his head to the cave's entrance where sun had finally begun to peer through the crashing water. He didn't speak, didn't drop the weapon as he pulled something from his pocket.

"Please. Help me get her back and I promise, I'll return."

Lux sighed, but it was the sound of a man who was relenting. He finally lowered his weapon and stepped away a few paces, "Fine. But put this on."

The light caught on links of silver. "A bracelet?"

"He said you'd like it. An apology." Lux held the thing as if it were a viper, about to strike him. Disgust curling his lip from his teeth. He wouldn't look me in the eye, not happy about delivering such a message. "A parting gift—until you meet again."

Baltazar had given me gifts before. Weapons. Potions. Always pertaining to jobs. I took it, gingerly and felt the diamonds, small but plentiful. Smoothed down to follow each curve. My chest constricted as I readied myself to nod, to tell him we had to go—the cave shook, water misted, scattering the sunlight, and a black blur filled my vision.

Jett's body slammed into the mass of Lux as her hooves scraped against stone, sending him flying into the wall. Rubble tumbled down on top of his sprawled body.

I ran to him, seeing his closed eyelids twitch, but pressed my fingers to his neck still. The slow thump of his pulse responded, even as he lay there.

Whirling on Jett I screamed, "What the hell was that?"

"Us saving your ass, *again*." Liam walked through the cave's entrance. His arrogant smile was already in place and his arms crossed over his chest.

"Saving me?" My voice bounced around the cavern. "He wasn't going to hurt me. We came to an agreement."

"An agreement?" Liam's eyes went wide, and his face filled with rage as he stomped toward me. "And what was this *agreement*? Following him back into my brother's merciless arms?"

Oh, what a card to play. Time to show him my hand. "Why are you even here?"

"Because our *master* has proven—again—he values no one." His words felt like a blow, icy water splashed over a flame.

My eyes narrowed and I ground my teeth together. "I belong to no one."

His eyebrow raised, and he gave me a mockery of a smile. "You do believe that."

"I'm here with you," I gestured around the cavern. "Despite his orders."

Liam's head shook, his curls spilled into his eyes, and he angrily brushed them away. "Not by choice."

"Everything I've done today has been my choice." I prodded his chest at each word, each syllable.

He tried to snatch the bracelet, I didn't realize I was still held from my hand but I stepped back as he spoke through gritted teeth. "I thought you didn't like jewelry."

I squared my shoulders and met his eye. "I told you, we both changed." So much for honesty.

"It seems you have." His eyes shuttered, any flicker of emotion vanished, and my insides grew cold.

"Why did you even warn me? About Driata? That was a choice you made." He was barely a step away from me, and that close I could see my own reflection in his eyes. I could hear his sharp intake of breath when I spoke. I caught him off guard. Good. Perhaps we could be honest with each other for once.

"Because he wanted me to." His words were a blow, and I knew without a doubt he wasn't lying. But why would Baltazar send her and then have Liam tell me? He had to know I would go after her.

Stuffing the bracelet in my pocket, I bit down on my cheek to ward off my tears and leaned down to grab the axe Lux had dropped while tucking my dagger away. His giant back had landed on the sheath holding his sword, so I wouldn't be able to strip him of that. I just had to get away.

Grabbing a bag, I stuffed lighter things in there, some clothes, a blanket, some herbs for potions. My eyes darted around the cave and back to Lux. The axe was probably useless, but I strapped it to my back and fastened my dagger to my thigh.

"Jane." Liam's voice choked out. I was guessing with feigned emotion. Turning to tell him to never speak to me again, my heart fell into my stomach.

Lux had the back of Liam's neck in one hand and a sword in the other. He sliced through the chain holding Liam's talisman and kicked it into the shadows.

I gripped the hilt of my dagger. I could leave them both. But then I had two liabilities. Even if Lux killed Liam—and he probably would—he would take me back to Baltazar for interrupting his orders. Lux certainly wouldn't help me after what Jett had done. Then I would be back in the castle at square one. And despite what I thought of Liam, I didn't want him to die.

"Let him go." I made a show of releasing the dagger, slowly and allowing it to slice through my palm. "And we can leave him."

"No—" Lux clenched down on the back of Liam's neck to silence him.

Lux looked torn between his current orders and the one he was sure he may get in the future. "If I let the boy go, Baltazar would be disappointed to lose one of his belongings and you know what happens when he gets disappointed." He shook his head and brought up the sword.

Liam flinched, trying to pull his neck from Lux's grasp, but still couldn't move.

Throwing up my hand, I yelled, "Ruptus."

Lux's axe wielding arm snapped—the bone bursting from the skin. He let out a roar and Liam's face turned to beat red. In anger and in pain, Lux was

choking him to death. He wouldn't have much time.

Time.

"Tempus moderato." Silence descended. Liam's head looked like it may pop. A disfigured Lux had dropped his sword. His arm stuck out to the side and drops of his blood froze, hanging in the air.

Lunging for them I grappled with Lux's fingers, trying to pry them away from Liam's neck. They wouldn't budge. He had a death grip on Liam's throat. I bent and pried and pulled.

I could leave him—*should* leave him. I glanced at his contorted hand. Broken by the sheer will and malice of his brother. My mentor. My manipulator. His, as well.

"*Think about yourself.*" It's what Baltazar was constantly instilling in me when I went on a job. "*If it comes down to it, you save yourself.*"

Fat, warm tears trailed down my face. I always knew I couldn't do it.

Lux had been there on my first few missions. Not even Baltazar had gone out in the field. I pulled my dagger free. I brought my arm up, careful of how far away I stood, and I arced down, slicing off Lux's four fingers.

My stomach lurched and I heaved up any trace of contents in my stomach. Water sprayed my face from the falls, so cold in comparison to my tears. For a moment, I thought how nice it felt as I tucked away from the blade and used a cord to string Lux's arms together behind him and kicked out the backs of his knees. He tumbled forward in slow motion.

Shit. Things were moving.

I wiped my mouth on the back of my wrist and yanked a slowly blinking Liam forward. He stood, still unseeing. Rocks scraped my hands as I pushed around for his talisman lying by that had fallen during the fight. I stuffed the wolf trinket and the chain into my pocket with the bracelet.

Pulling Liam's arm over my shoulder I half dragged him, half pushed him toward the entrance.

Lux's roar began anew, with a fresh wave of pain and rage as he realized what I had done, and my ears rang.

Liam stumbled as I strapped my bag to Jett's saddle and slapped her back end.

"Run!" I screamed, dropping his arm.

I knew it was probably disorienting, to be in a different place then when time stopped, but for his part, he tried to keep up.

The river had calmed, though I still couldn't see its bottom through the obsidian-colored surface. And I could tell by the placement of the sun that it was around midday. I made my way across the rocks without tumbling in and waited for Jett to follow.

Liam ran ahead of her taking the rocks two at a time. "Where are you going?"

"To get Dri." The fresh air was filling my lungs as I sprinted across the gleaming stones.

"You're not going back with him?" Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him tilt his head back toward the cave where Lux was undoubtedly trying to gather his severed bits.

I huffed a breath and shifted on my feet as I waited for Jett to clear the river, contemplating leaving them both. "That was the plan until you and the killer mare over there knocked him out. Then I chopped his fingers off."

"What's the plan now?" When Jett finished crossing the river, I looked at the water cascading and bubbling down the rocks. I let myself breathe deeply the scent of the damp grass. My eyes wandered to the cave, and

though I couldn't see through the fall, I could smell the smoke of the dying fire.

"No concern of yours." Hopefully, he couldn't tell that was code for I didn't know. He blocked my view of the cave, his eyebrows raised. "You're going to leave me here with Lumberjackass?"

I shrugged. *We should go our separate ways.*

"You're headed to the boundary."

I didn't speak and controlled the look of shock I felt creeping on my face.

"It's a two-day ride and you haven't eaten or slept. You shouldn't travel alone." His voice was gentle as if he were concerned with spooking me as if I would run away. I may have considered it.

My brows knitted, while I weighed my options, and he tracked that too. "I also have food. Stashed it in some trees down the river after I saw ogre-sized footprints." When he assumed somehow that Lux had been there, and came back for me.

My stomach growled in the answer just before it echoed in a roar of ire. Lux was on his way.

I ran. The humid air hit me in the face, shoving its way down into my lungs. The ground was already drying in the afternoon sun, but my boots still sunk into wet spots as we ran uphill. Liam kept pace with me, not out of breath yet which was a good sign. My thighs burned adrenaline finally giving way to exhaustion.

We stopped once we reached the tree line, taking in jagged gulps of the sticky air and near choking on it.

"There." He pointed to a small pile of things, a collection of mushrooms and berries—none of which were blister berries. I picked away the ones I

knew would kill us, cause hallucinations, or make us ill. Then I rationed it into two edible piles.

We ate greedily, not caring that the bitterness of the mushroom or the sour and sweet taste of the berries were horrid when combined. Jett grazed on the grass nearby, and I was relieved to see her eating. She needed to be content to make the trek.

He wiped his mouth on the back of his arm as I pulled out a piece of leather from my pack. I wrapped the inedible bits in the scrap and tucked it toward the bottom. The rough tie straps scraped my skin.

"Which way is it from here?" He brushed off his pants as he stood.

"Follow the river and by tomorrow we should have reached the pass." I pointed in the direction of the mountains.

He nodded. And looking back, I should have probably been suspicious of how quickly he agreed.



It was nearly nightfall when we found a place to camp. I was hopeful that Lux's injuries would slow him down in tracking us, though I had been careful to cover our tracks just in case. We made it to the edge of the Dreadwood—once known as the King's wood before the curse had killed all life there and left only a graveyard of wooden bones.

The trees were knotted and greying things, reaching toward a sun that couldn't save them, and they wouldn't provide much cover, but it was the best option we had. Jett was huffing mad that there was no grass insight, and I already had to reassure her four times since passing into the trees.

My sister's traveling party would likely stay on the road leading toward Lunasa. The Dreadwood was the only thing that lay between that path and the passage through the mountains to faery. A passage that followed the bank of the Nera River, created before the laws of my kind prohibited interaction with the fae. If that was where she, Fox, and Scoot were headed...we should have been able to find them.

Dri had no idea what she had gotten herself into. Prepping for dinner parties and getting fitted for dresses wasn't exactly a gateway into the

lifestyle. I trained for months before I was even allowed on my first mission. And it sure as fuck hadn't been with *Scout*.

Liam's voice pulled me from my worries. "—sleeping on the ground, then?"

"It seems that way doesn't it." I dropped my bag onto the ground and started rifling through it.

"Not a fan." He mumbled, kicking at the dirt as if it had offended him.

"Of?"

"The ground."

"Use magic then to—oh wait." I smiled up at him and considered giving the damned talisman back. "You lost your talisman."

His lip pulled back in a grimace. "Now I'm as simple as you."

"So simple that I saved you." That settled it. I would toss it into the river before I gave it back to him. "So simple that you magicked a woman into looking like me."

Watching him tense at my words was almost as satisfying as knowing where his talisman was while he grappled without magic. "It's very presumptuous to assume I wanted her to look anything like you."

"Are you dense?" My head tilted. Genuine curiosity trilled through me as I wondered if he really thought I was stupid.

"Why fuck someone who looks like you when I could have the real thing?"

"*Excuse me.*"

"Don't act as though you haven't thought of it." His eyes were like chips of moonlight boring into me.

I snapped the blanket out and took great care to smooth it over the dirt while my jaw worked. *Calm—stay calm he's trying to get a rise out of you.*

My shoulders relaxed and I eased open my jaw. "Thought of what?"

Childish, and obvious as it was to pretend I didn't know, I watched his cocky smile falter as he turned away.

"It was fun," I said to fill the silence despite wishing I could yank the words from the open air. "Meaningless."

"It can mean nothing to you?" There was a flatness to his voice. But the question itself was redundant. It had to be. He had been with other women too, he had to know that it could mean nothing—just a way to fill a need and sate desire.

"Just like with everyone else I've been with since you—" I did force myself to shut up then. I had been in his company for too long. It was making me antsy.

In the growing quiet, I looked out at the Nera and noted that the waters had calmed after the storm. They reflected the moonlight and the stars beginning to twinkle in the darkening sky. I had to do something and get away from him for a while.

"Can you make a fire?" I asked unstrapping my dagger and the axe and tossing them into my bag. "It will only get colder and darker."

"And what will you be doing while you force me into manual labor?" He turned back to me then, with his arms crossed over his chest.

"I'll be bathing upstream." I nodded toward the river bank and stood.

"It's nighttime." He stepped in my way. "You shouldn't go into the river this late."

Edging around him, I wondered how hard it could be to evade him and my stirring feelings while we were alone. Then I noted the pinch in his brow, but that couldn't be...concern. Not for me. "Why are you stalling?"

Liam faltered back a step. "Why would you think that?"

My eyes narrowed on him. "Do you not know how to start a fire?"

"Of course, I do." His smirk didn't have its typical bite, though. I shrugged and brushed past him, continuing far enough up the river that the shadows hid me stripping off my clothes.

The water was chilled and nipped at my skin as I sunk down into it. All the tension in my body began to ebb away with the muck, grime, and sweat that had coated my body on our journey. I shoved off any gnawing thoughts of Dri, reminding myself that we should be caught up to them by the next afternoon. Instead, I focused on the feeling of the water lapping up over my breasts, the gentle pull of the current, and the rocky floor below my planted feet.

Tilting my head back to wet my hair, I looked up at the gleaming full moon in the now fully night sky. A blue and white ring surrounded it making it look ethereal, which I supposed in many ways it was. The stories crept in of a time when even my mother believed in the magic contained within the moon and the sun. She had told me of mortals who worshiped their greatness with art and celebrations.

I dunked deeper, willing my eyes to stay open even as my vision of the sky blurred and seemed to smear like a water painting. I stayed there, underwater until my lungs ached and burned, before bursting back out only to find Liam too close and staring at me.

"By the gods. What are you doing here?" I rushed to cover my exposed breasts from the cold air and Liam as my nipples hardened. I crouched down in the water and looked up at him.

There was an expression on his face I couldn't read when he didn't answer right away. But then, "I can't start a fire."

"That's why you're creeping up on me naked?" I had meant while *I was naked*, but there were rivulets of water dripping down his hard, shirtless chest and I wondered what the dark water surrounding him was hiding. Did he take his clothes off to come out there and retrieve me?

"No." His voice was rough, and he wasn't looking at my face...but beneath it. I craned my neck up to look at him in the low light, I recognized the look there. It was the same greedy look he had given me when I caught him with the servant. Hunger. Lust. Excitement.

Gods smite me for my stupidity, but I liked it. I bit down on my lip as I rose a fraction from the water and met the air. The chill sank into my bones immediately and with no remorse. gooseflesh coated my skin and his eyes tracked it all.

"I was thinking about what you said." Liam's voice was gruff and timid—unexpected. He may as well have reached out and touched me because his words were a caress all over. "It doesn't have to mean anything."

If I had sense, I would've been offended—but instead, my legs stretched more and my upper half came out of the water, fully revealing my chest to him. I knew in the back of my mind I was lying to myself, even as my head signaled an agreement.

"I barely like your company." I agreed, quickly...too quickly.

"And watching over you is tedious." He added. The smirk tugging at his lips told me he knew he was about to have his request granted.

"Not nearly as annoying as a man who can't function without mag—" His fingers tangled in my hair tugging hard enough to tilt my chin toward him and I hissed in pain. He devoured the sound as his soft lips—too soft in comparison to the crushing kiss—pressed against mine.

His tongue teased my mouth open and I gave in without pause while my nails raked over the ridges in his shoulders. Moaning into his mouth as his tongue met mine, I marveled at how our mingling breaths warmed my cheeks. Fuck's sake he was a good kisser.

My toes curled against the sandy river bed, and I was filled with the terrible thought that it definitely meant...something.

The rough pads of his fingers pinched around my nipple as he broke our kiss, and his lips and teeth explored the flesh of my neck.

His hand slipped down, following the curves of my stomach, then lower still, stroking my inner thighs and caressing it open until he reached their apex. His thumb swirled around the most sensitive part of me once, twice, and a third time before he picked up his pace.

I gripped his neck as my body tensed, and he brought me close, too close, without really having done much.

He stopped, so suddenly that it felt like he'd stolen my oxygen. My breaths were jagged, huffing nonsense when I asked, "what's wrong?"

I thought my heart may explode from my body if it ended there.

Liam reached up and pulled my hand free of him. I told myself it was an insignificant lapse of judgment.

We definitely had taken things too far.

But then his hand molded over mine as he used it to cup my breast and follow the same trail he had taken. Down, down, down.

"You said you're an expert at making yourself cum." He shifted behind me, so his dick was pressed against my back. His gravelly voice sent vibrations to my ear as his breath caressed me. Our joined hands dipped between my legs. "I want to see who you scream louder for. Me or you."

"Obviously me." But there was no conviction in my words and his deep chuckle rumbling through me was proof that he heard it.

Our thumbs teased over the bundle of nerves and I gasped at the contact. He urged my fingers down until two were pressing into me with his and I bucked against the pressure.

My head kicked back and landed on his chest while I let out a breathless moan. I felt him suck in a breath behind me when I rolled my hips against our fingers and hands, grinding down on them as pleasure coiled deeper, lower and swept down the muscles in my stomach, then my legs, then finally the center of me. I pulsed around our joined fingers, biting the inside of my cheek, but a small whimper escaped.

His breath was on the swell of my cheek, hot in contrast to the night air. "When you come for me, you moan, and you cry out but don't ever think you get to be silent."

My free hand found the nape of his neck, and I was dragging him toward me, lining his body up behind mine. He dipped his head, biting and licking at my flesh.

Tension wound tighter in me until all of my nerves were strung out inside me. The cold water, his warm skin, the press of our fingers inside me—it was delectable torture.

"My only goal is to ruin you." His voice vibrated against my lips and sent chills skittering up my spine.

"Ruin me?" My question was breathless, the muscles in my body taut as I tensed with the implication.

"For other men—for future prospects. Anytime you touch yourself or have another kneel before you, I want you to hear the echoes of your moans for me." With each word, he pumped our fingers inside me and I gasped,

gritting my teeth together against the cursed building in my throat. My core pulsed around our fingers, squeezing, tightening, and stealing away with my sanity.

I tilted my chin back and up, wanting to see him, feeling confused by the fervor in his tone, but he caught my mouth with his. He nipped at my lip, and I came undone.

The walls of my wet pussy tensed and quivered while I came for him, moaning his name. He lapped up the sound like it was the best thing he had ever sampled.

Only when my body was trembling, did he break our kiss and slide our fingers out of me, using his new grip on my waist to turn me.

Moving to slide my hands around him, but he caught my fingers with his mouth. The act of him tasting me was so shocking, so sensual as he smiled that need was cinching in me again. My chest grew heavy with want, and as the pad of his tongue played with the tips of my fingers, I squeezed my legs together again.

"Delicious." Liam's groan of pleasure that followed threatened the ruination he promised, and we were colliding again.

I needed him right then. I wanted to explore every plane of his body with my mouth and teeth while he made that noise on repeat for the rest of the time.

The frigid air whipped into me when he lifted me up and pressed me against the rigid planes of his body. Legs hooked around his hips, I felt him, hard between my thighs and I ground down on the length of him, wishing he would just pump into me until I was sick of it and my body was no more than a shell.

Water dripped off of us, but he barely jostled me as he carried me to land, still not feeding my need. Groaning in frustration, I dropped my ass down so the wetness at my center coated him. His dick twitched in response as a muscle in his jaw ticked, and he tried to maintain control.

We barely made it to the blanket. He placed me on the ground and pinned me there with his hand curved around my throat. "Tell me you want me to stop."

"I—what?" My brain was foggy, but I wanted anything other than that.

He was throbbing at my entrance and his voice was barely a whisper. "If you want this to stop, it does."

"No." I was panting, trying to calm down my thumping heart. "Just don't be gentle."

If he were, I would convince myself that it was more than what it was. More than what it could be.

"That I can do," he grinned. Bumping my legs apart with his own, he slammed into me without warning down to the hilt and I gasped his name.

Dirt and rocks bit into my back when I arched into him, my breasts pressing into his chest and the raised skin there from the cold on my nipples brought me back to the edge. He lifted one of my calves over his shoulder and thrust forward harder, lifting my ass off the ground.

It was ecstasy as he dragged his hand down my neck while buried deep inside of me. His hips rushed forward again, and I brought one hand up to claw at his chest and the other down to ease some tension building lower.

Liam grumbled something that sounded like my name as his thumb and forefinger swirled and pinched at my nipple.

I met his thrusts until our heavy breaths and the sound of our bodies colliding were all I could hear. I closed my eyes—only for a second—but

his hand left my breast and was at my chin, forcing my eyes open and looking at him.

Easing my leg down, he moved his hand, so it was posted by my head, and slid himself almost all the way out of me. "I want you to feel the power you have over me."

Bobbing my head in a nod, he drove his hips forward and seated himself inside of me. His lashes lowered as he pulled back again, casting his silver eyes in shadow.

His muscles flexed as our hips slammed into each other. My body tensed as he plunged a final time and pulsed inside me, so full of him. I bit down against the corded muscle of his arm. Unable to look him in the face as I followed him into oblivion.

Liam rolled off me and folded the blanket around me while he stood. It served me right to be disappointed, I thought as he walked toward the water's edge. What did I think—he would lay there with me?

I watched his moonlit form grow smaller as he drew nearer to the water and further from me. He crouched, picking something up, and turned back to our makeshift camp with a bundle in his arms.

When he reached the edge of the blanket, he laid down my clothes next to me and I almost laughed at my own dramatic thoughts as I rushed against the cold to dress quickly. I stopped myself from thanking him, knowing the cocky bastard would assume I was talking about the orgasms he had given me.

What did strike me into utter silence was when Liam squatted and nudged me over so that he could climb under the blanket with me and tucked me into his side. The muscles in his arm flexed below my head and I thought perhaps I had forgotten to breathe.

I shuffled deeper under the fleece, pulling it over my face. Trying to ignore the woodsy scent of him and focusing only on the warmth seeping into my bones.

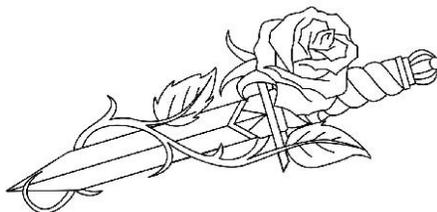
There had been a time I wouldn't have questioned an act like that from him, but that was before. And maybe it was only because the idiot didn't know how to start a fire, and I grew too tired to do it myself. But perhaps it was something more despite what we said.

Did he do that with everyone? Men I slept with since, often left right after or I would, depending on where we met up. Would Liam have done it with that woman he fucked by the apple trees?

"Why would you make her look like me?" I didn't clarify, thinking he would deny it again, or maybe even feign sleep. Though that close, I could hear his heart rate kick up.

Time stretched on and I could feel my breaths slow to an even pattern. When Liam finally answered, his voice was a muffled whisper above the blanket, and his finger traced gentle circles on my shoulder while I started to doze.

"I couldn't stop thinking about you." A deep sigh followed the murmured words. "But I thought—she'll never let it happen again. She's gone. Then I thought maybe if I fucked someone else... I would be fine. But I wasn't. Every time she looked up at me, I saw a face that wasn't yours. Brown eyes instead of green. Gods, I love your eyes."



I'm not sure when I fell asleep, but I woke to the sun casting hues of red on the inside of my eyelids and the sound of metal tinkling and fabric rustling.

Stretching, I reached for a body that wasn't beside me and jerked back from the cold spot where Liam had been. My lids flew open, the too-bright sun searing my eyes. Blinking away the spots of color clouding my gaze, I noted Liam hunched over a canvas bag while rummaging through it.

My bag.

"What are you doing?" My tone hadn't been accusatory, but he started, dropping the bag and spilling its contents on the dewy earth.

"Nothing."

Well, that was just obviously not true. "Are you looking for something?"

Had he figured out somehow, I had his talisman? The rest of the fog of sleep peeled away from my brain and I touched the pocket in my pants where I stowed it away with the bracelet.

They were there, and I grew even more confused.

"I'm looking for—" He paused. Clearly trying to think up a lie on the spot. "Food. I'm starving."

"You know there's no food left." My eyes narrowed on him. "Unless you'd like to poison us again."

"Fine." He threw up his hands and spun on me. "I'm looking for the bracelet that Baltazar gave you."

I tucked a hand into my pocket, feeling the crystals bite into my fingers before yanking the dainty thing out and holding it up. "This one?"

He dove at me, arms outstretched with a feral look in his eyes. I tried to slam my feet into his chest, but they tangled in the blanket.

Instead, one caught him on the hip, and he tumbled forward. I twisted onto my stomach and stretched my arms away as he yanked me by the hair. My neck snapped backward as his long body pressed against my back, and he whispered in my ear. "Give it to me, Jane."

My pulse jerked to a sprint, and I cursed myself for the memories washing over me of the night prior. But I forced myself to calm down. "Get off of me."

"Not until you give me the bracelet."

With his one good hand locked in my hair, he couldn't reach for it. I wrestled the clasp as I snapped it onto my wrist, and he let out a curse.

"Sonofabitch." His fingers loosened their grip, and I slammed my head back into his face.

Pain exploded in my skull as I connected with his jaw and his teeth clacked together. He leaped away from me and I rolled, watching him grip his face. His hand pulled away and blood glistened at the corner of his mouth as he glared at me.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" My voice echoed around us as I screamed.

"Abso-fucking-lutely nothing." He kicked at my fallen things, landing a blow on the handle of the axe and it flew into the river with a splash. "Let's just go."

He didn't pick my things up, or even look back as he walked off in the direction we were headed.

Jett snorted from where I had tied her up the night prior and my face flushed when I realized she was there the entire time. "Apparently we'll be walking for a bit today."



We reached the base of the mountain where the pass was, and I looked up at the serrated ridges of the mountain's peaks. They looked as though they disappeared beyond the sky.

"We're going to climb this?" Liam's eyebrows rose in question as he helped me down from Jett's back.

"Gods, no." It was massive, even if it was its lowest, natural point. Craning my neck, I looked at the dense trees and vegetation climbing up the side of it. The only part of the woods that wasn't dead, as if the mountain itself was breathing life into it.

Liam laughed. A low sound in his throat, that made my cheeks burn. "Scaling buildings made of stone, but not mountains."

"What's that?" My face scrunched. "What are you doing?"

"Compiling a list of your strengths and weaknesses." He tapped a finger against his head.

"You were there?" I thought of the night we went to Blair's ship, and how I had climbed from my balcony.

He shrugged, his face giving nothing away. "Orders."

"I fell into a mess of brambles from a three-story drop." My mouth gaped. I never thought so thoroughly about pummeling somebody. What their face would look like as it met the earth and bled. "And you were what? *Watching me?*"

He looked down at his hand, anger pulling at his features. "Whatever you think you know...you don't."

I would never understand what it was about those words...or what came over me then, even as his voice broke—but my hand lashed out. He caught it with his own, just before it connected with his cheek. Our bodies close, the air between us suffocating as we stand there, breath mingling. My head tilted up just a fraction. He let go of my wrist and it dropped to my side but neither of us moved.

Looking into his eyes—the same ones I pictured every time mine closed—I wondered if things would have been different. If my mother had told me stories about great loves instead of tragic loss. But she hadn't. And though I lived in a world of royals, I knew that princes weren't noble, and that love didn't prevail. "When?"

He started as if he forgot words existed or as if he forgot everything but that—us standing there. He hadn't even realized that the chasm had reformed between us.

"When did you heal your hand?" If my mother hadn't told me her stories, perhaps I wouldn't have noticed. Maybe I wouldn't have been waiting for him to falter, aware of his every movement. But when he grabbed my hand, it was with the one that was supposed to be broken.

And I still had his talisman.

Reaching for my dagger, I realized it was gone. My eyes left his face, long enough to see that he gripped it in his hand, his knuckles white.

Liam's voice was raw, ragged, his chest heaving. "There is nothing he hasn't planned for."

A moment of clarity washed over me. "What were your orders?" His muscles flexed as his hand twitched.

I trained my eye on his chest, trying to watch the dagger and his face as I took a step back, and he followed me. "What are you supposed to do with me now?"

"*Betray you.*" It was a whisper, and I wished, for a moment I imagined it, but he swiped with the dagger and I ducked away and kicked up into his chest, but he caught my boot.

Yanking my foot and nearly losing my balance, I pushed away from the thoughts of what we had done and of his orders to betray me. Had it all been lies?

"Jane, listen to me." He was gritting his teeth as if he were in pain, but I barely landed my blow.

My free foot slid in the dirt as I threw my fist into his face and my fist cracked open on his teeth. He dropped my leg as he clutched his mouth. "Why do you always go for the face?"

His knuckles whitened around the hilt of the dagger—*my dagger*—and rage stirred within me as I kicked at his wrist, but he leaped away.

"You think I care about damaging your face?" I didn't recognize my own voice when I shrieked it, but Liam flinched like he had hit him.

"Just hear me out." He winced again, and I noted how tense his entire body was like he was trying to remain still.

Bouncing on the balls of my feet, I tried to anticipate his next move. "Give me the dagger."

"I *can't*." His voice broke, and the jerky movements of his body reminded me of a marionette.

He lunged forward, and I tried to duck out of the way, but my ankle twisted, and he was falling on top of me.

I threw my hands up and screamed, "tempus moderó."

But rather than stopping time, I was met with the full weight of his body landing on me. The air rushed from my lungs as my body slammed against the damp earth. White spots clouded my vision as his hand pinned mine above my head.

Panic lanced through me, turning my veins to ice, and threatening to destroy everything. I managed to gasp out, "How?"

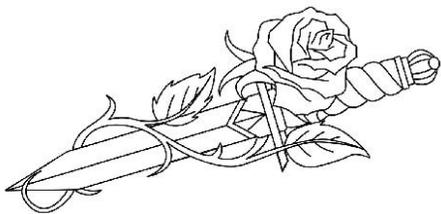
He didn't respond, but his eyes went wide like he couldn't understand what he was doing. They flicked above my head at my wrists. The bracelet was—what? A tool to sap my magic? I felt warm and yet cold, as my vital fluids poured out from my chest and made way beneath me, taking with it my consciousness.

Liam looked down, and his face looked strained. His eyes slammed shut and he backed off me. I heard a soft thunk as something fell to the ground. "No—*fuck*. No!"

"Why?" I wasn't sure if I spoke the word, or if it was just reverberating in my skull—clanging like the clapper of a bell.

"I never wanted this." His voice was fading, distant and the incessant white spots had vanished before my vision darkened.

My mind, like a message in a bottle, drifted out to sea.



Colorful orbs of light cut across the sky and then flickered out before rising again. A glowing arch read *faery*. A giant, iron circle soured into the sky, billowing above red and gold tents. Banners waved on soaring flag poles and flapped in the sea breeze. Cheerful, but discordant music of differing tunes played a hypnotic beat. The scent of butter and sweets danced in the air.

What was that place? Had I...died? My pack was still slung over my shoulders and my dagger was still missing. Liam had probably taken it when he killed me.

He *killed* me. With my own dagger.

Why?

In front of me, I could see colorful strung bulbs filled with fireflies framing crowds of misshapen creatures I didn't recognize pouring in on each side. In the distance, a great blue tower of light flung riders in screeching circles, laughter and cheers mixed with music to create a symphony of confusion.

We had been to a faire once—though it was many years ago. It was a long trip out to the isles surrounding Weylin, but my mother assured me it was worth it. She told me it was the only place in my world that reminded her of home. Though I had never seen the mortal realm, I wondered how a place without magic could conjure something so amazing.

I remembered wondering how she got passage and thinking that her descriptions of the fun we would have were a ruse. In truth, I thought she

was finally leaving my father, but he sent my siblings with us.

But we gorged ourselves on fun, nearly puking on rides made of iron and magic.

This? I wondered. *This was death? A carnival?*

A familiar voice interrupted my thoughts, causing me to start. "Jane!"

"Mom?"

Drawing my eyes from the faire, I looked to the center of the archway where my mother came walking toward me, her copper tresses spilling over her shoulders. An oversized stuffed toy filled her arms, a white horse with golden hooves. She looked...happy, sane. But I recognize her face—so like my own—even in death.

She dropped the horse and I barreled into her waiting arms.

"Mom?" I asked again, trying to calm my voice, but it broke in nerves despite my efforts. Was I in shock? The aftereffects of dying, I supposed.

And I must've been dead—to be there, with her.

She pulled away, giving me a disarming smile that lit up her face. "You made it."

Though she didn't seem too torn up about the reason for my being there.

"What is this place?" I asked, looking around at the lights. "How did I get here?"

She shook her head, not answering, and started walking toward the carnival. Leaving me to catch up.

It wasn't until we reached the orange and pink arch, that she finally slowed for me to reach her. The blinding array of lights and lanterns washed away any sign of night, forcing feigned dawn upon the world. Carts bore sigils and symbols I couldn't comprehend and bodies just as foreign. A male with the legs of a goat turned suspicious-looking meat over coals. A female

with cropped blue hair and gills sold live fish that had very human eyes. Flittering golden creatures beat their wings against the bars of a birdcage as oil popped and bubbled in a pot behind them. A large spider spun sparkling cotton candy webs around white cones.

The deeper we moved into the fair; a strange sort of numbness set in. "Mom."

Again, she didn't answer, only kept moving, her head swiveling as she walked, waving politely to passersby.

My feet felt leaden, and I stopped moving. "Mom, I feel strange."

"*Of course, you do Jane.*" She giggled, but her words sounded strange too. I shook off the feeling, wondering if I would ever get as comfortable there as she obviously had.

"Let's stop here." She clapped her hands together. "I want you to play a game."

"What? Why?"

"For fun, don't you love fun?"

"I—" I didn't know what to say. I wanted nothing more than to see her again, and there she was...more vibrant than she was when she was alive.

"Humor me." She turned to the game in front of her. There was a row of bowls filled with water, each a different size and shape, sitting atop a green table.

"Step on up, folks!" One of the carnies with a braided yellow beard hollered at a young man passing by. He juggled four white balls that dangled in the air just a second too long before falling back to his hands. "Toss the ball into the fishbowl and get one night with a mermaid!" He threw a ball into the collection of fishbowls where it landed with a plunk. "This is a no-brainer, folks. It's as easy as my mermaid is on the eyes!"

"Not this one." She shook her head and skipped ahead.

"Pop, pop, pop!" Another worker with fuchsia hair down to her ankles sang as we walked by. "Three darts, unlimited potential. Pop three balloons: win your very own Sefar, a true replica!"

She stopped and turned to me with a wicked smirk. "Play this."

Of course, she chose that one. I sighed and turned toward the booth.

That close, the female carnie looked haggard, with greying hair knotted with vines, a necklace of finger bones hanging around her neck. Brightly colored balloons were pinned to the wall behind her, with splashes of what I hoped was red paint splattered where balloons had once been.

"Ah. Back for more?" Her eye twitched as she bared her snaggletooth grin.

"Quiet, witch. I'm not playing your rigged game. She is." She nodded to me as the carnie held out three darts. I feel her disdain for the carnie rolling off her. Perhaps she lost the game before. But more likely, even dead my mother had no love for witches.

I narrowed my eyes at her, thinking about how she had said the game was rigged. "If I'm sure to lose, why would I play?"

"That's the point of the game."

"To lose?"

"To *play*." My mother nodded her head at the wall of balloons. I shook mine in response.

"Here, dearie. Best of luck." The witch dropped the three darts on the table in front of me and motioned that I should back up to the line on the ground. I looked at my mother and tried not to roll my eyes.

I snatched up the darts and rolled the cool metal against my fingers, feeling their weight and balance. They were much lighter than the throwing

knives I had practiced with Lux and even more so than my dagger. I stood at the line and lifted my eyes to the balloons, trying to tune out the racket of the faire. I had never done target practice under that much duress. All the people and lights and sounds were distracting. The most annoying thing at practice had been Lux's banter.

I flung one of the darts at the wall.

It bounced off a balloon rather than puncturing it, then plopped onto the ground behind the witch, who let out a cackle. "Two more chances. You won't win the sword, but perhaps I can find the little girl a stuffed toy."

I kicked the grass with my boot and jabbed my thumb into the tip of the dart. It was dull. No wonder it had bounced off the balloon. I had to practically stab myself to feel even the slightest prick.

Strength then, as well as technique.

I aimed and lunged again, throwing my arm forward and feeling the metal flick out of my fingers where it landed in a balloon with a satisfying bang, splashing red liquid all over the wall and ground.

The witch let out a whine as I let the third dart go and popped the purple balloon right above the last.

My mother sucked in a breath. "Impressive."

I realized then that she died before I learned how to carry a weapon. "You should see what I can do with a blade."

The witch sighed and handed me a stuffed green pig the size of my palm.

Handing it to my mother, I offered her a small smile. Thinking of how much she missed, and how much I missed her.

"Let's go." She led me deeper into the carnival and I heard rides, big, metal and wooden contraptions, zooming and clacking along tracks.

Screams and laughter chorused with the sounds of carnies and vendors trying to convince people to play their games and buy their wares. Running children chased each other around with glowing wands and swords that played a familiar song. A man carried a rose, and a bucket of spilling popcorn as a woman near him ogled a giant teddy bear. A grandmother sat drawing at a picnic table, as two little girls rushed past with their funnel cakes, giggling about the nice centaur running the Ferris wheel.

"Lift it, toss it, swish it in the net! Make a basket, win a prize!" A carnie's voice buzzed from a stretch of games piled on top of each other between two iron rides. The screech of metal whirred behind him as a cart shaped like a dragon roared to a stop behind the booth and a chorus of laughter ensued.

A girl stumbled out of the exit, her face a pale shade of green as she emptied the contents of her stomach, not quite making it to the trash can in time. A group of friends looked on in excitement as they neared the front of the line, shoving each other and laughing.

Assholes.

I turned away and looked at the parents cheering on their children as they rode the blue and white-dyed horses around a ribbon-laden pole. Sitting side-saddle, on a pale pink mare was a hunched little man, with thinning hair and giant painted lips spreading to his ears. His face paint ran in sweaty lines down his face, and he held a deflated heart balloon with yellow string. We locked eyes, just before the horse rounded the pole and took him away.

"Close call, y'all!" Another carnie barked. "He went for the win but ended up whining."

My mother stopped so quickly, I nearly ran into her. "She'd like to play for the biggest prize."

The carnie had blue eyes as clear as a morning sky, framed by a wrinkled and spotted face. "If the pretty girl wins, she can pick from any prize I have." He gestured to the side of the booth, where prizes lined the wall.

A rose stood in a glass jar, lit by a light of its own, glowing a lilac color. Polished metal weapons and shields, stuffed animals, jars of liquids, and herbs. There was much to choose from, and nicer prizes than I saw anywhere else.

Picking up the orange ball, I bounced it between my hands and the ground. It was firm and returned to my hands easily. I hadn't played the game before—had never even watched others play, but it was throwing things. How much harder could it be than weapons?

I placed my hands on each side of the ball, crouched, feeling my leg and arm muscles tense. Narrowing my eyes on the net, I imagined the lines of travel, the arc that a knife would make as it flipped and cut into its target. Then I threw it, visualizing it sinking into the waiting net.

Instead, it bounced off the metal rim and slammed into the tarp underneath with a flop.

The worker let out a snicker and waved. "You should see your face. Better luck next time, kid."

I held out my hands in anticipation of him placing another ball in them, but my mom shook her head.

"There were three chances with the darts." My head swiveled between the still laughing carnie and her.

"Sometimes you only get one chance," the carnie said. "And sometimes you *lose*."

His words gave me pause and I stared blankly at him.

"You blew it!" yelled the carnie. "Now, move along before you scare away my next customers." A group of teenagers pushed past me, snatching the ball from the carnie's hands, and sinking it in the net as I watched on furiously.

My mother grabbed my arm to lead me away, but I wrenched it from her grasp. "This is stupid."

"We have more to see," she countered, once again walking away.

I wanted to stand firm, but even at that distance, I longed to be nearer. I had never seen her that content—so peaceful and so full of laughter. She stopped short in front of a building that took the shape of an oversized painted face, with a rolling tongue bent into stairs that led into the dark abyss of its mouth. Without a word, she bounded up the stairs.

Sighing, I followed her.

Inside I was greeted by a hundred versions of myself, all looking confused. Their brows pulled down in the middle, and their foreheads wrinkled. But then one turned angry, another sad, another giggled in excitement, and so on as their expressions morphed in each reflection. Laughter, my own laughter but a hundred versions of it, rang in my ears, and then swelled, met with a screech of rage, a wail of horror that mixed with the hundred laughs.

What was that? Had I gone mad? Where was my mother? I wondered as I plugged my ears against the roar of my own voices echoing in the small space.

I looked behind me for the exit, but it was gone, its place filled by yet another mirror, that one blank, reflecting only an empty place where I stood. I reached out to touch it, to make sure it was truly there, feeling the cool hard surface.

So forward then— I thought, dragging my hands across the mirrors trying to feel a path through the glass maze since my eyes were deceived by the images laughing and screaming back at me.

"Nothing is ever as it seems." My mother's muffled voice came from behind me, and I whirled around to find her standing alongside my reflection—one of them—a version of me that squatted down to the floor and lifted the panel of glass to reveal my mother and only her. My image stayed in the glass as it rose.

"What the hell is this place?" I breathed, as I crossed the threshold. I turned back and saw only clear glass at a series of angles, no reflections of myself or anyone else.

"The Hall of Probability. Everything and nothing that could be."

"Well, what does *that* mean?" My voice raised a pitch, filling the small, dark space much like my other selves had filled the mirrored room. "Those crazy versions are what I could be?"

"I suppose it's you who decides what you'll be."

"I hate it here," I said, and my mother only let out a derisive snort as she led us deeper into the fun house, climbing stairs twisted underfoot, dodging padded battering rams that punched at us through walls. We pulled ourselves through webs of rope—how she managed so nimbly was a mystery—and plunged blindly into a spiraling slide. We were dropped at the final obstacle, a giant spinning tube that took my feet out from under me as I tried to walk out. She laughed as I crawled from the mouth.

Before I could speak, to ask my mother for a break, to see if there was a quiet place in the chaotic hell for us to talk, she ushered me onward. "Come, there's more to see."

She dragged me to a food stall where I was greeted by orange and yellow lanterns casting a weird hue on people's faces. A hand-carved sign offered cotton candy.

"You should eat something." She didn't face me, but she sounded breathless. I told myself it was the excitement finally wearing her down, but a strange feeling clawed at my insides.

"I'm not hungry," I said, thinking of the strange wares at the entrance, and any appetite I could've had for sweets vanished.

Her head tilted and still, she didn't turn. "Don't you want to stay with me, Jane?"

It was the way she said my name slowly that finally made me hear it. *Jane*. Not Janie, the pet name she had called me since birth. The same one my father called me by, not understanding how it mocked me.

"Of course, let me just get my coins." I let my bag slide off my shoulders. Slowly, as to not alert her of my alarm. She hummed, unbothered and out of tune with the music.

Squatting to the ground, I began shuffling through my bag. I didn't know if I was dead, or if it was some hallucination, but I could at least rule one thing out.

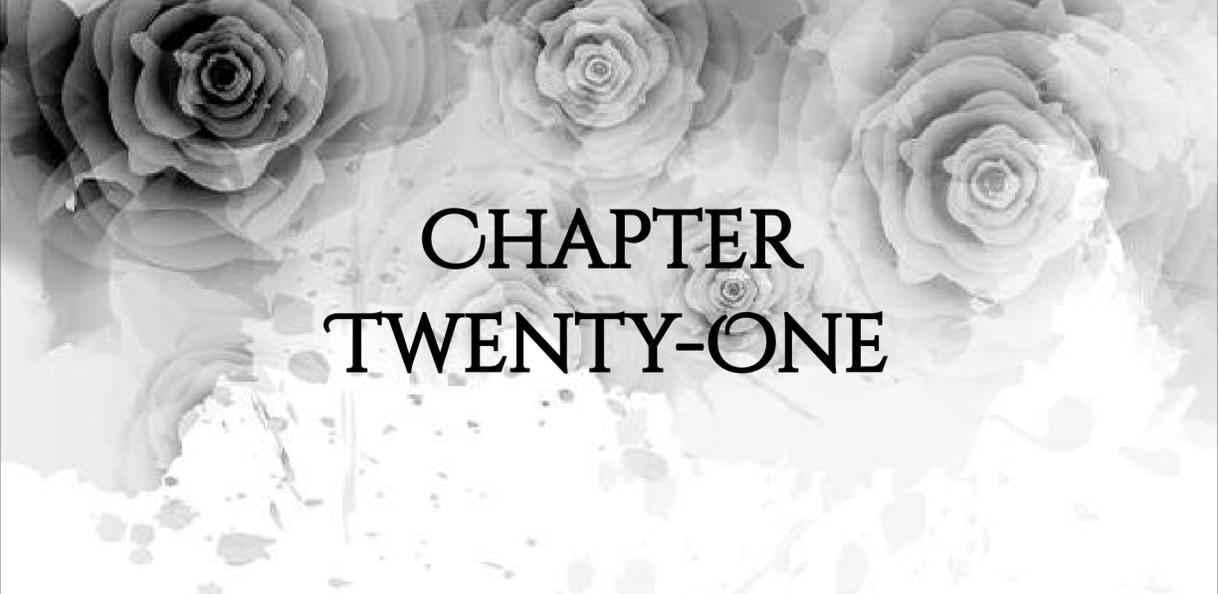
Finding what I was looking for—a vial of course salt, not gold—I heard my mother's scream as the granules spilled into my hand. She dove for me, but not fast enough.

She is not your mother, this isn't real, I warned myself as I felt the fear of losing her again and the weight that was left in my chest. I slapped my hand into my eyes.

The salt burned and cut my eyes, and the world frayed at the edges. Iridescent lines fragmented like shattering glass as the film of the glamour

shredded.

The music came to a screeching halt and the lights flickered out.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The sudden silence was like an assault on my senses. I was blinded—but seeing, deaf—but voices crept in through the darkness. I had been glamoured before, though it was at a much smaller scale, by a lesser pixie who had tried to make me drown myself. I heard three voices and figured they were probably working together with the magic. *What could they be?*

"She dreams of the queen while he dreams of her."

"The queen?"

"They're both in agony."

"The delicious taint of loss."

"Yes, yes...but the *queen*?"

"How does she know her?"

I smelled smoke, the scent of savory meat, and a tint of sweetness that nearly made me gag. I held it down—barely—and kept my eyes softly closed as if I were dreaming.

The delicious taint of loss. Behind my closed eyes, around the reddish tinge from what had to be the fire... I saw my mother's face. Smiling and

carefree as it had been, how I had wanted it to be, created from my memories of her.

For a moment, I wanted to be back there, to ask her the questions that would forever go unanswered. Even if it were my own subconscious that created those responses.

Shuffling sounded beside me, and pain cut through my chest as one of the fae lifted my arm and sniffed. It was everything I could do not to recoil. I forced my body limp, even as every nerve in my body screamed at me to run.

No, I told myself as a coarse tongue lashed out and trailed its way down my forearm toward my wrist. I needed to get my bearings. I focused on the ground. The earth below me was dry, parched as if after a drought. Lips lowered onto my wrist and parted. Hot breath scorched my clammy skin. It was all I could think about. The images and possibilities of what the creature could be raked my mind like sharpened talons.

Think. What do you hear? Serrated teeth met skin, and I almost screamed. But instead, the creature did, recoiling and throwing my arm.

"Devil's Nettle." The creature croaked.

"You said you checked her shoes."

"I did."

The sickening sound of a slap meeting skin.

A retching noise then, "Her wrist."

"The little witch has fastened a chain with it?"

"Take it off then, I'm famished."

Hags. They had to be Hags. Fae that lived in the waters below the boundary and...feasted on witches that ventured into the wood. First their emotions, then their bodies. My father used to have hunting parties that

went out searching for them, thinning them out until his curse fully took hold, and he was barely strong enough to wander the castle.

"There's no clasp."

There had been a fastener when I put it on...maybe they didn't see it. *Perhaps they would leave me be.*

"Don't be shy then, break it. I can't say she'll miss it."

A yank at my wrist as the metal bit into my skin but didn't give way. I couldn't take much more of it. *Think.* I just needed to think—

"Cut off her hand."

"That should do it."

I shot up and my forehead slammed into the wrinkled face of one of the fae. She went sprawling and her companions shrieked as blackness filled my eyes, then vanished. My chest ached, but no longer from loss. A stabbing, pain right above my heart. Cold night air nipped at exposed skin, where a moss-filled poultice was packed into the hole in my chest. The sweet smell...blister berries.

Had they healed me just to eat me? I sprung to my feet, the ground below me unsteady.

The Hag nearest me lunged, her nails scraping my arm. But I was faster. I rammed my shoulder into her middle, shoving her into the flames they were probably planning to cook with.

I scrambled back as her body puffed into vapor, leaving nothing but the echo of her screams. That was the reason they glamoured their prey, the same reason they got their name. Their haggard, waterlogged bodies were weak.

"Tell me, witch," The last one advanced slowly, more cautious than the others, and looked far angrier. "How is it that you've come to know the

queen?"

She had been the one so concerned with my glamour—my visions of my mother. But why was that of any consequence to her? "Why do you care so much about my mom?"

The Hag cackled, spreading gooseflesh up my neck. "The High Queen of faery is not your mother."

"Of—of course not."

"But those," she gestured to the now-black smoke rising from the fire, and to the ground near it where the other Hag lay, with a pale green fluid oozing below her head. "Were my *sisters*."

Her last word was no more than a snarl as she threw herself at me. I jumped away, but stumbled over another body, a body just far away enough from the fire that I hadn't noticed him. But as I toppled I saw his face.

Liam.

"He thinks you dead. How right he's about to be." The hag lifted a curved knife from a stump. "Though I hate to waste a perfectly good meal."

Climbing over him, I put my body between his and the Hags. "Excuse me for not knowing the proper etiquette for being eaten."

"Can you hear it too—him screaming your name?" Her eyes flicked to him as her tongue dashed out to taste her lips. "The delectable torment of a broken heart."

"I never wanted this." His words echoed in my mind.

"Broken heart?" I let out a dry laugh and bent my knees readying myself for her attack. *"He tried to kill me."*

"Ah. But wouldn't you like to know why?" Nimbler than her sisters, she danced around me and to my side, where she slashed out with her knife and claws.

I jerked away, gasping as the poultice shifted. Blood dripped down onto my stomach, seeping through what was left of my shirt.

Feinting to her right, I kicked my boot out, and her wrist made a popping sound as it connected. Her blade skittered into the dead bushes behind her. Her screech of pain and rage echoed in the empty sky around us as she lunged. Sharp teeth and nails like talons clamped down on my arm. I slammed my fist into the side of her head, and I felt the wound in my chest split open more.

A scream rang out as another body lunged into the fray. Fiery red locks blew back into my face as the attacker took down the Hag and crushed their body before stabbing an arrow through the raggedy bitch's head.

My breaths were heaving out of me—feeling like lead weights had taken residence in my chest. I looked to the woman who had saved me. She was dressed in black leathers that were coated in muck and leaves. She wiped the tip of her arrow off on her pants and tucked it into the quiver sticking out over her shoulder. Her face was covered by a mask that she began tugging off.

The bushes behind me rattled and a garbled curse followed as I turned to see a poorly bandaged Lux breaking through the foliage with Jett while he yelled. "I told you to fucking wait."

"That thing was going to kill her while you were dawdling." The woman's voice changed as she released her face from the cover and—

"Dri?" I narrowed my eyes, as if her being there was another glamour, and considered grabbing the salt from my bag. "Where are Scoot and Fox?"

She sighed, and I noted how gaunt her face looked. It made her appear much older—covered in grime and not dressed in pastels. "There were

raiders near the end of the Dreadwood. Scoot disappeared. Many others were lost. Then Lux showed up."

I turned to Lux as movement caught my eye off to the side. "You helped her?"

"We made a deal." The giant of a man flicked an invisible piece of dust from his sleeve. "I'm a man of my word."

A head of dark curls popped up in the corner of my vision and I lunged at Liam as he sat up.

"You asshole." My fist cracked into his cheekbone as I snarled. A large hand caught my arm when I reared back to punch him again.

"Can't let you do that." Lux pulled me back and I slammed my head against the solid wall of his chest and more warmth dribbled down my front. A pained sound left me and Driata rushed over. "Did those things do this to you?"

"*Liam stabbed me.*" I attempted again—despite the pain—to yank out of Lux's hold, but he wrapped his leg around the front of mine.

"That's why you've gone a bit rabid?" Lux asked while he inched us away from Liam.

"I can't heal it all the way, but this should help ease some of your pain." Driata gripped her talisman and pressed her fingers into my chest, not even flinching at the blood. "You won't be in fighting shape for a while."

As she spoke, she glanced at Liam. And she was right, though I would rather just kill him. The wound was drying, and parts of my skin wove back together. But it was still open, and while the pain ebbed, it was still there.

"This is not done," I said through gritted teeth, even though he wouldn't look at me. "Just keep him away from me."

He walked further away, toward Jett and rubbed his once ruined hand down her face. But she backed away and snapped her teeth at his hands like they were a juicy apple.

Somehow that angered me more. He hadn't wanted to; those were his words. Then why? Why does it at all?

I ground my teeth together against my pressing questions for him and turned to Dri. "Who the fuck gave you a bow and arrow?"

"I've been taking archery lessons with the twins for years." She shrugged as she wiped her hand on a cloth Lux handed her from a pack. "Baltazar thought it would be the best fit."

Baltazar.

"What are you supposed to do with me now?"

"Betray you."

There was a growing pressure in my chest and my eyes burned. And while Liam could have been wrong or lying, I had been stabbed because of Baltazar's command. My gaze moved to Liam, still standing with his back turned away from me and his head hanging in...resignation? I didn't know anymore. It felt like I had never known him at all.

How did he manage without his hand so well? When we fought Lux...when he and I...

No. I wouldn't allow my mind to travel along that path. Those were questions for our leader. But— "Lux, did you know what the outcome of this was?"

"I was told to retrieve you. And I want it to be clear now that I didn't hurt you. I won't have Lord Tellyk thinking I've done that." Lux gestured at my chest, and I realized he wasn't really looking at me either. I looked down

and noted that my shirt was ripped down the middle—my left breast fully on display.

Tugging the panels of torn fabric, I covered myself as best as I could. Driata shucked off her jacket and helped me into it, so I didn't jostle the injury.

"You can come out now." Lux sighed, turning to face the bushes that he came from.

My brow furrowed in question at the silence that answered, and I looked at my sister who seemed to share my confusion.

"Don't be shy now. You certainly haven't been subtle." Lux coaxed, at the brush. I was about to ask him if he lost his head when the low-hanging branches he was staring at rattled. The mud-coated pale yellow mantle stuck out like the sun peeking out of clouds as Lou lowered her hood.

She let out an awkward chuckle as she tucked loose strands that had fallen from her braids behind her ears. "How did you know?"

"I noticed you trailing me as soon as I left Ellesmere's gates." Lux raised a brow at her—I recognized the look. Reproach. "Maybe go for a darker cloak next time. And watch your feet."

"You didn't stop me." Her voice pitched in question even while she nodded in agreement.

The assassin shrugged and tucked his thumbs into his belt. "You didn't cause me any bother. But you did slow me down."

Had he...let her follow him? And let her keep up?

Lou didn't respond but closed the distance between us and tossed her arms around me in an embrace. "You sure love coming close to death."

"The problem is trusting the wrong people." My eyes narrowed over her thin shoulder at the back of Liam's head. I noted how the curls were matted

and looked wet. And he still hadn't spoken.

Driata cleared her throat and Lou released me, giving my sister a thin-lipped grin.

"We should get going," Lux suggested. "Without Scoot and Fox, your mission is compromised."

"My mission ended the moment all of those lives did." Driata's face pinched in memory and her eyes were wet with unshed tears.

"What were your orders?" I asked and but my eyes stayed on Liam, not wanting to be caught off guard again. He flinched in response to my question.

Her voice was thick when she answered, "We were transporting the servants over the boundary."

"You were taking them to faery?" I couldn't hide my anger as my fists balled at my sides. "They were dead the minute you left Ellesmere then."

"There's a village there." Driata paused and her lips pursed. "Well...a rumored one, beyond the pass."

"And?" Lou shouted at my sister, goading her on with it.

"That's all I know." Dri's shoulders drooped, and I knew she couldn't give any more information. Baltazar would have given her the bare minimum.

But the sadness I saw racking her, that was real. I looked at Lou and thought of what she had said the morning I left to find Driata.

All the new servants were fired when Oliver decided to sail to Weylin. Lou had stayed behind. But Agatha and Edera had gone. And what my sister recounted meant that they all died. For what—the scraps of food they carried with them for travel?

Rumors of raiders had started reaching the castle, but my father had simply upped the guards he placed on imports. He did nothing to make the

roads safer.

The fact that my sister lived was only thanks to Lux arriving when he had. And I cut off his damn fingers.

"—take us back to the castle?" Liam speaking brought me out of my thoughts and rage licked its way up through me again and blood rushed through my ears.

"We have to be much closer—past the barrens at least." Dri perked up then, "But you and I could work together."

I kept my eyes on the ground, but I could feel him staring at me. "I don't have my talisman."

Guilt warred with my rage. I didn't want to travel days to get back to the castle. And giving him the damned talisman back could speed that up. But if I was without magic, I certainly wasn't giving any to the man who just tried to murder me.

"Great." Lux heaved a sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. "We'll be walking then."

"We should go quickly if we don't want to meet up with any other of faery's nasties." Driata pulled the strap holding her bow to her back tighter and nodded.

I looked around again, noting the dense foliage around us. The trees were thick with verdant life and the sounds of animals rustling and squawking. "Oh, for fuck's sake. We're in faery?"

"Just past the boundary, about a hundred yards from the river." Lou offered, seeming to realize quickly that I was far past my limit of vague answers.

"The Hags must've been hunting in the river when you two had it out." Lux pushed past Liam and grabbed Jett's reins.

"We did not *have it out*. He *stabbed* me. *In the chest*." My words were clipped, and my jaw was aching from the pressure of clenching my teeth together.

The assassin laughed, as he walked my mare toward me and offered me his large, functional hand. Could I go a week without damaging someone's appendage? Probably not in that lifetime.

"Where are your horses?" I noticed the heavy pack Lux had fastened on his back and that his sword was now attached to his belt.

He lifted me up, carefully onto Jett's back and I bit back a yelp as my chest ached with the movement. "We don't have any. You ride and the others can take turns riding with you."

"I can walk." I offered, though it sounded weak even to my own ears. I need to get to a healer. There was only so much Driata had learned about magic. Given how weak it was anyway, and the thought that a princess should never have more than a paper cut from stationary.

Lux shook his head. "No."

"It's fine Jane. You need to rest." Driata gave me a weary smile.

Fallen leaves kicked up around Liam as he stumbled, arms pinwheeling as he tried to catch himself and fell forward on his face.

Driata and Lou rushed to him while I chortled from atop Jett. "Little help having both hands do you, when you can't manage your feet."

"Lie still." My sister urged as she placed his head in her lap. "You've been bashed in the head."

"Did Jane do this—when you fought?" Lou looked at me, and down to where I could feel the blister berries burning away infection and my sister's healing magic still trying to piece together my wound.

"Serves him right." Lux winked at me like we shared a joke.

Shaking my head, and scrubbing my hand down my face, I muttered, "I wish it had been me."

"He'll be the first to ride with Jane," Driata said as she and Lou tried to lift him and Lux, who had lifted me with ease, stood by and watched.

Over my cold, dead body. And even then, I would come back to refuse. "Don't bring him anywhere near me."

Lou tilted her head to the side, and her eyes went wide. "The injury is closed, but he probably has a concussion."

"I'll walk," Liam mumbled as he pulled away from the women and staggered again.

"You certainly will not." Dri put on her privileged voice. One full of snark and indignation. "Lux, help him onto the horse."

If I were any closer to the ground my jaw would have hit it when Lux lifted Liam by his collar and dragged him to Jett's back. "Behind or in front of you?"

"Really?" I asked. His disloyalty sunk into my bones as I looked at the man who trained me while he ignored my wishes and met Driata's.

"When I found her, she thought I was a raider and threatened to carve out my organs if I got any closer to her." He gave my apparently savage sister a pointed look. "Then she helped reattach my fingers."

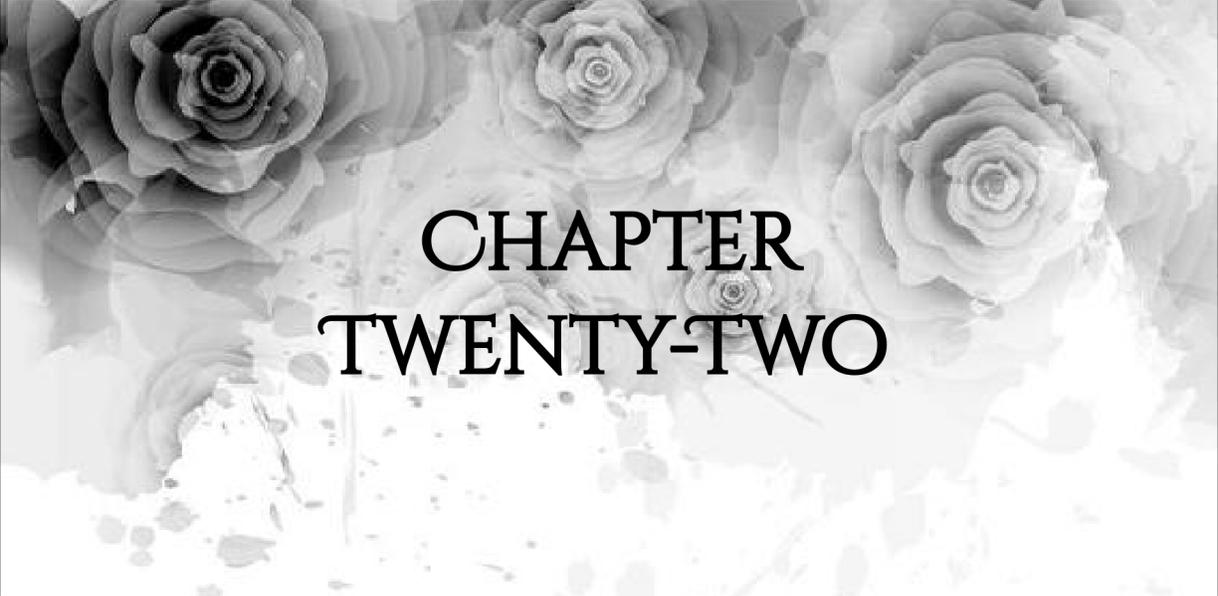
He wiggled them slightly from inside his bandages and lifted Liam off the ground. Jett sidestepped the large men, just before the traitor could kick his leg over her back.

She let out a vexed huff and trotted forward a few paces. I bit down on my lip to stifle the manic laughter bubbling up, but we didn't have time for that. Logic washed over me as I realized the predicament we were in. We

killed three Hags, but there could be more. And there could be much worse hidden among those trees.

"Let him on, girl." I patted her neck. "If he tries anything you can trample him."

Lux helped Liam once more, and we hightailed it out of the deadliest part of Anwyn.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

We made it to the pass quickly with only the sounds of skittering creatures following us. The dense brush covered our footfalls and Jett's hoof beats while we trekked a nonexistent path.

I was desperate to find out more about a supposed hidden village and the raiders who had taken down the traveling party. Still, we had to be wary of the risk of being seen or heard, so I kept my eyes silently tracking Dri as she walked.

Liam's body slumped against my back, and I jabbed my elbow into his ribs to rouse him.

"Fuck." He grunted and scooted further away. "Stop doing that."

Grinding my teeth together to prevent a spiteful response, I marked Lux's eyes narrowing on Liam who I felt shrink behind me under the weight of the assassin's glare.

Whatever was going on between the two of them, I wasn't aware. Though, friendly didn't really describe their relationship. Well, friendly didn't describe Lux at all. Sometimes, I was sure he only tolerated me. But

there was something more there, a tension rumbling in the air as the large man stared down Liam with his expression taut, like a band about to snap.

One thing I was certain of was I wouldn't get involved. I was injured, without my magic, and weaponless.

What had happened to my dagger anyway? Did Liam still have it? Remembering my own blade being buried in my chest only made me seethe, wishing to clear the damned passageway so Dri could heal me a bit more. I would leave Jett with Liam and walk for a bit. The horse would be pissed, but nothing a few sugar cubes or fat carrots couldn't solve.

Driata's voice was low, almost humming in the wind when she spoke. If my ears hadn't been on high alert scanning for dangers, I may have missed it. "We didn't have time to break down camp. We only concealed it, once we get over the pass we can rest there."

Nodding, despite her back turned to me, I thanked the silent gods that she said it. It was as if they were answering my unspoken prayer. Just a little longer.

Liam leaned into me then and my knuckles turned white around Jett's reins. "Can we talk...when we stop?"

His whispered breath brushed against the curve of my ear, and it was all I could do to keep my body from relaxing against him. *He stabbed you, idiot.*

The rocks underfoot began sloping down and I focused my attention on that. No reaction was better than risking anything else. Especially one someone would have when they were a fool in love. And it was in that silence as we descended, that I realized the unfortunate part of that truth. I still loved him.

How could my heart betray me like that?

The wound of realization was far worse in some ways than the actual stabbing. It felt like the organ was ripping in two from the inside, while hurt flared in my chest and swelling to a monstrous size. I didn't know how my body wasn't combusting.

Utilizing my training had never been such a necessity. Silently steadying my breathing and blinking away the haze in my eyes, I shoved Liam back once more.

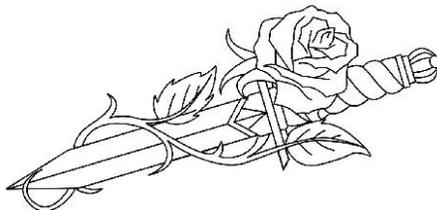
He would not hold the power over me. And now that I knew the emotion was there, the shameful thing lying in wait—I would carve it from my body myself if the need arose.

Tangy copper burst in my mouth when I bit down on my cheek hard enough to draw blood.

Fuck him. I would find a way to make him pay for using my body to sate his needs.

Perhaps I could make him fall for me, and then have him fall on my blade. Mine will be the last face he sees, and he will know his betrayal was what ended him. Then, and only then, I would go after Baltazar. I would break that man until he spilled his secrets at my feet. Yes, they would both regret manipulating me.

I had grown tired of being a pawn.



The camp Driata had told us of wasn't far at all. We arrived at a patch of dirt shrouded by barren trees in the Dread Wood, and she sighed as she

gripped her talisman.

Watching the magic concealments peel away had been fascinating. It always reminded me of the time a nobleman had been visiting the castle and his courtesan and my mother snuck me into a brothel to watch a performance. There had been beautiful people backstage caked in kohl, rouge, mystery, and in all states of undress. When they introduced me—with a fake name of course—the women and men doted on me. Placing extravagant, colorful wigs on my head and painting my face.

The makeup coming off was like a large concealment lifting. It melted down a canvas you didn't realize was there until it began peeling. The thicker the spells used the more you had to work at undoing them.

The greying trees dripped away first, then the patch of dirt gave way to a fire pit where the embers had gone cold. Unfurled sleeping mats followed with two heavy-looking bags. Then, finally a pair of covered, short swords, another axe—the curved edge looking much sharper than the one Lux had in the cave—and a crossbow.

What was he planning on encountering out there? I tilted my head at him, and the brute shrugged. "Always be prepared."

I shook my head in disbelief and snickered at the assassin. Leave it to him to come ready for warfare.

Driata stepped in front of him and took care with the bindings wrapped around his hand while she held her talisman. Lux's face seemed to relax a fraction as more of his unseen pain left him. *Damn, I should probably apologize for that.*

"You're next," she said when her gaze connected with mine.

I got the first good look at her since she came to my rescue, and I noted how different she looked outside a castle's walls.

Sure, she wasn't wearing a gown and her hair wasn't perfectly pinned in place, but that wasn't the only difference. There was something off with her face, and her posture was rigid. Purplish bags had formed under her hazel eyes too. *What was going on with her?*

She turned away from my apparent scrutiny to face Lou. "There are clean bandages in one of the satchels. Will you help him?"

"Don't need—" Lux started but whatever look of reproach Dri gave him made him slam his mouth shut.

My brows raised at the sight of a trained killer fumbling for words because of my sister. Lou coughed out a raspy laugh as she motioned for Lux to sit down, so she could assist him. Even sitting his head was above her waist.

Dri approached with her chin lowered a bit and not looking me in the eye.

"Are you alright?"

Her head bobbed—fast enough that it was suspicious, paired with a smile that was overly wide. "Just a bit tired."

Perhaps being away from her scented baths and having the polish on her nails chip away was giving way to crisis. I wriggled out of the jacket she loaned me and exposed my front.

Dried blood had mixed with the poultice in the wound, and I curled my lip back. Gross, but practical. The injury would mend and whatever remained of the blister berry mixture would dissolve with a good wash.

Gentle hands pressed into the flesh near it, and I looked up again at my sister while she worked to close it more.

Her nose wrinkled. "Why does it smell...sweet?"

"An antiseptic made of berries." I thought of how the fae had been basically preparing me for their next meal and grimaced. "The Hags were thorough."

"Whatever you do, don't eat them." Liam's voice was less strained since he rested during the trip.

Realizing that my skills in masking my emotions had been successful in even fooling me was a shock that I couldn't afford then. How was I supposed to ensure the guise didn't falter if I didn't know it was in place? Was it obvious to others? Dri? My father? Oh, Gods...Baltazar or Arius?

If they had, I would figure out how to fix it. Finding the right angle would help. I couldn't cover it up with hatred. One, it hadn't worked before and two, it was far too easy to mistake the emotion for passion.

No. To accomplish it, I would have to dismiss him entirely and not allow him to provoke me. I could rage internally while appearing completely unbothered by his existence. But I couldn't be pleasant. It would be suspicious after he stabbed me.

It would help me with my own personal mission too. How did that saying go? *The heart wants what it can't have*. I would make myself unobtainable in every way until he was panting after me begging for scraps of my attention. Then and only then I would destroy him.

"You can eat all of them you want." I smiled, and I knew it was a cruel thing. Just a slash of teeth with my lips pulled thin before looking away.

"We need to talk."

"I'm not bored enough to talk to you." My face was an unreadable mask.

Driata sighed and fixed the panels of my ripped shirt before helping me to cover up again. She backed away with her forehead wrinkling, pointing between Liam and me. "I'll leave you to whatever this is."

Shit on it. I couldn't beg her to stay. It would be obvious there was something wrong, though the rules I was concocting for the plan were already getting out of hand. What would a normal person do after one impaled them? Be fearful, I supposed. But I would sooner profess my infuriating love than act afraid of Liam Tellyk.

"What is it you want?"

He rubbed the back of his neck and didn't speak.

Waiting, while he opened his mouth and closed it again was infuriating. But I coached my face to stay relaxed, picturing in my head the image of clay drying—simple boredom.

Finally, and praise above before I gave any sign he was irritating me, Liam spoke. "It's not what you think."

Weighing my options and knowing that playing dumb simply didn't suit me, I rolled my eyes at him. "Then what is it?"

"I... I can't explain." Liam gritted his jaw, pausing and starting again. "But I wa—I didn't want...*fuck*."

"Are you having a stroke?"

"No."

Jett had a sudden spell on the other side of the logs Lux was working on lighting. She reared up and stomped her hooves on the dry earth while letting out horrendous braying noises. Shoving past the tongue-tied ass, I ran toward her.

"Easy girl." I grabbed her reins when she calmed and rubbed the center of her face while leaning to see if there was anything around her that could have caused her reaction.

Liam reached a hand and Jett yanked her head away, pinning her ears. Her reins tore at my hands as she bucked. "You've pissed off Jett."

"She adores me."

The horse snorted in a way that proved she, in fact, *did not* adore him and pressed her face back against my palm.

"Are you going to say whatever it is that you think I haven't already guessed?" I gave him a pointed look and then focused my attention on soothing Jett.

The sounds he made when he started to sputter again made me wish I hadn't asked. But then, "There are things you don't know."

"We've had this discussion before." I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Tons of things I don't know, then you got all stabby. Let's say we skip the last part, and you just fill me in?"

No answer. Listening to the crackling fire Lux must have gotten going and the distant voices of our companions on the journey, I counted my breaths before trying again. "You were ordered to betray me?"

"Yes."

"By Baltazar, evidently."

A nod.

"Is that why you slept with me?" Damn my voice for cracking, but I had to know.

"You-fucking-*what*?" Lux's tone was full of condemnation as he barreled into Liam, fists already slamming against unprotected ribs.

Toxic masculinity at its finest, pass.

I backed away a few steps before twisting to face the deserted fire. Sitting in front of it, hands outstretched, the warmth filled me. I ignored the grunts and shouts of rage from where the two men brawled. Even if Lux were to have no hands, I couldn't see a world in which Liam won, but I had

seen him train. He was fast, and would probably get a few good licks in, but Lux was better—and purely *vicious* when pissed off.

Lou grunted, plopping down next to me. "What happened there?"

"Where were you when it started?"

"Helping Driata find something safe to eat." Lou patted her knees as she talked, her voice void of her usual snark. "She said if Lux offered her dried meat one more time, she'd be ill."

The very same sister who couldn't stand by and watch an innocent animal being eaten was currently trying to yank Lux off Liam by his collar.

"So?" Lou persisted and I hummed in turn

Dri stomped her foot, looking ridiculous near the bulk of the two men. "You'll ruin your hand, you buffoon."

Lux's nose was bleeding and his brow split, but I couldn't see the damage Liam was taking under him.

"Why are they fighting?" Lou's voice reminded me I was trying not to care, and I glanced at her. She was staring, not at the ground where the fighting was happening, but instead at Driata.

"Lux heard I had sex with Liam." Shrugging my shoulders, I tugged at a frayed thread on my sleeve.

"Oh." She sounded confused, but not surprised.

I thought of all the times she had seen me with my clothes missing or in disarray after being with Liam. *Damn, she was around often enough, I'll have to convince her of my lack of feelings too.*

"Are you and Lux..." Lou left the end open in suggestion, and I barked a laugh.

"Not ever." Though the realization that I didn't know why Lux was so angry made my mirth sober up. "I'm not actually sure why he reacted that

way."

Lou clicked her tongue. "Men will just never be worth all of this trouble."

I was about to tell her I agreed when Driata finally managed to separate the pair. Instead, I shouted. "If men would just talk, the world's problems could be resolved. Instead, they whip out their *tiny swords* and duel."

"Why don't you pull out a measure and check us for yourself." Liam's eyes drilled into me as he turned his bleeding lip in a grin.

Lux lunged for him again, but Liam ducked out of the way and Driata stepped between them. My cheeks burned with the implication, and I narrowed my eyes on the dimple that popped up on Liam's. *He would not get a rise out of me.*

"Jane's right." Driata pointed away from the camp, near the riverbank. "Talk it out."

A muscle feathered in Lux's jaw, but he followed my sister's command with Liam at heel.

While they made their way to have a—hopefully civil, if Driata had anything to say about it—chat, my sister perched next to Lou and me as if she were wearing a gown and sitting at a luncheon with royals.

"Don't you want to know what they'll say?" Lou asked, before deepening her voice. "No really, my dick must be bigger than yours."

"Watch this," Dri whispered and gripped her talisman. Suddenly, the men's voices carried over to us on the breeze.

"—you tried to kill her."

"Correction. I tried *not* to kill her."

"Tell that to the stab wound asshole."

"Orders."

"To betray her?"

"Indeed."

"By fucking her."

"That's how it will be interpreted I suppose."

"But why would Baltazar send me to retrieve her?"

"My guess?" Liam dragged his hand over his face. "You were far more likely to get her to wear the bracelet than I was."

"But why would he want any of his assets at a disadvantage?"

"Why does Baltazar do anything?"

"Control."

I was vaguely aware of Lou and Driata's hushed tones, but my ears rang with the conversation we were overhearing. One that it was clear I wasn't meant to be privy to. I thought of the underground empire I had seen when Baltazar had taken Liam and me for training. The concealed masses that had bowed for him. The way it had felt when he struck me and later when I realized he was manipulating me. I had gotten too reckless, *uncontrollable*.

He thought me a beast in need of a lesson, but he unwittingly showed his hand. I wasn't an untamed beast, I was a thorn—one that would prick and bleed to see his empire come to ruin.



The sun was cresting over the mountains when we reached the barrens. Farmlands that once stood thick with endless rows of orchards and crops that fed all Lunasa. Now they lay empty, the soil unturned, and many of the cottages and farmhouses had been burned in the riots when my father limited the allocation of the once ample food supplies in each household. Lands passed down and tilled through generations, now gone to waste.

The weight in my chest as I walked next to Jett had nothing to do with the almost healed wound, and everything to do with the emptiness surrounding the barrens.

Looking up at my sister who was astride my horse with Lou, I could see her eyes were wide with shock. My family never traveled out that way. If it wasn't a shorter distance between us and the castle than the road from Luhne was, I could say we wouldn't have come that way that day either.

But I witnessed the horror lining Driata's face as she came to realize where we were. The rows of empty fields unyielding well before being scorched by flames in the riots. I found myself staring more at her than our surroundings the further I walked. The way she sank lower each time we

passed a vacated home, though the ones left standing were few and far between.

I forced myself to travel through the barrens each time a mission took me in that direction. To memorize the color of the rubble, the shape of the children's toys I found amongst the remains, and the acidic scent of the infertile lands.

Seeing Driata's reaction made me angrier at my father and his damned curse. His love for his original wife had turned into an obsession after the fae foiled their eternity spell. And that obsession had led to his people suffering every time her incarnation died.

That though, had been the worst time. When he killed my grandmother, thinking my mother, and not her, was his love—he had set off unprecedented reactions throughout his own kingdom.

It was like the land and sky revolted against his selfishness. Knowing that and being exposed to the backlash his people faced because of his actions, were two different things.

And after all that he had caused to happen, my father refused to see his people and hear their pleas only encouraging them to move to bigger cities.

We continued on, the hush dragging between each of us who were carrying burdens it seemed only thoughtless to mention in such a place. So, when the sound of a yelling woman peeled back the quiet, I ran.

Clearing the hills scorched earth and feeling the wind whip at my hair that I had only braided that morning, would have normally been something that brought me peace. But some unknown fear clawed beyond the new scar on my chest with each thud of my boots. I had never been on that side of the barrens, but I thought everyone had been evacuated.

My breath heaved out of me with each new gulp, and my lungs burned with the exertion as the acrid smell of the earth coated my lungs.

Who could be out here?

Lou hollered behind me, and dust twisted up around Jett as she was goaded on. They quickly cleared the distance and surpassed what progress I made as she galloped in the direction of distress.

Liam and Lux's longer legs each took up the space at my side, as I pumped my arms, and adrenaline coursed through me.

"Raiders?" Liam asked easily, not even breaking a sweat as our feet propelled us forward.

Lux—who was only jogging to keep up with me—shook his head. "Not this far from the roads."

An ache grew in my side and sweat licked at my brow, I worked to lengthen my strides and gained no advantage. *In through the nose, out through the mouth*, Lux had coached when we had first started my training. Dumbest thing I had ever heard. My nostrils couldn't suck down near as much air as my mouth. Logic. A muscle cramped in the back of my thigh and shot down my leg when I lifted it again and my body *folded*.

"*shitfuckdamnit*." I wheezed. The earth was hard under my back, and white spots flared in my eyes.

"You forgot to stretch," Lux said, coming to a stopover me. He examined me while I clutched my leg to my stomach.

My eyelids scrunched with my face when I slammed them closed. "No time."

"There's always time to be prepared." A sharp, cold response. Smug asshole.

"Go help the others, I've got her," Liam said, and I wished a hole would rip open in the earth, so I could fall within it.

A grumbled response under the ringing in my head.

"I've got her," Liam said again, that time firmer.

"It's not far off, join us quickly." There was a warning in Lux's tone, but his boots skidded on the ground by my head while he turned and padded off.

"Not everything has to be a competition." Liam's voice held a note of humor and I wished he was right.

But I paused, thinking of how hard I pushed myself after they caught up. "I wasn't aware I was competing."

"You've no competition." Liam cleared his throat before changing the subject. "Can you get up?"

"Yes." The truth was I didn't know. My leg was taut as a bowstring. I needed to drink more water but Lux and Dri each had only one canteen. And because of our incident with the Hags, I lost mine. It was probably in some lost items' graveyard along with my dagger and the socks I sent to be laundered that never came back.

Instead of complaining though, I made sure everyone else had a fair share, feigning swigs when they passed it to me. Lux would be furious. Liam would think I was an idiot. Dri and Lou would probably be insulted.

Rubbing my knuckle against the tense muscle, I grunted and wrestled myself into a sitting position. Pain flared up my back and up my ribs from their contact with the ground.

Calloused fingers wrapped around my wrist and the back of my neck, helping guide me slowly upright.

I smacked at his hand, nearly losing my balance again when he adjusted his grip. "Don't touch me."

Liam laughed, and I realized how close he was standing. "In our language, that's not how you say thank you."

He reached down and pressed his fingers into the back of my thigh, massaging the ache. My heart, my lungs, and my body froze. His hands moved in deep, gentle strokes against the pain and my mind zeroed in on the pressure right under my ass.

The cramp faded, but I couldn't move, not when it felt like a current flowing from his body into mine. My back arched slightly into his chest. Then, as if waking from a fever dream, the noise of my thudding pulse and my too quick breaths came back into focus and I yanked away from him.

"*Don't do that.*" I hissed, already remembering we had somewhere to be and stomping after our group.

"You can't say you don't enjoy it," Liam countered.

I squared my shoulders, disinclined to let him see how much he affected me. "And you are an idiot if you think you speak for what I enjoy."

I glanced sideways and watched Liam bite his lip as if to stifle a smile. "I think I'm well versed in what you enjoy, but by all means—feel free to give me another lesson."

Heat spread up from my neck as I burned from outrage and shame. "No."

"Pretty little liar." His silky voice was nothing more than a purr when it reached me, but his laugh was loud as he sprinted off.

His managing so simply to rile me into a rage was not a great sign that my plan was going well. I counted my breaths until I finally came to a property with a squat cottage sitting pert in the middle.

Jett was hitched to a post connected to fallen, dull white panels of fencing. I gave her a wave, and she snuffed calmly at the dirt surrounding her.

She was there, but where was everyone else? The house was quiet, no one answering when I knocked, so I edged around the side of it. I quietly noted the latched blue shutters, their paint peeling from years of keeping out the overly hot sun.

The metal frame of some kind of shed came into view and I heard the muffled and rushed voices of my companions.

"—mean you no harm," Lux said, his deep timbre and giant size probably not very reassuring.

"What are you doing, snooping on my property?" The voice was that of an irate woman.

"Ma'am," Driata—ever the mediator, was probably giving the woman her brightest smile. "We heard a shout and came to offer aid."

Picking up my pace I rounded the corner and saw the door hanging open to a little greenhouse made of stained-glass windows and iron. Lux was crowding the entrance, but I could see vines of plump tomatoes climbing up walls over even the assassin's head. I couldn't make out the woman in front of them, but through the part in their bodies, I saw Driata's petite hands raised with palms forward.

Rushing in, I shoved past Lux, ducking when he tried to stop me. I ran into Dri whose back was stiffer than the ground I had so recently fallen on.

"How many more are there of you—you heathens?" I could see her now, her face lined with age—commoners didn't age as well since they weren't given access to magic. A plump little woman, who only stood as tall as my

chin. Which in and of itself was impressive since I didn't have much height for her to contend with.

Her freckled cheeks were rosy with what I could only assume was rage since in her unsteady hand she wagged a butcher knife at each of us in turn.

I snaked around Driata and Lou and shielded them with my body. It wasn't a huge space, and it was filled to the brim with ceramic and wooden planters—all overflowing with greenery. It was hot in there though, causing me to sweat already and I wanted to tug off the jacket.

"Eyes on me, Missy." The woman tutted and my attention snapped back to her and the knife which was now only inches away from me.

"Ma'am, wielding sharp objects is no way to have a conversation." I tried, following Dri's lead, contorting my grimace into a smile.

"You all barge on my property, covered in filth and what one can only assume is blood and you think I'm not going to protect myself?" Her button nose wrinkled, and she jabbed the knife at me to punctuate her words.

That was it, truly. Why hadn't anyone disarmed her yet?

"Lady," My sigh was heavy, causing her to flinch. "I've already been stabbed this week and I'm not taking any more appointments."

Her little eyebrows scrunched together. "Get off my property."

"You're apparently not in any danger," I took a step back, giving her a thumbs up. Those behind me moved in turn. "So, can and will do."

I bit my tongue to stop myself from correcting her stance as we made our way—step by step—backing out of the greenhouse. *Probably not best to help someone maim you.*

"What's going on mama?" A little boy's lisp carried to me through the crowded bodies at the shed's entrance. I could barely make out his form

through the huddle, but I could see that he was carrying a hefty sack of...something resembling dirt?

Familiarity rang through me, as my group parted to head back off the property we were very clearly not welcome on.

"Hush up, Kaleb, and go wash." The woman, apparently the boy's mother, shooed him to the back entrance of the house, which I now noticed was a little porch with two rocking chairs. Glancing beyond the greenhouse, I noted that the chairs looked out over the family's empty field and beyond to the mountains dotting the horizon in the distance.

The woman shrieked when skinny arms wrapped around my waist. My eyes drew away from the property to look down in horror at the small child latched onto me.

But then he bared his missing front teeth in a smile, and his rounded cheeks dimpled.

Oh... I recognized him.

"Did you like the bread?" Kaleb asked, his squeaky voice muffled by the fabric of my shirt. He hadn't smiled that brightly that day in the market, but he had been friendlier than his sister.

Kaleb's mother was sputtering now, shouting for Gwen—her daughter and the boy's older sister, who came banging out of the house holding a limp, wet head of cabbage. She was wearing a flower-patterned apron that said, "kiss the chef."

She didn't look at her mother, but instead was staring at Liam, her eyes wide and her face turning the same shade as a crisp apple.

"Young man, if you don't let that woman go right this—"

Gwen cut over their mother, seeming to notice there were more people there than just Liam and I. "You're the woman from the market."

Not knowing what to say with the woman hauling her son off me, and feeling everyone stare at me, I nodded.

"By the gods," The woman's eyes flew wide while she tucked the arm holding the butcher knife behind her back. "Forgive me."

"What did you do in the market?" Liam—having apparently made quick work of catching up—feigned a whisper. He clearly found the sudden change in circumstance amusing.

"I bought some bread." I shrugged, not liking having so much attention on me at once. The woman was still ogling me with something akin to awe on her face and the boy was bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"And a carrot," he added, showing me all his teeth as he smiled.

"You were too dim to know how much it was actually worth." Gwen flicked her braid over her shoulder and turned to go back inside. *Unimpressed with me...I liked her.*

"Gwyneth, you apologize. This instant." The woman waved the knife in the direction of the house when the door slammed shut, its hinges screaming the whole way. "I'm sorry about her."

"Teenagers—what are you going to do?" Lux offered when the quiet had become awkward.

"You must allow me to make up for my inhospitality." The woman handed Kaleb the knife and scooted him closer to the house before continuing.

"My name is Tessa Dower. You've met Kaleb and Gwyn. You must be weary and hungry from your..." She paused, tongue in cheek as she assessed our soiled and bloodied clothes. "Travels."

"We were just on our way through actually," I smiled, not wanting to take anything from the family when I had seen how excited they were over just a

few gold coins. It wouldn't be right.

"Like my friends tried to explain, we thought you were hurt or in danger." Lou's eyes were narrowed, she was not swayed by the newly polite woman.

"No one travels this way other than the raiders." Tessa's eyes lined with silver and her chin trembled. "It's no excuse to assume, but honestly...look at the state you're all in."

We did, and the results were not good. The panels of my jacket had popped open at the top to reveal my ripped shirt, stiff with blood. Everyone else had all manner of scratches and gashes and scrapes from the journey too. And even where they had been healed, the crimson stains remained.

Lux was the worst of us, with his bandaged hand and his giant axe strapped to his back, he hooked our bags with the other weapons attached to Jett's saddle. But the axe alone, on a man who was already intimidating...not a great look.

My companions grumbled their acceptance of the truth.

"But we *did* hear you scream." I prodded, needing to know if there was anyone hiding in wait.

"The worms." Tessa patted her cheeks to wipe away her worried tears, then smoothed them down the front of her oat-colored dress. "They keep chewing through my tomatoes—tomatoes are my best sellers at the market."

"So that's why you had the knife?" Lux sounded genuinely impressed as his lips curved up into a smirk. "You were threatening the worms."

"Yes, though it sounds silly when it's said aloud. Anyway," her freckles darkened as she blushed. "I'm not willing to take no for an answer. You will

sit down to sup with us—and eat your fill. Then you can rest your sleepy heads."

She gained about an inch when she straightened, planting her hands on her hips, and daring one of us to argue.

"We will leave first thing in the morning," Driata promised, grinning as Tessa looped her arm and led my sister inside.

"Wipe your feet," Tessa urged. "And the big one can leave his axe outside, I'm sure he has plenty more hidden weapons to protect himself with."

Lux undid the strap fast enough that it seemed as though his own mother had ordered him to, or risk a whooping. He had to duck through the door frame, as he prowled inside after Tessa with his tongue nearly lolling out.

Luckily, the house was a bit larger inside than it looked from out, and he barely had to tuck his head.

We entered a kitchen already warmed by an oversized oven, with coals heating behind its open doors. Dri was sifting flour into a bowl by the sink and Gwyn was chopping the head of cabbage with the same knife her mother had held us up with.

She looked up just as Liam stepped in behind me, placing his hand on my back. Gwyn brought the knife down again. That time, awfully hard, and the still-rounded half flew off the wooden cutting board and splashed into the bowl of flour, powder burst from the bowl covering Dri in the mixture.

"The big one—"

"Lux."

"Lux, you're good with blades, I assume. Please chop the vegetables while I show your friend where to wash up. Gwyn, please go fetch more water from the well."

Lou snorted a laugh at Lux's expense and offered, "I can help with the pails."

Tessa nodded her agreement, somehow seeming fine with having so many filling her home and the lot filed off.

I felt a tug at my sleeve and looked down into honey-colored eyes. "I can teach you how to make the rolls. We already have some for dinner, but mama is making some for the market."

He firmly made me wash my hands and cuff my sleeves, before leading me to the counter. They were beautiful, made of pine.

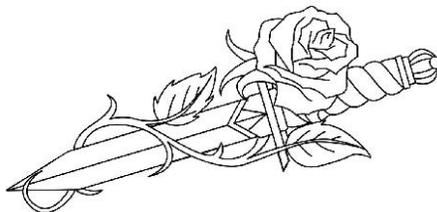
Kaleb noticed me running my fingers along the edge and said, "my Pa made everything in this house before..." He trailed off, and his toothy grin faded.

"I heard we're making rolls?" Liam ruffled the boy's hair, seeming to reactivate Kaleb's cheerfulness.

"Don't mind me," Lux grumbled, but I caught that smirk on his mouth again. "Just alone over here chopping the vegetables. Onions, ack. Who needs them?"

"It'll give you a good chance to shed some of those pent-up tears." Liam chuckled at his own joke, but bit down on my laugh, knowing we would both pay for it later.

"So," I focused instead on Kaleb. "Where do we begin?"



The Dowers had seen that we were all given fresh clothes and cleaned up before we sat down to dinner on mismatched chairs. Well, luckily my trainer had brought extras of his own things because Liam barely fit in Tessa's husband's trousers.

Right then, the tan material stretched tight around his thighs each time he leaned in to add something to his plate.

I wished he had been seated further away, where I couldn't have noticed. But as it was, he and Lux sat in the rocking chairs to my left. Driata was on a quilted ottoman near Tessa, and Lou was perched on a step stool between the children.

When Tessa had insisted that I would sit at the head of the table, I refused as politely as possible. My mistake, because damn me if Liam hadn't stolen the seat nearest me when I sat down. But it was obviously her husband's seat before he passed away and my stomach twisted at the loss the children and their mother faced so early on.

"Would you mind passing the potatoes, Miss Tessa?" Lux's manners shouldn't have been shocking, but each of our heads turned when he used them.

To her credit, at least, Tessa did seem to expect it. She ladled up a massive scoop and plopped it onto his plate as she hummed a nursery rhyme.

"How do you manage to keep such fresh produce?" Driata asked, biting on a green bean looking like it was the most satisfying thing she tasted in weeks. Which—given all of the meat offered in Ellesmere—it probably was.

The Dowers looked amongst themselves, without answering, clearly uncomfortable with the topic. Probably because they were farmers and

should have had fields of fresh fruits and vegetables.

"Sorry," Driata wasn't used to being the cause of such a lapse in conversation. I could see her fumbling for words as they exited her mouth. "I don't mean to pry. I've never been to this part of Lunasa and was shocked to see how bad it's gotten."

"Where did you say you're all from?" Gwyn asked, exchanging a look with her mother that may have been subtle if I had no eyes.

"We didn't actually," I cut in, keeping my tone easy, my breathing steady as I lifted my water cup. "But we travel from Karhdaro to Anwyn to select wares for the king."

"You're personal with the King of Karhdaro." Tessa arched a brow at me. It should forever be seen as a testament to my skill that I didn't falter or blink despite the indecent place my mind traveled to.

"Very," I nodded and my eyes caught the other heads around the table doing the same. "Well, Lux is a hired hand—our guard."

"My father used to sell his woodwork in Karhdaro," Gwyn said, and I immediately knew I made an error as the tension in the room spiked. "He came home and told me of their rich markets and glorious accents."

"Ah, yes." Lou smiled, casting a faraway look in her eye as if she were homesick.

"None of you have accents." Gwyn's eyes narrowed on me, daring me to keep up the lie.

Challenge accepted. I gulped, letting a mist of unshed tears film my eyes. "Well originally, we're from Anwyn—which is why Blair trusts us, we know the continent. But when the lands spoiled, we had nothing keeping us here and no job prospects. So, we took to the seas, each on our own journeys that led us together."

Too far, I knew I had gone too far. But I couldn't reel it in now.

"The selfish king and the mad one," Tessa spat. "Pick your poison—they'll let you die either way. At least your new king treats you well?"

"Very." With that, I hoped for the end of the conversation, but Driata just couldn't leave it be.

"Has it gotten so bad here?" She needed to stop before she also went too far. "That you hate your king?"

"He and his children sit on their gold-encrusted rear ends while their people starve to death." Tessa's grip on her fork threatened to bend it. "The people didn't blame them for a while."

"They blamed the farmers who weren't producing their share." She went on looking at each of us in turn. "Most of the people who had survived it—though many were lost—moved to the cities. It's why our capital is an overpopulated wasteland and not suitable for any that live there."

My throat closed up, and my stomach tightened as her anger became a palpable thing that sat in on dinner with us. "But the cities were given the third line of food. With the castle filling its stores with each new shipment, the noblemen were next, then our cities, and only then the people who had kept everyone from going hungry years prior."

"Be glad you got out," Gwyn added while nodding.

Even I had no idea how truly awful it had become. Our tables had never been without food, and the noblemen and women who showed up to court never looked hungry either. I had seen so much go to waste and it had enraged me then. But learning that the imports weren't making it out to the rest of our people... That people were vacating their homes, giving up everything they knew for a chance at the scraps that royals don't want—it was horrifying.

Driata's eyes brimmed with tears before they free fell down her bronze cheeks. "I—there has to be a way to fix this."

"Ah, child we're angry enough that eventually, something will give." Tessa's temper had calmed. Possibly because she was so used to living that way, she saw no reason to let it fester constantly. If Baltazar saw the ease at which she controlled her emotions, she may be his next mark in our merry band of misfits. "Besides, my grandmother survived her season, we'll make it through ours."

"Excuse me—season?" My head tilted to the side.

"Every lifetime, the land hibernates for a season—this is ours." The woman shrugged and I thought my heartbeat had to be visible in my neck. *The commoners didn't know about the curse.*

It's why they didn't blame my father at first, but they should have. Perhaps if he were held accountable, he could have searched for a way to end his curse and heal his infertile lands. Instead, he let his people think that every hundred years, the lands were unforgiving. Because Gods forbid, they knew that he let them suffer for his own love.

Kaleb groaned beside me, "This is boring."

Tessa clapped her hands together. "He's right. That talk is far too dark for polite company."

Lux cleared his throat, and I sensed a change of topic in order. "After supper, I thought I'd take a look at your back door, Miss Tessa."

Lou choked on the bite of potato she had bitten into, and Liam howled, nearly falling out of his chair. Lux's face drained of color while he corrected, "It looks as though your hinges have gone crooked."

"Childish," I muttered under my breath, dabbing my napkin to my mouth to hide my amusement.

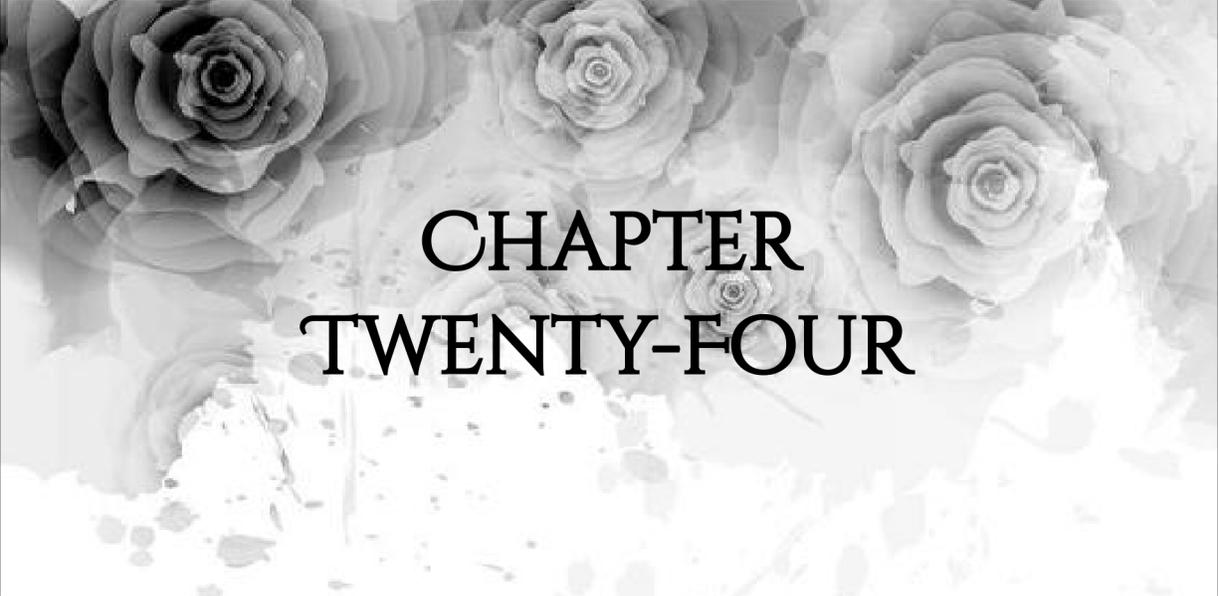
A bony elbow caught me in the ribs, and Kaleb leaned in, his voice hushed, "can you keep a secret?"

"I have a few." I kept my eyes on my plate, playing along.

"Gwyn has a crush on your friend."

The sound that came out of the girl at that moment was unnatural and reached a decibel I had only seen when Gemma got her first haircut and the servant took off too much. The girl slammed her silverware into the porcelain dish in front of her and threw her chair away from the table, stomping off into the recesses of their home.

"You forgot to whisper," I said, eyes wide as the young boy giggled and bit into a butter-soaked roll. "That's the most important part of a secret."



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Perhaps Lux shouldn't have offered to look at the warped hinges on the door, because Tessa had quickly marveled at his efficiency with tools. Once dinner had been cleared and the seats put back where they belonged, she found out too how many things he could fix without the need of a ladder.

Gwyn hadn't emerged from her mother's room—which we found out during dinner was where the pair of children would be sleeping, so we could use *their* room. After trying and failing to reassure them it wasn't necessary, it became apparent the Dowers wouldn't take no for an answer.

So Driata and Lou had retired, claiming dinner had been so filling they were likely to sleep for a year. And Lux was busy fixing lanterns that hadn't been re-oiled in years.

I took up the settee braiding my hair after Kaleb asked if I wanted to see card tricks. He was shuffling through his deck, apologizing every time they spilled out of his hands.

"It's okay, I thought it was part of the suspense." I wink and the boy's cheeks flushed.

"With practice, you'll only get better." Liam's voice came from over my shoulder and with great care, I didn't jump.

"Why don't you help Lux?" I asked, hoping for some space between us. I apparently couldn't trust myself to keep angry, when my problematic thoughts kept drifting to how he looked in the overly tight clothes.

Think about Baltazar. It didn't cool me off, but the heat of my lust gave way to a boiling rage. But even then, my mind wondered of the things I didn't know. Years of training and working for the man taught me that there was information I hadn't been given. But it always fed his will and his cause. So, what was he withholding that led to me being powerless? And why did he order his brother to betray me?

But Liam wasn't innocent either—not really. He could have ignored the orders or warned me. We could have worked together to convince Baltazar that he had done whatever needed doing.

Instead, he stabbed me. My fingers absently trailed over the new scar on my chest, just above where my heart lay.

Dri had offered to heal it the rest of the way, but I denied her. I have never been a fan of blank canvases, anyway.

"Here," Liam said, rounding the settee and sitting next to Kaleb. His hands curved around the cards, careful of the bent edges as he showed the boy how to shuffle without losing them.

"You're going too fast," Kaleb whined.

"That's the trick, the faster you move the less your audience sees."

"Oh." Kaleb held his little hands in front of Liam's and copied the movements he made until they were taking turns.

"You gave me a secret, so it's only fair I give you one as well." Liam waggled his brows at the boy who was studiously sifting the cards in hand.

"The real magic is in knowing who has a queen in their pocket."

He reached over and waved his hand around Kaleb's breast pocket before pulling free a card. A bubble of laughter escaped me before I clapped my hand over my mouth.

Liam had done the very same trick with a rose when we first met at my parent's anniversary ball.

I was eight at the time and clung to my mother's side all night when Liam and Baltazar were announced as they walked in. Liam hadn't been taught much yet in the ways to use his talisman, and I was having no success with mine. He told me there was other magic and had seemingly conjured a rose from thin air. Baltazar had been hired officially as my father's Keeper the next day, and they never left.

My eyes were glazed with memory when they connected with Liam's and it seemed he was thinking of the same fateful night. Was he wondering how different our lives would be if we were other people if our duties weren't so misaligned? What if we had just been two common strangers instead of...us?

"Oh!" Tessa's eyes popped wide when she entered the room. "Kaleb, it is well past time for bed."

"But they'll be gone in the morning," he whined, and he was right. If I had any say in it, we would be leaving by dawn.

"I have to check on the horse anyway," Liam ruffled Kaleb's hair. "If she eats too many of your mama's carrots, she won't be able to carry anyone home."

He better not let Jett hear him talking like that or it won't be my fists his pretty face will have to worry about.

Tessa tutted at the boy, all but lifting him by his ear and leading him to bed.

When they were nothing more than silhouettes at the end of the darkened hall, Liam's mouth popped open, but I was already moving. I wouldn't get caught up in conversations about what could have been. If he was going out back where Jett had been moved, I would be out front.

My scrambled thoughts chased me to the door, and I burst out of it, gulping down the crisp night air. It wasn't as cold as it had been in the Dreadwood, but there was a familiar bite in it. We were close enough to the castle that we wouldn't have to walk much the next day and it was apparent by the weather. Gone would be the balmy nights in Ellesmere—for a little while at least, and I was glad of it.

The orangey glow of a fire by the fallen fence caught my attention and I moved toward it.

"Lux?" I asked when I saw his bulky form warming in front of it. "I was just getting some air. Do you mind if I join you?"

"You'll do it even if I say no, right?" His words were followed by a chuckle, and he scooted back from the fire to look at me.

"Are you hiding out here?" I asked, picking up a stick on the edge of the fire and prodding the thickest log. A piece of bark sparked and peeled away as the flames bellowed up the side, before slowly dying in the dirt.

"Are you?" He countered.

"No—" He gave me a pointed look that warned me not to lie. "A little."

He shrugged, glancing at the house. Lanterns lighting the windows gradually flicked off one by one. "The Dowers can only host so many people, I figured I'd stay out here."

"I don't think Tessa minds having you around."

"She's a tough one." Lux's laugh was hearty and deep and there was a clear fondness for the woman. "I offered to stay—there's so much to be done around here."

"What about—you know..." Lowering my voice, I leaned closer to him. "The job."

"Working with Baltazar has never been simple work. But it always made sense. And even when it didn't..." He sighed and rubbed a palm over his face. "It didn't ever involve hurting anyone I—ah. You're a good one. And the situation he's put me in here compromised the morsel of morals I have."

Emotion clogged my throat, and he continued, "you'd do well to get yourself out too."

"So that's it then?" I lobbed a punch at his bicep that he deftly blocked. "You tell me you care about me, then you're going to leave?"

"Well technically you'll be leaving, but yes."

I was quiet for a minute, before remembering something. "What about your cat?"

"Ginger?" the corners of his mouth turned up in a smile. "She'll find me—always does."

Halfway across the continent? I almost asked, but I didn't want him to think I was trying to convince him. Instead, I blurted, "I'm sorry about your hand."

He held up his clean bandages and wiggled his fingers. "Your sister said they're almost as good as new."

"Right," I chewed on my lower lip. "But I know how it feels to be hurt by someone you care about."

Lux made a sound of realization. "I can't speak on what went down between you and pretty boy, but as far as my hand is concerned, I'm

actually proud of you."

My mouth fell open. I cut off his fingers, and he was...proud? Maybe it was good he was retiring. The job must have been rotting his senses.

"Don't act so surprised," shadows danced in his eyes, which had nothing to do with the flames. "We both heard what Baltazar said to you that day. But you disarmed me—twice. I wouldn't have done anything differently if our roles had been reversed. You should always be prepared to do whatever you must, to win."

"I only bested you because of my magic." I tugged on the damned bracelet as I spoke—feeling powerless.

He placed a heavy hand on my shoulder and forced me to look at him. "Your magic isn't what makes you special, Jane. Take it from the man who trained you—it's your inability to give up."

I nodded, but there was no conviction in it. "There's truly no way to take it off, then?"

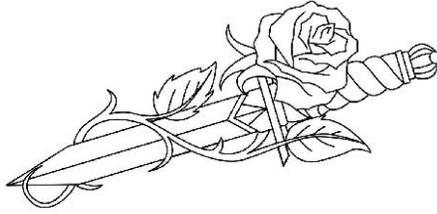
"Not that I know of." His brows furrowed as he examined my face like he was searching for something in its lines. "Want to know something?"

"If I say no, you'll tell me anyway, right?" I asked, taking his earlier words.

He smirked, but his mouth flattened when he began to speak. "I think you scare him."

"I—"

Lux held up his hand and went on, "for a man who craves control as much as Baltazar does, he's forgotten you came into this without access to magic. And now he's fanned the flames of his own destruction by underestimating you."



Even though I planned on checking on my mare before laying down, I didn't want to risk the potential encounter with Liam. The kids and Tessa had spoiled her with vegetables, and I knew she was secured in the fence beyond their greenhouse.

I made my way into the room quietly, taking in the filled shelves hanging on the walls. With intricately carved figurines, framed hand prints, a child's drawing of the Dower family that included a man floating above those that remained.

An ache filled my chest when I turned the knob.

"Turning in?" The lantern was dimmed but I could see Lou propped up by the headboard, resting her eyes. What was more surprising though, was Driata's head resting in her lap.

My sister's face was ruddy, and tear tracks lined her cheeks.

"Is she hurt?" I made my way over to the other wooden bed and pulled at the laces of my boots.

"Not physically."

Driata was most likely just tired of not having her own chambers, her shampoos, and gowns. "Did you remind her we'd be home tomorrow, and she can pamper herself all she wants?"

Lou's head snapped to attention, and she narrowed her eyes at me. "She may have noticed the tax this life has taken on the people later than you, but she's seen it."

"Oh." My mind went to the questions my sister had asked at dinner. I thought she was being insensitive, but she was concerned?

"Have you ever taken a moment to ask her if she was alright after everything she experienced out there?" Lou's voice was nothing more than a breath, but they felt like a slap.

"I meant to—"

"Well while you and everyone else were busy allowing her to heal all of your wounds, she was carrying many of her own." A muscle feathered in her jaw, and I saw it there all at once. Driata's distance and the slight details she had given since she found me, frantically pinged around my brain. She had watched all those people die...and she was only alive because Lux saved her.

She must have been terrified—and was so distracted by my own circumstance that it hadn't clicked.

Gods.

Pulling the covers over myself and closing my eyes, I wondered how I could fix it—fix everything. There was no excuse not to find a balance between helping her with what she went through and sorting out my issues.

The door creaked and my eyes splintered open. Lantern light from the hall flooded in around a silhouette.

Liam.

The pair in the bed across the confined space was snoring softly, so I whispered to avoid waking them, "can I help you?"

The snicking of metal on leather made me cast my eyes down to his hands undoing his belt. "I'm going to bed—early day and all that."

"Lux has a fire going."

"Driata and Lou are sleeping." He smiled as my face scrunched in confusion. "I thought we were stating facts about our companions."

I pulled the blanket higher around me, though sweat was climbing up the back of my neck. My tongue felt too thick in my mouth while I searched for words.

With one stride he was at the foot of the bed, flicking his wrist so his belt slid free of the loops in his trousers. "Scoot over."

"No," I said, already shaking my head. "Go sleep in the sitting room."

"Sitting rooms are called such because one doesn't sleep there." His damned dimples carved into his cheeks.

"Then sleep outside—there's plenty of room there."

"Honestly," he said, clicking his tongue. "I think Tessa would be disappointed with your inhospitality."

"I don't care. It's not my house to be hospitable in." Fanning my fingers out on both sides of me, I judged there were about four inches in either direction of the remaining mattress.

One more step, and he was at the side of the bed leaning down so his knuckles depressed the bed. "Scooch or I move you."

"You wouldn't da—"

Liam's hands shot under my calf and my shoulder at the same time, faster than I could react. He rolled me, so I was facing away before leaping in the bed behind me. His thigh pinned my legs together and his arm wrapped around mine, before locking together.

"It's not so bad, is it?" He chuckled into my hair, having managed to plant his face above mine on the pillow, so I couldn't head butt him.

His forearm was pressed against my breasts, just low enough that I couldn't bite him. I wriggled my body trying to slip his grasp, hoping to

break any one of his bones.

"Fine," I huffed, stretching, moving, and pulling at my body—exasperatedly. "I'll sleep outside, just let me go."

"Jane." His voice was a husky warning, and I froze. Everything from my collar up to my hairline was hot with embarrassment when I felt what good my struggling did—pressing right against my ass.

His limbs unfurled from around me, and we rolled onto our backs—we laid there quietly, shoulder to shoulder each of us hanging a bit off our side of the bed.

Liam's eyes were clamped closed, and I did my part not to look down at the raised bit of blanket at the top of his thighs...but sleep wouldn't come.

Every so often, I would listen a bit harder to his soft breaths, trying to tell if he was faking it—sleep, that is.

It was because I was listening so intently, that I heard the splintering sound of wood breaking. Liam tensed beside me, which confirmed he was in fact faking it.

"What was—" Though my murmured words had been barely over a breath, he turned onto his side and clamped a hand over my mouth.

My eyes were wide, trying to readjust to the darkness of the room. Glancing at him, I nodded signaling that I understood. He lifted a leg, and the inside of his thigh brushed over the tops of mine. His hand lifted the cuff of his pant leg where he pulled free a dagger—my dagger—and tucked it into my hands before rising from the bed.

Wrapping my hand around the carved pommel gave me a sense of peace and comfort, I didn't realize until that moment how fully I had been missing it. My bare feet padded on the chilled wooden floor when I followed Liam from the bed to the closed door.

I wanted so badly for it to be nothing, one of the broken-down shutters falling in a gale of wind—but the sloppy, drunken sounds of arrogant male laughter filled the home. The intruders stomped, hooted, and seemed to break every fragile thing they got their hands on.

My grip tightened and loosened on the dagger and I stretched my neck in preparation for a fight.

Liam took a step in front of me and pulled open the door, it creaked which would draw attention, but we were prepared.

"Back here," one of the men shouted as he barreled down the hall. Liam reached his arm out and the man crashed into it. He stumbled to the floor. But not before grappling with one of the shelves as he tried to catch himself but dropped it—and its contents—on his own head instead.

The drunk fool had knocked himself unconscious. Red fabric from his cap caught my eye and I realized who these men were at the same time Driata screamed. "Raiders!"

Stepping over the body, I flipped the dagger in my hand and crept along the wall on stealthy feet. The men ransacking the kitchen refocused on finding out who the woman was that screamed. The idiots were talking in exaggerated whispers, seeming to think they could still sneak up on my sister—who clearly knew they were there.

One such raider ambled to the hall's entrance, mumbling something about first dibs when he saw me. He gave me a grin full of greying gums. "Well, hey the—"

My foot slammed up into his chest, and he bowled into his short friend, stepping in behind him. Shortie stabilized Toothless, but not before I smashed my palm into his nose. "You wittle bith," he lisped, as blood teemed down his face.

"That wasn't very nice, was it?" Shortie said, his voice laced with sugar.

"Do me a favor, Jane?" Liam called back from the room where Driata was whimpering.

Shortie tried to side-step me, his tongue lashing out like he could taste my sister's fear.

"A little busy here," I reminded him through gritted teeth as my knee met Shortie's groin.

"Do something Leath, don't just fucking stand there." The little Raider gripped himself from the floor while trying to make a grab for my legs. Toothless—Leath—let go of his bloody nose long enough to remember he had a sword strapped to his side.

I ducked as he sliced it for my head and jammed my fist into his gut.

He grunted, but didn't back down, stepping on Shortie's face to dive for me. Lower still, I slammed my dagger into his thigh—slightly hoping that was the side the nasty asshole was packing on.

Leath's scream filled the house and the crashing from the kitchen stopped as boot steps echoed and the toothless one fell on top of the short one.

"I was going to say," Liam appeared next to me holding two of Driata's sharpened arrows. "Show them just how *not nice* you can be?"

He winked and slashed down into Shortie's and Leath's necks, letting blood spray onto the pale flower-dabbled wallpaper.

"We're going to owe Tessa a cleaning fee," I sighed, wiping my dagger on my pant leg.

"If it helps, the Raiders don't normally leave any of their victims alive."

"Let's repay the favor then, shall we?"

A skinny man rounded the corner, and I slammed my dagger into his gut, thinking of his people killing my sister's entire traveling party. Leaving her

so frightened, she cried herself to sleep.

I bellowed my rage into his face as he fell, already leaping around him to find the others.

Lux was in the kitchen, his rounded axe coming down on a blonde man's shoulder as two more jumped on the retired assassin from behind.

Wrapping one's long hair around my hand, I slammed my knee into his back—the other dove at me with knuckles lined in metal and punched me in the side of my face.

My jaw cracked and my head snapped back. White spots clouded my vision as I straightened.

"If she wanted it rough—" Liam jerked the man away from me, stabbing the arrows up into his shoulder blades and exposing his chest to me. "She would beg for it."

Fighting against nausea that the pain in my face was causing, I darted forward burying my blade in his chest.

"Right," blinking my eyes to clear the stars, I pulled away.

The Raider slumped onto the floor which swayed underfoot. Strong arms caught me.

Metal clanged and Lux cursed a warning as he fell.

A Raider, near Lux's stature, waved a cast iron skillet at Liam and me.

"Driata didn't mention how ugly you all were," Liam murmured—or maybe he shouted as he shoved me behind him.

"*Driata?*" The man's head tilted as he looked at me with hooded eyes. "We've been looking for you."

"Look at her again—and I carve out your eyes before I kill you." Liam's voice held a promise of violence beyond what we had done in the once innocent home.

"Found her!" The man's shout had come from the same hall as Driata and Dowers' screeches, filling me with unyielding rage. I turned, but Liam must have too because the Raider took the opportunity to grip my hair—yanking me back to him.

He lifted me so that I was barely able to stand on the balls of my feet, then pressed his tree trunk of a body flush against my back.

"Why'd you run?" His nose dragged along my cheek. "Our fun had only just begun."

He thought I was—oh Gods, what had he done to Driata in those woods?

My hand spiked the dagger to his chest, but he brought the skillet down on my wrist. Bone crunched while metal pinged on the wood floor, as my dagger fell to the ground.

Warmth trailed down my cheek and the beast of a man tilted his head to the side, hot breath seething my jaw bone. He gripped my neck and traced the path of my tears with his tongue.

Bile coated my throat.

"Don't do it," the Raider warned. But I was clutching my wrist—I hadn't moved. "Try anything and I'll snap her pretty neck. Wouldn't that be a shame?"

Oh—Liam.

"Go help." It was slurred and pain sliced my face, while the tang of copper and vomit filled my mouth.

Through watery eyes, I watched him shake his head.

"*Please.*" I choked out.

Liam looked at me, then back toward the hall. Then he turned and ran.

Good.

"Now," a gurgled laugh assaulted my nerves as they all fired warnings. "Where were we?" Against my senses, I relaxed my entire body, letting it go limp and feeling the hair rip and snap at my scalp.

The Raider lost his balance with the new weight. I planted my feet on the ground and bent at the knees, as he tried to pull me back up. I banged my skull as hard as I could into his face.

My head shrieked in agony, but not as loudly as the man who was wildly swinging his frying pan at my head. Bobbing away from him, I heard Lux groaning from the floor and glanced to see his eyelids fluttering.

Any day now, Bud.

Lux was still sprawled out, with his fingers loosely curled around the handle of his axe.

You should always be prepared to do whatever you must, to win. My mentor's words echoed around in my head with the ringing of my concussion, and so I lunged for his fallen weapon.

The skillet smashed into my spine and I collapsed onto the floor. Rolling, I lifted the axe and plunged it up between the man's thighs and through his—probably tiny—dick. He howled like a dying dog and hunched over his wrecked manhood.

The axe fell from my hands and I dragged myself onto my knees, through a growing pool of sticky blood...toward the man I owed death.

Trembling hands gripped my arms from behind and I flailed.

"Shh, we've got you." Driata's healing magic rushed into me while Tessa helped right me, examining my face and body.

"How much of this is yours?" Tessa asked, her hands fretting over my clothes covered in blood.

A deep, gasping sob choked out of the Raider's mouth and I turned away from the fretting women to see Liam standing over him. He aimed my dagger at the Raider's face. "I made you a promise, did I not?"



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Lunasa's castle grounds were bustling with activity when we arrived at the gates. There were carriages teeming with well-dressed nobles. The contrast of rich fabrics stitched into gowns and suits to the tanned patches of dead grass busting through fading cobblestones was startling.

Servants moved throughout the crowds, emptying wagons and carts that spilled over with imports like produce and soil.

Ripened apples were kicked and rolled under polished shoes as the painted faces of noblewomen squawked orders about their luggage.

"What's this?" Driata's weary eyes scanned the drive with alarm. She magicked us straight up to the castle, so to avoid the glaring guards.

Which, seeing the patchwork clothes we were wearing, made sense at the time. But now, even having scrubbed clean all the blood that had coated us in the late hours of the night—we stood out in the busy crowd.

The nobles most likely would think we were the help, but the workers had eyes and knew our faces well. Standing there and gawking would do us no favors.

Grabbing Driata's arm, I hauled her to the side of the building where there was an entrance to the tunnels below the keep.

Lou and Liam kept to our heels as we darted for the cover of the shadows.

The stone had a frigid bite against my fingers as I dragged them along the crevices in the wall. As I searched for the one that protruded just a bit more than the others, I felt my growing nerves.

There.

I looked over my shoulder to ensure that no one had seen us and pressed my palm into it. It slid back and let out a puff of air as the secret door shifted open. Ushering the others inside, I followed—sliding through sideways before it could right itself.

Liam reached overhead and unhooked an unlit lantern from the wall. The knob creaked when he spun it. A warm, yellow flame burst to life behind the glass, illuminating the dust motes we roused with our arrival.

Driata let out a tiny gasp as her eyes adjusted to the dim light. "Has this always been here?"

"I think these passages were built when the castle was." I shrugged, trying to decide which of the split tunnels ahead to take. The passages led to all manner of places in the castle and beyond, but I needed to sort out where we would all be most expected.

After the long trip, I only wanted to be alone, but our group couldn't part until I deposited at least Lou and Dri somewhere they wouldn't get lost.

While Lou didn't know her way around the castle at all, she would be taught. Especially once she was introduced as my seamstress and equally so due to working with Baltazar.

I tapped my lower lip, in thought. Dri and I couldn't be seen in the clothes we borrowed from the Dowers—it would only raise suspicion.

"This way," Liam decided for me, taking the one that curved to the left. His knowledge of the tunnels matched mine, and he could easily go off on his own.

An irritating part of me was glad he didn't.

We wound through the inner walls of the only home I ever knew, like mice in search of crumbs.

Muffled voices bounced around us from various rooms I could guess were sitting areas and the grand hall. My guess rivaled anyone else's, to why the tunnels had been built. Perhaps, in case of an attack or disaster, but they must have long been forgotten by anyone of import by the time Baltazar discovered them.

They were perfect for him to host his—what I once thought small—band of misfits and criminals. A chamber well below the recesses of even the dungeon had been crafted for training and quarters for his displaced employees. The levels above had walls that amplified voices beyond them—an act of magic that allowed for Baltazar's spies to steal away important information and for his thieves to steal away important objects.

"Where are we?" Lou whispered when the lantern didn't serve well to brighten the darkest recesses of the tunnels.

Listening to the sounds of banging metal and the cursing grievances of overworked servants, I spoke normally. "Behind the kitchens."

Dri jumped at the sudden too loud noise.

Liam's deep chuckle bounded around the confined space. "And you don't have to whisper, my brother has been thorough in his spell work."

"Oh." Driata tilted her head while she too heard the laments of the tired workers. "Then I'll finally ask—why are there so many people here?"

"I don't know..." I paused, trying to figure out how many days we had been gone. "Father's traveling party should have been several days out still—at best."

Driata shook her head. "Your family-to-be had the entire group magicked back here as a demonstration of goodwill."

"Servants and all," Lou added, leaning against a dust-ridden wall.

"Maveri made them travel for days—when he had such magic?" I knew that other kingdoms' magics hadn't suffered the same fate as Lunasa's, but to also know that Maveri was already wielding it as a tool...didn't sit well with me.

"The mad king didn't think you would show." Lou shrugged, a half-smile tugging at her mouth. "His staff took wagers on it."

"It was a test?" I asked, unsure of why it mattered. Though I was largely more worried that I passed than of what would have happened if I failed.

Liam cut in then, catching my eye, "You can fall into crises about the idiocy you're marrying into later—none of this explains those nobles being outside."

"We won't find the answers to anything just standing here." Driata huffed, planting her hands on her hips.

"Then, by all means, *Princess*," Liam gave her an exaggerated bow. "Lead on."

"You've called me by name this whole time, no need to title me now."

"And you've managed to make yourself useful." His eyebrow peaked at the challenge and Dri crossed her arms over her chest and adjusted, so she was facing away from him.

Lou kicked off the wall, squaring her thin shoulders and I pinched the bridge of my nose. "I'm exhausted. So if you're about to argue, don't."

"I was only going to say, I think we could also use a drink." Driata cleared her throat, "I don't..."

Liam chuckled when she trailed off, turning heel and moving further down the corridor. Lou's eyes locked on Driata, her mouth opening before she snapped it closed.

Glancing between the two, I jerked my head in Liam's direction where shadows had already started to consume his form.

"Right." Lou motioned for me to lead, and we followed the sound of his retreating footsteps.

The corridor opened to a narrow, winding stairway and I finally knew where we were headed.

"My tower?" My voice was barely more than a hiss as I stomped after Liam.

"Do you have a better suggestion?" He asked without turning around. "I'd offer up my chambers, but I'm certain Lou would rip my head from my shoulders."

"You've never been there," I said, panic gripping my throat. "How do you even know the way?"

I moved my rooms after...

"If you think that I haven't made it my mission to know how to get to you at all times—you'd assume wrong." His posture was stiff when he spoke, reminding me of how he had been right before he stabbed me.

My heart was an erratic bird trying to escape on broken wings. But I pressed on despite it. Or perhaps, to spite it. "In order to kill me?"

His boots scraped on the stone when he faced me, clearing the few steps between us in the span of a breath.

My back slammed against the wall as he pinned me there in a cage made from his body. One hand posted above my shoulder, the other tilting my chin, so I met his gaze. "If I'd ever been ordered to kill you, Jane, you'd have long been dead."

"You could try," My eyes narrowed on the silver pools of his. A challenge, perhaps a threat. He saw what I could do—even with the bracelet, and *in that* he wouldn't catch me off guard again. *But this...*my mind warned, knowing that him being so close was doing something to me that was risking everything.

"My mark has never missed a target."

"You missed my heart." At the mention, the scar over my chest seemed to ache, a reminder of the betrayal—a warning that I was betraying myself.

"My mark has never missed a target," he repeated. His calloused fingers were warm at my chin and the scent of him settled around me.

I was vaguely aware of Lou and Dri's approaching footfalls. But it didn't matter that they were getting nearer. Nothing mattered but that—the place where his skin met mine. *Fuck.*

"You're admitting to so easily being able to kill me," I said, barely managing to keep my voice even as he nodded. "Then why should I let you touch me?"

Liam's palm slid down my chin until his fingers were loosely gripping my throat. He tugged, just enough to close the inch of a gap between our chests. My body was a pyre, burning up at the contact.

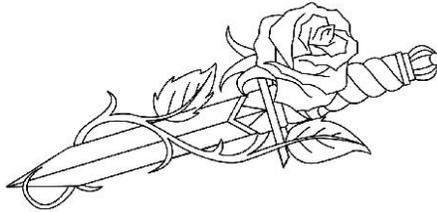
The stubble on his cheek brushed the arch of my ear as he whispered, "you shouldn't."

I didn't move—I couldn't, even when his hand left me and the cold of the musty cellar draped itself around every part of me that he touched. Even as he turned and descended back down the stairs, and when his departure exposed Driata and Lou's shocked expressions.

"Well..." Driata trailed off, clasping her hands in front of her awkwardly like she didn't know what to do with them.

"That was..." Lou started, but she looked to be grasping for words too.

Shaking my head, I worked to calm the nerves he so easily frayed. "Don't."



The passage narrowed the further up we climbed, before we were finally greeted by the wooden door that led into the tower I claimed for my room.

I chose that tower for its sheer distance, at the farther point of the castle from my family. The servants had moved my belongings just days after...after she died.

Struggling to even mentally say the words were my own burden—especially so soon after the mind fuckery that was the blister berries and then the subconscious trip the hags had put me through.

But standing there staring at the unadorned door to the tower, made me realize what day it was—and why all the nobles had come. How I let myself forget was beyond me, though maybe it could be excused by everything going on. My birthday was the next day.

My insides hollowed out as my mind ran through the days leading up to that moment. Frantically counting them down and ticking them off in my head while I gripped the iron knob like it was a lifeline.

The blessings ball—my father's celebration for my mother and I's shared birthdays. He didn't care that it would officially mark the third year she had been gone. The celebrations had gone on despite it, and each year I was reminded that she killed herself on my sixteenth birthday.

But I hadn't—I thought, as I stood there on the landing that led to my room, with Driata and Lou waiting to be let in.

It was my mother's favorite tower—the one she chose for her personal sitting rooms. Nearest to her garden, far enough away from my father. And with its views, she could pretend she wasn't trapped. The window to the right where our kingdom met the gnarled Dreadwood. Beyond that, the boundary that stood between us and Faerie...and the window to the right that looked toward Ellesmere where the land touched the sea. She could pretend those were her escapes. That she could and would escape the Kingdom and climb aboard a ship or scale that mountain...

"Jane?" Driata asked, her voice soft.

The burning streams seeping down my face told me what she was asking. Normally I would have scrubbed the tears away and brushed her off, but I noticed something different in her on our travels. I finally saw beyond the princess that had been groomed to be a perfect spouse.

"The blessings ball." My voice cracked and Driata was there, rushing toward me and sweeping the fallen hair from my damp face.

"It's tomorrow," she finished for me, eyes wide as she pulled me into her arms. And for the first time in our lives, I knew she understood.

Lou cleared her throat, choking on the emotion pouring from us. "I think it's time for those drinks.

I didn't wipe away the signs of my distress, didn't mask it with anger the way I so often did. Nodding, instead. I let them pull me into my chambers as the stark sense of loss was accompanied by what I just gained. There was peace in it, being with two people who didn't have to stay with you, but simply wanted to be there.

"The apartment I have over my bar is bigger than this." Lou snorted and sat down on the stone floor with the bottle of dark liquor I had stashed in a trunk sitting under my window.

It *was* a small space; I could give her that, looking at the room.

A plush mattress sat atop the layered rugs my mother picked and next to that, one hobbled nightstand I bought from a servant looking to toss it with the castle wastes.

The armoire across from them hung open—the door on it never truly closed, and I hadn't let anyone come in to fix its hinges. All manner of fabrics from gowns made for me to wear only once, spilled out of it.

The trunk where I would sit to sketch below my window ledge contained a false bottom. The top part of it held shoes, heavy enough to keep the wooden panel down that concealed my weapons and supplies for jobs.

Only two decorations filled the space and marked it as mine—a long-dead potted plant sitting on a padded stool by the barren window, and the tapestry that concealed the hidden door opposite the main exit.

I shrugged, snatching the neck of the bottle, and feeling the heavyweight of the thick glass. Tipping the bottle back, the warm liquid seared my throat.

Driata's face scrunched when she sniffed the contents of the bottle, "this smells of every man that's ever come onto me."

"That's because men need liquid courage to speak to a beautiful woman." Lou winked at my sister, not worried at her boldness. "They use it to cover the stench of desperation and failed dreams."

Dri's face stained red, and her eyes went wide before she cast them at the ground, a faint smile pulling at her lips.

My head tilted while I studied my sister in a new light. Consuming the information I never asked for and having previously made assumptions of my own. "I always thought you liked the attention."

"You were meant to." Driata coughed down a sip before continuing. "Arius showed interest in you early on, Gemma tended to father, so he would need her around more than he needed her to wed, and Olivia was being groomed to be an asset to the throne."

"So you were just expected to go along with it? You had no say?" Lou's brow furrowed.

"Look at what they've done to Jane." Driata waved her hand at me. "She didn't get to pick Arius. He was suitable and chose her."

My heart raced a furious beat when my brain realized what she was saying. I thought I didn't have a choice because my pairing would help Lunasa, and Ellesmere was our strongest ally. But if none of us had a choice...how was that fair?

"How have you not wed yet then? Or at least received offers?" Lou asked, her interest piqued as she threw back another swig. The only one of us—I noted—that didn't flinch at the taste.

"Courtly gossip is a strange thing. My father has brought suitors in mass from all over several times a year—a ball for every occasion—and I would

play my part. But just when the men would ready themselves to bend a knee, rumors would surface of my barren womb, my penchant for talking to animals, or my forgetfulness in bathing, and they would leave."

That time, Driata took down a mouthful of the liquor and for several moments, I only stared at my sister, and she blinked quietly back at me. Then, as her words settled around us, we each burst into riotous laughter.

"You—made up—stories—about yourself—to avoid..." Each time I tried to speak, my mind would go over what she said again, and I lost myself in a fit all over again.

By the time we finally settled, I was dabbing fat tears from my eyes and my lungs ached. Looking at her again, I saw her in such a different light and having a new respect for the woman I never truly understood.

"Enough of that," Dri said finally, though her words slurred. "I want to know something."

"What's that?"

"Why did you come?" Her eyes bore into Lou, whose thumb circled the rim of the bottle she saved during our spell of amusement.

"I overheard Baltazar giving Lux orders to find Jane—and that she would be looking for you."

"And..." I led, gesturing for her to go on, knowing there had to be more of it than that.

"And nothing. You both went missing and I came after you."

Driata hummed, showing she wasn't really believing it either, but Lou turned a sharp expression on me. "Since we're asking prying questions. When are you going to finally say what's going on between you and Liam?"

"They were together once...before...well before Jane's mother..." Driata searched for the right words so soon after my breakdown.

"Before my mother died." The words that I practiced in my head at the door fell from my lips and a heaviness that had nothing to do with the booze settled in my chest.

Lou nodded slowly. "I thought there was a history."

"He proposed," Driata added, her face scrunched in thought. "It was quite romantic in a sense...except then he went away for a while."

I had a choke hold on the bottle, taking a slug of it each time one of the women spoke. "And when he came back, he turned into a prick."

"You love him." It wasn't a question, and the bluntness of Lou speaking my secret aloud made me struggle for breath.

"It doesn't matter," I said finally, hoping that we could just drop it.

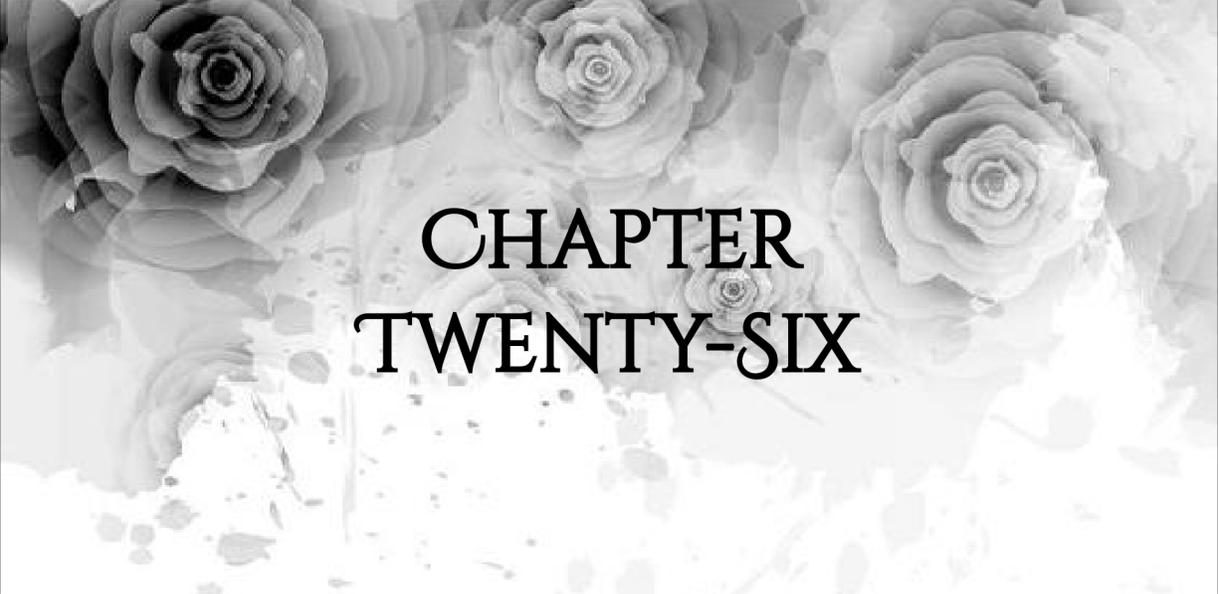
"But you do." My sister's voice had lowered as if she just remembered the walls had ears.

"I can learn not to." It was barely a whisper, and it said everything without saying anything at all. Because they didn't need to ask the rest. It was already a question I was asking myself. If it had been three years and I hadn't managed it yet... How would I ever?

Stretching, I stood. Realizing that I couldn't think of it anymore, I had to push it away to a place where the knowledge couldn't hurt me any longer. "I'm going in search of fun."

"You can't go out like that." Driata pointed to the layered dress I borrowed from Tessa and rose on wobbly legs. She ambled like a deer to my armoire and sifted through the gowns there.

"It's the whole reason we're hidden away." Lou chimed in though no one asked her. I didn't want to change. But my protests fell on deaf ears, the pair worked to dress me in a way fit to be seen by castle nobles.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

If I had known the walls of the castle would be moving as much as they were, I may not have left my chambers. But by then I was well and truly drunk, and I didn't really care about much at all.

The nobles were being placed in the usually vacant guest wing, but some of them floated about like spirits adrift.

Rounding a corner on silent almost stumbling feet, I overheard a group of them and slowed.

"The towns have gone to absolute ruin since we've relocated." One woman whined. *Duchess Tilby of the West*, the proud ruler of the Barrens, which meant she had every logical reason to hate my father and his cursed land. She and her husband took turns showing up each year after they relocated their primary estate to Ellesmere.

"I don't know how the king is even managing keeping up without his taxes." *Lord Weemble, of Luhne*. Yikes. Of course, he was concerned with taxes, I was sure even the guards couldn't pry an extra coin from our capital.

"Ellesmere practically owns everything now." Duke Tilby's deep voice added, surprising me by apparently showing up with his wife for a function

rather than a courtesan.

Their voices began to fade as they shuffled down the corridor, but it was a straightway, meaning I couldn't follow them since there would be no place to hide.

"Really?"

"Why do you think Maveri gifted us estates when the crops died?"

"The king is literally giving up his child to that heathen just to keep his support."

"If Maveri didn't already have that concubine of a wife, I'm sure one of the king's other daughters would be forfeit as well."

"Gods," Duchess Tilby gasped. "Have you seen that man?"

"*The horror.*" Her husband agreed, and I had to stifle a snort of laughter despite them being correct at the horror. I thought of my soon-to-be father-in-law and the unruly drool dribbling from his maw while he spoke of my child-bearing body. That any woman should have to be chained to him even willingly was disturbing. His son was bad enough, his attractive face not making up for his lack of...well everything else. *A prize-winning boar.* I hadn't met the queen during my visit, and come to think of it, she hadn't been at the ball they attended years ago either. Perhaps he feasted on her in desperate hunger.

"Let's just collect our favor and get out of this hellhole as quickly as possible." Lord Weemble offered hopefully.

Staggering around the corner when the last of their voices disappeared, I tripped on the velvet blue material of my gown's train, barely catching myself on the rough fabric of a woven tapestry. Righting myself, with wide eyes and a slurring giggle, I patted the wall in thanks for catching me and

continued my way to find something—anything really—more fun than talking about my old relationship over drinks.

What the nobles said nagged at a distant part of my mind, and I squashed the thoughts away. *Ellesmere practically owns everything now.* The thought put up a solid fight, but it lost when I had to focus on the placement of my feet.

It was strange, how similar the halls of the home I spent my whole life in look to the one I would be soon moving into across the continent. But I could see when I looked down how the rugs were fraying after years of being stepped on stitches where the threads had been repaired. There were also tiny cracks in the stone that we should have hired someone to fix, perhaps opening jobs to some out-of-work commoners. It was after I stepped on one of those fractures, that the conversation I'd overheard echoed in my mind.

Had Lunasa reached the dregs of its seemingly endless well of riches? I saw the treasury and knew it was still full of gold and jewels each time I liberated a bit for Lou to pawn to give to those in need. It was beyond what anyone's family required to survive a lifetime. But was it not enough to maintain a kingdom?

Was the mad king behind our continued survival? My mind went to the mass of imports being hauled in when I arrived, and my jaw worked as I thought of the implications in that. How much debt had my father accrued to maintain his way of life?

If that was happening, and the towns and cities were still starving...where was all the money going? The thought was sobering to a washed-away mind, but I couldn't piece everything together. I stopped at a window

looking out over the front lawn and saw that most of the carriages were gone, having been emptied into our stores.

How much of the food would go to the people? Any?

My hands fisted at my sides as I wondered how much longer he would watch the citizens starve—some of them have survived a lifetime of it, long enough to have supported him before the curse took its root that time around. He was so content to watch them die, apparently.

"What do we have here?" A silky voice reached me from down the hall.

I ignored him, regarding the mountains in the distance, wondering how the Dowers would fare after we left them. Looking at my bare finger where my engagement ring had been and knowing that Driata had left a hefty sack of gold too, I knew they could make it at least a bit longer.

But then what?

The male from down the hall whistled as he drew nearer, and I finally turned. He was tall, with a thin build and as he moved closer, I noticed his slanted eyes. They looked familiar, but nothing else about the blonde man did, though his bright, emerald-colored tunic and smart trousers marked him as a member of the traveling nobles. The strangest thing though was that he was staring right at me, and it seemed...trying to get my attention.

"Can I help you?"

"I certainly hope you will since you've robbed me."

Oh, shit. Had that man been an unwilling donor to my cause? I really hoped not. "I don't know what you're talking about."

An unsteady step back and the fogginess around my mind reminded me I was far too drunk for a fight of any kind. I also wasn't going to let a strange man blow my cover. Not to mention...

"I've been robbed of my very breath."

A bubble of laughter escaped me. "Oh, no sir. You must be mistaken."

Please, Gods don't let the man embarrass himself, not after the day I had. The week if I was being honest.

"Sir?" He gripped his chest. "You wound me."

Not as much as I could have if Driata didn't take my dagger before I left my chambers.

My chin dipped in apology even while I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. "That was not my intention." *Sir.*

"Well, politeness never hurt anyone." He propped himself on the wall next to me. "I think I will manage to survive it."

"That's good. It would be improper to have blood on my hands." I wiggled my fingers, before twisting them in my skirts. They weren't the supple and unmarked hands of a noble.

"I don't know, I've got a nagging feeling that you would like to be stained." He waggered while giving me a dimpled grin.

My eyebrow peaked, as the man finally gained my interest. Every so often, I would find a man that managed not to bore me too thoroughly, and I would have a bit of fun with them. No names, no titles, no history. And though I fretted the first and second time that my honor and reputation would be sullied...they seemed reasonably quick to keep our new shared secret.

He stretched and adjusted in front of me when I gave him a smirk in answer. Skinny as he was, he filled up my vision now with how near he was standing. "Why would a beauty like yourself be walking around unattended?"

He wasn't really my type—nice, even for a noble and a bit too old if the crinkling around his eyes was any indication. Though, it was always hard to

tell with witches.

My smile widened, and I looked up through hooded lashes. "I'm not alone."

"Not now at least. No—now you get the honor of accompanying me to the ball tomorrow, you lucky thing." He winked when he leaned with puckered lips and grabbed my hand like he was going to place a peck on it.

But I leveraged it to grip his chin, reaching up so my lips brushed his. It was gentle, his hands feathered my waist. I dragged him closer, so I was pressed against the sill, the stone biting into the tops of my thighs.

Gods. I felt...nothing. It was like kissing a block of cheese.

His tongue danced at the part in my mouth asking for permission.

"You know what they say?" Liam called, appearing behind the man. He yanked the noble back by the collar and made me wish the floor would swallow me into its cavernous belly. "Three is company, four is a crowd."

The man jerked away from Liam's grip, and I could hear him grinding his teeth though there was a body between us now, blocking my view.

"Four?"

"Me." Liam flared a hand to indicate himself, "*Princess Jane*, you, and your overinflated ego."

"You forget your place boy," The noble spat, showing a bit of his truth—his entitlement. "And it is well below one where you can speak to me in public."

"I don't want to talk to you." Liam's brow cocked as he spoke, I had seen him give the expression before. It usually ended violently for those on the receiving end.

"Then why are you interrupting?" The man's pale face was turning red, but if his posture was any indication, he wasn't embarrassed but pissed. A

vulture guarding his meal.

Liam waved a hand to indicate the noble move further away from me. "To offer you a tour of the palace grounds."

The man paused, clearly thrown off by the sudden change. But then, "Come find me later?"

"No, no you misunderstand," Liam spoke quietly, gripping the man by the collar of his shirt and tugging him up, so they were nose to nose. "If you don't make your exit, you'll meet the ground from that window."

Liam pointed to the arched window behind me, and I glanced again below. Just high enough that at speed the noble would minimally break several bones. Liam released the fabric of his tunic and smoothed it before removing his hands entirely, "your choice."

The man made a sound of disgust and took several hurried steps back. "Baltazar will hear of this."

Before I could wonder how a noble that I didn't recognize knew my mentor so casually, the smell of magic announced his departure.

"You just can't keep yourself from getting into trouble?" Liam snapped, turning to me while rubbing his temples.

"I hadn't been in any trouble." I propped my ass on the window ledge gauging the distance between myself and the ground in case Liam thought to shove me. Or in case I jumped.

"Are you drunk?" He asked, massaging tanned skin, making the corners of his eyes out and in, up and down.

I chose not to answer, but the flare of his nostrils told me that was a mistake. His inhale was sharp, and his hands fell away from his face. "Are you fucking drunk?"

Shaking my head, I said decisively, "No."

"You smell like a pub." His eyes narrowed on me, scraping down my face and pausing on my neck like he could see my hurried pulse, then back up.

"And you smell—" I stopped myself—barely—from admitting that he smelled delicious if only because my mouth chose that moment to hiccup.

He sighed but his posture didn't loosen with the breath. "There are too many nobles around for you to be this drunk right now."

"It's unbecoming." I flashed my teeth in a mockery of a smile while I tugged at the hem of my sleeve. "I'm aware and I truly don't care."

"Not that... Jane, you don't see how they look at you."

"No Liam—I do. Why do you think I left my chambers?"

"For attention?"

"For *fun*." Steepling my hands in front of me, I weighed my options. Unfortunately, my anger weighed out. "What if I told you, I planned on letting him fuck me?"

Something sparked in his eyes before his face became as unreadable as stone. "You wouldn't dare."

My head tilted, and I glared at him. Thinking of what implications would make him speak out on my actions. "Why, because it may upset Arius?"

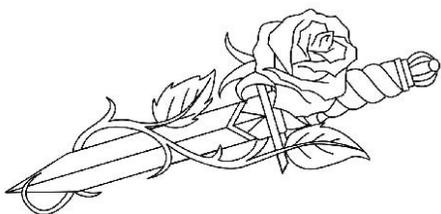
"Because if you ever let him touch you," he said, turning on his heel, already walking away again. "I would have ripped out his spine."

My eyes popped wide and my mouth fell open. "You're a psychopath."

"For you." I thought I may have imagined his words, though I was sobering up by the second.

"For me?"

"Orders." He shrugged and disappeared around the corner.



If Liam thought that he could dismiss me and simply disappear that easily, he was mistaken.

The moment he rounded the corner, I kicked off my slippers—worrying the soles may make a sound and give me away—and followed him.

Which was why I had exited the passages to stand in a dusty, curtained alcove. I repressed a sneeze and suffered the peach-colored settee that was pressing into my hip. But I couldn't move, not at the risk of being seen or heard.

As it was, Baltazar's wing-tipped shoes clicked a furious beat each pass he took in front of the curtain. I could only imagine his face was pinched in barely concealed rage while Liam did his best at posturing calm.

But the last time I bore witness to my mentor's disappointment in his brother, it resulted in a barely functional hand for a time. Though, I figured Baltazar had something to do with it being healed given that Liam was still using them both. But that time, Liam had his talisman, and I still had it stashed among my things.

"You can't go around threatening nobles." The clacking of his shoes echoed his words, and further, his displeasure.

"He's an ass." Liam offered, unapologetically and I was sure it was paired with an expression masked in boredom.

"Nevertheless," Baltazar said, and his agreement surprised me. "Now he's become a pain in mine."

"He wouldn't normally show up to these things, why is he here?" My brows knit together as Liam spoke.

How important was the noble that he had driven the brothers into a strange unity?

"I'm not certain, but you need to keep him away from Jane." Baltazar seemed...perturbed. Which was, perhaps the most shocking of all. Angry, decisive, self-sure...but never uneasy.

"You're not sure?" Liam voiced my worries, reminding me that we both knew the man well.

"That's not your concern." Baltazar's voice was tense, though alluding to their being bigger problems at bay. "Just keep him away from her. He can't figure out what we're doing."

"He won't touch her again," Liam swore, with something akin to venom laced through the promise.

"Be sure of it." Baltazar stopped just outside of the curtain, and I could see the backs of his polished shoes pointed wherever it was Liam was standing. "And brother, don't think I haven't realized you're pushing boundaries."

"I haven't."

"You have." My mentor said calmly, though there was an undercurrent of violence. "And luckily so far they've aided my plan, but the moment they hinder it, I will tighten your leash."

Fading footfalls told me Liam had been dismissed, but the backs of Baltazar's feet warned that he remained. And being that near to him, with no witnesses—not even his brother to stop me, begged me to confront him. He had caused me much grief in the past several days that my fists ached to lash into him.

Baltazar had manipulated my every action for Gods knew how long, and those last few days had proven it. But he was stronger, faster, better trained...he'd proven that each time I sought to show him how much I learned, and he thoroughly put me back into my place.

Plus, he always seemed to be one step ahead of me, if not ten or twenty. Even Lux and Liam had been confused by his actions, not knowing what he stood to gain from giving them opposing orders. To beat him, I needed to plan without planning, make moves without lifting a finger and manage to catch him off guard, but his slights would not go unpunished.

No, when I won—whatever game we were playing—he would regret picking his game piece up at all.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

People danced around the party as the music dipped and swelled.

The woman nearest me spun offbeat in a circle of married nobles, whose wives were suspiciously absent.

She wore a primitive-looking gown crafted of white fur and red feathers. The combination of which made her look like she had skinned several unsuspecting rabbits and left them unclean on her trip. Nevertheless, the fabric alone probably cost more than a month's supply of the feast servants were carrying around on polished silver trays.

Everyone there was dressed just as gaudy though there were unexpected variations in color, textures and some looked as though their bodies had been painted with liquid gems and gold.

Driata was amongst the crowd, pleasing, smiling, doting, and collecting favor. She was putting on quite the spectacle given the argument she had with father the day prior.

Having finally escaped the dimly lit corridor where Baltazar and Liam had their secret exchange, I was corralled by a frantic Driata into a family dinner in my father's chambers.

At first, it was remarkably quiet without Oliver and Olivia. Ciaran was pissed he had been left behind, and Gemma was too focused on tending our father to notice me.

But father had stiffened when Driata entered behind me. "And just where have you been?"

"I wanted to... I—"

Silencing my sister with a nudge, I gave my father a nod, the only pleasantry he would receive. "I asked her to come with me. So, she wouldn't have to be cooped up for days on end in a carriage."

"You knew Maveri offered to transport us," My father said to Driata, hearing but ignoring me altogether.

"Jane will be leaving us, and I wanted the extra time with her." My sister offered the lie easily and I stifled my proud grin.

"Without warning?" His beady, bloodshot eyes narrowed on her. "I expect this behavior from Jane but not from you."

Ouch, that was a cheap shot—true...but still.

Opening my mouth to come to her aid, Driata stepped closer to the round table, her fingers gripping the edge as she leaned toward him. "You should remember, it is Jane's wedding that is saving your sorry ass and this kingdom."

My mouth had popped open in disbelief and Gemma had almost fallen out of her seat. Driata had never spoken to him like that.

And if the color rushing to his face proved anything, it was that. "You—you will not use that kind of language." He turned that anger on me, his shaking finger raised. "Did you tell her to speak to me this way, Janie?"

"That is not her name!" Driata's voice rose above his as her hands slammed down onto the table in fists rattling the dinnerware. "And if you,

for one single second, thought of anyone other than yourself you would know that. Instead, you sit there, wasting away but eating your fill while your people—my people—starve to death. And they don't even know why. Do the nobles know about your pathetic curse? Do they know that you've caused all of this?"

Her voice echoed around his sitting room, confronting my father's strained expression from every angle.

"Enough!" He dabbed at his splotchy face with his napkin while Gemma and Ciaran only stared on, with equal looks of absolute shock. "You will respect me."

"You may have my hand to pawn off to the highest bidder since that is all your children are good for." Driata had said, storming toward the door. "But you will never again have my respect."

But Dri was at the blessings ball, an event most likely planned hastily to do just what she accused, marry my remaining siblings off. And if what the Tilbys and Lord Weemble had claimed the day prior was true, our kingdom needed it now more than ever.

On the chance that was the case, and Driata didn't scare them off with her brilliant ruse to make herself secretly undesirable, she would surely have several offers by the evening's end.

She looked stunning with her sparkling diadem sitting amongst a crown of curls. Her cheeks had been rouged to make her look more modest, the long column of her neck was covered by pale lace and the gown she wore was crafted of the finest silks my father could import on such short notice. The golden tint of which complimented her eyes each time she focused them on another ill-fitted suitor.

I could see the difference since I was purposefully looking for it. Her smile wasn't as easy as I once thought it to be, and behind the sparkle, in her gaze, there was a dullness like her life drained away each time she was forced to give one attention.

If my father noticed my sister's act from the erected dais to the side of the vaulted room, he didn't show it. Which told me he didn't, otherwise he did and couldn't care. There was a ghost of a smile toying at the corners of his face as he sat propped, watching all three siblings mingle amongst the crowd.

He had given me one command—to keep up appearances, so I was loitering along the walls, swiping food as it passed me.

Liam was there too, though I noticed Baltazar missing. He made his way through the crowd, offering greetings to familiar faces before being swept into an upbeat dance.

A weasel-faced servant cleared his throat at the entrance to the great hall, and I nearly dismissed it before seeing a flash of white hair.

"Duke Vellum Tellyk and his son, Keeper of the Crown, Lord Baltazar Tellyk." The weary butler announced, and it felt like my heart and my stomach switched spaces.

A noble that put both Liam and Baltazar on edge so much that they were speaking on common ground, one I didn't recognize because he very rarely left his manor and had never visited the castle.

And as the shock of blonde hair, only a few shades darker than his eldest son's and eyes the same honey shade. I was an idiot—a stupid, idiotic woman that had kissed Liam's gods damned father.

Kill me...strike me down where I stand. Liam saw me kissing his father for fuck's sake.

If ever there was a time to acknowledge my rightness in not wanting to come to the function, it was at that very moment as Lord Tellyk's eyes met mine from across the room.

A server swept by me, and I ducked behind her, and into the herded bodies swinging around the woman draped in animal pelts. If I had any say in it, Liam wouldn't have to keep his father away from me as Baltazar requested. I would stay well away all on my own.

The crowd swallowed me as I made it deeper into the room. I was only occasionally stopped by nobles wanting to see the ring—my excuses for not having it was not landing well. There were also those annoying few, collecting favor by complimenting my outstanding match.

Was it though? Not likely—and the nobles probably knew it too, given the way the ones in the hall had spoken. But everyone also seemed to know which direction Lunasa was sliding, which was right into Ellesmere's grip.

"There you are." Driata popped out from between two guards I had shamelessly hidden behind. She gripped my forearm, "can I hide with you for a moment? I won't give you away to whoever you're avoiding, and I'll be gone before—"

"I don't mind," I said with a quiet laugh if only to stop her worrying explanation. Prying her death grip from my arm, I raised a brow in question.

She peeked around the taller of the two guards. "Father has invited every unattached potential match in existence it seems."

"Is that why Duke Tellyk is here?" I thought about the implications of that...did he want a wife after all those years?

"Ah, yes." Her nose wrinkled as she turned back to face me. "Baltazar warned me to stay away from that one."

Despite my anger with him, it was hard to entirely erase the bitter sting I got when she mentioned it. It wasn't that I wanted the crime lord to seek me out, but more so that I was used to it. But he hadn't and I wouldn't go to him until I had a firmer grasp on the knowledge I gained.

"You should stay away from Baltazar," I urged even though I knew she wouldn't listen. Baltazar was a lot of things, but his charisma is what wrapped everyone around his finger. His charm was surely one reason I had panted after him for so long.

"I thought we were past that." Driata shook her head, wringing her hands in front of her.

Biting my lip to silence an argument before it began, I huffed a sigh. "He's the reason Liam stabbed me."

"Right." I gaped at her, and she held up her hands, rushing on. "That's the story that Liam is telling and you're so quick to believe him after he *stabbed* you."

"Why would he lie about it?"

She squeezed my hand in her own and her voice was barely a breath when she finally seemed to remember I was waiting for an answer. Instead, she asked, "why wouldn't he?"

Glancing over her shoulder, I saw one of the older dukes attempting to wave her down and shoving past dozens of spinning bodies to head our way. "You have to go."

Driata peeked and her eyes went wide. "Catch up with you later."

She ducked away just as I made the decision that I had made enough appearances. I was going to head to my room for a nice, quiet rest, and most likely drinking until I could forget what day it was.

I had been breaking into heavily guarded estates and treasuries for three years. If I could do that, then I certainly could sneak out of my father's idea of a party.

I leaped back into the horde of nobles who danced like they would shatter if they stopped. Working to avoid inviting eye contact with them and hoped I wouldn't have to socialize with them for at least another year.

Well...there was the wedding...but that was a guest list problem for another day. I made it about halfway when the servant at the entrance cleared his throat once more. That time, the sound was choked like the man was sobbing. Squinting and leaning around the gasping nobles nearest me, I realized why everyone seemed to be taking several collective steps back. The music stopped, one of the string instruments screeching as the bow halted mid-note.

My hand covered my mouth as the horror of what I was seeing settled into me. Arius, dressed in a loose-fitted black tunic and pants, tailed by several of his palace guards fanning out behind him. But the real horror was the burlap bag he was holding so casually. The sack reminded me of a dying rose, still vibrant at the middle but ruined around the browning edges.

"Announce me," the prince hissed at the trembling servant and one of his guards pressed a long sword to the back of the poor man's neck. Though he spoke low, the words echoed in the silence of the space like a war drum.

"P—Prince Arius of Ellesmere," the man sputtered out finally as a dark spot spread on his trousers.

"What is the meaning of this?" At the sound of my father's rasp, the crowd parted, forming an aisle that Arius strolled calmly down.

The prince's boots squeaked on the drippings from his satchel, splashing onto the shining quartz floor. "You'll be happy to know, I've learned who

stole my father's crown."

"Is that what this display is about?" My father's frail hand was lifted from the arm of his raised throne to encompass Arius and the dramatic act he was putting on.

The incessant dribbling of the blood caught my focus, and I couldn't move my eyes away. He figured it out. *Drip*. I was going to die in the same space my mother had. *Drip*. They hadn't changed the floors. *Drip*. If I looked close enough, the splatters looked like the puddle that had pooled around her. *Drip*.

"Given that we in Ellesmere have been your greatest and only allies, and my pairing with your daughter... I was stunned to find out your children had so cruelly stolen from my father." Arius' pace never slowed. The metal plates of his guard's uniforms scraped together as they formed a tighter semi-circle around him. *Drip*.

My heart would simply give out. I couldn't let him say the words, not in front of everyone.

My shoe inched forward—to do what, I wasn't sure—but a strong hand gripped my bicep, and the smell of pine and spice folded around me.

"Don't." Liam murmured, in my ear before he released me and moved into the crowd.

Arius was going to kill us, and he already killed someone because even an idiot would know that sack didn't contain smashed tomatoes.

Guards poured in from the hall, and I felt a second of relief before seeing the Ellesmere crest patched onto their chests.

"My children would never do anything to harm our most trusted alliance," my father said but there was more panic in it than conviction.

And when his eyes darted not to the new wave of guards, but around the space, I knew who he was looking for.

Me.

His most defiant child, the one who traveled ahead of everyone else and was unaccounted for during the robbery.

"There must be a mistake." Baltazar offered, coming to my father's side. The look of panic and confusion lining his normally indifferent face was one I had never seen.

Dread washed through me. *Drip.*

"You *killed* him." I was so sure that I had been caught, that when Olivia's howl of agony boomed around the room it took me a few seconds to react—to drag my eyes from the pool of blood forming at Arius' feet.

My eldest sister was being hauled in on her knees by the four guards. She was bound in chains that glowed a shade of orange cuffed around her ankles and wrists. She lifted one of those rattling chains and pointed a finger of contempt at the prince.

Turning to see Arius' reaction, I noted the cruel slash of teeth he bared at her in a semblance of a smile before once more facing my father. "Would you like to explain why your heir and his twin decided to steal one of my father's most beloved heirlooms?"

I looked back at Olivia, and for a moment my sister's eyes narrowed, I could see the contemplation. She was trying to figure a way out, to kill Arius. Blood for blood.

Members of the gathered crowd inhaled sharply, some outright gagging as a squishing sound came from the dais. Regretting it already, my head swiveled again.

Rolling at a steady, squishy pace was Oliver's swollen, unseeing head as it careened for the steps to my father's throne.

Olivia's screams echoed throughout the crowd. Her gaze bored into her brother's sightless ones, seeming to look right back. Her twin, her equal, her future king. Her eyes welled with tears. I hadn't ever seen Olivia cry. Not when she broke her arm fighting against two armed guards in a tournament. Not when Oliver was chosen as my father's heir. Never. But now, crystalline tears, fat and full of grief rolled down her cheeks.

Seconds ticked by, then minutes before she seemed to make a decision. Shoulders, sagging forward as she stopped holding her weight and the four men holding her toppled together, off-balance. She jumped up, dragging them with her as she charged the line barreling through and dodging the guards surrounding her.

Beelining for the prince who had taken away her twin's life, she dove around a guard poised with a blade to stop her. Boot snapping out and slamming into his wrist. She rolled, snatching the falling dagger from his unclasped hand.

A bellow of terror and sorrow left her lips as she was tackled, but she let the blade go free. It arched through the air once, twice, Arius lifted his talisman and the dagger vanished.

The prince held up his free hand and the dagger reappeared there.

Oh fuck.

In two quick strides, he cleared the distance between them and delivered a swift and fatal blow to her heart.

He yanked the blade free, only to drop it on her slumped body before cuffing his now bloody sleeves and whirling on my father. "I was planning

to give her a reasonable trial, but in front of so many witnesses, she committed treason."

My father was still staring at the bloated and blood-spattered head of his heir, but he jerked his head in a nod.

"You'll do nothing?" Ciaran's deep voice boomed across the hall as he questioned the king. Fresh tear tracks discolored his face. "He killed them, and you sit there?"

"Did you not hear me, boy?" Arius' eyes narrowed on my only remaining brother. "They conspired against the crown."

"Your crown. Not ours." Ciaran argued defiantly, his shoulders were squared like he was preparing himself for a fight he could not win.

"My crown is the reason you're able to have this party." Arius' arms went wide to encompass the celebration I never wanted. "My father's generosity is the reason your nobility have safe residences outside of the ones your commoners burned down in raids. It is my father's money that lines your silk-lined pockets. Your father may be a king in title, but my father is the king who owns it all."

Ciaran's face pinched with each truth Arius spoke and it grew harder for me to breathe. He was insane. And my father had sold me to him like cattle to slaughter.

"Since you have proved to be an unreliable alliance, my father has sent an unbiased third party to offer you two options." Arius gestured with a lazy hand behind him, and a woman barely concealed in gauzy gold fabric appeared.

In the glittering light of the chandelier, you could see all of her through the material. It dragged behind her on the ground, through the spatters of the twins' blood that adorned the body-made aisle.

It was only as she arrived that I noticed the servant had crumpled—hopefully fainted and not been murdered.

Baltazar leveled the new arrival a flat stare, not looking below her neck like most of the other salivating men and women in attendance. "How can we help you Queen Aurina?"

I was surprised when he said her name because if I had ever doubted anything, it would have been that Maveri had won over a woman that was so beautiful...but I supposed it explained their son's looks. But she was also there when she had never been seen by anyone other than Arius and the mad king. That itself gave me pause.

Her voice was like that of the musical notes that played before the instruments had come to an abrupt stop. "My husband has sent me to bear witness to your decision as an act of goodwill."

It didn't really seem that Maveri's wife could be unbiased, but none of what was happening made much sense.

The knot in Baltazar's throat bobbing was the only sign of his distress, those who didn't know him that well would miss it. "And what are we making a decision on?"

"We can pull our resources entirely..." She laced her hands in front of her, keeping her back stiff. Baltazar was already shaking his head, declining the first option, while my father's eyes looked like they might fall from his skull. But she held firm, and continued, "Or you can crown my son at the wedding and step down."

Oh—Oh no.

The crowd chattered around me, stirring. I wished for my bed or the earth or anything far enough away from there that I didn't have to hear the decision.

Arius' would be made king, and I—his queen. I knew, for certain he had no proof of any such crimes from the twins. Were they awful people? Certainly. Did they deserve that? Not by that cruel prince's hand, at least.

A nod, Baltazar's nod was nearly imperceptible, but I caught it...and when my father spoke, his words filled my body with lead. "Very well."

"Perfect." Arius grinned, stepping in front of his mother. "We wed in two days' time."



Two days.

My life as I knew it would end in two days. My heart rate—which was at a steady incline since Arius arrived—was at a lethal pace. My chest was aching, and I had to keep reminding myself to breathe.

In and out.

Arius raised a hand at the band and though they rushed to pick up their instruments, the blood rushing through my ears made it impossible to hear the notes as they began to play. People around me began chattering, but I only knew it by how quickly their mouths moved.

In and out.

The prince's body turned to me, and each fall of his boots brought him closer. I was overly aware of my clenched hands, my tear-stained face, and my stiff posture—all of which were doing the wrong things.

Smile, Jane. If he demonstrated anything today it was his willingness to kill first and ask questions later.

He would kill me if he found out all I had done in the last several days. Perhaps though, it would be better than a lifetime shackled to him. Stuck

with a madman who would seek to cage me and keep me under his thumb.

Potentially like his mother, whose body was still on display for the entirety of the ballroom to gawk at. Kept unseen for years only to be used as a pawn in a game we didn't know we were playing until we lost.

That had to be their goal all along—Maveri and Arius sought to take over Lunasa. But I saw their people's way of life, they were fed, healthy even—at least in the upper district. What had Arius called those in the lower district? Undesirable?

Not to mention, we didn't know if my father giving up his seat on the throne would ease the effects of the curse. Or surely, he would have already done it years before. *Right?*

Arius wove around the last body distancing us, a frown pulling at his mouth and brows dragged together.

"You didn't think to greet your future king?" he asked before even reaching me.

"In fairness," I started, peeling my lips away from my teeth in what would have to be accepted as a smile. "You've only *just* become my future king."

Arius clapped his palms against my cheeks—looking every bit to those around us like affection, feeling to me like it would leave bruises. He squished my face between his hands and crushed my lips with a wet kiss.

I hoped it seemed like I was enjoying it, but my stomach turned with the urge to empty the contents of everything I ate that night.

Finally, he let me come away for air and dragged his hands down my face, then my neck to my forearms. "Did you miss me?"

"It's only been a few days."

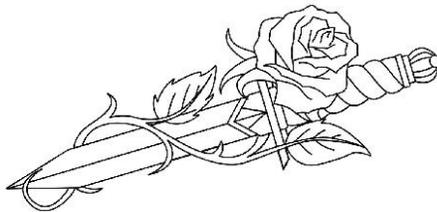
His eyes narrowed and I knew I said the wrong thing, my mind wasn't moving fast enough to keep up with the demands of the current situation.

"What I meant was," I rushed out, "Though it's only been a few days, it felt much longer."

Not much better, really. But the crazed glint in his eyes dulled if only by a fraction.

"Come." He dropped one of his hands but kept the other firmly cuffed around my bicep. "I have a surprise for you."

"Great." I pasted on a grin when he gripped his talisman, despite the gnawing feeling that his arrival was only going to lead to more death.



We arrived by the darkened, ivy-coated stables where the dead grass had been trampled so thoroughly by hooves and boots, it had gone away completely leaving behind only wide patches of dirt.

The squealing, snorting sounds of a huge pig resonating in the wooding building told me what my surprise was before I saw it.

Arius toted along with my gift.

Swineston.

"You brought him?" My voice was so sweet and too high-pitched that it sounded foreign to my ears.

Arius was already shaking his head. "He's not the surprise."

"Oh?"

"This is." He grinned, spreading out his arms to encompass the stables and the surrounding land.

Glancing at him, then back over where he was indicating, I tried to gauge how he wanted me to react. "The castle grounds?"

"This will be our wedding venue."

My brow raised in question. He still had my sister's blood on him, had scared every Lunasian noble, and my king half to death...and he was already in the throes of nuptial planning?

"Before your brother's untimely death, I asked him what he thought another suitable wedding gift for you would be." Arius shrugged.

"You—did what? I'm sorry...I don't understand."

"No need to worry about specifics." He waved a casual hand to dismiss my question. "After some questioning, Oliver told me the only two things you care about in the world are drawing and your horse."

Nodding, but still not understanding what he had done to pry my eldest brother for information about me...or how Oliver had any to give at all, I said, "that was thoughtful of you."

Was that what he wanted to hear? I couldn't tell. But I just kept that dumb, smitten smile on my face while I judged the distance between me and Jett's stall. She was at the far end, by the hay bales, and I was certain Arius would grab hold of me before I got to her.

That wouldn't do, I would have to come back when I was alone.

No princess, no wedding, no Arius as king. That would have to work, it was my only plan. Maybe I could set aside the grudges I had against Baltazar and Liam, and we could figure a way around it.

Baltazar had looked just as worried when Arius walked in as I had. When he saw Oliver's head, I had watched his skin go a shade paler. None of what

Arius was doing was part of the Keeper's plan.

Long game it was, then—though two days was not much time.

"I'm nothing if not considerate," he agreed, showing me all his teeth as if he hadn't just slaughtered two of my siblings. "Now, would you like to see Winston? He's missed you too."

"Sure." My eye twitched with all the effort I was putting in to manage my facial expressions.

"We'll take him for a walk." Arius reached for my hand, and I took a step back, masking my face with a smile.

"I'm actually very tired, I was getting ready to retire when you arrived."

"We can go back to my rooms if that's what you prefer." He winked and revulsion poured through me. I would not be doing that.

Swineston chose that moment to squeal—praise the gods—and I was given a reason to deny the prince. Widening my eyes, I looked to the stables wistfully. "Actually, maybe we should take a walk first."

"Let's not mistake his needs as more important than mine." Arius scratched at his beard and the skin around his eyes crinkled as he regarded me.

"Of course, not my Prince." Vomit—I was going to throw up everything I had eaten but only after I survived the conversation. "But it is practice. I want to be the best mother I can be to your future heirs."

I would sooner slit my own throat than lay with him, let alone bear him any children. But the way he was leering proved I had strummed the right chord. "We will not coddle them. That should be said now. If your brother had been a stronger man, forced off his mother's teat earlier, he may have stood a chance."

Oliver had been a piece of shit, but he had not been weak. I wouldn't have blinked if Arius had admitted it took forty of his men and himself to take down the twins. They trained relentlessly to maintain their power and together, they were even more formidable.

"You're right," I lowered my eyes to the ground then back up to meet him. "But your children will be mighty."

"My *sons*." He nodded, striding through the wooden entrance. "Daughters are for fools and men with weak seed."

Oh Gods, the man was the most insufferable piece of—"True."

Swineston was rolling in his fifth in the first stall, he abruptly righted himself when I walked in and snuffled, pressing his dirt dusted nose against the door.

Unhinging it, I let it swing open and the boar bumped his head into my legs as he walked out nudging me away from Arius and placing his body between us.

Hmm...maybe I could like the rotund animal. That close—and when I actually paid attention—I could see his bristly hair was a dark shade of brown with a few pale pink spots.

Stray strands of hay poked out and I absently brushed them off. "Do you want to go on a walk with us?"

Swineston grunted as if in answer. Down the line of stalls, a fierce whinny cut through the quiet night as Jett lost her absolute mind. Her hooves slammed against the door to her stall as she bucked and kicked at it.

I held a finger up to ask the pig and the prince for a moment before rushing to calm her.

"Woah, girl." I raised my hands, palms out, and she seemed to not notice me. Glancing around in the kicked-up straw, to see if I saw what could have

spooked her, I didn't see anything.

Moving as slowly as possible, while trying to nudge myself into her line of sight, I spoke in gentle tones. "Easy, Jett. Easy. Look at me—that's it—lower your head."

Jett moved her strong neck down. Jerking her head to the side and throwing her dark mane in the direction of the entrance, she let out a heavy huff of breath.

"We'll be back shortly. I'm just going for a walk." I looked into her large eyes and tried to stroke my hand down between them. But instead, she reared back and lowered her head so that her muzzle touched my nose and snorted in my face.

Rude.

"Alright," I said while backing away, "I'll come back later with sugar cubes."

Making my way back over to Arius, I jerked my thumb toward the exit. "All set."

I lifted my foot, about to start walking, but he grabbed my hand and yanked me back a step right before Swineston stepped from the wooden floor onto the dirt path.

Crackling and breaking echoed before the boar's shrieking wails of pain caught me up to what happened. Swineston fell, his massive size shaking the ground underfoot. His legs spread away from him at unnatural angles. I moved to run to him, but Arius' grasp on my arm was firm.

"You'll want to wait." I looked at his cruel smirk and watched him grab his talisman, then back at the boar, where the dirt ground lit up with a sigil marking a ward that was cast there before it faded.

As soon as the blue light faded, I dove for the pig who was still thrashing in distress while his high-pitched barking noises continued.

"Help him," I demanded of Arius while I fretted trying to calm the thing down. "Heal him—you can heal him."

Arius crouched beside me so that his breath warmed my ear, "we do not coddle the weak."

His hand slashed out and hot blood sprayed my face. I realized what he had done a moment before Swineston's uproars of pain were silenced, and he twitched below my hands.

I turned my head and drained my stomach on the earth until I was retching up water and air.

"You're making a scene, " Arius said as if what I was doing was more distasteful than what he had done. But I swiped the sleeve of my gown over my mouth and stood, swallowing down my words with every gulp of breath.

My wide eyes scanned around us, and sure enough, guards marked with Ellesmere's crest paced around us. They were far enough away that I hadn't noticed them before, but close enough that they had seen everything. None of them moved nearer, but I could feel their watchful gazes on us. There were probably more than I could see, hiding just in case I lashed out.

"*What was that?*" My voice was gravelly from straining my throat, and my wet lashes weighed down my eyes. My face felt sticky with gore, but if I thought of it too long, I was sure I would be sick again.

"Wards." The prince turned away from me and nodded to one of his men. "They've been placed all over the grounds. No one can enter or exit unscathed until after the wedding aside from those who have been invited—even with magic."

Oh...oh. *This was a warning and a threat.*

He was letting me see what would happen if I tried to escape and avoided going through with our marriage. Had it all been for that end, then? Bringing me there, offering up the stables as a wedding location—just so I could be so close to freedom, without any chance of obtaining it.

The walls of my world crushed in on me, suffocating me and my shaking hand flew over my mouth, as warmth trailed down the drying blood staining my cheeks.

Arius whirled on me, surely to tell me not to be so weak, but his stare reached my fingers, which covered my mouth to trap in my sob, and he cocked his head.

"*Where is your ring?*" His words were icy, and he snatched my hand, trimmed nails digging into my flesh.

My mouth fell open, but no answer came. All of my lies felt too rushed, too risky. All of my training felt inadequate with so many guards watching. I was trapped in a nightmare I couldn't wake up from—where the prince was my villain, and no one would save me. There wouldn't be tales of my bravery or my adventures. Instead, they would remember me as the mad prince's wife. The downfall of Lunasa.

The truth was thick on my tongue, and I prepared myself to tell it, but as his eyes cut into me the scream of a babe cut across the grounds.

Everyone's heads turned, surprised by the interruption, even Arius had dropped his grip and crossed over to his nearest guard.

He remembered me as an afterthought and tossed over his shoulder, "Jane, go to your rooms and wait for me."

I, of course, had already readied myself for a quick death and would do no such thing.

Boots crunched on the gravel as the men followed Arius toward the sound. I kept my distance, my shoes padding the earth until I saw the men reach a crack in the ancient castle wall. Laying in front of it, was a young boy lying on the ground, clutching at a leg that was...all wrong.

His toothy lisp carried to me as he cried and begged the guards for help between apologies and my heart sank to my toes. Even if I couldn't see his skinny frame being hauled up and carried toward the castle, I would recognize his voice anywhere.

Kaleb.



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

If ever there was a time for action, it was right then. A scared boy was being hauled off like a felon to the dungeons.

But Arius caught me moments after they ensnared Kaleb. What guards they didn't have treating the babe like an escaped convict, he sent after me. I barreled—without a second's thought—into the largest son of a bitch that had the young boy's mangled leg in a vise grip.

I marked each of the guards' faces to memory—everyone that touched him and those who looked on without a word all had a space carved in my mind that promised them a long, agonizing death.

If it were under different circumstances, I would have been proud that it took four guards to lug me away. There wasn't an ounce of me that gave a damn about my cover anymore, and I fought in a way that would have made Lux proud if he saw it.

Lux.

Where was he?

Did he know the boy had traveled all that way? Was Kaleb alone? I couldn't imagine Tess knew, and if she did, then would she have sent along

with Gwyn?

Questions plagued me as I paced the floor of my tower while the guards who had dragged me away stared straight ahead, having posted themselves, so they surrounded me.

One gift being trapped there had given me was thought—a moment to breathe, to think, and to conspire.

Arius didn't know about the tower's second, secret exit, and the tunnels led off the castle grounds all the way to Luhne.

If I could get Kaleb out, we could get through and circle back to the barrens. Then I could...well I would figure out what to do once he was safe.

The sun's placement in the sky told me I had been at it for hours, well into the night and into the next day. Which meant I only had one to make everything right.

Step. Step. Observe. The guard to the right had a squared jaw, eyes that were too small for his face, and stood only a head taller than me. He also favored his left foot, which was hopefully my doing.

Then, before they noticed I stopped, I was back to stomping a rut into the stone floor. I had to get out of there. Then I needed to save Kaleb from what could and would only be an execution if Arius' history proved anything.

Step. Step. Observe. The guard to the left was a blonde with a scar that stretched from his temple to his lower lip, giving him a permanent sneer. He was sitting with his ankles crossed on top of my trunk. That one would be dangerous. Anyone who could survive their face being peeled like a potato was bad ass. *Avoid pissing him off.*

Wondering if the celebration was still going on, my slipper hissed on the ground as I turned once more. I could use the revelry, if there was one, as

my cover. Where was Dri—had she made it out after Arius snatched me away?

Step. Step. Observe. The third was a man who looked not much older than me, and his training was probably not half as thorough. Which...if I thought about it for too long was insulting.

My heel slid and I turned about-face and started circling once more.

Were the nobles, angry, scared, riotous, or joyous that their own cruel prince had been bested?

There were so many variables—too many.

The guard behind me yelled, "can you fucking stop?"

Rotating, I looked at him. Medium build, a sparse patch of grey hair you could see the scalp through, and aged skin that told me he hadn't been wearing the talisman dangling around his neck for long.

He was also the only one of four who had one. Recently promoted?

Step. Step. Observe. I was only a foot away from him now, and he flinched as I got nearer. Probably because my hair was wrecked, my face was spotted in blood, and I looked like the half-wild beasts I was not long ago rumored to be sleeping with. Maybe because women made him nervous. I was betting on both.

"Name?" Short, sweet, and laced with more power than he would want a woman to have. Especially if he was one of Arius' favored. Which—given the recent appointment to a higher position—I was also wagering on.

His silence told me two things. One, I was right in my assumptions, and two, he definitely had a small dick.

"I asked for your name." My words were clipped, and I took another step toward him, our chests only inches apart. His hand twitched at his side, likely itching to use that talisman on me.

No answer.

"Do you know how many men have been in this room, Commander?" I took a swing at his rank, again doubting I was wrong.

"He's only a captain." Looking over my shoulder, I noted the marred face of the guard glaring over me at the *captain*.

I stood corrected. "And does he have a name?"

"Gialanos, Milady." He nodded, before turning and looking back ahead.

"Yours?" I asked, noting he had thoughtful, pale green eyes.

"If it pleases milady, you may call me Zander."

"Well then Zander, can you prove another theory I have?" I asked the surprisingly polite guard.

"What's that, Milady?"

"Does he have a sm—"

Lou bursting through the door muzzled me, especially when I noticed Driata who was helping the seamstress carry bundles of white fabric.

"You can't be in here." Captain Gialanos said, his tone clipped.

"Correction," Driata curled her lip. "*You can't be in here*. My sister has to be fitted for a wedding gown."

"And?" The captain gripped his talisman with all the malice of a newborn babe and Driata straightened to her full height.

"Do you want to be the one to tell your prince you saw his future wife undressed?"

"By all means," Lou sagged in the door frame, a lazy feline grin grazing her lips. "I'm sure the bloodbath in the grand hall was a one-off and the prince is *lenient*."

"But just in case," I added, already undoing the buttons at the front of my gown. "Please do tell him, you were given the option to leave."

The blonde and the boy-man balked and averted their gazes while Zander was already dipping beyond my sister through the door.

"Good day, Milady. I'll just be on the landing."

Captain Gialanos called my bluff though, glaring as though he could bore a hole right through me.

My fingers made quick work of the line of fastens and all the while I made eye contact with him. And when my uncovered breasts sprung free the man turned a shade of pink that was about as unbecoming as my chest on display.

"Out!" He shouted at his men, and they sprinted for the door. He didn't look back when he said, "we will be right here."

The door clicked closed and I let loose a breath, I hadn't realized I was holding.

"We brought you these" Dri whispered, uncovering dark clothes.

"What if they come in here?" I stripped the rest of my gown and tossed it to Lou while Driata handed me a hooded tunic and I tugged it on over my head.

"Dri will be you." Lou shrugged as if it were that simple while I pulled on the black pants. "What?" I hissed, not wanting to point out the obvious flaws in the plan.

"Full. Volume. No whispering!" Captain Gialanos' stick up his ass had him screaming at us with what sounded like his lips pressed against the door.

"Ah, I'm beat from such a traumatizing day, I'll just have a rest." Driata flicked her eyes between the tapestry hanging on the wall and me.

Shoving my feet into boots, and wishing I had more time to plan, I watched my sister toss my duvet to the bottom of the bed and stick the

down pillows in a line before covering them up.

Lou tossed her a green fluffy robe from my armoire and Dri stepped onto the padded stool Lou lugged to the center of the room, facing away from the door.

They made quick work of removing her diadem and pulling the pins from her hair. She dragged her fingers through her perfect ringlets, causing them to fluff out a bit.

Shuffling around a drawer in my armoire, I pulled free Liam's talisman and tucked it in my pocket.

Tilting my head to assess her, I noted that my frame was wider than Driata's and a bit shorter, and my hair a few shades lighter—but if one wasn't looking too closely, from the back perhaps she could pass as me.

The seamstress placed the diadem on the bed by what was supposed to be Driata's head, and I stifled a snort, thinking it would be exactly how Driata would sleep so close to her title.

But that wasn't necessarily true anymore, and I wasn't certain it ever was. She was stronger than I knew.

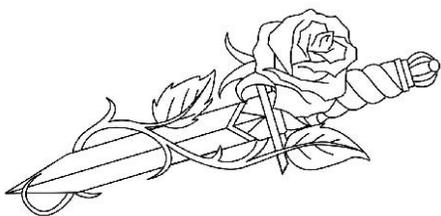
"Why is it so quiet in there?" Gods, I was sick of that man.

"Go," Driata mouthed, without making a sound.

"Do I really have to wear a corset? It's a torture device," I cried while ducking beyond the fabric covering the hidden door.

Lou gave me a thumbs up, before looking toward the main door. "If the way that guard regarded your breasts was any indication, we should really highlight that as your best asset."

"I wasn't fucking staring!" He was still trying to defend himself when I descended into the belly of the castle.



The castle's dungeons were full of vagrant drunks, and those angry enough with their king to attempt storming the gates. There was the occasional spy or assassin who wound up there, but due to their connections to Baltazar, they often had an untimely death before trial and sentencing.

Given the lack of altogether dangerous criminals, the staffing of guards below was normally lacking. But with a young boy's bad decision, and a tyrant's attempt at overthrowing a kingdom, the guards' number had tripled.

I wove back and forth from the corridor, back through passages avoiding the guards at every opportunity, that's not to say there weren't any close calls. The three men waiting at the entrance had been knocked unconscious and would wake up with quite a headache near the kitchens.

Why were they less likely to alert the others? Well, because they were also stripped bare and placed carefully into compromising positions.

Luckily, the lower down I went the fewer guards there were overall given that Baltazar's wards made anyone not part of his guild believe they saw moving shadows and heard the telltale signs of wicked spirits.

Insurance.

And of course, Arius, my malicious husband-to-be had placed a babe where even the worst criminals begged not to go. *That damned gossip had a way of spreading.*

But, fortunately for Kaleb, those rumors peeled the numbers back on the guards like a thin apple skin.

I crept onto his level and along the shadows clinging to the walls, hoping Arius hadn't hurt him any further. What I had of his ruined leg told me he wouldn't make it up the steps to my tower, which was probably for the best anyway, but at least if he could, Driata could heal him.

"Kaleb?" My voice was no more than a whisper, but it echoed around the space, and I flinched.

"Go away!" He sobbed, gasping for breath. "I don't believe in ghosts."

"Kaleb, it's me," I said, rounding a wall of empty cells and zeroing in on his voice. The walls weren't helping, causing the sound to bounce around me.

"Jane?" The sick sound of something wet on metal and stone turned my stomach. "What are you doing here?"

Shit.

"Well..." I began, trying to keep the sound of my feet from covering any noises that could lead me to him. "I lied when I told your family where we were from."

"I know," he said, though his voice sounded weak.

Wondering if his leg was causing him that much pain, I released a breath to keep my tone even. "How?"

"Lux told us right after you left." He paused, like he was thinking, or maybe drifting off to sleep. "When mama found the gold and the ring."

"Oh." I bit my lip, wishing I could take all of that experience away from him. "Listen, I'm sorry Kaleb. For this and for how my family has failed you."

"I believe you."

"I'm going to get you out of here."

Quiet met me, only the sounds of dripping water from somewhere greeted me then, "I don't believe you."

"I promise you, Kaleb." Saying his name felt like a tether and even when I wasn't speaking it aloud, I was repeating my promise tied to his name in my mind.

"The bars are really thick, and... I'm hurt."

"I know, but we have to get you back to your mama."

"She doesn't know I came here." Another, longer gap. "I'm a week early, but I wanted to give you back your ring."

"Early for what?" I prodded, needing him to keep talking as it grew darker.

"Can you keep a secret?" he asked like he had the night at his mother's dining table.

I decided to give him the same answer I had then. "I have a few."

"We take soil for the greenhouse."

"That's okay. I stole the mad king's crown." Admitting it aloud didn't scare me as much as I thought it would, and though his voice was strained, he sounded like he was in awe.

"You did?"

I hooked another right, and there he was with a faint smile on his face...but there was a thick, murky puddle around his middle, and after all my years of magic... I would recognize that tangy scent anywhere.

"Who did this to you?" I asked, and when he didn't answer and it looked like the slight frame of his chest had stopped rising and falling, I tried another question. "Can you walk?"

"I don't think so..." His head barely moved as he tried to shake it and his face had gone pale.

But thankfully he answered at all.

Biting my lower lip, I forced back my tears and yanked my rage to the surface. "Kaleb, I need you to get up."

"It hurts."

"I know, but I don't know how much more time we have."

Silence.

"Kaleb...take my hand." I laid on the floor, stretching one arm to reach for his barely twitching fingers through the bar, grinding my bones against the cold metal. With the other, I reached in my pocket and prayed pleadingly to the gods.

One palm curved around the smooth stone and my other reached and stretched and grasped until I felt his clammy little hand.

Please you careless, bastard Gods. I thought of warmth and light and love and healing magic—every lesson I ever learned about the magic that had never taken. I looked at the damned bracelet on the hand grabbing his, dulled by the low light then slammed my eyes shut.

I thought of his mother and his sister and their love for him, and their greenhouse where they managed to make produce not just grow, but thrive. I thought about how if anyone deserved to be whole, it was the bright little boy who had smiled even when they had nothing.

Please.

Warmth spilled down my cheeks as his silence echoed around me and filled me with such brutal hatred for such a cruel world. He didn't deserve that, to die in a damp cell so far away from his home. His mother didn't deserve that loss for trying to feed her children. All of Lunasa had deserved better but instead, all they got for their faith in us was that...desperation and death.

"Jane?" Kaleb's voice was strong as he tugged my hand. "You...made it better."

"What?" I crawled up onto my hands and knees and grasped the bars and watched in awe as he stood. I had...healed him. I used traditional magic. And through my stuffy nose, I could smell the sulfuric hint in the air.

Kaleb hopped, showing me that his leg was alright, and lifted his shirt to show me where his wound had been. A grin split his face as he rushed the bars and did his best to wrap his little arms around me.

"Okay listen...at the back of your cell there should be a loose stone that will open up a passage. I'm going to wait on the other side."

"You're leaving?" His chin trembled.

"No—no I'm not leaving you. I just have to meet you in a passage."

He stepped back, nodding, and felt around on the wall. Finally, one of the stones gave way and the hiss of air releasing told me he found it.

"Okay, I'm coming." I gripped the bar, hoping he would listen to my next words carefully. "If for whatever reason we get split up, stay along the left corridors and follow them to Luhne."

"No." He shook his head. "You have to come with me."

"Sure, yea—yes. I will. Just meet me in the passage." I gave him a smile, though it wasn't much of one, it was all he needed as he ducked away.

I made my way to the nearest entrance and felt the stones shift under my fingers before dipping into the pitch-black space. I felt along the wall knowing I needed to keep left—just like I told Kaleb.

Kaleb...I healed him. With Liam's talisman—traditional magic had worked for me.

The sound of a clicking tongue came from in front of me—too close and too recognizable. It stunted my thoughts just as Baltazar flicked a lantern I

hadn't known was overhead.

My heart was a battered bird inside my chest as I saw he was standing beside Arius.

The prince's hand lashed out and cracked into my face and my head snapped back with the impact.

"Jane." Baltazar titled his head like a concerned teacher, full of reproach. "I do believe you were told to stay in your tower."

I lunged away from them—but crashed into a wall of air, as sigils lit up around me. No...I had to get to Kaleb.

Arius' hand crossed over the boundary seamlessly and latched around my throat. My nails raked at his forearm scratching clawing digging but all the while he lessened my intake of air. The magic barrier—the trap they laid for me—grew tighter, crushing my thighs and ribs with each thrashing move of my body.

"That bracelet..." Baltazar smiled. "Has a sister."

He held up an identical band, that one attached to chains, and I bucked against Arius' grip while the magic tightened its vise.

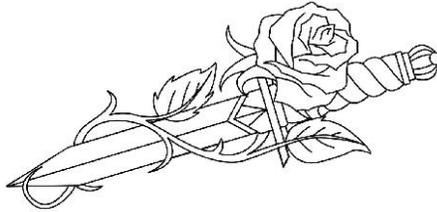
"Fuck. You." I bit out, learning finally—unfortunately—whose side Baltazar was on. His own.

"What a nasty thing to say when someone offers you jewelry." Arius spat, as he leaned in but the wards kept me from gouging his eyes out.

But between the walls of their two bodies, I saw a small, child's frame. Kaleb's face was lined with the terror of everything he had seen there—and I was certain, at that moment that he would never be the same.

"*Run.*" The words were nothing more than a rasp of breath. Black spots filled my eyes and the clanging sound of the chains locking onto my wrists and ankles was everything I knew.

But I prayed to the same gods who healed him, that he heard me as the black spots won and I knew nothing for a time.



There was never a moment in the three years prior that I let myself hope for a better future—a tomorrow that I got to choose.

But somehow waking with alarm bells ringing in my head and an ache racing from my jaw, into my cheekbone, and up through my temple ... I felt more hopeless than I ever had before.

My throat burned and scratched as I dragged in a wheezing breath and something cold pressed against my face.

"Easy." The grogginess in my head caused me to start, but when it peeled away, I recognized Driata's voice.

I tried to sit, but nimble fingers pushed my shoulders back down. "Don't move yet."

One of my eyes was swollen shut but the other overly focused on Driata's face.

The reminder of Arius' violent hands and fingers crashed into me just as another memory jerked me away from the recesses of the haze.

"Ka—leb?" I coughed out, copper coating my mouth telling me I must have bitten down on my tongue when I went unconscious.

"They haven't found him." My sister reassured me and a fat crystallized tear slid down her cheek.

Her pallid skin and deep purple welts under her eyes told me she hadn't slept much—if at all.

Sucking down another breath, I relished the sting of my bruised neck because I had been there to get confirmation.

I must have been out for a while, and if they hadn't found him, then...he was going to make it. He had to make it.

Racking my boggled brain, I tried to think of how I could get Lux a message, so he could meet the boy in Luhne and get him back to their family farm before the guards figured out where he had gone and raided the capital.

"Do you mind?" I pointed to my face where she was dabbing a cold washcloth, and she let out a shaky breath.

"I—I can't." I caught a glimpse of her chin trembling before she covered my face again with the cloth.

Was it so bad that she would have to heal it in increments?

Light spilled in again as it was lifted, and a floral scent made its way through my sore nose. "Arius threatened to kill any who would heal you."

A male voice came from the other side of the room. "She tried it anyway, and he ripped her talisman from her neck, Milady."

"Dri..." I pushed her hand away, trying to meet her gaze. "You shouldn't have risked that."

"You wouldn't wake up. I thought—" A sob broke from her, taking with it her words.

"We thought you were dead, Milady." That man again...the guard. I propped myself up and Dri was too overwhelmed to stop me.

He stood by the window, looking out at the mountains like in thought.

"What are you doing here?" The sheet covered spilled around my waist and I realized I was left stripped bare, in enough time to cover myself.

"We were ordered to take shifts, Mi—"

"Jane—just Jane, please."

"Right." He nodded, hands locked behind his back, and didn't look toward me which I supposed was good because I was still fumbling with the sheets around the manacles and chains binding my wrists and ankles. "Jane."

"How long was I out?" Glancing at Dri and seeing she had folded in on herself, I bit my lip. Pain scoured through my face, and I realized how bad an idea it had been.

"It's your wedding day." He said somehow knowing what I was really asking, and my gut fell into my toes.

But the sinking feeling only worsened when I looked about my room. The tapestry covering the hidden door was gone, replaced by a large sigil carved into the wood. In fact, the few things I owned were gone. The armoire, the plant, the stool, and my—"Where is my trunk?"

"We were ordered to take all your weapons, and anything they thought you may make one out of." A clock tower gonged in the distance, and Zander turned to the main door where two guards entered with Lou.

She once more held the white satiny fabric in her arms, but the seamstress didn't give me one of her lazy, easy grins. Her brow was split, her lip swollen and bruised, and sticking out from the material I could see her fingers were each bandaged.

"Milady." Zander tipped his head to me and made his way to the door while one of the other guards took his place.

The other—an escort, apparently—glanced at my chest where the sheets were doing a shit job of covering my breasts and smirked before backing out.

The door latching from the outside felt like a death knell and I wished I had made it to Kaleb before they found us.

But then—what if they had found us together. No. It was better that way. I could hope he was safely on his path home.

Maybe once I could have found my way out of it, found the perfect role, and played it well. But as the tower tolled noon and the final peal of the hammer rang out, that sinking feeling grew that that day wasn't the beginning of something but the end.

Dri and Lou helped me to my feet and the chains rattled against the floor. They helped me into a gown made up almost entirely of clasps and satin. The fasteners ran up each stretch of each half of the dress where a seam would normally be—down the length of my arms and sides. It was easy to assume they were to accommodate the restraints.

"What happened?" I asked Lou finally while Driata fastened the buttons.

Lou shook her head, glancing at the guard. My vision flashed red as I ground my teeth together and hot agony sliced through my jaw.

"Did you touch my friend?"

I only realized I began moving as the scraping of metal on stone reached me. He didn't turn, lest he risks me not being clothed and I shoved at his armored back. His hands caught the ledge just before he tumbled out of the window, and he whirled around on me, chocolate eyes flashing.

"You stupid bitch." Spittle hit my face just before the back of his hand cracked out and my head snapped to the side.

Righting myself I marked him, just as I had all the others who would die before Arius made his decision to end me. But I committed his brown—shit-filled—eyes, and his rounded jaw to memory and thought of the bronze sheen paling on his skin when he realized how long his death would last.

"Name?" Just as I asked Captain Gialanos, I figured he would give me the same silence-filled answer.

But instead, he squared his shoulders and rose to his full height, so I had to cock my head back to keep meeting his gaze. The gleam he shot back told me everything. "Codis Wallin."

"Proud of what you did then?" I narrowed my one good eye while ice wrapped around my stomach. "You feel like a powerful man?"

"I'm not apologizing, am I?" His lip curled away from his upper teeth as he looked down his nose on me as if the very air I breathed disgusted him.

"Keep that same energy when I paint your skin with your entrails." I turned, back stiff, to see the door open. Two more guards were carrying in a framed mirror and a wooden chair.

"If you attempt to break the glass, they are ordered to subdue you. But I'm of the mindset that every bride should see themselves on their wedding day."

Arius' mother was dressed in gossamer, her body once more on display through the sheer panels, but she held her head high, chin up as if it didn't concern her that the guards leered. She had a firm grip on a woven basket with brushes and combs sticking out the side.

Her pause when she saw my ruined face was nearly imperceptible, and when she motioned for the guards to set down the furniture, I almost thought I imagined it. "Sit."



CHAPTER THIRTY

My breathing was sharp when I did as she commanded, not sure what I expected of the woman who raised the monster that was her son.

The mirror reflected the horror that was my face, one side was completely swollen and seemingly made up of a bluish bruise. The lump of skin covering my eye was nearly indistinguishable from the rest of my face save for the smattering of dark lashes that split the skin. The other side was red and still warmed where Wallin struck me.

But the most jarring was the fat blue and grey markings of a hand print that circled the column of my neck.

Queen Aurina hummed behind me as she rummaged through her basket, finding a wide comb and pulling it through the ends of my matted hair.

"Did Arius ever tell you about his pet bird?"

Shaking my head, I thought, *this is it. The part where she tries to win me over for her beloved son.*

"Don't move." The comb gliding through my hair and the soft pull on my scalp kept me grounded as she began. "When he was a boy, my husband

had traveled to Karhdaro. When Maveri returned, he brought with him the most beautiful blue speckled bird and gifted it to Arius."

Aurina sighed, as she moved on to another section of my hair. "But the bird hated its cage and longed to fly. We had an entire aviary constructed, where gardeners tended real trees and plants. Painters detailed clouds and a bright morning sky. But the bird rebelled and flew so hard at the ceiling that it crashed into the ground."

The queen twisted one of my coils around her finger and met my eye in the glass. "I was going to braid it, but I think it's much too pretty to tuck away."

"What happened to the bird?" I asked, wondering where she was going with the story. "Did it die?"

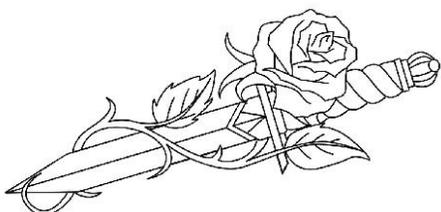
"Not then." A frown tugged at her full lips. "Arius—too afraid of losing her—clipped her wings. But she resisted still, attacking him each time he went near. He didn't understand she was terrified and away from all the freedoms she had ever known. One day, he went in to check on her, and she had thrown herself onto the floor in front of the doors."

Aurina paused, switching the comb out for a hair cream and smoothing it into my hair. "When he lamented, the bird flapped her broken wings as hard as she could to reach the open air. He grabbed her and snapped her neck."

Of course, he killed a pet in the name of love. "Is that supposed to be a warning?"

"Loving the men in my family is hard, I recognize that." She shifted in front of me and tugged my bouncing curls over my shoulders looking me head-on and that close, I noted what I hadn't before. Her high chin wasn't for her pride at being on display. "I just hope you do better than me. Just remember calm heads prevail."

And when a cold metal key fell into my cleavage as she shifted my hair to cover it, I knew what the story meant. The queen wanted me to do a better job escaping than the bird, and to be more successful at it than she had with the king.



Dread pooled in my stomach when the guards hauled me to the rose-coated arch that made up the altar.

Even knowing I had the key; I couldn't reach my hands up above my waist. My sister had been dragged off to be dressed and Lou wouldn't be allowed to attend. I couldn't even ask them for help. I blinked to clear my burning eyes. If I could help it, I would not let Arius see me broken.

Looking out on the blurred faces of the nobles—seated in chairs on either side of a flower-strewn aisle—I noted that none of them could quite look at me.

Perhaps their privilege had kept them from knowing such violence that marked my face. But maybe some of them also felt the wrongness of the event. The blight that Arius' ruling would cause our lands would be far worse than the curse.

My father was many things in my lifetime, but he would not once have seen that done to a woman and if he only knew what they had done to Kaleb... I had to think he would have stopped it. But as I stood there, attempting to keep up the ruse of my bravery—even if it was for myself—I

realized that though my father hadn't wielded his fists, and wasn't the one to lift the blade, he was part of the cause too.

Hatred, pure and vile seemed to replace my lifeblood and I shook with it wishing that all the men in my life would burn for what they triggered. I imagined it as I stood there, and while guests trickled in, I wove the illusion inside my head that I held the match.

Trumpets sounded, somewhere in the distance and I squinted to understand what I was seeing. Women clad in gowns that looked more like armor crested the dusty hill and I recognized Orabelle leading them.

"All the monarchs have been invited to recognize the prince being crowned." Duchess Tilby whispered to the man sitting next to her. Not her husband, I noted.

The man balked, showing he was offended by the idea though it was hard to tell if it was the plan to see Arius rise to power, or if it was the idea that the other rulers would come.

Something in the thought that Blair would be there made my stomach turn, especially when I was already hoping Liam would keep away.

I thought, not that long ago, that marrying someone I didn't love was the worst thing that could happen to me, but spending my life with a man I wished to see dead was that much worse.

Orabelle led her troop of women to the aisle where they fanned out finding spots among the gathered nobles. Each was as magnificent as their queen and looked at the other guests and the guards like they hungered to feast.

The foreign queen didn't sit just then though, instead, she stood no more than ten feet from where I was chained to the altar and curled her lip back from her too-white teeth. "I expected more from you than this."

"Me too." I forced a shrug but winced when the cuffs dug into my skin.

Her thin brow, dusted in silver cocked and the metal scales of her gown tinkled like chimes when she spun away. "Let us hope I didn't travel all this way for nothing."

"Will you help me?" I tried, not caring how pathetic it made me sound. Or how the guards stiffened with their hands on the hilts of their swords.

She didn't turn to face me, in fact, she was already walking away in answer, but then she said, loud enough that her voice carried to the sky. "I will never understand why women let men decide if they get to be the villain or the victim in their story."

The band filed into their seats beside the altar and tuned their instruments with shaking hands. Nobles shifted, uncomfortable with their new seatmates who seemed to be salivating every time the wind shifted.

The quiet was so loud, I could hear fabric rustling from the back of the audience. I wanted to scream, to beg, and plead. Briefly, I even considered ripping my own arms off to get out of the cuffs.

But my eyes trailed to the glowing markings underfoot, only set to deactivate once the wedding ended.

A furious whinny rocked me. I watched in abject terror as Driata, Lou, and Jett were dragged out from the stables by armored guards. Loaded crossbows pressed into their temples drawing beads of blood. Bindings wrapped around Lou and Dri's mouths and I screamed.

No words came, just a tidal wave of sound pouring out of me as I recognized Captain Gialanos, Wallin, and the scrawny guard that had been in my chambers before I found Kaleb.

Finally, words came. "If you hurt them, the gods themselves won't stop me from ripping you apart."

Captain Gialanos gave me a grin lined with malice and turned his crossbow, bringing the stock down hard on the top of Driata's head. She crumpled and I relished my fury as the cold metal of my cuffs sliced into my wrists and ankles, I slammed my body against the wall of air surrounding me, imagining it was his body I was bruising.

The music picked up, but I was in haze, while I beat all the shield with everything I had, until the sides of my fists were smeared in blood and my temples throbbed.

"*I'll fucking kill you,*" I swore irrevocably, nothing more than panting breaths but the nobles gasped at my language. Orabelle's people snickered, feeding on the frantic energy around us.

"Enough!" Arius' bellow from the end of the aisle, I hadn't even seen him arrive, but he stood dressed in a pressed white suit behind my father who had Ciaran and Gemma each on his arms.

My siblings looked at the wreckage of life like they were disturbed, and like they were questioning if they ever knew me at all. They hadn't—but I need not tell them now.

Gasping, rage-filled breaths heaved out of me as I stared over their heads at Arius who was being escorted by his mother.

Aurina blinked, once slowly as if urging me. *Calm heads prevail. But how—how could I compose myself in resolve to this?*

Gemma and Ciaran transported our father under the arch, facing me and I could see the recognition in his weary eyes that he could have prevented it. But he said nothing.

"You look—" Ciaran started in the same tone he would normally use to insult me, but the words died in his throat when Gemma smacked him in the back of the head.

"Beautiful." She finished for him, and she rushed him to the front row next to Orabelle.

The number of guards tripled, filling up any empty space and I wondered what they thought I would do, what they thought me capable of.

Right in front of Arius, a door ripped open the air, and when the knob turned... I knew and my body was filled with lead that I wished someone would cast out to sea.

Baltazar, my mentor, my friend, my manipulator stepped through the bloody portal he created from air and dragged Liam with him, dumping his slumped body at my feet. The crowd chatted at the use of the illegal magic, but Arius silenced them with a commanding hand as his mother placed a hurried kiss on his cheek and dove into the nearest seat.

"Your final wedding gift, my love." Arius' voice and words pelted through me as though a round of archers had made their mark. "Once this is through, you're free to do with him as you please."

Orabelle tittered like she was watching some grandiose production as the panels of my life shattered before me. Even if I found a way out...there was no going back, there were no shadows to cling to. The pair of them knew too easily how to crawl under my skin.

My lips trembled and my vision clouded before several warm tears slipped down my face, burning the scrapes and bruises there.

I stared at Arius long and hard through the veil of liquid formed of my own broken life before, "Kill me."

Arius *laughed*—the sound cutting into me. "Excuse me?"

"I would sooner die than spend a lifetime submitting to you."

His cinnamon-colored eyes—ones that I thought should have been kind if they weren't flecked with insanity—gleamed as he shook his head. "You

will not die today. But you will be the first to kneel."

The prince's polished boot kicked out, slamming into my leg and the damned thing buckled and crushed the petals coating the dirt. My gown caught on the chains, and my face smashed into the magic barrier. I slid, blood filling my mouth and nearly fell, but Arius gripped my hair so that I looked up to him.

Something akin to a purr rumbled out of him like the heat of his pleasure at my submission warmed the bubble of magic surrounding us. Bile mixed with blood in my throat.

He faced the gathered crowd and roared for their celebration. Sparse applause rang out from his guards, but the gathered crowd remained silent. I lifted my arms to gesture for the guards that could see me to go fuck themselves and realized the chains had a significant amount of slack.

Keeping my face neutral, I waited for them to look again at their fearsome soon-to-be king and tipped my chest forward into my hands, digging around for the key.

I freed it, tucking it into my palm, and slowly brought my hands together so Arius didn't notice the clatter of the restraints.

Working the thin key into the hole of the chains, I prayed once more, just as I had the night prior, but as one manacle clicked open, Liam stirred and brought Arius' attention with him.

I couldn't hide the hanging cuff or the key...so I pulled forward the vile liquid in my mouth with my tongue and I spit on Arius' bright white pants.

Blood and bile stained them, and he crouched to strike, but I was ready and with my free hand I rammed the key into one of his venomous eyes.

I wished to remember the exact note his scream hit, so I could play it on repeat until my fingers or lungs gave out. But it was short-lived when he

yanked the key from his busted eye and tossed it out of the air shield. His fingers lined up with the marks he already left on my throat, and he lifted me onto my toes while I pummeled the side of his face.

The ground below us trembled and the air seemed to string out taut. A clap that resembled thunder crackled with power as suited bodies appeared in the aisle, weapons already cutting down guards. Nobles screamed and clamored for a way to exit the aisles and as my vision darkened, I saw Orabelle's people driven into a frenzy as they ripped anyone marked with Ellesmere's crest.

Arius' hand almost crushed my windpipe and stars burst in my eyes when I swung both of my feet up, but I managed to kick off his chest breaking his hold just as the chains hooking me to the altar went taut.

The remaining air in my lungs sputtered out of me when my back thudded into the earth. He lunged from me, but I rolled, crashing into the air shield and sweeping his feet out from under him. My vision cleared and I met silver eyes, as Liam slammed his fists against the magic containing us.

"Turn around!" He shouted and I ducked in time to see Arius swinging my carved wooden dagger for my back. I brought up my chain, wrapped it around his wrist, and yanked, snapping the sensitive bones. The dagger—my dagger—padded onto the ground and I swiped it up.

Arius gripped his wrist to his chest, and I caught a glimpse behind him of Ciaran magicking my shaking father away.

Asshole.

Jabbing the dagger into Arius' thigh, I sliced and ripped and cut until he was tumbling to the ground on top of me, his limbs tangled in my restraints, and he crushed me and my arms underneath him.

Slamming his head down, aiming for my face I just barely dodged him. But Gods, he was heavy. Each expelled breath felt like it weighed a ton and each inhale felt as though my chest would never rise again.

Metal clanged around us as the fighting raged and more guards poured into the battle. A booming laugh rang out and I looked to find the source.

There. The King of Karhdaro wearing a dark blue suit with his long hair tied in a bun, carved his way through guards like they were butter for his morning toast. He made his way toward the altar, not breaking a sweat with a wicked smile on his face, each time he cut one of the bastards down.

Arius' head came down again and light flared and darkened as my vision shuttered before brightening. I growled, shifting underneath him, and jerking my legs up around his as he scrambled. The chain locked around his ankles, and I leveraged one arm free and blasted it into the side of his nose.

The cartilage crunched and he squealed. I lifted up my head and chomped down with my teeth ripping, tearing, cutting as the *tough man* wailed and recoiled away from me.

The magic barrier shuddered. I gripped my blade, rolling on top of Arius while he cowered and begged.

"Please, I won't make you marry me." But even as he said it, his hands reached for the talisman dangling from his neck. I lunged, slamming the dagger through the meat of his hand and into his cold, bitter, malicious heart.

The barrier gave out and Liam dove for me, but Baltazar was suddenly there. He yanked him up by his blue-black curls and pulled tight, lining up a blade with the center of Liam's neck.

"Let him go," I said, kicking off Arius' limp body and dragging myself toward them on the ground. The pressure of the remaining chains tried to

pull me back to that condemned altar and I rioted as fighting stormed on beyond us.

"After all these years, after betrayal, and heartbreak." Baltazar examined me with a sneer. "You still love him?"

Liam shook his head, just a fraction, his silver eyes pleading for me to deny it. But... I couldn't. Fuck—I wanted to.

My head bobbed in a slow nod.

Baltazar's laugh cut me open and bled me out. He pressed the edge of his blade firmer against his brother's throat.

"Please," I begged, and a muscle feathered in Liam's jaw. "I'll do anything."

But they couldn't see what I did. Blair crept up behind them, pressing his index finger to his lips, and brought the hilt of his sword up.

My mentor smiled then—a sweet one meant for lovers between night warmed sheets. "Anything?"

"I swea—" I started, as Blair brought the hilt down and Baltazar folded in on himself, the dagger dragging across Liam's neck.

"No!" The king rushed forward crimson staining the collar of his shirt too and my brow scrunched wondering how I hadn't seen him injured. But as quickly as I saw the wound, it was gone, only the already drying liquid remained even as Liam and Baltazar fell.

My nails dug into the hard, dry earth. They cracked and broke and dug as I towed myself forward and my cuffs shredded the skin at my wrist and ankles.

I had to get to him, but Blair was already there. His large back bowed as he knelt to heal Liam and rose.

"Shackles," he said, eyeing the magic sapping cuffs like their very existence was offensive. I couldn't say I disagreed. "Romantic."

"There's a key...but I can't—" I pointed to it, just out of reach.

"What do you say we get you out of those?" He grabbed it like it was made of acid between his thumb and forefinger.

"Please?" I scrambled back so the metal had slack, and he tossed me the key. The sound of them unlatching was even better than that of Arius' scream and I rubbed at my raw wrists.

Liam rose behind him, and he rushed over to pull off the chains before succinctly dumping them on Arius' unmoving chest.

"Who did this to you?" The backs of Blair's knuckles were warm when they stroked my cheek and his healing magic surged into me.

Jerking my chin in the direction of Arius, I let them help me stand.

"Are you okay?" I asked Liam, reaching to touch his neck.

"Let's just get out of here." He offered in lieu of answering, dragging his assessing eyes over my face.

But I turned, remembering my sister as the fighting ebbed, and saw the three trembling guards hadn't left their station despite their fallen men begging for help.

Captain Gialanos' crossbow wavered over a—now sitting—Driata who was rubbing the crown of her head.

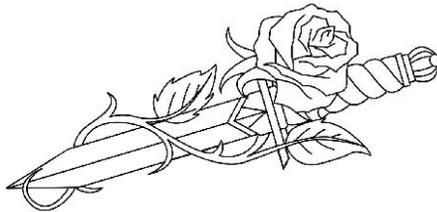
Her eyes widened when she saw me as if she was just coming out of a daze and the scrawny guard holding the tip of his arrow at Jett pointed it at me.

I felt Liam and Blair's large forms at my back as I stomped forward despite his finger poised on the trigger. Jett reared with a feverish huff and trampled him under her hooves. He fell beneath her, and the captain turned

his crossbow on my ferocious mare. Driata punched out before I had a chance to react, and her bound fists slammed into his manhood.

He gasped and gagged, doubling over, and I bent to search for a fallen weapon. Blair clicked his tongue behind me, to catch my attention and dangled my gifted dagger over my shoulder. I felt its weight in my hand.

Blair magicked himself and Liam behind the guards and clonked their heads together. They toppled, begging, screaming, and pleading, trying to drag themselves away but I didn't stop until their blood mixed on my hands.



Blair's strong hands pulled me back by my shoulders when my dagger slammed down to the hilt once more. "We have to go."

"Not yet."

"Jane," Liam said, stepping into view. "You've killed the crowned prince of both Ellesmere and Lunasa. More guards are pouring through the gates as we speak."

I shook my head, looking at the carnage created and watching Orabelle and her people vanish. Blair's clansmen gathered to leave at his command.

"Dri," I said, trying to clear the fog of rage that consumed me.

"I'm here." Her unbound hands grasped mine, despite the gore. "But I can't come with you."

"What?" My lip trembled as my voice broke.

She gave me the faintest smile. "I've learned a lot in the last few days that proved to me, our people need someone to look after them."

"I know." But even as I agreed, my head was shaking.

"This isn't goodbye." But she kissed my cheek and began to walk away.

"We have to go." Blair urged again, his gaze cutting to a rising Baltazar.

"You didn't kill him?" I yelled, whirling on the king.

"We can't." Liam gripped Blair's arm and dragged me against his chest.

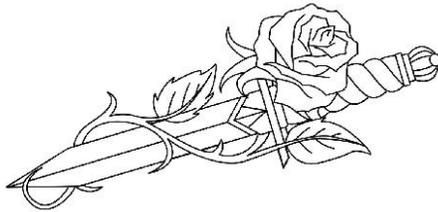
I grabbed for Lou, who urged Jett forward and grasped my hand.

"Let's go home," Blair said, and his men began to vanish as the world faded apart around us.

His magic emptied us out on a warm sand dune that butted up against crashing waves. The balmy, briny air coated my nose as I looked around at the white sand and our overdressed and blood coated group and—

One tall, tanned, completely naked woman with dark hair falling down over her breasts. My brow cocked in confusion. "Who are—"

She grinned like we were old friends. "I think it's time we have a chat."



Places

Anwyn: Ann-win

Lunasa: Lu-nah-sah

Ellesmere: Els-meer

Luhne: Lu-n

Karhdaro: Car-dar-oh

Weylin: Way-l-in

Faery: Fairy

People:

Lunasa

Jane Serpen of Lunasa- Jane Sir-pen

Jane's siblings:

Driata: Dri-ah-tah

Ciaran: Kee-ran

Oliver: Ol-a-ver

Olivia: Ol-iv-ee-ah

Gemma- Jem- mah

King Certis Serpen (*King of Lunasa*): Sir-t-is Sir-pen

Lord Keeper Baltazar Tellyk (*Keeper of the Crown*): Bal-ta-zar Tell-ik

Liam Tellyk (*Baltazar's Brother*): Lee-am Tell-ik

Duke Vellum Tellyk: Vell-um Tell-ik

Lux (*merry band of misfits*): L-ux

Louisa (Lou)(*Seamstress and friend*): Lu-is-ah (Lu)

Kaleb Dower: Ka-leb Dow-er

Gwyn Dower: Gw-in Dow-er

Tessa Dower: Tes-ah Dow-er

Duchess and Duke Tilby (*Rulers of the Barrens*): Til-bee

Lord Weemble (*Of Luhne*): Weem-bull

Ellesmere

Prince Arius Alistair (*Prince of Ellesmere*): Ar-ee-us Al-is-tair

King Maveri Alistair (*King of Ellesmere*): May-ver-ee Al-is-tair

Queen Aurina Alistair (*Queen of Ellesmere*): Ah-ree-nah Al-is-tair

Commander Jenson: Jen-son

Captain Gialanos: Gee-ah-lah-nos

Zander: Zan-der

Codis Wallin: Koh-dis Wah-lin

Isles of Weylin

Queen Orabelle (*Queen of Weylin*): Or-ah-bell

Karhdaro

King Blair (*King of Karhdaro*): Bla-air

Would you like to discuss your theories on what will happen next?

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Author's Note

I've spent my entire life falling in love with books and the characters and worlds stored within them. Bringing Jane's story to life was something that started off as a dream in July of last year. Imposter syndrome, paired with a vicious habit of procrastination and writer's block caused road bumps along the way, but the first book is done! Now, many people would probably consider me an actual lunatic for the way her inner dialog has so easily become my own while writing for her.

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And finally and most importantly, to my readers: Thank you! Without you, my dream wouldn't be in the process of coming true. I can't wait to continue Jane's story and share the rest of my worlds with you.

-Deanna ♥