



THE HALF- CLASS

ESCAPE YOUR
CLASS. DEFINE
YOURSELF.

KAYVION LEWIS

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Escape Your Class, Define Yourself



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ISBN: 9781953539892

Edited by Loni Crittenden, Malorie Nilson, Sophia Desensei

Cover Design by Shayne Leighton

The Half-Class logo designed by Amanda Wright

Art Provided by Adobe

The Parliament House

www.parliamenthousepress.com

*To my parents and Ms. Fame—for never letting me feel anything less than
infinitely loved and completely accepted.*

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Chapter One



Don't draw attention to yourself.
Always have your paperwork ready.
Remember your class.

Maybe during the day. Maybe most nights. But not this night.

I let the mantra chase me as we raced out from the mansion. Those words strangled me almost every hour of every day. But when I was out with the rebels, on nights like this one, they could never catch me. The pounding hooves underneath me beat the words back as furiously as they carried me forward. I wouldn't *let* them catch me.

There was only a half-dozen of us tonight, bolting towards the city in cloaks darker than the forest around us. I liked to think we were invisible in the night. Once we hit the streets of Bexbury, we would be anything but. The wind ripped through my curls as we tore past the trees. I squeezed my reins, absorbing the rush of the moment. The danger. The thrill. The need.

Head of the formation, Jace's beaded braids danced behind her—a style typical of the dark-class. If she weren't so light-skinned, like I was, she might have been able to pass for a natural dark. But Jace would never even consider that. She was one of the only people I knew who wore her half-class status with pride, even when the sun was up and when we were headed out to spit on the face of a king.

Luke, riding at my side and the only dark-class with us tonight, shot me a smile. His grey eyes sparkled in the faint light of the lantern bouncing at the side of Jace's saddle, glowing golden against his smooth, brown skin. I forced a quick, friendly smile, though even for that, I chastised myself. I was supposed to stop encouraging him so much. But it wasn't the time to think about whether or not I wanted to return Luke's smiles.

The watercolor blue of the bakery peeked through the branches first. Bexbury, even as big as it was, never showed itself until you were right upon it. They say they used to call the forest encircling us the *Leafy Shield*. No one could see through. I hoped it would live up to that reputation tonight.

With the sight of the city igniting my excitement, I pushed my horse even faster through the trees. Dirt gave way to cracked cobblestones. Hooves clattered like thunder. The stink of moist soil and decaying trees fell away under the waxy scent of oil streetlamps, which cast the teal and yellow storefronts of the city's Eastside in an eerie burning glow.

The few pedestrians walking about late plastered themselves against buildings as we passed. A pair of women ran towards the safety of an alley. Pure terror clutched the face of an elderly light-class couple clinging to each other as we raced by. They knew who we were, and if they believed the reports King Dreux sent out about us, we were dangerous. We weren't violent, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't like seeing things reversed. For a second, these light-class Eastside citizens, gripping satin skirts and rushing to move in finely polished boots, were the ones pushed to the edges of the street.

It'd been so long since I'd been to the east side of the city. During the day, while everything was open, most of the stores and restaurants around here only welcomed naturals. Good people who were fully light or fully dark. Pure, the way God intended. My gaze slashed to the side as we passed a ribbon shop with curling pink and red ribbons painted over its glass windows. But my attention homed into the sign perpetually pressed against the

darkened shop window.

Natural Lights only, please. (Agreeable Natural Darks allowed after Mid-Day.)

I dragged my eyes back ahead. It wasn't like I could afford to shop at these shops anyway, even if they did let me in.

We turned onto the central main street, and our destination came into view. The dead grey municipal building stood out from the watercolor streets. Amid bright Morran oranges and corals, the colorless brick was the only dead flower in a lively field. The building's cement columns and monstrous brown doors reminded me of the ancient temples from times long past or the ageless castles described in my volumes of Taliver. Those were enchanting to read. This place made my stomach turn.

We flew past the gates into a courtyard preceding the building. Two streetlamps stationed before the curled iron bars illuminated the stone entranceway in a pale-yellow light, the only hint of color the area boasted. But soon, their lamplights wouldn't be the only fires lighting up the night.

"Stop!" a pair of officers shouted. They raced down the stone steps. In their matching pale blue uniforms, they were like identical toy soldiers reaching for the swords at their sides. But there was no point.

Jace split away from us, and Luke tossed me the end of a thick braided rope. Clutching my reins with the other hand, I wrapped the rope around my gloved palm. It pressed into my skin, feeling like a noose in my grip. I cut away from Luke, and the rope tightened against my wrist as it stretched taut between us. We bolted past the men, leaving behind a thunderous echo of hooves.

The rope knocked right into their throats, and the officers slammed into the ground. They hacked and gagged, but they were still breathing. Surely, a few scrapes and bruises would be the extent of their injury. At least, that's what I told myself.

Thomas and Maxine reined in behind us, sliding off their horses to take

hold of the injured officers with ropes pulled from the saddles. Nothing more. Even if some members of Gilow's movement wished otherwise, we did not kill people.

Hopping down from my horse, I felt a rush of wind. I followed Jace and Luke up the municipal building's steps.

Luke grabbed the brass door handles and shook. Deep shudders radiated through the air.

"It's locked. Guess we'll have to go home," Luke said.

"Very funny." I yanked him out of the way.

Jace knelt at the door. She retrieved two long pins from under her cloak and slipped them into the door's lock. The hooks and cogs inside the door clattered softly until a little click sounded. The door moaned as she pushed it open. I couldn't see her smile, but the lift of her cheeks under her cloth mask was just as reassuring.

The crunch of my boots over the white tile echoed through the empty lobby. Thomas and Maxine dragged the struggling officers in behind them. Once inside, Luke shut the massive door.

I stood frozen, breathing in the feel of the building. It was grey and dull, yes, but there was something magnificent about it too. The high ceilings and branching corridors were so different from the typical style of Morra. King Dreux had this building built in the traditional Ryland style, and though I'd never been to Ryland, the architecture gave me an idea of what their cities must be like—grand but colorless.

"What are you waiting for?" Jace asked.

I suppose I wasn't the only one who'd gotten caught up in the awe.

"Let's get busy. Find all that disgusting paperwork."

Joining with Luke, I sprinted down the municipal halls, searching for that precious collection of papers. The corridors themselves were devoid of, well, almost everything, so we went straight for the rooms branching off from the hall.

I kicked open the first door. Darkness drenched the room, but enough moonlight snuck between the curtains framing the little window for me to make out a polished desk and chairs. An office—not what we were looking for.

I shoved over a beige tufted chair and thrust a stone paperweight, piles of folders, and a bronze nameplate to the tile. Papers fluttered to the floor.

A similar scene unfolded in the other rooms I passed. The stir of paper and crash of furniture sang like music in my ears. But maybe the symphony was a bit too loud. My heart quivered. Could the neighbors hear us? Or people out for a late-night stroll?

I shook the thought away. Jace would have told us if we needed to be stealthy.

“It’s down here!” Thomas shouted.

I bolted around the corner. Maxine dropped a pile of files and ran after me.

Luke and I skidded into the municipal lobby. Thomas and Jace flew in, too, hauling in armfuls of parchment. I froze as they dropped the papers, some slapping the floor and others fluttering down. This couldn’t be real. What we sought were just sheets of paper. Nothing special about them. Pieces of paper that had so much power over us.

Jace nodded back to one of the corridors. “Left hallway, last two rooms.”

“Why are we bringing here?” Luke asked.

“The other rooms are too close to the shops next door,” Jace said. “We’re not going to risk burning down the whole Eastside.”

“Maybe we should,” Maxine said behind me. She squeezed her fingers under her chin, looking like she wanted to bounce out of her own skin. I imagined that excitable smile of hers twisting under the tight orange curls that her mask must have been pressing into her cheeks. Thomas—the fluff of his hair gently lifting his mask—snickered.

He opened his mouth to agree with Maxine, but Jace shot a glare towards

them. He shut up instantly.

“Just go,” Jace said.

Following her order, I ran with Luke, Thomas, and Maxine down the next corridor. It was identical to the last one I was in, except there weren’t nearly as many lining this hallway. Only two tall doors marked each side of the hallway, but that just made the ones we were headed for easier to distinguish.

Maxine ran with Thomas into the set of doors at the far end, and Luke and I darted into the first room on the left. The room was massive. Rows and rows of narrow shelves cluttered the floor from wall to wall, each stuffed with countless collections of parchment.

This was Bexbury—where each and every person was classified. All its people boiled down to nothing more than sheets of paper. I reached out and touched a pile. Was my classification somewhere in this room? Would I be able to feel it if I touched my own paper?

I peeled the first sheet. *Light-class, Natural*. The words lined the top edge. Like all parchment, it was feather-light between my fingers, but its weight sank into my soul.

No, I was right before. These were more than just simple pieces of paper. And that was why they had to go up in flames.

I pulled as much paper as I could from the nearest shelf, stuffing them between my arms. I felt like a hungry monster, greedily wanting to rip away more and more. When my arms were so full, I couldn’t carry anymore, I tottered out into the hall. Dozens of sheets slipped from my grasp as I ran, dancing to the floor behind me.

In the lobby, I dropped the pile on top of the growing mountain, scanning them as they fell.

Name

Parents

Class

None of these people were half-classes. How were we distinguished on our paperwork from the naturals? Artificial light? Artificial dark? Half-class wasn't an official term, just slang for those of us who didn't really belong in the light or dark class. Having parents from two different classes, we were "artificially" assigned one. But it wouldn't surprise me if the term made its way onto any of our papers.

I pushed down a twist in my stomach. *You're just as natural as anyone else, Evie.*

We went back and forth through the corridors, hauling more and more papers into the stone lobby. As I pulled a particularly tall stack of documents from a shelf under the back window of the filing room, the shudders of the clover green shop next door scraped the glass. Jace was right. Had we started the fires in here, we might just have sent them up in flames too. And likely the rest of the block as well.

I don't know how long it took us to clear out the file rooms. We bolted like lightning through the rooms, and in what felt like no time at all, the lobby floor was piled high with parchment. But what felt like no time could quickly become too much time, and if any of the residents saw us and decided to call the officers, each minute was one closer to them arriving.

"That's good enough," Jace said.

I dropped the final stack of papers down with the rest.

"Thomas, Love, will you help Maxine escort these dear officers outside? Wouldn't want them to get hurt."

Maxine's mask shifted, and I imagined she was smiling underneath. She and Thomas dragged the gagged officers out, likely to be left tied against one of the stone columns near the steps.

"Alright, let's go," Jace ordered.

I circled behind her toward the lobby doorway. Luke slid down one of the mounds as if he were skidding down a snowy hill, then finally joined us. With one last glance back, Jace threw her lantern onto the floor. Glass

shattered, and the flames devoured the papers. A flood of heat washed over me, wrapping around me as the orange fires climbed up the sheets and trekked across the sea of papers, turning the entire lobby into a burning inferno. The blaze burned my eyes, but I didn't let myself close them for one second. I wanted to witness them smoldering, these heavy, powerful papers. A warmer than the fire smile lifted my lips. We could burn this to ash. What else could we burn down?

"Guess that's the end of that," Thomas said.

I nodded. These may not have been the only records the king had of Bexbury, and it may not have changed everything, but it had to change something. *I* had to change something.

"That's enough gawking," Jace said. "Let's ride before the real officers get here."

My heart longed to stay and watch the fire until it died, but I knew she was right. Bouncing down the municipal's steps, lamp light's glow faded over an apartment across the street. It wouldn't be long before the whole block was awake.

I pounced onto the nearest horse, thankfully mine, and wrapped the reins around my palms. More lights lit up the windows lining the street, and I felt as if the entire world was watching me. I twisted my reins in my fists anxiously—it was time to go.

But I forced myself to wait. There was one last embellishment to be made.

I turned back to Luke, the only one of us not on his horse. With his jar of crimson paint in one hand and oversized brush in the other, he drew our symbol across one of the thick pillars atop the municipal steps: a circle crossed with a diagonal line, with half colored in—half dark, just like us. The symbol graced the very same pillar the unfortunate officers sat tied against. Whoever came up with it must have thought they were so clever.

I breathed a sigh of relief when he threw the jar and brush into the

burning lobby and raced back down to the rest of us.

“Took you long enough,” I said as he mounted the last free horse.

“What can I say?” He settled himself into the saddle. “I’m an artist.”

With all of us ready, Jace led the charge. She bolted into the street, and we followed in a parade of succession. Luke and I remained at the very end of the convoy, but unlike me, he didn’t seem to mind the dozens of people wrapped in robes and night-dressings who crept cautiously outside to see the spectacle. They gawked at us as we raced back into the night. Was gawking the right word? Some of them turned up their noses in disgust. Others shook with shock.

Someone had to be happy with our accomplishment.

As we tore down the street, a light flickered into a small window above. An elderly woman peered between lace curtains. Even at a distance, I could make out the faint brown tint to her skin and the delicate coarseness of her hair. She was one of us, a half-class hidden away in someone’s top room. She smiled.

And that made it all worth it.

Chapter Two



“You should have seen it, Kat!” I collapsed into our well-worn sofa and threw my legs over the armrest, letting them dangle over the side. “It was like a big bonfire right in the middle of Eastside. I’ve never seen taller flames!”

Kat hovered before our cracked mirror and alternated between a pale rose pink and a sapphire blue dress—both with equally revealing necklines. We sometimes shared clothes, but I wouldn’t be caught dead in either of these pieces. Though, I wasn’t in the same profession as my older cousin. Not yet, at least.

“I wish I was there to see it.” She threw the sapphire dress onto our bed and tugged at the laces of the rose pink one.

“You could have,” I propped myself up on my elbows, “if you had come with us last night.”

Kat sighed. “I’m not seventeen anymore, Evie. I don’t get to stay here for free. I have to spend my nights working, not running around with Gilow’s gang.”

That was partially true. Ever since I came to live with Auntie Jen and Kat, Auntie was clear about one thing. She’d take care of both of us until we were eighteen. After that, we had to work, pay rent, or leave.

I honestly thought she was bluffing—until Kat turned eighteen last year.

Then, two days after her birthday, Auntie set her up with her first *John*.

Whether or not Kat was happy with her new arrangement, I didn't know. She'd seemed so curious about what goes on in the barn's private rooms during the months leading up to her birthday. If I was being honest, I was curious too. Growing up in Auntie Jen's barn gave us more exposure to the forbidden than most. Still, I think we both knew that actually doing the deed was going to be a lot different than hearing it through the rafters or listening to stories from Sammy or the other girls.

With my eighteenth birthday less than three months away, I wondered how she had really felt back then. Curiosity, yes, was part of it. But more than anything, I was terrified.

Whatever Kat had felt back then, the sentiment appeared to be gone now. She worked more nights than she needed to fill Auntie Jen's quota and seemed content. She made good money—great money, actually. Sometimes, I hated her for being so at peace with a job she, as a natural light-class, wasn't bound to—not in the way an *artificial* light like me was.

She had so many opportunities that I would never have, but she hardly seemed to notice. If I didn't love her so much, I'd despise her.

Kat could work the floor all her life and be fine. Many women could. But no matter how I stretched the idea, I could never see a version of myself that was alright trading my body for money every night. I didn't think I was better than Kat, and I surely wasn't better than any of the half-class girls in the world who couldn't find any other work. But I still didn't want that for myself.

Kat yanked at the tangle of ribbons lining the back of her dress until they were loose enough to spread the fabric of the gown apart. Tossing me the dress, she pulled off her night shift—or day shift as it should have been called, since Kat and I only slept during the day most of the time.

I held the bodice of the dress open at her feet. She pulled her lengthy golden hair back as I slid the fabric up to rest on her shoulders. Her fingers

fiddled with the front while I detangled the web of laces at the back.

“Isn’t this a little impractical?” I asked. “Wouldn’t you and the other girls be better suited wearing dresses that are a tad easier to take on and off?” I smirked over her shoulder, and she returned it through the mirror.

“There are only two types of men,” Auntie Jen answered. Her heavy cotton skirts rustled as she entered from the rickety staircase on the opposite side of the room. “The type who gets a thrill from the unlacing, and the type who doesn’t care enough to take the dress off.”

I tapped my chin. “And which do you prefer, dearest cousin? The former or the latter?”

“Neither,” Kat said. “I prefer the third type who Auntie has clearly forgotten about.”

“Oh?” Auntie shoved me with a hip and waved my hands from the laces.

I settled at the mirror’s side so I could face the two of them.

“What type is that?” Auntie asked.

“The type who passes out before he can get his boots off and leaves his coin out for the taking.”

Kat and I snickered. The hint of a smile tipped Auntie’s lips too, but before it could fully shine, she hit Kat’s shoulder and straightened her lips. Auntie wasn’t exactly prone to smiling, but wrinkles crawling from the corners of her lips up her cheeks told me she used to be. Perhaps she wasted them all back when she used to work like one of her girls.

Auntie mentioned once that she and Kat’s mother looked similar. Though it was tinted with silver strands, Auntie’s hair still glimmered gold like Kat’s. Both of their eyes had the same honey sparkle—the only family trait I shared with them.

“Righty. You’re all done.” Auntie Jen said. She spun Kat around, a crisp bow at her back. It was sure to be gone within the hour. “Sammy and the other girls are downstairs if you want to come down too.”

“Already?” I asked. Orange light glowed through the slit in our curtains.

“The sun’s not even down yet.”

“I’m opening early tonight,” Auntie said. “A little birdy told me a regiment of soldiers is to arrive from Ryland, today or tomorrow.” She glanced to Kat, whose eyes lit up at the word soldiers. “You know how those officers are after a long trip. More business for us.” Auntie hoisted up her skirts and headed back for the stairs. “We open in ten. Evie, you’ll work the bar. If it’s as busy as I hope, we’re gonna need all the help we can get.”

I fell back onto the sofa. “No, thank you. I think I’m going to read tonight, instead.” I had a new volume of Taliver calling my name.

“You’ll need money for your next book soon, won’t you? Better come get the tips while you can.” Auntie Jen descended the stairs without another word.

I tried to set her on fire with my eyes as she left, but alas, it didn’t work.

“So much for curling my hair,” Kat said, plopping down on our bed and pulling on a pair of heeled, cream boots.

I gave her my sweetest smile, pushing my curls from my face. “Kitty Kat...” I fluttered my lashes.

“I’m not giving you the coin for your book.” She laced up one boot, then the other. “But you could earn three times as much coin than the bar in half the time if you flaunted those curls just right.” She let her skirts slip over her calf, casting me a seductive glance.

Resigned, I jumped up from the sofa, took her hands, and pulled her up from the bed too.

“Let’s just go,” I said. Hopefully, it would be a decent, quiet night.



Auntie Jen was right; there was a surge of customers in Bexbury. And they all found their way to the barn.

An hour after dark, we were packed. The main floor swelled with

dancing, drinking, and everything in between. Although most of the ladies making rounds downstairs were Auntie Jen's, there was a fair share of non-working ladies out and about too. The barn was so much more than just a brothel.

It was a gathering place for lights, darks, and half-classes. One of the few places where I was bound to run into at least a handful of others like me, excluding the plethora of half-class girls who made up most of Auntie Jen's troupe. Walking through the tables, I could pass a light-class arm-wrestling with a dark-class; working the bar, I would serve a half-class flanked by patrons of both other classes. Even just lingering up in the rafters from my favorite perch, I could watch the skin tones ranging from snow to deep umber dance around each other, and feel a strange sense of belonging. It was like there were no classes here—no lines between light and dark-class. And no such thing as half-class at all.

The first couple hours of the night behind the bar with Auntie Jen were all clinking glasses, slurred orders, and sloshing barrels. It was a mess, but I couldn't help but let my initial grimace fall away after the first hour or so. There was a certain carefreeness in the air that seeped into me, whether I wanted it or not.

When Julian, a dark-class boy a year younger than me, showed up for his shift two hours before midnight to take my place, the cozy friendliness of the night coaxed me onto the floor. *Come join crowd, Evie*, it said. *When else do you get to?*

I tied my apron around my skirts and drifted onto the floor. It was a little ridiculous to put the apron on after I'd finished my work, but I'd figured out a long time ago that the apron was often the easiest way to tell the patrons that I was not for sale myself. No matter how modest the dresses I chose to wear were, I still got requests at least once a week. The apron at least deterred most.

I strolled through the floor and around patrons, catching bits and pieces of

conversations.

“I appreciate the decrease in taxes since we joined the Ryland empire,” a man with a cloud white beard tickling his dark skin said, rubbing it with each word. “But sometimes I miss the days without the restrictions...” The man’s voice faded away with my steps, replaced soon by less insightful observations.

A trio of lanky young men leaned into a table, trading slurred sentences. The yeasty scent of beer clogged my nose as I passed. “No, it’s a good investment...” one insisted. “With one-hundred gold pieces, I could be the biggest radish seller in the city.”

I held back my grin as I passed. He must have forgotten about the massive radish farm only an hour’s ride from the city’s south edge. But beer tends to leads to forgetfulness.

A light-class soldier, military pins running down his breast and braided gold cords looping over the shoulders of his deep green coat, with two light-classes dressed in casual trousers and the olive-green linen shirts that were quite popular in the Eastside these days, stood near the fireplace.

I took a rest behind the packed stone wall of the fireplace, listening in secret.

“I’m tellin’ you, the entire Eastside almost burned to the ground,” one of the men in the plain shirts said. “If the salters hadn’t gotten there, the whole city might have been gone.”

His companion hummed his agreeance.

The soldier shook his head. His silky wheat brown hair glinted with the firelight.

“How do you put up with it?” he sneered. “You know, back in Aurell, we don’t have this kind of problem. There aren’t any half-classes running around causing unrest like that back home. And certainly, no dark-classes sympathizing with them either.”

“Oh, come on,” one of the casual men said. “You tellin’ me you don’t

have any trouble back in the capitol?”

The soldier chuckled and took a swig from the mug in his hands. “Well, of course they *exist*. But in Aurell, people know where they belong. Where God wants them. There’s no way we’re ever going to get rid of all of the abominations, not any time soon. But halfies know better than to try anything like that in the king’s city.” He smirked. “And besides, we don’t want them all gone, do we?”

The man turned to watch as Samantha crossed the floor a few feet from them, her tight coils still disheveled from the interaction she must have just concluded.

“Who will work places like this without them?”

The men chuckled. Something sick churned in my stomach, and I stormed away from the little corner I’d been eavesdropping from. That was what I got for venturing out against my better judgment. These Ryland soldiers might have been good for business, but the sentiments and reinforcements of their ‘God’ they were bringing with them were certainly not.

I kept my head down as I weaved around the tables, chairs, and sofas cluttering the barn floor. People laughed, hit tables, everyone seemed to be talking. It seemed as if the number of soldiers had doubled since I left the bar. I couldn’t make it two steps without seeing a green coat or braided cords. Was it just me, or did every conversation I passed seem to contain the world half? I was sick of hearing it. I needed to get out.

I caught Samantha’s tight coils and curvy figure slipping behind the bar and into the corridor beyond.

“Sammy,” I called, following her behind the bar.

Samantha, halfway into the kitchen, turned back. “Hi, Evie.” She smiled her brilliant smile. “Are you hungry? I’m starving.”

“I’m always hungry for Sammy,” I said.

She threw her head back and laughed. “You sound like my patrons.”

She circled behind me, grabbed my shoulders, and guided me into the

kitchen. Just like that, I already felt better. Sammy's spirits were always up, and her air was contagious.

Our cook, scratchy-haired Albo, must have been taking his on-the-hour, half-hour long break because the kitchen was empty. A pot of stew simmered on the stove, and a scent like basted sugar cane wafted from the oven. I sat at a scratched-up table pushed against the back wall and kicked another chair out for Samantha, who joined me after ladling a small bowl.

Sammy blew over the steaming bowl, her cherry red lips pursing adorably as she did. In the ten years I'd known Samantha, I don't think I'd ever seen her without her signature red lips. They were as distinguishable as her short curls. She took a small sip from the bowl and frowned.

"No good?" I asked.

"It's...edible."

"I guess that's good enough for Albo."

"What was it he said to me the other day?" Samantha tapped the side of her bowl. "Oh, yes. He said, 'anything tastes good when you're drunk.'"

"Then I'm sure our patrons are quite content."

Sammy rolled her eyes. "If Jen had any sense, she'd fire Albo, but her heart's too big."

Poor Albo. He spent more time on break than he actually cooked and his dinner could only be described as 'edible.' But if he lost his job here, he'd have nowhere else to go. Auntie must have known that.

The only thing harder than finding work as a half-class girl was finding work as a half-class man. Pity aside, he did make damn good desserts. A feat that almost earned his wage.

"If only she would be so lenient with me," I murmured.

Sammy's eyes dropped down. She took another sip of stew.

"Samantha?" She raised a brow. "Does it ever bother you?"

"Albo's cooking? All the time."

"No. You know what I mean, Sammy."

“Do I?”

Was she really going to drag it out of me? I folded my arms. “I mean, servicing men like those soldiers from Aurell. I know work is work, and maybe it shouldn’t matter but...but Samantha, a lot of them hate us. They think we shouldn’t even exist. Or at best they see us as nothing more than...” I raised my hand to her but stopped myself from saying anything else.

“Nothing more than this?” She gestured to herself.

I bit my lip.

“I just meant—does it ever bother you to do that with men like them?”

Sammy sighed and cupped the sides of her bowl. “It used to. Perhaps it still does. But it’s best not to think about it. Just smile instead.”

Just smile. That sounded even worse than thinking about it.

“I didn’t see you last night.” She changed the topic. “Wherever could my Evelyn have been?”

I leaned back in my chair. The wood legs creaked under me. “I was out on the town.”

She paused. “You wouldn’t have happened to be on the east side of town, would you?” Sammy kept her deep brown eyes locked on me. She knew where I was last night. But she’d never say it outright.

“Don’t be silly, Samantha. I never go to the east side.” I smirked. “But if I did, I’m sure I’d have a flaming good time.”

She shook her head. “Well, if you ever find yourself there again, in similar company, please be cautious. As you can see, there are going to be a ton more officers lurking around town this season.”

I tried not to roll my eyes. “Me and my company will be fine. We always have been.”

“This is different.” She lowered her voice. “The Ryland officers take resistance a lot more seriously than our officers.”

I scoffed. “I think the Morran officers take it pretty seriously.”

“Not like they do in Ryland.”

Her conviction made my heart beat faster. She'd never shown so much concern before.

Her shoulders dropped, taking the capped rouge sleeves of her dress with them. "I'm only recommending that you be extra careful on your late-night outings while they're in town, alright?"

Sammy was never supportive of Gilow's rebellion, especially not my involvement. It was 'dangerous' and 'caused more problems than it solved.' Maybe the first part was true, but not the latter. Things were going to get worse for us, whether we acted or not.

"Noted."

I sat with Samantha, running my fingers through my curls while she finished her little meal, all the inclination to converse gone.

Just as she finished, Auntie Jen burst into the kitchen, her gaze skimming the room until she found Sammy. Apparently, Mister Archie was here to see her—a moderately wealthy dark-class man who came every Sunday to see Sammy, and sometimes on extra nights, like tonight. He hadn't missed a week in ten years. I asked Sammy once why she hadn't become his full-time mistress. She could have a nice apartment near his, more money than she made now, and she'd only have to spend nights with him. Sammy told me he never asked.

I didn't realize it at the time, but having a mistress was much more characteristic of the light-class. Most occupations the dark-classes are permitted to just don't yield enough money to support a mistress. So you don't see men working as street-sweepers or builders renting out separate apartments for their side women. And even for the dark-class men who could afford one, like Mister Archie, who'd found moderate success in owning and running a small group of dark-class window cleaners, it had become too taboo in the dark-class circles.

"Besides," Sammy had said. "I would have said no anyway. I much prefer my freedom."

I didn't get it. If given both options, a decent life with only one man sounded a hell of a lot better to me. Not that I planned to do either.

Samantha fluffed her taffeta skirt over her thinning stockings, pushed up her corseted bosom, and made her way to the door.

"Bring him a pint of that strong stuff Julian just opened," Auntie said as Sammy squeezed past her into the corridor. "You know the stuff."

"Of course, Jen," Sammy called. The clack of her boots over the wood flooring faded into the hall.

"I wonder why Mister Archie's here on a Wednesday." I lowered Samantha's clay bowl into murky sink water and dried my hands on a stained rag. "You think he had a fight with his wife?"

"If so, let's hope the marital discord continues. Better him here than at home." Auntie's focus flittered around the room. "Where the hell is Albo?"

"Who knows." I shrugged and walked toward the door. "If I see him, I'll send him down."

I crossed the back hallways, peeking into the wide-open cellar door as I passed. Laughter echoed up the cellar steps. Like the main floor, the cellar was probably extra busy tonight, full of clattering coins and countless card games. Maybe I'd use my tips from the bar to wager against some of our guests later.

Passing the cellar doors, I continued to the very end of the hallway, where our apartment door waited. I knelt and slipped my fingers into the narrow slit beneath the door frame and found the brass key inside. I unlocked the door before returning the key back to its hiding place. Then, after a quick glance back to make sure none of the patrons had seen me hide the key, I cracked the door open and slipped inside.

I made it a few steps across the patchwork carpet before I spun back around, rushed back up to the door, and relocked it. Oh, how Auntie loved to berate me every time I forgot to do that.

"Albo?" I called. "Are you here?"

I untied my apron and threw it onto the nearest sofa chair—one of many Auntie had clumsily organized around our fairly large sitting room. One side of it was our sitting room, and the other was her makeshift bedroom, complete with a bed, a wardrobe, and a mirror balancing over an old chest only she had the key to. I always wondered if that was where she kept the piles of money she refused to give me for my books.

I crossed the room and started up the rickety stairs.

“I know you’re here, Albo.”

I smirked as I stopped on the little landing dividing the lower half of the stairs from the upper half that led up to Kat’s and my room. My fingers ran over the wooden boards of the wall until they hooked into the little crevices between the boards. With very little force on my part, the hidden door popped open, and I stepped out onto the landing. Laughs and conversation ricocheted up from the main floor. Albo’s silhouette, lanky and tall and topped with a dandelion of brown-black hair, cast a faded shadow behind him.

“Damn.” He took a drag from his cigar. “Didn’t think anyone would find me up here.” His hand clung tightly to one of the wooden beams jutting out from the wall behind us as he leaned precariously over the edge of the landing.

I tip-toed to the edge and grabbed a beam myself, but with both hands. “I’m the one who told you where this place was. You shouldn’t be so surprised.” *I know you have a master key for some reason.*

He took another drag. A scent of black cherry and ash tickled my nose. Interesting, last week he was smoking cinnamon flavored.

“My Aunt is looking for you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll go back soon. You leave five minutes, and suddenly everyone’s on your ass.”

Probably half an hour.

I leaned further over the edge, letting the beam hold my weight. The people below looked so jovial from up here. A trio of light-class men in red

and blue velvet suits sat laughing at the bar. Their voices were lost to distance, but I imagined they were laughing at some innocent thought. Maybe that's why my secret little landing occupied a special corner in my heart. I could look down on the diverse company below and hear the buzz of the night without actually listening to a word. Rather than being on the edge of Bexbury—flanked by the forest on one side and the mostly dark-class homes and businesses on the other—we were drifting in an ocean where none of the outside world existed.

“Come up here to read?” Albo nodded to my stack of books pressed against the wall behind us.

“What else is there for people like us to do besides dive into fantasy?”

“Can't live in a fantasy world forever, Evie. Have to face reality sooner or later.”

The same group of men I'd overheard before were still gathered near the fire, downing new pints of beer and eyeing Christa as she descended the stairs across the room.

“What if reality is less than appealing?”

Albo took a long drag from his cigar, taking a long time to breathe the smoke out. “Then change it.”

He held the butt of his cigar over the edge, balancing it between his fingers. A tall, muscled soldier who was paler than the moon lingered just under it. His head was in the perfect position to catch the still red cigar butt. Albo held it out for a few seconds, and for a moment, I thought he might actually do it.

Albo crushed the butt in his palm. “Enjoy your stories.” He stuffed the crushed butt into his pocket, then slipped out the door, leaving me alone.

I pulled myself back from the ledge and leaned back against my wall, sliding down next to my stack of books.

Across the barn through the beams and rafters, I made out Kat's golden hair and her alluring pink dress ascending the stairs. A heavy-set light-class

man followed right behind her. My heart clenched in my chest. Was that going to be my reality?

I averted my eyes. No, I could change *anything*—that's what my nights with Jace and Gilow were for. I'd deal with fixing my reality when I had to.

But for tonight, I wanted to drift away.

So I pulled my current volume of Taliver off the top of the stack and opened the book.

Chapter Three



I slammed my hand down on the tree stump. “Read ‘em and weep, my friends.”

Brison’s eyes went wide. He glanced down to the cards, up to me, and back to my excellent hand.

“This game is rigged!” He threw his cards down on the stump. Richal, at his side, laid his cards down too.

A warm smile slipped over my lips. I loved nights like two nights ago, riding with Jace, but this was just as special. In our little corner of the forest, an hour’s ride from the city, we might as well have fallen into a different world. A place where the swirl of people in the mansion behind me, and the soft-eyed, freckle-faced sugar brown boys in front of me, would have come together normally. Not as a way to escape the city behind us.

“Only losers claim their games are rigged,” I said, pulling in the two sweeties they had bet against me.

Richal looked longingly at the little candies while Brison reexamined the cards, including the ones his identical brother had had.

“Next time, maybe you boys should try taking on someone your own age.”

“You are our age,” Brison said.

“You’re thirteen. I’m seventeen. Big difference.”

“This isn’t fair. You play cards every night,” Richal murmured, still staring at my wrapped caramels.

“You should have thought of that before you challenged me. And I don’t play cards every night.”

Brison glared. “Then what do you do every night?”

I reached across the tree stump and tugged a clump of his curly hair. “Don’t worry about what I do.”

In petty fashion, I dropped all the sweeties in my hand into Richal’s lap. His eyes lit up, flickering brighter in the firelight outside the mansion. Brison clenched his jaw and furrowed his brow as Richal unwrapped one of the candies. Richal, the sweetest of the two twins, took pity on his brother and handed him the unwrapped candy. In an instant, all wins, losses, and jabs were forgotten.

“If we come by Jen’s one night, will you let us play with you?” Richal asked.

“Your mother’s never going to let you come to Jen’s.”

Saddy, the twins’ mother, barely let them come to these late-night meetings of Gilow’s. In fact, of all the half-classes I knew, Brison and Richal were probably the most sheltered. They had to be.

The twins were born right before Ryland’s class ordinances took hold. Had they been born after, as the product of a union between a light-class woman and a dark-class man, they would have been born illegally. Though the twins were thirteen and fortunately legal, they looked younger than they were. It would be too easy for some officer to see them and assume they were illegals. If they happened to forget their paperwork, the officers would ship them to one of the work camps with the rest of illegally born half-classes.

Richal’s eyes dropped to the beaten grass. “You’re right.”

“Evie!” Maxine stuck out her wind-whisked orange head through the back door behind me. “We’re starting.”

Right. Playing with the twins was a fun detour. But there was a more

pressing reason I was here.

Leaving the cards scattered across our playing stump, Richal, Brison, and I trekked over the trodden grass and into the dim, back corridor of the manor house. Riding a fresh sugar rush, they bolted ahead of me, sprinting through the kitchen and toward the glowing light of the foyer.

I trailed my fingers along the wall as I went. Ash and burn residue built up on my fingertips, growing the closer I got to the light until finally, I stepped out into the room.

The dozens of candles and lanterns dotted the walls and perched in hands and on the remnants of the furniture. Their flames swayed and flickered over at least a hundred different faces and figures. Shadows, tall and long, stretched over the floors and walls, almost rivaling the high soot marks climbing up the walls. With the fiery glow and the greasy soot, I could almost imagine I'd been thrown back in time and could feel the reality of the fire that tore away the glory of this once-proud mansion. But even years later, there was a new fire growing here. I saw it in the eyes of all the people around me and could feel it licking up my own chest even now.

The twins pushed their way to the bottom of the grand staircase, where Saddy tapped her nails against the ornate banister. She forcefully asked her boys who had given them all that candy.

I settled about halfway up the steps next to a familiar face.

"I was beginning to think you'd missed a meeting," Luke said. A lantern rested on the steps just above him and flickered over his chestnut-brown skin.

"As if." I waved to Jace, who smiled and waved back down to me from the second step from the top.

She whispered something to Gilow, who stood tall at the very top of the staircase. He nodded and folded his hands over his black wool coat. With even the littlest movement, it billowed behind him like the cape of an emperor. Perhaps even it knew to tremble on the shoulders of the man underneath it.

Before I met him, I'd never seen a dark-class man stand with so much pride. In fact, I thought it was only possible for statues of kings to stand so proud.

But he was no king. Quite the opposite.

"Firstly," Jace projected over the entirety of the foyer.

The chatter quieted.

"Let me say how happy I am with last week's outing." She smirked, and her audience erupted.

We whistled and yelled at the top of our lungs. Luke and I drummed our hands against the steps above us. Jace let the celebration roll for a minute before she lifted her hand, and we settled down.

"I hope we can do it again sometime," she said.

"When?" a voice called from the back.

"Yes, when?"

"What's next?" Luke asked, beside me.

"When are we riding again?" I added. It was like I couldn't yell the question loud enough. Everything I was dealing with at the barn was in that question: my inevitable birthday, Auntie forcing me to find work, and finding a solution to these looming problems. My fate felt as though it hanged upon one word—*when*.

"Patience, Loves. Please," Jace said, with the charm that only she could hold. "I promise our next act will be even bigger and bolder than the last." She threw a handful of her long braids behind her back. "But, for the time, we're going to wait."

Wait?

All my muscles froze. A flutter of whispered confusions rippled through the room. Why would we wait for anything? Jace and Gilow were always talking about what was next. Always planning another move.

I didn't have time to wait.

"Do you think we messed up last week?" I whispered, brushing my sleeve

against Luke's.

"No," Luke said. He was focused on Gilow. "He's got another reason."

Worried whispers swelled around us. I peered across the steps at Thomas and Maxine. They looked just as confused as the rest of the group. Whatever was going on, Jace nor Gilow had told them about it either. I didn't know whether it was worrisome or comforting that Jace had kept this from everyone.

"It's the King." Gilow's voice boomed over all of us. The room quieted. Gilow remained perfectly composed in his spot, dead center above us all, hands still folded over his coat. "Thanks to us, he's coming to Bexbury."

I stiffened, and I couldn't have been the only one. King Dreux was coming to Morra? He hadn't been here since Ryland took over. Our demonstration at the municipal building must have been concerning enough to warrant an in-person visit.

"We've captured his attention," Gilow said. "That means we're making strides. If we're doing enough to get him to come all the way here, then we're doing something right."

Gilow let the sentiment settle over us for a moment. The entire room went quiet as if they were breathing in his faint praise. His commendation sparked something warm and desperate in my chest. Like a tiny bead of hope had swelled in my heart.

We were getting close. The king wouldn't be visiting if we weren't close to sparking some real change. Close to getting rid of these class rules. Close to me getting a chance to do whatever I wanted with my life.

"That being said," Gilow continued. "We can be sure that some things are going to change around here when he and his men roll in. Life, for all of you, is going to get a lot harder. I don't know how, and I don't know when, but it will. Both your lives as half-classes and as rebels. He's going to put his boot down on us during the day and ravage the streets, searching for us at night. That's why we have to wait. We can't go gallivanting around as we have

been. That's how revolutions get squashed and rebels get killed."

Gilow dropped his hands and took a step down beside Jace. He scanned over all of us as if he were searching for a rebuttal.

"But," Gilow said, "our situation isn't without a silver lining. A sparkling one." He raised a hand and pointed toward Bexbury. "He's on our territory now. And he hasn't been since Ryland took us and set this horror in motion nearly a decade and a half ago. If we ever had a chance to strike him directly, this is it. This is our chance to do real damage, but we can't waste it acting impulsively."

He paused. "They think they're smarter than us. Because their god says light makes right, because it's only natural that they would be."

I cringed at the mention of religion. I wasn't a believer in the old texts. I don't think anyone, even the Rylanders genuinely practiced anymore. But it had left a mentality in Ryland that had spread over its new territory just as quickly. All it took was a few verses in the old texts about the god himself being paler than the moon and the devils and servants under him being dark as dirt to give the former rulers of Ryland—and now Morra—a good reason to decide people of different colors were innately separate. More than that, it gave them reason to believe that those two very different groups of people were never, ever meant to mix.

"We're going to take this one day at a time. We wait. We watch. We live. And when the opportunity presents itself, and it will present itself, we'll take it. But I need you to trust me. Do I have your support?"

A murmur ran through the crowd yet again. With the king coming, changes were inevitable. But we had enough determination to make sure the end result was in our favor. There was no going back. We'd come this far with Gilow. So why not follow him further into hell, and perhaps sooner or later, the fire would give way to gold.

My chest pounded. I stood from my spot on the steps. The room quieted as all eyes fell on me. "You have mine."

Chapter Four



N*aturals only before mid-meal.*

I read it a dozen times. Too many times. This couldn't be right.

For a second, I thought I was at the wrong shop. But no, a single trembling glance around at the familiar swinging sign for Nero's linen shop and the peeling paint boards of the storefronts along this road reminded me that I was, in fact, in the right place.

A chilly breeze nipped my cheek as if to assure me that I wasn't asleep either. It wasn't a dream that Auntie woke me up early to fetch linens for her, and I didn't dream of dragging myself all the way here with my eyes roped to the sidewalk. I, unfortunately, wasn't dreaming this either.

My heart trembled. Gilow's words flushed over me: *There are going to be changes.*

I dropped my hand and took a step back from the shop door. This couldn't be happening. The one day I come out in the light of day, and the world crumbles on top of me. I almost wanted to throw my arms up like I could shield myself from reality. But it was too heavy to protect myself from. If it wanted to, it could crush me. I couldn't let it—I *wouldn't*.

I jumped as the shop door opened, the rusty bells tied over it singing loudly. Nero, with heavy eyes, stepped onto the porch. He shut the door

behind him. Carefully, as if he were keeping a pet inside—or something unwanted out.

“Morning, Evie.” He tapped his fingers against his thigh.

“What’s going on, Nero?”

He sighed and folded his boney arms. “I’m sorry, Evie. I really am. You know I don’t like this, and I don’t have no problem with you or any of the others, but I don’t have a choice.”

“What does that mean?” A light-class woman passed between us. I instinctively stepped out the way and dipped my head as she passed.

“It’s the king,” Nero said. “Got a notice the other day. He’s lowering taxes for businesses that promote natural business. You know I didn’t want to do it, but the linen trade isn’t like it used to be, Evie, especially with all those new fabrics from Ryland they bring in now, and ‘course, that’s all those people in Eastside wanna buy, and...” He sighed again. “I’m sorry. I’m sure it’s just for the season. He probably wants the officers to feel a little more at home, you know?”

“Yes, I know.”

Nero forced a smile, but I couldn’t do the same. “Come back in a couple hours, okay? I got whatever you need.”

Nero crept back into his shop, shutting the door behind him. I wanted to collapse onto the sidewalk, to fade away into the cracks between the cobblestones. So, this was what the king wanted—not just an implication to stay out of the way in the daytime, but real restrictions to keep us locked away.

The neighboring shop windows pulled my attention. I hadn’t seen them walking here when my eyes were stuck below me, trying to avoid eye contact with anyone. There were signs everywhere.

Natural lights and darks only before mid-meal.

Naturals only before sunset.

Naturals only, please.

Nero had been generous. At least he was letting us in before sunset. Some weren't letting us in at all. There was no way this was only for the season.

That's what everyone thought when they initiated the class ordinances in the first place when I was just a little girl. It was just temporary to get us adjusted to the way things were set up back in Ryland. There, they interpreted the Old Texts and their warnings against mixing in a much stricter way—the class system had been tweaked to perfection, so there were far fewer half-classes like me to splatter grey all over their black and white system.

I should have taken Gilow's warning more seriously.

How could I have been so stupid? I was out walking the streets like an idiot when none of the stores would let me in. Everyone saw it too. My mind ripped me back in time, imagining all the cuts of glares and giggling smirks I must have missed when walking here. I must have looked foolish. Pathetic.

I rushed down the sidewalk, barely keeping myself from running. Eyes bored down on me, and each pitiful glance and annoyed glare were a slap to my face.

I couldn't go home yet. I didn't want to talk to Auntie or Kat about this, and I couldn't handle their pity right now. I needed someone to listen to me. Someone who'd always let me talk. Somewhere I could breathe again.

I headed for the one shop I knew would let me in.



"Luke!" I banged on the wooden door again. He was probably in the front shop with his mother, but I wouldn't go up there. I didn't want any of his customers, or anyone, to see me like this.

I pulled my balled fist back to slam it into the door again, but it swung open.

Before Luke could say a word, I shoved myself inside. I sucked in as much air as I could, finally feeling like I could breathe in the safety of the

shoe-cluttered back room.

“What happened?” Luke took a step toward me, but I took one step back. If he took any of my space right now, I might suffocate.

“Have you seen them?” I huffed, resting my hands on my knees.

“The signs—who hasn’t? But we were expecting that, Evie.”

“We were expecting something, but not this.”

I took an extra deep breath and breathed out slowly. Luke watched me calmly. Why wasn’t he as mad as I was?

“I was just at Nero’s,” I said. “He sent me away. I can’t go anywhere now.”

“Even Nero?”

“He said he’s getting a break on his taxes in exchange for nurturing ‘natural business.’ I’m sure it’s only a matter of time before the king begins blatantly paying people to shun us.”

Luke frowned. “Why are you out now anyway?”

He said it like I should have known better. “To get stupid sheets for Auntie Jen! Since, apparently, neither of us knew about this.”

“Know or not, she shouldn’t have sent you out alone during the day.” Luke crossed his arms. “Why didn’t you come here first? I could have gone with you, and we could have avoided all of this.”

A fresh heat bubbled up in my chest. So, this was *my* fault? Silly me for trying to walk the streets alone like an actual person.

“You’re right. How selfish of me for wanting to go to shops, by myself, during the day, like everyone else.”

He threw his hands up, immediately going from accuser to defendant. “I’m sorry.” He took a cautious step forward. “I’m just trying to think of ways we can prevent this in the future. I hate to see you flustered, especially if I can do something to stop it.”

He closed the little remaining distance between us. My heart hitched as he stroked my cheek. I flinched and turned away.

He didn't seem to notice.

"Do you want to go back now? I can go in and get you whatever you need."

"No." That was the last thing I wanted. I wrung my wrists as an uncomfortable silence stretched between us.

Luke glanced over to the stairs opening up between the shelves of detached heels, knotted laces, and loose soles. "Do you want to see my new painting?" he asked.

Probably trying to distract me. I'd take it for now. Maybe that was what I needed.

I nodded. "You're probably dying to show me anyway."

Luke chuckled. I let him take my hand and lead me up the stairs into his studio above their apartment. I made a note to say hello to Miss Iris before I left. She'd always seemed to love me so much.

"It's a work in progress," Luke said.

Sunlight beamed into the hall from the art room. Inside, the bland wood panel walls turned into shades of infinite color. Watercolor and oil canvases stretched across every inch of the walls. The scenic flower depictions and abstract clusters of shapes worked together to make a giant collage.

The sunshine and color of the room lifted my spirits instantly. "You say that every time," I said. For someone so confident about everything else in his life, it never ceased to amuse me how defensive Luke was when it came to his art.

He dropped my hand and darted over to his easel, glowing in the direct light from the window. "Alright, be honest." He turned the easel around, revealing the expansive canvas.

Deep purples and blues swirled across the canvas. Dozens of figures popped out from the sea of blended color. People. Men and women of every shape and color swam up from the ocean. Each person was so small, no bigger than my little finger, but the details of each were distinct. These no

doubt had been people Luke had caught crossing the street under his window. He seemed to find a lifetime of inspiration from that square of glass.

“You hate it,” Luke said.

“I hate that you think I could hate it. Luke, this is extraordinary. It belongs in a museum.” Dozens and dozens of Luke’s other works, all of them as detailed and impressive as this newest, laid stacked against the walls. “Most of these do.”

“One day.” He stepped back to examine the painting alongside me. Luke was born to be an artist, just like his father. Since I met him, every hour he didn’t have to spend cobbling downstairs, he was either painting, talking about artists, or on his way to buy new colors. If he were allowed to sell, then Luke might have already been a well-established artist. At least in Bexbury.

But despite the passion fate had cruelly bestowed upon him, Luke could not be an artist. Not legally. The cushy, creative professions like artist, writer, musician, along with the truly lucrative ones like mathematician, healer, and architect were all reserved for the light-class. Dark-classes like Luke belonged in dark-class fields like construction, stable work, or cobbling.

When we were younger, I’d foolishly hoped that one day, fine arts would be switched to the ‘any class’ category, like servants or theatre performers.

Even more foolishly, I’d dreamt that Luke would appeal for a class change and could become an artificial light like me. Of course, as a half-class with my class *artificially* assigned to me, I could appeal to be an artificial dark-class if I wanted to. But I quickly realized that Luke would never switch classes. Artificials like me could change classes, but Luke—though I knew one of his grandparents was light-class—had too much of one side, so he got to be a natural dark-class. And naturals can’t change classes.

“Do you really think it will change, Luke? In time for us?”

Could Gilow’s plans really make a worthwhile impact in time for people like Luke to live out their dreams?

He frowned. “You don’t?”

“I hope for the best, but change takes time. More than we’ve got.”

“To hell with that.” Luke lovingly turned his canvas back around. “Change happens in a heartbeat and a century. It only depends on what we’re willing to do.”

I sighed. I loved Luke’s passion for our cause—I really did. But after what happened at Nero’s, his dedication was bordering on foolishness.

I leaned against his windowpane. Nearly every shop on the block below had a new sign plastered in its windows. “Then we must be doing the wrong things. Looks to me like we’re going backwards.”

Luke was behind me in an instant. His hand pressed into the windowsill as he leaned over me. “One step back, two steps forward.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s not the expression.”

“It is now. I changed it. See how easy that was?”

I bit back a smirk as I spun around, but my smile faded before it could grow. Luke’s body loomed over mine. He was practically pressing me into the wall; he was so close. I started to lift my hands to push him back by the shoulders, but I forced my hands back down.

I might not have been smiling, but Luke was. Gently. His eyes glimmered like shards of silver; they popped vivid against his brown skin. His face dipped closer to mine. My heart skipped a beat.

I yawned, bringing my hand up to my lips and dividing the slight distance between us. “I’m so tired,” I said. “I really need to sleep before tonight. You still don’t mind going into Nero’s for me, do you?”

Luke lingered for a moment, then pushed back from me. “Course not,” He crossed his arms. “I’ll get my papers.”

Chapter Five



“I’m sorry, Evie,” Kat said. “You should have woken me up. I would have gone instead.”

“It’s fine.” I folded my arms over the kitchen table and dropped my head into them. The warmth from the oven radiated across the room. The scent of chicken seasoned with pepper and parsley filled the kitchen. “I would have seen them eventually anyway. At least I got to see Luke.” I fidgeted, remembering Luke’s attempt to kiss me. I hadn’t mentioned that part to Kat.

Kat narrowed her eyes and took another bite from her pastry, one of the few left over from last night. I’d gotten back from my outing hours ago, but Kat, nips of hair slipping out of her silky blonde braid and the ribbons of her nightgown unraveling at the shoulders, had only just woken up. It wasn’t fair for her to be so beautiful, even with sleep clinging to her pale lashes.

“He didn’t come in, did he?” Kat looked around like Luke would suddenly appear in a random corner. “Tell me he didn’t come in. If he did, and you still didn’t wake me up—”

“No, he wasn’t here. He just bought the sheets for me. I’m sure he would have carried them back for me if I asked, though.”

“Hmm.” Kat leaned back and took another. Golden flakes of bread flittered down to her lap.

I sat up. "What?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"No, it's something. What is it?"

She swallowed, staring me down, then laid the half-eaten tart over a layer of crumbs on the table. Kat laced her fingers under her chin. "I don't think it's fair what you're doing with him."

"And what am I doing with him?"

"You know."

"No, I really don't." I'd never mentioned "doing anything" with Luke before. There was nothing to mention.

Her eyes cut into me. "You're stringing him along, Evie."

I sputtered. "I am not,"

"Yes, you are. Luke's been holding a torch for you for at least a year now, and you haven't done anything to remedy that."

I crossed my arms tight against my chest. "I haven't noticed."

"Only a fool wouldn't notice. It's pretty obvious. And if anyone can tell when a man is interested in them, it should be us."

I bit my lip and shrugged. "So, what if he is? What's so bad about being somebody's fancy? Somebody who might want me for something besides my body."

She ignored the jab. "Nothing—if you wanted him back. But you don't, do you?"

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

"I didn't think so," she said. "You haven't done anything to stifle his feelings. I know you, Evelyn. You're keeping him around as your backup plan in case you decide you don't want to do this." She waved her hand around the room. "I don't know Luke that well, but he sounds like a good person. He doesn't deserve to be swindled into a marriage with a girl who doesn't feel the same way as he does."

"Maybe I do feel the same way." *Maybe I just didn't realize it yet...*

Kat rolled her eyes. “Sure.” She rose from the table, swiping up the remaining half of her pastry. Was she angry? That wasn’t fair. She didn’t understand my options, which were substantially fewer than hers. How could she fault me for considering every one presented to me?

I jolted up. The chair legs scraped across the floor. “Even if I were ‘stringing Luke along,’ or whatever you’re trying to accuse me of, how is that any different from what you do every night? You trade companionship for the means of survival. They sound pretty similar to me.”

“That’s different, and you know it.”

“How so?”

“Because that is a transaction, nothing more. This is someone’s heart.”

“You care about Luke’s heart, but not mine?” My voice cracked. “Because I think doing this, here, might break mine.”

Kat’s entire body relaxed. She strode back to me and wrapped her arms around me. My vision blurred.

“I know this profession seems awful and intimidating—wrong even. It’s not for everyone.” Kat said as she pulled back, keeping her hands clasped on my shoulders. “This is what we’ve got, like it or not. Maybe one day you and Gilow and all the rest can change that, but right now...this is it. The sooner you accept that, the better.”

All we have? No, this was all *I* had. Kat chose this; I was stuck.

Stuck like all the other half-class girls with no other job prospects. Considering Luke as a way out was cruel and maybe a bit heartless. But I couldn’t give it up. Not when only this was left.

“I know Katalin.” I sniffled. “I’ll get past it.”

One way or another.

Chapter Six



So many patrons filled the bar, you could hardly make it two steps without brushing against someone. Yet despite the shoulder-to-shoulder patrons at the bar, Auntie Jen abandoned me less than an hour after we opened, leaving me alone at the mercy of our increasingly intoxicated patrons.

For an additional hour, until Julian arrived, I did my best to keep up with the demand and politely decline offers from the new officers to head into the private rooms with them. My apron was not doing its job very well tonight. I slighted most requests by pointing the customers in the direction of Kat, Christa, or any other of the girls I could find. But, when the night's business really picked up, and all of the girls were occupied, the pestering propositions started to really pile on.

I wasn't the only one caught in the assault. In my glances out over the floor, between pouring ales, rushing to the kitchen to retrieve plates of Albo's less-than-stellar shepherd's pie, and trying to explain to our new patrons that I was not a working girl, I noted several similar scenes across the barn. It seemed like every female visitor, particularly the few half-classes and dark-classes, were being just as hounded as I was. What should I have expected? I'm sure in Ryland, that was all half-class girls did. Then again, we weren't that far from the same here.

“Well, aren’t you stunning?”

My eyes flew up from the beer I was pouring. A long-haired blonde fellow, maybe no older than I, leaned over the bar. He grinned as his deep blue eyes ran over me.

I forced a smile. “Can I get you something?”

“How about a thank you?”

I jammed the spout back into the beer barrel. The glass mug clanged against the polished wood counter as I set it down slid it down to its patron. “Thank you. Anything else?”

He smirked. “How about *you*?”

“Sorry, not on the menu. But any one of our lovely ladies should be back down any minute now. They can help you with whatever you want.” I strode down to the other end of the bar, where I was happy to find an empty mug and a spill needing my attention. Drawing a rag from my apron, I started wiping.

A hand pressed down over mine. This bastard had followed me.

“I didn’t ask for them,” he said. “I asked for you.”

I yanked my hand back. “I’m not for sale. Find someone else.”

His eyes burned into me. I matched his glare as I reached to retrieve my rag. He reached for my hand as I did so, but I quickly jerked it back. I knew he’d try such a thing, and seeing him stumble into the counter as he missed me was oh, so satisfying.

A pair of dark-class men sitting at the stool next to our encounter snickered. My pursuer’s pale face flushed a furious red. He was angrier than I expected.

The man lunged over the counter. He grabbed the collar of my dress and jerked me forward. I didn’t even have time to scream.

“You’re all for sale,” he spewed, his face a breath from mine.

Instinct kicked in. I butted my head into his pointed nose and shoved his shoulders as hard as I could. To my surprise, he flew back from the counter

like a cart had just hit him. I gaped for a second at my own strength but then noted that one of the dark-class men had risen from his stool. He yanked the bastard back, beer glasses shattering to the floor, and the stool smacked against the stone wall.

My assailant tripped back, ramming into Big John. As he hit him, Big John's oversized mug splashed, spilling its contents all over the man. Beer doused his hair and soaked his shirt.

More than a few of the patrons in the area burst into laughter. The dark-class man who'd helped pulled the man off me crossed his arms proudly, stepping protectively in front of me.

"Thank you," I said, watching my attacker shake his head like a dog, tiny droplets of beer splattered every which way.

With a sheen of liquid still coating him, he straightened up and grimaced at the dark-class man next to me and the friend laughing next to him. He clenched his fists and tightened his jaw.

I twisted my fingers into my skirt. We hadn't had a fight in a while, but we sure as hell didn't need one now. Fights meant officers getting summoned—officers who weren't here to for fun. And Auntie never appreciated that.

An icicle shot through my heart, and my eyes ran over the assailant again. He wasn't a soldier, was he? His attire—faded brown pants and a dull grey shirt—wasn't like the underlayers of the soldiers, even without their gold-trimmed coats. I breathed a small sigh of relief. It was foolish of me to taunt him. If he had been a soldier, I likely would have had to deal with his friends coming for revenge later on. These dark-class men may have been kind enough to help me this time, but when faced with a group of men in uniform with authority to harm, I doubt they'd assist me again.

The man looked like he was about to pounce on the dark-class man guarding me, but as soon as he moved an inch forward, the other dark-class man at my rescuer's side rose too. Then the man next to him and a light-class man at the seat to my other side.

My assailant scanned over all four of his opponents, then took a step back. He looked like he wanted to rip someone apart. If there was only one of them, I'm sure he would have reminded them who was superior. But that wasn't the case. He grimaced at me one more time, then disappeared into the depths of the barn.

The tension dropped from my newfound rescuers, and a strange feeling of warmth settled over me. Even in the midst of all these Ryland soldiers, it was nice to know that there were still a few truly kind souls around.

"On the house tonight." I gave them all my most grateful smile. They all hummed their thanks, and I handed the bar off to Julian, who just then waltzed behind the counter. Perfect timing, as I'd had my fill of bartending for the night.

I slipped out into the little hallway behind the bar, feeling a little safer now that I was out of the crowd. Was every night with these new Ryland officers going to be like this? I breezed by the kitchen, having absolutely no intention to stop, but Auntie Jen's voice beckoned me in.

I halted in the doorway.

Auntie slid a ceramic dish topped with whipped potatoes into the oven. She leaned into the counter and heaved a breath, rubbing her neck. A light red stain blotted her apron, matching the half-cut tomato on the cutting board. Only one of a mess of vegetables and stacked bowls cluttering the counters.

"I'm guessing Albo didn't show up tonight," I said, strolling in.

Auntie slammed the oven shut. "Oh, he's here. Somewhere."

I knew where he was. I'd have to touse him for inadvertently causing my abandonment at the bar. Whenever I got done in the kitchen, by the looks of it. I had a feeling I'd be stuck with chef's duty until he returned now.

"You want me to get started on these dishes?" I stopped at the half-full sink, already resigning to my task.

"Hell no," Auntie snapped. I jerked my hands back from the water. "Albo's gonna do them when he gets back. I don't pay him not to do his job."

Except for when she did...

If not putting me back to work, what did she want? It wasn't like Auntie to crave small talk during the night. Not when there were a hundred other things she could be doing.

Auntie pushed a few strands of stray gold and silver hair back over her head. "I was talking to a man from the North part of the city earlier."

"Oh, dear god." I started out of the room, but Auntie, faster than she let on, followed.

"Very nice fellow. Light-class—a scholar. I think he said. Not even married yet." She trailed right behind me as I paced down the hall.

No, no, no.

Auntie grabbed my arm. "He's looking for a mistress. And not just here at the barn, full time, with the apartment, allowance—all the bells and whistles. Told me he's seen you at the bar a few times and thinks you're real pretty. It might not be a perfect match, but I think you should talk to him. He seemed like a real nice gent."

"If only I were looking for one." I pulled my arm from her grasp.

"Evie—"

"No!" I shouted, quickening my pace.

Her heavy footsteps followed behind me. I couldn't get to the door fast enough. Hastily, I squeezed my fingers into the little crevice where we kept the key and bounced back up.

Auntie was right upon me. She grabbed the door handle, forcing the door shut.

"Let go, Auntie."

"This is a good opportunity. It would be foolish not to consider it, at the very least."

"I just considered it. The answer is no."

"I'm trying to help you!" She glanced down the hall. A string of patrons filed out of the cellar, but none of them cared to look our way. She may not

have caught their attention, but her voice rang loud in my ears. I crossed my arms and looked down at the scratched wooden planks beneath us.

Her voice softened. “You can’t work in a store or a house or anything like that. No one’s gonna hire you. And if they do, they’re not gonna pay you well. I’m sorry, but this is it. It’s the barn or a comfortable mistress’s life, like what that man is offering you. I hate it for you. I do. But love you as I do, I’m not gonna take care of you forever. I wouldn’t do it for Kat, and I won’t do it for you.”

I bit my lip and kept my eyes on the floor. No, those weren’t all the options. I had at least one more.

Auntie sighed. She pressed her soft lips to my forehead. “Just think about it. Please?”

I forced myself to nod, if for no other reason than to make her go away.

It worked. She freed the door handle from her grasp.

I couldn’t unlock the door and fly inside fast enough. With my back pressed to the wood, I listened to her pace back into the world that didn’t seem to bother her, Kat, or any of her many half-class girls. Why was this hurting *me* so much? Why couldn’t I be content with my lot like the rest of them? Sammy. Christa. Kat. They were at peace with this life. Why couldn’t I be?

Maybe I placed too much value on myself. I wasn’t any different than those girls. The only thing I had that they didn’t was Luke.

Luke.

He’d marry me if I asked him to. In a heartbeat. I’d have to change classes—go from artificial light to artificial dark. That wouldn’t be too difficult. We might have some trouble getting a license since the marriage authorities loved to find any reason to keep a half-class from marrying anyone, but there was a good chance. They were a lot stricter about preventing half-classes from marrying into the light-class than they were with the dark. That almost never happened, but there was a fair chance they’d let

me marry Luke, a dark-class man.

I didn't love Luke. Not in the way that someone should when they consider marriage. But he loved me, and I did care about him. That was enough to make me love him eventually. And in the meantime, I'd pretend.

The interaction with the man from the bar replayed in my mind. If it was either Luke or *that* forever...

Pushing back from the door, I ripped my apron off. Dammit, I didn't want to think about this right now. My birthday was three months away. That was plenty of time to work things out.

I threw the apron onto the sofa and darted up the stairs. All I wanted to do was fall into one of my volumes of Taliver. His fictional problems, although deadly and fantastical, were so much more straightforward than mine. Stopping on the landing, I cracked open the hidden door and slipped into my reading ledge. I should have been alone, as I wanted to be, but as soon as the scent of smoke hit me, I knew I was not. Albo's eyes shifted to me as he lit a brand-new cigar in the flame of his candle.

Great. He's going to be here a while.

"Having a tough night?" I asked. Three ashen cigar butts rested near the ledge.

He took a drag of his fresh cigar. "Not as tough as you." He looked out over the floor below, towards the bar. A long trail of smoke slithered out of his mouth.

I knelt and grabbed my current book from the top of my stack that leaned against the wall. "You saw that?"

"You can see everything from up here." He took another drag. "Sorry. I would have helped if I were nearer."

"You might have been if you were actually in the kitchen."

He cricked his neck, eliciting a disgusting crack. "Well, we can't change the past."

I clenched my teeth. Albo's abhorrence of work was usually amusing, but

tonight it was aggravating. Why did he get a free ride, but I didn't?

"Why the hell doesn't my Aunt fire you?" I gripped my book tight enough to snap the cover.

Albo glanced back at me, then back over the floor. "She couldn't if she wanted to."

"Why not? She's willing to put me and Kat out if we don't work. Why do you get to slide by on her generosity alone?"

"Because I do."

"Because why?"

"She owes me this," he snapped. "And a lot more. More than she owes you and more than she owes Kat, which I'll remind you is very little."

What was that supposed to mean?

"She's our aunt. *We're* family."

Albo chuckled. "Trust me, family doesn't mean anything to that woman." He dropped his cigar into the pile and fished for another in his pocket.

Some part of me wanted to rebut, but remembering Auntie Jen's attempt to push me into a life as a mistress just minutes ago, I found that I couldn't defend her right now.

"Enjoy your cigar." I gripped the book in my hand, then pulled the landing door back open. Albo lifted his hand in a half-hearted acknowledgement, and I left him alone.

For someone who'd been here for years, I knew almost nothing about his life away from the barn. Let alone how he'd somehow managed to steal away all the leniency in Auntie Jen's heart.

Since I couldn't have my little landing, I guess I'd have to read in our room, though the aesthetic wasn't nearly the same. There was something about reading on my precarious ledge that made Taliver's life-threatening adventures seem all the more real. But I'd take what I could get tonight.

As I climbed the steps to our bedroom door, a groan sounded behind it. I froze. Somebody was in there, the sound faint but audible. Another voice. A

strained moan. Kat's moan.

I took a step down. Was she with a customer in there? No, she never took customers into our room. Not in the bed *I* had to share with her.

I listened further. The sounds were unmistakable. The heavy breathing, the creak of the wooden bed. The slap of flesh.

A mix of fury and naive embarrassment washed over me. I trotted back down the stairs. With all the action tonight, she probably ran out of private room. Still, she could have asked me, or at least told me before dragging patrons up to our bedroom. Perhaps it wasn't her fault. Maybe Auntie Jen told her to go up there. After all, there seemed to be no lines between personal lives and business with her tonight.

I made it back into the living room and, with nowhere else to go, fell into one of our tattered sofas. If ever there were a time to escape, it was now. Trying to block out the goings-on upstairs, I cracked open my book and unfolded the page corner.

Taliver, take me somewhere else.



I made it through an entire chapter before Kat and her john came pounding down the steps. I ducked down into the cushions, my book pressed to my lap.

She returned less than two pages later with another fellow. The bedroom door clapped shut, and I flipped the page.

Kat's current patron was a lot more enthusiastic than her last. His moans echoed all the way down in the sitting room, Kat's joining in, apparently compelled to match him.

I tried to focus on the story, but I couldn't make it through a sentence without a scream piercing through my focus. Couldn't I just have one place, no, one moment tonight that I wanted?

I growled in frustration and sat up.

Our apartment door was wide open, and standing not too far inside our living room, was a stranger. A light shade of pink fell over his quite fair skin as his gaze shifted from the stairs to me. His eyes, a vivid, glowing green, widened as they fell on me.

I jumped up from the sofa. “What are you doing in here? This isn’t a customer room. Get out.”

His eyes went wide, and he nodded quickly, sending shudders through his thick black hair. “Sorry, I didn’t—” A particularly loud moan from Kat echoed from above. My cheeks caught fire.

The intruder looked just as uncomfortable as I was. “I was just looking for some cards,” he insisted. “A lady told me I could find some in the storeroom.”

“At the end of the next hall, not this one. How did you even get in here?”

He looked back to the door for a moment. “It was unlocked.”

Of course, it was.

“I’m sorry to interrupt. I’ll leave now.” He turned back to the door just as another deafening groan rippled down to us.

“Wait.” I strode toward the door, no longer wanting to be there myself. “I’ll get you some cards.” I pushed my stranger out of our apartment and made sure to lock the door behind us. Entering the hallway was like a breath of fresh air. Silent air.

I started for the storeroom, and my stranger followed.

“You know, you could’ve told me that I had stumbled into a...um... working room. I would have left,” my stranger said, walking in pace at my side. Despite the quiver in his voice, the tension in his shoulders was gone. He, too, seemed more comfortable now that we were out of that scenario.

“Oh, I’m sure you would have, but I wasn’t lying. That’s not a working room. We’ve just been full lately.”

“Since the Rylanders came to town?”

We turned into the next corridor, a smaller one with only one door at the

end. In hindsight, it did look an awful lot like the door leading into our apartment.

“There’s more of them than we were expecting, but it’s good for business. Or should I say more of you?” I gave him a once-over. He wasn’t wearing an officer’s uniform, but his clothes were of a darker hue than was popular in Bexbury and spun from a tightly woven cotton—nicer fabric than was typical for patrons of the bar. From a distance, I wouldn’t have noticed the straighter stitching at the hem of his cuffs or lack of loose threads. Like costuming from a play, it blended in from a distance but was just outside of normality when up close.

“I’m not an officer,” he said as I swung open the door to the cozy storeroom. “But I am from Ryland. I’m just traveling with the rest.” I stepped into the narrow closet. My eyes scanned over the shelves, packed with dirty linens, mismatched shoes left behind by patrons, baskets, lanterns, and other miscellaneous things. There had to be an extra deck somewhere in here.

Moonlight dripped in from the small window above but didn’t do much to illuminate the shelves, making my task even more difficult.

“You might be out of luck.” I crouched down to examine the lower shelves.

“Check the top,” he said as if I didn’t know where to look in my own storeroom. I glared up at him. He shrugged. “Just a suggestion.”

Slightly irritated with him—probably not his fault—I ripped a little stool out from the corner and placed it before the shelf just under the window. The shelves were tall, and I couldn’t reach the top one without it. Only then did I realize I was still holding my volume of Taliver.

“Hold this.” I pushed the book into his chest and stepped up onto the stool. It barely added any height, but I was now tall enough to run my hands over the shelf above.

“The Tales of Taliver?”

His eyes flew up from my book and met mine in a flicker of disbelief.

“Volume Twenty,” I said. “You don’t read them, do you?”

“They’re the only thing I read! I don’t know anybody in Aurell who does.”

“Neither do I. Well, I mean, I don’t know anybody *here* who reads them. Most of the people I know think it’s silly to spend so much time in a far-flung fantasy.”

“My father feels the exact same way. He tried to ban me from the library once after I spent two days reading and rereading volume fifteen. I could barely pull myself away to eat; I was so enthralled.”

“How couldn’t you be? Volume fifteen is the one where the Sky Witch is introduced. I adore her.”

I nearly fell off my stool in excitement. I’d never had someone to talk about my favorite book series with before. And I could tell, neither had this stranger. “The Sky Witch? She’s awful.” My new friend shook his head. “I stopped feeling anything for her after volume thirty.”

“Well, obviously, I haven’t made it that far yet.” I glanced back down to the volume in his hands—volume twenty.

He quickly realized his mistake. “Sorry. Pretend I didn’t say anything.”

“What volume are you on?”

“Right now?” He dissolved into thought. “Fifty-two. I finished it last week.”

“Fifty-two! You’re almost halfway through the series!”

He sighed. “Don’t remind me. I rue the day when I run out of Taliver volumes to read.”

“Oh, what will be worth living for then?”

The moonlight fell over his face, and his emerald eyes sparkled. “Hopefully, I’ll find something new.”

A flush of warmth rose on my cheeks.

My stranger and I gushed over Taliver for what felt like a very long while—mostly about Volume Twenty, right up to the chapter I had stopped at. It

turned out that this volume was one of his favorites. I shared my suspicions about how it would end, and whether I thought Taliver would prevail in his current quest. My new friend looked as if he was trying desperately not to confirm nor deny whether my theories had any merit to them. Though, the glimmers in his eyes when I mentioned certain events and characters answered for me. I could have stayed there for hours, balancing awkwardly on my stool, talking about all the things that had meant nothing to everyone else.

“Just wait until you get to volume Twenty-Two.” My new friend tapped the well-worn cover of my book. “It’s going to make the trek to the oasis look like child’s play—”

“Cass!” a male voice shouted.

My new friend spun around. A new gent with smooth brown skin and short dreadlocked hair jogged up to us. His attire was similar to Cass’s—crisp cut hems, a little too nice for the barn. But unlike Cass’s cream and soft brown colors, his ensemble was all grey and black hues, from his coat to his polished boots. He raised his eyebrows. “The cards?”

“Right.” My friend ran a hand through his thick hair and turned back to me.

I returned my hands to the top shelf, skimming over dust and dirt. Just when I was ready to retract them from the icky surface, a crease grazed the tips of my fingers. I reached further back, balancing on my tiptoes to do it, and grabbed the box. Success. The unopened set of cards dragged a heap of dust off the shelf as I drew them out.

“Here you go.” I handed him the box and stepped down from the stool. After talking with the stranger at the elevated height for so long, it felt odd to be shorter than him again.

“Thank you,” he said.

I blew the dust off my fingers. Cass’s companion glanced curiously between the two of us.

“This is yours.” He offered my book back to me.

“Are we going to play now?” His companion asked, trying to pull his friend’s attention back to him. “Jasper’s getting pretty antsy down there. And he’s already in a bad mood.”

“Yes, of course,” my stranger answered. He rubbed the back of his neck. His gaze remained with me. “Um, you don’t happen to play cards, do you?”

I beamed. The night had started off rough, but perhaps it was looking up. At the very least, I found something I wanted to do. “Am I being invited to play with you?”

“Well, they’re your cards, so I think you’d have to invite me to play.”

I bit my lip, smiling. “Let’s go then.”

It took only a minute to race back to the apartment, pull by tips from my apron, and toss my Taliver volume onto the sofa. I didn’t slow down until I was back at the cellar doors, where my new friend and his companion were waiting for me. “I hope you’re not too attached to those coins,” my new friend said, glancing at the jingling bag at my side.

“On the contrary, I think they’re in need of some friends.”

His companion threw his head back and chuckled before bounding down into the cellar.

“Cass, was it?” I asked. The wood steps creaked beneath my boots.

“Um, yes. And that was Donnie. I can’t believe I haven’t asked your name yet.”

“It’s Evie. Short for Evelyn. But who goes by full names in a place like this?”

He chuckled. “What about outside of here?”

My joy faded a touch as we hit the bottom of the stairs. As if I had an outside life. “Still Evie.”

“Good. I like Evie.”

The cellar was buzzing—just as packed as the floors above. It was a miracle we hadn’t run out of cards sooner. Each table was packed, and nearly

every foot of the floor was jammed with a table. Still, a few games had managed to start in circles on the floor. Men tripping over their own feet and women trying to keep their skirts from getting caught between chairs and tables shoved through the floor, carrying around the scent of yeasty beer and howls of laughter with them.

“This way.” Cass took my hand.

We weaved through tables, twisting between the backs of chairs and patrons. A tall man slammed his table as I passed, making me jump. I squeezed Cass’s hand a little harder as we kept moving, the noise of the room seeming to follow us.

At a small table in the back corner of the cellar, Donnie sat laughing with a blonde gent whose back was to us.

“There they are.” Donnie gestured to us.

“Your friends?” I asked Cass.

“Yep.” He clasped a hand on the blonde man’s shoulder, and I noticed the heavy splotches of dark ale stretching across his shoulders.

I tensed as Cass’s second friend turned around. A familiar man with long blonde hair, deep blue eyes, and a shirt stained with beer.

My smile curled into a grimace as my eyes met his, and his expression mirrored mine.

It looked like it was going to be a very interesting game, indeed.

Chapter Seven



I sat beside Donnie, sliding my seat a little further away from that blonde-haired bastard one seat over. Cass took the fourth and final seat next to me, putting a much-needed barrier between me and his friend.

Cass opened his mouth, but a roar of laughter and slapping tabletops behind us drowned him out. All I heard was the name at the end of his sentence.

“...Jasper.” He nodded to the blonde friend.

I forced a smile, letting my gaze linger on the ale splotches on his shoulders. “I hope you’ve been having a good night, *Jasper*.”

Jasper tapped his knuckles furiously against the tabletop, grinding his jaw. “Something like that.”

“Who’s going to shuffle?” Donnie asked. A passing behind him tripped over a chair leg and fell into him. But Donnie only pushed the man back up and gave a pat in the right direction.

“On it.” Cass slid the cards from the box and split the deck. “What’s your game of choice, Evie?”

“Anything I can win.”

Aman across the room let out a victorious roar, only matched by the

storm of coins clattering to the ground as he dragged them towards him.

“Does that expand or limit your options?” Donnie asked with a warm smile.

“If you’re questioning my competence in these sorts of games, I’m afraid you’ll just have to gauge it for yourself.”

“Don’t let him intimidate you,” Cass said. “Donnie tries to make up for his lack of skill with mental warfare.”

“Does it work?” I asked.

“It does on Cass.” Donnie snorted a laugh. “Not so much on Jasper.”

“But what does work on an opponent who keeps aces quite literally up his sleeve?” Cass’s whisper was quite audible, even over the jumble of voices around us. Jasper’s deep blue eyes dug into me. Had they ever left?

“Fond of cheating, are we?” I matched Jasper’s stare. “Careful, I’ve seen men get throttled for less around here.”

Jasper leaned into the table. “What about unsavory girls? I’ve never known a lady who games. Not a real lady, anyway.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. “Then what are you doing here?”

“Ha!” Donnie threw his head back in chuckles and slammed his hand on the table.

“Why don’t we let the game decide who are the ladies and who are not?” Cass bridged the cards and dealt me five off the top. “No offence, of course.”

“None taken. Not from you.”

He dealt Donnie and Jasper their first hands, and our game began. High Hill—highest hand wins each round. It was simple and one of my favorite games.

“Five silver pieces,” Donnie tossed his coins into the center of the table. The metallic clatter harmonized the rest of the room. I could already tell he had a horrible hand. Five pieces was a lot of money to wager. A foolish amount to risk if his hand was only average, but a great amount to bet if he had a stellar hand. But the odds of him drawing a wonderful hand on the first

round were practically nothing. Therefore, his cards had to be awful, and he was trying to scare the rest of us into folding. I glanced at my own. They weren't perfect, but they had to be better than his.

I flicked the corner of my cards with my thumb. Jasper grumbled. Cass slumped in his chair.

"Fold," Cass said, placing his cards face down.

Jasper's gaze darted from Donnie to the coins. Was he having so much trouble reading his own friend?

"I...fold." He threw his cards down.

"Two folds, one wager. What is a girl to do?" I shook my head. "When in doubt..." I pulled the required coins from my little pouch and placed them in a neat stack in the center of the scratched wood table. "Put it all on the line."

"Idiotic," Jasper mumbled. Was he talking about me or himself?

"Donnie?" Cass raised an eyebrow. Poor Donnie. His neutral face melted into pure disappointment as he flipped his cards over. The highest card he had was a six of clubs. An awful hand.

"An admirable attempt." I fanned out my cards. As I suspected, mine were superior to his. "I guess lady luck is with me tonight."

"I'm just getting warmed up." Donnie laced and popped his fingers.

"While you do that, I'll keep these warm for you." I took eight of the coins from the collection in the center and left two in the pool. "Because I'm generous."

Donnie gathered the cards to reshuffle them, but I swiped Cass's before he could. He had three of a kind—the ace of diamonds, hearts, and spades. It wasn't the best hand but it was better than mine, and definitely better than Donnie's.

"You should have more faith in your hand." I handed his cards over to Donnie.

"Maybe I'm just not as risky as you." The lantern sitting at the edge of our table cast a dancing orange light over his face. For a moment, he looked

like a subject from one of Luke's paintings. I almost wanted to touch him to make sure he was real and not a work of oil and canvas come to life.

I didn't want to think about Luke right now.

"Can't always play it safe Cass, you'll never win. Besides, what's the fun in that?"

"Is that how you do things in Morra? All in, all the time?"

"In some ways. As you can probably tell, we love to live in extremes here. It's all or nothing, no middle ground."

"The best things are." Jasper was glaring at me again, tapping his fingers over the tabletop.

Cass shot a glance at him, and he dropped his gaze. Having it off me for a moment did let me breathe a little easier. Not that I couldn't handle his disdain.

"Tell me about Ryland," I said while Donnie dealt our new hands. "You three must be from the capital, right? What is it like in Aurell?"

Cass's green eyes flickered in the lantern light. "It's less colorful than here."

"Yes, *a lot* less," Jasper said. Cass shot yet another glare his friend's way, and for whatever reason, Jasper looked keen to remain quiet after that one.

"It's a bit more formal," Donnie said. Perhaps it was the comment that drew my eye to it, but he and Cass and even Jasper a bit sat with a straighter, taller posture than the other patrons around. Then again, most of the others were slumped over with drink, so that could have been part of it.

"It's very structured," Donnie continued. "At least in our circles." He paused. "Not mention people are a bit more...devoted to the old religion there."

For the sake of saving my good mood, I ignored that last part.

"And what sort of circles do you occupy?" I asked.

"The most tedious kinds," Cass sighed, examining his new hand.

Cass said he wasn't an officer. He was just traveling with the rest. Could

he have been one of the hordes of workers the king was bringing in from Aurell? I'd overheard a few patrons complaining that His Majesty was bringing in an entire troop of his own servants from Ryland with him instead of filling our former king's castle with ready and willing workers from here in Bexbury. Cass wasn't dark-class—his skin was perhaps the snowiest I'd ever seen—so he likely wasn't a menial servant, but maybe he was a scholar's apprentice or something of the sort. At that conclusion, my curiosity doubled about Donnie, whose umber brown skin told me he sure as hell wasn't a scholar's apprentice but whose clothing was far finer than a typical dark-classes. Who exactly was I spending my night with?

"Did you all come here to work for the king?" My stomach clenched.

Jasper opened his mouth to answer, but Cass kicked him under the table.

"Something like that," Donnie said.

Fine. If they didn't want to tell me, that was their business. I probably didn't want to know anyway.

"I'll wager five." Cass stacked the coins in the center of the table.

I shouldn't have been so confident after my first hand. All my succeeding ones were absolute rubbish. I must have jinxed myself because not only were all of the best combinations missing from my hand, but every single ace seemed to find its way into Jasper's. Was Cass's comment about Jasper keeping aces up his sleeve more truthful than I thought?

Five more rounds passed, and I was down to a lone two coins. Cass and Donnie seemed to be having just as much trouble as I was, the latter of whom was so frazzled by his consistent losses that he decided he needed a break. He abandoned the table to stretch his legs and perhaps devise a new strategy of mental manipulation.

Jasper slid a silver piece from the ever-growing pool he'd left gloating in the center into his hand while Cass reshuffled our deck.

"Don't worry, Evie." It was the first time Jasper had said my name that evening. It sounded disgusting coming from his lips. "Game or no game, I

promise I'll give you a chance to earn some coins back."

I clenched my fist over the table, splinters scratched my skin. I was sure he wasn't an officer now—how much trouble would I be in if I rammed my fist into his face?

"Just shut up, Jasper," Cass said. "Why don't you go take a walk with Donnie." Cass paused and glared at his friend, though at the moment, they seemed like anything but. I expected Jasper to say something, anything, back at Cass, but he held his tongue.

"Don't touch my coins." Jasper rose then strode away from the table. My hand, no, my entire body relaxed.

"I'm sorry about him." Cass let out a breath. "He's entertaining some days but most—"

"He's an ass?"

"Pretty much."

Cass tried to bridge the cards, more than a couple escaping his grasp each time. He shuffled like an old lady.

"Why do you spend your time with him?" I stole the deck from Cass. He reached to take them back, but I slapped him away and began my own shuffling, feeling satisfied to hear the suction of air as I bridged the cards up.

"He keeps me grounded. Connected to the real world." Cass leaned back and craned his neck around, watching the room behind him like he was a curious little boy absorbing the feeling of the night—the laughter, the yells, the smell of yeast from the beer.

He sighed and sat back up. "He takes me to places like this."

"You can't go out by yourself? Pardon my assumption, but you look full-grown to me."

"Thank you for noticing. But even so, I wouldn't have come here by myself. If left to my own devices, I might spend every hour of every day

locked away in the library.”

“The one your father tried to ban you from?”

He chuckled. “The very same.”

“Then what about Donnie?” I asked, bridging again. “He seems like the type to lust for an exciting night in a place like this.”

A smirk tipped his lips like he knew something I didn’t. “Not exactly like this, but perhaps. He’s too spontaneous, though. He’ll run from place to place without stopping to think about anyone else, even his old friend Cass.”

I nodded. How many times had Kat abandoned me to meet friends or to visit a new dress shop? Most of the time, when she left me, it was because she knew I wouldn’t be welcome wherever she wanted to go, But that didn’t make me feel any better.

“Sometimes I feel like I get left behind too, but for different reasons,” I said.

Cass’s smile faded. We sat in silence until I noted Jasper and Donnie descending the distant cellar stairs, Jasper with a disgusting grin on his face. It sparked a stellar urge in me.

“Now, Cass.” I leaned closer to him. “Tell me, are you the type of person to betray one friend for the benefit of another?”

He turned so that our knees touched. “I should think not.”

Jasper and Donnie were at the bottom of the staircase now, begging to squeeze through the room back to us. “Are you *sure*?”

Cass smiled. “No.”

“Then don’t say a thing.” I pulled the deck under the table between Cass and me. He watched me as I picked all the high-value spades out of the deck and moved them to the top. “Do you remember all the way back in volume two, when Taliver hinged his best mate’s life on a card game with the Magician of Mischief but won by stacking the deck with all spades?”

“How could I forget? And they say you can’t learn anything from fantasy.”

Just as Donnie and Jasper reached us, I moved the deck back over the table and shuffled one last time, making sure the top five cards remained where they were.

“Evie and I have been talking,” Cass said. Jasper and Donnie took their seats. “This game is getting tedious. Let’s end it. One last hand, winner takes all.”

Donnie scooted in his chair. “Sounds good to me. It’s not like I have much else to lose anyway.”

“Jasper?”

“All in?” He huffed and tapped his knuckles against the tabletop. “I’d be a fool to risk all my coins in one hand.”

“You’re the one who left them in the pool,” I said.

“Only because they were too plentiful for my pockets.”

“Are you sure,” Cass asked. He reached into his pocket and retrieved four gold coins. They sang as he dropped them over the mound of silver in the center of the table. I had to blink to make sure I didn’t imagine the color. One gold coin was equal to fifty of its silver counterparts. He had these all along?

Cass shrugged. “You can’t always play it safe.”

Jasper’s gaze swelled on the glimmering coins, filling with more hunger than the eyes of most men who stumbled into the barn. What was Cass doing? Surely, he knew he was about to lose those coins. That was a lot of money to throw away.

“I’m in,” Jasper said.

I dealt the deck from the top down. The whole table had already seen me shuffle. It was left to chance now—more or less.

Cass laid his hand down first. It wasn’t great— one pair of fives and some other cards, but no aces.

I had a straight, a five all the way to a nine. What a time for my luck to finally improve.

“You’re up, Jasper,” Cass said. “I hope you can beat Evie.” I cleared my

throat to keep from grinning.

Jasper's eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled widely. , bringing his hand up from his lap. "I hope she hasn't wagered all her night's earning in this little game."

A fire swelled in my chest, but the overwhelming anticipation overshadowed it.

"Four of a kind." Jasper slapped his cards on the table. "And that's the end of that."

Cass looked at me, then back down to Jasper's impossible hand. He'd managed to secure four aces into his set of cards, with the ace of spades resting proudly on top.

Donnie broke into hysterical laughter. The corners of his eyes pinched together, and his dreads bounced atop his head. "You're lucky. But not as lucky as my Jasper." He laughed so hard that a tear slid down his cheek. Donnie jumped up and dropped his cards over the pile of coins. A royal flush, topped with the ace of spades.

Jasper's face reddened.

"Isn't that odd, Cass?" I tapped my chin. "It appears there were two aces of spades in that deck."

"Very odd," he said. "I suppose it was a faulty deck. Too bad. Nothing we can do about it now."

Jasper jerked up from the table. His chair scraping against the floor was almost overcome by the clattering of coins over the table as Donnie raked his winnings into a pile. He glared down at me like he wanted to slit my throat.

"You stacked that deck."

"How could I?" I asked. "Cass was watching me the entire time. You can't call me a cheat without calling him one, too. Are you calling us *both* cheats?"

Cass crossed his arms, stony-faced. "Are you?"

From what I'd seen so far, Cass had some sort of hold over Jasper.

Whatever it was, I was making my last bet of the night in trusting that Jasper wouldn't slander Cass.

Jasper licked his teeth. "I guess not."

"I never thought I'd find myself literally wishing for deeper pockets," Donnie said, entirely oblivious to the outburst taking place on the other side of the table.

"Do you need some help?" Cass asked. "Because my pockets are quite empty."

Jasper gave up on all of us and stormed back towards the cellar stairs. I wondered where he would go now with no money to spend.

"Here, Donnie." I tossed him my flaccid coin pouch. "You need it more than I do."

Cass and I helped Donnie collect his winnings, mostly sliding half the coins into my former pouch, smiling between each other all the while. Donnie saved the final four gold pieces for last, sliding three of them into a pocket inside his coat.

"I can't think of a higher note to end my night on," Donnie said. He jingled like bells with the slightest movement. "We should get going before Jasper takes off without us."

"He wouldn't dare," Cass assured him.

"When has Jasper been anything but daring?" Donnie turned his attention to me. "I'm glad we got a chance to meet, Miss Evie."

"Likewise."

Donnie strolled past us, bumping other tables and still clattering with the weight of his wins.

"Can't wait for the next time!" He turned back. Something flipped out of his fingers, and I caught it in my hands. A gold piece.

I opened my mouth to protest, but Donnie was already twisting his way back towards the staircase and leaving Cass and me by the table, only a few steps away from the groups flanking us and smothered by the noise of the

night but still relatively alone.

“Trust me, he doesn’t need the gold,” Cass said.

I smiled softly and tucked the coin into my boot. I guess Cass didn’t need his coins either. At least, he didn’t seem to want them.

“You could have dealt yourself the spades,” he said. “I wouldn’t have minded.”

“And deprive dear Donnie of such a glorious triumph? I don’t think so.”

Cass ran a hand through his deep black hair. “So, you’re going to go back to reading now?”

“Most likely. I can’t think of anything else I’ll do tonight.” Surely Albo was out of my nook by now too.

His shoulders relaxed. Confusion took me for a moment before I realized what he was really asking. Was I going back to *work*? But was it relief I saw in him or disappointment that he couldn’t request my company? My heart sank. It was probably the latter.

“You should be off.” I stepped past him. “Wouldn’t want to keep your friends waiting.”

“Wait—” I bit my lip and turned back to him. He took a careful step towards me. “If I came back tomorrow night, perhaps we could talk about Taliver some more?”

His soft eyes were focused on mine.

Just talk about Taliver, or was this something else? For the first time all night, I couldn’t tell if I was being propositioned or not.

“I have plans tomorrow night,” I said.

That part wasn’t a lie. Jace had called a small meeting with her inner circle, and I couldn’t miss it.

“And the next night?” He looked like he was holding his breath.

I stared up into his gentle green eyes. His request sounded innocent enough. My new friend Cass hadn’t asked me for anything thus far, and some part of me did long to see him again. What was the harm in saying yes?

“The next night...” I took a small breath. “I’m all yours.”

Chapter Eight



“I’ve never been so tired.” Christa slumped over the bar counter and laid her head down beside her plate of eggs and bread. Her short, coarse black hair nipped the side of her place. “But I suppose this will be the new normal for the upcoming few months.”

Dawn was just beginning to peek through the rafters. Christa may have been tired, but I’d had such a good night that I hardly felt tired at all. I tried to stay in the moment, now in the empty barn with only Kat, Christa, and Sammy, but like the little dust bits dancing through the new sunlight, my thoughts wanted to drift away. Back to Cass and the most exciting card game of my life.

“Give it a week,” Sammy said. “It’ll calm down.”

“I don’t want a damn thing to change.” Kat perched on the edge of the counter, swinging her bare feet. Where her boots had gone, I had no idea. “Do you know how much coin I made tonight? Almost six gold pieces’ worth!”

“Is that before or after you subtract Jen’s cut?” Sammy raised an eyebrow at her.

Kat glanced down the hallway behind the bar, then flipped her hair. “Did I say six gold pieces? I meant four.”

We snickered. Four gold pieces was indeed a lot of money. Under normal

circumstances, that might have taken an entire week to earn. But my new friend Cass had more than that tucked away on his person and had thrown it away without hesitation. What sort of profession was he in?

“Who knew officers were so generous with their coins.” Kat beamed, plopping a grape into her mouth.

I clutched my cup of milk, my thoughts ripping back to my first interaction with Jasper unexpectedly. “Some more than others.”

Sammy frowned. “You didn’t have any trouble with any of them last night, did you, Evie?”

I shook my head. “Nothing serious.”

“I agree with Evie.” Christa stretched her arms over the counter. A light redness looped her brown wrists, but she didn’t seem to feel it. “A lot of my beaus were unnecessarily rough last night.”

“Probably because you were attracting the wrong johns. The petty officers are always more brutish than their higher-ranking companions and have less coin to spend. You should take a lesson from me and seek out the more worthwhile officers tomorrow night.”

“What exactly differentiates a worthwhile patron from a petty officer, Katalin?” Sammy asked. “Do share your knowledge so that we all may benefit.”

“Nothing on the surface, really.” Kat tapped her chin. “But if you pay attention to how each man walks and keeps his uniform, you can just tell.” She took a crunchy bite out of a strawberry. “Or you can ask a current patron if other men of their rank or higher have also come to the barn and work from there.”

“There it is.” Christa grinned. “The truth behind the ruse. If you really want to know where the rich men are, just ask.”

Kat ran her fingers through the end of her hair. “Whatever my methods, I’m ashamed to say I wasn’t able to secure my true prize last night.”

“And who was that?” I snapped as if I were just getting it. “Let me guess,

the general of the Ryland army himself?”

She bit back a smile. “Even better.” Kat leaned towards us. “One patron mentioned to me last night that he saw the prince himself dawdling about the barn.”

Sammy tensed, as did I.

“The prince?” Christa scoffed. “As in, of Ryland?”

“What other prince would he be referring to?” Kat said.

“Did you see him?” Christa asked. “What did he look like?”

“I didn’t actually see him myself, though I spent half the night searching between johns. The patron told me he’s abnormally fair with ink-black hair and bright green eyes. I couldn’t find anyone who looked exactly like what I was looking for.”

I froze. There was no way.

Kat was winning Christa over. She sat up a little. “Prince Cassian? In here? Who would’ve thought?”

Prince Cassian.

My entire body tensed, down to my bones. I couldn’t have moved if I wanted to. I think my heart stopped beating for an instant. Everything was stuck in time.

Kat was right; no one really talked about the prince. It was easy to forget he existed sometimes. Even in the rebellion, everything was always about King Dreux and the next thing he was planning. But last night, I hadn’t remembered any of that. I got carried away in what I thought could become a new friendship. I was blind...and I was wrong. It was impossible for someone like him to befriend someone like me.

“Do you think he’ll be back tonight?” Sammy twisted her wrists in her lap. I couldn’t fault her hesitation. The prince’s father hated our class. The idea of having him in the barn again made me uneasy. Almost as much as remembering how much time I’d spent with him last night.

“I hope so.” Kat hummed to herself. “Can you imagine what it would be

like to be the prince's mistress? To live in the palace and have servants and gowns and go to parties? It would be heaven."

"You honestly think you have a shot?" Christa looked at her like she was delusional.

"I don't see why not. If he's here and he's looking, then let me be found."

My hands tightened around my cup. Was that why Cassian was really here last night? Was that why he asked to see me again? Was the prince scouting for a mistress?

No, he didn't seem like he was looking for that sort of thing. That's the only reason I agreed to see him again in two nights.

God, he's coming back to see me.

What was I supposed to say to him? Could I say anything to him? Was I allowed to say nothing to him?

Dammit. Why didn't I just stay in the apartment? All I had to do was put up with Kat's moaning and let him go search for his own damn cards.

My head was spinning. This was too much to think about, and Kat's enthusiasm for the topic wasn't helping.

I turned and stepped back from the counter. I needed to sleep—to get out of this room. Something.

"Are you alright, Evie?" Christa asked.

"I'm fine, just tired. I'm going to bed." Without another word, I drew my arms in and strode into the hallway.

I just needed to sleep. To wake up in a new night. There was one person I knew who was great at solving problems.

Jace.

Chapter Nine



I took extra care to arrive at the manor before anyone else would be there. Except for Jace—she was always early. Sometimes I wondered if she and Gilow lived there. Nonetheless, I knew if I got to the house early enough, I could speak to her alone.

I left just before sunset, taking the lighter of our horses—a creamy quarter horse Kat and I had named Butter—out from Saddy’s stable, which sat the edge of the forest just outside the Westside. The barn teetered between the forest and the city, and I was able to take a trail through the trees and avoid most people getting there.

As I trotted into the trees, I took an extra moment to check that the path behind me remained empty. I had a lantern with me, but I wouldn’t light it until absolutely necessary. It was always felt safer to travel to and from the manor in the darkness. Isn’t the darkness where all rebellions dwell?

Butter’s hooves clacked over the rickety old bridge just as the night became utterly overbearing. Shadows cloaked the forest, and only memory guided me the rest of the way. But there wasn’t much longer to go.

The dark forest walls opened up, leading into the grassy clearing where the manor house stood in all its glory. The pointed roof nearly blended into the grey clouds above, and the rows of curved windows glinted the starlight. I circled around to the back entrance and left Butter tethered to one of the posts

out back.

I pulled open the unlocked back door and crept into the kitchen. Pale yellow light danced over the whole of the room, emanating from a lantern resting atop the old oven. To my delight, Jace was already waiting at the splintery breakfast table.

“I guess everyone’s showing up early tonight.” Jace pulled a couple of her braids behind her shoulder.

I shut the door behind me. “What do you mean?”

She gestured her head to the side. A figure hopped down from one of the countertops.

“Luke.” I wasn’t expecting to see him. “Why are you here? I didn’t see your horse.”

“I came in through the south entrance. You sound disappointed to see me.”

“No,” I spat out. “I just wanted to talk to Jace about something.”

“Without me?”

“No!” I bit my lip. “Well, yes. I don’t know...I just wasn’t expecting you to be here.”

Did I want Luke to hear any of this? I tried not to let my cheeks flare, remembering that attempted kiss a few days ago. I was already dealing with a lot, and Luke never liked to hear about my nights at the brothel, anyway. Every time I mentioned it, I felt like a little less of a lady in his eyes, even if I wasn’t doing anything there.

“How about I just stay in the corner?” he proposed. “Pretend I’m not even here.”

I squirmed. “That’s fine.”

I took the seat next to her, and Luke returned to the corner.

“Yes, Evie Love?” she asked. “What’s troubling you?”

I tapped my fingers over the table, putting together my first sentence. “What would you do if you, inadvertently, befriended someone but later

found out that they were the last person you should have befriended?”

“I would end our friendship, plain and simple.” Jace pursed her lips. “But it’s not that simple, is it?”

“Is anything in my life,” I mumbled.

Jace’s eyes narrowed. “What if you made arrangements to meet this person again before you realized that you have no desire whatsoever to do so? What if you’re almost certain this person is not going to miss your next arrangement because it was them who asked to meet again? And what if you’re also worried that if you make any misstep with this person, you might incite a resentment in them that could severely hurt you?”

Jace put her hand up, silently telling me to stop rambling. “Evie, what exactly are we talking about here?”

I should have known hypotheticals were only going to take me so far. I sighed and pulled my hands to my lap. Luke was still pretending not to listen at the edge of my vision. I dropped my voice. “Last night...I somehow made friends with the prince.”

“What?!” Luke jumped from the counter.

Jace perked up in her chair.

“If you could even call it that,” I tried to defend myself. “We just talked and played cards together. I didn’t know he was the prince, but now he’s supposed to come see me again tomorrow night.”

Luke was between us in an instant. I didn’t know what he was planning to do, but Jace stopped him with the raise of her hand.

“And it was him who asked to see you again?” she asked.

Heat washed over my face. I hoped Luke couldn’t see my blush. “Yes.”

Jace rose from her chair. “Stay here.” She strode out of the room.

Luke dropped into her seat. The intensity in his eyes made my heart race. “You’re sure it was him?”

“I am now.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “He told me his name was Cass. It was right in front of my face.”

“Don’t blame yourself for not seeing it. He was probably trying to manipulate you. I bet he’s just as conniving and slimy as his father.”

An image of Cass’s gleeful smile flashed through my memory. It wasn’t exactly what I pictured when I thought conniving and slimy.

Luke’s steely gaze settled into mine. “Oh, goodness. He didn’t try to—you know? Did he?”

A new wave of fire burned over my cheeks. “No, of course not! He didn’t ask for anything...except to see me again.”

Luke’s jaw clenched. He had already come to his own conclusion about why the prince wanted to see me again. Would my cheeks ever stop burning?

“I’ll come to the barn,” he said. “Tomorrow night. We’ll tell him you’re with me and you don’t have time to see him.”

“I already told him I was free.”

“Then tell him you lied. Or I will. You won’t have to see him.”

“Luke—”

“I’m serious about this!” He reached into my lap and took my hand. I reluctantly let him keep it. “Let me help you.”

Let him help me. Was that what I wanted?

Heavy footsteps stormed into the room. I was expecting Jace again, but instead, Gilow himself strode into the kitchen.

Luke and I immediately stood.

Gilow, with a determination even I hadn’t seen in him before, crossed to the table, right towards Luke’s seat. Luke immediately backed away. My heart pounded as he sat down. I pinched the sides of my dress at my sides, not knowing what to do with my hands. My toes wiggled in my boots. I realized I should probably sit back down.

Gilow dropped his elbows over the table and steepled his fingers. Jace’s braids rustled behind me as she took the seat next to mine, but I couldn’t take my eyes off our leader.

“I want you to tell me everything that happened between you and the

prince,” Gilow said. “Everything that might have had an impact on your interaction as well. Don’t miss a thing. Recount the entire night if you have to.”

I hesitated. “Why?”

“Please,” he said, not letting his eyes leave me for a second.

I swallowed. If Gilow wanted to know, I’d tell.

I recounted my story. Everything from my first interaction with Jasper to promising to see Cass again in two nights. But Gilow wanted specifics. When I said that we talked in the storeroom, he wanted to know exactly what we spoke about and for how long. When I told him that he didn’t stop me when I stacked the deck against his friend, he asked how hesitant he was about it. When I told him that he wagered all his money just for the benefit of my scheme, he wanted me to recall exactly how much it was. I told him every little detail I could remember. And when I was finished, he made me repeat the story again.

After what felt like an eternity of recounting events, Gilow’s turned his attention to Jace. She nodded.

“Evelyn, I want you to see him again,” Gilow said. “Tomorrow night. And as much as you can after that.”

I instinctively shook my head. “Why?” My heart pounded up to my throat. Something inside of me had already put the pieces together, even if my mind hadn’t.

“It’s apparent that he’s taken an interest in you. I want you to build on that.”

“Build to what?” Luke asked. I only then realized he’d been behind me this entire time.

Gilow didn’t even look up at him. “Whatever you can. Get as close as possible. Ask him as many questions as you can sneak into your conversations. If you’re convincing enough, maybe you can entice him to take you into the castle. Imagine the things you could learn there.”

Into the castle? There was only one way a girl like me would get into the castle. “Are...are you asking me to become the prince’s mistress?”

“I’m asking you to be our spy.” A hint of excitement danced through Gilow’s eyes, though his face remained calm. “I said an opportunity would present itself, and now it has. Do whatever you have to do to pull information from the prince and bring it back to us. We’ll have an advantage we’ve never had before.”

“Excuse me, Gilow,” Luke interjected. “You can’t honestly consider this. Evie isn’t just another girl. She’s one of us.”

“Wouldn’t you call that poetic justice?” Jace chimed in. “One of our rebel girls invading the king’s family just like he invaded ours?” She smiled, her eyes swollen. “I couldn’t imagine a more perfect person for the job.”

“But—” I stumbled. What was a good reason to say no? “We don’t even know if the prince knows anything. There might not be anything useful to glean...”

“Then work your way into the castle and find something useful,” Gilow ordered. “There is an opportunity here. Take it.”

Gilow stared me down. I could feel Jace and Luke’s eyes burrowing into me too. Was this the part where I said yes? Did I have to say yes? I brought this to Jace so she could tell me how to get out of this, not force me further in. Sickeningly far.

I couldn’t refuse. I’d been the first to pledge my support to Gilow the other night. If I could ride with Jace and risk death, there was no reason I couldn’t do this and risk something that shouldn’t be worth as much. What were my comfort and dignity if it could help bring us closer to freedom? It wouldn’t be fair to say no. Not fair to Jace, Thomas, Maxine, the twins, Sammy, and all the other half-classes. I was supposed to be sick of unfairness, so I was supposed to say yes.

“I’ll do it.”



“You can’t.”

Jace and Gilow had barely left the room, but Luke couldn’t wait to voice his objections.

“I don’t have a choice.” I folded my arms over the table and rested my head in them. I wished I could snap my fingers and be home in bed, curled up, not thinking about any of this right now.

He paced the floor. “There’s gotta be a way around this. You can ask Kat or Samantha to do it and they can just relay everything back to you.”

“Gilow didn’t ask them to do this. He asked me. And the prince didn’t ask to see them again.”

A chair crashed into the wall. I jumped.

“It’s not fair!” Luke yelled.

I froze for a moment, my eyes stuck on the snapped legs and polished chair back he’d sent crashing into the wall. I’d seen him throw things before, but never something that big. But I suppose he’d never been that angry.

My heartbeat sped up. Should I say something? It’d probably just make things worse right now.

Just ignore it. “Nothing’s fair, Luke,” I said. “That’s what we’re trying to change.”

“By pushing you towards the source of all our problems? It’s disgusting.” He kicked one of the chair legs, sending it skidding into the dormant oven.

“Because of what they asked, or because it’s me?”

Luke watched me, his chest heaving. I’d never mentioned his attachment so directly before, but I had nothing to lose now. After this, I had a feeling Luke’s adoration for me was going to wane anyway.

“Both.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m doing it. Unless Gilow tells me otherwise. Please don’t ask me about it again.” I crossed my arms tight over my chest.

“This is all I was ever meant to do anyway.”

“No.” Luke kneeled at my side. “You’re worth more than that, Evie, and you shouldn’t have to do this forever.”

“Shouldn’t isn’t the same as will.”

“What if I can help?”

I chuckled dryly. “Can you make my skin two shades lighter?”

“I’m serious, Evie. I want to help.”

My heart clenched as I peered down at him. This was not a joke. “What are you saying?”

“Evelyn, I’m saying marry me. Come stay at the shop. You’ll never have to work at Jen’s, I promise.”

I shook my head. “Luke, I don’t think this is the best time.”

“I know. Not right now, but after. Whenever Gilow realizes how ridiculous this whole scheme is. I swear I’ll never bring this up. You’ll never have to go through something like this again.”

A surreal stillness came over me. The lantern light flickering over the kitchen walls seemed to freeze. This was what I’d been waiting for, my path out. All I had to do was take it. Even after what I’d been tasked to do, Luke still wanted me. I didn’t deserve him. No, he deserved better than someone who would use him only to escape her own fate.

This proposal created so much clarity for my future in the long run. But in the short run, I couldn’t tell if it was for the better or worse. How long was this assignment going to last? How long would I be leaving Luke in an uncomfortable limbo? More importantly, how would knowing that I had Luke waiting on me weigh on my heart while I was doing this—and his.

Just looking at him wrung my heart. I couldn’t decide if knowing I had a future after it was all over would make this easier or unbearably difficult, and I couldn’t decide whether either of us would be happy with this after everything was done and finished.

My body stiffened. If I didn’t answer now, Luke could still change his

mind later. No matter how potent my fears, I couldn't risk losing him. I couldn't lose this opportunity. Besides, I could always change my mind later, too. If I had to.

I forced a weak smile. "Yes."

Chapter Ten



The moment I awoke the next evening, I slipped away onto my reading ledge.

I didn't want to talk to anyone, and I didn't want to get stuck doing work whenever the prince arrived. A hundred emotions swirled inside me. I was engaged, but it didn't feel magical like in all the books. It felt heavy and constricting. Maybe the dread building inside me would go away when juxtaposed with the prince.

The prince.

Surely nothing would happen tonight. Even if something did happen, I just had to remind myself: it wasn't real. I didn't even have to think about it after it happened. How often did Kat or Sammy think about patrons after they were done with them? Probably not at all. If I were a smarter girl, I would have asked them for advice on how to handle tonight. But I'd foolishly indulged my desire for solitude instead. Now the night was about to begin, and I was on my own.

I forced myself to read while the first stream of patrons found their way into the barn. I was almost done with volume twenty of Taliver, and the more I read, the more I'd have to talk with Cass about. But I couldn't entirely escape into the story. My eyes kept flitting down to the increasingly full barn floor. When was he going to arrive?

The final few pages, if none of the others, were able to grab the majority of my attention. The climax of every Taliver volume was always the most enthralling part, and this one was no exception. Taliver and his companions, through a clever game of two truths and a lie, tricked the witch of hearts into revealing where she'd hidden her own heart, which they stole and ran off with, only to be captured by the witch's sister, the notorious Sky Queen, on the last page.

I returned the book to the top of my stack. I was itching to read more and might have, but I didn't have the next copy. Even if the Southside bookstore where I bought all of my books had the next volume, who knew if they too had complied with the new shop restrictions. I'd have to ask Kat or Luke to venture out with me the next time I went.

A new thought twisted my heart. Perhaps I could ask the prince to bring me a copy. Then he'd *have* to return another night. It's what Gilow would tell me to do.

Deciding that was a decent enough way to settle my claws in him, I devoted all my attention to the floor below. It swelled with patrons, just like the night before, but we hadn't reached our peak yet. Auntie Jen rushed about behind the bar as Christa ushered a scrawny-looking fellow up the stairs, and Samantha snuggled by the fire with Mister Archie. My gaze softened on them. Sammy curled up on Mr. Archie's lap, the two of them barely fitting into the armchair sofa they shared. He held her waist while she whispered to him. Even at a distance, his beam was unmistakable. He held her hand to his chest and whispered something back. Sammy giggled and dropped her head onto his shoulder, only to kiss him a second later. It was a long, passionate embrace. His hands didn't wander, and Sammy didn't drop her hands from his cheeks. It was so pure.

Mister Archie must have really loved her. But seeing the way Sammy grinned as she wiped her lip paint from his dark lips, I had to wonder—did she love him, too?

A fair man passed by Sammy and Mister Archie, tearing my attention away. His ink-black hair was too distinct to mistake. Cass was here.

I hurried out of my reading nook and made my way toward the barn. Pacing down the hall, I fluffed my curls and wiped my hands on my dress. Should I have worn something different? I could have chosen one of Kat's more revealing pieces, a dress dripping in lace and ribbon that clung to my chest. No, I winced just imagining that. It was too late to change now, just like it was too late to go back into the apartment. I was out in my fairly modest burgundy dress, and I couldn't turn back now.

Before I knew it, I was amidst the buzz of the main floor. Cass couldn't have gone far in the time it took me to get down here. So, where was he?

The staircase, the sofas, the fireplace, the bar--

The bar—there. He lingered awkwardly at the edge of it, caught in a conversation with a girl standing dangerously close to him. Her golden tresses glowed like fire.

Kat?

Dammit. She did say she wanted to find the prince.

I strode over to the pair. Cass took a relieved breath as he saw me. He relaxed the grip on a satchel bag crossing his body.

"Kitty Kat." I stopped at Cass's side. Kat's perfect smile faded, and she took a step back. "I see you've met my new friend Cass." I slipped my arm through his, hoping I wasn't being too touchy with him. He didn't seem to mind.

"Your friend?" Kat's gaze jumped from me to the prince. "You didn't tell me you knew my little cousin."

"I barely had a moment to," Cass said.

Kat blushed. Or perhaps it was a tinge of fiery red anger that came over her. Whatever it was, it made me feel guilty for not working out the time to tell her about this before.

"I didn't even know she had a cousin," Cass said.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me,” I winked.

He grinned, and I felt even worse.

“Perhaps we can all be friends,” Kat said.

Why couldn’t she take a hint? God knows what she must be thinking, but the best thing to do, no matter what conclusion she had drawn, was to walk away.

“Let’s get some drinks—on the house” She placed her hand on Cass’s chest. He tensed. Damn her and all the little tricks I’d yet to learn.

She turned to the bar, stretched to her tip-toes, and waved down Julian.

“Actually, I think Cass and I are going to go upstairs,” I said. Her head flipped back to us. “We’ve got some very serious, very important matters to discuss. Right, Cass?”

He nodded. “Most certainly. Perhaps another time,” he back to Kat. I prayed she had enough restraint not to ask to come with us.

“Promise?” she asked, batting her golden lashes.

Cass hesitated. “Sure.”

Before any more awkwardness could ensue, I pulled Cass away. He seemed just as eager to get off the floor as I was. I let go of his arm when we passed into the hallway.

“Sorry if Kat was haggling you,” I said. “When she sees someone she likes, she has a hard time being told no.”

“It’s fine.” He ran a hand through his thick hair. “I just...I sort of thought that it was the man who did the requesting. Not the other way around. I wasn’t quite expecting that.” A light red tinted Cass’s face. Was he blushing?

I giggled, partly because his nerves were cute and partly because of my own quickening pulse.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing.” I stopped at our apartment door. Before I even reached for the key, I tried the door handle. Of course, I had left it unlocked. I shut the door after Cass. “You don’t strike me as the type of person who frequents these

places.”

“I told you, I only came here the other night because of Jasper.”

I eased into one of our sofas, and Cass sank into the adjacent armchair. At least he didn’t seem to mind the ripped upholstery slipping out of the brass bolts at the edge of the armrest. He slipped off the bag crossing his chest.

“And now you’re here because of me.” A lighter red flushed over his face this time, and a tinge of heat tickled my cheeks as well.

His fingers plucked the strap of his leather bag.

“What’s in your satchel?” I leaned over the edge of my sofa to get a better look at whatever he held.

Cass’s face lit up, and he immediately flipped open the leather flap and rummaged inside. “Volume Twenty-One. You mentioned the other night that you usually have to wait to buy the next volume, so—”

“You brought me the next one?” I snatched the book from his hands. I couldn’t help myself. My fingers brushed over the sapphire blue fabric of the cover.

He chuckled. “So, I take it you didn’t already get volume twenty-one?”

It felt like a heavy block, formed of cement and guilt, dropped on my shoulders. I was going to ask for this, but he’d already considered that I’d want it.

So much for my plan to manipulate him with the book.

I tried to shrug it off and smiled instead. “Cass, if I’d already had volume twenty-one, I’d still be upstairs reading, and you’d still be at the bar with Kat.”

He sunk back into the armchair. “I was a little worried about embarrassing myself by bringing you a copy you already had.”

“As a general rule, if you’re ever in doubt as to whether you should bring me more Taliver, the answer will always be yes.”

“Noted.” He sighed a smile. “Tell me what you thought of the last book. The first time I finished volume twenty, I was furious.”

“Furious?” I tossed the new volume onto the cushion beside me. “How could you possibly have been anything but ecstatic?”

And just like, that we fell into a new conversation. It was even easier than last night. Cass moved to the edge of his seat, and I leaned over the arm of my sofa as we debated all the reasons one should or shouldn’t be excited about Taliver falling yet again into the clutches of the Sky Queen. Like the other night, he tried to tip-toe around the plot twists I hadn’t gotten to yet, but a few slipped through his smiles.

Maybe Cass wasn’t the prince. He was so easy to talk to.

Cass rubbed his chin as he locked eyes with me. “You might be right not to trust Taliver’s long lost brother—”

“No spoilers.” I put my hands up. “You’re getting me way too excited to read future volumes when I haven’t even started this one yet.”

He dropped his hand. “I haven’t said anything about future volumes.”

“No, but you grin and stare dead at me every time I hint at something that’s going to happen.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do. It’s your tell, and I’m going to remember it the next time we play cards together.”

“In that case, I’ll just have to figure out *your* tell so we’ll be even.”

I laughed. “You can try, but I assure you I don’t have one.”

“Everyone has a tell, or so Donnie mentioned once.”

“Even if that’s true...” I folded my legs under me and perched at the edge of the sofa. Somewhere in the barn, someone shouted, and glass shattered.

I bit my lip as it drew Cass’s attention, but I pulled it back to me. “How are you going to find mine?”

His eyes scanned over me for a brief second. Warmth rushed down my spine. “Let’s play two truths and a lie,” he said.

“Like in volume twenty?”

He nodded.

I shifted ever so slightly. “Alright. You first.”

He propped his elbows over his knees and laced his fingers under his chin. “First, I was born in Aurell. Second, I hate anything with blueberries in it. Third, my name is Cass, but it’s actually short for Cassandra.” He smiled and looked dead at me, and I burst into chuckles.

“Are you sure those aren’t all true, Cassandra?”

“You’re right, my mistake,” he said. “Your turn.”

I composed myself and tried to think of my truths and lie. “Well, I was born in Morra but not in Bexbury. My favorite food is salted sweet potatoes, and when I was a little girl, I wanted to be a traveling horse racer.”

“A traveling racer? Really?”

“Maybe. You tell me.”

He narrowed his green eyes, taking in every inch of my face. My breath quickened. The rest of the room—and all the muffled voices and movement from outside—faded away.

He only nodded gently, not taking his eyes off me. “That part was true,” he decided.

“Lucky guess. And the others?”

“I don’t know anyone who doesn’t love salted sweet potatoes, so I have to deduce that you were, in fact, born here in Bexbury.”

I grinned. “So close to perfect, but not quite.”

He frowned. “No?”

“Sorry to surprise you, but I detest salted sweet potatoes. And I was born in Fossfield, not Bexbury.”

“Fossfield—that’s further south. How did you end up here?”

I pulled my hands back to my lap, twisting my fingers. “I came to live with my aunt.” A slight pause settled over us, and he thankfully didn’t ask anything further.

“My turn,” he said. “First, I don’t have any siblings, although I’ve always wanted one. Second, I absolutely hate the Tales of Taliver,” I tried to smile at

his obvious lie. “And third,” his eyes flickered down for a moment. “My mother died when I was seven.”

My heart froze. Our eyes met. So, he had put the pieces together about my parents. Perhaps he saw it in my eyes. But instead of ignoring it, he chose to tell me the same about himself. He didn’t have to, but he did. It wasn’t the response I thought I wanted, but oddly enough, I was grateful for it. It made me feel...not alone.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Then we both are. Your turn.”

Footsteps and muffled laughter came from the hall. The doorknob rattled.

“Duck.” I pulled Cass down by the shoulder then dipped down into my own sofa. He peered curiously at me but stayed down. I brought a finger up to my lip.

The apartment door flung open, and a pair of footsteps clattered in. The door slammed shut.

“Where you going, sweetheart?” a slurred man’s voice asked. “The bed’s over here.”

“Not ours, handsome,” Kat replied in her most alluring voice. “This way.”

I stared at Cass. My face must have been as bright red as his. Maybe that’s what was so funny. I pressed my hand to my mouth as a lifetime of laughter threatened to pour out. Cass struggled to keep it together too.

“Angel, you’re driving me crazy,” the man said.

Kat didn’t miss a beat. “Then come up to heaven with me and let me relieve that tension.”

I pressed my hand harder over my mouth, and Cass pressed his lips together to keep from laughing.

“Come on, you devil,” Kat said. Her boots trotted up the stairs, and the man’s heavier footsteps followed. Cass and I stayed concealed behind our furniture, trying desperately to control ourselves until the bedroom door

clapped shut. We instantly burst into laughter.

“He called her angel, so she said she’d take him to heaven.” Each word was its own giggle.

Cass took a second to get his words together. “I’m trying— to understand —” he wheezed, “where ‘devil’ came from?”

I collapsed to the floor, giggling over the patchwork living room rug, and he fell down beside me in a similar state.

“Do you get to witness moments like that often?” he asked.

“Every now and then. But they usually don’t tickle me so much.”

He shook his head. “Why were we even hiding?”

“Why? Did you want us to get caught up in that interaction Cass? They might have tried to turn that devilish duo into a fiery foursome.”

Cass laughed again, so hard this time that he had to hold his stomach. This wasn’t exactly where I planned to end up with the prince, but it felt like it was right where I was supposed to be. It felt almost like I was just having a regular visit with an enjoyable friend. But was that in alignment or contrary to what I was supposed to be doing?

“Is this how you spend every night?” He turned his head to look at me. “Reading Taliver and listening to your cousin...entertain people?”

“More or less. That or work the bar.”

He paused for a moment, and we both stared up at the rafters above. “You don’t work like your cousin does?” He trod carefully over the words like I might snap at him.

I mulled over an answer. If I were going to really seduce Cass, admitting that I wasn’t a pleasure girl might hinder that plan. Or at least, prevent an easy way to get close to him. From what I could tell about Cass so far, he wasn’t looking for that sort of thing. I had a feeling he’d never even been in a brothel before the other night. Pretending to be a working girl might make him think less of me. All Gilow told me to do was get close to him, and I was doing fine at that by just being myself. Why start faking now?

“No,” I admitted. “I don’t do that. My aunt won’t make me until I’m eighteen.”

“And right now, you’re?”

“Seventeen.”

“You said your aunt will...*make* you?”

“A figure of speech,” I assured him. “What I really mean is she’s going to kick me out if I don’t start earning money by then.”

“But she’s your aunt.” Cass sat up. His brow furrowed. He stared down at me. “Who is she to give you an ultimatum like that?”

“My thoughts exactly. But it’s her place, and as I was recently told, she doesn’t owe me anything.”

“That doesn’t mean you don’t deserve better,” he said.

I sat up beside him. Was he just telling me what I wanted to hear?

“Auntie’s just being realistic. What else am I going to do?” I bit my tongue right after the words came out. I was supposed to be eliciting adoration, not pity.

Cass’s eyes cut to his lap. “Because you’re an artificial.”

“You can say half-class. It won’t offend me. Half-class has more ring to it than artificial light anyway.” I smiled softly, trying to lift the dampening mood. Maybe I should have nixed this conversation altogether. If I thought too much about who Cass really was, I might have gotten angry.

“Has it been harder since the king arrived?” he asked.

He said king, not father. It fully dawned on me that Cass never told me he was the prince, and apparently, he assumed I didn’t know. Maybe he liked keeping his secret. I’d let him have it. My seduction would be stronger if he didn’t have reason to think I was after him for his title.

“It’s always been hard,” I said. “But the past couple of weeks have been particularly taxing, and I assume it’s only going to get worse.”

Cass sighed. “I don’t disagree.”

A fire flamed in my stomach. Why would he bring this up if he weren’t

going to tell me something useful?

I clenched my jaw. “I don’t understand what King Dreux has against us. Our country was functioning just fine without a class system. We could have just kept doing as we were—paid our tribute and been on our merry way. It all feels unnecessary.”

“From an economic standpoint,” Cass said, “but it’s more than that, I think. The old religion is very specific about separate classes and—” he paused, “keeping bloodlines pure. It wouldn’t make sense to honor the religion back home but ignore it in the territories.”

I took a small breath. If I said anything else, I might start screaming.

“Perhaps it strokes his ego to keep the light-class on top, too,” Cass murmured. Why would he admit that to me? Did it stroke his too?

Time to change the subject.

I cleared my throat. “What do you do, Cass?”

He shrugged. “I do a lot of things. I read, eat, visit friends.”

I rolled my eyes. “What do you do for money? I’ve been guessing in my head since the other night. I had you pegged as a scholar’s apprentice.”

His eyes darted to that special place people look when trying to come up with something. Would he still lie when given an opportunity to reveal the truth?

“In another life, maybe I would’ve been a scholar, but in this one, I’ve been fortunate enough to land in an affluent family. Working, in the conventional sense, isn’t a requirement.”

It was almost impressive how skilled he was at dancing around the truth without technically lying. But I was in no position to judge him for being deceitful.

“And you?” he asked. “Since you don’t work—”

“Mostly just tips from the bar and sporadic gambling downstairs. Sometimes Kat will take pity on me and loan me some silver if I really want a new book or to go to the races.”

“Races?”

Oh damn, why had I said that? I hadn’t thought of the night races in weeks, but they popped to mind and out of my mouth before I could stop to wonder why.

“Horse races. People gather together for them every Sunday night. Some people race, others gamble. Some go to meet up with their lovers. That sort of thing. I haven’t been in a while, but when I go, I race and bet on myself. I usually come back with a decent amount of silver.”

“So that’s where your desire to be a traveling rider went.”

I scratched my cheek to hide the hint of a blush I wasn’t expecting. “Maybe the dream’s not as far behind me as I thought.”

He glanced down. “It’s Saturday today—tonight. If you’re up for it, we could go tomorrow.”

Was that worry in his voice? Did he think I’d say no? I might have to. What I didn’t mention about the races was that, like the barn, it was sort of a watering hole for half-classes and the like. A few of the lovers who went there to meet were of opposite classes. The races were one of the few places where it was an unspoken rule not to say anything.

“Cass, the races aren’t exactly the most lawful of places. And there are going to be a lot of people like me there.”

He frowned. “Do you think that would bother me?”

Only then did I realize how close we were. My heart skipped. We were very, very close. The little details I had taken for granted sparkled to life in front of me: his delicate honey scent, a barely visible freckle on the side of his nose, the lighter specks of green near the rim of his irises, a curious purple mark by the edge of his ear, and a tiny faded scar just below his bottom lip.

His lips were only a breath away from mine.

“Does it?” I whispered.

“No.”

My heart pattered like crazy in my chest. We lingered there, nearly upon

each other but still excruciatingly apart.

Was he going to do something? Was I supposed to? Despite the debauchery that had surrounded me for the last twelve years, I was ashamed to say that I'd never kissed anyone before. I'd *seen* plenty of kisses and had more opportunities than I could count, but I never took any of them. I just assumed when the right moment presented itself, I would feel it. Maybe that's why neither of us moved. It wasn't the right moment, even for this charade.

"Then it's a date." We awkwardly separated, and I tried to carry on like nothing happened. My heart felt like someone had just released it from a clenching grasp. "How good are you at following directions?"

"Decent enough."

I hopped up from the floor. My skirt was dotted with dust and little bits of fabric. Lucky for Cass, whatever smooth fabric comprised his pants and shirt seemed to repel any speck of dust that might have wanted to cling to him.

I slapped my skirt a couple times while I made my way over to Auntie's dresser. She always kept pen and paper handy. I picked up a pencil from the few scattered across her dresser and penned a little list of directions onto a small scrap of paper from the stack at the edge of her dresser.

I didn't want to give away that I knew Cass was staying at the castle, so I began my directions at the square. I blew over the ink and folded the paper in half.

Cass waited between the door and the stairs as if he were stopped by some invisible wall dividing the half of our apartment that served as the living room from the half that was Auntie's room.

"Follow these, and you won't get lost. Probably." I handed him the paper.

"Will you come look for me if I do? It's what Taliver would do."

"Oh, most certainly. I'll set off on a grand quest to find you. After I assemble my crew of misfits, we'll venture through every land and even cross the great sea to find you," I said.

“Only to realize that I was among your ranks the entire time.”

“I which case I’ll have to kill you—which is what Taliver should have done to Arzel after he wasted half of volume twelve looking for that dunce.”

His eyes narrowed. “But he did warn him before his so-called disappearance that he would always be with him. Who knew he meant literally and not just in spirit?”

I rolled my eyes. “How about we avoid all that frustration ourselves, and you don’t get lost?”

Cass smirked, and a second later, the bedroom door above creaked open. Cass and I hurried toward the door.

“That was quicker than expected,” I said, pulling the door open.

“And they say heaven is eternal.”

I dissolved into laughter. Cass and I all but fell into the hallway. He closed the door behind us, and we ran down the hallway.

“I should leave you to your reading,” Cass said.

The echoes of the barn floor pull us ahead. “Taliver is probably a much more interesting person to spend time with than me.”

“That’s true, but you’re working your way up to a close second.” He smiled. “Let me walk you out before Kat spots us and tries to steal you away.” I took his arm, and together, we went happily into the main floor. I didn’t think I’d ever laughed so much in one night.

The barn was stuffed with patrons, so it was unlikely Kat would spot up in this. Still, I wanted to get my prince out before she had the chance.

We weaved through the gaggle of patrons, slipping alongside the bar for a spell. Just as we passed the last stool, I recognized a familiar figure leaning against the adjacent wall. It was a shadowy part of the floor, but his silver eyes seemed to pop out from the darkness. I averted my eyes from him. He couldn’t be serious. Why the hell was he here?

I hastened my pace, hoping Cass wouldn’t notice how quickly I shoved and twisted our way through the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd, and we were at

the sliding door on the other side of the main room in no time.

“This is where I leave you, friend. I promise I’ll try to read at least half of twenty-one before tomorrow.”

“Only half? I expect you to devour the entire thing before the night’s over.”

I could feel Luke’s eyes beating into me. Don’t turn around.

“I’m just trying to hold onto your book for as long as I can,” I said.

“It will be well missed, but I hope you have many opportunities to return it in the future.”

I bit my lip and glanced at the floor. Success. My mission for tonight was over. “Good night Cass. Until tomorrow?”

He nodded. “Tomorrow.” He dipped his head and slipped out into the night. The door slid shut behind him.

I exhaled a deep breath and turned around. There went my fake beau. Now to deal with the real one.

Chapter Eleven



Luke was behind me before the barn door even closed.

“That was him?” Luke said, glaring into the night before it closed entirely.

“Keep your voice down.” I grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the door. “He just left. He could have heard you.”

“What happened? Where did you two go? I looked everywhere, but I couldn’t find you.”

I pulled him behind the bar and into the quieted hallway, closing the door. “We were in my apartment,” I said.

“Your apartment?” His jaw clenched. He was still for a second before he slammed his hand into the wall, sending a shudder through the boards.

“Luke!”

“I’m sorry.” He raised his hands in defense, then took a deep breath. “Are you...alright?”

The chair he’d sent crashing into the wall at the manor shattered in my mind again.

I cleared my throat. “Yes, I’m fine. Nothing happened. We just talked. That’s it.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

His shoulders relaxed as if a thousand weights had just been lifted off them.

“Why are you here?” I asked as calmly as I could, although every bone in my body wanted to scream at him. “You shouldn’t have come.”

He tapped his foot. “I wanted to see you.”

“You wanted to see me *with* the prince.”

“And if I did? What’s wrong with me keeping an eye on you?”

“You understand why that’s an awful idea, right?” His eyebrows jumped. Damn it, Luke. “What good is that going to do for anyone, huh?” I spewed. “The more you see of Cass and me together, the more likely you are to stop it. And the more I see of you while I’m with him, the more awful I’m going to feel.” The fire in his eyes told me he didn’t care at all about anything I just said. New tactic.

I took a step forward. “You don’t want me to feel awful, do you?”

He sighed. Tense muscles in his neck released. Good. If he wasn’t going to listen to logic, then maybe I could sway him with pleading eyes and a soft voice.

“When is he coming back?” he asked.

“He’s not next time. We’re going to the races tomorrow.”

“What?” he shouted. “You can’t take him to the races. You know how many half-classes are there.”

“Look how many are here—”

“And the races are dangerous, Evie. You know how some of those men are. You can’t go by yourself.”

“I won’t be by myself. I’ll be with the prince.”

He scoffed. “That’s not better.”

“Too bad. I already made the plans.”

We matched stares for a few seconds. “Fine,” Luke finally said, but saying something else entirely at the same time.

I clenched my nails into my palm. “You cannot follow us there.”

“I didn’t say I was.”

I crossed my arm. “Then promise me you won’t be there.”

I would have waited hours for my answer, but another party decided to butt into our conversation.

Kat flew in from the door behind the bar. She stumbled to a stop a step away from me. Luke and I took a step apart as Kat’s eyes darted between us. Whatever judgmental thought she had, she dismissed with the wave of her hand.

Her glare settled on me. “I told you I was looking for Prince Cassian, and you decided not to tell me that you’d already ‘made friends’ with him?! Not fair.”

“Kat, it’s not what you think—”

“Then after you hog him for an hour, you shuffle him out without giving him the chance to talk to anyone else? What the hell!” She huffed and blinked, holding back angry tears.

“I—”

“If it didn’t make me look like a desperate wench, I’d have flown out after him. But now I’ll have to wait until he comes back.”

“Kat.”

She stopped, her fair face frozen in a frown.

“I’m doing this for Gilow.”

Her shoulders dropped. “Oh.”

If there was a time to lay everything on the table for her, it was now. “Can we talk later, Luke?” I asked. “Please.”

He hesitated for a moment, then took his leave through the bar door, slamming it on his way out.

Why was he so angry? He already knew what was going on, and he’d had an entire day to come to grips with it. Nonetheless, I’d have to coddle him at some point. After all, we were engaged now. Making an effort to tend to his emotions was on my responsibilities list.

I was engaged—another thing to fill Kat in on.

“Come on,” I said. “There’s a lot I have to tell you.”



“So, you’re going to be his mistress?” Kat’s mouth sat agape.

I sat crisscross on our bedroom sofa. I would have sat on the bed, but I wasn’t going to do that until someone changed those sheets.

“He never technically told me that.” I twiddled with the hem of my dress. “He just told me to get as close to him as I could.”

“Well, there’s nothing else that could mean.” Kat folded her arms and paced. Her cream booties clacked over the planks of wood. “I won’t lie, I’m disappointed. Very much so. But for your sake Evie, I won’t intervene. Not until you’re done with his highness.”

“Thank you, Kat.” That was one less thing to worry about.

“Was that why Luke looked so furious?” She tapped her elbow. “Does he know about this?”

I dropped my chin into my palm. “Yes, and he had more than a few objections.”

“Objections are one thing, he looked absolutely livid.” She shook her head. “Such a shame too, to see such ugly emotions on that handsome face.”

I had to tell her the next part now. “I hear that men tend to get that way... when they know that another man is spending nights with their fiancé.”

Kat stopped. Her eyes widened. “Evie, no.”

“I had to. He asked, so I said yes. And he asked *after* Gilow assigned me all of this. He knew what we were getting into.” She opened her mouth, but I spoke first, “Don’t give me any of that manipulative ‘don’t play with people’s hearts’ stuff. It’s not going to change anything.”

Her honey eyes flickered between mine, and despite what I’d just said, they managed to dredge a pang of guilt from me. “If Luke’s willing to take

you after all of this, then it means he really cares about you, Evie.”

“I know that.”

“Do you? Because you dismissed him rather quickly back there.”

“Because he was being ridiculous! He showed up here when he knew I was going to be with the prince.”

“But he’s only acting like this because he loves you.”

“Ugh—what does that have to do with anything? Love or not, he should have enough restraint to keep himself from jeopardizing this assignment right out of the gate. Yet he still wanted to come to the races tomorrow night.”

She cocked her head. “The races?”

“Where Cass and I are going to meet again.”

“Oh.” She tapped her fingers against her arm. “That might be bad.”

“Exactly.” I fell back onto the sofa. “He’s just going to do what he wants anyway, and it’s not like I can tie him up to a tree until after.”

She flopped down to the floor beside me. “I don’t know about future instances. But how about tomorrow night? I’ll go with you.” I furrowed my brow at her. “Not to try my hand at the prince, I promise. I meant so I can distract Luke for you, should he show up.”

I sat up. “Really? You think you could keep him busy?” Kat only knew Luke by proxy of me, and I doubted they’d have much to talk about.

“Trust me, Evie, I entertain men for a living. I think I can distract him for a couple hours.” Her type of distraction wasn’t the type of was asking for, but I’d just have to trust that she could be just as entertaining with her clothes on. “Besides,” she continued. “I deserve a night off anyway.”

I grinned. “Thank you, Kitty Kat. What would I do without you?”

“What would the world do without me?” She twirled a lock of hair at her hairline like she would one of the golden-haired dolls we used to play with as little girls.

A wave of peace washed over me. This would be so much easier with Kat at my side, or at least, keeping Luke from mine.

“Do you think he’s attractive?” she asked suddenly.

“Luke? Definitely.” If only I were the type of girl who could fall in love with that alone.

“No, the prince.”

I bit my lip. “His father banned me from almost every store in Bexbury last week, so no, I don’t think I do.”

“Sins of the father,” Kat said. “And that has nothing to do with my question. I’m asking on a purely aesthetic level.”

I tucked a curl behind my ear. “Really, Kat?”

“Because *I* think he’s quite attractive. I really wouldn’t have minded being his mistress.” She shrugged, resigned to her loss. “Just a question.”

I rolled my eyes. There was nothing Kat loved to talk about more than money and men. She was doing a favor for me, so I might as well indulge her.

“He’s definitely distinct,” I said. “How many people in the light-class do you see with hair that shadowy black?” I was going to stop there, but for some reason, I went on. “And he has a really pleasing build, but he carries himself in a way that’s unimposing. His skin’s a bit snowier than I prefer, even in light-class men, but I think his eyes make up for that. They remind me of lily pads at the pond. It’s almost unnatural how green they are.”

Kat folded her arms over the edge of the sofa cushion. “So, you *do* think he’s attractive.” She smiled mischievously.

“I suppose, objectively, yes?”

She giggled. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say that about a light-class man before. Then again, you so rarely admit it about anyone.”

“Alright, enough lollygagging.” I smothered my smile and jumped up off the sofa. “I think it’s time for us to talk about something more serious.”

She blinked at me. “What could be more serious than everything we just talked about?”

I pointed to our bed across the room, ruffled sheets and all. “We need to

talk about the new rules for our bed.”

Chapter Twelve



The night was beautiful. A thousand stars dotted the sky above us. With no clouds in sight, the full moon beamed down unabated. Although I often found myself riding through the night, so rarely did I ever stop to take note of the beauty it held. Then again, not all nights could have been as lovely as this one. It was a perfect night. A perfect night to fall in love.

Or to pretend to fall in love.

I trotted out of the trees and into the spacious riding fields. Kat reined in at my side. Countless lantern lights danced around the clearing as if a few of the stars had fallen from the sky.

In the center of the field, a set of horses, guided only by the lanterns bouncing at their sides, raced across the well-trodden grass. Dozens of spectators, basking in their own lantern light, lined the edges of the field. Well, some were spectating. Others appeared to be wholly entranced in games, conversations, or entire meals they'd brought with them and sprawled out over blankets. When Kat and I were very little, Auntie Jen would bring us out here some nights to eat and watch the races. It was probably the worst place for two little girls, but we had so much fun.

"Do you see him?" Kat stopped next to me as we entered behind a row of spectators. "The prince?" My attention hopped from lantern to lantern,

surveying each figure I could make out. “Not yet. Do you see Luke?”

“No. Perhaps neither are here yet. The sun only set an hour ago.”

I clutched my reins. We weren’t that early. At least one of them had to be here. I scanned the field again, from the forest’s edge all the way to the tethered horses and riders at the other side of the field. I saw him. Not Luke nor Cass, but another recognizable shape. His shoulder-length dreads trembled as he spoke enthusiastically with another figure.

“Found him—not Luke.” I looked back to Kat. “Do you think you could stay around here? Whenever Luke shows up, he’ll have to come through on this trail.”

“Sure.” She dismounted Shadow, looking as elegant as ever in her midnight blue riding dress. “I’ll be the perfect sentry.”

I nodded and trotted off towards the other edge of the field. Donnie stopped talking and beamed at me as I reigned in. Less than a moment later, Cass spun around too.

“So, you didn’t get lost,” I said, looking at Cass. “That’s too bad. I’d already packed for my adventure to find you.”

“Entirely due to Donnie, I promise.”

Donnie’s eyes narrowed as he glanced from Cass to me. I swung down from Butter. “I haven’t the slightest clue what I’m being blamed for,” he said, “but I’ve come to accept that when someone tells me I’m to fault for something, it’s usually true.”

“I wasn’t expecting to see you tonight, Donnie.” I led Butter down to a nearby free tethering post, pleased to see that Cass couldn’t help but follow

“He invited himself,” Cass said. Donnie trailed nonchalantly behind him.

“Sometimes that’s the only way to get places,” Donnie said.

I unraveled the lead rope and used it to tie Butter’s reins to the post. As my hands worked on the knot, my gaze temporarily fell across the field. I saw Kat across the way, but she wasn’t alone anymore. She and a companion were chatting near the tree line. Was that Luke?

It was too dark to see. I'd just have to trust she was doing her job. "And Jasper?" I asked, turning back to my own conversation. "Did he invite himself, as well?"

Cass blanched. "No, he didn't." That was a small thorn out of my side.

"Well, I'm more than happy to see you here, Donnie." A new question popped into my mind. "Donnie—is that short for Donnet? Or Donnavan?"

A wide grin swept across Cass's face, and his eyes widened with amusement. He grabbed his friend's shoulder. "Yes, Donnie. Remind us. What is your *official* name?"

Now I really wanted to know what Donnie was short for.

"Well, it's..." Donnie shifted his weight, looking down at his boots, then sighed. "Donestan..."

"That's not so bad," I started.

"Donestan David Doneuulad..." He glanced back to Cass, who wasn't even trying to hold back his grin. "The fourth."

I broke into giggles and covered my mouth to stifle it. "Your parents were so cruel."

"Three generations have come and gone, yet no one decided to put an end to that cruelty," Cass said.

"It's a tradition." Donnie shook his head. "Every first son bestows his first son with this curse so that he'll know his father's pain. It's a shameful circle."

"And one day, you'll bestow Donestan Doneuulad the fifth with that same curse," I said.

Donnie straightened. "Only if I must."

Cass's smile faded. Was there more seriousness to this matter than I understood?

"Now that my true name has been shamefully revealed, I'll take my leave." Donnie straightened the cuffs of his coat, this one made of black velvet and embossed with sparkling silver brocade. He glanced back to a

string of lights floating just past the forest edge. “I’m going to make an acquaintance with persons who don’t know the truth about me.”

“Don’t have too much fun,” Cass told him.

Donnie lifted a hand toward us but didn’t look back.

“You’re going to race tonight, aren’t you?” My eyes dropped to Cass’s feet and the unscuffed, rustic brown boots he wore. They weren’t so different from my own. Actually, in my riding pants and chemise, Cass and I looked quite similar.

“I was considering it.” A thunder of hooves taking off across the field drew our attention to a new race taking off not too far from us. “But the competition looks steeper than I expected.”

“Are you doubting your own ability, Cass?”

“Judging myself honestly.” The storm of horses and riders disappeared into the part of the race trail that wound into the trees. “I used to ride when I was a boy, but that was more out of obligation than desire—Definitely not due to talent.”

“Once a rider, always a rider,” I said. “And didn’t someone tell you just the other night that you need to have more faith in yourself? Someone incredibly wise, intelligent, and beautiful, I believe?”

“I think what you said was I ‘needed to have faith in my hand.’ And my hands are currently devoid of cards.”

“Then find some.” I took his arm and led him from the tethered posts. “Metaphorically, I mean.” Cass frowned. I clarified. “I mean, in something like a game of cards, you have to have faith in your hand because you’ve risked something on it. You bet something, and that provides motivation. You just need to—”

“Make a gamble, so I’m forced to play?”

“Exactly. Just think of what you could win, and you’ll be dying to race—whether you think you can win or not.”

“Hmm.” Cass ran a hand through his dark hair, which appeared even

black under the night. “What if I needed something besides coins to inspire me to race?”

“Like?” Now that I was thinking about it, I suppose Cass had no real need for gold or silver. But I’d hoped I could convince him to ride with me by request alone. Racing is always more fun when a friend is competing at your side. The last couple of times I came to the races, Luke took it upon himself to be my partner. And, of course, comradeship always nourishes trust, which was just what I needed from him.

“What if we make our own gamble?” he asked.

His arm tensed under my hand.

“I’m listening.” Where was he going with this?

“I’ll race with you,” he began, “and if you win, I’ll let you keep my copy of volume twenty-one.”

My heart beat a little faster. If anything could tempt me as much as silver, it was that. “And if you win?”

We stopped, and he turned to look down at me. “If I win...then, I get to kiss you.”

I froze while he shifted from one foot to the other. In our own small portion of the field, the moonlight and wayward lantern light lit him perfectly. His green eyes had just the right amount of sparkle in them, mixing adorably with the nervous apprehension in them. I certainly wasn’t expecting Cass to propose this, and he looked like he wasn’t expecting to himself. But it didn’t make sense. If he wanted to kiss me, he could have done it last night. Unless he changed his mind over the course of a day.

The idea of kissing him now still didn’t feel right. What would it mean to give my first kiss to the son of the man who’d ruined my life and the lives of so many others? If Gilow hadn’t set me on this path, it would surely be treasonous. Being given “permission” by my leader shouldn’t have changed the core of it. No matter how kind Cass was, he was supposed to be the enemy. What kind of rebel feels okay with kissing the enemy?

Perhaps things would feel different after the race. Maybe it didn't matter. He wasn't trying to kiss me. He was asking.

And only if he won.

If *I* won, I could figure things out after. If I found my courage, I could kiss him. The power would be in my hands—and I'd get to keep that copy of Taliver. This was the perfect scenario.

"You have yourself a wager," I said.

Cass let out a breath. I took his arm again, and the both of us, silently but anxiously, headed towards the little group of registering competitors gathered not too far away. Another race took off as we strolled. Cass looked quite intrigued, watching them bolt across the field towards the distant path ahead. His gaze was far-reaching and careful. I imagined he was gauging his chances of winning. I'd let him hope, but Butter and I almost never lost races. Not when we really needed to win.

"The race goes into the woods?" he asked. The sound of hooves pounding the dirt and thrashing branches echoed from the trees.

"Most of them. Some just go across the field, depending on what the competitors decide."

"So, we won't know until we know who we're racing with?"

"No." I glanced at the group of registering competitors ahead. The makeshift organizer waved us closer. "We'll find out now." I pulled Cass's arm, and we jogged forward into the group.

The organizer's pencil danced over the group, counting heads as we arrived. "Wonderful," the man said. "That makes six. You all will ride after the next group that goes. Through the trees, right?"

A hum of consensus ran through us, except Cass, who only watched the rest of us, taking in every word.

"You all know the rules?" the organizer asked.

"Yeah, don't lose," a young fellow at the edge of our group said.

The fellow and his companion chuckled and shoved shoulders.

“And don’t hurt anybody,” the organizer added. “Nothing beyond that. Unless...” he lifted a jangly little bag from his side. “Does anyone want to put money on their race?”

Nearly all of our competitors slapped a handful of coins into the organizer’s hand, making Cass and I the only ones not betting at least a day’s work of silver. With that, the official sent us off. The current group was almost finished with their race, and by the time we were all lined up, it would be time for us to embark on ours.

“Is everyone in Morra this fond of gambling, or is it just Bexbury?” Cass asked. Our competitors headed back to gather their steeds, and we followed closely behind.

“You’re just dwelling with a certain type of crowd,” I said. “Then again, this is the side of Bexbury I see the most.”

“Doesn’t sound like an awful side to be bound to—all games and good spirits.”

“You don’t see any of that in your circles?” I asked.

“Some, but they’re nothing like this.”

“Then what are your normal interactions like? Mind numbingly dull?”

He looked bored just thinking about it. “More like predictably interesting, which will always be less preferable to pleasantly dull ways of spending time.”

I flipped a few of my curls behind my shoulders, noticing how Cass’s gaze followed me as I did. “What pleasantly dull activities do you consider superior to the predictably interesting?”

He rubbed his chin. “Well, I’m always prepared for a game of chess, however unpleasantly dull it may seem to everyone else.” Cass’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly. I suppose he was waiting for me to jump up and reveal my love for the game too. I would have if only to further cement our likenesses, but this was a love we couldn’t share.

“Before you ask, no, I don’t play.” He deflated a bit. I guess we couldn’t

have all the same passions. “I never learned. But my aunt tells me my father used to play on occasion. I think he was an oddity, though. I don’t know anyone else who know how. Except for you, I guess.”

“Do you want to learn?” We reached Butter’s post, and he eagerly untied her for me.

“I wouldn’t be opposed to it. Part of me has wanted to learn since I read volume thirteen.”

He handed me his reins. “I thought you said thirteen was your least favorite Taliver book?”

“Only because I didn’t know how to play. The whole ‘trapped in a living chess game’ plotline is a bit hard to follow when you don’t understand the rules of the game,” I said.

“I imagine it would be. Maybe I can remedy that by teaching you? Then you can reread the volume with new appreciation.”

And just like that, I had a third rendezvous dated and set. I hoped Gilow would be pleased. “I’d like that.”

I walked with Cass as he untethered his horse, a black quarter horse. I asked his name, but Cass said he was simply called fourteen. The previous group of riders trotted back to the edge of the field just as we mounted our steeds and headed towards the well-worn patches that marked the start of the race. The group before us was just darting into the trees. It wouldn’t be long before they’d be back, bolting across the opposite side of the field. In the dead center of our racing group, Cass and I waited anxiously along with the others for the prior groups to return. As soon as their first horse crossed ours, we were up—our turn at last.

Butter’s reins were slick with sweat in my grip. I should have brought gloves. This race felt more valuable than usual—it didn’t feel like *just* a race. My heart drummed up my throat, getting faster each waiting second. Normally, I wouldn’t have been nervous about winning at all, but with Cass here, things were different. Should I resign to let him have the win? That

would be the easiest way to do this. Easier than swallowing my pride and kissing him even if I did lose.

Across the field, the first rider, a heavy-set woman with a white riding skirt whipping behind her, burst through the tree, trailed by a trio of men pressing as hard as they could to get past her. I stole a quick glance over to Cass. He clutched his reins and leaned forward, then grinned at me with an awfully smug confidence.

No, I couldn't let him win.

The woman in the white skirt blew past our row, and we were off.

I bolted into action. With very little effort, Butter whipped forward. We tore into the field. Leaning forward, I pressed my heels into her flanks. There was almost no need. The ferocity with which we ripped through the air was astounding. The other horses faded out of view. I was ahead of them all. But so was Cass.

He was only a pace behind me, almost at my side. His horse's hooves pummeled behind me. I wanted to turn back and perhaps wink or smile at him, but I pressed forward. The woods were at my fingertips, and I couldn't risk losing my precious lead.

I pressed harder into Butter's sides just as we crossed into the trees. On a regular forest trail, I wouldn't have been worried at all. It'd be too narrow for him to get past me. But the racing trail had long since been widened with use. I stuck to its center and flew on. He would *not* pass me.

We whipped past the trees. The leaves and trunks were nothing more than blurs of color. The only sound in the world was the pummel of hooves. We were going so fast—I'd never ridden so rapidly in my life. A creeping dread clutched my heart. What would happen if I faltered now? Even the slightest movement could send me tumbling onto the path.

The trail ahead curved. My heart hitched as we got closer. Had the curve in the path always been so sharp? I was going so fast. Too fast. Could Butter make it? What if she slipped in the motion? It was too sharp. We were almost

there.

Damn it.

I tugged on the reins as we neared the curve. Barely at all, just enough to slow us down a little. Just enough to make sure we didn't tumble off into the trees.

But that was all he needed.

Cass and his horse whipped past us. A gust of air sliced past me. In my moment of hesitation, he cut through the curve. He didn't slow at all. Not even as he rounded the turn. Butter and I sped down the trail, but now he was the one ahead of me. Only a pace, but it was enough.

I pressed again into Butter's sides and leaned as far forward as I could. It was to no avail. Cass had his lead and wasn't letting it go.

A fire burned through me as we darted out into the field. I hadn't exaggerated—I rarely ever lost races. But I was about to. With all the force I could muster, I urged Butter forward. He was barely ahead of us. We could do this—we could beat him.

Halfway across the field, I drew up right at his side. He was less than an arm's length ahead of me, but the row of riders was just before us and we were coming up fast.

Just a little bit further.

We flew past them—Cass first, with me the breadth of a horse's tail hair behind.

I yanked back my reins, and we both drew to a stop.

I lost.

I gasped for breath at the edge of the field and pressed a hand to my chest. Cass tilted his head back and heaved his own breaths. At least I hadn't made it an easy win.

Cass smiled through his weary breaths. "I guess my riding skills haven't faded as much as I thought."

"You...you—" I panted.

His smile grew into a smirk. Did he swindle me? Just when I thought I had Cass pegged as a quiet, shy little prince, he took a swift turn from my expectations. Literally.

I steered Butter away from the race lines as our fellow riders slowed along the grass. Cass trotted behind me. In a quiet corner of the field, with my breath mostly back but with a dreadful shakiness in my heart, I swung down from my horse, sliding to the ground quite ungracefully. I almost slipped on the grass, but a pair of hands caught my waist.

“Careful,” Cass whispered behind me.

My heart hitched as I spun around, but he left his hands around me. Habit told me to peel them off, but I didn’t. He won, and I had a promise to keep.

The lantern dangling from a nearby post burned over us. Cass gazed down at me, gently and longingly. His eyes lingered on me for an agonizing eternity.

“What are you waiting for?” I asked. “You won. Take your prize.”

I forced myself to be still and tilted my head up to him.

Just let him do it.

He pulled me closer to him and dipped his head down to me. His lips drew near to mine. The feeling in my feet and arms and legs drifted up until only my lips were left to feel the sensation of touch.

The air felt dry around me. My throat was sand, and I tried to will away the pronounced feeling in my lips. Cassian was going to kiss me.

You won’t like it, Evie.

I closed my eyes.

“No.”

My eyes flew open. Cass dropped his hands and stepped back from me.

“No?” I repeated. “What do you mean, *no*?”

“I mean not now.” His smirk softened.

I fumbled for words. “But...but I thought you wanted to kiss me?”

A deep red settled over his fair face, visible even in the dim lantern light.

“I do.”

Something frantic and confusing swept over me. “But you won. I owe you a kiss, so why aren’t you kissing me? Did you change your mind?”

Was I not kissable enough anymore?

“Nothing’s changed at all,” he said. “You still owe me a kiss. And I intend to take it. Just not now.”

Really? Was he really serious? Did I do something wrong? No, I’d done nothing at all. And he wasn’t going to torture me by holding this over my head.

“No, you’ll take it right now!” I demanded. “Just kiss me.”

He laughed, an infuriating and confusing reaction.

I hit his shoulder. “I’m not joking, Cass. Kiss me!” I shouted.

“I can’t. It’s not the right moment.”

My chest heaved. Here I was practically throwing myself at him, and he wasn’t going to take me? Something I thought my life at the barn had taught me with complete certainty was that whenever I finally offered myself to someone, they would pounce. But he wasn’t going to. Cass, whose kiss I was ultimately readying myself to hate, was holding back. Time, now dragging me closer to my convenient marriage to Luke, never held back for me. Life never held back from hitting me. But this would-be enemy prince would.

The world was a wild, jumbled mess.

I couldn’t help but laugh if only to keep from screaming. “You’re awful,” I said between frustrated chuckles. “Absolutely awful.”

I grabbed Butter’s reins and yanked her away.

“Where are you going?” Cass asked. Even with my back to him, I could feel the contentment in his voice.

“Home,” I said. “To wallow in my defeat.”

“I can still come to see you tomorrow? So, we can play chess?”

I stopped and turned back to him. “I don’t know. Are you going to kiss me tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure, but I definitely can’t if I don’t see you.”

“Ugh.” I pulled my horse further away from him. He chuckled behind me.

“See you tomorrow?” he asked as I haphazardly mounted Butter once again.

He looked up at me, eyes pleading with all the hope one prince could hold.

“Yes.” Pouting like a little girl, I sped off back into the forest. Back towards home.

Prince Cassian doesn’t want to kiss me today? Fine.

I’d make damn sure he did tomorrow.

Chapter Thirteen



“You want to learn to kiss someone?”

I willed my cheeks to cool down. “That’s not what I said, Kat.” It didn’t matter what I said. That was what Kat heard.

A sparkling smile stretched across her face. Her honey eyes glimmered with a mischievousness that probably should have concerned me more than it did.

“Hold on.” She jumped from the kitchen table and ran out of the kitchen before I could say another word. I’d been waiting so anxiously for her return from the races. I thought she would be back right after me, but dawn was now only a few hours away, and she’d only just returned. Just what was she doing with Luke? I’d have to ask later, but for now, I needed guidance on a different matter and figured she was the perfect person to give it to.

Apparently, so was Sammy.

Kat shuffled back into the kitchen a few minutes later, dragging Sammy right behind her.

“Why did you bring Sammy?” I raised my hand to the oncoming pair like I was pointing out something ridiculous.

“The more, the merrier.” Kat pulled a chair out for Sammy, who pursed her ruby red lips, clearly unsure what she had been pulled into, then sat down beside Kat. “Sammy’s kissed a lot more men than I have.”

“I’m going to take that as a compliment.” Sammy folded her hands in her lap.

“Evie needs to know how to kiss,” Kat informed her.

Sammy’s eyes widened on me. “Kiss? Who?”

“I didn’t say I needed to know how to kiss someone,” I sputtered. “I simply asked that if there were a certain person who I needed to kiss me, how would I go about doing that.”

“Needed?” Sammy’s brow quirked.

“I mean, not ‘need’ as in I *need* to be embraced by this person because I’m completely enamored with them, and my heart is yearning for it,” I insisted. “But on a technical level...” Why was I so flustered trying to prove that that wasn’t the case? It wasn’t.

Gathering my words like a sane soldier, I went on. “Let’s say I told someone I would kiss them. As in, it’s a job of sorts. What is the solution then?”

“Lean forward, bat your eyes, and he should do the rest.” Kat tilted her head up, closed her eyes, and parted her lips in a demonstration.

“Tried that,” I said. “It didn’t take.”

“You already tried to kiss this person, and he denied you?” Sammy asked.

“He didn’t *deny* me. It just...didn’t happen.”

“Hmm.” Sammy tapped the dip under her lips. “There’s nothing you can do then. If he doesn’t want you, then he doesn’t want you.”

I scoffed. Not exactly the answer I was hoping for. “Who said he didn’t want me? Maybe I just wasn’t presenting myself in the most alluring way. I know we had a connection or something. It’s there. I just have to draw it out.” I slumped back in my chair. “Failure isn’t an option at the moment.”

“Just pounce on him.” Kat arched back and fluffed her hair over the back of her seat, putting her lovely, laced bodice on display for us. “That’s what I would do.”

“I was hoping for something a little more subtle,” I said.

“I agree with Katalin.”

My eyes flitted to Sammy in disbelief.

“I told you,” Kat sang.

“In some part,” Sammy said. “I see two routes before you, Evie, one of directness and one of patience. If you’re not willing to do the former, which is usually successful in Kat and I’s line of work, then you’ll have to settle with the latter.”

I scoffed. “So just wait and do nothing?”

“Not nothing. Keep doing whatever you’ve been doing. If you’re right and there is a connection, it will inevitably build to your desired kiss. Just give it time.”

Time. I was supposed to see Gilow and Jace again soon. I needed to have more progress to report. If only to prove to Luke that I hadn’t put our relationship through so much stress for nothing.

“May I ask who this lucky fellow is?” Sammy traced seemingly mindless circles over the tabletop. “Someone I’ve seen around here?”

Kat and I exchanged a curious glance. “No one special,” I said.

“But someone special enough to kiss?”

I bit my lip. “In some way.”

Sammy gave me a small smile and stood from her chair. “Well, whenever you do finally get to it,” she leaned down to me, “just remember to breathe after.” She brushed a hand over my hair. Heat flushed over my cheeks as she strode away. “And close your eyes. Only loons keep their eyes open during a kiss.”

Chapter Fourteen



Fingers snapped against my ear—again, and again, and again. I squirmed and willed my eyes to open.

I groaned. “What’s going on?”

A fuzzy figure hovered over me. I blinked, and it morphed into Auntie Jen. She clutched a shawl around her shoulders, the only thing covering her night shift. Her silver and gold hair fell in a mess behind her. “Someone’s here to see you.”

“What?” I mumbled. She wasn’t making any sense.

Kat growled and turned over next to me, snuggling the covers towards herself.

“There’s someone downstairs for you,” Auntie repeated.

“For me?”

“Do I look like I’m talking to Kat?”

I rubbed my eyes. Thin beams of sun slipped through our black curtains. It was daytime—as in sun was up, actual daylight hours. Nobody came to the barn during the day.

Kat hummed into her pillow. “Is it Luke?”

Oh, God. I really hoped it wasn’t Luke. It was too early to deal with his interrogation about last night.

“No,” Auntie said. “Some other boy. A light-class.”

I jumped up. Cass.

He said he was coming to see me tomorrow. I assumed he meant tomorrow night.

I threw back my covers. Kat whined as I climbed over her, catching my foot in the blanket and tumbling to the wood floor.

“What the hell is going on?” Auntie stepped back as I stumbled past her and flung open our wardrobe doors.

“Nothing. Nothing’s going on.” I rummaged through the dresses. No time to fill Auntie in. “Kat, get up.” I threw a random dress over her face. “Cass is here.”

She sat up. “Him? Now?”

“Who is Cass?” Auntie asked.

“No one,” I said. “No one at all. But can you tell him I’ll be down in a minute?” I turned back and batted my eyes at her. “Please?”

She looked between myself and Kat, who was now out of bed too, then rolled her eyes and took her leave, hopefully, to do as I asked.

Kat rushed to help me get dressed. I found a pale green dress stuffed against the side of the wardrobe. The deep green laces across the bodice were almost the same shade as Cass’s eyes.

I threw the dress on and straightened the laces across my bodice while Kat did her best to pull as many tangles as she could from my slept-on curls. My heart felt as tightly wound as the laces I was straightening. Today was the day I kissed him. I thought I’d have more time beforehand.

“I thought he wasn’t coming until tonight,” Kat said.

“So did I.”

Kat snatched a ribbon from the dozen dangling atop our wardrobe. Tiny strands of my hair pinched my scalp as she tied my hair back. “Calm down.”

“What do you mean calm down? I’m perfectly calm.” I swallowed.

Kat finished her bow, but I felt some curls resting over my bare shoulders. She must have only pulled back half of it.

“Sure you are,” she said. “But if you actually were feeling any nervousness about possibly receiving your first kiss very soon, I’d remind you that you shouldn’t feel so.” She pulled her hands back from my hair, and I immediately grabbed my boots from beside the bed. “It’s not like it’s real, right?”

I didn’t look at her. Just kept tugging the boots over my socked feet.

“It’s just for Gilow. It’s not real, Evie. So, it doesn’t matter,” she said.

It didn’t matter. Right.

I forced a smile. “Thank you, Kat.” I rushed towards the door Auntie left open. “Go back to sleep. We’ll talk later.”

With that, and with an inexplicable anxiousness, I shut our bedroom door and bounded down the steps.



“So now I’m going to move my rook?” I touched my fingers to the tower-shaped piece.

He nodded to tell me I had addressed it correctly.

I slid the piece across the board and knocked over his horse-shaped piece.

“Over here so I can take your...bishop?”

“Knight,” he corrected.

“Right.” I swiped the piece up. I may not have called it the correct name, but at least I took it.

“That wouldn’t have been a bad move if it didn’t cost you your queen.” He reached over the board and slid the actual bishop into my queen. Without hesitation, he took it. “That’s checkmate.”

Another loss. Though it was only my second game, it still hurt. Even more so since I found myself actually invested in the game. It was the perfect distraction from my thrumming heart.

Stop thinking about a kiss, Evie.

“Volume thirteen of Taliver made this seem a lot easier to learn,” I said.

He smiled and began reassembling the board. Mimicking him, I reset my side as well. The taps and scrapes against the board echoed through the empty barn floor. We were all alone, save Kat and Jen way back in the apartment. Laying out over the fluffy rug before the dead fireplace, we might as well have been on an isolated beach far, far away.

“Did you learn to play because of Taliver?” I asked.

“No, actually.” His eyes stayed pinned to the board. “My mother had me playing since before I could remember.”

His shoulders quaked just mentioning her. I wanted to ask what happened to his mother but now wasn’t the time.

“Does your father play too?” It was the first subject-changing question I could think of.

“In a way, but with very different pieces.”

Pieces like Morra.

With all the players realigned, Cass twisted the board so that the white now belonged to me. “Do you play that kind of game too?” I asked.

“Not if I don’t have to.”

I moved my first pawn. “So, what does Cass *have* to do?”

“A lot...and also very little.”

He hesitated, then moved his knight out over his row of pawns. Cass’s vivid green eyes homed in on the board., seeing something else entirely in this game, and I hadn’t the slightest clue what.

What did I really know about Cass besides his choice in books? Only that he wasn’t at all what I expected.

Where was *Prince* Cassian? The son of the king who so seemed to detest my class so much. He was in there somewhere; I knew it. But wrapped up in the same person was a boy who read the Tales of Taliver and played chess too? The type of person who’d return to a brothel with no apparent intentions but to talk to me—who’d race me for a kiss then wouldn’t take it.

A boy who had to believe, at least in part, some of what his father was promoting.

“You confuse me, Cass,” I admitted.

His eyes gaze returned to mine. “How so?”

“I can’t describe it.” I couldn’t describe how my enemy could be such a perfect friend. “You just seem like two different people stuffed into one.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Call it intuition, but I feel like I don’t know all of you.”

His brow furrowed. “We all have different sides to ourselves.”

“Yes, but I think we all have a true self too. And I can’t tell which one is you.” I leaned over the board. “Who are you, Cass?”

He flitted his gaze between my eyes as if he could find the answer there. “What if I said I don’t know?” he murmured.

“I’ll rephrase. Who do you *want* to be?”

My question seemed to land like a blow. For a moment, I thought he might fall back.

He tried to hide the emotion with a smile and a chuckle. “Who do you want me to be, Evie?”

That was a good question. What did I want him to be? Which version of Prince Cassian would be easier to continue with—the friend that sat before me or the prince I should have hated? Which was more Cass?

“I want you to be you.”

Cass’s emerald eyes stared into me as if I’d just said the most weighted thing ever said, but it was only the simplest.

I barely had time to blink.

His lips pressed against mine with the softest, most delicate touch. I leaned into him on instinct and touched my hands to his chest, his warmth melting into my palms. My lashes fluttered against his skin as his hand curved around my neck and pulled me even closer. My breath caught. I tried to for air, but I only got more of his kiss. It was so sweet. So thick. Like

honey flowing between us.

Finally, after a lifetime within the span of a breath, our lips separated. Cassian left his hand to gently caress the back of my neck, burning his touch into my skin and keeping me close to him. I didn't want him to let go. I should have—I could tell myself to hate this moment later. But in it now, that was too impossible.

I waited for the heat to wash over my face—a sense of regret or guilt. Nothing did. What was wrong with me?

“You found your moment.” I barely felt the words escape my lips.

“I think so, lovely.”

Finally, the blush came. *Lovely*. The same thing Taliver called his true love. It couldn't have been more fitting. I hated that I loved the sound of it so much.

I bit my lip and pulled back from him. He finally freed me from his embrace. “Now that we're both even again, should we start a new game?”

“We should.” He ran a shaky hand through his hair. It was kind of adorable. “Maybe I'll let you win this time.”

Chapter Fifteen



“Did you say two or three?” Cass held up a pair of eggs.

I laid down my little knife next to the sliced strawberries and peered into Cass’s bowl. “Um, just do two, for now, then add another if it looks dry.”

He frowned. “Right.”

I continued avoiding my work on the filling to watch his attempt to break eggs. He lifted the shell to the edge of the wooden bowl and barely tapped it to the side. It didn’t crack at all.

I giggled as Cass shook his head. “Don’t laugh. I told you I’m new at this.”

“At baking? I could tell. Haven’t you ever cracked an egg before?”

“I’m sure I have at some point.”

“Was it imaginary?”

“Maybe.” He brought the shell back to the edge of the bowl again, and this time split it right over the edge. Yolk dripped onto the counter.

“That was better,” I said. “But luckily, we have more.” I swiped a rag from the other end of the counter and tossed it to him.

He fumbled as he caught it. “Cleaning is also not something I often do.”

“Then I suppose you’ll have to practice at both.” I jumped up onto the counter and brought my bowl of strawberry filling into my lap. Cass’s eyes

swept down from me right as I glanced over to him. He wiped his yolky mess like he'd never used a rag before.

I tried not to watch him too ardently. Our kiss only hours ago was cozy and warm and close, but something about this moment felt even more intimate. No pressure, no anxiety. Just being together. It was nice. Well, as nice as my assignment could be.

"Doesn't anyone miss you?" I grabbed a spoon and stirred. "I mean, disappearing in the middle of the night is one thing, but it's the middle of the day now. Isn't anyone wondering where you are?"

He kept his chin lowered. "You've never slipped away during the day?"

"More of a night person. And my aunt is pretty nonchalant about Kat and me going places."

Cass sat the rag aside and lifted a new egg to the bowl. "My father's a busy man. Sometimes I go days without seeing him. I'm sure he doesn't notice."

My heart hurt for him. I no longer had my parents but when they were alive, I was their sun, moon, stars, and sky—their universe. Perhaps it was different because I was younger, but I imagined that they never would have stopped doting on me. Even now that I was with Auntie Jen, I knew she would be here for me if I truly needed her. At least I saw her. I'd never been truly alone, but the look on Cass's face told me that he had been. Maybe for years.

"And there's no one else?" I asked. "No cousins, uncles, or attendants who'll come looking for you?"

"Back home when I have responsibilities to attend to, but there's a lot less to do here. Besides Donnie and Jasper, no one's going to come looking for me."

"So, you're on a retreat of sorts?"

"I suppose."

Cass tapped his second egg against the corner of the bowl. This time, the shell split evenly. He tilted most of the yolk into the bowl then beamed up at

me like that was the most impressive thing he'd ever done.

"Keep it up, and you'll have enough skills to open your own bakery by the end of the day," I said.

"The day? I expect to open one by the end of the hour." We snickered.

Faint footsteps walked down the hall.

"Jen, where the hell—" Albo froze in the doorway.

We matched stares. What was he doing here in the middle of the day? He was probably wondering the same about me.

"You're up early," he said, not acknowledging Cass at all.

"So are you." If he had even slept at all. The bags under his dark eyes made me think otherwise. "Auntie's asleep."

He nodded and walked away, seemingly towards our apartment.

"Who was that?" Cass asked.

I kept my eyes on the doorway Albo had just been in. A dozen questions seemed to swirl in the space where he'd been. "Just our cook."

Chapter Sixteen



“You kissed him?”

Jace grinned at Gilow in a way that made me even more uncomfortable. Luke stood frozen on the steps behind Gilow, arms crossed as tight as braided rope. I did my best not to make eye contact with him.

“He kissed me.”

“Even better,” Jace said. “Did anything else happen?”

“No.” My eyes unwillingly darted up to Luke. Only for a split second, but long enough to see the fury bubbling behind his carefully calm features. It was getting alarming how familiar that was. “Just the one kiss. Nothing more.”

Jace nodded. “Still, decent progress for only a week’s time.”

“Go on,” Gilow said.

Like before, he had wanted to know everything that happened between me and Cass. I’d been recounting our past few days without interruption until I got to yesterday’s kiss.

Feeling practically naked under their gazes, I finished my story, revealing every little detail to them. I squirmed on the steps.

If things with Cass and I went even further than a kiss, would Gilow want me to describe that in detail too? My throat tightened at the thought. Having

to recount it here might be even more uncomfortable than the actual act. A phantom warmth from Cass's kiss blew over my lips. Perhaps the actual act wouldn't be so uncomfortable at all.

I snapped that thought out of my mind.

"So, you didn't actually find out anything useful?" Luke growled. He must have been really peeved to speak up while Gilow was here.

"It's only been a week," I said.

"Long enough to kiss someone, apparently."

"You're doing fine." Gilow silenced us both. "He'll confide in you more in time, so long as you don't stifle your progress. Report back in a week, unless an emergency happens. In which case, leave a red cloth on the back door. We'll meet the night after you do so."

With that, we were dismissed. But I had a final question.

"When will the next regular meeting be?" I asked.

Gilow glided down the grand staircase with Jace at his heels. It was just the four of us tonight. It should have been just the three of us, but Luke had showed up of his own accord. Whether I liked it or not, he was involved.

Gilow kept his gaze on the banister. "Not until we have more information. I told you we'd have to tread carefully until we could feel out the new status quo."

Jace glanced over her shoulder. "I have no doubt it won't be long now, Love." She winked at me, then strode off across the foyer with Gilow.

I wanted to say something else but couldn't find the words. I twisted my fingers. Maybe I was overthinking, but it felt as if all of their new plans were really just waiting on me to bring them something good. How was I supposed to function under that kind of pressure?

"I saw you at the races," Luke said. As always, he jumped to my side the instant we were alone.

I crossed my arms and started down the steps. Not two seconds away from my once over with Gilow, and now I was being interrogated by Luke.

“I didn’t think you were there,” I said. “Especially since I told you not to come.”

“You knew I wouldn’t stay away. That’s why you sent Katalin to distract me.”

“She was there too? I must have missed her.”

He grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. “Why are you being so difficult?”

“I’m not being anything.” Why was *he* being so difficult? “Can we not talk about anything relating to the prince? There’s no point if you’re not going to listen to me.”

I jerked my shoulder away from him, fully realizing that he’d grabbed me. If he did that again, we were going to have a problem. But for now, I just wanted to be done. For a moment, I heard nothing but his footsteps pounding behind me, which managed to hit the floor with an irritation of their own, before he finally took a deep breath.

“Let’s talk about something else then,” Luke said, walking up behind me.

My head was starting to ache. I rubbed my temples. “What then?”

“How about our engagement.”

I stopped. Of course, he’d pick the one thing I had no right to run from.

I forced myself to relax as I looked up into his steel eyes. “What about it, Luke?”

“I want to make it official.”

My heart raced. “It’s not already?” Did my interaction with Cass make him jealous? Was he going to try and kiss me again? A sick feeling sunk into my stomach. It would be wrong of me to deny him if he tried. I owed it to him. I had a feeling it would be nothing as pleasant as what I had with Cass. That thought sat in my mouth like ash.

Luke sunk his hand into his pocket and brought it back out less than a second later. At first, I couldn’t make out the little loop squeezed between his fingers. But as he brought it up to my eyes, it became painfully clear. A thin

gold band, topped with a little ruby.

Oh, wonderful.

“Is that—”

“It was my grandmother’s. My mother said she was going to give it to her daughter if she ever had one.”

My lips quivered as Luke grabbed my hand and slipped the ring onto my finger. It was a bit loose for me—the metal felt foreign and unnatural on my skin. The entire band weighed on my finger.

I bit my lip, resisting the urge to remove the ring immediately.

“Luke,” I said calmly. “You know I can’t wear this, right?”

He dropped my hand. “Not around the prince. But I don’t see why you can’t wear it when you’re not with him.”

“Because—”

Because what Evie?

He was right. I didn’t have a reason not to wear it. It would be disrespectful if I didn’t. What was I complaining about? This was what I had signed up for. I should have been oozing glee, not protesting.

I smiled as widely as I could make myself. “You’re right. I love it, Luke. Thank you.”

I hesitated for an awkward moment, then perched up to my tiptoes and touched my lips to his cheek. He lightened by a thousand pounds, all of which fell right onto me.

“Come by the shop tomorrow?” He took my ringed hand in his, and we started out of the foyer together.

“During the day?” I hadn’t been deep into the city since the day the signs went up. I knew about the restrictions now, but I still didn’t want to venture back into that just yet.

“A few hours before sunset. My mother’s been dying to see you since I told her.”

He told Miss Iris about this?

Of course he did. How else would he have gotten the ring? “I don’t know. I’m supposed to see Cass tomorrow night.”

He squeezed my hand tighter. “I said evening, not night. I promise you’ll be back in time for that.”

Damn it. I didn’t have a choice.

“Sure, I’d love to.”

He interlaced his fingers into mine. “I know this is still a bit strange now, Evie, but we’ll get used to it. I think everything will be easier once Gilow’s dropped this. You’ll see.”

My new ring pressed into my skin. “Yes. It will be.”



Kat was gone when I awoke. Her favorite cream boots were missing as well. That wasn’t so strange, but truly odd was that Auntie was gone too.

I headed downstairs to find her bed empty and unmade. The nosey part of me wanted to check the kitchen. For some reason, I imagined I’d find her there with Albo, who could be anywhere, seeing that he was intent on visiting whenever he pleased.

But I didn’t search for either of them. I had my own place to be this afternoon. With no enthusiasm at all, I grabbed the first dress I saw out of Kat and I’s wardrobe. A capped-sleeved sky-blue thing that might have had lace trimming.

After throwing it on, I pushed my new ring onto my finger, tugged my boots over my feet, and set out for the city feeling completely dead. Why was I dreading this so much? I didn’t have any problem with Miss Iris. But it wasn’t about her—it was Luke I didn’t want to see. Being his fiancé had been so much easier in my head. I didn’t think it would bother me so much, and I still didn’t understand why—though his occasional outburst probably had something to do with it. All I knew was that it was getting harder and harder

to see him, let alone talk to him. He had to know I didn't feel as strongly for him as he did for me, but he was going along with this anyway.

Everything felt wrong. But I had to go along with it.

My painfully loud thoughts managed to distract me during my journey through town. The new signs still hung proudly in the shop windows. Instinctually, I kept to the edge of the streets and didn't make eye contact with anyone if I could avoid it.

I got to Luke's cobbling shop in half the time I thought it would take. The curtains were pulled over the front windows. I hoped Miss Iris hadn't closed early just to see me I wasn't planning on staying more than an hour at the most anyway.

I turned the door handle, and to my surprise, it was unlocked. Maybe they *were* still open. Before the door could close behind me, the curtains at my side pulled open, and light flooded the shop.

"Congratulations!"

I jumped at the culmination of at least a dozen voices.

No. Oh, please, no.

Miss Iris rushed up to me and wrapped her thin arms around my body. "Congratulations, Evie! I'm so happy! I knew you and Luke were going to get married since the day I met you."

I awkwardly hugged her back.

So many people we knew were here: Saddy and her twins, Thomas and Maxine—who must have come all the way from Southside—Sammy, Christa. Even Albo, Kat, and Auntie Jen were in the crowd.

And, of course, my oh-so-loving fiancé.

Luke stood with his arms folded, just a couple paces away. He looked so pleased. No, assured. Why wouldn't he be? He just solidified our engagement for everyone. There was no getting out of it now.

I contorted my face into what must have been the most forced smile ever mustered. Miss Iris released me, and Luke came to my side instead. He

placed my hand in his arm, letting my ringed finger show for everyone.

God, I wanted to scream. How could he be so petty? He had to know how uncomfortable this would make me. Worse still, only one other person in that shop knew what was going on with the prince, and a good deal of the rest were likely to see me with him at some point. Revealing our engagement was going to make it countless times harder for me to nurture a relationship with Cass.

I locked eyes with Luke. I was wrong before—he looked...smug. He knew exactly what he was doing. Just like he knew I couldn't fault him for it in front of all these people.

If we were alone, I would have throttled him.

"I never thought I'd see so many friendly faces in one room," I forced out. "But I guess today is all about surprises."

"I'm surprised he finally asked," Thomas said from the edge of the group. Maxine hit his shoulder, and a quiet chuckle fell over them both.

"Oh! Let me get the cake." Miss Iris shuffled out of the room.

With that, the attention dissipated from Luke and me. Our guests split into their own conversations. I had some things to say to Luke.

"I wish you'd told me about this," I said, digging my nails into Luke's arm. "I would have worn something nicer."

He winced and twisted out of my grasp. "You always look nice. And it wouldn't be a surprise party if I told you about it."

"Why exactly did it have to be a *surprise* party?" I matched my eyes to his. I didn't glare outright, but my eyes were hard enough that he had to read what I was trying to tell him. *I despise you for this*. But the way his eyes pinched as he smiled lightly said something like, *I don't care*.

I couldn't be around Luke right now. Since leaving the shop was out of the question, I made my way over to Kat and Sammy, who were chatting near a shelf across the shop instead.

"Here comes the blushing bride." Kat steepled her fingers under her chin.

“I’m impressed, Evelyn,” Sammy said. “Not a few days ago, you were asking me how to coax out a kiss, and now you’ve gotten yourself engaged.”

“That must have been one hell of a kiss.” Kat smirked, knowing full well what—and who—I’d been referring to the previous nights.

“Did you know about this?” I asked.

“No, we just happened to stumble in here.” Kat’s smirk faded. “Of course, we knew. Allow me to be the first to wish you the utmost joy in your upcoming marriage.”

Did she think this was funny?

Sammy glanced between the two of us. “I’m going to see what Christa and Albo are up to,” she said, then drifted away. Sammy was never one to embrace tension.

“Why didn’t you warn me?” I whispered.

“I did warn you. I told you not to use Luke at all. But you didn’t listen, so now you have to put up with things like surprise engagement parties.” She lifted my hand and ran her thumb over my new ring. “And jewelry, apparently. Is this a real ruby?”

I snatched my hand away from her.

“Don’t be so hostile, cousin dearest. You should have the decency to at least pretend to be grateful, for Luke’s sake.” Kat pushed herself up from the shelf and strolled past me, making her way towards Luke, Thomas, and Maxine across the room.

I wiped my hands on my skirt. There had to be a way to channel all this frustration into feigned positivity.

“Evie!”

I spun around. Brison and Richal stood with their jumbles of curls looking equally messy. I smiled my first genuine smile of the afternoon.

“For you,” Brison said.

His brother lifted a brown paper box, no bigger than his hand, to my face.

“I picked it myself,” he said.

“We picked it,” Richal corrected.

“But *I’m* the one who convinced Mama to let us ride out and get it, so it was more my idea.”

I surveyed the room until I found Saddy whispering in the corner of the room with Auntie Jen. “She let you go out into the city by yourselves?”

“No,” Richal said.

“Just open it.” Brison looked like he was going to burst into flames waiting for me. For a moment, I debated inviting Luke over. If it was an engagement gift, then it was technically ours. But the twins gave it to me, and only me, so there was no harm in opening it alone.

I dropped to my knees so the twins could see me open the gift and tore open the top. A few layers of paper waited inside, which must have been Saddy’s suggestion. I pulled them back, revealing a small piece of red stained glass tethered to a twine string. I lifted the little ornament from its box. Light beamed through the glass, shooting a pale crimson light onto a nearby shelf. Instantly, I knew where they’d ridden out to.

“You went to the impossible pond.”

Brison held his head high with a lift in his chest. “I led the way. Richal almost got us lost.”

“We both knew the way,” Richal corrected again.

“But I’m the one who picked this glass from the trees around the water,” Brison said. “Because it looks like a diamond. Don’t you think so?”

A rough corner of the glass sparkled as it turned lightly on its string. “It definitely does.” A very misshapen but still perfect diamond. Something they could only find at the artsy little pond just outside of town. “Thank you, boys.”

I placed the ornament back into its box and pulled them into my arms. Richal hugged me back, but Brison squirmed from under my embrace.

“What’s wrong, Brison, too manly to accept a hug?”

“No.” He shook his head as a red shade fell over his light brown face. “I

just want a warning before I get touched by a girl, that's all."

"Next time, I'll give you a heads up."

I felt ten times less agitated. I arose from the floor with my new gift in hand. I hadn't been out to the pond in forever. The glass shards lining the trees there were supposed to bring luck. I hoped my shard of red glass would bring me plenty. I needed all I could get.

Miss Iris scrambled back in from through the backroom. Saddy lunged out of her way as she strode up to the counter, balancing a white iced cake over her forearms. The second she put it down, Brison and Richal abandoned me and headed for the desert, but Saddy grabbed their shirt collars and pulled them back.

Miss Iris smiled proudly at me. "Evie's favorite cake, chocolate." She turned to her son. "And Luke's favorite icing. It's the perfect mix."

"Oh, I bet it is," Thomas called from across the room. Maxine hit him again.

I felt more than a few eyes land on me. Thomas must have had something to drink before he came here.

Miss Iris ignored Thomas. "Come cut the first slice together."

She presented a small knife over the counter for one of us to claim. I glanced at Luke, then away just as fast as the two of us made our way back into the center of attention from our opposite sides of the shop. I hesitantly took the knife from Miss Iris, who still couldn't stop beaming. I bit my lip as Luke stopped, pressed at my side. He wrapped his hand over mine, and we held the knife together. We were still for a second. I didn't know if my hand was supposed to guide us or if he was going to take the lead. The hesitation lasted only a moment, and soon he was pressing my hand, and the knife in it, down into the soft cake. The room felt horribly silent. I couldn't wait for him to let go of me.

He freed my hand, and I laid the icing-coated knife on the countertop.

"Thank you, Miss Iris," I said. "You're even sweeter than this cake."

“Anything for my daughter.”

Daughter. No, not yet.

A pinch of icing clung to my finger. I turned to Richal, watching the cake from behind me, and swiped it on his nose. Brison laughed as his brother scrunched up his face and slapped it away.

“First piece is yours, darling,” Luke said.

I blinked. Was I *darling* now?

“Kiss!” Thomas shouted.

“Thommy, be quiet,” Maxine said.

“No, they should kiss,” Christa added.

“Yes!” A hum of consensus ran through our guests. My eyes darted over each and every one of them, taking note of Kat, who said nothing, and Albo, who perched in the corner, completely detached from the rest.

“Um...”

“Oh, you should!” Miss Iris clapped her hands together. “Just a little one. For me.”

I swallowed and turned to Luke.

He looked down at me as if he’d been waiting for me to meet his gaze this entire time, smiling softly.

I had no choice. The room wanted its kiss, and I could tell Luke did too.

With no way out, I stood stone still as Luke cupped both sides of my face. My heart thundered. *Don’t lean back, Evie.* I closed my eyes.

He pulled my face to his. All the things I should have felt yesterday pushed to the surface. A dry feeling in my mouth. A guilty tremble in my chest. And the urge to push those hands away.

A gasp escaped our pressed lips. The room was silent.

His kiss was so heavy. So passionate. So much deeper than it needed to be. In it, I could feel every other time he’d tried to kiss me over the past year, all coming to the surface now. It was overwhelming.

It was suffocating.

I laid my hands over his and pulled back. Shallow breaths slipped in and out of my mouth as I stared into silver eyes, still boring into mine. My breath was gone, but his was perfectly intact. His gaze dropped down to my parted lips. Did he want to do that again?

An arm curved around my waist. Luke stepped back, and I let the person pull me away even further from him.

“She’s an expert already.” Kat gave the room her golden smile. She squeezed my side. A chuckle ran through our party, and everyone returned to their own conversations as if nothing had happened.

“Plates...” Miss Iris mumbled. She darted back into the other room.

Kat released me and dropped her hand to her hips. “You, sir, look like you’ve had far too much experience with that whole kissing thing.” She narrowed her eyes at Luke.

“Well, look who’s talking.”

My heart sped. I expected Kat to be completely offended, but instead, her eyes glimmered with amusement.

“How dare you say such a thing. I’m a lady,” she said. “You’re going to have to start being nicer to me as your future cousin-in-law.”

I opened my mouth, but Luke interrupted. “Is cousin-in-law a real term, or did you just make it up?”

“It’s real because I made it up.” She flipped her hair back. “When you’re pretty and charming, you can do that sort of thing.”

I saw what she was doing. Even irritated, Kat couldn’t help but gravitate towards the attention. It made no difference at the moment whether she was doing it to save me or for her own amusement. Miss Iris returned with plates, and I slipped away from the group, letting Kat envelope Miss Iris and Luke with her charisma.

Near the shop windows, Auntie Jen and Albo exchanged hurried whispers. A vein on Auntie’s temple throbbed as she spoke. But midway through her sentence, Albo twisted his hands into his pockets and walked

away. Whatever that was about, it seemed to have left Auntie in a sour mood, so I decided I might as well add to it. How bad did it look that I hadn't told her about my engagement myself?

"Is everything alright?" I nodded to Albo.

"Should be now. For you." Auntie's honey eyes found my engagement ring. I folded my hands behind my back. "I guess this means you'll be moving out soon."

"Not that soon. I don't think we're going to get married before my birthday." I had to tread carefully. "Unless I'm being forced out."

"I already told you, Evie, you don't have to go anywhere until you turn eighteen." I let out a breath. That was nice to know. "But I didn't think *this* was where you wanted to go."

"It doesn't bother you, does it?"

"You can do whatever you want to do. Who am I to stop you?" She glanced over my shoulder. "Kat seems to have some opinions, though."

"You're not mad then? Not even about me not telling you? Because I was going to tell you, and if I had known about this party, then I would have definitely done it sooner. I promise I would have—"

"Calm down. I ain't mad at you. I care about you, but I don't care about what you do. Why do you think I let you go run around with those hooligans at night?"

My gaze dipped to the scuff marks on the floor. Once we became ladies, it was 'do as you please' as far as Auntie was concerned. Why should this be any different?

"As for not telling me," she said. "I'm a bit hurt, but I can't fault you for keeping secrets. We all do that." Auntie reached up and pushed a little curl away from my face. Her old fingers were soft against my skin. "I'll miss you when you're gone."

"I'll only be down the street."

"Maybe. But it's never the same as having your little one live with you."

“Not that little anymore.”

“No, I suppose not.”

The rest of my surprise engagement party was a blur. Kat kept a tight hold on Luke and his mother’s attention while I drifted anywhere but there. Albo was the first to leave, then Saddy and the twins, after double-checking that she had their papers. I waited for the rest to go, but after another half hour of Thomas ranting about the old days—with Sammy, Christa, and Auntie Jen looking perfectly content to listen to him for hours longer—I realized that they were probably planning to stay until the barn opened. I, however, was supposed to meet Cass just before dusk.

I made my way back to the group I’d been avoiding.

Miss Iris snickered at the back counter. Kat, across from her, shook her head.

“I had no idea she was going to do that,” Kat insisted, ending some story I hadn’t heard.

“Look who’s back.” Luke’s smile fell the moment he saw me. He crossed his arms over his chest, and the laughter Kat had incited fell silent around him.

“I never left,” I said.

Luke took a deep breath. “Are you about to?”

Did he want me to stay longer? I’d already told him I couldn’t.

“Unfortunately, I must,” I said. “If I have your *permission*.”

Luke didn’t move. Looking up at him, his eyes were more grey than silver now. Was he going to say no? Asking was only a courtesy.

“Of course, you can go, Evie,” Miss Iris answered for him. “I’m sure you’ll be back more often anyways. And then permanently, sooner or later.” Her eyes shifted to Kat. “And I hope to see you here more often too, Katalin.”

“What do you mean? I was going to move in with Evie.” Miss Iris laughed. “And I’m not leaving just yet. You still have to show me that thing

we talked about.”

“Oh, I certainly do.” She winked at Kat, probably alluding to that story I hadn’t heard. “Luke, be a gentleman and walk your fiancé home. It’s so dangerous for a girl to be out alone these days.”

“No, he doesn’t have to—”

“Good idea.” Luke grabbed my hand. “Come on, darling.”

Without saying a proper goodbye to anyone, Luke pulled me across the floor. We shuffled out of the shop and into the bustling afternoon traffic. Luke gripped my hand, and we headed down the sidewalk.

Before I knew it, we turned off the narrow street that held the cobbling shop and onto a slightly larger road. There were more faces here and more eyes that seemed to stare at us.

I tried to wiggle my hand out of Luke’s grasp. “You can’t take me all the way back.”

“I can’t?” He held me tighter than ever.

“Why are you angry?” I tried to keep my voice from flaring. We were walking awfully fast down June Street, and we’d be on the main street before we knew it. I didn’t want to get into an argument outside.

“I told you I had to leave before sunset,” I said.

“I’m not mad about that, although I should be.”

“Then what?” Couldn’t he just say whatever he wanted to say so I could go?

“I was waiting, Evie. I was waiting that entire time for you to come back and talk to me and my mother. But instead, you sent Kat over to do it for you.”

“I didn’t send Kat to do anything. She came over all on her own.”

“Sure, she did. Like she just showed up at the races by herself too?”

“That was a completely different scenario.” I averted my gaze as a light-class couple looked down their noses at us as we passed.

His hand was still gripping mine. We neared the turn onto Main Street. I

pulled against Luke again, but he held me firm.

“I know you’re not ecstatic about this, Evie, but you could at least be polite. For my mother’s sake, at the very least.” He tugged me like a doll into the very busy West Main. For a second, I hated myself for not being as strong as him.

“Who said I’m not happy?” Angry or not, I tried to salvage the situation. “I am happy. About this and the future...and you.”

“If you are, you don’t show it.”

What did he want from me? I wasn’t exactly in a position to fawn over him all day, every day at the moment. And If I were, was that really what he wanted?

“I’m doing my best, Luke.”

“Are you? It feels like you’re not trying at all.”

A fire filled every single limb in my body. He did want that from me. Didn’t he?

He wanted me to kneel down and kiss his boots. To show how grateful I was that he proposed to me. With everything in me, I wanted to scream at him. To push him into one of these shop doors and throw this ring in his face. I wanted to slap him with the same hand he had gripped in his.

But we were out in public, and already receiving more side glances than I would have liked. And whether or not I hated it, I did need Luke. I needed this ring on my finger.

But I sure as hell didn’t need him holding my hand.

“Let go of my hand.” I tugged my hand in Luke’s again.

“No.”

“Luke, let go of my hand.”

“Why? So, you can take your ring off?”

“Yes, actually.” I hadn’t even thought about that, but now that he mentioned it, I did need to move it.

“You can do it when you get home.”

We weren't too far now. I could make it back to the barn alone by myself.

We passed a small alley between two apartments, and I took the opportunity to stop and swoop into it. Luke jerked back as I came to a halt.

"You can stop here," I said.

With all the force in my arm, I yanked my hand from his. I slipped my ruby ring off my ring finger and onto my center finger instead.

"Thank you for taking me this far, but I can make it by myself from here."

"Evie, we're not done." He blocked my path back out into the street, but years of evading patrons at the barn had taught me how to get around an attempt like his. I spun around him and trotted back to the sidewalk.

Just go home. Please don't follow me.

"Evelyn." His boots slapped against the cobblestone behind me.

"Go home, Luke. I have things to do."

"Things more important than us?"

"You know they are."

He let out a tense, shaky breath. "Evelyn, turn around."

"I have to go home. We can talk later."

"Evelyn."

I walked faster.

"Evelyn."

No.

"Evelyn!"

A trio of light-class women carrying gift boxes jumped, and a man with a toddler in his arms whispered to his partner before they sped up. My heart skipped a beat as I instinctively turned around. Luke was right upon me, glaring down with more anger than I think I'd ever seen in another person's eyes. Certainly not in his.

"You two!" a deep male voice boomed.

A hand pushed my shoulder. I stumbled back into the yellow wall of the

apartment building we were passing. Luke backed into it too. My throat went dry.

The officer wasn't very tall, no taller than me, but he felt like he was a thousand feet above me. His bright blonde hair stuck out crisply against his tan skin.

"What's going on here?" His eyes darted between us. "You two disturbing these nice folks?"

"No, Sir." Luke shook his head, the irritation in his voice completely gone. It was only monotone now.

"That's not what it looked like. What the hell are you two doing out anyway? It's not sundown." He waved his hand to the street around us. "None of these places are letting in halfies before sundown. You out here pickpocketing? Making a scene while she robs them blind. Is that it?"

"No, Sir," Luke said again. "Just having a discussion with my friend, that's all."

"He's not a half-class," I blurted out. "He doesn't need to do that."

"Really?" The officer's thick eyebrows rose on his forehead. "So, what does that make you, a natural light?"

I clenched the fabric of my skirt.

"That's it, show me your paperwork." The loose shackles tied at his waist jingled as he took a small step back. The passing pedestrians circled around our interaction as they passed. Some pressed their lips together and looked away, and others nodded approvingly. They were equally agonizing to watch.

I slipped my hand into my boot and found my folded set of papers. I didn't even remember sliding them into my boot, but it was so second nature now that I rarely ever did. I gently handed the man my papers. He snatched them away. "Yours too," he said to Luke.

Luke rummaged in his pockets. Each second that passed, his hands grew more frantic. All the color drained from his face. *No*. We left so fast. He didn't.

“I—I don’t have them.”

The officer furrowed his brow. “You don’t?”

He shook his head.

“Well, I guess I wouldn’t bring my papers if I were going pickpocket people either.”

“That’s not the case,” I insisted. “He just forgot them. Like I said, he’s not even a half. If you let us go back and get them. We’ll show you.”

“Let you two just walk away, so you can do this in the East end? I don’t think so.” He reached for the shackles behind him. “Turn around.”

My throat twisted as the officer jerked him around. “Wait,” I said, “he can stay here, and I’ll go get them. Please, it won’t take me ten minutes.”

“You do that, sweetheart.” The officer pressed my papers, which he barely even looked over, back into my hand. “You can bring them to the cells. They’ll let him out when they know who he is.”

Luke’s eyes widened. The officer pressed his chest into the wall. The cells? No, I couldn’t let that happen.

Even if I brought Luke’s papers there, who knew if they would even believe they were his. Hell, I could end up in prison, too, for trying to pass off fake papers. He couldn’t do this. We didn’t do anything wrong.

“Please, Sir,” I said louder than I intended. “He hasn’t committed a crime. You can’t just shackle him and take him away.”

“Walking without papers is a crime in itself.”

A crime that only affects half-classes. Light-classes never get asked for papers. Dark-classes are asked more, but not as much as people who can’t be so easily differentiated. Kat didn’t even know where hers were.

He grabbed Luke’s wrists and tightened the shackles around them. “It’s fine, Evie,” Luke whispered, but the quiver in his voice told me that it was anything but. “Go get my mother.”

“It’s not fine!” I shouted. In a moment of stupidity, I grabbed the officer’s shoulder. “This isn’t necessary. I swear on my life he’s—”

The officer rammed his elbow into my chest. I crashed into the ground.

“Evelyn!” Luke jerked back, but the officer grabbed the back of his neck and pinned him against the bricks.

“You stupid little thing,” the officer spewed down at me.

I clutched my chest. My ribs felt like they were collapsing in on themselves. I swallowed a sob.

“If I had another pair, you’d be coming in too.” He finished locking Luke’s wrists, and all I could do was watch from the ground. Luke was about to be taken away, and I could do nothing about it. Nothing at all.

“Stop, now!”

The officer, with Luke’s shackled wrists in his grasp, frowned. His eyes searched around for the voice that called over to us with such conviction.

That voice. I knew whose voice that was.

He stumbled to a stop and knelt at my side, wrapping his arms around me.
Cass.

Chapter Seventeen



“Are you alright?” Cass took my hands and guided me up. His jaw hardened as he looked over every inch of my body.

I nodded and turned my gaze back to the scene before us. The officer stared at Cass like he was trying to think of something right on the tip of his nose. In reality, perhaps it only took a second. But the revelation hit him in an instant. This officer must have been one of the new ones from Aurell. Maybe he’d seen Cass before, or he’d heard about his distinct features. Or maybe he just knew, from the way Cass was standing and the glare he was boring into the man now.

“Your highness.” The officer bowed his head. “What are you doing out in the streets?”

“Are you asking me questions?”

“No, Sir. I-I’m not—”

“Did he hurt you?” Cass turned back to me.

The officer’s face melted into something delightfully horrifying. I’d never had the tables turn like this before. I suddenly felt like I was the one with all the power.

“No,” I said. “But my friend...”

“I’m sorry,” the officer sputtered. “I didn’t know she was with you. I would have never—”

“What are you waiting for?” Cass looked at the man like he was a dunce. “Let him go. Now.”

“Yes, your highness.” The officer fumbled to find the keys tethered at his waist. They shook in his grasp as he scrambled to free Luke as quickly as possible. The shackles clattered to the ground.

Luke rubbed his wrists and stepped back from the officer. His attention went straight to us, but mainly to Cass.

“Sorry about that, Sir,” the officer said. I couldn’t tell if he was talking to Cass or Luke.

“What’s your name?” Cass asked.

“Petty Officer Enkins, your highness.” his voice cracked.

Cass watched him for a moment longer. A moment I hoped he remembered forever. It was certainly one I’d savor forever.

“Go away, Enkins,” Cass said.

The officer bowed his head again and swiped his shackled from the cobblestone ground. With not so much as a glance at Luke or me, he bolted down the street, disappearing into the crowds.

“Thank you.” I clasped my hands under my chin. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“What happened?” Cass stroked his hands gently up my arms.

“I...we—” I bit my lip. turned back to Luke, drawing Cass’s gaze to him too. “A friend of mine forgot his papers.”

“Oh.” Cass raised a brow to Luke. “Do you need new ones?”

Luke rubbed his wrist and shook his head. “No.”

Oh, how I wished I could read their minds. But that might have made me even more anxious about this moment.

“Do you think you’ll be stopped again? On your journey to...wherever you’re going?” Cass asked.

“I’m not planning to be,” Luke said.

He had to say it. He knew he had to. It would be suspicious if he didn’t.

“Thank you. Luke nodded his head stiffly. “Your highness,” he added. I tensed. He didn’t have to add that.

“I’m sorry that happened to you.” Cass tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. “Both of you. Do you want to go home now? I don’t want you to worry about this happening again.”

“Yes, please.” I gave Luke one last look. “I’ll see you around, alright?” He barely nodded, and Cass and I started down the cobblestone.

“Does that happen often?” Cass asked.

“I don’t go out often.”

“But when you do?” He furrowed his brow.

I squeezed the papers in my hands. “It’s not uncommon.”

Cass’s gaze stretched ahead of us. What was he thinking? Probably of how pathetic I looked just a moment ago. All my gratitude melted away. Why should I have needed saving at all? It wasn’t fair. We didn’t do anything wrong. It wasn’t fair that I had to carry around these papers. It wasn’t fair that his father was doing this to us.

His father was the king. That officer addressed him as your highness.

I cleared my throat. “Do people call you your highness often?”

Cass’s steps slowed.

I bit my lip. His mouth fell open, clearly uncertain what he should say.

“I—” His eyes darted between mine.

I returned to the pace we had been walking, and he took a second to catch up. “I was going to tell you,” he said. “But it seemed like an odd thing to just mention. Especially after we’d already started to become friends and I—” He sighed. “I was afraid you wouldn’t want to see me anymore.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to see you anymore?” A breeze blew through a space between shops, nipping the edges of my hair.

“Well, because,” he lowered his voice. “Because of my father, and the law, and your—”

“Class?”

Something shameful settled across his face. He didn't have to finish.

I took a deep breath. "You told me it didn't bother you."

"It doesn't," he said quickly.

"Why should it bother me?"

We stopped walking altogether, near the end of West Main, and the pedestrians were dwindling. I should have been nervous, but I had the prince with me. That same powerfully free and delightful feeling from before boiled inside me. No one was going to stop me now that I was with Cass.

"If you don't judge me for where I come from and for things I can't control about myself, then I can't judge you for the same. Doesn't that sound fair?"

Cass stared awestruck down at me as if I'd just said the most surprising thing. Honestly, it surprised me as well.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," he said.

"Good. If we can agree on that." I slipped my hand into his arm. "Then nothing's changed. Not to me."

I started us forward again, a short distance from the last of shops and townhouses, the barn waited all alone at the edge of the forest. I felt Cass's soft eyes on me. "You know, every time I think something I say or do or don't say is going to offend you, you spin it around and make me feel silly for ever worrying at all," he said.

"I'm less offendable than you imagine. You have less to worry about than you think."

His muscles shifted under my palm. "It feels like there's nothing to worry about when I'm with you." A twinge of guilt shot through me. If only he knew, he likely had very much to worry about. "What will we do tonight?" he asked. "Maybe your aunt will let us do all the baking for her customers. You know, I've been told I make wonderful strawberry turnovers."

"Yes, delicious strawberry and egg-shell filled turnovers. Unfortunately, that's not a patron favorite."

“So, what then?” Cass tilted his head up to the dimming sky.

We teetered between afternoon and evening now. A blend of yellow and orange sunlight painted the city around us. My memory unexpectedly called back to the little ornament Brison and Richal had given me and the beautiful beam of red light darting from it.

I tugged on Cass’s arm. “I know where we can go.”



“Are you even trying to keep up?” I taunted Cass.

He reached the crest of the hill. I’d been one step ahead of him since we left the main trail. The riding skills he was displaying now paled in comparison to what I’d seen at the races, but perhaps he wasn’t as well adjusted to Shadow. That or he wasn’t accustomed to traversing trails like the twisty overgrown one we were on now. If you could even call it that. Fresh grass overshadowed most of the beaten path beneath us, and I mostly relied on memory to lead the way.

“I’m only letting you take the lead,” he said, stopping next to me.

“That’s what they all say.”

“They?”

“All the princes I bring out here.”

“And how many princes have you led into these woods with your charms?” He relaced his fingers over his reins.

“Oh, I don’t know.” I flicked my wrist. “At least a hundred, probably. That makes you lucky one hundred and one.” I smirked and pressed my heels into Butter’s sides, pushing the horse into motion again. My skirt whipped in the wind behind me. Thankfully, the dress I’d mindlessly chosen for my engagement party had a full, circular skirt with enough fabric that I didn’t need to hoist the hem up my thighs to ride. It appeared our impromptu ride was meant to be, just as it was fated that Kat’s usually stubborn horse,

Shadow, didn't immediately shun Cass, and we were able to set off without worry.

I led us down the hill, maneuvering around trees and bounding over roots and fallen branches. Cass lagged a bit behind, hesitating over a few large trunks and around low branches. A part of me was glad. He may have beaten me back at the races, but I could still outride him out in the real world.

The trees ahead of us thinned. I pulled back on Butter's reins, and Cass did the same until we were both at a leisurely trot. We were here.

Newborn moonlight trickled in through the thinning trees ahead. But not just moonlight. A rainbow of light. Beams of blue, red, green, and every color in between sparkled before us. Cass's emerald eyes stared straight ahead. He was entirely entranced, just as I'd hoped.

We rode forward into the rain of lights. Shards of stained glass of every shape and size dangled from the trees. A few colored lanterns dotted the branches too. They swung delicately through the air, casting beams of colored light every which way. Cass's gaze never left the trees. He gaped at them, and I grinned just watching him.

We passed through the last of the trees into a small clearing, where a little pond basked in the rainbow moonlight. Opposite us, a knoll crept up into the forest, nestling a thin stream and a miniature waterfall that trickled down into the pool.

This was it, just as magical as I remembered. With a thousand colored lights dancing around us, Bexbury, no, all of Morra was far behind. We were in another world entirely, our own personal storybook.

"What do you think?" I slid off Butter to the perfect grass below. "Worth the ride?"

"I'll admit, I was hesitant when we left the main trail," Cass said, swinging down too. "But this, lovely, this is exceptional."

"Then let this be your lesson to never doubt me again."

He let out an enchanted breath and finally brought his eyes back to me. "I

never will.”

We let Shadow and Butter graze at the water’s edge, then started a stroll of our own at the edge of the pool.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“This.” I spun around, letting my dress dance around me. “Is the impossible pond. That’s what everyone in town calls it.”

“Impossible?”

“Because of the water.” I knelt beside the pond and dipped my fingers into the water. A row of ripples waltzed through the lights. “The waterfall over there, it’s constantly pouring into the pond, yet the pool never grows. It never passes into the trees or even gets close. At first glance, it’s—”

“Impossible.” He knelt beside me and trailed a finger over the surface. I giggled as his fingers brushed over mine.

“In actuality, there’s a cavern at the very bottom of the pond,” I said. “It’s supposed to run under the forest floor and let out somewhere in the great lake or the river. No one knows for sure.”

“How does anyone know there’s a cavern at all?” He shook the water from his fingers. “Maybe the pond really is impossible.”

“They know because of the story, obviously.” I sat back in the grass, propping myself up on my palms and tucking my legs underneath me.

“A story? Now you must tell me.”

I bit back a smile. I knew Cass would appreciate this sort of thing. “Once —”

“Hold on.” He laid back in the grass and folded his hands under his head. “Alright, now I’m ready.”

He never ceased to surprise me. “Once upon a time, before even my Auntie was born, which I assume was a long time ago, an artist’s son and his brother came to swim here. They say the little brother dipped under the water and never came back up again. The older brother ran back to the city to get help, and when his father came back with his oldest son, he dove into the

water to find his son. But he disappeared too. A few more people went in after them and discovered the cavern, but they never found the artist or his son.”

Cass’s playfulness faded. Perhaps, I should have warned him that this wasn’t exactly a light-hearted tale. I glanced back into the trees. “The remaining brother tied these panes of glass around the water to mark it. Maybe as a warning, or maybe to honor his brother and father. No one knows. He vanished into the water too before he could explain it.”

Cass sat up, frowning. “He went into the water too? To kill himself?”

“To be with his family again.”

Cass scoffed. “How foolish.”

Not the sentiment I expected.

“You don’t think it’s endearing? To die for the people you love?” I gestured over the lights, their infinite colors dancing and overlapping over the water. “That’s why this place is so beautiful. It’s a symbol of eternal devotion, even in death.”

“You don’t honor the people you love with death. The artist, he wouldn’t have wanted his only remaining son to die for him. Any good parent would have wanted him to live and be as happy as he could be without him. We honor the people we love by living our best life, even without them.”

That was an easy conclusion to draw for someone who hasn’t lost anyone. But Cass had lost someone. “Is that what you believe about your mother?”

He froze. Why did I ask that? There was a long draw of silence between us, but I didn’t retract the question. It was out, and I really wanted to know.

“It’s what she would have wanted,” he said softly. “She only ever wanted me to be happy. I try to be that. For her.”

I nodded and plucked at a few blades of grass. “Can I ask how she died?”

Cass tensed. Had anyone ever asked him that directly? I’m sure back in Aurell, their queen’s death must have been common knowledge. I’d snapped on people for asking me the same, but I wanted to know. Perhaps we could

empathize with each other. So far, I'd felt as if I could talk about nearly anything with Cass. Why not this too?

"She was in an accident," he said. "Traveling to a neighboring providence with my father. I was in Back Aurell. Their carriage tipped over on a steep hill. My father was unharmed, but my mother didn't make it." He cleared his throat. "He told me she fought for two days before she passed."

My heart ached for him and for myself. Parents dying in a far-off city, leaving one morning and never returning. It was too familiar. "You didn't get to be with her?"

"I didn't even know she was gone until father and their troupe returned. Without her."

"They didn't bring her body back?"

He swallowed. "No. She was from the south country. Father sent her back there to be buried with her parents. He said she would have wanted that. I was only seven so, it was probably for the best that I didn't see her. I can only imagine how she looked after the accident."

One look, and I knew he had imagined. Just like I'd imagined what my parents' last moments had been like, standing outside the palace walls with the rest of the class detesters. The king said they'd turned violent. But for all my imagination, I couldn't picture my parents raiding those gates and attacking those officers. All I could imagine was the arrows piercing them. I had seen their bodies. I saw the holes in them. As awful as it was, and as unfair that that was my most vivid memory of them, I needed that. I'd needed to hug my parents one last time. I needed to cling to them until Auntie Jen pried me away. It was the only goodbye I'd ever have. I couldn't imagine not having it.

"Unexpected death is twice as painful as the expected kind," I said. "Although no loss is easy."

He raked a hand through his thick hair. "And your parents? Can I ask how you lost them?"

Everything in me wanted to tell him the truth. *I lost them in the incident.* He must have already been thinking it. But I wanted to do more than tell him.

I wanted to ask if he was there that day. Was little Prince Cassian watching from a window while the class protesters tried to storm his palace? What were the chances that he saw them?

But I'd tell him nothing. I couldn't. Wouldn't the daughter of rebels be prone to rebellion herself?

"They drowned," I said. "Their ship capsized on a journey back from the east. I got their bodies back but not them." I cleared my throat. "I was five."

I trembled. Somehow lying about this hurt more than keeping it in.

Cass laid his hand over mine. "I can't imagine losing both parents. Not having a mother was hard enough."

From what Cass had told me so far, it sounded like he *had* grown up without both parents. "So why grow up without one?" I asked. Thinking and talking about Cass's childhood was so much easier, and learning more about him would likely be to my benefit. "Why didn't your father remarry? There must have been more than a few willing candidates."

He sighed. "He wasn't interested. Honestly, if not for having me, I don't think he would ever have gotten married. He's just not the type."

"Not the type to fall in love?"

"Not the type to *be* in love. Not in the traditional way."

He twined his fingers in mine over the grass. A small thing, but with all the meaning in the world. "Did your mother love him?"

"I think so...in a way." He squeezed my hand. "I remember how she used to trail the halls behind him. Wait for him for hours when he was gone. My father has many faults, but I never heard her mention a one. That in itself has to be some kind of love."

Love? That sounded like fear to me.

I turned to the pond before us. We sat in silence, listening to the lull of the miniature waterfall gushing into the impossible pond. No wonder Cass

had turned to books. What a poor example of love his parents had set. In the little time I'd had my parents, and through the plethora of stories I'd coaxed from Auntie Jen, my parents had set a standard that I feared I'd never rise to.

"My parents were entirely devoted to each other," I said. Two matching fireflies glided across the water together, floating between the lights. "My aunt tells me that she's never seen a deeper love. She says it was more than that. It was more than love."

A faint smile crossed my face. "She tells me that my papa adored my mama—really, truly adored her. He told her she was beautiful every day. Even I remember that part. And my mama, she would kill for my papa. She'd go to hell and back just to see him smile."

My vision blurred. I blinked back tears. "They were so different but so perfect for each other. One was passionate, and the other reserved. She was meticulous, and he was spontaneous." I bit my lip. "One was dark and the other light. But they fit together so wonderfully. If I could be only half as lucky in love, then I'd have enough joy for two lifetimes." I sniffled. "But I doubt my papa would want me to settle for that. Kat says when she was just six, my papa told her, 'Don't take anything less than bliss in marriage. If not, then what's the point?'"

The ruby ring on my middle finger seemed to weigh heavier. Yes, what would be the point in that?

A tear fell down my cheek. I quickly wiped it away. "I suppose you were right about our parents, Cass. Mine only ever wanted me to be happy, just like your mother. But being happy these days is hard. Sometimes I feel like no path is going to lead me to a joyful life."

I rolled my lips and did my best to act like I wasn't on the verge of sobbing. Why had I said any of that? None of it mattered. I could never tell Cass about the life lurking before me. The one I was more and more sure would strip all my joy away. Why couldn't I have smiled and said nothing?

"Someone told me a little while ago," Cass said, "that I should have more

faith. Perhaps you need to have some more faith in your future. Circumstances are always changing, sometimes for the better. You should have faith that a new path will emerge.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Don’t think about that. Only think about now. Make the best of this moment. If you do that forever, then eventually that will add up to a lifetime of joy, right?”

A tiny smile slipped onto my face, forcing its way through my tears. *Be happy in this moment and be happy forever.* He made it sound so simple, so simple that I couldn’t counter him. Somehow, he’d made the impossible the easiest thing in the world.

Cass had made me smile. He’d made me happy within this brief moment. Maybe this was a start to that lifetime he was talking about.

“Cass,” I wiped my eyes. “I think you’re the wisest person I know.”

“You don’t know very many people, do you?”

I rolled my eyes. “With friends like you, do I need to?”

“Only friends?” His eyes dropped to my lips. Perfect stillness washed over me, as light and vivid as the lights dancing around us. I found myself genuinely smiling. I felt...happy.

“No,” I said. “Not friends at all.”

I closed my eyes, and our lips met. I pulled Cass’s body into mine, clinging to him like I’d never done to anyone before. I wanted this moment to last forever. This pristine, peaceful moment where everything was possible at the impossible pond.

Where I could be happy.

Chapter Eighteen



I was practically falling over as Cass and I stumbled through the trail at the edge of the forest. The walk from the stables back to the barn had never felt so long. Aside from Cass swinging my hand in his, the only thing keeping me awake was the splendor of the morning springing to life around us. It was that beautiful time when night still clung to one side of the sky while orange sunlight spread itself over the other. Soft hints of daylight spread out over the city to at our side, tickling our faces and lighting our way. The brush of wind was like a silky blanket. I wished the walk had been longer, but the barn just ahead, barely jutting into the forest, would soon bring our journey to an end.

“I’ve never been so tired yet wanted so desperately to stay awake,” I said, basking in the newborn dawn light.

“I thought you were up every night.” Cass grazed his thumb across the back of my hand.

I melted, feeling even warmer.

“That would make this my bedtime. Why aren’t *you* tired? Don’t you have things to do during the day?”

“All I’ve been doing for the past couple of days is sleep. You’ve sort of been keeping me up all night.”

I flushed. “No one notices when Prince Cass sleeps entire days away?”

“Not so long as he makes it to at least one meal a day, then nothing seems out of the ordinary.”

“What if someone comes looking for you?”

“In the case of an emergency, I’ve tasked Donnie with borrowing my clothes and impersonating me.”

Cass managed to keep his composure despite the ridiculousness he just said. I had to laugh, imagining Donnie with his dark brown skin and dreads trying to convince anyone he was his fair-skinned, green-eyed friend.

“It’s a solid plan,” Cass said, as serious as ever. “It hasn’t failed before.”

“Right.” The barn was just ahead now. I laughed for a good long while until a familiar set of figures lingering outside the barn doors took shape. Speak of the devil, but Cass didn’t seem to notice them.

I gestured toward the barn with a wave of my hand. “Look, Cass. Your twin is here.”

His demeanor faded immediately. His hand tensed in mine, and my joy quickly dissipated as well.

“What’s wrong?”

“Hopefully, nothing.” Cass hastened our pace toward the barn door, and Donnie, along with Jasper’s, gaze found us. They both strode towards us, meeting us just at the edge of the barn.

“I should have guessed this was how he was spending his time.” Jasper sneered as our pairs met, seemingly talking to Donnie but loud enough for me to hear. His deep blue eyes bored into me.

“Long time no see, boys,” I said.

Jasper’s face didn’t move a muscle, but Donnie gave me a half-hearted smile.

“Why are you here?” Cass pulled his hand from mine. My hand felt empty without his.

Donnie was quick to answer. “Your father’s looking for you.”

The color drained from Cass’s face. “How long does he think I’ve been

gone?”

“Long enough for us to hear about it,” Jasper said.

“He called a late dinner last night,” Donnie said. “I covered for you, but I think he’s been trying to find you since then.”

“Since last night?” Cass asked, his voice a touch frantic.

“You should get back now before you miss breakfast too.” Donnie motioned back to a carriage I hadn’t noticed before, waiting at the edge of the dirt street.

“Of course.” Cass ran a hand through his hair. “Evie, I’ll see you tomorrow. Or tomorrow night. I’m not sure, but soon, I promise.”

“Alright,” I murmured. “But is everything well?” Why was Cass so deconstructed suddenly? Did it have to do with something important? It dawned on me that perhaps this was the type of *something* Gilow would want to know.

“Everything’s fine, Lovely.” He kissed my cheek. “I just have to go.” Giving me one last smile, he strode off with Donnie at his side. Jasper stayed back, and we glared at each other.

“Sorry, *Lovely*,” he said, “important things come first.”

“Is that why they’re leaving you behind too?”

Jasper took a threatening step towards me. But I didn’t budge. He wasn’t going to do a damn thing to me. Not with Cass only a few paces away.

“Have fun while you can because you won’t last forever. You girls never do.” I bit my lip and forced my hands to stay down and not rip out every piece of scraggly blonde hair framing that disgusting face. “Here.” He pulled something out of his pocket. A silver coin clattered at my feet. “In case he forgot to pay.”

I wanted so desperately to move, to scream something back, but I stayed still. Jasper ran and caught up with Donnie and Cass, disappearing into the carriage behind them, and they started away into the city and back to the castle.

As they disappeared into the distant street ahead, I finally let my eyes drop to the coin at my feet. A burning tear slipped from my face and dotted the dirt next to it. I wiped my cheek and pressed my boot over the coin, beating it and my lone tear into the ground.

I took a deep breath and went inside.

Chapter Nineteen



“He’s here again.” I moaned and opened my eyes, and Auntie strode back toward the door. “Tell your friend to stop banging on the barn door in the middle of the day, too,” she yelled, stomping down the stairs.

I grumbled and forced myself up. It must have been Cass—but why was he back so soon? It couldn’t have been more than a few hours since he left, judging by the light sneaking in through the curtains.

I trudged barefoot down the stairs, out of our darkened apartment, through the halls, and out into the main floor.

Cass paced near the bar. I rubbed his chest relentlessly. Something was wrong with him. Despite the nicer, darker-colored clothes that I was unaccustomed to seeing him in, and the too neat state of his hair, a frantic storm brewed past his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said as I approached him, “I didn’t wake you, did I? That’s stupid. Of course, I did.” He took a shaky breath.

“What are you doing here? I thought you’d be busy with your father for a while.”

“Yes,” he said. “I wanted to ask what you were doing tonight.”

I frowned. “Tonight?”

He nodded with wide eyes.

“You came all the way back here to ask what I was doing tonight?”

“Yes.”

Something wasn’t adding up, and I needed to know what. “I don’t have anything planned—”

“So, you’ll be here then?” he interrupted.

“I will.”

“Nowhere else?”

“That’s what I said.”

Cass dropped into one of the bar stools. Relief washed over him. Something *really* wasn’t making sense.

I folded my arms. “Where else did you think I would be?”

“Nowhere,” he insisted. “I only wanted to make sure that tonight, you could be away with me.”

“Away from what?”

“Nothing,” he blurted out. He sighed. “Danger.”

“Why would I be in danger tonight?”

“You won’t be. Not if you’re here with me, I swear.”

“Cass, you’re talking in circles.” What was he so hesitant to tell me? I needed to know, so I took a page from Kat’s book.

I laid my hand over his chest. I felt his chest rise and fall lightly under my palm and locked my eyes to his. “Tell me what’s happening, please?”

He laid his hand over mine as his eyes softened. I was almost shocked at how potent my gesture was. Who knew I could be so convincing? “My father,” he said, “my father has discovered a half-class haven east of the city. He’s sending some officers to investigate it tonight.”

My heart froze. The king found one of our havens? If I recalled correctly, Gilow and Jace had set up five or six of them in the forests around Bexbury. Most were small, making use of old cottages or makeshift campsites, with manor house being our only major one. I’d only visited one besides the manor, but that was enough to show me how important they were to our

class.

My stomach clenched at the memory of the little half-class toddlers with curly hair and beige skin running around during my visit, and a pair of expectant mothers, one light-class, another dark-class, but both carrying half-class children. It was the first place since my parents died that I saw a dark-class woman and a light-class man kiss—outside of the barn or the races, of course. It was almost unreal. Those were the only places for people to go if they had half-class children born after the new laws were ordered, and the only places for different classes to marry and wear their wedding rings without shame.

And it was all illegal.

The king wasn't sending people to investigate. He knew what his officers would find. And all of those souls would end up in prison, the work camps, or worse. I had to warn them.

I tucked my hands back under my arms, pinning them to my sides to keep them still. "And you thought I would be at one of these havens or something?"

"No, I didn't." He squeezed his eyes shut, only to open them a moment later. "I hoped not. But I had to be sure. I just, I couldn't take the risk."

Cass cared enough to make sure I wasn't banished to prison or a work camp. But what about the rest?

It couldn't be okay for me to have enjoyed moments like we had at the pond if I knew he was only concerned with my life while everyone else's was in jeopardy. But I didn't have any proof that was where his mind was. Not yet anyway.

I pushed down a growing unease and forced a small smile. "Thank you for your concern Cass, but like I said, I'll be right here tonight. With you." Whether I wanted to be or not.

He relaxed and leaned his forehead down against mine. "Good. Then forget I said anything else. You don't need to worry about anything. I

probably shouldn't have been so worried myself."

Don't worry? Impossible.

I had to contact Gilow.



The moment Cass left, I bolted back to the apartment. I didn't have a moment to waste.

"Kat!" I took the stairs two at a time and slammed our bedroom door shut.

"Kat!" I shook her. It took only a second for her to squirm up.

"What, what is—"

"I need you to go to Luke and tell him exactly what I tell you."

She nodded. My tone must have told her that whatever I had to say was serious.

Kat left just past mid-meal. Would Luke be able to contact Gilow? What if they couldn't get to the havens in time? Hell, we didn't even know which one they were going after.

Damn it. I needed to be out there, but I couldn't risk it. After Cass told me directly what would happen, I couldn't risk relaying the information directly. If I got caught, I'd be solidifying my guilt. And who knew when Cass would be back since, apparently, he was stopping by whenever he wanted now. I had to stay put and hope for the best.

Mid-meal passed. Noon dimmed into twilight, and dusk faded into nightfall without Kat's return.

I paced endlessly across our bedroom floor. What could be taking so long? All Kat had to do was relay a message. But somehow, night arrived, and my cousin still hadn't returned.

Auntie Jen checked on me before heading out into the barn for the night. With her gone, I forced myself to bathe and change out of the dress I had

worn for days and into some fresh clothes—who knows what—before moving my waiting game into the living room. I had plenty of time to look myself over and ensure that I looked at least a bit presentable, but every second that I didn't spend biting my nails and pacing felt like a moment wasted.

Someone rapped on the apartment door, the sound reverberating only once before I swung it open. Everything in me wanted it to be Kat. I needed news—good or bad. Anything at all. But the vivid green eyes staring back at me were not Kat's.

I smiled weakly. I had no idea when Kat would be back, no idea if the heavens were safe, and now I had to entertain my prince and act like nothing was going on.



“Him, over there.” I pointed over to a man leaning against the barn wall. From our spot on the ledge, Cass and I could see everyone perfectly. Our legs swung precariously over the edge. Cass seemed hesitant to do so at first but he quickly got over it and joined me once I settled there.

“The man with the orange hair?” he asked.

“Yes. He comes in here every three days exactly with no respect for what day of the week it is, buys a beer, drinks it, then perches somewhere on the wall and doesn't move for hours. Just watches people.”

“Why?”

“No idea. But he's been doing it for months now. First, we thought he was just shy, so Auntie sent Christa—”

“Christa?”

“She's tall, dark-class, really slender.” I scanned the floor for a brief second but couldn't find her. “I'll point her out if I see her. But Auntie sent her to flirt with him one day, but it was to no avail. Then Kat surmised that

Christa just wasn't his type and tried her hand at him."

Cass smirked. "Let me guess, still not interested?"

"Not in the least. Then Sammy tried, and everyone in between too. It sort of became a game for a week or two. All of the girls tried to seduce him or even just get him to smile. But it's been months, and no one's succeeded."

"How unusual." Cass rubbed his chin. "Maybe he's more of an observer than a participator."

I propped back on my hands. "I think we haven't employed someone matching his tastes yet. Although after the variety we've presented to him, I don't know how many options there are left."

Cass narrowed his eyes, still looking out over the floor. "Has *she* tried before?"

I popped up just in time to see Sammy making her way over to Mister Mysterious. "No, she has not."

As if observing a theatrical performance, Cass and I watched attentively as Sammy stopped right in front of the man. Unfortunately, her back was to us, so we couldn't see her face, but I was able to silently admire the sheen her dark curls held tonight. She'd tried with him before, but would he change his mind about her tonight?

The red-headed man looked curiously down at her as she spoke, but his face remained expressionless.

"She's lasted a whole ten seconds," Cass said. "Is that usual?"

Sammy lifted her hand to the man's face, barely touching his cheek. I gripped the ledge. "It's not. She might actually be doing it."

Without warning, the man slid away, settling himself a few paces away.

"No!" Cass and I lamented Sammy's failure at the same time. Sammy just strode away as if nothing had happened.

"Different night, same story," I said. It was a shame Kat hadn't been here to try too. She'd made it a personal challenge to attempt to seduce Mister Red each time he was here.

Kat, who still hadn't returned.

My heart skipped a beat as I remembered why I'd really wanted to bring Cass up to my reading ledge; I could see when Kat got back. But somehow, I'd managed to lose myself in the moment with Cass. It had been nice not to worry for a few minutes, but now that my concern was back, I regretted ever letting it leave. The night was still relatively young, but who knew what time the king's officers were going to head out on their search. They could be out now for all I knew.

"Don't you feel a bit intrusive, watching people from up here?" Cass asked.

"Should I?"

Cass raised his eyebrows.

"What?" I shrugged. "If people come here, where they know there will be plenty of other people, they should expect to be watched. Whether they can see me watching them or not."

Movement pulled my gaze to the barn door. Was it about to open? Was Kat about to enter?

"So you wouldn't mind if people were watching you?"

"People already watch me, Cass. Sometimes too closely." No, the barn door wasn't opening. Only a trick of the eye. "I don't mind returning the favor."

The barn door slid open, and I perked up hoping it was Kat.

A trio of soldiers stumbled in, already looking well intoxicated. I deflated.

"Are you looking for someone?"

My head flipped back to Cass. "What? No." That sounded like a lie even to me. "Yes." I tucked a curl behind my ear. "I was actually wondering if Donnie or Jasper were going to show up again tonight. Not that I wouldn't love to see Donnie—"

"But Jasper." Cass clenched his jaw. Had something happened between

him and his friend since I last saw them? “I promise, he won’t be coming back here. Not with me.”

“Really?” Something had happened. Why else would he have been banned? Not that I was complaining. “Why not?”

Cass looked at me as if I already knew. “Because you don’t want him here.”

“Yes, but what else?”

“That’s it.”

Now I was the one frowning. “That can’t be the only reason.”

“Does there need to be another?”

He sent Jasper away for me? Only for me? And he didn’t even know everything Jasper had said to me, let alone done. I’d never been taken into so much consideration. Was my comfort that valuable to him?

“Cass, I—”

He faltered for a moment. “Of course, if you don’t want that, then I’ll tell him otherwise. I wasn’t trying to control who comes to your barn or who you see. I just thought—”

I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his. My hands ran into his hair, keeping him in place. It took him a moment to catch up, but before long, his hands were at my waist, and he was returning my kiss with equal fervor.

Another perfect embrace. Why couldn’t things with Luke be like this? Then maybe the ring he gave me wouldn’t feel so heavy on my finger. Though, then I’d feel worse about all the things I wasn’t feeling while kissing Cass—disgust, guilt, or nothing at all.

He pulled back for air, but I pulled him right back in. I could feel his smile against my lips. I kept him with me for as long as I could before I had to pull back for air too.

“So,” he said between breaths, “is it cheesy to say you take my breath away?”

I laughed and pulled him in again. “No,” I murmured between kisses.

“Because you’re the air in my lungs.”

We laughed together, barely balancing our chuckles and kisses.

“You,” he held my waist tighter. “Breathe life into me.”

I had to pull away and just laugh for a moment. “Oh really?”

He pulled me back into our kisses. “That’s right.”

After a longer kiss than the others, I pushed him back onto the wood floor, letting his grip on my waist take me down with him. I fell right over him. He looked shocked for a moment, but I quickly covered that expression with another kiss. A long, deep one. When I pulled away, our faces and lips were only a breath away. My curls cloaked around our faces. “I’ve fallen for you.”

We shared a perfect smile. “I’m grateful that fall didn’t take us right off the ledge,” he breathed.

“I would have caught you. Maybe.” I leaned down to kiss him again and nearly succeeded before the ledge door swung open. I jerked up, but there was no way I was getting off Cass in time.

Albo—who else—froze at the door. His dark eyes moved slowly between Cass and me as he tapped a cigar in his fingers. My throat tightened, and my veins throbbed with the heat of shame. Here I was kissing a man who definitely wasn’t the one I was engaged to—whose engagement party or family had attended just days ago.

Albo’s gaze shifted away from our faces, just barely, and I realized he was looking at my hand. The hand with my ruby ring on it—conspicuously resting off of my ring finger.

“Hm.” He slipped his cigar into his pocket and left as quickly as he had come.

A wave of crimson flooded my face as I slid away from Cass. His face also had donned a bold shade of red. “Wasn’t that your cook?”

“Yes.” God, I bet I looked like a harlot. Albo wasn’t the type to go gossiping about it to everyone. But who was I to be kissing Cass with Luke’s

ring like a stone in my pocket? Who was I to be kissing Cass while Kat was still out, completely unaccounted for?

Wanting to escape the shame whirling around in my mind, I grew antsy to *do* something. Why couldn't I disappear—set off and find her? The feeling that I should've been looking for her all along was powerful.

No. What use would I be wandering around without direction? I needed to stay here with Cass. That was my job, after all. I'd stay as long as I needed to and cling to hope that everything was alright.

Chapter Twenty



The following hours with Cass were the longest of my life.

I barely felt his kisses or noted his smiles. Every thought lingered on Kat and the others. Something awful must have happened. Why else would no one have returned to update me? I had to get out. I had to leave, to go to the manor. Someone would be there. Someone had to know what was going on.

My entire body wanted to scream. As Cass and I shifted our attention from Taliver to a game of chess, I theorized different ways to send him away early. I could tell him I felt ill, but what if he wanted to stay with me? I couldn't tell him I had to work the bar; the same result would likely ensue. I'd be stuck tediously minding customers while he lagged around. I sure as hell couldn't tell him I had somewhere to be. I didn't need to give him any reason to think I would meet anyone in the rebellion, especially since I *would* be. All I could do was keep my smile on, keep laughing, and hope he chose to leave soon.

He didn't.

Cass stayed with me all night. We talked about nothing I could remember. Hours that had passed so freely nights before now dragged.

I ran my hands through Cass's hair, making some joke about how his hair is thicker than mine and trying not to let my hands shake. When I finally saw

Auntie starting to clear out for the night, I realized it was nearly morning, and I had been drifting in a fog.

I yawned. “You should go back to the castle. Before you miss another important meal on my behalf.”

Cass smiled. “Are you kicking me out?”

“You keep me up all night; you come back during the day. When is a girl to sleep?”

He sighed. “Dream of me, Lovely?”

“Promise.”

I kissed Cass one more time, then ushered him out as quickly as possible. Telling him I needed a day to recover, I asked that he definitely not come back during the day. He seemed a bit disappointed, and this probably wasn’t doing our relationship any favors. But it had to be so. I needed time.

As dawn sliced through the city, he set away, and I couldn’t close the barn door fast enough.

“Who was that?” Christa called. She, Sammy, and Auntie Jen were chatting in the little hallway behind the bar.

“Sure as hell wasn’t Luke.” Auntie crossed her arms. I didn’t have time to deal with her. I needed to find Kat.

“Evie,” Sammy started. “Is there something you want to tell—”

“Good heavens, not now!” I ran past them, out of the main floor, and back towards the apartment. Leaving the door open, I sprinted up the stairs. It didn’t take long to find my riding pants and chemise. In seconds I’d ripped off my dress, thrown the new clothes on, and darted back down the stairs.

“Where in the world are you going?” Sammy’s voice echoed through my ears as I tore across the floor.

“Out.”

“It’s daytime!” Auntie called.

I ignored her. I ignored all of them and raced out the barn door.

The morning light didn’t seem to shine as bright as it had yesterday. The

air was thick around me as I circled behind the barn and into the trail towards the stable. The layer of dew glistening on the packed earth felt disgusting under my hasty steps, and the mist layering the adjacent forest drenched the day in a foreboding bleakness.

A day. It'd been almost a day since Kat was gone. Did Auntie Jen even care? What if Kat and Luke got caught up in the attack? What if something happened to Jace or Gilow?

A thousand what-ifs ran through me. I sprinted through the forest trail. I couldn't stop.

My lungs burned when I reached the stables, and I barely fumbled the latch open as I crashed into the stable doors.

"Saddy! I need Butter, now!"

I ran up to Butter's stall and tugged the door. Locked.

"Saddy!" I hurried back across the hay-strewn floor. Where was she? She was always up before dawn. Long before that. Even during the night, the stable was never left unattended. I ran around the stable at least three times. No one was there. How much trouble could I get in for breaking Butter's stall door? How would I break it?

I stormed outside, scouring the street around the stable. Saddy and the twins' apartment was just across the street. Maybe they just needed to be woken up. I made it halfway across the cramped street before stopping abruptly at the sight of her.

Looking paler than usual, Saddy meandered down the center of the street, her short hair was frizzed in the morning mist, making her look quite disheveled. In the distance, there was a bustle of people, the same group I'd seen when leaving the barn. More people were gathering by the looks of it.

"Saddy!" I sprinted up to her. Her dazed eyes searched aimlessly for a moment before they found me, right as I reached her. "I need Butter. Right now."

She shook her head. "You're not going to Gilow, are you?"

I grabbed her hand and pulled her to the side of the dirt street. No one was within earshot, but it was still dangerous to mention things like Gilow so openly.

“Yes, where else? I can’t tell you about it now, but something really big happened last night.”

“I know.” Her chest heaved. “Everyone knows now.”

Everyone? We hurried into the stable. “You mean everyone working with Gilow?”

“No.” Tears welled in her eyes. “I mean everyone in Bexbury.”

“Saddy, you’re not making any sense. I need Butter—I have to go.”

“No.” She scrunched both hands in her thin hair. “Don’t go back there. Don’t go back to him. Evie, it’s like the incident all over again.”

My heart skipped a beat. The incident? *No*.

They found it. They found the haven and must have killed them all.

“I have to check on the boys,” Saddy broke into my horror. “They can’t go back there.”

“My horse.”

“You don’t need it. And you don’t need Gilow anymore. I’m sorry.” So Gilow *was* alive.

I grabbed her shoulder before she could move away, and she jumped under my grasp. “I don’t know what happened, but I need to go. If you don’t tell me where the keys are, I will break the door and leave nonetheless.”

“I’m warning you—”

“Thank you for the concern, but my faith has always been with Gilow, and there it will stay. Please?”

Saddy blinked away the moisture in her eyes. How dead they looked. How tired. “Back wall, behind the leather saddles. It’s one of the brass ones.” I nodded and turned back from her. “Before you go,” she said. “Go to the square. But be careful, don’t let anyone see you. Just watch from a distance. That will be enough.”

“Why?”

“If after you go there, you still want to work with Gilow, then I can’t stop you. But me and the boys are done.”

She ducked her head and left, leaving me more than confused. The square was completely out of my way and in the dead center of town. Was that where she had come from?

The idea of postponing my trip to the haven was excruciating, but whatever she’d seen there must have been important, and I respected Saddy enough to know I had to go.

I found the key to Butter’s stall and ushered her out. A couple of cloaks hung along the wall near the saddles and keys. I had no idea whose they were, but I yanked a pale brown one from the wall. If I was going to the center of town, and if it was anything akin to the incident, then showing my face wasn’t the best plan.

The cloak was light and a bit too large for my frame. I clasped it closed anyway, grateful for the extra fabric covering me.

With every expectation and none simultaneously, I flicked Butter’s reins and set out into the day.



The heart of Bexbury swelled with people, some intangible force pulling us all towards the city’s center. As I made my way further into the center and nearer to the square, I too became entrapped by its pull. But it was more than that. From the unintelligible murmurs around me to the carriages hastily pulled through the streets at my side, a single feeling hung over the thoroughfare—anticipation. There was something to be seen, and we all were headed for it.

Under cover of my stolen cloak, I felt less revealed than I should have. Whatever the commotion was about, it demanded the attention of all those

out today, leaving me safely invisible.

Still, as the opening to the broad square became visible up ahead, a nervousness shot through me. I gripped Butter's reins and swallowed hard.

Saddy had compared whatever I was about to see to the incident. I wasn't there that day, at the protest that went horribly wrong. The one my parents, Saddy's fiancé, Luke's father, and so many others never came back from. But Gilow recounted the story of that day so vividly, I felt like I had lived through it too. It was the hour that divided all of our lives before with life now. A line in time, drawn in blood.

My stomach quivered, and I urged Butter into the square. Though, even he seemed hesitant to enter. The flow of the crowd slowed as we moved into the uneven cobblestone square. It wasn't packed to the brim, but it was thick.

Yet sickly still.

I stopped at the edge of the square. For a moment, I wanted to turn around. I felt like I was trotting into a nightmare. No sane person would do that. But whatever was ahead of me was no dream. And I couldn't turn my back on reality.

The people before us were near motionless. Sickening quiet surrounded me. I forced myself to face what they were, and I stilled too, seeing the horrific sight that had transfixed so many.

The once vivid white fountain standing proud in the middle of the square now overflowed with crimson. Layers of red pooled down from the top tier into the second, then into the large pool below. Something hung limply over the cornice—something big and lumpy. Something dark green. A body. A person. An officer.

It was his blood tainting the fountain. And help us all, he wasn't alone. I could barely make them out, all the way across the square, but there were more layering the bottom tier. How many? Two, three, four? I couldn't tell. From a distance, they were nothing more than clumps of green buried in a pool of red. Maybe I didn't want to make them out. But what I could make

out was the smaller, red symbol scrawled across the bottom of the fountain. The circle, slashed through the center, half colored, painted in red across the white of the fountain.

No. Paint wasn't that thin. It was plastered in blood.

Gilow—my friends. They killed these men.

My stomach lurched, and nausea threatened to take over me.

A storm of hooves raced into the square, snapping me out of my haze. More green-clad men. How long had it been since they left them here? Long enough for more men to be sent. Were they here to recover their compatriot's bodies or to search for their killers?

I pushed back every dazed and weakened emotion in me. Gilow would explain, he had to. And I still didn't know where Kat was, or Luke, or anyone. Breathing in the smallest bit of relief, I thanked the stars that at least none of them were amongst the dead here. But I still had to find them. And I had to find out what had happened.

Wrapping Butter's reins around my hands, I turned us around and trotted away from the square as unnoticeably as I could. There wasn't room for tears. I bit back everything that wasn't the fire to move forward.

Forward to my friends and answers.

Chapter Twenty-One



I sped into the manor house. My cloak rippled behind me as I sprinted through the kitchen, down the hallway, and into the foyer. Voices echoed down the hall—dozens of them—smothering the heavy pounding of my boots.

Sunlight coated me as I flew into the foyer. In the light of the morning, the tall windows and the cracked ceiling leaked daylight everywhere. All was bright.

My ears hadn't deceived me. Dozens of people danced across the floor, laughed against walls, and shared smiles like the air itself was feeding their mirth. A few children and mothers mingled about. Not the sort of visitors I was accustomed to seeing at the manor. Were they refugees from whatever haven the officers attacked? Why were they so content? In fact, why was everyone so joyful? The air was so light. I didn't understand.

Pushing back my cloak, I stormed across the room, maneuvering around everyone in my path. The stairs, save the bottom few steps, were mostly free. I marched up to them, knowing who I would find at the top. Or so I thought.

Lingering just past the top of the steps, Thomas and Maxine recounted some merry tale while the rest of Jace's closest listened intently. I pushed through them.

"Evie, where have you been?" Thomas asked.

I ignored him and pressed on. My heart quickened when I saw Jace, Luke, and Kat gathered in an old sitting nook.

Thank the stars. Kat was alright.

Before I could blink or breathe a sigh of relief, Luke was in front of me. His arms wrapped around me, but. I could only focus on Kat. *Luke brought her here?* She was just a messenger—she'd never been involved. Her gaze stayed on Luke as mine traveled over her. She appeared just as I remembered, almost. The tiniest smear of blood stained the bottom of her dress.

“Where have you been?” I shook out of Luke’s embrace. “Do you know how long I was waiting for you?”

Kat opened her mouth, but Luke beat her to it.

“She’s been with us,” he said.

“I wasn’t going to send her back while you were with the prince.” Jace’s hands rested confidently on her hips. “We’ll do nothing to jeopardize that relationship now.”

“Is everyone alright?” I turned to Luke. “What happened? I saw the square—”

“You did?” Kat lit up. “How many people were there?”

“Were there many?” Luke asked.

My head flipped between the two of them. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. They sounded...excited. People were dead, and they were celebrating.

“I have to talk to Gilow.” I pushed past the group.

“First room on the left,” Jace said. “He’s been waiting for you.” Her footsteps, as well as Luke and Kat’s giddy whispers, trailed right behind me.

I stormed into the instructed room. Everyone was acting upside down. Gilow, if no one else, had to be upright.

The chamber was smaller than I expected the rooms in this grand manor to be. A tattered rug, half-burned away, rested over the stone floor. The only other piece of decor was a strange-looking, barred structure pressed against

the wall. It took me a moment to recognize it as a crib. Across the small room, peering out of a long, tall window—one of two climbing up the back wall of the room—stood Gilow. His back was to me, but his signature black coat and powerful stance were enough to distinguish him.

“What happened?” I stopped halfway to him.

Gilow glanced back at me and the entourage that had followed. “Shut the door, Evelyn. We’ll talk alone.”

Fine. I didn’t need to be around whatever insanity had enveloped Jace and the others. I turned back to Kat and Luke. They hesitated for a moment, but Kat soon took Luke’s arm and pulled him away without another word. Jace glared past me to Gilow. I’m sure she didn’t like being left out of his conversations. Perhaps she’d hoped that her glare would be enough to change his mind, but he didn’t budge. Jace shot me a forced smile, then grabbed the scratchy door handle and delicately shut the door.

I should have been nervous or honored, being alone with our fearless leader. But in the whirlwind of other emotions, I didn’t have room for any of that.

“Is everyone alright at the havens?” I asked.

“They’re fine, for the most part. We had a few injuries, some more serious than others, but no one died.”

“None of our people, you mean.”

A cloud must have parted from the sun because a new stream of soft light flooded the room. Gilow kept his gaze out the cracked window. His shadow stretched out over the floor.

I took a deep breath. “How many did you kill?”

“Five.”

A chill fell over me. “*Five?*”

“They attacked us.” His words were beyond calm. “Had the children and women been there instead of us, they would have killed them.”

“But you got them out. Before the soldiers arrived?”

“We did.”

“So why did you stay?!” I took a bold step towards him. “If everyone was out, why did you need to be there at all? I didn’t tell you about the incoming soldiers so you could kill them!”

“Would that have changed anything?”

“What?”

“If you knew we were going to kill them, would you still have warned us?”

“I—”

I froze. *Would I?* If Gilow was right, and those officers had indeed come with plans to harm or kill anyone they found at the haven, then my warning had saved their lives. But I didn’t think that their deaths were even a possibility.

But if I *had* known.

If the only options were to say nothing and let all the families at the haven die or send those soldiers marching into their deaths...

I winced. I would have saved the haven. Every time.

“That doesn’t make this fine, Gilow,” I said. “They didn’t have to die.”

“And they didn’t have to search for us.” Gilow finally turned from his window. He paced across the room, but his eyes didn’t meet mine. “And they didn’t have to attack us when we told them to be gone. And Ryland didn’t have to conquer Morra. And God didn’t have to make us in so many colors. The king didn’t have to come to Bexbury, and his son didn’t have to come into your aunt’s brothel.”

Gilow stopped at the charred crib’s side. He laid a gentle hand over its edge. “Nothing had to happen, Evelyn, but this is what has. We must carry on with what we have, and we must do so with our own best interest in mind.”

“I don’t understand how killing soldiers is in anyone’s best interest.”

“It’s against the king’s.” He squeezed the edge of the crib and gazed down into it. “That makes it in ours.”

I bit my lip. How easy it would have been to collapse into the floor right there. Why was everything so confusing? I wanted things to get better, and I loved the idea of being a thorn in the king's side, but this was too much. It felt like we went from night raids to murder in the blink of an eye, and I was the only one questioning it.

"Go to the window, Evelyn," Gilow told me.

I frowned, but he wasn't looking at me. His gaze was fixed in the crib. "On the right."

I sighed and crept up to the glass. Morning sun bathed my skin. Outside laid a long-overgrown yard, dotted with bushes and filled with grass that would have passed my knees were I in it. At first, it appeared perfectly still. Not even the breeze rustled the field. But then, a flicker of movement caught my eye. A few flickers. Children. Playing amongst the grass. It seemed like at least a half dozen of them had found their way to the forgotten yard. They laughed and ran with no worries in the world.

Nearer to the manor, I saw their parents. A younger woman who was very much with child strolled along the yard, watching them. And not too far away, a set of couples, each comprised of a dark-class and a light-class, leisurely went about. In one of the men's arms, a baby bounced. I didn't want to take my eyes off them. Off the couples, the children, the families. Was this what it had been back when I was too young to remember? How many times had I walked the streets or gone out to play with my parents without concern for laws or class? Had I ever?

Would these families get to?

"If I had a child," Gilow said, "I would do anything for them—any fit parent would. I'd fight. I'd lie. I'd even kill to ensure that they had a fair chance at life."

I watched two of the smaller children outside race each other from one side of the field to the other. Their heads barely popped above the grass.

Gilow met me at my side. "But I have no children. Not anymore." He

tapped a crack in the glass. “I only have this. I have us. I have you.”

For the first time since I entered the room, we were face to face, eye to eye.

“We’re like a family, Evelyn. We are all we have, and we are the only ones who will fight for us and for *them*. You do what you must for your family, whatever it takes. Don’t you?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“Then trust me.” He laid a hand on my shoulder. “Trust your family. We’re only doing what’s demanded for change, and that might mean people get hurt. People were always going to get hurt. But it will be well worth it in the end.”

I wasn’t a fool. I’d known this was dangerous going in. It had always been. So why was I making such a big deal about this? Who was I to protest the death of soldiers who were going to kill innocent people? It was our family against the king, and I already knew which side I was on.

“I trust you,” I murmured.

Gilow removed his hand from my shoulder. He returned his gaze to the morning outside, resuming his position as if I’d never left. “Then tell me more about the prince.”



“You were there, weren’t you?” I strode towards Luke and Kat, still chatting away in the shadowy alcove. Gilow had finally dismissed me, and Jace took my place the moment I left.

I examined Luke as thoroughly as I could, but I couldn’t find a drop of blood on him. Even the stain on Kat was barely noticeable. Perhaps he’d changed clothes.

“We all were,” he said.

And ‘all’ included Kat now? My hands shook at my sides. They might

have been there, but who had done it? Who'd actually killed them, and how? Surely not Luke. His hands were tuned for painting, not holding a blade. And Kat? She wasn't even a part of this a day ago. There was no way she could have.

I almost reached for Luke's hands, trying to imagine the unimaginable. But all I saw were the faint bruises from where the officer had cuffed him the other day. I hadn't realized how tightly he'd been bound.

I swallowed. "I'm glad you're unharmed. Both of you."

"Don't worry, your fiancé's been keeping a close eye on me." Kat smiled and patted Luke's arm. "And he's promised to do so from here on out."

"Why would he need to do that?"

"If she's going to be around here from now on, she'll need a friendly companion," Luke said. "And you're busy—"

"You're coming back?"

"How could I not?" Kat asked, blinking at me like I was insane to ask otherwise. "I can't leave after what I saw last night. These people need all the help they can get. I'm only wondering why you didn't enlist me in the cause sooner."

Never asked? I'd never told her not to join me, but honestly, I didn't think Kat was cut out for this sort of thing. Perhaps I wasn't the right person to enlist her.

My eyes flew from her to Luke and back. "Well, alright then..."

My head felt weightless. No, my entire body did. I'd set out consumed with worries and questions and, in one way or another, had them all answered. Kat was safe. The people from the haven were safe. This was supposed to be a victory. But to go from so terrified to so victorious so quickly was jarring.

"I'm going back to the barn," I said softly.

"Already?" Kat frowned.

"I'm tired. It's been a long night. But you should stay if you want."

“I’ll ride back with you. It could be dangerous to be out alone today,” Luke offered. Kat pouted and opened her mouth, perhaps to protest, but I beat her to it.

“I’ll be fine. Stay here with Kat, please.”

I knew they were safe, and that was enough. For now, I needed to get away from them—as well as Thomas, Maxine, and everyone else.

I folded my arms under my cloak and walked down the stairs. I genuinely expected someone to follow me, but no one did. I made it down unabated.

The merriness of the floor engulfed me as I passed through it. It was suffocating. Of course, everyone would be jolly. This was our family, all together, safe and sound. I rushed through the foyer and down the hall. After I passed through the kitchen and out into the morning light, I had to take a long, deep breath. Everything was fine. This sort of thing was bound to happen sooner or later. This just meant we were one step closer to normal.

Let them be happy.

Butter had taken to grazing behind a fallen log. Thank goodness she wasn’t a wild thing. She never drifted too far when left unattended. I trekked up to her and guided us back towards the forest trail, which wasn’t too far away. Just as I mounted her and prepared for a slow journey back to the stable, the trot of hooves trickled into earshot. I froze as the thought of green-clad officers racing through the trees shot into my mind.

The figures drew nearer, and my fears quelled in an instant. The hooves were rather light. Only a single horse turned into view. A stubby brown and black dotted steed harboring two small, identical riders rode up.

“Brison? Richal?” They reined to a stop. I trotted up to them. Riding in front, Brison’s looked like he was deciding whether he could bolt away from me or not.

“What are you doing here?” I asked them.

Brison wiped the shock off his face and tilted his chin up. “Our Mama told us to come here.”

“No, she didn’t.” I narrowed my eyes. “Richal?”

His shoulders dropped. “She didn’t.”

Brison glared at his brother for a moment. He should have known Richal wasn’t as keen to make up stories.

I sighed. “Please don’t tell me you snuck away.”

“We had to,” Brison insisted. “Mama won’t tell us what happened in the square, even though a buncha people already came to the stable and talked about it. Then she said we weren’t allowed to come here anymore and didn’t say anything else!” He gripped his reins. “She’s trying to keep us from the action, but we won’t have it! Right Richal?”

Richal nodded but added nothing else. Saddy was the one person in all this who seemed anything but joyful about last night’s events. Hell, she had even compared it to the incident. I could understand her newfound distaste for Gilow. This was a whole new level of retaliation, and a dangerous one. If she didn’t want to be involved anymore, I could respect that. And if she didn’t want her sons in it either, I could respect that too.

“Look, boys, I know you think you want to be here right now, but I promise you don’t. This is dangerous. You need to go home, right now.”

“We know it’s not a game!” Brison said. “Who cares if it’s dangerous? *You’re* here.”

“I’m leaving, and so are you. Come on, we’ll go back together.”

“No! We’re not going anywhere.”

I gave them my most serious glare. “If you stay, I’ll tell your mother when I get to the stables. How long do you think it will be before she gets here and rips you both a new one in front of Gilow and everyone else too?”

“Evie...” Richal whined. Brison pinched his lips and glared at the ground.

I slowly started ahead. “Come back now, and maybe she won’t even have noticed you left. And if she does, I’ll tell her I found you picking a bouquet for her at the edge of the forest.”

I didn’t need to look back. I only made it a few paces into the trail before

Brison grunted and they turned their horse around, following me back toward the city.

We traveled in silence, their disappointment palpable. The twins were both so brave and eager to help the cause. I hated to take this away from them, but it was for the best. The further they were from this, the safer they'd be.

We'd long since left the manor, and the hidden trail leading up to it, behind. The forest trail lining the edge of the city carried us now. The opening to Saddy's street wasn't far ahead, and I was grateful that we had so far been alone on the trail. I found myself blinking in and out of attention, growing more and more entranced in my own thoughts.

One second my memory flashed back to the men in the square, and the crowd surrounding them, then to the children playing outside of the manor. Then, in a horrifying concoction, my imagination combined the two scenes. I saw the manor painted in blood and cluttered with the bodies of my compatriots—even the children. All dead, surrounded by a gawking crowd and a flurry of officers.

Then finally, I thought of Cass. In a world where the manor lay raided and dead outside the city, and those officers laid lifeless in the fountain, he was in a library, reading a book, none the wiser.

"Evie." Richal's voice yanked me back to reality.

My eyes immediately caught what had pulled his attention.

Oh no.

A soldier on a steed blacker than night darted onto the trail. Had he come from an alley at the city's edge? Perhaps he'd been hiding in the trees. It didn't matter because he was headed for us now. He jerked his hand up, palm out in an unmistakable gesture.

"Stop your horses," I told the boys.

"But—"

"Just do it and be quiet."

Brison stopped their horse, and I did the same just ahead of him. I smiled politely as the officer reined in right in front of us.

“Good morning, Sir,” I said.

“What are you three doing out?” the officer asked.

“My brothers and I were going for a morning ride. It’s such a nice day.” We didn’t need any questions about why three half-classes were together this morning. Being related made it seem less suspicious.

“You’re not supposed to be out,” he snarled. “No half-classes allowed in public until further notice by order of the king.”

“Excuse me?”

“Get down.”

I tried not to let terror ruffle me. I could have guessed that the king’s kickback for his soldiers’ deaths would be harsh, but I didn’t think it would be so efficient. Nor so all-encompassing. What did he mean by out? Out of the city limits? Out of homes?

I glanced at Brison and Richal and dismounted from Butter. Richal’s eyes were wide and stuck on the officer, and Brison’s chest trembled as he helped his brother down.

The officer jumped down from his horse. He was a large man, and he towered over me. I could only imagine how little he made Brison and Richal feel.

“Show me your papers.”

I reached down and pulled my identification from my boot. I panicked for a moment, remembering Luke’s slip up the other day. Had the twins made the same mistake?

I released a breath I didn’t know I had been holding when Richal raised both sets of papers up to the man. I shifted my weight as he scanned the documents. He scoffed, alternating between Brison and Richal’s. “You two are supposed to be thirteen?”

“Yes,” Richal answered.

“They’re just small-statured,” I said. My eyes met the soldier’s brown ones. Something about the shape of them was familiar.

Our eyes locked. Had I, in fact, seen this man before? Those familiar eyes narrowed as he seemed to be pondering the same.

“Where have I seen you?” he asked.

It hit me. Of course, where else would I have seen him? He was a patron at the barn.

The realization hit him at the same time. His thin lips slipped into a smile as his eyes drifted down me. “Now I remember.”

I stepped aside so he could see Brison and Richal at my side as if to remind him that we were not alone. “Can we please go now, Sir?” I asked as delicately as I could.

His eyes still didn’t leave me. My heart pounded against my ribs. “Come here for a second,” he said.

Brison and Richal looked as terrified as I was. The officer led me away from them, just a few paces away, perhaps not even out of earshot.

I stopped as far from him as I could, but he closed the distance quickly. “You know,” he began, only a breath away from me. “I’m supposed to take any half-classes I find out straight to the cells.”

I swallowed. “Those are the king’s orders?”

He nodded. “But I don’t want to do that. You’re not causing any trouble, and I’d hate to see a pretty girl like you in shackles.” He traced a finger up my arm.

No, this couldn’t be happening. Cass wasn’t here to save me this time.

“How about I do you a favor, and I let your little brothers leave?” He pushed back the shoulder of my cloak. My skin felt bare under his gaze. “Then maybe you can do me a favor, and you’ll leave too. How does that sound?”

My mouth quivered open, and my hands trembled as I realized what the man was implying. I couldn’t let the boys get arrested—that simply couldn’t

happen.

A smart girl would say yes—it would be over in minutes, and there was no other option.

But I couldn't.

I am so damn sick of this.

A burst of foolhardy boldness ripped through me. It felt like a hundred painful moments of my lifetime balled together inside me. A hundred moments like this one I shouldn't have had to deal with.

"Go to hell," I spat out through gritted teeth.

His smile diminished, and I jerked my shoulder back from him and spun around. I'd tell the boys to run—he couldn't catch all of us.

As I opened my mouth to call out to them, the officer slapped me across the face, then in one swift motion, he grabbed my wrist, yanking it behind me and slamming my back into a tree.

He pressed his hand over my mouth. I reached for it, barely able to breathe as his heavy fingers covered my nose as well.

"Where exactly did you say you were riding from?" he asked. "'Cause we been looking all over for a hideout you halfies been at. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?" I tried to kick him or hit him, but nothing worked. I had no distance to draw back my limbs. Each second without air weakened me.

The officer pressed his hand firmer into my face. I thought my skin might tear away from my jaw.

"Maybe I can ask your brothers."

A loud crack echoed through the trees, and the officer screamed and crumpled to the ground. His hand fell away from my face. I sucked in air and doubled over.

"Sto—"

Another heavy crack sounded, cutting through the man's plea.

Richal stood over the man. Blood coated his fingers, dripping down from

the rock they wrapped around. I kicked back against the tree trunk as he dropped the rock. It clunked beside the officer's bloody head—red drenching his hair and trickling down his face into a growing pool at the edge of the trail. The knee of his pants was ripped, revealing a deep gash.

I just stared at him, my breath shaking. Richal was perfectly still. A drop of blood slipped from his finger and spotted the dirt below. I scrambled to my feet.

Brison stammered halfway across the trail. He trembled as he looked upon the man and his brother standing at his head.

“We need to go,” I stammered. “Now.” I grabbed Richal's shoulders and pulled him away. His face remained blank. “Help me get him up,” I said to Brison.

He managed to tear his eyes away from the man, and together we led Richal up to Butter. Once he was up, I mounted too and wrapped my arms around him. Brison jumped onto their horse as well. Without looking back, we sped away, leaving the officer behind.

Chapter Twenty-Two



We had to tell Saddy everything.

Brison didn't want to, and I didn't either, but we were in too much of a hurry to dump the horses in the stable and hustle into the apartment to avoid raising suspicion. As soon as we burst through the back door, Richal collapsed to the ground, and Brison pressed his hands to his forehead. I leaned back against the closed door, my whole body shaking. Saddy had seen us come in, and she knew something was very wrong.

So, we told her everything.

Her gaze stayed far away from me as I finished recounting everything that had happened. She wrapped her arms around Richal and whispered to him.

"You're fine." She ran a hand over his curly head. "Everything's fine." Still not looking at me.

Saddy helped her son up, more pulling than guiding. The sheer emptiness in his face nearly shattered me.

"Stay here until it's safe," Saddy said, but I knew she was talking to me this time. "I don't know how long that will be, but after that, don't come back."

She led Richal out of the tiny kitchen, leaving Brison and me alone. Saddy thought this was my fault. Wasn't it? I could have told them to run

instead of stop. We probably could have made it. I could have taken the officer up on his offer. I could have let them stay at the manor like they had wanted to. I grasped at my heart through my chemise, feeling like I could pry it out. *Why did I have to make them come back with me?*

Brison's fists balled at his sides. "Was he dead?"

"I couldn't tell."

"But he had to be, right?" His voice pleaded for an answer I couldn't give. "He's gotta be dead."

I shook my head. Richal was never going to forget about that. Even if he could, it was only a matter of time before someone found the man's body. Word was going to get back to the king about it--another life to add to the number we'd taken already. Another dead soldier was only going to make things even worse.

Brison was right. He needed to be dead. If he wasn't, if he lived and he remembered our faces, we were done.

"He's dead." I swallowed. "I think he was."

I said it for Brison, but I needed to believe it too. He had to be dead. He *had* to be.

Brison's chin quivered, and a sob escaped him. "Are—are they gonna come for Richal?" He broke down completely. Tears streamed down his face as he coughed up sobs. I rushed up to him and squeezed him into me. He grabbed my chemise and wept into my chest.

"No, he's going to be fine. I swear it on my life." We slumped to the ground as I let him cry. My own eyes started to well.

"Nothing's going to happen. I won't let it." I did my best to muffle my own sob, realizing I had no guaranteed means of keeping this promise.

Brison stayed in my arms until he ran out of tears. Then we only rocked there in silence, each completely numb. I waited for Saddy to come back and tell me Richal was asleep or that he was alright, or even just to take Brison away. But she remained gone. Eventually, Brison picked himself up and left

too, presumably to check on his brother. Part of me wanted to follow him, but I knew I couldn't. Saddy didn't want me up there and, truthfully, didn't want to see Richal as I'd left him. In the safety of downstairs, I could imagine him sound asleep up above.

I sat alone in Saddy's kitchen. Saddy eventually came back to prepare mid-meal. Or perhaps it was breakfast. Perhaps it was neither. We said nothing to each other, though my mouth fell open with intentions to more than once. Each time I stopped myself. She was kind enough to feed me but did so without making eye contact. I had a feeling she would never look at me again.

A couple hours passed. The sun rose higher in the sky. I should have left as soon as we returned—when the street was clearer. Time only added to its population, and from Saddy's tiny kitchen window, I couldn't tell if the riders further down the way were simply townsfolk upon black horses or soldiers scouting for half-classes.

With no intention of taking any chances, I curled beside Saddy's oven fire and waited, hoping time and perhaps nightfall would provide an escape for me.

Chapter Twenty-Three



I blinked into darkness. The day was long gone now, and Saddy's oven fire had burned away hours ago. I wasn't going to ask her to rekindle it for me, so I sat alone in the shadows until a small flame drifted toward the kitchen, along with Saddy's silhouette behind it.

Saddy stopped in the doorway. The pale candlelight called attention to more creases and darkness in her face than it illuminated.

"There's a carriage here for you," she said dryly.

I stumbled to my feet. My legs ached from sitting on the floor for so long.

I wanted to ask who it was, but the moment I was up, Saddy left the room. I had overstayed my welcome.

In the darkness again, I crept across the room. My cloak caught on a chair. I bumped into the breakfast table. Actually, it wasn't my cloak at all. I'd stolen it from Saddy's stable.

Feeling a new pang of guilt, I unclasped the now dirt-caked and stained cloak and left it on the back of one of her chairs. I doubted I'd ever be able to return it.

I left the kitchen and maneuvered through the front room. Saddy, her face burning behind her candle, watched me from her seat several paces away from the door. I averted my eyes from her, then dropped my head and left out into the street. Not a second later, the door latched shut behind me, locking

me out for good.

As promised, a small but elegant carriage waited at the side of the street. The streetlamps didn't stretch this far from the center of the city, and in the night, the carriage looked like nothing more than a shadow. The deep green carriage car was almost as dark as the two black steeds drawing it. An orange glow burned through the windows.

The door of the carriage swung open, and Donnie peeked out. "Good evening, Evie," he said. "Do you need a ride?"

A rush of relief washed over me as I rushed into the carriage. Donnie sat back as I climbed inside and settled in the seat across from him. A small lantern burned at his side, illuminating the crisp dark car. I'd never been in a carriage before, but I immediately knew this one was a step above the standard. The seats were a velvety grey and softer than any pillow I'd ever slept on. They fit perfectly with the shimmering green trim lining the edges of the car and the paler green fabric covering the ceiling and floor. The etchings across the green fabric were so detailed, swirling and twisting. It was a work of art in itself, and my boots were stepping right over it.

Donnie hit his fist twice against the carriage wall, and we set forward. The soft motion felt unusual. It was a feeling I was unaccustomed to, smoother than riding in-saddle but close enough to the ground to feel the bumps in the cobblestone. I quickly adjusted.

"You don't know how glad I am to see you," I said.

"That tends to be the effect of my arrival."

"How did you know I was here?"

"Your aunt had an idea of where you might be. She told me you were about to go for a ride when she last saw you."

I nodded. "The stable keep was nice enough to harbor me, after all." I waved my hand. "This started. I was worried I'd never get out of there."

"That's all you were doing, going for a ride?" Donnie looked me over carefully.

I rubbed my wrist. "That's all."

He laced his fingers over his lap. "I hope so."

Please. Please, don't push this.

"Anyways," he said, thankfully ignoring whatever he wanted to say. "Your family seemed quite worried about you. Cass is too, I'm sure that's why he sent me and not an officer. Tensions are pretty high within the ranks as of now."

"Wait. Why isn't Cass here?" I asked. "Not that I'm unhappy to see you, but if he was so worried, why stay at the barn?"

"He's not at the barn. He's at the castle."

"But he said he was going to see me tonight." Maybe I should've just taken the change in plans. I was in no condition to entertain him tonight.

"Perhaps, but there was no way his father was going to let him leave after last night's events. It's too dangerous," he said.

"Not for you."

"I'm not the prince."

I slumped in my seat. Gilow and Jace had really screwed themselves with this one. If Cass wasn't allowed to leave anymore, there was no way I'd be securing any more information for them. They should have expected this outcome.

I jostled in the carriage, feeling pliable. This meant I wouldn't get to see Cass at all. No more chess. No more gushing about Taliver. It wasn't fair for things to end so abruptly between us. Maybe I deserved losing that after what I'd caused today.

"Cass sent you to tell me he won't be visiting any time soon."

"No, actually." Something worrisome crossed Donnie's face, but it lifted back into neutrality a moment later. He reached into his coat and retrieved a folded letter. "He sent me to deliver this."

"What is it?" I took the paper from him, skimming my thumb over the crimson wax seal.

“It’s an invitation. Or rather, a command. For you to come to the castle Wednesday night and have dinner with us.”

“Us?” That was the question that slipped out, but it was one of many. I was being *commanded* to come to the castle? Why? And why would Cass have to command me to do anything?

“It will include you, Cass, myself, and of course, the rest of the courtiers that came with us to Morra, and...His Majesty.”

I almost dropped the letter.

My muscles stiffened. Me? At a table in the castle...with the king? It was a nightmare clawing itself into reality. Cass had to know how uncomfortable this would make me and that I likely wasn’t wanted.

I grasped my chemise like I could reach through my chest and tell my heart to stop panicking. Maybe I was supposed to object, and all that *commanding* nonsense was just for show. I cleared my throat. “I didn’t think I was the type of person the king wanted to have in his company.” *Not when he just banned me from walking the streets.* “He has to know I’m a half-class, right?”

“Believe me, he knows. It’s him who’s demanding your presence, not Cass.”

Ice flushed my veins. This was no false offer then. I really did have to go. And this really was a nightmare. Albeit, a very confusing one.

Why would King Dreux want to meet me? Was he going to tell me to stay away from his son? No, why invite me to dinner with his courtiers if that was the case. He could have sent some soldiers to send the message and kept Cass from ever seeing me again. None of this made any sense. And that terrified me.

The confusion must have been flickering across my face because Donnie leaned forward and gently touched my hand. “All I know is that a certain someone with blonde hair and blue eyes managed to inform His Majesty about his son’s late-night rendezvous with a half-class girl at a brothel, and

now he wants to meet you. He probably assumes you're seeking a mistressship with Cass. If that's the case, he was going to need to meet you sooner or later. Hopefully, you have nothing to worry about."

Hopefully. How non-reassuring that was. "So, you don't think this command has nothing to do with my class?"

Donnie's gaze dropped to the floor. "He doesn't have a problem with people who stay in their place. Frankly, mistressships are the type of place where half-class girls belong, according to him. Be polite, and you'll be fine."

I nodded. A dinner with the king inside the castle. I was wrong. Gilow had gotten exactly what he wanted. I was on my way into enemy territory, whether I liked it or not now. This wasn't a late-night game anymore. This was real.

God, it felt like all of reality had come crashing down on me in only a day. Five, no, six people were dead. The laws were stricter than ever. And now I was headed straight into the lion's den. Things were supposed to be getting better, but I'd never imagined they could be so bad.

The carriage slowed to a stop. I pulled back the curtain covering the window. Light glowed through the barn's small windows, but the familiar hum of the night was missing. The trail and barn sat in dead silence, not a soul to be seen.

"Some seamstresses will be here to fit you tomorrow," Donnie said, leaning back. "It's going to be a formal dinner. A carriage will pick you up before dusk Wednesday, but please don't go out until then. Needing to be ordered out of the cells would be a poor first impression on His Majesty."

"Right." Not that he needed to tell me, I had no intention of going anywhere.

I reached for the door handle.

"Evie." Donnie grabbed my wrist. "About that ride you were on this morning..." My eyes frantically jumped up to his, but Donnie's were soft.

“Even if it was more than just a ride, I wouldn’t have a problem with that. Just tread carefully, especially from here on out.”

Donnie gave me a forced nod. He knew, or at least he suspected. Yet, he was fine with it. Good to know.

I opened the door and ducked out of the carriage. It took no time at all to make it to the barn door. I waved back to the carriage before I slipped inside.

The barn was totally empty. It was surreal to see the bar stools and the sofas completely free during the nighttime. Another oddity in my upside-down new life.

“Finally.” I jumped as the door pulled shut behind me. Auntie Jen latched it a second later. Had she been waiting by the door? “Where’s that friend of yours going?” Auntie asked.

“Home, I suppose. Where are all the patrons?”

“Who knows. At one of the taverns in Southend, or home if they have any sense.” Auntie stopped in front of me and cupped my face. “You alright? Nothing happened to you, did it?”

Nothing I wanted to share. “I’m fine, Auntie. Thanks for sending Donnie to Saddy’s.”

“We figured you’d get back there eventually.” She traced her thumb over my cheek. “You had an old lady worried.”

“I see no old ladies here.”

She smiled, tugging at the loose skin of her cheeks, and kissed my forehead. “You’re a mess. You should let me pour you a bath.” She started away, ready to ignore all the questions I obviously had.

“Wait.” I stopped her. “Did all the girls make it home safe? Is Kat back?” I figured she was since she and Auntie sent Donnie to find me. It was odd that she wasn’t down here waiting too. I’d been pacing holes into the floor when she disappeared. Wouldn’t she do the same?

“Sammy and the rest left before the orders started going out. You know none of them live that far, so I don’t see why they wouldn’t have got back

safe. And Katalin's asleep—has been for a couple hours now. Told her I'd wake her up when you got back."

So, she wasn't worried.

A twinge of frustration shot through me, but I pushed it back. If Kat had to sleep, then she had to sleep. Besides, I needed her rested if she was going to deliver a message for me.

I plucked the corner of the letter in my hand, still unopened. "Don't wake her up. I'll do it. But I would like that bath, though."

Auntie's shoulders dropped. "Whatever you want." She slipped behind the bar just as I settled into one of the stools.

"Oh." She stopped in the doorway and turned back. "And Albo's somewhere around here."

"Why?"

"He got stuck here, and I ain't sending him out now, so he might be here for a bit." She tapped the doorframe and went back about her way. Yet another curiosity. Apparently, Auntie had no qualm about Albo calling this place home until further notice.

I pushed Albo aside and returned my focus to the letter. My fingers danced across the thick paper and the wax seal. The creamy parchment was crisp, and the seal so finely detailed with small vines and roses that I almost didn't want to break it. But I had to read.

I tore the paper up from the seal and unfolded the letter.

Evie,

Firstly, I'm so sorry I'm unable to visit you tonight as we planned. I've been forbidden to leave the castle for the time being, but Donnie has promised to make sure this letter finds its way to you. I'm sure you've heard of the incident last night and the precautions my father has taken to keep Bexbury safe until the perpetrators are caught. I sincerely hope his actions haven't inconvenienced you or your family in any way, but just as my father believes about keeping me tucked away, I think it's for the best. It's safer for

both of us to be away from the city for now, so let us embrace our house arrests together.

Thankfully, we won't be apart for too long. My father recently discovered that I've been slipping away to meet a girl, and now he would very much like to meet you. We're going to have a formal dinner with the courtiers who came with us to Morra, and he wants you to be there. Don't worry, there will only be around nine of us in total, and Donnie will be there too, as his mother is a member of the court. He will tell you anything else you need to know.

Now if you excuse me, I must return to my library. But after becoming accustomed to spending my nights with you, it's not half as interesting. I'm counting the minutes until you arrive.

*Until then, Lovely,
Cass*

I read the letter a second and a third time. I pinched the paper harder each iteration. Cass was so oblivious about everything that was happening. Did he really believe his father was doing any of this for the safety of the people? Or did he want to tip-toe around atrocities to make room for claims of affection?

I shouldn't have cared. Cass's thoughts were irrelevant at the moment. All that mattered was that I got word to Gilow. It was settled that I had to attend this dinner--even Cass didn't bother asking--but I needed guidance, nonetheless. What was I supposed to say? What was I supposed to do? I would be at the same table as the king, and surely Gilow would have special instructions for me. I wanted some kind of plan. Some map to follow.

I folded up the letter and rose from my stool. I hoped Kat had gotten enough sleep because she was about to go on a ride for me.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Daytime visitors were becoming more frequent for us. I wasn't even surprised when Auntie Jen yanked me from bed to greet our guests downstairs—and there were many.

Donnie had told me someone would be coming by to fit me with a gown for dinner, but he didn't mention the tailor's four assistants or the countless bolts of fabric they brought with them. The ladies and their cloth wheels took up almost all of our apartment's living area. By the time they'd hauled in everything, every sofa along with the entirety of Auntie's bed was draped in fabrics, laces, and buttons galore.

Auntie had no idea what was going on, but she didn't object as the plethora of fabrics and notions were brought in. She only eyed me curiously from the staircase while I watched from the doorway. The rustle woke Kat up, and she soon made her way downstairs as well. Though groggy at first, her eyes blinked wide open as soon as she laid them on the wonderland that had grown downstairs. "Such exquisite fabrics!" Kat ran her hands over a reel of royal blue velvet.

I'd never been to Ryland, but I'd heard stories about their ornate fashions, in everything from their clothes to their architecture. The materials ranged from elaborate brocades to intricate laces and lush velvets like the one Kat couldn't stop touching. Aside from a few creamy whites, every reel was

rolled with a sweepingly dark fabric. People back in Aurell must have loved deep shades—in their clothing at least.

The tailor herself, a tall eastern woman who introduced herself as Geane, took notes as her assistants measured me.

“This is a formal event,” Geane said. She jotted down the last of my measurements. “An evening gown will be required. So long as it meets that standard, we will make whatever gown you desire. All you need do is choose the fabric and embellishments, and tell us what style to make it in.”

“Style?” I repeated skeptically.

“Would the lady like a full skirt or a slim skirt?” an assistant asked.

“A low neckline or a high neckline?” another asked.

“A laced back or a button lined?”

“Capped sleeves or off-the-shoulder?”

I tried not to say aloud that it didn’t matter. I may have been going to a royal dinner, but I was also going into battle—not a night of pleasure.

“Off the shoulder,” Kat answered behind me. “We can build from there.”

They worked all morning. Kat pulled my, actually *her*, favorite dresses from our wardrobe and pointed out the aspects of each that I, actually *she*, liked the most. This must have been a fantasy come to life for her; custom designing a gown with royal tailors. I suspected she imagined herself in it every step of the way. No matter, she could have it when I was done.

The only request I made was that my gown’s design be kept on the simpler side. I knew the stereotype for upper-class mistresses—they only cared about their companion’s wealth and loved to show it in gaudy, over-the-top constructions. The thought of falling into that stereotype for the king made my stomach turn. The simpler the dress, the better. And aside from that, I wanted to bring a touch of Morra in with me. Our fashions were never so bold, and if I was going into battle on unfamiliar territory, I wanted to feel a little like myself. With a design settled on, Geane and her ladies loaded up their bolts and accessories and left, promising to return with the finished

product a few hours before dusk the following day. It would be a rushed order, but with Geane's plethora of assistants, I had no doubt it could be done.

Auntie disappeared at some point during the designing. With the barn unlikely to reopen that night, I suppose she wanted to go explore the city. Or maybe meet with Albo, for whatever reason.

Kat darted upstairs the moment Geane and the rest were gone. I followed her up soon after. I'd fallen asleep waiting for her to return after I sent her to tell Gilow about the letter and dinner request, but she hadn't woken me up when she got back. Now was the time to find out what our fearless leader had said.

"Well?" I shut our bedroom door behind me.

"Well, what?" Kat pulled the sheets back over her, ready to settle back into sleep.

"Gilow! You didn't wake me up. What the hell did he say?"

"Oh, he wrote a note." She gestured to the side table near our bed. "I thought you'd already seen it."

I stomped to the table and snatched the note, glaring at her for a moment as she turned over. For someone who had seemed so dedicated to her newfound cause just the other day, she was awfully nonchalant about this now.

I unfolded the thin paper. Compared to Cass's note, which Kat had thankfully also brought back and left on the table, Gilow's was much less impressive. A thin sheet of parchment with scratchy writing scrawled across. There was no 'dear Evelyn.' It only began.

I'd hoped things would progress as such. Be vigilant and observant during your visit. Talk to everyone you can, ask many questions, and venture into every room open to you. If there's a place where the key to our next steps

lies, it's there. Find it, whatever it takes.

If you're clever, you might even be able to prolong your stay. That would be most desirable.

Your family is counting on you,

-G

I slid the paper under the nightstand, deciding not to snap at Kat for leaving things like this in the open.

That was it? Just be observant? I could have told myself that. Gilow didn't have any specific instructions for me, but his last sentence told me everything I needed to know. He didn't need to give me clear-cut information to elicit yet, because he could do that later. This was to be only the *first* time I'd visit the castle. Gilow was expecting me to be invited back again, likely for an overnight visit. It would be "most desirable."

An unsettled feeling crawled up my stomach. I knew I'd agreed to this, but Gilow didn't hesitate at all, expecting me to do *anything* to get Cass to let me stay at the castle. It was like I was just a wind-up toy...

"Are you done?" Kat whined into her pillow. "If so, can you turn that lantern down?"

I gritted my teeth. When had Kat become so irritating? I strode across the room, grabbed the lantern from the arm of our sofa, and carried it and myself out of the room, making sure the door slammed behind me.



I found Auntie in the cellar.

After wasting hours trying to distract myself with volumes of Taliver I'd already read, making an awful omelet, playing a short game of where's Albo—he was asleep in one of the customer's room—and doing anything that

could be considered a natural evolution of pacing, I decided to circle back around to the cellar. I'd seen Auntie entering the dank room with a broom and towels earlier. The secrets I'd been keeping from her seemed to be adding up by the day. If I needed something to do, mending things with her was probably a good idea.

Auntie only looked up for a second as I strolled across the cellar floor and picked up the broom leaning against the wall, then returned her gaze to the table she was wiping down. I swept in silence for a moment before she spoke.

"Those ladies from the castle?" she asked, still not looking up.

I pursed my lips. "They are."

She tucked a few loose strands of silver hair behind her ear and nodded. "They don't work for that other boy you've been spending time with, do they?"

"They do, actually."

"Does Luke know about this?"

"He does." I gripped the broom handle. "I would have told you. I just—"

"Like I said before, Evie, you and Kat don't have to tell me nothing. You're almost a grown woman. What you wanna do is your business." She stopped wiping and looked up at me. "I just want you to be careful, that's all."

"I know."

We returned to our silent cleaning. I was unsure if Auntie was truly angry or not. She wasn't attacking the table with her rag, which she tended to do when she was really angry, but the air around us still felt sharp.

"A dinner, huh?" Auntie asked as she moved to the next table. "At least you'll be able to get some good food for a night."

I relaxed. We were alright. "And have you ever been to a formal dinner, Auntie?" I asked, gliding the tattered broom across the rather dusty cellar floor and feeling a thousand times lighter.

"Once." She swiped a small collection of dirt down to the floor. "When I

was a younger woman.”

I stopped sweeping. I didn’t think the answer would actually be yes. “You never told me about this.”

“You never asked.” Auntie pulled a chair from the table and started working on it. “It was a long time ago. I think I was about eighteen. Yes, I must have been because it was right after your papa turned fourteen, and Louisa was only thirteen.” A rare smile crossed Auntie’s face, remembering the three of them all those years ago.

“Who invited you? And where was it?” Auntie Jen was so stingy with stories taking place before her siblings passed, so when I got them, I pounced.

“It was in Ryland, actually. Before they took hold of Morra. I had a friend, a good friend, who had a sister who was getting married to a man who lived in Hythe.”

“Hythe,” I frowned. “That’s near the border, right?”

She nodded. “My friend invited me to her sister’s wedding. I was young and eager to run off by myself for the first time. I told my papa, your grandfather, I was going. He gave me ten silver coins, which was more money than he’d ever given me before, and sent me off.” Auntie chuckled. “I remember thinking, ‘I would’ve gone on trips before if I knew he’d give me this much coin.’ Hell, that’s probably where Louisa got the idea to leave from.” Her smile faded a bit.

“Anyways.” Auntie waved away the tangent. “I wasn’t expecting anything big. Just a simple ceremony in someone’s front room or maybe at a tavern like we do here.” She paused as her eyes fixed on something I couldn’t see. “But Evie, when we got there to that groom’s house, it was the most marvelous thing I’d ever seen. He lived in this glorious mansion. Carriages were lined down the street dropping off guests. Meanwhile, Jessa, my friend, and I were riding up on a beat-up old horse. Oh, we got so many stares!” Auntie covered her mouth and snickered.

I smiled too. Had I ever seen my aunt so tickled?

“It turned out that Jessa’s sister, who ran off from home over a year earlier, had managed to snare a very wealthy man. Jessa didn’t know none the better! We’d been making jests ‘bout how her husband to be was probably a traveling clown or a butler the entire journey. I can only imagine our faces walking into that grand foyer, in the midst of all those gowns and jewels, while we had dirt on our shoes and dust in our hair from the ride.” She slapped her skirt as if brushing off the dirt from all those years ago. “You know, I think that’s the only reason Jessa’s sister sent for her because they hadn’t never been close before she left. I think she just wanted to see the look on Jessa’s face as she descended those steps in the deepest red dress I’d ever seen. Jessa looked like she was gonna faint with jealousy through the whole ceremony! And after that, we sat through the nicest dinner I’ve ever eaten. It was so much fun! There were games and dancing and so much food. Some of the people were a little uppity, but most of them were nice enough--once they got enough liquor in them. In less than an hour, we were dancing and singing like we’d lived in Ryland all our lives.”

Auntie’s smile was endless and contagious. This was one of her most treasured memories, the type that still brought her joy to think about. Why hadn’t she shared it with me sooner?

Auntie fell into the very same chair she’d been cleaning. I laid the broom down and took the seat next to her. She sighed heavily as the laughter began to drain from her face. “I met a man at that party,” she said, barely above a whisper.

I furrowed my brow. Now this she certainly hadn’t mentioned before.

“I didn’t even realize how much I fancied him until the end of the party,” she admitted. “Jessa and I were about to take our leave, but he stopped me and asked to meet me the next day. We were supposed to leave in the morning, but for some reason, I said yes.” She shook her head slightly. “I think it was me wanting to be rebellious and wild. And at the time, Ryland

seemed new and intriguing. And he, he was mysterious and older than me and so very handsome. Wealthy, of course. Maybe I thought I could end up like Jessa's sister. How stupid that was, had I considered where we were." She fiddled with the rag in her hands. "I stayed there for a whole month. We only met at night, at a townhouse he owned. That was fine with me. I thought the night was more romantic anyway. And when my papa's coin ran out, which was very soon, he let me stay there. It was like a waking dream. We barely ever left the house. You know I think for those few days, I loved him. At least I thought I did."

Sorrow had crept over her so quickly. "What happened?" I whispered.

She cleared her throat. "It wasn't meant to be. Life came crashing down, and he had to leave. I had to leave. But I knew I'd never be able to forget about him." Auntie stared numbly off across the cellar. "Or his dark eyes. That coarse hair." She closed her eyes. "His beautiful deep brown skin."

My heart sank for her. *Oh.*

"Like I said." She wrung the rag in her hand. "It wasn't meant to be. But I wouldn't ever change nothing I did." She stood from the chair and moved on to the next table.

In that instant, pieces started to fall into place in my mind.

"How long ago was this?" I thought out loud.

"Twenty-seven years," she said.

She knew exactly. Again, my heart sank for Auntie as I realized that this month in Ryland had left her with so much more than bittersweet memories.

"What was his name? Your love?" I asked, but I already knew.

She didn't look back. "His name was Alboran. But I called him Albo."

Chapter Twenty-Five



“**B**eautiful,” Geane said.

She and her assistant stepped back. The pair smiled contently next to the gaping Kat.

“Turn around.” Kat twirled her finger. “See for yourself.”

I lifted the weighty skirts of my gown and turned to the mirror behind me. A little gasp escaped my lips as I saw the reflection looking back at me.

The dress was perfection. A deep plum purple satin encircled my arms and hugged my chest from my bosom to my waist, where a sea of fabric poured out from my waist, rippling around me. The dark tint of the purple was a flawless match for my soft brown skin. Layers and layers filled the skirt, but the layer grazing my legs was silky soft. My shoulders and the majority of my arms were free. Off the shoulder sleeves, just as Kat had requested.

My curls were braided into a perfect crown around my head, leaving only the smallest spirals free to frame the sides of my face. Pearl pins shone through the braided brown. Apparently, they once belonged to my late Aunt Louisa. A quiet pain had covered Kat’s features as Geane pressed her mother’s hairpins into my curls, but neither of us said anything.

I spun back around, letting the layers of my skirt billow around me, and looked over my shoulder to see my back. A row of satin buttons fell from the

top of the fabric into my skirts, then disappeared into their waves. A simple gown, but easily the most extravagant thing I'd ever worn.

I stared at my reflection for a long while. While I'd told myself my appearance was irrelevant, I had to admit, the girl I saw in the mirror—she truly was beautiful.

“Don't forget the shoes!” As if she'd had servants all her life, Kat snapped at Geane's assistant and pointed down at my feet. I felt the urge to apologize for my cousin immediately, but the assistant didn't seem to mind. Without qualm, she retrieved the shoes from the sofa and knelt on the floor before me. I lifted my skirts so she could slide the silver-heeled slippers onto my feet. A flawless fit, both of them. Allowing Geane to steal one of my most comfortable pairs of boots for sizing was well worth it.

I dropped my skirts and offered my hands down to the assistant. She hesitated for a moment, then took them and smiled softly as I helped her up. She stepped away, and Kat took her place before me.

“You look like Auntie Mai,” Kat said. Her honey eyes flittered over me.

Did she really mean that, or was she just saying it? She was older, so I suppose she would remember my mother's appearance more than me.

She grazed the fabric looping my upper arms. “More or less.”

“We should get going, Miss,” Geane said. She and her assistant had cut it quite close. Dusk was just beginning to fall over Bexbury. I didn't know how long the ride to the castle was, but by carriage, it couldn't be less than an hour.

“You best be off then.” Kat exhaled a smile. “I'll be sure to tell Auntie how lovely you looked before you left.”

Auntie seemed to have disappeared yet again. I hoped she wasn't regretting revealing anything to me yesterday. I would've liked to see her before I left. Tonight felt like a night I should have seen her.

Kat followed us out of the apartment and through the main floor. Geane and her assistant helped carry my skirts as we went, keeping them out of the

dirt once we were outside. In the street, two sets of carriages waited. The first was a small, brown car with a single door on the side. The second was a smooth black, twice the size of its companion, with two adjacent doors on its side. Both were led by a pair of familiar black steeds and accompanied by drivers in coats of such dark green they almost passed for grey.

Geane and her assistant led me to the black carriage, for which the drivers held open the doors. I stepped into the car and sunk onto the velvety green bench. Geane's assistant pulled a cloth from the pocket of her dress and took it upon herself to wipe away the dirt from the bottom of my slippers. I felt like a snob, letting her do so, but I didn't question it. Wouldn't want to track dirt into this immaculate carriage.

"We pray you have a lovely evening, Miss Evelyn," Geane said when her assistant was finished.

"You're not riding with me?" I asked. The seat across from me was completely empty, and there was enough room for one person on each of my sides.

"We'll ride ahead of you," she said. "Good evening."

She and her assistant scurried away, and the carriage door clicked shut before I could say another word. The other carriage was so tiny in comparison. But if this is what Cass, or his father, had ordered, then who was I to disagree.

The reins outside snapped, and the car jerked forward. We were en route to the most important mission of my life.

I wouldn't waste it.

Chapter Twenty-Six



The tiny curls at the sides of my face blew back as the carriage doors swung open, revealing a new world.

A footman extended a hand to me. I took it and stepped out of the carriage. My eyes flitted up, expecting to face the mammoth entrance of the castle.

But we weren't at the castle's entrance at all. I'd passed by our former king's residence a handful of times in the past. The entranceway was unmistakable. A grey bricked walkway rolled out from the trees and stretched over the yard, bordered with a little wall on each side. At its end stood the castle. A tall, symmetrical structure from the front, its pale grey captured every ounce of moonlight cast over it. It was a masterpiece of glowing windows, rounded towers, and looming wooden doors.

This was not that entrance.

We'd circled around to the side of the castle. Trodden grass crunched under my slippers. Rather than a grand entrance, a small set of old wooden doors pinched between beaten bricks laid a few paces ahead. A twisting, pathetic feeling wrapped around my stomach.

Only back entrances for girls like me.

I clenched my skirts, almost wanting to rip them away as I walked across the dead grass. One of the men jumped ahead of me and pulled one of the

doors open. My skirts rustled as they squeezed through the slender doorway.

“Keep straight,” the man said, then shut the door behind me.

Left alone, I started down the slender corridor. At least a half dozen doors lined each side, all uniformly bland. Cracks ran through the dull stones that comprised the walls, which were quite noticeable even in the uneven light dripping from the lanterns and candles hung haphazardly around the hall. I passed a couple sets of doors, my slippers clicking against the stone floor. The wood and massive black hinges of each door mimicked one another. This wasn't what I imagined when I'd pictured the inside of the castle. In my imagination, every room and corridor was lined with crown molding and filled with gilded furniture. But this? This was about as luxurious as the barn.

I glided past an open door. A hint of laughter echoed into the hall. A pair of women, each very dark, were talking about something I couldn't quite make out. One of the women perched back on a small bed—one of at least four in the room. Her friend, whose back was to me, fiddled with the tie of her apron. Her friend was wearing one with the same lace trim.

The woman on the bed's eye caught on to me, and I quickly hurried ahead. The conversation stopped, and a second later, I heard their door slam shut. Something fiery and shameful washed over me.

He sent me through the servants' quarters. Because that's what I am, a servant.

If the fancy dress and carriage had fooled me, this was to be my rude awakening. I hadn't even met the king yet, but he was already putting me in my place.

Did Cass know that this was how I would arrive? Did he care?

My slippers clattered violently against the stone floor. Fine. His Majesty wanted to play games, then so be it. All he'd succeeded as was showing me a far less guarded entrance into his castle. I'd be sure to tell Gilow about it.

After what seemed like an endless journey down the servants' corridor, I ran into a thin door at the very end. Two more halls branched off to the sides,

but my driver had said to keep straight, so that's what I would do. I pushed the door open and stepped into a small closet of sorts. Aprons, shoes, and bonnets lined parts of the walls and shelves harboring buckets, rags, and the like cluttered the rest. Except for the wall across from me, which was draped in a thick red curtain. Had the driver lied to me?

A sliver of light snuck out from under the curtain. I pulled the curtain aside and found yet another door. I pressed it, and it easily popped open. Vivid yellow light flooded my sight. I eagerly stepped out into it.

I lost my breath.

A lush red rug spilled out into the hall before me. Dozens of torches lined the corridor, along with a dozen more golden candelabras to match, leaving the hallway as bright as any day. Thin tables clung to the walls, covered in vases, flowers, and other lovely things which existed only to be so. A pleasant rose scent, one that probably never left the hall, swirled around me like it wanted to lift me off my feet.

This was the castle I'd imagined.

I pressed the door closed, marveling at how it clicked perfectly into the wall. The lining was nearly invisible. But a simple hidden door wasn't going to keep my attention for long. I had one of those back home. I slowly crept further down the lavish hallway, letting my heels sink into the carpet with each step. Dozens of paintings, larger than life, larger than me, covered across the walls. Scenes of battles, victories, naval attacks. The theme was obvious. Though several of the works were violent and messy, they were entrancingly vivid—dark but stunning. Staring into each felt like falling into their world.

"Evie!"

I jumped and turned to the source of the call.

Cass beamed at the end of the hall. He jogged towards me and the naval battle I'd frozen in front of. How had he found me so quickly? Perhaps he'd known I'd be coming from a servant's corridor. I tried not to think about that.

My heart skipped. Cass was dressed differently tonight. His casual riding pants and shirt were replaced with snug black pants and glossy boots. A dark blue coat, the color I imagined the deepest part of the sea to be, lined with silver buttons and trim, fell from his shoulders, around his arms, and down almost to his knees. Even his part was different, with hair swooping over his forehead and dancing over his eye. He was the definition of dashing. It struck me, *Like an actual prince.*

“Lovely...” He slowed before me and let his eyes drop from the top of my head all the way to the hem of my skirt. The tremor in his mouth as he brought his eyes back up to mine sent a flush of fire over my cheeks. “You look—”

“If you say like a princess, I will leave.”

He picked up my hands and touched his lips to my burning cheek. “Nothing less than a goddess,” he whispered.

My eyes fluttered to the rug below. If I looked at him, I think I might have melted away. But I put myself back together as he slid my hand into his arm.

“Thank you for coming,” he said as he led us leisurely down the hall.

“I figured if I didn’t, you would send in the cavalry to drag me here.”

“No, not the cavalry. I’d come to get you myself,” he said.

“You think you could take me all by yourself? I’m insulted.”

“You’re right. I’d need a stack of books to lure you away.”

I smirked. “That’s much better.”

The lull of a conversing room faded in ahead of us. My fingers gripped Cass’s arm tighter than I intended to.

The court.

The King.

Cass placed his palm over my hand. “I know you weren’t expecting this,” he said. “I would have deterred him if I could, but when Father’s made up his mind, there’s usually no changing it.”

“It’s fine,” I insisted. “I’m just a bit nervous. This isn’t exactly like my normal circles.”

“Midnight races and impossible ponds are usually out of my realm, but I adjusted. What is one small dinner compared to any of that?”

There he went again, making everything sound so simple. “You’re right, Cass. A night in your life should be a piece of cake compared to the unending adventure that is mine.”

He smiled and stared at the floor for a heartbeat. “One small thing, and don’t take any offense, but you should probably call me Cassian in front of the rest.”

“Cassian?” The name was unfamiliar on my tongue. Had I ever said it aloud?

“My father’s a bit particular about names and titles. He hates catching Donnie calling me Cass, let alone anyone else.”

Let alone a lowly half-class like me.

“Should I call you Prince Cassian then?” I tried not to sneer. “And are there any other self-adjustments I need to make?”

“All you have to do is be yourself, just a little more politely than usual.” He looked down at me; a soft worry, but also hope, glimmered in his green eyes. “And if all else fails, simply smile and say, ‘I agree.’ They love to hear that.”

Be agreeable.

I gripped his arm. “Thank you for the sound advice.”

We turned into a new hall and through a tall, wide-open set of doors. From there, we entered a grand sitting room. Countless sofas stuffed to the brim with padding, sitting chairs built with gold and silver legs, and tables polished to the point of being blinding were organized over dozens and dozens of ornate rugs. But as exquisite as the decor was, they couldn’t hold a candle to the people they hosted.

There were only eight or so men and women, not counting the several

dark-class servants waiting patiently against the walls for instructions. All the men wore coats in the same style as Cass's but most a thousand times more flamboyant. The shimmering gold of their coat linings and the shine of their boots were enough to make me blink my eyes. The women looked more dress than people. Thick brocades filled their skirts, and elaborate laces and rows of gems danced around their necks and sleeves. Each gown was a marvel of detail and complexity. For a moment, I found myself wishing I'd asked for something more elaborate myself.

"He's back!" a familiar voice called from the back of the group. It helped me relax the moment it hit my ears. In perhaps the most fashionable deep red coat in the room, Donnie raised a glass of what must have been wine to Cass and me, and the conversation dwindled as all eyes turned to us.

"And with a girl," said a balding man with a belly trying to burst out of his vest.

"It's the girl," a dark woman with a plunging purple neckline lined with sparkling lavender jewels said calmly.

"Is this her, my prince?" asked an older woman craning her head, which was piled with aged white hair, around from the sofa she rested in.

So, I was *the* girl? I could make do with that.

"I hope I'm her," I said before Cass could answer. "But if you see any other girls called Evelyn running around the castle, please let me know."

A wave of laughter washed through the room. A good first start.

"My prince, bring her here. Let me get a closer look at this beauty." A man of equal age to the elderly woman rose to assist her off the sofa as Cass led me through piles of decor towards the court. The feeling of being Gilow's toy, now in Cass's hands to display, came back to me. But I had no time to focus on it as the court met us halfway, soon completely bombarding us. Donnie winked at me as he stopped behind a sofa across from us.

Cass introduced his companions one by one. The names were a blur, a string of Sirs and Ladies. I hoped interactions over the course of the night

would help me commit more of their names to memory. For the time being, the only ones that stuck were Lady Anne, the elderly woman. Lady Lilith, the very dark woman with the plunging neckline who, for obvious reasons, I deduced to be Donnie's mother. And Sir West, an overly jovial man of a short and stumpy build, whose gut was trying to break free from the confines of his clothing.

The person I was most anticipating was absent. King Dreux was nowhere to be found. I knew he wasn't here from the moment everyone settled around us, even before they introduced themselves. None of them had that kingly air to them. Then again, I hadn't pegged Cass as a prince when I first met him, but I had a feeling tonight would be different with his father.

"My prince," Kaya said. At least, I thought I'd heard someone call her Kaya. She was blonde and wrapped in pink lace. "Tell us how you met this creature." She lowered herself and the piles of dress around her down onto a long sofa, and the rest of the court took seats as well.

A couple of the men, led by Donnie, reorganized chairs so we could all sit near each other. Cass and I sat back on a smaller sofa across from the blonde woman. He took my hand, and our fingers locked together over my skirts—an act which didn't go unnoticed by the ladies in the room. A tinge of heat brushed my cheeks as a pair of them whispered something just out of earshot. I hadn't expected Cass to be so outright about us. But then again, if they all thought I intended to become his mistress, what was the point in hiding anything?

"I've already told you that story, Lady Kaya," Cass finally answered.

"Did you forget already?" Donnie smirked at her as he propped his feet up on the small table between our group.

"I don't forget anything!" Lady Kaya said, running her delicate hands over her skirt. "I only want you to recount it in the presence of your beloved, so we can deduce what was truth and what was fantasy. Your tale was too fantastical to be based entirely in reality."

“And what was fantastical about my recount?” Cass asked. Suddenly, I wanted him to retell the story too. Surely, he hadn’t told them everything about what happened.

“The part where this beauty wanted to talk to you,” the jovial Sir West said, lifting his hand to me over his potbelly. A chuckle ran through the court, and Cass only smiled and shook his head.

“Titles tend to bring that sort of attention,” a sharp but feminine voice cut through the laughter. My gaze shot to Lady Lilith, who lounged in a wide armchair. Her arms rested on the sides so that her deep brown bosom was free to all. “Especially a title like Prince.”

“Mother,” Donnie said.

“A title which I concealed for quite some time,” Cass said, coming to my rescue. “Nothing was known to her when we first ran into each other. If you’d listened to the story the first time, you might have known that, Lilith.”

Lady Lilith pursed her lips.

I marveled at Cass for a second. Who knew he could be so assertive? This was the same Cass I’d seen briefly when Luke and I had our run-in with that officer. Was this who *Prince* Cassian was? If so, exactly how different was he from my Cass?

“Such silly things, titles are,” a scrawny orange-hued man said. He took a sip from the goblet he balanced between his fingers and matched eyes with me. “I understand that your old king, Ferdinand or something, had no title system or courtiers at all. I couldn’t imagine living in a kingdom without a proper structure like that. How wild it must have been!” He raised his goblet to the others and laughed as if it were a joke in itself. Lady Kaya giggled in agreeance.

Wild? Why? Because there were no boxes to trap everyone in?

“On the contrary, I’ve been told things were a lot simpler then.” I couldn’t stop myself. “Without all of the complexities we inherited from your great country. After all, there’s no structure in the forest, yet it continues to

thrive. Isn't nature the greatest kingdom of all, Sir--" I froze, realizing I had forgotten this man's name.

"Don't mind Percy," a tanned brunette woman with sharp cheekbones sitting alongside Lady Kaya said. I couldn't quite remember her name. "He's only pointing out that Morra's way of doing things felt a little too loose. Lack of proper organization collapses even the most prosperous of nations. After all, isn't that why the great God gave us differences, to help us separate ourselves into our divine purposes? That is the superior way. Through his guidance, all men and women have a natural sense of camaraderie within their community. It too is simple, but it's structured simplicity." She paused briefly, and I couldn't help but think she was reciting from a memorized book rather than saying anything she truly meant. The quiver in her features for a moment made it feel as if *she* knew that too. She went on, "who are we to disagree with the great God?"

She and the other courtiers watched me intently. My blood boiled. This had to be a test. I was supposed to say that they were correct. Ryland had brought needed godliness and structure to my unholy and disorganized little country. What used to be my country.

I glanced at Cass, but he didn't move. Even his eyes seemed to have turned to stone briefly. He wasn't going to step in this time. Defending our relationship was one thing, but proclaiming a loyalty for Ryland, the old religion, and the representatives before me was something I had to do on my own. Even Donnie stayed quiet, but he warned me with his eyes. Now was not the time to speak up.

I squeezed Cass's hand and dredged up a smile. "I agree."

A hum of consensus rippled through the court. I'd kept most of their approval for the time being.

The mood in the room lightened soon after, and thankfully so. After I more or less claimed submission to their thoughts on Morra, they welcomed me with open arms. When not discussing the structure of nations, I found that

members of the court were actually quite fun to talk to. An intoxicating playfulness bounced around them. I requested stories about Aurell and found almost all of my companions wholly shocked to discover I'd never visited before, let alone never having left Morra at all. Well, all except for Lady Lilith, who subtly added that she "wasn't surprised."

I pried into the court's responsibilities within Ryland without making it seem like I was too interested. Still, frustratingly, every one of my attempts was dismissed with the wave of a hand and a comment about it being too boring to linger upon.

Amid the buzz of our conversation, attention somehow turned to the grand piano sitting idly near the far corner of the room. Amongst the clutter of lavish décor, it had been invisible to me until now.

Lady Kaya jumped from the sofa and beckoned the woman with the sharp cheekbones at her side to follow. "Oh, Lady Irene, you must play a song for us!"

"No, I can't." Lady Irene blushed.

"Yes, you can," Donnie said as if they'd done this song and dance before.

"You must!"

The court cheered. A response which I'm sure was her only reason for denying in the first place. Lady Irene continued to bathe in the pleas of her friends but made no real attempt to hinder them.

"You play, Lady Irene?" I asked, adding to her swarm of attention.

"Quite horribly, I'm afraid." She batted her eyes and folded her hands over her lap, looking slightly away. Good god, how much egging did she want?

"That's a lie," Cass gently tsked.

"Almost as false as her modesty," Lady Lilith said.

For the first time since we met, I agreed with her.

"Awful or not," I said, "I think horrible talents are just as entertaining as masters, so you must play."

Sir West broke into a hearty laugh, and Lady Lilith grinned in a way that was almost as loud. Lady Irene's face flushed a red that seemed more malicious than embarrassed as her dark eyes cut into me. I hadn't meant to offend her, but she shouldn't have expected so much cajoling, especially from a stranger. If Lady Lilith's reaction said anything, she did this sort of thing quite often.

Cass rose from my side and offered his hand to Lady Irene. Her sharp glance melted into something soft as she looked up at him.

"There's only one way to prove your talents now," he said. "And if Evelyn insists, then so do I."

If Cass insisted, then she had no choice. Lady Irene delicately took his hand and rose from the sofa. She put up no fight. I suppose the special request from her prince was enough to satiate her for now.

"You have no idea what you've done," Lady Lilith whispered to me as Cass led Irene to the piano bench.

"She'll be playing all night now," she said.

Our party migrated toward the grand piano. Lady Lilith, Donnie, and I lagged at the back of the group. Lady Irene fussed with her gown at the bench for at least a minute but miraculously finished right as the entire group had settled around the piano and in the sofas nearby.

The murmur of our conversation died down as she gracefully lifted her hands to the keys. A moment of silence lingered for dramatic effect, then, she began to play.

Her fingers floated across the keys, a ballad of chords and notes filled the air. The tempo was soft, but the melody was complex. Each of her fingers graced the keys at the moment of delicate precision.

The song was like a lullaby. Each note echoed into the next, like a whisper passing from one another. Each tone rustled like the wind, singing over all of us. The song beckoned me in, drawing me away into a waking dream. I never knew such beauty could exist only in sound.

The tempo of Lady Irene's lullaby slowed even more, and soon it dropped to only a distant lull. With one final, enchanting chord, the song came to a close as the last notes evaporated into the air.

The room was totally still, all of us as unmoving as the furniture, completely enthralled in the remnants of the song. Irene took a deep breath and dropped her hands back to her lap. Cass, still at her side, was the first to clap. Then a full ovation erupted. Well, as much as nine people could muster—the servants against the wall didn't move at all. Donnie was the most enthusiastic audience member, and even his mother contributed, though she looked anything but impressed.

"Thank you, thank you." Lady Irene pressed a hand to her chest. "I suppose I'm not as out of practice as I thought."

Lady Lilith whispered to her son, unintentionally lending her voice to me as well. "Weren't we just at a miniature concert she hosted at her manor two months ago?"

"One month ago, Mother," Donnie said, still clapping.

"Feigned ineptitude or not, that was a lovely performance." Lady Kaya glanced back to us with all the sweetness in the world. Where was that sweetness when she and Sir Percy had taken it upon themselves to examine the complexities of what used to be my country?

"I have to side with Lady Lilith." I inserted myself into the conversation. "It would have been a sweeter performance if it didn't need to be coaxed out."

Lady Kaya twirled a strand of her bright tresses around her finger. Paying closer attention to her hair than I had before, I noticed the tiny specks of brown growing from the roots of her brilliant blonde hair. "To each their own then."

Lady Irene began a livelier song. This time it was a waltz. Not the type of song I expected her to play. But as I saw Cass and Sir Percy giving instructions to the waiting servants, who proceeded to move furniture back

from the piano, I realized that she was playing from request. Lady Kaya, along with Donnie, drifted away, leaving me temporarily alone with his mother.

“He must really like you,” Lady Lilith said. She lounged casually, with her arm balancing over the back of our sofa and fingers tapping the glazed wood lining. “We’ve never had the pleasure of meeting one of Cassian’s female companions before.” She glanced down at her hand as if she were admiring the gaudy rings anointing them. “I wonder what makes you different.”

Was she trying to insult me?

“You should ask His Majesty. He invited me.”

Lilith’s eyes locked on mine. To my surprise, concern bubbled up behind them. She pulled both her hands back over her skirts, locking eyes with me.

“You should be—” She stopped herself. “Excuse me.” She yanked up her skirts and trekked across the room.

She disappeared through a small door on the other side of the room, leaving me more than confused. I should be what? Worried?

Careful?

I didn’t have much time to think about it. Cass was on his way over, gently skirting by others, with a hand held out to me.

“Dance with me.” A light glimmered in his eyes.

“Is that an order, my prince?” I asked, drawing out the title the court so loved to address him by.

“Only if you say no.”

I took his hand, and we practically ran over to the space cleared by the servants. Lady Kaya, Sir Percy, Lady Anne, and the equally aged Sir Bundy had already formed two pairs, and we happily made the third. I noted Donnie and Sir West lounging back on a nearby sofa together. For a moment, I wondered why they weren’t dancing too. Perhaps there was no partner for Sir West, but Donnie had initially slipped away with Kaya.

Suddenly, an unwelcome thought hit me. Donnie wouldn't be dancing as there was no dark-class partner for him. My heart sunk, but something about the way he was smiling at Sir West made me wonder. Perhaps Donnie wasn't interested in dancing with ladies...

Cass lifted my left hand to his shoulder, then gently clasped my right before his other hand dropped to my waist. My stomach fluttered. His touch was feather-light.

"Ever waltzed before?" he asked.

"I've walked before. I assume it's the same but with more spinning."

He grinned. "That's exactly correct."

With no proper instruction, our dance began. My first steps were disastrous. I stepped on Cass's toes so many times that I expected to find scuff marks when we were done. My skirts didn't help me in the least—they were an unnatural barrier between us. Thought least I had the blessing of a patient partner. The first song was rough, but by the second, I had my footing.

"A fast learner in all things, I see," Cass said.

We swayed across the floor.

"I'm a prodigy." I dared to close my eyes and bask for just a moment.

"How long did it take you to learn? A year? Two?"

"You know, I think I was born with the talent. An inherent ability of all royals."

I was going to inquire about the waltzing ability of Cass's presumably commonborn mother, but I quickly stopped myself.

"You know what this reminds me of?" Cass whisper brushed my ear. "Taliver, Volume eight. When Taliver and his men impersonate the knights of Farmington and infiltrate the Sky Witch's ball—"

"So they can steal her crystal scepter!" I giggled, comparing the castle and room around us to the event I imagined from the book. "This is exactly like that."

Cass beamed, and his glee spread over me too. “The question is,” he asked, pulling me closer with the next step, “who here has the scepter?”

This was a game I’d love to play. “If Taliver has taught me anything, it’s likely the person we’d least expect.”

“Naturally,” Cass said. “So that eliminates Lady Kaya and Sir Percy.” I furrowed my brows at him. “They’re too saccharine. Of course, they would wield the most powerful relic of light magic. It’s too obvious.”

“Fine then,” I said. “What about Donnie, with Sir West at his side? I don’t mean to be rude, but there has got to be more than belly hiding under Sir West’s coat.”

Cassian chuckled. “Maybe, but I don’t think they have it either.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’re the *least* obvious. No one thinks it will be their best friend who would betray them, which automatically makes them the most obvious. The witch would never be so straightforward.”

“A brilliant deduction. Who does that leave?” Both of us glanced over to Lady Anne and Sir Bundy—our clear-cut culprits.

Cass ran his eyes over them in feigned seriousness. “It’s the only possibility.”

“Well, your logic is more than sound, my dear Cassian, but I have to disagree. You forget about one possibility, and I’m positive that they are the real concealer of the scepter.”

“Who?”

“It’s you.”

“Me?” Cass’s smile grew.

“It’s obviously the person who’s trying to convince me that someone else has it. It’s been a while since I read the eighth volume, but I haven’t forgotten that the actual wielder of the crystal scepter was one of Taliver’s own men. You gave yourself away from the start.”

Cass sighed. “You discovered me. Were we actually in Taliver and at the

Sky Witch's ball, I would happily forfeit my life to you now."

"Since we're stuck here in the real world, I'll accept your concession as payment enough."

Cass spun me around with zeal and kept me upright with the hand clenched against my waist. I laughed heartily as my skirts billowed around us then crashed into his legs like waves. His green eyes glimmered with joy, and in their reflection, I could see a joy of my own. More than I thought my own eyes could hold. Another little moment adding up to forever.

No sooner had I come to this conclusion did Cass's stunning eyes widen. He dropped his grip on my waist and grabbed my hand instead. "Come with me."

"To where?" I asked as he led us towards a small set of doors opposite the side we'd entered.

"To Taliver."

We ran through the doors, out of the great room, and into a torch-lit corridor. A blur of doors, tall windows, and dark paintings whisked around us, but we were moving too hastily for me to properly take in any of it.

The hall opened up to a lofty staircase, overlooking an open sitting area dressed in the same furnishings as the room we'd abandoned the court in. Cass led me up the staircase, the thick green and gold carpet under each step feeling like wispy clouds, then across a landing and up a second flight of stairs. We stepped out into a lengthy hallway. Bloated grey curtains boxed spaced windows on one side, and equally sparse single doors lined the other. Only a few candelabras dotted the hall, casting it in an ethereal mix of silver moonlight and golden firelight.

Cass didn't look back at me before he started us down the mysterious hall, moving at a slower pace that matched the aura of the corridor. A few of the doors we passed were open. I expected to see bed chambers inside, but I saw nothing of the sort. Instead, there were settees, desks, tables covered with papers. This hall was not for bedrooms.

Cass stopped us halfway down the hall, right at the edge of a door half ajar. The whisper of a voice crept out into the hall.

He turned and pressed a finger to his lips, then slipped past the door with all the caution and quiet in the world. He motioned for me to follow. Trying to follow his example, slipped past it as well. I crossed through the light shining from within and couldn't help but peek in. I didn't see much, but I saw the man's ink-black hair. The same hair Cass had.

The King.

Before I could get a better look, Cass pulled me further down the hallway. My head kept flipping back to the half-open door. What was King Dreux doing in there? Something important enough to put off his dinner with the court, although that likely didn't matter to him. Whatever he was doing, Cass didn't want his father to know we were passing by, so it had to be something I shouldn't know about.

I had to find out what was going on in that room.

Cass took me all the way to a pair of slim cream-colored doors. He grabbed the small handles and swung them open, then stepped aside for me to enter.

It was a library. Compact shelves stuffed with books of every shape and color stacked up the walls. Cozy didn't even begin to describe it. The room wasn't even the width of Kat and I's bedroom. But it made up for that in height. The shelved walls extended up and up, like two high-ceilinged floors were stacked over each other. A black iron spiraled staircase hugged one of the corners, leading up to a wrapped balcony halfway up the room. Both levels hosted ladders that were propped against waiting shelves. Two plump armchairs and a small table brushed against each other in the center of the bottom floor.

Stepping over the faded red carpet, I craned my neck up to admire the little library, hearing Cass click the doors shut behind us.

"Not very impressive, I know." Cass breezed past me and ran his fingers

across a row of books on a nearby shelf. “Our library back home is a thousand times more apt.” He slid one of the ladders over to the center of the shelves and hopped up the steps. “The organization here is horrendous, but I managed to work out some sort of logic in it.”

Cass scanned over the shelf with a trained eye and pulled two books out.

“Were librarian skills also something you were born with?” I asked.

He jumped down from the ladder, books in hand. “Maybe, just not from my father. My mother’s family owns a small bookshop near their residence. My mother told me she used to work there when she was younger, just for fun, really. She used to spend hours in our library at the palace. Made sure every book was perfectly placed.”

From book shop clerk to Queen—now that was a story I’d like to hear.

Cass held up the two books in his hands. Not just any books. I recognized the burgundy trim on the spine.

“Volume twenty-two and volume twenty-three,” he said. “Now that you’ve finished twenty-one.”

“You remembered.” I took the books from his hands. The covers were dusty, but the spines were barely cracked. Nothing like the well-loved condition each of my volumes was in. “If you had these volumes here all along, why haven’t you already brought them to me?”

He faltered for a moment as an adorable light red wisped across his face. “Honestly, I was keeping them in case I needed an excuse to visit you.”

I smiled. This was the Cass I knew.

“So, Sir Librarian, how long do I have before I need to return these? I wouldn’t want to keep any other patrons waiting.”

“Well.” Cass rubbed his chin. “Given the number of readers this library services and the demand for these particular volumes, I expect them back no later than half a century.”

I saw a shining opportunity to get myself back into the castle if need be—no mistress-ing required. “And if I finish them before their due date,” I

stepped closer to Cass, “Can I come to return them myself?”

Cass’s mood sunk, and so did mine. I understood in a second that, for whatever reason, he wasn’t planning on inviting me back, and I would only embarrass myself by asking again. He crossed his arms. “Keep them.”

I forced a smile and settled into one of the reading chairs. The style of these armchairs compared to the furniture downstairs was refreshingly simple. The same could be said for its accompanying table. They must have been leftovers from when our king occupied this castle. I suppose the reading room went overlooked when the castle’s interior was replaced with the imported Ryland decor.

Cass collapsed into the chair next to me. His thick hair flew around his face before settling back into position. It was quick, but for a moment, as his hair danced through the air, I thought I saw a light purple mark hiding at the edge of his forehead.

“Are we ever actually going to have dinner?” I asked, ignoring my observation until I could get a better look.

“Eventually.” Cass crossed his boot over his knee. “Whenever my father decides to come down.”

Down from his mysterious little room that we couldn’t be seen crossing. “What exactly is he doing that’s so important?” I dared to ask.

“What he always does; whatever he wants.” That was all the answer I was going to get from him. If I wanted to know more, I’d have to investigate for myself. But how?

Until I worked that out, I needed a reason to stay on this floor.

“Read to me, Cass.” I reached over the arm of my chair and offered him the twenty-second volume.

He hesitantly took the copy. “Out loud?”

I nodded, snuggled into the cushions of my chair, and pretended my skirts were a blanket over my legs. “Please?”

He obviously wasn’t eager to do so, but I pleaded with my eyes, and he

soon succumbed with a slight smile. “Do you remember how the last volume ended?” He cracked open the book to the first of its many pages.

“The ivory thieves abandoned Taliver on the island of stars, with no chance of escape and half a healing potion. I genuinely have no idea how he’s going to get back to the mainland.”

Cass smiled in the way he did when he wasn’t trying to spoil anything for me. “Allow me to enlighten you.” He began to read. A monotone narrator at first, I could tell he wasn’t accustomed to reading for others. But within only a few pages, Cass shifted into the most enthusiastic of orators. From our first meeting, I remembered him naming volume twenty-two as one of his favorites. It wasn’t hard to see why. All the magic in the world was encapsulated within those pages, and his passion for the words only drew me in further. For a while, we were on an adventure together. Cass, Taliver, and I.

Someone rapped against the doors. Cass stopped mid-sentence as the slim doors flew open. A maid—a full-figured, very dark girl with her hair pulled back into a tight bun—stepped inside but jumped back when she saw us.

She bowed her head. “I’m so sorry to interrupt your highness,” she squeaked. “His Majesty and the court are waiting for you. It is time for dinner.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven



How long had we spent tucked away in the library? A quarter-hour? Half? A full hour? Who knew how long we kept the court, and the king, waiting? His Majesty was probably not used to the task, let alone accepting of it.

The maid led us back through the castle, down to the first floor. Cass slid my hand into his arm as we approached the doors of the dining hall. His muscles were tense under his coat. With each step, his gaze hardened. Lady Lilith said he'd never invited a girl to meet the court before. This was new for him too. But he didn't ask to introduce me, the king asked to see me. I had expectations to meet, and if I was lucky, surpass.

Arriving late was not putting me off to a good start.

The doors of the dining hall, another tall, imposing pair, stood wide open, with a guard posted before each. The lighting changed as we entered. It was darker, dimmer. The candles protruding from the chandeliers above seemed to give off the least amount of light required of them. The candelabras lighting the table were no more eager to share their light with the room. They succeeded only in lighting the table's guests in an eerie glow.

Sir Percy was the first to recognize Cass and my entrance only a moment after we passed through the open doors. He rose to his feet, and the rest of the court did the same. In an instant, the entire table was standing, all except for

the figure at the head of the table. The backs of the dining chairs were tall. I could only see the grey sleeve of his coat and his fingers tapping the curve of his chair's arm.

The servants lining the wall bowed, and a couple Sirs of the court did as well.

But still, *he* didn't move.

My heart clenched, my stomach squeezed, and my veins pulsed under my skin. I couldn't be afraid. I would not be intimidated. This was nothing more than an assignment, and I'd face it with the courage I carried on all our missions.

Two seats were left open, one right next to the head of the table and another next to that.

"Finally," the king said.

We passed the edge of the table, and his face was revealed to me.

His hair was longer than Cass's but of the same thick black hue. His jaw stern, even under the thin layer of stubble running over it.

His skin was the lightest shade of tan. Like he had spent all day basking in the sun, although the shadows would have suited him better. Not until Cass pulled out a chair for me, thankfully the one not at his father's side, did he finally bother to bring his eyes to me. They weren't the same lively green as his son's. They were dull. A dull, dead hazel. They scanned over every inch of me, examining every mark, curve, and curl. Suddenly, every flaw in my person became aware to me. Every twitch of my muscles, every rustle of my dress. Under his scrutiny, I felt as far from perfection as one could be.

Cass took his place between his father and me. The barrier between us helped ease my discomfort but didn't distract me from my purpose here. My enemy was only a seat away from me.

Play nice.

"We apologize for keeping you all waiting," Cass said. With him seated, the rest of the court returned to their seats as well. "We were preoccupied."

“I’m sure you were,” King Dreux said, his eyes still lingering on me. Lady Lilith snickered across from me. I blushed horribly.

“Evelyn, isn’t it?” His Majesty asked. As if he didn’t know my name. If the court knew so much about me, then so must he, if not more. I was going to play nice, but I couldn’t let him walk all over me. He wasn’t going to dismiss me before I ever even said a word.

“King Dreux, isn’t it?” I asked, tilting my head ever so slightly.

His rhythmic tapping halted. My heart pounded furiously against my ribs. “You’re unsure of your own king’s name?” he asked in a dead tone.

“As unsure as you are about mine, so I’m rather certain.”

Cold silence fell over the room. My gaze on the king stayed constant, but in the corner of my eye, Cass was as still as stone and paler than usual. He told me to be myself, and that’s all I’d done. But maybe I should have waded into it.

King Dreux clapped his hands and broke into a laugh. “As blunt as Jasper said.”

Cass breathed a small sigh of relief at my side, and the court seemed to be of the same sentiment. Everyone shared a weak laugh, sounding as uncomfortable as I should have felt.

I smiled, contributing to the apparent joke.

“Donestan, too, told me you were of a rougher sort, but who doesn’t like that in a lady like yourself?” The king offered his hand to me over the table. Some part of me wanted to recoil, but instead, I lifted my hand and laid it in his. “It’s wonderful to meet you, Evelyn.” He leaned over the table and brought my hand up to his lips. The scraggly hairs of his unshaven jaw scratched my skin as he pressed a kiss to it.

How gauche he was—from his over-the-top kiss to his brocade grey coat, to the furniture he’d cluttered this castle with. But under the coat and behind the kiss was a man no different any I might find walking the streets of the town. He didn’t seem to fit with the court, or even Cass, despite their

uncannily similar features. They were soft and delicate in appearance like they'd spent a lifetime inside a glass case. But the king was firm and hard. Their air was demanding, but his was overwhelming.

The king released my hand, and I quickly returned it to my lap. He raised his hand to the air, and the row of servants waiting against the wall scurried out. The court began to engage in their own conversations, but nothing was as lively as it had been in the great room.

"Have you ever been to the castle before?" King Dreux asked, placing his hand back under his scraggly chin. The answer was obviously no. Perhaps he wanted to hear me say it.

"Only in my imagination."

"You fantasize about castles and the company of royalty often, do you?" Lady Lilith asked, her dark eyes as calm as possible. She slashed a glance to the king after she spoke as if trying to gauge his approval.

"I fantasize about any and everything." I held my head high. "My imagination knows no bounds."

"You're a constant daydreamer then," Sir Percy, seated next to Lady Lilith, said. "You must be an avid reader as well."

"The best people are," Cass said.

Donnie, or *Donestan*, I should say, pulled himself away from whatever trivial conversation he was having with Lady Kaya. "I'm sure there's no self-flattery there." He shot Cass a grin.

"Now I understand why you and my son get along so well," King Dreux said. "You're just as distracted and dreamy as he is. He's too much like his mother in that way."

Cass's eyes shifted to the table in a flickering moment of pain. Had King Dreux really just managed to insult his son and late wife at the same time? And it was going to go unchecked too.

"Did you not love that about her?" I asked. "A free spirit and an imaginative heart are usually the traits that inspire love, not flaws overlooked

in spite of it.”

The king, clearly not expecting any sort of question in response, answered, “I loved other things about her.”

“Like what?” What did he love about this woman, if not the very things that must have made her, her?

King Dreux’s playfulness was fading fast. I was pushing too far, but I couldn’t help it. If I’d learned anything from Cass’s and my night at the pond, it was that his love for his mother was deep. For the king to attack her even in death was needlessly cruel.

“I loved her charm,” the king said. “And her sense. She always knew when to go on. And when to be quiet.”

I bit my lip—and my tongue. My hand balled into my skirts. Why was I being so abrasive anyway? What happened to playing nice?

The servants returned, hauling in dozens of platters and plates with them—there were so many of them. They situated themselves around the table, and in an instant, the thick table runner disappeared under the countless platters. I’d never seen so much food and of so many different varieties. Duck, lamb, boiled potatoes, fresh buttered bread, and dozens of other dishes. Some I didn’t even know the name of. The buttery and savory scents licked the edge of my nose. This was a true fantasy brought to life indeed. I might have basked in the splendor of this feast for more than an awestruck moment had I not had the revelation that on this table laid enough food to feed half of Bexbury, yet it would be enjoyed by only a total of eleven.

I remained still for a moment as the court began to fill their golden plates with whatever dish was within arm’s length. No one looked particularly impressed. Was this an ordinary evening for them?

“Nothing you like?” Cass whispered to me. His brow bent in concern.

“I don’t know where to start.”

“Hm.” He picked up my empty plate and switched it with his already very full one. “Start here.”

I snickered. "I hope you have good taste."

"Awful," he leaned nearer to me, "but since we're so alike, it shouldn't matter."

I smiled and glanced at the king, who had thankfully become intertwined in a quiet conversation with Lady Lilith.

Perhaps my inquiries about his wife left too bad of a taste in His Majesty's mouth. For the first half of our meal, he said nothing else to me. Donnie was too far to properly converse with us, so he stuck to his half of the table. That was fine. I was quite content with Cass and Sir West, who sat at my opposite side.

Of all the courtiers, Sir West won the title of my favorite. Listening to him laugh about any and everything kept a constant smile on my face. I could barely eat between giggles. He was obviously a favorite of Cass's too. A breath of fresh air in the court he'd likely grown up with.

"Are you married, Sir West?" I asked as West took a sip from his never-empty chalice.

"Sir West is married to himself," Cass said with a smirk. "The only person who could put up with him."

"What a falsity," West swore. "I'll have you know that there are at least a hundred women in Aurell begging for my hand."

"Begging for your hand?" I asked. "Not the other way around?"

"Why yes." Sir West spread his arms and presented the entirety of his very round torso to me. "With a fine prize like this available, women lose all their senses."

I covered my laugh. "You're entirely right." I placed a dramatic hand over my heart. "Cassian, I'm sorry, but I feel compelled to kiss Sir West right this moment."

Cass shook his head. "How could I ever compete with the magnanimous Sir West?"

"Worry not, my prince," Sir West said. "I will not steal this beauty away

from you. I'm smarter than to blight my future king in such a way." He briefly glanced to the ever-distracted King Dreux, faltering in his cheerfulness for a split second. "Besides," he continued. "Had I wanted to marry, I would have done it years ago. But I couldn't find a tempting enough reason to do so."

I took a bite of duck and relished the sensation of it melting over my tongue.

"You've never been in love?" I asked.

West swirled his chalice. "Only with myself and my country."

"And you never wanted to have children?"

"Certainly not. If they were anything like me, they'd probably poison me and take all my fortune. I had no obligation to procreate, so I tossed the idea aside."

I frowned. Now that he mentioned it, why wasn't he obligated? "What about your court seat?" I asked. "Who will take your title when you...pass on?"

"Court titles are assigned, not inherited," Cass informed me. "When a member dies, the king appoints a new person. If they have children, it could be one of them but not always. Anyone in the kingdom could take the seat, in theory."

"The only one who needs to leave an heir is the king. Or future king." Sir West took a sip from his chalice.

Cass remained silent. Not that it mattered, but my heart burned up for a second, wondering exactly when Cass would be expected to do such a thing. And with who. Was his father expecting him to fall in love with a proper, light-class girl?

"Are we speaking about parentage?" Lady Lilith's smooth voice drew my attention back across the table. It appeared she, His Majesty, and Sir Percy had tired of talking amongst only themselves.

"Something of the sort," Cass answered.

“Your parents are from Bexbury?” the king asked. His knife scraped against his plate as he cut a hefty piece of boar away.

“My father is.” I did my best to ignore the stitch in my throat. “My mother came to the city when she was around my age, but her family lived on the coast before that.”

“But they both reside here now?” He lifted the raw piece into his mouth and raised his thick eyebrows.

“In a way.” I struggled to keep my eyes from drifting down. “They’re dead.”

A hush fell over our side of the table. Sir Percy lowered his head in a subtle condolence. Cass’s eyes told all the apologies in the world. Had we been alone, perhaps he would have wrapped his arms around me. Sir West, though out of my sight, was quiet too.

But King Dreux’s demeanor didn’t change one bit. He swallowed his bite. “Oh, that’s right,” he said. “Cassian told me that. I must have forgotten.”

This bastard. Had I offended him so much by asking about his wife that he needed to draw this out of me? Was he trying to test my strength?

Or perhaps he just enjoyed it.

He took the most casual of sips from his golden chalice. “But he didn’t tell me how they died.” His dull hazel eyes stared me down. He wasn’t even going to ask, but I had to tell him anyway.

“A capsized ship,” I said. “The sea is a cruel mistress.”

“How unfortunate.” Not an ounce of sympathy was hidden in his voice. “Of your parents, which of them was the dark one?”

My fork slipped from my hand, clattering against my gold-rimmed plate. “What?”

“You are an artificial, aren’t you?”

“Father,” Cass pleaded, but the king silenced him with the lift of his hand.

“Well, aren’t you?” His gaze drifted over my skin, a dark hue compared to his and even darker compared to his son’s.

I gripped the knife left in my other hand. “I am.” I hadn’t answered his question, but I couldn’t will any more words out.

The dining hall was stone silent, and all eyes were on the king and me. My slip of silverware had turned everyone’s head.

“I only ask,” the king continued, “because, during our incident in Aurell, when all those artificials and peculiar pairs attacked us, I couldn’t help but notice that the majority of the couples were comprised of men from the dark-class paired with women from the light-class. It seemed as if all the would-be husbands were dark as night, but the wives were pale like the moon.” He rubbed his chin. “I’ve come up with a theory that light-class women must be more appealing to men of all classes, and their darker counterparts are less alluring, especially to men of the opposite class. There’s no way to test my theory directly since we’ve corrected all of those unholy unions here and long since back home, so I have to settle for asking the few half-classes I come across about their parentage. The tally so far is three in favor, one against. Will you be adding to my correctness?”

I could have killed him. Right there. This knife was sharp enough. One slash across the table was all it would take.

“I’m sorry I can’t confirm your theory,” I said through gritted teeth. “But my mother was the dark one, and my father quite fair.”

A tremor radiated through my body. Had I stabbed myself in the heart with this blade, the feeling would have been the same as it was then. He’d already taken my parents from me, and now he forced me to rob them of their identities too, to deduce them to nothing more than a color. It was entertaining to him.

“Interesting.” He glanced at Lady Lilith. She looked almost as shaken as I was, though her gaze remained on her plate.

The king threw a cloth from his lap over his plate and rose from the table. “I’m quite stuffed. Let us retreat to the great room for some games.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Not everyone was ready to leave the dining hall, but when King Dreux wanted to leave, everyone had to go.

His Majesty strode out before the rest of us. Lady Lilith was the first to follow. Cass let the rest adjourn from the table before helping me from my seat. We lagged behind the rest. I barely grasped the arm he offered to me as we walked back to the great room.

“Evie, I’m sorry,” Cass said the moment the last pair of court drifted far enough ahead of us.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” Aside from being related to that monster.

His shoulders dropped. “I didn’t know he was going to ask any of that.”

“He can ask me whatever he wants, and I’ll ask him what I want in return. That is how conversations work.”

Cass stopped and pulled me into a nook in the hallway. My eyes batted wide as he grabbed my shoulders.

“Evelyn.” His green eyes glimmered with concern. “Evie.”

My already wide attention grew at the call of my more common name.

“I know you’re only rising to his challenge, which I adore, but in this case, please, tread carefully. For both of our sakes.”

Both?

My eyes drifted to the corner of his face. His hair covered most, but I was close enough to see it under a few of the strands. A deep blue bruise.

I nodded carefully. Cass sighed and stepped back. I took his arm again, and we started back down the hall as if nothing happened.

The games had already been decided on during the minute Cass and I spent in the hallway. The party had divided—ladies gathered around one table and the men around another. King Dreux watched us as we entered the great room, late again, but said nothing. Some part of me was grateful as I settled with the ladies of the court. To be away from His Majesty was a needed relief, even if it meant having to part with the good company of Donnie, Cass, and Sir West as well.

Lady Kaya shuffled an oversized deck and leaned over the small table between the sofas we settled in. “Let’s play a memory game.” She spread the cards over the sunburnt wood.

“We’ve played this a dozen times today,” Lady Irene lamented.

“And you won every time,” Lady Lilith added.

“Who doesn’t like a game of memory?” Lady Kaya said. She didn’t stop assembling the cards. “You enjoy memory games, right, Lady Anne?”

The old woman only raised her fragile hand, which was enough for Lady Kaya.

“What else would we play?” Kaya asked.

“There’s always a game of wager,” I offered.

“I hope you’re joking,” Lady Lilith sneered. “We all know you have nothing to wager.”

Oh, the contradiction was infuriating. I wanted to remind her exactly how I’d met her prince, but to do so would likely only paint me as lowlier in her eyes.

“I’ll go first,” I said, starting this *lady-like* game.

Lady Irene and Lady Kaya carried the conversation. I tried to pay attention, but it was dull without the boys. The pleasant air of the previous

hour we'd spent in the great room nothing more than a memory.

First, I thought I was the only one dying of boredom, but glancing at the other group, I could tell they weren't having as much fun either. It wasn't the location that changed things; it was the king. No one acted quite the same around him. They were too reserved. Too careful.

The great room doors creaked open, and a figure slipped inside the room. Not a servant, he was dressed too officially. An officer.

He stopped only a few paces from the door. Though he was a whole room away from me, the strain in his body was clear. He looked like he'd been riding for hours and was returning tense and exhausted. No one besides me seemed to notice his entrance except for His Majesty. The king rose from his group and strode to the door, then left with the ruffled man.

What was that about? Something told me I should follow...

"Evelyn," Kaya said. "It's your turn."

With no excuse to leave the game, I resumed playing. At least ten minutes passed, yet His Majesty did not return. When it seemed that he would be gone for a while, the mood of the room slowly lifted. Lady Kaya and Irene laughed louder than earlier, and Sir West's voice wasn't afraid to carry across the room.

Soon, the vivaciousness was back with full force. As our second memory game approached its end, the men, unrestricted now, decided to migrate to our side of the room.

Sir West hovered over our table and pondered the pairs of cards below. "Oh, they're playing a matching game," he proclaimed. "The dumbest game in the world."

Lady Kaya shot Sir West the most frustrated glare she could muster and smiled even wider as Cass took a place behind my spot at our sofa.

He tickled the back of my neck with his fingertips. I could melt right there.

"Don't you ever get bored of this?" Donnie yawned.

“Yes.” Lady Lilith and Irene answered in unison.

“Why don’t we play something else then?” Cass proposed. “Any ideas?”

I had an idea. An idea that would grant me the opportunity I needed.

“Let’s play hide and seek,” I said.

Lady Lilith scoffed. “The children’s game?”

She was not going to squash my proposal. “Childish things can be the most entertaining, Lady Lilith. It keeps us young. You could use some youth.” I focused my eyes on every wrinkle and line begging to form in her face. She fumbled, looking like she wanted to strangle me. But she didn’t try to counter again, and Donnie didn’t come to his mother’s rescue either.

“I’d like to play hide and seek,” Lady Anne said. She took Sir Bundy’s hand, and he helped her to her feet. “I could use some youthfulness as well.”

With Lady Anne’s confession, the consensus was unanimous. Everyone seemed excited to play—except for Lady Lilith and Lady Kaya.

“But we haven’t finished this game yet,” Lady Kaya whined.

Sir West reached down and flipped over the remaining six cards on the table, revealing all the matches. “There you go, all finished.”

“West!” Lady Kaya pouted, but no one seemed to notice.

“Who will be the seeker?” Sir Percy asked.

It couldn’t be me; I had other work to do. And it would be best if there wasn’t a partner who wanted to hide with me.

“I nominate our prince,” I said and rose to my feet.

Cass frowned. “Why me?”

“Because it’s your castle, you should know it better than the rest of us. You’ll have the best chance of finding everyone.”

“Ha!” Donnie laughed. Of all the people inhabiting the castle for the season, we both knew that Cass likely knew it the least.

I turned back to the group. “All those who agree?” I raised my hand.

Donnie’s popped up too, then all of the court immediately raised theirs in agreeance, save Lady Lilith.

“I abstain,” she said. “I won’t be playing.” She glanced at her son, but he looked like he was trying very hard not to match her gaze.

“Suit yourself, Lilith,” Sir West said. The loss of her participation bothered him about as much as it did me. “Let’s start this game.”

The rules were set. All bed chambers were off-limits, no one would venture outside of the castle walls, and our seeker would count to two hundred before he set off to find us. If we weren’t all found within half an hour, we’d return to the great room. Everyone was content with these rules, and so, after we forced Cass to cover his eyes with his hands and promise not to cheat in his counting, we dispersed from the great room. Half of my fellow hiders set out through the doors Cass and I had first entered through, but I, Sir West, Donnie, Lady Anne, and Sir Bundy chose the other exit.

Out of the great room, we flew down the hallway with all the enthusiasm in the world. Even Lady Anne and Sir Bundy managed a quick step. A pair of passing maids pressed themselves against the walls as we ripped past them. What thoughts must have crossed their mind, seeing the court in such a fashion?

The rustle of Lady Anne and my skirts and the whip of West’s, Donnie’s, and Sir Bundy’s coats were almost enough to muffle the clatter of our shoes against the floor. Had I not been on a mission, I might have been having fun.

Lady Anne and Sir Bundy broke off from our group, choosing to find a hiding place somewhere on the first floor. I waved goodbye to them, and the three of us continued up the stairs. By the time we made it to the second floor, Sir West was gasping for air, Donnie’s dreads were a wild mess, and my arms ached from hoisting up my skirts. Donnie and Sir West turned to climb the next level, but I stopped.

“This is where I leave you.” I panted.

“Here?” Donnie frowned. “There are much better places to conceal yourself on the third level.”

“All the more reason I won’t be suspected.” I lifted my skirts scurried

away from the staircase. Sir West chuckled, but it was soon drowned out by the stammer of their boots ascending the stairs.

The floor sat in empty silence. The tremble of the light from the candelabras scattered over end tables and standing against the walls was the only movement, and the only sound was the rustle of my satin. I flew across the rugs and down the halls. How far was Cass into his counting by now? I hurried my pace, doing my best to retrace my steps from before. Finally, I turned into the desired hall, lined with thick-curtained windows on one side and spacious doors on the other.

I froze. What if King Dreux had returned here with that officer? Damn, I still had to check. I crept carefully along the side with the doors, sharpening my ears. Each step brought me closer to the room we'd seen him in before. The room I needed to enter.

Silence.

The door was closed. I took a deep breath, grabbed the doorknob, and swung open the door. Should anyone be waiting inside, I'd just apologize and claim I was looking for a place to hide.

It was empty.

I hurried inside and pressed the door shut behind me. Candles burned in the corners of the room. The scent of honey and wax tickled my nose.

My slippers sunk into the thick carpet. Creamy maps and diagrams covered the walls. I recognized most as depictions of Ryland, both the main country and its territories, but a few other countries were represented too. I approached the long desk situated near the far end of the room. It was the only real piece of furniture besides the cushioned chairs, which had somehow found themselves pushed away from the center of the room, along with a few stacks of thick, official-looking books. Was this some sort of study?

I approached down at the lone desk. Papers and stencils sat in uneven rows near the desk's edges. A leather-bound black tome as tall as my hand laid strewn over the center. I heaved it up and balanced it before my face.

Ordinances, Volume II

Such interesting reading the king did. And he taunted Cass for his.

I started to put the book back down, but something underneath caught my eye. A thin stack of papers had been hidden underneath it. Barely a stack at all, they layered over one another, no edges lining up. I picked up the top sheet, rubbing the thin paper between my fingers. What were these—little maps? A vague shape dotted with words and lines colored the paper.

My body went cold. I knew this shape. This was Morra. I recognized the words too. Villages and towns, followed by populations. Populations divided by class. At the edge of the map, a column listed the “artificial” population of each city. Each row down, the number dwindled. First, cut in half, then only a quarter, then only a dash. The light-class and dark-class populations didn’t change.

I scoured through the other papers. The remainder of the pile was all duplicates of the sheet I had.

What did this mean?

I rummaged through the rest of the papers littering the desk. More diagrams, duplicate maps, lists of names and people who meant nothing to me. Then I found it, hidden under a layer of papers at the corner of the desk. Another map, similar to the one before, but different. No numbers accompanied the cities this time. In fact, the attention wasn’t on the cities at all but rather on other tiny dots littering the edges of the country. Some were black, others red. Their placements were odd. They weren’t cities or towns, but I swear I knew the locations of some of the black dots. A cluster of them cluttered the south border.

It hit me. Camps. These were work camps. If the black dots were already existing camps, then the red must be new ones.

And there were dozens of red.

He was going to clear all the half-classes out of his cities. How perfect the class system would fall into place then, without all of us mudding the lines.

Without all of us, he could sharpen it into well-oiled perfection. Step one of organization: get rid of anything that doesn't fit.

It took everything in me not to grip the paper until it crumpled into dust. This was how he *would* have done it. Not anymore.

I ran my hand over the flair of my dress until I found the little slit in the fabric. A pocket in an evening gown was unusual, according to one of Geane's assistants, but Kat recommended it. It was invisible in the waves of satin. I folded up one of the duplicate maps and slid it into my hidden pocket. I'd made a mess of the desk but did my best to arrange everything back to how I'd found it.

When I was sure the desk looked as untouched as possible. I left it be and turned back for the door. Just as my fingers touched the doorknob, a scream rippled down the hall. I tensed as the stammer of footsteps flew down from the distant stairs.

She screamed again—Lady Irene. I cracked open the door and listened as she ran from her pursuer.

"You'll never catch me!" she yelled, laughing and trotting down the stairs. The other pair of feet was right behind her. Cass bolted down the steps, and the two faded away down to the lower level.

Perfect.

I slipped out of the study and snuck down the hall to the final set of doors. The library welcomed me back, and the volume of Taliver Cass had been reading still rested on the table between the two armchairs. It was only a matter of time before Cass found me here.

I paced the room. After a few minutes, a distant shuffle of boots sounded down the hallway. Sir West had likely been discovered as well, or Donnie perhaps, but nothing was headed my way. The minutes ticked by, and the end of our half-hour neared. Maybe I really had picked the best hiding spot, inadvertently.

Somehow, I made my way to the second level of the little library. The

wrap-around balcony was slim. The edges of my dress brushed against the bottom shelves and the balcony railing. I didn't know why I climbed up. Each minute made it harder to stay still.

I traced my fingers over the slit of my pocket. How long had the king been planning this? Since he seized us? Since before that? Since we raided the municipal building?

Since Gilow killed those men?

No, there was no way he put this together in such a short time. But I feared that Gilow and the rest of us had given him reason to expedite his plans.

Did Cass know?

He had to. He was the goddamn prince. He had to have known something about such a major change to his kingdom. I gripped the fabric of my dress, feeling the paper crumple inside. He knew enough not to want me seen passing that room. The question was, did he care?

My eyes fell blankly to the crimson carpet. Not caring didn't mean he didn't care about me. But how could he truly care about me if he didn't care about something that was a part of me?

I pressed a hand to my chest. Something deep inside me seemed to wither at that thought.

The little library's doors flew open. Cass stepped inside. His gaze found me and my bold purple dress quickly.

He smirked. "Found you."

I put my smile back on. "Took you long enough. You're almost out of time."

Cass ran across the room and stormed up the spiraling staircase. I moved to the side of the balcony opposite from him as he ascended onto the level. "I didn't think you would return here to hide. It would be the first place I'd look for you."

"And that's why I knew it would be the last."

He stepped toward me, and I stepped away.

“Are you always going to be one step ahead of me?” he asked.

Our dance around the balcony continued. Each step he took closer, I took another back. We circled all the way around the balcony until the staircase was nearest to me.

“Not one step,” I said. “I’ll be ten.”

I rushed down the staircase as fast as I could. Cass raced behind me. I didn’t risk looking back and dashed out of the library as soon as my shoes hit the ground. I skidded into the hallway and ran, with my skirts clutched in my hands, like I was running for my life itself. For a second, I felt like I genuinely was trying to get away from him. I glanced back only once before flying down the grand staircase. Cass was merely a few paces behind me. Was he trying to catch me or letting me run?

I dashed back through the castle. The great room was only seconds away. Cass was inching closer, but I was faster. A pair of maids lunged out of the way for me, and I pulled open the great room doors. With Cass right at my heels, I flew inside.

I almost tripped—.

“Caught you,” Cass breathed, wrapping his arms around my waist.

I tilted my head up to him. “Too late.”

Before I could really take in the moment, Cass’s smile dropped, and he unlocked his arms from around me.

I followed his gaze into the great room. All of the court stood waiting inside. Accompanied by King Dreux.

Cass cleared his throat and led us back to the waiting party.

“I didn’t know you were waiting for us,” he said with a hitch in his voice.

The king glared at us.

“Luckily for you, I haven’t been waiting long.” I wasn’t sure which of us that was directed at. “Lady Lilith told me your silly game was soon to be over.” He dropped his gaze firmly to me. “Evelyn’s idea, I assume.”

“With all of our approval,” Cass’s fingers locked around mine.

King Dreux watched us, watched Cass, for what felt like an eternity. His expression was so divided between intrigue and irritation that I had no idea what to make of it. What had we done wrong besides delaying our presence by a few minutes? Why was Cass so tense?

There was so much I didn’t understand about this king, about the way Cass was around him and how attuned the court was to dropping their laughter and smiles around him. I’d expected him to have a distaste for me, but why did his own court, and his own son, seem more threatened by him than anyone in the country he’d conquered?

A pin-prick smile crossed the king’s face, almost of the genuine sort. Lines crinkled the edges of his eyes. Though his new expression had all the appearances of warmth, the dramatic change in countenance sent a pang through my heart.

“I hope you haven’t tuckered yourselves out,” he said. “I have one final game for us to play before we end the night.”

The king raised his hand to the opposite set of doors. Lady Kaya frowned at Sir Percy, and Donnie rubbed his chin. It seemed no one had the slightest clue what King Dreux was referring to. Judging by their reactions, it was out of character.

King Dreux took the lead and led the court, followed closely by Cass and I, out of the great room.

“Cass, what are we doing?” I whispered.

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Some of the courtiers exchanged light whispers, but I stayed quiet as we followed His Majesty through the halls. Had he reprimanded the rest about our game before Cass and I arrived? Maybe Donnie or Sir West would tell me later, but for now, we had to get through this mysterious final game.

He took us through parts of the castle I had yet to see, bordered with more ominous paintings and ornate furniture. But as a set of doors towered ahead

of us, and I soon realized that he wasn't taking us deeper into the castle. The king was taking us outside.

Guards pulled apart another set of double doors, and we stepped out into the night. Over the heads of my companions, the castle walls loomed over and around us. I didn't know the castle had a courtyard. A massive, moonlit courtyard. The windows gazed down at us, some flickering with candlelight, others shrouded in darkness. Dozens lined each wall. Just over them, the towers of the castle stood tall. I knew the castle was larger than it appeared, but I didn't know it was this large. Guards and torches dotted the walls sparsely, from what I could see. The court in front of us blocked much of my sight as I stepped down into the grass.

A horrified gasp pierced through the air.

"My God," Sir West murmured. All were frozen in place. What were they seeing?

I let go of Cass's hand and pushed through the court. They moved aside, and I quickly made it to the front of the group, seeing the cause of the shock.

Two boys were strung up in the dead center of the courtyard. Each was bound to post, with their arms pulled around it and their backs to us. Blood and dirt speckled their shirts and skin. I couldn't see their faces, but I didn't need to recognize them. Their identical curly brown hair gave them away.

Brison and Richal.

"My friends," the king said, lifting his hand to the boys and grinning with wild, ravenous glee. "I give you our final game."

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Lady Kaya let out a nervous laugh.
“What is this, my king?” Sir Percy clenched her arm and pulled her close.

King Dreux strolled in front of us, soaking up every drop of apprehension radiating from his audience.

“Two days ago, an officer was attacked on a trail near the West end. Someone bashed his head in with a rock. It was brutal, unlikely the poor man will survive.” He waved over a set of servants, who brought over a thick horsewhip and a long cloth. “But the assailants were quite clumsy. They forgot to take their papers back from the man’s hand.” He glanced back to Brison and Richal.

My skin went cold. How could we have been so careless? None of us even thought to pick up the papers. It had been the last thing I was worried about.

Did he have mine too?

No. I relaxed, but only a little. The man had given them back to me, right before he ushered me away to that tree. I was safe.

“I was going to have them killed,” King Dreux said. “Publicly. But then I thought to myself, ‘we have to be better than those murderous rebels,’ which I assume these two were working for. But that being said, they still need to be

punished.”

Richal’s chest heaved against the post, and Brison’s legs quivered under him. I was guessing which was which. As much as I strained, I couldn’t tell them apart. With only their backs to me, they were the same.

“How do you know he didn’t just find those papers?” I blurted out. “Or that your officers didn’t plant them?” It was thin. It was desperate. But I had to say something.

The king scoffed. “My officers don’t lie to me. They know better.” He dropped the roll of the whip, letting its tail unravel to the grass. “And as if I needed confirmation, these two were trying to flee town just this evening. They put up quite the fight when they were discovered, as guilty people tend to do.”

“Or the wrongly accused!” My chest shook. Why was he doing this? Was he just this sadistic?

“Evie.” Cass grabbed my arm, but I yanked it out of his grasp.

King Dreux grimaced. As if my shunning Cass was a slight on him too.

“Why are you so concerned, Miss Evelyn?” The king asked. “Bexbury is such a small place compared to Aurell, or anywhere of significance for that matter. You wouldn’t happen to know these two, would you?”

It was me. That’s why he was doing this. He suspected I was working with the rebels.

“I don’t know them,” I sputtered without thinking, desperate to put distance between myself and the connection. “I just have a difficult time believing that two boys would, or even could, successfully attack any of your officers.”

“And I was shocked to discover that of all the girls that could have worked their way into my son’s attention, it just so happened to be a half-class. I suppose Morra is just full of unbelievable things.”

This was my test. The only way to eliminate me as a rebel in his eyes. I could defend the twins and prove myself guilty, forfeiting everything I’d

come to learn and likely my own life in the process, or play along and prove myself innocent for the time being. After all, what kind of comrade would watch as their fellow fighters, their family, was ripped apart in front of them?

I would. I'd have to.

Or I'd soon be up there too. And I couldn't let that happen to me.

The skin on my own back pricked up. I'd never been more conscious of it. I took a shaky breath, feeling my muscles slashed into threads already. I'd never felt fear so potent or been so protective of my own skin.

I clutched the fabric of my skirt. The king smiled smugly, quite pleased with my submission.

"Who wants to play first?" he asked, offering the whip to his captive audience. "This will likely be a short game, so only a couple will get to play."

No one stepped up. Donnie looked the worst of all. His entire head was bowed to the grass.

The king grew more irritated every second that passed without a volunteer.

"Someone's going to get the hell up here," he snapped. "Whether it's here or on another post."

"I'll play," a voice at the edge of our group said. Lady Lilith held her head high and glided across the grass to the king's side. Donnie didn't react at all, only stepping back as his mother drifted past him. "How do we play?"

"It's simple." The king placed the whip in her hands and unfolded the cloth between his fingers. She flinched as he secured it tightly around her eyes. "I will aim you." He grabbed her shoulders and walked her towards the post to the right. "And you will snap."

The air thickened. Like dense mud had filled my lungs, weighing down each breath I took. I couldn't move.

King Dreux took a step back from his player. "Whenever you're ready."

Lady Lilith nodded shakily and pulled back her arm...and I did nothing.

Snap.

The whip sliced through the air. Richal—I think it was Richal—whimpered. The tail nicked his shoulder. The end of the leather was so thin, not half the width of the thickest part, but it cut through his skin like butter, leaving a distinct slash in his shirt.

All the color drained from the world. Everything except for the color red, which dripped from Richal's shoulder. I blinked my eyes rapidly., trying to bring back all the other colors. Would I ever be able to see anything besides crimson?

“Close, Lady Lilith,” the king said.

Lady Lilith stood blindly as he adjusted her.

“Aim a little more to the right this time.”

My breath hitched. A hand grabbed mine, and I clutched it for dear life.

King Dreux stepped away.

Lady Lilith pulled her arm back again.

I could feel the king's eyes burning into me, but mine remained on the post.

The whip cracked again.

I clenched my fist. My nails dug into my palm.

A gash slit across his shoulder. It sliced down the edge of his back. Crimson red poured over his arm, painting his torn shirt and trembling back. He wailed through whatever cloth had been stuffed into his mouth.

I felt blood drip from my own hand; I clenched it so tight.

I was watching this...and I was doing nothing.

King Dreux clapped his hands together. “Much improved, Lady Lilith, but you can do better.”

Lady Lilith didn't dare remove her blindfold, even as Richal's wailing turned into sobs, and the king positioned her once again.

He tightened her fingers around the whip and pointed her straight towards the post. “Again please, my Lady.”

Lady Lilith let out a shaky breath. Her hand shook as she pulled her arm

back for the third time. I gripped Cass's hand with both of mine.

She cracked the whip forward.

Richal screamed into the cloth. A perfect line ripped across the meat of his back. I swear I could see a piece of his spine. Blood gushed out over his shirt. His twin shook violently against his post. I wished I could tell them apart for sure. I wished I could see their eyes. I wished I could untie them and spirit them away. I wished I could tell them I was so sorry. I wished I was smart enough to figure out a way to end this. I wished I was brave enough to move.

I wished I wasn't so selfish.

King Dreux laughed and clapped. "A true markswoman."

Lady Lilith dropped the whip and tore back the blindfold. She stumbled back at the sight, but Donnie lurched forward to balance her. She left the whip on the grass and retreated back to the group. Her face was completely emotionless, her eyes cold and empty.

The twins were going to die. They were literally bleeding out, right in front of me. While I stood here, squeezing this hand for dear life and watching it happen. Doing nothing, once again.

King Dreux retrieved the whip from the grass. "Who's next?"

"Wait!" I cried. My voice trembled. The survivor in me told me to shut up, but if I didn't say something now, then...

I deserved to die.

"Is—is this really the best course of action?"

The king stepped towards me. His eyes, his dull, cold eyes, linked to mine. It wasn't fair that I could see his eyes, but not Richal and Brison's. None of anything he did was fair.

His fingers tightened around the whip. Would he lift it to me next? Had he made his verdict about me? Would Cass and the rest only stand here and watch while I faced the same fate as the twins?

"Are you objecting, Miss Evelyn?"

“No,” my voice quivered, “only critiquing.” What was I doing? I was speaking to an immovable party and sounding less loyal by the second. I should just shut up. It was too late to save the twins. Why was I risking myself?

I silenced those weak thoughts and forced myself to stand firm. Even if my legs were shaking while I did so.

“And what is there to critique?” the king asked.

I swallowed. “You’ve already maimed one of them,” I said calmly, “You mentioned before that you were going to kill them publicly, probably to send a message to the rebels, I’m guessing. But sending back two boys on their deathbed isn’t going to do anything but egg them on. You’ll make them both martyrs and ignite the cause even further. But if you send them back as they are now, with one of them unharmed, then you’ll confuse them. Hell, some of them might even call you merciful for leaving one of two alleged murderers unharmed. You’ve already done enough to make your point about the consequences of attacking officers, but anything more will incite more retaliation than obedience.”

I tried to maintain my composure. It had to sound desperate, but it made sense. The more he did to Brison and Richal, the more Gilow and the rest were going to want revenge. This was to his benefit.

The king furrowed his brow. Was he actually considering my proposal?

“I agree with Evelyn,” Cass said suddenly. “It’d be best not to fan the flames of this rebellion.”

King Dreux’s eyes loomed over his son. Though he spoke with conviction, Cass was unnaturally still. I had a feeling that he’d risked a lot defending me, but he didn’t take it back.

His father watched us for an eternity. We made an unyielding pair, but it was only us. No one from the court added their support. Not even Donnie.

The king’s hardened gaze faded into something softer. “Perhaps you two have a point. Inflicting the same punishment of both twins would be a little

redundant.”

The tension in my muscles melted. It was over. It was done.

“So let us finish with this one and be done with it.”

My eyes flew from the king to Richal. No, he couldn’t. He’d had enough.

The king shoved the whip into my hands. My stomach clenched. My heart went cold. “I’ll let that other little boy leave unharmed if you finish punishing that other one.”

I shook my head. “I can’t.”

“You can,” the king grabbed my arm and ripped me from Cass’s side.

“Father, this isn’t necessary,” Cass pleaded.

“Be quiet!”

He dragged me ahead of the group, nearer to the post than Lady Lilith had been. “This was your idea, so you should be the one to execute it. That’s fair, is it not?”

The leather quivered in my hands. “I—”

“Why are you so hesitant?” He grabbed my shoulder and spoke directly into my ear. “You don’t know them, yes? This should mean nothing.”

My head jerked. The king threw the blindfold over my eyes and knotted it behind me. His hand dropped to my neck. I stumbled into him as he yanked me back.

“Don’t go easy on them. Do it, or I’ll end them both.”

“Father, this is insane!” I could hear Cass drawing nearer, but everything was black behind the blindfold. “Let me do it, please.”

“Your Majesty,” Sir West’s voice shuddered. The first interference from the court. But neither he nor Cass could sway King Dreux.

“Not another word,” the king said. “Or I might lose my generosity. And my hospitality.”

No one else would counter him. No one was going to save me. No one was going to save Richal. Who was it? Brison or Richal? I didn’t even know who it was. Whose skin, muscles, bones did he want me to tear open?

The king aimed me toward the unseen target, squeezing my fingers around the whip. My grip was slick on the leather.

“We’re waiting,” he said.

I can’t do it. I can’t do it. I can’t do it.

My chin trembled.

I had to, or they would both die. One life versus two. Wasn’t that something Gilow would tell me? Yes, that’s exactly what he would say. I couldn’t let both of them go through this. One of them had to make it out.

Under the cloth, I squeezed my eyes shut. Shaking, I pulled my arm back. I had to.

I thrust the whip forward. My snap was weak. The slap against his back was barely anything. Nothing compared to the harshness Lady Lilith had struck with. But still, I whimpered at the sound and waited for the agonizing scream. Had I even broken the skin?

“Terrible,” King Dreux said. The chill in my chest rippled through my veins as he straightened me. “Again. Actually try this time.”

I had to really do it. If I didn’t, someone else would, with less consideration than I. With a sharp breath, I jerked my arm back and snapped the whip again. I couldn’t help it. My crack was hard, but I missed my target entirely. The whip slashed into the grass.

The king huffed. “You might be the worst markswoman I’ve ever seen.”

“I can’t see,” I mumbled.

The king tore the blindfold from my eyes. The cloth rippled to the grass. My eyes blinked back open, settling right on the target before me, his back completely drenched in blood now. The king pushed me closer to him. The king pushed me closer to him. He was only a few steps before me now, and I could see his chest heaving and his legs shaking beneath him. And still, I wasn’t sure if this boy was my bold, brave Brison or my clever, soft Richal.

“One more chance,” the king warned me. “Don’t miss.”

This was my last chance. I couldn’t falter now. He was right in front of

me, and the king was too close to taking both of their lives. I had to do it. I had to do it now. My hands gripped the leather, my eyes hardened.

Do it, Evelyn. You're not hurting him; you're saving the other.

My thoughts took on Gilow's voice.

You're not doing this—the king is.

Do it.

I raised my arm high overhead. All eyes burned into me. Everything was hinged on this—more than one life, more than me, the mission, or my family.

Everything.

And I...

I couldn't do it.

A hand wrapped around mine. Cass tugged my arm back. Together, we sent a strong, hard crack straight into our target. A long, bloody slash cut across his back, ripping him from the corner of this neck all the way down to his hips.

Blood gushed out over his shirt. A moan bellowed from his muffled mouth. This gash was worse than all the rest. He went silent and collapsed down the post as his body went limp. Part of me was grateful that consciousness had been ripped from him if only so I didn't have to hear his screams.

I dropped the whip, and Cass pulled me back into his arms.

Somehow, looking at his torn, mutilated back and seeing the blood flow into the grass under him, I finally could tell him from his brother. I knew who we had done this to. The one who hadn't even done anything.

Brison.

"A perfect slash," the king said. "If only it had been entirely your own." His eyes cut over my shoulder into Cass. He stepped in front of me, putting himself between me and Brison's unconscious body. Cass held most of my weight, the only thing keeping me from collapsing. The king cupped my neck. I flinched under his chilly skin. *Please, let it be done.*

“Good enough, I suppose.” He lifted my trembling hand and brought it up to his lips. his kiss felt like pure darkness seeping into my skin. “Take those two back to the town,” he called to one of the guards as he dropped my hand and strode away from Cass and me. “That concludes our evening.”

“I want to go home,” I murmured.

Cass continued to hold me. “I’ll order a carriage.”

“No, you’ll stay here,” King Dreux called back to us. “It’s too late, and I’m sure Cassian wants you to stay the night. A servant will turn a room for you.”

Of course, he wouldn’t let me leave. He must have wanted to torment me as much as possible. If Brison was the test of my loyalty, then this was the reminder that I was here to please his son and nothing else.

The court parted. The king passed through them, then disappeared into the castle.

Donnie stared woefully at me. A lifetime wouldn’t have been enough to recite all the apologies in his eyes. Why did he feel sorry? Because he, like the rest, had done nothing? He took his mother’s arm, and they drifted back into the castle.

Cass pulled me towards the castle as the court trickled in ahead of us, entrapped in silence, leaving Brison and Richal to the mercy of the guards.

But I was stuck here for the rest of the night—in this castle, with this king.

With myself.

Chapter Thirty



The maid opened the door and hurried inside the chamber. I crept in behind her, standing still as she lit candles at the sides of the bed with a smaller candle she carried before her. With what consciousness I had left, I observed that it was a spacey chamber, boasting a bed bigger than any I'd ever slept in, thick curtains, and a wardrobe large enough to fit three of me in, along with a few chairs and a tall mirror.

The decor was clearly remnants of Morra—simple in design and subtle in beauty. The only thing certain to be from Ryland was the velvety green and blue carpet settled under the sitting chairs and the plump sofa lingering on one side of the room. Still, the room was a small comfort. A little familiarity in this distant castle.

I was ready to be left alone the moment I entered the room, but the maid insisted on helping me ready for bed. I had no choice. There was no way I could undo the row of buttons running down my back alone.

The maid sat me down on the bench at the foot of my bed and unraveled the braid adorning my head. I sat silent and docile as her fingers weaved through my curls. She was an older woman, and her fingers were nimble with experience. I imagined Auntie Jen behind me, running her fingers through my curls like she had when I was a little girl.

Then dropping her hands to my neck.

Then wrapping them around my throat.

Then squeezing.

What would she think of tonight? What would Kat? Luke? Gilow?

Saddy.

They had to be well on their way back to the city now. What was Richal going to tell her? Did he know that it was me who did that to his brother? He couldn't have seen me, but he must have heard me. Heard my name. Heard the ultimatum the king gave to me. He had to know that I tried, and at the very least, had saved him. There was nothing else I could do. Would he tell Saddy that?

Maybe he wouldn't tell her anything. The incident on the trail shook Richal to a degree I hadn't imagined. But this might have broken him forever. And what would Brison be after injuries like those?

In a way, they had died tonight.

The door clicked shut, and I startled. The old woman was gone, and a new, younger maid replaced her. She stood me up and began to free the buttons along my back. I felt again like a doll, with no autonomy of my own, as I let her remove me from my satin prison and replace it with a flowy night shift that someone had laid across the bed. Only when she moved in front of me to settle the sleeves of my gown on my shoulders did I recognize her as the same maid who had called Cass and me from the library earlier. I'd let her dress me completely and said nothing to her.

"What's your name?" I asked softly.

She had an odd but not unpleasant appearance. Her skin was a beautiful, very dark tone, and her hair, rather than black, was almost the same shade of deep brown.

"It's Bridgette, Miss."

"Bridgette." Not an unpopular name in Morra or Ryland. "Are you from here, or did you come from Ryland?"

She stepped past me and pulled back the thick bed cover. Like a child, I

crawled into the bed and let her tuck the sheets over me. "I'm from Aurell," she said. "I work in the palace."

"Oh."

Bridgette retrieved my evening gown from the floor. I sat up and panicked for a brief moment, remembering the map I'd hidden away in it. If that was discovered, I would never leave this castle. Not alive.

Carrying the gown to the massive wardrobe, she hung it inside, likely for me to take back with me tomorrow.

I breathed a sigh of relief as she shut the wardrobe doors and came back to the foot of my bed.

She folded her hands over her apron. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Do you know if I'll be able to leave tomorrow?"

"No, miss. I don't."

I slumped into the sheets. I didn't expect her to.

"One of us will come by in the morning with day clothes for you."

"Can you be the one to bring them?" I asked. Bridgette I barely knew, but she was already more familiar to me than any other maid. Perhaps it was because her age was nearer to mine, but if I had to be attended to, I preferred it to be her.

She nodded. "Yes, Miss. I'll see you in the morning." She lowered her head and drifted towards the chamber door. I sunk down into the bed and pulled the covers tight over myself.

"Miss Evelyn," Bridgette called from the door, her voice barely loud enough for me to hear. I turned my head to her. "It's not your fault. You did the best you could."

My eyes watered as she slipped out of the room. Alone, I pulled the sheets over my head and tried to hide from the world.

The best I could. My best got Brison maimed. My best made Richal kill that officer. My best got me trapped in this castle.

I pressed my face to the sheets and wept into them. *Brison is nearly dead. Those officers are dead. My parents are dead.* When would this finally end?

I sobbed into the silence.

It had to end soon. One way or another.

Chapter Thirty-One



A knock sounded at my door. I shifted in my sheets and forced my eyes open. Why was Auntie Jen knocking? She never knocks.

I sat up and looked around the room—the oak wardrobe, the tufted chairs, the four-post bed.

Oh, that's right.

My legs slipped out from under the covers. My feet touched the cold stone floor, and I shuddered.

When Bridgette said she'd return early, I didn't think she meant this early. It was barely dawn. I wrapped my hand around the doorknob, which was equally chilly, and pulled the door open.

Cass smiled weakly at me, with messy hair and a tray in hand.

"You're not Bridgette," I said.

"Who?"

I stepped back. "No one."

The heavy door shut on its own. Cass looked like he was heading for the small sitting area, but I was too cold for that.

I hurried back across the floor and snuck back into the bed, slipping my feet back into the warmth of the covers. "Over here."

Cass, looking surprised but not unpleasantly so, turned around and met me at my bed. I crossed my legs under the sheets as he laid the tray before

me, then carefully sat down across from me.

“You brought me breakfast?” I asked. Sliced strawberries and pears, boiled eggs, lamb likely leftover from last night. Anything I could have asked for. Not that I had much of an appetite this morning.

“All the way from the kitchen.” He picked up a piece of lamb and popped it into his mouth. “I’m not complaining, but I want you to know that it was a very long walk, and this tray was very heavy.”

I bit into a strawberry and forced myself to swallow. I suppose he decided that we were just going to go back to normal.

“Good. I need you to keep those muscles. If you lose them, then we’re done.”

He forced a chuckle. Last night Cass had looked his title, but this morning was a different story. His clothes were disheveled—the same as he wore last night—and his thick black hair had dissipated into a fuzzy storm. For whatever reason, his neck was tinted a reddish color. Maybe he’d slept oddly if he slept at all. Whatever it was, he was a mess. But I probably was too. Who knows how disheveled my hair must have looked or how see-through my shift was now that the daylight was beginning to tint the room, but I was okay with all of that. I didn’t have the energy to care. It was taking all my energy not to think about last night. Especially when every time I blinked, the darkness that should have been there drenched itself with red instead.

Maybe if we got into a conversation, it would distract me. “Did you fall asleep in your dinner clothes?”

“Yes.” He ran a hand through his hair. “In the library. I wanted to think about everything after last night.”

I gripped the sheets. So, we *were* going to address it. So much for a distraction.

“Evie,” Cass said, “please tell me honestly...did you know those boys?”

My heart clenched. Was he suspicious about me now too?

“I might have seen them running around the city, but I didn’t know

them.” I didn’t blink as his eyes scanned mine. Did he suspect I was lying?

He sighed, and his entire body slumped. “I didn’t know he was going to do any of that. Please believe me.”

“I do.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “I know you would have warned me if you did.” Everything would have been so much easier if I could blame Cass for this.—if I could believe that he and his father plotted this together and that they both forced me to do that to Brison. Life would be simpler if I could hate everyone in this castle.

But the opposite had happened. His father put me in an impossible position. He was going to make me do something that would have crushed me forever, but Cass showed me mercy. He took on the burden with me. I didn’t know if I would have done it on my own, but now I never had to know. That was an ignorance I couldn’t live without.

“Thank you, Cassian,” I whispered. “Thank you for helping me.”

Cass’s gaze wavered. “I would do anything to keep you from pain.” The pain in his eyes descended into guilt. “I would have stopped him if I could but—”

There was no need to finish. What I’d seen of Cass’s father made it clear that he didn’t accept orders—or disobedience—from anyone.

I glanced at the now apparent bruise at the corner of Cass’s head.

“Cass,” I said in a soft voice. “I want to ask you something, and you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

He furrowed his brow.

I leaned forward. “Does your father hit you?”

His face went blank. I let him watch me glance back up to the bruise on his head, then, almost instinctively, down to the redness around his neck, as I realized that he did not just sleep in an odd way.

He averted his eyes from me. “Doesn’t everyone’s parents.”

My heart broke. “Not like this.”

Cass threw his legs off the side of the bed, leaving his back to me. Only

the side of his face was visible. I waited for what felt like minutes until he finally spoke. “It’s not always like this. Not so long as I do as he asks. Most of the time, I just try to stay away from whatever he’s doing. I’d actually gone without angering him for almost an entire season before we left Aurell. But these past couple of days, he’s been so on edge, since—”

“Since those officers were killed.”

Since he found out about me.

Cass turned back to me. “This isn’t your fault. It’s mine. I shouldn’t have disrespected him in front of everyone like that.”

“But you did...Because of me.” How much of my behavior last night had Cass faced punishment for? How many people were suffering because of my mistakes?

“Meeting you has been one of the best things in my life,” Cass said. “I’d take a thousand licks for you and more.”

“Cass.” I pushed the tray aside and crawled over to him. “You shouldn’t have to take any. You know that, right?”

I leaned close to him. A shame had settled his features—a shame that didn’t belong to him.

He dropped his gaze and nodded softly, but he didn’t mean it. He might never believe that he didn’t, in some part, deserve what was being done to him.

I took Cass’s hand and brought it up to my lips. It felt so warm under my kiss.

“It’s alright,” I whispered. “One way or another, we’re both going to be alright.”

His eyes glimmered with an unearthly sparkle. He brought his hand up to my face and caressed my cheek. “Evelyn...” He paused, and the entire world was still. “I love you.”

My heart should have swooned. I should have smiled. I should have kissed him. But I could do none of it. I was entrapped in the stillness.

He loved me. That was the last thing I expected to hear, and at the moment, I didn't know in the least how to feel about it. There were too many factors and too little time to figure out how they all should have made me feel. I wished I could have told him to say it again later, after I had some time to think about it. But I had to say something back now, so I found myself saying what I knew he wanted to hear.

“I love you too.”

Chapter Thirty-Two



Cass helped me slip away in the morning. I hadn't been ordered to stay beyond the night, but we hadn't asked either. Part of me felt guilty for possibly putting him in an even worse position with his father, but the stronger part of me needed to get out of the castle.

My stomach clenched as my carriage neared the barn. News had probably reached almost every corner of our rebellion now. It surely had found its way to Saddy, and likely Gilow and Jace by extension. It would be a somber day, yet here I was, returning home in a royal carriage and a new dress. I felt like a fraud. Like I was spitting in Richal and Brison's faces.

The carriage stopped, and the first of the drivers opened the door. As I stepped out into the street, I felt the heaviness in the air.

The sky was dimmer, and the streets were a little muddier. The people were a little quieter. It felt as if the whole city was mourning with me.

After the driver helped me down in my ridiculously nice day dress, he reached inside the carriage and retrieved my purple gown. I'd gotten to keep it after all.

Neither Kat nor Auntie opened the door for us, but Albo instead. He disappeared soon after. I told the driver to leave the gown on one of the sofas. He did so with haste, then nodded to me before leaving. I slid the door shut and carried myself back to the apartment and up to Kat and I's room. It was

still early, so I expected Kat to be asleep, but she wasn't there. I couldn't find Auntie either. I was alone.

I decided to free myself of this day dress, desiring nothing more than to put on a pair of pants and a chemise. Then, before I forgot, I made my way back down to the floor and rummaged through my purple gown until I found the hidden pocket and the folded map. I could have tucked it away into a drawer for later, but I wasn't comfortable letting it leave my person again. It was the only thing that made that horrible night worth something.

I slipped the map into one of my boots.

The emptiness of the barn squeezed me like the walls were getting closer by the second. It wasn't like I could go anywhere. I was stuck there.

I wished I wasn't alone. I wished someone were there to talk to me. Auntie, Kat, Luke. Cass.

Well, there was Albo.

I strode back across the barn and back into the apartment. As I flew up the steps, I found myself hoping more desperately than ever that I'd find him tucked away in my hiding spot. I pulled the secret door open, content to see that he was.

Albo sat with his legs dangling over the ledge. The crisp smell of his cigar hit me before I saw a single puff of smoke.

"You're back late," he said. His cigar crackled as more of the paper burned into ash. "Or should I say early?"

I took a seat next to him, crisscrossing my legs right at the edge.

He glanced over me for a brief second before turning his gaze back to the desolate floor. "You look awful."

"You're one to talk." His mess of hair was looking extra unkempt today. Probably since he hadn't had to go outside in at least two days.

"I don't have any boys to impress." He took a drag. "Let alone two."

I chuckled. He didn't give a damn at all, did he? At least, not about my problems. I eyed the handful of cigars at his side. "Do those make anything

better?”

“Find out.” He lifted one to me. With no inclination to object, I brought it to my lips as Albo lifted his candle’s flame to the other end. The tail crackled and burned away as I took my first puff.

Smoke stuffed my lungs and shaking up a dozen coughs from me. I wheezed, trying to draw any air into my lungs, then fell back into a coughing fit. A cloud of thin grey spewed from my mouth. I shook my head as if I could shake away the tickle in my chest.

Albo smirked and took a drag like it was the easiest thing in the world. “Well, do you feel better?”

“I feel different, so it must be better.” I took another puff. Already it was easier. I only coughed a half-dozen or so times as the smoke clawed its way up my throat. I fanned away the smoke lingering in front of me. “Auntie told me, you know. The other day.”

“To stay away from cigars?”

“About your father.”

Albo took another drag and slowly let the smoke slip from his mouth. “Is that why you came up here? To talk about *our* family then?”

“Not at all. I’m a selfish girl. I came up here to talk about me.”

We sat in silence for a moment, taking matching drags. Albo’s cigar burned out soon, and he quickly lit another. “Then say whatever you need to say, little cousin.”

I sighed, embracing the irritation in my chest. Even now that we were family, I suspected Albo cared the least out of anyone I could tell about my ever-complicating life. If anything, I’d understand if he hated me and Kat. Why would Auntie Jen raise us, who weren’t even her own children, but not him? For whatever reason, I knew he couldn’t care less about my problems, which somehow made him the best person to tell.

So, without any restraint, I took Albo through my entire tale. From the raid that drew the king here, to my assignment with Cass, all the way to last

night's events. I laid everything out, feeling surprisingly blasé. I even told him about Luke's proposal and my growing discontentment with him, the officer Richal killed on the trail, and what the king had made us do to him and his brother, which I described in numbing detail.

Albo remained neutral through it all, not flinching or reacting to anything. He only took occasional drags as I went on.

"I don't know what to do now." I pressed the butt of my well-burnt cigar into the ledge floor. "Not that I ever did. I feel like my whole life's been a series of obedience and indecisiveness. But I didn't think things were going to get this bad. Not this quickly."

"Leave."

I frowned. "Leave?"

"Sounds to me like you don't want to deal with any of this anymore. You don't want to marry Luke. You don't want to work here forever. You seemingly don't want to work with Gilow anymore." He tapped his cigar. "Who could blame you for that last one. He and his friends sound insane."

"I never said I didn't want to work with them anymore. I do. I've wanted to from the day I joined them."

"No, Evie. You want better. Take it from me, you're not going to get it the way they're doing things. Not the kind of better you want, at least. I spent most of my life in Ryland, and I've seen more than a couple rebel groups try to do things his way. They always fail."

Maybe, but this was different. We were different. "How many of them had a girl in the king's court?" I asked, quite matter-of-factly.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, the first mild reaction I'd gotten from him yet. "Do what you want, Evie. But if you ask me, your best option is right in front of you."

"And what's that?"

"Leave—with the prince. You said he loves you. Shouldn't be hard for you to get him to offer you a real mistresship. So, take it and leave. Forget

about Gilow and his crap and go live in the palace. Drink tea and wear diamonds and spend your nights with someone you actually like. That's what you really want, isn't it?"

"No!" I didn't mean to shout. "I can't leave Bexbury and abandon everyone here."

"Sure you can. You just have to decide to." Albo's dark eyes centered sternly on mine. "Camaraderie and 'family' sounds great in the storybooks, but it doesn't mean anything in real life. In the real world, you gotta do what's best for you. Even if it screws somebody else over." He threw his now dead cigar to the side. "That's the only good lesson my parents ever taught me."

I sat silently next to Albo. Abandoning the rebellion, my family, I wouldn't do it. I couldn't. Maybe Albo didn't care about the problems facing us, but I did. And I wanted to stop them.

Still, as ashamed as it made me, I couldn't ignore the levity his option had brought. He showed me a new, illustrious door. One that promised a good, perhaps even happy life for myself with Cass. I'd never walk through that door, never ever. But knowing it was there felt really good.



Hours passed, and Albo and I had long since migrated to the kitchen. I leaned against the counter while he lazily poured a jar of broth in the pot bubbling over the stove fire, paying no attention to the measurements.

"Do you ever actually try when you're cooking for the barn?"

"Not at all." He tossed the jar aside. "Baking is my forte. There's nuance to it. Cooking is just throwing things in a pot."

The sound of the barn door slamming shut echoed into the kitchen. Before I could truly register it, a pair of boots stormed into the hallway. Another pair trailed behind them. I jumped down from the counter just as Kat

barged into the kitchen. She almost stormed right past us.

“You!” She set her fiery eyes on me. Auntie hurried in behind her, stopping to catch herself at the doorway. She reached for Kat.

“How could you?” Kat pushed Auntie back and stopped right in front of me. Her eyes were puffy and red-shot. A new collection of tears threatened to rain down from them. “He was only thirteen.”

My whole body felt stiff. “How did you—”

“I was there when those officers brought them back. Luke and I were coming back from the manor. We had to hide in the stable while the officers told Saddy how the king and their guests decided to let them off easy. You did it, didn’t you? You and the rest of them?”

“Kat, you weren’t there,” I said. “You don’t understand.”

“No, Evie,” she shook her head. “I don’t understand you. Not anymore. Luke was right. They’re really starting to sway you, aren’t they?”

My throat felt dry. “Luke said that?”

“You wouldn’t know, would you? You don’t see him anyway. But you don’t care. He’s just a tool, isn’t he? Your escape from having to live anything less than the decent domestic life you deserve. Heaven forbid you have to work like a whore like the rest of us. No, the great Evelyn is too good for that.”

“That’s—” My voice grew weak. “I never—that’s not true!”

“After all this lying, I thought you’d be better at by now.” Fury burned past her tears. “You don’t deserve him. You don’t deserve anything.” Kat sniffled, then turned and ran out of the kitchen. I didn’t think she would turn on me like this. She didn’t even give me a chance to explain. But I didn’t expect a lot of things.

I didn’t deserve anything. No, I deserved exactly what I was feeling now—shame.

“Is that where you were? At Saddy’s?” I asked Auntie Jen, blinking to keep tears from falling. “How are they?”

“How do you think?” She averted her eyes and gripped the doorframe.
No. Not Auntie too.

A sob climbed up my throat. “Are—are you angry with me? Do you want me to leave?”

“And go where?” Auntie sighed and turned around. “Like I always say, I don’t care what you do. But that sure as hell doesn’t mean I’m proud of it.”

I choked down the sobs threatening to explode from my mouth. How foolish—I’d actually wanted my cousin and my Auntie. Little did I know I’d lost them last night too.

“Saddy and the boys are leaving. We were helping them get their stuff together. Don’t know where they’re going, but they won’t be back.” She wiped her face. “I need to rest.” Showing more age than she had in years, Auntie shuffled away, moving as if every limb weighed on her. Again, I was alone with the only remaining relative that would speak to me. His spoon scraped the bottom of the pot as he kept stirring, completely unphased by anything that just happened.

I wiped away the pair of tears that had slipped from my eyes and leaned back on the counter. “Tell me more about your aversion to proper cooking Albo,” I said, taking a note from him and trying not to care.

Chapter Thirty-Three



E vie,
Try not to throw the book across the room when you get to chapter twelve. I promise Taliver will make up for all of his missteps before you get to the end of the book.

With love,

Cass

I smirked, rereading the little note that fell out of cover once I opened the new volume of Taliver Cass had sent over. It's been a week since I left the castle, but with the daily letters and new tomes he sent over for me, I felt like I'd seen him only yesterday.

I flicked the edge of the little paper and shifted my legs under the barstool, about to start the chapter Cass had warned me about. Reading this volume almost made me forget that I was trapped here in the barn, with the half-class restrictions still in place.

Right as I turned the page to Chapter Twelve, footsteps sounded in the hallway behind the bar. With the door open, I looked up to see Kat leaving the kitchen. She stopped when she saw me, grimaced, then tilted her chin up and strode away. It had been a week since she'd heard about Brison and Richal, and she still wasn't talking to me. At least Auntie was cordial enough to say good morning and good night.

I rubbed the back of my neck and put my attention back on my book. I just needed to think about Taliver. Kat would come around eventually. Hopefully.

A faint rapping came from the barn door. I sighed and closed the book. Probably another letter from Cass. I pulled the door open, expecting my newest letter, but before it could open halfway, the last two people in the world I was expecting to see shuffled in. Jace and Gilow.

I slid the door shut as Jace removed her hood, freeing her long braids. Gilow strode across the floor after her.

“What are you—”

“You couldn’t come to us, so we came to you,” Jace smiled. “Kitty Kat told us about your dinner—and the twins, of course. She’s not here, is she?”

Gilow paced behind us, scanned the floor, and even peered behind sofas. Probably seeing that no one else was here, he stopped beside Jace.

“She’s been gone all day.” I rubbed my wrist and stared down at the floor. “About the twins—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Gilow said. He waved his hand like he was swatting the thought away—a completely unimportant one, at that. “This is a war. Casualties happen. Let’s not dwell on what we can’t change.”

Jace nodded her agreement.

That was too quick. Why weren’t they angry? Disappointed? Anything. How could they be so indifferent about the maiming of a child?

“Thank you,” I said cautiously.

“What happened at the dinner?” Gilow took the last stool at the bar. We were cutting straight to the point. “Did you learn anything from the court?”

Jace followed him to the bar, and I apprehensively did the same. With each step towards them, one question grew louder in my mind: how well did I really know Gilow and Jace?

I reached down and retrieved the map I’d been obsessively keeping with me in my boot. The prize Brison’s sacrifice bought. I only hoped the

information was worth it. I unfolded the paper and pressed it into the bar between them.

“I learned this,” I said. “And it’s big.”

Chapter Thirty-Four



All day, I'd been riding. Had the threat of sunset not pulled me back, I would have kept on. My legs ached, but I deserved the pain. It felt like perseverance, something I needed plenty of now. After over a week of restriction, the ban on half-classes leaving homes was finally lifted. Temporarily, at least. We were now allowed out from two hours after mid-meal until sunset. I spent the entire time at the impossible pond, thinking about the twins, Gilow and Jace, Auntie and Kat. Thinking about who would miss me if I disappeared into the waters. At the moment, the only person I knew with complete certainty would miss me...was Cass.

I tethered Butter behind the barn and left her with an extra helping of feed and water. Her day had been taxing, but she pushed through it all. Some part of me was grateful to Auntie for bringing the horses back from Saddy's. I'd never have to go there again.

I circled around to the front door and stopped. A familiar carriage was parked not too far away at the edge of the street. With anxious curiosity, I slid the door open and slipped inside. We did indeed have a visitor. Auntie Jen lingered behind the bar, facing Kat, perched on one stool, and Cass on another.

"Cass?" I peeled off my riding gloves. "What are you doing here?"

He rose from his stool. "I've been here for a while, actually. Waiting for

you.”

“For a couple hours now,” Kat said, her first words to me in over a week.

“You’ve been here for that long?” I asked.

Cass’s face flushed the lightest shade of red. “Your aunt was kind enough to keep me well-fed while I waited.”

My eyes scanned the counter, and I realized I’d caught them all in the middle of a meal. I hoped Albo didn’t make whatever that was.

“It’s nothing from a palace,” Auntie Jen said, “but it’s something.” I could see Cass’s company had forced her to lift her spirits. Or at least pretend to. But Kat, leaning into the counter, didn’t seem to share the same inclination to play along.

Cass glanced back at Auntie and Kat, the former of which immediately snapped her fingers right in front of Kat’s face. “I have work to do upstairs. Come help me.”

Kat scowled at me. I dropped my eyes to the floor as she meandered around the bar and out with Auntie Jen. The small door shut behind them.

“Sorry I kept you waiting,” I strode up to him. “I’ve been riding all day. It was nice to be outside again.”

“I can say the same. I suppose my father decided to lift the bans for everyone today.”

“I’m sorry you had to waste your first few hours of freedom lingering about here.”

“It’s fine, I didn’t mind. I wanted to speak to your aunt for a little while anyway.” Why did he want to talk to Auntie Jen, of all people?

“But.” He sat back down, and I took a seat beside him at the bar. “Upon further review, I don’t think your cousin likes me very much.”

“It’s not you,” I said. “We’re in the middle of a fight right now. You just walked into the middle of it.”

“Oh. Whatever it is, I’m sure she’ll get over it soon.”

“Maybe.”

The building creaked around us. Cass was breathing heavier than usual, and I watched the lift in his chest with each breath. He was so near to me. His beautiful green eyes were frozen on mine.

“Cass, is something wrong?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I hope not.”

I frowned. “What’s going on?”

He was acting so evasive and nervous. It was out of character. Did something happen with his father?

He ran a hand through his hair and took a deep breath. “My father wants us to return to Aurell sooner than expected.”

My heart sank. “Why?”

“It has to do with the military and other things, but that’s not important. The point is, we’re leaving. In ten days.”

His words froze time. He couldn’t go. I’d only barely pierced the inner circle and was just beginning to understand the complexities of Cass’s life. I was only just starting to understand how I felt about him.

“You’re not coming back?”

“Not in the foreseeable future.”

My throat felt dry and constricted. “So, this is what, the first of many heartfelt goodbyes?”

“No.” Cass leaned forward, taking my hands in his. “I don’t want it to be.” I forced myself to keep my eyes up, though they wanted nothing more than to drift to the floor. I thought I was done crying, but now I wasn’t so sure.

“Evie, I want you to come with me.”

My eyes widened as I instantly knew what he was asking.

“Are you asking me to be your mistress?”

He stumbled. “For lack of a better word.”

A shattered breath escaped my lips. “You don’t mean that.”

Cass smiled. A beautiful, brilliant smile. “Yes, I do. I meant what I said

that morning.” He brought one of his hands up into my messy, wind-whipped hair. “Evie, I love you.”

I felt breathless. He really meant it. This was more than infatuation I’d inspired. This was a true, deep love. Perhaps the truest love I’d ever get. And he was offering me the best he could for it.

“I’m not leaving without you,” he said. “Please say yes, so I don’t have to call in the cavalry to steal you away.”

I chuckled. Another one of those moments that fate loved to dangle over me. I sure as hell couldn’t actually leave with Cass. As sincere as this moment was, it wasn’t real. None of it was. It was nothing more than an illusion. An illusion that would surely cause more than a few problems.

But for now, the charade had to go on.

“Yes.”

Cass let out a breath as the tension dropped from his body. He pressed his forehead to mine. I giggled like a little girl.

“I’ve been playing that out all day.”

“Now I feel really bad for making you wait.”

“Don’t be,” he breathed. “I’d wait a thousand years for you, Evie.”

“And eat a thousand more meals from my aunt? And have a thousand more conversations with my cousin?”

“Let’s not get too carried away.”

I smiled wide and pulled my head back, then let him kiss me with all the warmth two people could hold. My hands slid up his chest as he cupped my face and clenched my waist. It was soft and short, but powerful.

We were both breathless as we pulled apart. I blushed as Cass stroked my cheek.

“I’ll come by tomorrow,” he said. “There’s going to be a lot to work out before we leave.”

I nodded. *I* certainly had a lot to work out.

He rose. “I’ll see you tomorrow then.” He kissed my cheek. “Lovely.”

My heart fluttered at the word, and it stayed light as air as I saw him out, back through the barn door, then into his carriage.

I leaned back against the door once he was gone. A million different emotions wrapped around me, some pleasant, others less so, but all overshadowed by confusion. How was I supposed to feel about this?

I didn't have enough time to process any of them. The door behind the bar flew open, and Auntie Jen stepped out.

"What happened?" She came to an abrupt stop at the counter. "He offered you a mistressship?"

I stood up straight and tucked my smaller curls behind my ears. "He did."

Kat crossed her arms behind Auntie.

"Well, what'd you say?"

"You already know what she said," Kat hissed. "She said yes. Why wouldn't she?"

Auntie's head flipped back to Kat, then back to me, her eyes wide while waiting for my confirmation.

I rubbed my wrist. "Kat's right. I said yes."

Kat pushed past Auntie and headed for the door behind me.

"Where are you going?" Auntie frowned.

"For a walk."

I stepped aside as she pulled the door open. "Congratulations, Evelyn," she said before slamming the door shut.

I sighed. "Should I—"

"Leave her be. She'll be back when she's back" Auntie took a step away from the bar. "Oh, and I'm reopening tomorrow night."

With that, she retreated back into the hallway, leaving me to deal with my own thoughts. Would Kat ever understand? Did she even want to? If Auntie could forgive me, in her own way, then so should Kat. Even if it took some time.

But for now, as selfish as it was, I couldn't worry about her. I had to think

about Cass and my mission. I couldn't go with him, but, if that was true, then what was going to happen in ten days? Gilow would know. I just had to find out what it was.

Chapter Thirty-Five



Cass returned early the next morning with an entire entourage, including two carriages and half a dozen servants.

The clatter of the carriage wheels over the dirt outside pulled me out of bed. I got dressed as quickly as I could without waking Kat. Halfway down the stairs, I glimpsed the bottom of Cass's boots and made out his voice saying something to Auntie Jen.

"What's all that outside?" I asked as I hopped the last steps. The booted figure emerged to me completely, and I realized it wasn't Cass at all. "Donnie," I said. "Good morning."

Donnie nodded to me. Cass, who was just a few steps away next to Auntie Jen, lit up.

"A very good morning, now." Donnie lifted his hand to his chest. "May I say how happy I am to know that you'll be returning with us."

"Thank you." I strolled past him to Cass's side and slipped my hand into his. "I'm more than happy to see you, Donnie, but I must admit I wasn't expecting so much company this morning."

The apartment door swung open, and a trio of servants scurried in. Geane and two of her assistants, followed by a driver with a pile of dresses balanced in his arms. Our living room was suddenly very full.

"You can take those upstairs," Auntie Jen waved them up after she

pushed through the little crowd to lead the way herself. She and the rest trailed upstairs, looking quite out of place piling up our narrow staircase.

“Is it my birthday?” I asked.

“It’s not Fall yet, is it?” Cass asked.

I smiled. He had remembered that little thing about me that I only ever mentioned in passing.

“We’re actually here to take you away,” he said.

“Both of you?” I glanced back to Donnie for a second. “To where?”

“The castle,” Cass said. “My father wants to talk to you.”

My smile faded. “He talked to me plenty at the dinner party.”

Cass squeezed my hand. “That was before you were coming with us.”

“It’s just a formality,” Donnie reassured me. He looked back to Cass. “But we should probably get going. His Majesty expects our return before mid-meal, and, as I’m sure you know by now, he doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Of course not. I wouldn’t want to waste His Majesty’s precious time.

“Let’s be on our way then,” I said with a confident smile.

“We will,” Cass said, “as soon as you change.”

I looked down at the dress I’d just thrown on. A typical day dress for me—simple but elegant.

A twinge of anger shot through me. Even when he wasn’t here, His Majesty could remind me that I wasn’t up to the standard his son deserved.

It took me longer than expected to change into one of the dresses Geane and her assistants had brought for me--a pale pink piece with a deep red underdress that shone through the sheer rose-colored fabric. It had been designed perfectly for summer. The sleeves, which barely grazed my arms, were thin and dainty, not at all overwhelming. Geane and her assistants had expertly pegged my style.

The corseted back took an eternity to lace, but as I’d noticed from observing the gowns the ladies of the court wore and the other three dresses

left across my bed, a laced back or buttons were the only choice for ladies of Ryland who weren't servants.

After Geane pinned my curls back from my face with a set of ruby-dotted pins that she seemed to have pulled from nowhere and donning the most impractical pair of thin brown booties, I was permitted to leave.

Cass and Donnie were conversing about something when I descended into the kitchen, but they both stopped the second my boots touched the floor. Donnie crossed his arms and smiled, and Cass froze in a look of pure adoration.

I spun around, letting my skirt whip around me. "Do I look like a Rylander?"

"Not at all," Cass said, "Not a single girl in Ryland is as gorgeous as you."

I bit my lip, embracing the flush of heat covering my cheeks, then squeezed myself between Donnie and Cass and slid my hands into both of their arms.

"Off we go then." My flush hardened into something else. "Wouldn't want to be late."



Less than a day I'd spent in the castle walls, but every ounce of novelty was gone upon walking through the halls a second time.

Our ride here had been pleasant. Donnie was a wonderful companion who was more than happy to see Cass and me together for the long run. Cass beamed through the entire trip. It shattered my heart to imagine how crushed he would be when the truth finally rained down. But for now, I could bask in his joy.

I dug my fingers into Cass's arm as we passed through the castle doors. Memories of Brison's bleeding back and the weight of the whip in my hand

slammed back into me. I swallowed and forced myself to keep walking. Cass, either out of concern for me or in anticipation of his father, lost his smile too.

After an inquiry as to the king's location, our trio made our way to the great room. The doors clamored shut behind us. The king sat in a chair settled towards the middle of the room, and adjacent to him sat Jasper. *Wonderful*. He scowled at me as we approached.

"Welcome back, Miss Evelyn," the king said.

Jasper rose at our arrival, but His Majesty remained comfortable in the cushions of his chair.

"It's good to be back." A bigger lie had never left my lips, but I couldn't help myself. Not when the last time I saw Jasper, he told me that I'd soon be forgotten. His flush of frustration made it more than worth the pang that ran through me.

Jasper moved to sit back down, but the king stopped him. "Don't." He barely even bothering to look at him. "I've spent too much time in your company this morning, and with barely anything of merit to say. Why don't you take yourself somewhere else?"

Jasper flinched. A petty joy shot through me.

"Unless someone else would like for you to stay." King Dreux glanced up to his son.

"Not at all," Cass said. His gaze landed hard on his former friend.

Jasper, not daring to counter, bowed his head and strode out of the great room. I'd be lying if I said a little smirk didn't cross my lips as we watched him go.

"In fact," the king said, immediately wiping away my pleasure, "why don't you two go as well. I want to talk to Evelyn alone."

My muscles stiffened. I wanted to beg Cass not to leave, and he obviously wanted to stay, but his father was not going to allow that.

"Come on, my prince," Donnie grabbed Cass's shoulder. "You have the rest of forever to have her to yourself. Let your father speak with her this

once.”

Cass tapped his fingers against his thigh. “We’ll be outside.”

With dread, I watched him and Donnie shuffle out of the room, leaving me at the mercy of his quite merciless father.

I lowered myself into the sofa across from the king and folded my hands over my skirts.

The king shifted to the side and rubbed his scraggly chin. He looked much less formal today. Wearing only trousers and a light grey coat, albeit of an extraordinarily nice quality. His dull hazel eyes were quite content to scan over me for as long as they wanted.

“Someone’s finally managed to do it,” he said, “steal my only son’s heart away.”

I swallowed. “Were you expecting him to settle with someone different? All due respect, but I thought this was the norm for a girl of my class.”

“Expecting? No. Hoping? Perhaps. But I’m not too surprised that he found a girl like you at a place like he was at.”

Fire boiled in my veins. “So, what does surprise you, Your Majesty? That it happened so fast?”

The king chuckled. “I’m only surprised that he didn’t deem himself hopelessly in love after the first day. Cassian’s always been so overly sentimental in things like that. I’ve tried in vain to break it out of him, but the characteristic seems to stick.”

“Yet another undesirable trait from your late wife then—” I stopped myself, immediately wishing I’d bitten my tongue.

The king froze in place as his eyes cut into me.

Should I apologize?

No. Hold your ground. You said it. If you take it back now, you’ll be weak.

The king leaned forward and extended his hand.

I hesitated for a moment, then reluctantly placed mine in his.

“Young Evelyn.” He stroked his thumb over my hand. “I don’t know how things are going to play out between you and my son. Perhaps his devotion will endure forever. Or perhaps he’ll get bored with you after the first year or two and find some other, pretty girl to entertain himself with. So long as he’s not stupid about it, I really don’t care either way.”

The king squeezed my hand. “But if you’re going to live in my palace, then you’re going to have to behave yourself.” He pressed harder and harder. My bones crushed together in his grip.

I whimpered and thought I might scream, but his eyes warned me not to make a sound. I pressed my other hand to my mouth and stifled it as best I could.

“Do you know what behaving means, Evelyn?” he asked. “It means doing as you’re told. Staying where you belong.” He gripped my hand twice as tight as it already had been. A cry echoed in my throat as something cracked in my hand. “And it means keeping your goddamn mouth shut when you know you should. Do you understand, Evelyn?”

I nodded. My palm pressed to my mouth. My hand throbbed as the king dropped it from his grasp, and I instantly drew it away from him. The entire thing was a burning red. I tried to bend my fingers, but a shooting pain twisted inside each one.

The king stood. “Then we should have no problems with each other.”

I glared up at him, but quickly corrected my expression. For all I knew, a disrespectful glance might earn me just as much punishment as a comment.

“I’m hosting a ball. Sir West’s birthday is soon. A sort of going away event before we leave. You can introduce yourself formally there, to the remainder of the court and all of the pertinent people who reside here in Morra.” He stroked his chin. “Nine days from now, right before we leave. You don’t object.”

I shook my head. “No, Your Majesty. If it’s what you wish, how could I?”

“Good answer.”

He started away from me but drew up short. “If Cassian asks, tell him you fell from your horse or something. Try not to make it too obvious.”

He strode away without a second thought, leaving the room through the doors opposite of the one Cass and Donnie left through.

I whimpered, and I grasped my pulsing hand. Was this what Cass was used to? Was this his normal?

I couldn't let it become mine.

Nine days—that's all that was left. So little time for Gilow and Jace to work this out. So little time for everything to fall apart.

Wincing, I tried to move my fingers yet again.

My legs shook as I rose from the sofa. I slipped my hand behind my back and headed for the door Donnie and Cass must have been waiting behind.

Nine days. Then it all would change.

Chapter Thirty-Six



It took forever to convince Cass to leave. He wanted to stay with me while I recovered from the ailment I feigned as an excuse to leave the castle. But once I told him I wanted to take a bath to soothe myself first, he finally yielded and left.

I tried to wrap my swollen fingers myself but to no success. I had to wake Auntie Jen to help me. She asked what happened, and I told her I accidentally slammed it in the door frame.

I spent the rest of the day pacing around our bedroom and peering out into the street. With my hand too bandaged to ride, I was once again confined to the barn.

I perched aside our window for a long while, watching the people outside pass by. I saw Auntie Jen returning from some errand. Lone travelers drifting into the woods. Kat and Luke riding out of it.

I jolted up. Kat and Luke? Was that how she'd been spending all her time avoiding me—with him?

Luke reigned in his horse. Kat trotted in just behind him, barely catching Luke before he swung down.

I pressed my hand against the glass, my heartbeat picking up.

He's coming to the apartment.

I knew he wouldn't stay away forever. It was only a matter of time before

he came back. He didn't hate me after all. There was at least one person who didn't blame me for what happened with the twins.

I jumped up, ready to rush downstairs and meet him at the door.

But then...Kat stopped him. Kat grabbed his upper arm. She shook her head. What was she saying to him? I couldn't see Luke's face well enough, but his head swiveled back to the barn, lingering for only a moment before turning back to Kat. She tugged him away, and with little resistance, he complied. Side by side, the pair drifted further toward the city. Away from the barn and away from me.

Kat was keeping him away from me.

I wanted to scream. She must really have wanted me to suffer. I had so few people who cared about me left. It was a pain to lose Kat, but that wasn't good enough. She had to leave me with no one.

I yanked the curtain closed. Fine then. If I had to be alone, then let me be alone. I'd lost so much of my family already, one more person was nothing. She may hate me now, but she couldn't keep Luke away forever. My ruby red ring still laid untouched on our bedside table. It was only a matter of time before he found his way back to me, and then we'd see who his loyalty really lied with.

I clenched my fist.

Katalin.



Gilow and Jace strode into the manor kitchen. I rubbed my aching hand. Riding all the way out here had been more painful than I thought, but I had to make the journey.

"You called this meeting," Gilow said before he even took a seat. "What was so important?"

His bluntness disarmed me. I understood that he and Jace were probably

distracted with organizing a counter for the horrors I'd given them a map for, but this was important too, and they needed to know about it.

"What's important," I said, "is that the prince wants me to leave with him. In nine days."

Jace and Gilow shot glances back at each other. More than a few moments passed, and they said nothing. Panic gnawed at me.

"There's a solution for this, right? King Dreux is not going to let me push this back. We don't have much time. And Cassian didn't tell me directly, but I think the king might be planning to start his assault on us sooner than expected."

Gilow crossed his arms. Somewhere between the cogs turning in his mind, there had to be a fix to this. A solution to get me out of this mistresship and hinder the king's assault.

"Well?" I asked. "How are we going to stop this?"

After another moment of agonizing silence, Jace spoke, "What if we didn't stop it?"

My limbs went stiff. "Excuse me?"

"Not exodus of the half-class," she said, "but your journey to Aurell. Evie love, you've brought us so far in so little time, just by being the prince's companion. If you were his formal mistress, if you lived in Aurell, in the palace, even for a small amount of time, you'd be privy to so much more information."

She couldn't be serious. I felt like a toy once again. They'd wind me up and play with me all they wanted. "You don't know what you're saying."

"Oh, it wouldn't be forever, Evie, Love," Jace reached into my lap and placed her hand over mine, bandage and all. "Just until we've managed to make some truly meaningful strides. Until we did away with all this for good. Then you could come back to Bexbury as if nothing had ever happened. It would be no time at all."

No time at all! How long was that? A season? A year? A streak of pain

shot through my fingers. I couldn't spend a year hiding injuries and lying to Cass.

"Are you insane?" I ripped my hand away from her. I'd had just about enough. "I can't leave with the prince. What would happen if I were discovered? What if our coup succeeds, but we only manage to secure some sort of thin treaty with Ryland and lift all the restrictions? What would happen then? The king's not just going to let me walk away, all debts forgiven. And if they found out that we'd been toying with his son? A new war would start all over again!"

"Evelyn, Love," Jace soothed. "Calm yourself. I know this proposition isn't without its risks, but so is everything we do. There are definitely knots to be worked out later, but this opportunity is more than worth the risk."

Knots? The possibility of me losing my life was a knot?

This wasn't the Jace I knew. At least, not the one I thought I knew.

I shook my head. "I can't do that. I don't see my leaving with them ending in anything but disaster."

Jace's ever calm gaze hardened into something serious. "All due respect Evie, but what other option do we have? You said yourself that the departure can't be pushed back, and you've already accepted the prince's offer. Do you think he and the king would accept your change of heart with grace if you backed out now?"

I clenched my jaw. "Don't try to scare me into this, Jace."

"I'm not trying to scare you into anything," she said. "I'm only being realistic. We all know the king doesn't have patience for half-classes. For all you know, your defiance will just fan the ever-growing flames. He might take out his anger on all of us. To refuse now would be to put all of the half-class in danger."

No, it wasn't too late. I could change my mind now. Cass wouldn't punish me for it, would he? His words yesterday repeated in my head. The words between the proclamations of love and the kisses.

I'm not leaving without you.

I thought it was only an exaggeration, but what if there was more truth to them than I thought?

Even if Cass did let me go, his father wouldn't do the same. To refuse Cass's proposal would be like spitting in his face. Refusal was not an option, but there had to be a third path.

"I know you're right, Jace," I said. "I can't turn him down, but there must be some other way out of this." I dropped my arm on the table and turned toward Gilow. "Right?"

Gilow, still caught in the turning cogs of his mind, was quiet.

My chest rose and fell at a rapid pace. What if he agreed with Jace? They usually were of one accord. What if he had no other plan?

Gilow narrowed his gaze on me. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about a ball around a week from now, would you?"

I furrowed my brow. "It's one of the courtiers' birthday. Apparently, I'm required to attend."

"I've heard whispers about this all over Eastside. Not only will the courtiers be there, but almost every one of the king's wealthy supporters in Bexbury as well." Gilow's dark eyes focused on a thought, an idea Jace and I were only just beginning to grasp. "Evelyn, Jace, this is our chance. This is our opportunity to take them all."

Jace gripped the table. "You can't mean—"

"Yes." Gilow smiled softly, the first time I'd ever seen him do so. "We're going to strike the ball. If we can take out enough of the courtiers—the king, the prince, and their supporters—then Ryland will crumble. Or, at the very least, it'll be thrown into a distraught scramble. Maintaining the empire's territories will be an afterthought, if that. They'll be no one to enforce the class ordinances. We'll be free before the end of the evening."

I couldn't move.

Kill them.

That was the solution. That was his answer to all our problems. Kill the court. Kill the king.

Kill Cass.

Gilow leaned over to me, his eyes wide and eager. “Evelyn, you don’t want to leave with the prince. You won’t have to. But you’ll need to maintain your act in the meantime. Nine days is more than enough time to assemble every single ally we have in Morra and a few from Ryland.”

Gilow rose from the table. The clock had already started ticking. Their minds were already made up.

“Let me know if anything else happens,” he said as Jace rose to leave with him. “In eight days, we topple the king. In eight days, there will be no more class system.”

I trembled as they left the kitchen. My breath clogged in my throat. Eight days, that’s all I had. Eight days until it all came to a head.

Eight days until Cass died.

Chapter Thirty-Seven



I was completely numb as I dragged myself into the barn. It was finally open again, swollen with patrons. It had never been so alive, but I'd never felt so dead.

I meandered through the floor. The laughter and clinking mugs were nothing more than a muffled buzz at my ears. Someone might have said something to me, but I didn't hear. I only kept walking. The only thing I could hear was Gilow and Jace's voices, repeating every word they'd said. And the only sight I could see was Cass, lifeless and bloody on the castle steps.

Somehow, I made it into the hallway, forcing my feet forward at an even slower pace. I passed the cellar, and finally, the buzz of the night started to fade behind me. But just when I thought I'd be embraced by the cold silence I deserved, a smaller, weaker sound tickled my ears.

Someone weeping.

For whatever reason, I followed the sound and found myself at the storage closet's door. The very same one that Cass and I had had our first real conversation in. Pushing the memory back, I gently turned the doorknob and crept inside the tiny room.

Balled in the corner, lit only in moonlight, I found Sammy. She brought her head up as I shut the door behind me, quickly wiping her face. "Hi," she

whimpered.

I crouched beside her. “Hi.” It was the silliest thing to say at the moment, but the first thing I could think of. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. It’s noth—” Her own sob cut her off. She pressed a hand to her mouth. “I’m perfectly fine,” she insisted through muffled cries.

“Of course, you are. And so am I.” I wrapped my arms around her, letting her crumple into my arms. We held each other as she moaned into me. Her tears seeped through my dress and wet my shoulder.

“Archie is sick,” she wailed. “He’s going to die. I know he is.” I held her tight as she gripped my arms. “He’s going to get even more ill, and then one day he’ll leave and never come back. One day he’ll be dead, and I won’t even know it.”

She screamed into my arms, and I found myself tearing up for her. But why was she in so much pain? It was only Mister Archie. He was just a patron. She wasn’t even his proper mistress.

“Shh.” I ran my hand over her short curls.

“His wife—” She wheezed. “He wants to spend more time with his wife. He wants her. She’s never going to give him back to me—” She collapsed into cries yet again.

Despite all the pain swelling in me. I hoped just by holding her, I could take away some of hers. Its intensity was horrifying, and I couldn’t imagine carrying it all myself. Even if I didn’t understand it.

My poor Sammy’s cries softened for a few short moments. I thought she’d run out of air to wail with. But as she sniffled, she said one obvious sentence that made it all make sense.

“I love him, but he’s hers.”

I shut my eyes as the true sadness and reality of her situation fell over me. She did love Mister Archie. They were in love with each other. At the end of the day, and at the end of the night, he would always go home to his wife. Sammy could be his, but he would never be hers.

The real reason Sammy never became his official mistress was because it hurt too much. This eventuality was too painful. It would hurt too much to give your life—to give your heart—to someone who would never truly give you theirs.

So, I wept, too. We cried together as I fully realized that none of the doors in front of me were ever going to lead to happiness.



I tucked Sammy in on one of the sofas in our apartment. She curled into it immediately and shut her eyes as I tossed a quilt from Auntie's bed over her. Whether she fell asleep instantly or simply resigned herself to closing her eyes to the world, I didn't know. I was only grateful that the tears, both of ours, had finally stopped, and we were able to embrace the very different pain of silence.

I trudged up the stairs. I made not a sound, as if I were a ghost. Maybe I was. I'd already died a thousand times today.

I pushed open Kat and I's door, dragging my eyes up.

I halted.

Kat straddled Luke's hips. Her fair face, her lips, pressed against his. Her hands on his shoulders, pinning him back into the sofa. His hand on her neck, and the other gripping the flair of her skirt. To make it all worse, the ruby ring Luke had first given me glinted on her finger.

No, I was very alive. The fury shooting through me verified it.

Luke pushed Kat off him. She said nothing as she sunk back into the cushions, her face completely blank.

"Evelyn..." Luke locked eyes with me.

I slammed the door shut. The door frame cracked around it. Someone yelled behind me, but I was already pummeling down the steps. By the time I heard the door swish open, I was darting across the front room floor.

“Evie!” Luke called.

I yanked open the apartment door. If I’d trekked through these corridors like a ghost before, then I was flying through them like an animal now. The world around me was a blur. I tore my way through the floor and was outside at Butter’s side before I could even comprehend it. Before I knew it, I’d mounted her, and we were riding into the night.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



Kat and Luke were together.

I was everyone's plaything, wasn't I? Not a real person, with no right to things of my own. Kat, Gilow, Jace. They could ask anything of me, and I was supposed to give it up. They could take whatever they wanted from me.

How long had Kat and Luke been hiding this? Since everything happened with the twins? Since the races? After that?

Before?

I was a fool. The way she looked at him at the manor. The way they talked at the engagement party. The adoration. I'd tricked myself into believing that they were nothing more than newly blossomed friends. But it was all clear now.

Kat wanted him, so she took him. And if Kat was an option, why wouldn't Luke toss me aside for her? She was Katalin. Beautiful, perfect, *fair* Katalin. She was a flawless porcelain doll, while I would never be valuable enough to keep anyone or anything. Let alone someone's heart.

I should have been heartbroken. I should have hated Kat—or both of them. But why did I feel like these tears were for someone else?

My heels pressed into Butter. Faster and faster, we whipped through the trees. The evening was fading fast, night nipping at our heels. I couldn't go

back home. Not to them. More than that, I didn't want to go back home. Even if everything was perfect back at the barn, if I hadn't seen what I did, I wouldn't want to be there. What I really wanted wasn't there. I needed someone else. I wanted to curl up into someone else's arms and cry. Not about this, but about everything. To hell with trying to salvage an engagement I didn't treasure or a cousin who didn't understand my situation. There was someone else I wanted to save.

I wanted Cass.

Because...I loved him.

Butter's hooves pummeled the path beneath us. Faster, like we could outrun the night itself. Tears streaked my cheeks, but it wasn't sorrow that pushed me. An unyielding fire carried me forward.

Night overtook the evening. Darkness surrounded me. I should have been afraid, but a distant light peeking above the trees pulled me forward.

The castle.

Chapter Thirty-Nine



It was a miracle that I made it past the gates, let alone into the castle. I wouldn't have made it within a hundred paces without Cass's letter. The guards looked ready to strike me down the second I came into view, but when I showed them my letter, complete with the royal seal and all, they lightened up immediately.

I flew into the great room with stinging eyes, ready to collapse into Cass's arms. But he wasn't alone.

Sir West and Lady Lilith were with him.

Lady Lilith gasped, putting her cup and saucer on the table beside her settee. "Oh my."

Heat flooded my face. Cass jumped from the sofa across from them.

"I'm sorry." I shook my head. "I didn't..."

This was ridiculous. What a mess I must have been after the ride. I turned around, ready to push the doors open and leave as impulsively as I'd come.

"Wait," Cass called.

I took a deep breath and turned around.

"Leave," he said to West and Lilith. After a pitiful look from Sir West and a sideways glance from Lady Lilith, the pair shuffled away as Cass jogged to meet me.

"I'm so sorry," I said as he reached me. "The guards didn't tell me they

were with you, and I look—” I looked down at myself and immediately folded my arms over my chest.

“It’s fine.” He rubbed my bare shoulders. I hadn’t seen someone so worried for me in such a long time. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

I squeezed my arms tighter. “It’s Kat. She hates me, Cass. She really does. At first, I thought she was just mad about things that happened recently, but now I have cause to believe she’s thought of me as less for a long time.” Perhaps no one I knew was what I thought they were.

“Why?” He frowned. “What did she do?”

I sniffled. “It’s not important.”

“It’s important to you, so it’s important to me.”

I wanted to tell him the truth. I really, really did. “She stole something,” I murmured. “I don’t know, maybe I didn’t really want it, but that’s not the point. It’s that...she thought she could treat me like that at all.”

He brought his thumb up to graze my cheek. “That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“I know it doesn’t.” My voice cracked. “But it is. Everyone I thought I could trust...I don’t know anymore.”

I wrapped my arms under his and nestled my head into his chest. He embraced me in an instant. His warmth melted into my cheek.

“I had to get away, and there was nowhere else to go. I can’t go back tonight, Cass. I can’t look any of them right now.”

“You don’t have to.” He ran his fingers through my curls. “You should be here anyway. Honestly, it looks strange that you’re not already.”

Of course, it did. If I was going to be his mistress, I should be here with him every night.

“For good?” I asked. “Until Sir West’s ball?”

“Until we leave. It’s for the best.”

Leave. My heart synched.

“Alright.” I pulled back from him. “But I didn’t tell my aunt I was going.

I can't disappear forever without letting her know."

"Write her a letter. Tell her your prince needs you here. I'll have a messenger deliver it the moment you finish penning."

"You don't think that's cold? Delivering a message via stranger in the middle of the night?" Given how tense things were at home, I didn't want to add more distance between Auntie and me.

"I'll have Donnie take it," Cass offered. "Your aunt already met him, so it won't be by a complete stranger. And he can relay anything else you like by mouth as well. Is that better, Lovely?"

I nodded. "A little bit." He pressed a kiss to my forehead. I smiled weakly, and a tiny bit of my sorrow lifted.

"Thank you, Cass, for caring."

"I'll always care about you."

And just like that, the sorrow was back.



"Check." Cass slid his rook across the board, in the direct line of my king.

I adjusted my robe and reached over the board. The glow of the library fireplace illuminated the board, and him, in an angelic light.

"I thought you were done trying to let me win," I slid my bishop into his rook's square.

"It was a calculated sacrifice, I assure you," he said.

"Hmm." I grinned, almost genuinely. My mind had been racing, flipping through idea after idea since we settled down. This was supposed to be one of Cass's last nights alive. But I refused to let that be. There had to be a way for me to save him without ruining everything else Gilow and Jace had been working on. There had to be a way for me to save *only* him.

Even the wildest ideas seemed plausible.

I could tell him everything.

No. He might not take well to the idea that he was nothing more than an assignment to me just weeks ago.

I could ask him to run away with me.

And go where? Do what? He'd realize what I'd done, or what I knew was going to happen, after everyone he'd ever known was dead. That was more than enough to hate a person.

I struggled not to let my thoughts leak onto my face. But there had to be a way to save Cass's life without ruining the rebellion and without revealing to him that I knew it was going to happen. The solution was somewhere. I had only days to find it.

A rap sounded on the library door.

"You should get that," I said, tightening my robe.

Cass hopped up from the fireside carpet that we and our game had settled over and pulled open one of the thin library doors. Donnie's silhouette stood on the other side.

I waved at him over Cass's shoulder. I hadn't expected Auntie to send a return letter, and I definitely wasn't expecting Donnie to bring it to me this late if she did. Before I could rise to properly greet him, he spoke.

"Sorry to interrupt Cass, but—" He gestured into the hall.

Cass looked back to me, scratching his head. "I'll be back in a blink, Lovely." With that, he slipped out of the library.

I crept up to the library door and pressed my ear against it.

They weren't that far into the hall. I could hear the edges of Donnie's voice, but it was too faint and blurred for me to make out many words. And the ones I thought I heard didn't make any sense.

"Yell."

"Threatening."

"Family."

"Danger."

Cass said something back, but his voice was even fainter.

“Hurt.”

“Have.”

“Tomorrow.”

Their muffled conversation grew even quieter. I strained to listen, but before I could latch on to any more words, the much more distinct sound of footsteps heading back towards the door sounded.

I hopped back to my spot by the fire, and Cass slipped back inside only a moment after I settled back on the carpet. His eyes were stuck on the floor as something clearly occupied his thoughts. He was tense, and, if I wasn't mistaken, there was something akin to anger teeming behind his emerald green gaze.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“Everything's fine.” He sat back down and raked a hand through his hair before forcing a smile. “It's my turn.”

Chapter Forty



Despite having stayed up for hours with Cass, my thoughts woke me the next day before the sun could.

I snuggled into my armchair by the window and watching the colors in the sky outside brighten. A new day, one day closer to the end. One day less for me to figure out how I would save Cass, and the possible solutions were still shooting sporadically around my head.

Cass said he loved me. Does he love me enough to go against his father? If I buckled down and told him everything, from start to finish, perhaps he'd be more understanding. He'd be on my side, surely.

Or if I just found a way to secret him away before the massacre. As much as the thought appalled me last night, that seemed like my most solid plan. He'd realize that I'd known what was going to happen after the fact, but by then, all would be done. The only real sacrifice might be his love for me when he learned I'd let everyone he cared about die.

My heart stuttered. Maybe that was a trade I had to make—Cass might hate me, but he'd be alive.

A small rap sounded on my door.

"Come in," I called. It was early, even for Bridgette. Yesterday, my first full day back at the castle, she hadn't come until dawn.

No one answered. Footsteps scurried down the hall.

I got up and strode over to the door, the socks I'd requested keeping my feet perfectly warm over the stone floor.

A thin, folded paper rested over the carpet a few paces from the door. I snatched it from the ground. Hiding the note behind my back, I cracked the door open and peeked outside. The hallway was empty. Nothing but paintings and candles. I pulled my head back in and shut the door. With my back firmly against it, I unfolded the note.

Tomorrow morning, just before dawn. The woods, behind the northwest tower.

Be careful and be unfollowed.

-G

I rushed over to the nearest candle and held the paper in its flame. It caught in an instant, and by the time I tossed it into the unlit fireplace. It crumpled into ash. Pulling one of my tattered boots from the back of my massive wardrobe, I beat the ashes into the old soot of the fireplace.

I figured Gilow would try to summon me, but I didn't know if he'd be able to succeed. Did Gilow have another supporter in the castle? He had to; how else would I have gotten this letter. But whoever they were, they must have heard me call them in. Why not enter? If we were allies, there was no reason not to meet each other.

Maybe not. If the king discovered one of us, who knew if the other could be trusted not to reveal the other. This other spy clearly knew me if they knew to deliver this to my room. They wanted to protect themselves, and that was fine. At least I knew someone drifting through these walls had my back, even if their face remained a secret to me.

Another knock sounded at my door. I returned the grate to the fireplace

and hopped up.

“Come in,” I called again, hurrying back into the chair by the window, through which the beginnings of sunlight had begun to beam through.

The door swung open. “Good morning, Miss.” Bridgette gave me a smile. “Up early, I see.”

“For today,” I said. “But tomorrow, I’ll be sleeping in.”



“Now try this.” Sir West lifted a rose-pink miniature cake up to my mouth. Lady Irene watched me with big eyes, anxiously awaiting my reaction to this new treat. I took a small bite, and Sir West popped the remainder in his mouth.

“Well,” Lady Irene asked, pressing her fingertips together under her chin. “The best so far, is it not?”

Sparkling sweetness engulfed my mouth as I chewed the soft bread. “It’s very sugary.”

“That’s why it’s so wonderful!” Irene popped one of the little cakes into her mouth.

“Lady Irene’s sweet tooth is insatiable,” Sir West said. “It rivals even my own.”

“How have you survived thus far without such treats?” Lady Irene frowned. “What an awful childhood it must have been.”

“Here in Morra, we’re not as addicted to sugar as you Rylanders.”

“We Rylanders,” Sir West corrected. “You are indeed one of us now, and I’m afraid you’re going to have to get used to eating all these delicious, sweet things.”

“A fate worse than death, to be sure,” I said, “but for the sake of blending in, I’ll suffer it.”

Lady Irene laughed and waved over a servant. The maid replaced our now

mostly empty tray with a plate of entirely new little pastries and candies I'd never seen before. If I'd known they were planning this, I would have accounted for it during breakfast. But despite my almost too full stomach and lingering thoughts of days to come, I found myself sadly enjoying the little moment with West and Irene. They seemed to have found the brightest corner of the castle—a cute little room lined with tall windows, golden crown molding, and drenched in sunlight. The furniture here was minimal, looking much more like Morra than Ryland.

“Are these macaroons?” Cass, appearing from nowhere, leaned over my chair. He picked up around cookie.

A servant, one of two waiting diligently in the corner of the room, carried a chair from the wall up to our table. Cass sat and crossed his leg over his knee.

“We were just introducing Miss Evelyn to all the wonderful Ryland treats she's been missing out on for the past seventeen years,” Sir West informed him.

“Oh, that's right.” Cass leaned nearer to me. “Evie, you should know that luxuries of the edible variety take precedent above all else in Ryland, especially in Aurell.”

“So I should expect to double my size after two seasons then?”

“Keep spending your days with him, and you'll accomplish the feat in only one,” he said, gesturing to Sir West.

“I'm appalled.” Sir West scoffed. “I'll have you both know that my current physique is due only to my age and not my choice of delicacies. When I was a young man, I was slender enough to hide under a rug and go completely unnoticed.”

“Perhaps you can maintain your lovely figure by skipping meals as our prince does,” Lady Irene raised her eyebrows to Cass, and I found myself doing the same. Fate had been merciful to me this morning by keeping the king away, but I hadn't seen Cass either. I hadn't seen him since fairly early

last night. If not for Donnie, I would have been left alone to endure breakfast with the court all by myself.

“That was by accident.” Cass placed his hand over mine and curled his fingers under it. His silent apology to me. “I stayed up later than I intended and overslept.”

The skin under Cass’s eyes sagged. Honestly, he looked like he hadn’t slept at all. Was he worried about something? I hoped he hadn’t had an encounter with his father.

I brought my eyes back ahead before they could linger noticeably long. I wouldn’t ask here, not with West and Irene around.

“Who needs breakfast when you have macaroons?” Cass picked one from the tray, a strawberry one.

My smile faltered. Suddenly, my heart began pounding.

I’d only been thinking about Cass. What about Lady Irene and Sir West? They were people too.

They may not have been innocent, but they didn’t deserve death. Gilow would understand that if I told him what I knew about them. Perhaps it wasn’t too late to ask him to re-adjust his plans.

“Miss Evelyn,” Irene’s voice pulled me from my trace. “This one,” she said, offering me a little white macaroon.

I took it, feeling a genuine bead of anxious hope brush from my fingers to hers. “Thank you.”

Chapter Forty-One



The chamber door creaked as I pulled it open. I winced. Had it always been this loud?

The hallway was still and empty. I was luckily some distance from the court's rooms, the king, and Cass. I flushed to think about all the reasons the king would want to put my room out of earshot of everyone else's, but it was to my benefit now.

In nothing more than my nightshift, a robe, and tattered boots, I crept through the hall. The candles were greedy with their light, casting the hallway in an eerie in-between of dancing light and shadows.

I peeked around the end of the corridor. Empty. These past days being pulled every which way through the castle left me with a decent idea of where I was going. I knew a couple ways in, a few ways out, and at least one exit that wouldn't draw attention.

I slipped into a tiny drawing-room that had become Geane's makeshift fitting room. Mirrors splayed like wallpaper over one side, and misplaced furniture and windows lined another. I'd spent no less than three hours of my life in this room today, letting Geane and her assistants pin me up and down with fabric. It was more than enough time to notice the spot in the corner of the room they would sometimes disappear into. I felt my way up to the thin curtain draping the corner and pushed the velvet aside. A small spiraling

staircase descended into darkness. I gripped the rusty iron railing and circled down, each step whining under my boots. I couldn't shake the thought how horrible it would be if these stairs gave way under me, and in the midst of everything, I simply tumbled down them and died right there.

Eventually, the stairs evened out into a seamstress's workroom. Bolts of fabric, stacked like pastels in an artist's collection, leaned against the walls in perfectly color-coordinated rows. Work desks lined up alongside each other down the center of the room as if they were trying to form one long table. At the other side of the room, half-constructed works pinned into dress forms waited to be completed.

I turned to the harboring a set of windows. Kat had once told me that any seamstress worth her while will always have a door within arm's reach. Something about dying cloth and airing clean fabrics in the fresh air. For once, she was right about something. Tucked into an out of the way corridor, hiding just past the bottom of the staircase, was a small door.

The door didn't even squeak as it pulled open. Cool night air swirled around me as I stepped out into it. A line of fabric ran from a hook beside the door and extended to the far side of the grass, hanging as freely as any clothesline outside any average yard. It was an unexpected touch of mundanity in the realm of luxury.

Two of the castle's towers flanked me on both sides. But the northwest tower was on the other side. I couldn't be seen trailing the perimeter of the castle, so I'd have to enter into the woods and circle around. But what if there were sentinels above the towers? They'd see me sneaking into the woods.

I ran my hands over my white night shift and robe. The moon hanging high in the sky and its reflective light was doing me no favors.

A deep green square of fabric seemed to call out to me from the clothesline. I yanked it free. It was almost wide enough to be a blanket. Perhaps that could function for my excuse if I were caught. *I decided to go for a stroll through the woods and took this blanket to keep warm.* There had

to be some version of events in which that didn't sound ridiculous.

Draped in the green fabric, I took a deep breath and paced across the grass. With each step, I braced for the call to halt or the warning arrow to pierce the grass before me. But I kept my head down and kept moving. Through the grass, then into the tree line.

In the safety of the trees, I pulled the fabric from over my head and finally looked back. I couldn't make out any sentinels prowling about, but my eyes in the dark were perhaps not the most reliable.

I trekked through the dirt and leaves. My boots crunched across grass and fallen twigs. No less than four times did I nearly tripped over invisible roots. The forest to my right cooed and howled with danger, but it still felt more welcoming than the castle to my left. I circled almost halfway around the mammoth estate until the northwest tower was directly across from me. Opaque darkness pulsed around me. I wouldn't risk calling out. I'd have to rely only on my unreliable eyes to find my liaison.

I turned my back on the castle and peered further into the woods. Darkness, trees, grass, roots—

Cloak, horse, *person*.

The figure waited, with his hood raised and hand gripping the reins of his steed. I rushed towards him, twigs snapping under my feet.

"Gilow," I whispered. My heart clawed up my throat. The request I was about to make of him—to spare the part of the court's life—was big. But if I presented it correctly, then maybe...

He turned around and pulled back his hood. No, not Gilow.

I stopped a few paces from him. "Luke?"

My hand clenched around the fabric falling from my shoulders. My jaw clenched. It was foolish of me to assume Gilow would come here himself. But of all the people, he sent *him*.

"I know you don't want to see me," Luke fiddled with his horse's reins. "But I had to come. I need to explain what happened."

Something was wrong with his face. The darkness of the forest left it in a shadow, but past that, I could tell something was off about it. Was this what guilt did to him?

A cloud, which had fallen over the moon at some point without my notice, parted. Beams of moonlight shone through the forest. The world was a little clearer, and so was Luke.

My limbs went cold.

His face, his beautiful face, was beaten into shades of blue and black. His left eye was swollen shut completely. A deep red gash cut through his bottom. His chest quivered with the inhale of breath. I imagined under his shirt was a similar picture to his face.

“For all that is...” I stammered towards him. With care, I lifted my hand to his chest and touched it, with no more weight than a feather. He shuddered and pulled back. I’d hurt him with just that little touch. “What happened to you?”

“Your prince happened.”

I dropped my hand. “No.”

Cass wouldn’t. It was impossible.

“Yes, Evie.” He cleared his throat, an action that looked to give him even more pain. “Some of his officers came to my shop last night. Told me to stay away from you, and Kat, and Jen. They said to stay away, or he would kill me.”

“No.” I shook my head. He couldn’t have. Cass would never do that. He didn’t even know Luke.

But if he did.

Would that make him angry enough to do this?

The dark circles under Cass’s eyes this morning worried me. I thought maybe he’d had an encounter with his father. But no, he’d been waiting for news about an encounter of his own. That’s what was keeping him up last night. He lied to me. What else had he lied about?

What else had I let myself believe? Perhaps that any person who grew up lavishly, whether as royalty or in the court, could care anything about people they were supposed to think of as inferior.

“Luke...” My lip trembled as I looked up at him. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.” I wanted to hug him, to apologize a thousand times, but I couldn’t. Touching him would only cause him pain. Cassian had taken this moment from us.

“It’s alright.” He took my hands and squeezed them. “They’re just bruises. I’ll heal. I’m the one who has to apologize. That kiss with Kat, it was a mistake. One second, she was joking about how pretty your ring would look on her finger, and the next, she was on top of me. I should have seen it coming, but I didn’t. It’s never happened before, and it will never happen again.”

“I believe you.” How could I not? And even if I didn’t, what was his betrayal compared to mine? He and Kat caused me heartache, but I’d caused him so much more. I let myself get blinded by the enemy. I lied about things that I’d never thought I’d lie about. And now I let one of the only people I had left suffer at my makeshift beloved’s hands. “I didn’t want any of this to happen, Luke. I really, really didn’t.”

“Nobody did, but we all knew the risks going in. Just like we knew the reward.” He glanced back through the tree line, toward the castle behind me. “It’s going to be worth it. Just a few more days, and we’ll be free.”

A few more days. And to think I’d actually been dreading the moment. Now, my emotions were set. I’d played my part so well I almost started to believe it. How could I have truly believed that I knew him? Prince Cassian, son of a monster, and a monster himself. And I let him turn me into one too. But if that’s what he made me, that’s what I would be. This final day would come, and when it did, Prince Cassian would die. I’d do it myself if I had to.

“Alright,” I said. “What does Gilow need to know?”



I snuck back through the hallway to my room with only minutes to spare. The sun hadn't yet crawled over the trees, but the darkness of the night sky was beginning to fade as I cracked open my chamber door and slipped inside. The door clicked shut. Closing my eyes, I leaned back against it. So much to be done. So little time. So much weight.

"Evelyn."

I jerked up from the door. Bridgette stood at the edge of my bed.

My heart hurt—it was beating so fast. "You scared me," I laughed, "I just went out for a walk."

"No, you didn't. You went out to meet Gilow's messenger."

I froze. "Excuse me?"

"Evelyn, I know. I saw you sneak out from the seamstress's room." She chuckled. "I didn't actually think you would do it. You know what could've happened if you got caught?"

The secret supporter was Bridgette? I kicked myself for not deducing that myself. She was as calm as the breeze revealing herself to me. My immediate fear washed away in her presence.

"I can imagine," I said.

"Get caught, and you won't have to. You learn a lot of things working in the palace. First and foremost, the king doesn't take well to traitors and conspirators."

"Believe me, I know." I stepped forward. Her eyes stayed sharp on me. "So, you're one of Gilow's allies."

She dropped her hands into the pockets of her apron. "Up until now, I considered myself nothing more than a distant supporter."

"What changed?"

She shrugged. "Sympathy? One of the delivery boys brought in that note for you yesterday. Looked like he would break down crying right then and

there if I didn't agree to take it to you. I figured it must be really, really important to Gilow." She raised an eyebrow. "Was it?"

"More than you know."

Or did she know? If Bridgette was involved enough to know Gilow's name, she must have known more than she was letting on. I'd sure as hell never seen her at a meeting, so where was she getting her information from? She'd sparked a thousand questions in me.

I crossed my arms. "Why reveal yourself to me now? You were pretty eager to run off yesterday morning."

"Oh, I don't know." She rolled her eyes. "Seeing you risk instant death to running out into the woods was a bit inspiring, I suppose. If you were willing to risk that, then I thought you might be someone worth trusting." She looked me up and down. "That, and you're doing an awful job at subtly sneaking out. I figured you'd need some assistance."

She ran her fingers along the fabric of my robe. I hadn't noticed until then, but the hems of the robe and my night shift were speckled with dirt and grass. "Exactly how were you going to explain this? You 'went for a walk'?"

"Could you think of a better excuse?"

"Maybe not, but that doesn't make yours any cleverer." Bridgette returned her hands to her pockets. "But as an alternative, how about this: I assume you're going to need more communication with Gilow before we head off to Ryland?"

"That's partially true." I squinted.

"How about, instead of you risking life and limb darting off into the woods at night, I'll deliver whatever messages you have myself. No one's going to care if I disappear into the woods during the night. More than a few maids and kitchen boys sneak off together under cover of darkness. Even if the guards see me, they'll think nothing of it."

"You would do that? For me?"

"For Gilow. And it's only for a few more days."

I bit my lip. She didn't know everything. In fact, poor Bridgette must have known very little. But the question was, should I tell her? If she really was from Ryland, she might not take the imminent death of her king and prince well.

But as a supporter of Gilow, she couldn't have any fondness for them. And if she did, there was nothing she could do about it. To reveal any association with Gilow would be a death sentence. She'd trusted me for no other reason than she thought I was worth trusting. I could at least return the sentiment.

I took a breath. "Bridgette, I think you should sit down. I'm about to tell you everything."

Chapter Forty-Two



Bridgette fumbled with the laces of my dress. “Goddamn it.”. Her fingers poked and pressed against the back of my bodice. “Many things have I envied of the upper class in Ryland, but these ridiculous ensnarements they call dresses are not one of them.”

I smirked. “I’m glad someone in this castle agrees.”

Such a distinct change I’d seen in Bridgette since she revealed herself to me. The shy servant girl I met that day in the library was long gone. Instead, I found myself with a hot-tempered, rough-handed maid who couldn’t go more than ten minutes without damning something to hell. The old Bridgette only reappeared in the presence of others like Cassian or the courtiers who so loved to visit me unannounced. Then, she was all meek sentences and glances at the floor. I much preferred this version of Bridgette.

My gaze turned to the window. The night had just been born, and the last of the carriages had arrived no less than an hour ago. Most of Ryland was on its way to Morra. Everyone that mattered to the king, at least. Everyone that was already here, I’d meet tonight, most for the first and last time.

“What do you know about my fellow dinner guests?” I asked. “Anything I should know beforehand?”

“They’re all loyalist snobs, and I won’t miss them after they’re dead.”

“Alright, I’ll be sure to address them as such.”

Bridgette laughed. “You know, I might actually miss you after tomorrow’s event comes to an end. Never thought I’d say that about anyone dwelling in the upper floors.”

“What are you going to do after? I don’t think the palace will be in need of maids after tomorrow if all goes according to plan.”

“I haven’t a damn clue.”

“You could always stay here, in Morra.”

“Ha!” Bridgette threw her head back. “And what, become a farmer? A shopkeeper’s wife?” She shook her head. “Ryland has its problems and even more to come, but I’d sooner become a beggar than abandon life in the capitol for a Morran country life. I’m a Rylander at heart. That will never change.”

“Yet you’re fighting on Morra’s side.”

“I’m fighting against the King, not Ryland,” she said. “I don’t have to love my king to love my country.”

Bridgette finished lacing the back of my bodice. My waist cinched as she tied it off. She grabbed my shoulders and turned me towards the mirror. “Nice work, huh?” she smiled, resting her hands on her hips.

I’d let Bridgette pick my attire for the night, and she’d chosen very well.

A blood-red gown made entirely of lace flared out from my hips and wrapped its way up my chest. The crimson lace covered my arms from the edges of my shoulders to my wrists. The same ruby hairpins Geane had brought to the apartment nearly a week ago pushed back my curls, letting them rain behind my shoulders and down my lace-covered back.

I couldn’t help but think how perfect my ruby engagement ring would match with this outfit. I pinched my ring finger. Although I was done with Cassian now, and even though I’d hadn’t outright told Luke such, I didn’t think I’d ever be putting that ring back on. It didn’t fit on me, and after the world changed tomorrow, there shouldn’t be a reason for me to. I wouldn’t have to choose between marriage and working the barn.

“You’ve outdone yourself, Bridgette,” I told her, watching my reflection.

“Excluding the disaster that will be tomorrow, this is the last time you’ll get to wear a Ryland gown. Might as well go out with a bang.”

I turned back to face her. “I think that will come tomorrow.”

A knock sounded at my door. A heavy, weighted pounding. I grimaced. Since I saw Luke a week ago, every minute I spent with Cassian disgusted me.

His smiles were smug, his eyes were invading, his touch was violating, and his kisses were numbing. But I kept up my facade through it all. On occasion, I’d slip slightly, and he’d frown and ask what was wrong, but I’d smile and brush it away, becoming the perfect companion once again. Even if I wanted to vomit the moment I was alone again.

Bridgette put her own mask back on and pulled open the door.

King Dreux, clad in a coat of the deepest green, strode in without invitation.

“Miss Evelyn.” He looked me over, his eyes examining every inch of my body. “Stunning, absolutely stunning.”

His hand reached for mine. The same hand he’d nearly broken before. I instinctively jerked it back, but with a warning glare from him, I reluctantly let him take it. He brought my hand up to his lips and kissed it. The pain in my hand had subsided a couple days ago, but under his kiss, something equally disturbing swelled in my fingers.

“Where’s Cassian?” I asked.

“Downstairs with the others. I wanted to escort you myself.” He pulled my hand into his arm and led me out of the room. Bridgette had disappeared, so we were left to make our way down the hallway alone.

The corridor, though empty, teemed with remnants of visitors. Lights shone from under closed doors. With so many guests, with even more on the way, the entire castle was in use. I’d heard a few of my new neighbors bustling about before but didn’t dare venture out of my room. Despite having

changed feelings towards Cassian and some of the others, these new guests were strangers. Knowing that most had only hours to live weighed on me in a way I hadn't expected.

"Miss Evelyn, I think we've had a rough start," the king said. He led us down the hall at a pace too leisurely for my comfort.

"I don't disagree." I swallowed. "But I understand your hesitance to trust me. After all, we've known each other for so little time."

"My thoughts exactly. But that doesn't matter now. We'll have so much time to get to know each other better in the weeks to come. Tomorrow marks a new start for all of us, and I want to make sure you and I are beginning in the right place."

He had no idea the new start waiting tomorrow. For me, at least. For him and Cassian, it was only an end.

I swallowed my pride for the sake of simplicity. "If you're still worried about me, I promise it's in vain, Your Majesty. I haven't forgotten our last private conversation." My hand twitched in his arm.

"I didn't think you had. But that's not what I meant. Not this time."

I furrowed my brow. So, he hadn't come to layer me with vague threats the night before our departure. What other reason on earth could he possibly have to talk to me?

"I don't understand."

"I don't want to hate you, Evelyn," he said. "No more than I want to hate my own son. If we're going to be living together, I think it would be easier for both of us, all of us, if we could be friends."

"Friends?" The word slipped out of my mouth.

"Or cordial with each other, at the very least."

I struggled not to laugh. How could anyone in their right mind imagine that I, or any girl, would want to be friendly with him after what he put me through?

"Life will be a lot more pleasant if we like each other. Don't give me any

reason not to like you, and I'll treat you pleasantly for however long you stay around. Does that sound fair to you?"

That's what this was, a proposal of his own. The same agreement he and Cassian lived by, no doubt. Be obedient, be sweet, stay on his good side, and I'd have all my heart desired. If I were any other girl, and if he were any other man, maybe I would have been tempted.

I smiled and nodded up to him. "Very fair. So let us start over. As friends."

He grinned. Something that almost made him look human.

We made it to the edge of the staircase. I was ready to step down, but he stopped me.

"This is for you then." The king dropped my hand and slipped his inside his coat. From it, he drew out a gold-lined bracelet comprised of emerald jewels and linking gold circlets.

"This was my wife's." He wrapped the piece around my wrist and pressed the tiny clasp closed. The bracelet fit snugly around my wrist, wrapping in it a row of sparkling gold and emeralds. "It's one of the lesser pieces from her collection. I told her the emeralds reminded me of her eyes."

"It's gorgeous." Never before had I seen a more perfectly crafted work of jewelry. This was his peace offering, and it was a beautiful one.

"She never wore it as much as I would have liked, but I'm sure you'll appreciate it more."

He held his arm back out to me, and I slipped my emerald-adorned hand back into it. "I'll wear it tomorrow."

"I'd hoped you'd say that," he said. "Now, on to dinner. Don't disappoint me."

Chapter Forty-Three



So many new faces, each with names I was supposed to remember. But I didn't bother committing any of them to long-term memory. There was no point.

From the moment King Dreux and I descended the final flight of stairs, the world became a blur. He almost seemed happy to introduce me to the first wave of guests. I greeted them all with passion. After all, I was the mistress of a prince. I was supposed to be glowing with pride.

Cassian found us in no time and stole me away from his father. His company did nothing to improve my inner state. I couldn't stop staring at his eyes; the heavy bags had never disappeared, not since that morning. No one else over the past days had seemed to notice. Or if they had, they said nothing.

I waltzed through the party in a daze. Time became erratic. Moments passed like years, but hours passed like seconds. On the outside, I put out every ounce of joy and jest I could muster, but on the inside, I felt like death. I prayed for it to end.

The formalities passed, then dinner, then games, and so on. Of all the moments, my heart hurt the most when Donnie or Sir West was at my side. They might have been the only people I truly regretted not asking Gilow to spare.

When every game had been played, and I exchanged words with every guest at least once, the party drew to an end. Guests started peeling away to their rooms, and when all but a handful were gone, King Dreux bid us all good night, and the remainder of us were free to disperse as well.

The very last to leave, Cassian twined his fingers in mine as we strolled out of the great room.

“Exhausted yet?” he joked. His voice sounded unusually condescending.

“Are you kidding? I thought the party was just getting started.”

He smirked. “I’m glad you had a good time. I promise there won’t be any shortage of parties and feasts to come.”

You couldn’t be more wrong, Prince Cassian.

I inadvertently found myself glancing back up to Cassian’s lagging eyes.

“Are you going to ask?” Cass said.

My gaze shot ahead. “About what?”

“You’ve been staring at me for days. I thought you would have asked by now.”

“Ask what?”

“What’s wrong with me.”

I tried very hard not to grimace. “I figured you would tell me what was the matter in your own time.”

He squeezed his fingers between mine. “I wanted you to ask so I’d have a reason to tell you. I thought I wouldn’t say anything on my own, but I was wrong.”

“Just tell me.” I had no patience left. “Say whatever you need to say.”

Cassian led me away from the stairs as the rest of the guests ascended them sweeping me into the little sitting nook just under the stairs. I sat down and crossed my arms.

Go ahead, Cassian. Lie to me. Tell me something sweet to make me love you even more. Tell me a lie.

Cassian raked his hands through his hair. “Evie, I made a mistake.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever it was, I’m sure it’s not that bad. It can’t be bothering you that much.”

“It is.”

His conviction took me aback. I stared at him with wide eyes as he went on. “That friend of yours, the one who I freed from that officer.”

I bit my lip hard enough to draw blood. No. He wouldn’t. He couldn’t do this now.

“What about Luke?”

He took a shaky breath. “The other night, when you came here, and I sent Donnie to deliver a letter to your aunt...Evie, he was there. Donnie told me how forceful he was with your aunt and Kat. He said he could hear the screaming from outside. Your cousin and some other women were weeping inside the apartment. Donnie told me he was screaming at them. He demanded that he would see you when you returned. Evie, I thought he would hurt you. Somehow, I put it together that you really came here because you were afraid. I thought you would tell me in your own in time, but—” He paused. “I saw it in his eyes the day I met him. The way he looked at us. Just the thought of him attacking you or your family—I had to do something.”

Luke screaming and throwing things—I wished I could say it was ridiculous. But on the contrary, it made far too much sense. I could practically see the scene playing out in my mind.

But was that supposed to justify Cass’s reaction?

“What did you do to him?” I muttered.

“Lovely.” Cass knelt down before me. “Nothing I’m proud of.”

“Tell me exactly.”

He looked up at me, and I realized that it wasn’t exhaustion that had been coloring his face for these past few days. It was shame. “I sent some officers to...to intimidate him. They hurt him. Five nights ago. Not badly enough to cripple, but bad. I told them not to kill him, though.”

I clenched my skirts over my lap. “I would have told you if I was in

danger.”

“I know, and I should have known that, but I couldn’t take the chance. It was a mistake, Evie, and it’s been weighing heavier on me each day.”

I shrank back. Why did he have to tell me this? Why couldn’t he have kept his cruel secret to himself? Why couldn’t he just let me hate him?

“I don’t know what to say,” I whispered. “How am I supposed to feel about this?”

“Whatever you want, Lovely.” He reached out to touch me but held back. “I never want to stifle your emotions, even if they are against me. But I want you to know that my actions, however regrettable, were born out of love for you.”

“That’s not the kind of love I want, Cass.”

“I know, and it’s not the kind you deserve. You deserve better.”

He rose to his feet and paced before me. “I’m trying really hard not to be my father. I try every day. Sometimes, he gets the better of me, and I find myself doing things I don’t want to do. Things that I know are wrong, but he would tell me were right. I’m trying to be a better man than him. For Ryland, for myself, and now for you.”

Did he really mean this? Was it some cruel manipulation? Maybe he was a monster, but not by choice. A monster who wanted to change. A monster who wanted to be a man.

That didn’t change what he had done. It didn’t change the perspective I’d gained. He hurt someone I cared about. He was still the enemy. What kind of rebel has sympathy for the enemy?

“Evelyn.” He dropped down before me again. I saw all of him. His ruffled hair, his sorrowful green eyes, his trembling face. “I’m sorry.”

My heart ached. Was I supposed to backtrack now? To go back to my desire to save his life? That was selfish of me from the start. I’d let him blind me from the greater picture. Hating him for these past days showed me that. Saving him, against the will of the people who were fighting for my freedom,

against what Gilow and Jace and everyone else in the rebellion wanted and were risking for change, was cruelly self-serving.

I thought I knew Cass well enough that he would never do something like what he did to Luke—in *any* circumstance. I was wrong. I could be wrong again. Who's to say if he lived through this and made it back home to his throne in Ryland, he wouldn't try to keep things going just as they were.

I didn't know anything for sure. Except that looking into his trembling eyes now and imagining his death tomorrow felt like the most unfair thing in the world. But if I took my heart out of the equation for even a second, then letting him perish was the only fair thing to do.

Which side was I supposed to listen to?

If I had years to decide, I still might not know. But I had only a night.

Time was ticking again. For now, I answered with one thing I thought I was sure of.

"I forgive you."

Chapter Forty-Four



The day to end all days arrived.

Bridgette woke me before dawn. Even she seemed shadowed by the day. As we shared the breakfast she'd brought in for me, and as I bathed, we said almost nothing. What could be said about a day like today?

The first rays of sunlight beamed through the windows as Bridgette helped me out of the water. Sir West's birthday ball, in alignment with his bright demeanor, was to be during the day. The last of the carriages had arrived during the night, and Bridgette told me that many more guests were making their way in from the city today. I wondered how all of Jace and Gilow's allies, who were so used to hiding under cover of night, felt about making their grandstand in vivid daylight. It would certainly be easier to see their targets.

And more difficult if I slipped away with Cass. *If.*

Bridgette helped me dry myself then wrapped me in a thick white robe.

"If I don't ever get to speak to you again, let me just say good luck," Bridgette said.

I gripped the sides of my robe.

What would Bridgette do if she knew I was considering saving Cass for even five seconds? Lock me in this room? Threaten my life? If I were her,

that might be what I would do.

“To you too, Bridgette.”

Geane and her assistants arrived within the hour, hauling in a sea of shimmering gold. Bridgette and the assistants pulled me out of my robe and all four of them, even Geane, helped me into the waves of fabric. I watched in silent amazement as they fitted me into the dress. It was a goddess of a gown. Golden silk, rippling at the slightest touch, danced around my body. Only my arms and collar were free from its embrace. Despite the sweeping width of the skirt, I felt as light as air moving in it. Capped sleeves were never my favorite in a dress, but somehow this golden piece managed to pull them off. They complimented the curled, brocaded design that swirled around the bodice and wrapped around my back, where the pattern disappeared into a sea of corseted ribbon.

Somehow, Bridgette managed to pull my hair into an intricate braid that descended down my head and behind my shoulders. She'd even managed to find a golden hairpiece to place across my crown. As Geane finished the ribbons, another assistant slipped on a pair of gold-trimmed slippers, and finally, another assistant clipped the late queen's gold and emerald bracelet over my wrist. The green stood out dramatically against the vivid gold of my gown. I wondered if that's what the king had wanted.

Time was shrinking away. Each second, each breath, brought me nearer to the party, nearer to Cass.

It was the end. I should have accepted that. I'd come too far to betray my cause now. The moments ahead were inevitable. The day unstoppable. Fate was sealed. Who was I to try to change it?

I swallowed and wiped my moist hands on my skirt, matching my gaze in the mirror. *Be brave, Evie. Do the right thing. Change requires sacrifice. You know what to do. You have to let him die.*

Geane and her ladies fiddled with the little nuances of my appearance. A flair of fabric here, a curl there. But they were soon finished with their work.

There was nothing more to be done to me. I gazed into my mirror. Never before in my life had I been so beautiful, and likely never again would I be. This was the girl I'd imagined when playing pretend as a little girl, locking hands with her true love.

The confident decision I'd made only seconds ago already began to waver.

Bridgette, Geane, and the assistants bid me adieu, then left me alone. The first in a series of painful events was about to unravel, and it would begin with my escort down the party. Part of me wished I could see Kat and Auntie Jen before this all began, but my falling out with Kat had put an end to any of that.

Cass didn't even ask if I wanted to see them before we left.

A knock danced across my bedroom door. It cracked open.

"Evelyn?" Donnie peeked his head inside. Seeing me fully dressed, he let himself in. He looked so dashing in his black coat and silver sash. He grinned. "And I thought last night was the peak of your beauty."

Donnie. I hadn't even thought about him at all during the last few hours.

I forced a wide smile. "Always happy to surprise."

He glanced down at my bracelet and nodded, then offered his arm to me. "Shall we begin our wonderful day?"

I took his arm. "We shall."

Donnie was practically skipping as we made our way through the corridors of the castle. Cass had told me gatherings like this were his bread and butter, and his glee sent unbearable pangs through my heart.

How could you even think about saving Cass and not him? If you can't save one, you aren't meant to save either.

"When we get to Aurell," Donnie began, "you have to let Lady Kaya and I take you to haberdashery."

"The haberdashery?"

He beamed. "It's the grandest shop on the edge of the city, full of things

you can buy that have absolutely no purpose. Statues, empty books with beautiful spines, playing cards written in illegible languages. That sort of thing. I only think of it now because it's where we've all gotten gifts for Sir West this year. We realized a while ago that there was nothing practical we could get him, so we decided to go in the opposite direction."

I glanced away as we started down the steps. "I'm afraid I didn't get him anything."

Donnie placed his hand over mine. "Don't fret about it. You'll just have to get him something spectacular for his birthday next year."

A sharp pang shot through my heart. "Yes, I will."

We reached the bottom floor, and the party truly began.

Laughter and smiles coated every inch of the floor and didn't disappear in any part of the castle. Donnie was kind enough not to abandon me immediately and led me through the hosts of full skirts, polished boots, piled curls, and clinking glasses. Many—most, even— stopped to greet or at least look at me as we made our way further into the castle. Some of them I'd met the night before, but many faces were new. Almost all of the guests were light-class, but a few dark-classes were scattered about as well. I thought I'd be able to tell who was from Morra and who was not by the clothing the guests wore, but I was wrong. Very few people, even the ones from Morra, had chosen to dress in our signature bright colors. I think my eye-catching gold was the brightest color there. It made me stand out. Yet another deterrent, or perhaps sign, that I wasn't meant to be able to slip away easily.

Everyone had a drink in their hand, and every table hosted a game. I noticed the occasional dark-class servant making their way through the floors as well and did my best not to look at them. Though I knew for sure some of them were looking at me.

"Donestan!" Lady Irene shouted.

Donnie and I turned back from the conversation we were having with a younger man who claimed to be from Hythe. Lady Irene, dragging Sir Percy

along behind her, scurried up to us. “Oh, Miss Evelyn, you look lovely.” Her gaze fluttered over me.

“Quite so,” Sir Percy added.

“Have you seen the jester?” Lady Irene asked Donnie.

“No, I haven’t.”

“Then you must come!” She grabbed Donnie’s arm and yanked him away.

With only a slightly apologetic glance back at me, Donnie let her whisk him away.

Sir Percy nodded to me and followed leisurely behind them.

I sighed. That might have been the last time I’d ever get to speak to them.

“It’s Hildegard, correct?” My heart tremored at the sound of Cass’s voice.

He strode past the man I’d been speaking to and settled at my side. Though he’d obviously been speaking to the man, his gaze was on me. I bit my lip and glanced down as he took my hand in his, but I forced myself to look up as Cass entertained some sort of conversation with the man. I may have spoken at some point too, but for the life of me, I couldn’t recount what I’d said. I only knew, at some point, Hildegard went away, and Cass and I were left alone in the busy room.

“Have you been meeting lots of interesting people, Lovely?” he asked.

“Too many.”

He frowned. “Are you alright? You don’t look well.”

“I’m wonderful,” I insisted. “There’s just so much going on today.”

He stroked my cheek, then left a kiss on my forehead. “It won’t always be like this, I promise. Now’s just an opportunity for everyone to see your face.” He squeezed my hand. “And your hand in mine.”

I nodded. No, it would not be like this forever.

“Perhaps we can slip away to the library for a while before we leave.” He leaned in to whisper to me. “A party full of strangers reminds me of Taliver

volume twenty-nine.”

“Ah, I’m sorry, Lovely. No spoilers, right. Even if I have learned to hide my tell.”

I could hardly bear to look at him as he looked me dead in my eyes, reminding me of our second night together. After today, that little gesture would mean absolutely nothing to anyone besides me. It would be only a memory. He’d be a memory.

Do something, Evie.

But as I tried to move to pull him away, a warning and an alliance inside me kept me still.

Don’t you dare.

At least another hour passed. Cass and I made our way around the castle, spending most of our time in the great room, which had become a miniature circus. The jester Lady Irene mentioned hogged the room’s attention, filling it with laughter. Countless party games played on along with so much dancing. Maybe Cass and I would have participated, but he seemed more concerned with pulling me to every little group just to kiss my cheek and squeeze my hand as much as possible. I suppose directly saying “this is my new mistress” wasn’t the proper way of doing things, so this was how he did it instead.

We ran into a few other members of the court, and I noticed they were all wearing the same silver sash as Donnie. The longing glances I saw other guests cast their direction told me they were a great source of envy for many who didn’t have them. Today it would only make them a target.

The festivities bore on. My heart raced with every passing second. It wouldn’t be long until--

“Are you ready?” Cass pulled my gaze from the juggler. He was tucking his batons away now. I hadn’t even noticed he stopped juggling.

“For what?”

“To go outside and watch Sir West bathe in the attention of his birthday song.”

It was time.

I wasn't ready. I...I hadn't decided yet.

My throat was almost too dry to speak. "Yes."

People were already making their way to the courtyard. Sir West's biggest mistake was telling me that was where he would have everyone assemble to wish him a happy birthday.

Because that was where I told Gilow he could find everyone all at once.

Somehow, the entirety of our party managed to squeeze into the courtyard. Barely so. A few groups spilled out into the hallways, but the crowd had kindly left enough room to walk through them. Well, for Cass and me to walk. We were some of the last to assemble with everyone else. A crimson aisle shot out from the courtyard doors, leading all the way to a vast stage in the center. It climbed only a few feet off the ground, but enough to raise those on it above all the rest. Most of the court had already assembled on the platform, along with His Majesty, who whispered with Lady Lilith off to the side.

The murmur of the crowd was pulsing. Everything was pulsing.

I felt weak. My legs were thin blades of grass.

I gripped Cass's arm tighter than I intended to.

"Relax," he whispered. "We're just going to sing for him, then we'll step down. That's all."

A few in the crowd bowed to us, to Cass, when we passed. As we approached the stage, Sir West's waved to us. His careless smile shattered my heart a thousand times over.

"I thought it was my birthday, yet you seem to be the center of attention, my dear." West offered me a hand. We climbed the couple of steps up to his side.

"Not my intention at all." He didn't seem to notice the hitch in my voice.

West pouted. "Well, when we celebrate your birthday, Miss Evelyn. I shall arrive in a coat made of pure gold and steal all the attention away from

you. It's only fair."

I could barely muster a weak smile as the final courtiers, Sir Percy and Donnie strode down the courtyard. Donnie went to accompany his mother, and Sir Percy went to the other end of the stage to be at Lady Kaya's side.

My heart quivered. *Everyone is here.*

It's too late. You already decided, Evie. It's over now.

My eyes scanned the second and third-story windows. Jace said she would be up there, waiting to shoot.

"Thank you, friends," Sir West projected over the crowd, immediately quieting their buzz. "I am so very glad you all ventured here to celebrate the beginning of my twenty-fifth year of life."

A wave of laughter rippled through the crowd, but I didn't contribute.

"Yes, you're turning twenty-five for the twenty-fifth time!" Lady Irene shouted, loud enough for everyone to hear. Another burst of laughter washed over the courtyard. I swallowed, drawing my eyes away from the windows above for only a split second.

Sir Percy grabbed West's shoulder and looked out over the crowd, a wide smile on his face. "Let us sing this song before he starts regressing in age!"

My hands trembled.

Sir Percy cleared his throat and raised his hands as if conducting an orchestra. The courtyard inhaled in unison. All except for me.

"For he's a..."

The windows were still. There was no movement past the curtains, no figures pacing behind them. What were they waiting for?

"...jolly good fellow. For he's a..."

Cass's voice echoed in my ears. And the court's, and Donnie's too. The lightness in them was excruciating. I needed it to end. It had to be over soon.

"...jolly good fellow."

A flare of light sparkled across one of the windows right above us. It was so small that I knew no one else had noticed it. All eyes were trained upon

West.

“...for he’s,”

A window opened, and a thin bow pierced out of it, pointing our way. My entire body stilled. My throat dried.

“A jolly good fellow...”

Cass’s hand slipped into mine. I took in a sharp breath. His touch was delicate. This would be the last time I’d ever touch him.

A thousand moments washed over me. Cass betting all his coin during our card game. Laughing on the floor at the apartment. Him teasing me at the races. The moment he kissed me over our first chess game. The lights dancing over us at the impossible pond. Chasing me through the castle halls. Saving me from that dreadful moment with the twins. Telling me he loved me. The first time he called me Lovely.

It was already over. I should have taken my hand from his.

But...I couldn’t.

I couldn’t let him go.

“Which nobody can den—”

“No!” I tackled Cass to the ground. The arrow shot past my head and plunged into the crimson aisle.

We had barely a moment before chaos shattered the courtyard.

Arrows rained down into the courtyard. Dozens of windows flew open, beginning a brutal assault. In an instant, Cass rolled on top of me. The guards formerly lining the walls frantically pushed towards us. A frenzy of fabric and screams encircled us. Heaving under Cass’s protection, I watched helplessly as bodies collapsed into the grass. A scream escaped my mouth as another arrow pierced the aisle inches from my face.

“Keep your head down!” Cass tore me up from the ground.

A set of guards formed a shield around us. We rushed towards the castle doors, striking down everyone in our way. Two of our protectors fell before we made it inside. As we pushed our way into the castle, I tripped over my

dress, ripping it up the side. Cass hauled me back to my feet in an instant.

The Rylanders ran in a violent panic, darting in every direction. Most sprinted towards the main hall. I looked around. Torn coats laid across the carpet. Streaks of blood smeared a nearby wall. At least three limp bodies laid across the hall, people frantically scrambling over them. Where was Donnie? Where was West? Where was the king?

Cass and the few guards left with us pulled me ahead. We raced down the halls in a chaotic clatter before I realized where we were going.

“No!” I jerked to a stop. The castle’s entrance was just at the end of the hall.

“Come on!” Cass grabbed both my arms and tried to drag me forward.

“Not here.” I struggled against his grasp.

The castle’s doors flew open ahead of us, and an assault of arrows shot in. The cluster of guests ahead of us, only paces from supposed freedom, shrieked as the arrows plunged into them. Those who could, stumbled back. Two of the guards with us were pierced, and the remaining two rushed in to fight back the tide of fast-approaching invaders.

Without a word, Cass grabbed my arm again, and we ran further back into the castle. My shoes flew off in our frenzy, I ran barefoot under my gown.

He dragged me down hall after hall. I didn’t know where we were going. I only knew the people around us were dwindling, and soon we were running alone, with the cries of terror and chaos behind us, through a nearly empty corridor.

Two servants flew out of a doorway, directly into our path. No, no servants at all, though they were dressed like it. One wielded a small harvesting scythe and another a tall bow. Cass pushed me into the wall as the archer raised his bow. He lunged forward into the man, and they both crashed into the floor. The man’s quiver and arrows splayed across the carpet.

The other man let out a ferocious battle cry and lurched toward Cass, still wrestling the other man on the ground. He raised his scythe, ready to plunge

it into Cass's back.

In one fell swoop, I dropped to the floor, swiped one of the arrows from the fallen quiver, and threw myself into the approaching attacker. I slammed him into the wall, piercing the arrow into his heart.

He dropped the scythe and clawed at his bleeding chest, but it was no use. I forced the arrow even deeper into him until I could feel the point of it scraping against the stone wall behind him. Deep red rinsed over my hands. He stopped fighting and slumped down the wall.

I scrambled back. My chest heaved.

A disgusting squelch drew my eyes back down to Cass. His hand had found its way to the scythe, the scythe which was now coated in fresh blood. A new wave of crimson gushed from his attacker's throat, his life pouring over Cass's cream coat before his desperate gasps for air slowed to complete motionlessness.

I trembled as I watched Cass stumble up from the man, and more blood pooled over the floor.

Dropping the scythe, he reached for me.

I flinched, but he gripped my arm and tugged me through the bodies. "We have to keep going," he said.

I tried to keep breathing. We weaved through the castle, through rooms and corridors and bodies. Screams and footsteps echoed behind us. Most were doomed, trapped as they were in this maze of a castle.

Cass pulled me into a servant's passageway. The same passageway I'd first entered the castle through.

Why? What was I doing? We couldn't escape, could we? Would I let us?

We reached the end of the passage, bright, vivid light shining, guiding the way.

"We're almost there," Cass panted.

We raced for the open doorway toward freedom, and burst out into the day. Bodies littered the lawn.

My stomach churned. The only bodies out here were in servants' clothes. These were supposed to be allies.

As we ran, I looked back to the castle. One of the rounded towers at the corner of the castle hadn't fallen. Its sentinels aimed arrows down. The allies who had come this way hadn't even made it inside. Luke hadn't attempted to come in this way, had he?

Across the grass, bordering the edge of the forest, a row of carriages and horses sat idly. Figures flickered in the forest past them. A handful of steeds and thick fabrics flashed through the trees, including a few flashes of silver. Some of the court had gotten away, and so had we.

We ran toward one of the carriages. Over half of them had their horses stripped away, so perhaps more than just a few Rylanders had escaped. I tripped over something as we neared the carriages.

An ally. I recognized him. It was Thomas. Fresh blood gushed from his chest. A crossbow, still loaded and unused, laid beside him.

I covered my mouth and willed myself not to heave over. It wasn't hard at all to find her too. Only a few feet away, Maxine, facedown, her stolen servants' clothes drenched in red. Cass finally released his hold on me. He raced to free one of the remaining horses from its carriage.

So many people lost. People who were supposed to be my friends. My family. I let this happen to them. I let them die. I killed one of them myself...for Cass.

Three people dressed in servants' clothes sprinted out of the castle. They were a distance away but approaching fast, swords and clubs in hand. I didn't know who the two in the back were, but I recognized the leading man's figure. It was Luke. They were almost out of the shadow of the castle, almost in range of the sentinels above, ready to shoot down any invaders in sight.

I threw my hands up and begging them to stop. *Please, please don't come any further.*

Luke halted, stopping his companions at the edge of the wall's shadow.

He surveyed the bodies between us. How much had he seen?

Had he seen me save Cass's life?

The moment's pause that spanned the distance to Luke was shattered as Cass heaved me onto the horse and swung into the saddle behind me.

He darted us into the trees. I clutched his waist but kept my eyes back toward the castle—toward Luke, toward my family—as we ran away.

And I knew they might never want me back.

Chapter Forty-Five



The velvet curtains of a carriage pressed into my cheek as I laid my forehead against the window. They were pulled back, as they had been since we left the safe house.

The minute we'd arrived from the castle, guards rushed the two of us into this unassuming carriage and ordered us out of the city. We hadn't even been able to change. Cass still wore his bloodstained coat, and my once beautiful golden gown, now torn and splattered with blood and dirt, sprawled over the carriage floor.

We'd traveled for too long. If my entire appetite hadn't left me, perhaps forever, I might have been starving. The daylight sneaking under the curtains was starting to fade. How long would we ride without stopping? All the way to Aurell?

"Do you think he's dead?" Cass stared blankly ahead.

I knew he was talking about his father, but I thought of Luke and Gilow.

"I'm sure he made it out," I whispered.

Cass nodded, but I think we both knew it was doubtful.

The bumpy trail beneath us gave way to smoother ground. The now-familiar sound of wheels over cobblestone seeped through the floorboards. I peeked outside.

A new city stared back at me. Streetlamps lit the tall shops, a mix of

pastels and deep but vivid paints coloring them. We had to be in Morra still.

Our carriage drew to a stop. Cass and I waited for the guards that had been traveling ahead of us to open the door. When they did, we were quickly ushered into a wide door. Ordered to keep our heads down, I climbed the flat stone steps alongside Cass before entering through the back door.

A wave of voices washed over us. Women in with ripped skirts and torn sleeves. Men missing their coats with disheveled hair. Guards stood by every door and window. A few servants, some just as dirty as Cass and I were, meandered about. Others sat with their head in their hands in scattered chairs.

The din of the conversation intensified as we entered a large sitting room. A few dozen survivors, all still donning their party attire, bit their nails and rested with heads in their arms. A few of the women were crying, but I saw none of the men trying to comfort them.

“Cassian?”

We both turned at the call of his name, just in time to see Lady Lilith rising from a small bench pressed against the wall behind us. She smiled weakly, keeping her eyes on her prince. I’d never seen them so soft. “You’re alive.”

“Have you seen anyone else?” he asked. “My father?”

“Your father is alive,” she said. “He left for Aurell not a half-hour ago. Percy and Kaya went with him.”

Cass let out a small breath.

The bastard had lived, and so had Percy and Kaya. We’d failed. The enemy was still in power. It was even worse than what I feared might have happened if I’d only tried to secret Cass away. Instead of the chance that Cass would follow in the footsteps of his late father, the father was still alive.

And the failure was nearly entirely due to me.

“Who else made it?” I asked.

Lady Lilith nervously flicked a ring on her middle finger. “Donestan is here. He was hit during the onslaught, but he’ll live. West is upstairs with

him now.”

“Who else?” Cass asked.

Lady Lilith winced. “Bundy and Anne are dead. I saw it myself. They got Anne leaving the courtyard, and Bundy would not leave her.” She took a deep breath. “Irene escaped. She’s readying a carriage to leave now. It’s so late, I doubted I would even see you again.” For a moment, I thought Lady Lilith might break into tears, but she held her composure. I’d give her one thing, she was resilient.

Cass clenched his jaw. “How did they get the servant’s uniforms? How did they know the entrances to sneak into?”

I searched his face for any doubt in me, but his eyes were steady and trusting. I suppose saving his life had, for now at least, earned me his unyielding faith.

“Does it matter? It happened.”

“When are you leaving for Aurell?” Cass asked Lady Lilith.

“First thing in the morning, I suppose,” she said. “So long as Donestan can be moved.”

“Can I see him?” Cass asked.

Lilith smiled. “Of course.” I wanted to visit Donnie too. I was beyond grateful that he’d managed to survive, both he and West. But another familiar face peeking out of a darkened hallway ahead and demanded my attention.

“I follow soon.”

I slipped away from Lilith and Cass. They barely noticed, and I drifted into the narrow hall.

“You couldn’t do it.” Bridgette leaned back against the wall. The light of a distant candle flickered across her face.

“And you couldn’t stay away.”

“Thanks to you, I’m not out of a job yet.” Her clothes were crisp and fresh—not a spot marred the billowing fabric.

“How do you know what I did or didn’t do?” I folded my arms. “You

weren't there to see it."

"Didn't have to, but I knew if you arrived here, then that meant you couldn't go through with it." She smirked. "To be honest, I had a feeling you wouldn't. Saw it in your eyes this morning. The fire you had all the week before, I don't know what changed, but it was gone."

"You're surprisingly chipper about all this. I thought you'd be angrier. Aren't you frustrated that Gilow's revolution failed? The king is still alive. And the prince. Most of their court. Nothing's changed. If anything, things are going to get worse now." I could only imagine how furious King Dreux must be. His rush to return to his capital was not a good sign.

Bridgette shrugged. "I would be if we had lost. But I happen to know for a fact that things are just getting started."

I furrowed my brow. "What do you mean?"

Bridgette slipped her hand into her apron. "I received another note this morning. With instructions to give it to you if somehow you and the prince both made it out alive. I couldn't help but read it." She handed me the paper. "Tell me if you need anything, Miss Evelyn," she said, then smugly slipped out of the corridor.

Left alone, I unfolded the note. The dim light was just enough to make out the flowy script.

Gilow is dead. See you in Aurell.

-J

I clutched the parchment. Jace knew. Jace knew all along I wouldn't do it. And it was exactly what she'd pleaded with Gilow for. She wanted me to go to Aurell and take this assignment further and deeper in some other direction.

So, how was it a coincidence that the one time I ever knew her to break in

alignment with Gilow—and on something as important as this— it was the same time he just so happened to disappear?

The answer choked me. If Jace left this note before the attack, how would she know he would fall today?

I crept up to one of the distant candles and let the paper burn away in its flame. I was right where Jace wanted me.

Was the Jace that send this message the same one I thought I knew? Even if she wasn't, I didn't have anyone else. If Gilow was dead, then she was our leader.

Jace *was* the rebellion.

And if I wasn't with her, then I was against her. If I wasn't with her, then I was alone.

No, I'd worked too hard for us. Even though I'd saved Cass's life, I was still a rebel.

I had to keep going until we got what we wanted, no matter who was in charge. If I was in the rebellion's bad graces now, I'd prove myself worthy of being with them again. Whatever it took.

Bridgette was right—things were just getting started. A real war was about to begin.

And I was right in the middle of it.

END OF BOOK ONE

Evie Still Needs You

Did you enjoy The Half-Class? Reviews keep books alive . . . Evie needs your help!

*Help her by leaving your review on either
[GoodReads](#) or the digital storefront of your choosing. She thanks you!*

Acknowledgments

Holy crap, I can't believe I'm writing this. It's been nearly two years since I started writing this book, and now here I am, putting together my thank-yous like I'm giving an Oscar speech. Real talk, publishing a book really does feel as magical as winning an academy award. The road to my debut's publication has been a rocky one, and everyone who's taken the time to help this story find its way deserves all the thanks I can give. (That includes all you readers reading this right now!)

But as for the specific shoutouts, first, I've gotta give my undying gratitude to everyone at Parliament. To Chantal, thank you for taking a chance on a wide-eyed newbie author and her risqué little series. You will always be the first editor who read my work and said yes. (If not the only one, lol.)

To Loni and Malorie, I never expected to have two content editors, but I'm grateful to have gotten to work with both of you. You each made this book sharper and stronger.

Everyone at Parliament truly deserves a standing ovation. I couldn't have dreamt up a better home for this story or a more badass team to debut with.

My darling critique partners deserve sooo much credit for helping sculpt this story into shape from the get-go. To Lisa, who read the first-ever draft of what would become this book, thank you for pushing me to go bigger and

deeper with this and challenging me to address the topics that made me uncomfortable to write about. Without you, I never would've had the courage to give this book the complete rewrite it needed, and I'm certain *The Half-Class* wouldn't exist at all.

To Juls! A hundred pages wouldn't be enough to describe how much you mean to me! Thank you for volunteering to be the first to read this book when it really was *The Half-Class*, and thank you for reminding me on my most doubtful days just how much you believed in it. The day you hit me up with that "wanna be CPs?" email will go down as one of the best days in my writing life.

Finally, thanks, Dad, for letting me spend an entire summer typing away on the couch and never once telling me to close the laptop and get a job. And thank you to you and Mama, who fought against racism, violence, family, and the world itself to marry a person outside of your races in a state that wouldn't even have let you a couple decades earlier. Thank you for never once letting Keithen or me think being mixed was a bad thing, even when the people next door said otherwise.

Thank you to all the people in my life who let me be myself in every way.

(Oh, and lastly, this is for you, Bianca—remember that time two years ago when I came over to your apartment and told you about this book I was writing? Then when you laughed at me, I told you I'd blast you in the acknowledgments? Well, here we are.)

About the Author



Kayvion Lewis has no degree whatsoever. She does have a CPR certification and an orange belt in kung fu though. (Is that as impressive?) When she's not writing, she's shuffling books at her local library, reading manga, jumping out of airplanes, and trying to turn her friends vegetarian. She lives in Louisiana with two energetic cats and her less energetic best friend. Her debut novel *THE HALF-CLASS* is coming out with The Parliament House Press in September 2021.

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