

A.G. MARSHALL

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a blue strapless gown with a matching capelet, stands on a stone balcony of a castle at night. The moon is full and bright in the sky, and fireworks are exploding in the background. The scene is illuminated with a blue glow. The title 'PRINCESS OF MIRRORS' is written in large, gold, serif letters across the bottom of the image.

PRINCESS
OF
MIRRORS

FAIRY TALE ADVENTURES BOOK 5
CINDERELLA RETOLD

PRINCESS OF MIRRORS

Fairy Tale Adventures Book Five

A.G. MARSHALL

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 Created with Vellum

To all my Royal Readers

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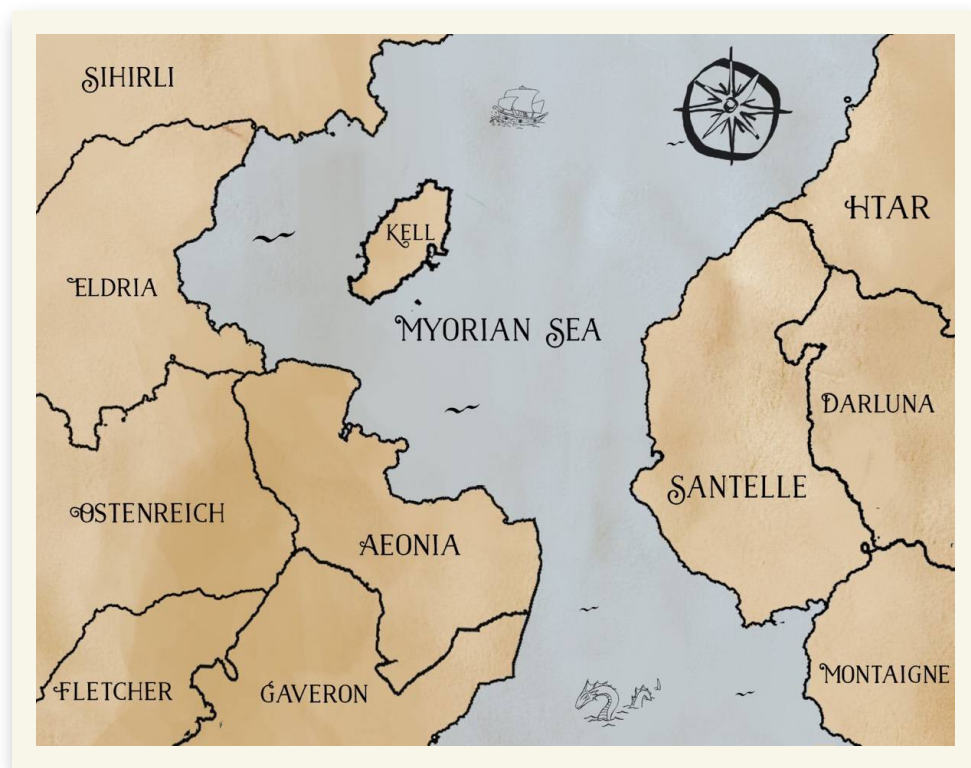
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MAP OF MYORA



PROLOGUE

“Come close, my dearest Ella.”

Ella blinked back tears and grabbed her father’s hand. His grip was weak, as was his voice. Far weaker than they had been yesterday. Much as she wanted to deny the truth, she couldn’t any longer.

Father was dying.

“Gavin! Gavin, my love!”

Lucretia Vidre burst into the room in a symphony of rustling skirts and clicking heels. Ella’s stepmother had lost her usual polished composure. Her chest heaved against her embroidered bodice as she gasped for air, winded from running across the Vidre’s large mansion and up a flight of stairs. The doctor had recommended moving Gavin to the far side of the house so he could have peace and quiet, but it hadn’t helped any more than the various tonics she had mixed for him.

Lucretia knelt on the other side of the bed and took Gavin’s free hand. She pressed it to her lips, then turned to the doctor standing quietly in the corner of the room.

“There must be something you can do.”

The woman, who had looked grim when they had summoned her several weeks ago, looked completely hopeless now. She took Gavin’s hand from Lucretia, checked his pulse, and shook her head.

“You’d best say your goodbyes, Duke Gavin.”

The duke nodded once and sank against his pillow as if that small movement had taken the rest of his strength. Ella’s breath caught in her throat as his grip on her hand loosened. Lucretia sobbed.

“No, not like this. I can’t lose you. Gavin, fight please. Fight it for us.”

“Ella.”

His voice was little more than a whisper. Lucretia nodded.

“Yes, Ella is here, dear. Rhoda and Lucille are on their way. We’re here for you.”

“I must speak to Ella.”

Ella tried to say something, but the words stuck in her throat. She turned to her stepmother for help, and Lucretia gave a watery smile.

“Ella is here, Gavin. She can hear you.”

“Alone. I must speak to Ella. Alone.”

“You want me to leave?”

A mixture of hurt and confusion filled Lucretia’s face. She looked from her dying husband to her stepdaughter, and her expression hardened. Ella tried once again to speak, but the words stayed stuck in her throat. She watched in silence as her stepmother exhaled and smoothed her features into a mask that showed no emotion at all. The doctor pulled Lucretia to her feet and whispered that it was best to give the duke what he wanted.

Lucretia kissed Gavin’s forehead, then let the doctor pull her away. Ella was vaguely aware of them moving. She heard the rustle of Lucretia’s dress and the percussive tap of her heels before the door closed behind them. There was a commotion in the hallway as Lucille and Rhoda arrived. Her stepsisters’ voices drifted into the room as they begged to be allowed to say goodbye.

Ella observed these things as if they were happening to someone else. They were like the memory of something that had happened so long ago that the details had become hazy.

If the sounds were a memory, then the pale man in front of her must be a bad dream.

“My Ella.”

“Father.”

She found her voice at last, but it didn't sound like her voice. It was broken and rasping, another part of this nightmare that she would surely wake up from at any moment.

“You must guard the mirrors.”

Ella blinked, and her father spoke in a rush before she could respond.

“The magic I showed you. Guard the mirrors. My journal-”

He gasped for air, and Ella nodded.

“Your journal is in the bottom drawer of your desk. I know, Father.”

“Guard the mirrors. Beware Evangelina. The Society-”

A cough shook his body, and his pale skin stretched over his face as he grimaced. He tried to speak again, but no sound came out. Duke Gavin raised a clenched fist with great effort and pressed something into Ella's hand. She felt hard edges press into her palm but ignored the pain. Father's eyes met hers, held her gaze for a moment, then emptied as he stared at nothing at all. His hand went limp and fell onto the blanket with a soft thud.

“No!”

She grabbed his hand again and squeezed it tight as if she could hold him there. Perhaps if she tried hard enough, she could pull him back and keep him with her through her grip alone.

The bedroom door burst open as Lucretia pushed past the doctor and rushed to the bed. Lucille and Rhoda followed close behind her.

“We didn’t get to say goodbye,” Lucille said.

Ella’s oldest stepsister was fifteen. Lucille was more of a young woman than a child. Almost old enough to go to parties in town and definitely old enough to understand that something strange had happened. She gave Ella an accusing glare, then turned to comfort her younger sister, Rhoda, who had dissolved into sobs at the sight of their stepfather’s body.

“What did he say to you?” Lucretia demanded. “Why did he want to see you alone?”

Ella swallowed. Her stepfamily didn’t know about the magic, and Father had decided on his deathbed not to tell them. The mirrors and their secrets were her responsibility.

“He just wanted to say goodbye.”

She stood and realized that whatever Father had given her was still digging into her palm. She unclenched her fist to look at it. A diamond pendant glistened in the firelight as if it were made of fire itself. Ella unclasped the chain with trembling hands and hung the gem around her neck.

“Didn’t he want to say goodbye to us?” Rhoda said.

Ella heard the heartbreak in her stepsister’s voice. Rhoda was only ten. Her eyes were still bleary from sleep, and more tears welled up in them when Ella didn’t answer. Rhoda had been young enough when her mother remarried that she had few memories of her biological father. Gavin had been the one to teach Rhoda how to dance and hold her tight when fierce summer storms swept over Mount Evangelina and disturbed her sleep.

And now he was gone. He had left her without saying goodbye. Had chosen not to say goodbye. Rhoda may be young, but she was old enough to understand that.

Ella reached out and placed a hand on Rhoda’s shoulder. Lucille pushed the hand away and stepped forward, placing her body protectively between them. Ella looked to her stepmother for help, but Lucretia’s blank expression offered no comfort. The woman looked from Gavin’s body to her crying

daughters to the diamond necklace glistening around her stepdaughter's neck. Her mouth pressed into a hard line.

“Go to the kitchen, girls. Cook will make some hot chocolate for you.”

Lucille and Rhoda obeyed, clinging to each other as they walked away. Ella turned to follow, but Lucretia stepped in front of her.

“Stay with me a moment, Gabriella. Your father must have had some reason for wanting to see you alone. I understand if you don't want to burden your sisters with it, but please tell me what it was.”

Ella swallowed. Lucretia only called her by her full name when she was in trouble, and she was definitely in trouble now. Nothing in her twelve years of life had prepared her for this. She felt young and lost and woefully unprepared for the mission she had been given. She looked into her stepmother's eyes and briefly considered telling her the truth. Even if Lucretia couldn't work magic herself, she could help Ella gather the materials she needed for enchantments. Lucille and Rhoda could help watch the mirrors. It would be fun to share this with them. A sort of game.

Only it wasn't a game. Father had told only Ella his secret, and he had spent his last breath begging her to guard it. Warning her against the secret society that would take advantage of the magic if they ever found it. Perhaps he suspected Lucretia of being a member of that society. Or perhaps his reasons were something else entirely. There was no way to know now that he was gone.

Ella gave her stepmother a small, sad smile. She liked Lucretia. The woman had never tried to fill the hole left by the death of Ella's mother. Instead, she had been a warm, steady presence in the young girl's life. She had treated Ella as her own daughter, and Ella had returned her affection.

Ella liked Lucretia, but she couldn't trust her.

“He said goodbye and gave me this.”

She gestured to the diamond pendant. Lucretia's eyes narrowed.

“That's all?”

“That's all.”

“Very well. Let's leave the doctor to her work.”

She gestured to the bed, where the doctor had already covered Gavin's body with a sheet. Fresh tears rolled down Ella's cheeks. Her father was dead. How could he be dead? This was a nightmare. Some horrible dream. She would wake up at any moment.

But she didn't wake up. Not when she sat in the kitchen, trying to explain to Rhoda why she hadn't been allowed to say goodbye. Not when she tried to ignore the resentment in Lucille's eyes as Rhoda pushed her hot chocolate aside and shook with sobs.

Ella didn't wake up when Gavin's will was read. When Lucretia's mouth hardened into that now familiar line as she discovered that her husband had left the estate to his daughter instead of his wife.

The nightmare persisted as Ella searched Father's journal for answers and taught herself magic as best she could. Father had taught her a few enchantments, but she had never worked them without his help. She had never been responsible for so many mirrors at once. She spent long nights sitting by the kitchen fire and reading by its light so Lucretia wouldn't question why she needed so many candles. She fell asleep on the hearth and simply said she had been cold when questioned about why she slept in such a dirty place.

She didn't wake up, and Father didn't come back. Lucretia stopped calling her Ella. That was a nickname for a beloved daughter, and Ella wasn't that any longer. Her stepsisters followed their mother's example, calling their stepsister Gabriella until they tired of that and shortened it to Bri.

Ella was gone. She had died that night with her father and fallen into a waking nightmare.

After six years of the nightmare, Gabriella Vidre was forced to admit that perhaps it wasn't a dream after all. That this might actually be her life. Acceptance settled onto her slowly, like the soot from the fireplace settled onto her skin. She learned to ignore both, pushing away the hurt and looking past the gray smudges on her skin and clothes. Both were part of this new life.

Bri kept the secret. She guarded the mirrors.



HENRY AWOKE TO A FLASH OF LIGHTNING. HIS HEART RACED as he breathed deeply and tried to calm the panic coursing through his body.

Where was he?

He clutched handfuls of slippery fabric. The slick texture only added to his terror.

The lightning flashed again, showing him an expansive bedroom for a split second, then plunging him back into darkness. Thunder rumbled overhead, and he pulled the slippery blanket up to his chin.

“Dad?”

The word echoed as if he were in a cave rather than a house. His voice sounded strange to his ears. High pitched and frightened. The voice of a child.

Which, to be fair, he was. Facts drifted slowly into Henry's head.

The blanket was slippery because it was made of silk. He was in the royal castle. In his bedroom, in fact. A bedroom that was significantly larger than the single room cottage he had shared with his parents and two brothers before-

Before. He was remembering before. That blissfully simple life as a goat herder living in the mountains with his family. Running over hills, chasing the flock, and laughing with his brothers. Sleeping on a pallet on the floor, sharing a

homespun quilt with Cael and Benjamin while his parents slept nearby on the small bed in the corner of the cottage. Father snored most nights.

Father was dead.

The pain of that realization stabbed through Henry like a knife to the chest. He pulled the silk over his mouth to muffle the sob. Tears welled in his eyes and spilled down his cheeks. The blanket was soaked through by the time he ran out of tears. He lowered it and took a shuddering breath.

He wished he could stop forgetting that his father was dead. It meant living through fresh loss countless times. He would be going through his day, studying magic, then the pain would stab his chest as he remembered.

Or eating, when he would remember and suddenly lose his appetite and lower his spoon, leaving the luxurious royal dinner untouched.

Or he would dream his father was alive, then wake up and remember that he was not.

Father had always comforted him during storms. The fierce storms that hit Aeonian every summer had seemed much scarier in their tiny mountain cottage. Wind shook the walls and rattled the door. Rain leaked through the roof no matter how many times they patched it.

But when Henry woke, disoriented by his fear, he had not been alone. He had a brother on either side of him, snuggled close. He had a mother and father within sight. Sometimes, when the storm was particularly loud, it woke everyone. When that happened, Mother would start a fire and toast bread for a snack. Father would cuddle the three boys on his lap, telling them stories to make them laugh until they forgot to be afraid.

Henry swallowed and reminded himself that he wasn't alone. His brothers were sleeping in the bedrooms on either side of him. His mother was down the hall in the bedroom she shared with her new husband.

King Noam was perfectly nice and had welcomed Henry to the castle with open arms and a warm smile. But not even the

warmest welcome could replace what he had lost. His father was dead, and there was no one to tell him stories and remind him that the storm would pass.

Henry rolled out of bed and walked to the window. He pressed his hands against the cold glass and looked up. The window alone was taller than their old cottage. The enormous sheet of glass probably cost more than the goat herd they had so proudly cared for before they moved. He was surrounded by luxury. Expensive clothes, furniture, and food.

He would trade it all to be back in that mountain cottage with his family again.

Raindrops ran down the glass, as if the very sky cried in sympathy. Henry stared into the darkness, desperate to see the split-second glimpses of the mountain that the lightning revealed.

Some part of him knew that the grief would fade. Strong as it was, it was already gentler than it had been. It would fade. He would adapt.

And so, he did. As childhood gave way to adulthood, Henry stopped waking up in a panic. He stopped crying for his father in the night. He got used to sleeping alone on slippery sheets and dining with strangers when foreign delegates came to visit. But every time Henry saw the mountains through the castle's enormous windows, his chest tightened with a strange urge to retrieve what he had lost.

The sight of Mount Evangelina standing proud against the sky made him long for the place that, no matter how many years passed, still felt like home.

Bri woke to the sound of birds chirping. She pulled her threadbare quilt over her head, but the blanket was too thin to block the annoyingly cheerful noise. If someone had described this life to her before her father died six years ago, she would have thought it was charming. Sleeping in an attic garret and waking to birdsong would be delightful in a book. Picturesque in a rustic, romantic sort of way.

It was easier to find such things appealing when you had a feather bed to sleep in and a servant to make breakfast for you every morning.

Bri flopped onto her back and groaned. Her younger self would have thought that a mattress cobbled together from old quilts sounded charming as well, but the reality was that sleeping on it left her sore and stiff each morning. She glared at the streaks of sunlight leaking in between the cracks in the boards. The roof desperately needed to be replaced. She added that to the long list of repairs that she couldn't afford.

Her younger self had never worried about money. She had barely been aware that it existed.

Bri rubbed her tired eyes. That life had been the storybook one. It was too bad she hadn't known that at the time so she could appreciate it more. Ella had been the daughter of a duke. His apprentice and confidant in a magical secret.

Doubtless, Father had meant for her to go on being Ella and stay sheltered from the realities of the world a little longer. Why else would he have set his will in such a way?

Bri had searched for loopholes countless times over the years. Had even spent some of her ever-dwindling stash of coins to have a lawyer review it.

But there was no way around the arrangement. While Lucretia was responsible for managing the finances needed to run the estate, Ella had the final say in all decisions and ultimately owned the property. Lucille and Rhoda would receive dowries when they married, but no other financial provisions had been made for them.

The arrangement left no one in control and no one satisfied.

Bri stared upward, wishing once again that Father had told her stepmother why such an arrangement was needed. If it had worked, the arrangement would have guaranteed that Bri could dedicate her life to guarding the mirrors without needing to worry about the day-to-day management of an estate. Bri closed her eyes, imagining her life as Father must have seen it for her. Ella guarding the mirrors. Lucretia guarding Ella.

Instead, he had started a war between the two women. They were tied together by money and separated by everything else. It was a stressful existence.

Bri sighed. Thinking of her old nickname always made her nostalgic. She couldn't remember who had shortened her name first. She had been too busy to pay attention, but at some point over the past six years she had stopped being Gabriella and started being Bri. Gabriella was a lot of syllables to dedicate to someone you despised.

Bri didn't mind. She felt like a different person living a different life. It made sense to have a different name as well, and it protected the memory of Ella and Father. Whatever happened to Bri had nothing to do with Ella. She stayed safe in the past while Bri carried on.

While Bri had lost syllables, her stepmother had gained them. It didn't make sense for a servant to call the lady of the house by her first name, and it made even less sense to call her "Mother." So while Ella became Bri, Lucretia became Lady Vidre. The switch protected Ella's memory even further. Ella

had a loving stepmother, while Bri wrestled daily with a tyrannical duchess.

More birds landed on the roof. Their claws scratched against the wood, and their song grew even louder.

“Blast it all.”

Bri sat up and rolled her shoulders to relieve the stiffness. She couldn't afford to sit around and daydream about her past life and past self. Not if she wanted to finish her work on time.

Not on time, she remembered with a start. She needed to be done early.

Bri jumped off her pile of quilts and hastily tied an apron over her threadbare dress. She promised herself that she wouldn't sleep in her clothes again that night. She would take the time to change into her nightdress so that her dress could hang up and air out and wouldn't be so wrinkled.

Then again, did it really matter if her dress was wrinkled? No one would see her. Well, no one who mattered or cared.

She twisted her curly blond hair back in a quick braid and tied the end with a piece of twine. Then she grabbed the chain around her neck and pulled the diamond pendant out from under her dress. The gem glistened as it caught the sunbeams streaming in from holes in the roof. Bri raised it to her lips, pressed a gentle kiss against the hard surface, then hurried down the stairs. Her stiff legs protested, but she ignored them. No time to take things slowly today.

The attic was three flights of stairs above the ground floor of the manor. There were plenty of bedrooms on the lower floors, but the beds had been sold long ago. Those rooms weren't much better than her attic, and Bri preferred to stay as far away from her stepfamily as possible.

She reached the kitchen and fell into the comfortable rhythm of a well-rehearsed routine.

Build the fire. Boil the water.

Guard the mirrors.

Guard was a strong word to describe what she did. Bri didn't even know what she was guarding against. Father had told her to check his journal, but she hadn't found anything useful. Bri only knew that whatever she was guarding was important enough for Father to dedicate his final breath to it.

She checked the mirror in the kitchen first by clutching the diamond, pressing her hand against the cool glass, and speaking the spell that Father had taught her.

“Open.”

The surface of the mirror rippled like water and glimmered with light until it no longer reflected a thin blond girl with tired blue eyes. Instead, it showed a dark, empty landscape that stretched farther than she could see.

Normally Bri would stare into the mirror for a while and try to discover its secrets. But she was in a hurry today, so she simply whispered, “close.”

The rippling surface stilled and glowed white, as if reflecting sunlight. Then the glass became an ordinary mirror again, showing a girl staring resolutely back at it. Bri blinked at her reflection and rubbed a streak of soot on her cheek. It smudged, growing larger with each swipe. She sighed and left it alone.

The morning flew by as she continued her routine. Pour the boiling water into the kettle for her stepfamily's morning tea. Check the mirrors in the sitting room while it brewed. Boil more water for porridge, check the mirrors in the hall. Cook the porridge and stir in a few drops of honey from the nearly empty jar.

Eat an apple for her own breakfast while she checked the mirrors in the dining room.

The mirrors had simply been part of the decor when her father was alive. But the other furnishings had been sold when wool prices dropped, so they stood out now as glistening reminders of the past. Lady Vidre had suggested selling the mirrors many times, but Bri had refused. No matter how

ridiculous it seemed to have so many mirrors in an empty, impoverished house, Bri had the final say.

Lady Vidre had tried once to pull one off the wall to show Bri that the room looked fine without it. The mirror had not budged. Finally, Lady Vidre concluded that it couldn't be removed without damaging the walls.

Bri had already known this from previous efforts and had simply watched with amusement as her stepmother tried to pry the mirror loose. If it were that simple, Bri would already have gathered up the mirrors and brought them to the attic, where she could guard them in peace. But the mirrors were somehow tied to the house itself. It was some kind of magic, Bri supposed. Father's journals said nothing about how it worked or how to change it.

A rustle of skirts and clacking heels in the hallway told Bri that her stepfamily was on their way to the dining room. She quickly grabbed the breakfast tray and hurried through the hallway, hoping to leave it there and get back to the kitchen before they saw her.

No such luck. They entered the dining room just as Bri reached the table.

She locked eyes with Lady Vidre. Six years of domestic warfare had hardened her stepmother's eyes, and her mouth was permanently pressed in the thin line that had first appeared when Gavin died. Bri tried not to blame her. Bri was trapped, but at least she knew why. Lady Vidre had no idea why she was in this situation.

Bri set the tray down and stepped back. Lucille and Rhoda sat on either side of their mother. Rhoda looked down into her porridge, avoiding Bri's gaze. As the youngest member of the household, she had largely been sheltered from the conflict, but hurt still lingered.

Lucille glared at Bri with just as much venom as her mother. She had become a younger version of Lady Vidre, Bri thought. Lucille had the same brown, wavy hair and warm skin tone. The same blue-gray eyes that flashed with just as much fury.

Rhoda took after her late father. She had black, curly hair that defied all the fine styles Lady Vidre tried to force it into. It was defying one even now, as curls escaped the elaborate braid and framed Rhoda's face in a dark cloud.

"Wash your hands before you pack our bags," Lady Vidre said. "Perhaps wash your face as well if you can find the time."

She didn't look at Bri as she said it. Why bother looking at something you despised?

"They're already packed," Bri said.

She kept her voice soft, adopting the manner of a humble servant. It was one of the many bargains she had struck with Lady Vidre over the years. When Lady Vidre claimed there was no money to pay servants for such a large house and insisted that they downsize and move to town, Bri had volunteered to do the work herself so they could stay on the estate.

Bri understood why her stepmother wanted to move. She had two unmarried daughters, and a house in town would let them attend social events and meet eligible bachelors. But they could barely afford to support one household. They certainly couldn't afford a second. Lady Vidre argued that it made more sense to sell the unprofitable estate, keep some of the farmland to provide a bit of income, and buy a modest house in town that fit their reduced circumstances. In many ways, it was a good plan. But Bri couldn't leave the estate, so she refused to approve such measures.

In the end, neither got what they wanted.

"You shouldn't pack so early," Lady Vidre said. "The gowns will wrinkle."

"I packed them carefully."

"The servants can iron them if they're wrinkled," Lucille said.

"It is already bad enough that we must borrow Lady Hawley's servants to look after us. I don't want to create extra work for them."

Bri rolled her eyes. Lady Vidre never worried about creating extra work for her, but heaven forbid she inconvenienced the servants of someone who mattered.

“It’s so exciting!” Rhoda said. “Princesses from all over the world coming to Aeonian to compete for Prince Alaric’s heart! I can’t believe we get to see them.”

Her eyes sparkled as she spoke. For a moment, her enthusiasm filled the room and relieved the tension. The hard line of Lady Vidre’s mouth relaxed, and Lucille’s jaw unclenched.

Then they looked at Bri, and the tension returned.

The sound of an approaching carriage clattered in the courtyard. Bri quickly curtsied and hurried away. She stayed out of sight while the staff, hired especially for this occasion, loaded the trunks onto the carriage and helped the ladies into it. She knew these men. They had driven her and her father into town many times. She didn’t want their pitying looks or questions about why she wasn’t going.

Finally, the carriage rattled away. Bri sighed with relief and settled down for a cup of lukewarm tea and leftover porridge. She would have the house to herself for five lovely days while her stepfamily visited the capital city of Aeonian to observe the Princess Test. They were staying with a well-connected noblewoman who had secured invitations to parties celebrating the event. Judging by the dresses they had packed, these would be luxurious affairs. They might even attend a ball in the castle. Bri hadn’t asked, and they hadn’t told her.

She laughed to herself. There was much more to this trip than simply celebrating the visit of nobility. Lady Vidre wanted Rhoda and Lucille to find husbands. Father’s will had only given them dowries, so marrying was the only way for them to get their own money and escape this situation. But was the Princess Test really the best place to go husband hunting? There would be princesses from all over Myora present, and Prince Alaric only needed one wife. That left a lot of eligible princesses available. It seemed like stiff

competition to Bri. Better to go somewhere with a lack of fine ladies rather than an excess.

If all that was needed was marriage, they should take up goat herding. There were plenty of eligible men herding goats. Many of them were rather handsome as well, fit and tanned from climbing the mountains day after day.

Bri laughed again as she pictured Rhoda and Lucille climbing up Mount Evangelina in search of goat herding husbands. Such a union would probably not bring happiness to either party, no matter how much money was involved. Her stepsisters were fine, noble ladies who wanted fine, noble gentlemen.

Bri looked up at the mirror. Father had been a duke. Was that the only reason Lucretia had married him? Was that why Father didn't trust her with the secret?

But if Lucretia had only wanted a title, why had Father married her? She had brought nothing but herself and two young daughters to the union. There must have been affection there. Even love. Bri was sure she remembered love.

But in the end, there hadn't been trust.

Bri shook her head. There was nothing to be gained from thinking about the past. She finished her tea in a single gulp and threw herself into housework. It was so much easier to get things done when she didn't have to avoid her stepfamily as she worked. She dusted and polished and swept. The morning and part of the afternoon flew past. Bri only noticed the passage of time when her growling stomach reminded her that she should eat.

She allowed herself the luxury of a picnic lunch outside. Bri sneaked out the kitchen door and dodged her way through the valley that housed the Vidre estate. Even in her most penny-pinching moments, Lady Vidre had never suggested letting the outdoor servants go. The gardens grew vegetables instead of flowers now, a necessity rather than an aesthetic choice. No matter how tight money got, the Vidres would not go hungry while they maintained the garden.

Most of the gardeners and goat herders had worked for her father. They had known Bri since she was a little girl. She avoided them as much as possible and was especially eager to do so now. She would rather not make excuses for why she had been left behind when the rest of the family had gone to Mias.

Luckily, the servants were working on the far side of the valley. Bri climbed up the part of the hill with the most trees, following the trail worn from her previous excursions, and sighed with relief as she left the estate.

She kept climbing until she reached her favorite place on the mountain, then settled beneath a tree to eat.

All of Aeonian stretched beneath her. She could see the pale blue line of the ocean from here. Could almost hear the cry of the gulls. Mias was a hazy row of rooftops, and the roads traveling toward it were as thin as threads.

Wind swept down the mountain and carried the scent of snowballs. Bri leaned against the tree and relaxed for the first time in months as she chewed goat cheese made from their own herd's milk. Even Lady Vidre wasn't dedicated to their destruction enough to suggest selling the goats. Money from the herd kept the estate running, even if profits were down and Lady Vidre didn't allow the money to be used as it should.

Bri stayed under the tree long after she finished her lunch. She hadn't planned to linger, but the sunshine and fresh air soothed her aching body and tired heart. Housework could wait until tomorrow. She had plenty of time to finish everything before her stepfamily returned. She watched the wind play over the mountain. It danced through grass, flowers, and trees as if it were a living thing.

Dark clouds gathered in the sky, blocking the sun and making it seem later than it actually was. Bri hurried back to the house, not eager to be caught out in a storm. She put her picnic supplies away, walked slowly up the stairs to the attic, and stared at her bed for a moment. Those clouds probably meant rain, which meant a leaky roof and a damp night for anyone sleeping under it.

Bri rolled her quilts into a bundle and carried them to the kitchen. It would be warmer and drier there, and she didn't have to worry about avoiding her stepfamily while they were gone.

The storm hit suddenly. Lightning flashed, and thunder rattled the house. Bri hardly noticed. Summer storms like this were common enough in Aeonian. She wondered if her stepfamily had made it to their destination yet or if they would be caught in the storm and forced to seek shelter for the night.

The house shook beneath her feet. Bri clutched the bundle of blankets and braced herself against the kitchen counter. It shook again, and she frowned. Earthquakes were not common in Aeonian. Should she go outside in case the house collapsed? She looked out the window and decided against it. Rain swept across the earth in waves, and Bri suddenly wished she wasn't alone. Even Lady Vidre was better than nothing sometimes, and this was turning into one of those times.

“Don't be ridiculous.”

She said this to her reflection in the mirror. To the wide-eyed girl staring back at her by candlelight.

Lightning flashed, and the reflection changed. Instead of her own image, Bri found herself facing a man with black eyes and dark hair. His features were handsome, but his expression was too haughty to be attractive. He wore fine clothes that only added to his arrogant appearance. The man's eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed in suspicion. His scowl deepened, which only made him more intimidating. Bri stared, too surprised to move even as her instincts screamed at her to run.

The man whirled around to look at something behind him, and Bri snapped back to her senses once his gaze left her. She lunged forward and dropped the bundle of blankets on the floor as she reached for her diamond with one hand and the mirror with the other.

“Close!”

The mirror flashed white and once again reflected the kitchen behind her. Bri stared at her reflection as if her pale face and frantic eyes could give her answers. Her heart pounded as she pressed her hand against the glass. She stood that way a long time, just in case the man came back. He didn't, but that didn't make Bri feel any better.

All these years, she had wondered why she was guarding the mirrors. That question had finally been answered.

“Would Your Highness like to try something different with your hair today?”

Henry studied his brown, curly hair in the mirror as if he were seriously considering the offer, then shook his head.

“No, thank you.”

“Perhaps a new tunic? This velvet just arrived from Montaigne.”

He looked at the tunic just long enough to make it seem that he was interested.

“No, thank you.”

“I have brought a selection of brooches from the royal treasury for you to peruse.”

Henry shuddered at the tray of sparkling gems his servant presented. A man wearing that would become the center of attention, which was the last thing Henry wanted.

He pushed back a stronger response and once again declined politely. They always asked, and he always said no. It was the servants' job to make him look like a prince worthy of Aeonian. Henry's job, as far as he was concerned, was to be polite about declining. He may not be happy about his role as prince, but he could fulfill his role with grace.

He drew the line at jewelry.

“Your Highness, royal families from every country in Myora will arrive today for the Princess Test. As a prince of Aeonian, you have a responsibility to dress well and represent the royal family.”

Blast. Henry hated it when they called on his sense of responsibility.

“They’re here to see Alaric,” he said. “I don’t want to pull attention away from him.”

It felt like a thin excuse to Henry, but the servant accepted it with a shrug and removed the tray of brooches. He was safe for now.

“Prince Alaric can only choose one bride, Your Highness,” another servant said. “That leaves many eligible young ladies available.”

Henry swallowed. This conversation was headed into dangerous territory. He knew that princes often made political matches when choosing a bride. That was the whole point of the Princess Test. If all went according to plan, the crown prince would be engaged to an eligible young lady by the end of the three-day event.

Henry wanted no part of it. Daily life in the royal castle was bad enough. But a castle filled to the brim with high-ranking women and their families on the hunt for an eligible husband?

It sounded like torture.

“I don’t want to draw attention away from Alaric,” he repeated.

“Prince Alaric will dine separately tonight with the kings and the participating princesses. Your Highness will entertain the rest of the guests, including the queens, some of their younger daughters, and Aeonian nobility.”

Sweat beaded on Henry’s brow at the reminder that his princely duties this evening included hosting a dinner. He hated hosting dinners. How was anyone supposed to eat elegantly in fancy clothes while maintaining polite conversation at the same time? He had to focus on doing one

or the other. To do both while also dealing with flirtatious women was too much.

A servant wiped the sweat from Henry's brow with an embroidered handkerchief.

"You should wear your crown today, Your Highness. The castle will be full of strangers. You must let everyone know you're a prince."

Henry searched for a reason to refuse, then sighed and nodded his agreement. He didn't have a good argument against wearing the crown, other than that he didn't want the strangers to know he was a prince.

And being a prince was the whole point of this evening's welcome banquet. The whole point of the three-day Princess Test that began tomorrow morning. His royal status was the only thing any of their guests would care about, and to hide that was to shirk his responsibilities.

The servant lifted the crown from a velvet-lined box and held it over Henry's head. He stared at the prince's reflection in the mirror, making sure the crown was lined up as he lowered it onto Henry's head.

Someone knocked on the bedroom door. The servant frowned in annoyance and pulled the crown away, carrying it with him as he crossed the room to open the door. Henry relaxed a little as the crown moved away from him. Whatever this interruption was, it was extremely welcome.

Cael burst through the door. Henry stared at his brother. He was dressed not in royal garments suitable for a banquet, but in the simple homespun clothing they wore when they returned to the mountain.

"Your Highness-" the servant began.

"No time," Cael panted. "There's an emergency with the family goats. Get changed. We need to go."

"Go?" Henry asked.

"Up to the mountain. Where the goats are."

Cael gave his brother a significant look, and Henry suddenly understood.

Goats.

This was *not* about goats.

He stood and hastily stripped off the royal clothes the servants had so carefully helped him into. It had taken a ridiculously long time to put them on. It took only a few seconds to remove them.

The servants sputtered protests, retrieving garments from the floor while Henry pulled his homespun goat herder clothes from a box under his bed.

“But Your Highnesses cannot mean to miss the welcome banquet because of a few goats!”

The servant’s voice was almost a wail. Henry felt a belated twinge of regret for ruining the man’s hard work, then shoved it away. Cael answered while Henry dressed.

“I’m sorry, but if we don’t deal with this emergency quickly, we could lose the whole herd.”

Henry pulled on the stained leather boots at the bottom of the box and followed Cael out of the room and through the castle. The boots were well worn and molded comfortably to his feet. Why were his royal boots, made custom for him by the royal cobbler, never this comfortable? Probably because they were always replaced before they had a chance to break in properly.

The two brothers stayed quiet as they reached the stable, mounted the horses waiting for them, and rode away from the castle. Tension melted out of Henry’s body as they left Mias behind. Tightly packed buildings and cobblestone roads gave way to open pasture and dirt paths. They cantered up Mount Evangelina until the city was just a set of spires far below them. The ships that had arrived with visiting dignitaries that afternoon looked like toys at this distance. Not a threat. Not Henry’s problem.

“What’s wrong with the goats?” Henry asked when they slowed to a walk to give the horses a chance to catch their

breath. “I thought Mother was going to check on them before the Princess Test started.”

Cael’s eyes sparkled with excitement.

“She did. There was nothing out of the ordinary yesterday, but Eva sent a message to the Society this morning.”

“Eva’s in trouble?”

Henry kicked his horse into a gallop. If something was wrong with Eva, there was no time to waste. Their young cousin was alone in the mountain cabin watching the goat herd when the rest of the family handled royal responsibilities. If that job truly involved nothing more than caring for goats, Henry wouldn’t be worried. But while his family had worked as goat herders for generations, the goats were just an excuse to spend time on the mountain.

An excuse and a disguise. No one would think to look for the descendants of the dethroned royal family of Aeonian in a group of goat herders. And certainly no one would suspect those goat herders of working magic long thought to be merely a legend or of guarding a secret that had become even more of a legend.

“Evangelina Shadow-Storm,” Cael yelled over the sound of the horses’ pounding hooves as he tried to catch up to Henry. “Eva says she met Evangelina Shadow-Storm!”

“What!”

Henry turned in surprise and nearly fell out of his saddle. He pulled his horse back, slowing to a walk to regain his balance.

“I said-”

“I heard what you said, but that can’t be right. Why would Eva think that?”

“We’ll have to ask her when we get there, but Eva’s not the sort to cry wolf. If she says she met Evangelina Shadow-Storm, she has a good reason to think that she did.”

Henry wanted to ask more questions, but clearly, the answers lay with Eva rather than Cael. He urged his horse to

gallop again. The brothers rode in silence as they ascended the mountain, but Henry's mind spun with questions.

Evangelina Shadow-Storm was a shadow warrior who had sacrificed herself over a century ago to save Aeonian from a goblin invasion. She let herself be put into an enchanted sleep that sealed the dark creatures away, and as far as Henry knew, she still slept somewhere hidden in the mountains. Her twin brother Luca had shrouded her in legend, spreading false versions of their story until no one believed it was real.

Then he had done the same for the royal family of Aeonian, himself included, when civil war tore the country apart and threatened their lives. Sometimes Henry wondered if Luca had done his job too well. He disliked the hiding and secret magic almost as much as he disliked being a prince at dinner parties. His mother seemed to feel the same. She had urged the Society of Evangelina, the secret organization that Luca had established to protect his sister's secrets, to let her tell King Noam the truth when she married him. She didn't like such a secret between husband and wife any more than she liked such a secret between the current royal family and the past one.

The Society refused. Some members went so far as to say that Marta shouldn't marry Noam at all. In the end, Marta agreed to keep their secret but laughed at the suggestion that she shouldn't marry the man she loved just because he happened to be a king.

Henry wished he had that kind of confidence. He and his brothers were currently the only light wielders in the Society, so they were frequently sent on missions. Cael loved the excitement of working magic. Benjamin loved searching for answers in dusty scrolls.

And Henry?

If he was honest, Henry would rather herd goats. He liked the quiet simplicity of country life and spending hours alone with the herd. Goats could be even more judgmental and demanding than nobility, but at least they were open about it. Henry liked the straightforward nature of the task. No politics or hidden agendas. Just the goats and the mountain.

They galloped over a hill, and the family's cottage came into view. Eva stood outside it surrounded by the goats that were either too young or too old to travel up the mountain to graze. The old goats looked up at the approaching horses, then turned back to their grass. The kids scampered around the lawn and head butted each other in excitement. Eva matched their excitement, jumping and waving her arms when she saw them. Her green eyes were bright, and her face was flushed with excitement. Her red gold hair was pulled back in a hasty braid, as if Eva couldn't be bothered to style it as she normally did.

Blast. If Eva was too excited to style her hair, she truly believed she had found Evangelina Shadow-Storm.

And if that was true, Henry's life was about to become even more complicated.

Bri woke with a start. She stared at the dark stone walls in confusion before she remembered where she was.

The kitchen.

The mirrors.

The man.

She stood and studied the mirror. It looked the same as it always had, but she no longer trusted appearances. There had been someone in that mirror, and he had no business being there. The man's haughty features and fine clothes were burned into Bri's memory. Whoever he was, he had money and magic. Not good qualities for an adversary.

His outfit hadn't looked Aeonian, but Bri only knew the latest trends in women's fashion from helping her stepsisters dress. Perhaps men's garments had changed in the years she had been in the country.

"Open."

Bri tensed as the mirror rippled and glistened. What if the man was still there? Did guarding the mirrors mean fighting anything that came through them? That man was definitely bigger than she was, and she didn't have much fighting experience.

In truth, she had no fighting experience. If it came to a fight, she'd just have to fight dirty. Even large men had weak spots.

Bri slumped in relief when the mirror rippled and showed the same dark landscape it had always shown. There would be no fighting today, dirty or otherwise.

She tensed again when she realized she had been mistaken about the landscape. There was no man with dark, angry eyes, but there was something else. A small speck of light danced around like a star that had fallen from its place in the sky. Bri tightened her grip on the diamond and prepared to close the mirror, but nothing happened. The star simply circled through the darkness.

What was it? Was it connected to the man somehow?

Bri watched. It was beautiful, and its light showed her more of the landscape than she had seen before. The world inside the mirror had more form and substance than she had previously thought. There was land there. Uneven dark ground that climbed upward at roughly the same angle as Mount Evangelina.

Two more stars appeared. Bri swallowed a gasp and forced herself to stand still and watch. They were far away. She had plenty of time to close the mirror if they noticed her.

The stars circled around each other and flashed brighter and dimmer. Were they communicating? Were they even sentient?

Maybe they were nothing more than giant, magical fireflies, and she was letting her imagination run away with her. But they had never been there before. It was suspicious for them to appear the day after the man appeared.

Bri closed the mirror and stared at her reflection. She had dark circles under her eyes from a sleepless night spent running through the house and checking mirrors. Her hair was a tangle of knots and ashes. She had, in spite of her promise to herself, once again slept in her dress. It was wrinkled beyond recognition and streaked with soot from sleeping by the fireplace.

Oh well. There was no one around to see her.

Bri put water on to boil for tea and went through her usual morning routine of checking the mirrors. She saw the three stars in each of them. They looked farther away, as if they had moved up the mountain. They circled the landscape, covering the same ground multiple times before moving on.

Were they searching? If so, what were they looking for? What could a star possibly want?

Bri closed the mirror in the dining room and went back to the kitchen. She poured the boiling water into the teapot and checked the kitchen mirror again for good measure.

The stars were bigger than before, and they were moving in her direction.

“Close!”

Bri’s hands were damp with sweat as she pressed her palm against the glass. No matter if they were magical fireflies, drifting stars, or something else entirely, she didn’t want them to know she existed.

Guard the mirrors.

She sipped her tea and thought about that statement. Guard them from what? Father had warned her about the Society of Evangelina, but that wasn’t very helpful. The secret society was, well, secretive. Bri had made inquiries and learned that no one knew who the members were or how to join. No one knew what they did, beyond the occasional good deed or donation to charity. Most Aeonians considered the Society a group of do-gooders who liked the feeling of importance that a secret society brought.

Bri knew that wasn’t true, but she didn’t know what the Society wanted with her mirrors. Why had Father warned her against them?

She raised her diamond pendant to her chin and held it there as if that could give her answers or bring Father back to help her.

But of course it couldn’t. Wishing and dreaming accomplished nothing.

Bri drank the last of her tea and stared at the mirror. She hated to leave the house under normal circumstances. She was even more reluctant to do so with a man and stars wandering through the darkness.

But she needed help, and there was only one place she could get it. She rinsed her teacup and left the house.

It was a sunny day with only a few puddles remaining as evidence of the storm. Bri dodged them and walked in the damp grass rather than the muddy road. The estate servants were busy checking for damage and moving chickens from flooded pens to those on higher ground.

Bri changed her route and circled around the valley to avoid being seen. She ducked behind hay bales and hedges as she walked. No one had come to check on her after the storm, which probably meant they thought she had traveled to town with the rest of the family. If she was careful, maybe she could keep them thinking that the whole time her stepfamily was gone.

She liked the workers, but she hated answering their questions. They were understandably reluctant to believe that she was as perfectly happy in her circumstances as she claimed to be. They were good people and wanted to help, but Bri couldn't take what they offered.

Bri sighed in relief when she finally climbed the hill at the edge of the valley and left the estate behind. Goat herders without land further up the mountain often grazed their goats here. The stretch of grass was empty now though, so there would be no one to bother her.

The air smelled fresh and clean from the rain. The snowbells had bounced back from the torrent and danced in a breeze that carried their fresh scent over the mountain. Bri swung her arms as she walked, feeling the weight of her responsibilities slip away once again. How long had it been since she left the house?

Far too long if she didn't count yesterday's picnic. Guarding the mirrors and cleaning the house left no time to enjoy the beauty around her.

And yet, the landscape was Bri's favorite thing about living on Mount Evangelina. She rounded a corner and grinned as she saw the ocean and Mias below. A breeze carried a hint of salty sea air. It mixed with the scent of grass and snowbells, creating a heavenly aroma that couldn't be found anywhere else.

Bri allowed herself a moment to soak it in, then turned and continued up the mountain until she reached a small cave hidden behind a large bush. She crawled in, trying to ignore the fact that she had lost weight again and fit more easily than she had last time, and felt around the dark hole until her hands brushed against cloth rather than rock.

She gripped the bundle and pulled it to her chest as she backed out of the cave. She blinked in the bright sunlight and told herself that she didn't care that she now had mud on her skirt as well as soot. There was no one around to see.

Bri brushed dust and dirt off the bundle and carefully unwrapped it. Tears pooled in her eyes as she uncovered her father's journal.

She kept it here to make sure that Lady Vidre never found it. It would be disastrous if she did. But storing the journal out of the house meant Bri couldn't reference it as often as she liked. She couldn't trace the words her father had written when she missed him and needed comfort. She could only sneak away and visit like this from time to time.

Bri wiped her hands clean on the skirt, at least, as clean as she could get them, and settled down to read. If anyone knew why stars or men would appear in the mirrors, Father would.

She could only hope he'd taken the time to write down what he knew, and that this time she could find the message.

“There’s nothing there, Eva.”

Cael broke the news gently. Henry nodded in agreement and rubbed his forehead. Working too much light magic always made his head ache. At thirteen, Eva was old enough to be part of the team and handle the truth, but Henry didn’t want to be harsh with her. Even if this was a wild goose chase, it had helped him escape the Princess Test. He owed Eva for that even if it was a false alarm.

“There must be!” Eva said. “I met Evangelina Shadow-Storm last night. I know it!”

Her green eyes flashed, daring her cousins to contradict her. Eva was shorter than both men, but somehow she managed to look down her freckled nose at them.

“Tell us again what happened,” Henry said. “Maybe we’ve missed something.”

He was stalling, and Cael’s eye roll said he knew it. But Eva launched into the story with enthusiasm. She had been stargazing last night when a strange woman appeared from nowhere. She had dark hair and wore a filthy old-fashioned dress. Eva had offered her food and a place to sleep, assuming that she would be able to ask the woman questions in the morning.

But in the morning, the woman was gone.

“She just disappeared!” Eva said. “She has to be Evangelina Shadow-Storm!”

Henry had to admit that it was possible. Evangelina Shadow-Storm rested in her enchanted sleep on this part of the mountain that bore her name. It was why his family kept their goats there.

The goats bleated, filling the silence as Henry tried to make sense of the story. There were a few new kids, he noticed. They frolicked around their pen as if ready to take on the world. Life was simple for a goat.

“Stop thinking about goats,” Eva said. “It had to be her. Why else would someone be so covered with dust? She looked like she hadn’t bathed in a hundred years. And she seemed nervous. And her accent was strange.”

“There are lots of possible reasons for that,” Cael said.

“She looked like Evangelina Shadow-Storm,” Eva insisted. “And she hesitated when I offered her my hand to grasp. That proves it was her.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Cael asked.

“A hundred years ago, grasping hands was a gesture used to forge magical bonds,” Henry said. “Benjamin wrote a paper on the ritual last year.”

“Exactly! I offered my hand to test her, and she hesitated!”

Eva bounced with excitement. Henry looked from her to Cael and shrugged.

“We might as well keep looking.”

“You just don’t want to go back to the castle,” Cael said.

“And you do?”

“Of course not.”

“Then go find Evangelina Shadow-Storm!” Eva said.

She danced around the chairs she had brought outside, too excited to sit still any longer. Henry looked from her to the baby goats and smiled. Eva really was just as excited as the kids.

Henry sat and stared straight ahead, letting the green pasture around him blur as he summoned his light magic. His head throbbed, and the world darkened as the strange double layer of the realm of shadows settled on top of it. He saw it in a dim, blurry way. As if he were underwater with his eyes open and crossed.

No wonder this process gave him a headache.

Henry gritted his teeth and forced himself to concentrate until the realm of shadows snapped into focus. He took a deep breath and settled into the magic. The sound of goats bleating faded until it seemed far away. He turned in a circle to study the darkness. Two stars floated beside him. Henry flashed a greeting to Cael and Benjamin.

Benjamin was away at school and sick in bed, but neither of those things could stop him from joining a mission to search for Evangelina Shadow-Storm. The stars traveled much more quickly in the realm of shadows than their bodies could travel in the realm of light, so it didn't take Benjamin long to reach the mountain as a star once Marta sent him a message using an enchanted mirror.

Henry narrowed his eyes in focus and made his star flash brighter and dimmer in a greeting. Benjamin claimed that historical light wielders could speak in the realm of shadows but hadn't managed to figure out how. Henry couldn't imagine such a thing. The best he and his brothers could manage was growing brighter and dimmer and bouncing around.

Cael took the lead as usual and floated up the mountain to the place where Eva said Evangelina Shadow-Storm had appeared. Henry and Benjamin followed. Henry scanned the dark horizon as they flew through the landscape. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, but he saw only inky black ground and an empty sky.

Cael flashed five letters: "s-m-e-l-l." Henry sniffed but smelled nothing out of the ordinary. Either his light magic wasn't strong enough to extend his sense of smell to the realm of shadows or there wasn't anything to smell. Their scrolls

said that creatures of darkness had a terrible stench. Henry hoped never to find out if that was true.

He turned and looked back down the mountain. If he were Evangelina Shadow-Storm, or anyone lost in the mountains, he would walk down toward town rather than up further into the wilderness. Perhaps they should change their search and look in the opposite direction.

He started to flash this message to his brothers, but they had already moved up the mountain. Besides, that was a lot to communicate through their code. He would wait until they finished this round of searching to discuss it with Cael. Henry turned to rejoin them, but something caught his eye. He stared at it, squinting into the darkness.

There it was again. A faint flash of light.

His heart pounded. Was it another star? If so, could it be Evangelina Shadow-Storm?

No, that was silly. She worked shadow magic. Whatever she looked like in the realm of shadows, it would not be a flash of light. Legends said she was a fearsome woman with the legs of a goat. He should ask Eva if the woman she met had goat legs. Then again, that probably would have been the first thing Eva mentioned if that had been the case.

The light in the distance flickered again and again. Henry flashed to signal his brothers, but they didn't notice. He didn't dare look away, so he stayed where he was and tracked the spaces between the flashes. Was it some kind of code?

If it was, it was more complex than theirs. He couldn't make any sense of it. More lights flashed on and off. Too late, Henry realized he should have counted how many flashes there were. Maybe that was the message, rather than the intervals between them. He certainly couldn't detect any other pattern.

Finally, the light stopped. Henry marked the spot where it had happened in his mind, looking left and right for some kind of landmark.

There were few landmarks in the realm of shadows. The ground roughly mirrored the topography of Mount Evangelina, but it had an unfortunate tendency to change and shift.

Still, he had a good idea where the light had been.

Henry left the spot and flew toward his brothers. He tried to think of a simple way to explain what he had seen and settled for, “l-i-g-h-t.”

Cael and Benjamin flashed a question mark at him. Henry added, “t-h-e-r-e” and bounced three times in the direction of the light.

He heard Cael sigh in the realm of light, then the eldest brother flashed “b-r-e-a-k” and disappeared. Henry flashed a goodbye to Benjamin and pulled himself out of the realm of shadows. Eva’s face came into focus as the enchantment faded. She leaned close to Henry, eyes wide with curiosity.

“Well? Did you find her?” she asked.

“Yes, what did you see?” Cael asked.

Eva squealed.

“I knew it! You found something!”

Henry rubbed his eyes, trying to adjust to the bright sunlight. His headache transformed the goats’ bleating from a nostalgic sound to a torture device.

“I saw something. Lights flashing in the distance. But I don’t think it was Evangelina Shadow-Storm.”

“It could have been her jewels,” Eva said. “You know she fights with magic gems!”

“The stories say she fights with magic gems,” Cael said. “The stories also say that she had goat legs and Luca was a talking donkey. You can’t believe everything that was put into the legend.”

Eva stuck her tongue out at Cael and turned back to Henry.

“You saw lights? Where were they? What did they look like?”

“They were just lights,” Henry said. “They flickered, then disappeared, like sunlight reflecting on water. Somewhere that way.”

He pointed down the mountain. Eva frowned.

“There’s a nobleman’s estate over there. Not much else other than goat pastures.”

“A nobleman?” Cael said. “Who?”

“Duke Vidre. Well, he died, so now it’s his wife and daughters.”

“That doesn’t sound threatening,” Henry said. “Do you think Evangelina Shadow-Storm went there looking for help?”

“It’s the only lead we have at this point,” Cael said. “We might as well investigate it.”

He settled back in his chair, clearly preparing to go back to the realm of shadows.

“I’ll ride over to the estate,” Henry said quickly. “Eva saw Evangelina Shadow-Storm in the realm of light. Even if she is in the realm of shadows, her body will be somewhere here.”

“Good point,” Cael said. “But you can’t ride. Goat herders don’t have horses. We need to leave ours hidden in the barn.”

“I’ll walk then. That will help me make a more thorough search. I’ll pretend to be looking for a lost goat and my cousin who went looking for it and is also lost.”

Eva sniffed in contempt.

“As if I would get lost looking for a goat.”

“I didn’t say it was you.”

“I’m the only goat herding cousin you have!”

“It’s a good plan,” Cael interrupted. “Henry will walk the mountain and search for Evangelina Shadow-Storm in the realm of light. Benjamin and I will search that area in the realm of shadows.”

“And I’ll pack you a lunch,” Eva said, clearly not happy to be left out of the plan. “I’d go with Henry, but someone has to

guard Cael's body while he's using his magic.

"You have a very important role," Cael said. "If Evangelina Shadow-Storm really is awake, we all need to be on our guard."

Cael looked ahead. His eyes narrowed, then lost focus as he entered the realm of shadows. Henry took the parcel of bread and cheese that Eva offered him and set off in the direction of the lights.

He swung it as he walked. This day was turning out much better than he could have dreamed. Instead of dressing in stuffy clothes to impress stuffy people, he was free to wander the mountainside. The air was fresh from the rain and scented with snowbells. He was wearing his favorite boots.

He couldn't remember the last time he had felt this happy.

Henry took his time, partly because he was enjoying himself and partly because he didn't want to miss Evangelina Shadow-Storm if she really was there. He didn't know what to make of Eva's story. He believed that she met someone last night, but could it really be their legendary ancestor? He had always accepted the legend in an abstract sort of way. How could he not, with his own magic as proof that the realm of shadows really existed?

But he had never expected Evangelina Shadow-Storm to wake in his lifetime.

Henry stopped to drink from a stream and splashed some water on his face. If she really was awake, what would that change?

For one thing, he would no longer have a handy excuse to escape the castle. Henry and the rest of the Society of Evangelina regularly patrolled the mountain to guard Evangelina's resting place and search for anything that might disturb the seal she protected. To justify the visits, his mother pretended that she was too attached to the family goat herd to give it up, even though she was a queen. King Noam supported her in this, and the kingdom seemed to find it endearing. In reality, it was usually Marta's sons who came up

the mountain to complete surveillance for the Society of Evangelina while they pretended to take care of the goats.

Would that end if they found Evangelina Shadow-Storm?

Henry hoped not. Even if they didn't have to look for the hero anymore, maybe they could keep the goats and guard the seal. Unlike the adventure-loving Cael, Henry preferred watching the goats to using his magic and completing secret missions. If he convinced his family to let him care for the goats, maybe things could turn for the better. He could watch the herd and let his mother and brothers deal with the pressures of royal life and the fallout of finding a legendary shadow warrior. Eva could go live in town as well, if she wanted. He would have the cabin to himself.

Henry was so absorbed in this pleasant vision of the future that he almost tripped over the woman sitting on the ground in front of him. He froze when he saw her, staring at her in disbelief.

He'd done it. He'd found Evangelina Shadow-Storm.

She was just as Eva described. Covered in dirt. Wearing a tattered, wrinkled gown.

She was reading a book, which surprised Henry. Eva hadn't mentioned a book. And she looked more peaceful than anyone with the title "shadow warrior" should look.

He cleared his throat, wanting to get her attention, but not sure what to say. She had slept for a hundred years. She might be confused.

The woman quickly lowered her book and hid it under her skirt. She stared up at him, eyes wide with alarm and rimmed by dark circles. She didn't look like someone who had slept for a hundred years.

She didn't look like Evangelina Shadow-Storm at all now that he thought about it. For one thing, this woman was blond. All the legends said Evangelina Shadow-Storm had dark hair, and Eva had confirmed this.

And she didn't look as fierce as Henry expected a shadow warrior to look. This woman was thin and rather delicate.

There was something scrappy in her expression that suggested she could hold her own in a fight, but not in a trained warrior kind of way. More like she would scratch your eyes out if it came to that.

Henry fought back a sigh. The only thing she really had in common with Eva's description was that she was very dirty. Her skin and dress were coated with soot and cinders and mud. Not the dust of sleeping for a hundred years, though. She was probably some kind of scullery maid.

A very ill-kept scullery maid. Her dress was filthy enough to match the woman Eva described, but Eva said Evangelina Shadow-Storm was wearing purple. This woman's dress was a nondescript gray-brown. It might have been one or the other at some point, but age and grime had blurred the boundaries between the two colors.

Henry felt a flash of annoyance at whoever this woman worked for. They should take better care of her! Clearly, they had pushed her to exhaustion. The least they could do was feed her properly and provide clean clothes.

“Hi.”

Henry started at the sound of her voice. He had been studying her as if she were a puzzle, trying to sort out if she was Evangelina Shadow-Storm, but she was a living person and bound to notice his scrutiny.

She wasn't Evangelina Shadow-Storm. He was sure of that now. If nothing else, her voice confirmed it. Eva had said that Evangelina Shadow-Storm had a low voice and odd accent. This woman's voice was bright and clear, higher pitched with the usual accent of those who lived in the country.

“Hi,” Henry said back.

He didn't know what else to say. His carefully thought-out plans flew from his mind at the sight of this woman's bright blue eyes.

“Can I help you?”

She tilted her head, and those eyes sparkled in amusement. Henry realized he was twisting his tunic in his hands like a

nervous schoolboy and quickly released it.

“I’m looking for a missing goat,” he said. “And my cousin, who went looking for the goat and is also missing. Have you seen anyone around?”

The excuse sounded flimsy as he said it, but the woman seemed to believe him.

“I haven’t seen anyone. Cousin or goat.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

Henry stood in silence, but his mind raced as he tried to think of something acceptable to say. Cael would know what to say. He was always smooth with the ladies. With everyone, really. Even Benjamin would do better than this.

Smooth with the ladies. Where had that thought come from? Was Henry trying to be smooth with this woman?

“I’m Henry.”

What a stupid thing to say! Then again, maybe not. Introductions were good, right?

They were good unless you were a light wielder pretending to be a prince pretending to be a goat herder. In that case, it was probably best to offer as little information about yourself as possible.

Why did he even care?

The woman smiled, and Henry found that he did care. The smile erased some of the exhaustion from her face and brought a pleasant twinkle to her eyes.

“I’m Bri.”

Apparently, neither of them was very talkative. Henry’s mind leaped around like a penned goat. This would be a perfectly acceptable time to thank her and walk away. That would be the sensible, uncomplicated thing to do.

“Do you live around here?”

Another stupid question. Obviously, she lived around here.

“I work at the Vidre estate. What about you?”

“I herd goats.”

“You don’t say.”

Her lips quirked up in another smile, and Henry felt his face go red. Obviously, he herded goats. He was dressed as a goat herder and searching for a missing goat.

Except it wasn’t that obvious to him because he wasn’t just a goat herder.

Not that he could tell her that.

More questions popped into Henry’s mind. He wanted to ask her about the estate, but what could he say without raising suspicion? He could be direct and ask if she had seen any magical lights at the estate, but that was a strange question, wasn’t it? If someone was working magic at the estate, they would probably keep it a secret. Would it be a servant? Or possibly the mistress of the estate herself?

Henry pictured a dark sorceress who mistreated her staff and used magic to keep them in line.

It was possible.

“Have you noticed anything unusual around here lately?” he asked.

Not the best sneaky question, but the best he could do at the moment.

Was it his imagination, or did Bri’s eyes widen in alarm before she said, “No, have you?”

“No.”

“Then why ask?”

There was something more than the question in her words. Henry had the feeling that she was testing him. But why? About what? Surely, she didn’t recognize him as a prince?

“I’ve had several goats go missing lately. Just wondered if you’d seen anything.”

“Ah. Sorry about your goats.”

She looked like she believed him. Again, this would be the perfect time to walk away.

Again, Henry found that he couldn't.

When he thought about it later, he told himself that he stayed because he wanted to get more information about the Vidre estate, but in that moment, he only knew that he couldn't bear to leave her alone.

He sat down on the grass and unwrapped the picnic that Eva had prepared. It wasn't much. Bread and goat cheese. But he divided it into two portions and offered the larger one to Bri.

She stared at him for a moment, eyes narrowed with suspicion. Then she relaxed, tucked the book further under her skirt, and took the lunch.

When she thought about it later, Bri told herself that she had only accepted the lunch because she was hungry. It had nothing to do with Henry's friendly gray eyes and earnest expression. Or the wayward brown curls slipping out from under his cap.

Nothing at all.

She really was hungry. She hadn't taken the time to cook and pack a meal for herself. The servants wouldn't deliver food to the house if they thought it was empty, which meant she would have to make do with the odd assortment of things left over unless she wanted to reveal her presence.

Bri took a bite of the bread first. Bread that someone else baked always tasted better for some reason. She followed that with a bit of cheese.

"I should have brought something to drink," Henry said.

He seemed to be apologizing, and Bri gave him a stern look.

"Yes, how dare you not bring a complete feast to share with a stranger that you didn't know you would meet?"

He stared at her for a moment, unsure. She winked to show him that she was joking, and he laughed. It was a pleasant, warm laugh. The kind that made you want to laugh along. Bri found herself swept up in it. She couldn't remember the last time she had laughed.

The laughter lit Henry's gray eyes until they practically sparkled in the sunlight. Bri remembered her earlier thoughts about handsome goat herders and grinned to herself. Henry was exactly the type she'd had in mind. He was unassuming in his homespun clothes and cap, but his manners were open and warm. He seemed to be enjoying the day as much as she was.

"Who's your cousin?" Bri asked. "I know a few goat herders, and I can help spread the word that someone is missing."

Henry's eyes bulged a bit as he choked on a bite of cheese. It took him some time to recover.

"I see now why you wanted something to drink," Bri said.

"Yes, it was entirely for selfish reasons. I'm looking for my cousin Eva, but I'm sure she's fine. She knows these mountains well. I just get nervous when I come up from town and can't find her."

"You're from town?"

Henry nodded.

"Can you not mention anything about my thinking Eva was lost? I'm sure she's fine, and she gets defensive about things like that."

"My lips are sealed."

Bri ran her finger over her lips to emphasize her words, then grimaced when she felt the streak of dirt on her face.

Blast it all. She had forgotten she was so disheveled and dirty. No wonder Henry had stared when he found her and offered to share his lunch. It was pity, not whatever else she had briefly thought it might have been.

She smoothed her skirts, suddenly self-conscious about her appearance. So much for there being no one around to see.

"I-"

She stopped. She had no idea what to say.

Henry waited a long time. When she didn't speak again, he filled the silence.

“You said you work at the Vidre estate, right? Is everything well there?”

Bri could read between the lines. He was asking if she needed help and giving her an opening to admit that she was a servant being abused by her employers. This was why she avoided people. They were good and generous and wanted to help.

She couldn't take help.

“Perfectly well,” she said, keeping her voice light. “The family has gone to town for the Princess Test. They took most of the servants with them.”

She added the last bit just in case Henry's search for his missing goat and cousin led him closer to the estate. She didn't want him to come to the house.

“They're not home?” he asked.

“Why does that surprise you?”

“Oh. Well. I personally don't see the appeal of the Princess Test. If I had the choice and an estate on the mountain, I'd stay home rather than going to town.”

Bri grinned.

“I feel the same way. It's made some extra work being the only household servant around, but I like the quiet. It's nice to have the place to myself.”

“You're there by yourself?”

Bri swallowed. She probably shouldn't tell men she had just met that she was home alone. Not that Henry had given her any reason to be suspicious, but still.

“The outdoors servants are there. We have a lot of men to take care of our animals and gardens.”

“You should ask them for help if you need it.”

“I don't.”

Bri didn't mean to sound sharp, but she did. Why did everyone think she needed help?

Probably because she was filthy and sitting alone in the wilderness without food. She would offer herself help as well. Bri needed to do better. At the least, she would bathe in a stream before she went back to the house.

“Don’t be afraid to ask if you do,” Henry said.

His voice was soft, and his eyes were softer. You could get lost in those eyes. They were full of warmth and caring.

Bri pushed the thought away. She didn’t need anyone to care.

“Why do you live in town if you hate it so much?” she asked, eager to distract Henry from her problems.

This time it was the goat herder’s turn to look uncomfortable. He muttered something about not hating town, and Bri raised an eyebrow at him.

“Fine,” he agreed. “I’d much rather be up here herding goats, but it’s complicated. My mother remarried, and my stepfather’s business requires all of us to live in Mias.”

He spoke carefully and considered every word. He was definitely hiding something, but Bri didn’t press him for more details. She could guess what he wasn’t saying. His stepfather wanted him to help with his business, and his mother wanted the family to be together.

Or perhaps it was something more sinister. An evil stepfather, perhaps? Some domineering figure with both wife and stepsons under his thumb?

“Don’t be afraid to ask if you need help,” Bri said.

Henry sputtered and choked on his last bite of cheese.

“You really should bring something to drink if you can’t eat without choking,” Bri teased.

“I’ll keep that in mind next time.”

“Next time?”

They stared at each other. Bri spent enough time looking in mirrors to know what Henry saw. A too-skinny, too-dirty

servant girl with greasy blond hair and dark circles under her eyes.

So why did he look interested rather than disgusted? He was doing far better than she was. He had a job in town and a goat herd on the mountains. While his family situation might be complicated, it was nothing compared to hers.

Granted, he didn't know her whole situation. He couldn't. If Father hadn't trusted his wife with the secret, Bri certainly couldn't trust a goat herder she had just met, even if he seemed kind and generous.

At least, she couldn't trust him with the mirrors. But maybe she could trust him enough to eat lunch with him again. She gave Henry a small smile.

"Next time," he said. "I can't get away often, but there are times when I can."

"Like when you're looking for a lost goat?"

He laughed.

"Exactly. The next time I lose a goat, may I come here to see you?"

Bri considered this and found with surprise that she wanted to see him again.

"Yes, although I might not be able to get away when you come. I can't make any promises."

"I'm not asking for promises."

He stood and brushed grass off his trousers. Bri wished he would stay, then pushed the desire away. She had work to do. She couldn't spend the entire afternoon talking to a goat herder, no matter how charming he was.

"Good luck finding your goat."

She winked as she said it. She had a strong suspicion that the missing goat was simply an excuse to get away. Henry laughed, confirming her theory.

"Thank you. Enjoy your reading."

He nodded towards the book hidden under her skirt and walked away. Bri's hand flew to Father's journal as if she could protect it from prying eyes. Henry had seen the book! What if he guessed her secret?

Bri took a deep breath and told herself to stop being silly. Henry had seen a servant girl reading a book, and the journal was bound with unmarked leather. He probably thought she had sneaked a novel away from the family library and come up to the meadow to read it in peace while her employers were away.

There was no reason for him to suspect the truth.

All their joking about drinks left Bri thirsty. She wrapped the journal back in the cloth and carried it with her as she walked toward the nearest stream. Her stepfamily would be gone for a few days, and Bri was nowhere near finished with her search for answers.

She hid the book under a bush and waded into the stream without bothering to undress. Her clothes needed washing just as much as she did.

Bri thought about what she had read that morning to distract herself from the icy water. She had read the journal often since Father's death but focused mostly on more recent passages. Today, she had decided to read it cover to cover and search for anything she might have missed.

The journal started with simple accounts of day-to-day life. Young Gavin, not yet a duke, was given the Vidre Estate when he came of age. His father preferred living in town, so the estate had fallen into disrepair. Gavin learned how to manage each aspect of the estate as he restored it.

Reading the journal made Bri miss her father so much that it ached. She read through his meeting her mother at an assembly. His thoughts as he fell in love with her. He recorded her favorite things and conversations they shared. There were drafts of wedding proposals as Gavin searched for the best way to express his feelings. Then a jubilant entry reporting that she had said yes.

At that point, the journal became more of a ledger book. Gavin wanted his estate to be perfect before he brought his bride home, so he increased his efforts to improve the land and house. Columns of numbers filled the pages. Goats bought. Lumber cut. Fences built.

It was dry reading, and Bri usually skipped over it. But this time, she was searching for clues she might have missed in the past. She read each column of numbers multiple times. She had been looking for patterns in the tallies of grain bought and hay sold when Henry had interrupted her.

Bri stepped out of the icy stream and wrung the water out of her hair. Her wet dress clung to her body, and she now questioned the wisdom of bathing in her clothes.

No matter. A little sunshine would dry both her and the dress in no time.

She retrieved the journal and found a sunny rock to lie on. Bri forced herself to wait until she was mostly dry before she unwrapped the book. Then she flipped back to the page of grain tallies and studied the numbers. She gave up, turned the page, and skimmed over a column of large numbers before looking at the top to see what Father was documenting.

Sales of wool. Bri blinked and looked at the numbers again. No wonder she had never worried about money before Father died. The estate had not simply been profitable. It had thrived. If wool sold for that much now, she would have enough to fix the roof, buy herself a bed, and fill the library with books.

Bri pushed the thought away. Dreaming about how things might have been did nothing to help her current predicament. She studied the page again, treating the numbers as simply numbers rather than symbols of a comfortable life that was now far out of reach.

What exactly was she looking for? There must be something here. Father had told her to look at his journal. This was his journal.

Father had also been dying. Maybe he had misremembered what he wrote.

The thought felt disloyal, and Bri pushed it away. If Father said there were answers, there must be answers.

She forced her attention back to the page. Numbers. Was there anything here?

There! A number was faintly underlined in pencil.

Bri stared at it. Maybe Father had simply wanted to mark that figure as important?

But no. Another number was underlined in the next column.

She returned to the previous page and gasped in delight when she found yet another underlined number in the grain tallies. The marks were so faint that they were only visible in the bright sunlight. Bri flipped back until she reached the pages where the journal turned into a ledger book.

Nineteen. The first number was nineteen.

What was significant about the number nineteen? Nothing that Bri could think of. She looked ahead until she found the next underlined number.

One.

Twenty-three.

Thirteen.

If there was a pattern there, Bri didn't see it. She kept going and found she couldn't keep track of all the numbers. Should she return to the house and find paper to write them out?

That would only help if there was a pattern to them. And even if there was, what good could numbers do?

A memory whispered in the back of her mind. Sitting on her father's lap as he read her a story. Something about spies and secret messages.

Bri had been too young to read the text, but she was old enough to know that the story told did not match the illustrations on the page. Father had only laughed when she accused him of making things up.

“You’re just trying to get me to do math,” she said.

“Not all numbers are math, Ella. These spies are using them to represent letters. See? The number *one* represents the letter *A* because *A* is the first letter of the alphabet.”

Bri hadn’t seen it then, but she saw it now. She flipped to the beginning of the ledger and began to translate the numbers into letters. Please, let this be the answer. She was so desperate for answers!

Nineteen. Bri counted through the alphabet. Nineteen would be the letter S. She kept going.

S.

A.

W.

M.

Sawm? Maybe it wasn’t a code after all. Still, it was the only lead she had. She couldn’t give up now.

Bri found a patch of dirt and scratched the letters into the ground, ignoring the fact that she was getting dirty again right after bathing.

SAWMANINMIRROR

Bri stared at the last six letters. Mirror. It was a code!

Her heart raced as she separated the rest of the words and saw the complete message.

“Saw man in mirror.”

She whispered the words to herself, trying to make sense of them. She wasn’t the first to see the man in the mirror. Father had seen him as well. That man was why the mirrors must be guarded!

And she had left the house unattended for hours.

Bri hastily ran her hand over the letters in the dirt, smudging them into nothing. Then she wiped her hand clean on her damp skirt, grabbed the journal, and sprinted back to the estate.

Next time.

The words echoed through Henry's mind as he walked a large circle around the hills that surrounded the Vidre estate. He counted only three workers tending to the gardens and animals, but that was three too many for him to feel comfortable going into the valley itself. He found nothing of interest, which gave him time to think about his lunch with Bri.

Entirely too much time. He turned the conversation over and over in his mind. Why had he been so awkward?

But if he had been awkward, would she have agreed to see him again?

Next time.

Henry grinned. It was a foolish hope, but it was a hope. He liked her, and she had agreed to see him again.

Next time.

He'd bring a proper meal next time. Maybe something from the castle kitchen. While he still preferred simple food, the chefs made a few pastries that he enjoyed. Perhaps Bri would like them as well.

Henry stopped walking. He had been so caught up thinking about Bri that he had forgotten he was a prince.

That complicated things.

Blast it all. Henry pushed the thought aside and climbed the nearest hill to get a better look at the Vidre estate. It sprawled beneath him, looking as he expected: a large country manor surrounded by servants' quarters and barns for the animals. The gardens around the house were well kept, although they had vegetables rather than flowers. Henry liked the practicality of it. Why not fill your grounds with plants that could also provide food? It was the sort of thing that would be rejected in the city, where gardens were purely decorative.

He squinted at the house, telling himself that he was looking for signs of magic rather than signs of Bri.

There were no signs of either. It was an attractive manor. The walls were made from stone that had doubtless been mined from somewhere nearby on the mountain. The roof was made of wooden shakes and could use some patching. But perhaps a family that couldn't be bothered to provide clean clothes for a servant also couldn't be bothered to maintain their roof.

The roof's disrepair and a few loose shutters were the only outward sign that anything was wrong. All three stories of the house had windows that gleamed in the sunlight. Multiple chimneys suggested numerous fireplaces that would keep the rooms warm in the winter.

Henry liked the house. It was built for comfort and efficiency rather than show and luxury. He found himself picturing the interior. It could be comfortably furnished with chairs by the fireplaces and reading nooks by the windows. Each room would have plenty of natural light and beautiful views of the surrounding scenery.

He shook his head. He was supposed to be looking for magic, not sizing the estate up as if he wanted to buy it.

A country estate. Was that a possibility? If he couldn't return to life as a goat herder, could he ask his stepfather to let him take over a country manor somewhere and serve the crown's interests in that region? It was a suitable occupation for a prince, but it would still get him out of Mias and away from the royal court.

Perhaps he could still have a goat herd. He could put on worn work boots and take them up the mountain himself from time to time. What the court didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

Henry grinned at the thought. This was why he liked the mountains. The fresh air and quiet made it much easier to think. A country prince. That would suit him very well.

But right now, he was supposed to be checking for magic. Something had happened in this area earlier. If nothing looked amiss in the realm of light, perhaps he needed to check the shadows.

Henry climbed down the other side of the hill until he was out of sight of the estate. He found a sheltered place in a grove of trees and sat with his back against a trunk. He didn't usually use his powers without someone standing guard, but this place seemed peaceful enough. He stared at a tree in front of him until it went out of focus and faded into shadows. The sound of wind rustling through the leaves disappeared.

Nothing seemed amiss. Henry spent a few moments gathering his concentration as a star, then flew toward the estate. The valley was still there, but the house and outbuildings were not. He saw no sign of the gardeners or any living thing. Henry circled the space where the Vidre house sat in the realm of light, but the realm of shadows looked the same as it always did. Had he been mistaken?

Or perhaps he had been mistaken about the light. Maybe there was nothing special about the Vidre estate.

Nothing but Bri.

Henry blinked his eyes and broke the enchantment. He turned his head from side to side to stretch his neck. It had gone stiff, and a knot in the tree trunk had left a sore spot on his shoulder.

So much for his search.

He stood and walked stiffly back to Eva's cottage. The sun had slipped behind Mount Evangelina by the time he arrived. Henry watched the last of the sunset, waiting until the clouds turn from orange to gray before he entered the cottage.

Eva and Cael sat at the table eating dinner. Eva grinned and gestured to a plate filled with food. Henry sat and dug in, glad for the casual manners. Meals at the castle were a production of well-timed reveals and multiple forks. He doubted there was a single fork in this cottage. They ate with their hands as goat herders had for centuries.

“Did you find anything?” Henry asked.

Cael shook his head.

“I’m telling you, she’s real!” Eva said.

“I didn’t say she wasn’t!” Cael protested. “I only said that we didn’t find anything!”

It sounded like they had been having this argument all day. Henry took a bite of bread, grateful that he had been spared the bickering.

The bread stuck in his throat when Eva turned her bright eyes to him.

“What about you? What did you find?”

“Nothing.”

Henry flushed a bit, remembering how he had mistaken Bri for Evangelina Shadow-Storm. If only it had been that easy.

“Liar! You’re hiding something!” Eva said.

Henry sighed. He had not planned to tell the story of mistaking a servant for a shadow warrior, but he knew Eva. She would pester him until he told her the truth.

“There was a woman-”

“A woman?” Cael said.

“Was she pretty?” Eva said, her eyes now sparkling for an entirely different reason.

“What?”

It came out as a bit of a yelp, and Eva’s grin widened.

“So, she was pretty! You like her!”

Henry sputtered. Denying everything would be the best way to end their teasing, but saying that Bri wasn't pretty or that he didn't like her felt disloyal.

Not to mention it wasn't true.

"I thought she was Evangelina Shadow-Storm," he said finally. "She was sitting in the meadow, and I approached her because I thought I found Evangelina Shadow-Storm."

"But she wasn't?" Cael said.

"No. She's a servant at the Vidre estate."

Henry turned back to his food, hoping that would be the end of the matter.

"So you stayed and talked to her?" Eva said. "What was she like?"

"Nice," Henry admitted.

It was as much information as he was willing to offer, but it was enough. Eva squealed and clapped her hands in delight. Cael gave a mock scowl.

"You're the last person I expected to be distracted from our mission by a woman."

"I wasn't distracted! I searched around the estate in both the realm of light and the realm of shadows. I didn't find anything."

"You found a girlfriend," Eva said. "I think that counts as something."

Girlfriend? Henry choked on his water and was coughing too hard to respond further. Cael patted him on the back.

"That's enough, Eva. We'll be down a light wielder if Henry dies of embarrassment."

"I'm not embarrassed."

His red face said otherwise, and he knew it. Eva opened her mouth to say more, but Cael spoke first.

"It's dark now. We agreed to meet with Benjamin again after sunset."

“Great!” Henry said.

He'd never been so happy to have a mission. He stared at the cottage wall and quickly slipped into the realm of shadows. They couldn't tease him about Bri while he was wielding light. He ignored Eva's giggling until the sound faded into the darkness.

Henry appeared in the realm of shadows as a star. Benjamin's star was already there and floated toward them. Cael appeared and led the way as they floated over the mountain.

The shadows were darker at night. Or maybe their stars were dimmer. Henry's limited training told him that shadow magic was stronger at night, while light wielders had stronger magic during the day. It made sense.

He turned back to look toward the Vidre estate, but he saw no signs of the lights from earlier. The valley was as dark as the rest of the realm of shadows. If something had been there, it must have moved on.

Benjamin's star circled around Henry to catch his attention. He turned from the estate and saw that Cael had moved down the mountain toward Mias. Henry flew over to catch up.

A pink light flashed in the distance. If Henry had a physical form instead of being a star, his jaw would have dropped.

There was something down there.

The brothers floated closer. Henry focused his magic. Benjamin claimed that they should be able to see further while in the realm of shadows, but the scrolls he found did not elaborate on the technique.

Something rumbled through the darkness. An earthquake? More light flashed ahead of them.

Henry looked at Cael. Should they approach it? They didn't know how to fight, but they shouldn't need to fight if it really was Evangelina Shadow-Storm.

Before Henry could decide what to do, another bolt of light pierced the darkness. This time, he clearly saw two silhouettes. One was large and indistinct. It was wispy like smoke, and Henry couldn't tell what exactly it was. But based on the enormous size, it probably wasn't human.

The other was a woman in a flowing black dress.

The light faded, and the two shapes disappeared. The ground rumbled, then everything fell still.

Cael recovered from his surprise first and flashed a signal. The three stars dashed forward, but the shadows were empty. They circled for a while, but nothing remained of whatever had been there. Cael flashed instructions to Benjamin to tell him when they would meet tomorrow, then his star disappeared. Henry followed.

“Did you see them?” Henry asked.

Cael's pale face said he had.

“See who?” Eva asked. “Did you find Evangelina Shadow-Storm?”

“We found something.”

Cael looked at Henry as if seeking confirmation. Henry nodded. He couldn't say exactly what he had seen, but he had definitely seen something. His mind spun with the possibilities of legends come to life. Whatever that had been, the brothers were no longer alone in the realm of shadows.

“We only saw it for a moment,” Cael said. “It was too fast to see details.”

“I'm not sure what the smoky figure was,” Henry said, “but there was definitely a woman.”

“I told you!” Eva said. “I told you she was awake! Evangelina Shadow-Storm has returned!”

Bri awoke to the smell of soot. She blinked at the fireplace. She'd fallen asleep on the hearth again.

“We have to stop meeting like this.”

She pushed herself up and rolled her shoulders, trying to work out the stiffness that always followed sleeping on stone. The fire had provided light while she searched Father's journal for clues late into the night.

Unfortunately, she had not found anything useful, and she was covered in soot again. So much for yesterday's bath.

Bri stood and placed the journal on the kitchen table. It sat there, so ordinary that it was practically mocking her.

Blast it all.

She wrapped her fingers around her diamond pendant and touched the mirror.

“Open.”

The glass rippled and showed the same dark landscape it always did. Bri sighed in relief. No man. No stars.

“Close.”

She put water on to boil and went through her morning routine, checking all the mirrors as she cooked breakfast. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Thank goodness.

She ate her porridge while she stared at the closed journal. She must be missing something. Father had said to check the journal. There was one coded message, but it wasn't exactly helpful. Surely there was another.

So why couldn't she find it?

Bri looked around the kitchen, feeling a sudden urge to get out of the house. The mirrors were as safe as she could make them for now, and she had only noticed the secret message outside in the sunlight. Maybe the dying firelight simply wasn't bright enough for her to find the journal's secrets.

Sunlight. She needed sunlight to see and fresh air to clear her head.

Bri stood and caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror. Blast it all. She was covered with soot again, and the circles under her eyes had darkened. She looked terrible.

Nothing she could do about the soot and dark circles at the moment, but she could at least braid her hair more neatly.

Making an effort. That was new.

Bri finished braiding her hair and rummaged through the kitchen to find some food for a lunch. She grabbed a basket and filled it with more than she needed. Enough to feed two people.

Just in case.

Bri smiled, caught herself doing it in the mirror, and scowled at her reflection. Now was not the time to get distracted. She stared at the picnic basket as if it was to blame for all her problems but didn't remove the extra food. Just in case.

Next time.

There probably wouldn't be a next time for her and Henry. She was only setting herself up for disappointment hoping for such a thing.

Bri wrapped the journal back in its protective cover, placed it in the basket, and slipped out of the house. She ducked her head and hurried around the corner before the workers bustling

in the gardens could see her. She already had dealt with one distraction yesterday. She didn't need another.

Bri climbed a hill, found a comfortable tree to sit against, and unwrapped the journal. There must be something there.

There was nothing there.

Blast it all! What was she missing?

She shoved the journal away and stared at Mount Evangelina. The mountain loomed over her, but its size was friendly and comforting rather than intimidating. A familiar presence that she could count on to always be there. Movement in the distance caught Bri's attention. A flock of goats moving up the mountain to graze.

Henry's goats?

"Stop it," she muttered to herself.

Henry himself had said he couldn't get away often. It was completely ridiculous to expect him to come see her the very next day.

It was probably ridiculous to expect him to come back at all. Why had she packed lunch for two? Was she that desperate for company?

She didn't need company. She needed answers.

Bri turned back to the journal. She looked through the columns of numbers again, searching for anything that didn't belong. Pencil marks. Ink smudges.

Father had kept a very neat ledger. Other than the code she had already found, there was nothing out of the ordinary.

Bri huffed in frustration and dropped the journal onto her lap. It fell open to a passage describing how Father had climbed Mount Evangelina to pick snowbells for his love. For the mother Bri had never known.

Bri blinked back tears and looked up at the tree. Sunlight danced through the leaves as the wind swept over the mountain. Bri watched the glittering light for a few moments, trying to find comfort in its warmth.

“I could use some help,” she said, not sure if she was talking to Mother, Father, the tree, or the mountain. Did it even matter?

The breeze pulled strands of hair from her braid and brushed them against her cheeks. If she closed her eyes, it almost felt like an embrace.

The wind changed directions and pushed her hair into her mouth. Bri sputtered and shoved the loose strands back into her braid. The breeze rustled the pages of the journal, turning them one way and then the other. Bri watched. The movement was calming, like waves against a shore.

The wind gusted, and leaves fluttered down from the tree. They landed on Bri and the journal pages. She brushed them away and froze when her fingertips felt an unfamiliar texture on the book’s spine.

Bri ran her fingers down the crease in the middle of the book.

“Ouch!”

She pulled back and sucked on her finger where the paper had cut her. When the pain faded, she lifted the journal close to her face and stared at the space between the pages.

There, hidden in the crease, was the cause of her paper cut. A raw edge of paper.

Someone had cut pages out of the journal!

Bri gently bent the journal’s spine to get a better look. The missing pages had been carefully extracted. Probably with a sharp knife, judging by the straight line of the cut. What remained of them was hidden in the crease. It was no wonder she hadn’t seen them before.

Had Father removed the pages?

Bri’s mind raced with the possibilities. Perhaps he had written something so secret that he didn’t even trust it to his journal. The pages had been removed and—

And what? Hidden? Burned?

She really, really hoped they hadn't been destroyed.

Bri read the page that would have come just before the missing pages. It was the part of the journal where Father was preparing the estate for his bride. He had moved into the house so he could more easily supervise the renovations. The very next page was the start of the accounting ledgers.

Had something happened when Father first moved into the estate? He had never told Bri how he learned magic or why he guarded the mirrors. She had assumed his grandfather had taught him, but perhaps that wasn't the case? If someone else taught him, had Father written about it, then decided it was a mistake to document such a thing? Or maybe the missing pages told the story of bringing his bride to their new home.

Either way, Bri wanted to read them.

She tilted her head back up to the sky as if the tree's swaying branches and rustling leaves could give her answers. They gave her nothing.

It was possible the pages had been removed for completely innocent reasons. Maybe Father had spilled ink on them and cut them out so that they wouldn't ruin the neat lines of his ledger. Maybe whoever made the journal had accidentally damaged them and removed them before selling it to Father.

Or maybe they had been removed after his death.

Bri gasped. What if Father had a good reason to distrust Lady Vidre? Had her stepmother known something about all this after all? Had she stolen the pages to keep the information from Bri?

There were too many possibilities, but Bri really hoped her first guess was correct. That Father had removed the pages that held answers and hidden them somewhere safe.

If that was the case, where had he hidden them?

Bri packed up her picnic, pushing away her regret that she hadn't had the chance to share it with Henry, and walked back to the estate. It wasn't much of a lead, but it was something. She had the possibility of answers now, and she knew how to

look for them. If Father had removed the missing pages, he would have hidden them somewhere in the house.

It was time to clean.

“She must be an impostor. There’s no way the Golden Goat is awake.”

“Perhaps young Mouse Catcher is mistaken. How much do you trust her account of the incident?”

More voices echoed through the cave. Henry grimaced at the familiar cadence of an argument beginning.

“Sounds like they started the meeting without us.”

“Stupid Society,” Eva said. “They never believe anything I say. Even my code name is stupid.”

“All the code names are stupid,” Cael said.

“Easy for you to say. They didn’t name you after a mouse.”

Henry and Cael shared a look over Eva’s head. They had tried to convince her to stay home and let them deal with the Society of Evangelina, but the girl had insisted on coming.

“Remember, I’ll do most of the talking,” Cael said.

“Sure, Thunder Lark. Chirp away.”

Cael stepped in front of the group, blocking their path through the narrow underground tunnel.

“Eva, I’m serious. You know how the Society is.”

“But we’ve found her! We’ve found Evangelina Shadow-Storm!”

The muffled conversation at the end of the cavern stopped. Henry groaned as a heavy silence filled the dark space. Cael gave Eva a stern look, then turned and ducked through the end of the tunnel to enter the main room.

The larger cavern was better lit than the tunnel, but only slightly. Light glistened from the shards of glass that covered the floor and walls. Henry caught glimpses of people in those mirrors, but only glimpses. An eye. A mouth. A cat.

Cats were more common than you might think. They seemed drawn to the magic mirrors. Or maybe they just resented their humans paying attention to anything other than them. A mirror in the corner went dark as a cat sat on it.

“I am a goat,” Henry said.

“I have donkey breath,” the voices in the mirrors responded.

With the passwords given, the conversation resumed.

“Thunder Lark, tell us what you saw last night,” a voice said.

Henry recognized the woman’s voice as a senior member of the Society of Evangelina with the unfortunate code name of Onyx Cockroach. While he knew his immediate family’s names and code names, the rest of the Society operated in secrecy. Privately, the brothers called the woman Madam Scowl since the only thing they could see of her in the mirror was her scowling mouth. Most of the members of the secret society took the secret part seriously and insisted on speaking in riddles, especially since Marta had defied them to marry King Noam.

Cael told the Society about the woman they had seen in the shadows. Eva bounced on her toes as he spoke, barely able to contain her excitement.

“And you think this woman was the Golden Goat?” Madam Scowl said.

“Of course she is!” Eva said. “Who else could she be?”

“Control yourself, Mouse Catcher,” Madam Scowl said. “This is an official meeting of the Society of Evangelina. Please show the proper decorum.”

“But we’ve found Evangelina Shadow-Storm!” Eva said.

“You think you’ve found her,” Madam Scowl said. “There is a difference.”

“The evidence is strong, Onyx,” Marta said. “She matches the description, and there is every reason to suspect the strange woman who appeared at the castle is the same one my boys saw in the realm of shadows.”

Marta had one of the smaller mirrors in the Society. A tiny shard that she hid in a locket when she wasn’t using it. Henry could only see the bright blue of his mother’s ceiling, but even that was reassuring.

“You are not helping matters, Ruby Snowbell,” Madam Scowl said. “What were you thinking, entering that girl in the Princess Test? Whoever she is, we should keep her hidden, not expose her to every king in Myora.”

Henry and Cael raised eyebrows at each other. How had their mother managed to enter a stranger who may or may not be Evangelina Shadow-Storm in the Princess Test? Apparently, things had gotten interesting in the castle in their absence.

“I’m hiding her in plain sight,” Marta said. “And it was the only way to make sure she didn’t run off again. She’s trying to figure things out and get her bearings. Probably hoping to report to the Council of Kings.”

“Heavens above, don’t let her do that!” This man’s code name was Preening Peacock, but the brothers preferred to call him Lord Disagreement. “Can you imagine the consequences if the Golden Goat told the current Council of Kings the secrets of the past?”

“We need to get her out of there and hide her!” Madam Scowl said.

“So, you want me to reveal the existence of the Society to her and take her to a safe house?” Marta said.

Henry stifled a laugh. He knew that tone of voice. His mother was scheming.

“No!” Every mirror cried out.

“Do not reveal the Society!” Lord Disagreement said. “Whatever else you do, don’t reveal the Society!”

“You would ruin a hundred years of subterfuge and planning!” Madam Scowl said. “You’ve already caused enough trouble by marrying the king! Would you further expose us by admitting our existence to a complete stranger?”

“She’s not a stranger,” Eva said. “She’s Evangelina Shadow-Storm!”

“Golden Goat!” Madame Scowl screeched.

The rest of her words were lost in the whirlwind of voices coming from the mirrors. Every member of the Society offered their opinions, trying to shout over each other. Their voices echoed through the cavern, and Henry found himself wishing for the quiet of the mountains. Even goats didn’t bleat this loudly.

One by one, the members realized their shouting accomplished nothing and quieted down. Marta broke the silence first.

“If we can’t come to an agreement, I propose that we continue as we are for the time being. My sons will search the shadows for clues. Hilda-”

“Trouble Turkey!” Madame Scowl and Lord Disagreement said in unison. Marta sighed.

“Trouble Turkey and I will keep an eye on this young woman, which is best accomplished by keeping her in the Princess Test. I can’t withdraw her now without bringing a lot of attention to her. The test will be over in a few days, and then we can proceed without every king in Myora watching us.”

“It isn’t the worst idea I’ve ever heard,” Lord Disagreement said.

Coming from him, that was a resounding endorsement.

“But why did you feel the need to put her in the Princess Test in the first place?” Madam Scowl said. “It’s ridiculous.”

“I think it will all work out for the best,” Marta said.

Henry and Cael shared an alarmed look. Things rarely turned out well when their mother spoke with that tone of voice. At least, they rarely turned out well for anyone except Marta.

“Forget the mystery woman for a moment,” a man called Garnet Pig said. “I’m more concerned about the other figure in the shadows. If it really was that big, it could be a goblin.”

“Goblins aren’t made of smoke,” Madam Scowl said.

“We don’t think they’re made of smoke,” Lord Disagreement said. “No one alive has actually seen one.”

“I think at least one of our scrolls would have mentioned the smoke if it were true.”

The discussion gave way to another argument. Henry placed his hand on Eva’s shoulder and shook his head to warn her to keep quiet. Adding Eva’s spark to this fire would not help matters.

“Goblin or not, it should be investigated,” Madam Scowl said reluctantly when the argument had finally run its course. “We could search the secret archive for any mention of monsters made of smoke.”

“You think we wouldn’t have found such a thing already if it existed?” Garnet Pig said.

Henry had always suspected that Garnet Pig was Simon, the scholar in charge of the royal archives, but he had yet to think of a non-incriminating way to ask him.

“We should stay on the mountain and search the shadows for any signs of the creature,” Henry said.

If his mother was scheming and Simon was researching, he wanted to stay as far away from the castle as possible. Goblin or no goblin, the mountains seemed like the safest place.

His comment started another debate. Some time later, the Society of Evangelina agreed that the two light wielding princes would stay on the mountain and search for anything unusual while Marta kept an eye on the mysterious woman. The mirrors rippled and went dark as the Society members ended their enchantments.

Henry left the cave as quickly as he could, stopping only to make sure the space outside was clear so that no one saw them leaving the secret entrance.

“Well, that was exciting,” Cael said.

His eyes glistened as if he actually believed that. Henry shrugged.

“It was horrendous.”

“No more than any other Society meeting.”

“Come on,” Eva said, grabbing the brothers’ arms and pulling them down the mountain. “You have work to do! You have to find Evangelina Shadow-Storm and the goblin!”

Henry sighed and swept his gaze over the moonlit scenery beneath him as they walked. He could almost see the Vidre estate from here, although he was too far to see people.

To see Bri.

“Looking for your girlfriend?” Eva asked.

“Of course not!” Henry said.

He hurried down the mountain before they could tease him further.

Bri tossed her dusty rag onto the pile and grabbed a fresh one. She ran it over the trim in the bedroom fireplace, searching for cracks in the stone that were big enough to hide pages.

Nothing.

She sighed. She had cleaned all day yesterday, stopped only to sleep, and then resumed her cleaning and searching after checking the mirrors. So far, she had found nothing.

At least the house sparkled. It had been far too long since she dusted it properly.

Bri rolled her shoulders to work out the stiffness that had settled there. She needed to hurry, as she wouldn't have time to search once her stepfamily returned from the Princess Test. While it was entirely possible that they would linger in town for a few extra days, she couldn't guarantee it. She had to find the pages before they returned.

Bri finished cleaning her stepmother's bedroom and sighed in disappointment. This had been her father's bedroom once as well. It had seemed as likely a hiding place as any.

Perhaps too likely. If Father wanted to hide something from Lady Vidre, he wouldn't put it in their shared bedroom. Bri stood in the middle of the floor and tried to picture the room as it had been before Father died. The memory wouldn't come. There was no trace of Father left in that room. Even his desk, which was too large to fit through the door and therefore

not able to be sold, seemed unfamiliar without Father's estate ledger sitting on top of a pile of papers.

Where was the ledger? Bri opened the desk drawers just in case she had missed something, but they were empty. That was strange. Lady Vidre was supposed to be running the estate. She should have at least some paperwork on her desk.

If the pages weren't in Father's bedroom, what was the least likely hiding place in the house? Bri considered this for a moment, then walked to Rhoda's room. She dusted and searched the highest possible hiding places first. Rhoda had been a child when Father died, and she was short. The upper trim or windowsills were out of her reach and would probably escape the notice of a servant as well.

Bri gasped when a piece of decorative corner trim above a window gave way in her hand. Her shaking legs made it hard to balance on the chair. She leaned against the wall, took a deep breath, then stood on tiptoe to reach her hand into the small opening.

Her fingers brushed against paper, and Bri's heart skipped a beat. This was it! She had found the missing pages!

She pulled them out and gently smoothed the wrinkles away. The paper was in better shape than she had expected. Probably because the pages had been safely tucked into the wall rather than hidden in a cave as the rest of the journal had been.

Bri stepped off the chair and carefully unfolded the paper. Something shiny fell out. Bri climbed off the chair and picked it up. A single ruby earring. The gem was small but well-cut and a brilliant red. Bri held it up to the window, admiring the clarity. Had Father left her additional gems as well as hidden pages? She turned back to the paper, eager for answers.

My Dearest Rhoda,

Forgive me for saying goodbye by letter instead of by person. My aunt is sending me to Mias to complete my

education. I cannot say when or if I will return. My darling Rhoda-

Bri stopped reading and stared at the note in confusion. This wasn't her father's handwriting, and it certainly wasn't a missing journal page. It seemed she wasn't the only one in the family with secrets.

Bri fought her curiosity for a moment, then skimmed over the rest of the letter. In spite of everything, Rhoda was still her younger sister. She had nothing to do with Bri's endless battle with Lady Vidre or with Lucille's resentment. If Rhoda was in some kind of trouble, Bri wanted to know.

The letter was innocent enough. The author professed his love for Rhoda, his regret at leaving her, and told her not to wait as he could not say when or if his prospects would improve. He signed it simply with the shape of a heart.

So much for answers.

Bri placed the ruby into the small indentation in the paper, carefully folded the letter along the original crease lines, tucked it back into the wall, and replaced the piece of trim over the hole. She stepped back and studied the wall a moment to make sure it looked the same as it had before, then continued to clean as she pondered this new mystery.

Who was Rhoda's mysterious suitor? It must be someone who lived nearby. Her stepfamily didn't go to town often enough for Rhoda to form an attachment there, and he mentioned leaving for Mias. How often had they met? And when? Was this a recent parting or something from years ago? The paper was not yet yellowed with age, but the ruby had been folded in the paper long enough to leave a permanent indentation.

Bri tried to remember any changes in Rhoda's behavior recently and failed. If the youngest Vidre had suffered a broken heart, she hid it well. Perhaps the attachment had not been serious.

But if it hadn't been serious, why keep and hide the letter? Why hide a gem along with it? Had the gem been a gift from the lover, or simply another secret Rhoda wished to keep?

Bri sighed. Her search for answers had only yielded another mystery. She finished cleaning Rhoda's room, gathered up her dirty rags, and walked slowly to Lucille's room. If her older stepsister had secrets, she hid them better than Rhoda. Bri found nothing but a missing stocking that had fallen under the bed.

She stopped in the hallway to watch the sun sink behind Mount Evangelina. She would lose daylight soon, which meant she would have to stop for the night so she didn't miss anything in the dark. Luckily, she only had one more room to search.

Bri had saved the library for last, but now she was questioning the wisdom of that decision. She was tired, and the empty shelves would require a lot of dusting and searching.

She stood in the doorway and stared at the dusty shelves. Their emptiness always made her heart ache, but now she felt tense for another reason. What if the missing pages had been tucked into one of the books that Lady Vidre had sold? The information she needed could be anywhere in the kingdom by now. It could have found its way to the Society of Evangelina or into a fireplace as trash.

No. Thinking like that wouldn't get her anywhere.

Bri took a deep breath and rolled up her sleeves. No point delaying any longer.

The sound of knocking nearby made her jump. Bri whirled around, but the room was empty.

The knocking continued. Bri ducked into the hallway so she was hidden from the view of the windows. Who was at the door?

It must be one of the servants. Maybe a gardener delivering fresh produce. It must be someone new. The

servants had been given strict instructions to leave all deliveries by the door and never come into the house.

Then why was this one still knocking?

Henry.

Bri wiped her dusty hands on her even dustier skirt before smoothing them through her hair. Could it be Henry? Had he come back to see her so soon?

She hurried through the house, catching glimpses of her reflection in the mirrors she passed and trying to wipe the smudges off her face as she walked. Two days of deep cleaning had done nothing to improve her appearance. She followed the sound of knocking to the kitchen and flung open the door.

There was no one there.

Bri stared at the empty yard for a moment, blinking in the fading sunlight and searching for the goat herder.

He wasn't there. No one was there.

She stepped out and looked around, but there wasn't a delivery either.

Knock, knock, knock.

Bri backed into the house and slammed the door shut. The knocking wasn't coming from outside. It was coming from the kitchen mirror.

She stared at the mirror. It reflected her wide eyes and the kitchen behind her as if it were an ordinary piece of glass.

And yet, something behind it was knocking. The sound filled the room, proof that couldn't be ignored.

Bri really wished she had found those missing journal pages. Knowing that Father had also seen a man in the mirror did not tell her if she should open the mirror and see who was knocking. Had the man been friendly? Or had he been the thing that Bri was supposed to guard against?

Knock, knock, knock.

Bri gritted her teeth. She couldn't just ignore it. Well, she could, but her stepfamily wouldn't. A knocking behind their mirrors would make them suspicious at the very least.

She had to deal with this. Had to answer whoever was knocking and fix the problem before her stepfamily returned.

Bri grabbed a large knife off the counter. She held it with one hand and the diamond pendant in the other as she approached the mirror. She pressed the hand with the knife against the glass and tried to ignore the fact that she was trembling.

“Open.”

The glass rippled. Something white appeared on the other side. Part of it twitched. Ears? Bri stared in confusion as her reflection disappeared and revealed a white donkey.

The donkey lifted his hoof and tapped the glass.

Knock, knock, knock.

“Close.”

Bri closed the mirror and backed away from it. She set her knife on the counter, afraid it would slip from her trembling hand and stab her in the foot. That was the last thing she needed right now.

She leaned against the counter, not sure if she should laugh or cry. A donkey? Why was there a donkey on the other side of the mirror?

Knock, knock, knock.

Bri forced herself to breathe. There had to be an explanation. Maybe the donkey belonged to the man she had seen earlier. Maybe it had gotten hungry and wandered off.

Or maybe it wasn't as innocent as it appeared. Anything in that shadowy place wasn't an ordinary creature.

Guard the mirrors. Did that include guarding against donkeys? Bri had always pictured something more sinister.

It was still knocking. That couldn't continue. If nothing else, she needed to shoo it away.

Bri grabbed her diamond pendant and reached for the mirror.

Before she could speak, the glass rippled again. The donkey's face appeared, his white nose squished against the mirror. Bri screamed and stumbled back. She tripped on a stool and fell to the floor.

The donkey stood still, his nose pressed against the glass as he watched her with calm, dark eyes.

Bri struggled to breathe as she met the creature's gaze. How had it opened the mirror? That shouldn't be possible.

No matter. She could close it again. Bri crawled forward, moving slowly so she didn't alarm the donkey. Her backside ached from falling, and her body shook. The donkey stayed still as Bri reached for the glass and pressed her hand against it.

"Close."

The glass rippled, and the donkey disappeared.

Bri collapsed onto the floor, weak with relief. It had worked. The donkey was gone.

The glass rippled, and the donkey's face appeared again.

"Blasted creature!"

Bri's fear gave way to anger. She stood and closed the mirror again.

The donkey opened it. Was it her imagination, or were his eyes twinkling with mischief?

"Close."

The donkey disappeared.

Then reappeared as he opened the mirror.

"Stop that!"

The donkey winked at her. Bri lifted her hand to close the mirror, then pulled back. It wouldn't do any good. The donkey would just open it again, and Bri had the feeling that the creature was enjoying this game.

Some guardian she was. She couldn't even protect the mirrors from a donkey.

“What do you want?”

The donkey lifted his upper lip in a grin, and Bri realized he was holding something in his mouth.

“What's that?”

The donkey bared his teeth, revealing a piece of paper.

Bri stared at it. The paper was neatly folded. She couldn't read what was written on it.

If anything was written on it.

It was probably just a coincidence that she had spent all morning looking for a piece of paper, and then a donkey appeared holding one.

But what if it wasn't?

“Can I see that?” Bri asked.

She held out her hand as if reaching for it. The donkey moved closer and pushed against the glass. Bri pressed her hand against the mirror as if she could pet the donkey's nose.

Then her hand touched warm fur instead of cold glass.

She swallowed a scream as the donkey's nose pushed through the mirror. His nostrils flared as he sniffed her. Then he opened his mouth and dropped the paper. It fluttered to the floor, but Bri couldn't take her eyes off the donkey.

He had come through the mirror. How was that possible? Had Father known it could be done?

The donkey pulled his nose back. Bri stumbled forward, and her hand caught on the glass. The mirror was solid again. The donkey brayed at her, winked, then turned and trotted into the darkness. Bri watched until he disappeared. She watched long after he disappeared, staring at the emptiness as if it could give her answers.

Things could come through the mirrors. This changed everything. Donkeys were harmless enough, but what else was

hiding in there? Bri swallowed as she recalled stories of monsters from her childhood. Goblins. Gremlins.

“Close.”

The mirror rippled and turned to glass, but Bri found no comfort in that. If a donkey could break through, anything could. What else might be lurking in the shadows and waiting for an opportunity to attack?

She glanced at the knife on the counter. What good would that be against a gremlin or a goblin?

No good at all.

Bri bent over and picked up the piece of paper with trembling hands. It was slightly damp from the donkey’s mouth. She unfolded it, and tears of relief pooled in her eyes as she saw exactly what she had hoped to see.

Father’s handwriting.

Henry was hungry, but he ate slowly. He had spent more time in the realm of shadows over the past few days than he had at any other time in his life. His head ached. His body ached. He only got a break during meals, so he was determined to make those meals last as long as possible.

Cael, on the other hand, ate quickly.

“You’ll choke yourself,” Henry grumbled.

“And you’ll die of starvation before you finish.”

Eva looked from one brother to another, bouncing all the while. She hadn’t stood still since meeting the woman she thought was Evangelina Shadow-Storm. Henry wished he had that kind of energy.

“Hurry, Henry!” Eva said. “It’s almost sunset!”

Henry sighed.

“Even if we find her again, I don’t know how we’ll find proof that will satisfy the Society.”

“You just need to speak with her!” Eva said.

Henry didn’t bother answering. He let Cael explain that they couldn’t speak as stars while he slowly ate the last of his food.

He finished just as the sun touched the horizon. Henry sat in his chair and stared ahead, letting his gaze soften and

ignoring the headache that built as he slipped into the realm of shadows.

He spun in a circle and searched the darkness for clues.

Nothing.

Benjamin's star appeared next to them and flashed a greeting. Cael answered it and floated away to begin their search.

Henry followed, looking back occasionally toward the Vidre estate. He saw nothing but darkness. It seemed that whatever caused the strange light there really had moved on.

The brothers drifted toward the city, and Henry lost sight of the estate. He spun around and searched the space ahead of him.

There! A red light in the distance!

Henry flashed a warning, but Cael had already seen it. The stars flew toward the light.

The smell hit Henry like a full-speed carriage. If that carriage was made of an absolutely disgusting stench. He gagged and lost control of his light magic for a moment. He caught a glimpse of Eva's concerned face. Cael had wrinkled his nose but stayed in the realm of shadows.

Henry gathered his focus and pulled himself back into the enchantment.

Stars above, that smelled terrible! Henry wanted nothing more than to run away and never look back. People said goats smelled bad, but they would bottle the scent of goat as perfume if they ever smelled this.

Cael kept moving toward the stench, and Henry followed. He took shallow breaths, which helped a little.

A very little. He had no mouth as a star, but somehow, he still tasted the foul odor.

The realm of shadows quaked. Deep laughter, low and rumbling like an earthquake, shook the air around them. Then

a green glow split the darkness. The light grew until it formed a sword.

Henry froze in midair and stared. The sword's light illuminated a woman's grinning face. She wore a black, flowing gown, and her dark chestnut hair streamed behind her. Her green eyes gleamed in the light.

Evangelina Shadow-Storm.

Henry had cautiously allowed the possibility of her existence before. That possibility quickly reshaped itself into certainty as the woman before him lifted her magic sword.

A hulking shape moved in the shadows, and Henry realized that the shadow warrior wasn't alone. She was facing a monster with broad shoulders and massive horns.

A goblin.

The creature, if it was the same one they had seen before, was no longer made of smoke. It was solid as the mountain itself, and its hide looked tough as stone.

"You've broken the seal," Evangelina Shadow-Storm said. "You know what that means, right?"

Henry swallowed, then regretted swallowing as some of the stench went down his throat and made his stomach churn. In all the excitement, he had forgotten the original reason that Evangelina Shadow-Storm had been put into an enchanted sleep in the first place.

She had slept to seal away the dark creatures, and now she was awake.

Blast. That wasn't good.

"I will devour the light you protect."

The goblin's voice was deep and rumbling, like mountains grating together. It sent chills down Henry's spine.

"No. It means there's nothing to keep me from killing you."

Evangelina Shadow-Storm lunged toward the goblin. Henry had never seen anyone fight like that. She was

impossibly fast, and her sword was even faster. She slashed at the goblin, moving more quickly than Henry could follow.

Then red light flew from Nog's hand and crashed into the shadow warrior's face. She gasped in pain, and the green sword disappeared.

The sudden darkness shook Henry out of his stupor. Evangelina Shadow-Storm needed his help!

His brothers had the same thought. The three stars raced toward the goblin. Cael arrived first and crashed into Nog's eye. The goblin pulled his claws back from Evangelina Shadow-Storm's throat and swatted at the star. Henry circled around the goblin's head to distract him. Benjamin went straight for the shadow warrior. Henry caught a glimpse of his brother pulling Evangelina Shadow-Storm out of danger. He dashed into the goblin's other eye to keep him from seeing where they went.

The goblin roared in frustration, blasting Henry with a wave of putrid breath. Henry gagged and fought the urge to vomit. There would be time for that later. Right now, he needed to keep the goblin's attention.

White light flashed behind him, and Benjamin's star joined his brothers in tormenting the goblin. Henry glanced back into the shadows.

Evangelina Shadow-Storm was gone.

Cael flashed a signal to retreat, and the stars flew away from the goblin. Thank goodness he didn't follow. Henry couldn't stand that stench any longer. Without waiting for the signal, he broke the enchantment and settled back into his body in the realm of light. Henry doubled over in his chair and took deep gulps of fresh mountain air. Cael followed a few moments later.

"What happened?" Eva asked.

Henry shook his head, not quite up to speaking yet. Cael recovered first.

"Goblin," he said.

Then he took the glass of water that Eva offered and drained it. Henry sipped at his and swished the liquid around in his mouth to wash away the bad taste.

“Goblin?”

Eva’s eyes sparkled with excitement. Henry swallowed the last of his water and tried to find a way to break the news gently.

“It was bad, Eva. It almost killed Evangelina Shadow-Storm.”

“You found her? I told you she was awake!”

Eva looked entirely too pleased with herself. Henry sighed.

“This isn’t a game, Eva. She’s awake, but so is a goblin. The whole kingdom could be in danger.”

“Nothing can defeat Evangelina Shadow-Storm.”

“Well, the goblin came close. We distracted it, and she got away.”

Eva frowned.

“She wouldn’t run away. You must have seen it wrong.”

“I know what I saw.”

“We both know what we saw,” Cael said. “We need to tell the Society about this. If goblins are running loose, it could mean that the seal is broken.”

“They’re not going to like that,” Henry groaned. He could already hear the shouting as the Society argued about how to deal with the dark creatures and a damaged seal.

“We could start by telling Aunt Marta,” Eva said.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Cael said. “She should probably check on Lady Evangelina, anyway. She might need healing.”

Henry swallowed. Healing. It hadn’t occurred to him that they were in danger, but of course they had been. They had come face to face with a goblin!

He stood and tried to ignore how his legs shook. Goblins were monsters in legends. They weren’t supposed to be real,

and they certainly weren't supposed to be here in Aeonis.

"Let's go to the mirror and tell Mother what we saw."

Cael's voice quivered a little. A very little, but it was enough to confirm Henry's thoughts.

They were in serious trouble.

I don't believe in ghosts, but I think I'm living with one. I hear things I shouldn't. See movement in the corner of my eye.

Bri traced her father's words. Reading these pages was like having him with her again and hearing a story he had never told her before. He had told her stories often before he remarried. She would curl up at his feet in the library, a roaring fire and cup of hot chocolate to keep her warm while he shared stories of his life. His exploits in school. Her mother's love of dancing and the balls they attended. Sometimes he read from books. Sometimes he challenged her with riddles and math problems.

When she was older, he challenged her with magic. She had accepted the mirrors and gems as a child accepts anything outside their experience. With wonder, then complacency. She had heard so many stories over the years. Too many to count.

But she had never heard this one.

Perhaps it is the effect of living alone in the country. This house is far too big for one person, and the empty space weighs on me. Maybe all my fears will vanish when Marie's laughter fills these halls. But should I really bring my love to a place that may threaten her safety?

The account continued. Father's musings grew more and more nervous. His handwriting wavered, as if his hand shook when he wrote.

Bri glanced up at the mirror, then around the kitchen. It was a cozy enough space, but the rest of the house loomed over her. Father was right. This place was too big for one person. It started to weigh on you, especially at night.

Then, the story stopped. The journal became a hasty scrawl of disjointed text, as if Father had been desperately trying to take notes.

Diamonds are best. Emeralds, rubies acceptable. Contact is essential. Words start magic. Touch sustains magic. Easy if gems already enchanted. Guard mirrors. Evangelina. Society.

The hasty notes stopped when the page ran out of room. The final piece of paper contained a list of words written in different ink and even worse handwriting. Bri squinted at it, trying to make them out. Father's hasty notes were difficult to read, but these words were nearly impossible. They didn't look like Father's handwriting, but who else would write in his journal?

Words start magic. That sentence, followed by a list of words, seemed very promising. Bri tilted her head sideways as she worked to make out the top word and wished that her father had taken the time to copy them more neatly.

"Illuminate?" Bri said, hoping that she had guessed correctly.

Her diamond pendant glowed with a soft, white light. Bri lifted the gem and studied it with wonder. Magic. She had long ago adjusted to the magic of the mirrors, but this was something else entirely. The light was cool like moonlight, and it made the familiar kitchen look like something from another world.

Bri turned the diamond over in her fingers, then looked at the door. What would the outdoor servants think if they saw

this strange white light leaking through the cracks?

She wrapped her fist around the gem to block it. Her hand glowed red as the light shone through her skin. Bri searched the scrawled list of words for something that would make the light stop. She squinted at the word under “illuminate” and made her best guess.

“Extinguish.”

Her shoulders sagged with relief as the light faded, and Bri loosened her grip on the diamond. She shouldn’t be careless with strange magic. It was dangerous to cast enchantments without knowing what they actually did.

And yet, this was a golden opportunity. She wouldn’t be able to experiment like this once her stepfamily returned.

Bri stuffed rags under the door to keep any light from showing and returned to the journal page. She cast the illumination enchantment and turned her attention to the word under “extinguish.” Finally, she worked out a promising possibility.

Guard

If that did what she thought it did, why hadn’t Father taught her that word? If the point was to guard the mirrors, surely the enchantment for guarding was important.

Bri held the diamond with one hand, pressed her other against the glass, and whispered the new enchantment.

Instead of rippling, gentle white light spread across the glass, then disappeared. Bri felt a sense of hardening, as if the mirror was now coated with iron. She pulled her hand away, and the sense of iron disappeared. The mirror rippled slightly, showing a glimpse of the darkness behind it before settling back to ordinary glass.

Blast. How was she supposed to sustain the enchantment?

Bri turned back to Father’s notes. A phrase jumped out at her.

Contact is essential. Touch activates magic.

In one sense, Bri already knew that. She had to touch the mirrors to open them. But was there more to it than that?

She pressed her fingers against the glass and tried the guard enchantment again. The light spread across the glass and disappeared, but the sense of iron remained. Bri ran her fingers along the surface of the mirror and tried to feel the iron that she sensed. The glass was smooth as ever, but she couldn't escape the feeling that there was something more there.

She pulled her hand away. The feeling of more disappeared as soon as her skin broke contact with the glass.

Bri frowned. She couldn't be in every room at once. It would take an army of enchanters and a fortune in gems to keep the house secure. She was one person with one diamond.

She pursed her lips at her reflection. Contact was essential, but was it contact with her or contact with the gem?

She reached for the necklace clasp, hesitating only a moment before undoing it. She hadn't removed the necklace in years, and her skin felt cold where the warm metal had been.

Bri gently placed the diamond next to the mirror and pushed it close so that one of the facets sat smoothly against the glass. She kept one finger on the diamond and pressed her other hand against the mirror.

“Guard.”

The white light spread across the glass, and the sense of invisible iron grew as the light faded. Bri held her breath as she removed her hand from the glass.

The enchantment held.

Bri sat, waiting and watching for any sign of the enchantment fading, but it remained strong. She didn't see anything different, but she could sense it.

That was a relief. If she could get more gems, she could guard the entire household at once.

Unless the enchantment protected all the mirrors?

Bri stared at her necklace for a moment. The diamond shimmered like a living thing. She didn't want to leave it.

She was being ridiculous. The mirror was guarded, and the house was empty.

Bri hurried from the kitchen to the dining room. She placed her hand on the glass. It felt normal. No sense of iron or hardness that came with the guard enchantment.

Well, it was worth a try. She hurried back to the kitchen and smiled in relief when she saw that her diamond was still there. One mirror, at least, was guarded.

Bri laid down on the hearth and tried to sleep, but her bare neck felt wrong. She stared at the mirror and her twinkling diamond. How strong was the guarding enchantment? What if the donkey or something else could still break through?

What if something stole the diamond?

She wrestled with her thoughts a few more moments, then retrieved her diamond and fastened the clasp around her neck once more. As much as she would like to sleep with the extra protection of a guarded mirror, she wasn't willing to risk the diamond. It was the only gem she had and the last thing that Father had given her.

There was another gem in the house. Rhoda's ruby.

Diamonds are best. Emeralds, rubies acceptable.

Bri shook her head and closed her eyes to block out the temptation. One gem wouldn't make that much difference, and she had already violated her stepsister's privacy enough by reading the letter. She wouldn't add to the wrongdoing by stealing from her as well. She watched the mirror until she fell into an uneasy sleep.

“E va, don’t run ahead!”

“I wouldn’t have to if you weren’t so slow! Aren’t you excited?”

Eva stuck her tongue out at Cael as she spun to face them. She bounced from foot to foot as she waited for her cousins to catch up.

“Of course I’m excited,” Cael said, “But we need to be cautious. You heard the report.”

They had all heard the report at the Society meeting last night. Marta had confirmed that the mysterious woman really was Evangelina Shadow-Storm, and she had told her about the Society. In return, the shadow warrior had explained that she had been fighting a goblin called Nog. She had been severely injured from the fight, but Marta’s healing potions had set that right.

Henry hadn’t realized that wounds from the realm of shadows could affect your body in the realm of light. Had they been in danger as stars when they attacked Nog?

“I can’t believe we’re going to meet her,” Eva said. “Evangelina Shadow-Storm!”

She squealed with excitement and started to run ahead again. Henry grabbed her arm and held her back. Eva shook loose and glared at him, but she matched the brother’s slower pace.

“What should we call her?” Henry said. “It seems like a mouthful to call her Evangelina Shadow-Storm every time.”

“Lady Evangelina,” Cael said without hesitating. “That’s what the elder Society members call her.”

“You had already thought of that?” Eva said.

“It’s a fair question. She may prefer to be called by her full name, but let’s start there. It’s respectful and recognizes her status.”

“Lady Evangelina it is, then!” Eva said.

She ran ahead again, ignoring Henry and Cael’s calls for her to stop.

“She’s going to run into a goblin,” Cael muttered.

“It’s daylight,” Henry said.

Still, he quickened his steps to keep up with Eva. They had encountered enough unexpected things over the past few days that he wasn’t willing to risk Eva’s safety on the belief that goblins only appeared at night. A lot of what he had thought true had turned out to be blatantly false.

Eva darted over a hill and disappeared from view. Henry and Cael shared a look, then jogged up the hill to search for her.

When they reached the top, there was no sign of her. Henry’s breath caught in his throat.

“She’s probably just over the next hill,” Cael said, gesturing to the hill in front of them.

“Eva! Wait!” Henry called.

No answer. The brothers shared another look and sprinted up the next hill.

Henry stumbled when he reached the top. Eva was there, but she wasn’t alone. A woman with chestnut hair and sparkling green eyes stood with her.

Evangelina Shadow-Storm.

Cael sprinted ahead, and Henry jogged to catch up. Cael's extra height and head start were hard to overcome, and the older prince reached the shadow warrior first. Cael bowed. He spoke, and Evangelina Shadow-Storm answered, but Henry couldn't hear what they said. He reached them just in time to hear Evangelina Shadow-Storm say, "You were the stars that helped me, weren't you?"

Henry bowed and waited for Cael to answer. But his brother seemed to have lost the ability to speak for the moment, so Henry answered.

"Henry at your service, Lady Evangelina. Yes, we were the stars that aided your fight. The third was our brother, Benjamin. He's away at school at the moment but will do his best to help us from there."

"Please, call me Lina. Thank you for your help."

Henry looked at Cael and raised an eyebrow. Cael looked horrified at the suggestion.

"Lina?" Henry said, once again speaking for both of them. "I'm not sure we should. That seems so informal."

"I don't mind. Evangelina is a bit of a mouthful. Most people call me Lina."

Lina. Henry tried the name out in his head. It sounded nice, and it suited the woman in front of him. But it hardly suited the grand persona he had grown up hearing stories about.

"I want to be called Lina," Eva said. "That's a nicer nickname than Eva!"

Cael ruffled her hair.

"Eva, that would get confusing. You be Eva. Lina can be Lina if she wants. Although I agree with Henry. It feels too familiar to call a hero by a nickname."

Lina grinned.

"Strange to meet me in person?"

Cael laughed.

“You have no idea. I’ve heard stories about you since I was a child. To be honest, I thought it was all made up. A fairy tale to keep us content herding goats.”

“Nothing would keep you content herding goats,” Henry said.

Cael shrugged.

“They’re not terribly exciting. And they smell.”

Henry bristled at the insult and felt the need to defend his goats.

“They’re nicer than most people. With a goat, at least you know where you stand.”

Eva leaned over and whispered something to Lina. They both looked at Henry, and he flushed.

“Eva, what are you telling her?”

Lina squeezed Eva’s shoulder to quiet her.

“Nothing. Now, are we ready to investigate the cave?”

The cave? Henry had been so distracted by Lina that he hadn’t noticed their surroundings. They stood in what had once been a grassy meadow. Something had trampled it into a muddy mess. Bits of stone were scattered around and ground into the dirt. Marble?

Possibly the remains of a statue if the legends were correct. Legend said that wolf statues guarded Evangelina Shadow-Storm’s temple.

Henry swallowed. Surely, she didn’t mean her temple when she said the cave? He found himself nodding along with Cael and Eva. Whatever was in there, he wanted to see it.

“I can’t believe it was here all along,” Cael said. “We bring our goats to graze here all the time. We were so close to you.”

Lina pressed her ring into a small hole in the stone. The massive boulder clicked open and detached from the hill around it. Henry and Cael rushed to help her pull the massive rock door open. Eva darted inside.

“Eva! Come back!”

“It’s dark in here! I’m in Evangelina’s Temple!”

Eva’s voice echoed through the cave. She laughed.

“Illuminate,” Lina said.

Her diamond lit the cavern with a soft glow. Henry stared, amazed at her casual use of magic. Cael looked equally impressed.

Lina found Eva and pulled her back.

“Don’t run off like that! What if Nog had been in here?”

“Oh. I didn’t think of that. Is he?”

Lina sniffed.

“No. We’d smell him.”

Cael nodded.

“That thing smells worse than the goats. Normally my senses are dull when I’m wielding light, but the stench was overwhelming.”

“Your senses should be stronger when you’re wielding light,” Lina said. “You should be able to sense more in both realms.”

Henry adjusted his hat, suddenly wishing he had practiced light magic more. It was one thing to be weak when it was just him and his brothers. It was something else entirely to have his skills compared to a legendary warrior.

“I’m afraid we’re not very accomplished light wielders,” he said. “We don’t have a teacher. You can only learn so much from scrolls, and not many of those survived the war.”

“Oh. Maybe I can teach you a few things. Luca was always bragging to me about his technique.”

“You know Luca’s techniques?” Cael asked.

“Of course she does,” Henry said. “Luca’s her brother. They trained together.”

Cael cleared his throat.

“Yes. Forgive me. It’s just, the possibility of learning something like that is overwhelming. Luca was one of the strongest light wielders in history!”

Lina snickered.

“Really? Does it say that in his scrolls?”

“Um, yes. Wasn’t he?”

“He was strong, but he was also a bragger. I wouldn’t take his assessment of his own abilities too seriously. Still, I’m happy to show you what I know.”

Cael’s face fell. He scuffed his feet along the cavern floor. It kicked up a small cloud of dust. Henry looked from Cael to Lina, still trying to reconcile the warrior of legend with this irreverent woman. It made sense that she spoke lightly of Luca. Henry spoke of his siblings the same way. But Luca was more to them, especially to Cael.

Henry moved closer to Lina and spoke softly.

“Luca is his personal hero,” Henry said. “He’s always wanted to be an adventurer just like him. Be careful what you say. He’ll take it personally.”

The shadow warrior’s green eyes sparkled with mischief, but her joking expression disappeared when she saw how serious Cael looked. She put her hand on his shoulder and gave him a sincere smile.

“I’m glad Luca has admirers. He was a good brother and a good warrior. My best friend. He deserves better than to be remembered as a talking donkey.”

Cael smiled at her.

“You’ll have to tell me about him sometime, Lina.”

“I’d like that.”

Ahead of them, Eva peeked her head out of the door to the sleeping chamber.

“Is this where you slept? No wonder you were so dirty!”

“Yes, that’s the place. If I’d known I would sleep for a century, I would have set some cleaning charms.”

Cleaning charms? Was she joking, or was that actually possible? Henry shared a look with Cael, sure that his brother’s eyes were just as wide as his own. He knew magic was more common a century ago, but would it really be used for something so mundane as cleaning?

“Nog hasn’t been here,” Lina said. “There would be footprints. He would have smashed everything.”

Henry hadn’t moved from the doorway. Eva was scampering around the room stirring up dust, but Henry’s feet wouldn’t move. Lina noticed and smiled at them.

“Welcome to Evangelina’s Temple.”

It was real. Every legend he had been told was real. Henry stared, feeling suddenly overwhelmed.

“We should take off our hats, right?” he said. “That’s a respectful gesture, right?”

He slid his hat from his head, revealing a tangled mess of brown curls. Cael left his on. He stood frozen, not even blinking, as he examined every corner of the room.

Lina was starting to look uncomfortable. Henry cleared his throat and tried to change the subject.

“Ben will be sorry he missed this. He’s more scholarly than the rest of us.”

“Except for Prince Marcus!” Eva said. “He comes up the mountain all the time and asks me questions about Evangelina and goats.”

“Marcus?” Lina asked.

“The king’s youngest son,” Henry answered. “He and Benjamin are studying at the same school. He is something of a scholar. Even more so than Alaric.”

“He said he’d tell me if he found any scrolls about shadow magic,” Eva said. “He’s been researching it.”

“Oh. That is interesting,” Lina said. “He doesn’t know the truth about you?”

Henry shook his head. Cael finally snapped out of his daze and answered.

“No. No one does. It wasn’t our secret to tell.”

Lina pushed a strand of hair away from her face.

“We’d better start searching for Nog. If he tried that hard to break into the cave, I don’t think he’ll be far away. He’ll be in the realm of shadows until nightfall, but we may still be able to track him.”

Henry was listening, but Cael had turned his attention to a large mirror in the center of the room.

“Did Luca enchant this?”

Lina nodded, and Henry’s attention snapped to the mirror as well. It was the largest enchanted mirror he had ever seen. Far larger than the shards that the Society used for their secret meetings.

Cael placed his palm against the glass. A spark of light crackled from his hand across the mirror. Cael pulled his hand away, and the mirror shattered. He jumped back.

“Lady Evangelina, I am so sorry! I thought I could restore the enchantment! I didn’t mean to destroy it! I should have asked your permission before touching it.”

Lina pulled Eva away from the broken glass.

“Cael, it’s fine. You didn’t mean to break it. The enchantment was gone, anyway.”

Cael stared at the broken glass like he might cry.

“It was a relic,” he said. “An antique. Priceless. I’m so sorry.”

Henry pulled his brother away.

“Calm down, Cael. It’s just a mirror. We need to find Nog.”

Lina nodded.

“Now that we have proof Nog was here, do you think you could convince Marta to take the princesses back to the castle? I don’t want to risk their safety.”

Henry’s jaw dropped.

“Mother brought the princesses here? Why didn’t you tell her there was a goblin loose?”

Lina bristled.

“I did. She wouldn’t listen to me.”

Cael made a face.

“Of course, she wouldn’t. She’s stubborn. And she’s always had too much confidence in our abilities. I’ll try to talk some sense into her. You and Henry can search for signs of the goblin.”

Lina smiled at him.

“Take Eva with you. I don’t want to put her in any danger.”

Eva looked up from where she had been drawing hearts in the thick dust on the floor.

“I don’t mind. I can help.”

Cael put his hand on her shoulder and edged her toward the door.

“You can help me convince Mother to return to the castle.”

Eva brightened.

“Will the princesses be there?”

“Yes. All of them.”

“Let’s go!”

Eva grabbed Cael’s hand and pulled him down the hallway. Lina and Henry jogged behind them. They stopped when they reached the cavern door.

Dark clouds had gathered in the sky while they were in the cave. The edge of a storm crawled over the mountains, blocking the sun.

“Run, Cael,” Lina said. “Those clouds could be trouble. Get the princesses out of here.”

Henry watched Cael and Eva disappear over the hill, then turned his attention back to the sky. Thick clouds deepened the shadows over the mountain.

Shadows. Surely that didn't mean what Henry thought it did.

A foul stench filled the air, and Henry gagged as he turned to Lina. The shadow warrior wrinkled her nose and nodded.

“Goblins,” she confirmed. “Nog is coming.”

Bri watched the clouds from her spot beneath the tree. They gathered at an alarming rate and were so thick and dark that they blocked the sun.

So much for one last picnic before her stepfamily returned. Whatever storm was blowing in, she needed to get back to the house before it hit.

A gust of wind caught her skirt like a sail and threw her off balance. It carried the worst stench Bri had ever smelled. She gagged and clamped her hands over her mouth and nose. She held her breath as long as she could, then quickly gasped for air. The odor stuck in her throat and churned her stomach.

What was that?

Lightning flashed across the sky.

Red lightning.

Bri ran. She clutched the picnic basket to her chest, not caring that she was crushing it and everything inside. Now was not the time to worry about such things.

The ground quaked and rumbled beneath her feet. Bri stumbled and fell. She forced herself to stand and keep going, but she moved more slowly. Her knee ached where she had landed, and it was too dark to sprint. It was dark as night now.

A night without stars.

Another bolt of red lightning. Another earthquake. Another wave of stench.

What was happening?

Bri reached her house and stumbled through the door. She slammed it shut and leaned against it as if she could block out the mysterious forces at work. Was it magic? Some kind of attack?

Lightning flashed outside, and the kitchen mirror flashed red. The burst of light showed the silhouette of a hulking shape. Bri stared in horror.

It was a monster. The lightning didn't last long enough to show her details, but it showed her enough. The creature was huge and muscular, built like a pile of rocks.

If a pile of rocks had a horned head and massive arms raised to attack.

Bri dove across the room and pressed her hand to the mirror.

“Close.”

The glass shimmered and showed her wide-eyed reflection. Then the house shook with another earthquake, and the mirror flashed red again. That terrible smell filled the kitchen.

Bri grabbed a cloth from the counter and held it over her face to filter out the stench.

It helped a little.

A very little.

Three specks of light appeared in the mirror. They darted around the monster's head, reminding Bri of mosquitoes more than anything.

“Guard.”

The mirror hardened, and the specks of light disappeared. Bri kept her trembling hand against the glass. Flashes of red light shone under the door as lightning continued to streak across the sky, but the mirror remained still.

What was happening? She had never seen anything like this before.

The terrible smell wafted in from the dining room, and Bri scowled. She could only guard one mirror at a time. What if something came in from one of the others?

She had no way to protect all the mirrors, but she could guard one more if she took Rhoda's ruby.

Red light flashed again, and Bri pulled her hand away from the mirror. She sprinted through the house to Rhoda's room, trying to ignore the monster that appeared in the mirrors with each flash of lightning.

Guard the mirrors. She would do the best she could.

"Illuminate."

Bri's diamond filled Rhoda's room with gentle white light. She pulled a chair over to the window, not caring that her diamond's light would shine through the window, and retrieved the letter from its hiding place. She gently removed the ruby earring and tucked the letter back into the wall.

She could guard two mirrors now, but which should she choose?

Bri decided on the dining room. It was the largest in the house. If anything was going to come through a mirror, it would come through that one.

Bri tucked the ruby earring into the dining room mirror's ornate frame and made sure that the gem was in contact with the glass. She pressed one hand against the jewel and one against the glass.

"Guard."

The large mirror glistened red for a moment, then stilled. Lightning flashed outside, but the glass remained glass. It showed Bri's face, which looked strange lit from below with her glowing diamond pendant. Her eyes were dark sockets, and her mouth a grim line. She looked a bit like a monster herself.

Bri slumped into a dining room chair and stared at the mirror. She saw the strange red lightning through the windows

and felt the rumble of thunder and earthquakes, but the reflection looked completely normal.

Even in this storm, the guard spell worked. If she had more gems, she could guard the entire house.

Bri searched her stepfamily's rooms with a sort of desperate hope but found no sign of jewelry that she had missed. They must have taken everything with them to wear to the parties. Or maybe it had all been sold long ago.

She came back to the dining room and looked at the large mirror. It reflected the room and only the room. She had never been so happy to see a table and chairs.

In spite of the storm raging outside the house and the mirrors flashing red inside it, Bri felt hope. Gems were expensive, but they could be acquired. The once impossible task of guarding the mirrors no longer felt so impossible.

Bri returned to the kitchen. She held her hand up to guard the mirror, then let it down again. She couldn't guard all the mirrors. Maybe it was better to know what was happening on the other side of the glass.

She made a cup of peppermint tea to mask the terrible smell and calm her frayed nerves. The mirror still showed the hulking monster swatting the specks of light. She sipped the tea and hoped it would unravel the knots in her stomach.

“Extinguish.”

Bri put out the magical light of her diamond and moved closer to the fire. She was shivering more from shock than cold, but maybe warmth would help. She wrapped a tattered quilt over her shoulders and sipped the tea as she watched the scene unfold in the mirror.

The monster was surrounded by a faint glow now. Ground had materialized beneath him, and he trampled snowbells with every step he took.

Then everything changed.

A woman appeared and stood facing the monster. She wore a black dress that billowed around her. Her chestnut hair

was pulled back into a braid. She lifted her hand to her lips and whispered something. Green and white light flashed from her hand and stretched into a spear. The woman threw the spear at the monster. It pierced the creature's shoulder, but that didn't slow him down. He continued to bash a large stone with his fists.

The woman kept attacking. She formed a sword of green light and lunged at the monster.

Bri dropped her teacup. It shattered against the stone, and the last few drops of tea hissed in the fire. She hardly noticed. A nightmare far worse than any monster had appeared in the mirror, and she couldn't breathe. Spilled tea was the least of her concerns.

A clap of thunder shook her out of her daze. Bri jumped up and rushed to the mirror.

“Guard.”

The mirror flashed white, and the reassuring feeling of iron spread over the glass. The monster and the woman disappeared. Bri stared at her trembling hand as she tried to process what she had seen.

Evangelina Shadow-Storm.

Like every other child in Aeonia, Bri had grown up listening to stories of the shadow warrior and her talking donkey companion. Unlike every other child, she had learned secret magic and been told to beware the Society of Evangelina.

If the Society was bad, the woman they represented must be much worse.

“She's real,” Bri whispered.

She repeated the words as if that would help her to believe them. Evangelina Shadow-Storm was real.

As were goblins. The proper name for the creatures returned to her as she calmed. Goblins had been the scariest monsters in the legends, so Bri hoped what she had seen was a

goblin. If there was a monster worse than that, she didn't want to meet it.

They were real, and they were in her mirrors.

Guard. Was this what she was meant to guard the mirrors against? Creatures of darkness and warriors who fought in the shadows?

And donkeys. Bri gave a half laugh that turned into a sob. The donkey hadn't talked, but he had been intelligent enough to bring her exactly the thing she needed. And had somehow known where to find it.

Who knew? Maybe he could talk. Maybe he was just shy or toying with her.

Bri bent over so she could unclasp her necklace without breaking contact between the diamond and the glass. Whatever else happened, she needed to keep that mirror guarded. She stepped away from the mirror and realized her legs were shaking. Her hands were shaking.

Her whole body was shaking.

She sank onto a stool and leaned against the table. It was too much. Magic mirrors were one thing. Monsters and legends come to life were something else entirely.

Bri looked back at the mirror and her diamond. She breathed deeply to calm herself and noticed that the terrible stench was no longer drifting through the mirror. She cleaned the remains of her broken teacup off the hearth as she tried to slow her pounding heart. Her diamond glistened against the glass, and the mirror remained a mirror.

Rain pelted the house. There was thunder and lightning, but the lightning was no longer red. If the battle was still happening, it was no longer near her.

Bri stood again and put more wood on the fire. She made herself another cup of tea and tried to make sense of the evening's events. She wanted to doubt her own eyes, but there was no denying what she had seen. Evangelina Shadow-Storm and goblins were real. She may not be able to fight them, but she had escaped their notice. The guard enchantment blocked

whatever magic they were using. She would have a hard time hiding that awful smell from her stepfamily if such a thing happened again, but that was a problem for another day.

Evangelina Shadow-Storm was harder to ignore. Father had spent his last breath warning Bri against the shadow warrior's secret society. Did the seemingly innocent organization know the truth about their shadow warrior? Did they know that she had returned?

Had they been the ones to summon her?

The storm raged around her, but she had weathered storms before. Panic gave way to exhaustion, but Bri couldn't bring herself to sleep. She sat at the kitchen table and stared at the mirror until her tea went cold.

Henry held his breath as he dived toward the goblin's head again. Nog had proved impossible to stop and difficult to slow down.

If Henry was honest, their attacks didn't seem to be doing anything at all.

Still, he had to try.

Lina was amazing. Henry tried not to get distracted every time the shadow warrior created a new weapon from her enchanted gems and attacked the goblin with them.

Henry silently cheered as Lina's spear flew through the air and stuck in Nog's chest. Then he sighed in silent frustration when the blow did nothing to slow the goblin.

"That was your mistake, goat girl," Nog rumbled. "Thinking you could do this on your own."

"I'm not on my own. I have stars."

Nog laughed.

"Those pathetic pinpricks of light? They're not strong enough to hurt me."

Cael's star flashed in rage and charged toward Nog. Henry followed on principle, although he had to admit Nog had a point.

The goblin raised his hand and blasted them with a bolt of red lightning. Henry saw it coming, but there was no time to

dodge. His vision pulsed red, and a searing pain crackled against his skin.

He opened his eyes but saw only darkness. He panicked for a moment. Had the goblin blinded him?

“Blast it all,” Cael muttered.

Henry turned his head and saw his brother sprawled on the ground beside him. Not blind, then. Nog had simply pushed them out of the shadows and into the dark night. One by one, his senses returned. He was wet and cold from pouring rain. The air still smelled terrible. The goblin’s odor was so foul that he could taste it.

“He’s too strong,” Henry said. “We can’t stop him.”

“Nonsense. We have to go back.”

Cael stared straight ahead, letting his focus blur as he summoned his light magic. Henry did the same.

Nothing happened. Well, nothing except a splitting headache.

“Any luck?” he asked Cael after trying for a few minutes.

“No. Blast it all! How are we supposed to beat that thing?”

“He seemed to be pulling himself into the realm of light. Maybe we can join the fight somewhere on the mountain.”

Even as he said it, Henry wished there was another way. He wasn’t trained for non-magical combat. He was certainly no match for a goblin.

But he had to try.

He scrambled to his feet and nodded to his brother. Together, they stumbled up Mount Evangelina. The ground was slick from rain, and it was dark. They moved slowly, following the goblin by tracking his stench.

“I feel like a hound,” Cael complained.

“The world’s unluckiest hound,” Henry said.

Red lightning flashed ahead of them. The brothers quickened their pace.

“They’re moving up the mountain,” Cael said. “How are we supposed to catch a goblin and a shadow warrior on foot?”

Henry had nothing to say that would help the situation, so he stayed quiet. He was soaking wet and nauseous from the goblin’s stench. He didn’t need Cael reminding him they were failing their mission as well.

Something rippled in the air and a feeling of openness washed over him. Henry couldn’t explain it, but he knew something had changed. He looked at Cael, who nodded.

“Let’s try again.”

They sat on the muddy ground. Henry stared ahead, trying to ignore the mud and the rain and the cold and the stench as he focused on his magic.

It worked. He searched the realm of shadows, then darted toward Lina. Cael followed. Benjamin appeared a few moments later.

“It’s about time!” Lina said. “Help me shut this!”

Henry moved closer to the place where she stood. A flat expanse of magic glimmered in the air, and the goblin lay on the ground behind it.

Somehow, Lina had won the battle. Henry stared at the magic, awed as he realized what it was.

The seal. This was *the seal* that Lina had created with her enchanted sleep and guarded for a century. It kept the dark creatures sealed away and the people of Aeonian safe. Well, it had kept them safe. Nog had escaped, then been put back in, and Evangelina Shadow-Storm was asking him to help close it.

Henry had no idea how to repair a magical seal. He flew to a place where the magic seemed thin and flashed light at it. It was silly, but what else could he do?

Lina pulled a round emerald out of her headband and held it against the seal. The gem crackled as the enchantment absorbed it. Power washed over Henry. He backed away, picturing the moment Cael had accidentally shattered the

mirror and not eager to repeat it with a magical seal that was holding a goblin prisoner.

Nog sat up and crouched behind the shimmering curtain. He glared at them, and Henry floated back a bit further.

“What have you done, shadow warrior?” Nog asked.

Henry would have asked the same question if he was able to speak as a star. What had Lina done, and what was she doing? She was gathering wisps of shadows in her hands, but why?

“Saved your life, goblin,” Lina answered. “You owe me. You will answer my questions.”

Nog chuckled as Lina raised her hand. The shadows flew from her skin toward the goblin.

“You’ll have to find me first,” Nog whispered.

He disappeared in a flash of red fire. Lina gasped and pressed her fingers against the seal. Henry looked from her to the place Nog had been. Had the goblin escaped? Or simply vanished into whatever lay beyond the magic barrier?

Henry had never given much thought to where all the dark creatures had gone when they were banished, and he didn’t have time to think about it now. Lina staggered backward and collapsed. The three stars hovered over her and tried to heal her wounds, but it didn’t help. She remained unconscious.

Or dead.

Henry pushed the thought aside. She couldn’t be dead.

He pulled himself out of the realm of shadows and realized that mud had soaked through his trousers.

Cael jumped to his feet, not seeming to notice the mud.

“We have to help her!”

“How?” Henry asked.

“I’ll go to the cave and search for Lina. You go down the mountain and find reinforcements.”

Cael ran up the mountain before Henry had time to reply. No matter. It wasn't like Henry had a better idea.

The rain had stopped, but the ground was still slippery. Thankfully, the goblin's stench had faded, and the air smelled of wet earth and snowbells. Normally, Henry loved being alone on the mountain after the rain. Right now, he wanted nothing more than to find people. Preferably helpful people.

He saw a flickering light and rushed toward it.

"Hello! Over here!"

He waved his arms, realized whoever held the lantern still couldn't see him, and moved as quickly down the mountain as he dared in the dark.

"Henry? Is that you?"

"Mother? Thank goodness!"

Queen Marta lifted the light to look at her son. She frowned.

"You're filthy."

"I expect we all are. Lina beat the goblin, but she's hurt. We need to find her."

"No need!" another voice said. "She was still in the temple."

Cael stepped into the light. He held Lina's unconscious, battered body.

"Oh dear," Marta said. "Put her on the ground."

Henry helped Cael place Lina gently on the muddy ground. Marta poured a healing potion on the shadow warrior's forehead and whispered, "Heal."

Lina didn't move. Her face was covered with bruises, and Henry suspected the rest of her was as well.

"She's not waking up," Cael said. "What if she doesn't wake up?"

"Carry her to the road," Marta said. "There's a carriage waiting."

“Are you sure we should move her?” Henry asked.

“I have stronger healing potions back at the castle. Or maybe we could find something to help her in the vault.”

Opening the vault took hours. Judging by Lina’s ragged breathing, they didn’t have that much time.

Still, Cael carefully lifted the shadow warrior and carried her down the mountain. Lina’s limp body seemed small in his arms. She had looked invincible when she wielded her shadow magic against the goblin. It was easy to forget she was as human as the rest of them. Marta watched Cael for a few moments, then turned to walk back up the mountain and motioned for Henry to come with her.

“What are we doing?” Henry asked.

“Alaric is still out there.”

Henry stared up at the dark mountain looming over them.

“How are we supposed to find him?”

“Nog left an easy trail to follow.”

Marta gestured with her lantern. Sure enough, a stretch of trampled mud and broken trees form a sort of path. They walked up it until they found Alaric. The prince was crawling down the muddy ground, following Nog’s footprints.

“He’s hurt,” Marta said.

She poured a healing potion on her hand, then pressed it on Alaric’s forehead.

“Heal.”

Henry watched in surprise. The family’s magic had been a carefully guarded secret for a century. Had his mother really just healed her stepson and revealed her power?

Then again, Alaric had just fought a goblin alongside Evangelina Shadow-Storm. Marta’s magic was the smallest enchantment he had seen tonight and probably wouldn’t come as much of a surprise.

Alaric sat up and took a deep breath.

“Lina! She was in the realm of shadows! The goblin-”

“Save your strength,” Marta said. “We know. Nog is back behind the seal. You’re safe.”

“What about Lina?”

Marta didn’t answer. Henry didn’t either. He didn’t know what to say.

Alaric tried to stand but collapsed to the ground.

“What happened to her?”

Marta’s voice was calm when she answered.

“You’re safe. She’s safe. We need to get you all home.”

Henry bent over and grabbed Alaric’s arm to help him stand. Alaric wrapped one arm around Henry and one arm around Marta. Together, they hobbled down the mountain. Clouds parted, revealing patches of a starry sky. They passed what remained of Evangelina’s Temple. Nog had torn that piece of the mountain apart in his attempt to reach the shadow warrior. Alaric stared at the mess.

“Did Nog—”

“No,” Marta said. “We found her sleeping on the stone. Cael carried her to the carriage. Just a little further now.”

They kept walking and reached the carriages. Alaric stumbled toward them, and Henry helped him climb into the carriage. Alaric froze when he saw Lina. Marta followed him into the carriage, and Henry backed away. The moment seemed private, and he didn’t want to intrude. Not to mention there wasn’t room.

“I won’t lose her.” Alaric’s voice drifted from the carriage. “I love her.”

Henry raised an eyebrow. Apparently, quite a bit had happened while he was up on the mountain. Mother’s scheme must have been even more involved than he had guessed.

The carriages rolled away, leaving Henry and Cael standing on the mountainside. They waited until the noise faded and the carriage lights disappeared into the darkness.

“Well,” Cael said.

“Well,” Henry agreed.

The brothers turned and walked back to Eva’s cottage.

Bri stared at the ruby in her palm. It sat on her skin, red like a drop of blood.

How often did Rhoda look at it to remember her love? She had left the gem and letter in their hiding place when she left the house, which suggested that she felt they were secure in their hiding place and might not check them often. The ruby was small and missing its companion earring. Not particularly valuable, as far as jewels and jewelry went.

No matter how many excuses she made, it still wasn't hers.

Bri swallowed. Thanks to the donkey and the new journal pages, she finally had a way to secure the mirrors. She could guard them against Evangelina Shadow-Storm and the horrific monster that had appeared last night.

Unfortunately, that method required gems.

Diamonds are best, the journal said. Emeralds or rubies are acceptable.

Acceptable. Ha. It was an expensive magic. Not a concern for a wealthy nobleman. Impossible for a servant girl.

Bri pursed her lips together and glared at the ruby. She ran through her list of justifications again.

If Rhoda valued the gem, she would have brought it with her. It was a token of an ill-fated romance. Maybe Rhoda resented the giver but couldn't bring herself to throw away such a valuable and sentimental present.

Besides, Bri wasn't even taking it out of the house. It was less stealing and more misplacing it on purpose.

It still felt like stealing.

Bri walked to Rhoda's bedroom and studied the trim around the window. The hiding place was too tall to access without standing on a chair. Surely Rhoda didn't open it often. The fact that she had hidden it meant that she wanted to keep it secret. She would risk discovery every time she took the letter out of the wall.

Bri closed her fist over the ruby and quickly left Rhoda's bedroom. With any luck, her youngest stepsister would never notice the gem's absence.

If that luck continued, Bri would find a way to buy more gems and guard all the mirrors before anything else appeared in the mirrors. Then she could return the gem with Rhoda none the wiser.

She tucked the ruby back into the corner of the dining room mirror's frame and whispered, "Guard." The sense of invisible iron spread across the mirror, and Bri sighed. That would protect them from anything large coming through and keep family dinners peaceful. She would leave the kitchen mirror open so she could see any future attacks and warn her stepfamily if they were in danger.

The dining room mirror had an ornate frame, and the ruby was well-hidden in the corner. Her stepfamily wouldn't notice it from the table. Hopefully, none of them suddenly decided to be helpful and dust the mirrors. That seemed less likely than another goblin attack.

Bri stepped back and stared at her reflection. She had guarded one mirror, but there were more. A lot more.

That meant she needed a lot more gems.

Blast it all.

She searched her stepfamily's rooms again, hoping to see something she had missed now that there was daylight. She found a pair of shoes decorated with sparkling beads, but

closer inspection showed that they were glass rather than gems.

Whatever jewelry her stepfamily still owned, they had taken all of it with them to Mias. Bri would have to search their jewelry cases while she unpacked their things and sneak out anything that looked promising. It would be easy enough.

She hated the plan. Bri waited for the guilt to fade, but it didn't. Goblins or no goblins, she couldn't talk herself into stealing from her stepfamily. Even if she took every gem they owned, she wouldn't have enough to guard all the mirrors. Not to mention they would notice the jewels missing eventually.

She needed to acquire a lot of diamonds very quickly.

Bri sank into a chair in the kitchen. The room felt less cozy now that she knew a monster or shadow warrior could appear at any time. She twirled her diamond between her fingers. Should she take off her necklace and guard this mirror as well?

No, she wanted to use it as a watchtower to see if anything was coming.

Plus, the donkey had come to this mirror. She would leave it open for him in case he returned with another useful spell.

Bri hid Father's journal under her pile of quilts in the corner and busied herself preparing for her stepfamily's return. When she finished her chores, she checked the mirrors one last time.

They looked normal, and the space behind them was dark. There was no stench. No monsters or donkeys.

No sign of Evangelina Shadow-Storm.

Bri shuddered. Somehow, she had to find out more about the shadow warrior's return. But how? The Society of Evangelina was secretive. Doubtless, their leader would be even more so. Evangelina Shadow-Storm was legendary for a reason. She had the ability to move between realms. She could hide in the shadows, never showing her face until she was ready to act.

A clatter of footsteps and voices told Bri that her stepfamily had returned. She rushed to the door to meet them. They acknowledged her with a nod as she took their cloaks. Rhoda gave Bri a small smile, and Bri pushed away a surge of guilt at the thought of the ruby now hiding in the dining room mirror.

“How was the Princess Test?”

Normally, she would disappear without saying a word, but these were far from normal circumstances. Her stepfamily had been in Mias. They had traveled the length of Mount Evangelina to get there. Had they seen something?

Lady Vidre sniffed in disapproval, and Lucille scowled. Apparently, things had not gone as they had hoped.

But Rhoda beamed at the question.

“It was wonderful! Princesses from around Myora! Balls and feasts and a play by Prince Alaric!”

Lucille scoffed.

“You would comment on that blasted play even though we saw the real thing.”

“I liked the play!”

“The real thing?” Bri asked.

“I was saving that for last!” Rhoda said. “Evangelina Shadow-Storm! We saw Evangelina Shadow-Storm.”

Bri’s arms went limp. She dropped the cloaks onto the muddy floor and just managed to catch her balance in time to keep from landing on top of them. Lady Vidre raised an eyebrow, looking from the crumpled fabric to her sputtering stepdaughter.

“I’ll wash them,” Bri said quickly as she gathered the cloaks. “What do you mean you saw Evangelina Shadow-Storm?”

“She’s returned, apparently,” Lucille said. “And she’s engaged to Prince Alaric.”

Bri dropped the cloaks again. Rhoda nudged her sister in protest.

“You’re ruining the story! You can’t just say it like that. You have to lead up to it! Tell her how Evangelina Shadow-Storm appeared at the castle on a stormy night. How she fought goblins and saved the kingdom. How she won Prince Alaric’s heart with her bravery and beauty.”

“More like her so-called royal lineage,” Lucille said. “I’ll bet she’s not even really Evangelina Shadow-Storm. She’s just some actress they hired to get Prince Alaric out of a political marriage.”

“Of course she’s Evangelina Shadow-Storm!” Rhoda said. “She awoke after a hundred years of sleep to save Aeonian once again. It’s so romantic!”

“That’s enough, girls,” Lady Vidre said. “Whatever you believe about her, she is our crown princess now. You will speak of her with the proper respect.”

She swept out of the room. Lucille followed her quickly. Rhoda lingered a few moments, looking at Bri as if she wanted to say something more. Then she sighed and left as well.

Bri stood in the hallway, clutching an armful of muddy cloaks and trying to process what she had just heard.

Evangelina Shadow-Storm was engaged to Crown Prince Alaric. This was much worse than anything Bri could have imagined. The shadow warrior had emerged from the shadows and somehow completed a bloodless political coup. She would be queen. The Society of Evangelina would rule the country.

Bri brought the muddy cloaks down to the kitchen. The coachmen had already placed the travel trunks there. The ball gowns needed to be laundered and ironed and put away. The shoes needed to be polished.

As did the jewelry.

Bri opened the trunks and ran her fingers over the jewelry cases. If Evangelina Shadow-Storm had all of Aeonian’s resources at her disposal, would this meager assortment of gems really be enough to stop her?

It wasn't theft, Bri told herself as she opened the jewel cases. She wasn't even taking them out of the house.

And even if it was, what choice did she have?

In the end, she was spared the choice. All of her stepfamily's jewelry was made with semi-precious stones or paste. Bri pulled a garnet necklace from its case, pressed it against the kitchen mirror, and whispered, "guard."

Nothing happened. Fake jewels might fool nobles in a candlelit ballroom, but they couldn't fool magic mirrors.

Bri turned a pair of earrings over in her hand. They looked more real than the others. Rubies or garnets?

Nothing happened when she tried the spell, so perhaps these were simply better imitations than the rest. Or perhaps she was doing something wrong, and Father's journal could help her figure it out. Bri tucked one of the earrings into her apron and returned the other to its place in the jewelry case. If rubies were acceptable, maybe garnets could be made so. It was worth a try.

She turned her attention back to unpacking. The ballgowns were in sad shape, which probably meant the party had been a success. Rhoda's had sweat stains in the armpits, and someone had spilled wine onto Lucille's skirt. It would take a lot of work to make them presentable again. Bri draped the gowns over a chair and sighed as her workload grew visibly taller. She lifted the last gown out of the trunk, and something clattered to the floor. Bri set the gown aside and picked up a small black book. Normally she wouldn't pry, but she was well past caring at this point.

She opened it and found columns of numbers written in Lady Vidre's elegant handwriting. After studying Father's journal so closely, Bri knew a ledger when she saw it. She glanced at the tallies, turned the page, then kept turning. She followed the records of wool and crop sales since Father had died until she reached the latest entry.

Bri flipped back to the beginning of the book and checked the profits again, sure that she must have read the totals wrong.

She hadn't, and they were abysmal. No wonder Lady Vidre had sold the furniture and jewels. It was a miracle that they hadn't been forced to sell the estate as well.

It didn't make sense. If wool prices had dropped so dramatically, why wasn't the rest of the country struggling? Bri wasn't on speaking terms with any of their neighbors, but the goat herders she saw climbing the mountain from time to time seemed cheerful enough. Surely, they wouldn't smile and laugh if the price of their goods had dropped so dramatically.

“Bri, when will you have dinner ready?”

Lady Vidre scowled when she saw the book in Bri's hands. She snatched it away before Bri could react.

“We're hungry from our journey,” she said. “Please prepare a meal before you begin the laundry.”

Lady Vidre clutched the book to her chest and hurried out of the room. Bri watched her leave as memories swirled through her head. Lady Vidre speaking with solicitors behind closed doors. Furniture sold and servants let go. The many arguments about moving to town. A will that left nothing but dowries for two daughters, and a profitable estate left suddenly impoverished.

Bri closed her fist around her diamond and stared at the empty door. She needed money for gems. If her suspicions were correct, there might be money available after all. But first, she had to find it.

Moonlight streamed into the archive. Henry glanced nervously at the ceiling, then at the walls. Then at the floor.

He looked everywhere except across the room where his stepfather and stepbrothers stood. When he did dare to glance at them from the corner of his eye, it only made him more nervous. King Noam's expression was one of careful neutrality. Royalty needed expressions like that. Henry, unfortunately, knew that from experience. Alaric's expression was a mirror of his father's. Stefan had apparently missed the day they taught how to hide what you were thinking. He was visibly curious and excited.

As was Marcus. The two younger princes had come home as soon as they were well enough to do so. Benjamin stood next to Cael and Henry. Marcus stood next to Alaric and Stefan.

In spite of everyone's best efforts, there had always been a divide between them as they grew up. How could there not be when three brothers were royalty and three were hiding the fact that they were the royal family the other three's ancestors had overthrown?

Henry bit his lip. Would revealing that secret widen the gap between them or build a bridge over it?

The archive doors opened. Simon the archivist rushed to meet Lina and Marta. Henry's nervousness grew as the two

women crossed the room. Whatever was going to happen, it was going to happen now.

“But what is this about, Alaric?” King Noam said. “Why are we here?”

“Why, indeed?” Stefan said. “Dragging me here in the morning is one thing. Dragging me here in the middle of the night is something else entirely.”

“Here,” Alaric said. “Lina will explain everything.”

Lina. Henry still had a difficult time calling the legendary shadow warrior by a nickname. Alaric wrapped his arm around her, and Henry fought another wave of conflicted feelings. His stepbrother was engaged to Evangelina Shadow-Storm, who was apparently distantly related to Henry. He hadn't figured out the family tree yet. Was Lina some kind of great aunt? Or cousin several times removed?

He wondered if he should have a talk with Alaric about respecting Lina. It didn't seem like the prince had any problems with that, and the shadow warrior could take care of herself. Still, it seemed like something that should be done by family, and Lina had lost hers. Luca wasn't here to speak for her anymore, so the task would fall to his descendants if it fell to anyone.

Deep in thought, Henry was only vaguely aware that Lina was speaking. He knew the story well, so he didn't need to pay attention. Luca had hidden Lina underground, then hidden the rest of the royal family in plain sight as goat herders.

“Oh!” King Noam said. “So, you mean-”

He stared at his wife with wide eyes. She nodded.

“I would have told you if I could. I'm sorry.”

Henry tensed. This was the moment he had feared since he moved into the castle. His stepfather had learned the truth. He knew that they had all been lying to him. What would King Noam do? Henry shared a nervous look with Cael and Benjamin. There were no guards here, and it would take time to gather troops if Noam decided to arrest them. There would be just enough time to grab their mother and run. They could

hide in the mountains for the night, but they would probably need to leave the country. Maybe hike across the border into Eldria or Osterreich.

Then King Noam laughed. He took Marta's hands and kissed them. Henry relaxed. Would it really be that simple?

"All this time I worried what you thought of me," Noam said. "How you could marry a man whose ancestors had such blood on their hands. But you were protecting us all along?"

Marta nodded and laughed with him.

"Yes! Your ancestors were simply bad at searching. And I suppose Luca was good at hiding."

"Luca was a master of pranks," Lina said. "And hiding that many people would be a sort of prank. He probably enjoyed the challenge. Most of the goat herders are descended from the royal family. Marta and I are distantly related."

Stefan gaped at his stepbrothers.

"You were princes this whole time?"

They nodded.

"That's it, then. No more goat herder excuses to get out of princely duties. I fully expect you to greet the next ten ambassadors who visit!"

Blast it all. Henry should have known that Stefan would find a way to turn the situation to his advantage. He straightened his tunic and tried to look dignified. Maybe there was still a way out of this.

"We weren't always looking after goats, you know. Most of the time we left suddenly we were helping the Society of Evangelina."

"You're all part of the Society?" Marcus asked. "That's fantastic! Can I join? I've always wanted to, and they wouldn't let me!"

Marta gave Henry a look, and he sighed. Apparently, she had planned to save that bit of information for later.

“The Society is an excuse for Luca’s descendants to meet,” Marta said. “We couldn’t risk a member who was an outsider.”

Marcus ducked his head.

“But now that you know, I see no reason you can’t join.”

“Really?”

Marcus beamed at Marta.

“When is the next meeting?”

She chuckled.

“I’m not sure. The Society’s role will change now that Lina is awake. We have guarded her since Luca died, but I’m sure she’ll need help in other ways now.”

The discussion continued, but Henry was distracted by thoughts of the Society. Of course it would change, but how would it be different? Would the members step out from behind their mirrors and meet with Lina face to face?

“They’re not going to be happy about this,” Cael whispered.

Henry and Benjamin nodded. Before they could respond, Simon the archivist rushed over and handed them smocks.

“Everyone must wear a smock in the vault!” the archivist said. “The items Luca left are irreplaceable. I won’t risk getting them dirty!”

Henry slipped the smock over his clothes. The silver moonlight gleamed on the white cloth. He and his brothers walked to the center of the room, gathered light magic in their hands, and aimed it at the ceiling. Henry’s face flushed as he worked. He had never imagined that he would show his magic to his stepfamily. He had never thought he would show it to anyone.

“Concentrate,” Cael said.

“Sorry.”

Henry turned his attention back to his magic. This would take a while.

Stefan's voice broke the quiet of the archive.

"An hour? We're going to sit here for an hour while they blast those mirrors with light?"

"Come do it yourself if you think it's so easy," Benjamin muttered.

Henry laughed, and Cael scowled at them.

"I wonder if the spell was originally meant to be aided by shadow magic," Lina said. "I can't imagine Luca having the patience to spend an hour opening a door."

She walked to the middle of the room and shot a blast of shadow magic toward the mirrors. The archive shuddered, and a section of the floor slid away to reveal a winding set of stairs. Henry looked from the stairs to Lina to his brothers, who looked just as shocked as he was.

"Remarkable!" Simon said.

"Thank goodness," Stefan said.

Simon and Lina walked down the stairs into the secret archive. Henry followed them, eyes still wide from Lina's display of power.

"I knew we weren't the strongest, but wow," Benjamin said. "She's incredible."

Henry nodded his agreement and watched as Lina stopped at the bottom of the stairs. Her eyes widened as she took in the huge room supported by marble columns. It stretched as far as you could see in every direction, and enchanted gems in the ceiling illuminated the space.

"Oh," Lina said. "This is amazing! I had no idea it would be this big!"

"We don't know what half of it is," Marta said. "Luca's cataloging system isn't very organized."

Henry and Cael shared a look. Calling it a cataloging system was generous. It was more like a pile of scrawled notes that were mostly illegible.

Marcus ran off to examine a table of charms. Alaric followed. Stefan stayed by the stairs. He looked less than thrilled by the vault.

“I’m not helping,” he said. “I’m done with research for a decade at least.”

Lina grinned at him.

“I won’t ask for your assistance, then. From what Alaric has told me, you’ve already helped me quite a bit.”

“More than you’ll ever know. This oaf refused to acknowledge his feelings for you. He might have ended up with that bird brain Carina if not for me.”

“She isn’t really obsessed with seagulls,” Lina said. “She was helping me. Distracting Alaric.”

Stefan shrugged.

“So you keep saying. Ugh. The only one worse than her was Fiora.”

“Stefan!” Marcus called. “Come look at this! I found armor and swords!”

“Excellent!”

Stefan bowed to Lina and rushed to join Marcus. Marta pulled Lina and Alaric to a side room. Henry watched them go.

“Luca’s letters,” Cael said. “Of course that’s the first thing she’ll want to see.”

“Maybe Lina can make sense of them,” Benjamin said. “We don’t know what most of this is, but she might.”

“It isn’t about making sense of a system,” Henry said. “She lost her brother. For us, he died a long time ago. But for her, it just happened. She’ll need time to grieve.”

“She needs to grieve,” Cael said, “but we also need to defend Aeonian. That goblin disappeared, and there could be more.”

“It’s complicated,” Henry said. “Have you noticed how much stronger her magic is?”

“We’ll have to train hard to catch up,” Cael said.

His eyes lit with excitement at the prospect.

“And do more research about everything in the archive,” Benjamin said, matching Cael’s enthusiasm.

“Great,” Henry said with no enthusiasm at all.

Stefan returned, carrying a magical sword glistening with enchanted gems.

“So, what does this do?” he asked, waving it around.

The three brothers stepped back to get out of range.

“Not sure,” Cael admitted.

“Well, at least it looks cool.”

Stefan struck a pose, admiring himself in a large mirror.

“Don’t touch the mirror!” Cael warned. “It could shatter.”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” Stefan said. “I have a mirror in my room. They’re not that exciting.”

He placed the sword on a nearby table and smiled at the brothers. Henry didn’t like that smile. He had seen it before, usually just before Stefan created chaos.

“So,” Stefan said, his voice a little too casual. “So, you’re really princes. In fact, you’re more royal than I am. Let’s talk about the royal duties and social calls that you’ve been neglecting. There are a few visits coming up that now have your name on them.”

High-pitched shrieking filled the house. Bri whirled toward the mirror, but the glass reflected nothing more than her grimy kitchen and grimier face.

Not the mirrors, then. After that fateful night, the mirrors had shown nothing out of the ordinary for several weeks. But if it wasn't a magical attack, what was happening?

“Bri! Come at once and help!”

Bri sprinted up the stairs to her stepmother's bedroom. She stood in the doorway, gasping for breath as she looked at the mirror in Lady Vidre's room.

Nothing.

“What's wrong?”

The words came out as little more than a gasp. Bri's heart pounded as she tried to make sense of the scene before her. Lucille and Rhoda ran frantically around the room, trailing gowns and shoes behind them. They pulled things from wardrobes, shook their heads in disgust, and threw them onto the floor.

“Is there a mouse?” Bri guessed.

“A mouse?” Lucille said, eyes wide with panic. “A mouse? Ha!”

Rhoda ran to the window and squealed. Lady Vidre pulled her away from it and back to the center of the room.

“Not until you’re dressed! What if he sees you?”

Bri looked at Rhoda with confusion. Her stepsister *was* dressed. She wore a lovely blue dress that complemented her violet eyes and dark hair.

Bri wandered to the window to see for herself. Lady Vidre was removing Rhoda’s dress and didn’t stop Bri from leaning close to the glass and looking into the courtyard below.

“A carriage? You’re making all this fuss over a carriage?”

“A royal carriage,” Lady Vidre hissed. “Royalty has come to call.”

“Royalty?”

The blood drained from Bri’s face. Could it be Evangelina Shadow-Storm? Had the shadow warrior somehow sensed Bri’s mirrors and come to claim her magic?

She clutched her diamond pendant and forced herself to breathe.

“Finally, you see the seriousness of our situation,” Lady Vidre said.

“Why are they just sitting in the carriage?” Rhoda asked.

“They’re being polite,” Lady Vidre said. “They’ve arrived unannounced. Naturally, they want to give us time to prepare for them.”

“But you’re already dressed,” Bri said. “At least, you were.”

Poor Rhoda stood in the room wearing only her chemise. Her curly hair had come loose from its braid and stuck out around her head.

“We’re not dressed in clothes suitable for royalty,” Lady Vidre said. “Girls, which princes did you dance with at the Princess Test ball? One of them must have come to visit!”

Rhoda shook her head to indicate she hadn’t danced with any princes, but Lucille’s eyes widened.

“I danced with Prince Cael and Prince Stefan.”

“Two! I hope it’s Stefan. Cael is royal by marriage rather than birth.”

Lucille wrinkled her nose.

“I didn’t think much of either of them.”

“Lucille!”

“Shouldn’t we invite them in?” Bri said.

“In! They’ll have to come in!” Lady Vidre said. “They’ll see the house! We need to offer them food. Bri, what do you have ready in the kitchen?”

“Bread,” Bri said. “A few apples.”

Lady Vidre swore and turned her attention to helping Lucille lace up her gown. Bri turned to help Rhoda with hers.

“Wait,” Rhoda said. “Your hands are dirty. You’ll stain it.”

She gave Bri an apologetic look, and Bri looked at her hands. They were dirty. She had given up her room in the attic and started sleeping on the hearth so she could keep an eye on the mirrors. Unfortunately, that left her covered in cinders every morning.

“Oh heavens, you’re filthy,” Lady Vidre said, looking at Bri as if seeing her for the first time. “You can’t serve tea to a prince looking like that!”

“But we don’t have any other servants,” Lucille said.

Lady Vidre looked from Bri to her daughters to the window where the royal carriage waited. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. When she opened them, she showed a calm resolve that Bri hadn’t seen in the woman since her father died.

“Bri, you will go to the kitchen, wash your hands, and prepare the best refreshments possible with what you have available. Brew tea, slice and toast the bread, and slice the apples. Find some jam if you can. Arrange everything onto a tray, then make yourself scarce. Under no circumstances are you to let the prince or any of our royal visitors see you.

Rhoda, come here so I can lace up your gown. Lucille, put on your ruby earrings.”

Bri quickly backed out of the room. She had taken one of those earrings to experiment with and she did not want to be there when Lucille discovered it was missing.

Blasted royal visit. Who would have thought her stepsisters would need their jewels while at home?

Bri walked slowly to the kitchen, amused that her stepmother kept calling the garnet earrings rubies when there was no one to hear. Or perhaps this confirmed her theory that the earring was a ruby, but she was doing something wrong?

A flurry of voices told Bri that the earring’s absence had been discovered. She held her breath, waiting for the accusation to come, but no one called her name. They thought it was lost. They didn’t blame her.

“No time to look for it now,” Lady Vidre said. “Wear the pearls instead.”

Bri sighed in relief. She was safe for the moment.

She ran to the kitchen, prepared the tea tray as quickly as she could, delivered it to the parlor, then sprinted out the back door. She needed to put some distance between herself and the house just in case Evangelina Shadow-Storm really had come looking for her. She could run up the mountain and hide until all this was over.

Then again, she was supposed to be guarding the mirrors. Could she really abandon the estate while Evangelina Shadow-Storm invaded it? What if the shadow warrior threatened her stepfamily?

Bri turned back to the house. She couldn’t leave it undefended. She would sneak inside, listen at the door, and hope for the best. She hurried around the corner and ran into someone before she reached the kitchen door.

Bri stammered an apology, then smiled when she saw who it was.

“Henry?”

Henry blinked, hardly believing his luck at finding Bri so easily. She looked as disheveled as ever, but she smiled when she saw him. Henry returned the smile, and Bri grabbed his hand.

“Follow me.”

Henry let Bri pull him behind a bush. She motioned for him to stay quiet and peeked between the branches to see the house. Henry sat quietly with her and watched Cael jump from the carriage and knock on the front door of the Vidre’s mansion. It opened at once, and Henry recognized the woman from descriptions as Lucretia Vidre. It seemed a little strange that the lady of the house answered the door herself, but maybe she wanted to greet the prince personally.

Or maybe she had no choice because her servant was currently hiding behind a bush and spying on her. Henry cast a sideways look at Bri. She watched Cael with far more interest than seemed necessary. Had Henry misread her? Was she just as obsessed with royalty and rank as the rest of the country?

Cael bowed. Lady Vidre curtsied. They went inside and closed the door.

Bri sank to the ground and slumped in relief.

“Only the prince,” she whispered.

“Only the prince?” Henry asked in confusion. If she hadn’t been fascinated by royalty, what had she found so interesting about the scene?

Bri looked up in surprise, as if she had forgotten he was there. Her face was streaked with soot, and Henry almost wished that he had taken Cael's place as the royal visitor. He wanted to tell the Vidre family to take better care of their servants. Cinders aside, the dark circles under Bri's eyes suggested that she wasn't sleeping well.

Henry knew better than to say any of this to Bri. He also knew better than to march up to the Vidre estate and make demands while he was dressed as a goat herder. They had a plan, and he would stick to it. Cael would deliver the royal news, a responsibility that Stefan had foisted onto his stepbrothers with particular glee, and Henry would gather information from Bri.

"Why are you hiding out here?" he asked.

"The prince is visiting," Bri said. "The household is in chaos."

Henry looked at the house. It looked peaceful from the outside. There was no sign of the flurry of activity that was doubtless happening within the walls.

"I've come at a bad time," Henry said. "You must have a lot of work to do."

"Not at all. I was kicked out of the house because I'm not suitable to be seen by royalty. You've come at the perfect time."

She grinned, and Henry sputtered, feeling a new wave of hatred for the Vidre family.

"Not suitable to be seen?"

"It's a great excuse for an afternoon off. Come on!"

Henry followed Bri across the grounds, wondering what Lady Vidre would think if she knew that her servant was being seen by royalty at this very moment. He almost wished she did know. He had a few things he would like to say in reply to whatever excuse she made about Bri's appearance.

They ducked behind trees and buildings, avoiding the farmhands scurrying around the estate. Apparently, Bri wasn't

suitable to be seen by them either.

She didn't seem to mind, but Henry was outraged on her behalf. He felt the entirely unreasonable urge to lift her into the royal carriage and take her away from this dreadful place.

Well, away from those dreadful people. The estate itself was lovely. Maybe Bri stayed because she liked the location. There was work in the city, but Henry understood not wanting to live there.

They settled on a hilltop overlooking the whole estate. Bri leaned against a tree and faced the house.

“Are you spying on them?” Henry asked.

Bri laughed but didn't deny it.

“I'll need to go back to the house when the prince leaves. I hope they have a long, boring visit.”

For his own sake, Henry hoped that as well. He doubted Cael would agree with the sentiment.

“Oh, I brought a snack!”

Henry pulled a wedge of goat cheese from the satchel he carried and handed half to Bri. Then he pulled out a bottle of water and two cups. Bri laughed.

“Food and drink? What luxury!”

Henry poured her a glass of water and settled onto a flat patch of grass. It was peaceful up here, and he felt the stress of the past few weeks melt away. Here in the mountains, it didn't matter that his life had been thrown into chaos. He could breathe the fresh air and simply be Henry.

“Did you lose any goats in the storm?” Bri asked.

Something in her voice made him turn and look at her. Bri studied him with questioning eyes, and the realization washed over Henry. Bri's estate wasn't far from Evangelina's Temple. She would have seen the storm that Nog summoned.

“I was in town helping my father,” Henry lied. “But I heard the storm was like nothing that's ever happened before.”

“You were in town?” Bri said. “What have you heard about Evangelina Shadow-Storm?”

Henry swallowed. Apparently, chaos had reached this sanctuary as well.

Bri bit her lip and wished she hadn't spoken so eagerly. Henry's face had paled at her question, so she backtracked and forced her voice to remain calm.

"The ladies of the house were at the Princess Test and brought strange stories back. They said that Crown Prince Alaric is engaged to Evangelina Shadow-Storm!"

"That much is true," Henry said. "It's all anyone talks about in Mias these days."

Bri waited for him to continue, but he didn't. Apparently, Henry didn't like to gossip. Or was there something more to it? He almost looked afraid.

"What's she like?" Bri asked. "A shadow warrior. That sounds intimidating."

Henry swallowed.

"I couldn't say. The rumors say she's nice enough."

"The rumors also say she defeated a goblin with magic."

It wasn't her imagination. Talking about Evangelina Shadow-Storm made Henry uncomfortable. He kept swallowing, then taking drinks of water as if his throat had gone dry.

Why was he afraid to talk about the shadow warrior?

"How did she end up in the Princess Test in the first place?" Bri asked.

Her stepfamily had been very vague on that detail, but it seemed important. How had Evangelina Shadow-Storm infiltrated the Princess Test and won Prince Alaric's hand in marriage? How had she so easily put all of Aeonian under her power?

For some reason, Henry's face went red at that question.

"I think it had something to do with the queen," he finally sputtered.

The queen? If Queen Marta was conspiring with Evangelina Shadow-Storm, things were far worse than Bri had thought. Was the queen a member of the Society of Evangelina? If so, Aeonian had been under their power long before the shadow warrior appeared.

"Are you alright?" Henry asked.

Now it was Bri's throat that went dry. She nodded and took a sip of her water, trying desperately to calm the panic that wanted to rise up. She was not simply guarding the mirrors against a shadow warrior and monsters. She was guarding them against a secret society that had infiltrated the royal family!

But why? What did the Society hope to gain?

Bri choked on her water and turned to the house as she remembered who was currently visiting. Prince Cael was Queen Marta's son. If the queen was involved with the Society of Evangelina, the prince likely was as well.

She had let an enemy walk into her house and left it unguarded.

"Bri?"

Bri forced herself to breathe. Only one prince had entered the house. Surely, he couldn't cause that much damage. Her stepfamily would keep him occupied.

Unless he disposed of them so he could take over the mirrors. Were the Vidres in danger?

"Bri, are you well?"

She shook her head. It was too much. She was only one person, and she was trying to fight a legendary warrior with a single gem and a handful of enchantments.

“I need to go back to the house.”

“I thought you were banned while the prince is visiting.”

Blast it all. Why did he have to be so reasonable and pay attention to what she said? Bri stood and walked toward the house in a daze. Henry followed. It took a few moments before she thought of an excuse.

“I left a fire burning in the kitchen. I need to check on it.”

More like she had left her stepfamily with a possibly murderous prince, but she could hardly tell Henry that.

Or could she? What would he say if she suggested such a thing? Likely, he would laugh in her face and call her crazy.

But his steady eyes and concerned expression made her think he might believe her. Bri held his gaze for a moment and felt her pounding heart settle into an entirely different rhythm.

“The storm,” she said, a little breathless. “The last night of the Princess Test, there was a storm.”

Henry nodded. He offered his arm to help Bri down a steep drop, and she took it. Could he feel how she was trembling? If he could, he didn't comment. Bri slipped on a slick patch of grass, and her shaky legs gave way. Henry caught her and tucked her hand around his arm. Bri held it, grateful for something to steady her as they walked home.

“It wasn't an ordinary storm,” she said. “There was red lightning and a terrible smell.”

She waited for Henry to say she was being ridiculous, but he simply nodded.

“Others said the same,” he said. “The royal family and some of the visiting nobility were on the mountain for a picnic as part of the Princess Test. They reported smelling something terrible.”

Bri gripped Henry's arm tighter. The royal family had been on the mountain that night? Had they caused the storm?

"Did you see anything else?" Henry asked.

Bri swallowed. Could she reveal what she had seen without telling him about the mirrors?

"There was something in the storm," she said. "I think it was a monster."

She expected Henry to laugh. He didn't.

"They're saying it was a goblin," he said. "And that is what goblins smell like, apparently."

"Really? All of them?"

"The rumor is that all creatures of darkness smell that bad."

"Oh. That's unfortunate."

"Good thing Evangelina Shadow-Storm sealed them away, isn't it?"

Henry grinned at her. Bri forced herself to smile and nod in return. She wasn't willing to admit that anything Evangelina Shadow-Storm did was good. Not until she knew more about her and the Society.

The donkey hadn't smelled bad. Neither had the man or the stars. Did that mean they weren't creatures of darkness? And if so, what in the world were they?

There were too many questions and not enough answers. Bri gave up on figuring it out when they reached the estate. First things first, she had to make sure that her stepfamily hadn't been attacked by a monstrous prince. She led Henry to a nearby bush so they could peek into the parlor window. Bri sagged with relief when she saw her stepfamily was alive and well. Rhoda sat on the far side of the room and stared at Prince Cael with wide, violet eyes. Lucille sat nearest him and fluttered a fan in what was doubtless meant to be a flirtatious manner. She stopped, probably to give her hand a rest, and Lady Vidre gave her a meaningful glance. Lucille forced a smile and began fluttering the fan again.

Prince Cael seemed oblivious to it all. Or maybe he was perfectly aware and simply an expert at hiding his feelings on the tension in the room. He smiled at the ladies and spoke, although Bri couldn't hear what was said. Whatever it was, it was well received. Rhoda jumped to her feet and squealed in delight. Lucille fluttered her fan faster, and even Lady Vidre looked pleased.

"Poor man," Henry muttered.

Bri laughed, overcome with relief that her stepfamily had not been murdered.

"What do you mean?"

"Hmm? Oh. It's just a bit awkward, isn't it? Having that much attention on you?"

"It is. I wouldn't be royal for anything. It seems like a lot of trouble."

"Agreed," Henry said after a moment's pause. "Oh, weren't you going to check on your fire?"

Right, the fire. Bri looked back to the house, confirming once more that her stepfamily was well and the prince wasn't threatening them.

He wasn't. In fact, he was standing to take his leave. Bri and Henry ducked behind the bush to hide.

"I'll check on it once he's gone."

"Then I should take my leave as well."

They sneaked around the back of the house, careful to stay out of sight of the carriage and courtyard. Bri stood by the kitchen door and smiled at Henry. She half wanted to invite him in, but there would be absolute chaos if Lady Vidre found Bri with a man in her kitchen.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Henry asked.

"What do you mean?"

Bri couldn't help sounding defensive. She didn't need people prying. Especially not now that her enemies included the royal family and a shadow warrior.

“That storm,” Henry said. “It would be enough to upset anyone.”

“It was alarming, but it’s over. Do you think there will be any more goblins appearing? I need to stock up on perfume if that’s the case.”

Henry laughed.

“There shouldn’t be. We have Evangelina Shadow-Storm to protect us now.”

And that was exactly what Bri was afraid of. She said goodbye to Henry and ducked back into the kitchen. She heard her stepfamily squealing as they watched the royal carriage drive away.

Bri made a pot of tea and carried it to the parlor. They would want fresh tea after all that excitement, and she wanted news.

Her stepfamily sat slumped in the chairs as if they had just completed a full day’s work in the fields. Bri poured tea and waited for them to speak, but they were too busy fanning themselves and smiling at the ceiling.

Ridiculous.

Bri offered a cup of tea to Lady Vidre. Her stepmother took it and sipped while she looked out a window. Bri couldn’t wait any longer.

“What did His Highness want? Did he make an offer for Lucille’s hand?”

Lucille scoffed.

“Don’t be ridiculous. What kind of idiot would propose marriage after a single night of dancing at a ball?”

“I think it sounds romantic,” Rhoda said. “But Prince Cael brought even better news.”

Bri took a deep breath as she poured a second cup of tea. Calm. She needed to stay calm.

“Better news than a proposal? It must be something very grand.”

“It is!” Rhoda said, bouncing in her seat in a very unladylike manner as she reached for the cup. “We’ve been invited to serve as wedding attendants for Evangelina Shadow-Storm!”

The cup slipped from Bri’s hands and shattered on the floor. She heard Rhoda scream as the tea splashed onto her dress. Lucille exclaimed in disgust and Lady Vidre scolded Bri for being careless.

She heard these things, but her mind tuned them out to focus on something more pressing.

Evangelina Shadow-Storm.

What game was she playing? And how could Bri win when she didn’t know the rules?

“Next time you get to deliver the news,” Cael said. “My ears are still ringing from their shrieks.”

“Oh, but you have experience now,” Henry said. “It only makes sense for you to take on such royal duties from now on. Besides, those clothes suit you so well.”

Cael rolled his eyes. The carriage hit a bump, and the brothers grunted in unison as they bounced out of their seats.

“Next time I’m riding my horse,” Cael said. “I don’t care if it doesn’t look as official.”

“Next time? So, you’re going back?”

“Perhaps. There’s something strange about that house. No servants. Almost no furnishings, as if they were preparing to move. Yet they dressed in fine gowns, and the whole place was filled with mirrors.”

“Maybe they’re just vain.”

Cael glared at his brother.

“You’re the one who saw magic lights down there. Or was that an excuse to visit your girlfriend?”

“Stop calling her my girlfriend.”

“Then stop grinning like an idiot every time she’s mentioned.”

“I don’t.”

Cael raised an eyebrow, and Henry quickly changed the subject.

“Something strange is definitely going on there. They kicked Bri out of the house so that you wouldn’t see her, but she spied on you the whole time. We even sneaked close to the house and watched you through the window.”

“That is strange. Why kick your only servant out when you have royal company?”

“Apparently, she’s not fit to be seen by royalty.”

“Why didn’t they think she was fit to be seen? Too ugly for royal eyes to behold?”

Henry knew he was being baited. He also couldn’t help taking the bait.

“More like she’s so pretty that she’d take attention away from the terrible daughters.”

“They’re pretty enough.”

“She was covered with kitchen grime and looked like she hadn’t slept in a week. They probably don’t want the prince to know that they’re mistreating their only servant.”

“Their only indoor servant,” Cael said. “There were others working in the yard.”

He paused for a moment, studying his brother’s face, then continued.

“Do you really think they’re mistreating her? Should we do something?”

Henry’s shoulders slumped.

“I don’t know what we could do. She gets defensive every time I bring it up.”

“Another mystery of the Vidre estate,” Cael said. “Or maybe it’s not so mysterious. Maybe they’re just a vain family that fell on hard times and are lucky enough to have a loyal servant to take care of them.”

“A vain family that possibly has magic,” Henry said. “Could they be using magic to coerce her?”

“It’s possible. If Lina’s return has taught me anything, it’s that there is far more to magic than I ever imagined.”

“We need to keep an eye on them,” Henry said.

“Eva can watch them. We need to return to Mias to continue training in Luca’s vault.”

Henry turned to look out the carriage window. The mountain scenery passed by in a blur. Given the recent goblin attack, it was entirely reasonable for him to return home and train. Entirely reasonable for him to get caught up in the wedding preparations and his duties as a prince of Aeonis.

And yet, he wasn’t feeling very reasonable.

“Eva can’t work light magic,” he said. “Someone needs to watch this area in the realm of shadows. If someone on the Vidre estate is working magic, it will take another magic user to know that.”

“And that magic user should be you?”

“Why not? I already have connections on the estate.”

“You have a tentative relationship with a prickly servant girl.”

“Well, I suppose if you’d rather stay and pay the Vidre family a royal visit every day, I have no choice but to let you.”

Cael narrowed his eyes, and Henry laughed.

“It won’t hurt anything for me to stay a few days with Eva,” he said. “I can check in with Bri and see how the Vidres took your visit and the news that they’re to be part of the wedding. And I can still train from here. Benjamin trains with us when he’s at school.”

“Fine,” Cael said. “But I’m not defending you to Mother or the Society. You’ll have to face their wrath yourself.”

“Fair enough.”

The carriage slowed as they reached Eva's cottage. The brothers jumped out to stretch their legs. Henry breathed deeply, savoring the delicate scent of snowbells on the fresh mountain air. Even if he only stayed for a few days, the calm would be worth it.

Eva burst out of her cottage, and Henry's heart sank.

"What's wrong?"

Because something was obviously wrong. Eva sprinted toward them, eyes wide and hair wild.

"Prince Stefan is missing!"

"It's probably a prank," Cael said. "We saw Stefan before we left. He was fine."

Eva shook her head.

"Marta just called a Society meeting to arrange for a search. He disappeared."

Henry frowned. Marta wouldn't involve the Society unless she truly believed it was serious. Stefan could be annoying, but he was still family.

"Looks like the Vidres will have to wait," Cael said. "We need to get home."

Henry nodded, desperately hoping that Bri would be okay while he was gone. He jumped into the carriage and watched the mountains grow small in the distance as they raced home.

“Maybe I should come with you.”

Bri kept her voice casual, as if she hadn't rehearsed the words over and over in her mind for the past few days.

“Come with us? Why?”

Rhoda sounded genuinely confused.

Bri finished folding the last gown and placed it in a trunk.

“You said that Prince Cael invited the duke's daughters to be wedding attendants. Won't they think it strange if only two of his daughters arrive?”

“Why the sudden interest in the royal wedding?”

Bri met Lady Vidre's gaze and gave her stepmother what she hoped was an innocent smile.

“Who wouldn't be interested in a royal wedding?”

“You,” Lucille said flatly. “You spend your days playing in cinders. What would you do at a royal ball? Find your way to the kitchen so you can sleep in a bigger fireplace?”

Rhoda giggled, and her mother gave her a look.

“Sorry, but it's funny,” Rhoda said. “Bri dressed in a ball gown, curling up on the castle hearth to take a nap. Can't you picture it?”

“Yes, hilarious,” Lucille said without enthusiasm. “Everyone would call her the cinder girl.”

“Cinder Bri,” Rhoda said. “No, that doesn’t sound right somehow. Ash Bri? Soot Bri?”

“Go fetch your jewelry, girls,” Lady Vidre said. “I want a word with Bri.”

The sisters shared a glance but obeyed without a word. Bri watched them go, then turned back to her stepmother. Lady Vidre’s eyes narrowed.

“What are you playing at, Gabriella?”

The use of her full name caught Bri off guard. She blinked, momentarily stunned into silence. Lady Vidre continued.

“Why choose now of all times to show an interest in a royal event? Why not ask to come to the Princess Test? Or any of the other parties we’ve gone to over the years?”

“This seems more interesting, and I’m curious about Evangelina Shadow-Storm.”

Lady Vidre scoffed.

“That woman. They really want us to believe that she woke from a century of sleep? That she can work magic? I didn’t think you’d fall for such an act.”

Bri blinked. Apparently, not everyone in Aeonian believed that the shadow warrior was real. Bri wished she had that luxury.

“The royal record will clearly state that the Duke of Vidre has three daughters. I don’t want you to get into trouble if someone notices that one is missing.”

“You’ve done an excellent job denying your noble heritage over the years,” Lady Vidre said. “No one will notice your absence. Why do you really want to come?”

Bri sighed. She had tried to tell the truth, but her stepmother didn’t believe it. Perhaps she could create a convincing lie instead.

“It’s boring here,” she said. “The countryside is restful, but I’m tired of it. I’d like to see the city again.”

Lady Vidre's eyes glistened. This she understood. A slow smile spread across her lips.

"Of course you're bored here, dear. You're a vibrant young woman tucked away in obscurity. Unfortunately, we don't have the funds to outfit three of you in finery fit for the court. But if we were to sell the estate--"

"We're not selling the estate."

"Then you're not leaving it."

Bri's chest heaved as she fought for control. All their old arguments simmered just below the surface as the two women glared at each other. There was no need to say anything. They had fought this fight a hundred times before, and both knew that neither would win if the battle erupted again. They stared, stuck in the past as they silently clashed.

Lady Vidre broke the spell first. She took a single step toward Bri.

"Let me make one thing clear, Gabriella Vidre. Until my daughters are married and settled with their dowries, you will not step one foot in Mias unless you prove yourself reasonable by agreeing to sell this estate. I will not let you ruin their chances at happiness."

"You think I want to attend the wedding so I can find a husband? So I can steal their beau?"

"This wedding will be the social event of the season. Everyone who is anyone in Aeonian will gather in one place, and everyone's minds will be on matrimony. As wedding attendants, Lucille and Rhoda have places of honor. Attention will turn to them. I will not have that attention distracted by a bumpkin of a stepsister who wishes to gawk at the royal family to satisfy her curiosity."

"Then let me come as a servant," Bri said. "It will save you the trouble and expense of hiring someone."

"Lady Hawley is providing servants for us. Why are you suddenly so set on this?"

Lady Vidre's expression hardened as she studied Bri and tried to work out the puzzle that was her stepdaughter.

But you couldn't solve a puzzle if you were missing a piece.

For one brief, glorious moment, Bri considered handing her that piece. She could tell her stepmother everything. If the mirrors flashed again like they had the night of the storm, it was only a matter of time until they discovered her secret, anyway. Maybe it would be better to be proactive. She could open the mirror and show Lady Vidre the shadowy world beyond. She could show her Father's journal and finally tell Lady Vidre what her husband's last words had been.

She could do it, and yet she couldn't. Father hadn't trusted Lady Vidre, and based on the estate profit records that Bri had seen, he might have had a good reason not to. Not to mention that she and Bri had been enemies since he died. Even if the conversation went well and Lady Vidre believed everything, it wouldn't solve the problem of the Society or answer Bri's questions about the mirrors.

"A legend has come to life," Bri said. "Who wouldn't want a chance to meet Evangelina Shadow-Storm?"

Lady Vidre's expression turned into a blank mask as she smoothed the anger from her face. Bri knew that look. The argument was over. Rhoda and Lucille returned, and the lingering tension of the conflict dissolved.

"I still can't find my ruby earring," Lucille said. "It's the only jewelry I have that will match my ball gown."

Bri curtsied and hurried from the room. Blast it all. How was she supposed to guard the mirrors when her stepsisters suddenly wanted all their jewelry?

No matter. Whether the gem was a ruby or garnet, she had not been able to use it for magic. Bri made a quick side trip to Lucille's room to return the earring, then waited in the kitchen while they searched for the missing jewel. She heard muffled conversation when they found it tucked in the corner of the jewelry box. Lady Vidre scolded Lucille for not looking more

carefully, and Lucille protested that she had. Bri stayed out of their way until Lady Hawley's carriage arrived and carried them away toward Mias.

Toward Evangelina Shadow-Storm.

Bri watched them go from an upstairs window and spent the rest of the evening checking the shadows for goblins or the shadow warrior. She saw no sign of either, which did nothing to settle her nerves.

The days leading up to the royal wedding passed in a blur of magic and mayhem. Stefan was missing. The only clue was the disappearance of both Henry's spare goat herding clothes and Stefan's tailor. Taken together, these two pieces of information only added to the confusion. Why steal clothes but also bring a tailor?

The royal family sent messages to spies and friends all over Myora. Soldiers searched the land. Sailors searched the sea. Henry, Cael, and Benjamin searched the realm of shadows.

Lina joined them whenever she could. They wandered the dark landscape together, searching for any sign of the missing prince.

They found nothing.

Meanwhile, the castle staff prepared for a wedding as if nothing was wrong. Henry endured fittings for a new suit and mourned the loss of his comfortable goat herding boots as he was fitted for yet another new pair of formal footwear. When they found Stefan, the prince owed Henry an old pair of boots.

As days passed and their search yielded no clues and no results, Henry began to doubt he would get either his stepbrother or his boots back anytime soon.

Their patrols through the realm of shadows settled into a routine. Each brother searched on their own, taking a different direction and flying as far as he could in the allotted time.

Then they met at the seal to look for signs of Nog. Henry circled around the shimmering enchantment. It hung in the air, giving off a faint green glow. It looked the same each day, and he had slowly become accustomed to interacting with legendary magic. How could he not, when he lived in the same house as Evangelina Shadow-Storm?

Cael flashed the sign for all clear, and Henry blinked until the darkness faded and he saw the castle room and his brothers beside him.

“Still no sign of Stefan,” he said, just to have something to say.

“There’s no sign of goblins either,” Benjamin said. “That’s good, right?”

“I still think it’s a joke,” Cael said. “He’s probably holed up with a theater troupe somewhere rehearsing another play.”

“Not even Stefan would go this far for a joke,” Henry said.

Unfortunately. If it had only been a day or so of absence, Henry might have believed Cael’s theory. But surely the prince wouldn’t ruin his brother’s wedding for the sake of a prank?

Because it was ruining the wedding. The stress lines around Prince Alaric’s eyes grew deeper with each day that passed with no news. A cloud of gloom hung over the entire castle even as servants filled vases with fresh flowers and prepared food for the feast. Gloom would have hung over the entire country if the news was widely known, but the royal family had decided to keep it quiet. Aeonina was still reeling from the return of Evangelina Shadow-Storm and the goblins. The royal family had not forgotten Gaveron’s threats at the Princess Test or the skepticism of several of the other countries. No need to give them even more to gossip about when Stefan would surely be found any day.

But Stefan did not appear. They began to fear that he had been kidnapped, but who would do such a thing? Bastien insisted that Stefan’s tailor, Heinrich, was loyal and would not harm the prince. No other suspects came to mind. Besides, they had received no ransom note. No demands.

There was nothing at all.

“Should we delay the wedding?” Lina asked during a family dinner the night before the ceremony.

Silence hung heavy in the air. This was the moment when Stefan should have made a joke about getting cold feet, but Stefan wasn't here. Henry glanced toward the prince's empty chair. He noticed that everyone else did the same.

“Guests have already arrived,” Alaric said.

“And your brother is missing! No one expects you to get married under such circumstances!”

Lina took Alaric's hand and squeezed it. He smiled at her and pressed her fingers against his lips.

“The country needs this wedding. There's a reason we've pushed to have it so soon.”

There was another joke opportunity there, Henry thought. Stefan would probably say something about other reasons to rush the wedding. Tease Alaric about marrying Lina after his longtime crush on Evangelina Shadow-Storm. Or say that Lina was old and couldn't wait any longer.

But the room remained silent. Alaric looked around the table as if waiting for someone to contradict him.

Hoping for someone to contradict him, Henry thought.

But no one did. King Noam and Queen Marta shared a guilty look.

“We can pare back the celebration,” Marta said. “There's no need to have a royal ball under such circumstances, but I don't think it's wise to delay the ceremony.”

“Blast Stefan,” Alaric said. “I never expected to spend my honeymoon searching for my brother.”

“I thought you were going to the lake district?” Noam said. “The staff have prepared the lake house for you.”

“As if I could relax by a lake while Stefan is missing.”

“We’ve already talked about it,” Lina said. “We’ll leave in the carriage and pretend to go to the lake district, then dress in disguise and search the kingdom for Stefan. It’s the perfect opportunity for us to sneak away and search without anyone realizing what has happened.”

“Should we announce it?” Cael asked. “If this is a joke, maybe Stefan is waiting for us to announce his absence before he springs the surprise.”

“Stefan wouldn’t take a joke so far,” Alaric said.

“His absence from the ceremony will be noted,” King Noam said. “Perhaps it would be better to announce it after all.”

“Can we not say that he has fallen ill?” Benjamin said.

“Stefan would have to be very ill to miss a party,” Alaric said.

“He must be in hiding,” Marta said. “Why else steal Henry’s clothes?”

“The Society would have found him if he was on the mountain,” Cael said.

The conversation continued but went nowhere. Henry focused his attention on his food. They were going in circles. Again. Searching for some reason why Stefan would disappear and trying to decide what to do about it.

The dining room door burst open, and a guard sprinted into the room. The royal family stared at him in alarm as he panted for breath.

“...gate... ..Stefan...”

Alaric jumped to his feet and ran from the room. The guard followed him. The rest of the royal family watched the open door, too stunned to move.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Marta said gently.

“I’m going to check on him,” Lina said. “He’ll be devastated if this is a false alarm.”

She stood and hurried after Alaric. Henry watched her go, then turned back to his meal. It was delicious, as was all the food made by the castle kitchen, but he had even less of an appetite than before.

He pushed the plate away. Everyone else at the table did the same.

“We should check on them,” Marcus said. “Just in case.”

“I agree,” King Noam said.

A servant rushed into the room.

“Your Majesty, Prince Stefan has returned! And he’s brought Princess Carina with him!”

“Carina?”

The royal family sprinted to see for themselves.

The evening passed in a blur. Henry only half-understood Stefan’s story of being transformed into a frog, fighting a kraken, and rescuing Carina from a charge of treason. His stepbrother seemed serious, but the story must be wildly exaggerated. For one thing, Stefan always exaggerated stories. For another, there was no way he had managed to defeat both a kraken and the king of Santelle as a frog.

Even after hearing the story multiple times, Henry knew only two things for certain.

One, he wasn’t getting his boots back.

Two, he had a very unpleasant task to complete on the morning of the wedding.



Henry knocked on the door again and stepped back to wait. It was far too early for a social call. Even he knew that.

And yet, here he was.

He studied the house while he waited. It was a fashionable building in a fashionable part of town. The paint was fresh, and the windows gleamed in the morning sun. While it had probably been built around the same time as the other houses on this street, the owner had added layers of ornamentation to the façade until it stood out from the others.

In Henry's opinion, it stood out in the worst way possible. He was studying the ornately carved trim around the windows when a servant finally answered the door. The woman took in his royal outfit and carriage with widening eyes, then curtsied deeply.

"Your Highness."

Henry frowned. He should be used to such treatment by now, but he wasn't. He couldn't help contrasting this servant to Bri. She wore a clean, well-pressed uniform and looked well-fed and well-rested. This was how staff should be treated.

"I need to speak to Lady Vidre. Immediately, if possible."

"Of course. Please, come in. I'll bring refreshments for you while you wait."

Apparently, immediately wasn't possible. Henry followed the servant through the hallways and into a formal parlor. The size and shape of the room looked much the same as every other noble townhouse he had been in. Not that he had been in many. He preferred to avoid such visits if possible.

And he really would have preferred to avoid this one. Unfortunately, bad news must be delivered, and Marta wanted to soften the blow by having it delivered by a prince.

Henry was the only prince available at the moment. Well, Cael was free, but he insisted that it was Henry's turn and disappeared into the bustle of wedding preparations.

Henry looked around the parlor for a place to sit. If the outside of this house was gaudy, the inside defied his vocabulary. The owner seemed determined to squeeze as many expensive items into the space as possible, and that left little room for human occupants. He finally located a chair with minimal jewel encrusted pillows and perched on the edge of it.

Squealing came from somewhere above him. Henry winced. It seemed the ladies of the house had been informed of his presence. The noise went on, followed by a few thumps and the soft clatter of footsteps. It sounded like they were having a military drill on the upper floor.

The maid returned with refreshments and the mistress of the house.

“Lady Hawley, at your service, Your Highness.”

Henry stood, bowed, and choked on a waft of snowbell perfume. Another thump sounded overhead, and Lady Hawley smiled at him.

“Please, have some tea, Your Highness.”

Henry sipped the tea while Lady Hawley droned on about what an honor it was to welcome him to her humble home. Henry complimented the house and its décor. It was the biggest lie he had ever told as a prince. Both of them ignored the racket drifting from the bedroom above.

When the ladies finally arrived, there was no sign of the flurry of activity he had heard. They glided smoothly into the room, all primped and preened as if they were going to the wedding this instant instead of greeting a guest. Lady Hawley took her leave to give them privacy. The overwhelming cloud of snowbell scent followed her out the door.

Henry swallowed a sigh of relief and bowed, taking quick inventory of the three women as he did so. Lady Vidre, the mother. Lucille, her oldest. Rhoda, her youngest.

Bri’s mistresses. The women he suspected of mistreating her.

Henry reminded himself that he couldn’t be rude to them. He was here as an ambassador of the royal family. He needed to be polite.

He really didn’t want to be polite.

“Your Highness, what an honor,” Lady Vidre said. “To what do we owe this delightful surprise?”

Henry was experienced enough to translate the flowery words into their actual meaning: we'll take advantage of these circumstances as much as we can, but what in the world are you doing here before breakfast?

He tried to speak and found the words stuck in his throat. Blast it all, this was awkward.

"Your brother, Prince Cael, visited us at our home not long ago," Lady Vidre said. "It was such a delight to take tea with him."

Henry fought the urge to roll his eyes. He had witnessed part of that meeting through a window. It had been far from a delight for Cael.

"We are so looking forward to seeing him again at the wedding today," Rhoda said. "He promised to dance with me."

Her voice bubbled with genuine enthusiasm. She was excited about the wedding. They all were.

And Henry was about to crush that dream.

"Yes, the wedding," he said. "About that."

They all leaned toward him and waited. Henry took a deep breath and spoke quickly before his courage abandoned him.

"I'm afraid Evangelina Shadow-Storm no longer needs you to serve as her wedding attendants. A princess of Santelle arrived unexpectedly last night, and she must take social precedence to maintain international relations."

That was the message Henry had been instructed to give. It sounded a lot better than the truth. Lina's friend was able to make it, so we don't need you after all.

But he might as well have said that, based on the effect of his words. Rhoda's eyes filled with tears. Lucille's expression grew stormy.

Lady Vidre stiffened, and her eyes turned to ice. She froze Henry in place with a single look, and he felt unexpected sympathy for Bri. No wonder she stayed. He felt compelled to do anything this woman said rather than face her wrath.

“What do you mean, my girls are no longer needed?”

“Princess Carina was invited to be the wedding attendant first, but she declined. That’s when your daughters were invited. But that turned out to be a misunderstanding, and she arrived last night saying that she could do it after all. So, she’s going to be the wedding attendant now. I’m sorry. You’re still invited to attend the wedding, of course! You just won’t be the attendants.”

Blast, this was getting more and more awkward. Henry watched Lady Vidre’s inner struggle play out on her face. She wanted to yell at him and demand that he give what had been promised to her.

He saw the moment she decided against that and smoothed her face into a calm mask instead.

“Of course we understand, Your Highness. International relations must always be a priority for the royal family. But I do hope you won’t forget about us at the wedding ball tonight. Perhaps you could save a dance for my girls?”

“Of course,” Henry said quickly. “I’m sure Cael will want to dance with you as well. He’s mentioned his visit to you several times.”

Not a lie. Cael had complained about that visit nonstop. But if Henry was going to be sacrificed to the Vidre family’s daughters, he was dragging Cael down with him.

It worked. Rhoda wiped the tears from her eyes and gave Henry a small smile. The storm in Lucille’s eyes subsided, leaving a calculating gleam behind. Lady Vidre’s expression remained so composed that Henry could only guess her feelings.

“I look forward to the ball then, Your Highness.”

“As do I.”

It wasn’t exactly a lie. He was looking forward to it with dread.

Bri spent the night of Evangelina Shadow-Storm's wedding pacing in front of the mirrors. She wasn't sure what she was waiting for, but there had to be something. The shadow warrior was marrying into the royal family and gaining power over the throne. Surely now was the time to make her move?

But the evening passed quietly. No storms with red lightning. No terrible smells. Nothing but Bri's own reflection in the mirrors and empty shadows beyond them.

Perhaps the shadow warrior had something quieter planned. A subtle takeover, as she built her power and influence until no one dared to question her.

Bri slumped into a chair as she stared at the darkness in the mirror. That made more sense. She should have insisted on going to the wedding after all. If Lady Vidre refused to take her, she could have sneaked away from the estate and caught a ride with a farmer going to town.

Only, she had no clothes suitable for a royal wedding and no way to sneak into the castle.

Bri sighed. Father had asked her to guard the mirrors. That had seemed like a large duty once, but now it didn't seem like nearly enough. Evangelina Shadow-Storm had taken control of the government of Aeonian, and Bri had no way to stop her. No way to gather information except for going to a wedding ball and asking questions.

A ball. Who would have guessed a ball would be her undoing?

Bri closed the mirror and stared at her reflection. She had been a noblewoman once. With a little effort and a nice dress, she could pass as one again.

After all this time working as a servant, her dearest wish was to go to a ball. It was ridiculous. Unattainable because she had made sure that it was. Nothing short of magic was going to get her into that castle.

Bri got tired of looking at her reflection, opened the mirror again, and stared into the darkness. She had magic, just not the right kind. She had the ability to look into the shadows and a few enchantments provided by a somewhat helpful donkey.

“I don’t need a donkey,” she muttered. “I need a fairy godmother.”

Bri had always found stories with fairy godmothers ridiculous. They appeared to helpless young maidens and granted them their heart’s desires, which often involved a nice dress and a prince. Maybe that was what she needed after all. A fairy godmother to sweep into her life and solve all her problems.

Even in the daydream, it seemed far-fetched. Given the right resources, Bri could solve her own problems. Unfortunately, the right resources were a pile of diamonds and an invitation to the castle.

Bri glared at the mirror. Sitting here and staring at it wasn’t accomplishing anything. She left the kitchen and wandered through the house to check the rest of the mirrors. They showed nothing, and after the magical storm, she suspected that they were all connected to the same space. Every mirror had shown the lightning and the goblin, and every mirror was now dark and empty.

That theory still didn’t solve her problems. She needed gems, which meant she needed money. Almost without meaning to, Bri found herself in Lady Vidre’s room. She illuminated her diamond and searched the desk for the estate

ledger. The desk was just as empty as before. Bri stepped back and studied it. It was odd for a desk to be completely empty. Drawers tended to collect odds and ends. There should be receipts and scraps of paper. Mismatched buttons and broken quill pens.

Bri needed money, and she suspected the answer to that problem might be found in Lady Vidre's ledger. Unfortunately, the ledger wasn't there. She searched the room without success, then went through the house again to check the mirrors.

Blast it all. She couldn't catch a break. Bri returned to the kitchen, sat with her back against the hearth, and faced the mirror. She watched flames flicker against the glass until the fire died. Then she watched it in the darkness, waiting. She didn't know what she was waiting for, only that it didn't come. She fell asleep waiting and woke up with her head still facing the mirror. Evangelina Shadow-Storm had married Prince Alaric, and still Bri was waiting for answers that hadn't come.

The wedding ball was everything that Henry hated wrapped into a glamorous package. Simpering ladies. Simpering gentlemen. Both crowded so tightly into a glittering room that it was difficult to move or breathe.

The only way to escape the crowds was to escort a lady to the dance floor. Normally Henry avoided that, but it couldn't be avoided tonight. The Vidre ladies sought him out, and he had already promised them he would dance.

And once he had danced with them, he was fair game for the other glittering ladies who fluttered their fans at him. Henry danced past Stefan and tried to catch his eye and signal for help, but his stepbrother had eyes only for Princess Carina.

Henry couldn't blame him. The princess of Santelle looked radiant, although there was a gleam in her blue eyes that signaled trouble. Goats made similar expressions before they butted you in the stomach and stole your lunch.

"Penny for your thoughts, Your Highness?" his dance partner asked.

What would she say if he told her he had been mentally comparing Princess Carina to a goat? Henry laughed and shook his head.

"I'd much rather hear your thoughts, my lady. How are you enjoying the ball?"

She flushed, and Henry felt a little guilty that he didn't remember her name. There were just so many ladies here, and

they all looked alike to him.

“It’s a lovely party,” she said. “I especially enjoy watching Prince Alaric and Princess Lina dance.”

Henry followed her gaze to where the newlywed couple danced nearby. He smiled in spite of everything. Watching Alaric and Lina together was the only good part of the evening. Their love made them radiant, and wasn’t that the point of a wedding ball? To celebrate a happy couple?

“I’m happy for them,” Henry said.

“Indeed,” the lady said. “Prince Stefan and Princess Carina seem happy as well. If only I could find such happiness for myself, I would be quite content.”

She fluttered her eyelashes, and Henry’s heart sank. It had been a trap, and he had walked right into it.

Blast it all.

“What about you, Your Highness? Do you search for such happiness?”

The trap was tightening. Fortunately, the music stopped. Henry stepped back, bowed, and hurried away. He ignored ladies with fluttering fans and kept going until he reached the nearest balcony. Unfortunately, the balcony was already occupied. Stefan and Carina stood in the corner wrapped in an embrace.

“It’s so nice to have arms,” Stefan said as he lifted a hand and brushed a golden curl behind Carina’s ear.

Henry didn’t stay to hear her response. Talking about one’s arms didn’t sound like a particularly romantic statement to him, but what did he know? He quickly backed away and reentered the ballroom.

“Ah, Your Highness! I’ve been looking for you.”

Lucille Vidre walked towards him, fluttering her fan. Henry sighed and forced a smile. It seemed like the night would never end.



HENRY ROLLED OUT OF BED AND SQUINTED AT THE SUNLIGHT streaming through his window. The ball had dragged on, but his slumber had passed far too quickly. He stood and grimaced as his sore muscles protested. Dancing was hard work. Far harder than chasing goats up the mountain. He walked to the window and stared at Mount Evangelina in the distance. What he wouldn't give to be back there right now, basking in the solitude and fresh air.

Back with Bri. Was she alright? Henry had tried to gather information from the Vidre sisters at the ball, but it had been difficult with them so intent on flirting. He hated leaving Bri alone and possibly in trouble, but the world seemed to be conspiring to keep him away from her. First Stefan disappeared, and now he had to train with Lina before she left on her honeymoon.

Much as he worried about Bri, he and his brothers needed to train.

Things had been quiet since the Princess Test, but that didn't mean they would stay quiet. Henry dressed in the simplest of his royal clothes and staggered to the dining room. He blinked at an enormous pile of brightly wrapped boxes leaning against the wall, then sat beside Cael at the table.

"Wedding presents," Cael said. "Apparently getting married as a royal means that other royals shower you with gifts."

"I'll keep that in mind," Henry muttered.

"You've got plenty of options," Cael said with a grin. "The Vidre sisters couldn't take their eyes off you. Neither could their mother, for that matter. And then, of course, there's their lovely servant."

"Shut up."

Henry shoveled eggs in his mouth so he wouldn't have to answer.

“Is Henry romancing a servant? How exciting.”

Princess Carina swept into the room, looking far more awake than anyone who had spent the evening dancing should look. Her blond curls bounced, and her blue eyes sparkled with mischief.

Henry’s mouth was too full to answer, so he settled for shaking his head and glaring at Cael. Carina grinned but didn’t press the matter. She was distracted by the presents.

“Oh, it looks like everyone is trying to impress the new royal couple. I suppose as wedding attendant it’s my job to help open these.”

She bounced over to the biggest gift and examined it.

“From Kell. Who knew they cared so much? And this one is from Prince John of Fletcher.”

She picked up a small box and shook it. Something inside rattled.

“Either gems or something glass that is now broken. I bet on gems. He’s probably trying to butter them up to ask for a favor. Why does everyone assume that young ladies can be won over by sparkly things?”

Carina set the package down and sat at the table across from Henry. She turned her head, looking from side to side and frowning at the empty seats.

“Where is everyone?”

“Probably sleeping,” Henry said.

“Or packing,” Cael said. “We’re only up this early because we need to train before Lina leaves.”

“Ah, yes. I heard about the secret vault full of magical items. I can’t wait to see it.”

Henry and Cael shared a look of alarm.

“You’re interested in magic?” Cael said.

“I have a little experience with it. Besides, I can’t resist things that sparkle.”

She winked at them, and Henry swallowed. Stefan rushed into the room, his hair sticking up and his clothes wrinkled.

“There you are! Hurry, I have a surprise for you. You’ll have to change, though. You look far too nice in that gown.”

“Oh? I’m intrigued.”

Carina stood and brushed the wrinkles out of her skirt. Stefan took her hand and pulled her out of the room. Henry and Cael sat in silence until the door swung shut.

“Those two will be trouble,” Cael said.

“Hopefully not our trouble,” Henry said. “Do you really think she’ll want to train with us and learn magic?”

Cael gave a helpless shrug and didn’t answer. The brothers finished their breakfast, then walked together to the castle room set aside for training. There had been some debate about where to hold the training. The secret vault under the archives seemed the likely place, but unfortunately the entrance was in the middle of the archive floor. There was no way to open it without everyone in the archives seeing them, and closing the archives to the public would definitely raise some eyebrows. The building had always been open to anyone seeking knowledge. No one in the royal family wanted to deprive their people of that resource.

So they used the secret vault only at night when the archive had closed and took what they needed back to the castle for daytime training. It was a convenient space, but certainly not a private one. The Society was not pleased with the arrangement but had failed to come up with a better idea.

Henry grabbed a scroll from the pile and tried to read it. Luca’s handwriting meandered across the page in wavy lines. Some words were underlined. Some were crossed out. Most were illegible. Henry sighed. He had tried to read the scroll before. It was no wonder the brothers hadn’t gotten far with their light magic training when the instructions were so difficult to interpret.

“Try this one,” Cael said. “Lina made a translation for us.”

Henry gave up on his scroll and joined Cael in looking from Luca's sprawling letters to Lina's tidy script interpreting his handwriting.

"Oh, is that what that says?"

Henry looked from Lina's notes to Luca's scroll a few more times, trying to pick out the words that Lina said were there.

"I guess so," Cael said. "Maybe it's a twin thing? She's the only one who understands his genius."

More like she was the only one who could read his chicken scratch, but Henry kept his mouth shut about that. Cael idolized Luca. There was no point picking a fight over the light wielder's terrible handwriting.

Henry read Lina's notes a few more times to make sure he understood. Luca's scroll contained directions for how to speak in the realm of shadows. The brothers had tried to learn the skill many times before and failed. After reading Lina's interpretation of Luca's instructions, Henry understood why.

"Let's try it," Cael said.

Henry nodded reluctantly. After all, that was the point of training. He settled back in his chair and let his eyes drift out of focus. The room darkened as he pulled light magic to himself. Suddenly, he was in that strange, empty world with Cael's star flickering beside him.

"Hello," the star said.

Henry laughed. Cael's voice was high and thin, like a bad actor imitating a whiny child.

"What?" Cael demanded.

"Your voice," Henry said.

At least, he tried to say that. The sound came out as a garble of squeaks. Henry lost focus and returned to the realm of light, gasping for air as he laughed until he cried. Cael blinked as he broke his own spell, then glared at Henry.

“It’s not funny! This is a major breakthrough in our magical technique.”

“Of course it is.”

Henry tried to look serious, then burst out laughing again.

“We sound like mice.”

“It will improve with practice.”

The door opened, and Queen Marta came in.

“Oh good, there you are. The Society has requested a meeting.”

“What’s wrong?” Cael asked.

“Nothing, nothing.”

Henry and Cael shared a look. Their mother was an accomplished liar. She had kept her royal heritage a secret from her husband and her Society a secret from an entire country. But her voice cracked a little as she spoke, and her eyes were tight with worry. Something was definitely wrong.

“Bri! Where are you?”

The shouts echoed through the house. Bri covered her bread dough with a cloth and hurried to the front door.

“You’re back so soon,” she said as she rushed to gather her stepfamily’s cloaks. “How was the wedding?”

Lady Vidre glared at Bri as if the question had been asked purely to annoy her. Bri quickly turned away to hang the cloaks on nearby hooks. Had something happened? Perhaps Evangelina Shadow Storm made her move, after all?

“We were rejected as attendants,” Rhoda whispered.

“Rejected? So you didn’t attend the wedding?”

Bri spoke aloud without thinking, then hastily clamped her mouth shut when her stepmother glared at her again.

“Of course we attended,” Lady Vidre said. “But unfortunately, the girls were outranked. It was a matter of social precedence.”

“Princess Carina of Santelle,” Lucille said, answering the question Bri hadn’t asked. “She arrived at the last minute and replaced us as wedding attendants.”

“She arrived at the very last minute with Prince Stefan in tow!” Rhoda said. “Apparently he was enchanted by mermaids and had been missing for days!”

“No more of that nonsense,” Lady Vidre said. “One royal using magic as an excuse to justify his questionable relationship is plenty. Two is just ridiculous. Mermaids, indeed. If they wanted to cast us aside, they could at least have come up with a plausible explanation.”

“They told you that you couldn’t be wedding attendants because of mermaids?”

Bri asked the question in all seriousness. First a goblin attack, now mermaids? What was the world coming to?

“Of course not,” Lady Vidre snapped. “The mermaids are just a ridiculous rumor, as is the bit about the frog. The relevant news is that we will have company in a few days’ time. Even though they didn’t serve as wedding attendants, your stepsisters caught the eye of Prince Cael and Prince Henry.”

“Their Highnesses are coming to visit?”

Bri fought to keep her voice calm. A prince dropping by to issue an invitation was one thing. A prince coming by on an official visit was something else entirely. What were these royals playing at? Were they courting her stepsisters to gain access to the mirrors, or did Evangelina Shadow-Storm have something even more sinister in mind?

“Don’t be stupid,” Lady Vidre said. “As if I would allow the princes anywhere near this place on purpose. My friend Lady Hawley is coming to call. Now that the girls have royal marriage prospects, we are discussing the possibility of staying with her in town on a more permanent basis.”

Bri’s eyes widened in surprise. Were the princes truly serious about pursuing a relationship with her stepsisters? Judging by what she had seen at the tea, that wasn’t the case. Prince Cael had seemed bored out of his mind and eager to get away. Maybe Evangelina Shadow-Storm had ordered the princes to get closer to the ladies that lived near the mirrors. Or could their plan be something else entirely?

“Lady Hawley fancies herself a matchmaker now,” Lucille said.

Her mother glared at her.

“Lady Hawley is a dear friend who has gone out of her way to help us time and time again. You will do your best to make her feel welcome here.”

Rhoda snorted, then quickly schooled her features into a serene expression. Lady Vidre turned to Bri and gestured for her to follow. They walked down the hallway together as Lady Vidre spoke.

“I trust you can have the house ready for genteel company in time. This is an opportunity for all of us. If Lucille and Rhoda marry, they can claim their dowries. We can finally move to town, and you’ll be free to do whatever you want here.”

The donkey appeared in a mirror behind Lady Vidre and pressed his nose against the glass. Bri stared in horror. She hadn’t seen the donkey the whole time her stepfamily was gone. Why did he have to appear now?

“Don’t look at me like that. It won’t be much extra work. Lady Hawley is aware of our reduced circumstances, and I’m not expecting miracles. You merely need to prepare a guest bedroom for her and a few meals suitable for someone of elevated rank.”

The donkey raised his lips and bared his teeth in a grin. Bri shook her head, trying to warn him to stay silent. Lady Vidre glared at her.

“What do you mean, no? Get some of the outdoor servants to help you, if necessary, but you will make this happen. You think things are miserable now? They’ll be much worse if you mess this up. We’ve been rejected by royalty, then accepted by royalty all in a matter of days. We finally have an opportunity to get out of this dump. I am not in the mood to accommodate your laziness.”

The donkey pressed his lips against the glass in a kiss. Bri’s heart pounded. If he pressed through the glass, his lips would hit the back of her stepmother’s head. Bri had imagined many ways that Lady Vidre might discover the secret of the

mirrors over the years. None of them had involved her stepmother being kissed by a donkey.

“Yes, of course,” Bri said. “I’ll make sure Lady Hawley is comfortable while she stays here. I’ll recruit some of the outdoor servants to help. You have other things to worry about, like helping Rhoda chose what jewelry to wear.”

Bri stepped to the side and gestured toward Rhoda’s room. Lady Vidre raised an eyebrow as she walked in that direction. Bri circled behind her, pressed her hand against the glass, and whispered, “close.” The donkey’s face disappeared as the mirror turned to regular glass.

“What was that?” Lady Vidre snapped, turning back to Bri and the mirror.

“Clothes,” Bri said. “You all need to choose clothes. To *guard* your chances.”

The invisible iron spread across the glass. Bri kept her hand on the mirror, gripped her diamond pendant, and hoped the spell would hold the donkey back. Lady Vidre gave her stepdaughter a searching look, then turned and walked away. Bri pulled her hand away from the mirror and breathed a sigh of relief. The glass rippled, and the donkey stuck his nose through and dropped a piece of paper on the floor.

“Meet me in the kitchen next time,” Bri whispered. “What if she saw you?”

The donkey huffed at her, and Bri wrinkled her nose. Donkey breath. Not exactly pleasant.

“What’s the point of teaching me how to guard the mirrors if you just come through them whenever you want?”

The donkey winked at her and pulled his nose away. The glass rippled as he faded from view. Bri watched until the mirror returned to normal and reflected the hallway again. Then she picked up the piece of paper. She hoped to see another page from Father’s journal, but this messy scrawl was certainly not his handwriting. Bri twisted the paper, uncertain for a moment which way was right side up. Hopefully, this contained another useful enchantment, but it would take some

time to decipher. She was still working on the last page the donkey brought.

Bri put the paper in her apron pocket and hurried to the kitchen. Between preparing for company, guarding the mirrors, and interpreting the scrawl on the donkey's pages, she was in for a busy week.

“They’ve already started the meeting,” Queen Marta said.

She flipped open her locket and placed it on her desk. The shard of glass inside glistened and tiny images flickered on the surface. A bit of a scowl. A cat’s paw. Or maybe that was just Henry’s imagination as he saw the things he knew should be there.

The voices were faint, but Henry could still make out Madame Scowl and Lord Disagreement arguing like usual.

“We should wait until the Golden Goat is here,” Lord Disagreement said.

“And interrupt her honeymoon preparations?” Madame Scowl said. “Don’t be ridiculous. We’ve had meetings without her for a hundred years. One more won’t hurt.”

Henry, Cael, and Marta shared a look.

“The Society was formed to help her,” Cael said.

“Ah, good. The royals are here,” Madame Scowl said. “Yes, this organization was created to assist the Golden Goat, and that’s exactly what I propose we do.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Lord Disagreement said. “We are all undercover as goat herders and guarding the mountain. What more could we do?”

Madame Scowl laughed. Henry swallowed nervously. He had never heard her laugh before, and he didn’t like the sound.

“Times have changed. The Golden Goat has returned, as have the creatures of darkness. We no longer serve her best by maintaining these ridiculous disguises. I propose the Society of Evangelina reveals itself to Aeonias and tells the truth of what happened a hundred years ago.”

Collective gasps echoed from the shard of glass. Henry looked at his mother and brother. Surely Madame Scowl wasn't serious?

“Surely you're not serious?” Lord Disagreement said.

Henry groaned. Things were definitely bad if he agreed with Lord Disagreement.

“Completely serious. You all may remember that I opposed Ruby Snowbell's marriage.”

“Oh, I remember,” Marta said.

“I had my reasons for it, but I am now willing to admit that I was wrong.”

More gasps echoed from the mirror. Marta's gasp drowned them out. Madame Scowl scoffed.

“Yes, yes. I've changed my mind. It's very surprising. But back to business. Ruby Snowbell and her boys were able to ensure the Golden Goat's success and security because they were in the castle in a position of power. Who knows what would have happened to her if they hadn't been there?”

“Perhaps we would have found her sooner if they had been helping us patrol the mountain instead of throwing parties,” Lord Disagreement said.

“And then what? As goat herders, we are in no position to schedule an audience with the king, much less convince him that a warrior of legend has returned after being asleep for a hundred years. That's the sort of story that even the most benevolent king would not believe if told by a stranger. It is much more compelling when told by a beloved wife.”

Henry glanced at his mother. Queen Marta had a strange expression on her face. Half annoyance, half amusement.

“What exactly do you propose?” Marta said.

“The Golden Goat’s position is still far from secure. Many in Aeonian still don’t believe in her. The King of Gaveron and other foreign troublemakers may yet question King Noam’s rule because of the alleged murder of the former royal family of Aeonian. The only way to put that rumor to bed once and for all is to reveal that the royal family was not murdered. We must reveal ourselves and come out of hiding.”

“That is the most preposterous thing I have ever heard,” Lord Disagreement said.

“Is it? You don’t think we can do more good for the Golden Goat with more status? That we can patrol the mountain more effectively if we patrol openly?”

“The Society of Evangelina has stayed hidden for one hundred years! Would you have us ruin a century of effective subterfuge?”

“I would have us begin a new century of effective protection for Aeonian and its rulers. If the former royal family is revealed to be alive and offers their support to the new royal family, every objection to Aeonian’s government disappears.”

“It isn’t a bad plan,” Queen Marta said.

“What?” Lord Disagreement protested. A few more protests echoed his. He and Madame Scowl may be the most vocal members of the Society, but they weren’t the only ones who had a say in this matter.

“Luca had good reasons for hiding the royal family,” Marta continued. “Those reasons no longer exist. If you all want to return to the open and claim your identities as nobility, I see no reason why you shouldn’t. Although I do think we should consult Lady Evangelina before taking any action.”

“Of course,” Madame Scowl said.

Henry raised an eyebrow. She sounded entirely too pleased with herself. Had she called this meeting while Lina was on her honeymoon on purpose? So she could propose her plan without interference from the shadow warrior?

“I still think it’s ridiculous,” Lord Disagreement said. “You say you want to bring stability to Aeonian, but what happens

when a horde of new nobles descends on the court? There will be another struggle for power. You would divide our country again and risk another civil war!”

“The royal houses are already doubly united. King Noam has married our Marta. His son has married Lady Evangelina. Who could question such a firm political union?”

Henry blinked. He had never heard Madame Scowl use actual names during a meeting. She truly was serious about this plan.

“We will do nothing in haste,” Marta said. “And we will do nothing without consulting Lady Evangelina.”

“You could always stay hidden if you like,” Madame Scowl said. “Those of you who like being goatherders could remain so.”

Henry looked out the window toward Mount Evangelina. If only that were true. It might be possible for everyone else, but he was already a prince. There was no escape for him.

Lady Mildred Hawley swept into the Vidre household like a flock of goats trampling through a meadow. Bri was ready for her. The house was clean. Bri was clean. She led the lady's servants to the room prepared for their mistress. Somehow, Bri had managed to find a complete set of furniture in what remained of the estate. It didn't match, but it was a complete set.

The footman sniffed in disapproval as he deposited the trunk on the scratched wooden floor. The maid sniffed in disapproval as she unpacked the trunk and hung Lady Hawley's gowns in the battered wardrobe.

"I'm Sarah Jane," she said.

"I'm Bri."

Even the maid's introduction was haughty. Bri backed toward the door, but another disapproving sniff stopped her.

"Is this the only looking glass?" Sarah Jane asked.

"Afraid so," Bri said, trying her best to sound like a humble country servant.

All the bedrooms had mirrors that couldn't be moved, so Bri had chosen the bedroom with the smallest mirror possible and tucked Rhoda's ruby into the frame with the guard spell. Best not to have Lady Hawley's primping interrupted by a donkey or goblin staring at her.

"Can we bring in a bigger one?"

“Afraid not.”

The maid glared at Bri for a moment, then wrinkled her nose and turned back to unpacking. Bri glimpsed a jewelry box buried beneath the folds of a skirt.

Gems. How she wished she had more gems. How long would Lady Hawley be staying? Long enough that Bri could borrow some of her jewelry to guard the mirrors and make sure the visit was not interrupted?

No. Best not to chance it.

The maid cleared her throat, and Bri realized she had been staring at the trunk. She gave a quick curtsy and hurried away to the kitchen to check on dinner. She had done as her stepmother suggested and recruited outside help. The kitchen bustled with activity when she entered it.

A woman with silver-streaked hair sat on a stool in the corner as if it were a throne. Frieda was the grandmother of an estate goatherder, but she issued orders with the confidence of a queen. The young women assisting her scurried to do her bidding. One pulled a roast goose out of the oven. Another sliced bread and spread it neatly on a tray. Another stood at the stove, stirring the soup that was to be the first course.

Bri watched with a wistful longing for days gone by. Once upon a time, this kitchen had always been this busy.

Frieda noticed her and scowled.

“There you are. Dinner is ready to serve. Best begin before it gets cold.”

Bri almost curtsied. This woman may be a goatherder, but she certainly had an air of command about her.

“I’ll see if the family is ready,” Bri said.

She had only been able to find one acceptable servant’s uniform, so she was the only one who could visibly serve Lady Hawley. It was for the best, anyway. The extra help may know their way around a kitchen, but they wouldn’t know how to navigate a formal dining room.

Bri entered the parlor and stood in the doorway with her eyes turned down at the floor.

“Shameful, that’s what it is,” Lady Hawley said. “Absolutely shameful that two of our princes have married disreputable strangers when they could have had nice, respectable Aeonian girls. A magician and a banished princess. What is King Noam thinking allowing such a thing?”

Bri looked up, interested in spite of herself. Had the Santelle princess really been banished? And what did that have to do with mermaids and frogs?

No matter. She had problems enough without worrying about foreign royalty.

“Dinner is served, Your Grace,” Bri said in her best servant’s voice.

It wasn’t strictly correct to interrupt the conversation, but Lady Hawley seemed to be the kind of person who could go on forever if given the chance.

“Thank you, Bri,” Lady Vidre said.

Her tone of gentle condescension was exactly as one should speak to a servant. Bri gave a small curtsy and hurried to the dining room to make sure the extra help had set the table correctly.

Surprisingly, they had. There wasn’t a fork out of place. Satisfied with the table, Bri turned her attention to the mirror. That was a worry. Explaining magic mirrors to her stepfamily was one thing. Explaining them to a gossiping courtier was something else entirely. There would be no way to stop the rumors if Lady Hawley saw a donkey in a mirror.

Bri reluctantly unclasped her necklace and tucked the diamond into the corner of the mirror’s frame. She whispered, “guard” and pressed her hand against the glass until the invisible iron coated the mirror. Hopefully that would be enough to ensure a peaceful meal.

The ladies entered the dining room in a flurry of silk and lace. Bri took her place in the corner of the room. Technically, this was a job for a footman, but Bri had no footman’s livery

and no gentleman suitable to train as a footman. Trying to explain the job to a goatherder on such short notice was out of the question.

Lady Hawley gave Bri a long look, but only said, “What a lovely room,” as she entered.

“Thank you,” Lady Vidre said.

And then there was silence. Bri rolled her eyes. Good friends indeed. The ladies did not have much to say to each other. Lucille and Rhoda sat poker straight in their chairs and kept their eyes down as Bri served the soup. In a very fine house, the soup would be served to each guest at the same time in a carefully coordinated dance between all the servants. Lady Hawley’s sharp gaze said that she knew this. Bri could almost see the numbers dancing through her head as the lady calculated how cheaply the household was being run. Of course, her calculations would be off. She thought they had at least one servant on the payroll, when, in fact, they had none.

Bri’s chest felt cold in the diamond’s absence. She fought the urge to stare at the mirror and check that it was still there.

“My dear,” Lady Hawley said, “I admire your dedication to the simplicity of country life. Such quiet and tranquility. You can’t find it in the city, you know.”

Bri gritted her teeth. Lady Hawley knew they were poor, and she knew why she was here. Why go out of her way to offer untrue compliments?

“It has many charms,” Lady Vidre said. “Although I must admit to missing the bustle of Mias.”

“Of course you do. Not to mention the convenience! That reminds me, I brought the documents you requested from your solicitor. No need to make an extra trip.”

“Ah, thank you. That was very thoughtful.”

Bri poured more wine into Lady Hawley’s glass and forced herself to remain calm. She could search for the documents later.

“Of course, I’ve robbed you of an excuse to visit me by bringing them,” Lady Hawley continued. “But that does not mean you should stay away. Your poor daughters must yearn for all the entertainments of the city. The balls! The theater! The fashion!”

“The potential husbands,” Lady Vidre said. “There aren’t many good options this far out in the country.”

Apparently, Lady Vidre was done with formalities and ready to get to the point. Lady Hawley took it in stride.

“Ah yes, the eligible bachelors of Mias certainly add to its charms. And your girls have been lucky enough to catch the eyes of the most eligible of all.”

Lady Hawley cast a significant look at Lucille and Rhoda. Lady Vidre fixed her eyes on them as well. Lucille swallowed.

“Prince Cael is an exceptional dancer,” she said with a strained smile. “And a brilliant conversationalist. We had a marvelous chat when he visited us.”

“Indeed,” Rhoda said quickly, “Prince Henry is equally brilliant. We had a lovely conversation with him the morning of the royal wedding.”

Bri swallowed a laugh. Lady Vidre and Lucille were almost convincing with their acting. Rhoda spoke with the air of a woman reciting lines that she had carefully memorized.

“I had the pleasure of meeting Prince Henry that morning,” Lady Hawley said. “Such a nice young man. It is a shame you couldn’t be wedding attendants, but the real value in that experience was in the attention it brought you. And what you do with that attention now that you have it.”

They were almost finished with their soup. Bri left them to their conversation and went to the kitchen. The goat herders had carved some of the roast goose and arranged the meat on a tray. Four women would not eat an entire goose in one meal, so the rest of the bird sat on the kitchen counter. The goat herders were gone, and the kitchen felt bare in their absence. Bri picked up the tray and hurried back to the dining room.

“Of course, it is difficult to pursue the acquaintance with their highnesses while living in the country,” Lady Vidre said.

Bri’s hand slipped on the tray, and it rattled as she set it on the table. Her stepmother glared at her.

“Apologies, Your Grace,” Bri murmured as she placed slices of roast goose on each plate.

“So difficult,” Lady Hawley agreed. “Even a man in love may find it troublesome to pursue a lady so far out of his reach. Especially when there are other ladies in town.”

For some reason, Bri thought of Henry. She hadn’t seen him in some time. Did his business keep him in town? When would he return? Or perhaps the better question was, would he ever return?

Nonsense. The fluttering in her stomach was utter nonsense. She hardly knew him. There was no reason to dwell on the fact that he was kept away from her in the city or might be finding entertainment chatting with the ladies there.

“You are so correct, Lady Hawley,” Lady Vidre crooned. “I can hardly stand to think of dear Prince Henry and Prince Cael spending time with the other ladies in Mias. How those shameless flirts may be fluttering their eyelashes and trying to steal the princes away from my girls.”

“Shameless, indeed,” Lady Hawley said. “My dear duchess, I wonder if you would allow me to help?”

“I couldn’t impose,” Lady Vidre said, in a voice that suggested she would love to impose. “You’ve done so much for us already since Gavin died.”

“My dear Lady Vidre, let’s not stand on formalities. I’ve come to see myself as a sort of fairy godmother to your family. Please allow me to grant your wishes once again.”

Lady Hawley spread her arms wide as if to catch the adoration coming her way. Lady Vidre obliged her and chattered on, spouting phrases of thanks. Lucille and Rhoda did the same.

Bri walked back to the kitchen to fetch the next course. The mirror rippled, and the donkey appeared. Bri pressed her hand against the glass and whispered, “close.”

Nothing happened, and she gritted her teeth. She didn't have her diamond, so the words did nothing. The donkey grinned at her as she grabbed the next tray and rushed to the dining room.

“Of course, I'll provide servants,” Lady Hawley said. “And gowns. Anything you need.”

“You are too generous,” Lady Vidre said. “We'll pay you back as soon as we are able.”

“Nonsense, I won't hear of such a thing. We are old friends, Lady Vidre. It is my pleasure to help.”

“And it will be our pleasure to return your kindness when we're in a position to do so,” Lady Vidre said.

“I ask for nothing but the joy of helping two bright young women find the love they deserve.”

Lady Hawley's voice was too sugary, and the scent of her snowbell perfume mixed with roast goose turned Bri's stomach. Lady Vidre's face was serene as she answered.

“Then we thank you, Mildred. Truly.”

Her words were polite, but Bri knew her well enough to catch the strain in her voice. Perhaps Lady Vidre hated accepting help just as much as Bri did.

“I think it’s a great idea,” Cael said.

Henry laughed.

“I can’t take anything you say seriously when your voice sounds like that.”

Henry knew that his voice sounded equally strange. They hadn’t mastered the art of speaking as stars yet, and the magic still made their voices sound high-pitched.

“It’s getting better,” Benjamin said. “We sound like squirrels now instead of mice. Progress.”

Cael’s star bristled. Henry wasn’t sure exactly how he knew it was bristling, but it was. Something about the way the light moved.

“We are finally able to speak in the realm of shadows. This is a magical breakthrough, and you’re complaining that my voice sounds funny?”

Henry and Benjamin laughed harder.

“Now you’re an angry squirrel,” Benjamin said. “It’s so much funnier when you’re angry.”

“This isn’t funny at all,” Henry said, copying Cael’s outraged tone. “I am a serious light wielder doing serious work.”

His squeaky voice cracked, and Benjamin howled with laughter. Squeaky laughter. Cael huffed with frustration.

“This is a temporary problem. As soon as Lina returns from her honeymoon and translates the rest of Luca’s notes for us, we can polish our technique and speak with our normal voices.”

“And we can have our official meeting with the Society,” Henry said. “Do you really think it’s a good idea to come into the open, Cael?”

“Of course. The Society no longer has a need for secrecy. Why not tell the truth and come out into the open?”

“Because then Prince Stefan will push even harder for us to take over his royal duties.”

“That’s your problem,” Benjamin said. “My schedule is already full. I’ll need several more years of study before I’m ready to work in the archives.”

“I plan to create a new branch of the royal guard once my magic is made public,” Cael said. “We need a team of light wielders and trained soldiers to defend against the creatures of darkness. I can do more good working with the guards than working alone.”

Blast. Henry glared at his brothers and flickered with disapproval.

“You could join the guard as well,” Cael said. “Just think of it. Traveling the country on secret missions. Fighting to protect the land.”

“Or become a scholar,” Benjamin said. “Sit in the library all day reading and interpreting ancient texts.”

“Is there some option between nonstop adventure and nonstop boredom? I’d rather take my chances with Stefan than do either of those.”

“You mean you’d rather go back to your goats,” Cael said.

“And your girlfriend,” Benjamin said.

“Who told you about Bri? She’s not my girlfriend.”

Cael laughed.

“You’re right. His voice does sound funny when he’s angry.”

“Let’s just practice,” Henry said. “We’re supposed to be expanding our sight, remember?”

It was a lame change of subject, but it worked. Cael and Benjamin’s stars grew bright with excitement.

“Focus and open your mind,” Benjamin said. “Luca’s notes said that’s the key.”

“That’s what Lina’s interpretation of Luca’s notes said anyway,” Cael said. “Focus on a spot on the horizon, then let your mind expand.”

“It’s kind of contradictory, isn’t it?” Henry said. “How are we supposed to both focus and expand at the same time?”

“That’s the genius of it,” Cael said. “The apparent contradiction.”

“Opposite forces make magic stronger,” Benjamin agreed.

Henry floated away as his brothers continued to discuss magic theory. He looked roughly in the direction of Bri’s house and focused. He saw only darkness. Blast it all, this was ridiculous. How was he supposed to focus on a single point when all he saw was emptiness?

Henry squinted and looked harder. There. Was that a horizon? Or a hill? Or his imagination?

No matter. Something was moving. A tiny dot in the distance. Henry focused on it. He inhaled in surprise as the dot expanded. He could see a rough shape now, and it was walking up a hill.

Focus and expand. Contradiction. Opposite forces.

He was getting a headache.

Still, this was progress. Henry let his gaze soften. Expand. Focus. Expand. Focus.

Suddenly, he was flying through the air. His vision came into focus with an audible snap. He saw the goblin in the distance.

Henry shouted in surprise. It came out as a squeak.

“Goblin!” he said. “There’s a goblin over there.”

“A what?” Cael said.

Whatever enchantment he had formed broke. Henry’s vision blurred. When it cleared, he was back in place with his brothers floating beside him.

“There, in the distance. I focused and expanded and there was a goblin.”

He floated forward a few paces in the direction he had searched.

“There’s no time to waste then,” Cael said. “Let’s go.”

He dashed forward. His brothers hurried to catch up with him.

“There’s no way we can take a goblin in a fight,” Benjamin said. “Lina could barely do it, and she’s much stronger than us.”

“We can at least see where it goes,” Cael said.

“And make sure the people in that area are well,” Henry said.

Make sure that Bri was well. He had been looking toward her estate, after all. Was the goblin after her? But that was ridiculous. Why would a goblin hunt a servant?

Henry’s head pounded with the effort of working light magic by the time they reached the mountains. The brothers circled the area, illuminating it with the light of their stars. They saw nothing.

“Where exactly did you see it?” Cael said.

“It’s hard to know for sure,” Henry said. “I was aiming for the Vidre estate when my vision suddenly flew across the landscape and focused on the goblin. I don’t know how far away it was.”

“I don’t smell anything,” Benjamin said. “Wouldn’t we smell something if there was a goblin?”

Cael sniffed.

“I smell roast goose.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Benjamin said.

“No, I smell it too,” Henry said.

“It must be coming from the realm of light,” Benjamin said. “Why would a goblin smell like roast goose?”

“Why would anything in the realm of shadows smell like roast goose?” Cael said.

“There’s something going on at that estate,” Henry said.

“Dinner?” Benjamin suggested.

“Very funny,” Henry said.

“The seal!” Cael said. “If a goblin escaped, it might be compromised!”

They rushed up the mountain to the place where Lina’s emerald had dissolved into the shimmering curtain of magic. The brothers circled it and searched for any signs of weakness.

“It seems fine?” Benjamin said finally.

“I’m glad our resident scholar can offer such a confident expert opinion,” Henry said.

“It hasn’t changed, anyway,” Cael said. “That’s as much as we can tell without Lina’s help.”

Henry sniffed and was relieved to smell nothing. No stench of dark creatures. No roast goose. Maybe he had imagined the whole thing, but he wasn’t willing to risk Bri’s safety on a maybe.

“Cael, it might not have been a goblin, but I saw something on that estate. I think it’s time for an undercover mission.”

“Not another tea with those insufferable women,” Cael said. “I’d rather fight a goblin single handed than listen to them giggle again.”

“I delivered the bad news to them on Lina’s wedding day,” Henry said. “I had to deal with tears. I’m sure that’s worse

than giggles.”

Cael’s high-pitched scoff said he disagreed.

“I can’t visit them as a prince when Bri knows me as a goat herder,” Henry said. “I know we’re thinking about revealing the Society, but that would be an awkward way to do it. But if I avoid the family, I can talk to Bri and get a servant’s perspective about the estate.”

“But we still need someone to visit as a prince and talk to the Vidres,” Cael said.

He and Henry turned to Benjamin.

“Oh no,” he said. “Absolutely not.”

“It’s your turn,” Henry said.

“Think of it as research,” Cael said.

“More like torture.”

“Cheer up,” Henry said. “Maybe you’ll get some roast goose when you visit.”

The goose was gone. Bri stared at the counter where it had been. There had been a lot of goose left. Four ladies could only eat so much. She had planned to use the leftovers to feed the family for most of Lady Hawley's visit.

Where had it gone? Roast goose didn't just get up and walk away.

Bri looked around the kitchen, feeling ridiculous as she searched. She checked on the shelves. She checked under the shelves. She looked in the corners and in the cupboards.

There was no sign of the goose.

Had the goat herders taken it? Bri dismissed the idea. She had slept on the hearth and woke up early. She had locked the door. There was no way someone could have entered the kitchen without her knowing.

Bri looked at her reflection in the mirror. Well, there was one way.

Blast it all.

Bri's heart pounded as she pressed her hand against the glass.

"Open."

The dark emptiness of the realm on the other side of the mirror stretched in front of her. No donkey. No man. No monsters.

But roast geese didn't get up and walk away on their own.

"Close."

Bri used the mirror to braid her hair and wiped the cinders from her face with a damp cloth. She probably shouldn't have slept on the hearth while they had company, but she needed the light to read. She was still struggling to interpret the paper the donkey had given her. So far, she had deciphered the words "gem," "mirror," and "travel." It was enough to make her believe the donkey had brought her more magical instruction, but not enough for her to make sense of that instruction.

Bri pulled the paper from her apron and squinted at it. Maybe it would make more sense in the daylight.

It didn't. This had either been written by someone in a hurry or a child with a broken quill. Possibly both. Bri sighed and put the paper back in her apron. Why did everything lead to a dead end?

And why would someone come through the mirror and steal her goose?

Whatever the reason, she had bigger problems at the moment. Namely, breakfast.

Bri bustled around the kitchen, brewing tea and cooking oats. She sliced some of the bread left over from last night's dinner and toasted it. Why hadn't the goose thief also taken the bread? Maybe it only ate meat?

That sounded ominous. Goblins probably ate meat.

No, now was not the time to think about goblins. Besides, she would have smelled a goblin if it had come. Terrible as that smell was, it was an effective way to track the monster's presence.

Bri arranged the breakfast food on a tray and carried it to the dining room. She quickly opened and closed the mirror to check it.

Nothing. Whatever stole the goose appeared to be long gone, and there was no sign of the donkey either.

Bri heard footsteps in the hallway. She pulled off her diamond necklace and activated the guard spell, just in case. The ladies bustled in and chattered about their plans. They had decided last night that the entire family would go live with Lady Hawley so Rhoda and Lucille could pursue the princes. It was a straightforward plan, but there were apparently lots of details to work out. Things like new shoes, new dresses, and new hairstyles. Bri waited a few minutes to make sure they had everything they needed, then hurried away to check the rest of the mirrors.

She put her hand against the glass of a hallway mirror and whispered, "Open."

Nothing happened. Bri scowled at herself. She had forgotten that she wasn't wearing her diamond.

Blast it all.

Bri backed up and peeked into the dining room. The ladies had finished eating but showed no signs of moving to the parlor. They were engrossed in a debate on which color dress would best compliment Prince Cael's eyes as well as Lucille's complexion.

Bri hovered outside the door, trying to catch Lady Vidre's eye so that she could suggest they might be more comfortable in the parlor. Bri would definitely be more comfortable with them in the parlor. It had no mirrors.

But no one looked at her. They continued the debate as if they were determined to stay as long as possible in the room with the largest mirror.

Bri sighed. She couldn't remove her diamond from that mirror while they were in the dining room, but she also needed to check the other mirrors and look for signs of the goose thief.

She wandered through the hallways and found herself outside Lady Hawley's room almost without realizing it. She stared at the door. The mirror didn't need to be guarded while Lady Hawley was in the dining room. She could take the ruby, check the rest of the mirrors, and bring it back before anyone noticed.

And maybe, if she was lucky, the papers from Lady Vidre's solicitor would be out in the open where she could read them.

Bri knocked softly.

"Hello? Are you in there, Sarah Jane? Would you like breakfast?"

No answer. The maid must be busy elsewhere. Bri pushed the door open and peered inside. The room was empty.

She breathed a sigh of relief and hurried across the room to the mirror. The ruby was still hidden in the corner of the frame. Bri picked it up and held her hand against the glass.

"Open."

The glass rippled and showed empty darkness. Still no sign of the goose thief.

"Close."

"What are you doing?"

Bri squeaked in alarm and whirled around. Sarah Jane stood in the doorway. The maid put her hands on her hips and tapped her foot as she waited for a reply.

"I remembered that I forgot to clean the mirror."

"It's already clean. How dare you enter my lady's room without permission? What's that in your hand?"

Bri closed her fist around the ruby.

"Nothing."

Sarah Jane cast a meaningful glance at Lady Hawley's jewelry box, which sat on a travel trunk across the room. A stack of papers sat next to it, and Bri couldn't help looking wistfully at both. How could the solutions to her problems be so close and yet so far out of reach?

"Show me what you have in your hand."

"I only came to check on the mirror," Bri said.

"And I saw you eyeing Lady Hawley's jewels when she unpacked. You think this is the first country house we've

visited? You think you're the first bumpkin to be tempted?"

"I don't want her jewels."

Bri did her best to sound indignant and make the lie sound truthful. She did want Lady Hawley's jewels, but not for a reason any of them would guess. She wasn't a thief.

"Then show me what's in your hand."

Bri quickly considered her options. The maid was guarding the doorway. There was no way to get past her. Not without tackling her, anyway, and Bri wasn't eager for a fight. Not to mention that would raise everyone's suspicions that she really was up to no good.

She could keep refusing and try to talk her way out of this, but Sarah Jane didn't look like she would let the issue go.

Bri sighed and opened her hand. The ruby earring twinkled against her skin, sparkling cheerfully as if it were glad to be seen.

"Ha! I knew it!"

Bri rolled her eyes.

"This doesn't belong to Lady Hawley. I found it on the floor and picked it up to ask Lady Vidre about it later."

Sarah Jane came closer and squinted at the gem.

"This isn't Lady Hawley's."

"I told you it wasn't."

"Still, I'm sure your mistress will be very interested in seeing this."

The maid grabbed Bri's arm and dragged her towards the dining room. Bri struggled, but Sarah Jane had a strong grip. Apparently, folding gowns and doing hair was a great way to build finger strength. Finally, Bri stopped struggling. Even if she did break loose, what would she do then? She couldn't stop the maid from telling her tale. It would be better for her to be present so she could control the damage.

Sarah Jane pushed Bri into the dining room and told her story with so much feeling that Bri wondered if she had a background in theater. The woman had missed her calling. She should be an actress.

Lady Hawley's reaction was equally dramatic. She clutched her hands to her chest. She gasped. She rolled her eyes heavenward.

Bri and Lucille rolled their eyes as well. Lady Vidre's expression was dangerously blank. Rhoda's face went pale as she looked from Bri to the gem. Bri had no doubt that she recognized it.

"A jewel thief!" Lady Hawley said. "My dear Lucretia, how relieved you must be to know the truth! Now you can be rid of this worthless servant and sleep safe at night."

"I'd like to hear Bri's side of the story," Lady Vidre said.

Bri swallowed. Best to go with the truth. That is, as near the truth as she could.

"I found the gem on the floor and picked it up to return it to its rightful place."

"And that rightful place was Lady Hawley's room?"

"I remembered that I hadn't cleaned the mirror in her room yet and wanted to polish it."

"Because I am clearly incapable of polishing that ridiculously small mirror," Sarah Jane said.

It was a fair point, but Bri had no other explanation for being in Lady Hawley's room. None that she was willing to share, anyway.

"Give me the jewel," Lady Vidre said.

Bri handed it over and gave Rhoda an apologetic glance. Her stepsister's eyes were wide with panic.

"I don't recognize this," Lady Vidre said. "She didn't steal it."

"She didn't steal it from you," Lady Hawley said. "Who knows where the wretch took it from?"

“It’s mine,” Rhoda said.

Her voice wavered a little as she reached her hand out for the gem.

“Yours?”

Lady Vidre sounded surprised. Lady Hawley looked from mother to daughter with a curious gleam in her eyes.

“I lost it years ago and thought it was gone for good. Thank you, Bri. I am so glad you found this for me.”

Lady Hawley huffed.

“More like you’re glad she was caught in the act. Don’t be naïve, girl.”

“Bri wouldn’t steal from me,” Rhoda said.

She looked straight into Bri’s eyes as she said it, and Bri swallowed. Rhoda knew that she knew about the letter and had been snooping. And yet, she was covering for her. Bri didn’t deserve the favor, but she would take it.

“I found it while cleaning,” Bri said. “It had fallen between two floorboards.”

“I am glad to have it back.”

“She’s obviously lying, girl,” Lady Hawley said. “You shouldn’t be so trusting. The royal court will eat you alive.”

She turned to Lady Vidre as if expecting backup. Lady Vidre looked from Bri to Rhoda to Lucille to Sarah Jane to Lady Hawley. Bri held her breath, hoping that Lady Vidre’s desire to maintain appearances would keep her from questioning either Rhoda or Bri.

Finally, Lady Vidre sighed.

“Rhoda is a sweet girl, Lady Hawley. I won’t ask her to be otherwise. If she says she lost the gem, then I believe her.”

“She wasn’t trying to return the gem,” Sarah Jane said. “She tried to hide it when I asked about her.”

“You see?” Lady Hawley said. “You must dismiss this servant. It would be irresponsible to let her remain in your

household another moment.”

Lady Vidre’s eyes flashed. Bri had no doubt she would dismiss her if she was able. But she wasn’t, and to explain why would be to admit to deceiving Lady Hawley.

“I will deal with her as I see fit,” Lady Vidre said. “After all, as you said, this is my household.”

Bri hung her head and tried to look suitably humble. Lady Vidre’s options for dealing with her were limited, but she had no doubt there would be consequences for this. Not to mention the questions that would come Rhoda’s way.

“Well,” Lady Hawley said. “Well. If you’re so confident in your own methods, perhaps you don’t need my help after all. Perhaps your girls would like to catch husbands on their own.”

“Of course, we still want your help,” Lucille said. “Please forgive us, Lady Hawley.”

Everyone turned to stare at her. Lucille gave an innocent smile, but her eyes were hard.

“Bri has served us her entire life. She was a favorite of my deceased stepfather. It is understandable that she would get ideas above her station, and that my mother is reluctant to turn her away. She is a simple girl and wouldn’t last a week without our help. To be too trusting would be detrimental to a princess, but to be harsh would be equally unseemly.”

Lady Hawley studied Lucille as if seeing her for the first time. Then she nodded.

“You’ve a good head on your shoulders, girl. I can make something of you. You will come with me to Mias. I’ll help you catch your prince.”

“I thank you, my lady. And what of my sister?”

Lady Hawley shrugged.

“I find I only have the energy to deal with one young lady at the moment. Your sister may remain here and reflect on what she has done. If you behave well and prove to be no trouble, perhaps I will send for her in time.”

She looked around the room as if daring anyone to question her judgment. Rhoda cast a hurt look at Bri, then ducked her head and kept her eyes down. She apparently cared more about retrieving her ruby than going to Mias, but she certainly wasn't happy that Bri had put her in this situation. Lucille nodded in agreement. A flash of fury swept across Lady Vidre's face, but she quickly schooled her features and nodded as well.

"Of course, caring for two girls would be overwhelming for you, Lady Hawley. Thank you for your kind attention to Lucille."

"We'll leave at once," Lady Hawley said. "You may feel comfortable living in the same house as a delinquent servant, but I do not."

"Of course," Lady Vidre said through gritted teeth. "Bri, please pack a picnic lunch for them to eat on their journey. There should be plenty of leftover goose."

"The goose is missing, Your Grace."

"Missing?"

Lady Vidre's calm façade finally snapped. She stared at Bri, eyes blazing with fury.

"Delinquent," Lady Hawley muttered as she stood and turned to Lucille. "Pack your things, girl. I want to leave within the hour."

She swept out of the room. Sarah Jane gave Bri a smug smile and followed. Lucille stood and hurried away. Bri started to follow, but Lady Vidre caught her arm.

"I expect a full explanation for this once they are gone," she hissed.

Bri swallowed.

"I have already given my explanation."

"You have lied, stolen, and ruined Rhoda's chances of marrying a prince. This is far from over."

"Yes, Stepmother."

“And Rhoda! Where did this ruby come from? Why did you claim it is yours?”

“It is mine.”

Lady Vidre asked more questions, but Rhoda refused to answer. She pressed her lips shut and looked from her mother to Bri with wide eyes. Finally, she burst into tears.

“Am I not allowed to have one pretty thing, Mother? One thing to call my own? Why can Bri have a diamond, but I can't have a ruby?”

Lady Vidre stared at her daughter, then glared at Bri with an expression that said this was all her fault.

“Both of you, go to your rooms.”

Rhoda hurried away. Bri gave a small curtsy and ignored the order as she cleared the half-eaten breakfast from the table. She took her time, moving so slowly that Lady Vidre finally gave up and left the room in disgust. Bri retrieved her diamond from the mirror and fastened it around her neck with shaking hands as she walked back to the kitchen.

“I think it’s a great idea.”

Henry stared at Lina. He wasn’t sure what he had expected her to say, but that wasn’t it.

The royal family sat gathered around Queen Marta’s locket. A clamor of voices erupted from it at Lina’s statement. Henry gave up trying to separate the rush of sound into intelligible statements. Apparently, Lina felt the same way. She sat quietly, leaning against Alaric, until the voices quieted.

“If you all can manage to contain your excitement, my wife will explain her reasons,” Alaric said.

Across the room, Princess Carina giggled. Henry wasn’t sure if she was laughing at Alaric, the Society, or something Stefan had whispered in her ear. Any of those possibilities was likely.

Alaric raised an eyebrow at Carina, and she pressed a hand over her mouth and winked. The princess wore an incredibly frilly pink dress. Henry hadn’t been aware until that moment that it was possible to put so many ruffles on a gown. He could have done without the knowledge.

“As you all know, Alaric and I have just returned from our honeymoon in the lake district,” Lina said.

She took Alaric’s hand and squeezed it as she said this. He bent down and gently kissed her forehead. Behind them, Stefan copied the gesture and Carina giggled again.

Henry caught Cael's gaze and rolled his eyes. Cael grinned and rolled his eyes in return. Henry was happy for his stepbrothers, of course, but being surrounded by so many couples was getting to be a bit much.

"Traveling outside of Mias was very informative," Lina said. "Those who were present for the Princess Test believe in my magic. They saw the storm the goblins summoned and the way the other royal families accepted my claims. Those in farther reaches of the kingdom did not, and they seem less likely to believe my story."

"They think it's some kind of trick," Alaric said. "A ruse designed to let me marry a commoner while strengthening my claim to the throne."

"I'm sorry, son," King Noam said. "Those who know you would never doubt your dedication to Aeonian."

"Oh, they don't doubt him," Lina said. "They doubt me. There are rumors that I'm a wicked enchantress who made him fall in love with me through magic."

King Noam winced, and Marta placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Unfortunately, there is a precedent for that," she said. "But Lina is nothing like Cassandra. How do we make the people see that? How do we win their trust?"

"I thought I already had," Lina said. "I didn't know enough about the recent history of Aeonian to realize it wouldn't be so simple."

The Society members listening through the mirror couldn't hold back any longer. They burst into a cacophony of chatter again. Henry found himself lost in his own thoughts, remembering the whirlwind of confusion that had led to his mother marrying the king. He had been too young to be part of the action, so he only knew the basics. A wicked enchantress had used her magic to make King Noam fall in love and marry her. Most of the kingdom had believed that their love was genuine, but the king's oldest son had sensed something was wrong. Alaric had wandered up the mountain searching for

Evangelina Shadow-Storm and met Marta instead. He confided his troubles to the friendly goat-herder, and to his surprise, she believed him. Marta and the Society of Evangelina had freed Noam from the enchantment, which led to the banishment of Cassandra.

The Society had been pleased about that. They had been less pleased when Noam and Marta fell in love and married.

Henry sighed. He hadn't been pleased about that either. He was glad his mother was happy, and he liked his new stepfather. He had expected to adjust to life in the castle in time. His brothers had.

So why was he still dreaming of the mountains?

"We should have a ball," Princess Carina said.

Henry snapped out of his reverie and back to the present. How had the conversation progressed from Cassandra to a ball?

"What good would a ball do?" Madame Scowl's voice snapped from the mirror.

"It makes perfect sense," Carina said. "Those who attended the Princess Test and saw Lina's magic believe her story. Those who were too far away to witness the magic think she's a fraud. So, all we need to do is throw another ball, invite the whole kingdom, and show them that she is really who she claims to be."

"A ball for the whole kingdom?" Henry said.

Everyone looked at him, and he felt his face flush. He hadn't meant to speak aloud. He certainly hadn't meant to sound so horrified.

"We could reveal the Society of Evangelina at the ball as well," Stefan said. "Those who wish to be revealed, anyway. We could have demonstrations of magic. They could tell the guests their stories of being in hiding."

"Witnesses," Benjamin said. "People will have first-hand encounters with Lina and members of the Society, then go

back and tell their friends. If anything will convince the kingdom we're telling the truth, this will."

"A ball for the entire kingdom?" Henry said. "How will they all fit in the castle? The ballroom was crowded enough with just the wedding guests."

To him, that settled the matter. This was a bad idea, and that was the end of it.

To his horror, Carina spoke again.

"I suppose we would need to have more than one."

"Three balls on three different nights," Stefan agreed. "And we can open the theater, courtyards, gardens, dining rooms, and secondary ballrooms to make room for more people."

"I knew you were paying attention during the Princess Test," Marta said. "I don't suppose you want to help organize these events?"

"Certainly not," Stefan said. "I'll be too busy working with the theater troupe. We'll need an encore performance of Alaric's play for this event."

"We most certainly will not!" Alaric said.

"Perhaps a tour of the secret room in the archives instead?" Lina suggested.

"Out of the question!" Garnet Pig's voice said from the mirror. "We can't reveal that to the public! We don't have enough smocks for everyone!"

"Those magical artifacts are the only defense we have against enemies," Lord Disagreement said. "We can't show them all our weapons."

"The people of Aeonian aren't our enemies," Alaric said.

"But there may be spies," Madame Scowl said. "Whatever we plan, we must assume that spies will attend."

Everyone turned to Carina. She nodded and her pink dress flounced as she moved.

“That is a fair point. Our enemies will certainly see this as an opportunity to enter the castle and evaluate our strength.”

“It would be easier to guard against them if we knew who our enemies were,” Cael grumbled.

“Perhaps we can study them just as they are studying us,” Lina said. “Someone helped Nog escape. Someone woke me up. If they are drawn to the castle to study us, perhaps we can trap them.”

“Speaking of enemy magicians,” Garnet Pig said, “I have heard strange rumors from Eldria. Their crown prince has not been publicly seen for over a month.”

“Maybe he just needed some peace and quiet,” Henry said.

“Or maybe he was turned into a frog,” Stefan said.

“Oh, wouldn’t that be fun?” Carina said. “Prince Darian would make a miserable frog.”

“Anyone would make a miserable frog,” Stefan said with a shudder. “I wouldn’t wish that fate on anyone.”

“But if we’re going to wish it on anyone, Prince Darian should be a top candidate,” Carina said.

“We’ll look into it,” Lina said. “But what about the balls? Should we proceed with this plan to prove myself and the Society to the people of Aeonian?”

“It’s a big undertaking,” Marta said. “Throwing a party for the whole country is easier said than done.”

“Not everyone will come,” Madame Scowl said. “But those who do will bring the story back to their neighbors. If we can have at least one person from every district attend, the word will spread.”

“People will believe their neighbors over a stranger,” Lord Disagreement said.

That was when Henry knew he was doomed. Lord Disagreement agreed with the plan. There was no escape.

Bri glared at the counter. More specifically, at the overturned dish and trail of crumbs.

It led from the counter to the mirror, and there was no trace of the loaf of bread she had placed there the night before.

“Not mice,” she muttered. “Definitely not mice.”

She had started covering the leftover food each night, but that didn’t stop the thief. No matter how heavy the dish she put over it, the mysterious thief moved it and stole the food underneath. Not even a cast-iron skillet had been enough to stop him.

This had to end. Bri was on thin ice with her stepfamily already, and she didn’t need the added tension of missing food. She no longer had an extra gem, and she wasn’t willing to take the diamond necklace off while she slept. She couldn’t guard the mirror.

There would be no toast for breakfast.

Bri sighed and boiled water for porridge. She sliced apples from the root cellar and stared at the piece of paper as she arranged her stepfamily’s breakfasts neatly on a tray.

“Mirror” and “travel.” She had decided that another of the words was either “milk” or “walk.” “Walk” made more sense, but then again, what did she know of mirror magic? The donkey seemed to thrive there. Perhaps the shadowy realm was the perfect place to start a dairy.

Bri poured goat's milk into the porridge and put the kettle on for tea. She made her usual rounds through the house while the water heated. She checked the mirrors and found nothing out of the ordinary. Bri stared out the window at the mist-shrouded mountains, watching the goat herders round up the flock and guide it up the path. The goats frolicked and butted each other playfully. The goat herders smiled and laughed. It was a pleasant scene. Bri searched their faces, hoping to see Henry. If he was there, it would be a good excuse to sneak away and say hello. For a moment, Bri wished she could join them on their trek up the mountain.

The kettle shrieked, and Bri pushed the thought aside. Henry wasn't there, and life as a goat herder probably wasn't as carefree as it looked. Nothing was perfect. She ran to the kitchen, pulled the kettle off the stove, and poured boiling water into the teacups. When everything was ready, she carried the tray to the dining room and left it on the table.

Meals had been somber affairs since Lucille left. Lady Vidre was giving Bri the silent treatment. Probably to save herself the energy of yelling at her worthless stepdaughter. Yelling hadn't done any good, anyway, and she didn't have to speak to show her displeasure. Her glare spoke volumes.

Rhoda stayed quiet as well. She hadn't confronted Bri about the ruby, and she refused to answer her mother's questions about it. The gem had disappeared, and Lady Vidre had searched for it with no results. Bri assumed it was back in its hiding spot in the wall, but she didn't have the heart to check.

Rhoda must value the ruby a lot if she was willing to sacrifice so much to keep it secret. Or maybe she was upset about being left at home while Lucille went to Mias to try to catch a prince.

Bri longed to cheer her stepsister up. To joke about Lady Hawley and how miserable it would be in her house. To remind Rhoda that she barely knew the prince and certainly shouldn't marry him based on one afternoon tea and a few dances.

But to speak to Rhoda was to invite questions about why she had taken the ruby in the first place, so Bri stayed silent. She gave Rhoda extra honey in her porridge, but that was as much as she dared to do. If Rhoda noticed, she didn't comment.

Bri didn't understand it. If Rhoda loved the man who gave her the ruby so much, why had she never mentioned him? He must be well-off to give her such an expensive gift. Rhoda was young, but surely Lady Vidre would approve if a long engagement could be arranged. There was no reason to keep the suitor a secret and mope around the house pining for him.

Or had Rhoda developed affection for the princes after such a short acquaintance? Did she truly want to be a princess?

Or did she just want to get away from here? To wear fine gowns that matched prince's eyes and make social calls and do whatever other exciting things young ladies did in Mias?

Maybe she just missed her sister.

Bri cleared the breakfast tray and carried it back to the kitchen. She was stuck. She couldn't translate the donkey's paper. She couldn't make things right with her stepfamily. She had yet to locate the financial papers that Lady Hawley had brought from Mias.

She glared at the breadcrumbs as she swept them up. Of all the tasks before her, guarding the mirrors suddenly seemed the most achievable. Something was stealing food. Could she catch the thief?

She could at least try.

Bri pulled a length of rope from its place on the ceiling. Normally, she would use it to dry herbs, but today it would serve another purpose.

She scooped flour from her barrel and made bread dough. She tried to decipher the donkey's paper while she waited for it to rise. Milk or walk? She scratched both on a spare sheet of paper. Maybe if she wrote all her guesses for each word, she could combine the possibilities into something legible.

The bread was ready to bake before she had an answer. Bri tied a knot in the rope and shaped the loaf around it. She had to leave the oven open a crack to accommodate the rope. No matter. The only creature eating this bread would be the food thief, and it deserved an undercooked loaf.

Bri pulled the loaf from the oven and spread oil over the top to make it glisten. If she was going to set a trap, it was best to have attractive bait. She placed the bread on the counter to cool and made lunch for her stepfamily. She cleaned the house as an excuse to look for the papers, managed to avoid both Rhoda and Lady Vidre for the rest of the day, then cooked dinner.

Finally, it was time for bed. Bri looked at the loaf. It really was undercooked. She put it back in the oven for a bit to give it more color. The smell of freshly baked bread filled the kitchen. That should be enough to tempt the thief.

She set the bread on the counter and laid the rope behind it, so it wasn't visible from the mirror. She stretched it over to the hearth and lay down by the fire. She fought the urge to lie facing the mirror and turned toward the flames instead. This way, she didn't risk giving away the trap if she opened her eyes.

Bri waited.

And waited.

The fire died down to cinders. Her eyelids grew heavy as she fought off sleep. Bri closed them. Just for a moment. She wouldn't actually fall asleep, but it didn't hurt to rest.

She woke to something pulling on the rope. Bri sat up and turned to the mirror. The bread had disappeared, and the rope trailed into the glass.

"I knew it!"

Whatever held the bread jerked away in surprise. The loaf caught on the rope, flew back through the mirror, and landed on the kitchen floor.

Bri jumped to her feet and rushed to the mirror. She had saved the bread, but she didn't care about that. She needed to

catch the thief!

But the thief wasn't running. Bri reached the mirror and found herself face to face with a monster. Fangs. Claws. Horns. It towered over her.

"Clever," the goblin growled.

Bri's heart pounded, and her lips parted with surprise. Words stuck in her throat as she stared at the monster.

Guard the mirrors. What could she do against such a creature? It could tear her head off with one swipe of those enormous claws.

"Close."

Bri forced herself to reach forward and touch the glass. The mirror rippled and closed, trapping the goblin behind it.

"Guard."

The invisible iron spread. Bri panted for breath and kept her hand pressed hard against the glass. This was the best defense she had. If the goblin broke through, she would be helpless.

Luckily, it didn't. Bri stood with her hand against the mirror until her heartbeat settled into something resembling its regular rhythm.

Goblin. There was a goblin in the mirror. She had known it was a possibility, but a goblin in theory and a goblin standing in front of you were two different matters entirely.

A goblin had been stealing her food.

A goblin might be looking in other mirrors even as she stood here. Might be threatening her stepfamily.

Bri pulled her hand away from the mirror and waited a few moments. When the goblin didn't reappear, she left the kitchen and crept through the house as quietly as she could to check the rest of the mirrors.

Only when she was satisfied that Lady Vidre and Rhoda were safe did she return to the kitchen. Bri picked up the bread and grimaced at the claw marks in the loaf. It looked like it

had been stabbed by five enormous knives. This was a danger she was not prepared to face. She couldn't even keep a donkey out! How was she supposed to stop a goblin?

She needed gems. A lot of gems. And she had no way to get them.

Bri tossed the loaf of bread into the fire and turned her attention back to the chicken scratch piece of paper the donkey had given her. If she couldn't get more gems, maybe she could get more magic.

Henry scanned the empty shadows. Focus and expand. It was getting easier to see into the realm of darkness. It was a shame there was nothing to see.

“Nothing this direction,” Henry said.

Practice and Lina’s further interpretations of Luca’s handwriting had improved his ability to speak in the realm of shadows. His voice sounded almost normal now.

“Nothing this way either,” Benjamin said.

“Same,” Cael said. “Let’s end training for today.”

“Are you sure?” Henry said. “Maybe we should search the area again just to be safe.”

Cael laughed as his star disappeared. Henry pulled his focus back to the realm of light and glared at his brother.

“I thought you liked training.”

“You just want to avoid your fitting.”

“As any sane person would.”

“There’s still time to rethink becoming a scholar,” Benjamin said. “I’ll be wearing my scholarly robes to the ball. No fitting needed.”

“They’re making a new version of the guard’s uniform for me,” Cael said. “It will have a white stripe to show that I’m a light wielder.”

“Must be nice,” Henry said.

He rubbed his head, trying to banish the headache that had been his constant companion since they started preparing for the ball. All their practice had made their light wielding stronger, but that didn't mean it was easy.

Unfortunately, the headache only intensified when he entered the tailor's rooms and saw piles of fur and silk on the tables. There was only one person who would use fur on a formal suit in the summer.

"Prince Henry, welcome!" Bastien said. "I have decided on a goat-themed outfit for the balls. It is the perfect way to honor your past as a goat herder."

There were a lot of ways to make a goat-themed outfit. Unfortunately, the sketches around the room suggested that Bastien was taking a very literal approach.

Bastien took Henry's stunned silence as approval and gestured to a line of tassels hanging against the wall.

"The tail will be the most difficult part to interpret, but I think we can create an elegant solution."

"No," Henry said. "I'm not wearing a tail."

"Not a literal tail," Bastien agreed. "That would be too much. More of a metaphorical tail."

"Forgive me, Bastien, but why are you making my suit? I'm sure you have a lot to do to prepare Alaric's outfit."

When in doubt, deflect. The strategy had served Henry well over the years. He didn't even have to pretend to be confused this time.

"Crown Prince Alaric will be wearing his military uniform to formal events from now on."

Right. Henry vaguely remembered hearing something about that. He searched his memory, frantically looking for a way out of this mess.

"What about Carina? I'm sure her wardrobe requires your full attention."

“Princess Carina and Prince Stefan have left the country for a mission. In fact, it was Prince Stefan who suggested that I turn my attention to you and your brothers while Carina is gone. No one else needs my services at the moment, so I can devote all my time to your formal attire for the balls.”

Blast Stefan.

“What about a goat herder themed outfit instead?” Henry said. It wasn’t much of an argument, but he was feeling desperate. “As a prince, I will already have enough attention on me without an elaborate outfit. I don’t want to take attention from Lina and the newly revealed members of the Society.”

Bastien set down the tassel and considered Henry.

“Your Highness’s humility does you credit. A goat herder themed suit. Yes. Yes, that would do quite well for the first ball.”

Henry couldn’t help sagging with relief as Bastien walked away from the tassels. He would do a lot for his country, but he preferred not to wear a tail.

He finished the fitting and changed back into his clothes, feeling much better about the whole thing. Bastien’s new sketches looked like a well-tailored version of Henry’s usual goat herding outfit. In fact, Henry might use the suit for actual goat herding once all the balls were over. Silk was a surprisingly tough material.

He just needed to make sure that Bastien never found out that his masterpiece had been worn for manual labor, and that he didn’t try to go back to the goat outfit for the second or third ball.

Henry stepped out of Bastien’s room and into chaos. Servants ran up and down the hallways, whispering frantically to each other.

“What happened?” Henry asked the nearest one.

“Royal guests!” the man panted. “Princess Fiora and King Gustave arrived a few moments ago! With no warning!”

Forgive me, Your Highness, but we are rushing to prepare suitable accommodations for them.”

He bowed hastily, then hurried away. Henry stared after him in a daze. Fiora and Gustave? What in the world were they doing here?

Henry had intended to go back to training, but he turned toward his mother’s study instead. He knocked and pushed the door open when she called.

Queen Marta’s locket sat on her vanity. Her maid Hilda sat beside her.

“Yes, that’s right. More trouble with mermaids and an attack on Montaigne,” Marta said. “We may need to delay our balls.”

“Or have them sooner,” Madame Scowl said. “You’ll need the Society’s support if this really is part of a larger plot.”

“The Society can offer support while in hiding,” Hilda said.

“Yes, we can charge at our enemies and scare them away with the stink of goats,” Madame Scowl said. “Your sons are not the only ones capable of learning magic, Ruby Snowbell. Others can learn from the Golden Goat and protect the kingdom.”

Marta glanced at Henry and gave him an apologetic smile.

“I’m sure my sons would love to have help, but-”

“Excellent. I know just the person. I’ll have him report to the castle for training as soon as possible.”

“There’s no need to do anything hasty,” Marta said. “Lina and Alaric are talking with Fiora and Gustave now. We will have an official Society meeting and decide what to do once they have the full story.”

“It’s hardly hasty,” Madame Scowl said. “If we’re coming out of hiding to protect the country from rogue mermaids, we need to be prepared.”

She humphed, and the mirror rippled as she ended the enchantment.

“That went well,” Hilda said.

“As well as could be expected,” Marta said. “Well, we already have a castle full of guests. What’s one more? Hilda, can you tell the maids to prepare an additional guest room? I expect that she meant it when she said she’d send this person as soon as possible. And Henry, please tell your brothers that you will have someone new training with you.”

“I will. So Fiora and Gustave are really here?” Henry asked.

“Afraid so,” Hilda said. “I thought we were rid of that woman, then she has the nerve to show up again without an invitation.”

“Anyone in need is welcome in Aeonian,” Marta said. “Although you have to wonder how many stray princesses we’ll take in before we get to the bottom of this.”

Suddenly, it was too much. Henry sank into a chair and rubbed his pounding head. Adding Carina to the castle household had been one thing. She was trouble, but at least she was friendly about it. From what he had seen of Princess Fiora at the Princess Test, she was outright hostile.

His mother knelt in front of him and took his hands.

“You’ve been working too hard,” she said softly.

“As if I have a choice,” Henry said, hating the way his voice cracked. “We’re preparing for a fight, but we know nothing about our enemies.”

“We know that wearing out our light wielders won’t help our cause.”

Henry swallowed. His mother’s voice was soft, but her eyes were steely. She was scheming, and it was directed at him.

“I’m fine,” he said quickly. “You heard Madame Scowl. She is already preparing reinforcements.”

“Madame Scowl?” Hilda said.

“A nickname my boys have for our dear Onyx Cockroach,” Marta said.

“It suits her,” Hilda said with a laugh. “Can we make that her official new code name?”

“We won’t need code names much longer,” Marta said. “And we won’t need to work my sons to the bone much longer, either.”

“We’re fine,” Henry protested. He tried to pull his hands away, but Marta held them in a tight grip.

“Cael and Benjamin might be fine, but you clearly are not. Why don’t you take some time off and go to the mountains? Maybe check on the Vidre estate?”

She winked, and Henry fought back a blush. Which of his brothers had told Mother about Bri?

“I can’t leave. Not now.”

“Of course, you can. Even if we hurry, it will take time to prepare for the balls. Eva would be delighted to have company. You could even take over the goat herd for a while so she could come to town and be part of the excitement.”

Henry stared at his mother. She was offering his dearest wish. An escape from the castle. Time in the mountains. The chance to check on Bri. But he couldn’t take it. Not now, when another kingdom had suffered a magical attack and he was one of only three light wielders protecting Aeonian.

“Not until after the balls,” he said, but he spoke without conviction. He was a son and brother and prince, and he had responsibilities to his family and his kingdom. He couldn’t justify running off to the mountains just because he had a headache and wanted some fresh air. Or because he was worried about a woman he barely knew who had rejected his offer to help her.

Marta studied him a moment longer, then released his hands and smiled.

“Very well, if that’s what you want.”

Henry knew his mother too well to believe that she was letting the matter go that easily. He changed the subject to distract her.

“I was fitted for my suit this morning by Bastien. Apparently, he has free time since Carina left the country and has decided to make my outfit.”

“I’m sure you’ll look marvelous,” Marta said, her lip quirking up in amusement.

“I almost looked like a goat,” Henry said. “I talked him into something inspired by a goat herder instead.”

Marta’s lips quirked further upward, and Hilda frowned.

“You didn’t like the goat-themed outfit? What a shame. Bastien has been excited about it ever since Prince Stefan gave him the idea.”

Blast Stefan. Henry hoped his spy mission lasted a very long time. Then again, as long as Stefan and Carina were gone, Bastien would be making Henry’s clothes. It might be best if they came back soon after all.

His mother’s offer to send him to the mountains suddenly sounded very appealing, but Henry pushed it away. He couldn’t. At least, he couldn’t until he knew that Aeonias was safe.

The night was half gone by the time Bri thought to check on her stepfamily. She checked the mirrors in the hallway and paused outside Lady Vidre's door. She listened to her stepmother's breathing for a moment to make sure that she was asleep. She listened at Rhoda's door as well before making her way back to the kitchen. Impossible as it seemed, Bri had finally made progress deciphering the donkey's notes. Maybe the terror of a goblin in her kitchen focused her thoughts, or maybe knowing a goblin could pull her bread through a mirror opened her mind to possibilities she hadn't considered before.

Bri looked at her interpretation of the scrawled papers and bit her lip. If she had this right, she could walk into the shadows just as the goblin had walked out of them.

Bri stuffed rags in the gap under the kitchen door and blocked it with a chair. Just in case the enchantment created sound or light and someone was tempted to check.

"Open."

Bri had opened the mirrors countless times, but her heart had never pounded in her chest this much as the glass rippled. The shadows on the other side were empty. No lights or goblins.

Nothing to stop her.

Bri pressed her fingertips against the glass. It stretched like fabric pulled tight. Somewhat solid, but also giving under her

touch.

She pushed harder, and suddenly her hand was on the other side of the mirror. Bri gasped. Could it really be so easy? The enchanted glass felt cold but insubstantial around her wrist. She pushed through, all the way to her elbow. Then her shoulder.

The kitchen mirror wasn't big enough for her to go any further. Bri pulled her arm back and stared at her skin. No sign of injury. No sign of anything. Her hand looked as it always did, calloused and a bit dirty from tending fires.

She closed the mirror. This proof that she was correct should make her happy, but any feelings of satisfaction were replaced with a new apprehension. If she could fit her arm through, she could go further. She could walk all the way through the glass and step into the shadows if she dared.

Bri pulled the chair away from the kitchen door and hurried to one of the spare bedrooms. The room was empty except for the full-length mirror mounted on the wall. Useful for a lady getting dressed, as she could admire her ensemble from head to toe.

Useful for other reasons as well, apparently.

“Open.”

Bri didn't give herself time to think. She stepped over the frame and into the shadows.

The glass brushed against her skin like cobwebs, and she stood in the shadows. Bri stared into the darkness. Now that she was inside it, she could see just how vast the emptiness really was. She turned slowly. The shadows stretched as far as she could see in all directions, but she sensed that they went far beyond her line of sight. It was like staring at the ocean from high on Mount Evangelina. The water faded on the horizon, but you knew it continued.

Bri sniffed and relaxed a little when she smelled nothing. The night the mirrors had flashed red, the shadows had been filled with a terrible smell. Henry had said goblins smelled

bad. The lack of smell now was another sign that things were peaceful.

She turned back to the mirror. It hung in the air, suspended on nothing. She could see into the bedroom as if she were looking through a window. Bri pushed her hand through the glass, suddenly afraid that she was trapped here. But her hand passed easily through the opening. She pulled it back.

Now what? Bri walked into the darkness, careful to keep the mirror in sight so she didn't get lost. She was fairly certain that Father had never figured out how to come through the mirrors. Surely, he would have shown her that or recorded it in his journal if he had.

“Illuminate.”

Bri unfastened her necklace and held the diamond above her head. The glowing gem did little to banish the darkness. She could see herself more clearly, but not much more of her surroundings. Bri extinguished the light and refastened the necklace. She turned and walked slowly back to the mirror. She didn't dare explore further.

Something pressed into her back. Bri screamed and jumped forward. She flew higher than expected and landed softly some distance away.

“Heehaw!”

“Are you laughing at me?”

Bri panted for breath and glared at the donkey. He winked at her and bared his teeth in a grin.

“That wasn't nice.”

She could have sworn the donkey shrugged. His white fur glowed slightly in the darkness. She wasn't sure if it was a trick of the light or a sign that the donkey actually was a magical creature.

The donkey took a few steps away from the mirror, then looked back at Bri, clearly expecting her to follow.

“You're kidding, right? You expect me to follow you just like that?”

The donkey winked, and Bri groaned. She could go back through the mirror and spend another night searching for answers in Father's journal and the donkey's notes, or she could follow this annoying yet occasionally helpful creature into a dark void of shadows.

She looked once more at the mirror and the empty bedroom beyond it. Then she shrugged and ran after the donkey. She moved more quickly than she thought she would. She seemed to weigh less here. Bri jumped to test that theory, grinned at how high she went, then made a running leap and soared over the donkey.

He huffed in annoyance, as if telling her to grow up and take this seriously.

"You have no room to talk," Bri said.

The donkey rolled his eyes and trotted away. Bri kept up with him easily as they moved through the shadows. She was surprised to discover that the terrain was not completely flat. They climbed hills and descended into valleys as they went. Overall, they seemed to be moving down. She tried to make note of their path, just in case the donkey abandoned her and she had to find her way home alone. Going uphill would at least move her in the right direction. Beyond that, she would only be able to guess.

Bri had no idea how long or how far they had traveled when the donkey finally stopped. Time seemed meaningless in this endless night. The donkey moved behind her and nudged her forward. Bri climbed over the hill and gasped when she saw a small circle of light in the distance.

"Another mirror?"

The donkey nodded.

Bri stared at it as her world shifted yet again. She had assumed that her mirrors were unique, but apparently the Vidre estate was not the only house with such enchantments.

The donkey snorted and pushed her toward the circle of light. Bri walked toward it, but the donkey stayed behind.

"You aren't coming?"

He shook his head.

“Why?”

The donkey flattened his ears and bared his teeth. He looked angry. Bri felt sympathy rather than fear. The donkey had been friendly and helpful to her. What had the owner of this mirror done to him?

“I’ll be careful.”

The donkey nodded, and Bri crept toward the mirror. She glanced back at the donkey.

“This isn’t a trick, right? You’ll wait for me?”

He nodded, and somehow Bri believed him. She walked toward the mirror, stepping lightly and staying as quiet as possible. She approached it from the side, hoping that she would be out of sight if anyone was there. The room seemed to be empty, so she circled to the front of the mirror and looked into the room. The mirror was big enough to offer her a good view, but not quite big enough for her to crawl through. A flat surface stretched out in front of her, suggesting that the mirror was attached to a vanity or desk.

Moonlight streamed through a nearby window. It seemed bright after the darkness of the shadows. Bri studied the room, trying to guess what the donkey had wanted her to see.

The vanity was covered with cosmetics. Bri didn’t know exactly what the various bottles and brushes were for, but she recognized makeup when she saw it. This mirror probably got a lot of use as its owner transformed her face into whatever version of beauty she preferred.

It seemed like the sort of thing you would find in a bedroom, but Bri couldn’t see a bed from her vantage point. The walls were covered with bookshelves filled with large, ancient volumes. Bri squinted but couldn’t read the titles in the moonlight.

What did the donkey want her to see?

She scanned the room, searching for anything that might be a clue. A nearby table held a bowl of glistening red apples.

Some sort of fabric draped over a chair in the corner. Possibly a dress, but it was too dark for her to tell for sure. An inkwell and stack of papers sat near the apples. Maybe reading them would offer a clue, but she couldn't reach them from here.

Bri gave up on finding a clue and turned her attention to the window across the room. Where was this place? Judging by the distance they had walked, not anywhere near her estate. Was this what the donkey wanted her to see? How far she could travel while in the shadows?

Unfortunately, the narrow view from the window didn't tell her much. Moonlight glistened against a rippling body of water some distance below the window. So, this was a tall building near a lake. She was looking through a fourth or fifth story window at least.

Bri pressed her face through the mirror to get a better look. There seemed to be a forest around the lake, but it was hard to tell in the dark. Something white moved against the surface of the water. Probably birds. Possibly swans, but she couldn't be sure. They were little more than white specks at this distance.

She looked once more around the room before pulling her head back into the shadows. Bri turned and saw the donkey standing on top of the hill in the distance. She looked back at the mirror and suddenly felt nervous. How would she explain herself if someone found her spying on them through a magic mirror?

She hurried to the donkey, making the journey in a few jumps that were the closest she had ever come to flying. The donkey seemed to sense her nervousness. He nuzzled her hand once to comfort her, then trotted into the darkness. Bri followed. Now that she knew other enchanted mirrors existed, she couldn't stop searching the shadows for them. Were those flashes of light mirrors on the horizon or simply her imagination?

A green light that was definitely not her imagination flared in the distance. Bri froze and stared at the place where it had been. Was that a mirror? Or something else entirely? A terrible smell wafted through the air, and Bri gagged. She looked at

the donkey with concern, and he trotted behind her and pushed her forward. The smell faded as they moved away from whatever monsters were in the shadows.

It was still night when they reached her home, but judging by the birdsong coming from the bedroom window, it wouldn't be dark for long.

“Thanks,” Bri said.

The donkey grinned and pushed his nose against her hand in farewell. Bri scratched behind his ears, then stepped through the glass. She waved goodbye to the donkey and closed the mirror. She stared at her reflection, searching for any visible evidence of what had just happened. She looked the same as she always had, and yet, she stood a little taller as she turned away. She still had a lot of questions, but somehow the answers seemed just within reach.

“My name is Nicolas, but you can call me Nic. All my friends do. I’m so pleased to meet you.”

Henry clasped hands with the young man and watched in a daze as Nic greeted Cael with the same level of enthusiasm.

“I thought there were three of you?” Nic said.

“Benjamin had business at the archives today. He’ll join us later if he can.”

Nic nodded and turned to face the door. He shifted from one foot to the other in a sort of bouncing motion.

“Not what I expected Madame Scowl to send,” Henry whispered to Cael.

“He’s more like Sir Smiles,” Cael agreed.

Lina entered, carrying an armful of scrolls.

“Sorry I’m late-”

“Lady Evangelina! Such an honor!”

Nic bowed low, took the scrolls from a stunned Lina, and bounced beside her, waiting for directions.

“On the table, please,” Lina said with a grin. “Are you the new recruit?”

“Forgive me, Lady Evangelina. I was so excited that I forgot to properly introduce myself. I’m Nicolas, but you can call me Nic. It’s an honor.”

He bowed again, and Lina laughed.

“Please, call me Lina.”

Nic beamed at Lina, then turned and beamed at Henry and Cael as well.

“This is marvelous. I’ve dreamed of this moment my whole life, but I never thought it would actually happen.”

“This moment?” Lina asked.

“Your return. The chance to come out of hiding and train in magic. All of it. It’s a dream come true.”

Henry felt a stab of guilt. Apparently, not everyone had enjoyed life as a goat herder as much as he had. No matter his personal feelings, he shouldn’t begrudge the rest of the Society this chance to claim their identities.

“I translated more of Luca’s scrolls,” Lina said, gesturing to the pile on the table. “These techniques will allow you to take a shape in the realm of shadows.”

“Amazing!” Nic said.

Henry took a scroll and tried to read it, but it was difficult to concentrate with Nic bouncing all over the room. He looked up, caught Lina’s eye, and gave an apologetic shrug. She grinned.

“Cael and Henry, why don’t you observe us for a while? I’m going to test Nic for potential in shadow magic since he has a family history of it. It wouldn’t hurt for you to understand more about how shadow magic works.”

“That sounds fascinating,” Cael said.

The brothers turned their chairs around and faced Lina and Nic. The young man smiled, and Henry found himself curious if someone so sunny could actually be a shadow warrior. Lina looked the part, but Nic definitely did not. From his golden hair to his warm hazel eyes, everything about him radiated warmth. His skin was sun-kissed and freckled, and he looked more like he belonged in a mountain meadow than the realm of shadows.

“Nic has already told me that he dreams often,” Lina said. “This can be a sign of potential shadow magic, as the magic is most accessible when you are asleep or in a trance.”

“I hope I’ve described the dreams correctly,” Nic said. “They used to be just darkness, but lately, the darkness has a little movement in it.”

“You dream of darkness?” Cael asked.

“Blurry, hazy darkness,” Nic said with a smile. “My aunt said that was a good sign.”

It didn’t sound like much of a sign to Henry, but what did he know?

“Shadow magic is triggered by your subconscious,” Lina said. “That’s one reason it takes so much training to wield and is hard to detect. In my day, we tested for potential by interacting with enchanted objects. Those without an affinity for shadow magic will either feel pain when touching the object or damage it, like when Cael shattered the mirror in my cave.”

“Sorry again about that,” Cael said. “I had no idea.”

“It’s fine,” Lina said. “I believe the Society has put the shards to good use as communication charms.”

“Still, if there is any way I can make it up to you-”

“Hold this,” Lina said, holding a carved piece of wood toward Cael.

“What is it?”

“A spindle that has been enchanted with shadow magic. Not particularly useful, which means it doesn’t matter if we damage it.”

Cael grabbed the wood, then quickly pulled his hand back.

“Ouch!”

“I didn’t know it was possible to enchant wood,” Henry said.

“Gems are preferable,” Lina agreed. “Especially very hard gems like diamonds. But in a pinch, other things can be enchanted. They just won’t last very long, which is why you don’t have many wooden artifacts in the archive.”

She offered the spindle to Henry. He glanced nervously from it to Cael, then reached out and touched the tip with one finger.

A pricking sensation spread down his hand, and he jerked his arm back. Lina nodded.

“The shadow magic clearly doesn’t like your light magic. I don’t feel anything when I touch it. Now, Nic, let’s see what happens when you touch it. If you have light magic, it should prick you.”

“And if he has nothing?” Cael asked.

“It might still prick him, or it might explode.”

Nic’s smile didn’t falter as he reached for the spindle. Apparently, explosions didn’t faze him. He wrapped his fingers around the slender piece of wood and took it from Lina’s grasp.

Henry raised his arms in defense, just in case. But nothing exploded. Nothing happened at all for a few moments. Then a slender trail of shadows spread out from the spindle and coiled around Nic’s wrist like a piece of gray thread.

Nic laughed in delight as he looked from the shadows to Lina. She nodded.

“Congratulations, Nic. You have the potential to be a shadow warrior. I should warn you, it will take a lot of hard work.”

In response, Nic leapt from his chair and hugged her. Lina sat in stunned silence for a moment, and Nic pulled back.

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to hug you! I’m just excited!”

“I can see that,” Lina said. “I must admit, I’m excited as well. It will be nice to have another shadow warrior around.”

She wrapped her hands around the spindle with Nic's. The shadow thread around Nic's wrists thickened and grew darker. The corners of the room darkened as well, but the shadows dissolved as soon as Lina released her hold on the spindle.

They spent the rest of the afternoon training. Henry tried and failed to shape his light into a form in the realm of shadows with the method Lina described from Luca's notes. Nic tried and succeeded in lying very still on a nearby couch. Judging by his soft snoring, shadow warrior training involved taking naps. Henry tried not to be jealous, but a nap sounded much better than intense focus and a pounding headache.

"Let's stop for the day," Lina finally said. "We've accomplished a lot."

Nic immediately bounced off the couch. Maybe he hadn't been asleep after all.

"What now?" he asked.

"Are you sure we should stop now?" Cael asked. "We don't have a plan for the balls yet. Princess Fiora's information gives us a bit more to work with, but how can we trap Elspeth or any other spies that may attend? We need to decide how to prove your magic to the guests and protect them if anyone attacks."

"Princess Fiora?" Nic asked. "She's from Kell, right?"

"She's also a mermaid, an enchantress, and has an evil half-sister who enchanted Gustave," Henry said. Lina had filled them in on her conversation with Fiora, and Henry still didn't know quite what to make of it.

"Well, she doesn't mess around, does she?"

"That's one way to put it," Lina laughed.

"Overtraining is as bad as doing nothing," Lina said. "Besides, I have to attend a council meeting with Alaric. You could patrol the shadows and look for anything unusual if you want."

"Perfect," Cael said. "I'll check the seal again."

He looked expectantly at Henry. Henry looked at Nic, whose ever-present smile had faltered a little.

“I suppose I could guard your bodies while you work,” he said. “A reversal of the usual roles of shadow warriors and light wielders.”

“Or I could show you around the castle,” Henry said in a burst of inspiration. “You should learn the layout in case there is any trouble at the balls.”

Nic beamed at Henry, and Cael nodded.

“That’s smart. He can show the other Society members when they get here as well. I’ll patrol by myself and report to Lina if I find anything.”

Henry guided Nic out of the training room before Cael could change his mind. Nic followed Henry down the hallway, bouncing with each step.

“Thanks for showing me around! This is-”

“Great. I know,” Henry said. “Let’s go to the servants’ wing first. You won’t spend as much time there in your day-to-day life, so you’ll have to make an extra effort to learn that part of the castle.”

“That’s going to take some getting used to. Up until now, the servants’ wing is the only place I would have spent any time.”

“I know what you mean. I felt very awkward in the finer rooms when we first moved here. Sometimes I still do.”

“Really? You seem so comfortable and confident.”

“You think so?”

Henry studied Nic, searching for the stiff expression that usually accompanied a compliment from the court, but the man’s admiration seemed genuine.

“I kept the secret while hiding on the mountain. You kept it with an entire country and your stepfamily watching. It’s impressive.”

“I guess.”

Henry had never thought of himself as impressive before.

“Do you want to train together once I get better at shadow magic?” Nic asked. “I’m sure you’d rather work with Lina, but I’ll need a partner eventually, and- sorry. That’s a stupid thing to ask.”

“Actually, that sounds fun.”

“Yeah?”

Nic grinned at Henry, and Henry grinned back. He couldn’t help it. There was something contagious about Nic’s genuine warmth and enthusiasm.

“This is the gate guard’s room,” Henry said, turning his attention back to the tour. “They control who comes in and out of the castle.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Nic said, offering his hand to the guard on duty.

The guard shook it and offered Henry a questioning look.

“Lina’s new apprentice,” Henry said. “He has potential for shadow magic.”

“Ah.”

The guard’s expression changed from confusion to respect, and Nic smiled at both of them.

“So, you protect the gate?” Nic said. “It closes after sunset, right? I heard you wouldn’t even let Evangelina Shadow-Storm in when she arrived after dark!”

“There have been several disturbances lately that disrupted that rule, but in general, the gate is closed after dark. Make sure you’re back before sunset if you go out.”

“Why would I want to go out? I just got here.”

The guard laughed, then turned to Henry.

“A message came for you, Prince Henry. I might as well give it to you now, since you’re here.”

“You distribute messages as well?” Nic asked.

“We do, indeed.”

The guard pulled a glossy pink envelope from a box and handed it to Henry. Henry waited until they left the room to check the names on the envelope.

Lady Mildred Hawley and Lucille Vidre

That explained the gilded edges and slight scent of snowbells lingering on the paper. He cracked the wax seal and held the note high enough so that Nic could read over his shoulder.

“A dinner party invitation!” Nic said. “That sounds fun.”

Fun was the last word that Henry would use to describe such a thing, but he kept the thought to himself. No need to dampen Nic’s enthusiasm.

“We should go,” Nic said.

“We?”

“It says you can bring a friend. Maybe Cael will come as well.”

“We don’t have time for parties.”

“Oh, I see.”

Nic’s face fell, and Henry felt a strange pang of guilt.

“You really want to go?”

“Not if you don’t want to. It’s just, I’ve never been to a formal event before. It would be good to practice before I’m presented as royalty at the ball.”

Henry found he couldn’t disagree with that. Which was a shame, because he really wanted to. Still, it wasn’t all bad. This was an opportunity to question Lucille Vidre, and Henry had a lot of questions.

“Bri!”

The rest of Lady Vidre’s words were garbled by Rhoda’s shrieking. The knife in Bri’s hand slipped and came dangerously close to slicing her finger. She had been on edge since she learned how easy it was to walk through mirrors and that there was a goblin stealing their food. Her stepfamily’s screaming launched her into action.

She pushed aside the potatoes she was chopping, tightened her grip on the knife, and sprinted through the house.

Rhoda screamed as Bri burst into the room with a knife held over her head. Lady Vidre stepped back, eyes wide with alarm.

Bri searched the room for signs of a monster. The mirror looked normal. Her stepmother and stepsister were surprised but unharmed. Not a goblin attack then. She quickly lowered the knife and hid it behind her back.

“You called?”

They stared at her in silence a few moments longer, which gave Bri time to catch her breath. Nothing had come through the mirrors. Her secret was still safe.

Surprisingly, Rhoda recovered first.

“A carriage is coming down the drive,” she said. “A royal carriage.”

“Clean the kitchen and prepare refreshments for the prince,” Lady Vidre said. “And for the love of everything, clean your face and put that knife away.”

Bri gave a quick curtsy and hurried away. She paused to look out a window before she returned to the kitchen. Sure enough, a carriage rolled down the winding road that led into their valley. It was still some distance away. How had her stepfamily seen it? Had they been sitting by the window watching, just in case?

Regardless, a royal visit meant potential trouble. Prince Cael hadn't caused any harm last time, but he was still connected to Evangelina Shadow-Storm.

Bri wrapped the knife in a rag and put it in her apron pocket, just in case. Then she hurried to straighten the parlor and brew the tea.

Her efforts were for nothing. When Lady Vidre and Rhoda answered the door, they found a servant in the royal livery waiting for them. He handed them an envelope, bid them to follow the instructions exactly, and left.

Bri listened to the exchange from the hallway. She waited until the carriage rattled away, then burst out of the kitchen with the tea tray.

“Refreshments, my lady?”

Lady Vidre glared at her, but Rhoda accepted a cup of tea. Mother and daughter walked to the sitting room, and Bri followed. Whatever instructions the royal family had sent, she wanted to know about them.

The envelope was made of fine paper with a silver sheen and sealed with crimson wax stamped with the royal seal of Aeonian. It was the most official looking document that Bri had ever seen. Judging by the careful way that Lady Vidre opened the seal and unfolded the paper, she felt the same way. The lady's eyes widened as she read, and she turned to Rhoda with a wide smile.

“We've been invited to another royal ball!”

Rhoda offered a small smile that said she was happy but not thrilled. Bri's heart sank. First the wedding, now a ball? What were the odds that her family would be invited to the castle so frequently if there wasn't some sort of scheme?

Rhoda took the invitation and read it. Her smile widened.

"This says that everyone in the kingdom is invited. Even servants."

"There's no need to sound so pleased about it," Lady Vidre sniffed. "Who wants to attend a ball crowded with riffraff?"

Bri couldn't contain her curiosity any longer. She moved behind Rhoda so she could read over her stepsister's shoulder.

Rhoda had spoken the truth. There would be three balls to celebrate the recent wedding of Crown Prince Alaric to the shadow warrior Evangelina Shadow-Storm. Everyone in Aeonian was invited, regardless of rank.

Bri raised an eyebrow. She was inclined to agree with Lady Vidre. A ballroom filled with an entire country sounded like an unpleasant proposition.

"This says that as the noble family of the house, we're responsible for notifying our staff and the locals in our area of the invitation," Rhoda said. "That must be what the servant meant by following the instructions in the invitation."

"As if they would be interested in attending," Lady Vidre said. "It's a mad scheme. What possessed the royal family to do such a thing?"

Bri wondered about that as well. What could Evangelina Shadow-Storm possibly gain from inviting the whole country to her castle?

Unless that was where she planned to make her move. The wedding had been held on short notice and sparsely attended. Maybe she needed time to prepare her magic. Maybe she wanted a bigger audience for whatever she had planned.

Bri wiped her sweaty palms against her skirt. The danger had spread from the mirrors and her family to all of Aeonian. Whatever else happened, she needed to attend that ball.

“Notify the servants. Such nonsense. Bri, you’ll take care of that.”

“What?”

“We’ll be far too busy getting ready to see to such a ridiculous task. Go around the estate today and tell the necessary people about the invitation. We don’t want to be accused of ignoring the king’s instructions.”

Bri sighed. There went her careful avoidance of the outdoor servants. And she wasn’t sure which of them could read, so she would have to deliver the message verbally in person rather than leaving a note.

“And Bri?”

Bri halted in the doorway and turned to face her stepmother. Something in Lady Vidre’s expression made her flinch.

“Yes, Lady Vidre?”

“Don’t get any ideas about attending this ball. You’ve already ruined Rhoda’s chances once. I won’t let you run loose in the castle and make things even worse.”

“Yes, Lady Vidre.”

Bri frowned as she stepped outside and squinted in the sunshine. That made things more difficult. If she couldn’t ride to Mias with her stepfamily, she would have to find another way to get to the city. Because no matter what her stepmother said, she needed to attend that ball.

She walked to the nearest cottage and knocked on the door. She heard scuffling inside, and then the door opened. It was the same woman who had helped cook food for Lady Hawley’s visit. Frieda’s gray-streaked hair was pulled back in a tight braid that made her down-turned mouth seem even more severe.

“Well, I never. Gabriella Vidre on my doorstep. What brings you here?”

“It’s Bri, and I have a message for everyone.”

Frieda raised an eyebrow.

“Everyone?”

“The king has invited everyone to a royal ball at the castle. Three balls, in fact.”

“He invited everyone?”

The goat herder seemed to find this as ridiculous as Lady Vidre had. Bri sighed and gave her the rest of the information. Frieda retrieved a piece of slate and chalk from her cottage and wrote down the dates and times for the three balls. Bri made a mental note that the woman could obviously read and write. Next time, she could deliver this message in a note.

“Everyone,” Frieda mused. “I suppose that includes you, Gabriella. Will you attend?”

“Not if Lady Vidre has anything to say about it.”

“Hmmm.”

Bri pressed her lips together and wished she had kept her mouth shut from the beginning. The woman’s eyes were sharp and focused wholly on her.

“A ball attended by the whole country is a good opportunity to meet new people. Or perhaps to spend time with old friends.”

“Can you pass on this information to the others?”

Frieda’s manner was friendly enough, but Bri was feeling increasingly nervous. She felt exposed, standing out in the open and being studied.

“Yes, I’ll make sure they get the message and pass it on to all the other goat herders on the mountain. News like this will travel quickly, I’m sure.”

“Thank you.”

Bri didn’t realize she was backing away until she was some distance from the door. Frieda chuckled.

“A ball like this is a once in a lifetime event. Are you sure you don’t mean to attend? We should have extra room in our

cart if you want a ride.”

Bri mumbled an answer that not even she understood and hurried back to the house. She didn't relax until she had closed the door behind her and checked the kitchen mirror. Then she sank into a chair and took a few deep breaths. Evangelina Shadow-Storm was finally making her move, and the invitation to the ball meant that she could be there and try to stop it. But how could she leave her house unguarded with goblins coming through the mirrors? It was an impossible dilemma.

“It is such an honor to have you at our home, Your Highness.”

Henry smiled politely and resisted the urge to adjust his collar. It was uncomfortably tight, and the stuffy atmosphere in Lady Hawley’s overdecorated dining room wasn’t helping.

Neither was her constant repetition of what an honor his presence was.

“Your brother couldn’t attend?” Lucille Vidre asked.

Henry hadn’t recognized her at first. Only when she introduced herself to Nic did he realize the primed and polished lady in front of him was Bri’s mistress. From her ruffled dress to her overwhelming perfume, Lucille had been remade in Lady Hawley’s image.

“He was otherwise engaged,” Henry said.

Lucille offered him a smile as glistening as the jewels she wore. Both were probably fake. Henry had spent a fair amount of time around jewels for his training and even more time around overly polite nobles trying to make a good impression.

Lucille was trying very hard.

“It is such a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Vidre,” Nic said. “Have you been in Mias long?”

“Lady Vidre is my mother. Please, call me Lucille.”

Lucille gave that dazzling, practiced smile again. It was as well rehearsed as any dance step, and Lady Hawley watched from across the room with a satisfied expression. She was clearly the choreographer.

“Lucille, then,” Nic said. “I can’t thank you enough for the invitation tonight. It’s my first dinner party.”

“Is it indeed?” Lucille said.

She stopped there, but Lady Hawley sniffed in disapproval. Nic’s mix up with Lucille’s title was enough to signal his inexperience with polite company. Never mind his coming out and telling them that he was inexperienced with polite company.

“How is your family?” Henry asked. “It must be hard to be away from home for so long.”

“Not at all. I find the atmosphere in Mias absolutely dazzling. The company cannot be matched.”

“And your family?”

Was it Henry’s imagination, or was she avoiding the question?

“They are well,” Lucille said. “I expect Mother and Rhoda will come to town soon so they can attend the royal balls.”

She looked at Lady Hawley when she said this, and the lady gave a small nod, as if passing judgment.

“Rhoda is your sister?” Nic asked.

Lucille nodded.

“I’m glad your family can come,” Nic said. “Social events are so much more fun when you attend with people you know. When will they arrive?”

“I have no idea. Soon, I hope.”

Lucille looked at Lady Hawley again. A small flicker of disapproval crossed the lady’s face, and she looked purposefully from Lucille to Henry. Annoyance flashed briefly in Lucille’s eyes, then she giggled and turned to the prince.

“I am looking forward to dancing with you again, Your Highness. I so enjoyed our dance last time.”

Nic looked from Lucille to Henry with wide eyes. Then he grinned and nudged Henry’s shoulder.

“I should have known you would take the prettiest girl for yourself, Henry. Perhaps I could dance with Rhoda, then. I’d love to make her acquaintance if she’s half as pretty as her sister.”

“I’m afraid Rhoda will be otherwise engaged with Prince Cael,” Lady Hawley said.

She gave Nic a withering look, as if he were a dog that could be sent running if she glared hard enough. Nic smiled back at her.

“Is that so? What a shame. Still, with the whole country invited, I’m sure no one will lack for dance partners.”

“Yes, such a strange event,” Lady Hawley sniffed. “I mean no offense to you, of course, Your Highness.”

“None taken,” Henry said. “The entire royal family is aware that this is a strange way to host a ball, but Evangelina Shadow-Storm is eager to meet more of her subjects. I am curious how the servants who wish to attend will be accommodated. I understand that the nobles of remote estates have been put in charge of spreading the word of the invitation. Do you know how your family is handling that, Lucille? Do they plan to offer transportation to those who wish to attend?”

Lucille blinked, then recovered her composure and offered Henry that glittering smile once again.

“I’m sure I have no idea, Your Highness. But my mother is very generous in the running of her estate. I’m sure she will make provisions.”

“She’s far too generous,” Lady Hawley snapped.

The group turned to her in surprise. Lady Hawley herself looked startled. She stayed silent for a moment, then offered a gracious smile, as if forgiving someone else’s misstep.

“Why do you say she is too generous?” Henry asked. “Surely generosity is a positive trait.”

He was pressing his luck, but this was the closest he had come to getting information about Bri. He didn't believe their claims of generosity for a moment, but perhaps their answers would reveal something useful.

“Lady Hawley and my mother had a small disagreement about how to treat the household staff,” Lucille explained. “A difference in country and city manners. Nothing more.”

“I see,” Henry said.

This had to have something to do with Bri. She was the only household staff working at the Vidre estate. Henry's heart twisted as he tried to decide a subtle way to inquire further. Bri had not been treated well to begin with, and now Lady Hawley was suggesting that she found Bri treated too well. Did that mean that Bri's conditions were even worse now thanks to this lady?

“Providing transportation for the servants is an interesting logistical problem,” Nic said. “I grew up in the mountains. It is a long trip into town. Of course, your servants won't have that problem, Lady Hawley. I'm sure they're excited to attend the ball.”

“Indeed,” Lady Hawley said. “Every accommodation possible has been made.”

Henry glanced at the maid serving refreshments. She rolled her eyes behind Lady Hawley's back. That was worrying. The plan to show Lina's magic and legitimacy to the whole country wouldn't work if only rich nobles attended.

“Shall we proceed to the dining room?” Lady Hawley said.

She pulled Nic along with her and gave Henry a significant look. He smiled at Lucille and offered his arm. She took it. Her smile said she was happy, but her hand was tense as it rested on Henry's sleeve.

He spent the rest of the evening trying and failing to get more information about Bri. Lady Hawley offered to serve drinks after dinner. Henry declined politely, reminding her that

the gates would lock at sunset. They would already have to hurry to make it back in time. Thankfully, that gave them a reason to cut their goodbyes short. Henry sat quietly in the carriage while Nic chattered about the evening.

“Charming ladies. Haven’t had such a good time in ages.”

“You’ll have to be more careful once you’re announced as a member of the royal family,” Henry said. “They mostly ignored you because they thought you were a nobody, but if you’re that friendly with young women as a nobleman, you’ll find yourself engaged in no time.”

“I know. In fact, I’m counting on it.”

Henry raised an eyebrow. Nic grinned and, for once, didn’t elaborate. The future shadow warrior hurried away when the carriage stopped at the royal stables. Henry walked back to his room and sat on his bed. He pulled the box of goat herder clothes out and stared at it. He had yet to replace the boots that Stefan had stolen, but some of his older riding boots would do if he scuffed them first. He could take his horse and be back in the mountains in a few hours. He could check on Bri and make sure that Lady Hawley hadn’t done something to harm her.

He could do that, but then he would miss training in the morning.

Henry pushed the box back under the bed and stared into the distance until the room around him fell out of focus. His star appeared in the shadows.

His extra training had paid off. Henry flew quickly through the realm of shadows and found his destination without difficulty. He hovered in front of the small mirror and flashed his light a few times.

Nothing happened. Henry squinted, focusing on the space beyond the glass. The cottage’s interior was empty.

“Eva! Eva, are you there?”

Nothing. Henry settled in to wait. He watched the shadows in the cottage lengthen as the sun set behind the mountains. Then it grew dark. Finally, the door opened. Henry heard a

match strike, then a flickering light showed his cousin's silhouette.

“Eva! It's Henry.”

Eva spun toward the sound, and the candle went out. She muttered something under her breath and lit it again. Her face appeared in the mirror.

“Henry? What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you. Where have you been?”

Eva shrugged.

“Your voice sounds better. Seems like training with Lina has paid off. What do you want?”

She was dodging his question, but Henry let her. He told Eva about his conversation with Lucille and his concerns about Bri. Eva's eyes sparkled in the candlelight as she listened.

“You think that Lady Hawley convinced Lady Vidre to mistreat her only servant?”

“Something like that. I know it sounds a bit far-fetched, but something strange is happening on that estate.”

“Something strange like true love?”

“Eva, please. This isn't a joke.”

“I didn't laugh.”

“You're laughing on the inside.”

“I'm doing no such thing.”

Eva's glittering eyes said otherwise, but Henry let the matter drop.

“I just want to make sure that she's alright. If she's been mistreated or is in danger, I want to help. But I have to stay at the castle and train right now.”

“So, you want me to check on your girlfriend for you? Shall I pass on a message as well? Maybe bring her a bouquet of flowers?”

Eva sounded entirely too excited about the prospect, and Henry groaned.

“Just check on her and make sure that she isn’t hurt. Don’t ask her a lot of questions. Don’t interfere.”

“Of course not,” Eva said. “I would never dream of interfering with your love life.”

“You could at least try to sound convincing.”

Eva winked.

“Just leave it to me. I’ll make sure that your girlfriend is unharmed and can make it to the ball.”

“Who said anything about the ball?”

“Don’t you want to dance with her and tell her how you feel?”

“Eva, I just want to make sure she’s safe.”

“Which is why you need her to come to the ball so you can ask her yourself!”

Now that she mentioned it, the ball would be the perfect place to meet up with Bri and make sure she was alright. He wouldn’t mind a dance either, if Bri liked dancing. Henry’s face flushed, and he was glad that Eva could only see him as a star.

“Don’t do anything suspicious, Eva. I’ll come up the mountain to visit as soon as I can, but I can’t leave training right now.”

“Nothing suspicious. Got it.”

“I wish I believed you. Speaking of suspicious, why were you out so late tonight?”

“Close.”

Eva’s face disappeared as she closed the mirror and left Henry alone in the shadows. He shook his head to break the enchantment and flopped onto his bed. He hoped he hadn’t just made a terrible mistake.

Bri opened and closed the kitchen mirror, just in case. The shadows were as empty as they had been ten minutes ago. She wished she found that reassuring. She took her necklace off and guarded the mirror so that she could work in relative peace. Her nerves were frayed from the constant bustle of getting Rhoda ready for the ball and her uncertainty about how to proceed with her mission to attend the ball herself. She threw her attention into making soup instead. An outdoor servant had stopped by to tell Bri that they had spread the word of the ball to the others. He had also brought a large basket of vegetables, and they would go bad if Bri didn't do something with them.

She stirred the simmering liquid and tried to decide if she should take the goat herder's offer and ride into town with them. They knew her true identity and enough about her past to be curious. She didn't want to deal with questions about her situation while she was trying to gather information about a shadow warrior.

But she couldn't get that information unless she made it to the ball.

But if she went to the ball, the mirrors would be unprotected.

Then again, what protection could she really offer against a goblin attack?

A donkey's bray echoed through the kitchen. Bri dropped her spoon and checked the mirror. It still reflected the kitchen.

She turned toward the source of the sound and discovered a shard of glass tucked into the corner. Had that always been there? She grabbed her diamond from the large mirror and rushed toward the small one. It was so small that she had to lean close to see into the shadows.

Once she did, her eyes widened in surprise. She found herself face to face with a goblin rather than the donkey.

“You again!”

If he was back to steal her bread, he was out of luck. Bri reached her hand toward the mirror to guard it.

“Wait! Don’t close it!”

The goblin’s voice was deep and gravelly. Bri froze for a moment, too surprised to move. The donkey brayed again as if agreeing with the monster. Bri lowered her hand and looked from the donkey to the goblin. She trusted the donkey. At least, she hadn’t found a reason not to trust him. If the donkey had brought the goblin, he must have a reason.

She breathed deeply, inhaling the comforting scent of her simmering stew. She sniffed, slowly realizing something.

“You don’t stink.”

“I beg your pardon?”

The goblin sounded offended. It would have been funny if he wasn’t so intimidating.

“Goblins usually stink. Why don’t you?”

“I’m not a goblin.”

Bri raised an eyebrow and put her hands on her hips. She was not in the mood to be toyed with, especially not with the creature that had caused havoc by stealing her goose and bread.

“I’m a human. A witch cursed me.”

Bri had no idea if that was possible, but her definition of possible was pretty loose these days. She looked at the donkey. He nodded his head, and she sighed. This situation was getting more and more complicated.

Behind her, the soup boiled over and sizzled on the stove. Bri cried out in alarm and sprinted over to stir it and pull it off the heat. The last thing she needed was to burn dinner on top of everything else.

“I’m in a hurry,” the goblin growled. “I need medicine for a friend.”

He seemed offended that she cared more about the soup than what he wanted. That annoyed Bri. He was the one who had arrived unannounced and made demands. She answered him without turning around.

“Another goblin? I don’t know anything about goblins.”

She could practically feel him seething as she sprinkled herbs into the broth.

“You know what they’re called, so you know more than me.”

Bri shrugged and tasted the soup. It was a little overcooked, but maybe she could mask the burnt flavor with herbs and say it was meant to taste smoky.

“She has a fever,” the goblin said. “I can pay you. Please.”

The please caught Bri off guard. So, the monster had manners, after all. And his friend was a lady? She hadn’t considered the possibility of female goblins. Another reminder of how little she knew.

She may not know about shadows, but she did know how to treat a fever. Bri turned around to face the sliver of glass and the monster behind it.

“You’ll pay for the bread you stole as well.”

If she was going to help him, it would be on her own terms.

The goblin nodded.

“I’m not a doctor,” Bri said, just in case he had the wrong idea about her skills. No need to provide false hope if the illness was serious.

“I can’t go to a doctor looking like this.”

That was a fair point. Bri doused the fire under her pot of soup but left the coals glowing to keep it warm.

“Tell me more about her illness.”

“She was caught in the rain and is burning hot. She’s unconscious.”

“You’ve put her somewhere warm? Dried her off?”

“No. Well, I tried.”

The goblin held up his claws, and Bri understood. They were long and sharp. Perfect for slashing enemies in battle. Not ideal for tending to a sick friend. This would be more complicated than sending a basket of herbs and instructions.

Bri thought only a moment before she made up her mind.

“I’ll have to come with you then. You can pay me in jewels.”

The goblin nodded, and Bri’s heart began to race. After all this time, could the solution to her jewel problem really be so easy?

Well, not exactly easy, but convenient. Even if the goblin only provided one gem, that was one less mirror to worry about watching.

“Come back here in an hour with the jewels and something to carry soup in. I’ll have everything ready.”

She hurried out of the kitchen before the goblin could change his mind. Even one small gem was ridiculous overpayment for a few herbs and a pot of soup. Best not to let him think about that too much.

Bri tiptoed through the hallway and paused outside her stepmother’s room to see if she had heard. Lady Vidre and Rhoda were discussing the fashion benefits of fans and whether or not Rhoda should carry one at the ball.

Thank goodness they hadn’t heard the goblin. That would have been difficult to explain.

Confident that the discussion of fans and other ballroom matters would keep her stepfamily occupied for the time

being, Bri grabbed a basket and began gathering supplies. She collected every herb that could possibly be useful for a fever, as well as a mortar and pestle to mix them. Then she returned to the kitchen to check the soup. She tasted a spoonful and nodded with satisfaction. It didn't taste burnt.

She carried the basket of herbs and the pot of soup to the empty bedroom, opened the large mirror, and waited.

It didn't take long. The goblin appeared out of the darkness like some kind of phantom, and Bri swallowed. He looked much scarier now that she could see all of him.

“Stay back, or I'll close it.”

Donkey-approved or not, she didn't want the goblin anywhere near her house. He paused, and Bri relaxed a little. He was listening to what she said. That was a good sign.

The goblin held out his arms. Two buckets dangled from his claws. Bri hesitated. She obviously needed to retrieve them, but she didn't want to get that close to the goblin.

The donkey solved the dilemma by gathering the buckets and delivering them to Bri. One bucket was empty. That wasn't exactly what Bri had meant by something to put soup in, but it would work.

The other bucket was filled with gems.

Bri fought to hide her surprise as she stared at the sparkling jewels at the bottom of the bucket. There was a fortune here. Enough to buy her estate a few times over.

She ladled soup into the empty bucket, moving slowly to hide the way her hands shook. She had gems. More than enough gems. This changed everything.

Now she just needed to uphold her end of the bargain.

Bri hid the bucket of gems under an old blanket in the corner of the room and stepped through the mirror. Further study of the donkey's papers had taught her that she could open and close the mirrors from both sides. She closed it now, just in case something tried to sneak through and disturb the house or steal her gems.

The donkey nodded in satisfaction and twisted his head to look behind him. He huffed at Bri. She hopped on his back and hoped that was what he meant. She didn't want to get bucked off and spill the soup.

The donkey snorted, apparently satisfied that she had followed his order, and Bri adjusted the soup to a comfortable position on her lap.

“Lead the way.”

The goblin sprinted into the shadows. The donkey kept up with no trouble, and Bri suspected they were using some kind of magic to increase their speed. How else could they move fast enough to sweep her hair back without jostling the bucket of soup? Lights blurred past her in a whirl of white and green. She thought they were mirrors, but they were gone too quickly for her to say for sure.

And then they arrived. The goblin stepped through a mirror, and Bri hopped off the donkey and followed him.

She gasped as she entered a huge room completely filled with mirrors. It was dark, but even in the shadows Bri could tell this was the grandest room she had ever been in. The mirrored ceiling stretched far above her, showing her reflection from above. She looked tiny compared to the goblin.

The sound of falling rain echoed through the vast space, and Bri frowned. It had been a clear day in Aeonian, so where was she? Not in the shadows anymore, but certainly nowhere near home.

The goblin led her through a hallway, and Bri jogged to keep up with his lumbering pace. Wherever they were, it was impossibly large and impossibly luxurious. A castle, if Bri had to guess. She was too winded to ask all the questions that swarmed her mind. Where were they? How had the goblin acquired such a luxurious home? Not by sinister means, she hoped.

She followed the goblin to the kitchen, and then to a small closet near it. Bri wondered why they were there, then she

hissed in disapproval when she saw the woman lying on the floor.

“What did you do to her?”

The goblin growled as Bri waited for her eyes to adjust to the dim light. The woman was certainly feverish. Her pale skin and flushed cheeks were dotted with perspiration, and her golden-brown hair stuck to her face.

“Can you help her?”

He sounded strangely human when he asked, and Bri relaxed a bit. However this had come to pass, the goblin cared what happened to this woman. That was a start.

“I’ll do my best,” Bri said. “Go fetch water. She’ll need something to drink.”

The goblin lumbered out of the room, and Bri got to work. She pulled the blankets off the woman and frowned when she felt they were wet.

“Illuminate.”

She lit her diamond so she could see and carefully peeled the woman’s wet dress off her skin. The fabric was stained and threadbare. Bri scowled, outraged that the woman, who was obviously some sort of servant judging by her sleeping quarters, had not been provided with better clothes to wear.

Then she looked down at her own dress and grimaced. It wasn’t much better. No wonder people always offered to help her. In their eyes, she probably looked worse off than this woman.

Someone had left folded up men’s clothing near the makeshift mattress. Bri lifted the woman to a sitting position so she could pull the shirt over her. It was far too large, but it would cover her and protect her dignity.

The trousers were more difficult. Bri inched them up the woman’s legs, and the woman’s eyes fluttered open.

“What are you doing?”

Her voice was soft and slurred. Bri doubted that she was fully conscious, but she would take what she could get.

“I’m here to help. Do you think you can stand long enough to get dressed and walk to the kitchen?”

“I’m fine!” the woman said. “I can keep working. I’m fine.”

Panic filled her eyes, and Bri frowned.

“There’s no work to do right now,” she said. “Why don’t we go sit in the kitchen?”

“The kitchen.”

The woman seemed content with the idea. Bri pulled her to her feet, tied a belt around the woman’s waist to secure the too-large trousers, and half-carried her into the kitchen. Bri frowned at the blisters and raw patches of skin on the woman’s hands. Getting caught in the rain was the least of this woman’s worries.

Bri lowered the woman into a chair and got to work. She built a fire, grateful to find that the kitchen was better stocked than the rest of the empty rooms they had passed. She searched for materials to create a makeshift bed and extinguished the light from her diamond as the roaring fire now lit the room. She helped the woman into the bed, found a bowl and spoon, and offered the woman bites of soup. Water would be better, but that would have to wait until the goblin returned.

Bri crushed some herbs with the mortar and pestle and stirred them into the soup. The woman made a face at the bitter taste but didn’t complain as Bri continued to offer her small bites of the mixture.

“I can get you out of here,” Bri whispered. “If you’re in trouble, I can help.”

She shook her head, and her expression grew stubborn.

“I need to stay.”

It was the most coherent she had sounded since Bri arrived, and Bri didn’t have the heart to argue. Besides,

judging by the conviction in the woman's voice, there would be no use arguing.

Bri wondered if this was how she looked to other people. Disheveled and overworked but refusing to change or accept help.

Probably.

"Is it magic?" Bri whispered. "Are you guarding the mirrors?"

Maybe this woman was a kindred spirit. Another person tasked with a responsibility that she didn't understand but couldn't abandon.

But the woman's eyes had glazed over again. She slumped, and Bri wrapped a hand around her back to support her as she continued to feed her the mixture of soup and herbs.

The goblin returned with a pan full of water. It had certainly taken him long enough. Bri lowered the woman onto a pillow and glared at the goblin. No matter if the woman refused to leave, she couldn't shake the feeling that this entire thing was his fault.

She wanted to stay, and yet, she needed to get home. Who knew how long the return journey would take? She had her own responsibilities, and she had done all that she could for the woman right now.

"Keep the fire fed. Give her water whenever she's awake. Soup if she asks for it. There's willow bark in that bowl. Make a strong tea with it and have her sip it when she wakes. It will reduce the fever."

The goblin followed her gestures as she pointed out each item, then turned his attention to Bri.

"Will she be alright?"

Bri looked back at the woman. Her face was already less flushed, and she was sleeping peacefully. She wasn't in any danger.

Unless... She turned back to the goblin and glared at him.

“She’ll recover if she’s allowed to rest. If you force her to work again, she won’t regain her strength.”

“I’ll take care of her.”

He sounded sincere. Well, as sincere as such a monster could sound. Perhaps he was telling the truth, and he was human after all. Still, Bri hesitated.

“I don’t like leaving her here with you. I don’t like anything about this situation.”

“I’ll take care of her.”

He growled as he said it, and Bri fought the urge to growl back. Something about him being defensive made her feel defensive as well.

“I’ll know if you don’t, and don’t think you’re invincible just because you’re a goblin.”

The goblin stared at her in surprise, and Bri returned his gaze. Whatever role this monster had played in this woman’s condition, he needed to know that someone was watching and would hold him responsible. She had no idea how, but she had a bucket of gems and a magical donkey. She would figure something out.

“I will take care of her. I’ll make sure she rests.”

“Make sure that you do. I’ll see myself out.”

She turned quickly and left the kitchen. The white donkey was waiting for her in the hallway, and Bri smiled at him in relief. She wasn’t sure if she could find her way out of this castle without him, much less get back to her own house.

The donkey trotted through the hallway. Bri caught glimpses of tapestries and empty bedrooms. Maybe this place was simply a larger version of her own estate. A once-grand home that was now occupied only because of the mirrors.

It was still raining. Bri paused in the mirror room and tried to see out the window, but it was too dark. This castle’s location would remain a mystery for now.

She followed the donkey through the mirror, hopped on his back at his signal, and realized halfway home that she had forgotten her basket. No matter. She had other baskets, and that would give her an excuse to return and check on the woman.

She didn't know her name, Bri realized. Didn't know the goblin's name either. She had no way of finding them outside the shadows.

The mystery nagged at her the whole ride home. Then suddenly, they were outside the bedroom mirror again. Bri opened it and slipped through. The donkey winked at her and trotted away until he disappeared into the shadows.

Bri lifted the blanket and peeked at the bucket of gems. The jewels glistened back at her, the only proof she had that her strange evening hadn't been a dream.

And what marvelous proof it was. She had everything she needed to guard the mirrors now. And if she could guard the mirrors, she could leave the estate and go to the ball. Nothing would stop her now.

Well, almost nothing. Bri frowned at her reflection. If anything, she looked even worse than that woman. Her dress was covered with soot and cinders from sleeping by the fireplace. Her hair was greasy and slicked against her head. Her hands were just as calloused and work worn.

She might have gems to guard the mirrors, but she would need more than that to sneak into the ball.

She needed a dress.

Henry grimaced at his reflection. Bastien’s interpretation of goat herder clothing could be worse. He repeated that over and over in his head. It could be worse. It could be worse.

“It couldn’t be better!” Bastien crowed.

The tailor circled Henry, nodding his approval. Henry tried to see the outfit through Bastien’s excited eyes and failed. The silk suit had been tailored into an odd shape to mimic the loose fit of goat herder tunics and trousers. The normally comfortable boots had been replaced with a pair that was stiff and uncomfortable but designed to look loose and comfortable. Henry would never understand fashion.

“And now the hat.”

Bastien placed a strangely heavy lump of fabric on Henry’s head. His reflection showed the reason for the weight. A crown had been inserted into the center of the floppy goat herder’s cap. It looked like a castle rising from the mist, if the castle was made of metal and the mist was an awkward beige satin.

No, he would never understand fashion. Bastien and his assistants exclaimed at the design and showered compliments on Henry, while the prince tried not to think about the fact that he would wear this outfit in public in a few days. In front of the whole kingdom, or at least those who showed up.

It could be worse. At least he wasn’t wearing a tail.

What if Bri came and saw him like this?

Henry shook his head at his foolishness. He was supposed to be defending the kingdom, yet he couldn't stop thinking about Bri. The shaking motion sent the hat and crown tilting dangerously down the side of his head, and an assistant lunged forward to catch it.

"Thank you for your hard work," Henry said. "Is there anything else you need to fit before I go?"

"No, it's perfect."

Henry felt relieved as he changed into his normal palace clothes, then groaned at himself for how far his standards had slipped if he considered this outfit comfortable.

A servant found him in the hallway and handed him a summons from Queen Marta.

He walked to his mother's room, half-hoping that she would insist on sending him to the mountains again. He was tired enough of preparations to accept this time, but such an offer was unlikely. Couriers had been sent to noble families in every part of the kingdom. After Henry reported how Lady Hawley acted toward the idea of inviting servants to the ball, additional messengers had been sent to make sure that word spread to commoners as well.

Henry had no idea what Mother wanted, which was never a good sign. He knocked on her door and entered cautiously. Queen Marta sat at her desk, bent over her locket. Blast it all, what did the Society want now?

"How is the new recruit's training going?" Madame Scowl asked.

Marta gestured for Henry to come over and answer.

"Nic is doing well," he said. He had no idea if Nic's progress was typical for a shadow warrior or not, but he had jumped into training with more enthusiasm than Henry had known was possible. That had to count for something.

"No names!" Madame Scowl protested.

"The entire kingdom will know his name in a matter of days," Henry said.

“But they don’t know it yet. Do you want to ruin a century of secrecy so close to the end?”

The shard of glass showed her scowling mouth. Henry shared a look with his mother. She shrugged.

“My apologies,” he said. “I will refrain from making such a mistake again.”

“See that you do.”

“Have invitations spread in your part of the mountain?” Marta asked.

“Yes, no thanks to the noble families. I expect far fewer servants and commoners will attend than we hoped. Most nobles are not even offering their workers time off, much less providing transportation.”

Did that mean Bri might not come after all? The Vidre family barely bothered to feed and clothe her. They certainly wouldn’t make an effort to help her attend a ball. If anything, the invitation was probably making a lot of extra work for her. Eva had not yet reported back, so Henry had no idea. The uncertainty buzzed in his mind like a fly bumping against a window.

“If the nobles are not cooperating, maybe I should go to the mountains and help deliver the news,” Henry said. “Our couriers are spread thin, and there are a few estates that are fairly remote. I could check the area around Evangelina’s Temple while I’m there.”

Madame Scowl scoffed.

“Completely unnecessary. We have enough people to handle patrols until the ball.”

“I’ve completed fittings for my suit, and training is going well. It would be no trouble for me to come help.”

“It would be extremely inconvenient to have a prince gallivanting around the mountain at the moment.”

“Gallivanting?”

“I believe Henry is worried about the safety of a young lady,” Marta said. “There is a housemaid at the Vidre Estate that we suspect is being mistreated. Perhaps you all could-”

A strange sound cut her off. Madame Scowl was laughing.

“Do you find the potential abuse of a young woman amusing?” Queen Marta said, her voice cold.

“Believe me, that young woman can take care of herself,” Madame Scowl said.

“You know Bri?”

Henry didn’t mean to raise his voice, but he found he couldn’t help it.

“I am familiar with the Vidre family.”

She clearly knew more than that. Henry gave his mother a pleading look, and Queen Marta sighed.

“Familiarity with the estate does not mean that you know everything about its workings. Do you have any proof that the young woman is safe?”

“I know that she could escape any time she wanted. She wears a diamond necklace. Strange accessory for a disheveled servant.”

“I didn’t notice a necklace.”

“Well, clearly your attention was elsewhere.”

Henry flushed at Madame Scowl’s tone, and Marta frowned.

“Are you sure about the diamond? Do you think she’s an enchantress?”

In the glass, Madame Scowl’s mouth tilted upward into a smirk.

“We have no proof that she is working magic. I’m sure she is perfectly harmless, just as her father was before he died under mysterious circumstances.”

“What are you implying?” Henry growled.

“If you suspected someone on the mountain was working magic, you should have told us!” Queen Marta said. “We would have monitored the estate.”

“We already have been. You think you know all of the Society’s business just because you’re the queen?”

“My sons have been scouring the countryside for magical threats. It would have been helpful to know that you already had a suspect.”

“Not a suspect. Just a servant who wears diamonds and a man who died suddenly from unknown causes. And a prince who is far more love-struck than that girl’s charm or beauty warrants.”

Marta glared at the mirror.

“Are you implying that Henry has been enchanted?”

“I’m not enchanted! I just want to help her.”

Madame Scowl scoffed.

“It seems a lot of trouble for a girl you’ve met twice, and you wouldn’t be the first man to fall for such magic.”

“Noam’s enchantment was broken a long time ago,” Marta said.

“I was referring to King Gustave and his mockery of a marriage in Montaigne. Don’t look so surprised. You’re not the only one with sources of information, and a royal wedding is hardly secret.”

Henry glared at the sliver of glass that reflected her scowl. He had heard the story of King Gustave falling under Princess Elspeth’s enchantment and marrying her under magical compulsion until Princess Fiora freed him, but this was not the same. It was ridiculous to accuse Bri of being an enchantress and ensnaring him.

Wasn’t it?

“We’ll continue to keep an eye on the estate and the girl,” Madame Scowl said. “You left the mountain to marry the king, so this is none of your business.”

The glass rippled, and Madame Scowl's mouth disappeared as the mirror once again reflected the ceiling. Henry and his mother shared a look.

"Do you think she actually suspects Bri of something? Or is she just being contrary like usual?"

"It's hard to say," Marta said. "She's not wrong about Gustave, although my understanding is that mermaid magic was to blame. I'm sorry that my personal conflicts are causing you problems. Hopefully she'll be more reasonable once the Society is revealed at the ball."

"I don't suppose there's any hope of me going to the mountains before then?"

Marta patted his cheek.

"It's probably best to avoid the mountains for now, just in case. Madame Scowl may be difficult to work with, but she is still a trusted member of the Society."

"You don't actually think that Bri enchanted me, do you?"

Marta sighed.

"I doubt it, but enchantments can be devious. You could ask your stepfather for more information."

The last thing Henry wanted to do was ask King Noam about the enchantress who had taken away his will with an enchantment and convinced him to marry her. The enchantment had been broken, but the subject was still awkward. It had left scars, and Henry would rather not reopen the wounds.

Not to mention he would rather not consider the possibility that he himself had been enchanted. Bri wasn't like that. She wouldn't do that.

Which was exactly what a man under an enchantment would think.

Blast it all. Madame Scowl's ridiculous accusation meant that he couldn't even feel fond of Bri without questioning his feelings. Another thing that magic and his royal title had taken away from him.

“I doubt you’re under an enchantment,” Queen Marta said, “But I’ll examine her further at the ball just to be safe. I know the signs.”

Henry pictured his mother going over Bri with a magnifying glass and groaned. Marta patted his arm.

“I’ll be subtle. Lina can help.”

“Even better. With you, Lina, and Madame Scowl watching her, what could possibly go wrong?”

Henry left before he dug himself into an even deeper hole. How had his efforts to protect Bri turned into such a mess?

“Guard.”

The invisible iron spread across the glass, and Bri smiled. It had taken time to sort through the goblin’s gems. Not all of them were capable of working magic. Even some of the diamonds did not react when she spoke.

But she had just guarded the last mirror in the house. She had enough. She had even managed to match the gem’s colors to the frames. Someone who looked very closely might find them, but the Vidres should remain unaware.

She bounced the pouch of non-magical gems in her hand. They made a satisfying clacking sound. Then she felt silly for clacking together a fortune of jewels, hurried upstairs, and hid the pouch under her mattress in the attic. They may not be magical, but diamonds were diamonds. She could sell them or trade them for whatever she needed if she could make it to Mias.

Or maybe even beyond the city, depending on what Evangelina Shadow-Storm did at the ball. Bri had guarded the mirrors, but her problems were far from over. A shadow warrior still sat on her country’s throne, and she finally had some means to fight back.

“Bri!”

The call was not accompanied by screams, so Bri jogged rather than sprinted to answer Lady Vidre. She found her stepmother in Rhoda’s room.

“Oh good, you’re clean,” Lady Vidre said. “We’re altering Rhoda’s ball gown, and I need an extra set of hands.”

Bri nodded and pinched the fabric in the place that Lady Vidre indicated. Rhoda stood perfectly still as her mother pinned the dress around her waist.

“You need to eat,” Lady Vidre said. “We can only take in your gowns so many times.”

“I haven’t been hungry.”

Lady Vidre glared at Bri, who returned the glare.

“It isn’t my fault that she doesn’t have an appetite.”

Rhoda snorted. The sound was so unexpected that both Bri and Lady Vidre looked up at her. Rhoda realized her mistake and quickly returned to staring blankly at the wall. Lady Vidre narrowed her eyes at Bri.

“Perhaps she would have more appetite if she was offered more palatable food.”

“If you want better food, hire a cook.”

“As if we could afford such a thing.”

“But you can afford this dress? You can afford to attend a ball in luxury?”

“You’ll notice that I am altering this dress myself to save money.”

“I also notice that this dress is made of silk.”

“Silk in last season’s color.”

“Oh, well. It was a bargain, then, wasn’t it? Why set aside money to fix the roof when last season’s silk is available? I’m sure the prince won’t be able to resist.”

Something wet dripped onto Bri’s hand. She looked up and realized that Rhoda was crying. Tears rolled down her cheeks and fell onto the front of the gown.

“Oh, don’t, dear!” Lady Vidre said. “It will stain the fabric.”

She handed Rhoda a handkerchief and glared at Bri.

“Now look what you’ve done.”

“What I’ve done? I’m not the one who made her cry.”

Rhoda’s body shook with a silent sob. She gave a small yelp as the movement made the pins in the dress stick into her side.

“Rhoda, please calm down.”

“I am calm.”

Rhoda’s chin quivered as she spoke, and more tears spilled over. She dabbed at them with the handkerchief, and Lady Vidre sighed.

“Bri, help her out of the dress. We can’t keep going like this.”

Lady Vidre stormed out of the room. Bri unbuttoned the gown and held it as Rhoda stepped out so the pins wouldn’t prick her further.

“Rhoda, I’m sorry about your ruby. I can get you another one.”

Rhoda glared at Bri, her sadness replaced with anger.

“You think this is about the ruby?”

“Isn’t it?”

“Hardly.”

Rhoda pulled the gown from Bri and hung in it the wardrobe. Bri watched as she smoothed the wrinkles away.

“Is it about the man who wrote that letter?”

“Hush!”

Rhoda looked at the door to make sure they were alone, then turned back to Bri.

“Don’t ever speak of that again.”

“Rhoda, I-”

Rhoda’s eyes sparked with fury.

“You searched my room. You read my private correspondence and stole a possession I had hidden for safekeeping. You made me look like an idiot to cover for you and robbed me of my only chance to get out of this place. The best thing you can do now is stay quiet and help me prepare for the ball.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Please leave.”

Rhoda’s voice quivered, and Bri hurried out of the room. She kept going until she had left the mansion entirely. Then the estate. She found herself walking up the mountain, not entirely aware of how far she had gone until she was staring at the city and ocean far below her.

Mias. Now that the mirrors were guarded, the answers she needed were most likely to be found in Mias. Evangelina Shadow-Storm was there, scheming with her secret society, and Bri had no idea what they were planning.

“Hi!”

The voice startled Bri. She whirled around and relaxed a bit when she saw the girl. She was dressed as a goat herder and holding a squirming baby goat. The kid bleated, clearly objecting to being held.

“I’m Eva.”

Why did the name sound familiar? Bri searched her memory and found nothing.

“I’m Bri. Have we met before?”

“I believe you met my cousin, Henry.”

“I remember now. You’re the lost goat herder.”

Eva scoffed.

“Please, I never get lost. The goats, on the other hand, get lost quite often.”

She set the kid down, and Bri realized it was on a leash. It kicked around the grass, then settled down to graze.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Eva said. “Henry told me a lot about you.”

“Oh?”

For some reason, that made Bri’s face flush. Eva grinned but didn’t comment further.

“Are you hungry? I packed too much for my lunch, and I don’t want to carry it back down the mountain.”

Bri considered for a moment, then sighed and shook her head.

“I should get back. Besides, your goat is going to get loose.”

She gestured to the goat, who was chewing on its leash with enthusiasm.

“Blast it all,” Eva said. She picked up the goat, which squirmed in her arms. “Hey, have you heard about the ball? It’s exciting, isn’t it? Everyone is invited!”

Bri nodded and turned to stare at Mias. If she squinted, she could just make out the castle at the center of the city.

“It’s one thing to be invited. It’s another to be able to attend.”

“It can be difficult to find someone to tend to your responsibilities,” Eva said. “Not to mention finding a ride. But the noble families are supposed to help with that. Isn’t your family going to help?”

Bri grimaced but kept herself from commenting. However nice Eva was, she did not need to burden the young goat herder with her problems.

“I see,” Eva said. “And there’s also the matter of finding a suitable dress. I’m not sure grass stains and goat droppings are appropriate for a royal ball.”

“Or streaks of cinders and ash,” Bri agreed, brushing her own skirt. “It’s a nice thought, inviting everyone to the castle, but not exactly practical.”

“I suppose not,” Eva said.

The girl looked thoughtful for a few moments, then she shook her head and smiled.

“It was nice to meet you, Bri. I hope you find your way to the ball.”

“You too,” Bri said.

Eva was a bit young to attend such an event, but the invitation had said everyone was invited. Surely that included young goat herders.

“Thanks.”

Eva tightened her grip on the goat and wandered down the mountain. Bri watched her go and realized that she had missed her opportunity to ask about Henry. If anyone knew what he was doing and when he would be back, his cousin would.

She gritted her teeth and walked back to the estate. It was better to let that go. She had much more pressing concerns.

The manor was quiet when Bri entered. She started a fire to heat the oven and chopped vegetables to roast. She hadn't noticed that Rhoda had lost weight, but the gown really had been too big. If nothing else, she could make Rhoda's favorite meal as an apology.

Bri seasoned the vegetables, put them in the oven, and walked through the silent house. She passed Rhoda's room, but the door was shut. Lady Vidre's door was open. She sat at her desk, going over her ledger, her forehead wrinkled with concentration as she tallied numbers on the page. Bri stared. This was the first time she had seen the ledger since Lady Hawley's visit. Where did Lady Vidre hide it? The issue of money was less pressing now that Bri had the gems, but she couldn't stand to watch Lady Vidre profit from the estate's ruin. Last year's silk indeed.

With everyone else occupied, Bri went to the bedroom and opened the mirror. A small stack of papers with a rock on top of them sat on the other side of the glass. Bri reached through the mirror and retrieved them. An unfortunately familiar scrawl covered the pages. Bri closed and guarded the mirror

and went back to the kitchen to start deciphering the donkey's latest gift.

The last few days leading up to the ball passed in a blur of training and preparations. Servants cleared out any room large enough for dancing to accommodate the expected guests. They placed lights in the gardens so that guests could use the outdoor spaces as well.

They left no corner of the castle untouched. Henry knew this because he had tried and failed to find a quiet place to gather his thoughts. The spaces that weren't filled with servants rearranging furniture were filled with musicians rehearsing. Even his bedroom was chaos, as two different orchestras were practicing within hearing distance. The kitchens bustled with preparations, and the royal family ate simple dinners to give the chefs more time to focus on making food for the ball.

Henry had not heard anything from Eva yet. Had he made a terrible mistake? What if the Society was right about Bri, and he had accidentally sent Eva into danger?

“Focus, Henry!” Cael said.

Henry tuned out the sound of servants carrying furniture down the hallway and forced his attention back to training. He, Cael, and Benjamin were practicing a display of their magic for the ball. Cael called it a tactical maneuver. Henry thought it felt more like a dance, but he kept that to himself.

The stars circled around Evangelina Shadow-Storm in the realm of shadows. Enchanted mirrors would be placed around the ballroom so that the guests could see the display from the

realm of light. Lina turned one of her enchanted emeralds into a sword and swung it over her head. The stars circled faster until their light blended together into a ring. They were background dancers, Henry thought. Just a bit of added spectacle.

Lina tossed her sword into the air. The light flashed brighter, then disappeared back into the emerald. Henry watched it carefully, timing his light so he brightened when the sword did.

The sound of applause broke Henry's focus and pulled him out of the realm of shadows. He blinked at Nic, who clapped enthusiastically.

“Bravo!”

Cael and Benjamin blinked, and their stars disappeared in the mirror. Lina inhaled deeply and sat up on the couch where she had been laying. Henry was always impressed at how quickly she broke the trance.

“That's enough for today,” Lina said. “If this doesn't convince them that magic is real, I don't know what will.”

“It will definitely convince them,” Nic said. “And make them wish that they could work magic for themselves. You may find yourself with more students than you can handle, Lina.”

“I hadn't considered that. I suppose we may need to reopen a formal school of enchantment at some point.”

“That would be marvelous!” Benjamin said. “I'm almost done with my studies, and I plan to continue researching after that. If Fiora is correct that mermaid and human magic can be combined, we still have a lot to learn about enchantments. I could be a professor of magic!”

“One thing at a time,” Cael said. “First, we need to convince the people of Aeonian that magic is real and can be used for good.”

“But before that, we should eat lunch,” Nic said. “Do you all realize how amazing it is to have people cook every meal

for you? That's the real magic of this place. Food just appears on the table every day. Good food. It's amazing."

Cael and Benjamin laughed and followed Nic toward the dining room. Henry stayed behind and sat on a couch. Finally, he had a somewhat quiet place to think. Lina sat beside him.

"I'm fine," Henry said.

Lina raised an eyebrow.

"I didn't say you weren't."

"Right. Well, I am."

"It's fine to feel nervous about telling Aeonina the truth. I know I do. You've kept this secret for a long time. It must be strange to reveal it."

"Actually, I'm worried about Eva."

"She's having a hard time with all this?"

"No, she's thrilled. But I asked her to do something, and I probably shouldn't have. I might have put her in danger."

Henry half-hoped Lina would tell him that he was being ridiculous, but she didn't. Instead, she simply waited for him to continue. So, Henry did. Lina listened patiently while he explained his suspicions about the Vidre estate, the things he had seen there, and the Society's suspicions that Bri had enchanted him.

"It doesn't sound like the magic that Fiora and Gustave described," Lina said. "But it wouldn't hurt to look. Let's go."

She moved to the couch and lay down. A few moments later, she appeared in the mirror across the room.

"Go?" Henry said.

"To the Vidre Estate. I'll help you search."

Henry let his gaze soften and joined Lina as a star.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" he asked.

"I'm supposed to meet with Princess Fiora for yet another discussion about the way she combines human magic and mermaid song and the possible applications for shadow and

light magic. Those discussions haven't exactly been fruitful. She'll be happy to hear that something else came up."

Judging by Lina's face, she still didn't get along well with the princess of Kell. Henry hadn't seen much of either Fiora or Gustave since they had come to Aeonian, and that was fine with him. They stopped by a sliver of enchanted mirror to tell a servant to relay Lina's regrets to Princess Fiora, then they flew up the mountain.

Well, Henry flew. Lina was technically running, but she traveled so far with each step that she might as well be flying. Henry wondered if he would ever reach her level of control over his magic. Maybe after years of practice.

"You take the lead," Lina said. "Brighten your light so that we can see more and reach out to find the estate and lead us there."

He should have known this would end up being more training. Henry doubled his focus, and his star brightened. Now he just needed to find the Vidre Estate. The realm of shadows was always a bit flexible, but landmarks stayed in roughly the same places. Henry stretched his senses into the darkness and focused on the estate. The contrast gave him a headache, but it also provided a direction.

He followed the feeling until they reached the top of the hill that overlooked the valley. The shadows beneath them were disappointingly empty.

"Here?" Lina said.

"There's a house and garden in this valley in the realm of light," Henry said.

Lina nodded and lifted her diamond ring above her head.

"Illuminate."

The space around them grew even brighter. Lina walked slowly into the valley and circled it. If he squinted, Henry could just make out the hint of the estate. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking.

There was no sign of monsters or mirrors.

“If there is magic here, it’s well guarded,” Lina said. “I don’t sense anything amiss.”

“Then I either saw something passing through or I was mistaken,” Henry said.

“Most likely. On the bright side, that means the girl you’re worried about isn’t in danger.”

“Not from magic, anyway,” Henry said.

They stood at the top of the hill and studied the valley a moment longer. Then Lina broke her trance, and Henry blinked to bring himself back to the light.

“You know this girl well?” Lina asked.

Henry wanted to say yes, but instead he shook his head.

“We’ve only met a few times. A member of the Society accused her of enchanting me. I don’t think she did, but I still can’t stop thinking about her.”

Lina raised an eyebrow, and Henry’s cheeks flushed.

“I won’t tease you about it,” Lina said. “If anyone knows about falling in love quickly, it’s me.”

Henry’s face burned brighter. He hadn’t said anything about love. Lina patted his shoulder.

“Gustave described the enchantment that Elspeth used as a golden fog. He said it clouded his thoughts every time he tried to think about another woman. Have you felt anything like that?”

Henry shook his head. That didn’t sound familiar at all.

“I wouldn’t worry about magic, then,” Lina said. “And don’t worry about Eva either. I’ll have someone check on her and make sure she’s alright.”

She gathered her things and left Henry alone with his thoughts. He slumped into the chair, grateful for a moment alone. Then the door opened, and a group of musicians streamed in.

“Forgive us, Your Highness. We were told we could use this room to rehearse.”

Henry nodded an apology and stepped back into the chaos.

Bri watched the carriage roll away until it disappeared on the other side of the hill. Rhoda and Lady Vidre were finally on their way to Mias to attend the ball tomorrow night. Bri intended to do the same, but she would take a very different, hopefully faster, route. There wouldn't be much time left for travel once she finished cleaning up and pulling an outfit together.

She took a quick bath in the creek, wrapped a cloth around her head to keep her hair from dripping, and went to Rhoda's room. She hated to steal yet another thing from her youngest stepsister, but Rhoda was closer to her size than Lucille.

Bri dug through the mending pile until she found a gown that Rhoda had discarded when a seam in the sleeve tore. It was wrinkled from sitting in the pile for so long, but it was still better than Bri's cinder-stained work dress.

Bri hung the dress up in the kitchen, hoping that the heat from the fire would help the wrinkles settle. This was far from her first choice of outfits for a royal ball, but everyone in the kingdom had been invited. Surely, she wouldn't be the only one in a shabby dress. She would blend in, which suited her purpose perfectly.

She would blend in unless her stepfamily saw her. Even if Bri kept her distance so they couldn't see her face, they might recognize Rhoda's dress. Bri chewed on her lip as she repaired the sleeve. She didn't have time to alter the dress into a

different style. She would just have to avoid her stepfamily and hope for the best.

She finished the sleeve and slipped the dress on. Bri stared at her reflection, trying to convince herself that it wasn't that bad.

It was that bad. Rhoda was shorter and curvier than Bri. The dress hung around her torso in a limp, wrinkled mess, making her look more like a sack of flour than a woman. The skirt stopped well above her ankles. The awkward length would be acceptable for a work dress, but not for a ball at the castle. Worse, it would show her feet, and Bri didn't have any shoes suitable to be seen at a royal ball.

Someone knocked downstairs, and Bri jumped. Had her enchantment on the mirror failed? She sprinted down the stairs and sighed in relief when she saw her reflection in the glass. The protection charm held.

Then who was knocking?

Bri tied an apron around her waist to hide the dress and opened the kitchen door. Frieda smiled at her, although the expression wasn't convincing.

"Gabriella, good. I wasn't sure you were home. We're leaving for the ball, and we wanted to offer you a ride."

"All of you are going?"

Bri looked at the small crowd of goat herders standing behind the woman. It looked like every servant on the estate was leaving.

"Of course! It isn't every day that you get a chance to attend a ball at the castle."

Frieda's eyes glittered with excitement. Bri would have guessed that she didn't like that sort of thing, but apparently, she would have guessed wrong.

"We've arranged for some friends to take care of your goats while we're away," a man in the crowd said. "They've taken them to their fields to graze."

“Don’t interrupt, Klaus,” Frieda said with a scowl. “I was getting to that.”

“You were taking too long. We need to leave soon if we want to make it before dark.”

Frieda scoffed, then turned back to Bri.

“So, would you like a ride?”

“No thank you. I don’t plan to attend the ball.”

“Really? A lovely young woman like yourself is planning to stay home? The princes will be there, you know. It’s a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

Bri wouldn’t have taken Frieda for a matchmaker either. She forced a smile.

“I’m not interested in the princes, and I can’t leave the house unattended. Thank you for your offer, but I must decline.”

“But you’re already dressed. Although you look-”

“I said no.”

Klaus laughed.

“Bravo, girl. That may be the first time I’ve heard anyone tell her ‘no’ to her face.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Frieda said. “You disagree with me all the time. Well, if you’re sure, we’ll be off now. Enjoy your evening, Gabriella.”

Bri watched from the doorway as the crowd of goat herders hiked over the hill toward Mias. There was no way they would make it to the city before dark while traveling on foot. Maybe they planned to stay with friends along the way and continue in the morning.

The sun set, and the shadows lengthened. Bri shut the door and sank into a chair. Suddenly, she felt very alone. She was the only person on her estate. Possibly the only person in the valley, now that the goat herders had gone.

She pushed her loneliness aside. It was better that everyone had gone. That meant she could work her enchantments without interruption. The ball was tomorrow, and she needed to test the donkey's latest instructions to make sure that she would be able to get to Mias when the time came.

Bri changed back into her work dress, opened the large bedroom mirror, and stepped through it. The shadows felt lonely without the donkey by her side, but she couldn't bring a donkey to the ball with her.

His note had given instructions about how to search for specific things in the shadows. At least, she thought they did. These papers had been as difficult to interpret as the rest, and a few words were illegible. Bri hesitated, trying to decide what to look for. She didn't want to go to Mias yet. Not when Evangelina Shadow-Storm was there and not yet distracted by guests.

Bri thought of the goblin and his servant instead. She suspected it would be easier to find a place she had been to before, and she wanted to make sure that the woman had recovered.

Bri stared into the shadows, narrowed her eyes, and focused her thoughts on the mysterious castle filled with mirrors.

She felt a strange tug to her right. It reminded her of the feeling of the iron barrier spreading across the mirror. A faint, not quite there sensation that she now recognized as magic.

Bri followed it. She walked toward the feeling, bouncing on the strangely soft ground. The feeling grew stronger, and Bri broke into a jog.

The jog quickly turned into bounding leaps. Bri smiled in spite of everything. She was practically flying!

Her hair streamed over her shoulders as she ran. She had no idea how fast she was going.

Bri stopped, panic settling in as she realized how far she was from home. Could she make it back?

She thought of her estate, and the magic tugged behind her. Bri sighed with relief and turned her attention back to the goblin's castle.

She was winded by the time she reached it. Bri paused to catch her breath and stared at the large mirror, not sure how the goblin would react to an unannounced visitor. Best not to chance it.

She turned her thoughts to his servant instead. Could the mirrors help her find a person as well as a place? The invisible tug seemed to think so. Bri focused on the woman and followed the magic's pull. Perhaps now she could have a conversation with her and learn her name.

Faint music drifted through the shadows. A lone violin playing a slow, haunting tune. The sound grew louder as Bri reached her destination. She ignored the bright, large mirror that was nearby and followed the magic to a smaller circle instead.

Bri pressed her face against the tiny piece of light and found herself looking into a vast library. A man with a violin stood in the corner, providing the music. But the violinist was far from the most interesting thing in the room.

The goblin was dancing with the servant.

Bri watched, fascinated, as they moved together across the floor. The goblin's enormous claws rested gently against the woman's back. Her hand rested on his forearm, as he was too tall for her to reach his shoulder.

He towered over her, but he no longer seemed intimidating. The goblin twirled his dance partner away and caught her again. His eyes never left her. Bri felt a pang of wistfulness as the woman laughed. She was clearly at ease with the goblin and looked happy in spite of the strange circumstances.

Bri backed away from the mirror. The woman didn't need her help, and she was intruding on a private moment. She should go home and prepare for her own dance.

She doubted it would be as peaceful as the one she had just witnessed.

Bri focused her attention on her estate. The magic tugged her away from the castle and into the empty shadows. She followed it all the way home, smiling when she saw the faint outline of the bedroom mirror.

Before she stepped into it, Bri turned her attention to Mias. That was more difficult. It was a large city with a lot of buildings and people. It wasn't clear where she wanted to go. The magic seemed to agree, as it didn't provide a tug to guide her.

Maybe she needed to be more specific. Bri thought of the castle instead. She threw in a few thoughts of Evangelina Shadow-Storm for good measure.

That created a pull so strong that Bri moved toward it before she realized what she was doing. She quickly turned her thoughts away from the shadow warrior. It seemed that finding the ball wouldn't be a problem. She had transportation and a dress that was passable, if not beautiful. Perhaps she could add a ruffle to the bottom to lengthen the skirt.

But first, she needed food. Bri had no idea how far she had traveled, but she did know that she had worked up an appetite. She hurried to the kitchen and froze when she saw a box sitting on her counter. That definitely hadn't been there before.

Bri approached it cautiously. She had just traveled through a magic realm and spied on a goblin. There was no telling what mischief a box could accomplish.

She poked it. The box felt normal enough. She pulled off the lid and gasped in surprise when she saw the glistening pink fabric.

It was a dress.

Henry had thought the castle was crowded and busy in the days leading up to the ball. He had been wrong. The whole kingdom had been invited and, judging by the crowd streaming through the gates, most of them had accepted the invitation.

“That’s what you’re wearing?”

Henry glared at Cael, who looked regal in his military uniform.

“What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“You look like a goat herder,” Benjamin chimed in. “Is that really how you want to look when you’re presented to Aeonian as a member of the lost royal family?”

Henry looked from Cael in his uniform to Benjamin in his scholar’s robes, then studied his own reflection. Other than the ridiculous hat, Bastien had done a marvelous job creating a more formal version of a goat herder’s clothing. In spite of the fine fabric and uncomfortable boots, he looked like himself. Henry couldn’t help thinking that this might be the first time one of Bastien’s clients had been pleased with his outfit.

“Yes,” he said. “This is exactly how I want to present myself to Aeonian.”

His brothers shared a look, then shrugged. They walked through the castle hallways and entered the ballroom together.

Well, they tried to enter the ballroom. It was already bursting with guests. Henry's chest tightened at the sight of the crowd and the buzz of conversation mixed with music. This was a nightmare he had not known to fear until now.

"Well," Cael said. "Looks like we'll have a good audience for our demonstration."

Henry drew in a shaky breath as he imagined working magic in front of this many people and added stage fright to his ever-growing list of fears. He muttered something about finding a less-crowded room and hurried away before his brothers could see the sweat beading on his forehead. His legs shook as he walked, and he forced himself to keep breathing. He just needed a moment alone to calm himself, and then everything would be fine.

Every room was crowded, and there was no escape from the noise. Henry finally gave up his search for solitude and ducked into one of the smaller ballrooms. Perhaps he could disappear into the crowd. The scent of snowbells suddenly filled the air. Henry turned to run, but he was too late.

"Prince Henry? Ah, it is you. I almost didn't recognize you in that outfit. What a fortunate coincidence to meet you here."

Henry hoped that Lady Hawley didn't notice him flinch. Fortunate was the last word he would apply to this meeting.

"What a pleasure to see you again, Lady Hawley. Are you enjoying the party?"

She glared at the crowd, then gave him a forced smile. Henry almost laughed. An event this crowded meant more competition for the royal family's attention, which would not suit Lady Hawley's goals at all.

"It's delightful," she said. "Oh, look. Rhoda doesn't have a partner for this dance. She has been saying all evening how much she would like to dance."

Henry followed Lady Hawley's gaze and saw Rhoda standing nearby. She did not look like a woman eager to dance. Her eyes darted past Henry as she searched the crowd. She was either looking for someone specific or looking for an

escape. Neither would be easy to find in a castle filled with the whole kingdom.

The whole kingdom except for Bri.

“Your Highness?”

Henry forced his attention back to Lady Hawley and Rhoda, who had joined them at Lady Hawley’s command.

Blast it all, he was caught. There was only one thing to do now.

“May I have this dance, Miss Rhoda?”

Rhoda looked from him to Lady Hawley, weighing her options. Finally, she nodded.

“It would be my pleasure.”

Henry took Rhoda’s arm and led her out to the dance floor. The crush of people forced them to stand closer together than usual. He tried to guide her through the steps, but there wasn’t room to do them properly. They settled into a sort of swaying instead.

Rhoda looked over his shoulder and studied the other couples as they danced past. She didn’t seem interested in conversation, so Henry turned his attention to the other dancers as well. Was Bri here? Was she dancing with someone else right now?

Eva had taken his instructions to check on Bri a step further and left her a dress for the ball.

“It’s pink,” Eva told him. “Just look for the woman in a pink gown.”

Easier said than done. Henry’s eyes jumped from pink dress to pink dress with no success.

The music ended, and everyone stopped dancing to applaud the musicians. The polite claps turned into more of a thunderous applause with the ballroom so full. Henry leaned close to Rhoda and shouted so she could hear him.

“Would you like some refreshments?”

She nodded, and Henry led her off the dance floor. Rhoda wasn't interested in him, which made her the ideal partner for the evening. She was nearly as distracted as he was. Plus, he might be able to get more information about Bri once they were in a place that was quiet enough for a real conversation, if such a place existed.

Perhaps running into Lady Hawley was fortunate after all.

“Henry!”

Henry looked up to see Nic waving and rushing in their direction. Judging by his smile, the former goat herder was having a marvelous time at his first royal ball.

Rhoda's grip tightened on Henry's arm. He turned and saw a mixture of surprise and delight flash across her face. She recovered her composure quickly, but a wide smile remained.

“This is such a marvelous party!” Nic said. “So many interesting people. Will you introduce me to your companion?”

“Ah, this is Rhoda Vidre. Rhoda, my friend Nicolas.”

“My friends call me Nic.”

He took Rhoda's hand and pressed it to his lips. Their eyes met, and Rhoda's cheeks flushed.

“It's a pleasure to meet you,” Rhoda said.

Henry looked from one to the other, trying to figure out what was happening. He was no expert on romance, but he recognized sparks when he saw them.

“Would you care to dance, Rhoda Vidre?”

“Yes.”

Rhoda's response was a bit breathless, and she kept her eyes locked with Nic's as she took his arm and followed him to the dance floor. Henry watched with bemusement as the couple twirled around the floor. Was this why Nic had been so excited about the ball? Was Rhoda the reason he was so eager for a royal title?

He had a lot of questions, but they would have to wait until later.

Henry wasn't the only one to notice the couple's unusual interaction. Lady Vidre and Lady Hawley stood nearby, watching in disapproval. They looked ready to pounce and sweep Rhoda away to more acceptable company as soon as the dance ended.

Henry gritted his teeth and walked toward them. The last thing he wanted was to spend more time with Lady Hawley, but he would do what he could to help Nic.

"Rhoda dances beautifully, doesn't she?" he asked.

The two women started with surprise. Lady Vidre recovered first.

"She does indeed, Your Highness. I only wish she had a more suitable partner."

Meaning himself. Henry forced a smile.

"Oh, I assure you that Nicolas is very suitable. Can you ladies keep a secret?"

They nodded, and Lady Hawley's eyes glittered with anticipation.

"It will be announced later tonight. Nicolas is a shadow warrior who has just begun an apprenticeship with Evangelina Shadow-Storm. He recently moved to the castle to facilitate his studies. It is a rare place of honor."

Not to mention he would soon be acknowledged as a member of the long-lost royal family, but Henry couldn't spill that secret yet. He doubted they would believe him if he did.

"A shadow warrior?" Lady Vidre said. "How very curious."

"A shadow warrior in training," Lady Hawley said.

She sounded less than impressed, but neither woman moved to separate the couple when the music ended and a new dance began. Several young ladies walked past Henry and

fluttered their eyelashes. Lady Hawley scowled at them, and they hurried past to escape the lady's wrath.

Henry fought the urge to laugh. Perhaps this was a good place to stand after all.

Bri stared at the stranger in the mirror. Looking at the polished reflection was like looking at her past self. After years of struggle, she was Gabriella again.

She wasn't sure she liked the feeling. The image felt fragile, like a single wrong move would shatter the illusion and turn her back into a servant covered in cinders.

Bri smoothed her hair for the hundredth time. She had washed her hair and wrapped it in rags to dry so that her curls were more defined. She couldn't remember the last time she had worn her hair loose. The curls bounced around her shoulders, framing her face in gold.

The pink gown fit her surprisingly well. Or perhaps it wasn't surprising, considering its mysterious origin. Bri pushed any unease about the dress aside by telling herself the donkey had brought it. She refused to consider how a donkey would acquire a dress. That was the donkey's problem.

There was only one thing missing. Bri looked at the two pairs of shoes sitting on the table and wished that the donkey had brought footwear as well.

Her own shoes were hopelessly worn work boots, and no amount of scrubbing could remove the stains. If she wore them, people would recognize her as an impostor the moment they saw her feet.

The other option was an old pair of Lucille's slippers. They were in good enough shape to pass for finery, but they were

too big.

Bri sighed and grabbed the slippers. They would fit well enough if she stuffed the toes with rags. They wouldn't be comfortable, but they should stay on her feet as long as she didn't do anything too active.

Besides, she wasn't going to the ball to dance.

Bri stuffed rags into the shoes and forced her feet into them. She tried to ignore the way they squished her toes and rubbed against her heels. She would probably have blisters by the end of the night.

She looked back at the mirror to check her reflection again. The mirror rippled, and the donkey stared back at her.

"Don't do that!" Bri scolded.

The donkey bared his teeth and winked. Then he waved his nose from her to the shadows.

"It's better if I'm late," Bri said. "I need to blend in. That will be easier once the party has started."

The donkey snorted at her.

"I am not stalling!"

The donkey narrowed his eyes, and Bri laughed. She was absolutely stalling, and she was also arguing with a donkey. The night was starting off well.

"Fine."

She guarded the kitchen mirror and walked carefully to the bedroom, stopping a few times to adjust the shoes in an effort to make them more secure. She took a deep breath, opened the glass, and stepped through.

The donkey met her in the shadows. Bri placed a hand on his neck and turned her focus to the castle and Evangelina Shadow-Storm. The magic pulled her, and she followed it, moving more slowly this time so that she didn't mess up her hair.

A few minutes into the journey, the donkey stopped walking. Bri turned back toward him, and he shook his head.

“You’re not coming any further?”

He nodded, and Bri frowned. Even the donkey was scared of Evangelina Shadow-Storm. She knew she couldn’t show up to the ball with a donkey in tow, but she had hoped he would escort her to the castle.

It was yet another reminder that she was walking into danger and doing it alone.

“Alright, then. Thanks for the dress.”

Bri kissed the donkey’s nose and hurried toward the castle. Light from multiple mirrors lit the shadows as she came closer to the city. That could be a problem.

She walked slowly toward the largest mirror. It showed a crowded ballroom of dancing couples. There was no way she could slip through that one undetected.

Bri kept walking. She passed smaller mirrors and caught glimpses of the party on the other side. Most of the mirrors were in the main ballroom, but a few showed tables of refreshments or hallways filled with guests.

She stayed well away from them. It would be a disaster if someone saw her. Finally, the noise of the party faded, and Bri saw a dim circle of light in the shadows. She hurried to the mirror. It was large enough to fit through, and she didn’t hear anyone on the other side of it. But she couldn’t see the room beyond the glass. Something was blocking her view.

Was the mirror behind something? Only one way to find out. Bri opened the glass and pressed her palm flat against the mirror.

Something ripped as her hand pushed through it. Bri pulled her hand back and stared at the hole. Blast it all. There was no way to repair that. They would definitely know that she had been here.

Well, she might as well go for it then.

Bri stepped through the mirror, wincing at the crackling sound as she tore the mirror’s covering further. The room was

not lit. Wherever she was, it was not being used for the party. She had found the perfect place to enter the castle.

Perfect except for the fact that the mirror had been wrapped in paper. Bri illuminated her diamond and found herself in a storage closet filled with wrapped boxes. She pushed the torn paper back into place, trying to smooth the wrinkles. Then she extinguished the light, moved to the door, and pressed her ear against it.

Whatever lay beyond was quiet. A thin sliver of light shone under the door. She saw no movement or shadows, which suggested that the space was unoccupied. Bri took a deep breath and opened the door.

The hallway seemed bright after the shadows and unlit room, and it was thankfully empty. Bri pulled the door closed behind her and looked around, trying to memorize the door's location. It looked the same as all the rest in the hallway.

She gave up trying to find an identifying mark on the door and looked at the walls instead. A tapestry with a repeating pattern of goats and donkeys hung just opposite the door. That would have to do as a landmark. Hopefully, that tapestry was one of a kind. Bri couldn't imagine someone making multiple copies of such a bizarre piece, but anything was possible.

She walked through the hall, paying careful attention to every twist and turn. She went down a few staircases. The mirror was in a tower, then. Or at least an upper floor. That explained why the room was so quiet.

Bri followed the sounds of music and the hum of the crowd. It grew louder and louder until it was more of a roar. Bri found herself missing the peace and quiet of her estate. She hadn't been to town in years, and it had been even longer since she went to a party. Now she remembered that she didn't particularly like parties or crowds.

She gritted her teeth and entered the nearest room. She wasn't here to have fun. She was here to find Evangelina Shadow-Storm.

The ballroom was every bit as grand as she had imagined. Bri ignored the elaborate furnishings and looked instead at a small mirror hanging on the wall. Unlike the room in the goblin's castle, this mirror was not part of the original decorations. In fact, it looked a bit out of place and did not match the rest of the decor. It had been put there because someone wanted an enchanted mirror in the room, but why? What was the shadow warrior planning?

Bri pushed her way through the ballroom as she searched for the royal family. Surely, they would be on display somewhere. If she was going to keep an eye on them, she had to find them first. She was sweating by the time she finished circling the ballroom, and she saw no sign of the royal family.

Blast it all.

Bri found a relatively uncrowded corner and leaned against a wall to catch her breath. Maybe she should pause her search and find one of the refreshment tables she had seen in the mirrors. For all she knew, Evangelina Shadow-Storm was hovering over the snacks.

For all she knew, the snacks were poisoned.

Bri groaned. What was she doing here? Coming to the ball had seemed like a proactive step, but now it felt foolish. Forget stopping whatever Evangelina Shadow-Storm had planned. She couldn't even find her in the first place.

A familiar dress in the crowd caught her eye. Bri pressed further back against the wall as she recognized Rhoda. It was just her luck that she would run into her stepfamily when the whole kingdom was present. Bri stayed hidden and watched as her stepsister smiled up at her dance partner and laughed at something he said.

She looked happy. Far happier than Bri had seen her in a long time.

The music ended, but the couple stayed together for the next dance. They stared at each other as if they were completely unaware of the other people in the room.

It was the look of two people in love.

Bri leaned forward, interested in spite of herself. Was this the mysterious man who had given Rhoda the ruby? It was either that or an extremely strong case of love at first sight.

Bri smiled. At least one member of her family was having a good time tonight.

The crowd shifted, and Bri lost sight of the couple. She pushed through the mass of people, trying to find them again. When that failed, she turned her attention back to the edge of the ballroom. Her stepmother was probably keeping an eye on her daughters, which meant this was a terrible place to be. It would be wise to put some distance between herself and Rhoda and focus on her original mission.

Wherever Evangelina Shadow-Storm was, it wasn't here. Bri's time would be better spent in a different room. And if that room happened to have refreshments, she wouldn't complain. It had been a long time since she had food that someone else cooked. She should take advantage of the opportunity.

A flash of pink caught Henry's eye. He glanced at it, more out of habit than hope, then stared as he recognized Bri. She was here! He murmured a goodbye to Lady Vidre and Lady Hawley as he moved away from them. The crowd was so thick that he had already lost sight of her dress.

“Watch it!” a man in a velvet suit said.

Henry bowed an apology. His hat fell off his head and disappeared under a tangle of skirts and feet. He was in too much of a hurry to retrieve it. Bri was here somewhere. He stood on tiptoe and searched the crowd for her golden curls.

There. She forced her way through the crowd and into the hallway.

Henry pushed through the room as quickly as he could, apologizing as he went. The crowd thinned a little when he finally reached the hallway. He could move faster now, but Bri could as well. He caught a glimpse of a pink skirt disappearing into another room and hoped it was her. Henry dodged around people, his heart pounding. Now that he knew she was here, he couldn't bear to lose her.

This room was even more crowded than the last. Henry stood on tiptoe again and searched the crowd until he found Bri's hair. He apologized his way across the room, hoping that no one recognized him as he stepped on numerous toes in his effort to catch up to Bri. This event was supposed to boost the royal family's popularity, not give them a reputation for rudeness.

“Bri.”

He was panting for breath and couldn't manage anything more, but it was enough. Bri turned. Her face lit up with a smile when she saw him.

“Henry?”

Several women turned around at the sound of his name. Blast it all. He hadn't told Bri the truth about his identity yet. The last thing he wanted was for her to find out from a swarm of other women looking for a royal partner.

“May I have this dance?”

Bri hesitated, and Henry's face fell. It was presumptuous of him to assume that she would be as excited to see him as he was to see her. There was a difference between spending time with someone in the mountains when they were the only person available and choosing them as a dance partner when the whole kingdom was within reach.

Then Bri held out her hand, and all Henry's anxiety disappeared. He led her to the dance floor. As if by magic, the crowd thinned, and he found he had room to dance with her properly. He placed his hand on Bri's waist, and his face warmed at the contact. Blast it all. The gesture wasn't that intimate. He danced with women all the time.

He danced with those women because they pressured him into it and cared only for his royal title. Bri didn't know about that. She was smiling for Henry, the goat herder. Henry, as he really was, without any of the titles or complications or magic that had filled his life for so long.

He needed to tell her the truth. He hadn't meant to deceive her when they first met, but he was certainly deceiving her now.

Was she also keeping a secret? Madame Scowl was right about the diamond necklace. The gem twinkled against Bri's skin, and Henry wondered why he hadn't noticed it before. Where did a servant get such a thing? Was she really an enchantress? He thought of his last dance partner, Rhoda, and waited for a golden fog to fill his thoughts. Nothing happened.

If she had enchanted him, it was not with the same magic that had been used against Gustave.

The only way to learn the truth was to ask for it. Henry took a deep breath, trying to figure out where to start, but Bri spoke before he could begin.

“You look miserable.”

Henry laughed in surprise. He had been called a lot of things at parties over the years, but never miserable.

“I didn’t expect it to be so crowded,” he admitted. “It turns out, I don’t like crowds.”

“Completely understandable. I don’t like them either.”

“But you still came.”

Bri frowned, and Henry mentally kicked himself. That had sounded more like an accusation than he meant it to. Secrets and questions were weighing on him.

“I’m glad you’re here.”

Bri raised an eyebrow, and Henry mentally kicked himself again. Why was he so tongue-tied? He was usually competent at small talk, if not quite as smooth as his brothers.

He was normally playing a part. This was different. He was being himself, and it felt vulnerable.

“It seems like the whole kingdom really did come,” Bri said. “It’s incredible. Any idea why the royal family wants so many people here?”

Henry flushed. He knew exactly why the royal family wanted everyone there, but to admit that was to admit everything.

“I need to tell you something.”

Forget being smooth or finding the perfect moment. He should just come clean all at once and hope Bri forgave his deception. If that went well, perhaps she would feel comfortable sharing her story.

Bri tilted her head in confusion, and her golden curls cascaded over her shoulder. Blast it all, he needed to pull himself together.

They bumped into a couple behind them, and Henry grimaced. He couldn't focus on Bri, dancing, and his confession all at once.

“Can I tell you after the dance?”

Bri nodded, and Henry smiled. Bri smiled back at him.

“I'd forgotten how much fun dancing is. I haven't done it in years.”

“In that case, we'd better make up for lost time.”

Henry waited for a place to open on the ballroom floor, then spun Bri under his arm with a flourish. She laughed in delight as he pulled her back toward him, then spun her out again. They focused on dancing while the music lasted, moving in perfect sync, weaving through the crowd of other couples with an easy teamwork that Henry had never felt with another dance partner.

Perhaps Madame Scowl was right, and there was magic at work here. But it certainly wasn't the kind of magic she suspected. The real magic was the way Bri seemed to read his mind as they danced. The way they moved together as if they had been doing it for years.

The real magic was that when he smiled at her, she smiled back as if he were the only other person in the crowded ballroom.

The dance ended too soon. Bri reluctantly let go of Henry's hand to applaud the musicians. Dancing with Henry had felt like a dream. A beautiful escape from her increasingly difficult reality.

But she was awake now. Breaking contact broke the spell, and she remembered why she was here. She was supposed to be looking for Evangelina Shadow-Storm and evidence of whatever the shadow warrior and royal family were plotting.

Her feet throbbed, reminding her that she was wearing borrowed shoes that didn't fit well and hadn't meant to dance at all.

The musicians began to play, and Henry gave Bri a questioning look. Did she want to dance again?

She did, but she shook her head. Her feet couldn't take much more, and she had other priorities.

"Would you like some refreshments, then? Maybe we can find a less-crowded room."

Bri considered. She should really say goodbye and continue her search. But she could search just as well with Henry as without him, and she had been planning to find food, anyway.

"That sounds wonderful."

"The refreshments or the lack of crowds?"

"Both."

Henry laughed and offered his arm. Bri followed him through the hallways. He seemed to know his way around the castle. Maybe his father's business brought him here from time to time? If so, he could be the perfect person to help with her mission.

Bri swallowed. Asking Henry for help meant she would have to trust him. She wasn't ready to do that yet.

"Blast, this one is crowded, too."

"And there's not much food left."

It seemed that Bri wasn't the only one eager to sample food from the royal kitchen. Partygoers hovered around the table and pounced on every new tray that the servants brought in. Henry looked from the empty table to Bri, then he grinned.

"Are you up for a bit of an adventure?"

"Always."

Bri spoke without thinking, then laughed with surprise as Henry took her hand and pulled her through the crowded castle. The crowd thinned as they moved away from the ballrooms, and the music and drone of polite conversation was replaced with servants barking out orders.

They reached a hallway blocked by guards. Bri stiffened, expecting them to cross their spears and order them away, but instead the guards stepped aside and let them pass.

"What was that about?"

"I'll tell you in a moment."

Right, he had said that he had something to tell her. Apparently, her guess about his father's business bringing him to the castle was correct if the guards knew and trusted him.

The hallway grew hot, and they ended up in the royal kitchen. The room was a flurry of activity as chefs and servants prepared food, arranged it on trays, and carried the trays up a staircase that probably led to the ballroom.

"Wait here," Henry whispered.

Bri watched with amusement as he dove into the chaos of the kitchen, said a few words to a harried baker, and emerged with a tray of pastries.

“Are you sure it’s alright to take that? I don’t want anyone to get into trouble.”

“There’s plenty to go around,” Henry said. “They said we can eat here if we stay out of the way.”

He gestured to a corner occupied by a few sacks of flour. Bri followed him and sat on one of the sacks, hoping that the flour wouldn’t transfer to her dress.

“Another picnic with nothing to drink?” she teased.

“Blast it all. Wait here.”

She laughed as Henry once again braved the kitchen and emerged with two glasses of water.

“Best I could do on short notice,” he said. “They’ve already carried up all the wine.”

Bri tapped her glass against Henry’s in a toast and drank the water. She laughed.

“Even the water is better in a castle.”

“Only the finest,” Henry said with a grin. “But personally, I prefer water from a mountain stream. Here, try this one. It’s my favorite.”

He selected a pastry from a tray and handed it to Bri. She bit into it and closed her eyes as the sweet flavors filled her senses.

“They make a jam from snowbell flowers and turn it into a glaze,” Henry said. “I asked how they made jam from a flower, but they wouldn’t explain it to me.”

Bri opened her eyes and looked from Henry to the kitchen.

“So, you spend a lot of time here?”

He swallowed, and his face grew serious. Bri took another bite of the pastry to distract herself from a growing sense of

unease. It stuck in her throat. Whatever Henry was about to tell her, he was certainly nervous about it.

“It’s for your stepfather’s business, right?” she said when he didn’t continue. “It has something to do with the castle kitchen. That’s why the staff knows you.”

“Blast it all.”

He ran his fingers through his hair. It tousled his curls in a way that Bri found adorable. He looked far less polished with his hair mussed.

“Henry, I’ve spent most of my life working as a servant. Whatever job you do, I don’t mind. Let me guess. Miller? Knife sharpener?”

“I’m a prince.”

The words tumbled out in a blur, and Bri blinked. She couldn’t have heard that right. There was a lot of noise in the room from the kitchen. Staff shouting. Metal spoons clanking against metal pans.

“I’m a prince,” Henry said, and this time Bri knew that she heard him correctly. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before. I didn’t mean to lie. I grew up on Mount Evangelina as a goat herder. Then my mother married King Noam, and I became a prince.”

Bri realized she was crushing the pastry in her fist and forced herself to loosen her grip. A prince, and not one of the king’s sons. His stepson. Henry was a member of the Society of Evangelina. Bri laughed as she imagined what would have happened if she had asked Henry to help her find Evangelina Shadow-Storm. He probably knew exactly where to find her. Could have brought her straight to the shadow warrior. Doubtless, he knew exactly what they were planning.

“You’re a light wielder.”

The words spilled out as she realized that Henry was more than a member of the Society. He was a leader. An enchanter.

“Yes,” Henry said. “I’m a light wielder. But magic isn’t something to be afraid of, Bri.”

Bri stood, no longer able to sit still. She was in danger. Literally eating with the enemy. Henry reached for her hand, but Bri pulled away. She turned and ran for the door, dodging the confused kitchen staff as she went. She slipped past the guards and sprinted through the castle. She heard Henry calling her name behind her, then lost the sound of his voice in the jumble of music and conversations.

Henry was an enchanter. Henry was working with Evangelina Shadow-Storm.

And she had liked him. Had almost trusted him. How could she be so stupid?

Tears blurred her vision. Bri brushed them away and crashed into a woman in the hall. She murmured an apology and curtsied out of habit.

“Bri! Wait!”

Blast it all! Henry had almost caught up with her. Bri slipped past the woman and dashed through the castle. The fabric stuffed in her right shoe shifted to the side, and her foot slid as she stepped. She kicked the shoe off and kept going. She had to make it to the mirror before Henry caught her.

Bri climbed the stairs two at a time as she raced through the tower and searched for the tapestry. There. She'd recognize that pattern of goats and donkeys anywhere. Bri ducked into the room and leaned against the door as she caught her breath. Silence filled the hallway behind her. Good. She had lost him.

She turned to the mirror and frowned. Someone had pulled the paper off it and crumpled it into a ball in the corner. It seemed she wasn't the only one who had used this mirror tonight.

No time to waste then. Bri opened the mirror and stepped through it. The sound of music filled the darkness as it drifted through the many mirrors throughout the castle. Bri watched them for a moment, half expecting a hoard of enchanters to pour through the glass and come after her.

Instead, she saw only the party. The citizens of Aeonian dancing and eating and drinking without any idea that they

were in danger.

She had tried to help them, but she had failed.

Bri pushed the thought away. There would be time to plan after she escaped. She focused on her estate and let the pull of magic lead her home.

Henry bent over and picked up Bri's shoe. When he stood, he was surrounded by a crowd of women.

"So rude of her to run away."

"I'll dance with you, Your Highness."

By the time Henry made his apologies and assured the ladies that he was perfectly well but did not wish to dance, Bri was long gone. He walked down the hallway where she had disappeared. She had to be here somewhere.

He found no sign of her. The hall at the top of the tower was surprisingly empty, and Henry wondered how he had missed it in his search for a quiet place earlier. He stood in the empty space and listened for Bri but heard nothing. Perhaps she had doubled back and slipped into the crowd. It would be easy enough to hide in a crowded ballroom.

But why was she hiding in the first place? Was this confirmation that Bri was up to no good, as Madame Scowl suggested? Or was she simply hurt that he had kept the truth of his identity from her?

Henry looked down at the shoe. It was a dancing slipper, good quality but well-worn. The toes were stuffed with fabric, as if the shoe was too big but she was trying to make it work. That couldn't be comfortable. Bri must have been miserable dancing in a shoe like that.

Henry frowned. Eva had sent a dress, but she hadn't mentioned shoes. He should have thought of that. As a servant,

Bri wouldn't have shoes suitable for a royal ball.

He would apologize for the oversight when he saw her. She probably had blisters from dancing in shoes that fit this badly.

Henry wandered through the tower, checking doors as he went, just in case she was hiding. Even if she didn't want to see him, she would want her shoe. He didn't want her to make the long journey home partially barefoot.

A trumpet fanfare sounded in the distance. Henry reluctantly gave up on finding Bri as he made his way back to the main ballroom. It was time for the demonstration.

After Bri's reaction, he was even more nervous about revealing himself to the kingdom as a light wielder. Bri was sensible. Tough, even. She was strong and independent.

And she had been absolutely terrified of his magic.

"Why are you holding a woman's shoe?"

Henry looked from Cael to the shoe in his hand. He hadn't realized he was still holding it.

"Someone lost it."

"So, you decided to carry it around all night looking for a woman who is missing a shoe?"

"Something like that."

Henry tucked the shoe under his chair and took his place between Cael and Benjamin. He watched Nic say goodbye to Rhoda and join the other goatherders near the royal dais. This was it. It was happening.

He had imagined this moment since he was a child, but now he couldn't focus on it. King Noam signaled for silence and began to speak about the history of Aeonian, but Henry was too busy searching the crowd to listen to what he was saying.

Was Bri out there somewhere? Maybe she would feel more comfortable about his magic if she saw this demonstration.

Or maybe the entire kingdom would react as she had and run for their lives.

Lina spoke next. Henry searched for pink dresses in the crowd while Evangelina Shadow-Storm told her story. She spoke of Luca and all that he had done to save lives during the war. The citizens of Aeonian listened with hungry curiosity. Henry saw a range of expressions as he searched for Bri. Curiosity. Disbelief. Excitement.

And then his mother stood. Arm in arm with her husband, Queen Marta told the story of the hidden royal family and the Society of Evangelina. The already quiet crowd fell absolutely silent as she spoke. Henry looked from the crowd to his family. Benjamin and Cael were smiling. Alaric was tense. Lina reached up and rubbed small circles on his back until his shoulders relaxed.

The crown prince had not believed in magic a few months ago, and now he was married to the most powerful enchantress in the kingdom. Had that been a difficult transition? Had he been afraid of Lina and her unknown powers at first?

Had he looked at her with the absolute terror that Bri had felt toward Henry? Somehow, he doubted it.

Cael elbowed Henry.

“That was our cue.”

Henry blinked and realized that the crowd had turned their attention from his mother to him. He took a deep breath and tried to ignore all the eyes focused on him. He stared into the distance until the faces blurred and he found himself in the realm of shadows.

The enchanted mirrors hung in the castle were faint circles of light in the darkness. Henry flew around to the mirrors as planned, flashing his light in front of each one. The silent ballroom echoed with gasps and exclamations, but no one ran.

It was just his luck that he would fall for the one girl in the kingdom who feared magic.

Henry finished his lap around the castle and returned to the largest mirror in the main ballroom. Servants carried a cot to the dais, and Lina lay down on it. She closed her eyes and

breathed deeply. A few moments later, she appeared next to Henry in the realm of shadows.

The crowd burst into applause. Lina smiled and waved. She walked slowly, following the same path Henry had as she visited each mirror. Her arrival at each one was greeted with cheers.

“This is going well,” Benjamin said.

“Wait until they see us actually do something,” Cael said.

His voice quivered with excitement. Henry wished he could feel that excited about the upcoming demonstration, but he couldn't shake the image of Bri's eyes wide with fear.

Lina returned to the main ballroom mirror and gave the signal. The crowd cheered with delight as she created a sword of green light. The stars circled around her in their choreographed dance. The crowd loved it.

There was just one more piece of entertainment for the evening. Hopefully, it went as well.

Queen Marta stood and waited for the crowd to quiet. The stars hovered above Lina while the queen told the story of the Society of Evangelina and revealed that she was not the only living descendant of the original royal family. She gestured for the Society members gathered near the dais to join her. Nic jumped onto the platform while the rest of the goatherders took the stairs.

The crowd didn't cheer quite as loudly at this announcement, but Henry couldn't blame them. The revelation that there were a few more members of the nobility was far less exciting than Lina waving a sword made of light.

“Mission accomplished,” Cael said.

His star disappeared. Henry blinked and pulled his focus back to the ballroom. There was an air of excitement in the room. King Noam made a few closing remarks and signaled for the musicians to resume playing. Nic was the first off the platform. He smiled widely as he took Rhoda's hand and let her introduce him to her mother.

Henry retrieved Bri's shoe from under his chair and sneaked around the back of the platform. He couldn't handle a swarm of well-wishers and royalty chasers right now, and he wanted to find Bri.

He went to the gate first and smiled in relief when the guards said they hadn't seen a woman with a pink dress and missing shoe leave the castle. He asked them to watch for her, wrote a note for them to pass on along with the shoe if they saw Bri, then hurried back to the castle. The party was in full swing again, and the magic demonstration and revelation of the royal family had added even more excitement to the atmosphere.

Henry dodged the crowds as best he could and went to the kitchen to check for Bri. He searched the entire castle twice, questioned every servant he saw, then checked the gate again.

No sign of her.

By the time the music stopped and the guests went home, the entire castle staff and most of the guests knew that Prince Henry was looking for a blond woman with a missing shoe.

Bri woke with the sense that something was missing. As her head cleared, she realized she didn't feel stiff. The usual ache that came with sleeping on the hearth wasn't there. She reached up to brush a strand of hair away from her face and froze when her hand hit something soft instead of stone. A pillow. Why was she sleeping with a pillow?

Bri sat up and blinked in the sunlight. What time was it? Why had she slept so late?

Right. The ball. Henry. Magic.

She had stumbled home, guarded the mirrors, and climbed into Rhoda's bed still wearing the pink dress. Bri stood and looked at her reflection. The dress had been nice, but now it was a crumpled mess. She tried to smooth the skirt and realized her hand was still sticky from the pastry she had crushed when Henry had told her the truth about his identity.

Bri groaned. Henry was a prince, and she was no closer to finding the answers she needed. Plus, her feet hurt.

She was still wearing one shoe. Slowly, a memory formed from the panic-filled haze that had come after Henry had made his confession. She had lost a shoe in the castle.

She had lost *Lucille's* shoe in the castle.

Bri groaned again and limped to the kitchen to find something to eat. How had such a simple plan gone so horribly wrong? She rummaged through the cabinets. The tea was almost out, as was the flour. She needed supplies. That meant

she'd have to talk to the outdoor servants and request more supplies.

Except they had all gone to the ball, and she didn't know when they would be back.

Bri brewed the last of the tea, poured it into one of the nice teacups they usually saved for company, and went outside. She sat under a tree and sipped the tea slowly while she gathered her thoughts.

This was a disaster, but it could be worse. She knew Henry's secret, but he didn't know hers. Evangelina Shadow-Storm had gained power and was obviously planning something, but Bri had kept her promise and guarded the mirrors. So far, the only thing to come through them had been a goblin who claimed he was human and a helpful donkey. She had seen worse the night of the storm, but not since. Perhaps that had been a one-time occurrence.

There were two more balls. That meant Bri had two more chances to infiltrate the castle and find out what the Society was planning.

She looked down at her crumpled pink dress and bare, blistered feet. All of that was easier said than done. She would need another dress and shoes that fit. And food.

Lucky for her, she had a bucket full of gems.

Bri swallowed the rest of the tea and climbed the stairs to the attic. She sorted through the remaining gems that the goblin had given her and stuffed a handful of the smallest non-magical ones into a leather pouch. There was nothing she could do here, and she refused to do nothing.

She pulled on her work dress and worn boots and opened the large bedroom mirror. A horrible stench filled the room. Bri gagged and quickly closed the mirror. She stood for a moment, gasping for air as the smell slowly faded. Then she took a deep breath, held it, and opened the mirror again. Her eyes watered as the smell washed over her, but she forced herself to push her head through the mirror and look into the shadows.

She saw movement in the distance but couldn't tell what was moving. Still, the smell gave her a pretty good idea. Bri closed the mirror, guarded it, and stared at her reflection. The smell hadn't come through until she opened the mirror, which meant the guard enchantment was working. She could still leave the estate. She just couldn't do it through the mirrors.

It looked like she would be taking the long way to Mias.

Bri opened the mirror again and called for the donkey a few times, just in case. A ride would be handy. The donkey didn't answer. The smell and creatures in the shadows had probably scared him off, and she couldn't blame him.

She tucked the pouch of gems into her apron pocket and locked the door behind her as she left the estate. She looked back several times as she walked through the valley, just to check that the house was still there and not overrun with goblins.

Then she reached the top of the hills surrounding the valley. Bri looked one last time. Her home sat calmly, nestled in the valley as it always had been. It would not disappear without her there to hold it in place.

At least, she hoped it wouldn't.

"Be safe," Bri whispered, feeling just a bit silly for talking to a house.

Then she walked down the mountain. Snowbell scented air rustled through her hair, and Bri smiled. It was impossible to feel gloomy on such a beautiful day. Even with the weight of the world on her shoulders, the beauty of Mount Evangelina cheered her. She took a deep breath and caught a hint of an ocean breeze mixed with the scent of the mountain. It had been years since she was near the sea. While she preferred the mountains, Bri still loved the sound of waves against the shore. She could stop by a fish market and get something fresh to cook for dinner. Or if she got enough money for the gems, perhaps she could go to a restaurant instead and let someone else do the cooking.

The thought cheered her even more, and she smiled to herself as she found the path to Mias and followed it down the mountain.

“No shoe? I thought you were carrying it with you everywhere.”

Henry glared at Cael and filled his plate with scrambled eggs. He had forced himself to get up early in the hopes that he could eat breakfast and leave the dining room before anyone else arrived, but he had not been early enough.

“Do you think she left it on purpose?” Nic said. “Like dropping a handkerchief or something?”

“Has anyone ever actually dropped a handkerchief to catch someone’s attention?” Henry said.

Nic grinned and pulled an embroidered handkerchief from his tunic. Cael rolled his eyes, and Henry shook his head.

“I tried to put in a good word for you with Lady Hawley and Lady Vidre, but they weren’t impressed.”

“Then I’ll just have to win them over when I bring this back to Rhoda.”

Nic tucked the handkerchief into his tunic and turned his attention back to his breakfast.

The dining room door swung open, and Henry swallowed a groan as a group of Society members swept into the room. Lina and Alaric followed.

“Why is everyone up so early?” Henry muttered.

“You’ve lived in the castle too long,” a woman with silver-streaked hair said. “This isn’t early for goat herders.”

She sat next to Henry, drained half her cup of tea in a single gulp, and scowled at the remaining liquid as if it were to blame for her problems. Henry swallowed. The Society members had not officially introduced themselves yet, but he had a good idea who this woman was. Lina sat across from them and waited for Alaric to join them before she spoke.

“How do you think it went last night?”

She directed the question to Madame Scowl, but Nic answered first.

“It was absolutely marvelous!”

Madame Scowl huffed.

“It went as well as we could expect. There were no protests to the introduction of new nobles, and everyone seemed more intrigued by your magic than scared of it.”

“Not everyone.”

Henry didn’t realize he had spoken aloud until the crowd turned to him. He cleared his throat.

“A woman I danced with was terrified when she learned that I was a light wielder.”

“So terrified that she ran and left her shoe behind?” Cael said.

“Is that why you were carrying a woman’s shoe?” Alaric said. “I wondered about that.”

Blast it all.

“It was Gabriella, wasn’t it?” Madame Scowl said.

“You mean Bri? Is that her full name? How do you know that?”

“The servant girl?” Lina said. “You know her?”

Madame Scowl smirked.

“I know her better than Diamond Duck, apparently.”

“Are code names really necessary now, Onyx Cockroach?” Henry asked.

The woman’s scowl deepened. Henry got little satisfaction from knowing that he was correct.

“Don’t tease the boy,” Marta said, placing her hand on her son’s shoulder as she walked to her seat. “If you know something, tell us. And he’s right about code names. They’re hardly necessary when we’re in the same room.”

Henry jumped. He hadn’t noticed his mother come in. Madame Scowl shrugged.

“I prefer to keep my code name for now, and her full name is Gabriella.”

She paused for dramatic effect, as if considering what to say next. Was she teasing him, or did she actually know something more?

The dining room door swung open again, and Benjamin sprinted inside.

“Message from Carina and Stefan!” he said, waving a scroll.

“Finally,” Alaric said. “You’d think a trained spy would send more regular reports.”

He unrolled the scroll and held it to the side so that Lina could read it as well.

“They believe that Prince Darian is under an enchantment,” Lina said. “He has been confined to an old castle in the mountains of Eldria, and no one has seen him since. He only has a single servant staying with him.”

“Poor servant,” Alaric said. “Enchantment or not, that can’t be a fun assignment.”

Lina handed the scroll to Cael, who skimmed through it.

“Maybe he just wanted some peace and quiet,” Henry said.

“Peace and quiet are different from exile,” Lina said. “Carina sounds convinced that something else is going on.”

“Then why didn’t she tell us what she thinks is going on?” Cael asked. “This is the vaguest report I’ve ever read.”

“She has to be careful in case the message is intercepted,” Lina said. “We should come up with some kind of code.”

“We already have a code,” Alaric said. “Stefan should know it.”

“Should know it or does know it?” Madame Scowl said. “Prince Stefan doesn’t strike me as the studious type.”

Alaric simply sighed in response and turned back to his breakfast. The conversation returned to the ball, and Henry turned to Madame Scowl.

“What else do you know about Bri?”

“Why do you care?”

“You were right about the diamond necklace. You clearly know something.”

“She really does have a diamond necklace?” Marta said.

“Yes, but she hasn’t enchanted me,” Henry said.

“You’re right about that much,” Madame Scowl said. “I checked for enchantments before we left for the ball.”

“Then why are you being so cryptic about her? Why won’t you tell me what you know?”

“It seemed better that she tell you her secrets herself, but she doesn’t seem inclined to.”

“Bri doesn’t have any secrets.”

“Gabriella Vidre has plenty of secrets, Prince Henry. Are you really so naïve after so many years in the castle?”

“Vidre? But that’s- That’s not possible.”

Henry’s head spun at what Madame Scowl was implying. There was no way that Bri was related to the Vidres.

“You see? It would have been much better if she told you herself. I was doing you a favor by keeping it to myself. Check the genealogy records in the archives if you don’t believe me.”

Madame Scowl patted Henry's shoulder and turned her attention to discussing the next ball with Lina. Henry went back to eating, pretending that he was fine, but the food stuck in his throat. Bri. Gabriella Vidre. Why would she act like a servant if she was a member of a noble family? Why was she hiding?

Was that why his status scared her so much? Was she afraid that a prince would know whatever secret she was so desperate to keep?

None of it made any sense.

Henry went through the motions of training the rest of the morning. He rehearsed the dance that Cael still insisted on calling a demonstration of tactical maneuvers to make sure everyone remembered their steps for the next ball.

When it came time to break for lunch, he walked to the castle gate instead of the dining room.

"Here," the guard on duty said. "You'll want to wear this."

He handed Henry a guard's cloak. Henry took it with a questioning look.

"You'll see," the guard said.

He opened the gate, and Henry did see. A crowd of people surrounded the gate. Their voices rose in excitement when he walked through, then lowered when they saw the cloak. Part of the crowd approached him, anyway.

"My family used to be goat herders," one woman said. "I'm sure we're descended from the original royal family as well."

"I dream every night," a boy said. "I want to train to be a shadow warrior! Can you pass my name on to Princess Evangelina?"

"Make way! Let him complete his duties," the gate guard shouted. The crowd around Henry moved away, and he quickly pushed through.

He didn't slow down when he reached the streets. The same excitement filled the air throughout the city, and he heard

snatches of conversation as he walked. Everyone was talking about the return of the old royal family and the magic demonstration.

Their plan had worked. Maybe a little too well.

The archives were as crowded as the castle gate. A long line had formed behind the archivists' desks, as people waited to ask for information.

"For the last time, we don't have any scrolls about magic!" Simon called out to the crowd. "If you're waiting to ask where you can find information about magical training, leave the line now. You're wasting your time!"

A few people in the line shifted from one foot to the other, but no one left. Simon sighed and turned to help the next person in line. Henry couldn't get the archivist's attention without risking his cover, so he made his way to the genealogy scrolls and searched himself.

There were only so many noble families in Aeonian. He found the Vidre family tree and unrolled the scroll until he reached the present day. He swallowed.

Madame Scowl had told the truth. Duke Gavin Vidre did indeed have a daughter named Gabriella. In fact, she was his only biological daughter. Rhoda and Lucille were stepdaughters, and the current Lady Vidre was Gabriella's stepmother.

Henry rolled up the scroll. Something strange was happening on the Vidre estate. Gabriella was the legal heir. Why was she working as a servant? If Bri was Gabriella, that was. Maybe the real Gabriella had been sent away long ago.

Or disposed of.

Henry swallowed. Lady Vidre was unpleasant, but was she really capable of murder? It was far more likely that she was blackmailing her stepdaughter to maintain control of the estate. Bri's diamond necklace made more sense in that context. A duke's daughter might keep such a thing as a memento of better days.

Henry raised his hood to hide his face and strolled through the archives. There had to be more information here somewhere. He perused the shelves, his thoughts spinning as he opened scroll after scroll, hoping to find something useful.

Even if Lady Vidre wanted to keep her stepdaughter under her thumb, living with only one untrained servant was not ideal. Especially with two daughters of marriageable age in the household.

Three, Henry realized with a jolt. If Bri really was Gabriella, then she was noble as well.

Was that why Lady Vidre kept her hidden? Did she view Bri as competition and want to get her own daughters settled first?

Madame Scowl was right. It would have been better if Bri had told him herself. But she hadn't, and now Henry was stuck with information she hadn't wanted him to have.

He gave up on finding anything useful and walked slowly back to the archive entrance. The line at Simon's desk had grown even longer as more people waited to ask about royal lineages and magical training.

Henry knew he should return to the castle, but he turned and walked toward the coast instead. He needed to think, and he couldn't do that with so many people around. He walked out of the city and along the beach, stopping when he finally reached an isolated cove.

Bri was in trouble, but Bri was also scared of him. He wanted to help, but would it be better to give her space? Or was that leaving her in danger? Or leaving her to cause danger? Madame Scowl knew the truth about Bri and didn't seem concerned about her. Was that reason enough to assume that she was harmless?

Henry rested his head in his hands. As much as he wanted to play the valiant knight and sweep in to rescue her, Bri hadn't asked for his help. If he barged in now, he might only make things worse for her. And if he assumed that she was up to no good without proof, he would drive himself insane.

But if he suspected she was up to no good and did nothing, he was being irresponsible. Whether Bri was involved or not, something strange was happening at the Vidre estate. Maybe everything was a coincidence, but then again, maybe it wasn't.

Henry sighed. Bri was intelligent and strong and terrified of him. Perhaps the best thing he could do for her now was to give her space. The second ball was soon. Maybe she would come. If she did, he would have a chance to talk to her. To confess what he knew and offer his help once again.

And if she didn't come? Well, he had to return her shoe sometime.

Henry stood and made his way back to the castle. He kept his hood pulled over his face as he jostled through the crowd and entered the gate. He thanked the guard on duty and returned the cloak, then walked through the hallway. He was supposed to be training, but he found himself walking to the opposite side of the castle and knocking on a different door entirely.

Alaric answered it and gestured for his stepbrother to come in. He looked surprised, and Henry couldn't blame him. They had grown up together, but they weren't exactly close. He couldn't remember the last time he had come to visit. In fact, he didn't think he had ever come to visit.

"Henry, is something wrong?"

"Not exactly."

Alaric waited for Henry to elaborate. When he didn't, he shut the door and offered a chair. Henry sat, wondering if this was a mistake. But he was here now. He was frustrated that Bri wouldn't accept help, but was he really that different? He would try to be.

"I need help researching something," he said. "If you have the time, that is."

Alaric grinned.

"I can always make time for research. What would you like to know?"

Bri tried to look inconspicuous as she walked into Mias. She was just a girl from the country coming to visit.

A girl with a small fortune of gems in her pocket.

Mias wasn't known as a center of criminal activity, but this much wealth was enough to bring out anyone's greedy side. Bri took a deep breath and stepped into the crowd.

"Get Nog!"

A group of children ran by, waving bits of green fabric in their hands as they chased another child waving a black ribbon.

"You'll never defeat me, shadow girl."

The child holding the black ribbon spoke in a deep voice. Or at least, as deep a voice as he could manage. He let out a maniacal laugh, waved his ribbon wildly around his head, then sprinted into an alley. The other children waved their green fabric and chased after him. Bri stepped aside and bumped into a woman, who grabbed her shoulders and held her steady.

"At least it's a break from Tyrant Topple," the woman said. "Sorry they startled you."

Bri had no idea what Tyrant Topple was, but she smiled at the woman.

"Anything that keeps them busy is good, right?"

The woman chuckled.

“That’s the truth.”

Bri studied her. She wore the practical, homespun clothing of someone who worked for a living. Her brown, curly hair frizzed around the kerchief she had secured it with. The woman seemed to be studying Bri as well. Bri waited for the inevitable offer of help, but it didn’t come. Perhaps she had cleaned up well enough to avoid such things, or perhaps poverty was more common in the city than the country.

The woman’s quiet acceptance won Bri’s trust. She seemed honest enough. As much as you could tell someone was honest by a conversation about children and looking at their clothes.

“Would you be willing to help me find something?” Bri asked. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been to the market.”

“Of course, dear. What are you looking for?”

That was a good question. Where did she want to start with her very long shopping list?

“A dress,” Bri decided.

The woman gave her a knowing smile.

“Come to town to go the ball, have you?”

Bri nodded.

“I can’t go like this.”

She looked Bri up and down and shrugged.

“I believe the royal family meant it when they said come as you are, but I understand wanting to make a good impression. Just don’t go into debt trying to catch a prince. It’s a bad investment all around.”

“Is something wrong with the princes?”

The woman laughed, seeming more amused than the question warranted.

“Wrong with them? Oh no, dear. They’re as honorable as can be. A bit too honorable, some might say. But the word on the street is that they’re all either already spoken for or too busy training to look for a bride.”

Already spoken for or busy training. Bri wondered which applied to Henry. He had never mentioned another woman, but was that something you would discuss with a stranger? A stranger. Was that all they were to each other? She had thought something more was developing, but how could it with so many secrets between them?

“No need to look so disappointed,” the woman said. “There are plenty of other eligible men around. Besides, I heard the food was fabulous. I didn’t get to try any myself. They kept running out. I hope they make more for the next one.”

“So do I,” Bri said. “I’d like to try food from the castle.”

She hoped she looked like the innocent country girl she was pretending to be. She had already tried the food and danced with a prince. Attending the second ball was purely a matter of business, but she wasn’t about to trust a stranger with that information.

“I can’t guarantee that you’ll get food, but I can guarantee that you look fabulous. Come with me. I know a shop that sells secondhand dresses at very reasonable rates. We’ll find you something fit for a princess.”

Bri had expected the woman to direct her to a shop then leave, but the woman stuck by her side as if dressing Bri was the sole reason she had come to the market. She chattered about the first ball, giving Bri advice about how to get the most out of her visit to the castle while they walked through the marketplace. They passed shops, wagons full of supplies, and more children waving colorful ribbons and shouting at each other. Finally, they reached the shop, although that was a generous word for it. It was little more than a room covered with empty racks and shelves.

“This young lady needs a dress for the ball,” the woman announced with a flourish.

“Don’t they all,” the shopkeeper said. “I’m afraid I don’t have any.”

He was a gruff man with a large beard. Not the sort of person Bri expected to find in charge of a garment store.

“You must have something,” the woman said.

“They invited every person in the kingdom to their party. That means every lady in the kingdom needs a new dress. I don’t have anything, and neither does anyone in the whole city. I’ve placed orders with a merchant ship and asked him to bring me gowns from Eldria on his next voyage. Maybe they’ll arrive in time.”

Bri and the woman looked at the empty room one more time, then left the shop.

“Thank you for trying,” Bri said.

She turned to go, but the woman followed her.

“Come with me, dear. I can’t have you miss the ball for such a silly reason.”

She grabbed Bri’s hand and pulled her down a street. Bri knew Mias well enough to know that they were moving away from the market and into a residential area. Finally, the woman ducked behind a shop and up a flight of stairs. Bri followed her into a room with a bed and wardrobe and no space for anything more.

“But this is-”

“My home,” the woman said. “This dress doesn’t fit me anymore, but it looks to be about your size.”

She opened a wardrobe filled with a surprising variety of men’s and women’s clothing and pulled a carefully folded gown from a small trunk. Dried rose petals fell onto the floor as the woman unfolded it, and a faint floral scent filled the room. She shook the gown gently to loosen the rose petals, then held it toward Bri.

“I couldn’t,” Bri said.

“Of course you can. I was saving this for my daughter’s wedding, but I never had a daughter. This dress deserves to see the inside of the castle, don’t you think?”

Bri traced the lace sleeves with a single finger. The dress was pale pink. She couldn't tell if it had been red once and faded or white and the lace had colored with age. Either way, it was lovely, and she needed a dress.

"I can pay you," she said.

Judging by her worn clothes and small, sparsely furnished living quarters, the woman didn't have much money. Bri reached for the pouch in her apron, then hesitated. She hadn't traded her gems for coins yet. What would this woman think if she handed her a diamond? How would she explain having such a thing?

"It's alright, dear," the woman said, misunderstanding Bri's hesitation. "You can borrow the dress and bring it back to me after the ball. I'd love to hear your stories."

The woman ignored Bri's protests as she wrapped the dress in a cloth, handed it to Bri, and guided her out the door. Before she quite knew what was happening, Bri was standing on the street with a gown in her hands.

She turned to say goodbye, but the door was shut and the woman was gone. Bri blinked. She didn't even know the woman's name. She knocked, but no one answered.

Finally, Bri gave up and walked away. She made note of the address so that she could return the dress later and hurried back to the market. After walking up and down the street a bit, Bri located a jeweler's shop that looked nice enough to recognize real gems but not nice enough to ask too many questions.

"How can I help you?"

The woman's pinched face and tight tone made the question sound more like, "What can you afford?" Bri forced a smile.

"I'm looking to sell a family heirloom."

"I'm not interested in clothes."

The woman wrinkled her nose at the bundle of fabric tucked under Bri's arm.

“Oh, not this,” Bri said. “I’m buying things for the ball, but I need money to afford them.”

“You and everyone else in Mias. Well, what do you have?”

Bri reached into the pouch and pulled out a single sapphire. It glittered in her hand, and the woman hissed as she lifted a lens to her eye and studied it.

“Fine quality. Where did you get such an *heirloom*, girl?”

At least she wasn’t trying to cheat her. Bri told the story she had prepared, which was also mostly the truth. Her parents had died. She had sold most of their possessions to keep their country estate running but had resisted parting with her mother’s gems until now.

“The ball is too good an opportunity to pass up.”

“Yes, yes, the princes will be there. Every girl in Aeonian is convinced she can catch a man at these blasted balls, but even with the new nobles, there won’t be enough to go around.”

“The new nobles?”

The woman lowered the sapphire for a moment and studied Bri.

“You really have come from the countryside, haven’t you? It’s all anyone can talk about today. They announced a new group of nobles at the end of the ball last night. It turns out the Society of Evangelina has been hiding the former royal family since the war.”

She turned her attention back to the sapphire, and Bri struggled to breathe. This was yet another unexpected part of the Society’s plan. She had apparently left the ball far too early last night.

“The Society of Evangelina hid the former royal family?”

“More like, the Society *is* the royal family. At least, that’s what they claim.”

“They’re all noble?”

“All noble, and they’ve moved into the castle. But like I said, still not enough eligible young men to go around when

they've invited the whole kingdom to the ball. I can give you three gold for the sapphire."

"Ten."

"Six, if you show me what else you've got hidden in that pocket."

Bri hadn't realized she was holding her hand protectively over the pouch of gems. She nodded.

"Six for that one if you give me a fair deal on the rest."

She pulled three more gems from the pouch. It was still quite full, but she didn't want to give up all of them at once. It would be suspicious and bad business sense.

"Hmmm. You've got quite a lot of heirlooms, girl."

"From my mother's necklace," Bri said. "I pried them off so I could keep the chain and have something to remember her by."

If the woman didn't believe the story, she didn't push it either. She lifted her lens again and examined the new gems. Bri placed both hands on the counter and tried not to look suspicious.

"So, how many new nobles are there?" she asked.

The woman shrugged.

"A few dozen, maybe. Like I said, not enough to go around. But I wouldn't be surprised if they announced more at the next ball. Why have more than one, otherwise?"

Why, indeed. Bri was wondering the same thing.

"And what about the princes?" she asked. "Which ones are available? Just in case I meet one."

She giggled, trying to sound like a giddy girl excited about the possibility of meeting royalty. The woman rolled her eyes.

"Prince Alaric is married, and Prince Stefan is taken with the princess from Santelle. As far as I've heard, the rest are unattached. Although I heard strange rumors about Prince Henry and a woman's shoe, so I'm not sure about him."

“What about Prince Henry and a shoe?”

“He was walking around last night holding a shoe,” the jeweler said, as if that should have been obvious from her first statement. “I’ll give you twenty gold for all of it.”

“Forty,” Bri said, her voice quivering a little from the revelation that Henry had her shoe. Well, he had Lucille’s shoe. That was even worse.

“Twenty-five, and I don’t tell anyone where I got them.”

A humorless smile spread across her thin lips, and Bri nodded. It was far less than the gems were worth, but it was enough money to get what she needed. Besides, she had more.

The jeweler gave Bri fifteen gold coins and a pouch of silver and bronze for the other ten. Bri folded the gold coins into the fabric of the dress and put the pouch in her apron pocket. She thanked the woman, although really the jeweler should be thanking her for the bargain, and went to the market to shop.

She bought a new basket first. Then another, as her groceries filled the first. Then a third. The sack of flour was ridiculously heavy. She looked up at Mount Evangelina. There was no way she would be able to carry all these things back home.

And she didn’t need to. Not with fifteen gold coins folded in the fabric of a borrowed gown.

Bri walked further down the marketplace until she found a stable. She strolled past the stalls until she found a mare with gentle eyes and a reddish coat.

“How much for her and a small wagon?”

“Ah, Pumpkin caught your eye, did she? She’s a lovely horse. Gentle enough for a lady, yet-”

“Yes, I’m sure she is,” Bri said. “How much?”

The man looked at Bri, taking in her tattered dress and the bundles in her arms.

“Are you sure your mistress won’t want to examine the horse before you buy her?”

“I’m sure.”

Bri didn’t bother saying that she was the mistress. He wouldn’t believe her, and it didn’t matter. She could handle wounded pride if she didn’t have to walk back up the mountain.

“Twelve gold for Pumpkin and a suitable farm wagon,” the man said. “I’ll throw in the bridle and harness for free.”

“And I can keep her here until I’m done shopping and loading the wagon?”

“Of course, if you-”

“Deal.”

She should negotiate, but the price was within her budget and Bri was running out of daylight. She pulled twelve gold coins out of the dress and handed them to the stunned man. Then she patted Pumpkin’s cheek and scratched behind her ears. The horse huffed in appreciation, and Bri smiled.

“Please harness her to the wagon and put these baskets in it. I’ll be back in an hour.”

She walked away with her head held high, leaving the sputtering man to follow her instructions. It felt good to be the one giving orders for a change.

Just over an hour later, Bri, Pumpkin, and a wagon full of supplies left Mias and started up the mountain. As promised, Pumpkin was a steady horse. She pulled Bri and the wagon easily and stayed on the path, leaving Bri with time to think.

Not that it did her any good. Henry had her shoe. The Society had come into the open and joined the royal family. She couldn’t do anything about those situations other than go to the next ball and look for answers.

And maybe ask Henry for her shoe back, if she could find him in the crowd again. And if she could get around every other eligible lady in the kingdom.

And if she could summon the nerve to face him, now that she knew what he was.

Bri sighed. Time to think did no good when all you did was go in a circle. By the time Pumpkin pulled the wagon onto the Vidre Estate, Bri still had no answers. She unharnessed the mare and led her to the stable so she could brush her down. She hauled water to the trough and poured some grain in the bin. She could put the horse in the goat's pasture to graze tomorrow, since the goats had been taken further up the mountain.

Then she unloaded the supplies from the wagon, hung the borrowed gown in Rhoda's wardrobe to air out, and fell asleep.

“Can’t I just wear the same outfit to the next ball?” Henry asked.

“Considering that your hat and crown were found trampled beyond recognition in a hallway, no.”

“I could wear it without the hat.”

Bastien gave him a look that said this was the stupidest suggestion he had heard all day and continued his work. At least this outfit was normal by Bastien’s standards. Henry would not be dressed as a goat or a goat herder, but as a prince. The suit itself was dark gray, but it was decorated with tiny purple snowbells and green trim. It didn’t take a fashion prodigy to guess that the outfit represented Mount Evangelina. Henry would normally object to being covered with flowers, but he was willing to take them over a tail.

The door swung open, and one of Alaric’s servants entered, carrying a single scroll.

“The beginning of the information you requested, Prince Henry.”

“He is busy,” Bastien said. “Leave it in the chair.”

The man knew better than to argue with the tailor. He set the scroll on the chair and hurried out of the room. Henry stared at it. Apparently, Alaric wasn’t kidding about always being able to make time for research. Bri’s history was hidden in that scroll. Her secrets.

Henry looked away, feeling a little sick. As much as he wanted to know everything about Bri, this didn't seem the right way to go about it. He would rather learn these things over picnics on the mountain and walks on the beach. He would rather have her tell him when she was ready.

How much could one scroll reveal?

Bastien left the room, muttering to himself about satin, and Henry picked up the scroll and unrolled it quickly before he changed his mind. He found himself staring at columns of numbers. Tax records for the Vidre Estate. This was far less personal than he had expected, but Alaric must have had some reason to send him this information.

Henry skimmed over the details. The Vidre family's property went beyond the house and valley and extended up the mountain. They owned several herds of goats that they kept in the mountain pastures.

Herds that were not doing nearly as well as Henry would expect based on his experience. He checked the numbers again, trying to make sense of them. Herds this size should be generating enough profit to support the estate and its household, but the Vidres lived as if they were destitute. Why was the estate's income so low?

Perhaps Lady Vidre was committing tax fraud and stashing the money away for herself. But if so, why draw attention to the estate by paying taxes late? This had happened multiple times, and the scribe's crisp hand reported that several extensions had been granted.

Henry rolled the scroll back up. How was it possible that having more information only increased his confusion? The Vidres had a large estate but were still in financial trouble. The heir to the estate worked as a servant and seemed to have forsaken all her rights as a noblewoman.

He needed to see Bri. She was the one with the answers, and apparently her difficulties ran even deeper than Henry had guessed. But how could he tell her that he had been looking at her family's financial records? Talking about money was

awkward even in the best of circumstances, and this was far from ideal.

Henry stared at himself in the mirror. He would ask her at the ball if she came. And if she didn't, then he would seek her out and confess to snooping.

Bastien's return interrupted Henry's thoughts.

"I have prepared a special accessory for Your Highness."

Blast it all. Henry grimaced as the tailor held up a small leather bag with a single strap.

"You made me a purse?"

"I prefer the term 'satchel.' Several of the snowballs on your tunic will act as buttons and hold it in place while you dance."

Bastien demonstrated. Henry had to admit it was a clever design. He just had no idea why it was necessary.

"If Your Highness is going to carry women's footwear at a party, you should do it discreetly. This is functional, not to mention more sanitary."

Henry's face went red, and Bastien shrugged.

"I doubt the young ladies of Aeonian will appreciate being handed drinks with a hand that has recently held a shoe."

"I won't be handing anyone drinks at the ball. This whole thing is a waste of time."

"A waste of time?"

Bastien's eyes flashed with anger, and Henry swallowed.

"Forgive me. It is a clever design."

"You think I'm worried about what you think about the design? I am used to people not appreciating my designs. Genius is seldom understood in its lifetime."

Genius was one word to use for Bastien's work. Henry chose not to dwell on the others, especially when the tailor looked so angry.

“Is peace a waste of time, Your Highness? Is my wife and her family and the rest of the Society coming out of hiding a waste of time? Your own mother finally being able to breathe freely and be honest with her husband? Is that a waste of time?”

“Of course not,” Henry said. “Forgive me. I simply meant-”

“I know you meant no harm, but you are not the only one affected by these events. You were young and sheltered in the mountains when things were at their worst and the witch Cassandra held our king in her power. Things could have gone very differently, Your Highness.”

“You were involved in that, weren’t you?” Henry said, remembering pieces of conversations and wishing he had paid more attention. “You helped free King Noam.”

“I played my part, and now I celebrate our success. These events deserve celebration, Prince Henry.”

Henry looked from the tailor’s face to the satchel hanging from his side. It was just the right size to hold Bri’s shoe.

“This is very thoughtful, Bastien,” he said. “Thank you.”

“Just don’t stuff anything else in there. It will ruin the proportions of your outfit.”

Henry laughed.

“I assure you, I’m not planning to start a collection. My goal is to return the shoe to its rightful owner as soon as possible.”

Bri lifted the skirt of the borrowed dress to keep it from dragging along the streets of Mias. The skirt was a bit long, which meant it could hide her worn work boots if she was careful. After what happened last time, Bri wasn't willing to take any chances with shoes that didn't fit properly.

The crowded streets were too tightly packed for her to press through. Luckily, everyone was going in the same direction. The castle glowed above them, lit with candles, lanterns, and what Bri suspected was magic.

She reached for her diamond necklace, which was tucked under the dress, then quickly pulled her hand away. She didn't want to draw attention to her magical gem. Bri mentally reviewed her plan. She would stay hidden in the crowd, avoiding Henry and the rest of the royal family. She had worried that might be difficult, as the royal family and number of people she needed to avoid kept growing. But in a crowd this big, it should be possible to disappear. She would stay until midnight when they made their announcement. Even if it was simply a repeat of whatever they had said last time, it would be useful to hear it for herself. And seeing their magical demonstration would give her a better idea of what she was up against.

That would mean watching Henry wield light with Evangelina Shadow-Storm. The thought made her palms sweat. Bri wiped her hands on the skirt, then quickly pulled them away. She wanted to return this dress to the woman in

good condition, and sweat stains would be difficult to remove from the delicate lace.

She half expected to be turned away at the gate. Could they really fit so many people in the castle?

Apparently, they could. Bri's shoulders tensed when she walked past the guards. Were they members of the Society as well? Even if they weren't, they were loyal to the royal family. Luckily, they didn't give her a second look as they scanned the mass of people shuffling past them. If they were looking for someone in particular, it wasn't her.

The crowded courtyard gave way to a crowded hallway. Bri found it difficult to breathe with so many people around her. Heat from so many bodies in a small space turned the pleasant summer night into a sweltering evening. She needed to get out of here if she didn't want to sweat on the borrowed dress.

Bri followed the flow of the crowd, working her way toward the edge of the hallway so she could slip through the first door available. She pushed through several entryways until she finally found a garden. It was still crowded, but not as bad as inside. She sat on a bench in the corner and breathed deeply to settle her nerves.

"How do they expect us to find anything in this crowd?" a woman's voice said.

She had an unfamiliar, lilting accent and sounded annoyed. The man escorting her answered, but his voice was too soft for Bri to hear what he said. She leaned further back into the shadows, trying to hide without looking suspicious.

"It's worse than the Princess Test," the woman said.

She stopped in front of Bri, who studied the couple as she pretended to admire the flowers behind them. The woman had bright red hair and wore a green dress embroidered with seashells. Her companion had brown hair and a well-groomed beard.

"Nothing is worse than a Princess Test," he said with a laugh.

“At least that had defined rules, even if they did break them at every turn.”

“Thank goodness they did. If they had followed the rules and chosen the best princess, you would be married to Prince Alaric by now.”

The woman laughed as the man took her hand and kissed it.

“But without rules, I have no way to get them to listen to me.”

She reclaimed her hand and made a series of rapid gestures. The man responded with gestures of his own. Bri watched in fascination. They were communicating through signs. Was this a secret code? Were they members of the Society? Their accents suggested they were not from Aeonian. Yet they spoke of Prince Alaric casually, suggesting they knew him and were working with him.

It was the closest thing she had to a lead, and she would not let it go. Bri followed the couple as they worked their way out of the garden and through the hallway. Even at a distance, the woman's bright red hair made her easy to find in the crowd. Following her was another matter. People pressed against Bri, pushing her away from the couple. The red-haired woman lost her patience and snapped at someone who jostled her. Bri took advantage of the disturbance to duck under a tall man's arm and gain ground.

Finally, they reached the end of a hallway and went through a small door. Bri waited a moment, then followed them through it. She found herself inside an enormous ballroom. Bri had thought the room she was in yesterday was grand, but this room was much larger and even more elaborate. Worse, mirrors of every shape and size hung on the walls. Bri patted the pouch at her waist where she had stored a few enchanted gems for backup. It was reassuring to have more than one source of magic.

Someone elbowed her as they pushed into the room. Bri pushed back and searched for the red-haired woman and her companion. She spotted them some distance away, moving

along the ballroom's edge toward a raised platform under an enormous mirror.

The royal dais.

Bri swallowed. She was too far away to see faces, but she could see thrones and people elevated above the crowd. The two tallest thrones would be for King Noam and Queen Marta. Those thrones were currently occupied, as were the slightly smaller ones beside them.

Bri's gaze slid over a head of golden curls that doubtless belonged to Crown Prince Alaric and settled on the woman at his side.

Evangelina Shadow-Storm.

She wore all black, not surprising for a villainous shadow warrior. Gems in her hair glistened as she moved. Magic gems? Most likely. If Bri knew how to use gems to work magic, Aeonias most powerful enchantress certainly did.

Bri swallowed. Judging from the amount of sparkle in her hair, Evangelina had a lot of gems. Bri's own collection seemed insignificant in comparison.

The couple Bri had been following reached the dais. They reported to Evangelina Shadow-Storm, not the king and queen, which did nothing to settle Bri's nerves. The shadow warrior's hold on the royal court was even stronger than she had feared.

She was too far away to guess what they said, but Evangelina Shadow-Storm nodded and looked around the room after they spoke. The gems in her hair glistened in the candlelight as she moved. Bri bent her knees and hunched over, hiding as best she could in the crowd.

The three seats beside Prince Alaric were empty, which meant Henry was wandering somewhere around the castle. Perhaps in this very ballroom.

Bri wished she hadn't come. This was pure folly. Even if she discovered their plan, there was no way she could fight an entire royal family of magic users on her own. She should leave before they found her.

And yet, she stayed. Someone had to protect Aeonian, and she was the only person who knew that the country even needed protection. The rest of the ballroom was enamored with Evangelina Shadow-Storm and the royal family. It was up to Bri to find out their wicked plan and expose them.

So, she watched and waited. The shadow warrior and her husband seemed content to sit on the dais and be looked at by the steady stream of admirers. Bri watched them be watched, turning down the occasional invitation to dance as politely as she could. As far as anyone was concerned, she was a shy wallflower who was attending the ball to get a glimpse of the royal family. The crowd shifted around her, and Bri let herself move with the flow of people so that she wasn't standing in the same place all night.

The crowd carried her closer to the dais. Bri pressed against the wall and felt smooth glass against her hands. She stood with her back to an enormous mirror. Bri traced the glass with her fingers but felt no signs of magic. She knew from her previous trip through the shadows that these mirrors were enchanted. What was the point of them?

Hours passed, and midnight drew near.

Finally, trumpets sounded a fanfare. The crowd hummed with excitement and pressed to the sides to make way for a group of people to join the royal family on the dais. Bri's heart pounded as Henry took his place in one of the three empty chairs. She was too far away to see anyone's facial expressions, but she still recognized him. He wore a fine suit and golden crown, and he nodded to Evangelina Shadow-Storm as the rest of the family joined them.

He really was a prince. She had believed him when he told her, and yet some part of her had hoped that it was a mistake. But there he was, sitting with the enemy.

Once everyone was settled, Queen Marta stood. Bri was too far away to make out anything but the queen's curly hair and purple gown. She waved at the crowd as King Noam stood to join her. Even though he was technically in charge, he was one of the people on the dais who concerned Bri the least. The

other was the young man who sat on the opposite side from Henry. That would be one of Noam's sons: Stefan or Marcus. But which was he, and why was the other son not present tonight?

Bri looked around, as if the missing prince might suddenly appear behind her and drag her through the mirror. But everyone around her was staring up at the royal family, eyes gleaming with curiosity and expectation.

Then Evangelina Shadow-Storm stood, and Bri forgot about everyone else in the room. The shadow warrior's black gown sparkled with gems of every color as she moved. It was an unusual effect. Why not choose one color so that they could match? But it was also dazzling. She glittered like a poisonous animal that warns off predators with bright colors. Bri's own diamond necklace and handful of gems now seemed laughably inadequate.

Her knees buckled, and she leaned against the mirror for support. Evangelina Shadow-Storm was a legend come to life. She was a hundred years out of time, yet she had the nerve to smile out at the crowd as if she belonged here. She was comfortable enough to kiss her husband's cheek before she turned to address the room.

"Welcome, everyone. We are so pleased that you could join us."

Her voice was lower than Bri had expected. Her accent was Aeonian, and yet not quite Aeonian. She spoke with the cadence of a century ago, her voice lilting like some strange song that would put everyone into a trance.

Bri made a fist and pressed her fingernails into her palms. The pain helped her stay calm as Evangelina Shadow-Storm told the story of her enchanted sleep and her brother Luca's part in hiding the royal family during Aeonian's civil war. Bri's gaze drifted to Henry. He turned his head slowly from side to side, searching the crowd.

Was he searching for her?

She shrank further against the wall. Surely, he couldn't pick her out of the crowd from this distance?

The clock struck midnight. Servants carried a cot onto the dais, and Evangelina Shadow-Storm lay on it and closed her eyes. A few moments later, she appeared in the mirror above the dais. Bri yelped in surprise, but thankfully she wasn't the only one. The shadow warrior floated from mirror to mirror, and suddenly Bri's hiding place with a mirror at her back didn't seem safe.

She held her breath as the shadow warrior walked past the mirror above her head. She was close enough for Bri to see that her eyes were green. Evangelina Shadow-Storm's gems had come with her into the shadows, and her dress had grown into a billowing skirt and cloak. She was terrifying as she loomed over the ballroom.

Bri slumped in relief when the shadow warrior moved on to another mirror. Evangelina Shadow-Storm worked her way around the room, then stopped in the mirror closest to the royal dais and pointed toward the royal family. Bri looked and saw Henry and his brother had leaned back on their thrones. They stared out at the crowd with blank expressions. Then three stars appeared in the mirror above them.

Bri's jaw dropped. Apparently light wielder was a very literal description of the princes' abilities. In the ballroom, Henry stared into nothing with his body slumped against the chair. In the shadows, his star darted from mirror to mirror until it finally came to rest above Evangelina Shadow-Storm. The woman's body lay on the cot, seemingly still asleep, but the show in the mirrors had just begun.

The shadow warrior spoke an enchantment, and green light stretched and grew in her hand until it became an enormous sword. She swung it, performing motions that were half military drill and half dance. The stars flew around her, adding to the effect.

It was a dazzling spectacle, and the crowd cheered with enthusiasm. Bri clapped to blend in, even as her heart froze in

her chest. She had known Evangelina Shadow-Storm had strong magic, but she had not imagined anything like this.

Guard the mirrors. How could she hope to protect anything from magic this strong?

Bri pressed her hand against the smooth surface of the mirror at her back. Her breath came in shallow gasps as she fought the urge to run. There was nowhere to go in this crowd. She had no choice but to lean against the cool glass and watch this nightmare play out.

Henry was part of this, and Henry knew where she lived. She tore her eyes away from the magical display and looked at the royal family. Then below the dais. Rhoda stood there, her hand resting on a man's arm. The man wore a royal uniform made in black rather than the usual blue or red.

Bri pushed away the panic that clawed at her chest as Rhoda smiled up at the man. They were all in danger. Why couldn't they see that?

The display of magic ended with the stars expanding into wispy strands of light that came together to resemble their physical bodies. Henry's face looked strange made in light. It was stern and cold. Nothing like the man who had smiled at her and shared his food the first day they met.

Guard the mirrors. Father had not asked her to save the kingdom. She had simply been charged with protecting her small part of it. She could not challenge the royal family's current power, but perhaps she could prevent them from gaining any more of it. Bri didn't know what they would do if they discovered her mirrors, but if she was careful, she might not have to find out. She could live quietly alone on her estate and give Lady Vidre the rest of the gems so that her stepfamily could start a new life in town. Or maybe in a new country, if that would get Rhoda out of danger.

Bri would be alone. Life would continue as it always had.

It was a reasonable plan. A safe plan. All she had to do was wait for the crowd to clear so that she could slip out of the castle without meeting Henry. She needed him to forget her,

although she could never forget him. You couldn't afford to forget an enemy.

Something drifted through the air. An unpleasant smell that reminded Bri of rotting garbage. It was faint. Apparently, the kitchen staff had not emptied their rubbish bins.

No. She had been in that kitchen. It hadn't smelled anything like trash.

The smell grew stronger. The people around Bri shifted uncomfortably as they looked sideways at each other and tried to find the source of the stench. It grew stronger still, and people began to put handkerchiefs over their noses. Bri fought the urge, then finally did the same. This stench was familiar somehow, and not just from her experience working as a servant. Where had she smelled it before?

She remembered just as a shriek filled the air. She had smelled this the night of the storm.

Something dark jumped out of the mirror and over her head. Everyone screamed as the monster landed in the crowd. They tried to run, but there was nowhere to go. People milled around the room in panic. The creature was too small to be a goblin. Bri saw a flash of granite skin and needle claws as it darted around a woman's wide skirt and then disappeared. Its head reached just past most people's knees, so it was too short to see as it pressed further into the room, but it was easy to track it by the screams and panic of the partygoers. People pressed into each other as they tried to escape. Bri found herself trapped against the mirror as the crowd surged. The creature shrieked again. Evangelina Shadow-Storm disappeared from the mirrors and jumped off her cot.

"Gremlin!" she shouted. "Everyone, let me through, please."

The crowd tried to part for her, but there simply wasn't room. Bri lost sight of Evangelina Shadow-Storm as the shadow warrior pushed her way onto the dance floor. A woman screamed, and the crowd pushed even further back. Bri twisted her head to gasp for air and found her face squished against the enchanted mirror.

Another wave of stench swept through the ballroom. Bri's heart froze as she saw a hoard of gremlins rushing toward her in the darkness. One creature was causing mayhem and minor injury. Hundreds of them would cause chaos and death.

“Guard!”

Bri pressed her hand against the glass and shouted the enchantment. The invisible iron spread across the mirror, and the gremlins disappeared as the mirror rippled until it reflected the ballroom once again. At the far end of the room, guards ushered people into the hallways and to safety. In the center, Evangelina Shadow-Storm had finally reached the gremlin. Shadows whirled around her hands as she fought it, but she didn't recreate the giant sword. Perhaps that could only be made in the mirrors?

It didn't matter. Prince Alaric was a few steps behind his wife, and he held a sword of gleaming steel. The two fought the gremlin, seeming more interested in containing it than killing it.

The crowd around Bri shifted so that she could finally move away from the mirror. She reached into her pouch, retrieved an enchanted ruby, and tucked it into the corner of the mirror's frame. She stepped back and breathed a sigh of relief when the enchantment held. A wave of stench made her relief short-lived. Bri turned and saw the hoard of gremlins running toward another mirror.

She elbowed her way through the crowd and guarded that mirror as well. She left a sapphire on the frame and kept moving, working around the wall and blocking any mirror large enough to tempt the gremlin hoard.

The roar of panicked voices faded as the crowd thinned, and Bri was surprised to hear singing. She turned and saw the red-haired woman standing on the dais with her mouth open in song. The crowd quieted as she sang, and they filed out of the room in a more orderly fashion. Bri stared at the woman and felt faint wisps of magic brush against the invisible iron of her guard enchantment. She placed the last of her spare gems in a mirror frame, moved to the next one, and guarded it. She kept

her hand pressed against the glass to hold the enchantment and keep the gremlins from coming through. In the center of the ballroom, the gremlin swayed in time with the music. Evangelina Shadow-Storm and Prince Alaric lowered their weapons and stepped back as the creature sank to the floor and fell asleep. The red-haired woman stopped singing, and silence settled over the ballroom.

“Well done, Fiora,” Prince Alaric said.

The royal family looked around the empty ballroom. They followed the trail of guarded mirrors until their eyes settled on Bri. She stood completely still, as if they would mistake her for part of the scenery if she didn't move. The guards had followed the guests out of the ballroom, but that still left a formidable group of enchanters and warriors between her and the door. Evangelina Shadow-Storm's gems glittered, and Prince Alaric's sword gleamed.

“Bri?” Henry said, “Bri, are you alright?”

He stepped toward her. Bri panicked and pulled away from the mirror. The guard enchantment broke when she lost contact with the glass, and high-pitched shrieks filled the air. Bri screamed as gremlins jumped over her head and into the ballroom. Then she gagged as their stench filled her mouth. The gremlin asleep on the dance floor woke up and howled with rage.

“Bri, look out!” Henry said.

Bri looked from Henry to the gremlins to Evangelina Shadow-Storm.

Then she ran.

No one stopped her. They were too busy fighting the monsters pouring into the ballroom. Prince Alaric shouted orders, and the red-haired woman sang. Evangelina Shadow-Storm pulled a gem from her hair and sprinted toward the open mirror to close it.

The chaos was the perfect cover. Bri raced toward the door as fast as she could. She left the ballroom behind and ran through hallways until she reached the gate. The guards

opened it for her, clearly under orders to evacuate the castle. Clocks chimed as Bri sprinted through the streets of Mias. The people who had been in the castle had dispersed into the city and were eagerly telling their stories to those who had not witnessed the attack. They described Evangelina Shadow-Storm as a hero who had risked her life to battle the dark creature.

Bri dodged the gossiping crowd, retrieved Pumpkin from the stable, and rode for home. She wanted nothing more than to gallop back, but she forced herself to take it slow. The full moon and her diamond lit her way, but the path was still dark. Only when she was clear of the city did she realize that she was shaking. She lifted a trembling hand to scratch an itch on her face and realized that she was crying as well.

Bri pulled Pumpkin to a stop and looked back at the city. More and more lights came on as news of the magical attack spread through Mias. The castle was still well lit, but she had no doubt that it was empty now. Well, empty of guests. The royal family would still be there. Possibly still be fighting.

They had seen her. Evangelina Shadow-Storm had seen her work magic, and Henry knew where she lived.

Bri turned away from the city and urged Pumpkin up the mountain.

Henry tried to reach Bri, but he lost track of her as the horde of gremlins poured through the mirror. He gathered magic in his hands to defend himself and noticed with satisfaction that his light shone brighter after all his training. Cael and Benjamin moved to the edge of the ballroom and stood guard to keep the gremlins from escaping through the doors.

In the middle of the room, Lina was a dark blur as she fought the monsters. Her gems sparkled as she blasted the gremlins with bolts of shadow. Alaric's blade gleamed as he guarded her back. Henry pushed his way to them and added his light magic to Lina's attack. The gremlins shrieked and ran in every direction to get away. Unfortunately for them, one of those directions led them to Fiora and Gustave. A gremlin lunged toward Gustave, and Fiora screamed with rage. The magic in her voice reverberated through the ballroom, and the gremlins howled in protest. They ran to the mirrors and scratched the glass as they tried to escape the sound.

“Open the mirrors!” Lina shouted.

Henry fought his way to the nearest mirror before realizing he had no idea how to open it. He pressed his hand against the glass and felt an invisible barrier over it. Was that Bri's doing? Something clattered to the floor as the gremlins rattled the mirror, and the invisible barrier vanished. The mirror showed shadows instead of the ballroom, and the gremlins surged through the opening.

“Spread out and drive them into the shadows!” Lina shouted.

Fiora’s voice did most of the work, but a few stragglers had not yet realized there was a way to escape. Henry joined Cael and Benjamin in herding the remaining gremlins toward the open mirror. Finally, the last dark creature disappeared through the glass. Lina pressed her hand against the mirror and closed it. Fiora stopped singing, and silence filled the room.

Henry bent over and retrieved a sparkling sapphire from the floor. This was what Bri had used to close and guard the mirrors, and the knowledge settled on him like a weight. Bri had guarded the mirrors. She knew magic.

“Where did those come from?” Fiora demanded. “You said you sealed them all away!”

“I did,” Lina said.

“Clearly you didn’t.”

“I don’t have time to argue with you. I need to check the seal and contain those gremlins before they get away.”

Lina stormed past Fiora and lay down on her cot. Cael and Benjamin followed her and sat with their backs against the dais. They appeared as stars beside Lina in the mirror and disappeared into the shadows.

Henry stayed where he was and turned the sapphire over in his hand as if that could give him answers. When it didn’t, he looked up at the ballroom. Pools of liquid that looked suspiciously like blood glistened on the floor. Human blood? Or gremlin?

He met Alaric’s gaze. The crown prince frowned.

“We should ask the Society to gather some gems. If something damaged the seal, Lina might need extra magic to fix it.”

“Something or someone,” Fiora said. “You all saw that woman let the gremlins in, right?”

“She was stopping them,” Henry said. “She closed the mirrors.”

“Then why did she run after releasing the horde? Who was she?”

Nic coughed and looked at Henry. Henry shook his head.

“Bri wouldn’t do something like that.”

Fiora glared at him.

“Are you telling me that you know that woman?”

It was a more difficult question to answer than it seemed. Did he know Bri? He had thought so, but the evidence against that was mounting.

“I should help Lina fix the seal.”

Henry left Alaric to deal with Fiora’s ranting and sat beside Cael. The stench of dark creatures washed over him the moment his star appeared in the shadows. He flew toward the seal and found Lina, Cael, and Benjamin staring at it.

“Well?” Henry asked.

“We pushed most of the gremlins back into it,” Lina said. “A few escaped, but I can deal with them later.”

She pulled an emerald from her headband and pressed it into the seal. Henry and his brothers blasted it with light. The seal flashed green, then settled into a pale glow. Lina sent a bolt of shadow magic over it and watched the wispy shadows crawl over the light. Then she sighed.

“It seems sound. I don’t know what happened.”

“Let’s go back and check in with the Society,” Cael said. “Maybe they’ll know something.”

“I’ll stay and watch it,” Benjamin said. “Keep a mirror with you so I can report any changes.”

Henry blinked and broke the enchantment. In the ballroom, servants had lit extra candles and were scrubbing the floor. Henry looked from their red-stained rags to the mirrors that Bri had closed. This was bad.

“The others have gathered in the dining room, Your Highness,” a servant said.

Henry nodded and walked with Lina and Cael to join the family. He was relieved to see that the rest of the castle had not been affected. There were no monsters or injured guests in the halls. If anything, it was too peaceful. He had grown used to chaos, but even in the dining room, those gathered around the table spoke in hushed voices.

“No one was seriously injured, although the doctor is treating some scrapes and scratches,” Marta said once everyone was settled. “We have invited those who were attacked to stay in the castle overnight so we can give them potions and make sure their injuries don’t get infected. Were you able to seal the gremlins away?”

Everyone at the table turned to Lina. She sighed.

“We caught most of them and pushed them back into the seal. A few escaped, but gremlins aren’t very bright and tend to travel in packs. I can find them later. Benjamin is watching the seal to make sure that it holds.”

“And how did they escape in the first place?” Fiora asked.

“I don’t know.”

Silence followed Lina’s words, and Henry shuddered. Lina was the most powerful enchantress in Aeonian. She had created the seal. If she didn’t know why it had failed, they were in trouble.

“I couldn’t find any flaws when I opened it to send the gremlins back in,” Lina said. “As far as I can tell, there is nothing wrong with it.”

“But obviously something is,” Fiora pressed. “Perhaps that woman sabotaged it before she opened the mirrors.”

“Bri *closed* the mirrors,” Henry said. “That attack would have been much worse if she hadn’t been there.”

“Strange that she came so prepared, though,” Fiora said. “Why bring magical gems to a ball if you’re only planning to dance?”

She opened her palm to reveal a handful of sparkling jewels. Henry squeezed the sapphire that he had retrieved from

the floor. He hated to admit it, but Fiora had a point.

“Did you know that she knows magic?” Cael asked.

Henry shook his head, desperately wishing that he could say yes, and that Bri had trusted him enough to tell him the truth about both her magic and her family.

“We will investigate every possibility,” Alaric said. “Henry has suspected something strange was going on at the Vidre estate for some time, and it seems he was correct.”

“I know where her stepfamily is staying in town,” Nic said. “I can question them.”

“Stepfamily? You knew that she wasn’t their servant?” Henry said.

“Rhoda told me. Was it supposed to be a secret?”

Only from him, apparently. Henry shook his head.

“It’s highly unusual,” Cael said. “By rights, she’s the heir to the estate. Why is she working as a servant?”

“Actually, her father’s will left the estate in the care of her stepmother,” Alaric said. “Bri owns it, but her stepmother has legal authority to run it.”

“Why does everyone know so much about this woman?” Fiora asked. “Was she under suspicion before this?”

“No, but I’m very curious about her now,” Alaric said. “Nic, can you check on her stepfamily without raising suspicions? If they don’t know what she can do, I’d like to keep it that way. And if they do know, I’d rather not get their guard up. We’ll keep them under observation, and that will be easier if they don’t know we suspect them of anything.”

Nic grinned.

“I’ll be discrete and subtle.”

Those were two of the words that least described Nic, but Henry was happy that someone else was going to deal with the Vidres.

“I want to check the seal in the realm of light,” Lina said. “Perhaps I can find something there that isn’t obvious from the shadows.”

“I’ll ride with you and search the Vidre estate,” Henry said.

“And I’ll come with you,” Alaric said. “We can question Gabriella if she’s there and search for clues if she’s not.”

“Do you want backup while investigating the suspect?” Fiora asked.

“She’s not a suspect,” Alaric said. “She’s just suspicious.”

“Then who is a suspect?” Cael said. “Who else would want to ruin the ball?”

“That’s a good question,” Alaric said.

The room stayed silent while everyone considered this question. No one came up with any answers.

“Is it possible that this had nothing to do with the ball?” Gustave said finally. “Those creatures didn’t seem very bright.”

“Perhaps not, but the timing is suspicious,” Lina said.

“Oh, you suspect the timing, but not the woman who opened the mirror?” Fiora said. “She knows mirror magic, just like Elspeth. Are you truly not concerned about that?”

“This has nothing to do with your sister,” Lina said. “My priority right now is checking the seal.”

“Half-sister,” Fiora said. She made a series of quick gestures with her hands, and Gustave laughed. He answered with gestures of his own, and Fiora scowled at him and shook her head.

Henry left them to their signed conversation and followed Lina out of the room. It took far longer for their unmarked carriage to make it through the crowded streets than Henry would have liked. If all the citizens of Aeonian had attended the ball, they were now gathered outside talking about it. Lina

bounced impatiently on the seat, and even Alaric tapped his foot in frustration.

“Well, we certainly made an impression,” Henry said. “Perhaps too much of one.”

A group of commoners stumbled out of a pub and stepped in front of their carriage, forcing the driver to halt. They sang a song from Alaric’s play, loudly and off-key, as they supported each other across the street.

“Evangelina! Evangelina! Be my queen-ah! Be my queen-ah!”

Alaric’s face burned red. Henry bit his lip to keep from laughing.

“It seems the ball worked,” Lina said. “They’re singing your song.”

“Yes, but they’re singing your praises.”

The carriage rolled forward and passed a town square. A theater troupe had set up a stage and was hosting an impromptu performance. A woman in a black dress strutted around the stage, kicking every so often to show off the fact that her legs were coated with fur trousers and ended in hooves. Lina groaned.

“I think I liked it better when they thought I was a fraud.”

Finally, they broke free of the traffic and trotted up the mountain path. The carriage stopped at Evangelina’s Temple, where members of the Society had already gathered.

“How did Madame Scowl beat us here?” Henry muttered.

“Who?” Lina asked.

“Onyx Cockroach.”

“Who?” Alaric asked.

Henry laughed in spite of everything. Alaric may have learned about the existence of the Society, but apparently he hadn’t been briefed on the finer points of how it worked.

“It looks like you have help, Lina, whether you want it or not.”

“I’ll take what I can get. Do you all want backup to search the estate?”

Alaric shook his head.

“It will be easier to be stealthy with just the two of us. I’ll check in often.”

He pulled a shard of mirror from his pocket and waved it at her.

“You’d better.”

Lina kissed her husband, grinned at Henry, then followed Madame Scowl into the cave. Henry tried not to envy Alaric and Lina’s easy relationship. He had bigger things to worry about right now than romantic troubles.

And yet, that was what weighed on his mind when they reached the Vidre estate. The moonlit valley below them looked peaceful. Henry studied it, as if the land itself could tell him why Bri lived as a servant in a house that she owned or how she knew magic.

They left their horses at the top of the hill and walked down. Henry pushed away the guilt he felt at invading Bri’s space in the middle of the night, but it refused to leave completely.

“Maybe we should wait for daylight,” he said. “This doesn’t feel right.”

“I don’t like it either,” Alaric said. “But if something is going on here, we need to know.”

Behind them, the horses whinnied nervously. A return whinny echoed from the valley. Henry and Alaric shared a look and hurried to the stable at the edge of the estate.

A reddish mare stood in a stall. She shook her head at them and flattened her ears.

“Someone must be here,” Alaric said. “Let’s circle back around to the house.”

“There!”

Movement at a second-story window caught Henry’s eye. Was it Bri? Or simply a curtain caught in the wind?

Alaric walked to the front door and knocked. No one answered. Henry circled around to the kitchen entrance.

“Bri, are you there? Are you alright?”

He heard a strange sound inside the house. Alaric ran around the corner.

“What was that?”

“You heard it too? It sounded like a donkey.”

“Yes, but why is there a donkey in the kitchen?”

Henry thought he had reached the limit of possible confusion, but apparently, he hadn’t. They waited, listening at the door, but heard nothing more. Alaric knocked on the door again. It creaked open.

Alaric walked into the kitchen. Henry followed him after a moment’s hesitation. He hated entering Bri’s space without an invitation, but what if she was in trouble?

From a donkey. He sighed, feeling horribly out of his depth.

The kitchen was empty. Alaric pointed to the mirror on the counter, gave Henry a knowing look, then walked further into the house.

“Bri?” Henry called. “Bri, are you here?”

No answer. They stopped in a dining room filled with mirrors. Their reflections looked eerie in the darkness. Henry called again.

“Maybe no one is here,” he said.

“Then why would there be a horse in the stable?”

Why indeed? They searched the rest of the house. Most of the rooms were completely empty except for the mirrors. Three rooms had beds, but four people lived in this house. Where did Bri sleep? A trip to the attic answered that question.

Moonlight streaming through holes in the roof revealed a bed made from old quilts and rags. Henry had suspected that Bri was not treated well, but his heart ached at the confirmation of her poverty.

“This estate should be making plenty of money to support a household,” Alaric said. “They must be funneling money elsewhere and falsifying their taxes.”

“What would they use that much money on?”

“Buying enchanted mirrors and gems?”

It was as good an answer as any, but Henry didn’t like the implications. They entered a bedroom with a floor-length mirror attached to the wall. Such a thing would be expensive even if it wasn’t enchanted. Why keep it in an empty room when you couldn’t afford furniture or servants?

“I don’t think anyone is here,” Henry said. “We should go.”

“Check the shadows first.”

Henry looked around for a chair, but the room was empty. He sat on the floor instead. His head pounded as he let his gaze soften. He had worked far more magic today than he was used to. It was late, and he was tired.

And Bri could be in trouble.

He entered the shadows and flew around the space that would be the estate and the valley. He saw nothing. Not even a sign that the mirrors were magical.

Henry felt a movement behind him and spun around. The shadows were empty, but he sensed something lurking there. He sniffed. No stench, so it wasn’t a dark creature.

“Bri? Are you there? It’s me, Henry. Are you well?”

Silence. Henry waited a few moments longer, then broke the enchantment and shook his head at Alaric’s questioning look.

“If she was here, she’s gone now.”

Bri stayed frozen in the shadows, watching Henry's star from a distance. He made a final circle, then disappeared, but she still didn't dare to move. What if he came back? Henry had appeared out of nowhere, and she had barely managed to avoid him. He could return just as quickly, and he was looking for her. Worse, Crown Prince Alaric was walking through her house. She had officially attracted the attention of the royal family, and she had no idea what they wanted from her. To ask questions? Or something far more sinister?

Bri had no intention of finding out.

It was difficult to judge time in the shadows. The darkness didn't change, and the silence stretched on around her. Had she been waiting for hours or minutes? Green light flashed on the horizon, and Bri froze again and waited. Nothing more happened. Still, that light meant there was something else out there, and she didn't want to find out what.

Finally, she couldn't take it any longer. Bri tried to stand, but her shaking legs forced her to stop. She waited for the trembling to pass and took a few steps. Nothing. Perhaps she really was alone. She reached for her house with that vague, magical sense and felt the tug that she knew would take her back to the mirror.

After a few more moments of hesitation, Bri followed it. She was out of good options, so she might as well be proactive. She could either spend the night in the shadows, or she could risk being caught to check if the princes were gone.

What if they were still there? What if they were doing something to the mirrors? Or they found Father's journal? She had once again left her house unguarded.

Bri quickened her pace. When she reached the mirror, she stood to the side of it and listened.

She heard nothing but the sounds of an empty house. Branches against a window. Wind sweeping over the roof.

Either the princes were gone, or they were waiting in ambush.

Bri opened the mirror and stepped through it. The room was dark. She leaned through the door and squinted into the hallway. She saw nothing. Was it safe, or was this a very well-laid trap?

Hopefully, it wasn't a trap. She took a deep breath and stepped into the hallway. One step after another, she walked through the house. Finally, she reached the kitchen.

Empty.

Bri's head slumped with relief and exhaustion. She was safe for now.

She slid the bolt into place to lock the kitchen door. It showed no signs of damage. She checked the other doors and found them locked and unharmed. Had the princes used magic to gain entry instead of forcing their way in? Was it possible to use her gems to guard against their magic and keep the doors locked?

She was too tired to try tonight.

Bri looked at the hearth, shook her head, and made her way slowly to Rhoda's bedroom. She slid out of the pink dress, grateful that the night's adventures had not damaged it, and sunk into Rhoda's bed.



“Bri!”

Lady Vidre’s voice echoed through the house. Bri opened her eyes and blinked in the sunlight. What time was it?

“Bri! Why are the doors locked? Let us in!”

Blast it all. Bri jumped out of Rhoda’s bed and grabbed the pink dress from a nearby chair. She hadn’t expected her stepfamily to return so soon. For that matter, she hadn’t expected them to return at all. She took the back hallway and climbed the stairs to the attic two at a time. She covered the pink gown with a pile of threadbare quilts, threw on the nearest work dress, and hurried to the front entrance. She looked out a window first to make sure her stepfamily was alone. Other than Lady Hawley’s coach and coachman, they were. There was no sign of a royal ambush. Bri took a deep breath and opened the door.

Lucille ignored Bri and brushed past her. Lady Vidre lingered outside to instruct the coachmen where to put the trunks. Rhoda leaned against the wall, smiling a dreamy smile.

“I didn’t expect you to return,” Bri whispered.

Rhoda didn’t respond. Lady Vidre swept inside and gave Bri a look.

“We’ll take breakfast in the dining room as soon as you can prepare it.”

Bri gritted her teeth and curtsied. The house had felt empty without them, but now she missed the solitude. She bustled around the kitchen, brewing tea and burning the toast slightly so that it wouldn’t be obvious that the bread was stale. She had been too busy to bake, but they didn’t need to know that.

She carried the tray and placed it on the table with a curtsy.

“I didn’t expect you back so soon,” she said. “Won’t Lady Hawley miss you?”

Lucille snorted, and Lady Vidre glared at her daughter before turning her attention to Bri.

“Given everything that has happened, Lady Hawley decided it would be best if we retired to the country for the time being.”

“What happened?”

Bri tried to sound simply curious. It worked. Rhoda turned to her with glistening eyes.

“You wouldn’t believe it, Bri! Dark creatures called gremlins broke through the mirrors during the magic demonstration at the ball, but Evangelina Shadow-Storm fought them and saved everyone. She really is a hero!”

“It was an ill-conceived publicity stunt,” Lady Vidre sniffed. “Someone could have been hurt.”

Bri hadn’t considered that the royal family might have summoned the gremlins so that they could be seen defeating them. It made sense, in a way.

“At least we get to come home until the next ball,” Lucille said.

“The next ball?”

Bri had assumed a gremlin attack put an end to the madness that was inviting the whole country to a party. Apparently, she was wrong.

“I can’t wait to see what magic they show us at the next one,” Rhoda said. “Maybe the new members of the royal family will join them this time. I would love to see Nic’s magic.”

Lady Vidre stiffened, and Lucille snorted softly.

“It’s a mistake, giving royal titles to former goatherders,” Lady Vidre said. “They don’t know how to behave in polite society.”

Lucille snorted again. She caught Bri’s questioning look and shrugged.

“One of the new nobles is infatuated with Rhoda. He wouldn’t stop visiting and kept sending flowers and notes. That’s why Lady Hawley suggested that we return home.

She's trying to break them apart and make him forget about her."

"Lucille!" Rhoda protested. "That is not at all what happened."

Bri had seen how the man looked at Rhoda. She suspected that was exactly what had happened.

"He even came to Lady Hawley's house late last night to check on Rhoda after the gremlin incident. I think that was the final straw."

Bri studied Rhoda as if her stepsister's face could give her answers. Was Nic simply being considerate, or did he have another reason for checking on the Vidre family? Had he been looking for her and using Rhoda as an excuse?

"Rhoda is already being courted by Prince Henry," Lady Vidre said. "I will not allow some second-rate shadow warrior to interfere."

Bri felt the blood drain from her face. The man who courting Rhoda was a shadow warrior? This was bad.

"Does Prince Henry know he's courting Rhoda?" Lucille said. "Because he spent the whole evening looking for a blond woman with a missing shoe."

Bri cleared their empty plates and kept her eyes down. Henry had looked for her even before the gremlins attacked. She didn't know how to feel about that. Luckily, her stepfamily was too busy with their conversation to notice her avoiding their gazes.

"Lucille, watch your tongue! I'll thank you not to repeat rumors."

"Watch my tongue? I have watched my tongue and my hair and my posture and everything else that it is possible to watch since you sent me off to live with that woman. Do you know what it is like, being turned into bait for young men and hoping they take it?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. You think you are the only young woman who has tried to make an advantageous match?"

“I don’t want an advantageous match! I don’t care if I marry a prince!”

“Lucille, mind your manners!”

“I won’t! Not here. Not when I’m in the comfort of my own home and don’t need to impress anyone. We are in the middle of nowhere. I could run around in my chemise, and it wouldn’t matter. No one would see.”

As if on cue, someone knocked on the door. Lady Vidre gave Lucille a withering look, then hurried to the window. She slumped with relief.

“Only a courier. Bri, go see what he wants.”

Bri froze. It could be a trap. She should have run when she had the chance. But there was no way to refuse without raising suspicion. Bri dropped the plates off in the kitchen and hurried to the front door.

“Message for the lady of the house,” the courier said. “No reply expected.”

Bri studied him for signs of anything suspicious, but he looked ordinary enough. The sealed envelope he gave her looked ordinary as well. The seal was far too small to be anything royal. She thanked him and closed the door.

The lady of the house. By rights, that was her. She gritted her teeth as she handed the envelope to Lady Vidre. Her stepmother opened it, scanned the message, and scowled.

“How dare they!”

She slammed the letter onto the table, picked up her tea, and carried it out of the dining room. Lucille watched her go, then slumped back in her chair and ate her toast, not seeming to care that the crumbs fell on her dress. Rhoda sipped her tea and stared out the window with a dreamy expression.

Bri picked up the letter and retreated to the kitchen to read it. It was short. A few sentences, but they sent a cold shiver down her spine.

Their outdoor servants were quitting and sent their regrets for the short notice. They had recently been restored to their

rightful places as members of the royal family, so they no longer needed to disguise themselves as goatherders.

Bri's heart pounded as she read the letter again and again, sure that it must be a mistake. The Society of Evangelina had been on her doorstep since she was born. Had Father known they lived on the estate? Was that why he had told her to watch out for them?

She tried to read the letter again, but her hand was shaking too badly. She dropped it onto the kitchen counter and forced herself to breathe. The enemy had lived next door her whole life and had searched her house last night. They had a whole treasury of magical gems, while she had left most of hers in the ballroom. How could she fight back when they had every possible advantage?

“Is the foot tapping really necessary?”

Henry glared at Cael and switched to tapping his toes inside his shoes. He had to channel his nervous energy somewhere, and there was not much room to move in the royal carriage. He looked out the small window, as if Mount Evangelina could give him strength, but the mountain sat as still and stoic and beautiful as ever.

The carriage door opened, and Gustave jumped in. The former king of Montaigne was dressed as a courier. He had been very willing to help and hadn't blinked an eye when they asked him to wear a disguise. After everything he had been through with Carina, Henry supposed this might seem like an ordinary request.

“Bri answered the door,” Gustave said. “I heard more people talking inside the house, so at least some of the family are home.”

“I guess you all didn't search the house very thoroughly last night,” Cael said.

“Maybe she hid in the woods,” Henry said. “Or maybe she was staying in town, and she came back with the family.”

He pulled the shoe out of the satchel he had put it in for safekeeping and stepped out of the carriage. Cael leaned back against his seat and stared at the wall in front of him as he began his enchantment. He would watch the shadows for anything unusual while Henry visited the house. Gustave

would stay and guard Cael, another duty he hadn't blinked an eye at when asked.

"Good luck," Gustave said.

Henry nodded and walked over the hill into the Vidre estate. The house looked far less sinister in the daylight. His heart thumped in his chest as he came closer. He would see Bri. He would get answers.

He reached the front door and knocked. He felt a bit ridiculous standing there, holding Bri's shoe. But it was all part of his plan. Rumors had spread about his search for the woman with the missing shoe. He might as well use them to his advantage.

He heard voices and footsteps inside the house, but no one opened the door. Henry stepped back so he could see around the corner, just in case Bri made a run for it. Guards had been stationed in the woods and various places around the estate, but Henry had convinced everyone to let him talk to Bri first. He heard someone approaching from inside the house and stood tall, doing his best to look regal.

Bri opened the door. She froze when she saw him, and her hand clutched the doorknob as if it alone was keeping her upright. Henry's carefully planned speech stuck in his throat, and he offered a small smile instead. When that failed to get a response, he held up the shoe. That broke the spell, and Bri moved to close the door. Henry rushed forward and pushed against it to hold it open.

They stood there, staring at each other.

"Your Highness!"

Lady Vidre's shriek broke the spell. Bri gave Henry a pleading look, then lowered her head as she stepped back and let him in. She leaned against the wall, visibly trembling.

"Your Highness, please come into the sitting room. My servant will bring you refreshments while I fetch my daughters. They'll be so pleased to see you."

Lady Vidre dashed away, leaving Henry alone with Bri again. He swallowed, afraid to speak but more afraid of being

silent.

“Are you well?”

“Why are you here?”

“To check on you. Did the gremlins hurt you?”

She studied him for a moment, weighing his words. Then she curtsied.

“Please follow me to the sitting room, Your Highness.”

Henry followed. Bri curtsied again, then turned to go.

“Bri, wait.”

She glared at him.

“My mistress ordered me to find refreshments for you.”

“Your stepmother has no power to order you around like that, Gabriella Vidre.”

If she had looked scared before, she was terrified now. Bri collapsed into a chair and stared at him in shock. Henry sighed.

“I didn’t mean that as an accusation. I’m sorry. Madame Scowl told me.”

“Who?”

“One of your servants.”

“Former servants. They’ve all resigned. Apparently, they’re members of the royal family and have been for some time.”

Now she was accusing him. At least she didn’t look terrified anymore.

“I should have told you, and I’m sorry. But why does it matter? I have magic, but so do you. We’ve both been keeping secrets.”

“Yes, but I don’t have an entire country and powerful secret society behind me.”

“How did you learn, then? Who taught you?”

Bri crossed her arms and glared at him. Henry waited. When she didn't answer, he spoke slowly, trying to soften his words.

“The Society is suspicious of you, Bri. They have accused you of being responsible for the gremlin attack.”

“What? I saved you all!”

“I know, and I trust you. This is going all wrong, but I'm trying to help.”

“You can help by leaving me alone.”

“I'm afraid that isn't an option. Not without some answers. They wanted to arrest you right away, but I convinced them to let me talk to you first. I'm trying to help, Bri.”

She was shaking again, and Henry hated himself for causing her so much distress. Maybe he should have let Alaric do this. His stepbrother was a far more experienced diplomat.

Neither of them heard the door open, but they heard Lady Vidre's scandalized gasp.

“What are you doing, Bri? I told you to fetch His Highness some refreshments, not make yourself comfortable like the lady of the house.”

Lady Vidre returned with Lucille and Rhoda behind her. Bri jumped to her feet and offered a curtsy. She gave Henry a look, as if daring him to stop her, and hurried out of the room. He let her go. The house was guarded in both the realm of light and the realm of shadows. If she ran, she wouldn't make it far.

He tried to shake the image of Bri screaming for help as a guard dragged her away. He wanted to avoid that, but he also didn't want to reveal her secrets in front of her stepfamily. Maybe that was inevitable, but he didn't want to be the one to do it.

“My apologies, Your Highness,” Lady Vidre said. “It really is difficult to find competent servants these days.”

Henry swallowed a sarcastic remark and stood to greet the ladies. Rhoda offered him a smile, and Lucille glared. They

sat, and Henry tried not to make it obvious that he was waiting for Bri to return. He looked out the window, straining his ears for any sound out of the ordinary. If she left the house, the soldiers would capture her. That was sure to cause a commotion.

“Where did you get that shoe?” Lucille asked.

“Lucille!” Lady Vidre hissed under her breath. “That’s no way to address a prince.”

“My apologies. Where did you get that shoe, Your Highness?”

Lady Vidre kicked her daughter, doubtless thinking her skirts would hide the motion, and smiled at Henry.

“I believe Lucille merely meant to express her curiosity about your carrying a lady’s shoe, Your Highness.”

Lady Vidre gave Lucille a withering look. Her daughter returned it but kept her mouth shut. Rhoda filled the silence.

“Oh, is it *the shoe*, Your Highness? The one the woman lost at the ball?”

“Yes, it is,” Henry said, feeling ridiculous even though this plan had been his idea. “Since I’ve had no luck finding the woman in town, I’m bringing the shoe to various country houses to see if anyone recognizes it.”

Lady Vidre saw her opportunity and took it.

“And you thought of Rhoda since you danced with her. How considerate, Your Highness.”

“The woman was blond,” Henry said.

Rhoda twirled a strand of her dark hair around her fingers.

“I didn’t lose my shoe while dancing with Prince Henry. I had both shoes when I started dancing with Nic, and I danced with him all night.”

“Candlelight can play tricks on your eyes,” Lady Vidre said.

“You were very distracted by that gentleman, Rhoda. Perhaps you didn’t notice that your shoe fell off,” Lucille said.

Lady Vidre gave her an exasperated look, then turned back to Rhoda.

“Try it on, dearest. Prince Henry has come all this way to return it to you.”

“But it isn’t my shoe.”

“Perhaps you’re misremembering,” Lady Vidre said through gritted teeth.

Rhoda started to argue, then looked at her mother’s face and thought better of it. She kicked off her shoe and held her foot out to Henry. He stared at it for a moment, not sure what to do. Finally, he knelt and slid the shoe onto Rhoda’s foot. He flushed as his hand brushed against her ankle. This visit was not going at all as planned. Where had Bri gone?

“It’s too large,” Rhoda said. “Definitely not mine.”

“It seems to fit well enough,” Lady Vidre said with a clenched jaw.

“It looks familiar, though,” Rhoda said. “Lucille, don’t you have a pair of shoes like this?”

“No, that shoe doesn’t look familiar at all.”

Lucille gave a sweet smile, and Henry swallowed. She was lying. It was her shoe, and this entire endeavor was a mistake. He had been so eager to see Bri again and prove her innocence that he had forgotten the shoe wasn’t her size. She must have borrowed it from one of her stepsisters.

“Try it on, Lucille,” Lady Vidre said. “Now that Rhoda mentions it, that shoe does look familiar.”

Lucille hesitated a moment, then extended her foot. Henry tried not to wince as he slid it onto her foot. Lady Vidre gasped.

“A perfect fit! Lucille, why didn’t you tell me you had lost it last night?”

“Actually, it feels a bit tight,” Lucille said. “Not to mention I didn’t lose a shoe at the first ball or dance with Prince Henry. It can’t be mine.”

“Are you sure about that, dear?” Lady Vidre said. “It was a long evening, and you danced with a lot of men. Not to mention your hair has a few golden highlights. It could easily look blond in candlelight.”

“I think I would remember losing a shoe.”

Henry didn’t know why Lucille was so determined to deny the shoe was hers, but he was grateful for her insistence. He removed the shoe from her foot and returned to his chair.

“What about the other women on your estate?” he asked. “The whole kingdom was invited, so the woman could have been anyone. Perhaps a servant or gardener?”

“Unfortunately, all our servants recently quit, Your Highness.”

“Really? What about your scullery maid? The one who opened the door for me?”

Lady Vidre feigned a look of confusion and tilted her head, as if she had no idea who Prince Henry meant.

“He means Bri,” Lucille said.

Lady Vidre glared at her daughter, but Lucille simply shrugged.

“Bri?” Henry prompted.

“She didn’t attend the ball,” Lady Vidre said.

“Still, I’d like to speak with her. Servants often know more than you expect.”

“Plus, she’s blond,” Lucille said.

Lady Vidre cleared her throat. It sounded more like a growl, and Henry couldn’t help admiring Lucille’s calm in the face of her mother’s fury.

“Wasn’t she supposed to come back with tea?” Rhoda asked.

“I’ll go fetch her.”

Lucille stood and walked calmly out of the room. Lady Vidre looked like she was resisting the urge to tackle her. Rhoda offered Henry a small smile.

“You’re a light wielder, right? Does that mean you train with Nic?”

“Yes, I do. Nic is a very promising shadow warrior.”

Rhoda beamed as if the praise had been directed at her. Henry answered a few more questions about magic and how they trained. He assured both ladies that the gremlin threat had been taken care of. Neither Rhoda nor Lady Vidre seemed bothered by magic. What would they think if they knew Bri was an enchantress?

Lucille returned and offered Henry an apologetic shrug.

“I couldn’t find her. Sorry.”

If Lady Vidre had offered the apology, Henry would have suspected her of locking Bri up in a closet somewhere to prevent their meeting. But Lucille seemed sincere, and he believed her. Bri must have run, which meant the guards would have her by now.

She was probably terrified. He should get to her as quickly as possible and explain what was happening, and that they meant her no harm.

“I won’t take any more of your time then. Thank you for the refreshments, ladies. I hope to see you at our next ball.”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Rhoda said.

Henry stood and followed Lady Vidre to the door. He hurried up the hill and jogged to the carriage as soon as he was out of sight of the house. He flung the carriage door open, ready to assure Bri that she was safe.

But Bri wasn’t in the carriage. Cael was still in his trance. Henry looked at Gustave, who shrugged.

“No one left the house.”

Cael pulled himself out of his trance and turned to Henry.

“Did you see her?”

“Yes, but she wouldn’t talk to me, and she escaped the house somehow.”

“Really? And the guards haven’t found her yet?”

They turned to Gustave.

“No one came out of the house that I could see.”

“And nothing happened in the shadows. She must still be in there. We’ll have to search the house.”

Henry swallowed.

“We won’t be able to hide our interest from her stepfamily if we ask to search the house now.”

“I don’t think it can be helped. Alaric and Lina want to talk to her. She just happened to know magic and just happened to be by the mirror when gremlins broke through? It’s understandable that they have some questions.”

Cael left the carriage and whistled to signal the guard to come to him. Henry watched from the carriage window as they surrounded the house. As they knocked on the door and entered to arrest Bri.

“I’m sorry,” Gustave said.

Henry blinked. He had forgotten that he wasn’t alone in the carriage.

“It’s all wrong,” he said. “This isn’t how any of this was supposed to go.”

“Just because things don’t go to plan doesn’t mean they can’t work out. Believe me, I know the feeling of everything going wrong.”

“She’s terrified of me.”

Henry stared at the house. Bri’s fear bothered him more than anything else that had happened so far. He understood the need to keep secrets, although he didn’t yet know why Bri kept hers. Such things could be cleared up with conversation.

But the raw terror in Bri's eyes? Her trembling just at the sight of him? That would be more difficult to overcome.

"I just wanted to help."

"I know the feeling," Gustave said. "Look, Cael is returning."

Henry watched Cael walk back to the carriage. He could tell things had gone badly by the slump in his brother's shoulders. Cael entered the carriage, his face set in a grim expression.

"Gabriella Vidre has disappeared."

Bri ran through the shadows, not caring where she was going as long as it was away from Henry and whatever trap he had set. He had come for her. That was plain enough. Her worst fears had come true.

A star appeared behind her, and Bri forced herself to run faster. She clutched her diamond, hoping that the guard spell would hide her. The image of Evangelina Shadow-Storm and her enormous sword flashed through her mind. If the shadow warrior caught her, there would be no escape.

She ran until her legs gave out. Bri crawled to a low spot on the strangely soft ground and lay flat on her back. She breathed as quietly as she could, although her lungs screamed for air. Damp strands of hair stuck to her cheek, and the sweat-soaked fabric of her dress clung to her body. She had done all she could, but was it enough?

More light appeared in the distance. Bri closed her eyes and waited for the end. Whatever they were going to do to her, it would be better not to see it coming.

A warm puff of air hit her face. It smelled of grain and something else that was far less pleasant.

Bri opened her eyes and found herself nose to nose with the donkey. He huffed again, and she grimaced.

“I can do without your donkey breath in my face, thanks.”

He bared his teeth in a grin, planted a kiss on her forehead, and stepped back. Bri sat up and looked around.

The donkey glowed faintly, but the rest of the shadows were dark. No one else had followed her.

She reached up and patted the donkey's side.

"Is it safe?"

The donkey gave her a blank look.

"Don't pretend you don't understand me."

He winked.

"You're the worst. You know that?"

The donkey winked again, then trotted a few steps away. Bri groaned.

"Do we have to go now?"

He nodded. Bri stood and focused her thoughts on home. She felt the faint tug of magic. It pulled in the opposite direction the donkey was walking.

"Home is that way."

The donkey rolled his eyes at her. Then he turned and kept walking.

"What do you mean, we're not going home?"

Bri hesitated, torn. She wanted to go home, not further into the shadows. But maybe it wasn't safe back at her estate. The donkey hadn't led her wrong yet. He had annoyed her plenty of times, but he had proved trustworthy.

Trust. How strange that the first person she trusted after her father's death wasn't a person at all.

Bri followed the donkey. When she caught up, he stopped and waved his nose at his back. Bri took that to mean that he wanted her to ride and climbed on. Riding the donkey wasn't exactly comfortable, but she was happy to rest her legs after her mad run through the shadows.

A stench drifted through the air, and Bri gagged. The donkey flattened his ears but kept walking. The smell came and went, wafting past them in disgusting waves.

"I'd rather not fight any gremlins today," Bri said.

The donkey huffed and continued into the shadows. Bri lifted her arm so she could cover her nose with her sleeve. She didn't exactly smell good after sweating so much, but she smelled better than the monsters.

The donkey stopped and nodded at a faint light in the distance. When Bri didn't move, he lifted his nose and pointed toward it.

"Is that absolutely necessary?" Bri asked.

The donkey bared his teeth, and Bri sighed.

"Will you wait for me?"

The donkey nodded, and Bri walked toward the light that she now recognized as an enchanted mirror. She peeked through the small opening and found herself looking into some sort of library. Shelves full of scrolls stretched as far as she could see. Gems and weapons sat between the scrolls. More were littered across the floor. Bri wasn't sure if she was impressed or disgusted by such a display of wealth.

"What is this place?" she called back to the donkey.

He brayed in the distance. Bri sighed. He wanted her to see something here, but what?

She turned from the impressive scope of the room and looked at the scroll sitting on the table directly in front of her. A place with this many gems likely belonged to an enchanter. Perhaps it was a stronghold of the Society of Evangelina, and the donkey had brought her here to learn a new enchantment that could help her defeat them.

Bri searched the room to make sure no one was hiding inside it. It was dark, lit not with windows, but with beams of light streaming through holes in the ceiling. An underground hideout, then? That would make sense for a secret society.

She pushed her arm through the mirror and grabbed the single scroll that sat on the table. Hopefully, this was what the donkey wanted her to have, and hopefully it would be useful. Bri hurried back.

The donkey nodded with approval when he saw the scroll. Bri followed him through the shadows. They were going back to her house, but they didn't go the whole way. Instead, the donkey stopped in a valley and nudged her arm. He kept nudging until Bri took the hint.

“You want me to read it now?”

He nodded. Bri sat down and unrolled the scroll. She whispered, “illuminate” to her diamond and read by its light. Someone had tied a smaller piece of parchment to the front of the scroll.

“Financial records of the Vidre estate, gathered for Prince Henry by order of Prince Alaric.”

Bri's throat went dry, and she read it again to make sure that she wasn't mistaken.

Henry had told the truth. They were looking into her. *He* was looking into her.

“What good will this do?” she asked the donkey in a rasping voice. “Another enchantment would be more useful.”

The donkey flared his nostrils at her. Bri frowned.

“I already know about my own life. I don't need to read whatever research they gathered.”

Except, if she read this, she might finally learn what Lady Vidre had been hiding in her ledger. Even if it contained no new information, she would know what Henry had learned about her. Did he also suspect that Lady Vidre was committing fraud? Why else would he look into her estate's financial records after learning that she knew magic?

Whatever his reasons, the donkey had taken the time to make sure Bri got this document. If she couldn't go home, she could do something useful while she waited.

Bri unrolled the scroll. It contained tax records from the Vidre estate and as many bills of sale as the researcher could find. As it turned out, Bri didn't know everything about her life after all. She knew the estate had struggled financially, but she hadn't known that Lady Vidre had paid their taxes late for

the past five years or that she was selling their crops and cashmere for half the going market rate.

Whoever had compiled the report found it strange as well. The scroll was filled with notes about standard prices for each year and how much of a loss the Vidre estate had taken by selling everything so low.

“It is almost as if the person running the estate wants it to fail.”

Bri read the researcher’s conclusion out loud, and she had to agree with him. Lady Vidre had sabotaged their estate and forced them to live in poverty. Why? To force Bri to sell so they could move to town? As an act of petty revenge? Or had she forged sales documents and stored the money elsewhere so that she could abandon Bri and the estate once she had saved enough to live comfortably?

Anger burned in Bri’s chest, and the scroll shook in her hands as she tried and failed to stay calm. Years of struggle. Endless housework and selling Father’s possessions to make ends meet. Empty bookshelves and empty cupboards, all unnecessary.

Embarrassment mixed with anger churned her stomach. It was bad enough that she was in this state. It was worse that Henry and the royal family knew these things about her life. Without the knowledge of her secret magic and promise to Father, she looked like a pathetic pushover who had never once questioned why a profitable estate had suddenly stopped turning a profit.

The pushover part wasn’t true, but she had no way to tell Henry that. Bri reminded herself that it wasn’t important. The important thing was that she had the proof she needed to confront her stepmother. She had been foolish, but she wasn’t helpless any longer. If Lady Vidre denied wrongdoing, Bri could use the last of her gems to hire help. Surely Father had friends or business associates who would be willing to help his daughter by testifying about the estate’s former glory.

She stood, suddenly unable to stay in this place a moment longer.

“I’m going home.”

The donkey shrugged, if donkeys could shrug.

“Is it safe?”

He shrugged again, as if to ask if it mattered. She would do what she wanted, anyway.

And that much was true. Bri carefully rolled the scroll and followed the feeling of home as she walked through the darkness.

Her heart pounded in her chest when she saw the pale circle of light. Bri pushed through it, not giving herself time to think about Henry or the Society or anything else that might be waiting.

The smell of smoke greeted her. It wafted through the room, and a few wisps curled under the door. Bri froze, half in the mirror and half in the shadows, as she watched the pale gray haze dance through the room. Her house. They were burning her house.

She had no idea how to stop it, but there wasn’t time to think about that now. Bri dove through the mirror and ran into the smoke.

“Are you telling us that a servant girl managed to escape you three and a group of soldiers?”

Fiora’s accented voice lilted with outrage as she spoke. Henry sighed and didn’t bother to answer. That was exactly what he had just told the throne room full of people. Alaric and Lina sat quietly on their thrones, considering but not passing judgment yet. The rest of the people stood on either side of them. All their faces showed some level of disbelief, but Fiora was the first to speak. And she didn’t stop speaking.

“She secretly knows magic. She escaped the guards, and you’re not doing anything about it?”

“There isn’t anything to be done if we can’t find her,” Cael said. “We searched the house and didn’t find anything suspicious.”

“Disappearing is suspicious,” Fiora insisted.

“There are lots of places to hide in the mountains,” Nic said. “Of all people, we should know this. Luca hid the entire royal family there for a century. Isn’t it possible that she simply evaded the guards because she knew the area well?”

“She was scared,” Henry said. “She was terrified when she saw me.”

Bri’s expression still haunted him. What had he done wrong?

“You were the last person to see her,” Alaric said. “What did she say?”

“She was frightened,” Henry said, remembering. “She didn’t say much. She was outraged when I told her that she was under suspicion for the gremlin attack.”

The room fell silent for a moment. Then Lina shook her head and laughed.

“You told her she was suspected of attacking the castle? No wonder she ran.”

“You told her that and then let her out of your sight?” Fiora said. “That’s the most idiotic thing I’ve ever heard.”

“You all said not to let the stepfamily know that something was happening!” Henry said. “I could hardly arrest their servant in front of them in that case.”

This sparked a debate on what to do with the Vidre family now that Bri had disappeared and their suspicions had been raised. Fiora favored arresting everyone. Nic protested that Rhoda had nothing to do with her stepsister’s behavior, and that he would not stand by and watch her be arrested.

Henry understood. Even if the opportunity had presented itself, there was no way he would have arrested Bri. The unjustified fear in her eyes was bad enough. It would be far worse if he gave her a reason to fear him. She would not have come willingly. He would have had to grab her arm and drag her behind him. Possibly to secure her feet and carry her, if she tried to run.

He had no doubt she would have tried to run. Henry shook his head to dispel the image. He couldn’t do that to her. He was glad Bri had escaped and spared him the choice.

If only he knew how she had escaped and where she had gone. If only she would give him a chance to explain.

A sudden hush fell over the room. Henry looked up to see a woman standing in the doorway, her features obscured by the sunlight streaming through the window behind her.

For one brief, glorious, terrible moment, he thought it was Bri. Then the door closed, and the woman stood silhouetted against dark wood rather than bright light. It wasn't Bri, although there were a few similarities. They were about the same height and build, but this woman's thin frame was trim with muscle from training instead of from constant housework and lack of food. She had blond hair, but where Bri's was golden, hers was so sun-bleached that it was almost white.

She waited by the doorway, scanning the room while they studied her. She stood perfectly straight, her white uniform as clean and crisp as if she had just picked it up from the castle laundry. Her blue eyes paused a moment when they reached Lina, but her face gave away nothing. Finally, she faced Alaric and bowed.

"Forgive my interruption, Your Highness. I was told you wanted me as soon as possible, but I was not told that you were in council."

Her voice was precise and careful, giving no hint of her feelings. She was a soldier, here for duty and nothing else.

"You're here just in time, officer. Please join us."

The crowd parted to make room for her. She walked forward with a precision usually reserved for dancers on the stage. She made no unnecessary movements, and yet she vibrated with energy even when she reached the throne and stood at attention. Her stance felt dangerous somehow. She was like a bird of prey, unmoving and yet ready to explode into flight and take her target before the poor creature knew what had happened.

"At ease," Alaric said, and the woman relaxed her stance ever so slightly. "Everyone, please allow me to introduce Officer Odette. She and her company have been recalled from patrol to help with security at the final ball."

Odette had lived in the castle until recently, so Henry knew her even though they weren't close. He had never seen her this focused. Alaric introduced the group, and Odette bowed to them in turn. She didn't return Nic's bright smile or react to

Fiora's challenging stare. She didn't respond to Lina's warm greeting, except to bow again.

Henry had heard the gossip about Odette, of course. Before the Princess Test and Lina's arrival, soldiers and servants alike had whispered of her as a potential bride for Alaric and future queen for Aeonian. She had grown up in the castle and been good friends with the three princes since childhood. She had followed Alaric into military service, ignoring her family's hopes that she would join her mother in the royal dance troupe instead. The two had been inseparable.

And then, she had been abruptly transferred to a patrol unit in a remote section of the lake district. This would normally have been a prime topic of gossip, but it paled in comparison to a Princess Test and the return of Evangelina Shadow-Storm. Looking at her now, Henry couldn't help thinking that something gossip-worthy had happened to cause her transfer.

Odette remained silent as Alaric told her about the balls, the gremlin attack, and their suspicions of Bri's involvement. She spoke only when he asked for her opinion.

"If you suspect this girl, why not question her stepfamily? Even if they think they know nothing, they may have observed something useful. You have already searched their house. Surely, they are bright enough to realize that something is going on."

"Finally, another person with sense," Fiora said. "You all are far too concerned with social niceties for my taste!"

The corner of Odette's mouth twitched, but her eyes remained blank. She looked like an ice sculpture, standing so still and dressed in white. Her pale hair and skin only added to the effect.

"I can question Rhoda," Nic said. "She'll tell me if she knows anything."

"Let's start there," Alaric said. "And we'll keep the Vidre family and estate under surveillance. We have extra troops now that Odette's unit has arrived. Cael, why don't you brief Odette on everything that has happened in the past few weeks

in more detail? Catch her up on all the magical developments as well. Your light magic capabilities have developed a lot while she was away.”

“It will be my pleasure,” Cael said.

Odette looked briefly in his direction, then turned back to Alaric for the rest of her orders.

“Lina will tell you more about the nuances of shadow magic when you’ve finished with Cael,” Alaric said. “We’re defending against a magical threat, so you need to know as much as possible. It’s unlikely that we’ll encounter any mermaids, but Fiora can tell you about their magic as well, if there’s time.”

Fiora scowled and made a series of hand gestures to Gustave. He shook his head and signed back. Henry hadn’t thought it possible for Odette to stand any straighter, but she stiffened at the mention of a briefing with Lina.

“I look forward to speaking with you,” Lina said.

Odette bowed in reply. She was practically vibrating with tension, but somehow managed to stay completely still. Those who didn’t know her history with Alaric looked confused. Henry shared a look with Cael, who had briefly served in the same unit as Odette. Cael looked tense, but that was only natural. As the person designated to brief Odette, he had just been put in the middle of the unspoken drama.

“I’ll leave it to you to relay this information to your company, Officer,” Alaric said. “We are facing an unknown enemy with unknown capabilities, so we want everyone to be as prepared as possible.”

Odette bowed again and followed Cael out of the room. The tension slowly dissolved, and Henry took a deep breath of relief. Lina squeezed Alaric’s hand, and he gave her a small smile in return. Henry’s chest tightened at the gesture. Would he ever get the chance to comfort Bri like that? To convince her that everything would be alright and watch the fear fade from her eyes? More than anything, he just wanted to make things right. To know that she was safe, wherever she was. To

help in any way he could, even if that meant keeping his distance once he knew that she was not in danger or causing danger.

Instead, Bri was missing, and Henry had royal duties to take care of.

“Maybe she’ll come to the ball,” Gustave said, patting Henry’s shoulder as they walked down the hall together after the meeting ended.

“I hope she does,” Fiora said with a grin. “She won’t escape so easily this time.”

Gustave gave Henry an apologetic shrug and hurried after his lady. Henry added Fiora to the ever-growing list of things he would protect Bri from if he ever found her. Then he reluctantly made his way to Bastien’s suite for a fitting.

Bri followed the smoke into the kitchen. She opened the exterior door to clear the haze from the room, then turned back to find the source. The plumes billowed out from the fireplace. Lady Vidre sat beside it, her eyes watering as she poked the fire.

“You have to open the flue,” Bri said.

She turned the knob, and the smoke drifted up the chimney instead of into the room. Lady Vidre glared at her.

“You would know that if you ever cooked,” Bri said. Relief washed over her as she realized the royal family was not burning her house down. In fact, they were nowhere in sight. She had once again avoided them.

Her pleasure faded as she looked at the fireplace and realized what Lady Vidre was burning. Two different shades of charred pink fabric rested in the ashes. Bri reached for them, then pulled her hand back. There was no saving the dresses now. She would only burn herself.

“Those were mine!”

“Were they?” Lady Vidre said. “How odd that I’ve never seen them before. Where did a servant with no money get such things?”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

Never mind that she couldn’t. If she told Lady Vidre that she had received a dress from a magical donkey, her

stepmother would have her locked up as a madwoman. And she preferred that her stepmother not know about her trip to town. A woman loaning her gown to a stranger was almost as unbelievable as a magical donkey.

“You had no right to search my things,” Bri said. “You had no right to burn them!”

“I had every right after discovering that you stole Lucille’s shoes and wore them to the ball! How dare you betray us this way?”

“Betray you?”

“Prince Henry was clearly looking for you today. How dare you pursue him when you knew he was courting Rhoda?”

Bri couldn’t help it. She laughed. Lady Vidre’s scowl deepened.

“This may be a joke to you, but my daughters’ happiness is on the line.”

“Rhoda’s happiness does not lie with Prince Henry. Even I can see that.”

“Is there nothing you won’t sink to? You stole Lucille’s shoes. I can only assume you stole those gowns as well. And the horse! I shudder to think how you acquired the horse! It’s no wonder the royal guards are searching for you. Are you so determined to sabotage us?”

“Sabotage? You accuse me of sabotage? After everything you’ve done?”

Bri was too angry to adopt her usual meek persona and play the humble servant. She threw the scroll she still held onto the counter. Lady Vidre ignored it.

“I have done everything in my power to get my family off this sinking ship, Bri. Why are you trying to drag us down?”

“If the ship is sinking, it is because you put holes in it.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“No? These are the estate tax records for the past decade and comparisons of our sales prices to market rates. In other

words, proof that you have sold our crops at a loss in an effort to bankrupt the estate and force me to sell it.”

Lady Vidre’s silence felt dangerous as she read the scroll. Rage flashed across her face, but she quickly buried it beneath the calm facade.

“Where did you get this, and why was the royal family looking into my finances?”

Bri didn’t answer. Her stepmother was determined to think the worst of her, so it didn’t matter what she said. Lady Vidre continued to read. Her face remained a calm mask.

Bri edged around her to the fireplace and grabbed a poker, hoping there was still something of the dresses worth saving. But the fabric had been reduced to cinders and ash. She pulled a charred piece of pink lace out of the flames and laid it on the stone. It was all she had left to return to the kind woman from the market, and Bri was not looking forward to that conversation.

Behind her, Lady Vidre swore. Bri whirled around in surprise. Her stepmother never swore. She waited for Lady Vidre to say something more, but the woman remained silent.

“The estate was profitable before you took over.” Bri said. “Then you began operating it at a loss because you wanted to sell and move to town. Or perhaps you have a secret account with extra money stashed somewhere so you can fund your new life.”

“Is that truly what you think?”

Lady Vidre’s voice was deadly calm. Bri knew better than to push her when she was like that, but she was too angry to care.

“It’s what I know! And now I have a way to prove your guilt.”

Lady Vidre laughed.

“My guilt. The only thing I am guilty of is being a naïve fool. Do you honestly think I want to live in poverty? That I have enjoyed selling our possessions off one by one and

watching my friends distance themselves from me when they see my shabby clothes? You're not the only one who has suffered, Bri."

"Then why?"

"I was a grieving widow suddenly put in charge of a vast estate. When Lady Hawley recommended a solicitor to act as my agent and manage our business, I was beyond grateful. When he said crop prices had dropped, I believed him. When I needed to sell things from the house, Lady Hawley brought the items to him so that my name need not be attached and further sullied. They arranged everything. If these numbers are correct, they are both very wealthy by now."

"Lady Hawley?"

Bri sank into a chair, her mind racing in a confused whirl. Could Lady Hawley really be responsible for such a thing? Even if she was not, one look at her stepmother told Bri that she had pinned blame on the wrong person. Lady Vidre looked entirely defeated. Bri had never seen her stepmother's mask of perfection fall away so completely. Never seen her shoulders slump or her face twist in grief. Even when Father had died, Lucretia Vidre had remained in control.

But now she looked broken. Human and vulnerable in a way Bri had never seen.

"I didn't like the arrangement in the will either," Lady Vidre said quietly. "I would have begged Gavin to change it if I knew. I had no idea how to run an estate, and suddenly I was saddled with responsibility for managing wealth while penniless myself. There was nothing set aside for me. Nothing for my daughters until they married. If they don't marry well, we could end up on the streets."

"Do you honestly think that I'd let that happen?"

"I couldn't say. I thought we were a happy family, but your father showed his true colors on his death bed. I didn't know what to expect from you after that. I still don't."

"Don't you dare blame this on Father."

“But can’t you see how difficult it is not to? I was his wife as much as you were his daughter. And yet, he chose you in the end.”

Lady Vidre’s voice quivered. Bri fought back the tears that filled her eyes.

“That isn’t what happened.”

“Then what did happen, Ella? What did he need to tell you that I couldn’t hear? What was more important than saying goodbye to Rhoda and Lucille?”

The use of her former name made the tears finally spill over. Bri wiped them away and realized that Lady Vidre was crying as well. She had never seen her stepmother cry or realized how deep the hurt went. She had the power to ease that hurt and finally tell the truth about her father’s actions.

And yet, she couldn’t. Not with the royal family hunting her and monsters lurking in the shadows.

“I can’t tell you that. I’m sorry.”

Lady Vidre wiped the tears from her eyes, and her expression grew hard.

“If you’re actually sorry, then stay away from the third ball. Give your stepsisters a chance to win their happy endings.”

“Henry isn’t interested in Rhoda. Or Lucille, for that matter.”

“Since when are you on a first name basis with the prince?”

Bri pressed her lips into a thin line. She couldn’t explain that either. Lady Vidre sighed.

“I thought we were making progress, Bri. I understand your hostility over the years if you believed I was trying to force you to sell the estate, but now you know that wasn’t true. Your father meant for us to work together. We were a family once. Perhaps we could be a family again.”

Lucretia Vidre held out her hand. Bri stared at it, suddenly wanting more than anything to take it and trust the woman who had loved her father. Who had loved her. Who had failed, but not on purpose.

They had been happy once. Lucretia had treated Ella well. And because of that, Bri found she couldn't take the truce her stepmother offered. She couldn't put her stepfamily in danger just to ease the empty place in her chest.

Lady Vidre saw the rejection in Bri's eyes and pulled her hand back.

"You should return to town," Bri said. "You can take Pumpkin and the cart. I can't promise that I'll stay away from the ball, but I can promise that I'll stay away from you. I'll do my best not to spoil Lucille and Rhoda's chances at a good match."

"Very well. If that's what you want."

It wasn't. Bri sat in the kitchen, fighting back tears as her stepfamily packed their trunks and loaded them onto the cart. For once, they did not ask for her help. Before they left, Lady Vidre came to the kitchen and picked up the scroll.

"I'm taking this to town with me," she said. "It's long past time that I have a chat with Lady Hawley and her worthless solicitor."

Her eyes were steely, and Bri couldn't help but smile. It was nice to see Lady Vidre's rage directed at someone else for a change. Bri held out a pouch of coins. All that was left from selling her gems.

"This will help. Please don't ask where I got it."

"Goodbye, Bri. I'm sorry I burned your dresses."

Lady Vidre took the coins and left quickly, before Bri could reply. She climbed into the cart and snapped the reins. Pumpkin trotted away. Bri stood in the doorway, watching until the cart rolled over the edge of the valley and disappeared.

Bri spent the day of the third ball waiting, although she had no idea what she was waiting for. She sorted her gems. She checked the mirrors and the shadows. Figures moved in the distance, and she gagged on the stench of gremlins every time she opened the glass. She watched the guards stationed at the end of the driveway in case they decided to come closer and search the house again, but they stayed half-hidden in the woods and observed. She wasn't captured, but she wasn't free.

Silence weighed on the empty estate and pushed against her like a physical presence. Bri cleaned to distract herself from the decision she knew she had to make. She scrubbed the floors in all the interior rooms. It was a shame she couldn't wash the windows, but that would certainly give her away. She polished the mirrors and ate in the dining room since it was in the center of the house. She lit a candle on the table as if that could banish the gloom that dusk brought.

The room felt large and empty and a bit spooky, with the candle reflecting against the mirror and casting soft shadows on the walls.

Bri pushed her half-eaten meal aside, blew out the candle, and returned to the kitchen. The sky was a dark blue now, and the first stars glittered above her. She retrieved Father's journal from its hiding place and searched for answers, using her gem as a light since she couldn't make a fire without giving herself away to the guards.

She found no answers.

Bri put the journal away and sighed. She couldn't live the rest of her life like this. Father had asked her to guard the mirrors, and she had. But things were different now. The mirrors had monsters in them, and the monsters had attacked. She could keep them out of her own house with the guard spell, but hers were not the only mirrors in Aeonian. Could she guard the rest?

Not without consulting with the royal family. Bri swallowed. They already knew about her magic, and they suspected her of causing the gremlin attack. They had tried to catch her once, and they would doubtless try again once the distraction of the balls was past. They had stationed guards to watch her house, so it seemed pointless to hope that they would leave her alone.

Even if, by some miracle, they forgot about her, Bri could not forget about them. She would always be watching her back and hoping that she could flee to the shadows fast enough to avoid them if they came for her.

And once she was there, she would have to worry about monsters that she had no way to fight. Plus, Evangelina Shadow-Storm and the light wielders were more powerful in the shadows. The dark was no longer a safe refuge.

She couldn't stay in her house, and she couldn't hide in the shadows. That left a few options. She could run. Dodge gremlins and travel through the shadows while the royal family was busy with the ball. Perhaps the mysterious castle where the goblin lived could be a refuge. Bri had no idea where that was, but it seemed far enough away from Aeonian to be a suitable hiding place. She could go there and ask the goblin for a job. His servant was clearly overworked. She would probably be glad for the help.

Bri placed her hand on Father's journal. She didn't like the idea of running. She didn't want to abandon the mirrors just when they most needed guarding. If there were gremlins in the shadows, there could be other monsters there as well. She had gained some magical knowledge thanks to the donkey, but she could do even more.

“I don’t want to run.”

Bri said it softly to herself, then looked in the mirror and repeated it for whatever monsters lurked behind the glass. She wouldn’t run, and she was done hiding.

That left facing her fears.

Beware the Society of Evangelina. Father had used his last breath to warn her about them, but Bri felt better equipped to face them than the hordes of gremlins in the shadows. She couldn’t fight monsters, but she could talk to humans.

She could talk to Henry.

Blast it all, it was risky. She was staking her life and safety on the character of a man she had only met a few times. But it was still her best option. Bri had been wrong about Lady Vidre. Perhaps Father had been wrong about the Society. If she had to trust someone, Henry was her best option. As a member of the Society, he knew about magic and the attacks. If anything could be done to protect Aeonian, Henry would know what it was.

Bri paced the kitchen and tried to settle her nerves. Talking to a prince was easier said than done, but she could approach him at the ball. If she was wrong about Henry, the crowded ballroom offered some protection. Even if the Society was evil, surely they wouldn’t kill her where all of Aeonian could see. If things went badly, she could make a scene and hopefully escape through the mirrors in the ballroom.

And if things went well? Bri ignored the hope that grew in her chest. If things went well. If Henry could be trusted. So much hung on that “if.” If he believed in her innocence and was willing to share information, perhaps they would be able to guard the mirrors and protect Aeonian together. Bri had kept the secret alone for so long that she didn’t allow herself to think about what it would mean to have help.

The kitchen mirror rippled, and the donkey appeared. The faint scent of gremlins wafted into the room as he pushed his head through the glass and dropped a piece of parchment on

the floor. Bri picked it up and laughed. It was an invitation to the ball.

“I’m way ahead of you,” she said. “I don’t suppose you could find me another dress?”

The donkey huffed, as if to say that he had contributed more than his fair share to her wardrobe.

“Fine,” Bri said.

She looked at the burned remains of the dresses in the fireplace with regret. She hated to go to the ball in a work dress, but that seemed to be the only option. Bri sneaked to the door of an empty bedroom and stared out the window at the night sky. It was dark now, and the crescent moon shone brightly overhead. The ball had begun. If she was going to do this, she needed to hurry.

She pulled water into a copper tub and quickly scrubbed every trace of soot off her skin. She washed her hair until it gleamed and twisted strands around rags so they would dry in curls. She shook wrinkles out of her best work dress and mended a few tears while her hair dried. Then she searched her stepfamily’s things and found a few hairpins tucked into a drawer. After a few failed attempts, she managed to pin her hair up into a formal style.

The moon sat high in the sky by the time she finished. The house was cold with the chill of evening, but she still didn’t dare to light a fire with guards watching the house. Bri went to the dining room, illuminated her diamond, and brushed dirt off her work boots. Her entire plan depended on the safety of a crowd, and the ballroom would be most crowded at midnight when the royal family gave their magical demonstration. Just before midnight would be the ideal time to find Henry and talk to him.

Bri got dressed and went back to the kitchen for food. No point dancing on an empty stomach. She studied her reflection and frowned. She had done her best, but the effect wasn’t quite what she had hoped it would be. She looked clean, but she was still shabby. She would stand out, but not in the way she wanted.

She looked at the charred fabric in the fireplace once again. Dresses had appeared for the other two balls as if by magic. Had her luck finally run out?

Something growled behind her. Bri whirled around and saw a monster in the mirror. Huge, hulking body. Horned head.

A surge of panic shot through her. She was too late. She was going to die here in this kitchen, alone.

The monster didn't attack, and Bri realized it had a mass of blue fabric draped over its arm and didn't stink. This was her goblin then, and he was probably not here to kill her.

"What do you want?"

Her relief made her snap at him. What business did he have, appearing in people's kitchens and scaring them half to death?

"Are you crying?"

Bri wiped her eyes. They were a bit wet, probably from the shock of thinking she was going to die and the relief of realizing she wasn't. She glared at the goblin.

"Of course not."

He frowned at her, showing a mouth of very sharp teeth. Bri's heart raced. Rumors said that Evangelina Shadow-Storm had defeated such a creature, which meant she must be ridiculously powerful, and Bri was about to confront her in her own castle. Maybe this plan was foolish after all. How was she supposed to convince Henry to help her when she couldn't even find a dress for the ball?

"I'd like to make a trade," the goblin growled.

He lifted up the blue fabric, pinching it carefully with his claws. It unfurled into the most beautiful dress that Bri had ever seen. The fabric shimmered, and something sparkled on the bodice. Diamonds? Surely those weren't diamonds. The skirt and bodice were cut in an elegant style that Bri had never seen before. She would certainly stand out in this dress. She would have everyone's attention, which meant that all of

Aeonia would notice if the Society of Evangelina tried to harm her.

She stared at the gown, unable to believe her good fortune. It looked to be about her size. Her luck hadn't run out after all. It was better than ever, and this goblin had become an even unlikelier fairy godmother than the donkey.

"I need a practical work dress," the goblin said. "More than one, if you have it."

"You'll trade me that gown for a work dress?"

"Yes."

Bri's mind raced. She had the dress she was wearing. It was newly mended, but certainly not worth anywhere near that blue gown. More than one dress. She didn't have more than one in good enough condition to trade to the goblin.

Wait, yes, she did! Her stepsisters had packed hastily and left some of their older clothes in their rooms. Lucille's should be about the right size for the goblin's servant, and some of them were plain enough to pass for work dresses.

Bri looked down at the floor, wrestling with the guilt of taking Lucille's dresses. She would buy her stepsister new ones if she survived the night. Her gaze fell on her work boots. Wearing shoes that didn't fit properly had caused nothing but trouble, and these boots would look ridiculous if worn with a dress lined with diamonds.

"I need shoes as well."

"What?"

The goblin looked at her in disbelief, and Bri shrugged. Men were clueless when it came to fashion.

"I need shoes to go with the gown."

"You're very difficult. Do you know that?"

Was she pushing her luck? Bri looked at her worn, stained boots again and decided it was worth the risk. If the goblin had access to gems and this dress, surely he could get a pair of

shoes. If she was going to be the talk of the ball, she didn't want it to be because of her mismatched footwear.

"I'll give you three work dresses for that gown and some shoes."

"But I don't have any shoes."

"Then you'd better go find some. I'll be back with the dresses."

Bri sprinted from the room. She heard the donkey bray behind her but didn't stop to see what he wanted. She ran to Lucille's room and pulled three of the simplest dresses from her wardrobe. Her heart pounded as she draped them over her arm. This was going to work.

She went to the bedroom with the floor-length mirror and removed the guard enchantment. The kitchen mirror was too small to make the trade, and she didn't want to risk getting soot on that beautiful gown. She hung a blanket over the window and hoped the soldiers watching her estate didn't notice the movement. Bri peeked into the shadows and saw the goblin and the donkey standing nearby.

"Hey, over here!"

She waved at them from the mirror. The goblin walked toward her, carrying the dress. The donkey followed with a pair of shoes in his mouth. Bri stepped through the mirror and exchanged the work dresses to the goblin for the ball gown. The fabric was soft and smooth against her skin. She had never felt anything so fine.

The donkey offered the shoes. Bri tried them on, ignoring the wet patches of donkey spit on the satin.

"They're too big," she said. "How am I supposed to dance in shoes that are too big?"

She supposed that wasn't really the goblin's fault. She hadn't specified her shoe size. But still, it seemed a shame to be so close to magical perfection and somehow fall short.

"Stuff cotton in the toes?" the goblin said.

Bri scowled at him. She had already tried attending a ball with rags stuffed in her too-big shoes. That had not worked out well for her. The complete lack of sympathy in the goblin's voice made her angry, and she spoke without thinking.

“You have magic. You could make them fit.”

“You think I have any idea how to resize shoes with magic?”

“You could at least try. Here, I'll add a diamond to each to help the magic.”

Bri reached into her pocket, pulled out two of the diamonds that she had stashed there in case of an emergency at the ball, and placed them on the tips of the shoes. The goblin stared at her.

“What is that supposed to do?”

“Jewels power magic. Everyone knows that.”

Everyone with magic anyway. Although, judging by the goblin's blank stare, he hadn't known that. Bri crossed her arms and waited. He knew how to open mirrors. Surely, he knew magic.

The goblin lifted his hands, and a sticky red light began to cover his claws. Bri stared at it. This looked nothing like her enchantments or what Evangelina Shadow-Storm and Henry had done. Did goblins have a different type? How many different kinds of magic were there?

Whatever he was doing, it worked. The diamonds flashed white and melted into liquid that spread over the shoes. White satin became transparent as the liquid diamond spread over it. The shoes shrank and changed shape until they were made of glass and the perfect size. Bri nodded, trying not to let the goblin see how impressed she was.

“That will do.”

The donkey brayed, seeming pleased with himself. The goblin looked from the shoes to his claws as if he couldn't believe what had just happened.

“Is something wrong?” Bri asked. She didn’t want to wear shoes, even shoes as beautiful as this, if there was a chance they were going to explode or cause other magical mayhem.

“You have very small feet.”

Bri laughed with relief.

“Yeah, it makes shoe shopping a pain. Thanks for your help. Now, I have to hurry if I’m going to make it before midnight.”

She turned to the donkey.

“Are you coming?”

The donkey nodded and followed her through the floor length mirror into her house. Bri waved at the goblin, then put her hand against the mirror and closed it. The goblin disappeared, and Bri pulled another diamond out of her pocket and guarded the mirror. Then she looked at the donkey, realizing for the first time that she had a farm animal in her home.

“Don’t touch anything,” she said. “I’m going to get dressed, then we’re going to the ball.”

Henry hovered in front of the seal. He flashed his light a few times, as if that would reveal any weaknesses in the magical barrier. Beside him, Cael stood beside Lina, his light formed into the shape of his body. Henry stayed a star and wondered when Cael had found the time to practice and master that technique.

“It looks normal,” Lina said finally. “I’ll add an extra gem as a precaution, but I don’t think anything will break through this tonight.”

She pulled an emerald from her headband and pressed it into the seal. The barrier flashed green, and Lina turned to the princes.

“If there’s nothing in the shadows, I suppose we should check the castle for signs of trouble.”

Henry blinked to break his enchantment and rubbed his head. It was far too early in the evening to have a headache. The sounds of the party outside the door of the bedroom they had claimed for training did not ease the pounding at his temples. Across the room, Lina stood up from her cot and tapped Nic’s shoulder. The shadow warrior in training had once again fallen asleep while trying to put himself in a trance.

“Sorry!”

The word ended in a yawn. Everyone but Odette laughed. She stood by the door, guarding the entrance. She wore a dress instead of her usual uniform, but Henry doubted that anyone

would mistake her for a partygoer. Her military stance and stern expression were at war with the frilly pink gown that Marta had pulled for her from Carina's wardrobe.

"Everyone go with your partners and follow your planned routes," Lina said. "Report back immediately if you see anything unusual."

Cael approached Odette and offered his arm.

"Will you join me for a stroll, officer?"

She gave a brisk nod, causing the curls in her formal hairstyle to bounce slightly, and took his arm. Even that motion seemed militant, and she matched her steps to Cael's in a sort of march as they left. Henry watched everyone stream out of the room, then turned to Nic, who yawned again.

"Sorry. Shadow warrior training is exhausting."

More like he was having trouble waking up from his nap, but Henry didn't have the heart to say that. Nic jumped up and down a few times and swung his arms in circles.

"That's better. Let's go!"

They stepped out of the training room into a party in full swing. Even in the hallway, Henry and Nic had to dodge couples dancing and single ladies looking for partners as they pushed toward the ballroom. Henry wished he had a better idea what he was looking for. Another attack would be obvious. He could follow the screams. But there was no way to tell if someone could work magic simply by looking at them.

After what happened with Bri, he was all too aware of that fact.

Henry sighed. There was one thing that everyone in the castle had been told to look for, and that was Bri. If she came tonight, she would be arrested and held for questioning. Her disappearance from her well-guarded house had only fueled suspicions about her involvement in the gremlin attack.

Thanks to Henry, she knew that they suspected her. He doubted she would come, but if she was here, Henry needed to

find her first. His gaze darted around the room, looking for any sign of her. His heart quickened when he saw a blond woman in a pink dress moving across the room, then sank when he realized it was Odette. Her hand rested on Cael's arm as they walked their own patrol route.

"Nothing suspicious here," Henry whispered to Nic.

"On to the next room then," Nic said.

He sounded entirely too cheerful about it. He was probably hoping to find Rhoda and dance with her. They were supposed to act natural on their patrol and pretend that they were enjoying the party, but so far, Nic was the only one actually having a good time.

They pushed through the hallway and entered another small ballroom. Couples danced and laughed together. The gremlin attack had not dampened anyone's spirits. If anything, it added to the liveliness of the final ball. Women crowded around a man showing off a thin scratch on his arm that he claimed was a battle wound from the last ball. Injuries from dark creatures had been reduced to party tricks, and the people of Aeonian had no idea they had been in very real danger.

Henry scanned the room again and felt a pang of envy. He wished he could be as carefree as those who were simply here to attend a party and catch a glimpse of royalty.

"Clear?" Nic whispered.

Henry nodded, and they moved on. He and Nic walked from room to room. When he saw no suspicious people, he studied the rooms and furniture. The enchanted mirrors hung throughout the castle showed nothing but the reflections of flickering candles and swirling gowns.

"We should dance," Nic said suddenly. "After all, those are our orders."

He disappeared into the crowd and appeared a moment later with Rhoda in his arms. The couple twirled purposefully to the opposite side of the ballroom to get away from Rhoda's mother. Henry sighed. He was only surprised that it had taken Nic this long to find Bri's stepsister. The Vidre family had

been questioned about Bri's disappearance and insisted they knew nothing about her activities or whereabouts. A guard had been assigned to keep an eye on Lady Vidre, and Nic had volunteered to try to get more information from Rhoda. Henry doubted she knew anything, but Nic was going to dance with Rhoda anyway, so perhaps something useful would come of it.

A few nearby ladies fluttered their fans at him, but Henry couldn't bring himself to dance. The normalcy of the evening was wearing on him. A party shouldn't feel so relaxed after a gremlin attack. Perhaps things seemed normal because they were normal, and the timing of the attack had been an unfortunate coincidence. But they couldn't afford to assume that. If the attack was not a coincidence, then things were quiet because the person responsible was clever enough not to get caught. That made them even more dangerous.

He left Nic and Rhoda and made his way to the main ballroom. His investigation had revealed nothing notable. He needed to check in with Lina and the others. If their searching had also been fruitless, they needed a new plan.

The main ballroom was packed with more people than any of the other rooms. Henry's chest tightened at the sight of the crowd, and he forced himself to keep breathing as he entered the room. The odor of sweat and perfume in the stale air fueled his anxiety. How could anyone prefer this to open spaces and a mountain breeze?

The crowd only grew denser as he pushed toward the dais, and the noise increased. People shouted to be heard over the music and other conversations. The musicians took this as a challenge and played louder to be heard over the voices. Henry wiped his forehead and found it beaded with sweat.

He would be free of the worst of this once he reached the dais, but it seemed that Lina was an even more popular spectacle after fighting gremlins. Henry pushed toward her, but the crowd pushed back. Someone's elbow dug into his ribs, but when he turned, it was impossible to tell who was at fault.

His breath caught in his chest, and some part of his mind resigned himself to die here, drowned in a sea of silk. Henry pushed back the thought and pictured a mountain meadow. A picnic. Sitting with Bri. It was quiet there. Quiet and cool.

It took him a minute to realize that the quiet was not only in his imagination. The ballroom had fallen silent as well. Henry saw the musicians lower their instruments to their laps, their attention focused on something across the room. As one, the crowd turned to look. Henry found himself facing the grand staircase.

A woman stood at the top of it. She wore a blue ballgown with a skirt so wide that it brushed against the banisters. Gems on her dress sparkled in the candlelight as she moved, and her golden hair gleamed. When she took her first step, her skirt lifted enough to give a glimpse of shoes that seemed, impossibly, to be made of glass.

She moved slowly, taking each stair deliberately, as if she were determined to command the room's attention for as long as possible. It worked. She was the brightest thing in the room by far, outshining even the royal family in all their splendor.

She was so dazzling that it took Henry a moment to recognize her. Bri was halfway down the staircase when he realized that the woman he had been looking for was now within reach. Henry jostled through the crowd and pushed his way toward her. Whatever else happened, he needed to reach her first.

“Watch it!”

Henry turned to apologize, but the words weren't directed at him. He caught a flash of pink and gold in the distance. Odette was also making her way to the staircase.

Not good. Odette would arrest first and ask questions later, and she wouldn't hesitate to use force if Bri resisted. Henry quickened his pace, muttering apologies and something about official royal business that didn't make sense even to him.

But it worked. Whispers spread that the prince was trying to reach the woman on the stairs. Suddenly, the crowd parted,

and Henry found himself with a clear path. He raced ahead, sprinting past the grinning guests who had crushed into each other to make a way.

The crush slowed Odette. Henry heard her protest behind him as the crowd swept her back. Then he reached the stairs, and he had eyes only for Bri. He held out his hand, waiting as she carefully made her way down the last few steps. She was even more dazzling up close. It took all of Henry's imagination to see her as the country girl he had met in the mountain meadow. This version of Bri was lovely, but he thought that she lost some of herself in the jewels and silk. She didn't need such things to be beautiful, and she certainly didn't seem to be enjoying them. Her expression was tense, although she did her best to hide it behind a courtier's smile.

He should have been thinking of danger. Of Bri's secrets and how little he knew about her magic or her motivations. But instead, Henry took her hand without hesitation and helped her down the final step. Her fingers trembled as they rested against his, and he pressed them to his lips in a courtly gesture. He was vaguely aware of the collective gasp of the ballroom behind him, but he cared far more about the spark of amusement that flickered through Bri's eyes.

"I'm glad you came," he said. "I was afraid I would never see you again."

"We need to talk."

Bri looked around to search for a private place, and her face flushed as she realized just how many people were watching them. Henry followed her gaze. Odette had finally reached the front of the crowd, and she had gathered a few guards for backup. If he was going to have a private word with Bri, it would have to be under the cover of a public spectacle.

"May I have this dance?"

Bri raised an eyebrow but followed him further into the ballroom. The crowd parted, eager to see this scene play out. Henry waved a hand at the musicians, and they played a gentle waltz. He grinned.

“I wasn’t sure that would work.”

“You’re surprised that they followed their prince’s orders?”

“Being a prince doesn’t guarantee that you get what you want.”

Although it seemed to be working well for him tonight. Henry placed his hand on Bri’s waist, and they began to dance.

They settled into a rhythm as easily as they had at the last ball. Bri ignored the crowd around them and grounded herself in the feeling of Henry's hand against hers. The callouses on his palms brushed against her fingers as he twirled her. He may be a prince, but he had the hands of a goat herder.

And he was waiting for her. Watching with patient eyes. Bri wasn't sure where to begin, so she simply started talking.

"My name is Gabriella Vidre. I am the only daughter of Duke Gavin Vidre. On his deathbed, my father asked me to guard the enchanted mirrors in our home, although he did not say what to guard them from. With his last breath, he told me to beware the Society of Evangelina."

Surprise flickered across Henry's face, but he quickly hid it with the expression that Bri now recognized as his princely façade. Her heart pounded with the strain of speaking a secret that she had held for so long, and she struggled to breathe. Henry tightened his grip on her waist, stabilizing her as they continued to dance, and Bri realized that she was trembling.

"When our estate fell into financial trouble, I worked as a servant so that I could continue to live there and guard the mirrors. I saw nothing unusual in them until the night of the goblin attack. Since then, I have seen men, stars, goblins, and donkeys."

"Donkeys?"

Bri laughed at Henry's surprised expression.

"I guess those aren't common in the shadows?"

"I'd have to ask Lina."

He glanced toward the dais, and Bri stiffened. Evangelina Shadow-Storm sat there, watching the dance with as much interest as the rest of the room.

"I planned to stay hidden at first, but I'm tired of hiding. I promised Father that I would guard the mirrors, but I don't know enough to do it. I'm not a warrior. I'm certainly no match for a goblin or a legend come to life. That's why I'm here. I'm tired of running and hiding. I can't fight everything on my own, but I refuse to run away and do nothing."

She swallowed.

"I need help. I have to trust someone, so I'm trusting you."

Tears spilled down Bri's cheeks. She tried to blink them back, but they kept coming. Henry stopped dancing and reached up to brush them away. A quiet hush fell over the ballroom as the musicians stopped playing. Bri tilted her head up to meet Henry's gaze, suddenly very aware of how close they were.

"Thank you for trusting me," Henry whispered. Then he looked around the ballroom and winced. "Can you dance a little longer?"

Bri nodded, and Henry waved to the musicians. They began another tune, and he swept Bri into the dance.

"They're waiting to arrest you for questioning," he said. "This is the only way I know to buy us more time."

Bri had suspected as much, but she still tensed at the confirmation that she was a wanted suspect. Henry pulled her closer.

"I won't let them hurt you, Bri. I would never let them hurt you."

She nodded, unable to speak around the lump in her throat. She believed him, but he had said himself that princes didn't

always get what they wanted.

“So, you weren’t behind the gremlin attack?” he asked.

“No. I’ve interacted with a donkey and a goblin that claims he’s really a man, but I don’t know anything about gremlins.”

“You what?”

“He gave me this dress,” Bri said.

Henry stared at her, and she laughed.

“I guess that isn’t something that normally happens, even in the shadows?”

“Do you think this goblin could be responsible for the attack?”

Bri considered it for a moment.

“No, I seriously doubt that. He seems more concerned with wooing his servant.”

“I want to hear the rest of that story later, but we don’t have time right now. You don’t suspect the donkey either?”

“He’s been helpful, if a bit mysterious.”

“And you haven’t seen anything else?”

Bri considered this.

“The donkey took me to the goblin’s castle and one other place in the shadows. I only saw one room, and it was fairly empty. There was a lake outside the window.”

“When you say the donkey took you, what do you mean?”

“He led me through the shadows. I can find my own way now if I know what I’m looking for, but it’s easier with his help.”

Henry missed a dance step and stared at Bri with wide eyes.

“Are you telling me that you actually followed him into the shadows?”

Bri nodded.

“What exactly do you mean by that?”

“I stepped through the mirrors and walked with him in the shadows. Why do you look so surprised? You do the same.”

“I don’t. Bri, this is incredible. I’ve never heard of anyone physically stepping into a mirror.”

“This isn’t going to help my case that I’m a harmless, ordinary person.”

“You’re far from ordinary.”

The music stopped. Henry waved his hands at the musicians to continue, but this time, they didn’t obey. He looked at the royal dais, and Bri followed his gaze. King Noam held his hand up in a halting gesture, and the musicians were taking their cue from him. Guards stood in front of the staircase to block it, and there was no way she could make it through the crowd to any of the mirrors.

She was trapped, and the King of Aeonian was glaring at her. Not to mention Evangelina Shadow-Storm. Bri shivered. She had known it would come to this, but it was still frightening. Her plan had worked, and she had everyone’s attention. Now it was up to her to do something with it. Henry took her hand and squeezed it.

“Let’s talk to them,” he said. “I’ll stay with you, whatever happens.”

“Please do,” Bri whispered.

She let Henry pull her forward and held her chin high, trying to look as regal and memorable as possible for the gathered crowd. They were her insurance in case the royal family ignored Henry and decided to lock her away.

Above them, a clock chimed midnight. It was time for Evangelina Shadow-Storm’s magic demonstration, but no one minded that it had been delayed. The crowd only had eyes for the prince and his mysterious lady. They stepped back, making a path through the ballroom for the couple.

The twelfth clock chime rang through the otherwise silent ballroom just as Bri and Henry reached the dais. Bri forced

herself to meet everyone's gaze. She was surprised to discover that King Noam's eyes were kind. He looked at her with more curiosity than accusation.

Evangelina Shadow-Storm's eyes were green and piercing. She studied Bri as if searching for her secrets. Bri looked back. The legendary shadow warrior was intimidating, but she was also more human than Bri expected.

Bri waited, reluctant to break the silence. Henry squeezed her hand again. He was a solid, reassuring presence beside her. Bri leaned into him. Evangelina Shadow-Storm smiled at the gesture and opened her mouth to speak.

A gust of wind swept through the ballroom with so much force that Henry wrapped his arm around Bri's shoulders to steady her. The candles flickered, then went out. The magical lights followed a moment later, and the entire ballroom plunged into darkness.

Henry pulled Bri closer. She clung to his arm and whispered, “Please tell me that this is part of the magic demonstration.”

“It isn’t,” Henry answered. “Is it, Lina?”

“No, this isn’t part of the plan,” Lina said in a low voice that sounded grim in the darkness.

“Perhaps it was the Vidre girl,” Fiora said.

“Gabriella, did you do something?” Lina asked.

Bri flinched at the use of her full name, then gathered herself and glared in Lina’s direction.

“No, of course not. I was dancing.”

“Enchantments can be worked while dancing,” Fiora said. “My half-sister Elspeth proved that in Montaigne. She can also walk in mirrors and talk to goblins, not that any of you care about that.”

Bri flinched, and Henry pulled her tighter to protect her. Now was not the best time to learn that Bri wasn’t the only person who walked in mirrors.

“Elspeth did that with the help of mermaids,” Lina said. “The mermaids are on our side now, so we don’t have to worry about such things.”

Fiora said something else, but the crowd’s excited whispers drowned out her voice. Henry had almost forgotten

about the crowd in the darkness. From the bits of conversation he heard, they had followed the same line of thinking as Bri and assumed that the blackout was part of the show.

“Can someone with magic please cast some light?” Marta said calmly.

Before Henry could gather his focus and do as she asked, a beam of golden light appeared in the mirror above the dais. The crowd fell silent in eager anticipation of the show to come. The light started as a star, then gradually bloomed into a flower. The petals dissolved into thin threads of light that spread across the rest of the mirrors in the room. They created a pattern that reminded Henry of frost on a window. He turned to Cael, impressed that his brother had mastered such an intricate pattern outside of training, but Cael was staring at the light along with everyone else on the dais. Whoever was working this enchantment, it wasn't a member of the royal family.

The crowd in the ballroom murmured their appreciation as the golden light on the mirrors continued to spread in delicate patterns on the glass. It was unlike anything Henry had ever seen. Bri squeaked in alarm, and Henry turned to see Odette looming behind her. The soldier's white hair shone like spun gold in the enchanted light.

“Is this your doing?” she asked.

Bri shook her head. Odette grabbed her arm, not looking convinced.

“It wasn't her,” Henry said. “She was with me. I would have seen her working the enchantment.”

“Oh, we're all very aware that she was with you,” Odette hissed. “What were you thinking, dancing with her like that when she's a known enchantress and suspected of a magical attack?”

“Quiet,” Bri said. “Do you hear that?”

Faint music drifted through the room. Henry turned to the musicians, but they sat with their instruments on their laps and seemed as enchanted by the magical display as everyone else

in the ballroom. The music continued, soft and ethereal, like nothing Henry had ever heard before.

“It’s mermaid song,” Fiora said. “It seems that we may need to worry about such things after all.”

“Did she say mermaids?” Bri whispered.

“I’m afraid so,” Henry said.

“How would mermaids be here?” Lina said. She held her ring to her lips and whispered, “Check for danger.”

The ring flashed red, and Henry pulled Bri a little tighter. This didn’t look good.

“Elspeth knows mermaid song and can walk in mirrors,” Fiora said grimly. “I told you that we shouldn’t underestimate her.”

She took Gustave’s hand and stood tall, facing the glowing mirror. Alaric pulled a shard of glass from somewhere under his cloak and held it high. The golden light glistened against his hair and the mirror. Lina sat on the cot beside him, ready to go into a trance if a threat appeared in the mirror. Cael pulled his chair near the cot and sat, ready to work his light magic and support her as needed.

Bri leaned into Henry and clutched her diamond pendant. Odette leaned with her, unwilling to loosen her grip.

The golden light in the mirror above the dais grew brighter and swirled into the shape of an intricate doorway. Henry stared, as dazzled as the rest of the ballroom, when a woman stepped through.

The woman wore a flowing white dress, and her golden hair hung loose past her shoulders. It gleamed in the light from the mirrors until Henry couldn’t tell if the woman was reflecting the light or the source of it. She stood on the edge of the mirror as if it were a balcony and looked beyond the royal family at the crowd assembled in the ballroom.

“That’s not Elspeth,” Fiora whispered in surprise.

The woman’s gaze flickered to her for a moment in annoyance, then she looked back at the crowd and smiled.

“My dear people of Aeonian. If I had known that you were so enamored with magic, I would have shown mine to you long ago.”

She lifted her arms, and golden sparks danced across her skin. The crowd murmured in appreciation as the sparks gathered together and settled on the woman’s head in a golden crown.

“Perhaps you would have loved me better if I had shown you my true self.”

Her voice was soothing, gentle, and every bit as beautiful as the woman herself. She smiled as she spoke, a sweet expression of forgiveness on her face, although Henry couldn’t remember what he had done wrong. But still, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he had wronged this woman in some way.

“Snap out of it,” Bri whispered.

Henry blinked and turned to her in surprise. How could she be so callous to interrupt the beautiful woman’s speech? Bri’s diamond pendant glowed pale red against her chest and cast strange shadows on her face. Light shone from beneath her skirt as well, creating a pool of red on the floor around her. Perhaps he had been wrong about her after all, and Bri really was an evil enchantress.

“Guard,” Bri whispered.

Her diamond glistened, and her shoes cast a brief burst of golden light on the floor around them. Henry felt something like iron spread over his skin, and his head cleared. Bri was not the threat here. She was protecting him. But who was the golden woman casting a spell over the ballroom? She looked familiar, but he couldn’t place her.

“Cassandra,” Odette growled.

Apparently, her head had cleared as well. Bri and Henry turned to her in surprise.

“I’d recognize that smug smile anywhere,” Odette said. “She always looked like that when she ordered the troupe to change one of our dance routines just before a performance.”

“Take this. It will protect you.”

Bri pulled a glowing diamond from somewhere in her skirt and handed it to Henry. He took it. Then she offered one to Odette. The soldier gave her a suspicious look, then released her grip on Bri’s arm and took the gem.

On the dais, the royal family had recognized Cassandra as well. King Noam stood frozen, his expression torn between fear and anger. Beside him, Marta was pure anger. She stepped in front of her husband, shielding him from the enchantress. On the other side of the dais, Lina stepped in front of Alaric. The crown prince placed a trembling hand on her shoulder.

“Lina, don’t,” he warned.

“You are not welcome here,” Lina said. “You were banished from Aeonian.”

“Ah, but I’m not in Aeonian,” Cassandra said. “My terms of banishment said nothing about the realm of shadows. In spite of how unfairly you treated me, I have the greatest respect for Aeonian and its laws. Even a queen is not above such things.”

“You are not the queen,” Marta said.

“No? What else do you call the wife of the king?”

Cassandra gave a gentle smile that sent chills down Henry’s spine. He understood now why Alaric always spoke of his former stepmother with such a grim expression. Facing her as a grown man, he felt intimidated. Facing her as a child would have been terrifying. Cassandra turned, looking purposefully around the whole room before she continued.

“This shadow warrior claims the throne because she possesses a single drop of ancient royal blood. You all support her because she also displays a hint of magical ability. If such things are qualifications to lead, then I am far more qualified than she. Not to mention I hold a prior claim. King Noam fell in love with a goat herder, broke my heart, and told horrible lies about me so that he and Marta could be together. But none of that changes the fact that I was his bride before she was.”

She smiled and sang. Her voice was soft, but the music filled the entire ballroom. Henry felt traces of enchantment

brush against his skin, but Bri's magic pushed it away before it could affect him. Bri wrinkled her nose and clutched her diamond pendant as the magic swept over her. Odette brushed her arms as if removing cobwebs. On the royal dais, Fiora pulled Gustave close and sang in his ear. Lina muttered enchantments to her ring and took Alaric's hand. Marta pulled a bottle from her pocket, poured a few drops into her palm, and rubbed it over King Noam's forehead.

His family was fighting the magic, and whatever Bri was doing protected Henry from the former queen's influence. The same could not be said for the rest of the people in the ballroom. They swayed in time with Cassandra's song and listened with rapt attention when she spoke again.

"People of Aeonian, I come before you humbly asking that you return me to my rightful place as your queen. You welcome a maiden of shadows who is married to a prince with a heritage of bloodshed, but you deserve better. Would you not much rather live in a world of light and proper lineage? I can offer you the future you deserve. I am the queen you deserve."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the ballroom. The crowd's expressions grew angry, and they began to press toward the dais. Henry swallowed. If Cassandra was controlling these people, this was a very dangerous situation. If the citizens of Aeonian became violent, the royal family could not fight back without harming the people they were sworn to protect. He searched for something to say. Words had swayed the crowd in Cassandra's favor. Perhaps words could set them free. But what were the right words?

Odette beat him to it.

"She lies!"

Odette jumped onto the dais. She pulled a sword from somewhere in her frilly pink skirt and raised it above her head.

"People of Aeonian, do not listen to this woman! She is a witch and a liar. She seeks to enslave you with her magic as she enslaved King Noam years ago."

A few people in the crowd looked around in confusion. Cassandra sang another phrase of music, and their gazes returned to her.

“Are all humans so easily swayed?” Fiora cried with frustration. Then she opened her mouth and screamed. It was not a nice sound, but it broke the enchantment. Everyone in the ballroom blinked and looked around in confusion.

“How dare you interrupt me?” Cassandra said. “Is this how you treat a messenger of peace?”

Fiora kept screaming to block the enchantress’s song. She signed a message to Gustave, who nodded.

“She says that she’ll take your help at your earliest convenience,” Gustave said to Lina.

Fiora rapidly signed more to him. Gustave laughed.

“And she says that she told you so.”

But Lina was already half asleep on her cot as she fell into a trance.

Henry sank to the ground, pulling Bri with him. He took her hands and held her gaze for a moment.

“Guard my body,” he said.

Bri nodded, and Henry forced his mind away from the unfolding chaos as he softened his gaze and gathered his magic.

He appeared as a star in the realm of shadows just as Cael and Benjamin did. Lina was already there. She grinned as she formed an enormous sword out of green light.

“Did you really think you could just waltz in and take the kingdom?” Lina said.

Cassandra smiled, her face still beautifully serene. She lifted her hands, and the golden light on her arms changed to a deep red.

Bri watched the fight from the ballroom floor as Henry's unconscious body slumped against her. The crowd gasped with delight as brightly colored lights illuminated the dark room. For all they knew, it was still part of the show. It was a dazzling display, but Bri would have enjoyed it more if lives and the fate of a kingdom didn't hang in the balance.

She searched for the stars in the chaos, ignoring Evangelina Shadow-Storm's enormous sword made of green light and the red bolts of lightning that Cassandra flung from her fists. Which one was Henry? The three balls of light looked so alike that it was impossible to tell. Bri turned from the mirror to Henry's face, trying to judge from his expression if the fight was going well or not. But his face was unreadable, smooth and untroubled, as if he were asleep. No wonder he had asked her to guard him. His body was helpless while he fought in the shadows.

As was Evangelina Shadow-Storm's. Prince Alaric stood guard over his wife's sleeping body, but at least he had a weapon. Although Bri wasn't sure a shard of glass was the best choice. She would have preferred the enormous sword that Odette held, but then again, what did she know about dark magic? Or even her own magic?

Very little, Bri thought as she looked at her feet. Her glass shoes still glowed red along with her diamond necklace. She didn't even know how her own clothes worked. It was

laughable to think that she could fight or even guard against such threats.

A gasp echoed through the ballroom, and Bri quickly turned back to the mirrors to check on the fight. Something had gone wrong. Dull red light crawled up Evangelina Shadow-Storm's dress like a lazy fire consuming wood in a fireplace. The shadow warrior slashed her sword in a defensive motion, but Cassandra landed another blow. More of the red light stuck to Lina's dress and slowly pulled her to the ground. Bri swallowed. The protector of Aeonian was on her knees. This was not good.

"You," Lina gasped, her voice thin with pain. "It was you!"

Her green sword disappeared, and the mirrors in the ballroom glowed red. Bri looked for the stars. Surely the princes could help? But they were buzzing around Cassandra, seemingly unable to reach her. Beside Bri, Henry's expression looked troubled. On the dais, Evangelina Shadow-Storm lay perfectly still while Prince Alaric and Odette shared worried looks.

This was bad. They were losing the fight. Bri looked at Henry once again. He had trusted her to guard him, but she couldn't simply sit here while Aeonian lost the fight.

"Bri?"

"Rhoda!"

Bri jumped to her feet and pulled her stepsister into a quick hug.

"Can you guard the prince?"

Rhoda's mouth rounded in surprise as she saw Henry lying on the floor. She nodded.

"Take this," Bri said. "It seems magical, so it might offer some protection if she sings again. Just make sure you keep physical contact with Henry if that happens. He has a gem, but I don't know if it will work while he's unconscious."

She slipped off one of her glowing glass shoes and handed it to Rhoda. Rhoda took it without question and sank to the ground. She pressed the shoe against Henry's arm and kept her own hand against it.

“Like this?”

“Exactly like that.”

“Bri, what are you going to do?”

Bri wished she had an answer. She gave Rhoda a strained smile and pushed through the crowd. Above her, the red light burning around Lina grew brighter. The crowd shifted as people tried to get a better view, and Bri slipped past them as they moved. Blast this gown. The wide skirt may be fashionable, but it made moving difficult. At least the fabric was smooth and glided easily against the people around her.

Finally, she reached a mirror. Bri whispered the enchantment and stepped into the shadows. Her dress billowed around her as she hurried along the strangely bouncy ground. She wished she had worn a darker color. The red light glowed against her pale blue gown and changed it to a vibrant purple. The gems embroidered into the bodice glittered as she moved. There would be no sneaking or hiding in this outfit. Her goal had been to stand out, and now, for better or for worse, she did.

The crowd noticed her and murmured in appreciation, but Bri had eyes only for the scene in front of her. Evangelina Shadow-Storm lay on the ground. She was weighed down by the heavy red light that coated her like honey, and her face was contorted in pain. The stars had given up attacking Cassandra and were circling over the shadow warrior. Whatever they were doing didn't seem to have an effect.

Satisfied that she had defeated her foes in the shadows, Cassandra turned back to the mirror. She didn't acknowledge Bri. Perhaps she didn't see her as she focused on the ballroom and the royal family.

“Well, this could have gone better,” Cassandra said. “I came for a friendly visit, and you attacked me? My dear

husband and stepsons, I thought you were better than that.”

Bri crept forward. Cassandra was focused on King Noam, smiling at the way her former husband froze under her gaze. Then she turned her attention to Prince Alaric, who still stood over his wife’s sleeping body in the realm of light. He pointed the shard of glass at the enchantress. His hand shook slightly, but his expression was resolved.

“Crown prince, indeed,” Cassandra said. “You have always been weak, dear Alaric. How can you hope to protect a country when you can’t even protect your wife?”

Cassandra gathered more red light in her hands. Alaric stood frozen, unsure what to do as he faced the woman who had haunted his childhood. Beside him, Odette gritted her teeth and lifted her sword. The rest of the royal family followed, lifting their weapons or grabbing whatever was nearest to them that might be used for defense. They gathered around Alaric, forming a barrier between Lina’s body and the mirror. Cassandra laughed.

“My dear fools. Did you forget that you banished me from stepping foot in Aeonian? I won’t break the laws I am sworn to uphold, but I will defend myself when I am attacked in neutral territory.”

She turned from the mirror and waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. Red light flew through the shadows. At first, Bri thought she had missed, but then she realized that the shadow warrior was not her target. The light hit the stars. They paled, then disappeared entirely.

Bri swallowed a scream and turned to the mirror to search for Henry. Had the enchantress killed him? The crowd blocked her view of Henry’s body on the ballroom floor, so there was no way to know. Cassandra lifted her hands again. This time, there was no doubt that she was aiming for Evangelina Shadow-Storm. Her eyes held a dark gleam of victory.

Bri’s mind raced. She was supposed to guard the mirrors, and now she knew what she was supposed to guard against. But she had no way to fight. No enchanted weapons or advanced enchantments. If the shadow warrior who defeated a

goblin could not defeat this woman, how could Bri hope to succeed?

Time seemed to slow as Cassandra waved her hands at Evangelina Shadow-Storm. Prince Alaric let out an anguished cry as the red light crawled toward his wife.

Thinking was doing no good, so Bri acted on instinct. She reached down, grabbed her glowing glass shoe, and hurled it at Cassandra.

It flew faster and farther than she expected. The heel hit the enchantress on the head. Light erupted as the shoe bounced against her skin and skidded toward the mirror. It scraped Cassandra's cheek, leaving a single line of blood on her flawless skin. The red light gathered on her hands dissolved as she lifted her hand to her face. She looked from the drops of blood on her fingertips to the woman in the blue gown who stood before her. When she smiled at Bri, her expression held no trace of the serenity that she had used to address the people of Aeonian. Her eyes were hard and ruthless.

"Well, this is unexpected," Cassandra said. "For your sake, I hope that doesn't scar."

Henry should have been used to splitting headaches by now, but apparently he wasn't. He blinked, trying to make sense of the world as his head pounded. His back was cold, and his neck was stiff. He was holding a glowing shoe made of glass.

Henry blinked again and wondered if he had suffered a head injury. Surely that wasn't right. Why was he holding a shoe? He had already carried a shoe around once. Was this his new hobby or something? He really needed to sort his priorities out once his thoughts cleared.

"Your Highness?"

Bri? No, not Bri. This woman had dark hair. Her voice was familiar, but he couldn't place her any more than he could place the shoe.

Bri. He had asked Bri to guard him while he went into the shadows, but Bri was gone. Something must have happened to her. He tried to sit up, and the world spun around him. The shoe and everything else dissolved into a soft haze of light. It slipped from his grasp, and the woman pushed it back into his hand.

"Don't let go of this," she said. "It's helping somehow."

Helping what? Henry wanted nothing more than to sink into the deep sleep that had already halfway pulled him in. If he could help by holding a shoe, that was easy enough.

There were voices coming from somewhere far away.

Bri's voice.

Henry shoved his drowsiness aside and stared at the red-tinged ceiling overhead. Whatever had happened to him, it had happened in the realm of shadows. That probably meant he had unfinished business there.

His gaze softened, and he found himself floating as a star. His senses were dull, and his vision wouldn't focus. He saw a red blur and a blue blur up ahead. Bri had been wearing blue, so he floated toward the blue smudge of light and hoped that he had guessed correctly.

"Henry?"

A hand reached out and touched him, and everything sharpened. Henry's light grew brighter, and Bri's face snapped into focus.

"Hi," Henry said. "Are you alright?"

It was a stupid thing to say, but he didn't know where else to start. He was grateful that he had learned how to speak in his normal voice in the shadows. The moment would have felt very different if he spoke to Bri in the squeaky voice that sent everyone into peals of laughter when they heard it.

"I've been better," Bri said.

She turned from him to the red light. Henry turned, and he remembered with a flash of panic what had happened.

Cassandra stood in front of them, red light gathered in her hands. The enchantress still smiled, but there was a hard edge to her eyes that turned the smile into a snarl.

"Are you quite finished?"

"I'm out of shoes, so I suppose so," Bri said. "But as a citizen of Aeonian, I must object to your treatment of our crown princess."

She held Cassandra's gaze and walked calmly forward until she stood between her and Lina.

Lina. Blast it all, Henry had forgotten about Lina. The shadow warrior lay unconscious on the ground, coated in a

thick red light. Henry flashed reassurance at Bri and flew toward Lina. His senses dulled again as soon as he lost contact with Bri. Whatever magic she had, it was strong, but that was a conversation for another time.

Henry hovered above Lina's face and focused all his efforts on healing her. The red light resisted. He felt it pushing against him, sapping his energy. Forcing him back to the realm of light.

His awareness shifted back to his body, and he gripped the shoe tighter. He wasn't sure why or how, but it was still glowing. That probably meant it had some magic. Lina pulled magic from gems to strengthen her enchantments. Why couldn't he? Henry focused his attention on the shoe, then on Lina. The red light dissolved slowly, like honey melting in warm water. He glanced up at Bri, who smiled at him. Behind her, Cassandra scowled.

“Oh, that is quite enough. You think you're clever? You're nothing but an over-dressed commoner.”

She lifted her hands and threw a blast of red light at Bri.

“Guard!”

Bri grabbed her diamond pendant and held it tight. The red light brushed against her skin, prickling but not causing pain. Cassandra threw more magic at her and began to laugh. Bri didn't know what could possibly be so funny. The light had not harmed her. She could still stand and move freely.

Then she looked down.

Red magic crawled across her skirt, licking the fabric like flames. The edge of her hem turned black and curled upward. Holes spread in the fabric. Gems fell to the ground as the thread holding them disintegrated. The magic pulled color from the fabric that remained, leaving the brilliant blue gown a dirty gray. The ribbons in Bri's hair unraveled, and her curls tumbled down around her shoulders.

And still, Bri was not hurt. She glanced back at Evangelina Shadow-Storm. The red light around the shadow warrior seemed thinner. Could Henry free her? Where were his brothers? Surely, they could help. Bri looked at the mirrors, searching the ballroom on the other side for a trace of Benjamin and Cael. She didn't see them, but something else caught her eye. Odette had left the dais and was sneaking toward the large mirror. She caught Bri's eye and held a single finger to her lips.

Not the help Bri had expected, but she would take whatever she could get. She looked down at her dress. The

fabric was charred and hung in tatters around her body. The holes showed her chemise, which was thankfully intact but alarmingly covered in soot. Bri had never looked this shabby as a servant. Not even on days when she cleaned the fireplace and then slept on the hearth. She had wanted to make an impression in front of the whole country, and she certainly had accomplished that.

“Go back to the scullery where you belong, girl.”

“No,” Bri said, her mind racing for a way to stall. “You think you’ve defeated me because you burned my dress? I didn’t want to hurt you, but I won’t hold back any longer.”

Cassandra laughed. How did she manage to sound so beautiful and so terrifying at the same time?

“*You* won’t hold back? Oh, my dear. You have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

She lifted her hands and gathered more red light. A strand of blinding white threaded around her fingers and mixed with the red. Bri fought the urge to look to the side where Odette had been sneaking toward them. What if she couldn’t get through the mirror? What if this magic broke through Bri’s defense?

“Step aside, girl. This blow is meant for Evangelina Shadow-Storm. There is no need for you to take it.”

Step aside. Bri could do that. Stand to the side and let the woman she had feared for years burn in a haze of red. She could escape in the commotion that followed and find safety on a foreign shore. It was a sensible plan that sounded even more sensible in Cassandra’s soothing voice. Bri could disappear and make a fresh start in the shadows, but she didn’t. Instead, she stepped toward Cassandra and forced herself to stand taller. Father’s gem had protected her thus far. Hopefully, it would last a little longer. Cassandra scowled at Bri and lifted her hands to attack.

Odette attacked first. She jumped through the mirror, grabbed Bri’s discarded shoe on her way, and lunged at Cassandra. She swung both her sword and the glowing shoe

wildly in front of her. Cassandra stepped to the side, and the light around her flickered with annoyance as Odette sailed past her and disappeared into the darkness. Cassandra shot a blast of magic in Odette's direction, then turned to the mirror to address the royal family.

“Is this truly your answer? To attack one who comes as a messenger of peace?”

Her voice was more song than speech. The guests in the ballroom swayed under her spell. Fiora sang to counteract it, but Cassandra continued. She stepped closer to the mirror.

“My dear Alaric, are you so determined to claim the throne that you would murder your own stepmother to protect your power?”

Alaric stood frozen in place, more terrified of the woman and his memories than the magic she had gathered in her palms. The crowd surged toward the dais as Cassandra sang so loudly that even Fiora couldn't drown her out. She sang of treachery and a royal family that must be punished for it. Even the royal guards drew their swords and pointed them at their king.

Then Odette shrieked and lunged from the shadows. She had lost the sword and the shoe, so she used herself as a weapon instead. She tackled the sorceress head on and knocked her to the ground, then punched her face with a fist that held a glowing diamond. Red magic exploded around them in a burst of lightning. Bri saw a glint in the darkness and ran toward it. She grabbed the glass shoe and raised it high, looking for an opening to join the fight.

Odette grabbed a handful of Cassandra's hair and refused to let go. The enchantress shrieked and gathered magic in her hands, only to have Odette kick it away. Bri edged closer. Odette saw her, nodded toward the shoe, and held up her hand. Bri threw the shoe at her. Odette caught it and slammed it into Cassandra's nose. The woman shrieked, although Bri wasn't sure if it was from anger or pain. White lightning exploded from the point of impact, turning the realm of shadows into a mass of pure light. Brightness shone from the mirrors, blinding

the royal family and the watching crowd. People shouted in surprise and quickly turned away.

The light faded as quickly as it had come, and silence followed. Bri blinked to clear the white spots from her eyes. When she finally regained her vision, the shadows were empty.

Bri stared at the empty space where Cassandra and Odette had been. The shadows were so silent that she wondered if the explosion had hindered her hearing as well as her sight. She turned in a circle and searched the darkness as her senses slowly returned. She was cold. There was very little of her dress left, and the stress of the fight had left beads of sweat on her skin. Bri shivered as she reached into the shadows and searched for Odette. When nothing pulled at her, she reluctantly reached for Cassandra.

She felt no trace of either woman.

Bri reached for home to confirm that the explosion had not damaged her magic. She felt her estate in the distance, although the invisible thread that pulled her toward it felt thin and weary. If her magic still worked, what had happened to Cassandra and Odette? She whispered “illuminate” and held her glowing diamond up to reveal more of the shadows, but they were empty.

A rustling sound like wind moving down a mountain meadow distracted her. She turned, expecting to see a night sky full of stars, and instead saw a ballroom full of slowly moving people. It was illuminated by a single flickering candle near the door. Skirts rustled and voices whispered as guards helped dazed guests out of the enormous ballroom. Servants pushed through the thinning crowd and lit more candles. The room brightened gradually, like a sunrise, until Bri could see the people who remained.

Evangelina Shadow-Storm lay on her cot. She was no longer visible in the realm of shadows, but she still slept in the realm of light. Bri had no idea how shadow magic worked, but Prince Alaric's grim expression made her think that this wasn't normal. Prince Cael and Prince Benjamin sat slumped in chairs next to King Noam. The princes were unconscious, but the king looked worse than either of them. His face was pale and drawn, and even from this distance Bri could see his hands shake.

She walked forward until she stood at the edge of the largest mirror. The guests were gone, and Henry still lay on the marble floor. Rhoda hovered over him, speaking softly and patting his shoulder. Henry didn't wake.

Bri looked down. It was a significant drop from the mirror's edge to the ballroom floor. She would have to jump, and she hoped her legs would not collapse from exhaustion.

A hand reached up to help her. Bri pushed through the glass and took it. She jumped into the ballroom, and someone steadied her as she landed. Bri looked up to thank the person and gasped in surprise. She knew this woman. She would recognize that kind face and wild brown hair anywhere. But now the hair was pulled back into a formal style, and a crown sat nestled in the frizz. The woman had looked more at home in the market than she did in the ballroom, although she held now carried herself with the dignity of a queen.

"It's you!" Bri said. "I ruined your dress. I'm so sorry."

"You do seem to be rather hard on your formal clothes," Queen Marta said as she eyed the charred remains of Bri's gown. "You can tell me everything later. We have more important things to discuss right now."

"You think everything is more important than clothes," a gruff woman in a servant's uniform said as she approached them. She held out a box. "These are the potions that worked last time."

"Let's hope they work again," Marta said.

She pulled a small bottle from the box and handed it to Bri.

“Put a few drops of this on Henry’s forehead. I’ll take care of the others.”

Bri took the bottle, too surprised to respond as the queen walked away. She clutched it as she hurried to Henry. Rhoda gave her an apologetic look and stepped aside as Bri knelt beside the prince. The flickering candlelight cast strange shadows over his pale face. He was breathing, but barely.

“Wake up,” Bri whispered. “Please, wake up.”

She pulled the cork out of the bottle and poured three drops on his forehead. A faint aroma of snowbells filled the air. Bri hesitated. How many drops counted as a few? Should she use more? Queen Marta’s instructions had not been very specific.

Someone grabbed her wrist and pulled her upright before she could decide.

“You. What’s happened to them? Why won’t they wake?”

Bri recognized the lilting accent as one of the voices she had heard in the dark, and the woman’s red hair would stand out in any crowd. She shook her arm loose and returned Fiora’s scowl.

“I don’t know what happened to them. Queen Marta gave me this potion to help Henry.”

“She asked a stranger to work unsupervised magic on her son? You honestly expect me to believe that?”

Bri looked to Rhoda for help, but Rhoda was gone. Queen Marta was busy on the dais. There was no one nearby to convince this madwoman that she wasn’t dangerous.

“Perhaps you were too busy screaming to see, but I saved Evangelina Shadow-Storm’s life.” Bri said. “Perhaps that’s why the queen trusts me.”

“You say that as if you’ve done us all a favor,” Fiora said.

Her words were harsh, but her face was grim. She looked back at the dais, where Lina still lay in her trance. Bri used this as an opportunity to kneel and check on Henry. His breathing seemed a little easier, but he was still unconscious.

“How many drops do you think count as a few?” she asked.

“This is ludicrous,” Fiora said. “They might trust you, but they’re all idiots. Guard, please hold this woman so she can’t escape again.”

The guard looked from Fiora to the dais, where the royal family was still too occupied to notice the situation or give orders. He grabbed Bri’s arm and pulled her away from Henry. Someone across the room called to Fiora, and she glared at Bri before hurrying away.

“Wait! I need to give him more of this potion!”

The guard ignored her cries as he pulled her away, and no one else noticed her pleas. Bri twisted her arm to break out of the guard’s grip, but he held firm. She struggled, trying to break free. Queen Marta had trusted her to take care of Henry. What would happen if he didn’t get enough potion? What if Henry never woke up?

“Unhand my daughter, you ruffian.”

The guard stopped, and Bri looked up in surprise to find Lady Vidre staring at him in her haughtiest manner. Lucille stood beside her, copying the expression so closely that no one would doubt they were mother and daughter.

“Princess Fiora’s orders,” the guard said. “She’s under suspicion for this attack.”

“Nonsense,” Lady Vidre said. “My daughter is many things, but she is definitely not a magical threat.”

She gave Bri a significant look and then tilted her head down to gesture at the still-glowing diamond. Bri whispered the enchantment to extinguish it and did her best to look as ordinary and un-magical as possible. It would have been easier if the whole country hadn’t just seen her battle an enchantress and she wasn’t wearing a dress that had been through a forest fire, but she did her best.

“My stepsister is ordinary to the point of boring,” Lucille said. “We live together. I would certainly have noticed if she was working magic.”

She managed to keep any trace of irony from her voice, and Bri was impressed. Living with Lady Hawley had honed Lucille's acting abilities to a professional level.

"Nothing to be done, miss," the guard said. "They said she's to be arrested, so -"

"Oh my! It seems there has been a misunderstanding," Rhoda said as she ran toward them, sounding breathless. "Nic, can you help?"

Rhoda stood beside her mother and clutched a young man's arm. It was the same man that Bri had seen her dancing with at the ball, and he smiled at the guard.

"Thank you for your help. I can take it from here."

The guard looked to the dais as if searching for an answer once again. Then he released Bri's arm and bowed.

"My apologies, miss."

"My sweet girl! Are you well?"

Lady Vidre rushed to Bri and pulled her into a hug.

"We have a lot to talk about, apparently," she whispered so only Bri could hear.

"Yes," Bri said. "But it will have to wait a little longer."

She stepped back and looked at Lady Vidre. For the first time since Father had died, Bri did not see hatred and contempt in her expression. Instead, her stepmother's face held a wry confusion carefully disguised with a motherly smile.

But Bri didn't have time to dwell on that. She ran to Henry and poured three more drops of the potion onto his forehead. Was that enough? Would it harm him if she used too much? Joyous shouts sounded from the dais, and Bri looked up. Prince Benjamin and Prince Cael were awake. They rubbed their heads and stared at the empty ballroom in confusion while their mother fussed over them.

Evangelina Shadow-Storm still lay motionless on her cot. Prince Alaric knelt beside her and clutched her hand tightly in

his. Tears glistened in his eyes as he leaned close and whispered words meant only for his wife.

Bri looked away. It felt wrong to watch him, and she had her own prince to worry about. Henry's eyes remained closed, and his breathing was still shallow. His brothers were awake. Why wasn't he?

Had she been too late, or were his injuries too serious? Should she use even more potion, or did the magic simply need more time to work? Bri was used to magic that flashed with light or could be felt. This potion did not glow or give off an invisible trace of magic. If it was doing anything, it was undetectable. Bri leaned over Henry's forehead to study his skin. It smelled faintly of snowbells, but there was no sign of magic. Had they made a mistake and given her a bottle of perfume instead?

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She and Henry had so many secrets to share and stories to tell. Perhaps, when everything was revealed, they would discover that a relationship started with lies could not be transformed into one built on trust. She was willing to take that risk, but however things ended between them, it shouldn't be like this.

"Please, wake up," Bri whispered. "You have to wake up."

Another moment of silence hung in the air. Bri lifted the potion. She didn't care how precious it was. She would pour the whole thing on Henry's head if she knew it would help. Or perhaps she could use her gem? Why hadn't the donkey taught her healing enchantments? Perhaps he had tried, and she had been unable to translate the terrible writing on the scroll.

Out of ideas, Bri whispered, "guard" and placed her palm flat against Henry's chest. She felt the invisible iron stretch across her skin. Then across Henry's. She held her breath and waited.

Still nothing. Bri sighed and pulled her hand away. It had been worth a try.

Without opening his eyes, Henry reached up and pulled her hand back to him. Bri froze as she felt his heartbeat quicken

under her palm. Henry blinked and opened his eyes. He stared at the ceiling for a moment, then blinked and turned to her.

“Bri?”

She was too relieved to speak, so she simply smiled. Henry stared at her for a long moment. Then he lifted his hand and held out her glass shoe.

“Is this yours?”

Bri's smile sent a wave of relief through Henry. His thoughts were hazy. He didn't remember exactly what had happened. He had no idea why he was giving her a shoe, but things couldn't be too bad if she was smiling.

Smiling, but dressed in tattered rags. Henry looked from Bri's charred dress to her tear-streaked face with growing concern.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

His voice rasped in his throat. He wouldn't be much good in a fight right now, but if Bri was in trouble, he would do his best.

"I'm fine," she said. "But what about you? You wouldn't wake up. I thought-"

"I'm fine."

That wasn't exactly true, but he was getting closer to fine every second. The haziness in his mind gave way to the headache that always followed magical exertion. He could live with a headache as long as Bri was safe.

There was more that he needed to say, but joyful exclamations across the room interrupted him. Lina was awake. Alaric bent over his wife and pressed her palm to his cheek as if he could keep her conscious by willpower alone. Henry tried to sit and grimaced as pain shot through his head. Bri moved closer and helped him up with a gentle hand against his back. She left it there as half of the royal family showered

Lina with questions and the other half insisted that she be given space and quiet.

“I’ll be fine,” Lina whispered. “Just give me a moment.”

“Take your time,” Alaric said. “There is no hurry.”

“I’m not sure that’s true,” Lina said. “Where is Odette?”

Cael stood on shaky legs and walked over to the mirror. He pressed his face to the glass and stared into the shadows. Finally, he gave up and turned away.

“There’s no sign of her.”

“Perhaps that one knows where they went,” Fiora said.

It took Henry a moment to realize “that one” was Bri. Everyone looked at them. He pushed himself to stand. If Cael could do it, so could he. Bri ducked under his shoulder and let him lean against her. They walked to the dais together.

“Bri saved us,” Henry said when he reached his family and caught his breath. “She deserves thanks, not accusations.”

“She was in the shadows when Odette disappeared,” Fiora said. “She’s been present for every attack. Surely you all can see how suspicious that is?”

“She did save me,” Lina said. “I don’t understand her magic, but she used it to help us.”

Henry waited for Bri to agree with Lina and defend herself, but she stayed quiet. Her hand trembled against his back, and he pulled her close.

“I trust Bri with my life. I suggest you all do the same.”

“It seems that we may have to,” Lina said. “But first, we need to find Odette.”

“She’s gone,” Bri said.

“What do you mean, gone?” Cael choked. “She can’t be gone. She was just here.”

“I mean that I can’t sense her or Cassandra in the shadows. I tried before I came back through the mirror.”

“What do you mean, sense her?” Lina asked.

“You know. Sense her. I reached out for her, and she wasn’t there.”

Henry knew Bri had powerful magic, but her casual admission that she could sense people in the shadows still caught him off guard. He stared at her, vaguely aware that everyone else in the room was doing the same.

“I should go to the shadows and search,” Lina said.

“You’re far too weak for that,” Marta said. “All of you are. You need time to recover before you work magic again. I have already asked members of the Society to check the seal and stationed guards at each of the enchanted mirrors. We are as secure as we can be for now.”

“But what about Odette?” Cael said. “We can’t just leave her.”

“Perhaps they both exploded?” Fiora said. “That’s what it looked like to me.”

Cael sank into his chair.

“She can’t be gone,” he said. “Not like that.”

“They were blasted by lightning,” Fiora said. “If that one’s magic is to be believed, they’re gone.”

King Noam shook his head.

“She wouldn’t go that easily.”

He wasn’t talking about Odette, and the pain in his voice tore at Henry’s heart. Cassandra had a lot to answer for if they ever found her.

“We need refreshments,” Marta said.

“Already on it!” Rhoda said.

She and Nic walked arm in arm across the ballroom. A group of servants followed behind them, carrying tea and snacks.

Before Henry quite knew what was happening, he was seated with a cup of hot tea in his hands. Bri sat beside him,

sipping her own tea and watching in surprise as her stepsister served refreshments to the royal family.

Someone placed more chairs next to Bri. Lady Vidre and Lucille sat. Henry stiffened and prepared to defend Bri, but the ladies seemed to have made up. Or at least, they were putting on a good front for the royal family. Not that the royal family was paying attention. Alaric and Lina leaned close, whispering to each other. Cael stared at the darkness behind the mirror. Benjamin slumped into his chair and rubbed his head.

King Noam sat on the other side of Marta. He was one of the few who hadn't worked magic that night, but the king looked just as pale and haggard as the rest of them. Marta grabbed a cup of tea from the tray and pressed it into her husband's hands. When he made no move to drink it, she gently wrapped her fingers around his and lifted the cup to his lips.

"It will make you feel better," she whispered.

The King of Aeonian obeyed her like a child, taking small sips of the tea while keeping his gaze on the ground. Henry drank his own tea and stared at the wood floor worn smooth by centuries of dancers. It was the closest he could come to offering the man privacy. Mother had always said that Cassandra's enchantment had left the king scarred, but Henry had never seen evidence of it. He had been young and sheltered during the worst of the enchantress's reign, and he now realized that he had gravely underestimated her impact on the royal family.

Fiora and Gustave sat nearby, waving their hands at each other in quick gestures. Their tea sat forgotten as they argued in sign language. Fiora's signs were quick and sharp, while Gustave moved his hands in smooth, deliberate motions. Fiora gestured to Bri over and over, and finally sighed and stood.

"I understand that you all have decided to trust that one unconditionally, but are you going to let her family hear our plans as well?"

Henry raised an eyebrow. That was a surprisingly good point. He didn't trust Bri's stepfamily after seeing the way

they treated her. Even if they had reconciled, they didn't need to be present for whatever discussion followed tea.

Lady Vidre and Lucille stiffened in their seats. Rhoda smiled and squeezed Nic's hand. He nodded at her. Marta watched everyone for a moment, then gestured to Hilda.

"Forgive me, Lady Vidre. I'm sure you're exhausted. Please allow my maid to escort you and your daughters to a guest suite to rest."

"I thank you for your generosity, Your Majesty."

Lady Vidre stood and gestured for her daughters to follow. Rhoda tried to protest, but her mother stopped her with a stern look. Nic started to protest, but Rhoda shook her head at him.

Bri moved, and Henry realized that she was about to stand as well.

"Stay," he said, taking her hand. "We need you."

I need you. He didn't say the words, as they seemed too forward, but he hoped Bri understood they were implied. Bri stayed silent while Hilda led her stepfamily away and the door shut behind them. Henry wished that the door could shut on all their problems so easily. Perhaps the Vidres would keep walking away and never bother Bri again. He kept that thought to himself. For one thing, it was up to Bri whether her stepfamily stayed in her life or not. For another, everyone had finished their tea and seemed ready for a meeting. Cael walked to the mirror and knocked on the glass. The sound rang through the ballroom, and everyone turned to him.

"It's solid now," he said. "So, how did Odette go through?"

They looked at Bri for an explanation.

Bri had just finished a cup of tea, but her throat went dry when Evangelina Shadow-Storm and every member of the Aeonian royal family turned to her for answers.

“But I’m not special,” she said. “You all go through the mirrors as well.”

“We project our consciousness into the realm of shadows with magic,” Lina said. “You walk into it as if it were a physical place. That’s impossible.”

“It’s nothing of the kind,” Fiora said. “Elspeth can do it.”

Her nose wrinkled with disgust when she mentioned her half-sister, and Gustave shuddered.

“What?” Lina said. “Why didn’t you mention this before?”

“I did. Repeatedly. Maybe you should learn to listen and not cancel meetings with people who are trying to help you.”

“But you described mermaid magic,” Alaric said. “Bri isn’t a mermaid.”

“No,” Bri said quickly as everyone turned to her again. “Not that I’m aware of, anyway.”

“Neither is Elspeth, but she used mermaid song just like Cassandra did tonight. Why do you think I was so suspicious of that one? She has the same power to walk in mirrors as my deranged half-sister.”

“Her name is Bri,” Henry growled.

“We wouldn’t have planned a display of magic if we knew that enemies could come through the mirrors,” Lina said. “I thought Elspeth’s attack was an isolated incident involving kraken and mermaids.

“Gremlins came through mirrors at the last ball,” Fiora said. “That wasn’t enough evidence?”

“Gremlins are one thing. Humans are quite another.”

“But Cassandra used dark magic when she attacked Lina,” Benjamin added. “At least, it looked like dark magic based on my research. That thick red light was neither light nor shadow magic.”

“It felt the same as Nog’s magic,” Lina admitted. “But that’s not what dark magic felt like when I trained to fight it in school.”

“You mean to say that magic techniques might have changed in a hundred years?” Fiora said. “How very shocking. If only someone had tried to warn you.”

The debate continued. Bri watched and, impossibly, she smiled. The legendary shadow warrior was human after all, arguing with her friends and family just like Rhoda and Lucille did at home. The subject matter was much more serious than what jewelry to wear with which gown, but the tone felt the same.

She stood. The endless bickering was amusing, but it wasn’t going to solve their problems. Bri walked to the largest of the enchanted mirrors and placed her hand against it. One by one, the royal family noticed her and fell silent.

“I don’t know how the magic works,” she said. “Only that my father’s diamond makes it possible.”

She opened the mirror and stuck her hand through the glass. Everyone gasped and whispered to each other. Fiora rolled her eyes. Queen Marta stood and motioned for silence.

“Why don’t you start at the beginning, dear? We would love to hear your story.”

The beginning. Images of Father drifted through Bri's memory. Not as he had looked on his deathbed, but as he had looked when he was well. Tears filled her eyes as she thought of his laugh and his smile. Their long walks through the estate and late nights spent reading together in the library. Whatever happened next, he would be proud of her. She may not be Ella anymore, but she was still his daughter. Bri stepped away from the mirror, faced her audience, and spoke with a voice that trembled only slightly.

“My father, Duke Gavin Vidre, died six years ago. With his dying breath, he gave me this necklace and told me to guard the enchanted mirrors in our house and beware the Society of Evangelina.”

The royal family shifted in surprise at this last part but did not interrupt her. Bri's voice grew stronger as she told them everything. Father's will leaving Lady Vidre in charge of the estate and the struggle to remain in the house as their fortune diminished. Working as a servant. Seeing the man in the mirror. Following the donkey. Sneaking into the castle for the first ball. Getting a dress from a goblin.

Parts of the story struck Bri as funny when she said them out loud, but no one laughed. Evangelina Shadow-Storm's eyes widened at the mention of the donkey and the goblin, but Bri saw no signs of disbelief in her expression. Even Fiora listened with a begrudging expression of respect.

Finally, Bri finished. Henry was on the edge of his seat, as if fighting the urge to run to her. Everyone else sat in stunned silence, unsure which part of the story to comment on first. Bri shifted, uncomfortable with their stares and growing cold in her tattered gown. She turned to Evangelina Shadow-Storm.

“Princess Evangelina Shadow-Storm. I don't know why my father thought I should guard my mirrors against your Society. I don't understand how this magic works. But I am tired of running, and I would like to work with you to protect Aeonian if you will have me.”

“Please, call me Lina. I'm curious about your father's warning as well. Perhaps we can find the answers together.”

“Nice to see that you’re capable of listening to someone,” Fiora said. “If only you paid that level of attention to every important conversation, we might have been ready for Cassandra.”

The name sent a shudder through the room, and Fiora glowered.

“Her name has no power, and it won’t summon her. Especially not if she exploded.”

“She won’t be defeated that easily,” King Noam said.

His voice and expression were grim. Bri shivered. If the king of Aeonis was that worried about Cassandra, she was lucky to have escaped alive.

“We don’t know what happened to her,” Marta said, “But we won’t make the same mistake twice. We assumed she was gone for good last time, and it nearly cost several lives tonight.”

“It might have killed Odette,” Henry said.

Everyone looked at the mirror and the darkness behind it. Lina broke the silence first.

“If Odette is alive, we’ll find her. Is anyone else missing? Was anyone else hurt?”

“The castle staff said everyone is accounted for as far as they can tell,” Marta said. “There are no reports of injured guests or servants.”

“Good,” Noam said. “Thank goodness for that.”

His voice trembled a bit, but he finally lifted his head and looked around the room to meet everyone’s gaze.

“My family. My friends. I never thought to see that woman again, and I certainly never expected her to threaten our kingdom. If she is set on our destruction, I must beg for your help to oppose her.”

“We are not going anywhere,” Marta said as she took his hand. “We defeated her once. We will do it again.”

“It seems that she is using magic that none of us fully understand,” Alaric said. “Her power has grown.”

“As has ours,” Lina said. “She clearly expected to waltz in and take the kingdom without effort. We showed her that it won’t be so easy.”

“We put her on her guard, you mean,” Gustave said. “She’ll attack more forcefully next time.”

“And we’ll be ready,” Fiora said with a smile that suggested she looked forward to the encounter. “If you’ll get over yourselves and listen to me, that is. Both Cassandra and Elspeth used a form of mermaid magic as humans, and perhaps dark magic as well. Much as it pains me to say this, we need to work together to figure this out.”

“But what about Odette?” Cael said.

Bri looked at the mirror. Odette had been rude and tried to arrest her, but the woman also hadn’t hesitated to jump into an impossible fight and save her life.

“We’ll find her,” Bri said. “I’ll help however I can.”

“We all will,” Lina said. “I’ll search the shadows tonight while I sleep.”

Prince Alaric turned to her in alarm, and she squeezed his hand.

“I’ll be careful.”

“I can go back in the shadows and search as well,” Bri said. “Perhaps the donkey will help.”

She reached for the mirror, but Queen Marta shook her head.

“You already said you couldn’t sense her. I think you can serve best by resting tonight. There will be plenty of work to do tomorrow.”

“I’ll join Lina and help search for Odette,” Cael said. “I feel fine, and she shouldn’t go alone.”

Alaric gave him a grateful look, and slowly the group dispersed. Bri stood, unsure where to go, until Henry

approached her. He offered his coat, and Bri draped it over her shoulders. The chill slowly left her body as warmth and Henry's scent surrounded her.

"Mother prepared a room for you," Henry said. "If you want it, that is."

Bri nodded. She didn't want to go back to the estate by herself tonight, and the guards that were watching it would report if anything unusual happened. She and Henry walked slowly through the ballroom. Most of the candles had been extinguished, and everyone else had gone. The large room seemed cozy somehow. Maybe it was the solitude, or maybe it was Henry walking beside her.

Henry was quiet as they walked through the castle. It was a comfortable silence, or at least as comfortable as it could be given everything that had happened.

"This is your room," Henry said. "I'm in a different wing, but if you need anything at all, just ask a servant to fetch me."

Bri nodded.

"Thank you, Your Highness."

"No, please, don't call me that. I want-

He hesitated, unable to find either the words or the want. The unfinished thought hung in the air between them. Finally, Bri nodded.

"Thank you, Henry."

It seemed wrong to sleep after everything that had happened. It also seemed wrong to climb into bed wearing the ruined remains of her ballgown. Someone had apparently thought of that, because they had laid out several nightgowns for her. Bri changed into the nearest one and flopped onto the bed. She sank into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Henry knew he should sleep, but he also knew that he couldn't. He walked through the castle and hesitated in the doorway of the ballroom. Over the past few hours, the room had seen a lively party, a magical fight, and possibly two deaths. It was still and nearly silent now, as if the room itself were tired from everything that had happened.

The only sound came from a small group of people whispering near the largest mirror. Lina lay nearby on a mattress, and Cael sat slumped in a chair. Guards stood by each mirror and watched their reflections in the glass for any signs of trouble. Someone snored, and Henry realized that Nic lay nearby on another mattress. He should be well-rested by the end of his training, even if he never learned how to use his shadow magic.

Henry walked forward, painfully aware of the sound of his footsteps echoing in the room. Still, the group didn't look up until he reached them, and the sleepers did not wake.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" Marta said.

"I can't."

"Join us then. There are extra mattresses here if you want to sleep but don't want to be alone."

Henry looked where she pointed and saw more mattresses scattered around the ballroom. It reminded him of his childhood home in the mountains, when he and his brothers slept huddled together on the floor. It had been comforting

then, and it was somehow comforting now, to know that he could sleep while his family watched over him.

“They’re left over from the Princess Test,” Marta said with a wink. “I thought they might come in handy, but this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.”

She slid her chair closer to King Noam’s to make room for Henry in the small circle. Noam had recovered from the shock of seeing Cassandra, but dark circles had settled under his eyes. His mouth pulled into a grim line that made him look like he had aged a decade in the past hour.

Alaric didn’t look much better. The crown prince’s blond hair was tangled from running his hands through it, and he alternated between casting worried glances at Lina’s sleeping body and looking at flashes of light in the shard of mirror in his hand. Henry leaned over to see the glass. Instead of a reflection, it showed Lina’s shadow form and Cael’s star running through the shadows. Lina’s expression was grim and determined. Cael was simply a star, which was its own sign of exhaustion. He would have taken a shape if he was feeling well.

“The Society will have an official meeting tomorrow,” Marta said. “Lina and Cael hope to have something to report to them, although that isn’t looking likely.”

“I can help them,” Henry said.

At least, he tried to say it. His mother shook her head.

“Not until I’m sure that you’ve recovered from whatever Cassandra blasted you with.”

“Cael and Lina were hit too.”

“Yes, but you were the last to wake.”

“We’re asking too much of her,” Alaric said. “She’s a legend, but she’s also human. We can’t ask her to hold back armies on her own.”

Henry refrained from saying that Lina wasn’t alone. When it came to combat, she basically was. He and his brothers did

what they could, and they were getting stronger with training, but they were still far from Lina's level.

"This is my fault," Noam said. "I should have strengthened Aeonian after banishing Cassandra. Or perhaps I should have executed her and put an end to the whole affair."

"It wasn't so simple," Marta said.

"I let a powerful sorceress go free and did nothing to build my kingdom's magical defenses against her. It is exactly that simple."

"What matters is what we do going forward," Marta said. She took Noam's hand and held her husband's gaze with a fierce expression.

"We have allies," Alaric said. "Montaigne will surely help if Gustave explains the situation. Perhaps Santelle and Kell could be persuaded as well. We are hosting their princesses. Carina and Fiora could ask on our behalf."

"Carina was banished, and Fiora was abandoned," Henry said. "I doubt their word carries much weight. Besides, Elspeth attacked Gustave, and as far as we know, she is currently Kell's favorite princess. We can't count on them for help."

"Perhaps Fiora could persuade the mermaids to join our cause," Marta said.

"You want to ask the mermaids who transformed Stefan into a frog for help?" Alaric asked in disbelief.

"If anything, time as a frog did Stefan good," Marta said.

"This is a serious matter," Alaric said, looking back at Lina. "My wife almost died tonight. Even now, she is putting herself in danger to protect us."

Marta looked from Lina to Alaric. Her eyes narrowed, and her gaze grew sharp. Henry swallowed. His mother was scheming, and that usually meant trouble both for her enemies and her allies.

"We are not helpless, and Lina is not the only strong enchantress in Aeonian. Let's not forget the other young lady

who fought tonight. Gabriella Vidre is not to be underestimated.”

“We can’t put Bri in danger,” Henry protested.

“But we can risk Lina again?” Alaric asked.

“Boys, please,” Marta said. “If my plan works out, no one will have to face danger. At least, they won’t have to face it alone. We might have been caught off guard this time, but we do have resources at our disposal. It won’t happen again.”

She paused, waiting for Henry and Alaric to take a deep breath and relax before she continued.

“As I said, the Society will meet tomorrow morning. When everyone is gathered, I’ll propose my plan. Lina has already agreed to it, and hopefully Bri will as well.”

As Lina and Cael searched the shadows for clues, Queen Marta briefly outlined her plan to her family. Henry’s heart pounded as she explained his role in it, and for the first time in months, he felt something like hope.

Bri awoke to the sound of birds chirping. She buried her face in her pillow to hide from the bright sunlight. Her entire body ached, and she groaned as she remembered the list of chores she would have to hurry through to get her stepfamily's breakfast ready in time. She would have to skip breakfast herself, although she didn't feel particularly hungry.

She rolled over and froze at the unfamiliar way that she slid against the sheets. The fabric was slick, and it slipped from her hands when she tried to push it away. She pressed down and felt a soft mattress under her. Bri threw the pillow across the room and sat up. Her body ached in protest, but she ignored the pain as she stared at the room in shock.

She lay on an enormous bed, but it looked small in the even more enormous room. The walls were made of carved wooden panels that supported a lofty ceiling decorated with painted snowbells. A window stretched from floor to ceiling, flooding the room with sunlight. That one window probably contained more glass than her entire estate, and that was saying something, considering that her estate was filled with mirrors.

Bri looked down at her arms. Silk sleeves and lace covered her skin. She stood and studied her reflection in a mirror. The fabric was unbelievably luxurious, but this was clearly a nightgown. Since when did she own such a thing? She reached out to touch the mirror. The cold glass cleared her head and brought a flood of memories rushing back.

Bri stared at herself, almost more confused now that she remembered last night. She had fought an evil enchantress and defended Evangelina Shadow-Storm. She was reasonably sure that she was part of a team now and would be guarding a lot more than mirrors in the future.

She touched her diamond pendant and smiled at her reflection.

“I did it, Father,” she whispered. “I did what you asked.”

She half-expected the donkey to appear in the mirror and bray at her, but her reflection stared back at her uninterrupted. Bri sighed. The donkey would come whenever he pleased and not a moment before. She would thank him when he did. She would have been lost without his help.

Her glass shoe sat on a table beside her bed. Bri picked it up and studied it. Odette had hit Cassandra with the other shoe before they vanished. Did that mean something? Once again, she wished she understood more about magic. She had no idea what powers the shoe held, if it held any at all. She set it back on the table and turned to the room. The charred remains of her ballgown lay draped over a chair, but there wasn't enough left of it to wear.

Bri smoothed her nightgown and peeked out the door. A woman stood in the hallway. She smiled at Bri.

“Good morning, Miss Vidre. Was the room to your liking?”

Bri nodded, and the woman beamed.

“There are dresses for you in the wardrobe. I included a variety of styles and sizes that I believe should fit, but please let me know if they aren't suitable. The dining hall is currently being used for a meeting, but I can have breakfast brought to your room once you are dressed.”

Bri blinked. Someone offering her breakfast instead of demanding it was a pleasant way to start the morning.

“Or, if you prefer to dine with others, your family is being held in the tearoom.”

“Held?”

“Forgive me, that was a poor choice of words. They are taking refreshments in the tearoom, and you are welcome to join them if you wish.”

The woman’s tone stayed calm and friendly, but Bri’s heart pounded. The danger from the mirrors may have passed for now, but it seemed that her stepfamily was still at risk because of her. She closed the door and hurried to the wardrobe. As the woman had promised, it held a variety of dresses in a variety of sizes. Bri looked through them, wondering why the castle had so many identical gowns in different sizes sitting around. She chose the simplest one, a pale purple silk, and slipped it on.

Her hair was hopelessly tangled and dirty from the fight. Bri pulled bits of charred fabric from her curls, then tied them back with the matching purple ribbon that hung next to her dress. Several pairs of shoes sat beside the wardrobe. She found one that fit and hurried out of her room.

“Take me to my stepfamily,” she said.

The woman walked through the hallways. Her pace felt maddeningly slow, but Bri was too nervous to ask her to go any faster. The castle looked different in daylight. More inviting than menacing, and servants bustled through the halls completing their tasks. Finally, they reached a door with two men standing guard outside it. Bri swallowed. So, it was as she had suspected. Her family was being held prisoner. Had Evangelina Shadow-Storm’s offer of friendship been a ruse? Was Bri a prisoner as well? What would this well-mannered woman do if she demanded to leave?

She would figure that out after she saw her stepfamily. The woman nodded to the guards. They opened the door, and Bri stepped inside.

Lady Vidre, Rhoda, and Lucille sat at a small table covered with a tea set and mountains of pastries. Rhoda had changed into a green silk dress that Bri was certain she didn’t own. She would remember ironing all those ruffles. Lady Vidre and

Lucille wore the same gowns they had worn to the ball, which looked worse for wear after the evening's events.

There was an extra chair at the table, and Bri took it without saying a word. Rhoda poured her tea and handed her a plate of pastries. Bri nodded her thanks but left them untouched. It was a feast, but she had no appetite. She couldn't help noticing that the room had no windows or mirrors. It was the only room in the castle she had seen so far without either.

Lady Vidre sat silently across from Bri, her posture stiff as she watched the door. Lucille avoided everyone's gaze and studied the room, although Bri had no idea what she was looking for. Only Rhoda seemed relaxed. She finished her cup of tea and poured another.

"I'm sorry," Bri said when she could take the silence no longer. "This is exactly the sort of situation I've been trying to avoid."

"And what situation is that, exactly?" Lady Vidre said in a cold voice.

"Putting you all in danger. Involving you in all this."

"We're not in danger," Rhoda said. "Cassandra is no match for Evangelina Shadow-Storm. Or for Bri, apparently."

"Did we watch the same fight last night?" Bri asked. "Cassandra looked like more than a match for all of us combined."

"And yet, we're here, and she's not. It all worked out."

"Don't be dense, Rhoda," Lucille said. "Things did not work out. We are prisoners in the castle, and Bri almost died. This isn't a tea party."

"It could be, if you would drink some tea. Here, try this pastry. The chocolate is my favorite."

"I'll pass."

"That diamond is magic." Lady Vidre said. "That's why Gavin gave it to you?"

In answer, Bri unclasped the necklace and whispered, "Illuminate."

The gem glowed softly. She handed it to Lady Vidre, who cradled it in her palm and stared at the light as if it held the answers she was looking for. Finally, she passed it to Lucille, who passed it to Rhoda without a second glance.

"Father knew magic," Bri said. "All the mirrors at the estate are enchanted. He guarded them with this diamond, and he taught me to do the same. The night he died, he gave me the necklace so I could continue his work."

She swallowed, unsure how much more to say. Lady Vidre waited, her expression carefully neutral. Rhoda passed the diamond necklace back to Bri. She extinguished the light and clasped it around her neck.

"He treated us like his own daughters," Lucille said. "I thought of him as a second father. Why didn't he tell us about his magic?"

"I don't know. I wish he had."

Lucille finally met Bri's gaze. She let her guard drop, and Bri saw hurt and sorrow written across her stepsister's face.

"We loved him too," Lucille whispered. "We thought we were family."

"We were," Lady Vidre said.

Bri squirmed under her sharp gaze.

"I was a child, and my father swore me to secrecy with his dying breath. I wanted to tell you, but how could I?"

"How indeed?" Lady Vidre said. "I'm sorry, Gabriella."

A lump caught in Bri's throat at the sound of her full name. She looked at the woman who had been so many things to her over the years. Mother. Nemesis. Friend. Enemy. She wasn't sure how to reconcile the feelings that warred in her heart. They had been family once. Perhaps they could be that again, but years of hurt would not be resolved in a single conversation.

“I’ll get you out of here,” she said. “I won’t see you held prisoner for my actions.”

“Tell us more about your magic!” Rhoda said. “How did you learn to walk in mirrors?”

She poured more tea into their already full cups. Bri shrugged.

“A donkey taught me.”

They stared at her. A smile quirked at the corners of Lady Vidre’s mouth.

“We can’t go anywhere at the moment. Perhaps you should tell us your story.”

Rhoda smiled and stacked another pastry on everyone’s plates. Bri looked at each member of her stepfamily in turn. Rhoda grinned brightly. Lucille scowled. Lady Vidre’s expression was cautiously optimistic.

They already knew she could work magic. There was no point in keeping secrets any longer. Bri took a deep breath and told them everything. By the time she finished, the tea had gone cold and Rhoda had eaten her fill of pastries. Lucille’s jaw dropped in a very unladylike manner. Even Lady Vidre stared at Bri in genuine surprise.

“You see why we couldn’t move to town?” Bri said. “I couldn’t leave the mirrors unguarded, and I thought you were purposefully sabotaging the estate to force me to sell it.”

“I understand why you didn’t trust me,” Lady Vidre said, “But I hope we can at least be honest with each other moving forward.”

“I’d like that,” Bri said.

“So, you got that dress from a goblin?” Rhoda said. “Do you think he could make one for me? I’ll need a wedding dress soon, and he’s clearly very talented.”

“You’ll need no such thing!” Lady Vidre said.

“But now that the Society of Evangelina isn’t secret, I can tell you that Nic is not actually a goat herder, but rather a

shadow warrior and member of the long-lost royal family. You have no reason to object to him anymore.”

“Father told me to beware the Society of Evangelina,” Bri said.

“But the Society isn’t dangerous,” Rhoda said. “Nic’s in the Society.”

Lady Vidre scowled.

“We are discussing Bri’s secret magical talents. Your infatuation with that young man is an entirely different conversation that can wait for another time.”

Rhoda scowled, and Lucille put another chocolate pastry on her plate to comfort her.

“You said a donkey taught you magic?” Lucille said to change the subject. “How was that?”

“Chaotic,” Bri said. “He appeared in the mirrors whenever he pleased, and I had to hide him. He almost revealed himself to Lady Hawley.”

“No!” Rhoda said. “I wish he had! She would never have visited again after that.”

“I doubt she’ll visit again anyway,” Lucille said. “I hope to never see her again.”

“I hope to see her at least once more,” Lady Vidre said. “We may not be able to recover everything she stole from us, but perhaps we could at least get enough to patch the roof.”

“Were you not able to meet with her, then?” Bri asked. “I thought you were going to confront her with the records from the estate.”

“I am, as soon as I manage to catch her at home.”

Someone knocked on the door. A stern man in dark clothes entered, and Nic bounced in behind him. Rhoda beamed, and Lady Vidre scowled.

“Have you come to interrogate us, or are we free to go?”

The man raised an eyebrow and looked at Nic, who bowed.

“My apologies for the ruse, ladies. You were always free to go, but I needed to keep you here until my solicitor finished compiling your documents.”

“Excuse me?” Lucille said.

Lady Vidre glared at her, and Lucille shrugged.

“Please, don’t keep them waiting any longer,” Nic said to his solicitor. “Tell the ladies what you found.”

The man pulled a thick sheaf of papers from his coat. Nic groaned.

“No, don’t read the entire court proceedings! Just summarize.”

“Court proceedings?” Lady Vidre said.

“You said they knew about this,” the solicitor said.

“I knew,” Rhoda said.

This time, even her mother’s glare couldn’t banish her grin. Nic grinned back at her. The solicitor looked from Rhoda to Nic and sighed.

“I see. Forgive me, madame. I operated under the impression that I had your consent to represent you.”

“To represent me in what?” Lady Vidre asked.

“In the matter of Lady Mildred Hawley’s defrauding you of your livelihood. Thanks to the urgency of your financial situation and your detailed records, I was able to have your case expedited. Thank you for the use of your ledger.”

He pulled the book from his jacket and handed it to Lady Vidre with a small bow. For once, Lady Vidre was speechless. She blinked at the solicitor, who took that as permission to continue.

“The judge found Lady Hawley and her solicitor guilty of fraud and ordered them to repay you everything owed.”

Bri stared at the solicitor, trying to process his words. Repayment of six years of profits from the Vidre estate would be a lofty sum. They would have enough to fix the roof and buy new furniture. She could have a proper bed. Maybe hire a cook. The vision of her estate, properly run and restored, sparkled in her mind.

“Unfortunately, Lady Hawley seems to have anticipated this verdict. She and her solicitor have disappeared, as have her lady’s maid and the majority of her assets.”

Bri blinked as the vision of her restored estate vanished. Furniture disappeared, and rain dripped through the roof once more.

“So, you’re saying that Lady Hawley has been ordered to pay us back, but both she and her money are gone?” Lady Vidre said.

The solicitor nodded, and Bri wondered why Nic was still smiling. Was his face incapable of any other expression?

“The house!” Nic said. “Tell them about the house!”

“I am getting to that. There was one asset that Lady Hawley was unable to take with her. Her townhouse is fortunately still on its foundation, and the judge ordered it signed over to you to cover her debt.”

Rhoda bounced in her chair.

“Isn’t it exciting? We have a house! We can finally move to town!”

“Move to town?” Lucille whispered. “We can live in town without seeing Lady Hawley?”

She smiled for the first time that day. Even Lady Vidre looked pleased through her shock. Bri watched their excitement and swallowed the suggestion that they could sell the townhouse and use the money to repair the estate. There was no reason for her stepfamily to live there any longer.

She should have realized that things would change after everything that had happened, but somehow this detail made it real. Even though they were on better terms now, they

wouldn't all go back to the mountains together. Bri would return to the estate alone.

"The servants have expressed interest in staying in their positions," the solicitor said. "Although all final decisions of employment will be up to you."

"Isn't it wonderful?" Rhoda said. "Bri, you'll never have to tend another fire. You can have breakfast in bed every day if you wish."

"You want me to move in with you?"

Rhoda looked surprised.

"Of course we do! Where else would you live?"

On a lonely estate in the mountains guarding mirrors? Or here in the castle, training and preparing in case Cassandra attacked again? Bri's future had never been less clear.

"There is plenty of time to work all that out," Lady Vidre said. "I suppose we can go see the house today if we wish?"

"I would be honored to escort you there and review the paperwork with you," the solicitor said. "I need a few signatures to make everything official."

"I'm coming too!" Nic said. "You'll love the neighborhood. You're close to the markets and the castle."

He took Rhoda's hand and led her from the room. Lucille and the solicitor followed. Lady Vidre stayed behind.

"I understand if you wish to stay at the estate," she said, "but please know that you are welcome with us any time. I cannot resent you for following your father's dying wish, Bri. Even if I regret being excluded from his plan."

The softness in her expression stirred a memory in Bri. Father laughing the morning after his second wedding, when they all sat down to breakfast as a family in the estate dining room. He had been happy then. Happier than Bri had seen him in a long time.

"Father loved you," Bri said softly. "He came alive again when he met you. I will always be grateful for that."

“And I loved him,” Lady Vidre said. “And, though it isn’t always easy, and I don’t always understand their actions, I love all three of my daughters.”

She held out her hand. Bri took it and squeezed. They stood there a moment, hand in hand. Bri let go first.

“I need to return to the estate,” she said. “I can’t just abandon it.”

“Then please visit us any time you like,” Lady Vidre said. “And take this.”

She pressed the estate ledger into Bri’s hands and left without looking back. Bri stood alone in the room, lost in her thoughts and clutching the book, until a servant came in to clear the table.

“May I take some of these?” Bri asked, gesturing to the pastries.

The servant nodded. Bri folded several pastries into a napkin and hurried from the room so the servant could work in peace. She wandered through the castle and followed familiar landmarks until she found the ballroom. Guards stood in front of each mirror, ready to sound the alarm in case of another attack. Not sure what else to do, Bri approached the nearest one.

“Excuse me, can you tell me where to find Prince Henry?”

“He and the rest of the royal family are in a meeting with the Society of Evangelina.”

Bri’s breath caught at the mention of the Society. So far, they had been helpful, but she still couldn’t shake Father’s warning. Why had he been so concerned about them?

“Do you know when they will be done?”

“I’m afraid not. They have been in discussions for several hours already.”

Given everything that had happened, there was a lot to discuss. Bri had not been invited to the meeting, and she wasn’t ready to face the Society. She also refused to sit around and wait on them. She placed her hand on the glass.

“May I?”

The guard nodded. Bri pressed her palm against the enchanted mirror and opened it. She walked into the shadows and followed her magic home.

Heated conversation buzzed around Henry, and a cold plate of untouched food sat in front of him. He picked up his fork to push food around the plate, caught himself doing it, and set down the fork as he forced himself to refocus on the discussion.

Henry had always assumed that the Society members yelled so much in meetings to make sure that they were heard through the enchanted mirrors. It turned out that they yelled even more when meeting in person.

“Preposterous!” Madame Scowl said.

“Outrageous!” Lord Disagreement added.

Out of habit, Henry looked for Cael to share a look of concern. It never went well for them when those two agreed.

But Cael’s eyes were unfocused and staring straight ahead. He was working light magic again, doubtless still combing the shadows for Odette. Henry hadn’t realized that there was anything beyond professional camaraderie between those two, but it seemed that Cael at least felt something more. His brother had dark circles under his eyes, brought on by worry and the constant use of magic. They needed to resolve this quickly, for everyone’s sake, but especially for Cael.

“I thought you would be pleased, Onyx Cockroach,” Marta said. “You wanted to come out of hiding. The Society is in the open now, so you can take your rightful places as members of

the royal family. I've already prepared suites for you in the castle."

Henry stared at his mother. That was not the plan she had told him last night. Had she changed her mind without telling him?

Madame Scowl and Lord Disagreement launched into another round of protests at Queen Marta's words. She let them speak and glanced at Henry. The corner of her mouth quirked up into a hint of a smile.

She was scheming, and the Society was falling for it completely. Henry took a sip of water and tried to stay calm. If all went well, this scheme would work out in his favor, but however it went, he was powerless to stop the forces that had been put into motion.

He hoped Bri was alright. He had stopped by her room to check on her before the meeting started, but she was still asleep. Perhaps he should follow Cael's example and sink into the realm of shadows. Bri spent a lot of time with enchanted mirrors. Perhaps he could find her near one and say hello.

Or perhaps using magic to follow her was creepy and overbearing. Silence fell over the table, and Henry looked up in alarm. His mother stared at everyone, seeming too surprised to speak. Finally, she shook her head.

"Forgive me. It seems I was mistaken. Am I to understand that you don't wish to live in the castle after all?"

"Finally, you get it," Madame Scowl said. "This place is unbearably stuffy, and I hate the city."

"Loud," Lord Disagreement agreed. "Crowded. I haven't had a good night's sleep since I arrived."

"Oh dear," Marta said. "But I'm afraid all the magic mirrors and gems are located in Mias. If you are going to supervise their use, you'll have to live here."

Henry felt her plan fall into place. The snap was almost audible as the pieces clicked together.

It didn't take long after that. Madame Scowl and Lord Disagreement smugly proposed the plan that Marta had outlined to her family last night. Marta protested, which made the Society even more determined to have things their way. It was a good thing, Henry thought, that Madame Scowl and Lord Disagreement so seldom agreed. They were a formidable team when they worked together.

Finally, the group's attention turned to him. Henry knew it would come to this eventually, but the force of everyone's eyes still unnerved him.

"She trusts you," Marta said. "Perhaps it would be best for you to deliver the request."

"Request?" Madame Scowl said. "A request can be turned down. Wouldn't a royal order be better?"

"And that's why we're sending Henry," Marta said.

"You mean Diamond Duck," Madame Scowl protested. "This is still an official Society meeting. We should still use our code names."

"Code names don't seem necessary when we're meeting in person. Do you really want to be called Onyx Cockroach for the rest of your life?" Lina said.

She had stayed quiet to let Marta work, but she seemed to have been waiting for an opening to discuss this. A pause followed. What Lina had suggested went against every Society regulation, but she was also the person the Society was supposed to protect. Finally, Madame Scowl sighed.

"Very well, if that's what you prefer, Lady Evangelina. You may call me Frieda."

"And I'm Klaus!" Lord Disagreement said. "I never liked my codename. Preening Peacock, indeed."

"It suited you perfectly in your youth," Frieda said. "It's much less suitable now that you've let yourself go so much."

"I have done no such thing!"

The two continued to bicker. Marta leaned over and smiled at Henry.

“Why don’t you go ahead, dear? You can report back tonight.”

Henry slid his chair back and all but bolted from the room. He understood why his mother had approached things the way she did, but it seemed foolish to waste hours debating with the Society so that they would arrive at the conclusion that had started to feel inevitable in its rightness.

At least, it would be right if Bri approved. Henry shoved away a pang of nerves. What if Bri hated the idea? He would fight to protect her right to choose, but he hoped that she would agree.

Unsure where to look, Henry went to Bri’s room first. The door was open. He knocked, and a woman’s voice called, “Come in!”

Henry entered and found a maid pulling sheets from the bed. The tattered remains of Bri’s dress lay draped over a chair. An open wardrobe held leftover gowns from the Princess Test, and Bri’s glass slipper glittered on the windowsill.

“I wasn’t sure what to do with it,” the maid said.

“I’ll return it to her. Save the dress. Perhaps Lina can learn something of Cassandra’s magic by studying it.”

The maid nodded. Henry took the shoe and left the room. He stood in the hallway and wondered how he kept ending up in this situation. Once again, he held Bri’s shoe and had no idea how to return it to her.

He walked through the castle, asking everyone he saw if they had seen Bri. He followed the clues to a small dining room where she had eaten breakfast with her family, only to find it long empty and the table cleared.

Had the Vidres treated Bri better now that they knew her secret? Had they taken her with them when they left?

Henry doubted it, but where else would she have gone?

Perhaps that was a silly question. Bri could walk in mirrors. She could go anywhere she liked.

A quick visit to the ballroom to chat with the guards confirmed Henry's suspicions. He ran to the kitchen, gathered the necessary supplies, then carried everything to the stable. He hoped this wasn't a fool's errand. It was entirely possible that Bri hadn't gone home at all. Or that she might use the mirror to return to the castle in the time that it took him to ride up the mountain.

Still, it felt wonderful to leave the city behind. Henry urged his horse into a gallop. Wind streamed through his hair, and stress melted away as Mias faded behind him and the castle disappeared behind the hills.

Henry had lived in the castle most of his life, but as he rode up the mountain toward Bri, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was finally going home.

Silence hung over the house like a veil. It was a fragile thing. One word could destroy it, and yet it pressed against Bri as she walked the halls of her estate.

Her house seemed small and shabby after staying in the castle, and yet there was a richness in the familiarity of this place that no castle would ever have. She opened and closed the mirrors as she walked. Every time, she hoped to see the donkey's white face staring at her, and every time she found nothing but darkness.

Bri finished checking the mirrors, built a fire, and made herself a cup of tea. She opened Lady Vidre's ledger and read it while she ate the pastries from the castle. It began with a note to Lady Hawley's solicitor.

Dear Sir,

I have searched the house thoroughly but cannot find Gavin's ledger. Without it, my records for this year will be incomplete, and I have no way to track historical sales prices or profits as you suggested. Please supplement my numbers with your research as needed. Doubtless I can learn to manage an estate in time, as one could learn any other skill, but after the loss of my husband, the prospect is overwhelming. Thank you in advance for your help and kindness.

Lucretia Vidre

Bri scowled at the note. Some help the solicitor had turned out to be. Even if he had started out with good intentions, the missing records had given him and Lady Hawley free rein to cheat Lady Vidre while she grieved.

A lump of pastry stuck in Bri's throat when she realized that she was partly responsible. Father's ledger was missing because she hid it for safekeeping. Even if Lady Vidre had asked Bri to help her find it, Bri would have kept the book a secret.

Blast it all.

She pulled Father's journal from its hiding place and laid it open beside Lady Vidre's ledger. Line by line, Bri compared crop yields from year to year. The estate's production had stayed relatively steady after Father's death, which meant the profits would be enough to support the household once the goods were sold for full value. Bri had no more idea how to accomplish that than Lady Vidre had, but she was not alone. Henry had worked as a goat herder. Perhaps he would be willing to point her in the right direction. If not, Nic certainly would, and his solicitor had seemed reliable and competent.

Bri read her father's records until she reached the blank pages at the end. She stared at them. They had always seemed to represent her father's tragic end. A life cut short and stories untold. But perhaps that space did not need to remain unfilled.

Bri finished eating, washed her dishes, and picked up Father's journal. Then she grabbed a pen from the counter and held it over the page.

She waited, not hesitating so much as savoring, then pressed the nib into the paper and wrote "repairs."

She underlined the word, then wrote "roof" below it. The roof was the most obvious repair needed, and probably the most expensive. Bri had a few gems left from her bargain with the goblin. Hopefully, selling them would bring in enough money to make the necessary repairs and hire help until the estate turned a profit once again. She could take care of the household chores herself, if necessary, but she had no idea how to care for goats and gardens.

Bri wandered the house again, writing down everything that was in disrepair. A broken window. A cracked wall. She stared at the empty shelves in the library for a time, then flipped to a new page, labeled it “shopping” and wrote “books” at the top.

The shopping list grew alarmingly fast. Chairs. Beds. Feed for animals. Seed for gardens. Food for herself, she realized after she had covered everything else. Perhaps the royal family would let her use the mirrors in the castle to travel to town for shopping trips. That would save her the cost of hiring a delivery person or the time spent riding to town herself. Perhaps Lady Vidre would be willing to return Pumpkin and the wagon now that she had a permanent town residence. If not, Bri would need to buy another horse. She added that to the list, just in case.

Bri flipped back to her repair list and moved to the outside of the house. She noted cracks in the plaster between the stones. A door that hung crooked on its hinges. Her pile of gems was feeling smaller by the minute.

She walked to the servant’s quarters and barns and noticed for the first time that those roofs were also in disrepair. Bri sighed. If she couldn’t afford to hire help, perhaps she could sell off the goat herd and learn how to garden. It seemed a shame not to use her grazing pastures, but she could only manage so many tasks on her own.

Bri had always considered herself a productive and competent person, but facing the estate’s management alone was a daunting task. No wonder Lady Vidre had accepted help without asking enough questions. Bri would be tempted to do the same if she didn’t know how badly that could go.

She shut the journal and returned to the kitchen. She had access to every room in the house now. She could take tea in the parlor or claim the master bedroom for her own, but the kitchen had been her safe place for the past six years, and it still felt like home. Bri stared at her lists. Even with a plan in place, there was no way to fix everything today. She sat in the kitchen until the silence grew heavy. It weighed on her, an almost physical reminder that she was alone.

Finally, it became unbearable. Bri hid the ledgers in a large cooking pot, grabbed a few apples from the meager supplies in the pantry, and hurried out of the house. She walked up the mountains, and the silence lifted as the wind swept over her. It carried birdsong and fluttering leaves, bleating goats and the faint, possibly imagined, roar of the ocean. Bri's tension melted away. This was her place, and she was determined to enjoy it.

Father's journal was safe at home, but Bri still found herself drawn to the place where she had stored it for so many years. She sat under the tree outside the cave and breathed deeply. The walk had restored her appetite, and her stomach growled. The apples did not seem like enough food.

She needed to move grocery shopping up her list of priorities. The roof would hold a few more days. Her appetite would not. Bri leaned against the tree and bit into her apple. She closed her eyes and chewed slowly, savoring the crunch as well as the combination of tart and sweet flavors.

A twig snapped, and Bri opened her eyes. Henry stood before her, holding her glass shoe in one hand and a picnic basket in the other. His curly hair was tousled, and he stared at her, speechless. Bri smiled. His presence felt both unexpected and completely right.

"Hi," she said when he remained silent.

Henry started at the sound of her voice and nearly dropped the glass shoe. He recovered his grip and gave her a sheepish grin.

"Hi."

"Can I help you? Perhaps you're looking for a missing goat?"

"A missing girl, actually. You see, she left her shoe behind."

"Careless of her."

Henry laughed.

“I’m sure she had a lot on her mind. Parties, gowns, magical battles with evil enchantresses. The usual things.”

“What will you do when you find her?”

“Return her shoe, of course. And ask if she would like to share my meal.”

“I expect she would like that very much, although she can’t promise anything more than that.”

“I’m not asking for promises.”

“I brought something to drink this time,” Henry said. He pulled a bottle and two glasses from the basket.

“A drink and a glass? I’m impressed.”

Henry smiled as Bri clinked her glass against his. He completely forgot his mission until they had finished eating and the sun hung low in the sky. Bri looked back to her estate, and Henry followed her gaze. The house was dark, and the grounds were still. Even with the mountains around it for company, the valley seemed lonely.

“I heard that your stepfamily has a new house in town.”

“They have wanted to move to Mias for years. I’m glad they got what they wanted.”

“What about you?”

Bri looked at him in confusion, and Henry swallowed. Why did her gaze make his carefully planned speeches fly out of his head? He took a deep breath and tried to stay focused.

“Did you get what you wanted?” he asked.

Perhaps the Society had made a terrible mistake giving him this mission. He had been with Bri for hours and still had not managed to ask the question they had sent him to ask. Sadness flickered in Bri’s eyes, but she hid it with a smile.

“I have a mountain estate to myself and a magical glass slipper. What more could I want?”

“Bri, I’m serious.”

“I’ll be fine. There’s a lot to figure out, but I can do it.”

Henry tried to read her expression in the fading light, but shadows obscured her face. He had no doubt that she could turn the Vidre estate around and manage it on her own, but she also didn’t seem happy about the prospect. Perhaps she would welcome the Society’s offer after all. He gathered his courage and spoke quickly before he could change his mind.

“The Society of Evangelina has a proposal for you.”

“A proposal?”

Henry hoped that the twilight would hide his blush. That was a poor choice of words.

“It was Mother’s idea, actually, but the Society agrees with her, as much as they ever agree with anyone about anything.”

“Illuminate,” Bri whispered.

The diamond pendant around her neck glowed with a soft, white light. Bri became a bright spot in the ever-darkening mountain landscape, like a star fallen to earth. Henry forced himself to continue.

“They want to start a school of magic,” he said. “Cassandra may attack again, and even if she doesn’t, someone else might. We need a place to train a new generation of light wielders and shadow warriors. Perhaps mirror walkers as well, if you’re willing to teach.”

“Are you offering me a job?”

“If you want it, but I’m also asking for your help. The archives and the castle have artifacts and mirrors, but they have proved difficult places to train. They’re open to the public, surrounded by distractions, and vulnerable to attack. We need a more isolated place with enchanted mirrors and space to practice. Being on Mount Evangelina and near the seal would be helpful as well.”

This time, Bri was the one who was tongue-tied. Henry waited, letting her process the idea before she spoke. When she remained silent, he couldn’t help but continue.

“We’d pay you, of course! That is, we’d pay to rent your estate and repair it. It would still be your home, though. You would live here and have the final say in all decisions. And some of the Society members would like to come back, if you’ll have them. It turns out they prefer country life to the royal court, and they’d like to continue working on the estate.”

“They want to come back and be goat herders?”

“Desperately,” Henry said. “It turns out that some people have trouble leaving the mountains behind.”

He didn’t realize he was reaching for her until Bri leaned forward and took his hand. They sat very close for a moment as the mountain wind washed over them. Henry realized that he had left out one more important detail.

“They want me to supervise the school,” he said. “As a light wielder, Society member, and member of the royal family, I am uniquely qualified.”

“Indeed, you are.”

“But that would mean my moving to the estate. I would live in the house, or on the grounds if you prefer. We would see each other every day. Work together.”

He tried to pull his hand away, awkwardly aware of just how much he was asking, but Bri held tight. The light of her diamond pendant glittered in her eyes.

“That part is negotiable if you don’t feel comfortable with it,” Henry said. “I know we still have a lot to talk about, and I understand if you don’t trust me after everything that has happened.”

Bri squeezed Henry’s hand and smiled at him.

“We may have a lot to discuss, but I like this idea very much.”

“You do?”

“I do. Please tell the Society that I accept their proposal.”

The royal family worked fast. Bri stared at the pile of vegetables on the kitchen table and marveled that food could simply appear as if by magic. She reached for a potato, only to have it whisked away by the estate's new chef.

"Forgive me, miss, but it will be easier if I put things away so that I can find them later."

"Oh, of course. Forgive me, I'm in your way."

Bri curtsied to the woman, who laughed.

"Never thought I'd see the day my mistress curtsied to me."

"And I never thought I'd see the day that someone else cooked in this house," Bri said. "Please let me know if you need anything at all."

She felt a pang of emotion as she left the kitchen. Not regret, exactly, but something similar. A lot had changed in a short time, and the kitchen had always been her domain.

Hammering and shouting echoed through the halls. The construction crew had started repairing the roof today, and it wasn't a quiet job. Bri walked outside to see their progress.

"That's the wrong color," Frieda shouted with a scowl. "They're using the wrong color!"

"It's the color we agreed on," Klaus shouted back. "You said you liked it."

“I liked the color you showed me. That is something else entirely.”

“I disagree! It’s exactly the same!”

Bri hurried back to the house before they saw her. She had no desire to get caught in the middle of their argument. As former residents of the Vidre estate and senior members of the Society, Frieda and Klaus were logical choices to oversee the repairs and other logistics for the school. Bri had no complaints about their management of the project, but it certainly wasn’t a peaceful process. Henry had admitted to Bri that he and his brothers called the pair Madame Scowl and Lord Disagreement as children. The nicknames fit a little too well, and Bri had to be careful not to call them that to their faces.

She went to the library. The shelves were still empty, but they wouldn’t be for long. Books and scrolls were on their way from the castle so that future students would have plenty to read.

Nic, Eva, and Lina lay on cots in the middle of the room. After the battle, Nic was more dedicated than ever to being Lina’s apprentice and learning shadow magic. Eva had dragged her own cot in yesterday, and no one stopped her from joining. All three lay perfectly still with their eyes closed. Henry had assured Bri that this was training, although she was pretty sure Nic and Eva were simply napping while Lina continued the search for Odette.

“I’m telling you, it’s not the same color!” Frieda’s voice drifted in through the window.

“It is the same!”

A chorus of hammering accented the argument as the roofers continued their work.

Lina opened her eyes and sighed.

“I thought it was supposed to be quiet in the country.”

Nic sat up on his cot.

“Oh good, you can’t concentrate either? I thought it was just me.”

“It’s impossible,” Eva said.

“It’s usually quiet,” said Bri. “Maybe you should have waited until the construction is done to start training.”

“There’s no time to waste!” Nic said. “We need to be as strong as possible as soon as possible.”

“But Bri’s right,” Lina said. “We’re not accomplishing anything here.”

“We can train in the temple!” Eva said. “You slept there for over a hundred years. It must have been quiet. Plus, we’ll be near the seal. Maybe it will help us focus.”

Lina considered this, then nodded.

“Very well. Let’s try training in the cave.”

Nic beamed, and Eva bounced in excitement as they left the room. Bri watched them go, then turned back to the empty shelves. They felt a bit like the blank pages in Father’s journal, representing both an ending and a beginning. She couldn’t wait to fill them. She heard footsteps behind her and smiled when she saw Henry. He smiled back but waited to speak until another bout of hammering faded away.

“Sorry I brought chaos to your doorstep.”

“More like to my rooftop. Things will calm down once the construction is finished.”

Shouts filled the air as Frieda and Klaus continued their fight.

“Well, some things will calm down,” Bri said.

Henry laughed.

“Is Lina here?”

“Too loud for practice. They went to the temple.”

“Probably wise. Cael checked in to say that he is on his way to join training in person. He was wondering if Lina has translated any more of Luca’s scrolls.”

“Translated?”

Bri was slowly picking up the story of Lina’s life before sleep, but as far as she knew, the shadow warrior spoke the same language as her twin.

“Luca has terrible handwriting, and Lina is the only one who can read it. He wrote her a letter every day while he was alive, as well as some notes on his magic technique. It’s taking her a while to go through them.”

“That must be difficult.”

It was an understatement, but Bri didn’t know how else to put the feeling into words. She knew how it felt to lose someone. To try to balance moving forward with honoring the requests of the past. She was still figuring it out, and she had been doing it for six years. Lina’s pain was fresh and complicated. Still, Bri treasured her father’s journal. What would it be like to have a whole library of letters from him? For Lina, it was apparently overwhelming.

Thinking of the journal gave her an idea. Bri retrieved it from her room and carried it back to the library. She didn’t need to hide it any longer, so perhaps it was time that the book had an official home. She placed the journal on the shelf nearest the corner that once held her father’s favorite chair. The chair was gone, but that didn’t mean the memory had to disappear as well.

“Our first textbook,” she said. “I still have no idea who Father saw in the mirror or how he learned magic. Perhaps one of our students can sort out the clues.”

Before Henry could respond, a group of servants entered the room, struggling with the weight of an enormous crate. They sat it on the floor and mopped their brows.

“Books?” Bri asked.

“Always a pain to move,” a servant said. “We’ll be back with more.”

Bri and Henry shared a look. As soon as the servants left the room, they rushed to open the crate.

“These are incredible,” Bri said as she pulled out leather-bound books and ancient scrolls. “Are you sure the archive can spare them?”

“Our archivist has looked over each one personally and approved them for school use.”

“And included notes about how they should be shelved,” Bri said, waving a piece of parchment.

Henry laughed.

“That sounds like him. Should we get started?”

Bri grinned at him and lifted the first book out of the crate. Then another and another. They worked in companionable silence until the crate was empty and the shelves were no longer bare.

Bri surveyed their work and realized with surprise that she was crying. Henry offered his hand, and she took it.

“The books were the first thing to go,” she said. “Valuable, small, and easy to sell. Father would have hated that, and he would be so happy now.”

“I hope you’re happy as well?” Henry said.

“Tears are a sign of joy. Didn’t you know?”

“Ah, I see I have been misinformed. I should-”

A flash of red light filled the room, and a terrible stench wafted in a moment later. Bri’s eyes watered for an entirely different reason.

“Goblin,” Henry choked.

They ran to the mirrors, which flashed red light once more, then went dark. Shouts of disgust echoed above them as the stench reached the roofers. Bri reached for her diamond.

“Don’t,” Henry said. “We’re no match for a goblin on our own.”

Bri’s hand hovered over the glass. An enchanted sapphire sat in the corner of the frame.

“These are all guarded. The smell shouldn’t have been able to get through.”

“We need Lina.”

“We need to guard the mirrors.”

Bri stared at her reflection, hating how scared she looked. No one had expected another attack so soon. They were supposed to have time to read the books that now filled her library and train more enchanters.

“We have to do something,” Bri said. “If my guard enchantment isn’t strong enough, we have to do something.”

“We can get people to safety,” Henry said. “Clear the estate in case of another attack.”

It wasn’t the action Bri wanted to take, but she saw the wisdom in it. Henry ran outside to enlist help from Frieda and Klaus. The hammering on the roof stopped. Bri ran to the kitchen to warn the chef and household servants. She lingered a moment after they had gone, checked the kitchen mirror but found it empty, then ran out of the house.

The construction crew and servants hurried down the road and out of the valley. Henry stood alone by the gardens. Bri shook her head as she approached him, answering the question he didn’t need to ask.

“No sign of an attack.”

“I told everyone to go down the mountain, just in case. Frieda and Klaus are going with them.”

“Wait, what about Lina? She’s training in the cave.”

“We’ll check on them.”

Henry took her hand, and they ran up the mountain together. Bri had heard the story of a goblin attacking the cave during the Princess Test, and she half-expected to see one now. But the mountain air carried no trace of the foul scent, and when they reached the cave, the entrance was undisturbed. Henry went in first. Bri illuminated her diamond and followed.

“Hello?”

“Show yourself,” Eva demanded.

She stood in the dark holding a shard of glass like a knife. It reflected the pale green light of the seal. Behind her, Nic and Lina slept on blankets on the floor. Eva lowered the glass with relief when she saw them.

“Thank goodness you’re here. I was trying to fall into a trance when the seal flashed red, and the smell of dark creatures filled the air. I opened my eyes just in time to see Lina jump on the back of a donkey and ride into the shadows.”

She gestured to a large, enchanted mirror across the cave that now showed nothing but shadows beyond it.

“A donkey?” Bri said.

Eva nodded.

“It was white and sort of glowing. It sounds like the one you described.”

“Lina should be in good hands, then,” Bri said. “The donkey hasn’t led me astray before. Should we be worried that Nic slept through all that?”

Eva shrugged.

“He’s either progressing in his training or getting very good at taking naps. I’m not sure which.”

“The seal looks normal enough now,” Henry said. “Guard me, and I’ll check it in the realm of shadows.”

He sat on a pile of blankets and stared into the distance. His star appeared in the mirror, and his light stretched until it formed a rough outline of his body. Bri watched him walk around the seal’s shimmering green curtain. Then she pushed through the mirror and joined him in the realm of shadows.

“What are we looking for?” she asked.

“I wish I knew. Luca created the seal, so I suspect that even Lina doesn’t know exactly how it works. If she knew, I think she’d teach us.”

The sound of voices interrupted their conversation, and a white light glittered in the distance. Henry stepped in front of

Bri to protect her. His body was made of light, so she could see through him and wasn't sure he could actually stop an attack, but she appreciated the gesture.

The light grew bigger and brighter. Bri laughed when the figure came close enough to recognize.

“It's alright! It's the donkey!”

The donkey trotted toward her and brayed in triumph. Bri grinned.

“Welcome back. I was worried about you.”

Something moved in the shadows behind the donkey. Bri opened her mouth to give a warning, then slumped with relief when she recognized Lina. The shadow warrior rolled her eyes.

“Stop it, Luca. You've teased this poor girl enough already.”

The donkey huffed. Then, impossibly, he began to change shape. Limbs lengthened. Hoofs split into fingers. Hair disappeared. His eyes twinkled with mischief all the while. Finally, the transformation was complete. Bri stared in shock at the old man in the mirror. He had twinkling green eyes and a long white beard, and he was unmistakably her donkey.

“Bri and Henry, this is my twin brother Luca,” Lina said.

Bri sputtered in surprise, and the man winked at her. The expression was so similar to the donkey's that she laughed and reached out to hug him. Her hand passed through his body.

“Sorry about that. Unfortunate side effect of my enchantment,” Luca said.

“Thank you,” Bri said. “Thank you for everything.”

“You're quite welcome. I'm glad someone appreciated my instruction and learned from my notes.”

He looked pointedly at Henry, who flushed.

“Your handwriting is difficult to read, sir.”

“Don’t call him, ‘sir,’” Lina said. “His ego is big enough already.”

“My ego is exactly the right size,” Luca said. “Bri was able to learn from my notes, so I do not accept that excuse from the rest of you.”

“You can read Luca’s handwriting?” Henry asked Bri with admiration in his voice.

“I guess so, although it wasn’t easy.”

“Hmph. Everyone is a critic.”

“How is this possible?” Henry asked. “You died decades ago.”

“I pretended to die decades ago. There is a very big difference.”

“Lina! Eva! Are you alright?”

Cael burst into the cave. Eva waved at him but kept her eyes on the scene in the mirror. Cael followed her gaze and gasped when he saw Luca’s glowing body shining in the glass.

“Frieda said there was an attack. Who is this?”

Luca grinned and walked over to the mirror to address Cael.

“Ah, a fresh face. Luca Light-Terror at your service.”

He bowed with a dramatic flourish, and Cael stared in shock. Lina rolled her eyes.

“No one calls you Light-Terror, Luca. Not in this century or the last.”

“But they could if you would back me up on this.”

“Maybe I would consider it if you hadn’t told everyone that I had goat legs!”

“Yes, that caught on much faster than I expected. I think that’s because it looks so dramatic in illustrations.”

“It’s really you. You’re Luca.” Cael said. “I can’t believe it! I have so many questions.”

He stepped back and tripped over Nic's sleeping body. The shadow-warrior in training sat up and yawned. He stared at Luca in the mirror and rubbed his eyes.

“This is what I get for training so hard. What did I miss?”

FIRST EPILOGUE

“Well, donkey breath, is this what you had in mind when you founded your secret society?” Lina asked.

Luca stroked his long, white beard thoughtfully as he surveyed the room. The people sitting at the table beneath his mirror were an odd mix. There were goatherders turned queens and princes turned goatherders. Two tailors, a maid, and an archivist. A ruling king and a retired one. More princes and princesses than statistically should be allowed in a gathering that was not a ball or royal wedding. Not to mention the actual members of the Society. Frieda and Klaus had wholeheartedly embraced country life and wore homespun clothing even though the meeting was being held during a formal dinner in the castle. They argued with Bernhardt, another senior member of the Society who had embraced high fashion with unfortunate results.

“It’s goat-inspired, not a goat costume!” Bernhardt said. “It honors my humble past as a goat herder.”

“You’re wearing a tail,” Frieda said. “Surely that makes it a costume.”

“I don’t expect you to understand,” Bernhardt sniffed. “Few people have good enough taste to appreciate Bastien’s genius.”

Bastien was seated close enough to overhear the exchange. He beamed at Bernhardt, who smiled back and tipped the edge of his horned hat.

“I have good enough taste to know insanity when I see it,” Frieda said.

She looked at Klaus, who nodded in agreement. They may not agree on much, but on this, they were united.

“Bastien designed that outfit for me to wear to the first ball,” Henry whispered to Bri. “Luckily, I talked him out of it.”

Bri laughed so loudly that Fiora raised an eyebrow at her and signed something to Gustave. He laughed and signed back.

“Are you sure we don’t need code names?” Marcus asked Benjamin. The two were hunched together over a scroll and oblivious to the chaos around them. “It seems unfair that new Society members don’t get code names.”

“Believe me, you don’t want one,” Benjamin said. “That lady used to be called Onyx Cockroach.”

“Well, obviously, I would want a *good* code name. Don’t you get to pick?”

Luca watched all this from his place in the mirror, and he smiled.

“Yes, this is exactly what I pictured.”

“Liar,” Lina said fondly. “Even you couldn’t plan for this level of chaos.”

“If I was planning for chaos, I would include Stefan and Carina. It’s a shame they’re still in Eldria and can’t join us today. They sound like the kind of people who could bring a lot of energy and ideas to a meeting.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Alaric said.

He shuddered, and Lina squeezed his hand.

“I’m sure it won’t be that bad when they meet Luca.”

“No? I’m sure those three working together will be much worse than any of us could imagine.”

“Are we going to start soon?” Cael asked. His face was pale and drawn from too many sleepless nights, and his expression had been grim since Odette disappeared. “This isn’t a reunion, it’s a strategy meeting. We need to make a plan.”

“We will,” Marta said. “We’re just waiting for two more guests.”

She nodded toward two empty chairs next to Fiora. Cael sighed.

“Cassandra was seen in Eldria after the ball, which means she survived, but there’s been no sign of Odette.”

“Odette is tough and resourceful,” Alaric said.

He didn’t offer any further comfort. Assuring Cael that Odette had survived would be pure speculation, and both men knew it.

A seagull flew in through an open window and landed on the table in front of Fiora. His feathers were streaked with black, and he eyed her hopefully. Fiora tossed him a piece of fish from a nearby platter and turned to Marta.

“Spot says they’re here.”

She and Gustave left the room. Klaus tried to shoo Spot away, but the seagull simply hopped onto Bernhardt’s horned hat. The man lifted his hand to remove it, but Bastien cried for him to stop.

“It is magnificent,” he said. “The symbolism!”

Bernhardt smiled and grabbed a piece of fish off a nearby platter to feed Spot so he would stay. It wouldn’t do for his symbolism to fly away and find a different perch. Spot squawked in appreciation and settled onto the hat to wait for more treats.

The dining room door opened, and Fiora led the remaining two guests inside. Their wet hair reached past their knees and hung loose around their bodies. The older of the two wore a sodden, wrinkled dress that was an unfortunate shade of faded brown. The forks tied in her hair sparkled in the sunlight and

rattled as she walked. Bastien stared at her as if seeing a vision of an angel. “Magnificent,” he whispered.

“Everyone, this is my Aunt Kathelin,” Fiora said.

Kathelin made a series of signs with her hands, and Fiora sighed.

“She says she looks forward to eating your food, and if any of you require a fork for your meal, she is willing to share.”

Kathelin lifted a strand of her hair to display the forks to everyone, then took the seat that Gustave pulled out for her. Her dress squelched as she sat.

“And this is my cousin Zoe,” Fiora said.

Zoe tossed a golden ball into the air and smiled at the room. She wore a bright red sweater decorated with yellow and orange stripes of seagulls. Each seagull had a jewel for an eye, and they sparkled as Zoe moved.

“Where on earth did you get that?” Bastien asked. “That was sent as a gift to the King of Montaigne.”

He looked at Gustave, who flushed.

“The gift was received and much appreciated, sir, but this young mermaid fell in love with it when she visited our kingdom. We gave it to her as a gift to symbolize the new diplomatic relationship between our nations.”

Zoe followed the conversation with interest and stared at Bastien. She signed, and Fiora translated.

“She asks if you are the man who made this beautiful work of art.”

Bastien sat straighter with pride.

“Indeed I am. You wear it well, young lady.”

Zoe gave a silent squeal of delight, pushed her golden ball into Fiora’s hands, and signed too rapidly for Fiora to keep up.

“She likes your work,” Fiora summarized once Zoe finally stopped signing.

“Then she must have more of it! That sweater is part of a collection I made last winter. I believe there are several pieces still available.”

“Please save one for me!” Bernhardt cried. “I must have one!”

The noise startled Spot. The seagull jumped off the hat, grabbed a fish from the nearest tray, and flew out the window with his prize.

“Mermaids don’t usually wear clothes underwater,” Fiora said. “I doubt the sweater would hold up for long. She’s been keeping it in a box on the shore and saving it for special occasions.”

“Ah, of course,” Bastien said. “Underwater garments would present unique logistical challenges in both design and materials. Still, such obstacles are not insurmountable.”

Fiora stared at him.

“Are you saying that you could make clothes for mermaids?”

“I am saying that I can make clothes for anyone.”

Zoe tugged on Fiora’s sleeve and signed something. Fiora shook her head. Zoe signed again and cast a pointed look from Fiora to Bastien. Fiora sighed and interpreted.

“Zoe says that she has noticed I am uncomfortable being naked underwater and asks if you could make clothing for me as well. But I don’t visit the mermaids often. It isn’t necessary.”

“My dear lady, fashion is always necessary. I would be honored to make underwater clothing for you and your cousin.”

“Everyone is here,” Cael said. “Can we please begin and leave discussions of fashion for a later time?”

Marta gave him a look but didn’t reprimand him. King Noam stood to address the table.

“Family and friends, my honored guests, thank you for joining us. I wish we were meeting under better circumstances, but your presence at this time means all the more because of the danger. Aeonis was recently attacked, as was Santelle, Montaigne, Eldria, and the kingdom of the mermaids.”

Kathelin tugged on Fiora’s sleeve and signed to her.

“Queendom,” Fiora interrupted. “At least, I think that’s the right word? At any rate, the mermaids have a queen.”

King Noam bowed to the mermaids.

“My apologies. I know that we still have a lot to learn from each other and about each other. Such a diverse group can only strengthen our cause, especially if we can learn to combine our magics as Luca suggests.”

“Oh, sure, you listen to *him* when he says it’s possible,” Fiora muttered.

Lina heard and offered an apologetic smile. Fiora shrugged. King Noam watched the exchange with bemusement, then continued.

“When Evangelina Shadow-Storm awoke from enchanted sleep after a hundred years, it seemed like a once in a lifetime event. But that was not the case. We recently learned that her brother Luca entered an enchanted sleep in his old age, and he has returned to us as well.”

“Not *that* old of age,” Luca said.

“Tell that to your beard,” Lina said.

Luca made a face at her and bowed. Everyone around the table applauded.

“Luca has agreed to tell us his story as well as his ideas for fighting Cassandra,” King Noam said. “Please, eat while he does. Although you might want to avoid the fish.”

A servant took the hint and removed the tray of fish that Spot had touched. Luca paced back and forth in the mirror and stroked his beard while everyone filled their plates. Kathelin pulled a fork from her hair and offered it to Gustave. He took

it and wiped it as clean as he could with his napkin. Finally, Luca began.

“My story is long, and I will do my best to summarize it today. You all know that my sister, Lina, agreed to be put into an enchanted sleep one hundred years ago to seal away the dark creatures that plagued Aeonian. This was done in secret, and we only expected her to sleep for a short time. Imagine my concern when she did not wake, and another solution for containing the dark creatures did not emerge.

“I experimented with magic, searching for a way to strengthen the seal and wake my sister. I thought perhaps enchanted gems held the solution. I gathered as many jewels as I could and developed new ways to infuse them with magic. They were strong, but not strong enough. Lina still slept, and Aeonian had new problems. King Dacian had shown his true colors as a tyrant and demanded that all enchanters serve him with unquestioning loyalty. Some of us fought back in secret. This was the beginning of the Society of Evangelina, although I didn’t call it that at first.

“I devoted every spare moment to waking Lina, but there weren’t many to spare. Dacian’s son Thaddeus took the throne at sixteen, but he was too young to stabilize the country. War broke out, and my secret society dedicated itself to protecting the innocent from slaughter. This included Thaddeus and the rest of the royal family. I hid them as goat herders on the same mountain where I hid my sister. By this time, people had noticed that the dark creatures were gone. Rumors swirled about how it came to be. I turned them into legend and added a few special twists of my own.”

Luca winked at Lina and gestured to his legs. She rolled her eyes.

“I married and lived in hiding as a goat herder with my family. This gave me plenty of time to experiment with magic. I learned how to combine different types of magic to create new enchantments. I know that many of us were taught that is impossible, but I assure you that it can be done. Consider Princess Fiora. She is a living example of two magics coming together to create something new.”

“Thank you!” Fiora said. “That’s what I’ve been trying to say.”

“I look forward to further conversations with you,” Luca said. “Mermaid magic is truly fascinating.”

“We know the history of Aeonian,” Cael said. “What we don’t know is how you are here today.”

“I’m getting there,” Luca said. “As I came to the end of my life, I still had not managed to wake Lina or support the seal without her. I hated the idea of her sleeping alone as much as I hated the idea of leaving Aeonian unprotected. When I put Lina to sleep, we thought only the shadow warrior trance made such an enchantment possible. But when I learned to combine magic, I realized that I could put myself into a similar sleep. My wife had died years before, and my children were grown with children of their own, so I decided to join my sister in sleep. I prepared the enchantments and asked my most trusted apprentice to perform them. I hid my body deep in the mountains and slept uninterrupted for some time. Then, something disturbed me. I woke briefly, in the form you see me now, and wandered the shadows for a few moments before falling asleep. Then it happened again, and again. It is difficult to judge time in the realm of shadows, especially when you have been in an enchanted sleep. I don’t know how much time passed between each awakening, but I stayed awake longer each time. Finally, I stayed awake long enough for me to reach a nearby house and look into an enchanted mirror. I hoped to find a clue about what was disturbing my sleep. Instead, I found a young man preparing the house for his bride.”

Bri gasped, and Henry wrapped his arm around her. Luca nodded.

“Yes, that young man was Gavin Vidre. He seemed an honorable sort, and I had no other help, so I decided to take him on as my apprentice. I gave him my strongest enchanted diamond and taught him how to open and close the mirrors. I gathered more enchanted gems, intending to show him how to walk in the mirrors and guard them once I had more gems for him and could trust him not to lock me out. Unfortunately, whatever was waking me stopped before I could finish training

him. When I next awoke, Gavin was dead and had passed on the diamond to his daughter. But that wasn't the only thing that had changed. Someone had tampered with the seal and let out a goblin. I don't believe they intended to wake Lina at the same time, but they did."

"But why did you tell Father to beware the Society of Evangelina if you founded it?" Bri asked.

"I never told him that," Luca said. "Whatever made Gavin wary of the Society had nothing to do with me."

"That is unsettling," Marta said, "But we will investigate."

"Of course we will," Frieda said.

"Definitely," Klaus agreed.

Henry shared a look with Cael and shuddered. Madame Scowl and Lord Disagreement had been agreeing far too often lately for comfort.

"While tampering with the seal woke Lina completely, it did not have the same effect on me," Luca continued. "I drifted in and out of consciousness. I tried to reach Lina, but only succeeded in finding her after the battle with Nog. I managed to heal her before I drifted off to sleep once again."

"You could have told me, you donkey," Lina said. "Instead of acting all mysterious and making me think I had dreamed you."

"I may be old, but I'm still allowed to have fun."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

Luca laughed and continued.

"I began to work to wake myself up. Or, at least, to wake my consciousness. My enchanted sleep is more like a shadow warrior's trance than a true sleep. This body is similar to a light wielder's star, and my body sleeps even as I speak to you. I spent more and more time awake searching for Lina and a way to fix the seal. Instead, I found Cassandra."

Everyone but the mermaids shuddered. They looked at Fiora, who signed an explanation. Kathelin made a face, and

Zoe tossed her golden ball in the air.

“I tried to sabotage her sabotage,” Luca said. “It didn’t go well. She used mermaid magic to turn me into a donkey. I doubt she knew who I was. How could she guess such a thing? But the curse was effective. I gained a different physical body but lost the ability to speak with my human voice. I believe it is similar to the enchantment that you ladies are using right now.”

Kathelin and Zoe nodded their agreement.

“I discovered that I could go through mirrors and enter the realm of light as a donkey. This was an unexpected bonus, especially when I found a way into Prince Darian’s castle.”

“A bonus because you could torture him, or because he was also cursed?” Lina asked.

“If any of you here have met Darian, you know the answer to that.”

Luca winked, and everyone laughed.

“I also resumed my mission of training an apprentice. Bri proved a quick study and very capable with magic.”

“That’s because she could read your handwriting,” Cael grumbled.

“He’s got you there,” Lina said. “Even I have had trouble reading your letters.”

“You mock the handwriting of a frail, old man,” Luca said. “Youth today have no manners.”

“Please, we both know that you could take any form you want in the shadows,” Lina said. “You’re choosing to look old.”

“Oh, so you’re an expert in new magic techniques now, are you?”

“They’re hardly new at this point.”

“They most certainly are! I memorized Cassandra’s song as she sang it so I could transform into a donkey at will once the curse was broken. It is an unprecedented enchantment.”

Luca sang softly, and his glowing body shrank and grew more solid. A few moments later, a white donkey stood before them. He brayed in triumph and bared his teeth in a grin.

“That is fascinating,” Benjamin said. “I wouldn’t believe it possible if I hadn’t seen it for myself.”

“Does this mean that humans can learn mermaid song?” Marcus asked. “That has astounding implications.”

He looked at the mermaids. Zoe smiled at him and waved. Marcus waved back.

“Have you ever thought about learning sign language?” he asked Benjamin. “It can’t be that hard. We should have a book in the library, right?”

“He does know how to change back, doesn’t he?” Cael asked. “We know more about the past now, but we’re a long way from knowing how to defeat Cassandra.”

“He knows how to change back,” Lina said. “I’ve seen him do it.”

The donkey brayed and puckered his lips.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Lina said. “You don’t need a kiss, and you have donkey breath. Change back so we can continue our conversation.”

Luca winked at her, and Lina sighed.

“You’re insufferable.”

She leaned against Alaric and closed her eyes. A few moments later, she appeared in the mirror with Luca. She bent over to kiss him. The ground rumbled, and a foul smell filled the air. Everyone jumped to their feet.

“Stay calm,” Lina said. “It might just be a rogue gremlin.”

Deep, rumbling laughter shook the room, and another wave of stench poured out of the mirror. Lina groaned.

“Or not. Stars, get ready. Bri, don’t come into the shadows unless I tell you to. Alaric-“

The shadows flashed red, and a wailing sound swallowed Lina's words. Luca brayed in alarm as the ground shook, and he scrambled to keep his balance. Red lightning crackled across the mirror. Lina grabbed Luca and tossed him through the glass. He crashed onto the table and sent food flying over the guests. Another burst of red filled the shadows. Lina disappeared from the mirror and sat up next to Alaric with a jolt.

“Guard!” Bri said.

She stood with one hand on the mirror and the other clutching her diamond. The glass went blank, then showed the reflection of a very upset dinner party and a donkey on the table. Luca brayed in protest, and Lina shook her head.

“I had to do it, Luca. They broke the seal. It isn't safe in the shadows anymore.”

SECOND EPILOGUE

Odette awoke to the smell of goblins and the sound of thunder. She blinked, sure that lightning should accompany such a sound, but she saw only darkness. She tried to turn her head, but her neck was cramped and stiff.

Where was she?

With nothing to see, Odette relied on feel. Her body was stiff and sore. She tried to stretch out but felt walls holding her in. Some kind of cage, then? Was she a prisoner? She took a deep breath and gagged on the scent of goblins. On instinct, she tried to cover her mouth, but her hand wouldn't reach. She focused on her hand and realized that she was holding something hard and small.

A diamond. Gabriella Vidre had given her a diamond during the attack on the ballroom. It had allowed Odette to climb through an enchanted mirror and attack Cassandra before the world exploded. And then...

And then, what? Such an explosion should have killed her, but unless she was in a very cramped afterlife, Odette had survived. And if she had survived the blast, Cassandra had likely escaped as well. Had the enchantress returned to the ballroom and finished off the royal family? Or had Odette bought Lina enough time to recover and fight back?

These were important questions, but not the most pressing ones. Odette couldn't influence the royal family's fate at the moment, but she could change her own circumstances. Waking up in a dark box would send many people into a panic, but

Odette had spent her childhood dancing on stage and her adulthood fighting in the military. It would take more than this to shake her nerves.

She stretched her legs to kick the edge of the box and test its strength, but her legs kicked only air. Interesting. Perhaps this was not a box, but a tunnel. If that was the case, she could slide her way to freedom, or at least to a different position. Odette stretched her arms to reach the edges of the tunnel. She pressed against the walls and tried to push herself down. Her fingers lacked the strength, and she did not move.

Strange.

Odette heard footsteps and stopped trying to escape. If she let her enemy believe she was asleep, she would have the element of surprise when they checked on her. That was a good opportunity, and she would make the most of it.

“I knew it would smell bad, but this is ridiculous,” a woman’s voice said.

Her speech flowed with a Kellish accent and lilted like a song. In response, a deep laugh shook Odette’s prison.

“You humans are overly sensitive about everything.”

This voice was deep and rumbling, like a mountain come to life. Goblin, Odette decided. Or if not a goblin, something equally powerful and dangerous. She would have to escape quickly. She didn’t have the means to fight such a creature on her own.

“Stop bickering,” Cassandra said. “Put on some perfume if you can’t stand the stench, Elspeth. I recommend the snowbell scent.”

She kept speaking, but her voice faded to a low mutter. Odette strained to hear.

“This had better not scar.”

“You’ll still be the fairest of them all,” Nog said with a chuckle that shook the room and rattled Odette’s bones.

“Obviously, but it’s the principle of the thing. I can’t believe that girl drew blood.”

“I can’t believe you didn’t kill her on the spot,” Elspeth said.

“Well, there are fates worse than death. Besides, she’s a senior officer in the Aeonian military and holds a grudge against Prince Alaric. Perhaps we can find some use for her.”

“I doubt she would have smashed your face with a glass slipper if she planned to switch sides,” Elspeth said.

“Ah, but does anyone ever really *plan* to switch sides?” Cassandra said. “Especially when they don’t know where the lines are drawn? We’re both powerful women who were jilted by pathetic men who hold power they don’t deserve. I expect we have a lot in common.”

Odette breathed slowly through the stench to keep her heartbeat steady. Escape was a tempting prospect, but perhaps there was an even greater opportunity available. If Cassandra truly meant to win Odette over to her side, Odette could play along and act as a double agent. No one in Aeonian knew the former queen’s true strength or goals. If Odette gathered that information and sent it to the royal family, she could give them an advantage in the fight. It was risky, but war was always risky. Besides, Odette had grown up in a theater. She knew how to play a part.

The lid lifted off her prison, and Odette blinked in the sudden sunlight. Cassandra loomed over her. Her nose and cheek were bandaged, but that did little to detract from the former queen’s beauty. Odette’s body screamed at her to jump up and fight, but she breathed through the instinct and remained perfectly still. She would fight in a different way this time.

“I’m sure you heard my proposal while pretending to be asleep,” Cassandra said. “What do you think?”

She liked it, but it wouldn’t do to appear too eager. Odette narrowed her eyes and hissed. Then she recoiled, wondering why she had hissed instead of simply saying no. That was certainly overselling things. Perhaps the explosion had made her hit her head. Cassandra laughed.

“I thought as much. Your loyalty is as understandable as it is misplaced, but perhaps time will change your mind.”

The enchantress reached into the box and lifted Odette out of it. Odette squawked in alarm. She knew Cassandra had powerful magic, but she had not realized that the woman possessed inhuman strength as well. Odette caught a glimpse of Elspeth dowsing herself with perfume while a goblin watched from a mirror. Then Cassandra turned and carried her to a nearby window. Odette kicked her legs, calling on both her dance and combat training as she realized what Cassandra intended to do, but her feet simply flailed in the air.

“We’ll talk again soon,” Cassandra said.

Then she threw Odette out the window.

Odette caught glimpses of a castle, a mountain, and shimmering water as she fell. Relief flooded through her. She could survive this fall if she landed in the lake. She lifted her arms to prepare for a dive and squawked in alarm as they caught the wind. Her fall slowed, then stopped entirely. She flapped, performing the movement with the same confidence she would have when executing a pirouette or disarming an opponent. Odette caught the wind again and lifted higher into the air. She flew to the center of the lake and then pulled her arms in to allow herself to land. Thought gave way to instinct as she drifted over the lake, skimmed the water with her feet, and finally came to rest floating on the surface of the water.

Odette stared at the castle looming over her. She had fallen from the highest tower and not been harmed. She had barely even made a splash. She was either incredibly lucky, or something was incredibly wrong. Odette took a deep breath, tilted her neck down, and looked at her reflection in the water.

A swan stared back at her.

PRINCESS OF SWANS

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading *Princess of Mirrors*. This book has been quite the journey, and I hope you enjoyed reading Bri and Henry's story.

If you enjoyed this book, let me know by leaving a review on Amazon or Goodreads. I read all my reviews and love seeing what you think. Reviews also help other readers find my books and help me decide what to write next.

Happy Reading,

A.G. Marshall

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.G. Marshall loves fairy tales and has been writing stories since she could hold a pencil. She is a professional pianist and perfected her storytelling by writing college papers about music (which is more similar to magic than you might think).

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