

ALICE IVINYA

THE  
GOLDEN  
PRINCE

ONCE UPON  A PRINCE

A RAPUNZEL RETELLING

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Once Upon a Prince Series

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To Jacque Stevens,  
Thank you.

ALICE IVINYA

THE  
GOLDEN  
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ONCE UPON A PRINCE



A RAPUNZEL RETELLING

# GLOSSARY OF NAMES

CHARACTERS WHO ARE DECEASED ARE  
MARKED WITH A (D).

**Prince Thomas** - Crown Prince of Harelin

**Queen Heather** - Queen of Harelin. Thomas's mother.

**King Yulian (d)** - King of Harelin. Thomas's father.

**Lady Avali** - respected lady of Harelin.

**King Justus Meradian (d)** - Previous King of Harelin.

**Queen Rosally Meradian (d)** - Previous Queen of Harelin.

**Princess Rapunzel Meradian (d)** - Infant daughter of King Justus and Queen Rosally.

**Queen Meradia (d)** - the first Queen of Harelin who founded the country after fleeing Kobar.

**Greggory** - Prince Thomas's manservant.

**Sir Edward** - Oldest trusted knight of Prince Thomas.

**Sir Tristan** - Gifted swordsman and trusted knight of Prince Thomas.

**Sir Ryan and Sir Jonathan (Jonny)** - Twin trusted knights of Prince Thomas

**Lady Liya** - Minor lady of Kobar

**Lord Jarid** - Prominent lord of Kobar. Prince Thomas's official host.

**Lady Yasmin** - Prominent lady of Kobar.

**Duke Vasi** - Duke of Kobar who is courting Lady Sii.

**Lady Sii** - Prominent lady of Kobar who loves Duke Vasi.

**Maisie** - Young adult orphan thief.

**Daisy** - Young adult orphan thief.

**Mistress Faye** - Leader of an underground organization of thieves. Maisie and Daisy's mistress along with many others.

**Old Mother Baba** - A wise old woman from fairytales who was left behind by Spring.

**Spring** - An Ancient One.

**Winter** - An Ancient One.

## CHAPTER I

# THOMAS



“**T**hree cheers for Prince Thomas!”  
“Long life to Prince Thomas!”

Wine glasses clinked, and fists thumped the pristine tablecloth, accompanied by rough cheers from the knights’ table. The Great Hall was full of grins as all faces turned toward me, glowing in the candlelight of the chandeliers. The air was thick with spice and the smell of honey-roasted meat. It had been too long since the atmosphere had been so light and easy. The royal cooks had outdone themselves, evidenced by the long tables now creaking with food: carved meats of five varieties, piles of vegetables soaked in butter, crisp breads, and generous amounts of cheese.

We finally had a happy event to break the somber monotonous mood that had pervaded the castle recently. After we had eaten our fill, I would ensure the leftover food went to the townsfolk so they could celebrate too. Times were hard, and I wanted my birthday to lift their spirits.

A hush descended over the hall as my mother, Queen Heather, stood up beside me with a graceful nod of her head to the knights and nobles gathered. She clasped her hands neatly over her wide scarlet skirts and smiled. “It is with great joy that we are gathered here today to celebrate the birthday of my son, the Crown Prince of Harelin, His Royal Highness, Prince Thomas.”

Again, there were the clinks, the thumps, the shouts. I grinned and raised my glass to our guests. One of the young

noble ladies wiggled her fingers at me to gain my attention, and I turned my smile to her. Color rose in her cheeks. Whose daughter was she, again? Quite a number of the court women occasionally came to watch when I was doing combat training.

Mother waited for the noise to subside before continuing. “Today, Prince Thomas is nineteen years of age, the legal age for joining the army, though his feats in the jousting ring, the fencing arena, and racetracks are already well known. Not to mention his exceptional horsemanship.”

The cheers from the knights’ table were loudest now, and pride bloomed in my chest as their deep voices made the crockery shake. Now I was of age, I would meet all of their expectations and more. I would be everything my kingdom needed to flourish.

“Because of his achievements in this area, I would like to use this birthday to present him with his father’s sword, the sword of my late husband, King Yulian. As we all know, my husband freed our country from the tyranny of Kobar and defended it well with his blade. It has been passed down from ruler to ruler since the birth of Harelin, first the Meradian line, and now ours.”

Father’s sword...the Sword of Spring. My eyes widened in surprise, and heaviness settled over my chest. I hadn’t expected to inherit it until I was crowned as was tradition. I stood and bowed to my mother. She smiled as a servant scurried forward to present me with the short sword in its dyed red leather sheath. Rubies glittered on the gold-plated pommel and cross-guard.

Mother continued, her voice ringing around the high walls of the room. “Though as current ruler of Harelin, it is still mine by right, I pass it to Prince Thomas to show my confidence in his ability as heir to the throne. His skill with the sword far surpasses mine, and I believe it is what King Yulian would have wanted.”

A surge of memories made my throat tighten, both conflicting and difficult to process. This sword had never left my father’s side since he’d inherited it from King Justus



before him. Seventeen years ago, Kobar invaded Harelin and took the capital with ease. My father had been but a lord at the time and had led our remaining Harelin forces, refusing to give in. They snuck back into the capital, finally driving out the invaders with stealth and skill, but not before the enemy had murdered King Justus and his entire family. The royal Meradian line was completely wiped out, so the people of Harelin decided my father would be the first of a new royal bloodline. The gift of the crown was an honor we had to live up to every day.

I took the sword and silently vowed that I would be worthy of Father's memory, worthy of the people of Harelin, and worthy of the royal family who had come before us.

I would be perfect.

The hall quieted, many craning in their seats for a better view of us standing behind the high table. I drew the sword from its scabbard and held it above my head where they could all see it, tilting the blade so it caught the light of the hundreds of candles in the chandeliers. It gleamed, the blade more reflective than any I had held before.

I let my voice ring out. "With this sword, I vow to serve Harelin with my every breath."

Cheers erupted, and I thrust the sword high into the air, more heady from their praise than from the wine. The sensation was slightly ruined when I saw my manservant, Gregory, roll his eyes from where he remained seated beside me. He never understood these things. I'd told him again and again that much of being a prince was about the show, creating an image that inspired people and gave them hope. I was a symbol, a dream, their golden prince. I had to live up to that.

I sheathed the sword and sat down, ignoring Gregory and sipping the blackberry wine.

"Enjoying yourself, Your Highness?" Gregory's tone was as dry as a desert as he spoke into his plate. He seemed completely absorbed in tearing apart a chicken wing with his fingers, his hair falling forward to partially obscure his long face. He put a piece of meat into his mouth and chewed it

woodenly. Even Gregory's features were vague. Hair that was not quite blond, but not quite brown—and it couldn't be described as either straight or wavy. Eyes that were neither fully hazel nor green nor brown. Large angular features that struggled to fit together. And glasses that could never decide where on his nose they were meant to sit. The combination gave him a studious, misfit air.

I nudged him with a wide smile. "It's my birthday. I'm meant to be enjoying myself."

He scoffed loud enough for my mother to hear.

I thumped him hard on his bony back.

He jolted forward. "Hey, what was that for?"

I shrugged. "Oh, sorry, I thought you were choking."

He scowled and pushed his spectacles up his nose. "Clearly the subtleties of derision are beyond you if you thought that noise was choking."

I mock-frowned at him, pushing my own straight brown hair back from my eyes. "But if that wasn't you choking, Gregory, surely it wasn't you mocking me?"

He stared back at his plate. His voice was flat. "Of course not, Your Highness. I wouldn't dare."

I chuckled and topped up his wine glass. "Come on, Greg. Lighten up and have some fun for once."

He frowned and studied the room. "I'm still not sure this was a good idea, Your Highness. What with the famine and the refugees..."

I held up my hand to cut him off before he destroyed my good mood. "Not tonight, please, Gregory. We have every other day to think about them."

He didn't reply, just popped more chicken into his mouth with a sullen hunch of his shoulders.

I scooped creamed cheese and chives onto a chunk of fresh bread and ate, staring at the sword resting across my lap. The Sword of Spring, handed down from ruler to ruler for

hundreds of years. I felt the weight of it, the responsibility. I was ready. I would show Harelin that they could trust me as heir to the throne. And one day, when Mother chose to abdicate, I would lead our country to glory.

The doors at the end of the hall crashed open. The guests jolted in their seats. Wine spilled and somewhere a plate clattered to the ground. I pushed back my chair and stood, as did Mother, my hand already on the hilt of my new sword.

A lady wearing a heavy dark green cloak soaked with rain and mud strode in with purposeful, angry steps. The cowl was pulled forward, and I couldn't see her face. Behind her, two large men strode with swords at their waists. Tension flooded the room.

My mother's voice was loud and clear. "What is the meaning of this?"

The woman stopped in the center of the empty square formed by the tables. Every eye was on her and the soldiers. Around the edges of the room, our own guards were shifting, uncertain, and at the knights' table, all signs of frivolity had vanished. They were silent. Ready.

The woman threw back her hood. "I could ask the exact same question, my queen."

The newcomer appeared to be in her late thirties. I studied the black hair, bold eyebrows, and dark eyes, and the confident way she held herself. Her face was vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place it.

Mother's shoulders straightened. A forced, placating calmness entered her voice. "Lady Avali, it has been a long time since you came this far east. We are celebrating my son's birthday. If you wish to join the festivities, you are welcome."

Lady Avali? I looked down to Gregory who was frowning at the newcomer as he chewed on his lip. He sensed my gaze and mouthed 'old nobility' to me.

Interesting. Old nobility meant her family had survived the Kobaran Invasion, just like my own. She would have been a

noble under the reign of King Justus and Queen Rosally Meradia, and in a comparable position to ours.

Lady Avali turned her gaze around the room, letting it linger on the food and wine. People shrank from her gaze, and I shifted on my feet, uneasy. Still, I followed Mother's example. "My lady, please have a seat, and help yourself to food and wine. You must be tired after your journey." I flashed her a charming smile, but she met it with furious eyes that didn't waver. My smile dropped.

"Your people are starving. I rode here to beg succor for my people. I feared you might turn us away due to your own food woes, but I see, instead, that you are feasting. You fatten yourselves while the grain stores grow empty."

My mouth dried and my chest tightened. "I assure you, my lady, that there is still quite enough food in the capital. We have been discussing ways to combat the famine."

She raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? And how long will those food stores last?"

I licked my lips, caught off balance by the sudden questioning. Mother rested a hand on my wrist. "Avali, your household is very welcome here. You're welcome to stay at the palace, and we will see that you are provided for. We know the far western provinces are the most vulnerable when the harvest is poor."

Her sharp eyes turned to the Queen. "It is not just my household. I have brought my entire province with me. We held out for as long as we could, but the last of our crops have failed. We have made the difficult decision to abandon our homes so we could have food for the winter. Otherwise, too many will starve."

The world seemed to spin. Her whole province? I had heard of the crops failing—and we had had a steady trickle of refugees all year—but this seemed a little drastic. Did she really have that little hope? "How many?" I asked.

"Twelve thousand. And I suspect it will not be long before other provinces do the same."

“Twelve thousand?” I glanced at Mother in alarm while trying to appear calm.

Lady Avali took a step forward and glared at us. “If you don’t do something soon to stop this disaster, the entirety of Harelin will starve. *You* will starve. How serious does this have to get before you care?”

Mother bristled. “We care, Avali. And we have been discussing the famine. We were simply unaware of the severity in the far west.”

Avali’s eyes narrowed. “You must bring back the Blessing of the Meradians. That is the only way to undo this.”

Mother scoffed, her hand rising to rub her forehead and the diamonds dangling from their delicate golden chains. “The Meradians are dead. We don’t even know if the Blessing was real.”

The lady’s tone dropped as she stepped closer. “It was real, and without it, Harelin will eventually turn into a wasteland. Do you not see this?” She waved her hands around her in exasperation. I noticed nobody was daring to eat any more of their food.

I folded my arms. “How do you suggest we return the Blessing?”

Her eyes turned to me. “I do not know. But I suspect Old Mother Baba can show you the way.”

Mutterings broke out around the room along with some strangled laughs. Old Mother Baba was a myth from ancient folktales, even less believable than the Blessing of the Meradians. Even if she existed, it would be a challenge to find her. However, if she was real and knew the answer to regaining the Blessing, whoever found her would be the clear savior of Harelin. It would be the perfect way to prove myself.

I lifted my sword and raised my voice. “I have sworn to protect Harelin and all her people. Therefore, if this Old Mother Baba exists, I shall find her. I will stop this famine and restore our beloved country. Do not fear, Lady Avali. All will be well.” I gestured at the table. “Now, let us give all the

remaining food to your people for they have traveled far. Our steward will arrange accommodation.” I glanced at the elderly man dressed in black on the high servant table, and his face had gone white.

I lifted my sword. “For Harelin’s future.”

Smiles broke out around the room; the tension had vanished. Guests raised their wine glasses. “For Harelin’s future.”

I grinned at their applause and appreciative smiles and nods. In the center of it all, Lady Avali remained still, staring at me with cold eyes.

## CHAPTER 2

# THOMAS



“Did you have to raise the sword, Thomas?” Gregory normally used my first name when in private, as did many of my knights. “I’m almost certain Lady Avali rolled her eyes at you.”

I clamped Gregory on the shoulder as we climbed the circling stairs to his study. “The guests enjoyed it. I gave them hope and destroyed that horrid tension.” A shiver ran down my back at the memory. “Now what do you know of Old Mother Baba?”

He sighed, and the stone walls amplified the sound. “She is part of the old fairytale of Meradia—the one where the Princess receives the Blessing.”

“Yes, but we need more than old fairy stories, Greg. What do we *really* know of her?”

“My name is Gregory.” He gave me a long-suffering glance, heavy with impatience. “I have actually been studying this for a while.”

I straightened, skipping a step to become level with him. “You have?”

He nodded, pursing his lips. “The famine was growing, and I knew we would have to explore less conventional methods sooner or later given the unnatural rate of its spread.”

I frowned. “Why didn’t you tell me you found something?”



We reached the wooden door, and he fished his key from around his neck. He always concealed it under his tunic. “I didn’t find anything clear, and every time I brought up the famine, you told me to shut up.”

“Only when you were moaning. You’ve been speaking unhindered at the council meetings about rationing and could have shared any thoughts there. You’ve had my support to do so. I thought all your opinions were taken seriously enough.”

He sniffed. “That’s not the same.” He pushed open the door. I hadn’t been in the round tower room for a while and was surprised to see tables upon tables of open books marked with color-coordinated vibrant silk ribbons.

“I don’t have time to read all this, Greg. Just tell me where you think we should look for Old Mother Baba.”

I reached out to touch a gilded illustration in a book, and he knocked my hand away. “My name is Gregory, not Greg. And the clue is in the fairytale.”

Hope rose in my chest. “You know then? Where? We should leave at once.”

He sat down in his padded chair, and I almost tipped him out with impatience. But sometimes Gregory couldn’t be rushed and only dug his heels in harder the more you hurried him.

I took a deep breath and sat down beside him, resting my elbows on my knees so my foot didn’t tap on the floor.

Gregory cleared his throat. “As I’m sure you know—although I’ve learned never to take your knowledge for granted—the legend goes that Princess Meradia was forced to flee from her land and her throne by her wicked stepmother, the Queen of Kobar. Meradia’s husband had been killed, and she feared for the life of their unborn baby. Chased by hounds, she was forced into the barren plains to the south-east where nothing could grow other than stunted grass. The wind was endless, and it never rained.”

I pinched my brow. “This is all very sad, but what has this to do with Old Mother Baba?”

Greggory took a slow drink of water to punish me for interrupting.

“Deep in the plains, Meradia’s energy gave out. She lay on the dusty ground—alone—and her tears watered the ground. She prayed for her child to survive, even if she perished, and so deep was her love, her fear, her grief, that her tears summoned Spring herself.”

I held out my hands. “Greggory, this story is impossible. How is talking about Spring as a person helping?”

He ignored me. “Since Meradia’s kingdom had been stolen from her, and the land was overrun with enemies, Spring granted her a new kingdom. She turned the eastern half of the plains into a fertile land covered with flowers and trees. Clouds formed, heavy with rain. So fertile were the lands that people flocked from the countries all around to live there. Though, try as she might, the Queen of Kobar could never find anything but barren plains. Spring tied the Blessing to Meradia and her descendants to ensure their safety. For without them, the land would become a barren plain once more. And so, the kingdom of Harelin was formed.”

I let my hand fall from my forehead to my knee and rocked my head back. “The story isn’t true. It’s impossible. Not to mention Kobar found Harelin easily enough when their country invaded last time.”

Greggory met my eyes with a deep seriousness. “The Meradian line has been dead seventeen years, Thomas. And now the plains are returning. It was slow at first, but getting faster. The plant life is fading. If we don’t stop it, Harelin will be no more.”

I shifted with impatience. “Old Mother Baba, Greggory. Where is she?”

“They say that when Spring left Meradia, she left an intermediary. An old lady. Every year, on the first day of spring, Queen Meradia and her daughter, Princess Irelan, would make the trip to a place called Rapunzel to celebrate all they had been given. That is the origin of our Spring Festival. My inkling is that they visited this intermediary there.

Throughout many of our fairytales, heroes and villains seek out the aid and advice of Old Mother Baba. I believe they are one and the same.”

I was starting to get very lost trying to follow Gregory’s logic. “You think Rapunzel is a real place? I’ve never heard of it. Isn’t it a flower? Hang on, isn’t that also the name of the baby who was killed in the Kobaran Invasion? King Justus and Queen Rosally’s only child?”

Gregory stood, his excitement starting to come through. “Yes, yes, an edible flower many see as a weed. It was said to be one of the first plants that Spring chose to grow here.” He pushed his glasses up his nose a little too hard, causing him to squint in discomfort. “I suspect Rapunzel is the place where Spring came to Meradia, and so, the location was named after that flower. And I suspect that also is why the last Princess was given that name. To the Meradians, Rapunzel is a word of hope.”

I held out my hands. “Wait, you’re acting as if Spring visiting Meradia was a real historical event.”

He scurried to a table full of old maps. “Stories have power. Stories have truth. Stories are never just stories. I have been searching for this place for months in books and maps, and I’m pretty sure I have found it.” He pointed to an old leather map. “Look.”

I squinted at the faded ink. “Rampion?”

Gregory nodded so excitedly that his glasses slid down his nose. “Yes, another name for the Rapunzel flower. This map is hundreds of years old. The name has changed over time.” He laid a modern paper map over the top and lifted an oil lamp so you could see the ancient map underneath. “So if we line these up exactly, we can tell the town that was Rampion is now called Ramton.”

I stared at the map and struggled to match Gregory’s excitement. I curled my finger around my chin. “You’re telling me you think the answer to this famine is going to a town called Ramton, because it used to be called Rampion, which is another word for Rapunzel, which is allegedly where Queen

Meradia traveled to on the Spring Festival hundreds of years ago, so it *might* house an old lady who *might* be Old Mother Baba, and she would have to be almost a thousand years old? Oh, and she's an intermediary for Spring?"

He nodded and pointed to the town on the map, completely missing my sarcasm.

I closed my eyes, dreading coming back a failure, and the disappointment that would welcome me. The shattering of people's perceptions of me. I couldn't let them down.

Well then, I would have to keep searching until I found what I needed for Harelin to survive.

I took a deep breath. "Fine. We'll take four knights and ride to Ramton tomorrow. It looks like it should only take two days."

---

IT TURNED out Ramton was on the top of a large hill. The horses trudged up the dusty road, tired after two days of riding in the early summer heat, and I'd become increasingly discomfited by the refugees. We passed abandoned houses and farms more frequently the farther we traveled. It was one thing seeing the numbers on paper. Another when they stood right before you with worried eyes and hands clutching children.

It was summer. Surely there was enough game to hunt and fish in the rivers to sustain them for a little longer? But those food sources would almost cease when winter arrived. I hoped seeing knights riding purposefully down the roads would give them hope, but many people didn't lift their heads up from the road before them.

I had given my bread and cheese to a woman pulling a cart with five sunburned children while Gregory fixed a spoke on their wheel, and now my stomach was tight with hunger. Still, I couldn't complain.

The buildings of Ramton were visible above us, silhouetted by the setting sun, and I prayed that one of them

would be an inn with proper beds. It didn't look like a large settlement, however, so I didn't have much hope. I could only trust that since the original Queen of Harelin had traveled here every year, maybe others had continued the tradition over the last several hundred years and so required accommodation and food. I shifted in the saddle, my thighs and lower back aching as I dreamed of a warm bath to ease my muscles and wash away the sweat and grime. This time of year, everything was caked in dust.

Greggory perked up, his eyes scanning the hillside for unknown signs. At least *he* was enjoying himself. The knights seemed as pessimistic as me.

I pulled my horse up next to my manservant. "You know, if I were pregnant, exhausted, and dying, the last thing I would do would be to drag myself up a massive hill."

Greggory just raised an eyebrow at me. His expression remained solemn and dry.

"You see, this place is unlikely to be where Spring visited Meradia. None of it makes any sense."

Greggory shrugged. "We don't know all that happened. Maybe there was shelter from the harsh winds of the plains up here. A cave perhaps. Or maybe Queen Meradia visited this place once a year because this is where Old Mother Baba chose to live. Either way, it is worth our inspection."

I couldn't believe I was pointing out aspects that made a children's fairytale unrealistic. It personified Spring, and I was talking about pregnant women climbing hills as if that were the most unrealistic part.

I shifted my numb backside and turned my attention back to the shifting grasslands and wildflowers that cloaked the sides of the hill. Dotted throughout were the vivid purple heads of rampion flowers, and I hoped that was a good sign. The bleating of sheep and goats increased as the sun set. I looked over my shoulder to my four most trusted knights chatting quietly in the growing twilight, trying to gauge their mood. Did they think me a fool for chasing whispers within

ancient fairytales? None of them would ever say that to my face.

But if there was no Blessing and no Old Mother Baba, didn't that mean there would be no way to stop the spread of the famine? As silly as it was, I needed at least some aspect of this to be true. And I trusted Gregory. He could be intense and his knowledge-filled monologues irrelevant to the current issue, but he was rarely wrong. And giving him the opportunity to see if his theory was true had put new excitement in his eyes.

Lights glowed inside the houses, and the streets were empty as we finally entered Ramton. Dusk had brought a chill and the wind was stronger up here on the exposed slopes making us fight our cloaks with numb fingers.

To my relief, the sign of an inn, faded by the elements, creaked in the breeze. I read the chipped paint: *The Wildflower*.

We left two of the knights, Edward and Tristan, to stable the horses while we entered the inn. The common room was empty except for a young woman in a stained apron cleaning the counter.

"Do you have bed and board for six?" I called to her.

She looked us up and down slowly, her eyes lingering on our swords, before replying. "Yes. If you don't mind sharing three rooms. And we take payment upfront."

She reminded me of a flighty bird, cautious and untrusting.

I smiled and handed her ten gold coins, more than enough to feed and house us. She relaxed a little. Her eyes rose to my face, and she blushed. "Would you like dinner right away, my lord?"

I nodded. "Please. It's been a long day."

"We have warm stew, and I can make more flat bread. I will give your horses oats."

"Thank you."

She bobbed a curtsy and turned, but I stopped her by calling out, "Have you heard of somebody who goes by the name Old Mother Baba?"

Her face paled, and she shook her head before hurrying out of the room. I frowned at her reaction, and my tiredness ebbed a little as I became more alert for danger. I unstrapped my sword belt as I sat down but kept it in easy reach. The men settled down around me, pulling their boots off to warm their toes by the wide fire. Two large shaggy wolfhounds slept on the rug, now and again lifting a floppy ear when we dragged chairs or somebody laughed.

Edward, the oldest of the knights, wiped a gloved hand down his thick dark brown beard that somehow resisted the grey that had invaded the top of his head. "There's a tension in the air here, Highness. A wariness. We should stay on our guard."

Jonathan and Ryan immediately stopped their joking to peer around the room. The twins were identical apart from the scar on Ryan's upper lip. He had gained it while sparring with Tristan and called it his best feature. Nobody was better at the sword than Tristan, not even me, though he had such long lanky limbs and was well over six foot, so his advantage seemed a little unfair.

The flighty woman reappeared with a wide tray and handed out six bowls of stew and a large loaf of bread with a dish of butter. Station and manners mattered little when we were on the road, and we tore into the bread and scooped the hot stew, eager to fill the gnawing in our bellies and halt the growing grumpiness and impatience in our conversations.

As we used the bread to mop our plates and let the heat of the fire relax our limbs, Edward kept his eyes fixed on the doorway.

Maybe I should send Tristan on a scout of the town to help put our minds at rest. I opened my mouth to ask his opinion when a burly man in an apron approached our table. He was balding, but his muscle hadn't turned to fat with age. I guessed he was the innkeeper.

He sat down in a free seat and leaned in.

“Is there a problem, sir?” asked Edward, his eyes narrowing as he slid his hand from his knee to his hip. He tilted his body slightly, positioning himself between me and the innkeeper.

The newcomer studied us each in silence for a moment. “That depends. Knights from the capital are welcome in my inn, make no mistake, but I’m not looking for any trouble.”

I smiled to ease his fears and placed my hands on the table as a sign of peace. “We are no trouble, my friend. We are seeking to learn about the famine so we may return Harelin’s Blessing.”

The man met my eyes, and I saw a flicker of fear there. He knew something. He seemed to choose his next words slowly and carefully. “And what brings you to Ramton?”

I thought of Gregory’s long-winded explanation and decided to be simple and direct. “We seek the counsel of Old Mother Baba.” I watched the man’s expression closely and saw tightening around his eyes at the words. “We are following a lead that said she might live here. Or another woman who is just as wise.”

The man leaned in and lowered his voice. Edward tapped his third finger in my direction. A signal to be careful.

“I suspect the one you speak of is the lady we call Hetty. She is a healer and wise woman. She lives up the slope in a hut by the caves. But there have been strange goings-on in the last weeks.” He leaned closer. “Nobody has seen her for ten days, and nobody dares to go check on her. The very air feels wrong. Cold. I suggest you find another way to fulfill your quest. The town is nervous and wary of strangers. They won’t want you to attract evil down to the village.”

I frowned and lowered my voice to match his. “What do you mean by strange goings-on?”

He looked around the empty room. “Cold, bitter winds. Fruit turned hard. Sightings of strange animals in the shadows of the hillside: pale beasts that leave no tracks.”



I swallowed and looked at Gregory. His face was blank as he drew a pattern on the table in some spilled ale.

It could be something. It could be nothing.

“Thank you for your concern, sir. We will keep our heads down, but we will check she is well before venturing on. We shan’t stay more than a night.”

He shrugged. “Just don’t tell anyone else why you are here. They will be afraid that you will make things worse.”

The innkeeper left without further statement, and I met the eyes of my men. Tristan looked excited and Edward wary, while the twins were thoughtful. Gregory still didn’t look up. “We should go to her hut at first light. Tonight, we should continue keeping watch. Jonny, it’s your turn for the first half. Ryan, you take second watch.”

The men nodded, and we drank our ales in quiet, the fire no longer feeling so warm.

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FROST COVERED the grass in a stiff lace. To say that was unusual for this time of the year was an understatement, even in the hill country. Summer was normally when all the foliage baked to death and every breath was clogged with dust. But here, undeniably was ice. It should have been impossible.

We walked through the sleepy village as the sun’s rays started to melt the tracks back to mud. None of us were in the mood for talking, and all of us had our hands on our weapons, disturbed by the evidence of the unseasonal temperature.

The track beyond the town was too narrow for carts, little more than a sheep track. It wound toward a copse of trees sheltered by a cliff face where I assumed the caves lay that the innkeeper had spoken of. There was no chimney smoke or clucking chickens. Nothing but faint morning bird song and the distant bleating of sheep.

I turned to Gregory who was lingering near the rear of our party. “Do you wish to stay behind?”

He snorted and strode closer to my side. "I'm not leaving. You'll miss something important or do the wrong thing."

I scoffed and gave him a half-smile but didn't push him. I could see his underlying nerves in the way his eyes darted around and his fingers shredded threads from the hem of his coat sleeve.

Jonathan had stayed back at the inn to keep an eye out for trouble and to make sure nobody tried to steal the horses. His easy personality made him the best at picking up gossip and smoothing things over with the locals.

Greggory clamped his hand on my arm, startling me. "What was that?"

He pointed into the trees shadowed by the cliff face. I could see nothing. "What?"

"It was...I'm not sure." His voice was quiet and uncertain.

I nudged him. "You're not sure," I repeated dryly. "One of these days you're going to give me a heart attack."

Edward took the lead, as he often did when he was wary, his cloak thrown back and his huge hands on his sword hilt as he reached the edge of the copse of trees. I motioned for Greggory to keep to the back. His ability to fight was so bad, he would be more likely to injure one of us than an enemy. But he always noticed things nobody else did.

Frost-laced leaves crackled beneath our feet as we reached the tree line. Through the spindly trunks, I made out the shape of a cottage. To one side was a mill pond with a stream. A water wheel creaked as it slowly turned, dripping swaths of ragged pond weed. The path toward the cottage was well trod.

I caught up with Edward in two long strides and touched his arm. I nodded to him and took the lead. He followed close behind, but I could tell he was uncomfortable with me being in front and so the most exposed. But I always wanted to lead by example. All the best leaders throughout history did that.

The cottage door was ajar, and no light spilled from inside. It groaned slightly in the breeze as it rocked back and forth. Every part of my body was on alert. I motioned for Ryan to

skirt around the outside of the cottage and make sure we weren't flanked or taken by surprise. I turned to Edward and gestured to the old mill wheel and pond where there were plenty of bushes and structures for things to hide behind.

When I was sure my orders were understood, I took one last look at the woods, checked to see that Gregory and Tristan were ready, and pushed open the door with my foot. The hinges were rusted, so it jerked open with a screech. Then, silence.

“Hello?”

The only sound was the low creak of the water wheel through the wall. We stepped forward and were greeted by darkness, damp, and cold. The fireplace contained nothing but old ash. A chair was knocked over backward and a teacup missing its handle was half obscured under the table.

There was a soft hiss of metal as Tristan drew his sword.

I licked my lips, trying to take in all of the room at once. “Old Mother Baba? Hetty? We are here for your aid.”

The end of my scabbard knocked an empty rocking chair, and it started rocking back and forward violently with a sudden explosion of hollow noise.

“Thomas...” Gregory's voice sounded uncertain, almost scared.

I turned and saw him pointing to something behind a ragged curtain, beyond my line of sight. I stepped up to him and followed his gaze. The breath left my lungs. Half sitting on a bed of rags was a woman. She was unmoving, solid like a statue. Her skin was wrinkled, and her long hair was white, bound back by a colorful strip of cloth.

“What's happened to her?” I whispered.

Gregory shook his head. His eyes were wide and his mouth open as if he had run out of words. He stepped closer to the figure, and I noticed his hands were trembling. He dragged in a deep breath. “I...I think she's frozen. Only...there is a strange white pattern over her skin. Like ice across glass.”

I felt Tristan shift into a defensive position behind me. I cleared my throat as my eyes darted once more around the room, my mouth dry. “Is she alive, Gregory?”

My manservant waved his hands in front of her unmoving eyes, then watched her chest. “I don’t think so.” He licked his lips again before reaching out to find a pulse in her throat. The moment his skin touched hers, he cried out and jumped backward. I drew my father’s sword on instinct.

I reached out to touch Gregory’s shoulder. “Are you alright? What happened?”

The man clutched his hand as he stepped farther back. “She’s cold. So cold it’s painful. And rock hard.”

My eyes turned back to the woman. “What could have done that? What kills through freezing? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

Gregory’s skin had drained of all color.

The room felt like what it was: a sinister tomb.

I turned to the door. “Let’s go.”

Outside, a shout was cut off abruptly, stopping us in our tracks. Then Tristan came to life, pushing past me. “That was Ryan.” He broke into a run through the door, sending it crashing back on its hinges. I grabbed Gregory, who was still staring at the frozen woman, and pulled him outside after the tall knight.

We blinked in the bright light of the rising sun as we came to an abrupt stop. It took me a moment to understand what I was seeing. A ring of giant white dogs surrounded the hut like creatures escaped from a nightmare. Their breath fogged around them, and their footsteps made no sound. Teeth longer than my palm snarled from torn gums, and short bone-white antlers spread from the crown of their fur-less heads in broken shards. There was something...dead about them.

I raised my sword and tilted my head to my servant while keeping my eyes on the beasts. “Err, Gregory? What are these? Anything from your storybooks?”

Greggory positioned himself behind me. “I think, Highness, that we have walked into a trap.” There was a high-pitched tremor in his voice.

My eyes darted to Tristan, and I saw him on the other side of the ring of monsters. He was standing over Ryan who was lying on the ground, face down, motionless. Tristan faced two more of the massive beasts as they slowly circled him moving closer and closer as if analyzing him before they pounced. His eyes were wide with a hint of panic, and he clenched his sword close to his face with white knuckles.

It would be difficult for me to help him; I was too far away and had too many attackers of my own. My courage wavered as I observed the creatures focused on me and Greggory. Their numbers, size, and strength were all clear advantages. Greggory was never much use in these situations.

I turned my head, searching for Edward, darting rapid glances between the monsters and the surrounding trees. My fear grew at his absence, and before I could locate the older man, one of the monsters next to me pounced.

I dodged from its path, pushing Greggory roughly behind me. He fell to the floor with a strangled yell. I stepped over his splayed legs trying not to trip as another beast launched at me from the side. I barely managed to turn to face it before its front feet caught my chest. The air exploded from my lungs on impact. I stumbled backward, desperate to keep my feet, but my heel hit Greggory’s knee. I fell, the beast slamming down on top of me. Teeth rushed toward my face in a spray of saliva. I blocked its jaws with the flat of my blade, then twisted it and sliced upward. To my surprise the beast disintegrated into a gust of dirty snow.

I lay on top of Greggory’s legs, panting in surprise, then sprang to my feet. The next beast was already running for me, its movements too flowing to be natural. I swerved, spun, and caught its flank with my sword. There was a brief jerk of the blade, then it, too, burst into snow.

I grinned in relief, but a heavy weight barreled into my back, snapping me forward as my neck cracked back. I landed

on my hands and knees, winded, but rolled away on instinct, jaws snapping where my neck had just been.

I struggled to breathe, lifting my sword too slowly as the creature threw itself at me again, trapping my blade downward against my chest. I brought the hilt up instead, cracking it into the underside of the beast's jaw, deflecting its teeth from my throat. I expected it to pull back from the pain, but it recovered fast, its teeth spraying rot-stinking saliva across my face. I kicked at its underside as I brought the hilt up again. This time I managed to twist the blade of my sword and slice downward through its thigh. One cut, and it vanished.

I barely gasped in a breath before two more were upon me. I swiped at one. It fell back, wary and stalking me. The other went for my leg while I was distracted. I yelled as jagged teeth sank into my thigh. Gregory threw himself at the monster, stabbing his dagger at its flank. It didn't disintegrate. It didn't even flinch.

I gritted my teeth in pain as I swiped down with my own blade at the bone-white shoulder. It crumpled to snow the moment the metal pierced the skin. A cold burning sensation remained in my thigh centered around the bite wound as strength seeped from my leg. I clutched my hand to the wound, but to my surprise, there was no blood.

I couldn't inspect the wound further before the other beast finished its wary circling and pounced again. I yelled, sprung forward, fell skidding to my knees, and caught its underside mid leap with my sword. The strange snow brushed my face before dissipating on the breeze.

Part of me was disappointed about the lack of audience to see that particular move.

*Audience.*

I looked around for Tristan and Edward as I stood up, hoping for enough of a respite from the attacks to make sure they were alright. I couldn't see either of them.

Gregory leaned his hand on my shoulder, and we stared at each other for a moment, panting. "I didn't know your father's

sword was magic. The Sword of Spring.” He said the title as if it were significant, somehow. There would be time to think about that later. Hopefully.

We stood back-to-back and prepared for further attacks. I kept the weight off my bad leg, shutting out the pain, hoping it would hold long enough to finish the fight. However, the two remaining monsters were backing into the shadows of the trees, snarling softly as they went. Then they vanished into the gloom.

I looked down at the gold and ruby hilt of my sword and turned back to Gregory. “Neither did I. Maybe it’s not unique to my sword. Maybe any blade of a certain quality turns them to snow?”

Tristan cried out, though he was too far around the side of the house for us to see. I hobbled toward him, biting back pain from the burning cold of the bite wound. I rounded the corner. The knight fought at impressive speed, Ryan still motionless at his feet. Two beasts fought Tristan from either side, lunging to snap at his arms and face before retreating immediately, their hackles raised. His sword sliced frantically, but merely left bloodless marks on their strange flesh.

I reached the nearest one and caught it with my blade as it spun toward me, reducing it to grey snow. The second barreled into Tristan and knocked him to the ground, its teeth around his forearm. Tristan yelled as he tried to push the beast off his chest, its teeth still sunk in his flesh.

My leg was feeling weaker by the moment. Colder. I pushed through the pain and numbness and sliced the creature across its flank. It disintegrated, leaving a wide-eyed Tristan covered in powdery snow.

I looked around, trying to shift to a position where my leg felt steadier. “Where’s Edward?”

Gregory’s voice called from behind. “Over here!”

I turned to see him dragging Edward’s huge unconscious body toward us, his face red with the strain. Tristan rubbed his hand across his pale face, his jaw tense, and motioned

Greggory to bring him to us. Then the slender knight dropped to his knees before Ryan and rolled him over, shaking his shoulders and calling his name.

I took one last look around, but the white beasts had gone. I sheathed my sword and hobbled to help Greggory with Edward's heavy body. Those beasts had easily been a match for us despite all our training. We shouldn't have left Jonathan at the inn. If my sword hadn't turned them to snow, we wouldn't have made it. The thought that some were still roaming around in populated areas in Harelin made my blood run cold.

And we might not yet make it ourselves... Maybe Jonathan would be the only survivor.

As we heaved Edward close, Tristan spoke. "He's still breathing, but his wounds are strange. Look." He pulled up Ryan's shirt to show a bite mark across his ribs. The puncture marks didn't look deep, but spreading out from them was a white web that looked like frost. Tristan held up his own arm to show a similar mark where he had been bitten across his bicep. His eyes were wide with growing fear.

I carefully laid Edward beside Ryan and squatted to rest my hand on their foreheads. They were ice cold. Their breathing was shallow.

Greggory yanked me back. "Don't touch them! Look, Edward has the same marks as Old Mother Baba." Greggory pointed to his leg and shoulder where his clothing was ripped across bloodless wounds. A quiver entered his voice. "When I touched her marks, they did something to my hand." He held it up and I saw his fingers were frozen almost solid, white veins of ice spreading across them. "If we touch those marks, they can spread to us."

"Greggory..." I whispered, staring at his hand. Then I knelt to look at the bite wound on my leg, pulling up my trousers. The same white webs just under the surface of the skin were spreading from the puncture marks. It was already hard to bend my ankle or wiggle my toes. The coldness *burned*. All five of us were affected.



Panic fluttered in my chest. Were we all about to be frozen to death like the old woman? For a moment none of us spoke as horror dawned. Those beasts had killed us all, even if my sword had eventually chased them off.

*My sword.*

For some reason it had broken whatever magic was keeping these creatures alive. Maybe it could break this magic too.

I drew the sword and, clenching my teeth, drew the blade lightly across the bite wound on my leg, slicing through the middle of the white web. There was no pain; the whole area was numb. The pale veins in my skin seemed to be drawn to the surface where they cracked like frost. My lips parted in wonder as I brushed the tiny white fragments free. The skin looked healthy once more, except for tiny puncture wounds left from the teeth. Warmth and sensation ebbed back into my leg with a tingle of pins and needles.

Greggory was staring at me but didn't say anything as I ran the blade across his palm, then on Tristan's arm, and finally along the wounds of the two knights lying unconscious. To my relief the white webs were drawn out of all of them, fragmenting and scattering on the breeze and making their skin healthy once more.

I bit my lip to hide the full force of my relief, pressure building behind my eyes. That had been too close. I was responsible for the life of everyone here, and beyond that, I cared deeply about each of them. Yet I had led them into an ambush and almost gotten them killed. We had only survived by the luck of my father's sword.

I had to do better than this. I would not treat my men's lives recklessly.

When Edward and Ryan were breathing easier, though not yet conscious, I walked back into the cottage and ran my sword gently over the old woman's side. The white web across her skin became frost that shattered as she crumpled. She fell onto the bed, no longer frozen solid but still motionless. I

checked for her pulse, but her skin was cold and clammy. Her lips had a grey tinge, and her eyes were sunken.

I was too late; she was dead.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

Her dead eyes didn’t reply.

I let my gaze wander and noticed ink stains on her fingers. Beside her on the bed were two sheets of paper on a wooden tray. One was an ink painting of a young lady. It had exquisite detail, the image clear despite dog-eared corners and creases from being folded. The other was a letter addressed to *Her Majesty Queen Heather*. Old Mother Baba had only managed three more words before the ink ended in a panicked scribble.

I frowned and held up the picture of the woman. She was pretty with wide blue eyes, an easy smile, and long pale hair. I guessed she was between sixteen and eighteen.

A caption below the picture was written in the same handwriting as the letter.

*To bring back the Blessing, she must leave Ravi and become Queen of Harelin.*

I stared at the words, processing them. This woman, whoever she was, had to be in Ravi, the capital of Kobar. If she needed to become Queen, that meant I should marry her. Could it really be that simple? All I had to do to bring back the Blessing and stop the famine was marry this girl? My chest loosened. Maybe she was some forgotten illegitimate Meradian descendent.

A slow smile spread across my face. Wooing a girl was something I felt far more comfortable about than chasing fairytales or reading giant dusty books. I was good-looking, talented, and the Crown Prince. I would have her at my side within days.

I looked back at the old woman and closed her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest. Had the white wolves come to stop this information from reaching me? Had she discovered something she shouldn’t have?

The timing was certainly suspicious.

I bowed to the lady as I left her. “Thank you. I won’t let your sacrifice be in vain.”

## CHAPTER 3

# MAISIE



The dim corridor in the palace of Ravi was deserted. I silently counted to one hundred again, aware that soft carpets could muffle footfalls. Still, no shadows shifted on the gilded walls. From far away, the ballroom music echoed, another world of light and people and laughter.

Here was only silence and shadow.

I couldn't put it off any longer. Nerves and a trace of fear stirred in my stomach, and I reached in my bodice for the secret stash of boiled sugar sweets. I unwrapped one and popped the sticky prize into my mouth without first peeking at its color.

*Lemon.*

I rolled it around in my mouth, the sensation calming me, and my confidence returned. I edged down the hallway under the steadily burning oil lamps. The only sound was the whisper of my silk skirts. One door, two, three...four.

I tried the handle, and it pushed down smoothly, but the door was locked. I fished out another sweet, needing sugar to match the adrenaline.

*Orange.*

The boiled sweets clattered against the insides of my teeth as I rolled them around. I slipped my lockpicking set from inside my sleeve and unraveled the velvet. My fingers took on a mind of their own as they selected the instruments in the low light and freed the catch with a faint click.

I smiled and let myself in.

The room was dark, the only light coming from the smoldering embers in the fireplace that flared and popped in the breeze of the open door. I closed the door silently behind me. Now, if I were a man, where would I hide earrings that I intended to give someone?

Duke Vasi would want them hidden from prying eyes, but he would probably also worry he might forget where he hid them if they weren't somewhere he looked often.

*Sock drawer?*

I slid open the top of the chest of drawers.

*Nope. Cravat drawer? Yes!*

The box was crammed between the colorful folds of silk. I opened it, and the diamond and emerald earrings caught the low light with an expensive sparkle. I slipped them into my bodice and threw the empty box into the fire.

I turned to leave, the sudden flames in the fire causing the pink silk of my dress to shimmer, when I noticed a jeweled pin on the mantle, the sort designed for the lapel of a jacket. I paused and slipped another sweet in my mouth, but this one was hard to taste.

The pin called to me.

It was so small, anyone could misplace it. He would assume he had dropped it somewhere. Maybe even into the fire. Careless place to put it really. It could roll anywhere.

But I wasn't supposed to steal anything else. I was meant to take the earrings and go. Stealing anything more was a stupid risk. Mistress Faye wouldn't be happy.

But it was just a pin. Just a small, pretty pin. A trinket. It barely counted.

I put another sweet in my mouth, the first three almost dissolved, but it didn't reduce the skin-tightening desire. I gave in and took the pin and a rush of adrenaline and power and satisfaction accompanied it. I slipped it into the ribbon that

held part of my elaborate hairstyle. I turned my head in the mirror, and it gave a subtle sparkle almost like a wink. *Perfect.*

I padded out of the room and clicked the lock back in place. The corridor was still deserted. I straightened my bodice and glided back toward the ball as if I were taking a purposeless stroll. Thankfully, all the servants were so stressed by the grand scale of the ball, none were looking for stray guests. I swayed back into the chaos of bright silks and bubbling champagne flutes.

*So far, so good.*

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Thomas

*Six hours earlier*

THERE WERE two ways from Harelin to Kobar. The continent curved like a giant horseshoe, meaning one could either travel for a week through inhospitable, mountainous desert and plains to the south or sail west for three days across the sea. Naturally, everyone preferred the latter option. Only mad Princesses fleeing evil stepmothers would take the desert route, and that was a stretch of the imagination, as I had mentioned to Gregory several times on our journey. He didn't seem to mind. He remained smug for being right about where to find Old Mother Baba. I still didn't understand how he had figured that one out.

As our ship neared the port, which was only an hour's travel from the Kobaran capital of Ravi, I checked my appearance once more in the hand mirror. It was vital that I made a good impression on the Kobaran nobility during this visit if I was to improve relations between our two countries. Since the previous ruler of Kobar died, we had been at peace. That didn't mean memories of the invasion had been completely swept under the carpet, however. In every Harelin children's story, Kobar was always the villain.

But maybe, if we truly wanted peace, it was time for that to change. And improving diplomatic relations seemed a good cover for my visit to find this girl. It had been Gregory's suggestion. As had a hundred other ideas for finding this mysterious woman. He had drawn up plans involving a tour of the whole of Kobar in order to find her.

A delegation was waiting at the harbor side, swathed in dark cloaks against the chill of the sea air while noisy seagulls circled above. It was a lot colder this far west, despite it being summer. I waited with Gregory and my four most trusted knights as sailors bustled to bring us into port and lay down the gangplank.

The welcome party bowed as we disembarked. The aging man at the front had dark hair and eyes and bore a welcoming smile on thin lips. I felt myself relax as his gaze swept over us without hostility and the corners of his eyes crinkled. His posture was slightly stooped, and he held a gilded cane, but didn't seem to lean much on it. In all, he was unthreatening.

The man spoke as I approached within earshot. "Your Highness, it is an honor to have you visit our shores. It has been far too long since Harelin royalty have set foot here. My name is Lord Jarid. His Majesty The King of Kobar asked me to escort you and advise you as required for the duration of your stay. He was most thrilled to receive word of your intended visit to improve relations between our two countries after generations of hostilities and sends his regrets that he is not currently in Ravi so cannot greet you in person. He hopes there will be a next time when he can get to know you personally."

I gave him a polite nod and kept my voice low and informal. "In truth, I would prefer it if this visit remained on the more informal side. I find it is much easier to get to know a country that way, and what better way for us to improve our relations than for us to understand each other better?"

Lord Jarid's smile spread. "Quite, quite. Well, if you're not too tired, I have carriages here to take us to Ravi at once. There is a large ball this evening you may like to attend."



Perfect. I enjoyed balls and would be able to start searching at once, while being publicly seen to be smoothing over international relations. I nodded my assent.

Lord Jarid gestured through the center of his party toward the cobbled street where black and blue lacquered carriages waited. “May I inquire about your preference for accommodation? The King offered guest rooms in the palace.”

I held up my hand. “We would actually prefer to stay in an inn, if that is not too much of a bother. I feel our impression of Ravi will be more authentic that way, and we will cause less of a stir.”

The lord nodded enthusiastically as we walked toward the carriage. He barely used his cane. “Of course. You’ll want the Mayflower Inn. It is by far the best establishment in Ravi and accustomed to high-ranking nobility. The innkeeper, Mistress Kilmi, is very experienced, and the food there rivals the King’s.” He lowered his voice and raised his eyebrows for the last words as though sharing a great secret.

I grinned. “Sounds perfect.”

He nodded as we reached the carriage. A footman opened the door, and the lord climbed in after me, Gregory entering last.

“I will keep out of your way, Your Highness, if you wish for informality. But you can call on me anytime, and I can arrange any tour or entertainment you require.”

“Thank you.” I leaned forward as the carriage lurched into motion and pulled out the scrap of paper from my belt. “There is one thing you could help me with. A slightly sensitive matter.”

The lord moved closer to me, raising his eyebrows in curiosity.

“I was wondering if you knew the girl in this painting.” I handed him the picture from Old Mother Baba. It was worth the chance.

The lord held the paper close to his face, and I guessed his eyesight was starting to fade. “Oh yes, easy. That is Lady Liya.

A good likeness too. Who is the artist?"

Excitement quickened my heart rate. I shook my head and tried not to sound too eager. "I don't know. I found this picture by accident, and it mentions she's from Kobar. I just wondered who she was."

Lord Jarid grinned as he handed back the paper. "I'm not surprised. Beautiful, isn't she? She will be at the ball tonight. I can introduce you if you like."

My heart stumbled. "That would be...very good of you."

The lord chuckled. "As long as everything stays good and proper, I don't mind at all. Charming lady. This is her first season at the capital. You wouldn't be the first to be quite taken with her."

As his attention trailed off to watch something through the window, I threw a grin over my shoulder to Gregory. All his worrying and planning had been for nothing. This was going to be even simpler than I had hoped.

I ignored Gregory's returning skeptical glower. He really needed to lighten up.

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## Maisie

THE BALLROOM WAS BECOMING stuffy as the evening wore on, and I was sure there was a faint haze of sweat in the air. I wove around the silk-clad bodies looking for my target.

"Ah, Lady Liya. Do you have a moment?" I froze and turned toward an elderly man who wore a long silk coat bright with brocade. His hair was black and his beard still bushy despite the deep wrinkles around his eyes.

*Lord Jarid. Widower. Daughter my age.*

I gave him a warm smile and widened my eyes to imitate childish innocence. "Good evening, Lord Jarid. How lovely to

see you.”

He took my arm and patted it in a fatherly manner. “If I may, I wish to introduce you to some newcomers.” He gestured to two people beside him. I swept my gaze up and down. The first was tall with neat brown hair, richly dressed and carrying a jeweled sword and dagger, so I assumed royalty. He had a lopsided smile, a dimple, a straight back, and a swagger. Definitely royalty. I suspected a cocky idiot. He wore no wedding ring, and the way he was looking at me as if drinking in every detail showed any interaction with him would be easy.

His companion was the studious type. Ink stains on his fingers and one on his cheek suggested no one in his circle cared enough to point it out. His eyes didn’t quite meet anyone else’s, and his spectacles were quickly fleeing down his nose. His boots were scuffed but he wore a well-made coat. Also easy. He was the sort that only required nodding with an interested look in your eyes as you asked him to talk more about whatever subject he was droning on about.

I curtsied to the two men as Lord Jarid introduced me. “Lady Liya is visiting Ravi for the summer, is that not right, my dear? She lives at a countryside estate, and it’s her first time at court.”

I smiled at him, sliding my eyes away to mimic shyness. “It has been the most amazing experience. I won’t know what to do with myself once I go home.”

Lord Jarid chuckled, patting my arm again. “This is Prince Thomas of Harelin and his companion, Gregory. They arrived by boat only this morning.”

I curtsied again, lowering my eyes as if slightly intimidated. “It is an honor, Your Highness.” I rose, flashing my eyes up to him at the last moment. His lips parted as he drank me in. “We so rarely have guests from Harelin, let alone royals.”

The Prince smiled at me, overly confident. As soon as I had caught his eyes with mine, he’d been unable to look away.

His cheeks revealed the lightest flush. Satisfaction bloomed in my chest.

The Prince took my hand and kissed the air an inch above it. His eyes still didn't leave mine. Seemed like he was one for drama. "I hope that may change and our two countries may have better relations in the future. There is no need for continued tensions now that we are officially at peace. I always find that true friendships develop by getting to know people better."

Beside him, Gregory rolled his eyes. I hid a smirk.

Prince Thomas took a step forward. I widened my eyes ever so slightly and parted my lips as I looked up at him. He held out his arm. "Lady Liya, would you honor me with your company on a stroll along the balcony above the veranda?"

I lowered my gaze and smiled as if I were deeply flattered. "Of course, Your Highness." I bit my lip. "Would you mind if we go by way of the sweetmeats?"

He grinned. "A woman after my own heart. Of course."

He couldn't be more wrong. Our hearts were nothing alike.

I gave a parting nod to Lord Jarid and Gregory and looped my arm around the Prince's. It was easier to pass through the ballroom on his arm. With his height and status, guests naturally moved out of his way. Women blushed or smiled or winked behind feathered fans. Some seemed puzzled, congregating in groups to gossip about who the handsome newcomer was. I wondered why Lord Jarid had chosen to introduce him to me above all the other women who were clearly interested. Perhaps he thought I would be the one who could impress him the most.

I was very good at impressing people.

At last, I caught sight of the ruby dress I was searching for. Lady Yasmin was talking to a crowd of admirers, including Duke Vasi's lover, Lady Sii. The whole setup couldn't be more perfect. The Prince of Harelin had provided me with a robust cover.

I guided the Prince to the left so I would pass directly behind Lady Yasmin's back. I brought up my fan from where it dangled from the loop on my wrist, as was the fashion, and flicked it open in front of my bodice. The action allowed me to retrieve the two earrings without being seen.

I fluttered the fan in front of my face and gave Prince Thomas a shy smile. He moved a finger over my wrist, and I tried to block out the sensation. I didn't want any unhelpful distractions. "Are you sure you don't want to go straight outside if you're hot, my lady? It is very crowded here."

I stepped forward and slipped the earrings into Lady Yasmin's powder bag. One fell to the bottom, but I let the other catch on the edge so it was half visible and at risk of falling to the floor.

I turned to Prince Thomas. "I think you're right. Some fresh air will do me a lot more good than food."

He grinned, steering us to the balcony doors. "We can always have a servant fetch us some."

I widened my smile as if the idea would have never occurred to me without his helpful suggestion.

As we reached the edge of the crowd, I caught the words, "Yaz, you've dropped something. Look there, it fell from your bag."

"Wait, isn't that Duke Vasi's? The earrings he inherited from his mother?"

Lady Sii's voice was barely perceptible. Hot, restrained, angry. "Why do you have those, Yasmin?"

Mistress Faye would be pleased. Lady Sii would soon leave in a huff to talk to Duke Vasi, he would spend hours with her to placate her rage, giving my co-worker, Daisy, enough time to empty Lady Sii's room of the Feyandan silk dresses and jewelry. Lady Sii had boasted widely that she had bought twenty of the priceless, complex gowns for the season. Now she would have none, and Lady Yasmin would be their main suspect, having already been caught 'stealing.'

Mistress Faye would alter the gowns and sell them, keeping a few for me and her other girls. By the time Lady Yasmin proved her innocence, the trail would be cold.

I smiled, letting the tension melt from my chest as the Prince swept me from the room and into the cool night air.

## CHAPTER 4

# THOMAS



The evening was going better than I had ever imagined. It was like Old Mother Baba knew we were fated to be together. Perhaps we were.

Lady Liya was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Her blue eyes were wide with wonder and innocence, reeling me in. Her pale gold hair shone so brightly in its complex up-do, I wanted to reach out and feel its softness. Her lips smiled freely as if she were an endless well of happiness and joy, and there was a softness about them that made me imagine kissing her.

This had to be what it felt like to fall in love. How long should I wait before I proposed? I didn't want to scare her off, and there was so much we needed to know about each other. But still, we had a whole lifetime to learn each other's secrets. As soon as I was confident about her feelings, I would ask her. A week or two, maybe. Then we would return together to Harelin as its saviors.

The night's sky was clear, shining in its star-studded glory. Lady Liya leaned on the marble railing staring up, her eyes filled with admiration. "It's beautiful."

I leaned on the railing beside her. "Everything out here is beautiful."

The corner of her mouth flickered as the compliment in my words settled on her. She was so innocent with no vanity about her at all.



She turned her eyes to mine, and a flutter went straight from my stomach to my chest. “Is this palace very different from yours?”

I chuckled. “You have a lot more carpets.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Carpets?”

I nodded. “I suspect that’s because it’s cooler here.”

“Of course.” She stared out across the gardens below as if searching for something to say.

I pictured her with Harelin’s crown nestled in her golden hair. She would make a magnificent Queen. The people would love her for her beauty and grace alone, and if she could indeed bring back the Blessing...

I leaned on the railing beside her. “Do you have any family in Harelin?”

Her expression changed to one of bewilderment. “No, my family is Kobar nobility. We’ve been on our estate for many generations.”

“Of course, of course.” What was I doing? I couldn’t just come out with the idea that she might have illegitimate blood from a hidden royal scandal. That would be insulting.

Her attention returned to the wide balcony around us. “Do you think, Your Highness, that you could get me a drink? There don’t seem to be any servants about, and I’m still feeling rather overheated.”

I looked around for a seat in case she was feeling faint and pulled the metal garden chair across the balcony so she could still look out and admire the garden. “Of course. What would you like? Juice? Water?”

She smiled gratefully as she sat. “Apple juice would be lovely, thank you.”

I nodded and looked around for a servant, but we were alone. Maybe I should have asked Gregory to follow us from a distance. I left her gazing over the silvery gardens but paused at the doors to take in her still form. I couldn’t help myself. She was gilded by moonlight, making her pale skin seem

almost silver. So, so beautiful. I followed the elegant line of her slim neck as it swept down to dainty shoulders and moved my gaze up again to admire the way strands of hair fell in gentle curls from her up-do as if spun from pure gold.

She was exquisite, like a fairy from a storybook, and had a kind and gentle manner to match. Utter perfection.

I was definitely in love.

I shook myself but continued to enjoy the pleasant warmth in my chest as I sought out the juice. There really should be more servants at an event as grand as this. I needed to think of something interesting to say. An engaging conversation. It was just hard to think straight when I was in the moment.

I found a table with flutes of apple juice, next to one where a servant was pouring tea, of all things. Why were they serving tea at a ball? My thoughts were broken by Gregory tapping on my arm. “How is it going, Highness?”

I pushed back my fringe. “Well, I think. I...I’m very taken with her.”

Gregory unfurled the paper we had shown to Lord Jarid before he had introduced us. “It’s definitely her likeness. It has to be her. Have you been able to connect her family to Harelin?”

I shook my head. “She thinks she’s fully Kobaran. Maybe there was an affair that was covered up years ago that she’s unaware of. Not that she would just reveal that, even if she did know. Or maybe she has some other trait that will bring back the Blessing. Pureness of heart or something.”

Gregory pushed up his glasses, looking around. “The curious thing is I have asked a few people about her family, but nobody seems to know much. They say her estate is far away and quiet. This is the first time somebody from her household has visited the capital in decades.”

“That is exactly how a family would act if they had been hiding a scandal.” I smiled as I helped myself to a glass of wine. “No wonder she is so taken by it all. I suspect she has had a sheltered country life.” I looked down at my servant.

“Either that, or your information is scarce because nobody wished to talk to you. Did you plow into the questions without proper introductions, by any chance?”

Greggory bristled and shook his head. “I was polite.”

“You’re never very polite.”

“Only because you define politeness as simpering or charming.” He opened his mouth and closed it again, as if caught off guard. “Where’s your dagger?” His eyes widened farther. “And your belt pouch?”

I frowned, putting down my wine and lowering my hand. “It’s h...” I looked down. The leather thong that always attached my bag and dagger to my belt had been cut through. At least, my father’s sword wasn’t missing. Surely there wouldn’t be thieves in a place like this? Though I imagined a lot of Kobarans bore Harelin ill will. Still, stealing from a Prince at a royal ball in the palace? It was an international insult.

No, it had to have caught on something and torn free. Maybe when I carried the garden chair. I pinched my forehead. This was not what I needed right now. I didn’t want to lose the attention of Lady Liya simply because I had dropped my money.

I clamped my hand on Greggory’s shoulder. “They must have fallen free. You look in here. Get the servants to help you. I’ll look on the balcony, but I need to concentrate on Lady Liya.”

Greggory grumbled under his breath just loud enough for me to catch my name and headed off toward the Master of Ceremonies.

I carried the juice carefully as I navigated through the crowd so none spilled on my red and gold silk coat. If something had tugged at my dagger hard enough for the leather to snap, how had I not felt it? Maybe I had been concentrating too much on Lady Liya.

As I neared the doors, I noticed a commotion in the corner. Two women were shouting at a richly dressed man who

looked more confused than anything. An older woman was trying to calm down the woman with tears streaming down her face.

I shook my head. Some men just didn't understand women. Poor guy. He was in for a long evening.

I opened the tall glass door with my elbow and stepped onto the balcony, proud that the flute of juice was still full.

The chair was deserted. I frowned and strode to the railing, looking all around. Lady Liya had vanished.

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I STIFLED A YAWN. "Sometimes women vanish on purpose, you know. They think it creates allure and mystery."

I popped another grape in my mouth. My eyes were heavy from the extremely late night and the few subsequent hours of broken sleep. The curtains were drawn against the glare of the noon sun, even if it shone weaker here than in Harelin.

Greggory grunted from where he was stitching a new leather thong onto my belt. "Some women vanish because they don't want to be bothered by a man anymore."

I shook my head. "No, no, it wasn't like that. We had a... connection. We were enjoying ourselves. Maybe she had an emergency. Maybe she felt more unwell than she had let on and had to lie down."

Greggory grunted again.

We'd left the ball late, after all the servants had searched for my dagger and belt pouch. They had found the latter in a flowerpot on the lower level, all the money and possessions still inside. I couldn't make any sense of it. The dagger was still gone. Thankfully, the drawing of Lady Liya was safe with Greggory. I didn't want anyone asking awkward questions about it—not until I knew why those white hounds had killed Old Mother Baba to prevent her from passing on the information. I didn't even know who her source of information had been.

“Anyway, all that matters is making sure we meet again. It was definitely her, and it was a good first introduction. So far, we have been extremely lucky.” I sighed, flicking my hand through the air. “Though, I thought we might have a message from her by now. But then, there is no reason why she would know where we are staying.”

“Over half the city knows where we’re staying because of the gossip over visiting Harelin nobles and knights,” mumbled Gregory. “And this is the most expensive and prestigious inn in Ravi. Anyone trying to find us would search the Mayflower Inn first.”

I ignored him. “So we must hunt for her. We must discover which guardian she is staying with while she is here and which social events she is likely to be attending. Lord Jarid might know already.”

Gregory sighed and tossed my belt back at me. I caught it one-handed and ran my fingers over the new leather thong. I would need to purchase a new dagger now since it appeared mine was thoroughly lost.

I sat up straight and rolled my shoulders, trying to persuade my body to feel more awake. “We could call on Lord Jarid this afternoon. He seemed to know her well and is very keen to help.”

Gregory pushed himself out of his chair as if the movement took tremendous effort. “I’ll ask the innkeeper for directions to his townhouse and have her send a runner to announce our intention of calling on him.”

I sat back and sipped my honeyed water. “Perfect. We can walk to Lord Jarid’s estate and look out for her on the way. Maybe stop at a few blacksmiths and jewelers for a new dagger. Oh, and when you speak to Mistress Kilmi, order some lunch at the same time. Thick bread, lightly toasted, creamed goat’s cheese and cress with the stalks cut off.”

Gregory grumbled something as he left the room. Sometimes I wondered if he realized that I paid him to be a servant and that required him to work.

I sighed, stretching my back, and headed to the room next door to tell the knights of our plan.

## CHAPTER 5

# MAISIE



I swung my basket as I walked down the cobbled street, past the gaudy Mayflower Inn, humming a tune. The early afternoon sun was hot and cheerful, and I lowered the brim of my wide straw hat to keep its glare from my face while enjoying the warmth.

Daisy had brought the dresses as planned, eighteen in total, without any mishaps. And Mistress Faye had finally given me permission to leave my position in court as Lady Liya. I would write Lord Jarid a letter, saying my mother had sent for me since my sister was sick, and simply disappear.

No more tedious balls and repetitive conversations with men talking about *carpets* and expecting me to be impressed. I would take the week off to celebrate and stay in my apartment, reading and eating cheese and crackers with huge mugs of hot chocolate and spiced tea. I had enough cheese in my basket to last a month.

I turned up a narrow street that carriages avoided since it led straight up the hill. Nobody except Mistress Faye knew the location of the two small rooms I called my own, which was exactly how I liked it. I could be left alone.

A laugh reverberated through the crowd and my senses became alert. I recognized the sound.

*Great! What are the chances of him being here?*

Pulling the brim of my hat even lower, I glanced back. Prince Thomas was causing a ripple in the crowd. City folk naturally gave such richly dressed people a wide berth, though



the streets here were narrow and winding. His pretentiously handsome face and tall build were attracting a lot of attention. How were some people born with everything while the rest of us had next to nothing?

Well, at least I was born with one unusual, helpful trait. I turned ahead and changed my hair with a simple thought to short, straight, and brown with a thick fringe. I moved to the side of the street so the white balconies dripping with tiny flowers and vines would shade my face. For some unknown reason, this street had some of the best flowers in Ravi, even though it was too narrow for many hours of sunlight, and they seemed to get better every week. The abundant tiny flowers of sapphire, crimson, and lilac were one of the things I liked about this road, especially as they distracted people away from the shadows.

And Prince Thomas was no exception. Though he was keeping an eye on the faces around him and did a double take every time he passed a blonde woman, his attention was constantly drawn to the waterfalls of color dropping from the balconies. I grinned, half hoping that my seductive act of the previous night was the reason he was searching so intensely in the crowd. It was always nice to receive a compliment. But I didn't want to be found again. He might be a Prince who appeared to have everything, but Lady Liya would stay out of his reach forever.

I kept my head down and wove through the people, past large barrels catching drips of water from the roofs and a boy playing his accordion on white stone steps, past a pop-up vendor selling fur hats for the coming winter, and another selling painted silk fans for the present season.

This district up the hill was occupied by people with my preferred level of wealth. Not rich enough to be pretentious or unwelcoming like those near the Mayflower Inn. Yet safe enough for me to walk alone in the dark without being bothered by drunks.

The street became steeper with a small flight of steps every few yards. I glanced behind me, pleased to see Prince Thomas and Gregory were now out of sight. I unlocked the unmarked

door of my apartment which was squeezed between a haberdashery and a much more ornate house door. Whenever somebody looked here, their attention always fell to either side. My dark door with peeling paint avoided any interest.

As I closed and double bolted the door behind myself, the tension left my shoulders as I finally shut the world away. I had been lucky to have noticed Prince Thomas when I had. The Prince was the last person I felt like talking to right now. It would be hard to come across as placid and brainless when I had so much energy coursing through my limbs. I needed to relax and let all the stress of the last few weeks melt away. I slipped a sweet into my mouth.

*Banana.*

I would have a bath to unwind, then it would be books and cheese and crackers. I patted my basket.

There was only enough space by the front door to hang up my shawl and sun hat. Two flights of rickety wooden stairs that led to my bedroom and kitchen started almost immediately in front of the door. My legs felt heavy as I hauled myself up, standing close to the edges out of habit to prevent them from creaking, even though nobody else ever came to my apartment.

I bent my free hand to the back of my dress and started losing the ties on the back of my bodice as I opened the door at the top of the stairs with my foot.

Something was wrong.

I froze, my instincts screaming as I struggled to identify what had triggered them. It was cold. Far, far too cold.

Nothing moved, and from the doorway, the room appeared empty.

I placed the basket on the floor and drew the Prince's dagger, heavy and unfamiliar, along with my own stiletto. What would make a room cold?

I rolled the sweet across the roof of my mouth, though I could no longer taste it.

*You're in control.*

I stepped back toward the stairs. A shift in the air made me duck. Arms reached me from behind. How had anyone gotten behind me? There hadn't been space for me to pass them, and the door was bolted. I kicked out and hooked the brute of a man around the back of his knee. He overbalanced, stepped back, and tumbled down the stairs when his foot only found air. He knocked into another man lurking behind him, just as huge and muscular.

*How had they gotten behind me? How?*

A low feral growl sent cold shivers of terror down my spine. I'd never heard anything make a sound like that. My lungs no longer contained air. I edged away from the stairs and turned back to my room, dreading what I was about to see. Three bone-white creatures were stalking toward me; they appeared similar to giant wolves, only their eyes were milky and wild, their jaws elongated, and they had no fur. Bony protrusions broke through their almost-translucent skin, including antlers that crowned their skulls. Their breath misted from their drooling mouths, and even from here, it stank of rotting meat. I hadn't smelled that moments before. What was going on? What even were these creatures?

The closest creature pounced, its eyes on my throat. I threw myself to one side and rolled to my feet. In the doorway, the shadow of one of the large men appeared. I was completely outnumbered.

There was only one way I could think of to survive this. I didn't want Prince Thomas's help, but my need for self-preservation won out—I didn't want to die.

I dashed to the window, turning my hair long and blonde as I fumbled with the latch while still holding both blades. Claws scratched wood behind me, and I lashed out blindly with the dagger. A weight collided with my side, making me stagger as I brought my arms across my chest away from teeth and claws. My eyes closed by reflex, and I kicked out, my foot connecting with hard muscle. A claw dug into my leg as the creature pushed away from me. I yelped.

I opened my eyes and saw the creature had caught the window when it attacked, swinging it open. I stood, kicking out again as the creature turned toward me, and I grabbed the windowsill with one hand.

“Prince Thomas!” I screamed. The creature shifted back on its haunches, the muscles in its back rippling as it prepared to strike again. I threw myself half out the window. “Prince Thomas, help me!”

I barely dared look down in the street for him as I clambered the rest of the way onto the windowsill. If only I wasn't wearing so many layers of skirts. “Thomas!”

The creature launched itself at the window with a snarl, flashing its teeth. I kicked out with my boot, hitting it in the muzzle. It didn't retreat like I had hoped, but twisted its head and locked its teeth around my ankle. I felt the teeth sink through the soft leather and into my skin. I screamed and kicked it hard with my other foot, dropping the stiletto and gripping the window frame for balance. It started to pull back into the room, dragging me inside with it. I clung to the window, knowing the moment I let my grip slip, I would end up in that room being set upon from all sides. Ripped apart by icy fangs.

“Lady Liya! Jump!”

I looked down to see Prince Thomas's servant directly below me with his arms wide. A bundle of something lay at his feet. It didn't look like a very trustworthy landing.

The creature yanked harder on my leg, shaking his head as if trying to tear my joints. Pain lanced up my ankle, making me scream again and kick at it harder. Below, more people were gathering in the street. Where was that useless Prince?

My grip on the window was slipping. The other two creatures were stalking closer, ready to pounce as soon as I hit the floor. I made a last desperate decision.

I pulled on the windowsill with all my might, yanking my leg and ignoring the pain as teeth tore skin. I twisted and threw my weight backward out of the window, using gravity to help

pull my foot from the creature's bite. I swung down headfirst, cutting off my view of the monster, coming to a halt hanging upside down on the outside of the building. My body banged against the rough stone wall, and my skirts billowed around me, but I could feel the creature skidding toward me over the floor, my boot slipping, slipping...

*Let go. Please, let go.*

My foot came free from my boot, and I plummeted. Screams shrieked around me. Arms caught me, awkwardly, merely cushioning my fall and jerking my neck before we both collapsed to the cobblestones.

I groaned and rolled free, pain blossoming in many places. My ankle burned as if on fire from the creature's bite.

Greggory crouched next to me, his glasses askew and his cheeks flushed. "I'm dreadfully sorry for the bad landing, my lady. Are you hurt?"

My heart refused to slow, and I couldn't manage a reply. I looked back up to the window, expecting an icy beast to launch itself after me at any moment.

Nothing.

I staggered to my feet, the dagger still in my hand. Then I remembered it was Prince Thomas's and hid it before anyone noticed. My ankle almost buckled under my weight.

I slipped a sweet into my mouth, taking deep breaths to calm myself so I could think clearly. "Greggory, where is Prince Thomas? Wasn't he with you?"

The man finished straightening his glasses. "He ran ahead as soon as he heard your screams. Knocked down your front door." He gestured at the wooden mess that I had walked through only moments before.

My heart stuttered as my mouth fell open. "He's up there?" My eyes flew back up to the open window. "But there were two men and three giant white wolves. Something like wolves anyway, only they were hairless with antlers."

Greggory was staring at me as if I were mad. Perhaps I was.

I grabbed his shoulders and shook him. “We must save him.”

Movement caught my eye, and I looked back up to the window. Prince Thomas was leaning out, his sword drawn but the blade was clean.

“Are you alright, Lady Liya?”

I gaped at him. Surely, he hadn’t just defeated all of my assailants by himself. Barely a hair on his carefully groomed head was out of place.

Before I could reply, he swiveled, dropped his body weight to his fingers, and dangled from the window frame for a second before letting go. He landed in an elegant crouch beside me in a little cloud of dust. It couldn’t have been more different from my wild upside-down escape.

What an insufferable show off! But how could he be so calm after facing literal monsters?

His eyes went straight to my bootless foot. Though it burned from the bite wound there, I was surprised to see no blood. Thankfully, my skirt was long enough to cover where my stocking was torn from the creature’s teeth. Then he gestured to my upper arm where blood was soaking through my silk sleeve.

The cockiness vanished from his face and was replaced by concern. “You’re hurt.”

I stared at the cut. I hadn’t even realized I’d hurt myself there; I must have caught it on a bit of the windowsill. It hurt a lot less than the burning bite on my ankle. And I could feel a bruise on my thigh from the creature’s claws. “I think it’s just superficial.” I really didn’t need him fawning over me.

He frowned and stood, his hand hovering over the injury on my arm. “May I, my lady? I need to ensure it hasn’t bitten you.”

Was he really going to make a big deal over the small cut? I hesitated, but in front of the gathering crowd of people, I supposed I had better play along. I nodded and tried not to wince as Prince Thomas cut through the silk of my sleeve with a knife to reveal the wound. Gregory stood next to me so I could lean on him for support. I wished the crowds would go away. I didn't want news of this to spread. Though I supposed I would have to find another place to live now anyway.

Had Mistress Faye sold me out by telling somebody the location of my apartment? Or did those creatures have another way of finding me? And why would they want to kill me?

Thomas's face seemed relieved. "It's just a scratch. No bite marks. For some reason when they bite, those injuries don't seem to bleed."

I froze, my eyes snapping to his. "You recognized what attacked me? You know what they are?" I clenched my teeth as his fingers touched tender flesh. It was just a small scratch; I was used to far worse. Couldn't he leave it alone? The leg wound hurt a lot worse, but I didn't need his help.

Thomas nodded. "Three monsters attacked me, but I slew them. Two shadowy men fled as soon as I entered the room. You were dangling from the window at the time. They just... walked into a wall and vanished." He cocked his head to look at me with a lopsided smile. "Don't worry, my lady, I am unharmed."

As if that was my chief worry. I faked a relieved smile. "Thank goodness. But what are they? How did you kill them so easily?"

He hesitated, then took a flask of water and started washing my scratch, soaking the rest of my sleeve. Gregory handed him some ointment from his belt pouch, and Thomas applied it to the wound, the cool balm soothing as it stung. "I've seen them before. I learned how to kill them."

I frowned, struggling to believe his words. They had been very strong and seemed hard to kill. Let alone three at once. "Where have you seen them? What are they?"

He wrapped several clean linen strips—again, provided by Gregory—around my arm with surprising tenderness. I wondered why he was doing this himself rather than taking me to a servant or healer. Maybe it was part of his wooing act. Maybe I should have been less flirtatious the first time we met, but the damage was done. He was infatuated with Lady Liya.

He stood back and met my gaze, his expression both serious and earnest. This close, I could see glints of gold in his warm brown eyes, and I resisted the urge to step back from him. “We saw them in Harelin. A month ago, I never believed in monsters or things that could appear and disappear through walls. Now I’ve seen them twice.” He paused and looked down. “They killed an old lady known as Old Mother Baba. She was said to be hundreds of years old and able to grant wishes and magical items. I don’t know how much of that is true, but we found her frozen body and these creatures waiting for us.” He lifted his hand to my arm and his thumb brushed a small, hesitant arc. “They may be after you. We need to protect you.”

Gregory was giving him a meaningful look as if expecting him to say more, but Prince Thomas waved him away, and before I could object, he bent and literally swept me off my feet, carrying me against his chest.

I squealed. “I can walk. Please put me down. This is quite unnecessary.”

Thomas grimaced. “You’re limping and only have one boot. You’re obviously in pain, not to mention that these streets are hardly clean.”

I glared at him, my mask starting to drop. “I mildly twisted it as I fell. Now, put me down.”

He gave me a placating smile. “You just fell from a second story window onto Gregory, and I’d be willing to bet he didn’t catch you very well. I suspect it’s more than slightly twisted. We need to get you somewhere safe. Were you staying in that place alone?”

I thought hard for something plausible for a lady of my supposed station. “It was my private space where I went to



think. I've been staying with a friend while I'm visiting Ravi."

He nodded and shifted his arms so I rolled into his chest. "We can take you there, and then, together, we can figure out who is hunting you and what those creatures are. Let me call a carriage, and you can give the driver directions."

I licked my lips and squirmed in his arms. He pulled me closer, and I was surprised by his strength. But I had to escape.

If these creatures were after me, I needed to get all the information from him that I could and then go into hiding as quickly as possible. Then I would disappear from Prince Thomas's life before he discovered anything more about me.

I needed to handle this carefully.

I relaxed back into Thomas's arms and let my head lean against his chest. I heard his heart rate pick up even as his body relaxed slightly. His dark eyes flickered down to mine, his lips parting, before he concentrated on climbing the winding path and avoiding the jostling people. We reached the busy intersection where the wide adjoining street led straight to the heart of the city, and he called to a carriage. A warmth crept into my chest as I studied his face when his attention was off me. I had to begrudgingly admit that I was attracted to him. Physically, anyway. Not his annoying, cocky, self-centered personality. But there was something reassuring about the solidness of him. He was the sort of person that the world rotated around, and everything simply clicked into place for him. The opposite of me for whom fighting was necessary merely to survive. We were darkness and light. Incompatible.

I hid a sigh and refocused as the pain in my ankle increased. My instinctive attraction was not important and didn't need to be acknowledged. All that mattered was that he was attracted to me, and I could use that as long as I hid my true self from him.

*Just get the information and get out.*

He stopped walking as a carriage pulled up in front of us. "What happened at the end of the ball? I returned with your apple juice, but you had vanished."

I looked down at my hands resting over my stomach, pretending to be embarrassed. “I’m sorry, Your Highness. I was feeling increasingly dizzy and unwell. I feared I was about to do something embarrassing, so I called one of the servants to take me to a palace guest room. I was going to send you a message, but I must admit, I was so exhausted, I fell asleep. I awoke the next morning and felt it was too late to explain myself.” I swept up my eyes, keeping my chin pointed down so my gaze was shadowed beneath my heavy lashes. I could hear his heart stumble as our eyes met. “Please forgive my rudeness.”

“Of course,” he mumbled, faint color entering his tanned cheeks. “Here’s our carriage.”

He carried me up the step without issue and set me down on the seat. He settled opposite me and motioned for Gregory to sit outside with the driver. As he closed the door, I felt uncomfortable, trapped in the small space with him. I unclipped my fan from my bag and slipped a sweet into my mouth.

*Cranberry.*

I clicked it around my teeth, the mask of Lady Liya settling calmly over me, obscuring all my real feelings. I unfurled the fan with an elegant flick of my wrist and used it to beat the air as if I were flustered.

I *was* flustered. Those white wolves had affected me more than I wanted to admit.

“Thank you for your aid, Your Highness. You are very kind to go out of your way like this.”

He smiled as he leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. Our bodies were not far from touching. His face was so open and readable, I felt sorry for him. Anyone could take advantage of him. Though he had come from a life where he got everything he wanted, so what did it matter? He was a crown prince, and when he displayed that easy, lopsided smile, I could see why people fell for him. He was too good-looking for his own good.

Too bad he was an idiot.

My ankle throbbed. He couldn't find out about that injury, or it would be harder for me to escape. He would be too worried, and I didn't want to rely on him further. I didn't want him to know how vulnerable I was. I just needed to know what to do, and then I could sort it out myself. "You said it was good the creature hadn't bitten me. Why? Are their bites that bad?"

His face darkened. "If they bite you, strange white lines spread under your skin from the injury, and slowly, you start to freeze into a statue from the inside out. Once your entire body is frozen, you die."

Shock and cold flooded my body.

I licked my lips as my heart started to pound. "Are you sure? You've seen this?"

He nodded. "More than once, I'm afraid. Now what address should I ask for?"

I looked out the window to have the space to think, but aware that the carriage driver would start getting impatient. I needed to get to Mistress Faye's as quickly as possible. She would know what to do.

I hated needing her help, but I knew exactly how her mind worked, and the cost was predictable. I gave an address that would take us over Whitestone Bridge and held onto the side of the carriage as it lurched into action.

I could feel Thomas's eyes on me as I continued to look out of the window and tried to concentrate on something else as warmth spread over my cheeks. If only he knew who he really shared this carriage with. I wasn't sweet Lady Liya at all. If only he knew, he would be avoiding my eye contact and sitting as far away from me as possible. In fact, he wouldn't have gotten in a coach with me at all.

Pain from my ankle lanced up to my knee, as I tried to wiggle my toes. They were going numb. How much time did I have? I didn't want to ask Thomas in case I roused his suspicions.

We reached Whitestone Bridge, and as the carriage started to climb up its graceful curve, I straightened my back, pointing outside. “Stop the carriage!” I thumped twice on the wood and heard the driver shouting a hurried command to the horses.

Thomas leaned forward. “What? What is it?”

“I saw my friend.” I stood and hid my pain, leaning over him in the cramped space so he couldn’t stand without bumping into me. “She makes healing salves. Stay here, I won’t be a minute.”

His mouth opened, but I didn’t wait for him to speak before I opened the door. I hid my limp as I climbed out. To my surprise, he remained seated. I hadn’t expected that to work. He was so ridiculously trusting.

I slipped down the side of the carriage, where neither the Prince nor those driving could see me and changed my hair from gold to floor-length black. I wished I had a cloak, but it was still hung on its peg at home. Most of my cloaks had a lining of a different color on each side so I could turn them inside out to become somebody else at a moment’s notice.

“Lady Liya?”

The carriage rocked behind me, and I guessed that was Prince Thomas standing. Time to disappear.

I bent my head and changed my walk to that of an older woman, heading back the way we had come. Each step was agony, and my foot wouldn’t quite obey me. I gritted my teeth, reaching the stairs that led under the single curve of the bridge to the canal. Behind me, Prince Thomas called my name again, this time with an edge of panic and frustration.

I limped down the stairs and onto a small jetty under the bridge. A beggar boy sat there, throwing stones into the water. He didn’t look up as I approached. “She won’t be pleased with you bringing strangers so close to the apothecary.”

I ignored him and knocked five times on the dull door built into the wall of the bridge.

## CHAPTER 6

# MAISIE



I put a sweet into my mouth before I opened the door, needing the extra courage. I swayed as my injured leg started to buckle under my weight.

*Apple.*

A bell tinkled from the other side of the wood as I opened the door.

Mistress Faye looked up from her worktable as I entered, and I didn't miss the slight widening of her eyes before she hid her surprise. Caution and suspicion built inside me. Had she given away my address to whomever had sent those cold white creatures and the men who could walk through walls? Had she expected to never see me again?

She was slicing through dried herbs, the air heavy with their floral scent. Her chair grated over the flagstones as she pushed it back and wiped her hands on her stained apron. It was impossible to guess her age. Her hair was pure white, always tied into a neat bun, yet a few wrinkles bracketed her eyes and mouth. Her face was round, smooth, and bland. She had looked that way for as long as I could remember.

"Maisie, I wasn't expecting you again so soon." Her eyes narrowed. "Are you the cause of the shouting on the bridge? You had better not have led anyone here."

I shook my head and smiled to ease her nerves, though I could tell she saw straight through it. "They didn't see where I went." I softened my tone when she frowned. "I am sorry. I'm injured so I had little choice."

She raised an eyebrow, her eyes going to the bandage around my arm. “Injured?”

My mind flitted through a dozen ways I could approach this conversation—a dozen ways this could go wrong. I decided to play it safe, at least, until I knew more.

I kept my tone carefully neutral. “I was ambushed in my flat. I’m not safe there. I think it’s best if I lie low. These people could be after me and may have been following me for a while.”

She sighed and set down her knife with a clunk. “You were careless then.”

I rolled the sweet on my tongue as her dismissive words caused me to tremble, creating a crack in my armor that could widen and swallow me whole.

I lowered my eyes so I wouldn’t seem defiant. The innocent, helpless act was often my best defense. “I am always careful, Mistress. I always change my appearance before entering my flat. I don’t understand how they could know I lived there. And besides, they seemed to have...otherworldly powers.” I raised my eyes to study her reaction as I said the last words. Did she have something to do with this or not?

The older woman watched me with pale eyes, giving nothing away.

I dragged in a deep breath. I needed her help, even if I couldn’t trust her. And I had no other choice now. “There were big white hairless wolves with antlers and misting breath. One of them bit me, but the wound isn’t behaving normally. I can’t feel my leg, and my knee is refusing to fully bend. It’s rapidly getting worse, like I’m slowly freezing...or turning to stone.”

Even as I spoke, cold chills ran through my body, and I blinked away a wave of dizziness. Mistress Faye shifted her feet, a finger tapping her lips. Something flickered behind her eyes.

I pulled up my skirt and petticoat and sat down on a low wooden stool. I winced as I moved my leg out and tore off my stocking. Then I gasped. The flesh around each puncture

wound was cold and hard, and a tiny spiderweb of white was spreading beneath the skin, just like Thomas had described. The frosty network already covered a large proportion of my lower leg and was bracketing my knee. Had any of the people he'd mentioned—the ones who had been bitten—survived? Fear ignited in my chest, and I popped a second sweet into my mouth.

*Orange.*

I concentrated on the tangy sweetness, and my heart rate steadied.

Mistress Faye stepped around the table, and her eyes widened as she analyzed the situation. Her finger continued tapping her lips at the same frequency. Tap, tap, tap...

My nerves grew. If she couldn't heal this, I was dead.

At last, her finger curled down, and she met my eyes with pursed lips. I could only hope she deemed me worth helping. "You've been bitten by a Winter Hound. Their bite is toxic."

"I've never heard of them."

"They come from the realm of the Ancients. Winter is hunting you, girl."

I swallowed the remains of the sweet and licked my lips. "Winter? What? Why?"

Mistress Faye shrugged and turned back to the table to wind string around a bundle of herbs.

I looked away, my mind racing. The Ancients were seen by most as folklore, but I knew Mistress Faye had made deals with their kind before. She always said they paid a lot for strange things.

*Strange things.*

I shrunk my hair to a short boyish style. "Is it because of my hair? Or is that the reason my hair can grow and shrink—because I have blood from their realm? Would they know who my parents were?" When she turned and only blinked at me, I changed tactics. She always suppressed conversations about



my hair and forbade anyone from talking about it. Was this why?

I looked back at my leg, the white frost spreading its web under my skin. I swallowed, trying not to appear frantic. “Will you help me? Do you know how to heal the bite wound?”

The woman folded her arms and pulled up a stool to sit between me and the table of herbs. My heart called out to her for comfort or kind words, even a sympathetic smile, and I steeled myself, stopping the reaction before it could lead to pain. I wasn’t sure why I still looked for those things from her when they were so rare.

Mistress Faye spoke with her eyes on my leg. “I can help you, but you know how I operate. Will it be worth it for me? Winter is greedy as well as wealthy. If they are truly after you, they would pay a lot.”

I closed my eyes. I had expected the words, but they still stung. *Help me because I have worked for you all these years. Help me because you’re the closest thing to a mother I’ve ever had.* But of course, I could never say such things out loud.

I opened my eyes and looked at her full on. “I am valuable to you. You knew that years ago when you bought me from the orphanage. Nobody else can do what I can. I have brought you wealth and helped your political maneuverings. I can’t aid you if I am dead.”

Mistress Faye’s expression remained impassive. “You can if your death brings me wealth from Winter.”

I took a deep breath and took another gamble, my chest constricting at the risk. “You already have money from them. You told them where I lived. Why not play both sides and take your price from both of us? Heal me. Hide me, and they won’t know you interfered.”

A slow smile spread up the lady’s plump cheeks, and she cocked her head. I could almost convince myself that I saw fondness in her eyes, but I could never truly believe that. Believing anyone cared always led to pain.

“Hmm, you want to play a very dangerous game, girl.” Her eyes flickered back down to my ankle. “What is the one thing that can always banish Winter?”

I frowned. “Spring?”

She nodded. “Spring is always Winter’s death.”

I shook my head. “None of this makes any sense. Who are the Ancients? What *is* Winter?”

She moved as quick as a viper’s strike and grabbed my hands. I pulled back, startled, but her long-fingered-grip was like iron, almost painful.

“I have some medicine from Spring, but it is very rare. I will heal your wound and keep you safe, but it will have a high price.”

I swallowed. “And otherwise, you will sell me to Winter?”

She smiled, sadness in her eyes. “Otherwise, the poison will spread, and you will be dead within a day. I will give your dead body to Winter.”

The air left my lungs. “Help me,” I whispered, already knowing what she would ask for. “Take me back to my old home.”

---

Thomas

*PLEASE LET HER BE ALRIGHT.*

I ran my fingers through my hair and tugged at the roots. It didn’t make any sense. How had she vanished into thin air? Again. And why were those creatures after her? What if she had been hurt worse than we thought and was freezing solid? What if she had somehow fallen into the canal and drowned? What if those shadowy men had returned?

Tristan was still leading a search party of locals, but we had already combed the area for an hour and found nothing.

I banged my forehead gently against the cool glass of the windowpane as if my frustration would make her magically appear in the street below me. When she didn't, I resumed pacing.

Because the sun had begun to set, Gregory had dragged me into a tavern to stop for dinner, but my food lay untouched in our private dining room. His was long since devoured.

"I shouldn't be in here," I murmured. "I should be out there. What if she's freezing to death and only my sword can save her?" I returned to the window and scanned the street once more.

"I think it's time," Gregory said in an exasperated voice behind me, "to think about this logically. We need an actual plan."

I sighed, expecting the whole 'I told you so' lecture. I really didn't have the patience for it right now.

I pressed my forehead against the cool glass, still watching the street below. "Why would somebody who is clearly attracted to me keep running away from me, especially when she's in danger? Is she intimidated by my station? Does she love somebody else? Maybe she has a pre-existing betrothal. Maybe she's shy. That is, if she's even still alive!"

Gregory sighed. "Or maybe she doesn't like you and doesn't want you following her around."

I turned from the window and gave him a flat look, tensing my jaw with the effort to stay calm. He was perched in an armchair, a book open on his lap. He shrugged. "You should focus. She's fine, sire. If something bad had happened, there would have been a commotion or signs of a struggle. She ordered the carriage to stop and walked off. She *wanted* to slip away."

I turned around to face him and dragged in a deep breath. "She snuggled into me, Greg. *Snuggled*. And when she looked me straight in the eyes, I could see the color rise in her cheeks. You can't fake something like that. And besides, she must know that I like her. A lot." I flung up my hands. "I even saved

her from those monsters! Surely that is a significant step forward in our relationship! What are the chances I would be so close to her location when she was attacked? And after showing her I could protect her, why would she run away while she was still in danger?"

He shrugged. "Well, I still think we need a plan. And my name is *Greggory*."

I slumped into a seat and pinched the bridge of my nose. I shouldn't need a plan to woo a girl. Romance didn't involve Greggory-style plans.

But strange mythological monsters and disappearing men probably did. If they were after her, I had to save her. Once I removed the threat, hopefully, she would stop running and everything else would fall into place. It would show her my commitment to her welfare and how much I cared.

I leaned forward, my elbows on my knees. "So what's your plan?"

He held up his hand, three fingers spread out. "I've been thinking we should have a multi-pronged attack. First, we must find out everything we can about Lady Liya. So far nobody seems to know much, and I am suspicious. She clearly meant to escape us just now, and nobody saw anything."

I shifted in my seat, running a hand up and down from my shoulder to my elbow. "I'm not sure I like the idea of asking people questions about her behind her back. It feels... dishonest. Rude."

Greggory ignored me. "Second, we need to find out everything we can about these white creatures and Old Mother Baba. There might be texts in the royal library that we don't have in Harelin. I suggest we give this job to the knights."

I stared at him. "You think the men will agree to read children's stories when those creatures are out there freezing people to death?"

He still ignored me. I was fairly confident that most servants didn't ignore their princes. "Once we know more,

hopefully, we can remove that threat. And we should also discover the reason your sword turns the beasts to snow.”

I forced myself to eat a few mouthfuls of food. I needed the energy to keep going. “Did I detect jealousy in your voice?”

He frowned, and his spectacles slipped down his nose. “No, I...”

I patted the sword hilt, the joke easing my anxiety despite this out-of-control situation and my annoyance at Gregory. “Don’t worry, I understand. Everyone wants a magic sword. Only problem is you wouldn’t be able to lift it.”

He sighed. “Your Highness, you make me carry your bags almost every day. You treat me like a packhorse. Of course, I can lift your stupid sword.”

I shrugged. “Didn’t see you killing any monsters back at Old Mother Baba’s.”

He closed the dusty book with a heavy thump. “You wouldn’t have even found her without me making the Rapunzel-Rampion-Ramton connection. Now stop getting distracted.” He held up the remaining finger. “Third, you need to decide what you’re going to tell her. If she is the answer to restoring Harelin, she needs to know that.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I feel like we should get to know each other first. It’s a lot more of a shock finding out you’ve got to marry a stranger, than marrying a friend you already like.”

He folded his arms. “She still deserves to know. It’s her choice.”

I fiddled with my hands. “I would like her to marry me because she wants to, not because she has to. If I tell her, I would never know.”

Gregory looked uncomfortable. “But that *is* why you’re marrying her. She deserves to know why you are paying her so much attention. You’re doing this for Harelin, not for Lady Liya.”

I looked back out the window. I hated how he made me sound like I was being dishonest. I was meant to be the charming Prince who was above reproach. “Well, let’s find her first and make sure she’s safe. Or find what’s hunting her and eliminate it. Preferably both.”

Greggory tilted his head and gentled his voice. “You realize that to break the curse, you just have to marry her. You don’t need love for the marriage to happen. It can be a simple agreement of necessity between the two of you, and that will rule out any misunderstandings.”

I frowned. “Of course, marriage needs love. Nobody wants to marry somebody they don’t love, or at least, who they don’t like a lot. Not to mention my mother would hate to see me marry for duty. And then there’re the people. They see me as their Golden Prince, Greggory. They want to see a glorious, epic love story between me and my perfect woman. And, to be honest, I believe I’m half in love with her already.”

Greggory muttered something in a scathing tone as he ran his hand down his face. He cleared his throat. “There’s one other thing that’s been bothering me.”

It was my turn to give a heavy sigh. “I can’t wait to hear it.”

He held up the heavy book he had been reading. “It’s about Kobar attacking Harelin seventeen years ago.” He pursed his lips, still deep in thought. “Why did you think they invaded and killed the royal family?”

I shrugged. “Why are all wars fought? For resources. We have more abundant harvests. Or we did before the famine. They wanted Harelin’s fertile lands and killed the Meradians so they could rule both regions with a smaller risk of uprisings. They were greedy.”

Greggory tapped his lips. “That’s what we assumed, isn’t it. It was the only reason we could think of. But in these history books there’s nothing about a food shortage. Nothing about restless armies or kings seeking glory. Barely anything is mentioned about the war at all.”

I shrugged. “They lost. They committed atrocities and murdered an entire family including a baby, not to mention many other nobles. Why would they record that?”

Greggory continued staring at the book with a frown I knew all too well. If I wasn’t careful, he would become lost to everything else but this new idea of his. “We just... communication has been so poor between our two countries due to our hatred and distrust of each other. Now we’re here and at peace, maybe we can finally consolidate our knowledge and make sense of the past.”

I squeezed his shoulder gently. “One problem at a time. Let’s focus on Lady Liya and these white beasts. Edward is still in town listening for any talk of more creature sightings, and who knows where Ryan is. But we can send Jonny and Tristan to the libraries right away. You can help them look in the right places. For the beasts, mind, not history. Then we can call on Lord Jarid...”

There was a sharp knock on the door. “Enter.”

Edward and Ryan strode in as if miraculously summoned by my words. Both looked bright and energized despite the last few hours. Hope rose in my chest.

“What did you find?”

Edward nodded to me in respect, using his palm to smooth down his grey-streaked hair. “Two things, Highness. First, nobody we talked to has seen these monsters in Ravi before or even heard of them. There aren’t any rumors or superstitions about white furless beasts. Second, Ryan thinks he knows where Lady Liya went.”

My eyes snapped to the younger man. “Where? How?”

Ryan made a half bow that seemed to emanate nervous energy. “I hope you don’t mind, Your Highness, but I trailed you earlier through town. I was making some enquiries when I heard the commotion caused by the white monsters attacking Lady Liya. I hung back and followed your carriage to cover your back. I could see she was injured, and I wanted to make sure those creatures didn’t return and attack you from behind.”

He paused and shifted his feet as if expecting a response from me. I motioned for him to continue, the anticipation unbearable.

“When you stopped on the bridge, I saw Lady Liya get out. She must have been carrying a black wig for she moved close to the carriage in a place you wouldn’t be able to see her, and suddenly, she had long black hair. She walked back to the start of the bridge and down some stairs to the canal. I followed from a distance and saw her go through an unmarked door that was watched by a beggar boy. I didn’t get close enough for him to see me.”

I threw up my hands in frustration. “Why didn’t you come and tell me this straightaway? It would have saved hours of stress and searching. I could have caught up with her by now.”

Ryan lifted his grey eyes to meet mine. “She is a hard woman to track. I thought it better that I didn’t lose her. With her skill for changing appearance, I didn’t want to take my eyes off her for a moment.”

I nodded, resting my chin on my hand and feeling increasingly uneasy. What on earth was going on?

“I understand. What happened then?”

“After a few minutes, she came back through the door with an older woman. This time her hair was short and brown, and she was wearing a black cloak. They got on a small punt and took off down the canal. I hired a rowboat and followed them down to the river as well as I could, but after they left the city, they abandoned the boat, and I lost them. They were moving with both stealth and speed. They didn’t want to be found, and they knew what they were doing. When I was certain I couldn’t locate them again, I came straight back.”

I frowned and massaged my temple. Was she fleeing from the hounds by leaving Ravi? Hadn’t I explained I could protect her? I should have shown her the sword. I supposed I was still little more than a stranger to her. A foreigner from a country with estranged relations with Kobar.



“Ryan, go back to the bridge as fast as possible and watch that door. Keep out of sight and make note of any comings and goings.” I turned to Edward. “Gather the knights. We should go to that door in strength and find out where Lady Liya has gone.”

Behind me, Gregory sighed as he threw down his book with far greater force than was necessary. “Not even one knight to the library?”

I shook my head. “Not until we know what we’re dealing with. I don’t want any more close calls. We’re going to be more cautious from now on, especially since it appears those white hounds are stalking and attacking Lady Liya. It sounds like she’s left the city, so we must be ready to follow as soon as we have her location.”

Gregory continued grumbling as he pulled on his coat. “Well, I guess we’ll discover things the hard way then. Take on the enemy blind. Put all our trust in a magic sword we don’t understand. You know, sometimes, it really is a case of more haste and less speed.”

## CHAPTER 7

# THOMAS



I knocked on the black peeling paint of the door.

“S’ not in,” said the beggar boy behind me as he kicked his feet in the canal, causing water to splash on my polished boots. He didn’t even look up.

I walked to his back. In the growing gloom of night, it was hard to make out his features. “When will she be back?”

The boy shrugged.

“What’s her name?”

He shrugged again, tension in his shoulders. I leaned over and dropped three gold coins into his lap.

The boy scoffed and set the coins rolling over the flagstones back toward me. “I’m no fool.”

I picked the coins back up, uneasy. I tried a different tactic. “Lady Liya is in danger. I know how to protect her. I just need to find her to keep her safe.”

His gaze stayed on the canal, his feet causing ripples. “She don’t need your help.”

I sighed and walked back up to the bridge, leaning on the stone railing. Why would she run away from me? Why? Was she bound by some terrible bargain to somebody else?

She was incredibly beautiful. Our relationship was starting well. So why would she do this? I gripped the smooth stone so hard my knuckles ached. It made no sense.

A voice behind me made me startle. “I hear you’re looking for me.”

I whirled around and found a round-faced woman with white hair frowning at me from within the fur-trimmed cowl of a cloak. I glanced at Ryan’s look-out spot on the jetty and he nodded. It was her.

I straightened and gave her a respectful nod. It took everything I had to restrain an outburst. “I am. I am looking for Lady Liya. You know where she is.” I clipped my words to keep them under control.

She smirked. “Long gone.”

My chest loosened. “She’s well? She’s not...injured?”

She nodded and started to turn back into the flow of the crowd crossing the bridge.

I lurched forward. “Wait. Tell me where she went and why she’s running, and I will pay you handsomely.”

She turned partially back and narrowed her eyes. “I don’t take kindly to being spied on.”

I blinked, taken aback. My hands trembled with impatience. “I am sorry to intrude. We are desperate.”

A gleam appeared in her eyes. “Very well. I could make an exception if I receive recompense. But you must never tell anyone else about me or the apothecary, understood?”

I nodded, my shoulders sagging in relief. I wasn’t used to begging people for information or cooperation, and I was certainly not used to being the one receiving orders. I was starting to feel like I was in over my head.

She tilted her head. “If you do tell anyone, I will kill you. Understood?”

I shifted. Threatening a Crown Prince typically meant war. But I needed her—she was my only lead. Also, she probably didn’t know who I was; she probably assumed I was just a Harelin lord, and I wanted to keep it that way. “I understand. I vow to tell nobody of you or your residence.”

She lifted her chin. “Good. We will speak somewhere else. I fear you may have already brought attention to my door. Do you like cinnamon tea? It’s a Kobar specialty.”

I shook my head, taken off balance by this strange woman. “I’ve never had it.”

One side of her lips curled up. “It is late now. I will see you at eight o’clock in the tea shop on Redhill Corner. You alone are to enter the shop and make sure you come with gold.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but she turned, and her dark cloak melted into the darkness.

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AFTER A SLEEPLESS NIGHT during which my thoughts had run riot in my mind without ceasing, I ate a quick, plain breakfast and, leaving Gregory in the library, headed out to find the tea shop.

I gestured for my knights to wait outside and keep alert. When Edward objected, I patted my sword to remind him I could handle myself.

I pushed the door open, the bell tinkling above me, and took in the tables divided by ornate screens.

The woman from last night was waiting for me, straight backed at one of the tables. She wore a black dress with a high neck and frothed lace at her wrists. She gestured to the seat opposite her and called to the waitress to order something before I’d had a chance to read the menu. Her pale blue eyes met mine again. “I see you brought your men with you.”

I suppressed a surge of annoyance. “You said I was to enter the shop alone. I have done that. They won’t intrude unless I call for them.” I waved two fingers at Edward through the glass of the window who shifted backward in response. I wanted to show this woman that I was well protected and that she would be unwise to try anything.

The serving girl brought us two cups of steaming tea and an engraved metal pot of hot water, its spout shaped like a dragon. My tea smelled of cinnamon and apple.

The woman clinked a silver spoon around her cup until I was biting my tongue with impatience. Her skin seemed unnaturally smooth and emotionless. At last, she spoke.

“Now, tell me what you want to know and what you’re willing to pay for it.”

I took a sip of the tea, scalding my lips as I slowed my heartbeat. I couldn’t get over the feeling that this was some sort of test.

“I want to know everything about Lady Liya, including why she ran away from me, and where she has gone. I want to know if she’s in trouble.”

The lady pursed her lips and sipped her own berry-red tea. “‘Everything’ is a big word.”

I leaned forward. “What is your price?”

She shifted in her seat as if calculating my worth. “What do you plan to do with this information?”

I hesitated. “I’m hoping to persuade Lady Liya to return with me to Harelin.”

She looked down into her tea and stirred it again. “Hmm, good. That would work well for all of us. While she is in Kobar, there is always the risk Winter will come for me in order to get to her. In truth, I would like her out of my hands. She has become more trouble than she is worth.”

Her words deepened my confusion and my concerns. Why would a lady of Liya’s rank be in this woman’s hands? “What is Winter?”

She leaned forward. “If you pay me ten thousand gold pieces, I will not only give you the information about Lady Liya, I will also tell you how to get her to Harelin.” She dropped her voice slightly. “*And* I will tell you what hunts her. Believe me when I say nobody else knows what I do in Ravi.”

I released my breath, shaking my head in shock. Ten thousand gold. A lifetime of wealth. But if this was the cost of getting Lady Liya to Harelin and ending the famine, so be it.

“I agree. You have my word. I can give you five hundred today. For the rest, I can give you a signed and sealed letter granting you permission to take it from the treasury of Harelin.” I held out my hand for her to shake.

She studied me for a moment, her eyes seeming to see right through to my soul. “It seems we have a deal.” She took my hand and shook it, her velvet glove feeling delicate beneath my fingers. She topped up her teacup with hot water. I fought against fidgeting with impatience. Whatever trouble Lady Liya was in, I would save her.

“Lady Liya’s real name is Maisie. She is not a noble lady. I found her in an orphanage when she was five. Since then, she has played various roles to steal things for me.”

The world seemed to fall away. She was a thief? Surely that was impossible.

“She was running away to prevent you discovering the truth, and because she trusts nobody.”

I swallowed down a sour taste in my mouth and sipped my tea, concentrating on calming my racing heart. It was no wonder Lady Liya...Maisie trusted nobody when she lived in a world where I could buy her secrets from the woman supposedly helping her. The woman before me didn’t even seem uneasy. She acted like she couldn’t wait to be rid of the girl.

“She is running from Winter—those giant white monsters that attacked her in her room and the shadowy men who can walk through walls. They’re called Winter Hounds and Frost Ghosts. Both are very, very dangerous. She asked me to help her escape them, so I’ve hidden her in a place that is hard for them to penetrate. Though, I am sure they will try.”

I swallowed, a jolt of real fear for Maisie making me lean forward. “Where?”

“A tower three miles north of the fork in River Denu. It sits in the wild meadows. Few travel there. It would be very hard for Winter to get into the tower. She is safe there. For now.”

I looked down at the table and clenched my hands. “I can protect her.”

“I don’t think that will be the main issue.” I looked up in question and took in the woman’s amused expression. “Your biggest problem will be her cooperation. As I said, she trusts nobody.”

I sat back with sudden caution. “What are you suggesting?”

The woman pulled a wrinkled paper bag from her coat pocket. “Maisie loves boiled sugar sweets. In fact, she can barely survive without them. Her food source in the tower is basic. The only sweets there are the ones already on her person. She will want these.”

I reached out and took the bag. I raised an eyebrow. This woman really thought I could persuade Maisie to trust me using sweets?

“The blue sweets contain a strong sleeping concoction. One will knock her out, then if you keep dissolving them in her mouth periodically, they should buy you enough time to reach Harelin while she remains unconscious.”

My mouth fell open. “You’re suggesting I should drug and then kidnap her?”

She shrugged. “I suspect it will be the only way. It will certainly be the most efficient way. I want her out of Kobar, so I’ve provided you with a strategy. But do as you will. Keep them.”

I frowned to show my displeasure as I pocketed the sweets. I was the golden Crown Prince of Harelin. I was honorable. I didn’t deceive or trick people. “The ones that aren’t blue are safe?”

She nodded.



At least I had a peace offering to give her after buying her secrets if I removed the blue ones. “And Winter? Who are they, and why are they after her?”

She blinked slowly. “You are from Harelin where the veil between worlds is thinner than in Kobar. I am surprised you are unaware.”

I bristled but held my tongue.

She tilted her head as if suddenly interested. “You really don’t understand what happened, do you?” she murmured then raised her voice. “Winter is one of the kingdoms of the Ancient Ones. Winter is a being, but also the many beings in her realm.”

I slopped tea onto my hand and let go of the cup with a jolt as it scalded my skin. “They’re real? Spring really came to this land to create Harelin?”

She nodded. “We know so little about them, but there are signs of the Ancients everywhere...if you know where to look. Some of their people will bargain with you, though their ruling council forbids interference with the mortal realm. Some even have people here in our realm who serve them.”

“Like Old Mother Baba,” I whispered.

She nodded. “Like Old Mother Baba. Though she was not human but an immortal from Spring. There are also mortal servants here, though no human could ever survive crossing into their world of chaos and creation.” She paused to sip her tea. “Spring should have never saved Princess Meradia or her unborn child and created Harelin. It upset the balance. Now Spring and her people can never enter the mortal realm again—the veil was closed for them.”

I frowned, one finger tracing the spot where tea was soaking into the table. “What has this got to do with Maisie?”

Her eyes met mine. “I’m not sure. But the girl shows signs of Spring. That is why I chose her years ago.”

I frowned. “You think she is a descendant of the Meradians? Were they ‘mortal servants’ of Spring, as you put it?”

She nodded. “They were. But I don’t know how Maisie could possibly be related to them. The family line was wiped out—most likely, the decision of the Ancients.” Her eyes became shadowed for a moment as if remembering something suppressed and unpleasant. “If the Ancients want to undo the interference done by Spring, the country of Harelin and the Meradians need to be undone.”

Horror dawned. The destruction of Harelin was the will of the Ancients? Powerful, immortal beings from another world? My entire country wiped off the map?

I licked my lips. “So, you’re concluding that Winter is trying to kill the last survivor of the Meradians. Even if she only carries a trace of the bloodline?”

The woman nodded. “I suspect Maisie is Spring’s last shred of hope. And Harelin’s.”

I ran a hand through my hair while shaking my head. This was a lot to take in. I ran through her words again. “What did you mean by ‘shows signs of Spring?’”

She tilted her head. “They’re obvious if you know what to look for, if a little subtle on her. Around her, flowers grow brighter over a few days. But I don’t think she’s even noticed.”

I gaped at her. “Does Maisie know *any* of this?”

The woman shook her head.

I thought through the connotations and pressed my hands to the table, annoyed. “Does anyone know?”

She sighed. “I have never spoken my suspicions aloud before. I don’t meddle in the affairs of the Ancients if I can help it. I’ve been caught up in their ways before and nothing good ever comes of it, however tempting their rewards may be.” She brushed her hands together. “No, Maisie was useful, but now she’s a liability. I want her gone.”

I clenched my teeth. “You could have told the people of Harelin about this.”

She raised an eyebrow, a hard look in her eyes. “I’m telling you now.”

## CHAPTER 8

# THOMAS



When I returned to the Mayflower Inn and relayed what I had learned, Gregory was so fascinated by the thief's words that he made me repeat them to him several times. His eyes grew wide with awe, and I had to stop him from going to the apothecary to question her himself. I could only imagine what she would make him pay for snippets of information. Gregory would probably willingly sell his soul.

"Thomas, it sounds like she's actually had dealings with the Ancients! Imagine the knowledge that she possesses."

I raised an eyebrow. "And she is also a thief and likely a liar. She might tell us how to find Lady Liya due to self-interest, but we don't know if her information about everything else is accurate."

Gregory's excitement only grew. "That could mean she is downplaying her knowledge! She could have had multiple dealings with them! Know secrets no other human has ever heard!"

I sighed, changing the conversation. "Did you find anything while I was at the tea shop?" I nodded at the pile of books.

He nodded with a slight frown, fumbling through the stack before pulling out a shabby leather-bound journal. "I did. The official texts speak very little about the invasion of Harelin. Merely a few sentences. But I found this. It's a low-ranking knight's account of the invasion."

I shook my head and continued packing my belongings. We hoped to leave for the tower within the hour. “Greggory, you need to focus on the white beasts and what’s hunting Lady Liya—I mean, Maisie. The woman called them Winter Hounds and Frost Ghosts. We simply don’t have the time to go over the differences in various historical accounts of the invasion of Harelin, however important it might be.”

Greggory held a finger. “Before you completely dismiss me, you will find this is relevant.”

I paused my packing and picked up an apple, already skeptical. “Go on.”

“According to this record, it was the Queen Consort of Kobar who pushed for the war. She was also the leader of the troops. She sailed with them and was there when Harelin’s capital fell.”

I frowned and bit into the apple. I hadn’t known that. Had father ever mentioned her? He had spoken little of what he had found when he took back Harelin. I’d imagined he didn’t like to revisit the memories.

Greggory continued, holding up a finger so I didn’t interrupt. “It says here the knight witnessed her death. She was killed by *‘a Harelin noble who broke into the throne room. He picked up the sword of the slain King Justus Meradian and struck her with it. When it hit her, she vanished into a cloud of grey snow. We were all terrified by the event. The sword had struck normally when King Justus had fought with it earlier against Kobaran soliders. What creature had the Queen been? We fled Harelin and on our return to Kobar were sworn to secrecy. We were told that to speak of what had occurred to the Queen Consort would amount to treason.’*”

I stared at him. “You think The Queen Consort was struck by the Sword of Spring and disintegrated into snow, just like the Winter Hounds?”

He nodded. “I was unfamiliar with her, so I cross referenced her against other, more official, historical texts. She married the previous King of Kobar the year before the invasion to become his second wife. He already had heirs

aplenty, and she never became pregnant. After her death, he remarried again. She is a brief mention in the books.”

I threw away my half-eaten apple, my appetite gone. “So you don’t think she was human? You think that maybe she was one of these inhuman servants of Winter?”

He wagged a finger victoriously. “I think it’s a strong possibility. And so, I think Winter was behind the invasion of Harelin. According to your account of what the thief said, Winter wants to destroy Harelin and the Meradians because Spring should have never created them in the first place.”

I shifted, a heaviness settling on my shoulders at the enormity of what we were learning. “And now they want to kill Maisie to finish the job. Without her, Harelin will turn back into inhabitable desert and plains.”

Greggory nodded. I saw him put the journal into his coat pocket.

I raised an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t you put that back?”

He shook his head violently. “Absolutely not. If the Kobarans discover it, they will burn it. This is forbidden source material necessary for future generations. I’m keeping it.”

I folded my arms. “So where did *you* find it?”

He shifted. “It was locked under a trap door in a private storage room.”

I gaped at him. “How...” I raised my hand. “Actually, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.” I blew out my breath. “Now I hope you’re not planning on stealing any more books, because we need to go, and you’re carrying the bags.”

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I LEFT Jonathan in Riva in case anybody tried to contact us with further news, and he was given extensive library research instructions from Greggory. I hoped they weren’t too illegal. We bought a boat to row down the canal and onto the fast-

flowing Denu River. Edward had drawn a circle on our map around anywhere roughly three miles north of the fork. I could sense the excitement of the men to be doing something practical.

We took turns rowing—our physical fitness made the journey quick—and left the boat pulled up on the shore with Ryan to guard it. Grasslands baked in the summer sun, full of pollen which would make Gregory sneeze. Copses of trees dotted the gently rolling hills with deer and foxes darting in and out of their shade. Dark birds with long tails I couldn't identify shrieked when we passed. Though Kobar was not as hot as Harelin, it was still enough to make me sweat in my leather jerkin, especially as we left the riverside. I was glad we weren't in chainmail.

There were no tracks or signs of any settlement, so Edward scouted westward, Gregory and I north, and Tristan east. We followed the downward slope of a flower-speckled hill toward a stream and the knights were soon out of sight.

Gregory kept sneezing and each one was incredibly loud. I turned to him, still walking. "Do you have to be quite so dramatic?"

He scowled. "This air is full of pollen. Unless you want me to stop breathing, I can't help it."

I raised an eyebrow. "Command you to stop breathing? Why does that have a certain appeal?"

He rubbed his nose on an oversized handkerchief. "A bit of sympathy wouldn't be amiss. We can't all be as perfect as you."

"Do I detect sarcasm?"

He opened his mouth to reply, but all that came out was a quick succession of sneezes so loud, the nearby birds burst from cover.

I groaned. "If your sneezes scare her off, I will hold you personally accountable for the fall of Harelin."

He snorted and wiped his nose again. "Since you've scared her off quite successfully on your own twice already, I actually

think you would be twice as accountable for our country's destruction."

"I..." I broke off as we rounded a turn in the valley and stumbled to a stop. I reached out to grab Gregory's arm. "Look!"

I pointed to a dip in the hills around us—in the center was a tower. The single purposeless tower reminded me of a folly, built too far below the hill line to be defensive. There were no paths or roads leading to it and no other buildings around. Just a tower surrounded by a colorful blanket of wildflowers and the odd bramble. I felt like I had stumbled into a children's picture book where nothing quite made sense.

Gregory squinted through watery eyes. "I see no signs of Winter. But I think I would rather face monsters again than wade through that field of pollen. I will die of sneezing."

I patted him on the shoulder. "They say suffering develops character. Come on." I started to wade through the knee-high flowers.

He grunted. "Every day of my life is already suffering." *Sneeze*. "I must have more character than anyone in the world." *Sneeze*. "It does not need any further development. I like it just the way it is."

I picked up my speed, clouds of pollen and butterflies erupting in my wake, as curses poured from Gregory's lips between sneezing fits as he attempted to catch up.

The flowers were vibrant and beautiful and more dramatic than any I had ever seen in Harelin. The closer we got to the tower's base, the larger and denser they became: towers of magenta foxgloves, swathes of indigo harebells, tangles of pale wild roses, not to mention the ubiquitous yellow flowers of every shape, height and variety. Even some rampion. There was still no path, and I had to fight my way through the miniature jungle, puffs of pollen and dandelion seeds entering the air around me, as the buzz of bees and the heat of the sun lulled me into a kind of stupor. Disturbed butterflies fluttered around my feet like mist. Behind me, moving much slower,



Greggory wouldn't stop sneezing and was giving me a wide berth.

My heartbeat picked up as I neared the tower and placed my hands on its warm, pinkish stone. I was not going to mess up this time. All my life, I had succeeded at everything I'd put my mind to. This would not be an exception.

Greggory reached the stone tower beside me but was too busy sneezing to speak. Together, we explored its circular base. There was no door. The only opening was a window just below the roof that had to be at least four stories up. A wisteria clung to the stones, dripping cascades of purple flowers, but the barky vine was far too fragile to hold my weight.

"Well, that's annoying," murmured Greggory, his hands on his hips as he squinted up at the window. His eyes were red and swollen and streaming. I almost felt sorry for him. "Who builds a tower with no door and only one window? What's even in the lower half? There must be a hidden entrance somewhere. I'll check for gaps in the mortar again." He waded through the flowers, muttering as he pulled creepers back from the stone and ran his fingers around every crack. That was going to take an age.

I shielded my eyes as I looked up to the window. "Hello?" I yelled. "Lady Liya? Maisie? Or whatever your name is? Are you there?"

In the glaring sun, it was hard to see anything around the window ledge. I wondered if I should throw a stone through.

"Liya? I brought some boiled sweets?"

A head popped through the window, eyes squinting down at me. Some of the tension left my shoulders at the sight of her unharmed. Despite everything, it was good to see her.

Her fingers curled around the windowsill. "Prince Thomas? Oh, thank goodness you're here to save me."

Despite knowing it was likely an act, her relieved smile made something tighten inside my chest. She couldn't hide the way her eyes narrowed on the bag of sweets. She must realize

that I would only know about them if I had been talking to that woman.

I shook the paper bag up and down so the sweets rattled inside. I'd removed the blue ones into their own bag yesterday. I was not about to drug an innocent woman. "You can drop the act. I know who you are, Maisie."

There was a pause as she shifted, her chin cupped in one hand, her elbow resting on the windowsill. "Then why are you here? What do you want?"

Beside me, I was aware of Gregory reaching my side and squinting up at the girl, his handkerchief pressed to his nose.

I spread my arms. "I can protect you from those creatures from Winter. The person who has abandoned you in here doesn't have your best interests at heart, I do. Also, I need your help."

"Abandoned?" She snorted. "How do you think you could protect me any better than my mistress? And why would I want to help you?"

"You're the answer to the famine in Harelin."

She frowned, surprise clear on her face. "What?" She looked as if I were mad. Maybe I was.

"Can I come up so we can talk properly?"

She hesitated, then flipped her golden braid over her shoulder. She had woven flowers into it. I supposed there wouldn't be much to do when you were trapped in a tower. "How do I know I can trust you?"

I felt blood darken my cheeks. I was not used to having my honor questioned, especially not by a thief. "I am the Crown Prince of Harelin. Have I ever acted dishonorably to you before?"

"Well, you've gone behind my back to get information about me, or you wouldn't know my name."

"I would much rather get all my information from you directly, believe me."

She chewed on her lip for a moment then shrugged as if my actions meant little to her. “Fine. I’ll let you up, and we can discuss terms.” She disappeared inside the tower.

I stepped back from the stone, expecting her to reveal an opening or unroll a ladder. Instead, a thick rope fell from the window. I could just about reach it. It was shinier and smoother than hemp or linen. It looked like hair, but finer than any horse’s tail.

“It’s secure!” Maisie’s bodiless voice echoed from the window.

I gave the rope a yank. “Are you sure it can hold me?”

“I said it was secure, didn’t I? I’ve done this before.” Her tone sounded almost bored.

I removed my jacket so it wouldn’t restrict my arm movement—it was too hot anyway—and loosened my shirt collar under my jerkin. I hoped she wouldn’t notice the sweat patches under my arms.

I gripped the rope and yanked it again. It didn’t give. I let it take my weight and found footholds among the twists of wisteria to guide me up. The rope was tightly braided allowing me to grip, but still my muscles ached as I hauled myself up high and higher, the scabbard of my sword hitting my legs. There was no way Gregory would be able to do this. He would just have to stay sneezing among the flowers.

“Stay down here and keep watch,” I called to him. “I’ll shout if I need anything.”

The man muttered something I couldn’t catch, covered his face with his handkerchief and started trampling down the flowers so he could sit. He already had a book in one hand.

My arms burned when I finally reached the window and pulled myself in through the open lattice shutters. I landed in a crouch on thick carpet.

I was sure I saw Maisie roll her eyes at my smooth landing but when I met her eyes, her expression was smooth. Her hands still held the thick rope, looped over a beam where it went through a locking mechanism with large metal wheels.

The room was round and divided by a floor-to-ceiling navy drape down one end. To my left was a four-poster bed, the gauzy curtains pulled shut. Against the wall was a simple table with a hairbrush and a free-standing mirror.

It was a very simple sanctuary. Or prison. I wouldn't be surprised if climbing down the rope would be too tricky for Maisie. Besides, it was dangerous. She was trapped.

I straightened slowly as if she were a flighty wild bird. "I'm told your real name is Maisie."

Her jaw tightened, and her eyes glared down for a fraction of a second. "I am. I see Mistress Faye told you I was here." She took a small step back, letting go of the rope. To my surprise, it swung down, dangling from her scalp.

My jaw dropped. It was her hair. Golden hair. A completely different length than moments before. She walked to a lever on the wall and pulled it downward. The metal wheels on the beam grated apart, releasing the locking mechanism. Now that her hair was freed, she started to pull it back over the beam until it coiled at her feet, impossibly long. Had I really just climbed up her hair? I felt like I should say something, but my mind had grown sluggish, unable to process what I was seeing.

She glanced at me shyly before gathering her hair. One moment it was gold and long, the next it was pale blonde and sat just below her shoulders in gentle waves. She tucked one side behind her ear, and I noticed an area behind it where it seemed thinner than the other side.

She met my eyes and raised an eyebrow. "You'll swallow a fly if you're not careful."

I realized I was gaping and snapped my mouth shut. "Your hair is magic."

She gave me a flat look that made me feel stupid.

Mistress Faye had left out some major pieces of information. Was this one of her 'clear signs of Spring' or something else entirely? What other secrets had she left out? Annoyance at the woman resurfaced, but I pushed the emotion

away. Right now, I needed to focus on the woman in front of me.

Maisie folded her arms. “What did Mistress Faye sell me out for? What did you pay her?”

I gentled my voice, realizing she would see this as a betrayal and not wanting to be insensitive. Her feelings toward Mistress Faye would be far stronger than mine. “You’re right, she told us you were here. We...paid her for information. She said she had locked you up here to keep you safe from Winter.” I took a slow step forward. “Why is Winter after you?”

She licked her lips and popped something in her mouth. “So she gets paid by you, Winter, and me. That triple-crossing...”

“Maisie? Why is Winter after you?”

She shook her head and looked defensive, though I hadn’t meant my words as an accusation. “I don’t know.”

I frowned and curled my finger around my chin. Mistress Faye really hadn’t told her anything. “We’re trying to figure it out and have some ideas. The Winter Hounds killed a woman in Harelin. Froze her solid. She was the one who said to come and find you in Kobar. I wonder if she was killed so she wouldn’t tell me about you. Winter wanted me to be unable to protect you.”

I paused, unsure how to tell her the rest in a sensitive way. That we somehow thought she had Harelin royal blood and the rest of her family was dead. That she was the only one who could save my country while immortal powerful beings from another realm were simultaneously trying to stop her. I hardly believed it myself.

Maisie sighed and rubbed her forehead as she turned away from me. “I don’t need you to protect me.”

I patted my father’s sword. “I don’t know why but this blade turns those monsters into harmless piles of snow when it cuts them. It also heals their bite wounds. If you’re bitten, frost

spreads under your skin until you freeze solid and die. This blade stops the infection.”

Her eyes immediately fixated on the sword. “Where did you get it?”

I looked down. “It was my father’s. I didn’t know until recently that it had any magical properties, so...” I shrugged. “It’s been handed down from monarch to monarch since the formation of Harelin. Some call it the Sword of Spring.”

Maisie sucked on her cheek. Even the childish pose looked pretty on her. Was it a sweet she had popped in her mouth? Mistress Faye said she needed them when she was nervous.

I handed out the new paper bag. “Here.”

She hesitated, then reached out and took them. She unrolled the top and smelled the contents before looking back at me with narrowed eyes. “Why do you have these?”

I shrugged. “Mistress Faye said you would appreciate them. It’s a peace offering. I want to work with you. As friends.”

An emotion flickered across her face which I couldn’t decipher. She moved her hands to her hips, and I realized the paper bag had already vanished. No doubt hidden somewhere in her skirts, since her bodice was too tight to hide anything.

My cheeks heated as I realized my eyes had combed her body looking for any unusual bulges.

Maisie cleared her throat, and I hoped she didn’t think I had been inappropriate. “Why did the woman in Harelin want you to come find me?”

I shifted, wondering again how to bring up something so awkward. I’d envisioned our relationship being a lot further along before I brought up marriage.

I drew in a deep breath and decided to keep things simple. “She had a drawing of you with a note that read, ‘To bring back the Blessing, she must leave Ravi and become Queen of Harelin.’ Maybe you’re some distant relative of the last royal family.”

Maisie blinked, and her lips parted. “You’re here because you think I should be Queen of Harelin?”

I nodded slowly, instinctively placing my feet apart in a defensive stance.

She scoffed. “But they wouldn’t just crown me, a girl from Kobar. Harelin and Kobar might be at peace but...” She held up a hand. “Wait, you’re the Crown Prince. Does that mean you’re here because you want to *marry* me?”

I licked my lips and attempted a deep breath despite my tightening chest. “I understand this is a lot to take in...” I held up my hands in a placating gesture.

She stepped forward, her expression incredulous. “Who even was this woman, that you trust her so much?”

“I...” How did she manage to make me doubt my every thought and decision? “I think she was...she may have been Old Mother Baba?”

“Old Mother Baba?” Amusement glittered over Maisie’s face, the corners of her lips twitching. “The witch from fairytales?”

I folded my arms, trying to subdue my rising annoyance. “She’s not a witch. And... Look, if she wasn’t right about you, Winter wouldn’t have killed her. Winter wouldn’t be after you. It doesn’t matter who she was, her knowledge was clearly important.”

Maisie tilted her head, her blue eyes bright. Her short hair made her features seem more animated than when she had worn it long, her mouth wider and her eyes more rounded. “And you’re willing to marry me on that chance?”

“Well,” I scratched the back of my neck. “I was hoping we would be able to discover more details. Maybe, together, we can work out why you are the answer to the famine and how we can stop Winter from destroying both you and Harelin.”

Maisie walked toward me with playful, bouncy steps, the cautious girl from before abruptly gone. She stopped immediately in front of me and smiled. A sweeping motion in my stomach made my heart stumble. That smile...

“And what if we don’t find any answers? Will you still want to marry me?”

“Well...” She was so close I could smell lemon on her breath. Her lips were perfectly shaped, slightly parted, inviting me to lose my train of thought. “I find you very beautiful. Even if it wasn’t for the message from Old Mother Baba, I would very much like to get to know you better.”

“Ah.” The sound was almost a breath. She looked down as if I had confirmed something, but I wasn’t sure what. My mind was spinning. Why was she so hard to read?

Her large eyes flicked up, and I found myself transfixed by them. The playfulness had vanished as quickly as it had arrived, and I assumed it had been to cover up her nerves and discomfort. Now her eyes were rounded, confused, and vulnerable, and I wanted to wrap my arms around her and tell her it was all going to be fine. But I knew that was too forward. Especially after what I had just admitted to her. Besides, her mercurial moods were unnerving.

Her eyes flicked between mine with an intensity that felt suddenly intimate. “This is a lot to take in.”

Slowly so as not to startle her, I rested a hand on one of her arms. I needed to give her some degree of comfort, especially when none of this had gone as I had planned. “I know. I’m sorry. I intended to break the news more gradually. Instead, I find myself rescuing you from a tower.” I gave her my charming, disarming, lopsided smile that generally worked well at diffusing tension.

She dropped her eyes to my chest, seeming small and uncertain. She didn’t move away from my touch. “Do you mind if we sit down and have a drink? I need time to process this before I decide what to do.”

I stepped back and bowed my head to her. “Of course, my lady. Shall I make some tea? Do you have some here?” People in Kobar always seemed to need their tea.

Her lips curved into the sweetest smile. “That would be perfect. Chamomile, please, to calm my nerves.” She nodded



toward the navy drape that divided the round room in two. I pushed it to one side and noticed a small kitchen area. A tiny fireplace contained nothing but glowing embers, an iron kettle rested on a table, and several wooden cupboards were painted in yellow and green with tiny red flowers.

A few buckets of water rested on one side, and I filled the kettle in silence. She would be dependent on Mistress Faye for everything here. Food. Water. Clothes. Even her sweets. The whole situation made me very uncomfortable. I stoked the fire and placed the kettle on its stand, so the flames licked its base.

“Can you get out of the tower by yourself?” I made my tone light and didn’t look around as I spoke.

She paused. “No. The window is the only way in or out. My hair has to be long and locked in the mechanism to keep it still and so the weight of a person doesn’t pull it out at the roots. I need to be up here to pull the lever and unlock it. If I tied my hair to an object to let myself down, my weight would be too painful a pressure, and I wouldn’t be able to untie the knot.”

I frowned and looked around at her. “Even if you then grew it...eh...I mean, shrunk it short? That wouldn’t untie the knot?”

“Not a strong, tight knot around something solid. It’s not like the end just disappears. It’s got to be able to shrink back to my head. It would be stuck.”

I pinched my chin. “Couldn’t you just cut your hair once you’re on the ground?”

She folded her arms and shook her head firmly enough that her hair brushed her cheeks. “You can’t cut my hair.”

She didn’t elaborate but turned. “I’m going to lie down. Let me know when it’s ready. The chamomile mix is in the blue clay pot. It needs to steep for three minutes.”

As the drape fell back into place behind her, I dragged a hand down my face. I had hoped our relationship would form in a more natural way. But things were what they were. Even

more frustrating was that she seemed to be as clueless about Winter as I was.

Greggory's theory about the former Queen Consort who had invaded Harelin only confused things further.

Why did Winter want Harelin to fall to famine so badly that they would kill a whole family seventeen years ago, and now this innocent girl who was the only one who could stop them?

## CHAPTER 9

# MAISIE



I flopped down on the bed, concealed behind the gauzy curtains.

*He is such an idiot. A woman rumored to be a fairytale witch draws my picture and tells him to marry me, so off he trots to Kobar to win my hand? And now he thinks he's rescuing me from this tower. As if guilt-tripping a girl into marrying you was the same as rescuing.*

*And Mistress Faye told him everything.*

Pressure built behind my eyes, and I put a sweet in my mouth. *Almond.* I focused and changed the hurt to anger toward Mistress Faye. Anger was easy, pure, simple. Anger didn't open the hollow ache in my chest until it gaped into a vast black cavern of emptiness and agony. When I was angry, I could feel myself. Know myself. When I hurt, I became an abyss.

Of course, she'd be willing to sell out my location for money. She'd already sold me out to Winter. I knew I couldn't trust her, knew I couldn't expect loyalty or affection from her. But still, hadn't the last twelve years counted for anything? I lifted my hand to the smooth patch of skin behind my ear that had once been covered with hair. It still stung when touched.

*Trust nobody, Maisie. The more you trust, the more you're hurt.*

If I had known about Prince Thomas's stupid sword, I could have removed the infection from my skin without Mistress Faye's help, and I wouldn't be in this mess.

I kept my rage bubbling hot and carefully buried so Thomas wouldn't see it. Thomas who was clearly deluded and way too full of himself if he thought I would swoon at his feet merely at the mention of marriage.

I didn't need him. I didn't need anyone. I had let Mistress Faye get too close, and I had paid the price.

Thomas's call was muffled by the heavy drape. "Maisie, the tea is ready."

I sighed and sat up, running my hands down my arms at the sudden chill. I froze my emotions inside me until my heart was nothing but ice, then I placed the mask on my face that Thomas most wanted to see. The pretty, scared, vulnerable girl that needed him to protect her.

I pushed my legs to the edge of the bed. It was a soft, comfortable bed. I had to give Mistress Faye that much credit.

I chose a soft, tired tone of voice. "Thank you. Please bring it through."

Thomas walked in cradling a mug, most of his attention focused on not spilling it. I hid my amusement and smiled, making my eyelids blink slower and my movements sluggish as if I were exhausted.

"Here you go." He handed me the cup, all the herbs floating freely in the water. Didn't he know how to strain them? Maybe being Crown Prince, he had never learned to make a cup of tea. If that were the case, he would probably think this was a grand gesture I should be impressed by.

I smiled and cradled my hands around the thick clay so they could absorb some of the warmth. "Thank you." I frowned, looking him up and down. "Won't you have some? You boiled a whole kettle full. It will calm your nerves, and I'll feel more relaxed if you drink with me."

He nodded and disappeared back into the kitchen area. I reached into the silk pouch tied under my sash and took a pinch of the white powder there. I dabbed it on my lips, careful not to lick it free.

Thomas's voice drifted through the curtain. "I must admit, I don't drink much tea. Everyone in Kobar seems to drink it, but back in Harelin, it's more of a village tradition. In the castle, we drink juice and wine."

"I can't sleep without my tea. I get bad dreams." I cradled the teacup, and the warmth of success grew within me when the prince sat down beside me and placed an arm protectively behind my back, not quite touching me.

I rested my head against the crook of his shoulder and roughened my voice. "Thank you for coming. Nobody else would."

He accepted the thanks as genuine, even though he had only come because he believed that I could save his precious country. And then he wanted to marry me because I was pretty, even though he knew nothing about me.

I popped a sweet into my mouth before my annoyance showed, careful not to touch the white powder.

I felt Thomas shift. "Why do you eat those sweets?"

"They make me feel better when I'm unbalanced or nervous." His arm moved closer against my back as if shielding me. I hid a smile and blew on my tea to cool it.

"Have you always done that?"

I frowned. I didn't really want him to delve deeper, though, the truth might give me an advantage. I wanted him to pity me and see me as a weak creature that needed protecting. I wanted him to drop his guard. He must have information about me from his conversation with Mistress Faye, too, so I needed to reveal enough to match her story for him to start to trust me.

"In the orphanage, I suppose. We would often steal food. At times, I felt so hungry, it was as if my stomach were eating me alive from the inside. Unless I had food in my hands, it was all I could concentrate on. That need for food. Ever since then, sweets help me concentrate."

He frowned. "And does it work?"

I nodded. "Always. I always feel better."

For a moment, we were both quiet. “I’m sorry you went through that. What happened to your parents?”

“I...don’t know. I don’t have any memories from before the orphanage. Mistress Faye took me from there when I was five. I didn’t have any papers. The matron at the orphanage even gave me my name, Maisie. I don’t know if my parents died or abandoned me.”

Again, there was silence, the uneasy shift as he processed what I was saying. He would feel the deepening of our relationship as I shared such personal secrets. He would feel trusted and valued.

“I’m sorry, Maisie.” There was a roughness to his voice. I had him now.

He paused, and I heard him sip his tea. His words became softer. “For how long do the sweets make you feel better?”

*What a strange question.*

I shrugged, feeling an uncomfortable tightness across my chest. “I guess a few minutes after the sweet has dissolved.”

He paused, hesitating. “It must have been so hard for you in that orphanage. You know, I wonder if sugar helps when you’re nervous because food was the only need that was ever satisfied in that orphanage, and even that was poorly satisfied by the sound of it. I can’t imagine you received much attention or affection, if they didn’t even feed you well. If you never got hugged when you scraped your knee, maybe food became your substitute for comfort.”

My walls slammed up before I could even acknowledge his words. He was going far deeper than I had intended.

Everything within me became still as I concentrated on perfecting my iron, unfeeling heart and felt the cool, calm strength seep through my limbs.

The Prince continued, oblivious, as he swirled the herbs around in his tea. “I assume you could never trust the adults in your life since they didn’t reliably provide you with anything. The only trustworthy thing was food. So I can understand now why you would find it hard to trust me.”

I stood and started to walk away, slipping a sweet into my mouth as I battled to calm my racing heart. He made me sound so pathetic.

*Apple.*

I clicked it around the inside of my teeth. I concentrated on the taste of sugar.

Behind me, I heard Thomas stand. “You know, Maisie, there are people you can trust. Relationships that will bring more comfort and security than a sugar rush. Sweets were never meant to be a substitute for people.”

How *dare* he. How dare he treat me like a problem to be solved. He didn’t even *know* me.

My anger rose, and I clenched my teeth, breathing in through my nose. I needed to stay in control. I couldn’t mess up now. I pushed the sweet around and around in my mouth.

“You can trust *me*, Maisie. I’m on your side.”

I couldn’t help a laugh break out. It sounded cold and twisted.

Stupid, naive Prince. Only fools trusted other people. The more you trusted, the closer people got, and the more hurt you would be when you finally learned they only ever cared about themselves.

I fought for my mask, for the person I was meant to be right now. The safe person. The person that stopped him from seeing the real, shattered, unlovable me. I needed to appear pretty, soft, and vulnerable. And above all, *savable*.

“Thomas,” I whispered, letting just the right amount of distress enter my voice. I turned to him. He was staring at me, all his attention on my face. I allowed myself a moment to admire his own features and stature, knowing he would recognize that and respond to it. He might be lazy in some ways, but he certainly kept himself fit. It was a helpful distraction. “How can I learn to trust you?”

He stepped forward, his palms raised as if to reassure me. The last of the sweet dissolved on my tongue.



“We could work well as a team. I know we could. We can fill your life with good people, trustworthy people who won’t take advantage of you like Mistress Faye. Then you can be happy all the time, not just until the sweet dissolves.”

My heartbeat was racing so loud, my mind no longer processed what he was saying. I needed him to stop. He didn’t understand. Nobody understood. I had to move things forward and stay in control.

“Thomas,” I whispered again. Pleading this time. He stepped right up to me, taking both my upper arms in his hands. His grip was firm and warm. His eyes were wide and sincere as if he knew nothing of the world. “If I trust you, will you never deceive me? Will you always protect me?”

His lips parted, and his breaths deepened. “Yes. I swear it.” So naive.

I lowered my eyes to the gold buttons across his coat and edged closer so our bodies touched. He froze. “If there is a chance I can stop the famine and help your people, I will come to Harelin with you. I will marry you.”

I flicked my eyes up to his and heard his breath catch. I moved my gaze slowly down his perfectly straight nose to his mouth, knowing he was watching me closely. His breath hitched again. He was hooked. Now I just had to reel him in.

I leaned in and stood on tiptoes, letting my eyelids flutter shut.

I tasted the warmth of his breath a second before his lips found mine. The tenderness surprised me. There was a slowness that spoke more of respect than of caution. I leaned into the kiss, encouraging him, reassuring him that it was allowed, knowing that every second meant more of the powder left my lips and dissolved in his mouth. I wrapped my arms loosely around his waist. I had kissed men before. This was a trick I used when all else failed. However, this was the first time I actually liked it. Something stirred in my chest. Thomas was attractive whether I wanted to admit that or not.

I pulled back, knowing color had flooded my cheeks. I would have taken in the powder, too, though hopefully not as much as Thomas, and I didn't want to risk going close to my limit. I needed to take the powder in a sleeping draught every night or I lay awake, my mind drifting to unpleasant places. Over the years I had built up a large tolerance to it that should give me the advantage. But my frame was a lot smaller than his.

Thomas leaned his forehead against mine, his breathing a little ragged. "You're beautiful, Maisie. So, so beautiful." My mouth dried at the emotion behind his words. "I'm sorry for everything that has happened to you. From now on, your life will change. You will be safe." For a second, I was caught up in the intensity of the moment, my lips tingling from his, his breath warming my cheeks, the muscles of his back beneath my palms. The earnest tone of his words was searing.

His thumb trailed down my cheek to my chin, my skin awakening at his touch.

"Maisie, I..." He stepped back, frowned, and raised a hand to his forehead, squeezing his eyes shut. "I... Forgive me."

He stumbled, and I pushed him gently back to the bed. "Why don't you lie down for a moment, my Prince?"

He offered little resistance and was asleep before his head hit the covers.

I dragged in a deep breath and concentrated on slowing my pounding heart.

*It's only racing from the nerves. Just the nerves.*

Now that he was asleep, I had nothing to worry about. The rest was going to be easy, and I would never have to see this man again or think about how he had just made me feel.

In fact, considering what I was about to do, it would be really bad if I did.

I unbuckled his sword belt and strapped it to my own waist. The sword was heavy and long, banging against my thighs with each step. I wrapped a strip of linen over the hilt to hide the distinctive rubies. I didn't need the Prince or Mistress

Faye to protect me from Winter when I could protect myself. I preferred daggers and weapons I could conceal, but I could work with a sword. I would just need a good cloak.

I hesitated, then took his coin pouch too. Again. It didn't feel right to leave it behind. Last time, I had felt guilty and left it in a flowerpot. He clearly hadn't learned his lesson, so this time, I would spend it.

Seeing Thomas lying asleep on the bed, his hair ruffled and face relaxed did funny things to my heart, so I pulled the gauze curtains shut. I didn't want to feel guilt or any other inconvenient emotion. It was probably the sleeping powder making me more sensitive.

Still, something held me back. I hesitated, uncertain why. "I'm sorry," I whispered, eventually, even though he wouldn't be able to hear me. "I lied. I always lie. There is another way out of the tower. I just didn't want you to know."

Feeling a little lighter, I pushed aside a tapestry and unlocked the secret door with the key from around my neck. It clicked and the wood swung outward. The other side was darkness. I let the tapestry swing back into place behind me and closed the door, shutting myself in absolute blackness. I locked the door. I couldn't have Thomas coming after me before I made my escape.

I brushed my slippers over the floor until I felt the edge of the flagstone. The floor simply ran out. Beyond it was cool air. The breeze caressing my face whispered of space around and below me.

I crossed my arms over my chest, feeling slightly dizzy. "Goodbye," I breathed.

Then I jumped.

## CHAPTER 10

# THOMAS



I woke up to a pounding headache and dry mouth. I clutched my forehead as I forced myself to sit up. My neck ached as if I had been sleeping at an odd angle, and the bed and the dim room spun. Nothing was familiar.

“Your Highness, you’re awake.” The relieved voice was Gregory’s, and I clung to the one recognizable certainty in this spinning world. The bed bobbed as he sat beside me and held a cup to my lips. “Drink this. It will make you feel better.”

I drank. It was bitter, but my throat was so parched, I drained it to the dregs. I squinted around the gloomy room, a chill entering my bones. “What’s going on?” When had it become so cold?

This was...this was Maisie’s room in the tower. And...we had kissed. She had said she would go to Harelin and marry me. But then, how was Gregory here? And why was it now dark?

“Maisie?” I whispered.

A sudden bone-chilling howl tore through the night. It sounded close. I stood, ignoring Gregory’s protests, and staggered to the window, my legs weak and uncoordinated. I unlatched the shutter and let the cool night air spill in, tainted with an unseasonal chill. The moon was high and full in the star-speckled sky.

Everything was still. I squinted down at the base of the tower and startled backward when a ghostly white shape

darted between two bushes. A Winter Hound.

Another appeared, sniffing around the base of the tower before melting back into the long grass, utterly silent. I swallowed. Were they still after Maisie?

My hand fell to my sword, but it was gone. I looked down in alarm. My belt was gone along with everything on it, including my money pouch. I strode back to the bed, my heart pounding, and threw the covers to the floor. I checked under the bed, around the kitchen, and in the cupboards. My sword and money pouch were nowhere to be found.

What had she done? Where was she?

Another howl chilled the air, and I returned to the window to close the shutters. Gregory hovered awkwardly. “What happened? Where’s Maisie? Where are the knights?”

He stood beside the bed and shifted his feet. “I’m not completely sure myself. One minute I was sitting at the base of the tower, the next, Maisie was there. I have no idea how she got out. She was wearing a big cloak and seemed to be in a hurry. She said there had been an accident, and I had to get to you right away. Then she ran off. I was torn between finding you and following her. There was still no sign of Edward or Tristan at the time, and I assume Ryan is still with the boat. I wasn’t sure what to do, but when you didn’t reply to my calls, I climbed up. I found you unconscious on the bed. From your pupils and heart rate, I could tell you had been drugged.”

I frowned, massaging my lower face. “You climbed up the tower? How?”

He shrugged and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “There was no rope, so it was difficult. It took me a few attempts.” He held up one arm to show a ripped sleeve and a bloody graze beneath, then showed me his hands which were covered in cuts. I noticed one arm of his glasses was bent out of shape.

I shook my head slowly. “I can’t believe you climbed up with only the wisteria to help you. You could have died. It’s very high.”

“You don’t say.” His voice was dry, and he shrugged again. “How were you drugged? I assume it was Maisie. Does she have your sword?”

Memories of the kiss rose up more vividly than I’d expected, and I turned away from Gregory. I wasn’t about to admit that to him. “She must have given me some sort of sleeping draught. But...I don’t understand. I told her the people of Harelin needed her to stop the famine. I said I could protect her from Winter. How could she steal my sword and run away? Not only has she left us helpless, she’s also abandoning a whole nation of people who need her.”

A snarl and a yip echoed through the window. I pressed my knuckles to my forehead as my worry grew. “I hope she’s alright out there with those things hunting her.”

“Well, at the moment, they seem to think she’s still here.” Gregory sighed loud enough to shame a whole pack of Winter Hounds. “You must have said something that upset her. I should have come up with you.”

I spread out my hands. “I didn’t say anything bad. In fact, she was opening up to me. And she said she wanted to help Harelin. And she...” *kissed me.*

My hand went automatically to my lips. My first kiss, and I was completely confused by it. It had felt perfect, tender and vulnerable, but now I wasn’t sure if it had meant anything at all. How *had* she drugged me? The tea? But she’d been drinking the same combination of herbs as I was. And why had I only felt so suddenly tired after kissing her?

I suspected I didn’t know Maisie at all.

I shook myself and forced my normal, carefree smile as I straightened out my crumpled jacket. “So, Greg, what’s the plan? You’ve been sitting here with nothing to do but think for hours. What have you come up with?”

My manservant cocked his head. “Well, I’m hoping those creatures will be gone by morning. Without your sword, we can’t face them. Edward and Tristan are on the other side of the valley. We’ve been communicating by flashes of

candlelight. I told them to stay back since it was too dangerous for them to approach and you were stable—you just needed to sleep. Ryan must still be with the boat.”

I cringed inwardly and hoped Gregory didn't notice. This situation was painting me as the fool rather than their inspiring leader.

If my manservant noticed, he didn't show it as he continued. “Once the Winter Hounds are gone, we must find a way down. I found a door behind that tapestry while you slept, but it's locked. The wood is too thick for it to break. It looks like we'll have to risk scaling the wall. If we knot the bedding together, it might help. Maybe throw down the straw mattress if we can squeeze it through the window. We should wait for Edward and Tristan so they can help, and then, we make it as safe as possible.”

I slumped down on the bed. “So she has abandoned us here, defenseless, leaving us no choice but to wait until morning. And then we're back to square one in tracking down Maisie. Only this time she has my sword *and* all my money.” I fell silent as my frustration and annoyance surfaced. Where had she gone? Probably even Mistress Faye wouldn't know this time.

I needed to think. If I were her, where would I go?

It wasn't going to be easy, even once I found her. If she didn't want to come back to Harelin with me, what could I do? It wouldn't be right to force her. But what if the alternative was letting my people starve?

I grunted and dug the heels of my hands into my eyes. This woman was driving me insane and had made a fool of me. Again.

Distant Hounds started to bray.

I hoped she was alright.



I PULLED the hood of my cloak lower to obscure my face. I'd chosen bold eyebrows and straight black hair that was shaved on one side and hung at chin length on the other. It made me look as different as possible to normal, but still, I kept my face hidden as I didn't want to take any risks. Too many people were after me now. And too many *things*.

Dusk had set. The gentle creak of boats on the tide, the splash of water against their hulls, and the tired curses of sailors and cargo men became a lullaby as I sat among a pile of barrels. My eyelids drooped and my limbs refused to move, heavy from exhaustion.

*Not yet. Keep going just a little longer.*

I needed to escape from Kobar and start again where nobody knew who I was. No Mistress Faye to control me. No Prince Thomas stalking me for his sword or because of something an old woman had believed. *Freedom*. Even Winter would struggle to find me on the other side of the world.

And escaping from Kobar meant getting on a ship.

I popped a sweet in my mouth and waited. My toes were numb from the cold air seeping through my wet boots, and both my heels were blistered and rubbed raw. I longed for a bath...although, not as much as I longed for a bed. I hadn't slept for more than a few scattered hours in the last three days, and it had been an arduous journey to the coast, keeping away from the roads and jumping every time I thought I saw a white shadow. Once I'd arrived in the port town, I'd been too eager to avoid notice to buy lodgings. I would sleep once I was safe on a ship to Feyanda.

The whistle was low, almost quiet enough for me to miss it. I crouched and strained to make out the tune. Red Bonnet, Blue Bonnet. That was it. That was the code I was waiting for.

A jolt of adrenaline enlivened my limbs, and I sped across the planks of the jetty as quietly as I could, keeping the dark cloak pulled tight around me. I followed the tune to a small merchant's ship, its hull low in the water from cargo.

Hopefully, that meant it would be ready to leave as soon as the tide turned in the early hours of the morning. It was too dark to make out its name or any colors.

I spotted the whistler sitting on a barrel at the prow, half obscured by the only mast. She wore sailor's trousers and dangled one leg down, while the other was bent under her chin. She couldn't have been more than ten.

I took one last look around the deck and stepped onto the ship.

The whistling stopped.

I approached the girl. "I followed your tune."

She nodded and hopped down from the barrel. "Your place has been prepared as you arranged. No questions will be asked." She held out her hand, and I fished in Thomas's money pouch for five more gold. She tucked the money into her sash and motioned for me to follow her.

She lifted a well-oiled trapdoor on the deck and jumped down, not bothering to use the ladder. I listened, and when I heard nobody, I followed.

The hold was dimly lit by two lanterns half-starved of oil. Hammocks were fastened down one wall, all empty and swaying gently with the rocking motion of the boat. The girl led me to an unmarked door. "This is your cabin. There is dried food and water in the chest. Try to stay inside as much as possible. There are other passengers boarding tomorrow for this voyage, and I know you're trying to escape notice."

I thanked her and let myself into the cabin. It was tiny. A narrow pallet bed folded down from one wall, and a cracked chamber pot rattled in one corner as the boat rocked. A single chair was bolted to the floor and a board folded down from the opposite wall to create a table barely bigger than a book. A tiny porthole was the only source of natural light. The heaving of the floor without any steady point of reference was already making my stomach lurch.

It was only for a few days. I had survived worse. It would be worth it for my new life.

I locked the door, dumped my bag and sword belt, and unfolded the bed. The blanket was itchy.

I stared at the ceiling and thought of how nobody in the world knew I was here. I expected the thought to fill me with a thrill of freedom. Instead, I felt hollow and adrift as if nothing I did had any meaning.

I cleared my mind and rolled onto my side. I had secured a ship and was going to Feyanda. Now I could finally rest in safety.

Within seconds, I was asleep.

## CHAPTER II

# MAISIE



I sat up and instantly felt nauseous. I leaned over the edge of the bed and emptied what little was in my stomach into the chamber pot.

When the heaving stopped, my dry lips stuck together, and my eyes felt scratchy. I blinked, glancing around the room, and realized light was streaming through the porthole. The floor rocked and jerked far more violently than before. It was a miracle I hadn't fallen out of bed.

How long had I been asleep?

I staggered to the window with my arms outstretched for balance—my legs were weak from hunger—and squinted through the murky glass that was underwater one minute and showing sky the next. The constant plunging beneath the waves and the inability to tell which angle was level made the nausea rise in my throat again. I took a sip of stale water from the provided bottle and craved salt.

When had I last eaten? The last few days were a blur of running and bribing and hiding. Searching ship after ship for a suitable one. I had been focused on nothing other than survival and secrecy. But it was worth it. Hopefully, I had covered my tracks well enough that nobody would know I was on this ship. Winter, Mistress Faye, and Prince Thomas would never find me again.

And now we had set sail and were heading to a country where nobody knew me: Feyanda and the northern tundra. It was not a country Kobarans often traveled to. I could reinvent

myself however I wished. And I wouldn't have to rely on or fear anyone.

I tried to work out how high the sun was in the sky through the tiny porthole, but with the rocking and constant plunging below the water, it was impossible.

I grabbed some ship's biscuits from the chest and flopped down on the bed, eating them slowly and hoping they would calm my stomach. Wherever I looked, my brain played tricks. The room stayed the same while my body told me I was rocking on waves. Only the angle of the lantern hanging from its hook moved. The nausea built. The room was hot and damp.

I needed to get out.

I slipped and staggered to the door and pushed down on the handle. It was locked. Panic seized me instantly.

*No, no, no...*

I pushed again, hoping it was just stiff. It didn't budge. I wiggled the handle, trying different angles. I popped a sweet in my mouth but couldn't taste it. The panic inside me grew.

*Get out, get out, get out...*

I thumped on the door, my mind going blank. "Let me out!" I shouted. "Help!"

Heavy footsteps sounded on the other side. I backed away from the door. There was a low murmur of voices and the unmistakable sound of a key in a lock.

Had I been betrayed? Had Mistress Faye found me? Or an agent of Winter?

The door swung open, and Gregory stood there, pushing his glasses up his nose. Of all the people...

"You?" I managed.

He opened his mouth, but I didn't let him speak. I barreled past him and skidded across the dim hold to the ladder up to the deck. I scrambled up the wet rungs and out into the salty

sea breeze. The shrieks of seagulls accosted me. We couldn't be too far from shore then. Escape was still possible.

My eyes went to the man at the helm. A typical sailor. But behind him was... Thomas.

*No, no, no...*

He gave me a grin and a wave and started toward me. I backed away, but everywhere I looked, there was only sea.

I wrestled with my panic, begging my brain to start working again.

I ran to a rail. There had to be lifeboats strapped to the side. Every large ship had at least one. They would be tied close to the water. Maybe I could jump into one and slice the ropes. A man walked up to my side as I leaned over for a better view. "Are you alright, miss?"

I took in the newcomer, trying to become somebody else so I could slow my heart. A tall, muscular frame. A broadsword across his back. Arms crossed with confidence. A high-ranking guard or knight was my guess. Possibly one of the merchant's mercenaries.

I forced a smile. "Thank you, sir. I was feeling sick in my cabin, so I rushed up for air. I'm still worried I might be sick." I clung to the railing with white knuckles.

The man chuckled and held out a tiny leather pouch. "Mix these in water and drink it. It will stop the sickness."

I nodded and took the bag with a submissive smile. Did he actually think I would drink something given to me by a complete stranger? I pocketed it in the back of my belt. I turned my face to the side and saw Thomas walking toward me. How had he gotten on the merchant's ship?

I slipped a sweet between my lips.

*Cinnamon.*

I smiled up at the guard, making my eyes large and round. "There's a strange man approaching me. He's been staring at me since I arrived on the ship. He's scaring me."

The guard raised his eyebrows. “You mean the man crossing the deck right now?”

“Yes.”

I studied the guard’s face. He was suppressing a smile, and his eyes glittered. *Rats*. He was with the Prince. Probably a knight. I’d used the wrong tactic.

I could see the lifeboat strapped to the side of the hull only a few paces away.

The knight leaned on the railing. “Well, although I must admit he can be annoying at times and sometimes rather bossy, he really is nothing to fear.”

He grinned over my shoulder, and I tensed.

“What are you two talking about?” Thomas had stopped right behind me. His presence bored into my back. “Tristan?”

*Don’t turn around.*

The knight straightened and shrugged. “Nothing of importance, Your Highness. Maisie is feeling nauseous, so I gave her some herbs to help. Just ginger, peppermint, grape seeds, and springberry.”

I grimaced and edged one step closer to the lifeboat, keeping my back to Thomas and refusing to acknowledge him. I could feel his presence like a looming wave, every inch of me becoming sensitized to him even as I resisted. Instead, I raised an eyebrow at the knight. “That doesn’t sound like a very pleasant combination.”

I took another small step away. Would Thomas try me for stealing? Now that I was his prisoner, I was completely at his mercy. A tremble entered my hands, and I ate a second sweet.

*Blackberry*. I liked the way it mixed with the cinnamon and concentrated on the taste, trying to ground myself.

The knight grinned down at me. “You’ll like it. The springberry separates the flavors. It smells of peppermint but tastes of ginger. Catches me off guard every time.”



I'd never heard of springberry. Maybe it only grew in Harelin. Silence stretched out, and I still didn't want to turn to acknowledge Thomas. I heard the scuff of his boots on the planks as he shifted behind me. For some reason our kiss came to mind, and I shoved the memory away before it could distract me. I was already struggling to think straight while feeling so trapped. "Thank you, sir."

Thomas cleared his throat. "Tristan, would you mind leaving us alone? I would like some privacy."

The knight stepped away, giving me a friendly wink. My knuckles tightened on the railing. I had left the Sword of Spring in my cabin, just tossed on the floor. Gregory had probably retrieved it. *Idiot, idiot, idiot!* There had to be some way I could gain control of the situation.

I blew out a long breath and sucked a new sweet.

*Toffee.*

I made my voice very soft. Unreadable. "Where is the ship going? To Feyanda or Harelin?"

"Harelin." Thomas walked to my side and rested his hands on the rail looking out. "I'm afraid this merchant ship is under my command. We're going home."

Anger bubbled up.

"How?"

"It always was. I pay the sailors and captain and the girl who booked you the cabin."

I knew it. He had said I could trust him, but it was all lies. Always lies. He had tricked me and kidnapped me. If you let anyone get close, it only hurt more when they let you down.

All he cared about was his country. While that wasn't a bad thing, I resented him for pretending something was about me when it wasn't. I was just a stepping stone to get him what he wanted. None of his attitudes or motivations toward me had been genuine.

I glared at the Prince. I was nothing but a pawn to him, just like everyone else in my life who had ever pretended to care. I

could never let myself forget that.

“So the people I bribed with my money were all being paid by you?” My voice was cold and desolate. I felt him tense.

“You mean who *you* paid with *my* money. Yes. We guessed you would try to escape by boat, so I paid rather a lot of people to look out for you and lure you into this ship. Pretty much every ship in the harbor, in fact. Not to mention the other two port towns. It has been quite expensive and very labor-intensive.”

I folded my arms on the rail, an acidic taste in my mouth. “I’m flattered. And now, I’m your prisoner?”

“You’re not my prisoner, Maisie.” His voice sounded tired.

I whirled on him, finally facing him, my hands on my hips. “Well, it certainly looks like I am. Will you put me back to shore right now?”

He shifted awkwardly. “Just give Harelin a chance. We will protect you. You will be safe there.” Now that I was looking at him, I noticed the shadows under his eyes, stubble on his cheeks, and strands of hair falling free of his fringe. It was the first time he had ever looked anything but immaculate.

I stepped closer to him, glaring. “You can’t just kidnap me, Thomas!”

He opened his arms in a placating gesture that only made me angrier. “I’m not kidnapping you. I just want to talk so we can come to some sort of arrangement.”

I stepped right up to his open chest, jabbing it with a finger. “This is definitely kidnapping.” I jabbed him again for good measure.

Color rose to his cheeks. “You drugged me, lied to me, stole my weapon, and left me trapped in a tower that was an absolute pain to get out of. I had to wait for the rest of my men to arrive. Do you really blame me for needing to take such extreme measures to talk to you?”

I looked him up and down. “Well, you’re fine, aren’t you? It wasn’t that bad. If you hadn’t realized, that was my way of

telling you to *leave me alone.*”

Desperation entered his eyes as the corners of his lips turned down. “We need you in Harelin. *I need you.*”

“Nobody *needs* me.”

He stepped closer, his eyes on mine, pleading. It became harder to breathe. I looked down at his hands. Neither was next to a weapon. But there was the edge of a paper bag sticking out of his belt. I frowned and grabbed it before he could object.

“What’s this?”

His eyes widened, and an unpleasant feeling grew in my stomach. He extended a hand to grab back the bag back, but I side-stepped.

I opened the small, wrinkled paper packet and found it full of blue boiled sweets. Had he brought more to bribe me with? As if sweets would be enough to convince me to go to Harelin and marry him. My frown deepened. This was too suspicious.

I lifted one out and brought it to my nose to smell it.

Thomas leapt forward and grabbed my wrist, keeping the sweet locked in place. “Stop. Don’t eat it. They’re not for you.”

I took a deep breath, ignoring him and processing the scents. “Aniseed and...is that valerian and...bonnet weed?”

Realization dawned on me and with it was hot anger.

Thomas didn’t let go of my wrist. His tired eyes were still wide with an edge of panic. “I don’t know what’s in them, exactly. Mistress Faye gave them to me.”

My rage deepened and any trace of guilt or sympathy vanished. I yanked my wrist free. “You planned to drug me.”

Thomas shook his head, lifting his hands palms up. “No. I didn’t. Mistress Faye gave them to me, and I removed them from your sweet bag. Remember? The sweets I gave you were all fine. Only the blue ones are drugged.”

I scowled at him, not at all convinced. In fact, my anger only grew hotter with his denial. “If you didn’t intend to use them, why do you still have them? Why didn’t you throw them away?”

He shrugged and ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know. Maybe I thought they could be useful in the future?”

I folded my arms, not even attempting to hide my anger. “Like if I refused to come with you to Harelin?”

His eyes widened even farther and he stepped forward. “Not on you. I would never use them on you. But...you know...maybe they could be given to...enemies.”

“*Enemies.*” I drew out the word. He was such a bad liar. I tucked the sweets into the back of my sash while he was distracted. My hands were trembling as my anger burned hotter and hotter, and with it an edge of panic.

He leaned closer. A plan started to form as he kept his hands raised and away from his belt. “Yes, enemies. You know, if we were locked up or something and needed to escape. Or to drug a dog or something.”

His position was perfect. I slipped his small knife from his belt. It was much easier than reaching the dagger strapped to my thigh...which was also *his* dagger.

While he was still staring at me, clueless, I slipped my hand under his arm, twisting it behind him, and placed the knife against his throat.

He froze beneath me. “Maisie, stop this.”

I ignored him, my pulse hammering in my ears. “I told you to leave me alone!” I hissed. “You deceived me, kidnapped me, and brought the means to drug me.” I raised my voice as the men around us started to take notice. “If you want your Prince to live, you will all stay back,” I shouted.

More men appeared on deck. Four soldiers and five sailors. The former already had their swords drawn. I could feel Thomas’s pulse flicking through my hand at his throat.

Greggory awkwardly extracted himself from the trap door. Thomas's sword was in his hand. "Lady, stop this. If you kill the Prince, the whole of Harelin will hunt you down."

My chest tightened.

*Calm, Maisie. Think.*

I tossed back my head and smiled, though there was nothing amusing about this. "You're already after me." They believed that stupid story from a partially written message from a dead woman.

*Calm, Maisie.*

But I couldn't find the calm, rational part of me. I was so angry. Angry at Thomas. At Mistress Faye. At Winter. Angry at the orphanage. Angry at my parents for abandoning me. Angry at everything that had happened to me. Why couldn't the world just leave me alone!

I aimed and threw the small knife through the air. It spun over and over before smashing into the lantern built on the aftcastle railing. The one that was always burning. It exploded in a shower of glass and sprayed fiery oil over the deck.

Men cursed and stepped back as the fire found tar and wood and waxed canvas to ignite.

I didn't watch the result of the chaos but pushed Thomas backward over the railing while kicking his feet out from under him.

He toppled over the barrier and splashed into the sea with a half-strangled shout. Now they had two disasters to keep them distracted. Fishing the soggy Prince out of the water and saving the ship would be their top priorities.

I ran and leaped over the side of the ship into the rowboat, jarring my knee. It rocked violently and almost tossed me into the sea. My heart stuttered. If I fell in, it would be hard to swim in these skirts.

I unsheathed Thomas's original dagger from my thigh and sawed through the salt-encrusted ropes. As one frayed and snapped, the boat rocked dramatically, almost tipping

completely vertical with its nose pointing down to the swells of the ocean. I scrambled up to the second rope and sawed. It snapped when I was halfway through.

I screamed at the sudden lurch. The rowboat plummeted into the waves, half submerging before bobbing up, a foot of water in the base. The bow wave of the ship immediately seized the small boat, sending it spinning outward. I gripped onto the sides as it violently rocked and flung me around. My elbows knocked painfully against the sides as my soaked skirts tangled around my legs. I prayed I was not about to be tossed into the depths and drowned.

At last, the boat settled on the waves, and I panted, still gripping the sides with white knuckles. My sodden dress and dripping hair caught the chill of the ocean's breeze.

I bent down to pick up the oars which were half submerged in sea water, my fingers already numb. Now I just had to row to shore. But...which way was that?

I squinted out across the waves looking for some clue. From the sun, I could tell which direction was south, but how was I to know which way was the closest shoreline? Kobar was bordered by a ragged coastline, with many pinnacles jutting into the ocean that could be closer to us north or south. Or had we followed the southern curve of the coast to the barren wasteland that separated Kobar from Harelin?

I would have to head west and hope I saw land before I succumbed to exhaustion. I had no food, no water, and no dry clothes. And I didn't have the sword to guard against Winter. But I had no choice now, so I would survive—like I always had.

Something in the water caught my eye. A brightly colored body bobbing strangely. Cold realization flooded me with horror. Was that...? But surely a Prince as admired as him could swim? Had he banged his head? Was he weighed down by something?

His limbs moved weakly, but he was facedown, bobbing away from the ship. As I watched, he sunk beneath the huge swells of the waves, at times entirely disappearing from view.

I gritted my teeth. I should leave him. His men would catch sight of his bright red coat any second and come to his rescue. He had a whole ship to help him, and they probably had the fire under control by now.

He was not my problem. He had kidnapped me. Betrayed me. Possibly been about to drug me. I needed to escape.

The red silk was swallowed by the waves.

I swore and tore off my skirts and bodice until I wore only my shift and stockings. I split the bottom of my shift down the center to free my legs for kicking and dived into the waves. The strength and fridity of the open ocean was shocking, stealing my breath.

I swam to where Thomas was slowly sinking deeper and deeper, his coat ballooning around him. I took a deep breath and dived again.

The cold was absolute. The salt stung my eyes, forcing them closed. The sea tugged me, disorientated me. I reached out with my hand, kicking, praying I was still facing toward Thomas.

My fingers touched material. I clenched his coat, but he was too heavy for me to pull up. My lungs begged for air.

Desperate, I grew my hair, wrapping it around his body, the strands seeming to understand the need to knot tightly around him. My lungs were screaming. I kicked, propelling my body up toward the surface, needing air, forcing my eyes open to focus on the light. My hair grew longer as the distance grew between us.

I broke the surface and dragged in ragged breaths. My limbs were freezing and moving sluggishly. In order to pull him up to the surface, I needed to be in the boat, or I would drown us both. But he had already been underwater for so long. What if he was already dead? What if I had killed him?

I hadn't meant to kill him.

The rowboat was gradually bobbing away from us, slowly spinning on the side of a wave. To my other side, the ship was also moving farther away as men on the rigging shouted

Thomas's name, too far to easily help. The second lifeboat was being lowered into the water. I stifled a sob and swam as hard as I could, my limbs weak as the cold froze my joints.

*Please let him be alright. Please.*

I reached the rowboat and clung to the side with aching fingers. For one horrid moment, I thought I wouldn't have the strength to pull myself up. It was all I could do to hold on. I thought of Thomas dying beneath me and screamed, using the last of my strength to haul myself over the side...and almost capsizing the boat in the process. I collapsed on my back in the water at the bottom of the boat and panted, completely spent.

Gentle tugs on my hair gave me motivation to sit up. I couldn't stop. Not yet. My limbs screamed in protest as I started to reel in my hair, hand over hand. Tears washed the salt from my stinging eyes as violent shivers overcame my body. I had been such a fool.

I continued pulling, hand over hand, on and on, pooling my hair around me at the bottom of the boat. At last, I felt tension, and the weight increased. I dragged myself up to the lip of the boat and saw Thomas bobbing in the water, his face half submerged. His skin was very white, his lips blue. He looked dead.

I gripped the top of his coat and pulled upward. He moved toward me, but the higher I lifted him, the heavier he became. The boat tipped alarmingly beneath me, threatening to push me back in. I pulled.

The boat capsized and wood slammed into the back of my head.

Blackness engulfed me.



## CHAPTER 12

# MAISIE



I woke coughing and spluttering, struggling to breathe. My lungs rattled. I rolled to my side and vomited seawater into an already waterlogged boat.

I looked around wildly. *Thomas. Where was Thomas?*

I sobbed in relief when I saw his body on the other side of the rowboat. A figure in dripping-wet dark green was bent over him, pinching his nose and breathing into his mouth. As he lifted his head to perform chest compressions, I recognized Gregory.

“Is he dead?” I whispered. My voice was strangely hoarse.

Gregory didn’t stop the regular compressions. He was soaked. I realized he must have swum from the second lifeboat to save us both. My hair was still long and wrapped around Thomas’s waist. I pulled it free and let it shrink to shoulder-length.

Gregory’s eyes met mine. They were terrified. “Give him breaths. I’ll keep pressing on his heart.”

Thomas’s skin was too grey, his eyes half open. My body trembled but not from the cold.

I nodded and crawled to his head. Pinching his nose, I covered his mouth with mine and blew, feeling the air being shoved back by Gregory’s compressions.

“Come on, Thomas. Come back. Fight it.” I whispered. I gave him another breath, pinching his nose and cupping his

chin. Tears spilled down my cheeks. If he didn't come back, I would never forgive myself.

I breathed into his mouth again. Gregory paused to let his lungs fully expand. My hair moved of its own accord, encircling Thomas's wrist.

A jolt of energy startled me, making me sit upright. Beneath me, Thomas stirred. He coughed violently, turned, and spewed out water tinged with frothy blood. He slumped back down, and I cradled his head in my lap so it didn't fall back into the water at the bottom of the boat.

"I'm so sorry, Thomas." I started to sob. Gregory sat back, shaking with relief as he buried his face in his hands.

Thomas's glazed eyes focused on mine. He reached up, and his fingers touched my cheek before his hand fell. His eyes rolled back in his skull, and he returned to unconsciousness. I didn't dare take my eyes off the rise and fall of his chest as Gregory rowed us back to the ship.

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## Thomas

I WAS NEVER, ever getting on a boat again. This would be my last voyage. I never wanted to even see the sea again. Each breath ached, the pain made it hard to sleep, and I felt dizzy every time I tried to sit up.

But at least I was alive. I had Maisie and Gregory to thank for that. Though Maisie had been the one who had almost killed me in the first place.

That woman! That dangerous, infuriating, scared, beautiful woman! I raised a hand to my forehead and pinched against my headache.

The cabin door opened and closed. I propped myself up on my pillows and was surprised to see Maisie entering with a steaming cup.

She didn't meet my eyes, and her skin was pale. "I brewed these herbs myself. They will help with the discomfort."

I eyed the liquid suspiciously.

She scoffed. "Don't worry, it won't put you to sleep or anything, though it may leave you a little drowsy. There's no reason for me to trick you right now. You can't even leave your bed."

Though her words were light, her expression was serious, and I could see the shame there. She still wouldn't meet my eyes. I'd started to think her incapable of caring what happened to me, but maybe my almost drowning had crossed a line.

She was dry and clean, her hair plaited in a discreet braid, and a simple shawl covered her dress. Her eyes stayed downcast, so I let my gaze linger on her face, admiring the curve of her cheekbones and the daintiness of her chin. How could a woman look so ordered and perfect on the outside and be so chaotic within?

She looked like she hadn't been eating well, and I remembered Gregory saying she had been knocked unconscious trying to rescue me yesterday. She needed rest as much as I did, though, I suspected the only way she would rest was if we tied her to her bed. And if I tried that, I'd probably get stabbed.

I took the liquid and sipped it. The warm water was sweet and earthy. "Thank you," I managed. I kept a good distance between us on the bed.

"It wasn't completely my fault." Her eyes stayed down. "You kidnapped me, I found those drugged sweets, and...I panicked." She pushed her hair behind her ear. "But still, I'm sorry I pushed you. I didn't mean...well, how was I to know you were so bad at swimming?"

She spoke the words as if they were a strange taste in her mouth. I grunted in response.

"And I'm sorry for drugging you earlier in the tower."

I grunted again, worried that anything more would send me into a fit of coughing.

“But I still don’t appreciate you kidnapping me.”

I snorted and closed my eyes, feeling the warmth of the tonic radiating from my belly. I opened my eyes to see Maisie place a small bundle of herbs by my head.

“The scent will help you breathe. I know your lungs ache at the moment.” She froze, leaning over me, her face only inches from mine. I was touched by her concern and resisted the urge to feel the smoothness of her skin with my fingertips.

I licked my lips. “We should talk, Maisie.” My voice sounded gruff and alien.

I watched her shrink into herself and cross her arms, her face going blank.

I softened my voice to show I wasn’t angry. “I want to clear up what happened earlier.” A tickle grew in my throat at the words, and I coughed to clear it.

“I panicked,” she repeated as if that explained everything.

“Please, can we just talk? No more running away?”

She shifted and nodded.

I leaned back against the headrest. “Please help me understand. Why were you so angry at me? I never drugged you. You drugged me, and you’ve tricked me several times. Your anger at me seems unfair.” The words reduced me to a fit of vicious coughing, each one agony on my ribs. My breaths burned like fire.

When I could breathe again, her eyes fixed on mine with a quiet intensity. “I never said for a second that you could trust me. I’ve been honest about who I am.”

My stomach dropped, and I forced myself to sit upright, fighting against waves of dizziness. “But you *can* trust me, Maisie,” I whispered. “I wasn’t dishonest.”

She scoffed again, her face twisting. “You kidnapped me.”

I sighed. “So you’re allowed to do whatever you want to me, and I’m supposed to accept that? But I do anything to trick you, and you yell at me with knives and push me off ships? Even if you did the same thing to me first? And those sweets were honestly not meant for you. I was just stopping Mistress Faye from using them.” I spread out my hands before coughing again.

Her jaw hardened but she seemed in control. “Look, Thomas. I didn’t want you to just put up with my behavior. I wanted you to be angry enough to leave me alone and stop searching for me. The world is an ugly place where everyone tricks and deceives everyone else to get their own way. That is my world. That is how I live.” She deflated. “But you tell me that your world isn’t like that. You say that it’s possible to trust people, and that I should trust you. You paint a grand future playing King and Queen where everything is nice and fluffy and covered in pretty rainbows. You say that’s possible. Then you trick me.” She took a deep trembling breath. “Don’t you see how that’s not different? How it makes your rainbow world nothing but a pretty facade for getting what you want. It makes our worlds exactly the same right after insisting they’re different.” Her eyes bored into mine. “I am not a hypocrite when I do exactly what I say I do. You’re a hypocrite when you pretend to be so much better.”

I swallowed down the sting of her words. I wanted to be perfect. I had to be perfect for the good of the kingdom. But I wasn’t.

I cleared my throat. At least we were starting to understand each other. But every time we grew closer, something happened that sent us skidding apart again. Telling her to trust me was meaningless. I had to prove it to her. Somehow, I needed to cut through her endless web of defenses. And not just to save Harelin. I cared about her too.

But to show that to her, I needed time with her. A lot of time.

“Maisie, listen to me. I have a plan that might give us both what we want: a proposition.” I coughed again as the words caught in my throat.

She sat down on the furthest part of the bed, leaned back, and folded her arms. “What?” Her tone was dismissive rather than hopeful. She studied her nails.

“You said you would marry me, didn’t you? Right before you drugged me.”

Her face became cold, and she started to stand, but I lunged forward and grabbed her wrist. “Hear me out. Please. We can sign a contract. You had contracts with Mistress Faye and your clients, didn’t you? Think of this like that. A con. An act. A role you merely have to play to get what you want.” The words hurt more than I expected them to. I had never expected to degrade my marriage—my future—by making it so meaningless. I had wanted my marriage to be full of love and mutual commitment. Now I felt like I was destroying my life in order to save my country.

*So much for a perfect Prince.*

Maisie cocked her head. “What is in this contract?”

I licked my lips. It was clear that we were finally speaking the same language. My throat was scratchy, so I drank the rest of the tonic before continuing. Just thinking about what I had to say made me sick. “Marry me for six months, then we can dissolve it. In that time, my mother will hand us the throne. You can be Queen and vanquish the famine. I will handle the politics and the running of the country. After six months, you will be free of me forever.” I couldn’t keep the disgust from my voice. I had wanted this to be different. I had wanted our relationship to be real and honest. Instead, everything was a mess. The most important job I had ever been given, and I had made a wreck of it.

She had become very still, her gaze fixed on her hands. I wished I could read her mind. “And what do I get?”

I shifted on my elbows. “After six months, you get my father’s sword in case Winter is still after you, a house anywhere in Harelin you wish to live, and forty thousand gold.” I watched her eyes as the interest sparked there and swallowed down my bitterness. I wasn’t enough to tempt her, and neither were the lives of my people. But a fortune? She

would do anything for that. And now I was buying myself a wife. My nausea intensified. “While we are married, we will deal with Winter. And I hope, once the famine is vanquished, they won’t be able to enter our lands anymore. You should be safe from them in Harelin.”

Her eyes flicked up to mine. “While we’re married, the contract should state that intimate relations are not part of the deal.”

My cheeks heated. “Of course not. I would never presume...”

She flicked my awkwardness aside. “And what happens if the famine doesn’t stop? What if this old woman of yours was wrong?”

My mouth dried. “Then our deal still stands. Our marriage is dissolved after six months, and you still have your reward.”

She nodded. “I accept.”

*So easy.*

“I should add that we will need to convince the kingdom our engagement is genuine. It will be easier for my mother that way, and the people will want a wedding they can get behind. If we appear to be in love, the court will be more likely to agree to it as well. If Mother knew this was short term, she wouldn’t abdicate, and the court wouldn’t crown you.”

She nodded as if such acting was an everyday occurrence for her.

I looked down, shame weighing heavily on my shoulders. What would Mother think if she knew I had done this? She would be heartbroken. Father would have approved, though. He always believed good leaders should be willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the country.

Maisie straightened up, an excited light in her eyes. “What sort of wife should I be? Coy, shy, funny, bold, elegant? I suppose I should become the embodiment of an inspiring princess.”



Nausea rose again in my throat. I lay back down. “Just be yourself. I never wanted you to be anything but yourself.” I stared up at the galley roof, hating myself.

Maisie was quiet for a moment. “You know, I’ve been other people for so long, I’m not sure there is much of me left. Just the ugly bones of a person who never was.” Her words were so quiet and cold, I sat back up, my eyes finding hers.

For a moment we just stared at each other as if reaching a mutual understanding neither of us had expected. Did she really think so little of herself when she was so...brilliant, resourceful, clever? But there it was, self-hatred clear in her eyes.

She bounced up from the bed with a bright smile as if she had never spoken. “So then, when do we get engaged? Maybe tomorrow when you’re feeling better? We can announce it in the evening. And you’ll need to give me details about the court of Harelin and how I should behave to charm your mother and the significant nobles.”

I fell back onto the pillow. Did she really have to lie to them all? But if we were to be convincing, we would both have to.

“I’ll be the Lady May, perfect in every way.” Maisie brushed my wrist. “I’ll write up the contract and bring it in the morning. You should rest.”

I couldn’t bring myself to watch as she left the room.

## CHAPTER 13

# MAISIE



I stared over the railing at my first impression of Harelin. The gentle hills were already long darkened by nightfall, and the moonlight stole all their color. The breeze was warmer, even at night, and I let the hood of my cloak fall down. I was keeping my hair permanently long and blonde now, a shade I thought would be the most appropriate for a future princess and queen.

One of the sailors tipped his cap as he approached me. He stopped a few paces away. “We’ll be coming into harbor soon, my lady. If you could keep out of the way of the men as we make port, we’d be grateful. His Highness has said you’ll be sleeping your last night on board and leaving in the morning. I hope he will be recovered enough by then.” He made an awkward half-cough and walked on. I wondered how much money Thomas would have to pay them all not to reveal what had happened. It would be a disaster if the people of Harelin found out I had almost killed their Crown Prince.

The knights and sailors were giving me a wide berth, even Tristan, who had seemed quite friendly when I’d first met him. The sailors would soon leave, but the knights? I was going to have to work hard to win them over. After all, I would see them every day for the next six months.

Because I was marrying Thomas.

If we were to successfully convince everyone that our engagement was genuine, I would have to smooth things over between us too. He was a terrible liar.

I had seen the disgust in his face as he'd arranged our betrothal. Last time he'd asked me to marry him, he had been free and eager, full of hope. I guessed I'd destroyed that hope. At last, he was starting to understand. I wasn't somebody he could save or truly love.

A twinge of guilt made me take a deep breath and lean farther over the railing, watching the stars ripple on the surface of the sea. The emotion was unhelpful. We were both getting what we wanted, as was Harelin. I would be safe, and I would survive. Hoping for anything more than survival would only lead to more hurt. Survival was enough.

The quiet of the late evening was broken by sailors calling to one another as they took in the sail and guided the ship into a cove surrounded by walls of large rocks. They dropped the anchor, and a few of the men took a rowboat to shore. Apart from us, the harbor was quiet. I was thankful for one more night on the ship before I had to face the challenge of being on show to an entire country. Thomas had been playing this game for years. I acknowledged a grudging respect for him.

Footsteps becoming louder behind me made me turn, my hand automatically dropping to where Thomas's dagger was strapped to my thigh. I clenched my fist. I was going to have to stop that reaction.

Thomas gave me a weak smile as he approached. His skin was still pale, but at least he was able to stand without fainting now.

I folded my hands neatly over my skirts and gave him a concerned smile. "How are you feeling?"

He grunted and leaned on the railing beside me. "A bit better." He sucked in a deep breath of air. "It is so good to be home. Finally, the chill of the ocean has gone."

I nodded. "I'll brew you another tonic before you fall asleep tonight." I looked back over the dark shadows of the hills. "I look forward to seeing Harelin tomorrow. I know I have much to learn."

I hesitated, then reached out to lay a hand on his upper arm. He flinched and pulled back. I frowned. It wasn't fear. It was almost...distaste. "Thomas, if we are to pretend this marriage is genuine..."

He ran a hand over his face as he exhaled. "I know. I just...it's hard when I know it is fake."

He turned to look back toward his homeland, and I leaned on the railing beside him, close enough that our arms touched. "Thomas," I started again, making my voice smooth and low and coaxing. "If this is to work, you need to follow my lead. The whole country is going to be watching us. Your mother. Your knights. Didn't you say they need to believe this is genuine for them to allow the marriage and for us to take the throne together?"

He didn't pull away this time. "We're still on the ship," he muttered. He looked so tired, and that twinge of guilt returned.

"Are you sure you're ready to be walking about out here? If you need to take another day before we set out..." I raised my hand to touch his forehead and check his temperature. He caught my wrist midway.

"Maisie, this isn't you. You don't need to act like you care about me when we're alone."

I withdrew my hand and looked away, hurt. Did he really think I was incapable of caring? "You're in a charming mood this evening." My sarcasm came out sharper than I had intended. I needed him to meet me halfway. This contract had been his idea, after all.

I saw his knuckles whiten on the railing. "I'm sorry. I just..." He sighed. "You can be engaged to me without pretending to be something or somebody you're not. Can't you simply be yourself with me?"

I looked out to the harbor. He still didn't understand, though I had tried to explain it before. I didn't want him to see the real me. She was just a husk. When I removed the masks and the roles, there wasn't much left.

I flashed him a smile to cover my sorrow. His lips parted in response and his head moved a fraction of an inch closer. “Well, surely, if you’re the immaculate prince who does everything he’s meant to, you need a perfect princess by your side. You fill your role so well, I would hate to undermine it and tarnish your precious reputation.”

He scoffed. “Maybe I’m sick of being immaculate. Maybe I’ve tried so hard my entire life to do everything so perfectly, now all I want is something real. Something that matters.”

I laughed, the sound twisted and ugly. “If you want things that are real and that matter, you won’t find them from me.”

He licked his lips and looked down at my hands on the railing. “Or maybe you’re the one who can teach me what really matters. It’s not how perfect things appear. It’s what things really mean underneath.”

I frowned, taken aback, trying to process his words and what was underneath them. “Nothing between us is real. Nothing between us matters. It has to be like that, Thomas.”

He grimaced, still looking down. “You matter. Just be Maisie. Please.”

My chest started to tighten and the familiar sensation of being trapped returned. I pushed away from the railing. “You don’t want Maisie.” My words sounded stupid, even to my own ears.

Thomas took my hand, surprising me. His expression was soft. “*I want Maisie.*”

I scoffed, taking another step back, but not slipping my hand from his. Something about his hold made me feel more grounded. Less trapped. Though that didn’t make any sense. “No, you want a betrothed to save your kingdom. You want Lady Liya. Maisie wouldn’t marry you.”

He flinched and let go of my hand.

I swallowed, regretting the harshness of my words, even as I longed for him to understand. “Maisie wouldn’t marry *anyone*. Ever. She doesn’t even have any friends. That is why I must pretend to be somebody else for this to work.”

He wouldn't meet my eyes but nodded. "Fine." His tone was increasingly clipped and sounded hurt. He dragged in a shaking breath as if forcing himself to remain calm. "But know that Maisie will always have at least one friend. No matter if she holds a knife to his throat and tries to drown him." The corner of his lips kicked up in a humorless smile.

I folded my arms, looking away. Why couldn't he get this into his thick head? "Then you are an idiot. She will continue to hurt you. She is not a good friend." Even as I said those words, some stupid part of me wanted him to reach out and hold my hand again.

I didn't look at Thomas as he replied. "Maybe. But that doesn't mean *I* can't be a good friend to *her*. A better friend than I've been so far, anyway. I shouldn't have tricked you by advertising that this boat was going to Feyanda."

I looked back at him in surprise. Did he really mean that? I couldn't understand his motive or his thought process. Nobody had ever talked to me like this before. Why would you befriend somebody who would hurt you?

He stepped up with a small smile and put his hand on one of my shoulders. "Good night, Maisie."

My throat was too thick to reply, and embarrassment weighed my head down. His fingers flexed on my shoulder, and to my surprise the action gave me comfort. Then he left to go back below deck.

I stood alone, staring at the dark sea wondering what on earth was wrong with me.

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Thomas

TODAY WAS the day I returned home. I still hadn't decided whether my trip was a success or a failure. I supposed if the Blessing of Spring returned, that would deem it a success. Yet,

deep down, I knew that would never be enough. I was the Golden Prince no more.

My knights were in a positive mood, eager to see their friends and families. Edward had already gone ashore to secure horses for us, and Tristan had gone to get more food. Under normal circumstances, it was a full day's ride to the capital. However, I was still weak, and I suspected two days would be more sensible. Besides, I needed the extra time to figure out how I would introduce Maisie to my mother and persuade her to give up her crown once we were married. Would the note from Old Mother Baba be enough for her?

Then, being the perfect Prince wouldn't be enough. I would have to be the perfect King. One whose reputation would always be marred by losing his wife just six months into their marriage. But I couldn't think that far ahead right now. Harelin had to come first. My reputation was nothing compared to the wellbeing of my people. And if Winter's aim was to wipe Harelin completely off the map, I was willing to sacrifice anything to save it. Even myself.

As Maisie walked down the gangplank to the shore ahead of me, she turned back and smiled. An open, radiant smile that caused my chest to tighten and made me want to reach out to her. I couldn't bring myself to smile back. More than anything I wanted her expression to be genuine. I wanted to be more than a game to her.

I knew the smile was fake. I knew her reaching back and taking my hand was hollow. But then, why did my emotions respond to her? Why did my fingers instinctively wrap around hers as warmth stirred in my chest? It would be so easy to forget that the contract existed and pretend this was real. Just for a moment. And become lost in her.

But pretending she loved me was dangerous. It pushed me over a cliff that I couldn't climb back up. The emotion was too intense, my hopes and fears too insurmountable. If I let myself pretend, I would be lost.

Instead, I was stuck in this state of deceit, and it was torture.



We walked through streets already bustling with morning activity. Ryan walked in front, Jonathan behind, and Gregory to my left. Maisie performed her role perfectly, her arm linked through mine, smiling at passersby and keeping close to my side; even her movements echoed mine. Her hand constantly reached out to brush my sleeve, her head inclined to murmur passing observations. No onlooker would doubt we were a couple in the throes of early romance.

She had chosen long hair of a brilliant gold for her new role in Harelin. I had never realized there were so many different shades of blonde. As we walked, she stopped me to purchase a wide sunhat to shelter her pale skin from the blazing sun, and I ushered her on before the shopkeeper could stare at her for too long.

Once we reached the waypoint stables, I was relieved to see her confidently mount her horse. The next two days would have been miserable if she'd been new to riding. Instead, it appeared she'd had plenty of practice. I wondered if she would ever tell me all the roles she'd performed under Mistress Faye.

The winding streets forced us to ride single file, but once we left the village, the road was wide enough to ride three across. Once again, I found Maisie to one side and Gregory to the other.

Masie looked surprisingly fashionable and elegant in her sun hat. "Is it always this hot?" She looked around at the yellow grass in the fields where sheep and goats were grazing. The only green was near the streams. To the other side were the endless vineyards that lined this part of the coast. The grapes that covered them were small and shriveled.

"In summer, yes."

She blew air up across her face. "This is going to take some getting used to. I can't see how Winter could hope to destroy a place that is so hot."

Greggory spoke up. "It is, of course, considerably cooler in autumn and winter. Though it doesn't snow for months like in Ravi."

She shrugged. "I never liked snow anyway." Before I could say anything, she slipped off her horse. "I'm going to walk for a bit."

She walked up to the nearest vineyard and plucked a bunch of grapes. When she returned, I noticed she'd found a bunch that was healthy and bursting with juice. Looking closer, I realized this entire section of the field looked healthy, the grapes large and the leaves green.

Greggory frowned as she ate. "Erm, that is stealing, Lady May. You can't just eat a farmer's crops."

She looked at him as if he were mad. "He'll never notice it was missing. He has a whole field of them."

He eyed her dryly. "That's not the point. It's still stealing."

I sighed. "Greggory, go to the farmhouse by the barns over there and leave a note and some money for the grapes."

He sighed and kicked his horse on ahead while mumbling under his breath.

Maisie remounted her horse, her divided skirts falling to either side. "I'm sorry, I did that without considering what a soon-to-be-princess would do." She popped a few more into her mouth.

"It's alright." I smiled to reassure her and changed the conversation to something less awkward. "I'm sorry we have to travel at such a slow pace." Even as I spoke, I realized the heat from the sun was making me feel lightheaded. "I'm afraid we'll need to stop at an inn for the night so I can rest."

She nodded. "You should be well rested before we reach the castle. Our marriage might meet resistance since I'm not from a noble family. And our coronation likely will as well. We also don't know if Winter had other plans, especially when it seems they've embedded themselves in politics before."

I looked out across my beloved, dying country. "You're right. We need to both be ready to fight." I frowned, thinking back to the information Greggory had found. "Mistress Faye said she'd had dealings with Winter before. Do you know what they were?"

She shrugged. “I suspect she was the one who told Winter where my apartment was.” She flicked her hair over one shoulder as if that betrayal meant nothing to her. “But as long as I’ve known her, she has never aged or changed. She has to be far older than she looks. I suspect she made some deal with them years ago for youthful looks or immortality or something similar, but she’s never mentioned it.”

I tapped a finger on my lips. “Do you know anything about her past?”

She thought for a moment, twirling pieces of her horse’s mane around her fingers. “Nothing for certain, but I’ve always suspected she once had a job at the palace. She knew the servant’s passageways intimately, and many of our jobs were focused there because she knew all the escape routes.”

“Is there any chance she could have been a maid or servant to the second Queen Consort of the last King of Kobar?” I gave her an overview of what Gregory had found in the journal, including how she’d burst into snow when cut with the Sword of Spring. I also relayed everything that Mistress Faye had said.

She processed the information for a long moment, her face impossible to read. “I don’t know, but it would make sense of why she was always so cautious of speaking about the Ancient Ones. If she worked for an immortal from Winter who ended up killing the royal family of Harelin, well, I would want to stay away from them after that too.”

I nodded, my mood grim. “They thought Harelin would simply fall to famine without the Blessing of the Meradians. And it has. But they didn’t know about you. And now they will do anything to kill you, too, because you’re the last of the bloodline.”

She shivered, and I could see reality finally starting to sink in. This aspect wasn’t a game of pretend. “You said Mistress Faye believed that I had Meradian blood, too, just like your crazy old lady.” She frowned. “Wait. Do you think she was the one who told Old Mother Baba about me? She wanted me gone—didn’t she?—when Winter started prowling, so that

Winter would leave her alone. So maybe she told Old Mother Baba, knowing somebody from Harelin would come to get me.”

I nodded. “That certainly sounds plausible. Maybe she felt guilty about what happened to the Meradians when she worked with the Queen Consort.”

Maisie shrugged, and her voice was sour. “Or maybe she just wanted to extract money from as many people as possible by contacting everyone interested in me.” Her lips twisted into a grimace, and her pain made my stomach clench.

I reached across our horses and touched her arm. “Things are different now.” I met her eyes as I leaned back again. “And contract or not, I’m glad you’re here to help me figure this out and stop Winter.”

She snorted.

I gave her a wry smile and tried to lighten the mood. “I’m also dreading admitting to the treasury how much money I spent finding you and bringing you home. They’re about to receive a lot of letters.”

She tilted the brim of her sunhat up, a slight curve to her lips. “How much?”

I winced. “Sixteen thousand gold.”

Her mouth dropped open, and then a slow grin spread across her face. “Sixteen thousand gold.” She drew the words out, making them seem even worse. “And I’m guessing that doesn’t include my payment in six months?”

I shook my head, wishing I hadn’t mentioned it. The treasurer was going to kill me. Especially when he learned he’d be sending ten thousand gold to an underground thief in Ravi.

She laughed, as though strangely happy to learn I had wasted so much money just to get her on that blasted ship. She wore her stubbornness like a badge of honor. She twirled a strand of her hair around her finger.

I watched the golden strands, transfixed by how they gleamed in the sun where they left the shade of her hat. “Can you really change your hair to any length or color?”

An emotion I didn’t recognize flitted across her face, but she nodded.

“Does it only affect your hair? Or can you grow other things, too, like your nails.”

Her caution was replaced by a tight smile. “Only my hair. But not just this.” She tossed back her gorgeous golden waves. “I can also grow these.”

Before I could process what she had said, her eyebrows sprouted long hairs that fell over her eyes and down to her chin. She looked completely ridiculous.

I barked an incredulous laugh that turned into hysterical giggles as she made each eyebrow a different color and then made the hair form ringlets. “Stop, stop,” I gasped.

She grinned. It only took a moment for her eyebrows to shrink back into their neatly sculpted arc.

I shook my head, still chuckling in disbelief.

She looked forward with a satisfied smirk. Had she done all that to distract me from asking questions about her gift because it made her uncomfortable? I supposed her gift had been the reason Mistress Faye had taken advantage of her for the last twelve years.

My humor died. I licked my lips, wanting to know more about her without causing offense, but not knowing what she would deem a sensitive topic. “And you were born with that gift?”

Her smirk vanished, and her expression became neutral. She nodded again.

“But you don’t know what it means or where it came from? Or whether it has anything to do with the Ancient Ones?”

She shook her head, slouching slightly in her saddle. “Mistress Faye knew something about it. She suggested it had

something to do with the Ancients, but never let me talk about it. I have never heard of anyone with a similar gift.” She straightened suddenly and looked at me. “When you paid Mistress Faye to talk about me”—she ignored my grimace—“did she mention anything about my hair at all?”

I shrugged. “Only that you had ‘signs of Spring’ and then she commented that flowers grew brighter around places you visited often. I think that’s why she believed you have Meradian blood. Maybe from a few generations back. Perhaps one of the royals had an affair or something that never made it into the records.”

She frowned. “It just sounds so unlikely. If one of my ancestors was a Meradian, why would I have ended up in Kobar, the country they hated and that Winter was using to try to kill them in the first place? And why was I abandoned?”

I spread an arm out. “I don’t know any more than you.”

She looked down and appeared sullen and lost in thought. I moved my horse closer to hers. “You said you can’t cut your hair. What did you mean by that?”

She pressed her lips together and made a dainty shrug. “You just can’t. Nothing will cut it.” She became uneasy for a moment, looking around as if to reassure herself. “I once tried to cut it off when I was young. I used to hate my hair. I wanted it all gone. It felt...wrong for me to have it. But I tried everything, and you can’t cut it.” Her expression darkened. “You can pull it free, though. Yank it out. It’s how I paid Mistress Faye on numerous occasions. I hope to never have to do that again.” She tilted her hat to one side and showed a bald area behind her ear about two inches in diameter. Her hair was so thick, it was easy for her to hide. “It...hurts. A lot. To pull out my hair. It never falls out naturally, and it doesn’t grow back.” She frowned. “I gave her twenty strands to hide me in that tower, and then she goes and tells you where I was. The lying, traitorous monster.” She gave me a dark look. “That’s what the world is really like, Thomas. Or the world outside your perfect shining towers, anyway.”

I looked away, my own anger building. How could somebody treat another human being like that? Especially after caring for her since she was five. She had been a child for nearly the entire time she had lived with Mistress Faye.

“You won’t ever have to pull it out again,” I vowed.

She glanced at me, but I kept my eyes on the road ahead, waiting for my emotions to settle. If anything hurt her again, I didn’t think I’d be able to take it.

## CHAPTER 14



# THOMAS



We rode in silence for an hour as exhaustion settled into my very bones. I was becoming short of breath, and my chest ached with every inhalation as if little knives had embedded themselves in my airways. The horse jolted me uncomfortably even at a walk. I gave in and signaled for Edward to lead us to the nearest town. There was no point in pushing myself now. I needed to be ready for whatever challenge we faced in the palace.

The town was busy, probably because of its proximity to the capital. It was located along a common route for refugees. Despite all this, there was only one inn, and tables had been positioned over by the road with people eating and drinking under the hot afternoon sun. That was not a good sign.

Ryan informed me there was no room in the stable for the horses and went off to ask if he could hire one of the villager's barns. The steeds were too valuable to be left in a field unwatched overnight.

I briefly wondered if we should keep going after all, but then remembered that Maisie had also been knocked unconscious underwater. Knowing her, she would likely hide whatever discomfort she was feeling.

As we dismounted, Jonny exited the inn looking a little flustered. He cleared his throat and leaned close to me, throwing Maisie a furtive glance. "Highness, I went in to inquire about rooms, but they were all booked. Some rooms with whole families to a bed. I know you don't like to reveal who you are when we travel but I..." He cleared his throat. "I

may have mentioned that you were the Crown Prince and recovering from an injury.”

I frowned, but he rushed on before I could say anything, his palms up.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry, I swore them to secrecy. But I offered to pay them handsomely, and once they understood the situation, they offered to give up their own bedroom for you. The innkeeper and his wife, I mean. It’s just one room and it’s small. But they’ll sleep at a friend’s house tonight.”

I glanced at Maisie who was clearly listening despite Jonny’s efforts. “What of Maisie? And the rest of you?”

He shrugged. “I’m hoping we can sleep in the barn with the horses. They should have a hay loft. If not, what is another night under the stars? We’ve done that many times before. But you need to rest in a warm bed if you’re to recover.”

“No.” The discomfort and tiredness amplifying my emotions made the word come out more abruptly than I had intended. “Maisie can’t sleep with you in the barn or on the ground. She almost drowned too. And now that you’ve spilled my identity, people will guess hers when I announce our engagement tomorrow at the castle. What will people say once they realize she was sleeping in the dirt with the knights and no maid? No, she should take the bed.”

Maisie stepped up to us. “Absolutely not. I’m not the one trying to stop coughing up my guts. I can cope with sleeping rough. I’ve done so many times this week already.”

I shook my head and narrowed my eyes. “I am not having it. This is not up for discussion. I will not take the bed while you sleep with the knights.”

Jonny shifted, grimacing in discomfort.

Maisie rolled her eyes as if I were being completely unrealistic. “You’re ill. The entire country is literally dependent on your health.” She slapped me on the chest, and I took a step back in surprise. “Stop being an overly dramatic martyr and take the bed. I am fine.”

My chest grew tight. “You’re not sleeping with the knights...” I broke off in a fit of coughing. I could almost believe the trace of concern on Maisie’s face.

“Then I’ll sleep on the floor in the bedroom. You sleep in the bed. I can tend to you and make your draught.”

I frowned, a tinge of embarrassment heating my cheeks at this situation. “But...we would be in the same room. Unchaperoned.”

Maisie gave me a dry look. “You’re ill. I’m your betrothed. I’m allowed to look after you. I’ll sleep on the floor. Now let’s go.”

She strode into the inn before I could argue further. I shoved down my rising annoyance and frustration and followed. She would not be sleeping on the floor.

The innkeeper’s eyes widened as he saw us, and he gave a hurried bow before clearly remembering he was meant to keep my identity hidden. He tried to disguise his mistake by picking up a speck of dust from the floor. He staggered as he overbalanced, his face heating.

I gave the poor man a smile. “I greatly appreciate the sacrifice you and your wife are making.”

He forced a smile. “Not at all, Your Highness. It is an honor. I hope your health improves. My wife is changing the bed sheets for you.”

His eyes flicked to Maisie and back to me. I quickly spoke before he could jump to conclusions. “Is it alright if Lady May uses your kitchen to brew some tonic? She has been doing an excellent job of tending to me.”

The man glanced back, wiping sweaty hands on his apron. “Of course, of course. Now let me show you upstairs.” He led us to a private staircase. “I never thought I would entertain royalty in my little backwater inn. Though with all the people traveling nowadays, it doesn’t feel like a backwater anymore. We’re having a dance tonight if you are well enough to attend. We thought it would lift people’s spirits and give our local musicians a chance to earn some extra coin.”

Maisie smiled at him, one of her sweet, open, beautiful smiles—one I guessed was designed to win people over. “What a lovely idea.”

The innkeeper colored as he took her in, and I positioned myself between them so he could no longer see her. “Is this the room?” I interrupted.

“Yes, yes.” The innkeeper handed me a key. I went to the door just as it opened and a woman came into the narrow corridor, half buried under a mound of sheets.

“Oh,” she squeaked as she saw us standing there. Then she proceeded to try to squeeze past us with hundreds of muffled apologies although there was barely enough room in the corridor. Maisie and I were forced to press ourselves against the wall, much to the innkeeper’s horror. Maisie pressed her fingers to her lips as if stifling a laugh. My own lips started to curve.

Once his wife had passed, the innkeeper bowed deeply. “I am so sorry, Your Highness. So sorry.”

I held up my hand. “That’s quite alright, good sir. Thank you once again for the room. Do you think you could bring up some food and wine?”

He nodded, wringing his hands. “Yes, yes, of course.”

Maisie perked up. “And cake? And strawberries, if you have any. With cream, of course. They’re in season now, aren’t they?”

The innkeeper nodded vigorously. “Yes, yes, I’m sure I can find some.” His face belied that he wasn’t entirely convinced. Strawberries weren’t exactly prioritized in famines.

He ran off before Maisie could think of anything else. She clapped her hands as she opened the door to the room. “Being with royalty is more fun than I’d expected. I haven’t had strawberries in ever so long. I almost thought he was going to pass out from the tremendous honor of our presence.” She faked a swoon before skipping toward the dresser.

I stood in the doorway and watched her as she inspected the room, going through all the innkeeper’s drawers. I didn’t

dare ask what she was looking for. I didn't want to know. Her smile still lingered, and she looked...beautiful.

“Maisie, you do realize you're about to be Queen, don't you? Queen of all Harelin? You can have far more than just strawberries.”

She shrugged without turning to face me as she sniffed a vial of smelling salts. “Yes, but I won't actually *be* Queen. I'll just be pretending. You'll be doing all the work. I'll just sit and look pretty and make my magic bloodline cure the world, or whatever.” She held out the vial. “I bet you anything she stole this from a patron. This is crystal cut glass.”

I sighed and came to stand beside her to look at the glass. I just wanted to be next to her. “Maybe it was an expensive wedding present. Or maybe somebody left it behind by accident.” There was always a faint floral smell to her hair. A warm freshness.

She looked at it for a moment longer, something uncertain on her face.

I reached out and gently rested my hand on her arm. “Maisie, you cannot steal it.”

Her eyes widened slightly. She opened her mouth, closed it, and placed the vial back. She nodded toward the bed. “You should lie down and rest. I'll brew the tonic, then maybe later we can watch the dancing.”

I nodded, but she was already leaving.

That woman was like a hurricane. I pulled off my boots and lay down, my body instantly melting into the mattress out of exhaustion. If I got enough sleep now, Maisie could sleep in the bed later while I rested on the floor.

Despite the sun still shining through the window, I only had to close my eyes to fall into dreams.

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WHEN I WOKE UP, it was dark outside. The sound of shouting, pipes, and fiddles was so loud, it was a miracle I had slept for so long. A cup with a long-cold tonic rested beside the bed. I sat up, feeling a little dizzy and dehydrated, and drank it. I barely noticed the bitterness anymore.

I found a flagon of water on the chair and drank that, too, touched by Maisie's thoughtfulness. Maisie... A sudden stab of panic made my heartbeat increase. What if she had run away when I had been sleeping? It would have been the perfect opportunity. The knights would have been busy finding their own lodgings. The innkeeper wouldn't have questioned her. What if the contract had just been an act, and she had been biding her time?

*Idiot! Idiot!*

I pulled on my boots and pushed past Gregory who was snoozing in a chair outside my door. I hurried downstairs, not bothering to wake him. What if she was gone, and I never found her again? My chest tightened, and my breaths became labored. I pushed through the bustling common room, where Ryan and Jonny were drinking ale, and followed the noise outside.

The street was crowded with people laughing, dancing, and playing instruments in a chaotic medley of different levels of skill. I couldn't see her. Edward grabbed my arm, making me jump. "Highness? Thomas? What's wrong?"

I didn't stop scanning the crowd. "Where's Maisie? I fell asleep, and she wasn't there when I woke up."

To my surprise, the older knight grinned and pointed over my shoulder. "She's dancing. Gregory went up and persuaded her to change places with him. At first, we didn't think she would leave your side, but she's having a great time. I don't think she's stopped in the last hour. Half the men in the village have fallen in love with her and are asking for their turn to dance."

I sagged in relief. She was here. She was safe. Then Edward's words registered. "She's dancing with half the men in the village?"

Edward's grin widened. "Oh, yes. You're missing your opportunity. Pity you're ill."

I pushed past him to the clearing he had indicated, one of several unofficial dancing spaces. Sure enough, Maisie was there. She was wearing a white dress and had wildflowers in her golden hair. Where had she gotten that dress? It floated around her as if she were some ethereal maiden from a folktale. She was dancing with an attractive young man, and I bit my lip against a stab of jealousy.

*She can dance with whoever she likes, Thomas. It's not like you two are actually engaged.*

I watched her twirl, and then she caught sight of me. As our eyes met, I saw a jolt of recognition go through her. Her face lit up, and she beamed at me. My heart stumbled in surprise, and the breath left my lungs at the beauty and warmth in her smile. It was like I was the only other person in the world to her.

I took an involuntary step forward as her smile called me to her. She noticed and laughed. The man she was dancing with no longer wore a happy expression; he knew he had lost her attention.

The dance changed tempo, and she was swept from one side of the ring to the other. She was so beautiful I didn't believe that any eye in the crowd could be looking away from her.

Edward's arm brushed mine as he squeezed into the space next to me and handed me a flagon of ale. I sipped, but couldn't taste it.

Maisie caught my eye and smiled again. I felt the warmth of her smile from my scalp to my toes. I took a shuddering breath and forced myself to look away.

*What's wrong with you? It's not real. It's an act. We're putting on a show. Don't let yourself fall in love with her, you absolute fool. She'll destroy you.*

I repeated it over and over until my heart ached. I drained my flagon and dared look up at her again. She was now

dancing with somebody else. I could say those words a million times, but still, it was hard not to want her, hard not to pretend that this was real and she was mine and we were hopelessly in love.

That I was the only one in the whole world to whom she would ever give a smile like that.

I looked back. I couldn't help it. Why did she have to be so captivating, while being somebody I was never destined to have? This whole situation seemed too cruel.

Maisie skipped up to me as the music died. "Would you like the next dance?" Her cheeks were flushed from the exercise, and her eyes were gleaming.

*Yes. More than anything.*

I steeled myself. "I don't think that would be a good idea with my cough."

Her expression fell, and I felt it like a kick in my stomach. But if I danced with her, it would only make everything I felt so much worse.

She stepped forward and lowered her voice. "Everyone is watching. I know most of the people here don't know who we are, but it would still be a good chance to convince others that our relationship is genuine."

I tasted sour bile in my throat and swallowed, thickly. "I just don't think it would be a good idea," I repeated.

She shrugged, but I could see my words had hurt her. I lifted my hand to her shoulder, desperate to change the topic. "I've had some sleep in the bed. Why don't you sleep there tonight, and I will take the floor?"

She stood fully in front of me and, peeling my hand off her shoulder, cradled both of my hands in hers. The action was so gentle, I could only stand transfixed as she lifted her eyes to mine. "Dance with me, Thomas. Please."

This was a terrible idea. The sort of idea I was going to pay for a thousand times over. But I could feel my walls crumbling. In fact, my whole world felt like it was crashing



down, mere insignificant dust around that face. Maybe all the pain I was destined to experience later would be worth it for this one precious moment to simply pretend.

I licked my lips. "I'll dance."

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## Maisie

MY HEART GAVE a little jump for joy. This was the perfect moment to establish our relationship publicly. Hopefully, word of our dance would get back to the Queen. I would simply have to spread a rumor about our true identities as we left tomorrow. Then everyone would be talking about Prince Thomas and the beautiful golden lady he danced with.

That was all this dance was for. Still, I had to admit my emotions weren't exactly under control. Maybe I shouldn't have drunk the ale. Thomas refusing to dance with me had stung far more than it should have.

I still struggled to read him sometimes. I'd thought he would want to dance with me. He found me attractive, after all. Was he still bitter about the contract? Did he resent me?

I had always been so good at predicting people, I hated that he kept catching me out when we were meant to be working closely together for the next six months.

His hands slid around my waist, sending an unexpected sweeping sensation through my stomach and grounding my thoughts firmly in the present. He wasn't looking at me, instead watching over my shoulder for the musicians to signal. I fidgeted. Why was he ignoring me? We needed to be showing everyone we were in love.

As he continued watching the musicians, my discomfort grew, and I started to feel small. I felt needy, and I hated needing anything from anyone. But right then, all I really wanted was for him to look at me.

I lifted my hand to his cheek, my thumb finding his chin and guiding his attention down. His lips parted as his eyes fell to mine and started to drink me in. I swallowed. “What’s wrong, Thomas?” I gave him a teasing smile. “Don’t tell me you can’t dance?”

He smiled then, and my chest warmed, that feeling of smallness gone. “I’m not sure I can even breathe right now, and you’re worried about my dancing skills?”

I looked down to hide a twinge of guilt. “It’s a slow one, stop being dramatic.”

He chuckled and lowered his head slightly closer to mine. “If I keel over, it will be your fault.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll catch you and drag you away before anyone steps on you.” When had my voice become so breathy? I hadn’t intended that.

The music started, and Thomas guided me in the first steps. These were simple country dances, easy to pick up and forgiving for beginners. I enjoyed them much more than the complex ones I’d had to endure as Lady Liya in Ravi.

But it was becoming increasingly difficult to concentrate on the dance since it forced Thomas and I closer and closer together. His attention was fully on me now, and it was hard to look away. It was hard to do anything.

He was such a reckless fool. His gaze was too open, too honest. His dark eyes gleamed like warm honey when they caught the light. This was meant to be pretend. Only pretend.

*Stupid man.*

Didn’t he understand? People like me only survived. We didn’t get goodness or a steady life. We destroyed, and we lived among the wreckage. How could he know that I was a liar and a thief and still look at me like that, like I was the most beautiful thing in the whole world.

But for a moment, I could let that gaze touch my heart and believe it was true. For a moment, I could pretend that I was beautiful inside and out and worthy of his love. I could pretend this engagement was real and that he only cared for me, even

though I knew that despite his attraction, he was only doing this to save his people.

The dance ended too soon to scattered applause. Stepping back from him felt like breaking through the surface of water and being able to breathe again. Still, he didn't take his eyes off me.

It made me want to kiss him. Properly kiss him.

This was not part of the plan. It was meant to be a simple dance. If he was going to look at me like that, I needed to be more careful so this didn't go too far. Maybe I would have to add more subclauses to the contract. Clear boundaries and expectations.

I turned away. "You should get some rest."

He cleared his throat, a slight shake to his words. "You should, too, Maisie. It's going to be a big day tomorrow."

I nodded. If I was going to back out of this, tonight was probably my last chance. After tomorrow, too many people would know my face. If I was going to go through with this, I would need to resist Thomas. I gritted my teeth. I could do it. For the money and the security that came afterward, I would do it.

I led the way to our room, Thomas walking silently behind me. For a tall man of lean muscle, he was always quick and quiet on his feet. He was a good dancer too.

*Of course he was. He's the perfect golden Prince, Maisie!*

I wasn't sure why the thought made me feel so bitter.

I opened the door and nodded with approval when I saw Thomas had drunk his potion. The night was still warm, so the fire wasn't lit, but maybe I should light it anyway to help Thomas's lungs heal.

"The bed is yours." Thomas was back to not looking at me. It was probably a good idea if I didn't look at him either. It wasn't like we had witnesses now. So why *would* we look at each other?

Thomas started pulling a blanket from the bed to the floor. I bit my lip. He was ill. He was a prince. I was nothing. I couldn't let him sleep on the floor. I didn't deserve any kindness from him after what I had done; I'd nearly killed him. And it would be counterproductive if he was more ill tomorrow.

I spoke without meeting his eyes. "Please sleep in the bed, Thomas. I'll be upset if you get sick again after all those tonics."

He sighed as if becoming frustrated at repeating himself. "Maisie, you are not sleeping..."

I cut a hand through the air, my temper starting to flare. "Then I'll sleep next to you in the bed!"

He straightened, and his face became so red, I couldn't help smiling. My annoyance melted into humor.

"Maisie..."

I held up a finger. "Don't worry, we have the contract, remember? No intimate relations."

"But...but..."

"Don't be such a child. We keep our clothes on. You go under the covers, I go on top of them. Nobody will ever know whether you slept on the floor or in the bed."

I lay down and patted the mattress beside me. He ran a hand down his face. "I'm sorry to put you in this position. I would have never dreamed..."

I hit the covers harder. "Just get in the bed, and stop making it into a big deal. It will only be more awkward the more you talk about it."

He cleared his throat and climbed under the covers beside me, giving me so much space, he was in danger of falling out. I blew out the candle. "Good night."

"Good night."

I nestled down, pleased to have an actual bed rather than the uncomfortable pallet in the ship. Thomas's presence was

strangely comforting. I supposed it was because I didn't need to keep one eye open for Winter when he was right there beside me.

“Maisie, there's something I need to get off my chest before tomorrow.”

I froze in dread. If he said *the words*, said he had *feelings*, it would all be over. Our contract wouldn't work. I'd have to leave as soon as he fell asleep.

“You said that you only destroy things and hurt people.” He paused and shifted his weight. I could hardly breathe. “But your tonics have helped me heal. Your advice and ideas have helped me think. You are not darkness and destruction. You are not the bad things you've endured. You're brave and you're strong. You're light that can never be extinguished despite everything the world hurls at you. I don't believe anything will ever take you down if you choose to believe in yourself. I just...I needed to say that.”

I stared at the ceiling wide awake as he rolled onto his side away from me. He couldn't be further from the truth. But this mask was one of his own making.

How could he see me like that? The world seemed to spin.

## CHAPTER 15

# THOMAS



I woke feeling better than I had since I'd almost drowned. My lungs inflated smoothly with air, and the ache had vanished. I even had energy.

I rolled over carefully to check on Maisie, not wanting to wake her. Her eyes were closed, and her skin was pale. There were bags under her eyes. My heart sank. It must have taken her a long time to fall asleep. I should have insisted on sleeping on the floor.

I looked down and noticed I had kicked off the covers in my sleep. Strands of her hair had grown overnight and loosely coiled around one of my arms and my waist. I looked at it in wonder. She would never do something like that consciously, I was sure.

In fact, I was equally sure she'd be mortified.

I carefully untangled myself and sat up, hoping to not embarrass her. I had just freed myself when she woke up with a groan. "Don't tell me it's morning already?"

I chuckled. "It's morning. And today you meet my mother and the court."

She groaned again. "Great." She opened one eye and frowned. "How are you looking so full of energy? You're supposed to be the ill one."

I chuckled and rolled my shoulders back. "I honestly don't know, but I feel great. Do you mind if I use the washroom first?"

She shrugged, her eyes closing again. “It’s only a bucket and a sponge. I won’t fight you for it.”

I washed and dressed in a clean shirt before giving Maisie the privacy of the room to herself. I was pleased to find Ryan and Jonny already saddling the horses while the others finished toasted bread with eggs for breakfast. The innkeeper had even left out a bowl of strawberries for Maisie.

I smiled. She would love all the fruit here in Harelin. It tasted so much sweeter than the fruit in Kobar. Thinking of sweets, I realized I hadn’t seen her eat one of her boiled sweets since we’d set foot in Harelin. Maybe it was simply because we hadn’t faced much stress yesterday.

When Maisie finally joined us, and Edward had sorted out all the payments, I found myself impatient to reach home. It would be good to see Mother and tell her that she didn’t need to worry about the famine anymore.

We snaked out of town at a trot and took the busy road that stretched the last seven miles to the capital, Ryan riding ahead to announce our arrival. Farmers moved their carts out of our way, and many people stopped to stare as we passed, trying to identify us. Maisie wore her hair loose, and it rippled in the wind behind her like a banner of sunlight.

She was strangely quiet and barely looked at me, her eyes fixed ahead as if she was planning some great scheme to tackle the day. I didn’t doubt she would win the hearts of the entire nation with her smile, her clever words, and her plans.

An hour’s ride from the city gates, Tristan spotted a figure galloping down the road toward us. The oncoming horse’s hooves skidded as the man jumped from his steed before it could halt. I recognized Dan, Jonathan and Ryan’s youngest brother, a squire still too young to carry his own sword.

He bowed to me, his floppy brown hair falling forward as Gregory took his horse’s reins, muttering calming words. “Your Highness, welcome home. I came to greet you as soon as I saw Ryan riding toward the city gates.” He paused to catch his breath. “Since you’ve been away in Kobar, a lot has



changed. I wanted to let you know.” He paused to look behind him.

I studied his expression, his eyes wide and a tremble in his hands, and steeled myself. “Go on.”

Maisie walked her horse to my side, close enough to be a comfort, but without looking my way as if the movement was an accident.

“Your Highness, your mother has taken sick. She’s been ill for almost two weeks now. In your absence, Lady Avali has been overseeing the court.”

I frowned, not sure if I’d misheard. “Lady Avali?” She would have been my last guess to oversee court.

He nodded. “She had already begun preparing the city for the upcoming famine, organizing the refugees and moving the food stores. The council voted for her to take on increased responsibilities while Queen Heather was unable to perform her duties.”

I shifted, a weight gathering in my chest. “How sick is Mother?”

The boy looked down to one side, growing uneasy. “I’m not completely sure. Sick enough that she doesn’t leave her quarters. But her maids and the doctor won’t make any information about her public. They say they’re just being cautious with her health as if it is not too serious, but...they might simply be trying to keep things calm while you were absent.”

Guilt twisted inside me. I had been away for too long while she needed me. “Why wasn’t I sent for?”

“Apparently, she said she didn’t want to disrupt your quest.” He studied me with eager eyes. “Did you do it? Did you find a way to bring back the Blessing of Spring?”

I smiled, but my victory felt hollow. “We think so.” I gestured to Maisie. “My betrothed, Lady May, should be able to lift the curse.”

His eyes rounded and he gaped at her in awe. I could see him drinking her in, her hair, her beauty, her shy smile, her perfect innocence. I fidgeted in irritation and nudged my horse forward to regain his attention.

“Is there anything else we should know?” I tried to keep the annoyance from my voice.

The boy’s attention snapped back to me. He licked his lips. “It’s just... I’m not sure how welcoming Lady Avali is going to be.”

I tensed. “What do you mean?”

He shrugged. “It’s more of a hunch. But I’ve noticed the way she speaks about you isn’t always the most favorable. It’s not what she says in public, that is always very respectful, but more the small comments she mentions to individuals. The knights are talking about it.”

I glanced at Maisie to share my worry, but she was frowning at Dan. “Who is Lady Avali?”

I answered before the boy could. “Old nobility. Her family survived the Kobaran Invasion. She owned rural lands but abandoned them because of the famine. She arrived at the capital with her people the day before I left to find Old Mother Baba.”

Greggory was also frowning now. “In fact, she was the one who suggested Old Mother Baba.”

Uncomfortable coincidences started to click in place in my head. “Now that you mention it, it is suspicious that she sent us there, right where the Hounds of Winter were waiting in ambush. If we hadn’t had my father’s sword, we would have been frozen solid.” I rolled my shoulders. “But she was right. Old Mother Baba had discovered how to bring back the Blessing. It could be trickery. It could be honest.”

Maisie nodded slowly. “So she turns up, suggests you go to a place which is set up as an ambush, then as soon as you’re gone assumes rule from your Mother and subtly speaks ill of you. If the Queen dies—and you die—she would be the natural choice for the throne.” Maisie shifted. “Or worse, if

she is working for Winter, she would be in a good position to destroy the country from the inside out. She could be acting just like the old Queen Consort of Kobar.”

My mouth dried, and I shook my head. “We need to proceed cautiously. It could be coincidence, but...” My words died on my tongue. Could Lady Avali really be working with Winter? Perhaps even an immortal pretending to be human? Was she merely an opportunist? Or a useful ally?

Greggory straightened in his saddle. “Whether she intended the ambush or not, we must make sure she hands the court back over to you, Highness. If she refuses, we may have a battle on our hands. It should become clear quickly whether she is an enemy or a friend.”

I clenched my fists on the reins. “And until we can crown Lady May, our people shall continue to starve while we play a game of petty politics. This isn’t a delay I wanted.”

Dan was looking between us in shock. “I wasn’t trying to suggest Lady Avali was a complete traitor. She has brought much good to Harelin. She is gifted and well liked. I just wanted to warn you that she is not your biggest supporter, and you may find the tides have turned against you.”

I smiled at him to relieve some of the tension. “Thank you, Dan. Your news is helpful and much appreciated. Will you ride with us to the capital?”

I met Greggory’s eyes, and he gave me a firm nod.

More tentatively, I glanced at Maisie, hoping this wasn’t going to scare her off, but her attention was still on the road ahead, her jaw set in grim determination. Some of the tension melted from my shoulders. She was with me, and because of that I was so much stronger. *We* were stronger.

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OUR PACE SLOWED as we neared the throng of refugees outside the city gate. Maisie’s horse brushed my leg as we slowly

pushed through. “I’m sorry about your mother, Thomas,” she murmured too low to be overheard.

“Thank you,” I muttered. “I wish I’d been here.”

“Instead, you were chasing me across Kobar as I dragged things out. I’m sorry.”

I looked back at her in shock, but her expression seemed genuine. She didn’t meet my eyes. “Maisie, my mother being ill is hardly your fault.”

She drew out a long breath. “No. You’re right. It’s not.” She looked up at me and managed a smile. “Are you ready for this?”

I nodded, though tension was building in my stomach. “I am, I just...I’m not looking forward to being back on display. It’s exhausting always fearing that I could mess things up. And this time the whole of Harelin is at stake.” I gentled my voice. “Your life is at stake. I can’t afford any mistakes.”

She straightened her back. “Everyone makes mistakes, Thomas. Your strength is not that you’re perfect. It’s that you care so much about your country, and you don’t ever give up. That’s what makes you a good prince. And you will be a good king. You’ll never let Winter win.”

I raised an incredulous eyebrow. “I think that’s the first nice thing you’ve ever said to me.”

She scowled. “Don’t let it go to your head.” Then her scowl twisted into an amused smile. “You just said my life was at stake. I needed to give you an inspirational talk to make you fighting fit.”

I gave her a wry glance.

“But seriously, Thomas. You’re a good person. Don’t worry about what they’re thinking of you. Just worry about Winter.”

I looked ahead. “Wow, another compliment. Careful, or I might pass out in surprise before we even reach the palace.”

She kicked me in the shin, and I snorted a laugh.

Her expression became serious. “*Our* lives are in danger, Thomas. So we’ll have to work together to pull this off.”

I nodded, nerves fluttering in my stomach. “I trust you.”

She jolted, then covered up the movement by patting her horse’s neck and didn’t reply.

As the crowd thickened due to the city guards pushing toward us, I let her words settle. Things could be simpler. I could be a good prince without being perfect. I just had to concentrate on not letting Winter win. Nothing else. And that meant I had to get Maisie on the throne.

The guards met the front of our party, and our pace picked up as they escorted us through the city gates and then made a path for us through the crowded streets. Many of the civilians craned to see our return, and I smiled in return. Normally, I was greeted with waved handkerchiefs and flowers thrown before the horses. Today the busy streets were strangely silent, people watching in cautious expectation rather than joy.

Had they lost their trust in me to resolve the famine?

Once inside the castle wall, our horses were whisked away, and I motioned for my knights to stay close rather than leaving to see their families.

They each nodded to me, and I had never been so grateful to have them watching my back. The last agent of Winter to visit Harelin had wiped out the entire royal family. If Lady Avali was of the same ilk, she was an enormous threat.

The elderly steward met us at the main door with a polite bow and ushered us through the corridors toward the Great Hall. Despite his advanced years, he was still straight-backed and walked far too quickly, meaning I had to work hard to hear what he was saying. “Lady Avali has summoned everyone to the Great Hall to welcome your return, Your Highness.”

My heart rate picked up. Was she planning something? “Will my mother be there?”

He inclined his head as we walked. “I’m not sure. She has been unwell and hasn’t left her room for days, though the doctor says it’s nothing too concerning.”

Greggory stepped closer and spoke with a low voice. “Why does it feel like we’re walking into another trap?”

I grimaced and nodded my agreement. Maisie noticed my unease, and her arm brushed against mine as if she fully believed I could do this and was strengthening my resolve. It might be an act, but it helped none the less. And maybe, just maybe, her faith in me was genuine.

“The castle is beautiful,” she murmured, sounding tired and slowing down, forcing the steward to turn. “Good sir, I am very tired from the journey. While Prince Thomas and his knights are introduced in the Great Hall, do you mind if I retire? I’m sure Greggory could show me to my rooms.”

I looked at her in surprise and raised an eyebrow. That didn’t sound like playing the part of my intended. Surely, she hadn’t changed her mind and decided to run again?

Her blue eyes flicked up at me and her lips curved into a tight, sweet smile that was almost secretive. Whatever she was doing, I really did trust her, just like I’d said. That probably made me the greatest fool on earth. I fought the urge to go up to her and tease her secrets loose.

What was she planning? But she had infiltrated places before. I should trust her to know what she was doing.

I stepped toward her, but she stopped me with one hand on my chest, stretched onto her toes, and kissed me on the cheek. The breath left my lungs. She pulled back, her eyes laughing. “Don’t worry, my love, there will be plenty of time to introduce me tomorrow when I can make a much better impression.”

*My love.*

*It’s not real.*

Before I could speak, she had looped her arm through Greggory’s and was walking down the corridor in the opposite direction. I stared after her in confusion.

My manservant glanced back over his shoulder, and I raised my eyebrows at him, then nodded at Maisie, hoping to convey that he was not to let her out of his sight. She needed

somebody looking out for her and preventing her from being too reckless.

“Your Highness?” The steward’s voice conveyed impatience, and I realized I was standing frozen staring after her.

I shook myself and gestured for the servant to continue. My knights fell into step around me, filling the gaps left by Gregory and Maisie, but I felt more exposed without them. Edward gave my arm a brief pat of support. I flicked my wrist in our signal to stay alert as we reached the door. I felt them straighten around me and spread out in our most inconspicuous defensive formation.

I dragged in a breath as the steward pushed open the door. At least, I had my father’s sword back now. That was something I wouldn’t want to explain. Mother would never forgive me. Though I’d never found out what had happened to my dagger.

The room was empty of tables and chairs, though courtiers, knights, merchants, and servants filled either side, leaving a clear pathway between the door and the three thrones on the dais. Standing before the thrones was Lady Avali. She wore a tight-fitting red velvet gown with gold embroidery. Gold chains with tiny sparkling crystals swept through the gentle waves of her ebony hair. It wasn’t a tiara or a crown, but not far off. Any stranger might mistake her for the Queen.

She smiled warmly and spread her hands. “Welcome home, Prince Thomas. We’ve been anxiously awaiting your return during this difficult time in Harelin. We’re so glad to see you’re safe.”

I ran my eyes across our audience. They watched, expectant but not unfriendly. I had known these people for years. Normally, I felt the urge to put on a show, to be the immaculate prince they wanted. Now, as they stared, I remembered Maisie’s words. They didn’t need a golden prince. They needed Harelin to be saved and Maisie to sit on the throne. This wasn’t about me anymore.

I smiled in acknowledgement of Lady Avali's words but didn't halt, striding confidently down the hall and making her wait for my reply. I didn't like how she looked down at me from the dais. There was a power play at work, but this room had been my stage far longer than it had been hers, and now there was no fear of imperfection to hold me back.

I would take the throne, crown Maisie, and not let Lady Avali get in my way.

Lady Avali spoke before I could reach her. "Have you found the answer to the curse, Prince Thomas? Have you found a way to save our country?"

If I were to make my voice carry, I would have to stop walking, but I wasn't about to let her take control of the situation so easily. "I thank you all for your warm welcome." I smiled at the crowd. I made them wait until I climbed up the dais and then sat in the smallest of the three thrones. The Crown Prince's throne. Now Lady Avali was forced to turn her back on the people to face me. I could show I was still in charge of the situation.

I raised my voice, letting it carry around the room and making each syllable clear. "I hear you've been helping organize the refugees in my absence while my mother has been unwell." I nodded my head to her. "Thank you for your kind service. How is my mother?"

I caught a flicker of annoyance cross her face before her features smoothed. "As far as I am aware, she just needs rest. The doctor has been attending to her and said we should not be concerned. Now, please tell us if your quest was successful."

I shifted on the throne's cushion, wishing it was higher. "It was."

A swell of mutterings went through the room, along with a hesitant surge as people moved closer or craned for a better look.

I hesitated. Should I remind them that it had been Avali's idea to seek Old Mother Baba and give her the praise? She



couldn't easily discredit something she was involved in. But then, that could elevate her position even further.

I ran a finger over my lips. Maybe I was overthinking this and should simply take Avali at face value. I was never good at this side of politics.

I decided to play it safe. "Old Mother Baba had written of a woman who, if she is crowned as Queen, would cause the Blessing of Meradian to return. Well, I found the lady in Kobar. Lady May. We have fallen in love and are engaged to be married. When she is on the throne, the famine should disappear."

The mutterings broke out again.

Lady Avali shifted, her shoulders moving back and her chin jutting up. "Old Mother Baba promised this, did she? I would be interested to know of her proof."

I licked my lips. "Old Mother Baba is dead. Frozen by monsters from Winter. She was killed for trying to send my mother a drawing of this girl. She stated in her letter that this was the only way to restore the Blessing."

Lady Avali's eyes met mine. "This sounds like a very high-risk solution, Your Highness. You are staking the fate of the whole kingdom as well as your future on this marriage. What if you marry her, crown her Queen, and then the famine remains? You know, you can't easily undo these things."

I squared my feet. "I love her." As I spoke the words, I realized how true they were, however much I didn't fully understand it. I struggled to keep the ragged edge from my voice. "I wish her to be my wife whether she can bring Spring's Blessing back or not." A small, twisted part of me laughed at the stupidity of loving a girl who could only tolerate being near me due to a contract. And then pain reared at the thought that she would leave me in six months without looking back.

Avali raised an eyebrow, her voice growing louder for all to hear. "Ah, so you have fallen in love with a girl from Kobar and wish to marry her. Never before has a royal from Harelin

married a citizen from our long-time enemy. It was the Kobarans, of course, who murdered our last royal family. Massacred so many of our people only one generation ago. The public will not like this. Has she station? Wealth?”

I shook my head. “She has no family or status to speak of. However, we believe that she must have some Meradian blood. How else would she be able to restore the Blessing?” I decided not to bring up Winter. Not yet.

Avali stepped back as if shocked, but her eyes had grown a little too wide to convince me the reaction was genuine. Mutterings grew into conversations around us. “Do you have proof of this?”

I shifted. “I suppose the proof will be when the Blessing returns.”

“So you will marry her before it is confirmed? Surely there must be a way to test her bloodline before you marry her.” She looked around the hall as the murmurings swelled. “Where is she now?”

I licked my lips, forcing myself to keep calm and in control. “Resting from the journey.” Wherever she was, Gregory had better be with her. She had better be safe.

Avali shifted with a hint of frustration.

Lord Kennelsworth separated himself from the crowd, coming to stand at the foot of the dais. “Your Highness, you don’t understand. If Lady May is indeed a descendant of the Meradians—even illegitimate—your claim to the crown is much weaker than hers. Her claim is even stronger than your mother’s. She is the rightful ruler of Harelin. The throne is hers right now. You can’t simply stay the Prince before you marry her. She should be crowned first.”

I blinked. I hadn’t expected that objection. I curled my finger around my chin, trying to appear unshaken. This was a good thing, wasn’t it? If the council would agree to simply crown her straightaway, no pretend marriage was necessary? It promised an instant end to the curse. But why did it feel like a blow to my chest?

I ignored my emotions and tried to stay focused. “But we can’t prove her heritage. She was raised in an orphanage. The only way to know is if the Blessing returns when she is crowned. Since we’re getting married anyway, does it matter?”

Lord Kennelsworth turned to the steward. “Forgive me, Your Highness, but that isn’t quite true. We can prove it. And I believe who has the right to sit on the throne is a *very* important matter. We want to restore the Blessing right away. It may be that we don’t have to wait for an abdication and a marriage for this to happen.”

I leaned forward in my seat. “What do you mean?”

To one side, Lady Avali was smiling victoriously.

The steward nodded his head to me. “I understand you may find this irrelevant since you two are already betrothed, but there is a simple way to see if she can restore the Meradian Blessing. Their bloodline was blessed by Spring. All of them are gifted in making things instantly grow and flourish.”

I stared at them, processing this information. When Maisie had gone to that field of grapes, they had been the only ones that weren’t spoiled. Had that been her? Or had they been like that before she’d approached them? This would be far more dramatic than simply making flowers bloom brighter around her home in Ravi.

Lady Avali turned to me. “I think you had better leave that throne vacant for now, *Prince* Thomas.”

I glared at her, struggling to follow her motivations. Did she want Maisie to be Queen or not? Or was this just about removing me? Either way, her words shook me to my core.

Maisie didn’t need me. Harelin didn’t need me.

Avali raised her hands. “We must find Lady May at once and test her. Somebody, go to her rooms.”

I narrowed my eyes. She was so eager to find her. Was it so she could restore the Blessing of Spring or so she could wipe out the last remnant of the Meradian line and destroy Harelin forever?

## CHAPTER 16

# MAISIE



Ever since I'd set foot in Harelin, a strange, restless energy had been buzzing through me. Everything was unfamiliar in the castle. The architecture was angular and simple, the clothes lighter than in Ravi, and the floors primarily devoid of carpets. I had never left Kobar before, and I wondered if six months would be long enough to get used to this place and its stuffy heat.

"Where are we going?" Gregory yanked his arm free from my hand and pushed his glasses up his nose. His cheeks were pink, a sure sign he was flustered.

"The Queen's chambers."

The manservant's already-pale skin lost any tint of color. "We won't be allowed in."

I smiled at him with a theatrical exasperated sigh, an exact mimic of the ones he liked to perform. "Do you want to help Thomas or not? We need to find out what Avali is up to and disrupt her plans if possible."

He started playing with his sleeve, struggling to keep up with me. "But what if she's really ill? We can't just barge in. Even if Avali really is the villain and is poisoning her, the Queen wouldn't know that. She would just feel sick."

I shook my head. "We need as much information as possible. This lady might be a thief who works by deceit, so we need to know everything that's happening behind the scenes. Trust me. What if she's trying to steal the entire kingdom?" We reached the end of the corridor and two

directions beckoned. I stopped, my breath becoming heavy. I whirled on Gregory. “Which way? Quickly, quickly!”

I watched his cheeks heat as he became even more flustered. Poor man. I probably shouldn’t wind him up. He pointed. “That way. Fourth door, the one just around the corner.” He grabbed my hand, and his palm was sweaty with a faint tremble. “It will be guarded.”

I nodded and stopped before the third door just before the bend, so I was out of sight from the guard. Gregory pressed into me. “What are you doing? This is the room of the Queen’s chambermaid.”

I grinned. Perfect. I picked the lock and slipped in, pulling him in behind me. The room was deserted and had simple furnishings. I slipped into the wardrobe, pulled out a uniform, and moved behind the changing screen.

I heard Gregory pacing as I dressed. “The guard will know you’re not her usual maid. You won’t get past him. And what if she returns?”

I fastened the bonnet and apron, shortening my hair to a shoulder-length chocolate brown and thickening my eyebrows. I stepped out from the screen and threw my dress at Gregory. “Keep it safe.” I tidied the bow on my apron, flicked the catch on the outside window, and climbed out.

Flower boxes and decorative creepers were everywhere. These rooms were essentially asking to get burgled. I stepped from one wide windowsill to the next with ease. The right angles helped me, and I only knocked a few scarlet petals free. We were three stories up, so I didn’t look down.

The window and curtains of the Queen’s quarters were closed. I took out a thin sliver of metal from my belt and slipped it between the two windowpanes, sliding it up until it slipped the latch. Carefully, I opened one window and crouched behind the curtains. Ever so slowly I peeped through one side.

There was a dressing table just beneath the window with a stunning gold crown and a huge diamond necklace next to

china powder pots. Why did people leave things like that in such easy reach? I licked my lips, ignoring the temptation and looked beyond them into the room.

I almost screamed.

In the center of the room was the Queen, her hands raised as if in defense.

She was frozen solid.

Thomas! I had to warn him.

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## Thomas

THE ROOM HAD DESCENDED into chaotic conversation as I stood and relinquished the throne, glaring at Lady Avali. I couldn't argue with the logic. We needed the Blessing restored as soon as possible. Why wait for a marriage and an abdication when it could happen at once?

Avali stood smugly, looking over the crowd, her fingers tapping as she waited for Maisie to be brought in. She had seemed to care so much about the refugees. Was that only to gain our trust so she could infiltrate the perfect place and be ready to strike? Had she planted cracks all across the city and waited to watch the whole nation disintegrate?

I gripped the hilt of my sword. I would not let her lay a single finger on Maisie.

I wished Gregory was here to read the situation. I needed his intelligence. But right now, I only had myself to rely on. I couldn't fob off the responsibility for making decisions to Gregory anymore.

I stood next to Avali and turned to the steward. "What is this test, and why have I never heard of it?"

He shifted. "I knew the Meradian royal family before the massacre. It is not common knowledge, but not only did their

presence in Harelin encourage the flowers to grow and the crops to thrive nationwide, dramatic growth would occur in their immediate presence...at their touch. Plants, trees, even their own hair. It was part of the Blessing of Spring. Each demonstrated an example of their gift on the evening before their coronation.”

*Their hair.*

The room seemed to rock. She really was a Meradian and could easily prove it. The throne had been hers all along, not mine. But as soon as she revealed herself, Winter would attack, attempting to kill her before she could be crowned.

I looked at the men nearest Avali and saw several I didn't recognize looking alert and carrying weapons. Did she want Maisie exposed because she was planning to kill her right now?

Avali could have spent weeks preparing this whole room as a trap. How could we crown Maisie without Avali in the room? I no longer had any authority to kick her out, especially now that she was so embedded in Harelin's politics.

Cold terror bloomed in my chest, and I shifted my grip on the hilt of my father's sword, ready to draw it. I would protect her at any cost.

A servant's entrance banged open halfway down the room and a maid dressed as a royal personal servant staggered out. "We've been fooled!" she cried out. Everyone turned. She wasn't the Queen's regular maid. Lady Avali started toward her, but I blocked her path with my body. The maid looked up.

*Maisie, her hair short and black. What was she doing? Get out. Get out.*

She waved her hands in the air like a mad creature. "The Queen is dead. We've been lied to. She's been completely frozen by followers of Winter."

*Mother...dead.*

It felt like my feet had been kicked out from under me. She was dead, and I hadn't been here. I had failed her completely. I hadn't even known...



I clenched my fists and focused on the little points of pain as my nails dug into my palms.

*Concentrate.*

This was not the time to grieve. Maisie's life was in danger. We were all in danger.

And that was reason enough to get Avali and her men away. I cleared my throat. "Knights, arrest her." I pointed to Lady Avali.

Across the hall, my knights unsheathed their swords and started toward the dais. Lady Avali's guards leapt to surround her and drew their weapons, ready to fight.

"You have no authority or reason to arrest me!" Avali's voice cut through the chaos, silencing the panicked stirrings of the crowd as their attention focused back on us. "The doctor told me she was fine." She raised her voice and spoke a command full of authority. "Find her doctor and her chambermaid. Quickly. Arrest them and bring them here for questioning."

I unsheathed Father's sword. "You should be questioned as well. Tell your men to stand down."

Avali met my gaze with a fiery confidence, her body steady. "If there is indeed a woman with Meradian blood here, *she* is the rightful heir to the throne. You have no right to command the knights against me. You have no authority!"

"But I do."

I whirled around and blinked in shock. Maisie was sitting on Father's throne. A throne that had been vacant for over five years. She was dressed once more in her normal dark green floor length dress, her hair long and golden. How had she changed so quickly?

My grip tightened on my sword as I realized I was the only one on the dais able to defend her against Lady Avali and her guards. The other knights were too far away with a thick crowd of uncertain people between us.

Maisie met Avali's gaze full on. "I am the woman you speak of. If Thomas is not the rightful heir to the throne, then I am. And I have the authority to arrest you."

I slowly edged toward Maisie, my sword at the ready. My knights were gradually reaching the platform, moving steadily so as not to trigger an attack from Avali's guards. I hoped all the knights of Harelin would be on my side—mine and Maisie's—and not just my closest companions. But who knew what lies she had been spreading. I needed to be clearly in the right before I made my move.

My heels were close to Maisie's throne. I turned my face toward her, not taking my eyes from the armed men still surrounding Avali. "I think they might attack once you pass the test. Before you can be crowned," I whispered.

"I know," she murmured back. And the brute determination in her voice made me glance at her face. This wasn't the Maisie that ran away from danger. This was a woman facing her enemies straight on. This was a Queen risking her life for her country. "I trust you to protect me, Thomas. You've got the Sword of Spring."

My mouth dried. She *trusted* me to keep her safe?

Avali looked Maisie up and down. A flash of triumph in her dark eyes diverted my thoughts away from Maisie's words as she smiled. "Now that you're here, we must test you."

Maisie tossed her hair back over her shoulder as if completely unalarmed at the growing tension around her. She was simply magnificent. Still, I was terrified for her. I had never intended our bargain to place her in danger. "What do I need to do?" Her voice rang out loud and clear.

Avali turned to the steward and motioned him up to the throne. "What would you suggest, steward?"

He cleared his throat, his wide eyes fixed on Maisie as if she were a ghost. "You look just like Queen Rosally." He must have been so focused on me before that moment that he had never properly studied Maisie.

Maisie shifted at this and the corner of her lip twitched down. A small crack in her other impenetrable armor of control. She was being so brave right now; if only I could do something more to give her the strength she needed.

*I trust you to protect me, Thomas.* My hand became sweaty on the palm of my sword.

The steward took something from his pocket: a bag of dried sunflower seeds. I had seen him snacking on them before. He poured several seeds into the palm of his hand. “The traditional method involves seeds. If you have Meradian blood, you will be able to make things around you grow. You will restore the Blessing on all of Harelin once crowned.”

He held out the seeds in his palm.

A small flicker of panic crossed her features and she glanced at me. She had probably been hoping he would ask about her hair. I nodded with an encouraging smile and spoke softly. “You’ve never been in Harelin before. You don’t know what your powers are here. But even in Kobar there were always flowers blooming around you. No other street in Ravi was as beautiful as the one you lived on. And think about your hair. Nobody else can cause it to grow and change like you can.” I licked my lips. “And in Harelin, I think you grew those grapes. And maybe...maybe you even healed me that night at the inn.”

The steward nodded. “He’s right, Your Majesty. Your powers would only be fully realized in Harelin, the country created by Spring. You can make things from Harelin grow. Since your body is of Harelin, you could make your hair grow in Kobar. Now you are here, you should be able to control all plant life around you. And have some skill that allows you to repair all life from Harelin.” His eyes still stared at her, almost adoring. He had called her Your Majesty. It was clear he already saw her as his Queen.

She swallowed and held out her hand. I positioned myself between her and Avali. The steward dropped the seeds into the middle of Maisie’s palm. The moment they hit her skin, they sprouted and started to grow. Her hand shot back in alarm, but

they continued to grow, one shoot wobbling upward as roots tried to find purchase between the tiles. They toppled over as they expanded, then both produced buds that burst into wide yellow flowers.

Maisie was staring at them, a faint tremble running up her limbs. She seemed so alone then, so vulnerable. I climbed the remaining step to stand level with her and put my hand on her shoulder.

“It’s alright,” I whispered. “As soon as you’re crowned, we’ve won.”

She nodded, but the tension she carried seeped through my fingers. I squeezed and rubbed my thumb back and forth, attempting to calm her, while keeping my eyes on Avali.

The rest of the room stood frozen in shock, all eyes on Maisie and the sunflowers at her feet. At the back of the room, I noticed two knights leading a man dressed as a doctor and another holding Mother’s chambermaid. Nobody else had noticed, and I watched as the three knights nudged those nearest to them to find out what was going on.

I was about to call them to bring the prisoners forward, so they could give evidence against Lady Avali, when the steward spoke to Maisie. “How old are you?”

I glanced at Lady Avali. She was smiling, her eyes bright. A man I didn’t recognize was weaving through the crowd toward her.

I glanced back at Maisie as she shrugged at the steward. “About seventeen. I don’t know my actual birthday. I lived in an orphanage in Ravi until I turned five.”

The old man’s eyes filled with tears. “Then you didn’t die after all. You’re Rapunzel, daughter of Spring. The babe that was slain was saved after all. It is the only explanation that makes sense.”

“But that’s impossible. How did I get to Ravi?” she whispered. I felt her tension increasing as she struggled to control herself, and I continued brushing her shoulder with my thumb, gentle, calming strokes. Nobody should hear such

news while being watched by the inhabitants of an entire castle. And some of them probably wanted to kill her. Every foundation her life was built on was being shaken.

The stranger was getting closer to Avali. We couldn't give her any more time. I met the steward's eyes with a firm look. "We should crown her at once. Right now. And end the famine."

To my surprise, he didn't argue but turned to the crowd. "All hail Rapunzel, rightful Queen of Harelin."

As one, the onlookers bowed. However, Lady Avali and her men chose that moment of distraction to make their move. As everyone lowered their faces, Lady Avali took a sword from the man striding toward her and unsheathed it. It looked strangely similar to Father's sword, only with blue sapphires on the pommel and a silver hilt instead of gold.

If my sword was the Sword of Spring, could that be the Sword of Winter? And as my sword destroyed Winter, could hers destroy Spring? I released Maisie's shoulder and stepped between them. Whatever happened, I would not let Avali harm her.

At the sound of metal, the knights and guards around the dais sprung up from their bowed postures, drawing swords. But Avali was already striding forward, her eyes fixed on Maisie.

I should never have brought her here. I had dragged her to my home, bribed and manipulated her into doing something she'd never wanted, forced a crown and a role on her that she'd never have chosen, and now her very life was in danger.

*I trust you to protect me, Thomas.*

Avali lunged at me, and I parried, pushing her back. "You're of Winter, aren't you?" I hissed. I raised my voice. "You will not harm her."

She smiled and cocked her head. "You might have the Sword of Spring, Thomas, but you cannot protect her from us."

She stabbed her sword straight into the floor tiles, and they shattered, spraying sharp edges of pottery. Webs of ice spread out from the hole. Shouts erupted as the floor creaked and groaned beneath us.

I stabbed the floor with my own sword and the ice stopped. I grinned. Fighting was much more my area than backstabbing politics. And now it was clear who the enemy was.

I stepped toward Avali, my knights reaching the fight.

At the back of the room, screams started. I tore my eyes from our fight to see that the doctor was free, and he was freezing people with something in his hand.

What was he? A human servant of Winter? Or an immortal?

I met Avali's sword a second time. Above the split tiles, the air shimmered slightly.

Ghostly howls echoed from the doors and windows, still far away but coming nearer and nearer. My blood froze as our blades parted. There were dozens of them.

## CHAPTER 17

# THOMAS



A guard moved in the corner of my vision, his sword swinging toward me. Tristan stepped forward to take his blow, while I blocked Avali as she advanced with a low thrust. Years of training together clicked into place. I stepped out of Edward's way as he pushed another guard back, and the other knights worked to distance Avali from her men, leaving her for me.

Behind me, Maisie stood up on her throne. In one hand she had a knife, in the other a dagger. *My dagger.*

*Of course.*

My train of thought was cut off by Avali sweeping her sword in a wide arc; her feet were spaced in a perfect offensive stance, her skirts divided as if for riding. I caught the blade and went on the offensive to drive her back and away from Maisie, but Avali held her position, surprisingly strong and fast.

"Who are you?" I hissed. "Are you even human?"

She ignored the question and stepped forward with a flurry of quick attacks. I met them stroke for stroke as my knights continued to push her guards back. It seemed, unfortunately, that they were all gifted fighters. Surely, they couldn't all be immortals from Winter.

Stepping back from Avali, I caught one of her men on the arm with the Sword of Spring. He didn't burst into snow, but continued to fight Ryan. Human then. Avali closed the distance with quick steps and a low thrust that I had to



sidestep. If she was immortal, all I would need was one wound. If she was human, I would have to win the fight completely.

Her guard was impeccable, her footwork fast. It was going to be a challenge breaking through at all.

In the hall, the screams intensified. I risked a look and saw the doctor freezing anyone who tried to leave through the main doors. The servant entrance Maisie had come through was blocked by a strange sheet of ice that was slowly spreading additional webs of ice up the stone wall.

Tristan dispatched his opponent and stepped up to my side so we could tackle Avali together, but she was pushing me farther away from the throne.

“Stay with Maisie!” I yelled at him. If he was watching Maisie, I would be able to focus on Avali. I had never met a better swordsman than him.

Something white and feral moved behind Avali. I tried to ignore it, leaving it to my knights for now. I pushed her hard, forcing our blades into a small space between us and forcing her back.

A white hound leapt from the side. Ryan tried to stop it, but it ignored the sword blow to its flank, its jagged maw aiming toward my arm with ferocious speed. I stepped back from Avali to slash at the creature, my blade reaching it a split second before impact and turning it into a flurry of grey snow.

Avali took advantage of my distraction to aim a fast blow to my middle. I stumbled backward away from her blade, but off-balance, leaving me open to a second blow. Something green erupted from the floor and tangled around Avali’s ankle, stopping her short. I gaped at the vine that was coiling up through the shattered tiles.

Behind me, Maisie’s whoop rang out over the sounds of fighting. Had she germinated dormant seeds in the earth below the castle? I would have never guessed such a thing was possible.

She was amazing.

Avali scowled in frustration and slashed down with her silver sword. Ice spread down the vine, hardening it until it shattered into thousands of sparkling shards. Vines were appearing everywhere in the hall now, wrapping around the Hounds of Winter and Avali's guard.

I used the distraction to check on the fight on the far side of the hall and was relieved to see the doctor lying at the feet of a group of knights. They had barricaded the tall double door which was shaking as though something heavy beat against it on the other side. Hoarfrost was starting to spread across the planks in glistening swirls.

A hulking man melted through the wall into the room behind some guards. I sucked in a breath to bellow a warning...

A heavy weight barreled into my side as an injured man was flung at me.

I cried out as my body hit the floor hard, the guard landing on top of me and trapping my sword between us. Blood dripped onto my hand as I shoved the unmoving body up, attempting to roll free.

Filmy blue eyes met mine from one side as a Winter Hound noticed I was trapped. I tightened my rapidly numbing grip on the hilt of my sword and yanked, but the blade remained stuck. I kicked at the body, forcing it off.

The pale monster leapt, his muzzle distorted into a snarl.

Greggory appeared between us, holding his short sword in both hands, his feet too close together.

*No, no, no.*

I freed myself just as the beast rammed into him, knocking him down as teeth reached his throat. There was a crack as his head hit the hard marble tiles.

I bellowed in horror and sliced the beast with my sword as its weight crushed the fallen Greggory to the floor. It disintegrated into snow.

Avali was swiping at me again, but I deflected her blow and rushed past her to Gregory's side, putting Edward between us so he could hold her back for a moment. Gregory's eyes were rolled back into his head, sporadic tremors vibrating across his arms. Blood trickled from his mouth across pale skin. I watched his chest, but his breaths were shallow. I was vaguely aware of the ring of knights surrounding us as I shook Gregory's shoulders. "Wake up, you fool. Wake up." A puddle of dark scarlet spread across the tiles from the back of his head.

My throat constricted as true fear gripped me. "Greg, you're going to be alright. Open your eyes." I grabbed his limp hands. "That's an order, Gregory, wake up. Now."

Tristan's voice was strained from above me. "Your Highness, your sword is the only weapon that can kill these monsters and possibly Avali. You don't have time to sit with the wounded. And the air is shimmering over there as if the whole of Winter is about to enter."

He was right. I knew it with every fiber of my being, but my hand wouldn't let go of Gregory's. I couldn't let him fade away, ignored. He didn't deserve that. He had been a good friend for so long.

Tristan's voice grew more urgent. "Prince Thomas! More Winter Hounds are approaching."

I angrily wiped tears from my face and groaned in frustration. I lifted my sword, but hesitated. Gregory's skin was getting colder and clammy.

Maisie pushed through the circle of knights and bent beside me, resting her hands on his chest. Her hair was now tied back in a thick braid.

I moved out of her way, taking in her grim concentration, her lips pressed in determination. I cautiously allowed myself a flicker of hope. "What are you doing?"

She didn't look at me, her eyes stubbornly fixed on Gregory's. "He's from Harelin, like you. I can do it again."

*Do what?* I opened and closed my mouth, wondering if the shock was making my brain incapable of understanding her words.

She closed her eyes. “What does Spring do but flood things that are almost dead with life? And I’m in Harelin now.”

I blinked, still not understanding. Hands grabbed me from behind, pulling me back and up. My hand slipped from Gregory’s. Tristan shook me, making me look at him. “Thomas!” he roared. “Get yourself together now or more people will die!”

I nodded, numbness flooding me, and raised my sword, my arm feeling as if it belonged to another person. I spared Gregory and Maisie one last glance and saw color flooding his cheeks. The free strands of golden hair around Maisie’s face shifted as if in an invisible breeze. Gregory’s chest expanded in a deep breath. His eyes opened and met Maisie’s. She was grinning.

“Highness!”

Edward crumpled under a blow from Avali. As if in slow motion, she slipped between me and Ryan, lashing out at my other knight. I was too distracted, too slow to react in time. She grabbed Maisie’s braid in one hand. I leapt toward her, but the Sword of Winter was faster. It flashed silver light as it sliced down, cutting through the base of Maisie’s braid close to her scalp.

Maisie screamed in pure agony and collapsed, the sound freezing every warm part of me.

My feet were still moving, my sword outstretched. Avali stood above Maisie and Gregory, about to swing her sword again. Every muscle in me burned as I dived in front of her. I couldn’t raise my sword to block her blow in time. I sliced Avali across her middle as her own sword caught my shoulder. Cold froze my shoulder joint, shooting arrows of sharp pain across my body as I landed in a heap on my side.

Avali disintegrated into grey slushy snow.

I only allowed myself a moment of relief before I pushed up through the blinding pain to check on Maisie, hardly daring to breathe. She was sitting upright. There was no blood. I sagged in relief. “Maisie?” I whispered. She didn’t move.

Ryan knelt at my side, his eyes on the blood coming from my shoulder. “Highness, let me see your wound.”

I shoved him back, ignoring the pain and struggling to my feet to reach Maisie. She had said her hair could never be cut, but now a dull grey braid lay on the floor beside her. Her remaining hair had changed to pure white, brittle and stiff. Her lips were tinged with blue as she stared at nothing.

I grabbed her hand. “Maisie, what’s wrong? What did she do to you?”

Maisie turned her head slowly, and her eyes met mine, wide with fear. “I don’t know. I don’t know. But I can’t feel my hair. I can’t make it grow. I can’t feel the seeds either. I... I’m so cold.”

I grabbed Father’s sword and ran it across her hair, but the strands only fragmented at my touch, falling down like snow.

If I hadn’t let myself be distracted by Gregory...

This was all my fault.

I squeezed her hand as tight as I could without hurting her. My body trembled. “What do I do? Just tell me what to do, Maisie!”

She shook her head as the shivers continued. However, no frost spread across her skin. No wound that I could heal.

Gregory struggled into a sitting position beside us. He reached up with effort and took Maisie’s hand. “The power of Spring always vanquishes Winter,” he mumbled. “Always.”

I took his shoulder in my free hand, the three of us so close our foreheads almost pressed together. “Gregory, how do we use the power of Spring? Father’s sword isn’t working.” I looked behind me at the knights still fighting. Avali’s guards had been defeated but the Winter Hounds didn’t seem to care that they now had no leader. They continued their attempts to

reach Maisie, jaws snapping through the crowds of guards and knights desperately trying to hold them back. Toward the back of the hall, the Frosts Ghosts were inching forward, leaving dozens of soldiers on the floor clutching limbs that were slowly turning to ice. “Their leader is dead, but it hasn’t changed anything.”

Greggory gripped my arm. I clenched my teeth and ignored the freezing jolt of pain in my shoulder. “Thomas, listen to me. Maisie was meant to end the famine once she was *crowned*. Why? There must be something about the crown, the throne, maybe the sword too that connects her powers with the land. Think about it. Those three things were always in the possession of the Meradian rulers.”

I nodded, desperate for anything that might work. Maisie’s eyes were becoming unfocused. Their vibrant blue was draining to grey.

Ryan bent behind me. “Your Highness, you’re injured... you’re losing a lot of blood.”

I waved him forward. “We need to get Maisie on the throne. Quickly. And somebody, get the steward! Once she’s crowned, the Blessing will, hopefully, be strong enough to banish these fiends from Winter.”

I pulled Maisie’s arm over one shoulder, while Ryan took the other. We limped toward the throne, and I became aware of something cool and damp spreading down my chest from my shoulder; my tunic was becoming soggy with blood. Blackness pulsed around the edge of my vision. I couldn’t think about any of that now. Saving Maisie was the only thing that mattered.

We reached the throne, and I helped her down. She rested her head against the back, her eyelids half closed. Her skin was cold and clammy. I placed the Sword of Spring on her lap.

“Highness!” Tristan’s voice conveyed shock.

I ignored him as Jonathan appeared with the steward in tow, his sword still drawn in one hand as his eyes warily watched the chaos around us.

I stepped up to the steward's trembling body that still managed to maintain its straight poise. "We need to crown her now."

He looked at me, gaping, and then back at the chaos around us.

"Highness, are you sure this is necessary? She needs medical attention. As do you. It's hardly..."

I took his arm. "It is necessary. If we don't do this now, everything will be lost. These creatures are of Winter. They're here to destroy Harelin. We need to bring the power of Spring back. Now!"

He opened and closed his mouth. "But we can't. We can't get out of this room with all the fighting. And the crown is in the Queen's chambers."

I cursed. "Maybe if I fight..." Even as I said the words, the blackness around my vision pulsed, and I swayed. *Not now. I couldn't afford to faint right now. I had to protect her.*

Maisie straightened in her seat. Her eyelids flickered as if she were struggling to stay awake. My heart squeezed, and I longed to take her into my arms and whisper that everything was going to be alright.

"I took it..." she whispered. Her hand moved to point to the corner. I followed her gaze and noticed the maid's clothes shoved behind the dais, along with a leather satchel. I stumbled over and yanked it open, finding the crown inside.

"Why...no, it doesn't matter." It was hers anyway.

I took it and pushed it into the steward's hands, ignoring the pain the jolting motion caused my shoulder. "Crown her." My pulse pounded in my ears.

He licked his lips and nodded.

"How much of the ceremony..."

"The bare minimum," I interrupted. Around us, my guards were focusing on holding back the three remaining Winter Hounds in the room while most of the courtiers were helping keep the icy doors closed so more couldn't enter. The Frost

Ghosts were picking them off, one by one. There were going to be a lot of people who needed healing with the Sword of Spring.

The steward nodded and walked before Maisie, who was fighting to keep her eyes focused on him.

“Do you, May, named Rapunzel Meradia at birth, daughter of King Justus and Queen Rosally, take this crown as a sign that you will accept your responsibilities to the people and lands of Harelin and that you will do everything in your power to make them prosper?”

Her head lolled to one side as if in slow motion. *Come on, Maisie, don't give up now.*

Her voice was a breath. “I do.”

“Then I rightfully crown you Queen Rapunzel of Harelin.” He placed the crown on her lopsided, bowed head.

The Hounds of Winter drew closer, and I felt naked without my sword. Every enemy in the hall pushed forward, desperate to reach her. Desperate to kill her. I drew my tiny knife, standing between them all. The blackness around my vision throbbed, growing larger.

Behind them all, the air was shimmering more violently where Avali had stabbed her sword into the tiles. Was that a weakness in the veil to the land of the Ancient Ones?

*Come on, Maisie. Come on. This had to work.*

She released a long slow breath as if deflating. A chill ran up my spine, and I stepped toward her, ready to catch her if she fell. The crown tipped. Was she dying?

*No, no, no...*

Something bright and terrible flashed. Then a sound halfway between the howl of wind and a scream.

The air itself ripped open where moments ago it had been a shimmer. Dazzling white erupted, and for a moment, I saw a world I couldn't make sense of. Jarring images. Bleak pine trees. Snow above and below. Lakes of moving ice. Mountains



drained of color. Gaping caves. Thousands of giant white paws beating the snow. Howls. Winter Hounds.

I stumbled, and my vision went black. I shook my head, waiting for it to clear as I fell to my knees, but I couldn't see a thing. I lifted my hands to my face, and found my eyes were covered with a solid coating of ice.

“Enough!” The voice was multilayered, unfamiliar and brutal. It screamed in my ears though it was a low command. The air had grown so cold, it was painful to inhale.

Winter was here, and I was completely helpless.

## CHAPTER 18

# MAISIE



I couldn't feel the throne beneath me anymore. I couldn't feel anything.

I hung in nothingness. There was a rightness to it. An ending. All things died to make way for new life.

Spring became summer, which became autumn, which became winter.

Nations rose and fell.

People lived and loved and died.

And so, now, the cold darkness found me, and I realized I'd been waiting for it for a long time.

Maybe now I would finally have peace.

*Maisie.* The sound was a soft whisper, half audible, half a thought. Soft and gentle. Warm. *Maisie.*

I opened my eyes, but there was nothingness. Cold finality.

*Maisie.* The voice reminded me of warm sunshine.

*Yes?* I whispered. I didn't have a mouth, yet I could still speak.

*You are so close, my daughter. Don't give up now.*

I frowned. The movement somehow possible even though I didn't have a body. *Who are you?*

*I am Spring. The one they banished forever from the mortal realm. But my power lives on in you.*

I shook my head that wasn't a head. *I don't think I'm alive anymore. Winter stole my power. They won.*

*Not yet, child. You're not dead yet. You are close. Close enough that you are between realms, the one place I can reach you since Winter has torn the veil. You must stop her. Save Harelin.*

*How? I'm stuck here. And even when I was there, I couldn't make a difference.*

There was a pause and an unexpected warmth embraced my heart. *I created Harelin out of love, Maisie. Love and compassion. I couldn't see Meradia and her unborn child perish. The Blessing of Spring is linked to love.*

My throat thickened. *I don't understand. What must I do?*

*You have the throne, the crown, the Sword of Spring. You have been declared Queen. Now all you have to do is love. Winter will be banished.*

*Love what? Who?* Panic that I couldn't do what she asked made my chest tight.

The warm presence seemed to move closer. *Love is already there in your heart. You just need to release it. True acts of love require bravery and self-sacrifice. True acts of love leave you vulnerable, because nobody is perfect. I gave up much when I created Harelin and the Blessing of Spring. But love is always worth it. Be brave, Maisie. Braver than you have ever been before.*

I stifled a sob. I could feel what she spoke of. But people who loved got hurt. Even Spring had gotten hurt. Because, as she said, nobody was perfect. And those who you loved could hurt you the most.

But love would save Harelin. Save Thomas.

I calmed my breathing and focused inward. I felt the emotions there I had kept suppressed. The desire to live a life where I wasn't always on the run. One filled with goodness and joy. The love I had started to feel for Harelin as I danced and ate strawberries. The way I admired Gregory and the

knights and wanted a friendship like theirs. Bonds that nothing could break. Absolute trust.

The love I felt for Thomas. The desire to drown in the adoring way he looked at me. The dream of adventures with him for a lifetime.

I let it all out. I let myself feel every crashing wave of emotion and vulnerability.

It hurt until I feared my chest would explode.

But as my heart rate settled, most of all, I felt...peace.

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### Thomas

I SHIVERED ON THE FLOOR, one hand pressed to the ice over my eyes, trying to melt it away. Instead, my palm only burned with cold. With my other arm, I slowly dragged myself in the direction I thought Maisie might be. I had to find her, even if I was blind.

Even if she was dead.

*I'm so sorry, Maisie. I failed to protect you.*

Any minute now, I expected a Frost Ghost's sword to slice through me or a Winter Hound's jaws to find my neck. Or maybe I would simply faint from blood loss.

A sudden shock wave pulsed through me unlike anything I had felt before. Sound died as if all the world had been muffled. My own breath became loud in my ears. I pulled myself another few inches forward, my shoulder screaming in agony, but I was increasingly sluggish as if the whole world was now submerged in honey.

*Maisie...*

I pushed forward, desperate to reach her, to hold her, to not let her be alone during our last moments.

The muffled, sluggish sensation ended. Noise flooded to my senses—suddenly loud—and I could move freely once

more. I pushed myself up to my knees and fumbled around until I found the base of the throne. I reached up and grabbed Maisie's hand.

It was warm.

"Thomas." That was her voice. That was definitely Maisie's voice. It was rough, as if she had been crying, but she didn't sound scared anymore.

Warm, wet hands wiped my eyes and the ice freezing them shut fell away. I blinked until blurry images became sharp, and I could see her face. My heart stumbled as her eyes met mine: they were red from tears, but they were also determined, and a clear blue once more. She tightened her jaw and nodded to me, taking her hands from my face.

I struggled to stand and stepped back, my feet tripping over each other. She was alright. More than alright. She looked magnificent as she stood and held up the gleaming sword. Her hair flooded with gold and cascaded down to her waist until it draped over the throne and coiled over the floor. The jewels on her crown shimmered and sparkled.

Behind me, Winter released an eldritch scream as snow pummeled my back in a sudden storm. I didn't look around. I couldn't take my eyes off Maisie.

Her voice sent tingles down my neck as it rang out, impossibly strong. "This country is of Spring. Winter is not welcome here. Not one of you."

I could feel...warmth in her voice. The cold pain in my shoulder eased. The multilayered screams behind me ceased abruptly. I turned and saw the rift in the veil had vanished leaving only snow drifts on the floor. They dissolved into puddles, even as I watched.

I looked around the room. The remaining Winter Hounds and Frost Ghosts puffed into clouds of snow. The ice vanished as the wooden beams of the doors sprouted leaves. Everywhere fallen people were staggering back to their feet, frozen limbs working once again and eyes seeing clearly once

more. None had remained fully frozen and died like Old Mother Baba.

The breath left my lungs. I looked back at Maisie. Queen Rapunzel. The rightful Queen of Harelin. The room hushed to quiet as everyone caught sight of their radiant Queen and fell to their knees.

My chest became tight. I wasn't worthy of her. I took a step back and began to bow, but she rushed to my side and caught me before I could.

"Don't you dare bow," she hissed.

I stood and dropped my eyes. I was so glad she was alright and Winter had vanished, but I had let her down. There was nobody else close enough to hear, so I let the words spill out. "I'm sorry, Maisie."

She tilted her head and frowned. "What on earth for?"

"You said you trusted me to protect you, but I was so distracted by Gregory, I let Avali pass and...you almost died. You trusted me, and I let you down. I'm...I'm so sorry."

To my surprise she lifted her hand to cup my cheek. My eyes lifted and were entranced by hers. "Thomas," she whispered, flooding my whole body with warmth. Then she smiled, a gentle understanding smile that I'd never before seen on her face. "You don't have to be perfect for me to trust you. And you don't have to be perfect to be loved. You didn't let me down. You fought hard, and we won. You're a good leader, Thomas."

My mouth dried, and I struggled to find the words as her hand fell away. "Thank you," I said at last. "I..." I ran my hand down my face and broke into a wry grin. "I suppose I need to work on that."

She returned my smile. "I do too. Trusting and loving people who aren't perfect, I mean."

I raised an eyebrow. *Did she mean...? Was she saying? But, no, she couldn't...could she?*

Maisie's eyes gained a mischievous glint, and she looked around at all the kneeling figures in the room. "They're not meant to look up or stand until I say 'You may rise' or something, right?"

I frowned, not following the intention behind her words. "Yes. You should probably say that. With all this melted snow, their dresses and trousers will be getting soggy. Not to mention some of that snow used to be creatures and people. And that's, well...that's a bit disturbing." I was rambling now. I almost winced and clamped my mouth shut. It was so hard to think clearly with her looking up at me like that.

She grinned. "Not quite yet. I need just one more moment with nobody looking." She wrapped her arms around my neck, and I suddenly realized what she intended.

I didn't dare to move or even breathe as she tentatively placed her lips to mine. Pressure built behind my eyes as she kissed me, and I kissed her back, sweet and tender. This was nothing like the kiss she had given me before in the tower. This one was vulnerable. Real.

A joy unlike any I had ever felt before unfurled in my heart as we rested our foreheads against each other.

"I love you, Thomas," she whispered.

I bit my lip, only now acknowledging how badly I'd wanted to hear those words and how thoroughly I'd given up any hope of hearing them. "And I, you."

"Even though you can be an idiot." She grinned.

"Even though you pushed me off a boat and locked me in a tower." I grinned back.

Maisie took my hands. "No more perfect. Let's just do our best."

I nodded. "Let's do our best. And you should probably tell these poor people to rise or they might think you've left and forgotten about them."

Maisie tapped a finger against her lips. "How long do you think they would last?"



“Maisie!” I bit back a laugh.

She rolled her eyes. “Alright, fine, fine.” She stepped back from me but kept one of her hands in mine. “You may rise,” she called across the Great Hall, and the people rose together in celebration.

## CHAPTER 19

# MAISIE



I shouldn't have let Thomas leave my side. The three hours spent in my new room resting and eating and being changed by maids who were strangers was suffocating. My mind started racing again. What was I doing? I couldn't be Queen! It was hard enough for me to even care for myself, let alone a whole nation. I knew nothing about ruling.

I loved Thomas, and I was starting to love Harelin. I was relieved we had defeated Winter. But now what? People stared at me with adoration and awe. Nobody had ever done that before. Not the real me anyway. It made me want to shrink away or pretend to be the person they thought I was, wearing the mask of the perfect Queen and burying the real me deep.

But Thomas would say not to do that. Thomas would want me to be me.

A knock on the door revealed Gregory, who bowed deeply to me. "Your Majesty, Lord Thomas requests your presence. He's found information he thinks you should know right away."

I nodded. *Lord* Thomas. That wasn't right. Guilt stirred in my stomach. I had stolen his throne, but he would be ten times the ruler I was. He really was the perfect prince. There was no way I should be ruling instead of him.

My mind was a whirlwind as I passed down the dark corridors, the sun long set outside the windows, and opened the door into the small room, knights shadowing me on either side. I had taken off the crown, so I didn't have to be anxious

about it slipping off my head at an inconvenient moment. It felt strange to wear it anyway. The confidence I had felt standing next to Thomas in the throne room had vanished.

Thomas stood as I entered and bowed. I was never going to get used to that. He smiled at me, and some of my anxiety melted.

My eyes flicked to his injured shoulder. I had healed it earlier once I'd had my powers back, but the wound had been bad. It appeared to be completely better, but I didn't trust him to admit to me if it was still hurting or not quite right. I was yet to find the limitations of my power.

"Your Majesty." Thomas's eyes lingered on mine, and I felt the color rise to my cheeks. I really didn't want him to leave my side again.

I walked close to him. "Did you manage to unfreeze your mother?"

He sagged a little, and the corners of his mouth tightened. "She had been frozen for too long. Not even your magic restored her."

I raised my hand to his arm. "I'm so sorry."

He gave an awkward shrug, took a deep breath, and pointed to the far side of the room. "The servant of Winter posing as my mother's doctor has interesting information about Spring and Winter that you should hear. He is human, and our only prisoner who seems to actually know anything."

I nodded and turned to the traitorous doctor. He was tied to a chair a few paces away and wouldn't meet my eyes. Was this part of being Queen?

I straightened my back and played the role like any other I had played before. I made my movements and voice that of somebody else, somebody confident and in control. I kept the true, uncertain me buried, away from judging eyes. "Speak."

Thomas stepped toward him, and my chest tightened at his proximity. I felt safer. "Tell the Queen what you just told us. Say all of it."

The doctor licked his lips. “Winter was given permission by the Council of Ancients to undo Spring’s mistake and destroy the last Meradian heir, so that Harelin would return to its natural wasteland.” He lifted his eyes then. “Destroy you and your family. They thought they’d achieved their goal, then they realized you were still alive.”

*Me.* The baby left at the Ravi orphanage with no name or note. No person seen in the street.

“How did you find out about me in the end?” I asked, already fearing the answer.

“Old Mother Baba, Spring’s ambassador, received a letter. A letter a servant of Winter stole. We had been monitoring her for some time, waiting for her to die as Spring’s magic faded from Harelin. We found a letter in her house sent to her from one you know as Mistress Faye.”

I folded my arms and pretended my throat wasn’t tightening. “One where she was selling me to the highest bidder?”

The doctor shook his head. “She explained she had been a handmaiden of the previous Queen Consort. An immortal from Winter. Mistress Faye sailed with her to Harelin when they invaded, but when she realized that the Queen Consort wished to kill the entire royal family, she no longer wanted to be complicit. She found you, faked your death, and fled with you straight back to Ravi, leaving you at an orphanage. When it became clear you could control your hair growth as an older child, she feared Winter would get word of your survival, so she took you in.”

The world seemed to spin. This was not what I had expected. “Mistress Faye saved me? And then hid me? But later she told Winter where I was. She *used* me for years.”

The doctor shrugged. “I don’t know everything, only what I was informed and what I read in this letter. She explained to Old Mother Baba how she had sheltered you and how she was certain of your identity. She said that now you were of age, Old Mother Baba should send somebody from Harelin for you so you could restore the Blessing.”

I shook my head. I couldn't believe this. "And pay her?"

He grinned. "Oh yes. She wanted quite the reward. Anyway, she included an ink painting of you. We found this letter and stopped Old Mother Baba from telling anyone else. Lady Avali was sent to Harelin with me. Winter Hounds were to find you in Ravi and kill you. Prince Thomas was to be killed in the ambush waiting for him at Old Mother Baba's house so Avali could take the throne and let Harelin crumble. Everything would be wrapped up neatly. We didn't expect Prince Thomas to be given the Sword of Spring just before he left, a sword meant only for the Kings and Queens of Harelin. It was not rightfully his yet. We also didn't realize that Mistress Faye had sent two paintings of you. We destroyed the painting and letter, not realizing the second painting existed or that Old Mother Baba had written a few lines of her own letter. Prince Thomas happened to find it."

I swayed, and Thomas stood close enough for our arms to touch. Mistress Faye had known who I was and written Old Mother Baba so I could return to Harelin? She was the reason I had stayed hidden all those years, yet also the one who had given me away.

"Mistress Faye told Winter about my flat, though. She was surprised when I turned up alive and only then hid me in a tower." I looked up at Thomas who squeezed my shoulder.

The doctor cleared his throat. "Winter found her before they found you. I suspect they were very...persuasive. And though she cared for you, I doubt Mistress Faye was willing to die for you, from what I've heard."

I scoffed. "No. Once I turned fourteen, she always said I was old enough to defend myself."

Those words took on a new meaning now that I realized what she had risked to save me as a helpless baby. How she had given up her former life. Mistress Faye had cared about me after all.

A piece of my heart I hadn't even realized was broken, clinked back into place, and I breathed deeper than I had in years.

I licked my lips, trying to process all the information quickly, so I could ask the right questions while I still had a chance. “Who is Lady Avali?”

The doctor shifted. “She was Winter’s ambassador. When Old Mother Baba chose to stay in Harelin, Winter was granted permission to keep an ambassador here to help the balance.”

Thomas stepped closer beside me. “She was an immortal.”

He nodded. “She has worn many names through the last few centuries and kept that fact hidden. But yes, she was immortal and stuck here away from Winter.”

Thomas looked grim as he rubbed his chin. “She’s been undermining Harelin since it was formed?”

The man turned his attention to him. “No, lad. She’s been waiting for orders so that one day she’d be allowed to return home. The realm of the Ancients is more beautiful than you can imagine. This place is a poor substitute.”

I shifted, at sea in a world I understood so little of, drifting around until I was knocked by another revelation or responsibility. Pushed on tides I couldn’t control. I reached out and took Thomas’s hand. He squeezed it. “And now? What will the Council of Ancients do? Will Winter attack again? Use Kobar again?”

He shrugged. “Winter failed to kill you twice and now you are on the throne. They caused considerable disruption to the mortal realm in the process. I suspect the Council will vote for no more interference. Besides, it is a lot harder for Winter to harm Harelin while the Meradian Blessing is in place. No Hound of Winter can set foot here while you reign. Spring’s actions from long ago can protect you once more. But she will never be able to interfere again. Harelin is only safe while your bloodline remains. I suspect there will be no interference of any kind from the Ancients.”

I nodded. “So my parents really were the former King and Queen.”

The doctor replied with a flat look.

Thomas turned to me, lowering his head close to mine. “People say your parents loved you very much, Maisie. You were not abandoned. In fact, it sounds like Mistress Faye risked everything to save you, even though she pretended not to care.”

I swallowed against the thickness building in my throat. I gestured to the doctor. “And who are you?”

A small, tired smile turned up one side of his mouth. “I was a child dying of cold in Kobar. Winter offered me a deal in return for my life. It would not claim me if I served their kingdom for the rest of my days. I agreed. I have had a long, long life now. I do not fear death.”

I looked away. “Send him back to Kobar to Lord Jarid. Tell him that he was trying to disrupt our fragile peace, but I, Queen May, and Lord Thomas wish for our peace to remain. Lord Jarid is fair. Let him do with this man as he and the King wish.”

I turned and walked from the room, feeling light-headed. I didn’t want to process anything more. I shouldn’t be here. I was a fraud. I still had all the drugged blue sweets. If I slipped them into everyone’s drinks at a banquet to celebrate my coronation, everyone would fall asleep, and I could run away without being chased for a whole day. I trusted and loved Thomas deeply, but he deserved better than me—a lady actually trained to be Queen. I could abdicate to him. Yes, that all made sense. That would be best for Thomas and Harelin.

Entering the corridor, Thomas pulled on my hand, stopping me. A warm jolt went through me as his other hand reached for mine and I felt his skin against my palm. I remembered our dance, the way he had looked at me, and the way that had felt. His words, whispered in the dark: *You are not darkness and destruction. You are not the bad things you’ve endured. You’re brave and you’re strong.*

Thomas lowered his head close to mine so we couldn’t be overheard. “Maisie, are you alright?”

I shrugged and then crumpled into him, letting him in through my walls. “I don’t know how to be the Queen,



Thomas. I don't know what I'm doing. And I hate being shut in a room with all these women fussing over me."

He half-smiled. "I thought you might enjoy bossing them around and sending them to fetch you strawberries."

I gave him a withering look. "Seriously, Thomas. I'm not meant to be Queen. I have no training. I can barely look after myself. I've never committed to anything in my life. You have been trained since you were little and have all the experience. This is all wrong. I shouldn't usurp your position simply because of who my parents were."

He rested his hands on my upper shoulders. "I'm here beside you. I won't leave you. I love you."

My heart clenched. I would never get used to those words. I took one of his hands from my shoulder and turned it over, kissing his palm, and amazed that I was allowed to do so. "I know, and I love you as well, but this situation is ridiculous. You should be wearing this crown, not me."

He hesitated for a moment. "Well, according to our contract, we should be arranging a wedding very soon."

I narrowed my eyes. "You hated that contract."

He nodded with a grin. "I did, but..." His face became serious. "Maisie, will you marry me? Honestly, this time. No more pretending. Promising to love each other for the rest of our lives. We make a good team. Together, Harelin will be unstoppable. I will be a much better ruler with you by my side."

My breaths became devoid of air. "Thomas, I do want to marry you but...I don't see how I could ever be good enough for you. With everything that's happened, everything that I've done...I'll get anxious and do silly things and, I don't know, maybe even toss you over the edge of a boat."

He cupped my cheek and his thumb made slow strokes. "We're not trying to be perfect, remember, just doing our best. And I want to marry you, Maisie. You could be a good Queen."

I nodded, the reassurance of his words seeping to his very soul. I managed a grin. “Look who’s talking.”

He grinned back. “I know, I learned from the best.” His grin faded to concern. “And if you’re not ready to marry me yet, please stay anyway. I will take care of running the castle and ruling Harelin as you learn. I won’t leave your side.”

I took a deep shuddering breath. I could do this. This new Maisie could do this. “Fine, I’ll marry you. But it had better be quick. I want you beside me every second and that crown back on your head.”

He laughed. “I hope you want to marry me for more reasons than just to shirk responsibility.”

I smiled. “Maybe.”

His lips tilted up at the corners, and his eyes met mine again, sending the familiar jolt of awareness through me. “Just let’s never go on a ship ever again.”

I grinned. “Never again,” I promised and pulled his face down for a kiss.

# THE WICKED PRINCE

If you liked *The Golden Prince* and want more clean fairy tale retellings about a swoony prince, check out the next book in the series!



## **The Wicked Prince: A Robin Hood retelling by Celeste Baxendell**

**A righteous outlaw. A wicked tyrant. A marriage to save their crumbling kingdom.**

As regent, Prince John has a never-ending list of problems, including his brother's expensive war and his subjects' utter

hatred of him. But the biggest thorn in his side? The outlaw Robin Hood.

With an ultimatum from his brother—deal with the outlaw once and for all or be sent to the frontlines to die—Prince John needs a solution and fast. Upon discovering everything they thought they knew about the criminal was wrong—most surprising, Robin Hood is a woman—Prince John’s brilliant scheme is born.

Marry the outlaw. Secure his safety... even if he condemns himself to a wife that despises him and fascinates him in equal measures.

Robin has never come across a trap she couldn’t escape, but when Prince John proves himself as her equal, it’s time to put that to the test. She’d made a vow to fight his tyranny, and the ring on her finger won’t change that.

As long as she believes he is every wicked thing the world says he is, her heart is safe, and even though she might be the greatest thief in the world, it isn’t like he has a heart for her to steal...

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To read a sneak preview of *The Wicked Prince*, turn over for Chapter One!

# BONUS CHAPTER I

Every so often, there were days where the stars aligned and everything seemed to finally be going Prince John's way. Enough that it made being king *worth* it.

Fine. Prince Regent. Close enough.

Regardless, today was one of those historic days. The day Prince John had caught Astren's most elusive, most wanted outlaw, Robin Hood.

Well... maybe not *that* exact day, if Prince John was being *technical*. *And* if they were getting into those pesky details, Prince John wasn't the one who *physically* apprehended her. Robin Hood had been apprehended a few days ago by the Sheriff of Ferren Forest. It *had* been John's plan... he just hadn't had a hand in executing it.

What was the point in being Prince Regent if he had to *do* things instead of make someone *else* do them?

Regardless, this was the day his outlaw was scheduled to arrive in Lathe. The day she would be brought before Prince John.

So that made today the important one. The one everyone would remember.

The second John had stepped out of his room that morning, he'd dismissed all the advisors and officials squabbling for his attention. Vultures. He'd taken an extra half hour to ensure everything was perfect. To make sure *he* was perfect. Of course they'd taken the opportunity to swarm him the second he had appeared even though there was no sense in even

pretending to do any work that morning. He would be too distracted waiting for the arrival of his outlaw.

And her band of Merry Men, he supposed. The Sheriff had succeeded in catching all of them, thanks to John's brilliant plan. It was so perfect a plan even an idiot couldn't mess it up—proven by the fact that the Sheriff had caught her and hadn't lost her in transit. Catching all of them at the same time had been the key. The many times one or two got away had always led to the rescue of the others. But this time there would be no escape or rescue. Her little band would be headed straight for the dungeons. Robin would be brought straight to him.

John sat on the king's throne—it was his right as Prince Regent—and he waited. As the morning wore on, his patience didn't falter. But he did drum his fingers on the arm of the chair, watching the way the gold rings caught the sunlight. Another hour passed. He should have brought something to occupy him, but his usual hobby would have been too much hassle with all the rings on his fingers. His back started to hurt so he shifted, leaning back against the arm and swinging his legs over the other side in a display wholly inappropriate for royalty.

But who was going to stop him?

As long as Richard was gone, he was the highest authority in the kingdom. His brother was off in the desert fighting over who got more sand dunes behind their borders. No one in Astren held more power than John.

It was good to be king. Well, regent.

When a scrawny little page finally gave him word that the Sheriff and his prisoners had been spotted entering the city, John almost straightened back up into a proper position, but stopped himself. No. This would be better suited for his and Robin's second meeting, and his victory.

The doors opened, and the sight had John grinning as brightly as he had the day he'd

come up with his brilliant scheme.

The Sheriff—John couldn't remember the man's proper name, but he also didn't care to. He wasn't important enough for that. Regardless, the Sheriff was a weathered man at least two decades John's senior whose incompetence was the only reason John knew who he was. But at least today his incompetence had proven no match for John's brilliance. Or rather, the painstaking step-by-step instructions John had given him so that there was no room for the Sheriff to make a single decision on his own.

He was holding what looked like a leash made of chains connected to a set of manacles and shackles. Two of the Sheriff's men hovered around the figure in chains, their hands on her arms, forcing her forward while the Sheriff pulled on the chain.

But the young woman would not move an inch without a fight.

The only reason she wasn't being dragged on the ground was because of the guards half-carrying her. The chains rattled as she struggled, trying to kick and twist and break free in any way she could. Her head thrashed around, sending her dark blonde hair flying in a thousand different directions as she screamed—or tried to. The gag around her mouth muffled it, but considering how loud she was even then, John was grateful his ears were spared.

It was like they were transporting a wild animal.

John's cheeks started to ache with how big his grin was.

The second her blue eyes landed on him, she redoubled her efforts. To no avail.

"Your Highness," the Sheriff called out over Robin's screaming. "We executed your brilliant plan perfectly. She was right where you said she would be, desperately trying to talk Lady Marian out of her wedding to Guy."

Robin's screaming grew even louder.

A lesser man might have felt guilty at missing the wedding of the man who was the only thing he had resembling a friend.

But friend was a loose term. And John's presence would only have raised suspicion and could have ruined his perfect plan.

Falling in love with Lady Marian and giving John the opening to plan the perfect trap was the only useful thing Guy had ever done in his life.

"Of course she was. Criminals like to think they're so much cleverer than the rest of us." John let his rings catch the sunlight for a moment before lowering his hand. "Well... until they're caught."

The guards threw Robin to her knees, and her screaming stopped. The Sheriff jerked on the chain, and Robin caught herself with her hands. She was a streak of grass and dirt wholly out of place amongst the glittering opulence of the throne room. Her head snapped up and never before had John seen crystal blue burn so brightly.

He gestured to her gag. "I know you spend your time running around a forest and following your impulses like an animal, but if we remove your gag will you prove capable of civilized conversation?"

Her eyes widened, then they narrowed. How quaint. It was a little late for her to be worried about getting caught in a trap. But she nodded.

"Are you certain, Your Highness?" the Sheriff asked, eyeing Robin.

John tightened his fist, showing off his brother's royal signet specifically and giving the Sheriff a lidded, sharp look. His voice was frozen solid and shook the room despite not being any louder than before. "Are you questioning me?"

The Sheriff immediately signaled for one of his men to take the gag out of her mouth.

It was good to be king. Well, regent.

Robin's cheeks were still flushed from her screaming. She licked her lips, swallowing as soon as the gag was gone. She didn't start screaming again, but she was still glaring at him.



“See? Was that so hard?” John leaned his chin on his hand and grinned at her with no substance.

“Get off that throne.”

It was the first time he’d heard her voice in almost six months. Although, the rasping, hoarse quality was likely just because of all the screaming she’d done. Still, it was a wonder they’d believed she’d been a young man at all, given her distinctly feminine, lilting voice. To be fair, stealing didn’t exactly facilitate conversation. And the one time he had spoken with her, she’d tried to disguise it.

John tsked and shook his head. “Criminals don’t get to give orders.”

“There’s only one criminal in this room and it’s not me.”

“Show the Prince Regent some respect!” The Sheriff jerked on the chains, nearly sending Robin face first into the floor, but she caught herself again and didn’t look away from John. She looked at him like she could send an arrow into his heart with her eyes alone. A thrill ran down his spine.

“False kings deserve no respect.” Robin got one of her legs beneath her, pushing herself back up. “And that throne isn’t yours.”

“Well, it’s not like Richard has a use for it while the Esmeans shoot at him. Besides, if they do kill him, then it *will* be mine.” What a fascinating woman she was. “Shouldn’t you be

less concerned with my choice of chair and more about your own life?”

“I can do both.” Robin stood up straight, shaking her head to get her hair out of her face. “Don’t underestimate me.”

John grinned. “I’m the first person who didn’t.”

Robin rattled her manacles. “You can talk tough all you want, but everyone knows you’re too much of a coward to risk your own neck.” She strained against them as her lips curled up.

The young woman who looked like she'd been dragged out of a bush stared at him like he was the dirt on her skin. Perfect.

"I bet you won't even watch when you have someone else execute me." Her voice took on an airy superiority. "You wouldn't want to upset your delicate nerves."

John swung his legs off the arm of the throne and in one smooth motion pushed himself out of it and strode toward her. He tilted his head as he approached. "Who said anything about execution?"

Robin's brow furrowed and she tried to take a step back, but the Sheriff kept a tight grip on the chain, preventing her even that. Her balance faltered, and John caught her shoulder, steadying her. Her gaze snapped to his and then she ripped herself out of his grip, hitting the floor with a sneer on her lips.

And people thought he was prideful.

They weren't *wrong*, but still.

"Well, I don't expect you're going to let me go with a warning." Robin looked up at him, her voice still rasping. Her tunic was belted at her waist, wrinkled and as dirt-stained as her breeches. He was going to have to have the servants scrub the throne room floor once they were finished. Had she been rolling around in dirt the whole way to Lathe?

Actually, given the struggle she'd given just on her way in here, that probably wasn't far off from the truth.

Ugh. He should have had them at least dump a bucket of water on her before bringing her in to see him.

He reached down and grabbed the chain between her cuffed wrists and pulled her back up to her feet. The chain at least looked cleaner than she did.

Robin went completely limp, and John almost lost his grip on the chain. However, one of the Sheriff's men grabbed her by the back of her shirt and hauled her back up, actually lifting her clean off the ground so she couldn't do anything to be difficult.

That actually brought her eyes closer to his eye level. Perfect.

John reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of parchment. As he unfolded it, taking care with the edges, he said, “You had to know it was only a matter of time until I caught you when these started appearing all over the kingdom.”

Robin’s nostrils were flaring and her breath was huffy as he held up a wanted poster. They’d had wanted posters for Robin ever since her first appearance, but those had been different. Vague descriptions and a drawing of a hooded figure. This was the first one that identified her as a woman and had her face. John held the wanted poster up to her face to compare them side by side.

“Let’s see how close I was,” John said. “I only got a glimpse of you, and the light was fading, so small inaccuracies can be forgiven.”

But there were none. John was excellent with details. The face on the wanted poster was

a perfect recreation of Robin’s, down to the intensity of her eyes and the freckle on her right cheekbone.

Stunning. Breathtaking.

His handiwork, he meant.

He asked, “What do you think? It’s your face after all.”

“Unlike you, I don’t spend all day staring at my own reflection.” She tried to kick at him, but the guard jerked her back. “Some of us have more important things to do, like taking care of the people you rob blind.”

“Everyone has to have hobbies, even regents. Don’t you have any?” John lowered the wanted poster, starting to carefully fold it up again. “And no, crime doesn’t count.”

Robin went silent, still visibly fuming at him.

“Nothing else you want to get out? You were quite vocal on your way in.” No response. John leaned in a little, unable and uninterested in keeping his glee from seeping into his

voice as he cooed at her. “Come on, all birds sing, don’t they? While our first night together was one I won’t forget, you weren’t very vocal. I like you much better when you speak. Or you can scream if you like.”

John narrowly ducked back in time to avoid Robin’s forehead slamming into his nose.

“You disgusting, *vile*—”

He caught her chin in his hand, tilting it up to look at him. His voice darkened. “You should be a little nicer to the man who has all your Merry Men’s lives in his hands. I imagine you’re quite attached to them.”

Now that had her attention.

Robin’s nostrils flared again, and she ground out, “Stop playing games and get to the point.”

“The point is I don’t want to *execute* you.”

Robin still eyed him warily. He adjusted his grip, softening it and cradling her face rather than gripping it. When had his heart started pounding?

This was it. The moment for the history books. His eyes darted down briefly before returning to hers. He had the outlaw. Now...

“I want to marry you.”

She started to jerk her head back, but he resecured his grip, forcing her to look at him. Her eyes were so wide they might as well have popped right out of their sockets. “Are you mad?”

Not the worst reaction he had anticipated.

“Not even a little.” John reached forward with his other hand and brushed her wild, tangled hair out of her face, smoothing it down. His voice was soft, barely a whisper as he moved to paint his best work yet with it. “Doesn’t that sound nice? Being a princess? No more running around the woods and sleeping on the cold dirt? Dodging arrows every day? Always looking over your shoulder?”

He was pleased to feel Robin lean into his palm and see her eyes flutter shut as he spoke, envisioning the possibilities. The tension she had been wearing as her armor started to melt away and why wouldn't it? That was the real secret to his plan, giving her the thing she could never admit to herself she wanted. Even the legendary Robin Hood could be tempted if someone only knew what weakness to press on.

He'd seen it in her eyes beneath the hood. She was tired. That kind of life would wear anyone down over the years, especially someone like her. She wasn't just tired; she was absolutely exhausted. He knew it well. She was ready to give in. He had her exactly where he wanted her.

He'd won.

His smirk grew when she let out a soft sigh. He brushed his thumb over her lip, and Robin's eyes flew open, burning brighter than the sun. And then she bit him.

She *bit* him.

John jumped back with a high-pitched, undignified yelp as searing pain ripped through his now bleeding hand. Did she have blades for teeth? What kind of savage *bites* someone?

Her mouth was coated red as the Sheriff's men grabbed her and started to haul her back. She spat John's blood onto the floor and screamed, "I'd rather shove a hot poker through my own chest than marry you!"

Fine. Maybe she wasn't quite ready to give in. She still had some fight left in her yet.

John held his bleeding hand in the other, clutching it to his chest and swearing under his breath. The guards continued dragging Robin back, as she now struggled against her restraints to get another crack at him. She screamed incoherently as one of them put her gag back on her, smearing the blood on her cheek.

Robin Hood was absolutely feral.

The doors slammed shut.

And Prince John was just getting started.

# BINGO

## ONCE UPON A PRINCE BINGO

Front goose	Licking soap	Cover with arm tattoos	Radish-stealing gnome	Cover with roses
Sunburst	Cover with arrows	Cover with pottery	Cover with frost	Sweets
Painting	Cover with ribbons		Cover with a frog	Honey caves
Braids	Cover with an apple	Cover with a cat	Cover with glowing eyes	Masquerade balls
Cover with tentacles	Dragons on the beach	Cover with shoes	An extremely fluffy rabbit	A ratty hat

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Alice lives in Bristol, UK, and has loved fantasy all her life. Her favorite authors are Brandon Sanderson, Holly Black and Robert Jordan. When she's not off gallivanting in other worlds, you can find her looking after her young son, working as a small animal charity vet, hanging out with her church family, or walking the best dog in the universe with her husband.

She hopes to change the world for the better one word at a time.

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