

LYNDSEY HALL

THE
SILVER
PRINCE

ONCE UPON  A PRINCE

A TWELVE DANCING PRINCESSES RETELLING

THE
SILVER
PRINCE

ONCE UPON A PRINCE



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A TWELVE DANCING PRINCESSES RETELLING

The Silver Prince

A Twelve Dancing Princesses Retelling

Once Upon a Prince Book Seven

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First edition published in 2023

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ISBN: 978-1-8380911-9-4

<https://lyndseyhallwrites.com>

Cover design by MoorBooks Design

Edited by Astrid Johnsson

Formatting by R. S. Williams

For Alice

The best indie godmother a girl could ask for.

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CHAPTER I

ANDERS



As the ship sailed into the harbour, a warm, salty breeze filled the sails and tousled Anders' hair. He opened his sketchbook to a new page and shielded his eyes as he took in the sight of Orovia, the capital of the Southern Isle. An imposing city of pale stone and terracotta tiles.

But, if there was any truth to the tales told during the Longest Night, back home in the Northern Isle, beneath the glittering façade lay a dark heart of pride and greed.

The Gilded Palace stood high on the hillside, bearing down upon the rest of the city and casting a shadow over the winding, cobbled streets. Even from here, Anders could see movement along the battlements and atop the high towers. Archers keeping watch over the King and his two daughters, ready to defend them from attack. Or, more likely, to discourage would-be thieves. The vast wealth of the Southern Isle was well-known across the Four Continents, as was their love of flaunting it.

Anders tucked his sketchbook and pencil back into his bag and pulled his hood forwards to hide his pale-blond hair. As the youngest prince of the so-called Silver Isle—the kingdom to the north of Orovia—he was something of an unwelcome visitor. With no papers and only his name and characteristic hair to prove his identity, he was risking his life simply by setting foot on Southern land.

He'd been making his way back home to D'Argentis for over three weeks now, and the offer of passage on an Eastern trade ship transporting silks had been too good to refuse.

Despite the fact the destination was a little farther south than he would have liked. He'd attempted to haggle with the captain, but it had been a waste of breath, even the Easterners knew the North wasn't the place to sell luxury goods. Instead, Anders had agreed to pay half up front and the rest on his safe arrival in Orovia. He would simply have to walk the rest of the way to the north coast, where he prayed a sympathetic ferryman would be waiting.

Assuming he escaped the notice of the city guards. But that shouldn't be too difficult. As the once-in-a-generation Shadow Graced, he'd mastered the ability of hiding in plain sight long ago.

"Don't go getting yourself into any trouble now, lad." The captain of the trade ship took the fistful of silver coins Anders handed him and gave him a stern look. "Nice northern boy like you, they'll string you up if they catch you in these parts."

"I'll be careful." He nodded his gratitude to the white-bearded captain and turned back to the city rising up out of the Southern Sea, its tall spires and tiled roofs reflected on the surface of the dark water. Foreboding was a cold fist in his chest, but he didn't let the fear show on his face.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see the captain still standing there, a folded document in his outstretched hand.

"Take these, lad. They were—" He swallowed, eyes shining. "They were my son's. If you keep your head down and your hood up, they might just get you home."

Anders hesitated, unsure whether to take the man's kind gesture and assume his late son's identity. Would it be more disrespectful to accept, or refuse? The captain's son didn't exactly need the documents now, and Anders was sure no piece of paper could take away the man's memories of his child. Nodding and clasping the captain's hands between his own for a brief moment, gratitude swelling in his chest, Anders took the papers and slipped them into his pocket.

"Thank you." But the captain was already turning away, pinching the moisture from his eyes with his thumb and

forefinger, and shouting to his men to throw out the mooring lines.

The ship docked, and Anders stepped off, squinting in the bright sunlight that bounced off every polished surface. The port was alive with sailors singing and whistling as they worked. Traders shouted to one other as they lugged pallets and crates from far-off lands, containing spices, silks, dyed leather and wine. Gulls cried out, swooping overhead and diving on any scraps of food they could find. The air was crisp with brine, the scents of fish and smoke mingling in Anders' nostrils as he made his way from the harbour towards the town.

He was surprised to find that it reminded him of home; the hustle and bustle of the fishers and farmers in the south, the tang and clamour of the salt mines in the north.

“Looking for work, boy?” A tanned, shirtless man called as Anders passed. He was hauling a net that had seen better days out of an open fishing vessel while a scrawny youngster heaved buckets of water out of the bottom of the boat. “I could do with a strapping lad like you on my boat.” The young boy threw a glare in the direction of the fisher, who, from their similar features, Anders assumed to be his father.

“Sorry, I'm just passing through,” Anders replied, attempting to disguise his accent. Or what was left of it, after five years fighting overseas.

He kept his head down as a pair of city guards in brown livery strolled past, headed towards the ship he had recently disembarked. Short swords gleamed at their hips, their blades deathly sharp. He didn't fancy finding himself at the business end of one of those.

Hurrying on, he mentally calculated his remaining funds. After paying for passage, he only had a single gold coin, a couple of silvers and a few coppers left. That should be enough to get him a room for the night and a hot meal. And perhaps even a new pair of boots for the remainder of his journey; his own had worn-down heels and holes in the soles from months of walking.

When he reached the northernmost tip of Orovia, he'd have to pay a ferryman a few silvers to row him across the strait separating the Northern and Southern Isles. More than the journey was worth, perhaps, but the price ensured the ferryman would deliver him safely across the channel of water, rather than handing him in to whichever authorities offered the highest reward.

He tried to picture his father's expression as his youngest son was hauled in front of him by guards; unshaven and stinking, but unmistakably his boy. Would his father be happy to see him, after all this time away? His mother certainly would be, of that he could be sure.

He could try to swim it, but even at its narrowest point the strait was over a mile wide, and deathly cold. A chill washed over Anders as he remembered standing on the shore as a child, looking out at the icy water, his voice ripped away by the harsh wind as he yelled his best friend's name. Jürgen had run into the surf after his wooden toy boat and been dragged out to sea by the tide. Despite being a strong swimmer, his nine-year-old frame had been defenceless against the savagery of the ocean. His body had washed up on shore the following day.

Anders shook off the memory and focused on the present moment, inhaling deeply and grounding himself in his surroundings. The feel of the sun on his back, the sharp tang of sea air filling his nostrils. The sound of leather boots slapping cobblestones from the guards that appeared to be patrolling every square inch of the city, forcing him to keep his hood pulled forward.

The gleaming pavement wound up and around the hill, the pale stone bouncing the sun's rays in every direction, and Anders was panting by the time he reached a small but well-kept inn. Sweat soaked his undershirt and dripped down the sides of his face beneath the hood. He'd received a few odd looks, but they were nothing compared to the attention he'd garner if he lowered his hood and revealed his blonde hair. He'd have to try and get his hands on some boot polish before he continued on his way, to darken it.

Stepping into the inn's tap room, he closed his eyes and exhaled, enjoying the respite from the heat of the sun. He'd visited many far-flung places in his time with the army, but there was a dry, suffocating quality to the heat in Orovia that he wouldn't miss when he finally made it back to D'Argentis. His home, the capital of the Northern Isle, was a place the sun rarely graced with her presence. A stark landscape that saw more than its fair share of rain and spent half of the year in complete darkness; morning, noon and night.

He paid for a mug of frothy ale and a crusty cob with one of the coppers and sat down in a quiet corner of the tavern. He sipped his drink, enjoying the feel of the cool liquid sliding down his throat, and considered whether to enquire after a room for the night or keep walking a while longer and hope he came across another inn. One a little farther from the port and the oddly high number of guards roaming the streets.

Was there some occasion or national holiday going on he hadn't been aware of? Or were the Golds simply fond of putting their military might on view at all times? The display of strength felt a little unnecessary to Anders, but what did he know?

As he drank his ale and pondered, snippets of conversation drifted over from a nearby table, where three locals were nursing their own mugs of ale and gossiping loudly. A large woman with wildly curly hair said, "My niece is a scullery maid up at the palace, and she told my sister—who told me—" She leaned forwards and lowered her voice into a stage whisper, "It's witchcraft." A self-satisfied smile spread across her broad face and she sat back, letting her words hang in the air for a moment. "Mark my words, them daughters of his are up to no good."

One of her male companions scratched his salt-and-pepper beard and chuckled. "It ain't witchcraft, Ida. They're young women now. Probably sneaking out to dance with young men." He wagged a finger. "Don't tell me you did nothing of the sort at their age. I know for a fact you used to meet Arlo down at the docks when your mam thought you were in Sunday school."

The woman, Ida, harrumphed but didn't argue. Anders lifted his mug to hide the smile that tugged at his lips.

The other man drained his ale before wiping his face on his sleeve. "What about the shoes? Worn to pieces every single night, I heard. You've got to admit, that's more than a little strange."

Ida nodded enthusiastically. "Aye, what about that? Eh?"

The bearded man held his hands up. "Shoddy workmanship? I can't say. But there's nowt magical going on here. Just rambunctious young girls with little care for their belongings. You take it from me," he said, lifting his mug to his lips and slurping loudly. "He wants to marry 'em both off soonest, that'll put an end to all this twaddle."

The barkeep, a man built like an ox, carried three more mugs of ale over to the table and set them down. His voice was low and rumbling. "Whatever it is, it's catching. I heard at least three local girls have fallen victim to the same sickness. Disappearing all night long, turning up in the morning pale and exhausted, with worn-down heels." He shook his head, brows lowered. "All this dancing. It's a plague, I tell you."

A plague? Perhaps that explained the presence of so many guards, if Orovia had been struck down by some mystery illness?

A young lad burst into the tavern at that moment and slapped a piece of parchment onto the table in front of Anders. He darted off before Anders could ask him what it was, dropping identical leaflets on a few other tables, before being chased out by the barkeep with a snap of his towel.

Anders turned the parchment towards himself and studied it. It was an advertisement for a performance that evening of the Royal Orovia Ballet. The Tale of Asterina and Cethin; one of his favourites. It depicted the tragic story of two star-crossed lovers from rival families and their ill-fated plan to be together, despite it all.

Memories of watching the performances each year on the eve of the Longest Night flickered to life in his mind. He

closed his eyes and music swelled in his ears, making his pulse race and the tiny hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

He could spare a few coins to see his first ballet in over five years, couldn't he? Something familiar, something that would remind him of home and his youthful innocence. If he stood at the back of the yard and kept out of sight, he'd be fine. What could go wrong?

CHAPTER 2

ANDERS



Anders kept his hood up and his head down as he followed the crowd through the old town towards the theatre that evening. He'd swapped his gold coin for a room at the inn, leaving him with just a pair of silver coins and a few coppers. That should cover his ticket, and a boat to get him across the strait to D'Argentis. He'd get a few more days out his battered, old boots—no point risking blisters from a new pair when he still had so far to go.

The narrow streets had begun to form a bottleneck, Anders was jostled by southerners pushing to get to the theatre and snag the best positions in the yard—the standing area at the front of the stage. He forced his way to the edge of the crowd and slipped into a side street to wait for the surge to ease; he didn't need to be at the front, he'd be better off away from the crush of bodies clamouring to see the performance. The last thing he needed was for someone to bump into him and accidentally pull his hood back and expose his pale hair.

Standing in an alley between two tall buildings, he watched out of sight as the crowd made its way down the hill towards the theatre.

A rattling cough came from behind him, and he realised he wasn't alone in the alley. What looked like a heap of blankets lay against the wall, and on closer inspection he found three young children huddled together beneath the tattered and filthy rags. Eyes as big and bright as the full moon stared up at him, fear swimming in the dark of their pupils as they took in the hooded stranger before them.

Anger burned bright in his heart. In a city as wealthy as Orovia, what cruelty could have forced these children to live on the streets? How was it right that they felt safer here than in whichever home or shelter they had come from? Anders had heard the stories of the dark, unseemly side of the Southern Isle, but he hadn't anticipated coming face to face with it so soon after arriving.

In the Northern Isle, the entire community had a responsibility to care for those with less—orphaned children, widows and the like. This was just another glaring example of the greed and selfishness he'd heard about in the South. He couldn't turn a blind eye to these children, not when he could do something to help.

He crouched down so their faces were level, hands held out with the palms up. "I'm not going to hurt you." He looked around at their meagre belongings. "Are you hungry?"

They looked at each other, unsure. The oldest nodded.

Anders took out the crusty bread cob he'd bought at the inn and pocketed, planning to eat it while he watched the performance. But these three children appeared to need it more than he did, their skin was pale and wan, pulled tight over their bones like a drum.

"Here." He held out the small loaf, but the children only stared at it, wary. "Go on, it's alright." He stretched his hand out further, but the children just looked at each other, and the eldest shook his head.

Anders sighed and took out his coin pouch. He could spare the coppers; the silvers would cover his passage to D'Argentis. He tipped the small coins into his hand and held them out to the children, who hesitated, before lunging forwards and snatching the coins. Anders smiled.

"Get yourselves something to eat. And find somewhere safer to sleep, this is no place for children. Go on."

The children ran, trailing their dusty blankets behind them, vanishing like rats into the cracks of the city. He hoped they'd do as he said and find a good meal and a roof for the night; he

might not be able to do much, but he could help them to survive one more day at least. With a bitter taste in his mouth, he made his way back to the main street.

Re-joining the now thinned crowd, he cursed under his breath. He'd given his ticket money to the children. If he wanted to see the ballet, and still have enough coin for his passage to D'Argentis, he would have to slip in unseen. The thought made his throat constrict. The sights, sounds and smells of war flooded his mind, smoke filled his nostrils and the screams of his comrades drowned out the sound of the crowd. *Coward*, hissed the voice in his head.

He gritted his teeth. He should just go back to the inn and get a good night's sleep, ready for the remaining journey tomorrow. He had a long way still to go before he reached D'Argentis.

But that would mean giving in to the horrors in his mind, and he'd already lost too much to those dark, painful thoughts. He felt his nails biting into his palms as he fought against the memories, closing his eyes and inhaling deeply.

He could do this. He just needed to be strong. He clenched his jaw, put his head down and kept walking.

As the flow of townsfolk approached the magnificent, marble-columned building at the foot of the hill, gold, silk flags draped from roof to ceiling, he felt his earlier anger return. So much prideful ostentation. The Golds had no shame.

He stepped out of view between two pillars and cloaked himself in his shadows. The familiar unpleasant, cold sensation settled over him as his magic took hold, hiding his body from view. He'd slip in behind another group and find a dark corner that the braziers' light didn't reach. He'd even leave before the end, reluctantly, to avoid the inevitable crush as everyone tried to leave at once. He'd be back at the inn and tucked up in bed before the last note was played.

This might be his first ballet in years, but he'd be better safe than dead.

The interior of the theatre was just as opulent as the façade. Hundreds of burgundy, velvet-upholstered seats for the wealthy citizens of Orovia filled the cavernous space behind the open yard, and every surface appeared to be decorated with gold leaf.

Anders pressed himself into an alcove and waited for the other attendees to fill the space and the performance to begin. He wasn't sure what to expect, from everything he'd seen of Orovia, the Golds seemed to care more about appearances than actual substance. The dancers would certainly look the part, he would bet his last copper on that. But would they be able to convey the longing—the joy and pain and stubborn hope—that made the ballet so relatable and captivating? He only hoped they hadn't altered the story of Asterina and Cethin.

He'd always envied Cethin, the young man who would give anything to be worthy of Asterina's love. Even his life. Young Anders had hoped he would grow up to be as courageous as noble Cethin. That, given the opportunity, he'd be brave enough to lay his life down for his people. Only, when the time had finally come, Anders had failed.

He held his breath as a well-dressed couple passed close by, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up as the woman's dress snagged on his boot, but she simply gave it a tug and carried on towards her seat. Anders let out a slow breath, calming his racing heart, and checked his pocket to make sure the papers the ship's captain had given him were still there. They may not stand up to scrutiny, but just knowing he had them made his pulse a little slower.

A hush fell over the theatre as the torchlight was turned away from the audience and towards the stage. Music began to drift up from the orchestra at the front of the yard, and Anders was immediately back in D'Argentis, watching the same ballet for the very first time at ten years old.

The curtain lifted and, one by one, eleven ballerinas in identical white dresses glided onto the stage. As the dancers began their choreography, Anders was swept up in the swell of music that filled the hall, all the way up to the rafters. His fear and worry melted away as the musicians took him back to his

childhood in the Northern Isle, and all of those feelings he'd first felt watching the ballet with his family each year came rushing back.

The eleven ballerinas moved together in the centre of the stage, before gliding apart to reveal a twelfth dancer in a golden gown with a pair of feathered wings at her back. Her tanned skin glowed in the light from the braziers, and her dark hair flowed down her back in ringlets that swayed with each movement.

Anders' breath caught as her gaze met his—could she see him, standing in the alcove wrapped in shadow? No, it wasn't possible, she couldn't be looking at him. She joined her fellow dancers and floated across the stage, becoming the centre of their dance, like a celestial body drawing them into her orbit.

As the ballet went on, Anders became more absorbed in the tale of the star-crossed lovers playing out on stage. The emotion on the face of the prima ballerina sent a jolt to his stomach, her dark eyes were filled with so much passion. But there was a sadness in them that tugged at his heart.

Her movements were precise, almost perfect, but not in any way forced or calculated. He could almost believe that this was the first time she'd done these movements in this particular order—that she was truly torn apart over a love that could not be and felt compelled to express herself physically, through dance.

The performance approached its dramatic climax, the music building to a crescendo as the other dancers glided off stage and the winged ballerina was left alone. She leapt downstage, coming even closer to the audience; Anders could almost have reached out and touched her. Longed to.

A shiver of revulsion ran through him as he remembered his shadows; the fact that he hid in darkness while the dancer on stage pirouetted in the light, admired and beloved.

All the air seemed to be sucked from the room, as the dark-haired ballerina's eyes found his once more, and she stumbled. Her foot slipped and her arms shot out as she fell, her body

angled towards the orchestra pit and the burning brazier that separated them.

Anders moved like lightning, leaping over the musicians and their instruments to catch the dancer and pull her back on to the stage, away from the flames. They went down hard together, thudding against the polished dark wood. Silence had fallen over the theatre as the musicians halted their playing and the audience held its breath, waiting to see what would happen next.

Anders got to his feet quickly and held out a hand to the ballerina. She hesitated before taking it and he helped her stand. He took some of her weight, wrapping her arm around his broad shoulders, and she looked at him, her gaze intense, breath hitching.

“Are you hurt?”

She didn't speak; only shook her head, her startled expression changing into something like curiosity.

Anders felt a rush of warmth over his entire body as they stood there, pressed together, staring into each other's eyes. He didn't let go, and she didn't pull away.

It was at that moment Anders realised he was standing on stage in front of the entire audience, his shadows discarded, and his hood had fallen back to reveal his head of pale-blond hair.

A shout went up. “Guards! Arrest that man.” And the theatre exploded into chaos.

CHAPTER 3

ISADORA



Isadora closed the door to the rooms she shared with her sister, Livia, and slumped against it with a sigh.

She'd waved off the help of no less than seven guards, two valets and a butler on her way through the palace. She was fine, just a little sore from the impact. And the weight of the Silver brute who'd slammed her onto the wooden floorboards.

He'd appeared half-wild, with that long, pale hair and straggly beard. And the look in his eyes, like he hadn't eaten in weeks and she was a piece of meat. She shuddered, remembering how close they had been—and in front of the entire city. In front of her father.

She dropped onto the chaise longue and stretched out, reclining against the pillows. She grimaced, before yanking the feathered wings from her shoulders and tossing them to the floor. What a complete disaster. She had never stumbled on stage in her entire life, let alone fallen and almost landed on the orchestra. She'd been distracted lately; her usual focus gone, her mind wandering at all hours of the day.

Livia appeared from her sleeping quarters, still dressed in the white gown she'd worn on stage, long, wavy hair now loose and her face scrubbed clean of makeup. She looked younger than her sixteen years, in Isadora's mind her sister was still that little six-year-old imp running around the gardens, chasing butterflies and pulling up their mother's favourite flowers. So innocent. How she longed to go back to that time, before their mother had passed away. Before the curse.

Livia knelt at her sister's side, a mischievous grin spread across her face, dimpling both of her cheeks. "Well, that was rather exciting, wasn't it?"

"Mortifying." Isadora hid her face behind an embroidered pillow.

"Oh, Issy, don't be silly," Livia said, snatching the pillow away. "You were exceptional—right up until the fall." She cringed, and Issy groaned and rolled onto her front, but Livia just scooted round until she could see her sister through the cushions. "I can guarantee no one is thinking about that, now. They'll all be talking about him."

Him. The northern man who had launched himself onto the stage and manhandled her in front of everyone. One moment he'd been nothing more than a pair of piercing-blue eyes shining in the darkness, the next he'd been right there, knocking her off her feet like some kind of battering ram. Despite resembling a vagrant, he'd smelled of sea salt and mint, and something else she couldn't put her finger on. It reminded her of the night sky—but that was silly. It was probably just campfire smoke.

And then he'd been gone; dragged away by the guards to be interrogated in the dungeons, she presumed. A living, breathing Silver. She'd never met anyone from the barren north before, it was quite thrilling...

She shook herself. It wasn't exciting, he could have been intending to hurt her. Or worse. She'd been caught up in the emotion of the ballet, that was all. Blame Asterina and Cethin.

"Issy?" Livia had been speaking and Isadora hadn't heard a single word. Her sister could tell from her expression and repeated herself with a sigh. "Will you be alright tonight?" Her voice dropped into a whisper, as though she didn't want to be overheard. "What will happen if you can't dance?"

Isadora had been wondering that very same thing, but there was no point in worrying her little sister when there was nothing either of them could do about it.

"It'll be fine. My pride is more hurt than my body."

Livia didn't look convinced, but a knock came at the door and the royal physician entered, preventing her from saying more.

After checking Isadora over and confirming it was nothing more than a few bruises, the physician ordered her to rest and gave her a tonic to prevent swelling, which she swallowed in one gulp, gagging on the medicinal aftertaste. He sent a maid to fetch her some chamomile tea and promised to return in the morning.

Once the physician was gone, Isadora and Livia's lady's maids helped them to change into their nightdresses and braided their long, dark hair, ready for bed. Every evening, they went through the exact same routine. And yet, when they woke, they would once again be wearing their finest dresses and worn-out dancing slippers. It was a mystery no one seemed able to explain. And many had tried.

Livia clambered onto Isadora's bed and sat cross-legged, fiddling with the end of her braid. Within moments, her calico cat, Nina joined them. Livia lifted the animal into her lap and stroked its black, white and orange fur, eliciting a satisfied purr. "Do you remember anything? About last night, I mean."

Isadora shook her head, strands of wavy, dark hair falling free from her braid. "No. It's the same as always, I dreamed of dancing at a ball, with...someone. A man, I think. But every time I try to remember the details, the memory slips from my grasp like grains of sand through an hourglass."

Livia nodded solemnly. "And when you wake up, you realise it wasn't a dream at all. It's the same for me."

Isadora chewed her lip and played with the gold, sunburst locket that always hung around her neck. It had once been their mother's, and their Uncle had given it to Issy after Queen Idalia's untimely passing. "It's been months now, I just want to sleep, Liv. I'm distracted in lessons, and tonight during the performance, I felt so lightheaded I almost passed out. How much longer can this go on for?"

Livia's expression was serious as she kneaded the cat's head with her knuckles. "Prince Philip of Innsmere arrives in a

few days.”

Isadora looked at her sister in horror. “Really? I hadn’t realised it was so soon.”

Prince Philip would be the first potential suitor to visit after Isadora’s eighteenth birthday, meaning there was a chance of him asking for her hand. Isadora didn’t know which would be worse—him asking to marry her, or disappearing, never to be seen again. Like the others.

Livia scratched Nina behind the ear, and the cat nestled into her, purring. Her voice was barely above a whisper when she asked, “What do you think is happening to them? The princes. Every one that has tried to discover the secret has vanished without a trace. Where could they be?”

Isadora shook her head, an icy finger running up her spine. She hugged her knees to her chest. “I don’t know, Liv. I truly don’t. But I fear it won’t stop until someone uncovers the truth about what’s happening to us.” Her voice dropped and she worried at the engraved locket between her fingers. “I just hope someone figures it out before it’s too late.”

LIVIA PICKED at the crust of her custard tart and popped a piece of flaky pastry into her mouth. “It was the most exciting thing that’s happened in years!”

All twelve of them were squeezed around their favourite table in the pasteleria, right in the front window, watching the people of Orovia going about their business. The smell of baked bread and burnt sugar drifted from the kitchen at the back of the little cake shop, and the sound of gentle chatter and clinking china filled the air.

Issy could feel the looks the handful of other patrons gave her and her friends. Heard them whispering to each other about the curse, but she ignored it.

She rolled her eyes at her sister and gave the other dancers an apologetic look. “It really wasn’t all that exciting. It was over in less than a minute. I can’t even remember what he looked like,” she lied. “Apart from the Silver hair.”

In truth, it was his face she now saw when she closed her eyes. That square jaw and bright blue eyes. She suppressed a shudder and reached down to rub her aching calves, hiding her conflicted expression.

They had spent hours in the studio that morning, repeating the same steps until their toes were numb and their new shoes had rubbed their heels raw. Madame Zafra had been furious about the commotion on stage the night before and had made them run through the entire performance three times without putting a foot wrong, before she was happy. Well, happy was a little strong; Madame Zafra rarely strayed from disappointment. At best, they might get grudging approval if one of them managed to pull off a perfect pirouette or grand adage, but Issy couldn't remember a time she'd ever seen their dance mistress *happy*.

They'd been dancing together since they were infants, the twelve daughters of Orovia's noble families. It was tradition; a way to honour their ancestors and celebrate the Southern Isle's history and culture. But, with word of the curse spreading further, the future of their performances looked uncertain. Issy knew she and Livia were at risk every time they set foot in town or danced on the theatre stage, but their guards were never more than a hairsbreadth away. She could see them now, standing outside the cake shop doors, causing other potential patrons to hurry past. She wondered if Mrs Freira, the young widow who owned the pasteleria, minded them driving away business. But she supposed twelve customers with deep pockets and a love of elegantly decorated cakes was a baker's dream. And being the princesses' favourite place to visit would surely attract customers—when there weren't six armed guards protecting the entrance.

Eva took a large bite of her tart, leaving powdered sugar and cinnamon on her up-turned nose. "I bet he's being held in the dungeons under the palace. You should sneak down there and see!"

The other girls squealed with laughter, but Issy's stomach plummeted. She couldn't think of anything worse than looking into those terrible, ice-blue eyes again. The intensity in them,

the fathomless depths. She felt her mouth go dry and her palms prickled. To hide her discomfort, she picked up her own custard tart and nibbled the crust. She wasn't hungry—hadn't felt a real desire for food in months—but the buttery, sweet pastry and vanilla flavoured centre smelled incredible. They'd been her favourites once, but now she could barely finish a single tart. She set it back down on her plate and licked her fingers clean.

Anabella, the youngest of their dance company—along with Livia—at sixteen, tucked a strand of light brown hair behind her ear. Her voice was soft and musical, and the entire table fell silent as she spoke. "I'd love to see the Northern Isle. I've never left Orovia."

Alessia snorted, her green eyes bright and venomous. "Why would you want to go there? It's practically a wasteland—nothing but salt flats and barbaric Northerners as far as the eye can see. They'd eat you alive." She lifted her teacup to her lips and sipped, one brow raised, as though daring the others to challenge her.

Anabella chewed her lip and looked down at her pastry, but Sofia, the eldest of the group, elbowed her gently in the ribs. "I think you're brave enough to handle the Northern men, Ana. You'd have them building you fires and knitting you stockings with one flutter of those long lashes. It's not their fault they're so uncivilised, you'd soon teach them proper manners."

Ana beamed, a blush warming her olive skin. Issy gave her an encouraging smile from the opposite side of the table, and Livia nodded enthusiastically, licking butter and pastry crumbs from her long fingers.

"Sofia's right, they'd be fighting over which one of them got to take you as their bride."

Ana's bashfulness turned to horror, her mouth falling open, and a few of the girls laughed. The sound was like claws on slate to Issy. She wouldn't wish such a thing on her worst enemy, let alone sweet Anabella.

Ilona tossed her honey blonde hair over a tanned shoulder and winked at Alessia, blue eyes sparkling with mischief. “You definitely wouldn’t find cakes like these in the Silver Isle.” She leaned back in her chair with a satisfied smile. “I heard they only eat salted fish and greens.”

Issy suppressed a shudder. Life in the Northern Isle sounded perfectly grim.

Alessia threw her head back and laughed, slopping tea from her cup onto the saucer.

Eliana leaned forward, strands of silky black hair falling around her heart-shaped face. She snatched the half-eaten pastry off Ana’s plate, popping it into her mouth and speaking around it. “And it’s dark there for half of the year. How can they live like that? I’d go spare if I couldn’t see the sun for that long.”

Esmeralda, Eliana’s older sister, narrowed her green eyes and smacked her sister on the arm. “Eli, don’t talk with your mouth full.” But Eli just stuck her tongue out, cheeks full and round, like a beautiful, overgrown rodent.

Issy grinned, a swell of emotion in her chest. These girls were her family—almost as close to her as her actual sister. They spent every day together; practicing, performing, or gossiping at the pasteleria over tea and cakes. Those were the only times they could be themselves—no parents or tutors expecting them to behave like ladies, tutting when they slouched in their chairs or laughed too loud. No potential suitors to impress or foreign dignitaries to charm.

Issy knew she’d had a close call at the theatre the other night, and worry nagged at her in the quiet moments. What if it had been a targeted attack by the Silvers? What if it happened again? She watched Livia, who was laughing raucously at something Adriana had said, her bronze skin flushed with joy and youth. If anything happened to her—if the Silvers, or anyone else, hurt Livia—Issy wouldn’t be able to forgive herself. She’d already lost her mother, she couldn’t bear to lose her sister, too.

With everything going on, she expected her father was looking for any excuse to forbid her and Livia from dancing publicly—or even leaving the palace. She was surprised he hadn't already called them both into his study to tell them his decision. She could only imagine he remembered the happiness their dancing had brought to their mother before she died and was reluctant to lose this last connection to her. But seeing his daughter attacked on stage by a rogue Silver must have severely dented his resolve.

“I'm sure our father will get to the bottom of why he's here, and deal with him accordingly.” Issy's voice was firm and confident, but inside she felt anxiety gnawing at her stomach. She hoped the Northerner would be sent home and she'd never have to think about him again. Not his striking blue eyes, not his strange dusky scent.

Something tugged in her gut, and she pushed it down. Everything would go back to normal once the Silver was gone.

A heavy silence settled over the table as the girls finished their desserts and drained their teacups.

Maya locked eyes with Issy, a crease forming between her arched brows. Widely considered the most beautiful of the girls, at twenty years old Maya had turned down a number of suitors already, with her parents' approval. With her full lips, smooth, dark brown skin and midnight black curls, she could have had any man in Orovia. In all of the Golden Isle, for that matter. But her mother had set her sights a little higher than the average baron or landowner. She wanted her daughter to marry a prince, and Issy had complete confidence that Maya would one day find her handsome prince and be whisked away to some distant land to live happily ever after.

But, right now, she was looking at Issy with concern in her deep brown eyes, and Issy knew what she was about to ask.

“Why do you think this is happening?” She didn't need to elaborate, Issy knew what she was referring to.

Gabriella, sitting beside Issy, dropped her voice to a whisper. Her brown eyes shone. “Do you think we're being punished for something?”

Issy shook her head and placed a hand on Gabi's arm. "No, of course not. We've done nothing wrong. I've no idea why this is happening to us. I'm sure it won't last much longer. My father's men will find out who or what is responsible and put a stop to it. I know it."

She hoped she sounded more confident than she felt. She didn't even know where to start figuring out the reason for the curse, let alone who had cursed them. It did seem like strange timing that right when the Golden princesses were under a mysterious enchantment, a Silver savage had thrown himself at her on the stage.

Did the Northerner know something about this curse? Was he responsible somehow? She couldn't quite believe it, but then again, she didn't believe in coincidences either.

Issy couldn't talk to her father about her concerns or he'd definitely forbid them from performing publicly, and that would take away the one last piece of normality they had left. If she wanted answers, she was going to have to get them herself.

She shoved the rest of her tart in her mouth and chewed, swallowing hard and washing it down with the dregs of her cold tea. She'd decided. The following morning, before her father woke, she would sneak down to the dungeons and confront the Silver brute. If he knew something, she would soon find out.

CHAPTER 4

ANDERS



Anders lay on the hard, wooden cot in his cell, staring at the damp, stone ceiling. Two nights had passed in the dungeons beneath the Gilded Palace and Anders had barely slept a wink. As a soldier, he was used to a hubbub at all hours; the heavy footsteps of the guards on patrol, the banging of drums, the shouts and cannon fire. He could sleep through it all, comforted by the constant toing and froing around him.

The dungeons, on the other hand, were too quiet.

Down here, with only a single guard on duty, and no other prisoners, there was nothing but silence. Broken only by the monotonous dripping of water from somewhere above. To Anders, it was the worst form of torture.

He'd been surprised to find himself alone in the cells on arrival, but realisation had dawned on him quickly. Criminals were clearly dealt with swiftly and sternly in the Southern Isle. The thought made his stomach churn, he had to find a way to convince the King to let him go.

He ran a hand over his shorn hair, feeling the patches and clumps left by the guard's blade; ostensibly to prevent lice, but Anders suspected it was more likely intended to humiliate him.

A royal guard had questioned him in the hours immediately after the fiasco at the ballet, and Anders had been honest. He'd stepped off a trade ship that same day and was simply passing through on his way back to D'Argentis. He'd

seen an advertisement for the ballet and decided to go. He'd had no idea the prima ballerina was the Crown Princess Isadora and had meant her no harm when he'd leapt on stage to save her from falling onto the orchestra or catching fire on one of the braziers.

He reached for the metal cup of water he'd been given and winced, his ribs tender from the awkward landing on stage, and the beating he'd taken at the hands of the guards. His bowl sat empty beside it, licked clean of the porridge oats when he'd thought the night watchman was sleeping.

He'd left out the part about being the youngest prince of the Northern Isle, unsure as to whether that information would go in his favour or against him. If the Southern King suspected a Silver Prince had been sent to his kingdom to stir up tensions and bring the monarchy down from within, it could start a war.

Despite telling no lies, he got the distinct impression the guards hadn't believed him, from the words "spy" and "conspiracy" being thrown around. They'd taken his cloak and military uniform and given him a simple brown tunic and a pair of trousers to wear instead; they were probably picking his clothes apart right now, looking for secret messages hidden in pockets or sewn into the lining.

Anders probed his back tooth with his tongue, the guard had given him a few good slaps during the interrogation and it felt a little loose. But he'd forced himself to remain calm, using his training to withstand the pain and false accusations. As his battalion commander had liked to say, the only way to survive was to endure.

A reddish light filtered through the high, narrow window as dawn broke. The door to the dungeons opened with a clatter and a royal guard entered, Anders assumed to relieve the one who'd spent all night snoring softly at his post.

"How's the prisoner?"

"No trouble. What's the latest upstairs?"

The newcomer, an older, portly man, unbuckled his weapon belt and dumped it on the ground with a thud. He

didn't bother to lower his voice. "The Princesses were gone again last night. They're still refusing to say where they go to. The King is at the end of his tether, but there's another prince due to arrive in a few days, apparently. Perhaps he'll be the one to put an end to all this nonsense."

The night watchman sighed, getting up from his post and strapping his own weapon belt back around his waist. "I ruddy hope so, I'm sick to death of night duty. Maria's due in a few weeks and with another mouth to feed, we'll need the coin. But I could do without the sleepless nights."

His colleague chuckled. "Aye, you'll be having enough of those on your days off, with a new babe in the house."

The night watchman hummed, scratching his short beard. "Well, hopefully this foreign prince will discover the truth and win Princess Isadora's hand, and we can all go back to the quiet life we're used to."

Anders mulled over their words. So, there truly was a curse on the Princesses? A mystery to be solved? Perhaps if he were to uncover the truth, the King might offer him his freedom, as a reward? It had to be worth a try. He certainly couldn't spend the rest of his life behind bars, rotting away beneath the Gilded Palace. Or worse, face the executioner's axe for his alleged crimes.

He swallowed hard. If he ever wanted to see his family again, he had to do something, and this seemed like the perfect opportunity.

Anders stood, straightened his borrowed attire and smoothed his remaining hair, then cleared his throat. "Forgive me, good sirs. Did I hear mention of a curse?"

"QUIET!" The new guard rapped on the bars nearest to him with a metal rod, sending a loud and sonorous vibration through the dungeon. Anders cringed. When the sound had died down, he tried again.

"I wonder if I might be of service? I'm well-travelled and may be able to discover the cause of this curse. And if not, you can lock me back up down here, no harm done."

The guard struck the bars with the rod again. “I said quiet!”

But Anders saw the night guard’s brow furrow in thought behind the newcomer. “Franco, maybe we should hear him out. If we were to be the ones who brought the answer to King Aurelio, there would surely be a reward. Would there not?”

Franco looked sharply at his colleague, but the younger man only shrugged. “I don’t know about you, but me and Maria could certainly do with the extra pay right now.”

Anders could practically see the cogs turning in the guards’ minds. And really, where was the risk? If he managed to discover the truth behind the Princesses’ curse, then he would only ask to be permitted to return to D’Argentis, unharmed. If he failed, well, he couldn’t exactly say he’d welcome the idea of living out his days in the dungeons, but he certainly wouldn’t have lost anything. And if it were to be the axe or the noose for him, then he’d die knowing he’d done all he could to prevent it.

Finally, the older guard—Franco—strode over to his cell door.

“You’re volunteering to find out what’s happening to the Princesses? No Silver tricks, or nothing?”

Anders held his hands up, palms out. “No tricks, you have my word.”

“Why would you do that?”

He shrugged. “It’s not like I’m doing anything else. And if I discover the cause and break the curse, I might be granted a favour by the King.”

The guard narrowed his eyes, considering Anders for a long moment. “I shall put your request to His Majesty. But don’t hold your breath, boy. We don’t trust spectres round here.” Anders knew it was a common derogatory term for the people of the Northern Isle, referring to their pale hair and skin, but the word still stung. “The King’s more likely to put you to death than grant you free access to his daughters.”

The other guard laughed at that, and Anders swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. “Understood.”

With a final nod to Franco, the night watchman left, the heavy wooden door slamming behind him, leaving an echo that reverberated in Anders’ head long after.

ANDERS STUMBLED as Franco shoved him to his knees in front of King Aurelio, landing with a wince on the cold, stone floor of the throne room. For the second time in just a few days, Anders was on his knees surrounded by Southern guards. It wasn’t something he wanted to make a habit of.

The King of the Southern Isle sat atop a vast throne that looked anything but comfortable to Anders. Unlike his own father’s throne, which was smaller, wooden and covered in furs and skins for warmth, King Aurelio’s was carved from a slab of creamy-white marble with seams of glittering gold running through it. The effect was both impressive and intimidating. Which, Anders mused, was probably the intention.

“Name,” the King intoned, without looking up from the paper in his hand. An olive-skinned man in his late forties, the monarch of the Golden Isle wore a heavily embroidered, cream doublet and matching breeches, a gold crown sitting atop his subtly greying, dark curls. He was a symbol of strength and prosperity, and Anders felt a sharp, ugly feeling twist in his gut at the thought of the poverty his own people in the north suffered, while the King of the Southern Isle flaunted his wealth so arrogantly.

But this wasn’t the time for anger or jealousy. He needed to escape his current situation, and the only way to do that was to convince King Aurelio he was contrite.

Anders kept his head down, eyes on the ground. “Anders, Your Majesty.” He realised he couldn’t give his real name, unless he wanted to start a war between the two kingdoms, so he borrowed the last name of his childhood best friend who had drowned. “Anders Boreas.”

“I assume these documents are falsified, then?” The King tossed the papers in his hands to the floor and Anders recognised them as the identification papers the ship’s captain had given to him to help him enter Orovia. A heavy weight settled in the pit of his stomach; he should have refused them or discarded them somewhere. If those documents were the thing that got him killed, after all this...

“Not falsified, Your Majesty. They were given to me by a grieving father, he wanted to help as I had no papers of my own. I felt unable to refuse his gesture, so I took them, but I never used them.”

“What is your business in Orovia?” The King’s tone was commanding. It reminded Anders of his own father. Although King Aurelio’s accent was more fluid and lyrical than Anders’ father’s clipped speech.

Anders dared to raise his head and meet the King’s dark gaze. “I have no business here, Your Majesty. I was simply passing through on my way home.”

“You’re a soldier? From the Northern Isle?”

Anders nodded. “A cartographer, Your Majesty. I’m returning from the war in the east, I arrived on a trade ship two days ago.”

The King raised an eyebrow. “A cartographer? And you expect me to believe you’re not here to study our city’s defences and take your findings back to your superiors in the north?” He leaned back in his throne and narrowed his dark eyes. “How did you come to be at the ballet performance?”

Anders dipped his head. He couldn’t admit he hadn’t bought a ticket or reveal his shadow magic—if he did he’d likely be executed with no further preamble. He cleared his throat and hoped the King wouldn’t see through his lie. “I saw a poster at the inn where I had taken a room for the night. It sounded like an agreeable way to pass an evening, so I purchased a ticket for the yard. I was not aware that the prima ballerina was the Crown Princess. When I saw her stumble, I feared she would be injured, so I acted instinctively. I meant the Princess no harm, Your Majesty.”

Anders waited, breath held, for the King to pass his verdict. He didn't dare raise his head as the sound of his voice reverberated around the room, settling over them and leaving nothing but silence. He studied the stone tiles, nails digging into his palms where they were tied behind his back.

Finally, the King spoke again, his voice lowered. "What do you know of this curse that afflicts my daughters?"

Anders looked up, air rushing into his lungs. Relief flooded his veins. "Nothing, Your Majesty. But I overheard a conversation between the guards and offered my assistance. I have travelled the world with the army and seen many strange and wondrous things on my journey. I believe I can discover the source of the enchantment, given the chance, and free the Princesses from their affliction."

King Aurelio leant forwards, closing the distance between them. "And what would you ask in return for your *assistance*, Anders Boreas?" His tone sent an icy finger running down Anders' spine. Did the King know he'd given a false name?

He swallowed, steadying his nerve. "Only my freedom, Your Majesty. To be permitted to return to D'Argentis, to my family."

The King scratched his short, dark beard as he mulled over Anders' words. His eyes flickered about the room as he considered the terms, settling on Anders' face after a few moments. "Very well. You shall be permitted to investigate the...predicament my daughters find themselves in. And if you are able to solve the mystery and break the curse in three days' time you will be granted your freedom."

Anders forced down the bubble of joy that threatened to erupt from his chest. He wasn't going to be executed. In three days, he would be a free man, and surely his father would be impressed by his tale of how he escaped from the Gilded Palace with his life.

The King ordered two guards to release Anders from his bonds, show him to a guest bedroom near to the Princesses' rooms and remain with him.

Rubbing his chafed wrists, Anders moved to follow the guards out of the throne room, but something the King had said nagged at his mind. He turned back. The King had already begun a hushed conversation with one of his advisors and Anders was forced to interrupt.

“I beg your pardon, Your Majesty, but why three nights?”

King Aurelio waved a hand dismissively. “What’s that?”

Anders cleared his throat and raised his voice. “You said that I must discover the truth in three days; why three?”

A look of irritation crossed the King’s face, creasing the corners of his eyes, and his knuckles were bone-white where he gripped the arms of his marble throne. Anders worried he’d overstepped, but the King sighed. “Because, boy. No one has made it longer than three nights. Every person who has attempted to solve the mystery of my daughters’ curse has vanished without a trace on the third night.”

CHAPTER 5

ANDERS



“Father, you can’t mean that. The Silver prisoner is going to be *inside the palace*? In a guest room ten steps away from Livia and I, while we sleep?”

Anders heard the King sigh. He was listening to the King and the Princess’s low voices from the lavishly decorated bedroom he had been delivered to by the guards. The carpets were plush and the walls and doors were thick, but he found he could hear most of their conversation if he pressed his ear to the wall.

“That’s the point, Isadora. You do not sleep. Nobody knows what you do all night or where you go. This can’t go on, too many noble young men have disappeared. Every day I receive letters requesting news, and their safe return. I can only mollify their parents with empty promises for so long. If anyone outside of this castle were to find out...It is only a matter of time before one of the other kingdoms decides to launch an attack against us. The prisoner has volunteered to find out the truth and put an end to this nonsense, and I suggest you allow him to do so. At least the loss of a common soldier won’t add to our mounting diplomatic problems.”

The Princess let out a frustrated sound. “Father, please see sense.”

“No,” the King retorted. “This has gone on long enough. You will obey me or suffer the consequences. If I hear you have obstructed him in his mission, I shall not be pleased, Isadora. You will be confined to your rooms until this blasted curse has run its course. You and your sister.”

“If mother were here—”

“Well, she is not!” The King roared, pain and frustration evident in his voice.

Anders moved away from the door as he heard footsteps thudding towards him. A moment later, the guard opened the door and King Aurelio entered. Anders caught a glimpse of Princess Isadora standing in the hall, her expression stormy, and their eyes met briefly before the door closed between them with a loud, resounding click.

King Aurelio ran a finger across the surface of the console table by the door and inspected it for dust. Anders could see the man’s chest heaving as he mastered his emotions and regained his composure. “I trust you have everything you need. I shall have a maid bring you some supper this evening, until then you’re free to explore the palace and grounds—within reason, and accompanied by your guards. If there is anything you require, they will take care of it.”

Anders bowed his head. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

The King gave Anders a long look, his lips parting as though he wanted to say something else, but instead he simply gave Anders a firm nod and swept out of the room.

Anders followed a minute later, his guards falling into step behind him as he took a tour of the palace, boots whispering over the plush carpeted floors. The halls were lined with enormous oil paintings of royals wearing elaborate crowns decorated with the sun and stars. One such painting towards the far end of the hall caught Anders’ eye. It portrayed a beautiful, dark-haired woman with bronze skin and dark blue eyes, wearing a red gown and a gold locket which bore a symbol he recognised, but couldn’t place. The painting was almost an exact representation of Princess Isadora—that expressive gaze and the high cheekbones. She appeared to glow from within, as though the sun’s warmth radiated from her skin. But this woman looked to be at least ten years older than the Princess. Her mother, then. Queen Idalia. But the similarities were breath-taking.

Anders recalled hearing about the Golden Queen's death. She'd been struck by a wasting sickness that had carried her to her grave within days of becoming ill. The Princesses had been no older than ten and twelve at the time, and Anders remembered hugging his own mother tighter each night before bed for weeks, concerned she would suffer the same unimaginable fate.

He turned away from the painting, forcing down the sorrow that rose up in his gut when he thought of his mother. He hadn't been home in over five years, he hoped she was well and that his absence hadn't been too difficult for her; left behind with only his strict father and obedient brother for company.

He studied the two guards in their dark-brown uniforms with the sunburst emblem emblazoned on their chests in gold thread. "What are the rumours? Where do the guards and servants believe the Princesses go each night?"

The guards shared a look that told Anders he wasn't going to get much, if anything, out of them. Frustration burned in his chest, clearly the prejudices between their two countries were going to get in the way of his investigation, if he let them. He tilted his chin. "The King said to give me anything I require. How am I supposed to get to the root of the problem if I don't know where to begin?"

The younger looking guard, a muscular man with a square jaw, cleared his throat.

"Marco," the older guard warned.

Marco shifted his feet and mumbled, "He's right, Paolo. The King did say to give him whatever he needed."

"Within reason."

"If it will help the Princesses..."

The grey-haired guard—Paolo—snorted and folded his arms. "Well, I'll have nothing to do with it. Sharing palace secrets with a spectre, indeed."

Anders watched the exchange with curiosity, until Marco rolled his eyes at Paolo and turned to Anders, a frown creasing

his forehead. “No one knows for sure, but word around the barracks is they slip out and go down to the docks to flirt with sailors and dance all night in bars.”

“Poppycock!” Paolo grumbled.

“Alright then, what do you think is going on?” It was Marco’s turn to cross his arms and look affronted.

“There’s no chance they’re leaving the palace. Someone would have seen them coming and going. No, they’re definitely not leaving their rooms.”

Marco threw his hands up. “Then, how do you explain the shoes?”

“The shoes?” Anders’ brows knitted together. He’d heard the group in the tavern mention something about shoes but hadn’t understood the significance.

“Well, that’s the question, isn’t it?” Paolo mused. “How are they wearing through their slippers each night when they can’t leave their rooms, and no one sees or hears a thing?”

Anders scratched his chin, where a straggly beard had sprouted since his last shave. He’d need to borrow some soap and a razor soon, if he was going to be wandering the palace halls he wanted to look the part. “So, you believe the Princesses are inside their rooms all night? And the slippers are, what, faulty?”

Paolo shrugged. “I can’t say for certain. But, you take it from me, those girls are not leaving this palace.”

Anders turned back to the painting of Queen Idalia as the two guards continued to bicker about the Princesses’ curse. He took in her kind eyes, the warmth emanating from her likeness, and felt a surge of determination. He would figure out the truth and save the Princesses—three-day deadline and missing princes be damned. He would do it for their mother, and for his own. And then he would return to D’Argentis a free man.

CHAPTER 6

ISADORA



The royal cellist tuned her instrument in a corner of the ballet studio, filling the room with the soft strumming of strings. Issy gripped the barre and extended her leg, slowly flexing her ankle, followed by her knee. She pushed the aches and stiffness aside and began her warmup by stretching and prancing on the spot, to loosen her leg muscles and get her heart pumping.

She needed to lose herself in dancing, it had been a long few days—a long few months, if she was honest with herself. And now, her father had lost all his senses and invited that Silver savage into the palace. Had permitted him to watch her and Livia, to follow their every move and see where they went each night. The very idea of him being so close to her made her skin break out in gooseflesh.

By the time she had dressed and hurried down to the dungeon that morning, the prisoner had already been dragged in front of her father and the decision had been made. Livia had appeared almost excited by the news, but Issy was furious.

Foreign princes were one thing, they were well mannered and always chaperoned. Even the Northern Prince who had come on a state visit a few weeks earlier—Prince Hans, she recalled. He'd been courteous enough, and almost handsome. But a commoner, and worse than that, a common criminal? She shuddered to think what would happen if he caught her in the corridor alone after dark.

She finished warming up and gestured to the cellist to begin playing the piece she had chosen to practice; a sweeping

melody that built to a crescendo, allowing her to start off slowly and work her way up to the more challenging movements.

She felt the music in her bones, the notes vibrated in her chest and she closed her eyes as she moved in time with the beat. She rose with the high notes and fell with the low notes, her body lithe and liquid as she moved from pirouette to fouetté, from ronde de jambe to arabesque. Her heart thundered in her chest, the emotion triggered by the music surprising her with its intensity.

Images of a dark ballroom filled with shadowy figures flashed through her mind; the sensation of being chased, of being trapped, thrummed in her limbs. Her breath came quickly and tears pricked the backs of her eyes, but she danced on, determined to complete the choreography.

The piece reached its climax, the cellist strumming and bowing the strings expertly, filling the dance studio with exquisite music, all the way up to the rafters. Issy thought her heart would beat out of her chest as she threw herself into the final movements. She leapt, throwing herself into the air with complete abandon, some instinct deep down inside telling her she would be caught. That she wasn't alone. A pair of light blue eyes and two strong arms reached for her.

She landed hard, her ankle giving way. With a gasp, she collapsed to the floor.

“Issy!” Livia’s voice came from the doorway, and Isadora’s sister rushed to help her up.

“How long have you been watching?” Issy hobbled over to a chair, with Livia’s help, and began to untie the ribbons of her ballet slippers. Her legs throbbed, her ankle sending shooting pains from her toes to her knee.

Livia gave her an apologetic smile. “A few minutes. You were so caught up in the music, I didn’t want to disturb you. You looked so—”

“What?” Issy asked, when her sister trailed off.

The cellist approached, interrupting them, and Issy nodded in her direction.

“Pardon me, Miss. Shall I send for the physician?”

Issy shook her head. “No, thank you. I’m fine.” She thanked the musician for the performance, and, with a quick curtsy, the woman gathered her instrument and left the two Princesses alone.

“I’m not sure how to describe it,” Livia admitted, taking a seat beside her. “Lost? Devastated? You were completely at one with the piece.”

“It was just a practice piece.”

Livia’s brows rose. “Just a practice piece? Don’t you remember?”

Issy shook her head. “Remember what, Liv?”

“That was the piece. The one from Asterina and Cethin. The one you were dancing to when the Silver boy caught you.”

Issy hid her surprise, but her younger sister knew her well enough to spot the smallest of tells. Livia’s face broke into a grin.

Issy felt irritation swell inside her. “What? What are you smiling at?”

Livia giggled and Issy’s irritation grew. “Nothing. Nothing at all.” She danced away from Issy and began her own warmup, lifting a leg onto the barre and stretching her body over the length of it. Issy watched as her sister worked through the basic movements. Livia had the grace and poise required of a dancer; her understanding of the craft was second to none. And when she moved, with precision and confidence, Issy saw the ghost of their mother.

When they danced was the only time Livia was more like their mother than Issy herself. Issy’s own dancing was too emotional, too passionate and wild. Too like their father. That expression was what had gotten Issy selected as the Prima Ballerina; but it was times like now she wished she could hide

her emotions, instead of having them written across her face for all to see.

Finishing her own practice, Livia wiped her rosy cheeked face with a towel and plopped down on the seat beside Issy. “What was she like?”

Issy knew immediately who her sister was asking about. “She was beautiful and graceful. Like you.”

Livia rolled her eyes. “I’ve seen the portraits, I know she was your twin, Issy.” She bent down to unlace her ballet slippers, her brown hair beginning to come loose from its chignon and falling down to frame her face. “What do you think it was like growing up in the castle for her? Do you think she was happy here?”

Issy smiled softly. “I do. I bet she and Uncle Iago had a wonderful childhood here, playing hide and seek and chasing each other through the gardens.”

Livia chewed the inside of her cheek. “She didn’t have a sister to share everything with, though. Having a brother isn’t quite the same, is it?”

Issy’s heart squeezed. “No. You and I are lucky, in that respect.” She put an arm around her sister’s shoulder and pulled her closer.

Livia grimaced. “You need a bath.” She stuck her tongue out and pretended to gag.

“So do you!” Issy pushed her sister away and laughed. Livia tossed her towel at Issy and collapsed into giggles.

“Come. Let’s order two baths and some tea and cake and make an afternoon of it. I think we’ve earned it.”

“Hear, hear!” Livia beamed. “Let’s soak our troubles away for a few hours.”

Something about Livia’s words made Issy’s stomach drop, but she smoothed her features into a smile and led the way from the dance studio back to their rooms. Perhaps a hot bath and some sweet tea would be exactly what they needed. Or, if nothing more, it would be a welcome distraction.

CHAPTER 7

ANDERS



Anders pressed his charcoal to the parchment, squinting one eye to better understand the proportions of the castle. He'd asked Marco and Paolo to find him some drawing implements, to allow him to draft a crude map that might help him to navigate the twisting halls and chambers of the Gilded Palace, and they'd spent the afternoon out in the lush gardens and wandering the labyrinth of corridors as he plotted his chart.

"Where did you learn to draw like that?" Paolo asked, a faint note of suspicion in his gravelly voice.

"I've always liked to draw," Anders replied without looking away from his parchment. "But I spent the last five years as a cartographer in the Northern Army, so that is where I honed my craft."

"You're very talented," Marco said, and when Anders looked up to thank him, he caught Paolo giving his colleague a sharp look. Apparently, they were still mortal enemies and not to utter any kindness to the Silver prisoner. Anders sighed. The light was beginning to fail, and he had successfully sketched a vague map of the entire palace over the past few hours. His stomach rumbled, telling him that dinner would be soon.

"Shall we retire indoors for the remainder of the evening? We're going to need some sustenance if we're to stay awake all night and discover the Princesses' secret."

Paolo nodded reluctantly. "Aye, I'm sure supper will be waiting in your room. You can continue your *investigating*

once we've all eaten our fill.”

Anders heard the sneer in his guard's voice, but he ignored it. He was familiar with being judged and hated for who and what he was. The sudden thought of what Paolo would think if he knew about Anders' shadow magic made him almost bark with laughter, but he covered it with a cough. The two guards narrowed their eyes at him, but he cleared his throat and said, “Shall we?”

Inside, they made their way back up to the guest room where Anders was staying. As he opened the door, the scent of roasted lamb and root vegetables hit him, making his stomach clench painfully. He hadn't eaten a proper meal in days. A cup of wine sat beside the heaped platter.

“We'll leave you to eat,” Marco said. “Enjoy the lamb, the cook is a genius.” He caught the withering look Paolo gave him and shrugged. “What? She is.”

Paolo shook his head and grabbed the door handle. “We'll be right outside when you're done. And don't get any ideas about hiding the cutlery and making an escape attempt. You'd be dead before you could make it three steps.”

A BARRAGE of cannon fire exploded, and Anders' heart thundered in his chest. He needed to get to safety or he'd be killed, like his comrades.

Darting between boulders and trees, he avoided the fire lances that whistled through the air, setting alight to the dry brush and filling the air with acrid smoke. The smell of burning flesh from the corpses that lay scattered across the field stung his nostrils and made his eyes brim with tears.

Shouts in a language he didn't understand reached his ears and he froze, terror flooding his veins and turning his limbs to lead weights. They were so close by, they were going to find him. It was only a matter of time. And when they found him, they would either kill him on sight or take him prisoner and torture him until he told them everything he knew. Which was very little, but they were unlikely to believe that.

Footsteps just an arm's length away made Anders' skin break out in goosebumps, despite the heat. His stomach lurched as he felt his magic erupt out of him, cloaking him in shadows and hiding him from the enemy soldiers who appeared in the jungle clearing, spears and torches in their hands. Nausea rippled through him as he fought to keep the shadows in place, despite his aversion to his dark magic. Sweat beaded on his forehead and trickled down his temples.

Another cacophony of explosions made his heart stop and his head pound. He squeezed his eyes shut and covered his ears to block out the sights and sounds of war going on around him.

“Anders. Anders!”

Anders opened his eyes and sat bolt upright in bed. His chest rose and fell sharply, his mind racing as he took in his surroundings. How had he gotten here? He was lying on his back on top of a soft, comfortable bed, still wearing the shirt and trousers he'd been given by the guards the previous day.

Relief flooded his veins, he was in the Gilded Palace, far away from the Eastern territory and the horrors he'd experienced there. But the relief didn't last, as he remembered why he was there and just what was at stake if he failed yet another mission.

“Anders, are you awake?” Marco and Paolo stood in the doorway, concern writ large on their faces.

Marco sighed. “We thought perhaps the curse had come for you.”

Anders swung his legs round and attempted to stand, but he immediately fell back onto the mattress. He pressed a hand to his head with a groan.

“What happened?”

“You fell asleep on the job,” Paolo replied bitterly.

Anders shook his head and pushed back up to standing, kicking over the cup from his supper the previous evening, which rolled behind the door.

“The King has requested your presence at breakfast. There’s a pail of hot water by the basin for you to wash up. You’ve got ten minutes.”

Anders pinched the bridge of his nose as Paolo closed the door, leaving him alone. What had happened? He felt as though he’d drunk three pitchers of mead and lost a bareknuckle boxing match.

He reached down to pick up the cup he’d kicked and noticed a folded piece of paper behind the door. Opening it, he saw a note in a delicate, scrawling hand. The words made the hairs stand up on the back of his neck.

Beware, Silver Prince. Do not eat or drink anything that is brought to you.

How did the letter writer know who he was? And what did they mean about the food and drink—had he been poisoned? Was that why his mouth was drier than a desert and his head was throbbing?

Anders’ eyes widened. Someone was trying to help him. Which told him that someone in the palace knew what was happening to the Princesses. And that meant he’d be able to discover the truth if he just asked the right question to the right person.

All he needed to do was find the right person. But where to begin?

He’d taken this quest on as a way to save his own neck, believing it would be a simple case of watching and noticing things that others had not—something he usually excelled at. But now, with the note and the poisoned cup of wine, he was starting to worry that it wouldn’t be as simple as he’d first thought. Someone may be trying to help him, but someone was also working against him.

If he was going to make it out of the Gilded Palace alive, he needed to find out who that was, and soon.

CHAPTER 8

ISSADORA



Issy pushed her porridge around the bowl with a silver spoon, her mind consumed with the shards of memory from the previous night. Again, they'd danced at the mysterious ball, again they'd woken in their finest gowns with shoes that had seen better days. And when she'd woken, Issy's ankle had been agony.

She dreaded the thought of dancing again that evening—luckily there was no ballet performance, but she feared she'd be forced to dance through the night once more, sore ankle or no.

She stirred honey and red berries into her oats until the entire bowl was stained pink, but she didn't raise the spoon to her mouth. She couldn't stomach breakfast anymore. It had been her favourite meal of the day before the curse, but now she woke every morning with a bad taste in her mouth and a stomach that balked at the sight of food. She'd lost weight, and the sleep deprivation had affected her studies, never mind her dancing. She'd always resembled her mother, but now she looked more like Queen Idalia when she was suffering with the wasting sickness than she did the portrait that hung in the hall outside her and her sister's rooms.

Her mother had become ill very suddenly, the sickness progressing quickly, until just one week later she had died and been entombed in the royal mausoleum. Issy had never quite understood how her mother had deteriorated so rapidly, she'd had the best physicians and apothecaries in the kingdom, and food and drink had been plentiful. Her father had told her it

was just the way of the world, sometimes people grew sick and died and there was nothing more to it. But Issy had—

“Isadora, have you heard a single word I have said?” Her father’s gruff voice cut through the chatter inside her head.

“Apologies, father. I’ve a lot on my mind.”

He shook his head in exasperation, but Issy saw the twitch of his lips and the twinkle in his eye that only seemed to appear when he was speaking to her. She supposed she reminded him of her mother; a strong-willed, confident young woman who knew her own mind. It had been an admirable trait in a queen—perhaps less so in an adolescent daughter.

But Issy reminded herself, she wouldn’t be an adolescent for much longer. In two days’ time, she would turn eighteen, and the business of marrying her off to the highest bidder would begin. As heir to the throne, she was still an attractive prospect for many young noblemen, even despite the curse.

“Well, I hope you’ll show Prince Philip more interest than you have this conversation when he arrives.”

Issy’s stomach churned and she feared she would lose her breakfast, but she hadn’t eaten anything.

Her father went on. “And Lady Fiona is arriving later today.”

Both Issy and Livia groaned.

“Don’t be like that,” their father warned. “She’s a dear, old friend and she offered to come and prepare the both of you to be presented to suitors. She is doing us a kindness, and I expect you to treat her with respect.”

“Yes, father,” they both mumbled into their bowls.

At that moment, the Silver prisoner was escorted into the breakfast room by his guards. He’d been given a shave and some clean clothes; a tan tunic with gold stitching around the cuffs, dark trousers and an embroidered waistcoat. It was jarring to see him dressed in traditional Golden Isle attire, but Issy had to admit, it suited him. The colour warmed his cheeks and brought out the golden highlights in his fair hair.

He was shown to a seat across from Issy, next to King Aurelio, who wiped his mouth on a linen napkin and rested his hands on the table in front of him, fingers interlocked.

“Good morning, Anders.”

The prisoner bowed his head. “Good morning, Your Majesty.”

“How was last night? Did you uncover anything interesting?” The atmosphere in the breakfast room grew heavy and suffocating; Issy suddenly could do nothing but wait and listen to what the prisoner would say, her breath held.

The Silver boy bowed his head. “Unfortunately, not. I heard and saw nothing of note yesterday evening, Your Majesty.”

Issy felt a rush of relief, and wondered what had brought it on. Didn't she want the curse broken? Or perhaps she simply didn't want the Silver commoner to succeed where so many royals and nobles had failed. Where she herself had failed.

Issy's father looked unsurprised, although she could have sworn there was a little disappointment in the tilt of his mouth, and she'd seen that particular expression enough times to recognise it.

“That is a shame. I was hoping for better.”

Was it her imagination or was the Silver boy—Anders—blushing slightly?

“I had hoped to investigate further today, Your Majesty. Would it be possible to access the Princesses' rooms this afternoon, to take a look around in preparation for this evening?”

Issy's father stroked his dark moustache. “Yes, I don't see why not. You will be accompanied by the guards, and my daughters will have the last word on what you may or may not look at or touch. Is that understood?”

“Understood. Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Issy's skin prickled at the thought of this strange man in her bedroom, riffling through her personal belongings. The

others had investigated her rooms, of course, and found absolutely nothing of note. And yet, Issy felt oddly uncomfortable with the idea of Anders going through the same motions.

But she didn't argue. If he discovered the truth and broke the curse, she and Livia would be free, and that was all she wanted.

Wasn't it?

THE MASTER COBBLER and his apprentice, Dominic, arrived before lunch. Issy and Livia handed over their worn and tattered ballet slippers—all of which had been brand new just a week earlier.

"I cannot understand it," Master Conti said in his lyrical voice, studying one of the shoes. "There is no reason this shoe should be so destroyed after only one week. This is some of my finest work, just look at the stitching here." He indicated a part of the shoe to Issy and she nodded solemnly, pretending she could see what he was talking about.

Gold rings adorned several of the cobbler's fingers, although pale bands of skin suggested he usually wore more, and Issy had noticed his crimson doublet and breeches were simpler and less embellished than his usual style. She hated to think their predicament could have caused the cobbler to lose business, but gossiping was a popular pastime in Orovia, as much as Issy despised it, so it was possible that customers were now avoiding Master Conti's shoe shop due to his proximity to the cursed Princesses.

"How is your family, Dominic?" Livia asked the floppy-haired apprentice boy, and he nodded politely.

"Very well, thank you, Your Royal Highness."

A blush crept across her round cheeks. "Oh, please don't call me that. It's just Livia."

Dominic smiled and pushed his round, horn-rimmed glasses up with his forefinger. "Of course, Princess Livia."

Issy suppressed a snort and rolled her eyes. Livia was clearly sweet on the cobbler's apprentice, but there could be nothing between them. He wasn't of noble birth, and there was no way her father would entertain the idea of marrying his daughter off to a commoner. At least Dominic had the good sense and manners to maintain an appropriate distance from Livia and rebuff her attempts at forming a relationship.

"Can they be repaired?" Issy asked Master Conti, who was still turning the ballet slipper over in his hands, shaking his head and tutting at the sorry state it was in.

"I will have to take them back to my workshop and see what can be done. They may be beyond repair."

Issy nodded, despite her suspicion that the cobbler was over-egging the pudding. "Of course, we will need to purchase several new pairs in addition to these, if they can be mended. How quickly can you make two new pairs for each of us?"

Master Conti's expression softened. "Four pairs? I can have these ready for you by tomorrow. Dominic will deliver them."

Dominic bowed his head to his master, and Issy saw her sister beam. She rolled her eyes at Livia, who stuck her tongue out behind the cobbler and his apprentice's backs.

"Our entire company will require new slippers, Master Conti."

Now, the cobbler's eyes widened and Issy could almost see the coins spinning in them. "All twelve? Two pairs each? I am not sure, Your Royal Highness, this is quite a large order. I may need to buy more materials. It could be days. Weeks, even."

Issy's smile felt forced, she knew the game he was playing, and her part in it, well. They needed the shoes, and Master Conti was the finest cobbler in the entire kingdom. "Whatever it costs, we'll pay double for the inconvenience. You have the measurements of all of our dancers, please deliver as many pairs as you can each day."

Issy caught the grin on Livia's face out of the corner of her eye. She hoped her sister wouldn't get her hopes up too high, only to have them dashed.

"If you would like to choose from these materials, Princess. I brought some bolts of our newest silks and leathers for you to sample." Dominic took a metal ring from his satchel and spread the attached fabrics out for Livia to see and touch. Issy saw the moment Livia's hand brushed Dominic's, and she didn't fail to notice the redness that tinged his ears, or the shy smile he gave her sister. Her heart sank. It would only end one way for them, and she dreaded the thought of her sister getting hurt. If anything happened to damage Livia's prospects, their father would be furious. Issy didn't want to be the one to discourage her sister's affections, but with their mother gone, who else was there to guide Livia? Certainly not that wretched Lady Fiona.

"If I may, Princess Isadora," the cobbler began, and Issy turned to find him studying her with a curious expression on his face.

"What is it?"

The cobbler leant forwards and lowered his voice, but Livia and Dominic were chattering away about the suppleness of the leathers he had brought and showed no interest in their hushed conversation. "What are you and the others doing to wear through my shoes so quickly? Is it truly just dancing?"

Issy baulked. She hadn't expected such impertinence, and refusing to answer the cobbler's question could be considered incredibly rude. She knew she and Livia were a source of gossip in the town, but it galled her to know that the people of Orovia were whispering about her, suggesting all sorts of unseemly explanations for their unfortunate predicament. The curse was ruining her life, and she had to sit here and be interrogated by a lowborn tradesman about it?

She swallowed her anger, smoothing her features into a demure smile. "Of course, Master Conti. What else would it be?"

The cobbler appeared to realise his mistake, his eyes widened momentarily, and then he laughed and waved a hand in the air. “Oh, nothing. Forgive me. The townsfolk do love to gossip and invent stories.” He cleared his throat and gestured to Dominic, who began to pack away the stack of fabrics he’d been showing to Livia.

Issy stood, giving Master Conti permission to do the same, and extended a hand, which he bowed to kiss. “Thank you for your time, we do so appreciate all your hard work, Master Conti. We look forward to receiving our order and continuing to enjoy your exquisite craftsmanship.”

The cobbler nodded and exited the parlour followed by Dominic, leaving Issy and Livia standing there in silence. Nina darted in through the now open door and Livia bent down to scoop the calico into her arms.

“Which materials did you choose?” Issy asked without looking at her sister.

“Materials?” Came Livia’s dreamy reply, eyes on the door where the cobbler and his apprentice had just been, her hand rhythmically stroking the cat as it purred in satisfaction.

Issy gave her sister an ironic look and flicked her braid over her shoulder. “Never mind. I’ll find out tomorrow when Dominic delivers the shoes.”

But something like anxiety gnawed at Issy’s stomach. What lengths would the cobbler go to to ensure he received regular orders? They were his best customers, and the King’s pockets were deep, but surely cursing the Princesses to dance through their slippers every night was a step too far? She pushed the thought away; Master Conti couldn’t possibly be to blame for their midnight escapades. Could he?

CHAPTER 9

ANDERS



Marco held the door to the Princesses' rooms and Anders stepped inside. He was struck by the opulence of the space, even compared to his own guest room; dozens of cushions and pillows lay scattered across sofas and chaise longues, embroidered bedspreads and blankets were draped over hard surfaces, and the walls were hung with embossed wallpaper and delicate watercolour paintings of dancers mid-pirouette.

In comparison, the castle he'd grown up in seemed sparse and comfortless. But that was how they liked it in the north, none of this wasteful extravagance and ostentatious displays of wealth. Although, he had to admit, his guest room mattress was very comfortable.

"The King stipulated that you're not to touch anything," Paolo reminded him from the doorway.

Anders nodded vaguely in response and continued his search, circling around the room from the centre and working his way outwards. He peered under the sofas, tapped the wooden floorboards, and lifted the patterned rug that covered a large area of the floor with the toe of his boot. From what he could see, there were no hidden trapdoors, no loose floorboards and no secret triggers that opened a concealed door.

Anders scratched the back of his neck and cast his eyes around the room. "Marco, could you be a gent and open this trunk for me?"

The guard joined him in the corner of the room where a leather travel trunk with gold clasps stood under an arched window overlooking the gardens. Marco hesitated.

“I just need to see what’s inside, in case it could explain how the Princesses are leaving the room each night. If it doesn’t contain a hidden staircase, you can close it immediately.” Anders gave the guard a wry smile and stood back as Marco bent to unfasten the clasps. The left pinged open with ease, but the right wouldn’t budge. Anders gave it a try himself, but the metal almost seemed to have been welded shut. Paolo abandoned his post at the door and joined them, taking out his sword and using it to leverage the lid open. The clasp broke, clattering to the ground in two pieces, but Anders didn’t care. He needed to see what was inside this trunk and why it had been sealed. Without waiting for Paolo or Marco to open it for him, he lifted the lid and gazed down at the contents of the trunk. His heart sank. There was nothing but dozens of tattered, old shoes inside. How disappointing. He’d been convinced there must be some clue to the mystery inside this trunk, but it was just as Paolo had said. There was no way the Princesses could possibly be leaving this room unseen and unheard.

Unless the conversation he’d overheard in the tavern had been right and the Princesses were leaving voluntarily. If he had been drugged, perhaps the guards were also being drugged each night and the Princesses were sneaking out once everyone was asleep...

He made his way towards Princess Isadora’s private chamber and caught a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye. The palace cat, a black, white and orange creature that he’d seen following the younger Princess around, had prowled into the room through the open door. The creature rubbed itself against Anders’ ankle before stalking away and sitting in the far corner of the room, its amber eyes still on him. He noticed a mirror hung on the wall behind the cat, reflecting himself standing in the entrance to Isadora’s room. He walked towards it, eyeing the elaborate gold frame and how it protruded from the wall. The cat mewed as he approached, and he bent to scratch it behind the ears as he studied the mirror more closely.

The frame appeared to be gilt, with some chip marks on one corner, and the carvings at the top reminded him of something, although he couldn't put a finger on what. But when Anders gripped the edge and pulled it away from the wall to see what was behind, he found nothing but smooth wallpaper and solid stone. He let out a groan of frustration.

"I need some fresh air," he said, pushing a hand through his short, pale hair. With an empty stomach and the aftereffects of the drug he'd been slipped, he felt a little lightheaded.

"How about a stroll in the palace gardens?" Marco suggested. "They're quite lovely this time of year. What?" He asked as Paolo stared at him with barely concealed shock.

The grey-haired guard shook his head. "Nothing, I just didn't realise you were such a naturalist."

Marco shrugged. "I'm not. I just like the gardens when all the flowers are in bloom. It reminds me Spring always follows even the darkest of Winters."

Anders' eyebrows rose and he slapped Marco on the back. "Lead the way, then maestro."

Anders' stomach rumbled; he hadn't touched the food at breakfast, thanks to the anonymous note that had been slipped under his door, and now he was famished.

Who could have written the note? Only a servant would know what was going on in the kitchens. Unless the poisoner was tampering with the food after it had been made, perhaps on the short journey from the kitchens to his room? Perhaps one of the Princesses themselves was sabotaging his attempt to solve the riddle, and her sister felt guilty and wanted to help him. Or maybe one of the Princesses was being forced into the strange mystery against her will, and she wanted Anders to uncover the truth and free her?

Or could Paolo be responsible for the drugged wine? Could Marco have written the note and dropped it in his room on entering that morning? Everyone was a suspect and no one could be trusted.

There were too many possibilities and no clear answers. He needed to speak to more residents of the palace, ask more questions and get more of the facts. And maybe even find an ally, someone he could trust to help him find the answers he sought.

But first, he needed to find something safe to eat.

“Are there fruit trees in the royal gardens, Marco?”

The guard looked delighted to have been asked. “Indeed, there are. Bananas, papayas and pomegranates, as well as cashews. Would you like to see them?”

Marco led them through rows of box hedges, down gravel paths between manicured lawns and flower beds in full bloom. The sound of bees buzzing from flower to flower, and water trickling from fountains was soothing to Anders, and as the sun warmed his face he wondered, not for the first time, how he'd lived in D'Argentis for so long with no sunlight for half the year. He'd known no different as a child, had always assumed it was how everyone lived, lighting candles and oil lamps every few hours and storing up enough food and necessities during the daylight months to last them through the darkness each year.

Having spent the last five years abroad, enjoying the warmth and beauty that daily sunlight brought, despite the horrors of war, he now couldn't imagine living any other way. And yet, he belonged in D'Argentis. When this curse was broken, he'd return to his family and endure the long, dark winters once more, and he wouldn't complain. But inside, he would always remember the glorious sunshine and cloudless, blue skies he'd seen while serving with the army.

They reached a part of the gardens where a small grove of trees had been planted in a sunny spot, protected by a wooden fence. An older gentleman was picking fruit from the low hanging branches, tossing them into the wicker basket on his arm. He wore coveralls in a shade of blue so dark it was almost black, with polished silver buttons. He clearly took a lot of pride in his appearance, for a groundskeeper.

When he spotted them approaching, he paused and waited, a smile on his deeply tanned and lined face, beneath a grey, shoe-brush moustache. His dark, deep-set eyes seemed to capture the sun's light and reflect it.

“Good afternoon, Marco, my boy. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Afternoon, Gus. This is Anders—”

“The Silver prisoner. Aye, I can see. What can I do for you, lads?”

Anders took a step forward and held out a hand to the gardener. “Pleased to meet you, sir. I was wondering if you might have some fruit I could eat? I missed breakfast, you see.” A white lie, but what Gus didn't know wouldn't hurt him. “And supper is still a good while away. I'll take anything you've got, I'm not particular.”

Gus chuckled. “No, I imagine not. I was a soldier myself, for my sins. You certainly learn to eat what you're given and like it when there isn't much to go round.”

“You're a military man?” Anders asked, intrigued.

“Aye. Twenty-seven years. I retired a long time ago and have been maintaining the palace gardens ever since. King Aurelio was kind enough to employ me when I left the army and settled down with my wife and son. Carlos is a soldier, himself, now.” Gus beamed with pride, and Anders found himself grinning back.

“Here,” Gus said, handing the basket of picked fruit to Anders. “These are all going spare, you may as well enjoy them.”

“You're sure?”

“Aye, they'll only go to waste otherwise.”

Anders took a pomegranate and offered the basket to Marco and Paolo, who both declined. He broke the pomegranate open and scooped the seeds out with his hands, shovelling them into his mouth with little decorum. He didn't care, he was too hungry to worry about what he looked like.

Something dawned on him then. “You’ve worked at the palace for a long time?”

Gus nodded.

“Do you know anything about this curse the Princesses are under? Or how they might be leaving their rooms each night—are there secret passages they could be using?” It occurred to Anders that, if he had been drugged, perhaps the palace staff were too, and that was how the Princesses were escaping the confines of their rooms. But to get away unseen by anyone, every single night? It would be challenging unless the guards were all fast asleep at their posts.

Gus shook his head, a regretful look on his ageing face. “I’m afraid I don’t. I rarely set foot inside the palace, my work keeps me outdoors. But I’ll tell you who might know.”

Anders waited expectantly for Gus to go on. When he didn’t, Anders said, “Who?”

“The historian.”

“Historian? Where might I find one of those?”

“In the palace library. Amma, her name is. She’s been working here longer than I have, she’ll know if there are secret passages in the palace.”

Anders shook Gus’ hand once more and thanked him, hope taking wing in his heart. The friendly gardener had just given Anders his first promising lead in the mystery of the Princesses and their ruined shoes, and with only two more nights to solve it, there was no time to waste. His very life depended on it.

CHAPTER 10

ANDERS



Anders jogged up the stone steps that led from the gardens to the palace, followed by his guards. As he reached the heavy double doors and grabbed the handle, the door swung open and Princess Isadora tumbled out with a gasp.

Anders put an arm out to catch her before she fell. “My apologies, Your Royal Highness. I didn’t mean to startle you.” He steadied her as she gripped his forearm for balance; slender, bronze fingers wrapped around his bare wrist where he’d rolled back the sleeves of his tunic. Her touch sent tendrils of warmth over his skin, spreading through him and leaving a tingling sensation wherever they touched. It felt strangely pleasant, and Anders swallowed as the tightness in his chest loosened just a fraction. Here she was, the ballerina whose dancing had made him feel something other than loneliness and fear and sorrow, for the first time in years. He knew he was leaving soon, and their kingdoms were bitter rivals, but for a brief while he could pretend that they might have been friends.

When Isadora looked at him, seeming to realise who he was, she pulled her hand away as though she’d been burned. A chill ran over Anders’ flesh as her warmth left him, and he suppressed a shiver.

“Forgive me,” she said politely. “I’m a little unsteady on my feet today. I should let you be on your way.” She stepped to one side and schooled her features into a smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes. Anders could see the exhaustion in her face, in the shadows around her warm brown eyes and the tautness of

her mouth. The curse appeared to be taking a toll on her, making him question whether the Princesses could be the orchestrators of their own fate after all. If they were, they surely regretted it now.

With a quick glance at the two guards standing on the stone steps behind him, Anders seized his opportunity. “Not at all, it was entirely my fault.” He bowed his head slightly and saw the surprise in the Princess’s face when he straightened. She’d been expecting a lowborn criminal and he had caught her off guard. Now was his chance. “If you don’t mind me asking, Princess Isadora, where are you off to in such a hurry?” He kept his expression neutral, his tone conversational, silently willing her not to command his guards to escort him away.

Isadora’s expression faltered momentarily, and he held his breath. Finally, she said, “My mother. I was on my way to visit her and take her some flowers from the gardens.” She gazed out across the manicured lawns and vibrant flowerbeds. Her voice turned wistful. “She loved sunflowers.”

Anders bowed his head, genuine compassion in his voice. “I heard of your mother’s passing, I’m very sorry for your loss.”

The Princess’s gaze shuttered and she waved a hand. “Thank you, it was a long time ago.”

“I saw her painting, she was beautiful. The resemblance between you two is striking.” Realising what he’d said, Anders felt heat creep up his neck. It was true, the Princess was beautiful, but he hadn’t quite meant to say so out loud.

Isadora’s lips twitched and a faint line appeared between her brows, as though she were trying to decipher something. “That’s very kind of you to say.”

Something in her expression had changed from the beginning of their conversation. She no longer seemed desperate to continue on her way. And, if he was honest with himself, Anders was in no rush for their conversation to end either.

“You must miss her very much.” He went on. He knew he was pushing the boundaries of polite conversation, but he may not have many other chances to speak to Isadora alone and he needed to find out as much as he could to help him figure out who had cursed the Princesses, and why.

“Sometimes, yes,” Isadora replied, her eyes cast downwards. She looked up at him then, her dark eyes framed by long lashes. “But we have each other, Livia and I. And Father. We’re very fortunate, in lots of ways.”

“Was it a long illness?”

A shadow crossed her face, and Anders feared he’d gone too far. But she shook her head. “No, not from what I can remember. It came on quite suddenly, and within just a few days she was gone. There was nothing the physician could do.”

Anders took a step closer, and instead of moving away, Isadora held her ground, chin high. This was it, his chance to discover what she knew, if anything. He lowered his voice. “Could your mother have been cursed, like yourself? Could her sickness have been something else?”

Isadora’s eyes widened and her lips parted. “You think someone killed my mother? No, that’s not possible. It was a wasting disease, it was nothing like our—my,” she stammered, shaking her head. “No. No, I don’t believe that.”

Marco and Paolo stepped forward, ready to intervene, but Anders was already backing away from the Princess, putting an appropriate distance between them. “My apologies, Your Royal Highness. I meant no offence. Please forgive me. I’ll let you be on your way now and go speak to the historian.”

Isadora faltered. “Amma? She’ll be in the library. What is it you want to speak with her about?”

Anders suppressed a smile. His words had had the intended effect—he’d piqued her curiosity about his investigation. Or perhaps, Isadora was behind the entire thing and was worried about what he might discover—although, he doubted that was the case. Either way, he’d chosen the right

stone to look under. “I just have a few questions about the Gilded Palace and the general history of the Golden Isle. But I won’t keep you any longer, Princess.” He bowed. “Good day.”

And with that he strode into the palace, closely followed by his guards, leaving her standing on the steps.

Anders had hoped to make some kind of connection with Princess Isadora, in order to further his investigation, but he hadn’t expected to feel anything more than sympathy for her. She had a habit of surprising him, this Golden Princess, and despite the circumstances, he found himself looking forward to their next exchange.

INSIDE THE PALACE, Marco led the way to the library, down corridors with glass roofs that let the midday sun pour in and fill the space with light and warmth. Dust motes danced in the shafts of sunlight, and the gold leaf adorning picture frames and side tables glimmered. A crystal vase filled with sunflowers sent a prism of multi-coloured light across the pale walls, like a miniature rainbow.

Anders found it all overwhelmingly ostentatious. In D’Argentis, the fashion was minimalist—conservative, even. In fact, fashion mattered nought in the Silver Isle; if an item wasn’t essential or useful, it had no purpose. Decorative touches were kept to a minimum; bearskin rugs and woollen blankets for warmth, and simple candlesticks for light. The occasional deer head mounted on the wall. Although Anders remembered his mother hand-weaving small tapestries by candlelight during the Longest Night; the half-a-year period when the sun never rose and the entire isle lived in darkness. And she had encouraged him in his drawing and passion for art, whereas his father had only appreciated Anders’ skill with charcoal and pencil as far as it could be used. Which is how Anders had ended up a cartographer in the Northern Army.

They reached the library and Anders stepped through the glass doors into a vast, elegant room with more books than he had ever seen in his life lined up on the shelves. Gazing around, he thought all of the knowledge in the entire world

must be contained in this one room. He stood in the entrance taking it all in, the moulded plaster and gilded curlicues, the painted frescoes on the high ceiling, depicting a bright sun and a shining goddess in golden robes. The thousands of leather and cloth bound books in every different colour and thickness. There were libraries in D'Argentis, of course, but nothing as large or grand as this. Finally, Anders felt at home somewhere in the Gilded Palace. His fingers itched to capture these new surroundings in his sketchbook. Perhaps if he were to solve the mystery and free Isadora from her curse, he'd be permitted to spend a little time here before he had to return home to the Northern Isle. For research purposes.

“Welcome,” came a warm female voice from somewhere among the stacks. “Can I help you find something?” A tall, slender woman with short black hair and dark-brown skin appeared before him, wearing a knee-length, brocade jacket over trousers. He hadn't seen a woman wearing trousers since arriving in Orovia, but he'd been used to the sight back home—northern women were involved in many physical tasks that would have been too cumbersome with long skirts in their way.

Anders was beginning to question whether his initial assumptions about the Southern Isle and its people had been somewhat...shortsighted. Perhaps there was more to the Golds than he'd first imagined.

“Hello, my name is Anders. I was advised by Gus, the gardener, to speak to the palace historian?”

The woman smiled and her entire face shone as if lit from within. “You are in luck, young man. My name is Amma, it's a pleasure to meet you. Gus must have a very good opinion of you to send you my way. What can I help you with?”

Anders followed Amma over to a group of velvet loveseats arranged around a low table and sat down. “I have been tasked with investigating the mysterious affliction the Princesses appear to be suffering under.”

The historian hummed. “A fascinating assignment indeed. And a dangerous one. But how is it that I can help you?”

Anders drew a deep breath. If she could give him the answer he sought, he'd have this whole thing sewn up in a matter of hours and be a free man by the following morning. He'd hung everything on his theory, after finding the trunk filled with tattered shoes in the Princesses' rooms, and he desperately needed it to be proven right. "I'm interested in the history of the palace itself, specifically the layout and if there are any hidden passages. Particularly in and around the Princesses' rooms."

Amma's eyebrows rose. "Hidden passages? I can't say that I'm aware of any personally, but I'll take out the palace plans and we can have a look."

She disappeared between the stacks and Anders decided to browse the shelves while he waited. The section of the library he was in held a broad range of texts, from classic fairy tales and epic poetry to folklore and mythology. He pulled out a thick spined, leather-bound book with the title *Myths of the Golden Isle*. Opening it to a random page, he found an illustration of the sunburst icon he'd seen in various places around the palace, but before he could read more about it, Amma reappeared.

"Ah, I see you've taken an interest in our myths and legends. I'm sure you have your own versions of these tales in the Silver Isle." She took a seat and began to lay out the maps and plans she had fetched on the table in front of her.

Anders closed the book and slid it back onto the shelf. "Yes, although I'm sure they differ somewhat from yours. For example, in our version of the ballet *Asterina and Cethin*, there's a lot more emphasis on Asterina's part in their demise."

Amma chuckled lightly. "I imagine there is. Have you ever heard the tale of how the Silver and Golden Isles came to be separated?"

He nodded. "My mother was very fond of telling stories to entertain me and my brother during the Longest Night." He smiled at the memory of snuggling under animal skins in the candlelight as his mother's voice lulled him to sleep. "But I haven't heard the Southern version."

Amma settled back against the cushions and Anders followed her lead, the palace plans lying forgotten between them. “Once upon a time,” she began, “the two kingdoms were one. The goddess of light, Maia, blessed the people with her warmth and radiance, gifting them the days. The god of shadow, Niro, gave the people darkness, allowing them to rest and recover from the days’ work. The kingdom was in balance and peace prevailed. Until, one day, Niro decided to steal Maia’s light for himself.”

Anders grinned; so far so like the story he’d grown up with.

“He had grown jealous of her gifts and wanted the people to love him the way they loved and worshipped Maia. But Niro’s plan failed and he was caught, so Maia decided to punish him by splitting the kingdom in two and plunging the Northern Isle into permanent darkness.”

Anders leaned forwards, elbows on knees, eyes trained on Amma’s face. He remembered the depiction of the god of shadow as foolish, and the goddess of light as vindictive and cruel. But something about the way the historian told the story made Anders sympathise with Maia, despite her actions against the north. She’d been betrayed by someone she’d trusted; it was the worst kind of hurt, and her reaction reflected that.

Amma went on, and Anders hung on her every word. “Niro retaliated by using his magic to make every person in the Southern Isle forget Maia’s existence. All knowledge of her disappeared in an instant; no longer did the people of the Southern Isle thank Maia for each sunrise and every meal. The goddess of light was devastated to be forgotten, after all, what is a god with no one to worship them?” Amma paused for dramatic effect before continuing, and Anders hardly dared take a breath. The emotion in her voice, it was almost as though she’d witnessed the entire thing.

“Seeing how his people suffered without Maia’s light, Niro begged for her forgiveness, promising to lift the spell of forgetting from her people. But his magic could not be reversed, the people of the Southern Isle did not remember

their goddess, no matter what he did. In the end, he could only lift the enchantment so that the people could rediscover their knowledge from books and stories, but the southerners never grew to love Maia as they had before. In response, she agreed to bless the Northern Isle with her life-giving light, but only for half of the year, leaving the people in darkness the rest of the time. The gods found a way to coexist, but the kingdoms were forever torn apart and grew to hate and fear each other, all because Niro coveted Maia's light."

Anders fell back against the sofa, brow furrowed. He knew the story was just that, a story, but it had to be rooted in some real-world events that had caused the conflict between the two kingdoms. What had happened all those years ago between a son of the Silver Isle and a daughter of the Golden Isle? Was it closer to Amma's tale of jealous gods, or to Asterina and Cethin's tragic love story?

Whatever the root cause of the divide between the two isles—real or perceived—how did it benefit either side? After everything he'd experienced in the army, he understood that war and conflict only had one loser, and that was the innocent victims on either side who were affected by the fighting. Just like the people of both isles had suffered as a result of Maia and Niro's feud.

"As you say," Amma went on. "I'm sure there is a version of this story in the Silver Isle that paints Maia in a much more negative light. And the truth is likely somewhere in between the two." She splayed her long fingers over the plans between them. "Now, you wanted to know about secret passages the Princesses might be using to escape the palace?"

CHAPTER II

ISADORA



Issy knelt in the grass and lay the sunflowers she'd picked against the foot of the stone statue of her mother. She preferred to lay flowers here than at the cold, depressing mausoleum where Queen Idalia's body was interred in the royal tomb, along with her own parents and generations of monarchs before her.

Issy's father had had the statue erected to commemorate his beloved wife, and to give his daughters somewhere pleasant to remember their mother. The palace gardeners had planted the beds around the statue with pink lily leeks and butterfly orchids, and the buzzing of bees as they moved lazily from flower to flower was a comforting, familiar sound to Issy.

She sighed, plucking a daisy from the grass. "I don't know what to do, Mama. I can't keep going on like this. The curse is stealing everything from me. My love for dance, my happiness. I'm so worried for Livia, every morning when she wakes, the fear in her eyes—I hate it, Mama. I wish I could take all of the curse on myself and free her and the others, but I don't know how. I wish you were here to guide me, Mama." She put her face in her hands and cried.

She hated feeling so powerless and afraid, but the worst part was not knowing who she could trust. Her mind had searched for answers for weeks, suspecting everyone she came across. Had one of the other dancers cursed her out of jealousy because she'd been chosen as prima ballerina? She couldn't rule it out, and almost wouldn't put it past Alessia, or even

Ilona. They had both been keen to impress Madame Zafra, and had expressed bitter disappointment when they hadn't been selected. Or perhaps Maya or her parents were to blame, hoping to damage the reputations of the Golden Princesses, with the aim of attracting a better match for Maya? And every maid, butler, servant and cook had come under Issy's suspicion. As had each visitor to the palace, including her potential suitors; all of whom were now missing as a result of the curse.

She groaned. If she could just remember something—anything—from the midnight balls. Anything of actual substance. But it was all so vague and shadowy.

Issy was exhausted from it all, and had almost given up trying to find out what was happening, until the arrival of the strange Silver boy. He seemed to be taking his task more seriously than any of the previous attempters, but then his life did depend on it, she supposed. Maybe that was exactly the type of motivation required to solve this mystery.

When her tears had run dry, she wiped her face on her skirt and stood. She pressed her fingertips to her lips and placed a kiss on the hand of her mother's statue, silently bidding her goodbye.

The sound of carriage wheels crunching over gravel caught her attention as she crossed the gardens towards the house. She remembered her father telling them over breakfast that Lady Fiona would be visiting today, and her heart sank like a stone. She didn't want to learn proper etiquette, her manners were perfect as they were, thank you very much. She may not have had a mother for the past six years, but she hadn't exactly been raised by wolves.

And if she was honest, she didn't really want to find a suitor. Why couldn't she rule the Golden Isle alone? Why must a queen be married before her coronation, but a king could rule with no wife? It wasn't fair that the male heirs were free to find their own love match, but female heirs were married off to the princes of other kingdoms in order to form alliances and strengthen international relations.

If she had her way, she would change the laws that treated men and women differently and make things better for future generations of princesses. But she would need to become queen first. And for that, she needed a husband. It was a vicious circle.

Gritting her teeth and preparing her brightest fake smile, Issy trudged back towards the palace, where a carriage she didn't recognise stood at the bottom of the stone steps. And a tall, slender man she did recognise was embracing her father.

"Uncle Santiago!" She ran the last few metres and threw her arms around her favourite uncle, almost knocking him off his feet. Santiago laughed, squeezing Issy tightly.

The doors opened then, and Livia appeared. "Uncle!" She darted down the steps and joined the family hug. "We didn't know you were coming."

Santiago released his nieces and ran a hand through his rapidly greying, but lusciously thick head of hair. "Ah, well, it was a last-minute decision. I just couldn't bear another day without seeing my two favourite girls. Or young women, should I say?" He took a step back to admire them at arm's length. "Look at you both, your mother would be so proud." His smile didn't falter, but Issy saw the shimmer of tears lining her uncle's blue eyes behind his horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Did you bring us anything?" Livia asked, and Issy's jaw dropped.

"Livia!" She hissed at her sister. But their uncle only laughed that rich, warm laugh she remembered so well.

"Have I ever been known to arrive empty handed?" He gestured to the footman, who had opened the carriage door and begun unloading Santiago's luggage. The fair-haired young man nodded and took up two exquisitely wrapped gift boxes, handing them to Santiago. "Thank you. Now, which one is which?" He held them out, crossing his arms over and under, pretending to have forgotten.

Livia bounced on the balls of her feet. "Is mine the biggest one?"

Their uncle chuckled. “Oddly enough, it is, yes. Here you are, Livia, my dear.” He handed the larger box to Liv, who tore off the cerise bow and lifted the lid with a squeal.

“Nina!” She dropped the box and held the stuffed cat to her chest. It was an almost perfect replica of her calico cat, who appeared from the palace doors as if by magic and wound around Livia’s ankles. “Don’t worry, Nina, she’s not a replacement.” She bent down to scratch the cat behind the ears, eliciting a satisfied purr.

“Here,” said Uncle Iago quietly, holding the smaller box out to Issy. “This is for you.”

Issy grinned and untied the turquoise ribbon. She was touched that their uncle had remembered each of their favourite colours. It had been a few months since his last visit, but he always brought them some trinket or treasure to show he’d been thinking about them on his travels.

Lifting the lid, Issy let out a gasp. She took the small, oval brooch out of the box and held it in her palm. It was a hand painted cameo of her mother, when she’d been around Issy’s age. If it hadn’t been for the blue eyes, Issy would have thought it was a painting of herself.

She looked up at her uncle, tears pricking the backs of her eyes. “It’s beautiful. Thank you, uncle.”

Iago swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing, and pushed his glasses up his nose. “I found it among some of my things, I believe it was painted when Idalia was sixteen, to be given to a potential suitor. I thought, with your eighteenth birthday soon, and everything that comes after, you’d appreciate having something of your mother’s. To remind you who you are, and what a line of strong, courageous women you come from.”

Issy swiped at her eyes and hugged her uncle again.

After a moment, her father put a hand on her shoulder. “Come, now. Let’s allow Santiago to get settled in and send the carriage on its way.”

“It isn’t your carriage, uncle?” Livia asked, brow furrowed.

Iago laughed lightly. “Oh, no, this one is a carriage for hire. I left mine back in Cicera, it needed a fresh coat of paint. Now, then. Shall we call for some tea and sandwiches?” He put an arm around each of his nieces’ shoulders and began to guide them inside, but they all turned as the sound of hooves came from the gate. A second carriage was pulling into the palace grounds.

“Ah. That will be Lady Fiona,” Issy’s father said, and her stomach plummeted. She’d forgotten about Lady Fiona for a moment, in the excitement of seeing her uncle. She saw her father take out a small coin pouch and hand it to the carriage driver who had delivered Iago, who nodded his gratitude before snapping the reins and steering the horses out of the gate, just as the second, grander carriage pulled up to the palace steps.

The footman opened the door and held out an arm to assist Lady Fiona in climbing down. Her hooped skirts caught in the doorway, and she had to gather them in a hand to squeeze through. The lemon-yellow gown with red rose buds at each gathering of material had been the height of fashion a few seasons ago. As she ducked out of the carriage and straightened, Issy noticed Lady Fiona’s cosmetics were a little too heavy, her dark hair just a touch over-styled. As though she were desperate to impress. It would have been endearing, if Issy wasn’t furious about why she was here. Just because the lady had no daughters of her own didn’t give her the right to start trying to mother Issy and Livia, they’d managed very well without her so far.

“Lady Fiona,” Issy’s father said. “Welcome, thank you for coming.”

The lady bobbed a neat curtsy, and Issy was surprised by how young she appeared—only ten or twelve years older than Issy herself. And a widow already. Her husband, Lord Valdes, had been killed a year earlier when he’d been thrown from his horse during a hunting expedition.

“It’s my pleasure, Your Majesty. Whatever I can do to assist you and your lovely daughters.” She smiled wide, showing slightly crooked teeth.

A bundle of brown fur launched out of the carriage with a volley of barks, and Nina screeched before darting back into the palace, pursued by Lady Fiona's lapdog.

"Zorro! Play nice." She called after the hairy cannon ball but didn't make any effort to chase or catch the creature.

Uncle Iago removed his arms from Issy and Livia's shoulders and extended a hand to Lady Fiona. "Charmed, M'Lady. I am Santiago, Duke of Cicera. It's a pleasure to meet you finally. Aurelio has told me so much about you already."

Issy's blood drained to her feet. Why had her father told Uncle Iago about Lady Fiona? Was something more than etiquette lessons going on here?

Lady Fiona held out her hand for Santiago to kiss. "The pleasure is all mine, Duke."

Issy's father cleared his throat and raised an eyebrow at his brother-in-law. "Iago had just suggested that we retire inside for a spot of tea. Would you care to join us?"

Lady Fiona beamed. "I would be delighted. Thank you, Your Majesty."

Aurelio offered her his arm, which she took, lightly gripping the sleeve of his navy damask jacket, and they walked up the steps into the palace together. Issy watched her uncle and Livia follow them inside, as the footmen began to heave both sets of luggage into the palace.

She hoped she was wrong, but she had a bad feeling about whatever was going on. Etiquette lessons were one thing. A new stepmother was quite another. She hoped her father hadn't completely lost his senses and promised anything to this woman, Issy wouldn't allow anyone to try to take their mother's place; not now, not ever.

At least she didn't need to worry about a younger male heir stealing the throne out from under her, the Southern Isle's monarchy didn't discriminate between male and female heirs. Unless somehow, her father could be convinced to change the law. But he wouldn't do that to her. Even without a suitor. Would he?

CHAPTER 12

ANDERS



Anders took the note out of his pocket and unfolded it once more. *Beware, Silver Prince. Do not eat or drink anything that is brought to you.* What did the letter writer know? How had they discovered his true identity? He couldn't be sure until he found them, but he could heed their warning at least.

A platter of beef and potatoes sat untouched on the side table, a full goblet of mead next to it. He'd snacked on fruit from the gardens throughout the day to stave off hunger, but now that the sun had set and he was confined to his room, his stomach groaned painfully. The delicious scent drifting from the meal he'd discarded didn't help.

He folded the letter up and tucked it back into his pocket, then paced the floor, wearing a path into the plush carpet as he went over everything he'd learned. There had been no hidden passages anywhere in the entire palace, according to the plans Amma had shown him. Of course, they may not have been included on the plans, if the point was that they were secret. Didn't all royal residences have servant passages, allowing the staff to move about the palace unseen? Anders suspected he hadn't been told the whole truth about the presence of secret passages and hidden rooms within the Gilded Palace.

His disappointment that Amma had turned out to be a dead-end was palpable, and he didn't want to believe that his strongest theory was a flop. She could have deliberately concealed the real plans from him, not wanting to trust a northerner with such sensitive information.

He knocked on the wall beside his four-poster bed and listened. It didn't sound hollow. He traced his fingers along the wallpaper, looking for gaps or ridges where an opening might be hidden, knocking as he went. When he'd searched the entire room, he stood in the middle of the floor, hands on hips. Just because there were no passageways leading to this room didn't mean there weren't any in the Princesses' rooms.

A bell chimed midnight somewhere in the castle and Anders thought he heard something else between the chimes. After an hour or more of complete silence before the bell tolled, he could hear movement across the hall—the sound of soft footsteps on creaking floorboards.

He swallowed hard and clenched his jaw as he drew his shadows around himself like a cloak. The sensation made him shudder and he had to force down the memories of his time on the battlefield, but it was a necessity if he was going to discover the Princesses' secret and gain his freedom.

He blew out the candle, casting the room into darkness, and slowly opened the door. The hall was dimly lit, the flickering of oil lamps throwing shadows against the walls. Both Marco and Paolo appeared to be fast asleep at their posts, slumped against the wall—as did the other guards stationed outside Princess Isadora's door. They had to have all been dosed with sleeping potion, so part of his theory was correct. A rush of adrenaline spread through him; he was one step closer to the truth.

A clatter from the other side of the Princesses' door made Anders cross the hall and slowly open it, peering inside. His heart thundered in his chest; this was it. He'd caught the Princesses red-handed. He was about to discover the truth about the mystery and secure his freedom.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the lack of light, even from within his shadows. When they did, he saw the Princesses dressed in elegant, calf-length gowns and brand-new ballet slippers, their hair curled and decorated with ribbons. They were standing before the full-length mirror Anders had noticed earlier, the one he'd looked behind and found nothing but solid stone and wallpaper. He closed the

door softly and moved closer on silent footsteps, hoping to see what they were doing without giving himself away. Isadora had something in her hand and was pressing it to the frame of the mirror. A pendant of some sort, on a chain.

Anders barely managed to suppress a gasp as the glass in the mirror rippled and vanished, and a staircase was revealed in place of the Princesses' reflections. Torches seemed to burst to life along the walls, lighting the way as first Isadora, and then Livia, stepped through the mirror and began to descend the stairs.

For a split second, Anders wavered, unsure whether to run and wake the guards and show them what he had found. But what if the mirror glass reappeared the moment the girls were inside? He needed cast iron proof if he was going to convince the King.

Steeling himself, he followed them through the mirror and down the stone steps, staying as close behind as possible, not wanting to miss something and lose them. The last thing he needed was to become trapped inside this enchanted mirror. He accidentally brushed the back of Livia's arm and she turned slightly, but the expression on her face made his blood chill. It was vacant, as though she were under some kind of spell. Did that explain why the Princesses were unable to reveal where they went every night? They were in some sort of trance and had no knowledge of what they were doing?

The stone steps ended and Anders realised they were outside now, the salty tang of seawater filled his nostrils and a breeze ruffled his shadows, like a cloud of smoke dissipating into the air. He clutched them tighter about himself, not wanting to be caught by whoever had enchanted the Princesses.

Isadora and Livia led Anders down a path to a jetty that stretched out over the inky black water. The night sky was studded with glittering stars, and the full moon hung lower than Anders had ever seen it, even during the Longest Night back in the most northern part of the Silver Isle.

Twelve small boats were moored along the jetty, the nearest two were empty, but the other ten each held a young woman in similarly elegant attire to Isadora and Livia. A lantern hung from the front of each boat, lighting the way. And across the expanse of shimmering, dark water, Anders could just make out a building looming in the distance. From its size, and the turrets and spires jutting towards the moon, he thought it looked like a castle. But the architecture was more Silver Isle than Golden.

Trepidation washed over him. Could the curse be the doing of his own people? His own family, even? What would provoke such an act, and what could someone hope to achieve by cursing the Golden Princesses to dance? Perhaps his father and King Aurelio had had a falling out during Anders' time with the army, and his father had decided to retaliate. But the man Anders had known growing up was not the sort to target two innocent, teenage girls in order to get back at a rival. It didn't make sense, and now wasn't the time to attempt to puzzle it out.

While he'd been taking in his surroundings, Isadora and Livia had continued towards the two vacant boats and were now climbing in. Anders dashed after them as quietly as he could, and as her boat was the nearest, chose to jump in with Livia. There was barely room for the two of them without touching knees, and when the boat began to move by itself, powered by some sort of unseen magic, Anders had to grip the sides to stop himself from being pitched into the younger Princesses' lap.

He looked out across the water and saw the other boats sailing smoothly towards the castle ahead of them. Theirs lagged behind slightly, most likely owing to the extra weight. Livia didn't appear to notice though, her eyes were glassy, staring into the middle-distance.

As they neared the opposite bank and the castle came into view, Anders noticed that it seemed to be constructed from some dark rock, with twisting spires and, from what he could see, no windows. Trees surrounded the base of the castle,

glittering in the moonlight, almost as though they were made of glass or some semi-precious stone.

The boats moored themselves and the entranced young women climbed out one by one, moving gracefully and in perfect synchronicity towards the ominous, black castle. Anders followed, keeping his shadows tight around him, staying as close behind Livia, who brought up the rear of the twelve girls, as he could without bumping into her.

They filed up the shining steps and as the first one reached the vast double doors, they swung open, unbidden. Inside, Anders had to bite his lip to keep from remarking aloud. The interior of the castle was just as dark and brooding as the exterior; the floor and walls were hewn from a shining obsidian and enormous black chandeliers hung from the ceiling, almost low enough to touch. Candles flickered on every flat surface, wax dripping and pooling on the floor, their flames giving the place an eerie feel, and haunting music drifted through the rooms.

Anders breathed a sigh of relief. It would not be difficult to blend into the shadows in this place.

The Princesses and the other girls moved with purpose, as though they knew exactly where they were going, leading Anders through the large foyer into a cavernous ballroom. Here, the music grew louder and the number of candles tripled, giving off more heat than light, by the feel of it. The girls, who Anders now realised were the rest of the dancers from Princess Isadora's ballet company—the same ones she had performed Asterina's story with—walked straight up a set of steps in one corner and onto a raised stage. Anders froze at the bottom of the steps, realising what was about to happen.

The dancers got into position, freezing with arms stretched and legs extended, waiting. The music changed, and the performance began.

He watched as the ballerinas glided gracefully across the stage, each pirouette and rond de jambe precise, but their expressions remained vacant throughout. It was a poor substitute for the emotion and intensity Isadora had shown the

first time he had seen her dance, in her performance as Asterina. She was just as beautiful, just as skilled, but without her personality shining through the enchantment, the dance lacked a beating heart.

When the piece came to an end and the dancers bowed, the room erupted with applause.

And that's when Anders realised he was not alone.

CHAPTER 13

ANDERS



The ballroom was now studded with young men dressed in evening attire; all black but for the silver buttons and the elaborate masks that hid their features. Anders counted eleven men of various nationalities—one even bore the pale blonde hair of the Northern Isle, although he was too far away to discern any other features—and they all appeared to be as transfixed as the ballerinas. They stood stock-still and their eyes never left the stage, moving side to side in unison as the dance went on. It was a chilling sight to behold.

If a highborn son of the Silver Isle had been caught up in this sinister enchantment, then Anders was sure it couldn't be the fault of his kin. His father would certainly never endanger the life of one of their own. The thought gave Anders little comfort, as he stood surrounded by the captivated suitors, unsure how to proceed or what to expect.

The dancers performed to three more classical pieces Anders faintly recognised from his childhood. His mother had always loved music, instilling the same passion for the arts in her sons. Something Anders knew to be rare in Silver families, and he adored his mother for her defiance.

Anders had been encouraged in his drawing and painting, while his brother, Hans, had learned the harpsichord. Hans had been a talented musician, but his life—like Anders'—had been preordained. He would follow in their father's footsteps, the harpsichord would remain a hobby and nothing more.

Anders supposed he felt sorry for his older brother. At least he had been given the opportunity to make a career out of his

natural talent for drawing. Hans would never have the same chance. The expectations on second sons may have been suffocating, but the pressure on first sons was much worse.

Anders pressed his back against the wall as the Princesses descended the steps, followed by the rest of the dancers. The room had fallen silent and the only sound was the soft tapping of their ballet slippers on the highly polished, black onyx floor. They formed a line across the ballroom and as soon as the last girl had fallen into place, the young men moved as one, forming a line facing the dancers. In a single, smooth movement, they bowed to the dancers, who curtsied in return, before holding out a hand in a silent request. The girls each placed their own hand in the palm of the suitor before them, and with a loud eruption of music that made Anders' heart leap into his throat, they were whisked into yet another dance.

He sat on the bottom step and watched as the couples spun and swayed across the ballroom, and at the end of each song they returned to their lines and swapped dance partners before twirling away once more. All except for one girl each time, who stood to the side and watched as her companions completed the choreographed movements.

There were no missteps, no stumbles, and not a word was spoken between the men and women as they came together and spun apart, over and over and over. Anders recalled the shadows beneath Isadora's eyes, the way she'd gripped his forearm for balance, clearly struggling with some injury or other. Seeing her forced to perform like this, with no rest and no reprieve, he felt a swell of sympathy in his chest. She didn't deserve this, no one did.

Anders suppressed a yawn, he had no idea how long they had been here inside the enchanted mirror, but he assumed they would return once the final dance had ended. The Princesses were found back in their own beds every morning, so there was little danger of them not returning to the castle before daybreak.

He took in the other ten dancers, recognising some of them from the ballet performance he'd attended. Could one of them be responsible for this enchantment? But why would they

curse themselves, along with Isadora and Livia? Maybe the spell had never been intended for the Princesses, but had been placed on one of these other young women instead, and the rest were simply collateral damage. It was certainly a line of investigation worth considering.

Anders watched as Isadora twirled for her partner and the young man caught her deftly in his arms, dipping her low and holding her there for a few seconds. He felt a slippery, twisting sensation in his gut as he watched, and heat crept up his neck. But it was soon replaced by a jolt as he took in the pale-blond hair of her suitor, the tall, lean physique. The man dancing with Isadora bore a striking resemblance to his brother, Hans.

But, Hans was back home in D'Argentis. Wasn't he? Surely, if he had travelled to Orovia to visit with the Golden Princesses or perform some diplomatic duty and had never returned, their parents would have raised the alarm? If the Crown Prince had been missing without word for more than a few weeks, Anders expected their father would be on his way to Orovia, accompanied by a few thousand of his best fighters, to have a stern word with King Aurelio. He was not a man known for his patience or easy-going manner.

While Anders had been distracted by Isadora and her suspiciously familiar dance partner, a table laden with food and drink had appeared at one side of the ballroom, and as the music came to an end on the final song, the ballerinas and their suitors all moved towards it in a procession. They lined up and politely filled small plates with delicate triangular sandwiches, pastries and chocolate tarts. At the end of the table, they each picked up a golden goblet, filled to the brim with what looked to Anders like wine. Then they spread out around the ballroom to eat, drink and stare blankly at each other.

Anders' stomach groaned painfully at the sight and smell of so much food, after having fasted all day. There were a few sandwiches left sitting on the silver platter nearest him, and he couldn't resist reaching over, hand hidden by his shadows, and grabbing one. The first bite was exquisite, the meat and fruit filling hit all the right notes of sweet and savoury, and the bread was so soft it must have been freshly baked that day. He

snuck a couple more sandwiches, making sure none of the ensorcelled revellers saw, and then he moved along the table and took up the only remaining goblet, downing the contents in two gulps. It burned a little going down, but the wine tasted of blackberries and plums, and it warmed his insides pleasantly.

Where was the harm in eating and drinking now, even if the food and drink had been dosed with sleeping potion? He just needed to get back to the castle before he began to feel any effects. The King would need some proof of what Anders had discovered, so he tucked the now empty goblet in the waistband of his trousers and pulled his shirt over it, careful not to let his shadows disperse and reveal any part of him.

He needn't have worried, because the Princesses and other dancers had begun to make their way out of the castle, leaving the masked suitors standing in a line, expressionless.

Anders hurried after the girls, staying on their heels as they left the warmth and decadence of the obsidian castle and stepped out into the cool, briny air. As they passed the glittering trees around the castle walls, Anders darted over to take a closer look. The wine goblet could have come from anywhere, but a branch from one of these strange trees would be incontrovertible proof. He snapped off a twig with some difficulty, causing a metallic screech to break the silence, but the dancers didn't turn, they just climbed into their little boats and, one by one, began to sail back across the water towards the tower and the enchanted mirror.

He ran to the jetty and clumsily boarded the only boat still waiting to set sail. The boat rocked a little as he dropped onto the seat across from Princess Isadora, careful not to brush knees with her. For a moment, he felt as though she were looking right at him; a small crease formed between her brows and her lips parted. But a second later, her expression cleared and the boat began to move. He let out a silent sigh of relief.

He'd uncovered the mystery. He was finally going home to D'Argentis. As he looked at the strong, self-possessed young woman sitting across from him in the little boat, a strange sensation threatened his joy at the thought of going home. He

might have discovered the truth of where Isadora went every night, but she wasn't yet free from the curse, and he knew in his heart he couldn't leave until he knew she and the others were safe. This wasn't over yet.

CHAPTER 14

ISSADORA



Issy lay amongst her pillows and blankets, staring up at the flowers carved into her bedroom ceiling. Her mother had commissioned them for Issy's tenth birthday; roses for beauty, lilies for calm, and sunflowers for happiness.

She sat up and looked down at the rumpled calf-length gown she'd slept in, catching sight of the discarded pair of battered slippers lying in the middle of the floor. She longed for the day she would wake up in the nightclothes she'd gone to sleep wearing.

She rubbed her thumb over the sunburst on her locket absentmindedly. In just a few days, her eighteenth birthday would arrive—the sixth one since her mother had died—and with it the pressure to choose a suitor, marry and begin her formal training for the day she would inherit the throne from her father.

Unless...If the soldier, Anders, couldn't solve the mystery and break the curse, she could end up unmarriageable, or worse. She pointed her toes, stretching her aching calves and testing her sore ankle. Had anyone ever danced themselves to death? She didn't fancy being the first.

She couldn't say how she knew, but something had been different last night. The memories that teased at the very edge of her consciousness were somehow closer, more solid than they'd ever been before. They were still just out of reach, dancing away when she stretched up to brush her fingers against them. And there was nothing she could grab onto, nothing that told her who or why this was happening. Just a

feeling she couldn't put into words—not that anyone would believe her if she did. But something had changed, and she had a suspicion she knew why.

Her bedroom door creaked open and Livia's face appeared, relief shining in her eyes when she saw her sister lying on the bed. Issy knew that relief, she felt it too, knowing Livia hadn't become another victim of the curse, like the missing princes.

Livia stepped into the room, still dressed in her own pale blue gown, and clambered on top of the covers beside Issy. Nina the calico joined them a moment later, mewing softly as she burrowed under Liv's arm.

“Good morning,” Liv said lightly.

“Is it?” Issy didn't turn her head, but she could feel her sister's eyes on her face.

“Well, the sun is shining...”

Issy snorted. “The sun always shines in Orovia.” She could almost feel Livia roll her eyes.

“Is it the curse?” Liv asked quietly.

Issy rolled onto her side to look her sister in the eye, propping herself up on an elbow. “No, of course not. Why would it be? We're only being magically forced to dance ourselves into the grave every single night with no end in sight. Oh, and almost a dozen princes and lords have vanished from our palace in the past few months, creating an international incident. Why would I be upset about that?”

Livia chewed her bottom lip thoughtfully. After a moment, her dark eyebrows lifted and she plastered a smile on her face. “It's your birthday tomorrow.”

Issy huffed and flopped onto her back again. “Magnificent. So, I'm either cursed and no one will want to marry me, or the curse has been leading up to me turning eighteen and some horrible fate is going to befall us at midnight. Things couldn't be better.”

Livia sat bolt upright then, a genuine, impish grin tugging at her cheeks. “I know what might cheer you up.” She hopped

off the bed and disappeared from the room, pursued by Nina.

Issy sat cross legged, watching the door with a frown that deepened by the second. What in the heavens was Livia up to now?

When she reappeared, in her hands was a small, black box with a white ribbon. It was a beautiful gift, and Issy felt a little shiver of excitement at the thought of her first birthday present. Livia pulled the end of the ribbon to untie the bow and handed the box to Issy.

“What is it?”

Livia practically bounced up and down. “Open it.”

When Issy lifted the lid, the most delicious scent she had ever smelled rose up to meet her.

“It’s chocolate!” Livia squealed. “Go on, try one. They’re absolutely delicious.”

The box contained six elegant chocolate bonbons, the kind that their father had been gifted once or twice by foreign dignitaries. There were four empty spaces where Livia had obviously already indulged herself.

“Livia, where did you get these?” Issy’s tone was sharper than she’d intended, but she couldn’t help it. This clearly wasn’t a birthday gift for Issy, so where had Livia gotten her hands on these chocolates?

Livia’s face fell. “They were left for me by a secret admirer.”

“*A secret admirer?* Livia, how could you be so stupid? These could have been poisoned. They could have been left for you by the person behind the curse.” Issy felt both her voice and her anger rising, her sister’s reckless behaviour could have gotten her killed. And Issy would have been powerless to stop it. The thought made her stomach churn and her throat constrict.

Livia’s bottom lip quivered. “Who would poison chocolate?”

A knock came at the door. “Miss Isadora? Are you awake?”

Livia’s eyes widened, but Issy just hissed at her to get rid of the chocolates and she hid the box behind her back.

“Yes, Beatriz. Come in.”

Issy’s lady’s maid entered with a maroon day dress draped over one arm, took one look at the Princesses’ clothes and hair and sent for two baths to be drawn.

While Issy soaked in the neroli and orange blossom scented water, Beatriz combed the knots from her long, damp hair, humming softly as she worked. Issy recognised the song, it was a lullaby her mother had sung to her and Livia when they were little girls. Closing her eyes, she let the steam and the song and the gentle ministrations of Beatriz lull her into a meditative state.

Her mind wandered back to her memories from the midnight balls. One image from the previous night kept taunting her, shimmering at the corner of her eye and vanishing as soon as she turned her mind towards it. She could see a figure—a man, she thought—dressed all in black, with a mask over his eyes. Was he the one who had cursed them? She couldn’t be sure. There’d been something familiar about him...

If Anders didn’t figure out what was going on today, he’d become another victim of the curse and vanish before daybreak. And then Issy would be back at square one; at least until Prince Philip of Innsmere arrived. But was another missing young nobleman going to help the situation?

Unless Issy tried to solve the mystery herself, and no more princes disappeared. Perhaps she could even find the ones who had and return them to their own kingdoms before any foreign rulers could launch an attack on Orovia. Her father had enough to deal with without the added strain of her and Livia’s affliction.

Beatriz wrapped a large, soft sheet around Issy as she stepped out of the now cool water. Once she was dressed in the

maroon gown, she took a seat at her dressing table and Beatriz began her work with the comb once more, separating Issy's thick, dark brown tresses into sections and braiding them tightly, wrapping each braid around her head and securing them with pearl-encrusted pins.

“How are you feeling today, Miss?”

Issy looked at her lady's maid in the mirror, watching her nimble fingers twisting and plaiting her hair. “I'm well, thank you, Beatriz. A little tired, but no more than usual.”

Beatriz nodded, but Issy could see the maid was holding something back.

“What is it?”

Beatriz glanced at the mirror, meeting Issy's eye. “It's not my place, Miss.”

“Please. Speak your mind.” The woman had become an almost motherly figure in Issy's life since her mother had passed away, and she trusted the maid's judgement and her plain talking, no nonsense manner.

Beatriz took a length of maroon velvet ribbon and tied it around Issy's neck. “I worry about you, Miss. First, the—” She hesitated, lowering her voice a fraction. “Curse. And now, this Silver prisoner in the palace, given free rein to roam wherever he pleases, watching over you at night. It ain't right, Miss.”

Issy sighed. “It is what my father has decided, we all must accept it.”

Beatriz nodded dutifully. “Aye, Miss. Forgive me.”

Issy shook her head. “There's nothing to forgive, Beatriz. I appreciate your concern, and you know I value your opinion. I'm not exactly happy about it myself but having spoken to him briefly—the Silver—he does seem a fairly intelligent sort. For a northerner, at least. Perhaps he will truly be the one to break the curse?”

Issy gnawed at the inside of her cheek as Beatriz hooked gold earrings through her lobes and nestled a gold circlet into

her hair, securing it with pins. She wasn't sure she believed it, but what did she have to lose? He was investigating the curse whether she liked it or not. She may as well let him. Anything he did discover would only help her own investigation.

Because she'd decided, the only way to put an end to all of this was to uncover the truth herself.

CHAPTER 15

ANDERS



Anders rolled over and groaned, clutching the pillow to his pounding head. Where was that banging coming from? And why did his mouth taste like the bottom of a birdcage?

He opened his eyes and was assaulted by the blinding light filling his bedroom. What had happened last night? He felt as though he'd been trampled by a horse.

He sat up and went to sink his feet into the plush carpet, but withdrew with a frown. He looked down to find a tree branch on the floor beside his bed—oak or chestnut, maybe—and next to it a dull, pewter goblet rolled away from where he'd kicked it. What in the world was going on here? Had someone snuck into his room in the night and planted these items as clues?

His plate of food from the previous evening sat untouched on the table, beside it a full cup of wine. Odd, he didn't feel especially hungry.

Anders dressed in the embellished shirt and trousers he'd been provided, sniffing the collar as his nostrils were hit with the scent of sea salt and some kind of incense. This morning was growing stranger and stranger by the minute. He slid his feet into his boots, only to find them damp, as though he'd been out walking in the rain the previous day.

Scratching his stubbly chin, he looked around the guest bedroom and took in the strange details one at a time. They added up to a very confusing picture, one that Anders could

not piece together. He only had two nights left to discover the secret of the Princesses' curse, he needed to focus, but everything felt fuzzy. How had he gotten to bed last night? He couldn't remember.

A knock came at the door and it opened to reveal Marco looking somewhat dishevelled. "Morning. Sleep well?"

Anders raised an eyebrow. "I think so. You?"

Marco shrugged. "Same as always." He jutted his chin towards Anders. "The King wants to see you."

He led Anders down to the formal dining room where the royal family were eating breakfast. The Princesses both paused, spoons halfway to their mouths. Livia smiled, but Isadora's brow furrowed and she looked away, as though she were trying to remember something.

Anders bowed. "Your Majesty."

"Ah, Master Boreas. How was your night? Have you uncovered the mystery?" The King's expression was open and expectant. He gestured to the empty chair across from Isadora and Anders took a seat.

"Unfortunately not, Your Majesty." He saw the Princesses exchange a look, Livia's expression was nervous, but Isadora looked unsurprised.

Anders took the pewter goblet and tree branch from his pockets and laid them out on the tabletop. "Someone left these in my room last night. I'm not sure if they're clues or only meant to confuse me, but I plan to get to the bottom of this. I still have two days left to find the truth."

The King cleared his throat and dabbed the corners of his mouth with a linen napkin. "One day, Master Boreas. You've wasted the first two, and as you were forewarned, you only have three nights to explain what is happening to my daughters."

Anders frowned. "One day? But, how can that..." He looked at the faces of Princess Livia and Princess Isadora and saw, with dawning realisation, that they agreed with their father. So, where had he lost an entire day?

Was this what the Princesses went through every single morning? It was an unsettling experience, and to have it repeated daily for weeks, or even months on end, would be unbearable. Anders felt a ripple of sympathy for the exhausted-looking young women sitting across from him, toying with their porridge oats.

He forced his mind back to the previous morning. He remembered the mysterious note advising him not to eat or drink—had he ignored the anonymous helper and eaten something the previous evening? He couldn't recall, but his meal had sat apparently uneaten when he woke, so he could only assume not.

There were vague images flickering in the corners of his mind; a dark room, twirling dancers, a feeling of strangeness. But nothing concrete, nothing that told him what had happened the night prior.

Why couldn't he remember?

Something he had heard the day before drifted around his head but wouldn't settle. It was the historian, in the library. Amma. She'd said something about the god of shadow making people forget...

Was that why he couldn't remember anything from the previous night? Slowly, he pieced together the events of the day before, but by the afternoon the memories were hazy, and only meaningless images and words remained from the second night of his investigation.

Could that explain why the Princesses claimed not to know what they did each night? They weren't being drugged or poisoned, their memories were being stolen? If he hadn't possessed magic himself, he would have thought it absurd, but knowing what he could do, maybe there were others with abilities he had never come across...

The King was speaking now, and Anders had missed most of what he'd said.

“You don't want to waste your last opportunity to earn your freedom, Master Boreas. I expect to hear from you this

evening as to where my daughters are going each night, and why their shoes are worn to tatters each morning.”

Anders nodded, his blood turning to ice water in his veins. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

If he failed to solve the mystery that evening, he would be returned to the dungeons, and most likely sentenced to death. If not for his alleged crimes, then to ensure his silence about the Princesses’ sticky situation. Failure was not an option, he couldn’t spend his final days in a dark cell beneath the Gilded Palace, knowing he’d committed Isadora to a life of misery that she couldn’t escape.

The King flicked his fingers in the direction of the door, irritation in the lines around his mouth, and Anders pushed his chair back with a screech. Marco and Paolo escorted him from the dining room and fell into step beside him.

“Where to now?” Marco asked, hurrying to keep up with him.

“The library,” Anders replied. “I need to speak to the historian. Again.”

“So, there is nothing you can tell me? You don’t know anything about a sleeping potion or memory-erasing magic that could make me and the Princesses forget everything we see each night?”

Amma shook her head. “I’m afraid not. We have a small section on magic here in the library, but I have never come across an enchantment in any of the texts like you describe. Can you remember nothing of last night?”

It was Anders’ turn to shake his head, rubbing a hand over his face. He was exhausted. How much sleep had he gotten last night? Clearly not enough. “Not much. Flashes here and there. Nothing concrete. All I have are this goblet and this twig.” He gestured to the items on the table between them.

Amma pursed her lips, studying the clues. “Can I see your notes?”

“My what?”

Amma smiled. “I’ve seen you jotting down information in your little notebook. Could I see it?”

Not feeling entirely comfortable, Anders withdrew his sketchbook from his pocket and passed it to the librarian. She opened it and began flicking through, eyes darting left to right at a speed Anders couldn’t quite believe. When she reached his sketches, her eyes widened.

“Did you draw this?” She turned the book around to show him a pencil drawing of the Gilded Palace from the harbour. He had scrawled it quickly as the trade ship had approached Orovia. “This is wonderful, Anders. You have a real talent.”

He felt heat creeping up his chest at her compliment. He wasn’t used to receiving them. “Thank you. It’s just a hobby.” He held out a hand to take the notebook back, but Amma held onto it a moment longer.

“This is how you unpick your memories and remember last night, Anders. You draw it. Draw everything you remember, no matter how insignificant it may seem. Just one image could be the key to unlocking all of your memories, and freeing the Princesses from this terrible curse.”

He chewed the inside of his cheek, sceptical. Would drawing his memories really help? He’d never tried it before. He’d never had a memory he truly wanted to remember though. Usually, he was glad to forget them. The way his father had looked as he’d left their house to join the army; his mother’s tear-stained face. The sound of his comrades screaming as their flesh burned and their limbs were shattered, while he hid beneath his shadows, cowering in a hole until it had all been over.

He pushed the thought away violently. Now was not the time to obsess over what he should have done during his time in the army. How he should have helped his friends and fellow soldiers, instead of running away and using his magic to escape.

“Alright. I’ll give it a try.” He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt.

CHAPTER 16

ISADORA



Issy lay in the damp grass beneath her mother's statue. The sun hadn't yet reached its peak and there was still a delicious coolness to the ground, despite the warm air. She'd come out here to think after breakfast and had fallen asleep for a while, surrounded by birds chirping and bees buzzing, and the scent of freshly mown grass and sea air.

She'd almost allowed herself to believe the Silver prisoner would uncover the curse and free Livia and herself from their nightly torment. But thanks to his bumbling ineptitude, he'd fallen foul of all the devil's tricks and was no closer to discovering the truth than any of his predecessors. All of whom had disappeared, never to be seen again, on the third night. And she found she wasn't the slightest bit surprised, her mother had always said if you wanted something done properly, you had to do it yourself.

"You were right, Mama."

A memory teased at the edge of Issy's mind, but every time she tried to grasp it with both hands it slipped through the gaps between her fingers. Snatches of music, a faceless man dressed all in black, a shock of blonde hair. Had the Silver—Anders—been dancing with her at the ball?

No. That wasn't possible. Was it? He couldn't have been inside the enchantment with them. That had never happened before...

Or perhaps it had. Perhaps that was exactly where all of the missing suitors were; trapped inside the enchantment until

someone found a way to break it.

Whatever had happened, Anders had had his memories stolen too, and the chances of him breaking the curse that evening and them all escaping their fates were slim.

If Issy wanted the curse broken, she was going to have to do it herself. And for that, she'd need help. And books. Lots and lots of books.

Brushing the dirt from her skirts, she marched back to the palace and down the hall to the library, where Amma was waiting.

“Ah, welcome Princess Isadora, what can I assist you with today?”

Issy flicked her braid behind her shoulder and straightened her spine. “I'm looking for a book on magic.”

Amma smiled enigmatically. “I have been waiting for this day.” She disappeared amongst the stacks.

Issy followed, confusion swirling in her mind. “What do you mean? Waiting for what?”

Amma paused, turning back to look at Issy over her shoulder. “For you to step into your destiny, Isadora.”

“My destiny? As the future queen, you mean?” Tomorrow would be her eighteenth birthday, after all, she supposed she was an adult now; with all the freedoms and responsibilities that entailed. Her formal training for the day she'd take the throne would begin soon.

“Indeed,” Amma mused, one eyebrow raised. “Your destiny as the future monarch of the Golden Isle. And one of the most powerful women on the continent. Blessed by the sun goddess herself.”

Issy chewed her bottom lip. She felt like there was something Amma wasn't saying, but she didn't have time to worry about why. She needed answers, she had to find out as much as she could about magic and the curse, and maybe, if she and Anders worked together, they could break the spell before anyone else was consumed by it.

How long would it be before she and Livia vanished, like the men who had tried to uncover the truth so far? Whether they were trapped inside the spell or not, Issy didn't want to befall the same fate.

Amma helped her to find every book on magic, curses and enchantments in the library, and they sat around the low table flipping through the pages, trying to find a single clue. But none contained anything like the curse that had been inflicted on Issy and her fellow dancers.

Something Anders had said nagged at Issy's mind. "Amma?"

"Mmm?" The historian looked up from the thick, leatherbound tome she was studying, index finger trailing beneath each word as she read.

"Did you know my mother well?"

Amma's brow creased, and she closed the book in her lap. "I did, Princess. She was a kind and clever woman; a wonderful queen. Why do you ask?"

Issy toyed with the end of her braid, unsure how to word the question floating through her mind. "Was she—do you think—was her death...natural?"

Amma's eyes flew open at that, her lips parting in surprise. Issy winced, wishing she could take the question back.

"I couldn't possibly say for certain, but that is what I have been told. Do you have reason to suspect otherwise?"

Did she? The vague musings of a Silver soldier, nothing more. "No. Not really. I just wondered, maybe, if she'd been cursed too."

Amma's expression turned sad. "I'm afraid not, Princess. Your mother was taken ill, it was very quick. There were no signs of any curse, not like the one you and Princess Livia are suffering from. If that is even what is happening to you."

Issy baulked. "What else could it be?"

The historian shrugged. "Any number of things. Someone's idea of a joke, or some enemy of your father's out

for revenge? There are many ways to make someone feel confused or forgetful, it is not necessarily magical. Your mysterious affliction could have a very mundane explanation. Sinister, but mundane.”

Issy pondered this for a long time. Who would want to hurt her and her sister? And what were their motivations? To damage the reputation of the Southern Isle? To weaken alliances and spread fear and mistrust?

But she kept coming back to the missing princes. If the true explanation for the memory loss and exhaustion was something dull and rational, then where were the princes?

If it continued much longer, the curse wouldn't only hurt Issy's prospects of finding a good match and marrying well, but it could put the entire nation at risk of invasion and war.

She needed to speak to her father.

KING AURELIO'S study wasn't far from the library, and Issy made her way there quickly but quietly, not wanting to alert any of the guards to her presence. She needed to speak to her father alone, without an audience.

As she reached his study, she noticed the door stood slightly ajar, and low voices came from inside. Her father was talking to someone—arguing, by the sound of it. Issy leaned closer.

“We cannot let word of this reach the other kingdoms,” her father was saying. “This, along with the vanishing princes, could destroy any trade agreements we have left. We'd be ruined.”

Issy instantly recognised her uncle's voice when he replied. “That's as may be, Aurelio, but how do you intend to keep it secret? The entire harvest is spoiled, Holy Fire has infected all of the grain. Half has already been distributed and may have been ingested, the effects could be catastrophic. You do not want an epidemic on your hands, brother.”

Issy's eyes widened. There was something wrong with the grain? And her father wanted to cover it up? She couldn't believe he would intentionally put the people of the Southern Isle at risk. She must have misunderstood, the father she knew would never do such a thing.

"Iago, I appreciate your council, but I am the King. This is my decision to make. I can't risk worsening our already precarious position. If Isadora and Livia do not find suitable matches soon, they may become unmarriageable. And that is not a situation any of us can afford to be in. I need them to marry well and bring financial aid and trade deals from other nations, or we will not only be vulnerable. We will be destitute."

Issy had to press closer to the doorway to catch her uncle's next words, as his voice dropped lower. "You are only King because my sister died. If she had never married you, you would be nothing. You'd do well to remember that."

Issy frowned, she had never heard her father and uncle argue like this before. Their relationship had always been good, especially since her mother had passed. They needed each other. Were things truly so bad that they'd both lost sight of that?

Aurelio's response was a growl. "Everything I do is to honour Idalia's memory. I keep this country running, I raise those girls, and I maintain our nation's great reputation, all for her. So do not make the mistake of assuming I have forgotten why I am here. No one knows this as well as I do, Iago."

Her uncle sighed, and she heard the sound of footsteps pacing around the room. "What is there to be done then? If the people continue to consume the effected rye bread, they shall all go mad and die."

"If they do not, they shall starve."

Issy's blood drained from her face and she felt a little lightheaded. Was their country in such dire straits that a scandal could ruin all trade deals with other nations, and the people were forced to eat contaminated bread and risk disease and death to protect the Southern Isle's foreign reputation?

How had she not realised how bad things had gotten? Her father had seemed more stressed than usual lately, true, but she'd never imagined it was as serious as this.

But she had been preoccupied lately, too. Distracted by the curse—or whatever it was. Since speaking with Amma, she'd begun to wonder if it had any magical root cause at all. What if someone, a servant or visitor perhaps, were simply poisoning them?

But, to what end? And what about the shoes? How on earth could someone destroy their ballet slippers each night, just to distract them?

And that was before she considered the missing young men. No, there was no mundane explanation for what was going on, it had to be some kind of spell. Perhaps the curse was the distraction? And the problem with the grain was the real issue.

It was a puzzle she hadn't quite found all of the pieces to yet, let alone put them together. But she hoped that if she kept at it, everything would soon fall into place and she would have her answer.

CHAPTER 17

ISADORA



Lady Fiona took a delicate sip of tea from her bone china cup and set it back in its saucer with barely a clink. She smiled at Issy and Livia and folded her hands in her lap.

“Now, tell me, Your Royal Highnesses. What do you enjoy?”

Issy looked at Livia, her mind a blank, and her sister’s expression told her she was similarly bewildered.

Lady Fiona’s carefully curated smile faltered momentarily. “Do you have pastimes? Hobbies or interests?”

Livia chewed her lip. “I like gardening.”

Lady Fiona’s brows shot up almost to her hairline, which was quite a feat as her hair had been backcombed into a vertiginous bouffant today, decorated with chartreuse feathers—the same colour as her flouncy, ribbon-bedecked gown.

“Gardening? Well, I suppose tending to rosebushes is a very ladylike and rewarding pastime. Do you, perhaps, play an instrument?”

Livia shook her head.

“We dance.” Issy watched as Lady Fiona’s face fell.

“Of course. Yes. Indeed.” She cleared her throat, uncomfortable with the direction their conversation had taken.

They were seated around a small round table in the orangery, overlooking the gardens where trees were laden with fruits. The wall to ceiling glass let the sun in, filling the room

with a warmth that made Issy think of summers spent lying in the grass looking up at the sky and making shapes out of the clouds. It reminded her of her mother's embrace. It made her feel safe and loved. A feeling that fizzled out as she endured Lady Fiona's questions.

The heat appeared to have the opposite effect on Lady Fiona, who repeatedly dabbed her glistening upper lip with her lace-edged napkin, looking more and more flustered.

"Now, ladies. Your father has invited me here to help you prepare to meet your suitors and find an appropriate match so that you may marry and fulfil your duties to the Crown."

Issy had a horrible feeling she knew exactly what Lady Fiona was angling at. Their duty, as princesses, was to bear children and produce an heir to the throne. The idea terrified Issy, and Livia looked thoroughly confused.

Issy did hope to one day have children of her own, but that day was a long way off in the distance. Once she'd found a man who loved her as fiercely as her father had loved her mother. As selflessly as Cethin had loved Asterina.

Lady Fiona sighed. "What about reading? I hear you are both well read and highly educated. What are your favourite books?"

Livia's face broke into a wide grin. "I love fairy stories, and folktales. And anything about plants or dancing."

"I've mostly been reading books about magic, lately," Issy said, reaching for a tiny triangular sandwich filled with smoked salmon and cream cheese. She took a bite and savoured the taste as she watched Lady Fiona's chin quiver. She'd made the widow uncomfortable. Good.

"Magic? Like in Livia's fairy tales?"

Issy could see the hope flickering in Lady Fiona's eyes, and she relished the opportunity to extinguish it.

"No, real magic," she replied, nonchalant. "Enchantments, spells. Curses. The old ways."

Perhaps the exhaustion and worry had finally gotten to her, but Issy wanted to frighten the over-frilled and flounced woman in front of them. She hadn't wanted to attend tea, or chat with Lady Fiona about her personal interests. It was a waste of her precious time; time she could have spent investigating and trying to put an end to the curse before it was too late. Frustration made her irritable and belligerent. Not her finest features, she knew.

But she had no desire to find a good suitor or marry well. She wanted to marry for love, and nothing less. And if that wasn't to be possible, then she would rather rule the Golden Isle alone.

She was the Crown Princess. She was a jewel, and any prince would be lucky to marry her. But if she married well enough, she may be forced to leave the Golden Isle and move across the continent to rule beside her new husband in his own nation. And if Livia did the same, there would be some difficult decisions to make if they were to avoid civil unrest. A lot of political manoeuvring would be required, a regent would need to be chosen.

Unless—was that why Lady Fiona was here, encouraging them to behave like ladies and find suitable matches? Was she hoping to marry them off abroad and fill the empty space with an heir of her own? She had another think coming if that was her plan.

She was sort of beautiful, Issy supposed, although she would look better with slightly less effort. If she washed off her cosmetics, undid her hair and swapped her elaborate chartreuse gown for a simple one, perhaps in periwinkle blue to match her eyes, Issy could imagine she would be a real beauty. Not quite a rival for her mother's good looks, but attractive, nonetheless.

Issy knew her father had been lonely these past six years, but she'd hoped she and Livia would be enough for him. At least, until they were grown up and married. Then he could find someone to spend his later years with. She certainly didn't want him to spend the rest of his life alone. He deserved happiness.

But perhaps that day had come sooner than Issy had anticipated. If the conversation she'd overheard between her father and uncle had been anything to go on, there were larger issues at play and her father may need the support of a loving wife to get him through. It was clear he was struggling with the stress of ruling alone, grieving his late wife, while his daughters suffered under a terrible curse and his people starved or succumbed to the infected grain.

Maybe the time had come for Issy to step up and take more of an active role in ruling the country, allowing her father to take a step back and regain some perspective.

Lady Fiona cleared her throat and dabbed the corners of her mouth with her napkin. "I hear it will be your eighteenth birthday, Princess Isadora. How do you feel about finally becoming a woman?"

Issy suppressed an eye roll. She knew Lady Fiona was only trying to make polite conversation, but she was growing increasingly bored of this charade. She needed to spend every spare moment trying to figure out the curse and break it, or she'd never be free.

"I have to say, I am not thrilled by the prospect. Being paraded in front of a never-ending line of arrogant, pompous princes so that they may properly consider me and decide whether I am of marriage potential is not my idea of a good time." Her voice rose as the strain of the past few weeks built up inside her and was finally released. "If I'm really lucky, father will hand me off to some brutish Silver prince in exchange for all the salt in the Northern Sea and I'll be forced to bear his savage children and live in perpetual night."

As the words left her mouth, she realised the orangery windows were open, and the Silver soldier, Anders, was standing between two fruit trees plucking apples from their branches. He stilled, and she knew he'd overheard her, despite the fact he did not look up or turn towards the window. Her heart sank, she hadn't intended for him to hear. And, truthfully, she hadn't meant what she'd said, she'd only been letting off steam, releasing her frustration and anger at her own circumstances.

She couldn't actually think of a single time Anders had been anything less than polite, respectful and perfectly civilised. Except for the first time they had met, when he'd thrown himself at her on the stage. But even then, he'd been trying to protect her from injury—she could admit that now.

But it was too late, the words were out and she couldn't take them back.

CHAPTER 18

ANDERS



Anders steeled himself. It didn't matter what the Crown Princess thought of him and his people, all that mattered was that he was going to solve the riddle tonight and gain his freedom. He would never have to look upon Princess Isadora again after tomorrow.

But something about her words had stung, cutting deeper than even he had anticipated. Were Silvers brutes? Some certainly were.

Was he one of them?

A vision of his comrades being killed by the enemy while he cowered beneath his shadows, hiding until the attack was over, rose up in his mind. Bile hit the back of his throat as he recalled the sights, sounds and smells of that terrible day—his friends screaming as their flesh burned. Sometimes, at night, he dreamt of them, and their screams morphed into his name. They called to him for help, but still he hid.

Princess Isadora was right. She was far too delicate and precious to marry a Silver prince. He had no doubt she was strong enough to survive in the Northern Isle—to thrive even. He knew dancers had to be disciplined, dedicated and hardworking. And she was an incredibly talented dancer, but he could also see the work she had put in to become that way. The hours she must have spent practicing, strengthening her mind and body, and perfecting her technique. Those were admirable qualities in the north.

But she'd spent her entire life living in the lap of luxury, surrounded by servants, never having to lift a finger. And she deserved that life. To be a queen, to reign over the Golden Isle as their beloved ruler. And that was something the Northern Isle, with its focus on functionality and servitude, could not offer her.

No. He was here to earn his freedom, not as a suitor. All Anders expected in return for freeing the Princesses from their entrapment was his release. Nothing more.

"How is the investigation going?" Anders spun to find Isadora standing behind him, admiring an orange from one of the fruit trees. He'd been gathering apples and oranges to stave off the hunger; after failing to solve the mystery two nights in a row, he wasn't trusting any food or drink that had been prepared by the palace staff.

He ran a hand over his patchy, blonde hair, mouth suddenly dry. "Your Royal Highness. How are you?"

She waved a hand in the air. "Please, call me Isadora."

He nodded. "Anders."

"I know." She cast her eyes downwards, and for the first time she seemed unsure of herself. Shy, almost. Was it possible she felt guilty for her harsh words? He'd seen no reason to believe she hadn't meant them.

"So, how is it going? The investigation? Do you have any clues as to who might be responsible?" She chewed her bottom lip, scanning his face for answers. He wished he had them to give.

"I'm confident I'll solve the mystery before my time runs out," he lied. "I have a few lines of enquiry, a couple of good suspects. I'm building a case and I plan to present it to your father tonight." He tapped his notebook, where he'd been sketching everything he could remember from the previous night and jotting down any notes that might connect it all together.

"Do you mind if I take a look?" Issy's eyes shone with curiosity, and something else. Almost like desperation. He had

never thought to ask her whether she wanted the curse to be broken. While she hadn't exactly obstructed his investigation, he felt she was hiding things and, therefore, he had assumed that she wasn't particularly keen on ending the enchantment—whatever it entailed. Could he have been wrong? Those shadows under her eyes, the way she played with her food instead of eating, he saw the toll the curse took on her. Why hadn't he imagined she would want to break it as much as he did?

He looked down at the notebook in his hands, heat creeping up his chest and neck, turning his ears pink. "I—I suppose so," he stammered. He handed the book to her and watched as she opened it to the first page and began to flip through the book, her eyes darting across the pages, sharp and intelligent. When she reached the first sketch—a dark tower under a full moon—her eyes widened. She studied each drawing, looking up at Anders when she turned to an image of a man with blonde hair in a black waistcoat and trousers, a mask obscuring half of his face. He knew what she was thinking—it looked just like him. He wasn't sure why he'd drawn it, only that his memories had featured a young man who looked to be from the north. Whether or not his subconscious had inserted himself into the memory, he wasn't sure, but Amma had told him to draw everything he remembered. And so he had.

Issy turned the page and froze. A delicate pencil drawing of a ballerina filled the next page. Her form was perfect, loose curls and ribbons floating out behind her as she spun.

"You drew this?"

Anders rubbed the back of his neck. "I, uh, yes. Amma suggested I draw everything I could remember from last night to try and jog my memory." He felt his face burning under her gaze. "I remember you dancing. And I don't think it's a memory of the Asterina and Cethin ballet. The dress is different, and your hair has ribbons instead of a crown." He cleared his throat, realising he was rambling.

The Princess looked at him for a long moment, an unreadable expression on her face. Then she turned back to the

notebook and continued flicking through the pages, one by one. Anders had drawn a ballroom full of dancing couples, an inky-black lake reflecting the moonlight, and dozens and dozens of images of Isadora.

He'd drawn her performing ballet with the other dancers, he'd drawn her waltzing with a tall, faceless suitor. He'd drawn her eyes, staring out from the page like smouldering embers; her silhouette against the bright, silver disc of the moon. He'd drawn close-ups and full-length illustrations; detailed sketches like the sunburst symbol on her locket, and crude, unfinished scribbles that were almost unrecognisable as her. But Anders knew. And from the expression on the Princess's face as she turned each page, taking in every single image of herself, absorbing them, he could tell she knew it, too.

Finally, she closed the book and looked at him. "They're mostly of me."

It was as though all of the air in the world had vanished in an instant, with those four words. All he could do was nod, casting his eyes downward, and wait for the inevitable backlash. But it never came. Instead, she held the notebook out to him, and glancing up at her, he took it.

"Tonight is the third night," Isadora said, her tone indecipherable. He nodded in response. "I turn eighteen tomorrow. I wish to find a way to end the curse, for Livia's sake, as well as my own. But I can't do it alone. I believe you're right, Anders. You're close to cracking it, and I think I can help. That is, I think we can help each other."

Anders' brows knitted together. "You'd like us to work together? To solve the mystery?"

She nodded, jutting her chin. "And end the curse. I need to marry well to ensure the Southern Isle's continued prosperity, and unfortunately, few men want to marry a cursed princess." She grinned then, and he realised she was making a joke. And it had been a funny one. Since when did Southern princesses possess a sense of humour? Anders couldn't help but smile back at her.

“Do we have a deal?” She held out her gloveless hand and Anders hesitated to take it. “We work together to find out who’s behind this curse and how to break it. Tonight. You get your freedom, and I get to live the life I choose, and enjoy dancing again. Agreed?”

He stared into her deep brown eyes, like molten chocolate. Could he risk working with her? What if she only wanted to keep an eye on the investigation and planned to report back to her father about everything Anders found? Or, what if she was only trying to distract him from his mission, and she deliberately confused the evidence or planted false leads?

But he only had one night left, and then he would disappear off to wherever the other intrigued young men vanished to. Unless Isadora could truly help him to figure out the truth. Could he really afford to turn down the only offer of assistance he had received?

“Alright. Agreed.”

ANDERS SAT on the ottoman in the drawing room of the Gilded Palace, watching as Princess Livia tried on a brand-new pair of ballet slippers in a buttery, lilac leather. Isadora had already tried hers and was now examining the stitching on a pair that looked to be newly made but were in fact mended.

“Dominic, these are wonderful! Did you make them yourself?” Livia asked the bespectacled, brown-haired young man who had delivered the four pairs of new slippers to the Princesses.

Dominic pushed his glasses up onto the bridge of his nose with his forefinger and nodded, bashful. “Yes, Your Royal Highness. I did.” The two shared a smile and Anders raised an eyebrow at Isadora, who looked away, lips pressed together tightly as though to suppress a laugh.

Anders took out his notebook and tapped it with his pencil, thinking. The others all turned to look at him, expectant. He cleared his throat, feeling their eyes on him like a physical

weight. “Pardon me, Master Dominic, could I ask a question about the damaged shoes?”

The young man nodded. “Of course. Anything I can do to help.”

Livia gave him a dreamy look and Anders worried she might swoon, but Isadora tapped her sister’s leg with a ballet slipper and Livia threw her a withering look.

Anders schooled his face into what he hoped was a serious, thoughtful expression. “How long, in usual circumstances, would you expect a pair of your shoes to last?”

“Years, sir. Or with especially heavy usage, such as daily dance practice and performances, perhaps months.”

Anders jotted this down. “Months? And in what circumstances might the shoes deteriorate within weeks or days, as they have been?”

Dominic shook his head. “I couldn’t say, sir. It is most unusual. We use the highest quality materials from across the continent, and Master Conti is the finest cobbler in all of Orovia.”

“In all of the Southern Isle!” Livia chirped. Dominic flashed her a grateful smile before turning back to Anders.

“He taught me everything I know.” Dominic held up a satin slipper in palest pink. “These shoes are expert craftsmanship. There’s no reason—no reason whatsoever—why they would fall to pieces so quickly.”

Anders mulled this over and scribbled a few final words in his notebook.

No matter how he tried to whittle it down, the suspect list only continued to grow.

He nodded subtly to Isadora, who stood, hands clasped in front of her. “Thank you for delivering the shoes, Dominic. Please give Master Conti our best regards, won’t you?”

A servant opened the drawing room door and Dominic was ushered out, as Livia looked longingly after him.

Isadora sat back down on the silk-upholstered settee. “Well? What do you think?”

Anders scratched his chin. “He certainly has a soft spot for Princess Livia.”

Livia’s face heated. “What? He most certainly does not!”

Isadora rolled her eyes and patted the seat next to her. “Of course, he does, Liv. Sit down. I see the way you two look at each other. It couldn’t be more obvious if he dropped to one knee and proposed marriage.”

Livia’s mouth dropped open at the thought, horror mixing with hope in her expression.

Anders tapped his pencil against the open page of his notebook. “Is there a chance Dominic is deliberately making the shoes fall apart after a single wear, so as to see Princess Livia more often?”

Livia’s fists clenched at her sides. “Absolutely not! He wouldn’t do anything so underhanded. He’s a fine man, not some duplicitous cheat.” The indignation in her eyes was admirable, Anders felt a rush of pride and respect for the youngest Princess. With such fire and a soft heart, he believed she could achieve anything she wanted; including convincing her father to allow her to marry a cobbler’s apprentice.

Isadora chewed her bottom lip, gazing thoughtfully out of the window into the distance.

“What is it?” Anders asked.

She looked at him, eyes clearing, as though she’d been woken from a daydream. “Oh, probably nothing. It’s just, when Master Conti and Dominic were here a few days ago, I noticed something.”

Livia looked at her sister, aghast. “Issy, you can’t possibly believe Dominic would do something like this? He wouldn’t harm a fly. I swear it on my life.” She pressed a hand to her heart, tears welling in her soft brown eyes.

Isadora waved a hand. “No, Liv. Not Dominic. Please sit down.” She patted the settee again, and this time Livia

complied.

“Go on,” Anders prompted.

“It most likely means nothing, but Master Conti is a very fashionable, conscientious man. He’s always dressed in the latest styles, with expensive embellishments and accessories. But last time they were here, I noticed that his outfit was less...elegant than usual. And he appeared to be missing a few gold rings.”

Anders’ brows rose. “You think he may be suffering under financial strain?”

“Possibly. It could explain why the shoes are falling apart so quickly. If he’s choosing to cut costs by using lower quality materials.”

Anders nodded. “It would also give him a strong motive for placing the curse on you and the rest of the dancers. The more you dance, the more quickly you destroy the shoes. The more often you need new shoes, the more money you spend with the cobbler.”

Isadora’s eyes widened. “It’s so clever. He makes his money both ways, providing sub-quality goods that require replacement more often, and forcing us to dance each night and wear them out more quickly. It’s the perfect plan.”

“Issy, no,” Livia said. “Master Conti has been a friend to our family for decades. He made Mother’s wedding shoes. He wouldn’t do this.”

Anders closed his notebook and tucked it into his pocket. “If there is one thing I learned during my time in the army, it is that desperate men will do anything to survive.”

CHAPTER 19

ISSADORA



Issy gasped as the modiste tightened the stays on the bodice, pulling in her waist and making breathing difficult.

“Does it really need to be this tight?” She tugged at the laces and Lady Fiona batted her hand away.

“This is the fashion now, Princess. We can’t have you greeting potential suitors in last season’s attire, can we?” The modiste nodded in agreement and Lady Fiona beamed. She was clearly in her element, surrounded by garish materials and whalebone corsets that Issy felt should have remained on the whales.

She measured her breaths to avoid bursting out of the bodice and raised her arms to allow the modiste to drape the turquoise material over her. It wasn’t that she disliked the colour, per se, but it was so eye-catching that it really necessitated a much simpler, cleaner style than the ones Lady Fiona had picked out for them. The bright colour, combined with the puff sleeves, flounced skirts and figure-hugging bodices, were too much for Issy’s taste. And no matter what Fiona and the modiste said, she didn’t believe they were ‘this season’s style’.

And, in any case, she was the Golden Princess. She set the trends, she didn’t follow them.

Livia stood beside her, bedecked in a similarly elaborate, fuchsia pink gown with black laces and ribbons. Their eyes met and understanding passed between them. This was utterly humiliating.

“What do you think?” The modiste asked in her rolling accent, and Issy opened her mouth to answer, but realised, to her chagrin, the dressmaker wasn’t looking at her. She’d directed the question at Lady Fiona.

“Marvellous, just marvellous. Perhaps some feathers for their hair?”

The modiste dug around in her collection of sample materials and pulled out a bunch of dyed feathers, eliciting a delighted coo from Lady Fiona. The raven-haired dressmaker slid a tall, black feather into Livia’s hair, which Issy thought made her look like she was attending a funeral. Until she came to Issy and gestured for her to bob down so that she could stick a pair of silver-painted, shimmering feathers into her own hair.

Straightening, Issy caught sight of herself in the mirror and didn’t recognise herself for a moment. The shape of the gown drowned her slender figure, and the way her collarbone jutted through her flesh, it was like looking at a poorly dressed skeleton.

She turned away, gut twisting with misery. She couldn’t even enjoy a dress-fitting these days—that is what the blasted curse had done to her. She’d always loved shopping for dresses and shoes, it felt like a small part of her had died.

But then a bolt of silk sticking out of the modiste’s wardrobe caught her eye. It gleamed like copper and rippled like water when she reached out to touch it. There was a matching brocade with an enchanting pattern of flowers and vines, and Issy could just picture the breathtaking gown the two would make. Perhaps Master Conti could even make a pair of matching shoes?

But Lady Fiona tore the fabric from Issy’s hands. “Oh, that is so out of fashion. Nobody is wearing metallics these days. Am I right, Deandra?”

The modiste nodded, her heavy jewellery rattling as she did. “You are, Lady Fiona.” She hesitated, eyeing Issy with a thoughtful expression. “Although, if anyone were to pull off this material, it might be you, Princess Isadora.”

Lady Fiona scowled, but Issy couldn't suppress her grin. She tugged the materials from the wardrobe, and with them came a bolt of molten chocolate satin, a sumptuous colour and material that Issy knew immediately would complement Livia's complexion and hair perfectly.

"Liv, you have to wear this. It would be heavenly on you." She dragged the entire roll of brown satin over to her sister and draped it across Livia's chest, holding it up to her jawline to show her how it flattered her tanned skin and light-brown eyes.

Livia squealed. "It's gorgeous! Do you really think Father would buy us these dresses?"

"Of course," Issy said, twirling so that the copper silk twined around her legs, eliciting strained looks from Lady Fiona and the modiste. "We're his daughters. And we must be properly attired when we meet our future husbands." She giggled, and Livia joined in, wrapping the chocolate material about her waist and mimicking a waltz with an invisible suitor.

Nina stalked in, attracted by the high-pitched laughter of Livia, and prowled towards the Princess, completely mindless of the priceless silks and damasks her paws trampled.

"Shoo!" Lady Fiona attempted, but the cat ignored her and rubbed against Livia's ankles, purring contentedly. Livia whisked her up into her arms and began to dance with her, as Fiona's lapdog, Zorro, barked from his basket.

"Ladies!" Fiona chased after Livia, grabbing the end of the brown satin and trying to pull it away, but only managing to become entangled in it herself. "This is not proper behaviour for young women of royal birth. Stop. Dancing. At. Once!" She tugged on the fabric and was dragged along, tripping over Zorro's basket and collapsing in a heap on the floor with an inelegant grunt.

Livia let out a peal of laughter, but Issy felt the sting of regret. She didn't want to humiliate Lady Fiona, she meant her no ill will. Not really. All she wanted was to be allowed to be herself. To choose a husband for love, and not for a political

alliance. And to wear her own clothes, not these garish, tasteless designs Fiona preferred.

She reached down to help the Lady up. “Are you alright?”

Fiona bared her teeth and swatted Issy’s hand away, her carefully coiffured hair coming loose and her expression livid. “Do not touch me. You two do not deserve my help.” She clambered to her feet and jabbed a finger at Issy. “You. You’re a self-important brat. And you.” She pointed to Livia. “You’re nothing but a delusional, empty-headed bore. No prince will want to marry either of you at this rate. And, frankly, I could not care less. I wash my hands of the pair of you!”

Fiona stomped from the room, only pausing to gather Zorro’s wicker basket into her arms, and the modiste quickly followed, bolts of colourful material trailing from her hastily fastened wardrobe.

After a moment, silence settled over the receiving room they had been using as a temporary fashion boutique. Livia stood, a remaining strip of chocolate satin around her ankles, hands over her mouth. “What did we do?”

Issy grimaced. “I think we’ve upset Lady Fiona.”

“Should we apologise?” Livia’s face was a picture of contrition.

Issy shook her head. “No. At least, not yet. Let’s allow her to calm down first. She seemed quite—” She couldn’t think of the word.

“Unhinged?” Livia suggested, and the pair of them burst into giggles again.

Issy looked over at the low coffee table where a bone china teapot and a cake stand studded with pastel-coloured macarons sat, untouched. “It would be a shame to waste perfectly good macarons.”

Livia’s eyes twinkled. “Indeed. We would be doing the cook a service if we ate them. She cannot possibly enjoy spending hours making delicate treats for us, only to throw them away later.”

Issy nodded solemnly. “Yes, we’d be helping. Protecting her, you might say. It may hurt her feelings to see a completely uneaten plate of macarons returned to the kitchens.”

Livia grinned, mischief in her light brown eyes, and threw herself onto the velvet sofa before the tray of tea and biscuits. The two sisters ate their fill of sugary, almond-paste filled treats and drained the last dregs of the teapot, still utterly captivated by the beautiful bolts of fabric they’d seen. And devastated at the thought of never getting to wear them.

“I’m sure Dominic would have found you simply enchanting in that colour,” Issy teased.

Livia bit her lip, but she raised an eyebrow at her sister all the same. “Oh, I’m sure, dear Sister. And I believe Anders would have swooned to see you in the copper.” She feigned a fainting spell, draping herself across the back of the sofa with one hand to her forehead.

Issy’s heart leapt into her throat. “What? That’s not—I don’t even know what you’re talking about. That’s ludicrous. The very thought.”

A grin spread across Livia’s cherubic face. “The lady doth protest too much, methinks.”

“He’s just helping us to escape the enchantment. That’s all.”

“Is it?” Livia asked, popping a raspberry macaron into her mouth and speaking around it. “The others were offered your hand in marriage if they succeeded. What makes him so different?”

Issy baulked. How could her sister be so dense? “He is not a prince, first of all. And second of all, he is a common criminal! A prisoner who has been offered nothing more than his freedom to figure out the curse. There has been no mention of my hand, and if there were I would refuse. So, keep your idle prattle to yourself in future.”

Issy leapt up from the sofa and stormed out of the receiving room, leaving Livia sitting there.

Marry the Silver soldier, indeed. Her sister had completely lost her senses if she thought Issy would ever stoop so low. It would almost be funny, if it weren't so absurd.

“FATHER, I told you it was no use. Livia and I do not need etiquette lessons. We—”

The King gripped the edge of his mahogany desk, knuckles turning white. “What you and your sister did, is you offended and humiliated a dear friend of mine. Someone who was only trying to help you both, as a favour to me. I am appalled at your behaviour Isadora. I did not raise you to treat others this way, or to consider yourselves better than others, particularly those who are trying to do you a kindness. This is beneath you, I won't abide it under my roof any longer.”

Issy hung her head. She hated when her father chastised her. It didn't happen often, in fact he usually seemed to enjoy her antics, whether it was dancing through the halls or arguing a finer point about politics with him. That twinkle would always appear in his eye and she'd know she'd won.

But not this time. The veins throbbing in his neck and the sweat beading on his brow told her she'd overstepped the line by quite some distance.

“I'm sorry, Father. I'll apologise to Lady Fiona.”

King Aurelio coughed, pressing an embroidered handkerchief to his mouth. “That's right, you will. And the modiste—you have made a mockery of this family today, Isadora. I am not impressed, not in the least.” He coughed again, bending double over his desk.

Issy considered moving to his side and putting a hand on his back, but she thought better of it. It was probably allergies. Unless he had unintentionally consumed some of the infected grain. She would have a quiet word with the kitchen staff and suggest keeping bread off the menu for a little while.

She still couldn't agree with her father's decision to cover up the grain issue and endanger the lives of the Southern people. She knew he was preoccupied with the curse and the

missing nobles and princes, but harming the public by allowing infected grain to be consumed? It wasn't right. She intended to speak to him about it as soon as possible, but this clearly was not the time.

“Yes, Father. I'll find Livia and we'll go and apologise to Lady Fiona, right away.”

“Wait, one moment. Hand me a glass of water, please.”

Issy poured a glass from a pitcher on the table beside her and passed it to him. He drank long and deep, draining the glass and setting it down on the desktop.

“I know you miss your mother, Isadora. As do I. But it's no excuse to behave like a wild animal. You will apologise for your actions today and promise to listen to whatever advice Lady Fiona has from now on. Am I understood?”

Issy's stomach dropped. She didn't want to follow Fiona's advice, she liked her own style of dress. And she had no interest in finding an advantageous match, she wanted to be free to be herself and fall in love naturally. Like her mother had. But the expression on her father's face told her she had no choice. She'd put herself in this position, and it was up to her to get out of it.

She nodded, eyes cast downwards. “Yes, Father. I won't let you down.”

CHAPTER 20

ANDERS



Anders paced the floor in his room, waiting for the guards to fall asleep. He'd peered around his door three times already to see Paolo yawning, and hear Marco snore, but the guards stationed outside the Princesses' rooms had still appeared to be awake.

He needed to get to Isadora and Livia before the bell chimed midnight and the enchantment began.

He'd warned the Princesses not to eat anything that was brought to them, in case their food and drink was being tainted too. They'd both hidden their food in their napkins at dinner, sneaking it under the table to Lady Fiona's fat little dog, Zorro, according to Livia. Anders had laughed at the image, although his stomach had clenched painfully at the thought of the delicious meal he'd missed out on. The scent of roast beef and pureed potatoes drifting from his abandoned plate on the side table almost made him cave in. But he needed to be strong. This was his third and final night, his last opportunity to uncover the truth and reveal to the King who and why someone had cursed the Princesses. Failure would mean imprisonment, or death.

But, if he could just make it through this evening and help Isadora to break the curse, tomorrow he would be a free man once more.

A bell began to chime and Anders let out a sharp exhale as he wrapped himself in shadows and cracked the door open. The guards were now all fast asleep at their posts. He slipped out, closing the door silently behind him, and darted across the

hall to Issy and Livia's rooms. He knocked gently, but after waiting a few moments with no answer, he opened the door and stepped inside.

The scene before him brought back memories of the previous night—he saw the two Princesses dressed in their ballet dresses, standing before the mirror hanging on the wall. Anders' breath caught as he took in the sight of Isadora. The pale, lemon yellow of her gown made her bronze skin glow, and her dark hair fell in soft waves, woven with matching yellow ribbons. Her bare shoulders and exposed ankles would have been scandalous in the Northern Isle, where the temperatures called for layers and warmth. But here, in the heat of the Southern sun, she simply looked elegant. Beautiful, even. He shook himself mentally, this wasn't the time.

“Isadora,” he hissed, letting his shadows dissipate. When she didn't turn, only continued to lift her gold locket and press it to the frame, he spoke louder. “Isadora!” But she didn't respond. He put a hand on her arm and turned her to look at him, and the sight of her glassy, vacant eyes made Anders' heart leap into his throat.

No, no, no. She couldn't be under the spell, he needed her help. He wouldn't be able to break the curse without her.

He gripped both of her shoulders and gently shook her. “Issy, it's me, Anders. Wake up. I need you to wake up, now. I can't do this without you, Issy. I need you.”

She blinked, her brow furrowing, and when she opened her eyes they had cleared. “Anders? What—what's going on?”

He let out a relieved breath. “You were under the enchantment. Did you eat or drink anything?”

She shook her head. “Nothing, just like you said.”

“Hmm. Your trances must not be caused by food or drink then. They must be something else—some part of the magic.” Realisation dawned on him. “The entire palace must be under the spell, and only new arrivals, like myself and the other young men, need to be drugged with sleeping potion.”

Issy grabbed Livia by the arm and spun her little sister to face her. “Livia. Livia!”

The younger Princess’s eyelashes fluttered and she shook her head, as though trying to clear a fog. She rubbed her eyes with her fists. “Am I sleep walking?”

“No, Liv. It’s the curse. You were in a trance.” Issy looked around the room then, taking it all in. “What were we doing? Where do we go?”

“Here,” Anders said, gesturing towards the mirror. “You were standing in front of it, pressing your locket to the frame.”

Issy held the gold pendant in her palm. “This locket? It was my mother’s.” She studied it, and then the mirror. “Like this?” She pressed the necklace to the gold frame, but nothing happened.

Anders stepped closer to her, inhaling her orange blossom scent. “May I? It was more like...” He took hold of her locket and lifted it to the corresponding sunburst marker on the frame. “This.”

The glass vanished, along with their reflections, and the stone staircase was revealed once more. Livia gasped aloud, and Isadora took a step back, catching Anders’ elbow and staggering into his arms.

Her expression was sheepish. “My apologies.”

He smiled as he righted her. “Not to worry. We should hurry, I’m not sure if the others will wait.”

“The others?”

“I’ll show you. I have to use my magic though. Don’t be alarmed. I can’t risk being seen.” He held out the palm of his hand and let his shadows gather and swirl around his wrist. This time it was Isadora’s turn to gasp, and Livia’s hand flew to her mouth.

“You’re a shadow conjuror?” Isadora asked, her voice low.

“I am.” Anders nodded, readying himself for the horror and disgust he knew would come.

“Is that how you got into the theatre that night?”

He hesitated. “Um. Yes. I was going to purchase a ticket, but I gave my last few coins to some hungry children. I never meant any harm.”

Isadora raised an eyebrow. “Why were you there, then?”

He scratched the back of his neck. “Asterina and Cethin is my favourite ballet.”

Livia beamed. “It’s mine, too.”

“You know the tale of Asterina and Cethin?” Isadora asked, surprised.

“Yes, although the story is slightly different in the north.”

She tilted her head. “I can imagine. Our version doesn’t paint Cethin in the best light.”

“Well, our version doesn’t exactly paint Asterina as an innocent victim, so we’re even.” He shrugged apologetically.

“As much as I’m enjoying this back and forth between you two,” Livia chimed in, eyes sparkling with mischief. “Can I see the shadows again? Please.” She added the last part on catching sight of her sister’s appalled expression.

Anders nodded, lip twitching. “Of course.” With a flick of his wrist, he threw his shadows up and cloaked himself entirely in them. Livia shrieked with joy and clapped her hands; Isadora just watched, a curious look on her face. Anders would have given anything to know what she was thinking in that moment.

“Come on, we need to get going or we’ll miss the boats,” he said.

In unison, the Princesses asked, “Boats?”

Anders led Isadora and Livia down the stone steps to the waterfront, where the other ten dancers from their ballet company sat motionless inside their one-man vessels. It occurred to Anders that the other dancers didn’t enter the enchanted world via the mirror in the Princesses chambers, so

how did they come to be here each night? Were there other entrances?

He climbed into Isadora's boat and they instantly began to glide towards the ominous castle on the other side.

"This is beyond anything I could have imagined," Isadora breathed, looking around at the lantern-lit boats drifting across the glassy surface of the water, at the dark spires and turrets that stretched up to the midnight-blue sky, and the low, heavy moon that bathed the entire scene in silver light.

"Me too." His voice came out low and rough. He knew she couldn't see him beneath his shadows, and he hadn't been able to take his eyes off her since they'd sat down. The look of wonderment as she took in every detail of this strange, magical place, and the bright, monochromatic light of the moon, made Isadora appear ethereal. As though she were lit from within. She was sea salt and starlight, and whichever suitor she chose to marry would be a very lucky man indeed.

They may have gotten off to a bad start, but perhaps if he told her the truth. Told her who he really was...

Their knees bumped together and Anders almost reached for her hand, but the boat stopped abruptly and he was forced to grip the sides instead.

He cleared his throat. "Here we are. I'll be right by your side all night, but it might attract unwanted attention if you speak to me, so try to be subtle if you do."

Isadora nodded as she climbed out of the little boat and followed the other dancers up the steps and into the castle.

Anders narrowed his eyes at the metallic, glittering trees that surrounded the base of the castle. Another memory clicked into place. The twig he'd found on his bedroom carpet that morning; it had come from one of these trees. It hadn't been a clue planted by a helpful bystander, he himself had brought it back from this obsidian castle.

At least he knew now that any evidence he attempted to take through the mirror would turn into something mundane and irrelevant by the next morning.

With any luck, no evidence would be required this time. The curse would be broken Isadora and Livia would be able to tell the King all about it themselves.

ISADORA



Issy copied the smooth, gliding way the other dancers moved as they all filed into the secret castle and entered a vast ballroom with a black onyx floor and dark papered walls. They seemed to be heading for a large stage at one end of the room, despite a distinct lack of audience members.

Issy longed to look behind her to see if Livia was following suit, playing the part of an entranced dancer, but she didn't want to be seen by whoever had orchestrated this entire charade. If they were watching, she needed to appear as though she were obedient and compliant, like the other girls.

They lined up on stage, and Issy had the sudden realisation that she was going to have to dance, and she didn't know the choreography. A cold bead of sweat ran down her spine as she stood in line, waiting for the music to start. What if there was no music? What if she would just have to dance and try to copy the others, as best she could? Issy was good, but she wasn't that good. The one who had cursed them, whoever it was, would know she was conscious in an instant.

Luckily, when the music started to play a moment later, she knew the piece well. Her company had performed choreography to it many times before, which she and the other dancers launched into now.

She lost herself in the movement and the music, and it was a few moments before she realised they were no longer alone. The ballroom was now filled with people. Men. Wearing strange, decorative masks. She wondered where Anders was amongst the dozen suitors who had appeared as if by magic.

By the time they had performed to three songs, Issy was getting tired and hoping for a break. Her back ached, her ankle throbbed and she needed a drink of water. But then the music started up again, this time it was one of Issy's favourite pieces, and the dancers leapt into action once more.

As she pirouetted across the stage, Issy caught sight of someone she thought she recognised. A tall, slender man with thick, greying hair. But it couldn't be. Could it?

The music finally came to an end and the dancers began to make their way down from the stage to the ballroom floor and form a line, side by side.

The men in black evening attire came to stand in a line across from the dancers and bowed. All except for the man standing before Issy. The top half of his face was obscured by a black sequin mask that caught the candlelight, making it glitter. But she would have recognised those blue eyes anywhere. Her mother's eyes.

"Isadora," the man said, holding out his hand to her.

She placed her hand in his palm. "Uncle Santiago."

THE DANCE BEGAN and Issy was whisked into a foxtrot by her uncle, flung around the ballroom like a ragdoll. She tried to take control, to take the lead, but Iago had her in a vice-like grip.

"How did you escape my little enchantment?" He asked, lips twisted into a sneer, eyes colder than she'd ever seen them. This wasn't the Uncle Santiago she knew from the other side of the mirror.

"I don't know. I just...woke up." She shook her head, searching for some reasoning, some rationale for why Uncle Iago was here. "I don't understand. You did this?" It didn't make any sense why her own uncle would want to hurt her and ruin the reputation of the Southern Isle. "Is it because of your falling out with father?"

His laugh sent a shiver down her spine. Cold and brittle. “Your father is a usurper. That throne should have been mine. The moment your mother died, he should have handed the monarchy over to me, that would have been the honourable thing to do.” He spun her away before reeling her back in and pinning her to him. “Perhaps if it weren’t for you, he would have.”

The snarled words, the cold, hard demeanour; this wasn’t the Uncle Iago she knew. The man who always brought them presents each time he visited—thoughtful, sentimental gifts. The cameo of her mother, the locket, her favourite gold hairpins. They had all belonged to her mother, Queen Idalia, once upon a time.

The locket. The sunburst locket that opened the enchanted mirror. Issy had seen it around her mother’s neck in the painting outside her and Livia’s rooms. Issy’s blood ran cold. Had her mother been cursed, after all?

“You ensorcelled our mother with this.” She gripped the locket in her free hand and showed him, but he didn’t even bother to look at her. His eyes were scanning the room, as though he were looking for someone.

He let out a low, rumbling laugh. “No. Oh, I tried, believe me. But your mother never wore jewellery. She hated pointless baubles.”

Issy frowned, stumbling slightly on her feet, but Iago had her in such a tight grip she barely missed a step. “But the painting? She’s wearing this locket.”

“I commissioned that painting. After she died. She never even wore the locket. I was forced to take matters into my own hands instead.”

Issy’s stomach plummeted. “What do you mean?”

He stopped dancing and looked down at her then, standing there in the midst of the swirling, chaotic ballroom. His eyes burned into hers. “I poisoned her. It was simple. Too simple, really. I joined her for tea one afternoon and slipped it into her cup. She never suspected a thing. When she became sick, I

visited daily and, each time, I poisoned her water. She was dead within a week.”

Issy gasped aloud, hands clutching her stomach. Her mother had been murdered by her own brother. And all for what? A crown? A throne? It seemed so petty, so absurd.

Issy’s mind warred between confusion and hatred for the man who had stolen her mother from her, solely to appease his own ego. The betrayal she felt was like a dagger in her heart, and the man she’d always looked up to and respected was the one twisting it.

“Have you been poisoning Livia and me? Is that why we can’t remember anything when we wake?”

Iago laughed. “No, that has nothing to do with poison. That’s all thanks to Niro.”

Niro? Where had she heard that name before...

And then it dawned on her.

“The god of shadow?”

Her uncle looked impressed. “Ah, you know your history! Niro is the god of shadow, indeed, and one of his lesser-known powers is forgetting. He made an entire nation forget their own goddess—that’s how powerful Niro is. I’ve been studying him for decades, trying to discover his secrets, and finally, I found this place.” He threw his hands up and spun in a circle, in perfect time with the couples twirling around them.

“You’ll never get away with this,” Issy hissed. “What are you planning to do, trap us here forever? Steal our father’s throne?”

Uncle Iago tapped her on the nose with his forefinger. “That’s precisely what I’m planning to do. It’s a perfect plan, really. No one will ever know who was responsible for the mysterious curse on the Golden Princesses, all they’ll know is that one day you never returned, and your father went mad with grief. And then my time will finally have arrived.”

Mad. Where had she heard that word?

If the people continue to consume the effected rye bread, they shall all go mad and die.

The grain. “Did you tamper with the grain so that it would make people ill?” Issy felt a sudden rush of blood to her head, making her feel faint, but she steeled herself and held her uncle’s cold gaze. “Were you trying to weaken the Southern Isle so you could swoop in and make everything better, once father was dead? Was inviting the foreign princes to visit and suggesting they try to solve the mystery your idea, too? Knowing they would become trapped in your enchantment and provoke the other kingdoms into a war?”

“You’re a clever little thing, aren’t you?” The expression on Iago’s face made Issy’s insides feel greasy and slick. She wasn’t sure whether she was about to burst into tears or vomit all over her uncle’s mirror-polished shoes. He snapped his fingers and the music stopped, the dancers halting as one. They all turned to look at Iago and Issy standing in their centre.

“Now that your little Silver friend has set foot inside the enchantment, the twelve dancers and twelve suitors are complete. A matching set. And when I leave this place and smash that mirror, you’ll be stuck in here forever. No one will be able to stop me.”

CHAPTER 22

ANDERS



Anders watched from the stage as Isadora and the older man danced, before stopping in the middle of the ballroom, like the eye of a storm. He couldn't hear a word they were saying, but Isadora looked distraught, and the sneer on the man's mouth made Anders' blood boil. Who was this masked man? Could he be the one responsible for the curse?

Anders began to make his way towards them, keeping a tight hold of his shadows and dodging between dancing couples. Before he could reach them, the dancers all stopped and turned to face Isadora and the suitor. Anders could see tears glistening in Isadora's eyes, and he wanted nothing more than to protect her from this man, but he couldn't get through the wall of dancers without touching anyone or giving himself away.

And then the man clapped his hands and they all started to move towards Isadora, reaching for her, hands grabbing and pulling. In the maelstrom, the man slipped out of the melee and tore off his mask, casting it to the ground before dashing towards the exit.

Anders looked from the fleeing man to Isadora, being attacked by entranced dancers. What should he do? She screamed and he made up his mind, he began to fight his way towards her.

"Livia! Follow him!" He shouted over the furore to the younger Princess, who had hung back and now watched the

scene before her with abstract terror on her face. “I’ll save Isadora. You follow that man!”

Livia finally tore her gaze away from the dancers and nodded; she sprinted out of the castle into the dark night.

Anders began tearing bodies off Isadora, throwing dancers and suitors alike to the side until he could get to her. He grabbed her hand and pulled her out—fortunately, there was barely a mark on her. Then they ran.

“We have to stop him!” Isadora shouted. “He’s going to destroy the mirror and trap us in here forever.”

Anders pushed harder and burst out into the darkness to see one of the little boats sailing away across the water. The ear-piercing scream that reached them from the middle of the expanse of water gave Anders chills.

“Livia!” Isadora yelled, diving for the nearest boat. A crackle of lightning splintered the dark sky and struck the water close to the distant boat that carried her sister away. In the flash of light, Anders could see Livia struggling with the man who’d been dancing with Isadora.

Anders grabbed her arm. “No, Issy, there are no oars. It’s too slow. I can save her. Trust me.”

Isadora only hesitated for a second, studying his face. She nodded, finally. “Go.”

Anders threw his jacket to the ground and kicked off his shoes. He’d swum in cold water plenty of times before, the sun never had a chance to warm the lakes and pools in the Northern Isle. It would be just like an early morning, summer swim in D’Argentis.

He steeled himself, took a deep breath, and dove in.

The water slammed into him like a block of ice, knocking the wind out of him and freezing him to the core. He swung his arms and kicked his legs, desperate to reach Livia before the villain could do her any more harm. Thankfully, the boat was still moving slowly, so it wasn’t hard for Anders to catch up. He reached them in a few strong strokes and grabbed Livia’s arm, but the older man took hold of her other arm and

they tussled. Livia sobbed, begging the man to let her go. Or was it Anders she wanted to let go?

When Livia's fingers slipped from his grasp, the unmasked man just smirked at Anders as she tumbled towards him, straight out of the boat and into the water.

Isadora's shrieking seemed even louder than before. "She can't swim!"

Anders took a lungful of air and submerged himself completely, groping around for Livia's flailing form. It was pitch black in the water, the moonlight didn't reach beneath the surface. But after a few agonising seconds, he felt cool fingers close around his own, and he pulled Livia up to the surface, where they both gasped for breath. She coughed and spluttered, but no real harm had been done. Anders hooked her arms over his shoulders and swam with her to the shore where Isadora waited, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"Liv, are you alright?" She threw her arms around her younger sister, holding her tight to her chest.

Livia coughed. "I'm alright. Thanks to Anders."

Both girls smiled gratefully at him, but there wasn't time to celebrate.

"We need to get back to the mirror before Uncle Iago breaks it," Isadora said, and they nodded. This time, they all climbed into the same boat, knees pressed together, huddling for warmth, and the boat made its way across to the opposite side and the mirror at the top of the stone tower.

ANDERS SPINTEO to the top of the stairs where they had stepped through the mirror, his heart hammering in his chest, his shirt and trousers heavy with moisture, shadows discarded. There was no need for them now.

He pushed his legs to move faster, he had to get there before the Duke shattered the glass and trapped them in this strange, magical realm for eternity.

He climbed another floor, and another, passing lantern after lantern. Had there been this many steps when they'd walked down? He hadn't remembered the tower being so tall. He couldn't see any light at the top where the entrance to the Princesses' bedrooms should have been.

Another floor higher, and he stopped. What was this, some sort of never-ending staircase spell? He wouldn't have believed it a week ago, but the things he'd seen in the past few days made him question everything. He turned and ran down the steps, but he'd barely taken two floors when the lake reappeared and he found Isadora and Livia huddling together at the bottom of the tower, waiting.

"Did Uncle Iago get away?" Livia asked, her throat thick with tears.

Anders lowered his head. "It looks that way. The stairs go on forever, there's no top—no mirror."

Livia's face crumpled and tears splashed onto her already soaked gown. But Issy's expression hardened. "What do we do?"

Anders shook his head. "I'm not sure. I'm not familiar with magic. Other than my shadows."

"Do you think they could work? Perhaps, if you cloaked yourself, the staircase would be tricked into letting you reach the top?"

Anders fought to keep his expression from giving him away, but he was impressed. Isadora's suggestion could work. "That's a good idea. I'll give that a try."

Once more, he gritted his teeth, fighting the nausea, and let his shadows consume him. The smell of singed hair and burnt flesh filled his nostrils, and the screams of his comrades pierced his eardrums, but Anders pushed the memories down. He had no choice, he had to do this. He had to save Isadora and her sister from this curse before something terrible happened and they were forever trapped in the dark underworld.

He wasn't concerned for himself, he'd lived enough of his life in darkness, it felt like a second home to him. But Isadora deserved to live in the light and warmth of the sun for the rest of her days. The way her tanned skin glowed and her hair shone, catching the sun's rays and reflecting them like a prism, it was a sight he couldn't live without.

Something had bloomed inside him over the past few days, something new and fragile. He wasn't quite ready to identify it, but he knew he wanted to protect it.

He took the steps two at a time, trying to catch the enchantment off guard and reach the top before it realised he was there. But no matter how many steps he ran up, there were always more above. After running for several minutes and getting nowhere nearer to the mirror, Anders turned around and was back in front of the Princesses in just a dozen steps.

"I guess shadow magic won't work then." The disappointment in Livia's tone tore at Ander's heart. But the expression dawning on Isadora's face made him pause.

"What is it?"

She shook her head. "Of course shadow magic won't work. This place is built from the stuff, it's probably absorbing your powers, Anders. Feeding on them."

She was right. They would get nowhere fighting shadows with shadows. What they needed was light.

Something Amma had said nagged at the back of Anders' mind.

Maia blessed the people with her warmth and radiance.

If Niro was the god of shadow, and Maia was the goddess of light, then she was who they needed to escape the Duke's dark curse. But how to summon her power and destroy the shadow realm?

Anders scratched his jaw and started to pace, casting his mind back to the stories his mother used to tell during the Longest Night. She'd spoken of the gods, but Anders had always assumed they were allegories. Perhaps they were, but the magic was real, so whatever the hidden meaning of the

stories was, it clearly had some basis in reality. And if shadow magic truly existed, then so did light magic. He was sure of it.

“What are you thinking?” Isadora asked, hope beginning to shimmer in her dark eyes.

“I remembered something my mother told me. About Maia and Niro.”

Isadora’s eyes widened and she inhaled sharply. “Uncle Iago mentioned Niro. He said he’d been studying him for years and had finally discovered his secrets. What did your mother tell you?”

Anders pinched the bridge of his nose, thinking. “It was something about being blessed. Amma reminded me of it, she said that Maia blessed the people with warmth and radiance. I think my mother told me the same thing. That someone graced with shadows, like me, and someone blessed with light, together they’d be able to break the curse.” He grunted in frustration, fists clenched at his sides. “The pieces are all there, I just can’t work out how they fit together.”

Livia stepped out of Isadora’s embrace, her expression thoughtful. “What if it isn’t literal? It could simply refer to someone from the Northern Isle and someone from the Southern Isle. Maybe it just means we need to work together to figure it out. Shadow and light, two sides of the same coin.”

CHAPTER 23

ANDERS



Anders shook his head, pacing. “No. If the story is just a metaphor, then how do you explain my shadow magic? And why does this strange, hidden realm exist? No, I’m convinced it means more than that. We just need to figure out what, exactly.”

He glanced around, hoping his gaze would fall on something—anything—that might help them to unravel the mystery and escape the magical world the Duke had trapped them in. Instead, he noticed an eerie tableau across the lake. The masked suitors and the ten ballerinas stood on the opposite shore, eyes turned towards Isadora, Livia and Anders. The sight sent a shiver up Anders’ spine. But none of the figures moved, not one dancer climbed into the remaining boats, they simply stood and stared, frozen by the enchantment.

A thought dawned on Anders. “Are those the other princes who’ve attempted to break the curse?”

Following his gaze, Isadora nodded. “Yes, that’s them. And the rest of our dance company.”

Livia gasped. “We have to help them! We can’t leave them here, they’ll be trapped forever if we don’t take them with us.”

“Of course, Liv.” Isadora put a hand on her sister’s arm. “We’ll find a way to lead them out, I promise.”

Anders recalled something he’d drawn in his sketchbook, one of the memories he’d scribbled down on Amma’s advice.

In the picture, Isadora had been dancing with a masked man who bore a striking resemblance to himself. But, what if...

“Issy, was one of the princes who disappeared Prince Hans of the Northern Isle?”

Isadora looked taken aback. “Yes. Do you know him?”

“He’s my brother. I need to get back across the lake. You two stay here and try to find the way out, perhaps it will appear for you.” He strode towards the jetty where the two lantern-lit boats waited.

“Anders.” Isadora’s tone made the breath catch in his throat. He looked back at her and noticed the way the moonlight shone on her face, illuminating her features. She looked like a beacon of hope, and for a moment, he couldn’t take his eyes off her. She pressed her lips together, worry etched into the line of her mouth. “Be careful.”

He nodded. He wanted to promise her that he would be back shortly, but he couldn’t bring himself to make a promise that he may not be able to keep. Not when her golden-brown eyes shone in the dimness like precious metal, and his heart hammered a tattoo against his ribcage at the sight of her.

He knew how she felt about people from the Northern Isle, she’d made that much clear, but he couldn’t help but wonder if there was a chance—even a slim one—that she might be willing to consider him as a suitor someday. If he returned to the Gilded Palace, after all this was over and done with, as a Silver Prince.

He made his way to the boat and climbed in. To his relief, the vessel began to move almost immediately, steering him slowly back across the glassy lake towards the obsidian castle. When he reached the shore, he leapt out and began to move quickly between the statuesque figures, scanning the faces of the dark-suited men, peering at their vacant eyes behind the elaborate masks.

A shock of pale hair caught his eye and he darted towards it. As he stood in front of the unmoving blonde Prince, he felt his throat begin to thicken. It had been over five years since he

had seen his brother. He swallowed hard and reached forward, gently taking the embossed mask by the corner and peeling it away from his brother's face.

"Hans," Anders said, casting the mask aside. His brother's eyes fluttered, seeming to clear, and finally they focused on Anders' face.

"Anders? Is that you?" The Crown Prince of the Northern Isle's voice was rough from disuse, but Anders would have recognised it anywhere.

"Brother," he breathed, and the two embraced tightly, the years of distance, shame and loneliness falling away as Anders inhaled the familiar scent of his older brother.

"Where are we?" Hans asked, pulling back and looking around at the castle, the strange metallic trees, the dark lake and the silent crowd of dancers and suitors gathered on the bank.

"It's a long story. I need your help to get these people out of here. But, first, I need to tell you something. It's about me. About the war. I—" He hesitated, looking into his brother's clear blue eyes. Could he tell his brother the truth? Would Hans forgive him, or have him dragged in front of their father and put to death for his cowardice? Anders swallowed. He would never know if he didn't try. "I hid. I let my comrades be killed while I hid in my shadows and waited for it to be over."

Anders studied his brother's face, waiting for his expression to change, for the anger and disgust to appear in his eyes. But it didn't. Hans only took him by the shoulders.

"You survived, brother. That's all that matters."

All the air rushed out of Anders' lungs. "It is?"

Hans smiled. "Of course. We thought you were dead, Anders. Father, Mother, all of us. We heard about the massacre in the east, we were told there had been no survivors. Mother has been heartbroken ever since that day." He shook his head, a crease between his brows. "Whatever it took to keep you safe, to bring you back to us, it was worth it."

Anders' voice broke as he said, "I feel such guilt. I feel as if it's my fault they're all dead." He looked away, blinking hard as tears threatened at the backs of his eyes.

"You're not to blame for anything that happened, Anders. You were barely more than a boy. You did what you had to do to survive. And it was the right thing to do, because here you are." Hans gripped Anders' upper arms tightly, joy in his gaze. "Mother will be so pleased to hear you're safe and well."

The weight of all Anders' worries and assumptions lifted and, for a single moment, he felt as though he were floating. And then he came crashing back down to the ground.

"We need to find a way out of this place, Hans. Will you help us?"

Hans raised an eyebrow. "Us?"

"The Golden Princesses are across the lake, looking for a way out. Their uncle is the one who trapped you here, the Duke of Cicera. We need to get everyone out before we're stuck in here forever."

Hans' eyes widened, but he nodded firmly. "Alright. Tell me what to do."

TOGETHER, they woke the other Princes and dancers, explained what was happening, and ushered them into boats to be ferried across to the other side, where Isadora and Livia were waiting. Once they were all standing on the same side, Anders and Hans joined Issy and Livia beneath the turret.

"Princess Isadora, Princess Livia," Hans said, with a quick bow. "I see you've met my brother, Anders."

Livia's brows shot up towards her hairline in an almost comical expression of surprise. But Issy only smiled.

"I knew there was something odd about you." She tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear, an unreadable expression on her delicate features. "I've never met a soldier who loved ballet or was as talented with charcoals as you."

Heat crept up Anders' neck and he looked down, hiding his smile. "I apologise for not being honest with you. When I was arrested at the theatre, I thought it would be safer to pretend to be a simple soldier than admit to being the younger Prince of the Northern Isle."

"Arrested?" Hans asked, at the same time as Issy said, "Probably for the best."

Anders grinned at Issy, and she returned it. A warm sensation was growing in his chest, but he pushed it away. There were more important things at hand, he could think about Issy's smile and how it made him feel later.

"It's a long story, brother. I'll explain everything, I swear. Right now, we need to get out of this trap before—"

"Before Uncle Iago kills Father," Livia interjected, her lower lip wobbling. Isadora put an arm around her sister's shoulder and squeezed.

Anders nodded. "Exactly. I take it the entrance did not appear for you, either?"

The younger Princess shook her head. "But, Issy had an idea that might work."

Anders raised his eyebrows at her, expectantly, and Isadora gestured vaguely with a hand. "It was just a thought really, but Uncle Iago must have forced us to dance here for some reason. Perhaps dancing under his enchantment helped to keep the dark magic alive?"

They all nodded, listening intently as the Crown Princess spoke.

"It's a good theory," Hans replied, and Anders felt a small swell of pride on Issy's behalf. "What is your idea, Princess?"

She glanced at her feet then, at the worn ballet shoes that had been new only hours earlier. But a moment later, she looked up, a renewed fire in her gaze. "I think we should dance."

"Dance?" Anders had expected almost anything else, but more dancing?

Livia nodded enthusiastically. “Tell them why, Issy.”

Isadora licked her lips and unconsciously rubbed the sunburst locket between her thumb and forefinger. “If dancing under the curse keeps this realm in existence, perhaps dancing is the only way to destroy it. Choosing to dance, for light and joy.” She looked to Anders, then, a smile tugging at her lips. “For Maia.”

It had to be worth a try. Maybe dancing was exactly what they needed to do? They wouldn’t know unless they tried. No one was coming to save them from the shadow world, whatever they did they would need to find their own way out. And maybe, just maybe, it would work.

Anders nodded firmly. “Alright. Put us in position and show us what to do, Princess Isadora.”

Isadora and Livia instructed their fellow dancers, who each took a now-unmasked prince or lord by the arm and got into position, forming a line of couples along the shore.

“Anders,” Issy said, as the others fell into formation beside them. He looked down at her outstretched hand, his stomach flip-flopping inside him. “Can I have this dance?”

He swallowed and gave her a quick nod, unable to find the words. He gazed at her as she slid her hand into his rough, calloused palm and arranged his arms in the correct position around her.

This was ridiculous. He was a prince. He’d been dancing since he could walk, and yet somehow he had forgotten all of the steps and found himself incapable of smiling, or even thinking straight. The scent of mint and night-blooming jasmine filled his nostrils as he held Issy at an appropriate distance, his heart hammering inside his chest.

“How will we keep time with no music?” Anders heard one of the foreign princes ask, a handsome red-headed young man with a freckled face and piercing blue eyes.

“We could hum?” Livia offered, twisting to look at Isadora from where she stood in the arms of Hans. He was just a little too tall for her, forcing her to crane her neck to look up at him.

“Yes. Hum the tune, please, ladies. We all know the final piece from Asterina and Cethin by heart, let’s go with that. Ready?” She counted them in, and on one they began to move together, stiff and awkward at first, but after a few minutes the dozen dancing couples were gliding smoothly around each other. It was a traditional partner dance, one that all royals and nobles were taught, and the steps came back to Anders quicker than he had expected. The voices of the dancers grew louder and sweeter, and some of the suitors even joined in—those who were familiar with the ballet about the ill-fated lovers.

Anders gripped Isadora’s hand tighter as the song came to a close, hoping upon hope that her idea would be what saved them all from the curse. But as the dancers slowed and came to a stop and the humming ended, nothing had changed around them. They still stood on the bank of a glittering, dark lake, beneath a star-studded night sky and a large, silver moon. They were still trapped in the shadow realm.

Livia released Hans and stepped towards Isadora. Anders reluctantly let her go so that she could turn to face her sister, tears lining her eyelashes. Frustration swelled inside him, he’d been hoping against hope the dancing would work. What were they going to do now?

“It’s alright, Issy,” Livia said. “It was a fantastic idea.” She reached forwards and took Isadora’s gold locket in her hand, stroking the sunburst design with her thumb. “Mother would be so proud of you.”

Isadora bit her lip and wrapped her own hand around Livia’s, sadness in voice. “The locket was never Mother’s. Iago had it made, and then he commissioned the painting of Mother wearing it.” A dark cloud settled over her expression. “After he murdered her.”

A sob escaped Livia’s trembling mouth, and she threw her arms around her sister’s waist, burying her face in Isadora’s shoulder. The older Princess stroked Livia’s hair and rubbed her back as her younger sister shuddered, fists grabbing the back of Isadora’s gown.

Anders thought over what Issy had said. Her uncle had given her a locket and pretended that it had belonged to their mother. Why? What benefit could he possibly get from gifting some trinket to his niece, and then cursing her to dance every night?

Unless the locket *was* the curse.

“Sorry to interrupt, Your Highnesses, but might I see the locket?” He held a hand out to Isadora, who frowned slightly, but pulled the chain from around her neck and placed it in Anders’ palm.

“Why—” She didn’t finish her sentence, as Anders opened the locket and a long, plaited strand of dark hair fell to the ground.

“Careful. That must have been Mother’s,” Livia said bending to pick it up. But Anders was faster. He snatched it up off the ground and held it away from the Princesses.

“I thought your uncle told you your mother never wore the locket. Why would he have put her hair inside it?”

Livia’s expression was furious, and she tried to snatch the lock of hair out of Anders’ hand. “Give that to me!”

But Isadora’s expression was one of curiosity. “He said he’d tried to get her to wear it, but she hated jewellery. Anders, I think you’re right. I think the locket holds the curse.”

Livia gasped and took a step back, staggering into Hans, who helped her to stay upright with a polite hand on her arm. “We need to destroy it,” she said, breathless.

With one nod from Isadora, Anders snapped the locket in two and threw it to the ground, stamping on it with his boot for good measure. They waited for a moment, glancing around, but nothing had changed. If anything, the sky had darkened even further. The only light now came from the glowing torches that lined the stairs up to the turret, where the mirror entrance had been.

“Wait. I’ve got an idea.” Isadora darted inside the tower and reappeared a moment later holding one of the flaming torches. Anders understood immediately. He picked up the

lock of dark hair and held it out to Issy. She took it with a grimace and, steeling herself, touched the end of the braid to the fire.

It caught instantly, an acrid smell filling the air as smoke began to rise from the burning hair. A high-pitched sound, not unlike a scream, shattered the air around them and Isadora dropped the lock of hair. It continued to burn on the ground, and they all took a step back, leaving a safe space around the cursed locket and its smouldering contents.

“Look!” Livia pointed to the sky, and Anders followed her gaze, wonder replacing the anxiety he’d felt moments earlier. The pitch-black night sky had begun to lighten around the edges, periwinkle blue and peachy pink were now visible on the horizon. Anders looked across the midnight-blue lake to the castle, and saw with a start that it was no longer a twisting, jutting monstrosity surrounded by glittering metallic trees, like so many blades. It now resembled a fairytale palace, with an elegant façade of sandstone and lofty turrets that embraced the increasingly pale-blue sky.

A heron swooped down and landed on the riverbank, snatching a fish as it leapt from the water, and Anders realised there were other birds twittering in the oak and chestnut trees that encircled the palace.

“This place is beautiful,” Isadora said beside him, her voice barely more than a whisper.

He gazed down at her, watching her take it all in. “It is.”

“Come on!” Livia cried, racing towards the tower steps. “We must be able to leave now.” She vanished up the staircase, and Issy turned to follow her, but she hesitated, looking back at the crowd of dancers and princes.

“Go,” Anders said. “I’ll make sure they all get out safely.”

She gave him a grateful smile, her hand rising from her side as though she were about to reach for him, but then she was gone, rushing after her sister.

CHAPTER 24

ISSADORA



Issy felt a rush of relief and exhaustion the moment her tattered slippers touched the carpeted floor of her and Livia's rooms.

She'd sprinted up the stone steps after Livia, following the light that glowed from the very top. When she'd reached the place where they had stepped through the mirror, she'd seen her sister's long dark hair disappearing through the doorway into the Gilded Palace, and the sight had almost brought her to tears. Now that they were finally safe, she felt a little lightheaded. When all of this was over, she was going to sleep for a week.

By the looks of the reddish light coming through the windows, dawn was just breaking in Orovia. Sleep would have to wait.

"What now?" Livia asked, turning to face her. Her gown was still wet from her dip in the lake, and she'd begun to shiver, teeth chattering violently. Issy wasn't sure whether it was from the cold or the shock.

She sighed, picking up a heavy woollen blanket and draping it around her sister's shoulders. "We need to tell father what happened and alert the guards. Uncle Iago can't be allowed to leave the palace, he's too dangerous."

"Why did he do it? What was his reason for putting this spell on us?"

Issy gave her sister a sympathetic look. "He's a madman, Liv. He's a power-hungry monster who couldn't stand the fact

that mother inherited the throne, and he didn't. Nothing more."

At that moment, Anders clambered through the hole left by the enchanted mirror—now a permanent doorway to the magical world inside—followed by the black-clad princes, all of whom appeared weak and pale in the soft dawn light. They had been trapped inside the enchantment for weeks—months, some of them. And Issy assumed the banquet provided each night was the only meal they had eaten.

With a soft gasp, she realised she remembered the banquets—the table full of platters of food and goblets of wine that appeared after each evening of dancing. Somehow, when they'd broken the curse, her memories had come flooding back.

Within moments, the Princesses' sitting room was packed full of bodies, all vying for spots on the plush sofas or leaning against the elegantly papered walls, yawning and staring blankly as the lingering effects of the enchantment faded away.

"We need food. And places to sleep," Issy said, looking around. "Everyone can begin their journeys home after a good meal and some rest, but for now, we can't let Uncle Iago know we've escaped his spell. We need to keep him in the dark until he can be apprehended. As it stands, he believes he's gotten away with everything, but if he realises we're free he'll bolt."

"I'll speak to my guards," Anders said. "I trust them. They'll take care of everything, with a little help."

"Thank you, Anders." Issy gave him a grateful smile and he nodded, rubbing a hand over his short, blonde hair.

Livia's eyes widened and her hands flew to her mouth, the blanket slipping from her shoulders. "What about the ball?"

"What ball?" Issy narrowed her eyes.

Livia winced, picking the blanket up and wrapping it back around herself. "For your birthday. It was supposed to be a surprise."

Issy raised an eyebrow. A ball may actually be the perfect setting for what she needed to do. "I guess I could stand to do a little more dancing. With the right partner." She chewed her

lip and when her eyes met Anders' it lit a fire in her chest that warmed her all the way to her fingertips. The Silver soldier—Prince Anders of the Northern Isle, it now seemed—had helped her to solve the mystery and break the curse. They were both finally free.

Issy wasn't sure why that thought made her a little sad.

ISSY ADMIRING the fitted sleeves and soft-corseted bodice of the copper, silk gown Lady Fiona had left on her bed. The noblewoman had written each of the girls a note apologising for her appalling behaviour at the dress fitting, and offering the dresses in their chosen materials as reparations. Issy remembered the day somewhat differently, but she wasn't one to turn down a beautiful new gown. She would be sure to apologise to Lady Fiona later, if everything went to plan.

Livia's face appeared around the edge of Issy's door, and her mouth fell open when she saw the copper gown. "Oh, Issy! You look absolutely magnificent. Anders is going to be awestruck." She waggled her eyebrows and Issy laughed out loud, for the first time in days. It felt good.

Livia stepped out from behind the door and pirouetted, the chocolate satin gown swirling around her legs.

"You look wonderful, too, Liv. I knew that colour would be perfect on you."

Livia beamed. "Now, all we need are two handsome young men to dance the night away with!"

"All in good time. First, we need to deal with that duplicitous uncle of ours. Where are Anders and Hans?"

"In Anders' room, with his guards. They're putting the final touches to the plan."

Issy nodded. "Good. Then it's almost time to go." Her hand went to her throat before she could stop it, finding nothing but bare skin. Her eyes fluttered closed and she took a steadying breath. Warm fingers closed around hers and she

opened her eyes to find Livia holding her hand, a soft expression on her face.

“I miss her, too. But you don’t need a locket to remember her, or anything else. We have each other. She’ll always be with us, in our hearts and our memories.” Tears glimmered along Livia’s bottom lashes, but didn’t fall. She blinked them away, painting a smile onto her sweet, heart-shaped face. She plucked the hammered copper mask up from Issy’s dressing table and held it out. “Ready?”

They crossed the hall and knocked on the door of Anders’ guest room. When it opened, the palace guards, Marco and Paolo, stepped out, taking their positions on either side of the door. Then Anders and his brother Hans appeared, dressed in matching midnight-blue tailcoats and leather masks, making them look more like twins than ever. But Issy would have known Anders’ sharp, blue eyes and tilted mouth anywhere. He’d had a haircut, evening out the patches into a short, sleek style, and his face was clean shaven. He looked handsome, she realised with a flutter of wings in her stomach.

“You look beautiful, Issy,” he said quietly, offering her his arm. She blushed under the intensity of his gaze, grateful that her light brown skin hid the warmth in her cheeks.

“Thank you.” She placed a hand on his sleeve, and they began to make their way to the ballroom, followed by Livia and Hans, and the guards. “Where are the others?”

“They’re getting ready for their performance.” She could hear the grin in his voice and it sent a frisson of excitement down her spine.

Issy hoped their plan would work. It depended on Uncle Iago being completely unaware that the Princesses, Princes and dancers had escaped the shadow realm. If he even suspected they’d gotten free, he’d abscond before he could be apprehended and punished. And Issy wouldn’t allow her mother’s murderer to get away with it for any longer.

Music and laughter drifted from the open doors to the ballroom, accompanied by the clinking of glasses and the clatter of tiny forks on tiny plates. As they approached, Issy

was glad to see that the room was already beginning to fill up. She recognised the royal families and nobility of several neighbouring countries, dressed in the traditional attire of their home nations. They were making polite conversation with each other and admiring the gold leaf detail that trailed up the marble pillars, supporting the high, elegantly frescoed ceiling.

She felt Anders stumble slightly, as though he'd missed a step. She glanced up at him, but his eyes were fixed on a point somewhere across the dance floor. She followed his gaze until she found them, standing with Uncle Santiago, and her blood ran cold. The King and Queen of the Northern Isle were deep in a serious-looking conversation with the man who had entrapped their sons, killed his own sister, cursed Isadora and her sister, and was, even now, attempting to murder their father and steal the Golden throne.

Issy felt a hand on her arm and heard a high-pitched voice in her ear. Lady Fiona was standing beside her, her heavily-painted mouth pulled back in a smile that bared too many teeth.

“I am so glad Princess Livia and yourself liked the dresses, Princess Isadora. I can't apologise enough for my behaviour the other day, but I'm pleased that my little olive branch has been accepted. And I'm sure we can all move on and continue with our etiquette training after the ball. Oh, and happy birthday, of course!”

Issy kept a smile on her face and spoke under her breath. “Lady Fiona, you need to leave. Right now.”

Lady Fiona's smile faltered. “Pardon me? I think I misheard you. It sounded like you told me to leave?”

Issy took Fiona's hands and pulled the woman close, as though to kiss her cheek. “It's not safe for you here. Uncle Santiago is the one who cursed Livia and I. He's trying to kill our father and steal the crown.” She leaned back and scanned Fiona's face, looking for understanding, before pressing her face to Fiona's other cheek and muttering, “Please go. Get in your carriage and leave, now.”

Issy stepped back, dropped Fiona's hands and gave her a firm nod. The noblewoman's expression was bewildered and Issy worried she might faint. But before she could say anything else, someone rang a bell and the room fell silent. All eyes turned to the man who had commanded their attention.

Uncle Iago stood in front of the wall of full-height windows overlooking the ocean, a solemn expression on his tanned and lined face. Dressed in a pale gold jacket and trousers, with sunbursts embroidered around the cuffs, he held the attention of the entire ballroom in the palm of his hand.

A white-hot anger filled Isadora, from her fingers to her toes, as she watched her uncle standing where her father should be. As though he were already on the Golden throne. She couldn't wait to watch him get his comeuppance. Just as soon as—

“Thank you all for being here to celebrate the coming of age of Princess Isadora today,” Iago began, his voice reverberating off the high ceiling. His sorrowful tone was like nails on a chalkboard to Issy. “Unfortunately, it falls to me to be the bearer of bad news on this, what would have been an auspicious day for my brother-in-law and his daughters. But, it saddens me to tell you all that the Princesses, my beloved nieces, have fallen victim to a terrible curse and have not been seen since yesterday evening.”

Gasps and whispers broke out amongst the gathered guests, and Issy did her best to stand behind Anders so her uncle wouldn't spot her, tugging Livia out of sight, too.

“King Aurelio is, understandably, devastated. I'm afraid the news of his daughters' disappearance has brought on a terrible illness in our once strong ruler, exacerbated by grief, and he has been prescribed bed rest by the royal physician.” Issy's breath caught, she hoped it wasn't too late to save her father.

Iago cleared his throat, attempting to smoothly transition from solemn and concerned, to proud and strong. “Until he is well once more, I shall be supporting my brother-in-law through this difficult time and offering my advice and

guidance on all matters of state. If there is anything at all I can assist with as we all navigate these troubling events, please do not hesitate to speak with me. I shall be launching a full investigation into the fates of my dear nieces, and the whereabouts of your esteemed sons. I assure you, no stone will be left unturned, no shadow undisturbed by the light.”

Issy rolled her eyes, she could tell he was pleased with himself for that little turn of phrase. She looked around for Anders, it was almost time for them to put their plan into action, and she for one could not wait to see her uncle get his just desserts.

A servant in brown livery wove through the gathering of royalty and nobility, bearing a silver tray. He reached the front of the crowd and swept into a bow before her uncle. Iago frowned, worry creasing his brow and puckering his mouth. He took a folded piece of parchment from the tray and thanked the servant before opening the note and scanning its contents. His head dropped as he refolded the note. The entire room held its breath, hanging on the Duke’s every word.

Finally, his deep voice broke the silence. “It is with great sadness that I must inform you all of the passing of King Aurelio.”

Issy closed her eyes, feeling Livia beside her squeeze her hand. She squeezed back and began to move, carving a clear path towards the front of the crowd, followed by Anders and Hans.

Their uncle hadn’t finished his speech. Apparently, he was enjoying having complete command of the audience’s attention. Issy couldn’t believe she had never seen him for the narcissistic, self-absorbed monster he truly was, until now.

“In the wake of these tragic circumstances, I shall act as regent—”

“That won’t be necessary, Uncle.” Issy had reached the front of the audience and now stepped out from between the King and Queen of the Northern Isle, coming to a stop in front of Iago. She reached up and removed the hammered copper

mask from her face. “As heiress apparent, I will handle Orovia’s affairs, in the absence of my father.”

Uncle Iago’s face turned ashen, his mouth pressed into a hard line. “P—Princess Isadora, thank the stars you are safe!” He stammered. “What fortuitous luck. Well then, I shall step aside and leave you to your guests. Do enjoy the rest of the ball, everyone. Music!” He clapped his hands and began to back away from Issy, fear now tattooed across his features.

Issy held up a hand, halting the musicians from resuming their performance. “Not so fast, Uncle. Won’t you stay for the dancing? Or have you had your fill, since it was you who cursed Livia and I, and enchanted the sons of these poor, unwitting guests to dance each night for months on end?”

CHAPTER 25

ISADORA



A ripple of shock ran through the crowd, hands flew to cover mouths and one lady near the back fainted into the arms of her husband.

“Tell them, Uncle.” Her voice began to rise, and she tried hard to keep it steady as she spoke, but the anger that had been building inside her needed a release. “Tell our guests how you lured their princes here to unravel a curse you yourself had set in motion, tricking them into vying for my hand, before ensorcelling them and keeping them prisoner for weeks?”

Gasps and angry muttering crackled amongst the nobles, and Issy didn’t need to take her eyes off Iago to know how they were looking at him now. The terror in his eyes told her everything she needed to know. She lifted her voice higher, not wanting her next words to be lost in the growing hubbub.

“Tell them, Uncle, how you poisoned our mother six years ago. Tell them how you murdered your own sister, all because you were jealous of her title as Queen. Tell them how, even now, you attempt to murder our father and steal his crown, all to satisfy your petty greed and arrogance.”

Iago staggered backwards as the dozens of royals and nobles from across the neighbouring kingdoms began to shout and jeer, calling for his arrest. Some, even baying for his blood. He turned to run, and collided with a tall, solid figure. Anders stood there, strong and regal in his formal attire, the leather mask hiding the top half of his face, but nothing could disguise the shock of pale hair, the piercing blue eyes, or the quiet confidence with which he had always held himself. Issy

felt her heart clench at the sight of him, the only one who had been able to help her unravel the curse.

Iago stumbled and turned back, recoiling from the statue-like figure of Anders. But he came up against another figure, turning to find Hans there, looking for all the world like an identical model of Anders. Iago fell backwards, shaking his head and scrabbling away on his hands. The crowd yelled for someone to grab him, but Issy, Anders and Hans made no move to apprehend the Duke.

He picked himself up and darted towards the crowd, trying to make his way to the great doors and escape the ballroom, but everywhere he turned he came face to face with a masked prince, standing stock-still throughout the gathering. None moved or grabbed him as Iago scrambled to get away from them, his mouth open in a silent scream of terror. They all watched him in silence, their eyes following his every move. Even the guests had fallen quiet at the sight of the black-clad young men, waiting on tenterhooks to see what would happen.

Finally, Iago reached the double doors. As they opened, Marco and Paolo took his arms, and he didn't fight them as King Aurelio appeared, framed in the opening between the doors. Issy felt a rush of relief and love as she watched her father—a little pale, and slightly unsteady on his feet, but most definitely alive—approach Uncle Iago and give him the coldest look she had ever seen on her father's face. It wasn't the expression of a disappointed brother and friend, it was the face of a king looking upon a traitor.

“Take him to the dungeons.”

The entire room descended into cheers, applause and shouts of ‘Hear, hear!’ as Iago was dragged away by the guards and King Aurelio finally joined the party. This time, when the King clapped his hands, the musicians began to play.

Issy dashed forwards and embraced her father, and a moment later Livia joined them, arms thrown around the pair of them. They stood like that for a long time, soaking in each other's warmth. Until the sound of someone clearing their throat behind Issy made her release her father and sister and

turn. The King and Queen of the Northern Isle stood there, accompanied by Hans and Anders, eyes shining.

“I believe I have you to thank for reuniting my family, Princess Isadora.” King Jurden held out a hand and Issy stared at it for a moment, frozen with shock. Eventually, her manners came flooding back and she placed her hand in the Silver King’s, her heart thundering in her chest.

“I can’t accept all of the gratitude, Your Majesty. Your son was the one who helped me to break free of the enchantment, myself. Without Prince Anders, I would still be under my uncle’s control and Prince Hans would still be trapped.”

Queen Anke stepped forwards and placed a hand on top of Isadora’s and her husband’s. “Without your strength and selflessness, my dear, we may never have seen either of our sons again. You have our eternal thanks, Princess Isadora. As do you, Princess Livia.”

Livia beamed and nodded to the Silver Queen, and Issy felt a swell of emotion as they all stood there, looking at each other with no fear or malice, only joy and appreciation. Her eyes found Anders’, and the look of adoration on his face made her stomach flip and her cheeks burn, but she didn’t look away.

King Aurelio cleared his throat. “I believe there is the matter of rewarding Prince Anders for solving the mystery and breaking the curse.”

Anders tore his gaze away from Issy’s face and dipped his head to the Golden King. “Your Majesty.”

“What was it we agreed?”

Anders’ throat bobbed. “My freedom, Your Majesty.”

Issy’s father laughed good-naturedly. “I think, under the circumstances, we can do a little better than that. Wouldn’t you say, Isadora?”

Issy looked at her father with wide eyes, her lips parting. What did he mean?

“I had promised your hand in marriage to any man who managed to break the curse upon you and your sister. Of course, I would never force you into an arrangement that didn’t please you, Isadora. But if you were to—”

“Yes,” Issy breathed. “Yes, I would. If you—?” She turned to Anders, heat flooding her veins and making her skin glow. She held her breath. What if he didn’t feel the same way about her?

“I would,” he replied, a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth, his ears and cheeks turning pink, and Issy felt all of the air rush out of her lungs.

“Then, we have even more to celebrate!” Aurelio clapped his hands and ordered a servant to bring out the champagne, before embracing both King Jurden and Queen Anke, and shaking hands with Anders. Livia squealed and hugged Issy, spinning her around so both their dresses floated about their calves, showing off the matching slippers Master Conti had made to go with their new gowns.

“Mother would be so proud of you, Issy,” Livia whispered, as she held her sister’s hands.

Issy brushed a tear away from under her eye and beamed at Livia. “She would be proud of both of us, Liv.”

CHAPTER 26

ANDERS



Anders watched his parents dancing alongside the royals, nobles and dignitaries of a dozen other nations, and felt something settle into place inside him. Perhaps now, the Silver Isle wouldn't be so isolated and separate. Perhaps now that he was to marry Isadora, the Golden Princess, the bonds between their kingdoms would be mended, trade and cooperation would replace the fear and mistrust, and all would be well.

It was a little idealistic, he knew, and it would take time for the tensions that had grown between the people of the Northern and Southern Isles to ease, but the thought brought him a sense of peace that he hadn't felt in years.

He caught sight of two people across the ballroom, watching him, their heads bent together conspiratorially. He paused with his glass halfway to his lips as he recognised Amma, the historian, her dark-brown skin warmed by the shimmering gold riding coat and trousers she wore. It seemed to catch the light and reflect it, the glow almost making him lower his eyes.

But it wasn't Amma who'd given him pause. It was the man she was speaking with. Gus, the gardener, was barely recognisable. Dressed in all black, his polished shoes shone and his lapels appeared to be encrusted with glittering diamonds. He carried a cane that looked to be carved from ebony, and on top was a milky-white glass ball that made Anders think of the moon.

When their eyes met, Gus' lips twitched and he winked at Anders, mirth dancing behind his dark, deep-set eyes. Amma simply smiled beatifically and nodded, looking as regal as any queen, and he found himself nodding back.

“Anders?” The voice behind him sent a shiver of pleasure up his spine and he glanced back to see Issy standing there, two full glasses of champagne in her hands and a nervous smile playing about her lips. He felt a blush come over him again and cursed his pale complexion for giving away his feelings.

He looked back to where Amma and Gus had been standing just moments before, but they had both vanished, as though into thin air. He would have to find and thank them both later, for the parts they each played in helping him to break the curse and save Isadora.

“What were you looking at?” Issy asked, as he turned back to her and accepted the glass she proffered.

“It's not important,” he said. “Not anymore.” He grinned, and Issy bit her lip, a bashful look coming over her. It made his heart squeeze inside his chest. He held his glass out to her and dropped his voice so she had to lean closer to hear. “To us. Thank you for giving me back my family, and my freedom. I will never be able to repay you, but I will spend every day for the rest of my life trying to do just that.”

Isadora's cheeks glowed and she didn't look away as he gazed into her warm brown eyes. She raised her own glass. “To us. Thank you for saving my sister and father, and helping me to stop my uncle from stealing the crown. And for showing me that it doesn't matter how different we are, when we work together wonderful things can happen.”

He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers, and his heart was filled with warmth. As she melted into his arms, the darkness of the past few years burned away, leaving only this. His Golden Princess. She tasted of sea salt and sunlight, and hope.

NEXT IN ONCE UPON A PRINCE

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A shoeless son of a miller. A high-fashion tabby. An adventure far more than they bargained for.

Leo is not a normal cat.

Archie Miller might be a dreamer, but he's seen the complex mousetraps the stray barn cat builds, and he knows he's right. When his late father wills him the "magic cat" as his only inheritance, Archie is ready to prove it, making a deal with the supposed faerie to gain his fortune.

But the ornery brown tabby has plans of his own. And when Archie ends up entangled with a shapeshifting ogre and a

reckless royal beauty, it seems he has unleashed more magical mayhem than he can handle.

Can the shoeless son of a miller romance a princess, become the hero his kingdom needs, and fit into a very fancy pair of hunting boots? Or will all his dreams become a toe-pinching nightmare?

The Shoeless Prince, a retelling of Puss in Boots, is book 8 of Once Upon A Prince, a multi-author series of clean fairy tale retellings. Each standalone story features a swoony prince and his flaws, growth, and happily ever after.

CAT GOT YOUR TONGUE?

They say cats have nine lives, and Leo was certain he had at least two. There was a time *before*, where many things were hazy but mostly pleasant, and then there was *now*.

Now wasn't pleasant at all.

His heart raced, and his fur stood on edge as he darted through the gates of Castletown just before sunset. Open market stalls towered overhead, casting long shadows. His paws glided across the cobblestone so silently it unnerved him. He had been in the central marketplace before, he was sure of it, but nothing looked familiar. It was all so *big*. So *loud*. And the smells—the human sweat and fish stink wafting off the fishermen's stalls; were they always so poignant?

At the same time, his other senses seemed dampened. Muted somehow.

He slowed his pace. His tail twitched with displeasure. Displayed next to another market stall, a giant pumpkin loomed larger than him. It should have been orange, but it seemed a washed-out brown or mustard yellow.

What did orange even look like?

Focus. He had come here for something. Someone. There had been trouble, and he needed—

A pair of boots crunched beside him. Loud footsteps. Large boots. The leather came up to the man's mid-calf but still stretched taller than Leo.

The giant man reached down to grab the giant pumpkin, and Leo startled backward.

“Puss?” the man said, as if he too were startled. “Shoo, puss. Find your master.” His words were dismissive as he turned to place his pumpkin inside a large vegetable cart.

Master? There wasn’t a lot Leo was certain about in that moment, but he didn’t have a master. He wouldn’t. He *was* the master, the sort other people should bow and cater to. They should come running now that he was here, showing himself in desperate need of their assistance.

And with those thoughts, a dark and commanding voice echoed inside Leo’s head. “*Kill the rats; serve your master.*”

He couldn’t escape it; something was *wrong*.

He opened his mouth. “Rr-ow?” *Wait*. Was that him?

Leo hissed, his tail still moving. That couldn’t be him. He was able to speak, wasn’t he?

But that was ridiculous. The voice inside his head had softened, replaced with a simple certainty. Cats couldn’t speak. Why had he been so sure he could, and that this lumbering crowd of dismissive giants could be persuaded to hear him? The vegetable merchant had already finished loading all his leftover produce into his cart, closing down his stand for the night, and no one else so much as glanced in Leo’s direction.

The crowd of giant feet would be certain to trample him if he tried to walk amongst them. A wave of upset gutter water could hit him, which somehow seemed just as bad. And even if he could speak ... what would he say?

That there was trouble. Something bad had happened. Worse than being drenched with water. Larger than a black dog with fangs.

Big. Bad. Trouble.

On the tip of his tongue.

“Mer-row?”

No. Now wasn’t pleasant at all.

CAT'S CRADLE

If Archie's life were a faerie story, or even one of the old plays, the clouds over Castletown in the heart of the Borderland Kingdom of Umbrae would have been a sad and inky sort of gray, releasing a drizzle of rain and the echoing sound of distant thunder. Or perhaps, as the fates loved irony, it would have been clear and bright as a summer day. But no, it was somewhere in the middle—an unremarkable late winter morning that heralded in the death of an unremarkable miller.

The same death that brought Archie and the miller's other two sons to mechanically spend the day hosting a series of local matrons and curious neighbors, burying the body in a box, and then gathering around their kitchen table when evening came.

"I have the will," Rupert said, the eldest of the three. "It was in his room next to the chest, just where he said it would be. He left the mill and the house to me." He paused and held the open parchment out loosely, as if daring any of the others to challenge the legitimacy of his claim.

No one did.

Rupert had always been honest to a fault, and—absent the meddling of fate or faerie—there was no denying the bulk of the fortune should go to the firstborn son.

It was one of those things that had always been and always should be.

He continued. "Harris. He left you the donkey and cart."

Harris nodded his acceptance silently, not even looking up from his stool. Again, it was the sort of inheritance any second son should expect to receive.

That only left one matter of business that should have been as trivial as a footnote.

“And, Archie ...” Rupert shook his head and held the will out again. A strange action for a man who did not appreciate theatrical suspense in the same way Archie did. “Well, perhaps it’s best if you see it for yourself.”

Rupert pushed the parchment over the tabletop, the rough movement scrambling the ink figures so they more closely resembled a nest of gray mice fleeing from an angry tomcat.

Then, the mice became letters.

Then, the letters became words.

And that was the moment when time seemed to stop, and everything in Archie’s dreary and ordinary life changed.

CHASING MICE WAS OVERRATED. Something that a lower, less intelligent creature might do. No, Leo didn’t chase mice. He waited for them to come to him.

The tricky part was not using his claws to tear into the winter’s store of grain. If he did, the cantankerous miller would see the brown tabby cat as another nuisance and attempt to block him from his favorite hunting ground. So, instead, Leo climbed halfway up a grain sack that hung from a pulley, already hoisted and ready to be fed through the central floor-shaft leading to the grindstones in the room below.

But the mill wasn’t moving now. The humans used gates to divert the water from the wheel at night or when the ice proved too much of a hazard. At the very least, the lingering cold of the late winter melt would ensure that the miller and his three sons would make a later start than usual and give Leo all the time he needed to complete his task. After giving the bag a shake, it deviated from its course enough to sprinkle a few kernels onto the floorboards.

Perfect. The bait was set. Now, he just had to wait.

The mill's upper story was a maze of shadows and wooden beams. The predawn light trickled in through the cracks. Leo climbed to the top of the pulley, hiding himself to wait for something small and tasty to walk under his trap. His tail twitched with anticipation. His mouth watered, just thinking of the tender sweetness of a freshly caught mouse-tail. The wait wouldn't be long. The mill was a prime place for mice to assemble through the winter months, and it hadn't disappointed him yet.

It helped that he had learned to keep his expectations low.

Leo still didn't have a master. None of the humans were going to help or even attempt to understand him, and he found he didn't need them to. He had at least a half-dozen homes—including the mill—where he might stop to sleep or eat, and a few humans he liked more than others, but he wouldn't say he belonged to them.

He could find food all on his own, and he needed little more than that.

As for the desperate danger of *before*—well, he never was able to tell anyone about that, and even his partial memories had faded. He knew there had been a voice in his head demanding that he kill all the rats, but maybe that wasn't so strange. He was a cat, and cats killed rats.

And whatever other trouble there had been, it just didn't seem to matter anymore.

Something made a scraping noise below him. Leo prepared his claws, ready to release the pulley and make a tasty mouse pancake to break his fast.

The trap door opened from the floor with a *bang*. After straining his senses to pick up any approaching mice, the sound rattled his ears and seemed far too loud.

“Puss?”

Leo's fur rose, a hiss building in his throat. *Humans*. Must they mewl and crash around like overgrown bull calves? The towheaded youth continued to pull himself up and walk

toward the central floor-shaft, making more noise in his bare feet than anyone had a right to. “Puss? Puss?”

Archie wasn't a human Leo had any reason to actively dislike, but he was a nuisance. There would be no mouse-tails. No mouse parts of any kind. Nothing Leo could properly smash with the weight of the sack alone, but he released his trap anyway, just to show his frustration.

After all, Archie was also the youngest of the miller's sons and least likely to retaliate.

The sack came down.

“Ow!” the youth cried, nursing his foot. Satisfaction rippled through the brown tabby cat from his pointed ears to his silken tail. Archie stood like a stork, though he had already spotted the grain on the ground and was searching through the shadows. “Puss. I know you're here.”

So what? The oaf would never catch him. Archie had bulked up in the last year, but the sudden change had left him entirely graceless. Even if Archie tried to shut Leo up somewhere, it wouldn't work. The mill was old and had plenty of loose hinges his claws could exploit.

Much had faded from his memories, but Leo had always been resourceful and excelled at landing on his feet—literally and figuratively. He was a born hunter, and even if he was smaller than the humans, he refused to become their prey. Checking exits, learning to open latches not intended for his use had become a staple in his life from the time *before* became *now*.

But just as Leo was about to dash into the surrounding winter fields and the coming dawn, Archie called for him again. “Puss, I know you're here, and I know you're not a normal cat.”

Just like that, Leo froze, fully caught in another man's trap.

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading *The Silver Prince*, I hope you enjoyed Anders and Isadora's story. If you would like to keep in touch and hear about my upcoming releases, you can join my email list at lyndseyhallwrites.com. As a thank you, you'll receive my prequel novellas to *The Fair Chronicles* free!

I would be so grateful if you would consider leaving a review, reviews are incredibly helpful for authors and other readers. Just a few words can make a huge difference!

I hope you enjoy the rest of the books in the *Once Upon a Prince* series. If you like young adult fantasy with fae, elemental magic and mythical creatures, you might like my trilogy, beginning with *The Fair Queen*.

Thanks again for supporting me and my fellow *Once Upon a Prince* authors!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people I want to thank for helping me to take *The Silver Prince* from a vague idea (and a lesser-known fairytale as inspiration) to a book that I'm so proud of. Writing Anders and Isadora's story has been a roller coaster with lots of ups and downs, but I've loved the journey this story has taken me on.

First of all, I want to thank Alice for grabbing the hand of a new, baby author and dragging me along on all of these exciting adventures with you. I'll never be able to thank you enough for all of your support, encouragement and friendship.

Second, to the two incredible humans who created this series of standalone fairytale retellings and took a chance on me by inviting me to join. Thank you so much Alora and Constance for your guidance and organisation, and for all the memes!

I also want to thank my fellow OUAP authors for their support throughout the past year, it's been a privilege and a dream come true working with you all, Deborah, Kate, Celeste, Angie, Kristin, Jacque, C.J., and Selina.

To my brilliant editor, Astrid, thank you for helping me to whip this book into shape and making sure I did Anders and Issy justice.

Huge thanks go to our fabulous cover designers, MoorBooks Design, you brought Anders and Isadora to life perfectly and I couldn't be prouder of this beautiful cover! And of course, to my wonderful formatter and forever friend, Rhianne, thank you for being a constant source of inspiration and joy! And for the gorgeous interior of this book.

Thank you to my husband, son and parents for always encouraging me to go after my dreams.

And finally, thank you to you, reader. I couldn't do any of this without you!

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Lyndsey Hall lives on the edge of Sherwood Forest, one of the most magical places in England's history, and the inspiration for her debut novel, *The Fair Queen*. She grew up surrounded by books, and loved to read and write from a young age.

She loves to travel and try her hand at new things, but is most at home when curled up in a chair with a cup of tea and a good book, usually accompanied by at least one dog.

Sign up to Lyndsey's newsletter to get a free story and be the first to hear about new releases!

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