



OLD KING COLE

RACY RHYMES, BOOK 3



BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BROOKLYN KNIGHT

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BOOK THREE

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Publisher: WordWorld Publishing

www.wordworldpublishing.com

info@wordworldpublishing.com

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Old King Cole

**Was a merry old soul
And a merry old soul was he;
He called for his pipe
And he called for his bowl
And he called for his fiddlers
three.**



CHAPTER ONE

PROLOGUE

14 MONTHS PRIOR...

“P rince Cole, your presence has been requested by your father, Old King Cole, and you must hasten to see him. There does not appear to be much time left before he crosses over.”

Prince Cole wet his lips and withheld a sigh as he listened to the announcement, which had come by way of his father’s most loyal servant. It had been four years of steady decline, but now it appeared as though the grim conclusion of it was afoot. There would be no delaying the inevitable.

The truth was, he did not wish to see his father. Not in this state. The man was tired and feeble. He was nothing more than a shadow of his former self, and Prince Cole could not bear to behold him in such a pathetic state. He muttered nonsensical words, which neither he, his mother or Lord Finley, the head of the Royal Council, had been able to comprehend. This was in stark contrast to the man Prince Cole had known for twenty-seven years, the man who’d ruled Luxemore with poise, determination, and power. No, this was not the man who now laid prostrate in a bed, eyes rolling, lips dry and cracked.

His mother managed to remain loyal and stay by her husband’s side, the way a good queen was expected to. She’d been there day in and out, listening to his rhetoric and interpreting his fantasies; yet Prince Cole could not bring himself to look upon his father. Rather, he preferred to maintain the memories he had of the man—memories which made him proud to bear his name.

Still, if his father was summoning him to his bedside, he must go. There was no negating this; for surely, the darkness of the hour would persist and transform into days, weeks, and years, if he did not. It was imperative for him to release his final words to his father, for he did not believe the man would not have any for him.

Albie Cornelly (who was approximately the same age as the Prince and had been assigned as his trusted companion from the time he was a child), accompanied him as he walked through the hallowed halls of Luxemore Palace. The corridors were still and dark, the only sound coming from the occasional scurrying of a mouse across the marble floors. And after many moments of gripping agony, he arrived at the door of his father's suite on the palace's Southern Wing. He paused, hand trembling slightly as he reached for the handle.

"Are you well, Prince?" Albie questioned, concern coming from his words, yet not manifesting on his features.

"I am not," Prince Cole confessed, "but I will be."

Albie nodded. "Shall I enter the King's chamber with you for support?" he questioned further, and for a moment, the Prince considered honoring this request.

Then, he decided against it.

This was a demon he needed to confront on his own, he figured, for upon his father's passing he would take the throne. Surely, that was no place for a weak monarch.

"No," he whispered. "All will be well, and I'll return after a few minutes."

Again, Alfie nodded.

Then, after taking a deep breath, Prince Cole opened the door and stepped inside.

The room smelled of rich spices, yet the pungent aroma of impending death did not escape Prince Cole's nostrils. And when he cast his eyes onto the bed, he saw his father laying there, looking feebler than he had on the last occasion.

"Old King Cole..."

His father's strangled utterings wafted through the air and knocked him in the chest.

"No, father, it is me, your only son," the Prince announced; but his father did not appear to be lucid, and so the rambling continued:

“Old King Cole. Merry soul. Fiddlers. Three.”

Suddenly, the aged man jolted upright in the bed. “Where are my bowl and pipe?” he bellowed. “Bring them to me! Bowl! Pipe!”

Prince Cole rushed to his father’s bed just as the door flew open with servants who delivered the requested items.

“Father all is well,” Prince Cole fibbed. “Your royal pipe and bowl have arrived, although I do not think it wise to smoke when you are about to...” The words fell away, and his body withered. “You must rest, Father,” he insisted, touching the man’s emaciated shoulder. “I am here now, as you have requested. All *will* be well.”

“My boy,” King Cole breathed, attempting a smile, but it sat crooked upon his lips. He cupped his son’s cheek. “You did not leave,” he whispered. “You are still in Luxemore.”

“I would never leave Luxemore, Father,” Prince Cole assured him, holding his father’s hand closer. “This is my legacy. It is also yours. I will honor your memory and maintain all that you have established during your rule. On this, I swear.”

His father smiled as the bowl was set next to him, and he set his head back against the bed. He closed his eyes.

“Merry old soul...” he whispered. *“Fiddlers.”*

Prince Cole sighed and sat on the edge of the mattress next to his deteriorating father. Perhaps he should have commanded Albie to join him, he thought as heaviness belted his heart, for now he knew he was not strong enough to emotionally manage this scenario alone.

Suddenly, Old King Cole sat up again, but this time the movement was slow and deliberate. He turned and stared into his son’s eyes. The sick, crooked smile was still firmly in place.

Prince Cole took his father’s hand. “What is it, Father?” he wanted to know. “What will you say to me?”

“The throne will be yours, Cole,” the King whispered. “You will lead our kingdom in a new way.”

The Prince nodded, deciding to entertain his father's babble, for surely this was a thing of which even the most common man was aware.

"The throne will be yours, but it will not be for long."

"P-pardon?"

"She will come, Cole," the King continued, failing to elucidate on his comment. "The woman. The queen. She will be luxurious and exotic. Smoky quartz."

Now, Prince Cole's eyes watered and tears pricked his lungs. "Of what do you speak, Father? For surely, I do not understand."

It is undeniable. The man has completely lost his mind, just as Mother and Lord Finley have pronounced.

The man's hand shook as he retrieved one of the many bowls which had been set at his bedside. He reached into it, pulled out a stone, and handed it to his son.

"Smoky quartz," he repeated, grinning.

Cole's jaw trembled as he looked at the jewel. It was dark and mysterious, rich, warm and earthy—the color of burnished gold.

The King's quivering hand folded over the prince's as he fastened Cole's fingers around it. "Cave," he wheezed. "Glittering Cave. This is the name."

"Father, I apologize. I have no knowledge regarding these things," Prince Cole responded, now failing to keep the tears from cresting in the corners of his eyes. They dripped onto his cheeks and collected upon his chin. "You are unwell, Father. You should rest and—"

"I speak logically and plainly, Son," the man insisted, tone loud and firm. "You will listen to the things I say, and you will guard them with your heart, or fulfillment will never arrive. She will elude you, and you will never see her again. The throne will be unable to give you what she can. You must listen or surely, you will rue the day that I left this earth!"

Prince Cole sobbed, and his shoulders folded forward as stifling emotion trampled him; but he nodded his consent.

Only then, did Old King Cole continue. "Sixty nautical miles to the north," he whispered. "Fifteen degrees westward. Twice daily."

"This is the location of said caves," Prince Cole guessed, attempting to keep up with his father's babble but it was taxing. "What are within its depths?"

"Merry..."

Cole sighed and wet his chaffed lips. "Very well, Father," he relented. "I... have heard everything you've said. Not only that, but I will also guard these words in my heart. No, I do not understand these mysteries, for surely, that is what they are; but I promise I will try."

"You do not understand now, Prince, but very soon, you will," were his father's final words.

The man laid his head back onto the pillow and his eyes began to roll. Then, the muttering started again:

"Old King Cole. Merry soul. Fiddlers. Three."

Prince Cole swallowed and released his father's hand so that it dropped onto the plush mattress. Then he rose to his full height and tugged at the hem of his garment.

The mineral was still in his palm.

His father's grumbling continued, growing louder and more robust. It even appeared to rhyme.

"May God receive my father's soul beyond the gates of eternity," the Prince whispered. Then, when he could look no more, he turned and left the room.

CHAPTER TWO

In the last month of the Gregorian calendar year, the time during which the most fantastic festivals were commonplace among the locals, the Luxemore Royal Court was well-occupied with ladies and gents who'd descended upon the palace from lands far and wide. This would surely be the celebration of the year—the one to top any others. It did not matter how affluent the host of any other party was, their shindig would not hold a candle to the one in the royal palace.

The women's gowns were fabulous and billowing, boasting bold colors that commanded the attention of single (and some not-so-single) men. They trailed through the gardens and down the aisles. Waists were cinched and corsets were precisely fitted, so that if a gentleman wanted to assess the vitality of a lady's breasts, it would not be inconvenient for them to do so.

And the gentlemen looked stately in tailored waist coats and top hats, which they dutifully tipped in the presence of blushing females. Some of them wielded canes made of ivory or precious metals. Whether or not they had an ailment which affected their stride was of no importance; for certainly, this was all part of the air. These men were aristocrats—Dukes, Lords, and Barons, titles which validated their presence in the Luxemore Royal Court.

But of all the fabulous attire, no one looked better than King Cole Kamprad, II—good heavens, no! Who in their right mind would dare try and compete? For even if they presumed to do so, they'd surely meet a miserable and passé failure.

It was said that King Cole only wore garments which had been imported from exotic jurisdictions. In fact, his personal tailors would travel once a quarter to secure the finest of linens for his regal apparel.

And purportedly, King Cole himself slew thousands of menacing beasts with his sword, so hand-selected cobblers could fashion his custom-made shoes.

And yes, in case the reader is wondering, said hunting excursions would take place on the African land mass, where said beasts were most regal.

Such rumors had been proven time and time again, as indeed, King Cole had many striking artifacts to showcase his numerous and frequent international guests.

So, to be clear, while the Lords and Ladies who'd received personal invitations to attend the monthly fete were dressed to the nines, *none* of them could top King Cole Kamprad, II, and none of them even tried.

But it was more than this.

King Cole was a dreadfully handsome man, with liquid gray eyes and reams of golden locks that danced about his sculpted shoulders whenever he moved. Only a few know for certain (for certainly only a few had been afforded the privilege of seeing this themselves), but purportedly, he was even as chiseled as the men who served in his militia, something which made everyone wonder how he'd secured such an astonishing physique. Some said it was genetic. Others speculated that it was from the previously alluded to hunting trips; and further still, some believed King Cole to be nothing less than a deity, gifted to the citizens of Luxemore for such a time as this.

The latter is probably the most accurate answer.

But the truth is, none of it really mattered. The *only* thing that mattered was that King Cole Kamprad, II of Luxemore was a gracious ruler who had the welfare of his subjects in mind and catered expensive parties; and if one were so lucky as to receive an invite, they'd be a fool to turn it down.

Especially if ‘one’ was a lady.

Speaking of a lady...

A striking woman, dressed in fashionable garbs and donning gold bangles, approached King Cole’s throne and offered him a pipe and a bowl filled to the brim with fresh fruits, which had been plucked from one of his numerous orchards. She leaned forward to display her bosom, but the king only removed the pipe from the tray and fitted it between his lips. Then, he selected a few of the berries from the bowl and twirled his wrist to dismiss her, but his mother cleared her throat in the seat next to him.

“Your Highness,” she purred.

Albie, who was standing in position nearby stiffened, and Cole sighed, already fatigued by his mother’s antics.

“This is Charlotte Worthington. Her father is Duke Reginald Worthington of Deville. You remember him, do you not?”

“A duke’s daughter is bringing the royal pipe?” he questioned, unimpressed.

“She is seeking audience, Your Highness,” his mother explained, chuckling nervously. “As you are aware, the line of eligible women who wish to present themselves to you is exceedingly long. I suggested this measure as a means to... speed up the process.”

“Of course.”

“Have you looked upon her, Your Highness?” his mother pressed.

The woman curtsied, making sure to display her assets yet again, but the king appeared unbothered.

“She is lovely,” he responded. The words were mechanic. Rote.

His mother cleared her throat again. “Perhaps, Your Highness, you’d like to speak with Miss Charlotte later on this evening, after the entertainment has concluded.”

“Perhaps not,” was her son’s tepid response. “I am sorely fatigued, as it has been a long day and there is much for me to do tomorrow,” he said. “However, I am certain Charlotte Worthington will find pleasurable company amongst the crowd.” He gave her a cursory once-over before extending his hand to the revelers; and indeed, many a gent looked on, drooling after the woman standing before the king’s throne.

His mother fought the urge to grumble and quickly fitted a placating smile onto her prepared face. “Very well, Your Highness,” she acquiesced.

The woman tipped her head into a respectful bow. “It was an honor to stand before you, King Cole,” she said.

King Cole hummed and fit the pipe between his lips, and as she walked away, his eyes moved with the slight sway of her hips. This was the structure of all the women in Luxemore. Even the ones who traveled to meet him resembled the rakes that were in his stables. These were the physiques which Luxemorian men lusted after. No doubt, they were the physiques of women who’d made splendid mothers, wives, and mistresses, but this did not titillate the king in any way.

Cole’s mother sighed and his attention shifted. “Something is on your mind, Mother,” he presumed. “What do you wish to say?”

“There are many things I wish to say, Your Highness,” she answered respectfully, “but I am doubtful any of them will be well received. Rather, my fear is that such things will fall on deaf ears, the way they have done for the past fourteen months.” She flicked her hair, which was just as long and billowing as her royal offspring’s.

“There may be some truth in the things you say,” he acknowledged, puffing the pipe, “yet, this has never stopped you or Lord Finley from *saying* before. Please, speak your peace. Spare us both the agony and do tell.” He twirled his wrist and his heavy jewelry clanked.

Undeniably, the green light was all his mother needed to proceed, no matter if Lord Finley was there or not. “I am concerned, Cole,” she whispered, eyeing the servants and

merrymakers to make sure no one was in earshot of their conversation; for certainly, if one were to overhear their clandestine discussion, it would make the daily notices. “You are not a young man.”

“In some jurisdictions, twenty-six years old is still considered youthful,” he remarked.

“But not in this one, and you know this very well,” she countered. “Despite this, you appear to be in no hurry to select a bride who will complement you on your father’s illustrious throne.”

“Correction,” Cole nipped, hoisting up a manicured finger. “It is *my* throne, Mother. Not only that, but it has belonged to me for more than twelve months. Might I remind you that it’s not appropriate to reference the late king, my father; especially since, under my rule, Luxemore is continuing to thrive, no matter what you believe.”

“Apologies, Your Majesty,” she said, momentarily dipping her head. “You are correct. You have done a stellar job since the late Old King Cole passed.”

“And as it relates to your second concern,” he continued, not particularly wanting to speak of his father, “I am in no hurry to wed.”

Now, his mother’s head rose. “But marriage is an honorable institution, Cole,” she said. “It will give Luxemore stability. Your father’s untimely departure weakened us, for now there is an empty seat in the palace.”

Cole’s jaw tightened.

“Not only that,” his mother continued, “but it will also provide you with an heir, someone who will succeed you since you are my only offspring.”

“These points are not lost on me,” he noted, “however, times are different, Mother. Marrying for legacy alone is important, yes; but there are other factors I am minded to consider.”

“Such as?”

“Love.”

“Love is fleeting.”

“But should it not be considered?” he opposed, cutting his eyes in her direction. “I do not mind the occasional romp.”

“You could have fooled me, Your Highness,” she nipped.

“However,” he continued, ignoring her derision, “regarding matters more permanent, there is something very particular I am seeking.”

“And what is that?”

His mother asked the question, but Cole had no answer. At least not immediately. For if the truth were revealed, the subject was something he’d mulled over for countless sunrises and sets. It had caused him to daydream, to stare into the vast openness at the methodical sea and the haphazard clouds. It produced imaginations of a woman—he had never been able to see her face—who brought him unspeakable joy and an abundance of satisfaction.

“She will come, Cole. The woman. The queen. She will be luxurious and exotic. Smoky quartz.”

His father’s final words often rolled around his mind. He had not understood them then, and not much had changed in that moment; but he’d been having dreams. Of a woman. And she had eyes the color of the stone the old man had folded into his hands. Yet, despite having access to this limited information, he’d never seen her in the flesh; and as such, the answer to his mother’s question escaped and baffled him just as much as it did her.

He pressed his lips tight and lifted his chin.

“Very well, Your Highness,” his mother sighed, a behavior she’d been engaging in more frequently since her son had taken the throne. “Because I am not Lord Finley, I cannot persuade you in the way of marriage. I am only the king’s mother.”

“And not even Lord Finley can persuade me if I do not see the benefit of his advice,” Cole clarified, stroking his beard; but then he leaned over and kissed his mother’s cheek to placate

her; and on cue, she wilted with adoration for her one and only son, the king.

“I love you, Mother,” he told her, smiling into her face, “and I will not disappoint you. You must trust me on this. When the woman of my eternal fascinations presents herself, you will know. The entire kingdom of Luxemore shall.”

His mother cupped his cheek. “I trust you, Cole,” she assured him, “and I will do my best to remain patient. Let us not dampen the spirit of this seasonal festival any further. There is much to celebrate. There is fine food, drink, and entertainment on the agenda. And who knows? Perhaps the woman of your enchantments will present herself this very evening.”

“Perhaps she will.” Cole offered his mother an appeasing smile, even though he was doubtful of the things she’d said.

It had been so long.

He’d searched high and low, and never once had he set sights on any woman who remotely resembled the one his father had alluded to while in the throes of insanity, or the one in his dreams; but stranger things had happened, and not even the king would be able to deny this.

His father’s fate was proof of this.

Having had enough of the lackluster conversation, King Cole summoned Lord Finley, who was always nearby and at his beck and call, just as he’d been for his father.

“Your Highness,” he bowed.

“The entertainment,” was the simple instruction. “It is getting late in the hour. Let us proceed.”

“Of course, Your Highness.”

Lord Finley hurried away.

As his mother had suggested, Albie, and other members of the royal staff, had made arrangements for music and dance performances from only the best. In fact, in preparation for this event, his administrators had flown in a trio of fiddlers who hailed from three corners of the globe. This act would be

the first one, and when the Luxemorian musicians left the grand stage, three new ones took their place.

The first was a tall, lanky man who was from Almany. The second was a middle-aged woman from Flanders. And the third...

Cole's hand curled around the arm of his throne. His grip had gotten so tight, his nails nearly pierced the gilded wood.

The third fiddler—she had dark skin and thick hair, that hung in long shiny ropes down the length of her back. At first glance the tresses appeared matted, but King Cole leaned closer, barely able to keep his buttocks in the seat, and that was when he was able to see that her hair was delicately intertwined—cottony and appearing soft to the touch.

And said locks were crimson-red, like blazing hell fire. To King Cole's astonishment, her eyebrows appeared to be the same color. Large earrings, made of some material (perhaps copper) hung beneath her mane.

And her eyes...

Smoky quartz.

CHAPTER THREE

I t is her. The one of whom my father spoke. She has come, just as he said she would...

“Your Highness?”

Not even his mother’s voice was enough to distract him from the goddess positioning herself on the seat next to the generic fiddlers from Almany and Flanders; and suddenly, King Cole’s chest was tight, as if he’d caught a case of influenza, and his vision clouded over.

His mother frowned. “Your Highness, shall I call for the medic? You appear unwell.”

Certainly, unless the medic had a device that would assess the state and functioning of his respiratory system, the man would be of little use.

“I am well,” Cole muttered, eyes still pinned onto the woman. “I am... simply taken aback by the quality of the entertainment.”

“But they’ve not yet played a single note,” his mother noticed. “Yes, they are very exotic, especially the woman with the dark skin—”

Father said she would be exotic...

“But we should wait until we’ve heard their performance before we determine their caliber,” she finished, flicking her hair. “If I am pleased, I shall have them return for my monthly tea.”

Or even mine.

To be clear, King Cole did not drink tea. He preferred imported spirits and strong drink; however, if having the fiddler in his presence meant he'd be required to digest the bland beverage, he'd do so in an instant; for he could immediately see that this woman (he'd acquire her personal details) was beyond average. Her physical structure conveyed this much. She was nothing like Lady Worthington, with her flat chest and bony hips. No, the manifestation of divinity currently positioning her fiddle had been fashioned far differently.

Cole had seen such remarkable physiques during his frequent travels, specifically on the African continent. There were curves and dips, and additional pounds of flesh that enticed him. He'd never engaged a woman bearing this enticing assembly. But as he peered at the woman, there was no doubt in his mind that this would change.

That very night.

With no hesitation whatsoever, he summoned Lord Finley and whispered in his ear, "The dark-skinned fiddler. What is her name?"

"Nkenge Okyere, Your Highness," he loyally responded.

"From where does she hail?"

"The place called Ghana, Your Highness," Lord Finley answered and then he paused before casting a sideward glance at the king's mother. "Is it your wish to meet with the fiddlers personally? You can speak with them in the grand reception hall once their performance is complete."

"If I decide to engage them, it will not be all three," Cole replied, stroking his beard, "but I will confirm my wish in due course. Thank you. You may depart."

Lord Finley nodded and scurried onto other business.

His mother turned to look at him. "What was that about?"

"Nothing," he answered, patting her knee. "Let us enjoy the show to determine whether she will perform at your tea."

“*She*, Your Highness? Perhaps you have not noticed, but there are three fiddlers.”

King Cole didn’t respond. His mind continued to be occupied with his father’s final, preposterous words:

“*She will come, Cole. The woman. She will be luxurious and exotic.*”

Was this whom his father had been speaking of? In those final moments of his time here on earth, could this be the woman he’d been referencing?

The thought juggled around inside of King Cole’s head, but he simply returned his attention to the woman on the platform, watching her carefully, the way he’d watch game in the Serengeti. He twirled a long, golden strand of hair around his index finger, noticing the way her chin melded onto her instrument. He observed how her fingers curled around the bow and could not stop the imagination of them curling around his solid member. He even saw how her hips fluffed off the side of the stool upon which she sat, and fantasized about how they’d assume a similar position over his lap—his cock.

Nkenge Okyere. Already, I am taken by her. Father was right. I did not understand, but I believe I am starting to.

His chest burned and his muscles spasmed as he waited to hear the first of her notes; for surely, they’d be just as magical as her person.

And then they came.

And they were.

Of course, it was not Nkenge Okyere alone who played the instrument, but somehow, her melody was the only one to reach the king’s flaming ears. Her body swayed. The fiery locks swung. The earrings danced chaotically against the music, and King Cole’s breath shuddered out of him. The colorful and striking garment she wore shifted around her curves, bringing more life to the piece. To the room. To his soul.

Then the music stopped.

Cole's eyes snapped open.

It started again.

More notes struck King Cole in the chest like Cupid's dagger. The woman's body and the violin seemed to become one instrument. Her fingers, long and slender, shivered over the strings, and the bow glided back and forth, threatening to take King Cole with it. Surely, she was like the [Pied Piper of Hamelin](#), who wielded his magical flute to lure his victims, for the king desired to be near her. She could lead him into the underwater abyss, and he would not care, if only he'd be allowed to touch her skin and look into her eyes as they descended together.

The music stopped again, and this time a rousing applause replaced it. The crowd hooted in glee. Even the king's mother clapped vigorously, celebrating so intensely the palms of her hands turned ruddy. Furthermore, it appeared as though her questions regarding the quality of the talent had been answered.

But as the fiddlers bowed and prepared to make their leave, something made Cole's stomach cluster into knots.

I must acquaint myself with her. I must see her.

The trio lowered, careful to make eye contact with their illustrious host. They wanted to see if the king was pleased with their performance, for if he was, he'd reward them handsomely in their respective local currencies; but when the dark-skinned fiddler looked at him, their eyes fastened.

Her breath snatched.

Slowly, King Cole lifted his hand into the air, as if commanding angels to descend upon Luxemore Palace. The ring sitting upon his pinky finger glittered as the crowd fell silent in anxious anticipation of hearing his voice.

"Encore," he whispered.

The fiddlers jostled, but took to their seats again; however, King Cole cleared his throat and they suspended.

“Nkenge Okyere,” he clarified, voice a little louder on this occasion. “I wish to hear more. From you.”

Nkenge’s lashes fluttered, and her full lips parted before she demurely bowed. “Of course, Your Highness.”

Finally, King Cole pressed his back against the chair, for he had been hovering prior to. And as the other fiddlers departed his presence and Nkenge took to playing for his pleasure, something rose in his throat.

It was like a cool breeze coming off the ocean’s surface.

Or maybe it resembled heated rays of golden sunshine raining upon his head.

King Cole was unsure, but by the time Nkenge finished her encore piece, one thing was certain: she was the woman who’d invaded his dreams. She was his father had talked about. She was the woman who would be his wife.

CHAPTER FOUR

Perhaps Nkenge had stopped breathing completely. That would be the only explanation for her sudden vertigo.

She had performed on many international stages before this one. She had been in the presence of Lords and Ladies, so Luxemore's pomp and circumstance did not frighten her. Not at all; however, to play before King Cole Kamprad, II... to have him request a solo performance, this was more than she could have ever dreamed.

And the king appeared to be so captivated by her rendering. The way his steely eyes bore into her unsettled her completely. The manner in which he twirled his long blond locks around his finger thrust her into a state of utter bewilderment. For this reason, she'd had to pay extra attention to her sheet music, lest she make an error and embarrass herself.

But oh, how the butterflies danced in her belly at the sight of the man. The young women in her village had mentioned how beautiful King Cole was. They'd referenced his physique and height, but even those precautionary warnings had not been sufficient to prepare Nkenge for the onslaught of his potent aura.

Thank the gods I am here, and he is there, she thought, hand trembling around her instrument. *I would not maintain my poise if he were next to me.*

It was a paradox of epic proportions. She wanted to remain on the stage under his personal spotlight, soaking in his appreciation and praise, yet she also wanted to escape him for

fear that she'd do something to bring shame to both her and the Okyere name.

So, when her encore piece was finished, she waited for mere seconds before curtsying (a gesture she knew, from experience, would be received as respectful and welcome by His Majesty) and hurried away from his presence and that of the woman who sat frightfully poised and stately next to him, glaring.

It was only when she was out of sight that her senses restored. She pressed her back against the wall and held her thumping heart. The fiddle rattled in her hand, and she gripped it, trying to stop it from knocking against her thigh.

It was barely any use.

The woman from Flanders approached with a bright smile on her face. *"Well done,"* she said in her French language. *"It seems that King Cole enjoyed your performance. So much so, he requested another of you alone."*

"You are very kind," Nkenge responded in the same language, although it was heavily accented, *"however, my solo was merely a means of additional entertainment for His Majesty. I am certain King Cole Kamprad enjoyed our performance as a collective. We did exceptionally, provided we had less than twenty-four hours to practice together."*

"You are correct and incorrect, Miss Okyere. I was pleased with the collective, but your act was more than mere entertainment. Indeed, you alone, have exceeded my expectations."

The unanticipated introduction of the king's voice (and his intoxicating glow) forced both women to lurch back and fold into a curtsy. Nkenge's hair dropped into her face, something for which she was glad, as she was sure her cheeks had now assumed the hue of her tresses; but she'd still been able to set her eyes upon the glorious man before the curtain concealed her vision.

King Cole was wearing a lavish and richly embellished cloak that boasted gold lacework and a fur trim. And the aroma

which accompanied him was that of expensive spices and ointments, which instantly filled Nkenge's head.

Surely, she'd blaspheme her name that very night!

"Your Highness," she said, eyes falling upon his buckled shoes. "I am pleased to have entertained you, and I am honored to have been hosted in Luxemore's Royal Court."

"The pleasure and honor are mine alone," he confessed. "Please rise. Both of you."

The woman from Flanders rose first because it took Nkenge a second to collect her poise. She had been trained for this moment. From the time she was a little girl, when her immense talent had become apparent, the queen mother in her village had taken her under her wing to train her in the ways of foreign culture. This was how she'd learned to curtsy and perfect her English and French.

She'd also been told not to look aristocrats in the eye, as surely this would be considered a measure of disrespect; but the king's energy was pulling her in. It was as thick as the ropes she'd seen tethering the enormous boats at the dock in the Luxemore village; and when she finally rose, as the king had commanded, they were eye-to-eye.

Her bottom lip trembled, and she looked away unable to behold him any further.

King Cole swallowed. "Your name?" he blurted. He was talking to the woman from Flanders, though he truly did not care about the information. In fact, he had not even given her the privilege of seeing his eyes.

"Etoile, Your Majesty. Etoile Marseilles."

"Thank you for your service, Lady Marseilles," he said, offering her a polite smile. "I hope you enjoy the remaining festivities. Should you need anything, my servants are on hand to ensure you are well taken care of."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Etoile curtsied, cast a sideward glance and a grin in Nkenge's direction, and hurried away.

The king looked after the woman, brows pulled in, and then he turned back to Nkenge, whose eyes were still pinned onto the carpet.

King Cole paused before touching her chin to shift her gaze. "Please, look upon me," he requested, allowing his fingers to feel the texture of her skin. "I would love to see your eyes, for they remind me of something I treasure greatly."

Her lashes fluttered as she obeyed his curious command, and the minute their gazes connected, he sighed.

They both did.

"I would ask your name, but it is obvious I already know it," he said, nearly fumbling over his speech. His tone and features were as soft as the fur on his royal robe. "Nkenge Okyere..."

"Yes," she confirmed. "You said it perfectly, Your Highness."

"Do others mispronounce it?"

"Quite often," she chuckled. "It is a Ghanian name, which means, *superior mind* or *intelligent ones*."

"Then I am speaking to a scholar."

"Indeed, I am well-schooled," she confirmed, lifting her chin, which was still in his gentle grasp. "I completed my schooling in Europe and speak four languages."

"Compared to my ten."

"It would be inappropriate for me to be more learned than someone of your caliber. Of this, I am certain."

"*Perhaps*," King Cole reluctantly agreed, speaking Akan, which was Nkenge's native language, "*though I am not completely convinced*."

The smile which appeared on the woman's face was enough to make him shed his crown and robe and drop to his knees before her. He paused and tried to collect himself, for surely this woman would ruin him if he failed to do so.

"Have you explored Luxemore, Nkenge?" he asked, shifting the topic.

“I’ve not had time, Your Highness,” she answered. “I have been here for less than forty-eight hours, and it was imperative that the other fiddlers and I practice, so you’d be pleased with our entertainment. But...” She inhaled and offered the king her smile yet again. “I don’t think I’ve ever experienced anything like Luxemore. I am well-journeyed. I have been to many places and seen many things, yet nothing quite as beautiful as your kingdom. It is truly captivating.”

“Then you must see all of it,” King Cole hastily suggested. “Starting with the Luxemore Palace gardens.”

“But the celebration,” she reminded him, perplexed. “Should you not remain in the center of the action? I’m sure there are many other performances, with which you will be well-pleased.”

“I am the center of the action,” he told her. “And to be clear, the only thing I would be well-pleased to do is remain in your presence.”

Nkenge’s eyes sparkled as the king slipped his hand into hers.

“Walk with me, beautiful fiddler.”

They meandered away from the gathering and journeyed amongst shrubs and flowers: Azaleas, Birds of Paradise, and Lotus. Fragrant petals, painted in bright oranges, yellows and reds, dangled from the shrubs like tassels. The humid air settled in her dreadlocks, and the sound of water lapping against the edge of the pond settled in her ears as the king’s hand tightened around hers. Every now and then, his majestic robe flapped in the soft breeze and brushed her body.

“Please, tell me about yourself,” he requested. “I wish to know everything.”

“There isn’t much to know, Your Highness,” she blushed.

“Begin by telling me your age.”

“I am eighteen years old.”

“Do you have siblings?”

“No, Your Highness. I am an only child.”

“And your parents?”

“My father is alive and serves as Chief of our village,” she explained.

“A prominent position.”

“Indeed, it is,” she confirmed, “but my mother...” Suddenly, a shadow of a frown passed over her features, and King Cole’s heart clamped with compassion. “She died when I was ten years old. There was a raid of our village and while my father was able to protect me, unfortunately, he was unsuccessful in protecting the love of his life. He took it very hard,” she recalled with a sad smile. “You see, as the village chief, he absorbed total responsibility for everything that happened and has not been the same since.”

“I am very sorry to hear this,” he offered, shaking his head.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” she smiled, as they ventured to the stables, “but we are well. They say time heals all wounds, and I’ve had more than enough to mourn.”

King Cole’s lashes fluttered as he thought about his father, and he nodded, understanding her plight. “Are you married, Nkenge?” he asked, proceeding with his meticulous investigation. If Old King Cole’s prophecy was accurate, the answer would be—

“No, I am not, Your Highness.” Her response cut into his reflections. “I am far too busy perfecting my craft with the fiddle and assisting my father, which means I’ve not had the time or desire to entertain a suitor.”

King Cole hummed, and they walked on, exploring more of the palace grounds.

“And what of you?” Nkenge suddenly asked. “Are you betrothed?”

She had been taught that it was improper to question royalty, yet she’d been unable to keep the query to herself. For the briefest of seconds, she feared that her interrogation would offend the king, but there was something about his expression that made her think he was anything but.

“I am not,” he answered. “There are many who wish to claim my affections, but like you, I remain uninterested.”

“Do not tell me you are perfecting your craft of the fiddle as well,” she joked.

The king laughed. It was a rich, deep sound that filled Nkenge’s soul to the brim.

“I am not a musician, Beautiful Fiddler. And even if I were, I doubt it would compare to the notes you rendered this very evening. On the contrary, I am waiting for the right woman,” he finished his thought. “I will... know her when I see her.”

“There are many ladies here tonight, Your Highness, and they are all dressed to capture your attention,” Nkenge noted, taking in her surroundings. “Surely, you have set your eyes upon her.”

King Cole’s pace slowed, and because his hand was still in Nkenge’s, hers did as well. “Surely...” he agreed.

A peaceful silence descended as they walked to the Royal Chapel before heading to one of the palace’s four towers, which Nkenge explored with great interest. King Cole showed her the moat and the Donjon, the most central and heavily fortified section of the Luxemore estate, for it served as a residence for the king and his distinguished guests.

Finally, when they came to a gilded bench, positioned before a shimmering water fountain in the center of the garden, King Cole invited Nkenge to sit. They had walked much, and he wondered if she might be fatigued, but the spark of curiosity in her eyes and the continued questions pouring off her tongue suggested that she was not.

This pleased him.

“What are your thoughts, Nkenge?” he asked, desperate to continue their interaction. The celebration was ending, and his unspoken fear was that she would leave him once and for all, just as his father had warned.

“I have no words to describe all I have seen, Your Highness,” she said, taking in the majestic surroundings. “You want for

nothing in Luxemore. Your kingdom is magnificent and supplies all your needs.”

“Do not be fooled,” he said. “The throne cannot provide that which I truly need.”

Nkenge’s head tipped to the side.

“And certainly, the things I have shown you tonight pale in comparison to all I would like to show you,” he continued, “and I can do so, if only you’d agree to stay.”

“Stay, Your Highness?”

“In Luxemore,” King Cole clarified. “In my palace.” He eased onto the bench next to her, desperate to minimize the dreadful space that was somehow keeping them apart. “I must be honest with you, for if I’m not, I fear I’ll experience significant regret,” he whispered, searching her face. “I have been swept away by your music, Nkenge. Your selection entranced me. Like you, I have traveled to many places, yet I don’t believe I’ve ever experienced such a soulful encounter.”

“What do you mean, Your Highness?”

“I mean that your music touched my *soul*.” He touched his robe over the space where his heart was located. “Surely, I could not explain it more, even if I tried. All I know is that I feel a pleasing connection between us.”

“Because of the music...”

“Yes,” the king nodded, “but perhaps even more. Nkenge, *you* are the woman I have been searching for. You’ve been in my dreams. You enter my chambers every night and you come into in my bed. My father told me you would arrive, and I doubted his words; yet, you have finally come.”

Nkenge’s eyes found the king’s and she dared to hold his gaze for a second longer than was customarily acceptable. Still, she couldn’t tear her eyes away. You see, the king’s eyes were like lures that beckoned her closer, and something was rolling off him. The people in Basusa called it energy, and according to them, energies mixed. Not only that, but they also advised that one should guard their energy, lest they be influenced by malevolent spirits.

Prior to this moment, Nkenge hadn't understood what they had been talking about. The truth was, she rarely did. Surely, it was another one of the symptoms the village doctor had told her about. He was sick, and his ramblings were proof of this.

But the king's *energy* was compelling. It was potent and enticing. It was sweet and agreeable, and there was nothing she would like more than to combine her energy with his.

But would that be wise?

"I would like to show you my country and hear more of your music," King Cole repeated, gazing at her alluring profile. "Luxemore Palace has many rooms. I am unaware of where you are currently residing."

"There is a small inn in the village," she explained, tummy fluttering. "It is very comfortable, and the staff are quite accommodating."

"I do not doubt this," King Cole agreed, "however, I also do not doubt that it isn't as comfortable as one of my rooms. You will stay here with me," he insisted.

"It sounds lovely, Your Highness," she responded, desperately fighting the urge to touch his bearded jaw, "but I am afraid it's not possible."

"Why not?"

"I'm scheduled to return to Ghana in a day's time," she said. "My father will be waiting, and—"

"I will send word to him," he interrupted. "I will respectfully let him know that you are entertaining the King. Surely, he will be agreeable to this."

Nkenge blushed hearing of his thoughtful and generous solution. "Your Highness, I could never request such a thing of you."

"You have not requested it," he reminded her. "It is an offer I have set on the table because I want you by my side, Nkenge. You were gracious enough to afford me the privilege of hearing your music. Now, I'd like for you to grant me yet another request. Please stay." His melodic voice reduced to a

whisper and his face drew closer to hers. “Please do not leave, Beautiful Fiddler. You are the one.”

The king’s lips parted, and the color his liquid gray eyes deepened until they resembled molten metal. His heart threatened to leap from his chest and into the temptress’s lap.

And the temptress—was this what you would call her? For the blush on her cheeks was so rich, it rivaled the intense color of her hair. Her body spasmed with anxiety and a longing she hadn’t known she could ever hold, for never had she been so infatuated with a man. Something soared in Nkenge’s belly. It was like the flock of white birds she’d seen lifting into the sky that morning when she looked out the inn window at the docked ships.

A whisper of a breeze flitted past them, perhaps a foretelling of that first kiss. But this was a lie, because when King Cole’s mouth finally landed on the fiddler’s, the gust came with the force of a maelstrom. A groan of intense desire rose out of his throat when he tasted her that first time. It was riddled with desire and overflowing with need. Nkenge’s mouth was sweeter than any of the delicacies in his bowl and more fulfilling than any puff of smoke his pipe could ever offer. His hand fell to her breast, but he could barely contain them in his palm. To his delight, her nipple pushed through the fabric of her cultural gown and touched his fingertips, showcasing her desire for him.

He grazed his thumb against it, wishing there was some way for his tongue to do the same. Better yet, he longed to taste the nectar he knew was spilling from the sweet place between her thighs. He desired to savor her essence and drink from her cup of love. Only then would he be completely satisfied.

Father, you were correct.

Nkenge whimpered and crumbled against his chiseled bosom, which was encased by the soft pelt of his robe. His lips dragged over hers. His hands found her slender neck beneath her silky locks. Similarly, her small hand found his neck beneath the sheath of his curls. They passed through the smooth strands, forcing a shudder lifted out of the King.

He took her hand and pressed it on his quivering lap. “Touch me, Nkenge,” he requested, but when she bore witness to the solid knot beneath the robe, she gasped and pulled her hand away.

King Cole fastened her against him. “Please do not run away from me,” he requested. He begged. “It is you who has done this to me, and from now on it will only be for you. My desire is to give it to you, Nkenge Okyere,” he said, staring into her eyes. “Do me the honor and allow me to delight you.”

“Your Highness,” she whispered, trying to hide her blush, but failing to do so. “I... do not know what to say or think.”

“Say only that you will stay with me in Luxemore,” he required, running his thumb along the curve of her jaw. “Think only of how much I truly desire you.”

She returned the stare as questions flitted into her mind, but the more she looked, the more answers began to manifest. To be clear, she did not understand the answers, but they were answers, nonetheless.

King Cole offered Nkenge a reassuring kiss, something he hoped would let her know he did not intend to hurt her. Quite the contrary, if she allowed him to have his way, she would be crowned within the coming weeks. Yes, the New Year would herald in the omnipotent rein of King Cole Kamprad, II of Luxemore, and his stunning queen, Nkenge Okyere-Kamprad.

If only she would allow...

When the sweetest kiss either of them had ever experienced came to a partially-fulfilling end, King Cole set his forehead against Nkenge’s and gazed into her smoky-quartz eyes.

Nkenge paused, unsure of what her response should be. She was thinking about her father, but she was also thinking about King Cole. As she’d said, she was scheduled to return to Ghana in twenty-four hours, and the chief was awaiting her arrival.

But the king had offered to send word and gifts, so what objection did she truly have?

Never had she once considered that extending her stay in Luxemore would be an option, and surely, she'd not planned for such a retreat; but how could she resist such a beautiful man? Especially when it was apparent that he wanted her so?

"Your Highness, it would be my honor to stay in Luxemore and—"

Before the final word could hit the king's needy ears, his mother rounded the corner with yet another woman dangling on her arm.

"Your Highness!" The tenor of his mother's voice suggested bewilderment as she set eyes on her son and the exotic fiddler.

The woman standing next to her dipped into a gracious curtsy. Her ball gown puddled on the grass. It had been fitted with crystals that glinted off the moonlight and cast a glow about the gardens, but they also illuminated the deep scowl on King Cole's face as he spun around.

"Mother," he bit out.

"I... have been searching high and low for you, Your Majesty," she said, attempting to keep her tone polite. "For certain, I was concerned as to your whereabouts."

"There was no need for concern," he snapped, rising to his full height, and marching in her direction. "What is the reason for your intrusion? Is the council in need of me?"

"No."

"Is there an emergency, Mother?"

"No."

"Are the gates being stormed at this very moment by barbarians?"

"Your Highness, none of these things are occurring," she answered, flustered. "I simply wanted you to meet this lovely woman I encountered at the festival. Her name is Lady Winifred. She is the daughter of Lord Robert Kenwyn, and she has traveled far to be at this event. To meet you."

King Cole's eyes cut in the woman's direction, and he scanned her person. She had porcelain skin and silken hair. And of course, her hips were narrow, and her chest area left much to be desired. For certain, by conventional standards, she was lovely. No doubt, she had turned down many suitors that very night in anticipation of gaining an audience with the king. But the fact of the matter was, she could not hold a candle to the woman behind him. Furthermore, her eyes were the color of emeralds, not smoky-quartz.

"Mother, I'm sure it *would* have been a pleasure to meet Lady Winifred," he said.

"*Would* have?"

"However, I am entertaining someone in this moment, and am occupied."

"Occupied, Your Highness?" His mother's brows quirked. "I... do not understand."

King Cole turned around to officially present Nkenge to his mother, but when he set eyes on the empty bench, his chest compressed.

She was gone.

CHAPTER FIVE

N kenge hurried out of the garden, holding the edge of her African-print ball gown between her shaking fingers. She did not know where she was going. Indeed, her travels with King Cole had taken her far away from the palace festivities. They had ventured to a quiet, private place, where it had been just them. What was more, by now the celebration had come to an end. Horse drawn carriages filed out of the palace courtyard, filled with inebriated partyers who'd, no doubt, had a satisfying night.

But Nkenge was full to the brim with worry. She'd become lost in the king's words. She'd floated out of her body and landed in a place which had rendered her completely vulnerable; but seeing the king's mother and the beautiful woman in her company had brought her back to reality: she was one of three fiddlers who'd been commissioned to entertain King Cole Kamprad, II of Luxemore, and she'd done her job. Not only that, but she'd also done it well.

That was the only thing that mattered.

“You are the woman I have been searching for.

You've been in my dreams.

I've seen you every night in my room, in my bed.”

No, nothing else...

She finally found her way to the room which had been set aside for the entertainers and was relieved to see that Etoile and the third fiddler, whose name was Hans, had already left. She knew this because their belongings were gone, but they

would never leave her. They'd be waiting in the carriage which had brought them to the royal palace. So, as quickly as she could, she fitted her fiddle into its case and tucked it under her arm. Then, she gathered her dress and dashed for the exit.

Five minutes later, she was in the company of the other musicians who'd wowed the royal palace that night. Hans was fast asleep, but Etoille smiled as Nkenge pulled her gown into the carriage and settled.

"I looked for you but did not see you," she said.

"I got lost," Nkenge replied, still aghast by what had happened.

"Did you enjoy the gala?"

"It was lovely," she answered. *"It was like a dream come true."* She thought about what she'd said and cleared her throat. *"It was a privilege to entertain the king, was it not?"*

"Indeed."

The carriage fell silent, and before Nkenge knew it, Etoille had fallen asleep as well. She looked out of the window to view the beautiful, glowing countryside, and the further away they traveled, the smaller Luxemore Palace became. This was a good thing, she told herself. In twenty-four hours, she'd be returning to her responsibilities in Ghana, and it would all be a memory.

A dream.

Hopefully, it would be nothing like the dream which had apparently consumed King Cole Kamprad, II of Luxemore.



THE NEXT MORNING, pure golden rays of sunshine burst through the inn's open windows and gently nudged Nkenge into consciousness. She stretched in the small bed and flexed her bare toes, but a sudden pounding on the door made her jerk upright and yank the thin covers up to her chin.

"Nkenge Okyere of Ghana."

The voice coming from the other side of the door sounded urgent and official, and Nkenge shivered on the mattress.

“King Cole Kamprad, II of Luxemore requires your presence, post-haste.”

“My Lord, I...” She paused and looked around the room, trying to make sense of what she was hearing. “I am scheduled to leave Luxemore in a few hours. Unfortunately, I do not believe I can honor the king’s request. Please send my most sincere regards.”

“That will not be necessary.”

The King?

Suddenly, the door burst open, but it was not one of the royal messengers who stood at the threshold. Rather, it was King Cole himself, and he stomped into the room, swiping his robe behind him. A look of both regret and agitation was marked onto his features as he approached, unrestricted and undeterred.

Shocked at his presence, Nkenge scooted back until her body struck the wooden headboard, but this did not stop King Cole from advancing; and when he reached where she sat, huddled on the bed, shaking like a leaf, he did not hesitate to pull her into a torrid kiss.

The uniformed man who’d accompanied him stared straight ahead, attending to his duties, which simply required them to mind their business.

King Cole devoured the fiddler. Unlike the evening before, now, she was wearing nothing but her thin bed chamber clothing, and when he touched her skin fire burned her flesh.

“Why did you leave?” he rasped, his hair falling into their faces and tangling with hers.

“Your Highness, I did not agree to stay,” she whimpered, succumbing to his sizzling touch. Her neck twisted as he pressed feathery kisses along it. Her back arched, breasts aching to be stroked.

“But you were about to,” he countered.

“Until your mother and suitor arrived.”

“She is not.”

“She’s not your mother?” Her accent was heavy and her tone sassy as she pulled back to look into his face.

“She’s not my suitor,” he clarified, firmly. “*You* are.”

“But your Highness...” Nkenge’s feeble protest (whatever it was about to be, for the truth was, not even she was aware) was swallowed by the king’s grunt as he pressed his mouth against hers yet again. Hours had passed and her taste still lingered on his tongue. His cock had been hard and ready, yet he’d been left imagining what it would be like to claim the fiddler. His sleep had been restless. He’d tossed and turned. The blissful dreams he’d been accustomed to having had suddenly transformed into nightmares. Now that he was before her, it would be agony not to claim her.

He lifted his hand. “Albie, leave us be.”

Immediately, the man standing at the door retreated and closed them inside.

King Cole severed the sweet connection just long enough to rip the royal garment off his back. He also snatched the crown from his head and tossed it to the floor.

The precious headdress clanked on the ground.

Then he crawled over the bed like a cat on the prowl, unbuttoning his linen shirt as he did so.

“What will you say to me now?” he demanded of her, eyes narrow and daring. “My mother is not here. Surely, she will not interrupt your response when I ask you a question on this occasion.”

“Your Highness, I’m not sure this is a suitable idea.”

“Will that be your choice of response?”

Nkenge swallowed as he peeled his shirt off his back. Her eyes feasted on layers of tanned, defined muscle. When the king shook his head, reams of golden hair cascaded over his sculpted shoulders.

No, that would *not* be her choice of response.

He advanced, unleashing his breeches as he did so. That was when his cock sprung out—thick, bulging... divine. The king sheathed her with his body. He toyed with the edge of her bed chamber garment, inching it higher and higher up her creamy, brown thighs. When his fingers touched her special spot, her back rounded and sudden tears stung her eyes.

King Cole growled as essence coated his fingers. He twirled them about the nub peeking between her plump folds and dipped them inside her body. She was wet. She was tight. She was a...

“Your Highness, I am pure,” Nkenge whispered, staring into his face. “I have never been with a man.”

“I know, Beautiful Fiddler,” he acknowledged, gazing back at her.

“But how could you know such a thing?”

“The same way I knew your name,” he answered. “The same way I knew where to find you this very morning. And also because you are mine, Nkenge. This means no other man could have ever had you. You belong to me. My father told me so.”

They stared at one another, an irrefutable link and yearning swirling between them like the mist which rose off the river every spring morning.

And then King Cole descended. Slowly. Torturously. He pulled at her bed clothes until they rent, and when he beheld her brown, beautiful breasts, his chest tightened.

“Will you have me, Nkenge?” he rasped. “Right here. Right now. I will show you Luxemore, be a gracious host and give you more than you could ever desire; but in this moment...”

King Cole couldn't finish the question. Never had he been required to utter anything like this in his life. Women cast themselves before him, prostrate. They offered him their bodies without him having to ask; but he would not proceed with Nkenge until he had her word. As much as he longed to taste her, to be inside her, he swore to God that he'd restrain

himself if he had to. No, he did not know what he would do if she denied him.

But who would deny the king?

It took a second for Nkenge to respond. For the life of her, she could not fathom what was happening—King Cole Kamprad, II had abandoned his royal palace and seek her in a humble village inn. What had people thought as they'd watched the prestigious processional parade through the streets? What would they think if they'd known he was seeking The Fiddler?

The thought made her heart grow, and as she stared into his eyes, there was only one thing she wanted to say: "I wish to pleasure you, My King..."

The anticipated response was whisper-soft, yet it boomed in King Cole's ears. Without delay, he took her with a passionate kiss and placed his fleshly rod against her weeping sex. With his thighs, he spread Nkenge's legs wide. With his mouth, he lavished her breasts. Her thick nipples were pleasant against his tongue as he lapped at them, and the moans of desire pouring out of her throat made him sick with need. His cock pressed against her, slowly and steadily. It slipped between her vaginal lips and into her soft, warm cavern.

Her body clenched and she wrapped her arms around him. "Your Highness," she wept.

"Shh, my Sweet Fiddler," he purred against her ear. "I promise it will not hurt for long. I could not bear to cause you pain."

His words soothed her as he inched deeper inside her tightness. Her teeth clenched at the sweet, agonizing pressure.

Cole buried his face in her neck, lost in the scent of coconuts. "Are you ready, Nkenge Okyere?"

She nodded, not completely sure, but knowing she wanted the pain to be over with so she could experience the pleasure.

And just like that, King Cole thrust inside her. Tears sprang from her eyes as she hid her face in his mane. He held her tightly, angered that the moment had occurred, but hopeful of what he knew was forthcoming.

“I will not proceed until you are ready, My Love,” he promised.

Nkenge blinked then sealed her eyes, desperately waiting for the pain to subside. And then it did, and after a few moments had expired, she opened them.

“I am ready, Your Highness,” she whispered. “Please fulfill your promise and show me Luxemore, the way you said you would.”

King Cole’s radiant smile beamed in Nkenge’s eyes as he ran his palm over her dreadlocks. “With great pleasure, My Lady,” he vowed.

CHAPTER SIX

King Cole collected Nkenge's lips in a soft kiss as he pressed himself on top of her. Together, they descended upon the narrow mattress, and he stroked his manhood into her depths. They were slow, gentle thrusts, which had Nkenge sighing and pressing her nails into his back. The king traveled his hand along her curves—up and down, as if she were a fiddle and he were a bow; as if traversing a foreign land.

And perhaps he was.

You see, he'd only experienced this level of fulfillment in his slumber. Before this unbelievable moment, the woman with the smoky-quartz eyes had been nothing more than a figment of his father's and his imagination. So, to have the real thing in his arms and to be sheathed deep inside her body, he feared his heart would not withstand the indulgence.

How warm and wet her interior was, was beyond comprehension. If he could have lost himself inside her love, he would willingly have done so. There was little more he could do than to taste her skin. Salt from her tears touched his tongue, and he tightened his hold on her, attempting with all his might to control his eruption.

"Your Highness," Nkenge moaned, moving her body to match his easy sway. "Please..."

"Shall I stop, My Love?" he grunted.

"On the contrary," she opposed. "I would like more."

King Cole growled and granted her special request. There were so many things he could have done to Nkenge's body in that moment. The king was a spectacular lover. It was said that when he made love to a woman, they were ruined for all eternity. Reportedly, he had learned unusual maneuvers and tactics from his overseas excursions that were guaranteed to send a woman into a frenzy.

This was what he wanted to do to the fiddler. He wanted to turn Nkenge Okyere out so that whatever thoughts she had of returning home to Ghana would be revoked. He wanted her to cry out his name so loudly, Albie and the guards (indeed, the other fiddlers as well) would know what he was doing to her.

King Cole shifted onto his knees, somehow never removing himself from his beloved's sex. Then he guided her legs over his broad shoulders and propped her buttocks up with the palms of his hands.

Nkenge's hair spread across the pillows like seductive ropes.

"Oh," she squeaked, catching her bottom lip with her pearly white teeth.

"Mm hm," the king mumbled as the tip of his cock impressed upon a spot that had the fiddler twisting on the bed. "Speak to me, My Love," he whispered. "Tell me all that you're feeling."

"Something is happening..." She could barely get the words out. The walls of her Cupid's Pit spasmed and tightened around his shaft. "It feels like... Oh..." She moaned and rocked her body, a move which somehow brought the king's stiff root closer and closer to the spot buried inside her. Nkenge's behavior was instinctual, for surely, she'd never engaged in an act like this before; but the need to experience the king in his fullness required that her body act of its own volition. His cock filled her to the brim and made her full, as if she'd consumed a fabulous meal directly from his table.

And as for the king, he was doing all he could not to shatter inside the fiddler. His sack tightened. His abdomen clenched. If his lover did not come to completion in the following seconds, he feared he'd arrive in heaven before her.

But he need not have worried about any such thing.

Suddenly, beautiful cries filled the room from wall to wall. The sound was lovelier than the selection she'd offered him the night before in the royal palace. Her body swayed like rippling waves on the pond in the village, and she beckoned him closer. Her toes curled at the base of his neck and tangled in his blond hair.

"Your Majesty," she cried. "Oh, good heavens!"

"Beautiful Fiddler," the king growled as sweat sheened his skin and he fed himself into Nkenge. The deep strain of his voice rang out alongside her moans of pleasure. His eyelids fluttered with the force of his release and then closed as he pulled Nkenge to him, their bodies crashing together in a torrent of lust. Her moans filled his ears, her body responded to his every control. And then they collapsed—completely spent.

King Cole collected Nkenge into his arms. Short, sharp bursts of air came from her plump lips as she tried to regulate her breathing, and he rained kisses on her face and shoulders, before setting his tongue on the peak of her boobies.

"My King," Nkenge purred, nuzzling her cheek against his mane. "What have you done to me?"

"We have threaded the needle, My Love," he answered.

"We've done what?" She pulled back to look into his face and balked at the unfamiliar terminology.

"We have made love," he clarified, amused by her expression. "I have claimed you as my own. The breaking of your hymen is proof."

Nkenge glanced at the sheet beneath them and saw the bright, red blood was streaked across the linen and smeared on her thighs. Even the king's cock was covered with remnants of her virginal fluid, and she recoiled.

"I'm ashamed to say I've made a mess, Your Highness," she muttered, turning her face from his.

“There is no shame to be had with me, My Love,” he assured her, taking her cheeks into his hands. “You have willingly given me your gift and I will make you more honorable than you already are. You will see.”

King Cole leveled Nkenge with a firm gaze, making sure she understood all he’d said. When she finally nodded, he kissed her lips in a way that had her body responding in the most curious of fashions. She melted against her king, already wanting him to thread her needle yet again; but somewhere deep in her heart, she wondered if everything they felt in the moment would really come to pass.

King Cole lifted Nkenge from the bed and wrapped the blanket around her body. Then he summoned his men. The door opened and the one who’d been standing at the threshold at the first, eagerly awaited the king’s command.

“Albie, bring in the wardrobe,” he ordered.

“Of course, Your Highness.”

Seconds later, a rack filled with luxurious gowns and wheeled into the room, and Nkenge’s eyes widened at the sight of them. They were spectacular frocks, boasting each of the colors of the rainbow. But what really blew her mind, was the fact that some gowns had been made of Ankara and Kente cloth, fabrics from her village.

And they had headdresses to match!

“Your Highness, surely, you’ve outdone yourself on this occasion,” she laughed, still trying to comprehend what she was seeing. “How is this possible? How could you possibly know my size?”

“Holding you in in my arms last eve allowed me to make an educated guess,” he told her, cupping her cheek.

The smile on her face was as large as the sun.

“I pray they are the perfect fit,” he continued. “In the event they aren’t, my tailors will simply prepare more.”

He pulled her onto her feet and into his arms.

“Come, My Love,” he ordered. “Let us get cleaned up and then we will venture back to Luxemore Palace. As promised, word has already been sent to your father. On the way to Luxemore Palace, I will show you the village and the spectacles. There is much more for you to experience.” He was rambling. “We must visit the Commons. It is always bustling with life and, no doubt, it will spark your curiosity.”

“It all sounds amazing, Your Highness, but—”

“And the village green,” he continued. “The Luxemorian children gather to play and practice their fighting skills.”

“Fighting skills?” Nkenge’s eyes widened with interest.

“They have aspirations to serve in the Royal militia,” King Cole explained, smiling. “Boys are reared to be soldiers from young. Their fathers take responsibility for this, but do not be fooled. The mothers will not be left out.”

“It sounds very much like my village,” Nkenge said, excited to share that which they had in common. “When boys are young, say around the ages of five and six years old, they are schooled in the ways on the African Warrior. They learn to use the spear and the dagger. To begin with, they must conquer the King of the Jungle.”

King Cole was enthralled.

“And the women play a part as well,” Nkenge continued, feeding off his aura. “In fact, there is a battalion of female warriors who are just as menacing as the men.”

“Then, this is where your sharpness comes from?”

Nkenge smiled. “Perhaps,” she agreed, toying with the edge of her gown. “I owe it to my mother and strong females who surround me.”

King Cole touched her bottom lip, unable to keep his hands off her. “When you bear my sons, Nkenge, they will follow the traditions of both our ancestors,” he said. “And my daughters will also walk in their mother’s distinguished footsteps.”

The man would not desist from slathering her with compliments, and Nkenge could not stop herself from

allowing fantastical imaginations to enter her mind. Everything the king was saying sounded so splendid. The very thought of bearing his children made her heart swell with pride. To think, of all the ladies in his kingdom, he wanted her. How was it possible? Would such a thing come to pass?

King Cole took Nkenge's hand and led her to the washroom, where he personally attended to her hygienic needs. He washed her back and breasts. He cleaned the semen and blood from her thighs; and to his shock, Nkenge did the same. She soaked the sponge with clear water and brushed it over his skin. His heart pulsed with emotion and longing. Certainly, he'd been attended to in this way before, but never by the woman of his desires—The One.

When they were finally clean and dry, Nkenge selected the Ankara-print garment and King Cole watched as it melded onto her body with precision. His chest expanded with pride, for this meant that his calculations had been spot on.

Then he guided her to the Royal Carriage. They were flanked by Albie and numerous guards, but this did not stop the curious peeps from the inn's inhabitants, including Etoile and Hans.

As they explored the Commons and the village green, Luxemorians gathered to honor the king and his exquisite companion. They asked her a million questions and she responded with the poise and grace befitting a royal. She held Luxemorian babies and shook the hands of the elderly. Her rich, brown complexion was like a glorious pop of color amidst the paleness, and King Cole beamed with pride as he beheld the woman who would sit next to him upon the throne.

"Your subjects are very happy, Your Highness," Nkenge said as the carriage trundled away early that evening. "Has it always been this peaceful in Luxemore?"

"For as long as I can remember," King Cole answered. "My father, Old King Cole, worked very hard to stay his adversaries and form alliances with Luxemore's neighbors. There *was* a time when there was great famine and threat, but my father put an end to that."

“Old King Cole was a good king.”

“He was,” he carefully responded. “But seven years ago, he became severely ill and the sickness traveled to his mind. There were no lucid moments for my poor father. In the years before his passing, the Royal Council was required to step in and make pertinent decisions, under my mother’s meticulous guidance. She moved his hand when he was unaware, although I was.”

Nkenge paused, thinking about what she was hearing as well as what she’d seen. The King’s mother certainly appeared to be a formidable woman. A shiver crept over Nkenge’s spine when she recalled the feeling she’d gotten the night before in the palace garden.

“Does she have this much influence over you, My King?” she asked, timid to do so. “What I mean is, does she have the power to move your hand, the way she moved your father’s?”

“She attempts to do so,” King Cole said, glancing at her. “But I am *not* my father. Neither am I the child she reared alongside her handmaidens. I am the King of Luxemore, and I can make my own decisions, whether she believes this or not.”

And this include the woman who will be queen.

The thought passed through his mind, but he kept them there. He swallowed, trying to clear away the tightening of his throat, as he thought of something else. It was something that had been bothering him for hours; something he’d not been able to shake no matter how hard he’d tried.

He took Nkenge’s hands into his and ran his thumb against her palms. “I asked you not to leave last night, yet you did,” he said, tone soft. “Please, tell me why.”

“I was frightened, Your Highness,” Nkenge whispered, turning her eyes from him, and twisting in the carriage seat. “When your mother arrived, I did not know what to think.”

“My mother longs for me to take a wife.”

“And with all due respect, Your Highness, it appears as though she has already selected this lucky woman on your behalf.”

“I am in charge of my destiny, Nkenge,” he told her, tone taut. “No one else. I am the king, which means my word is the final one. The question is, do you trust me?”

“I’ve only just met you, Your Highness,” was her honest response.

“Yes or no, Fiddler?”

She wet her lips. “It’s apparent that you’re an honorable man,” she said. “The way in which your subjects look at you says this much.”

“You are still circumventing the question,” he huffed, exposing her tactic. “The temperature of my subjects is a good indicator, yes; but do you feel it, Nkenge?” he pressed, desperate to hear her words. “Do you feel it when I am near you? When I am inside you?”

Now she flushed. The reference to the intimate moment they’d spent together, as well as the ones which might come in the future, made her heart patter.

“I do feel it, Your Highness,” she whispered, smiling into his handsome face. “This is not something I can deny. And yes, I trust you, as well. You have sent word to my father, who is in a faraway land. How can I not?”

“Good,” he nodded. “Then, remember these things and do not attempt to abandon me again. Surely, I will send my footmen after you.”

Nkenge laughed, setting King Cole’s heart on fire. Then he kissed her lips and stroked his thumb across her cheek.

“And to be clear, Nkenge Okyere, when we arrive at Luxemore Palace, I fully intend to delight myself in you again.”

“Oh,” she chirped, cheeks and other parts warming.

“Only, I fear that this time I will not be able to be as gentle as I was the first. Will you receive me?”

“I will, my King,” she agreed, sighing. “I look forward to the moment.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

A few hours were required for them to reach Luxemore Palace. When they arrived, The horses' hooves clopped across the moat's bridge, and the sturdy, wooden gate rose to allow them entry. The king's soldiers, clad in heavy armory, erected their swords and lifted their chins as King Cole and his striking companion passed through.

His mother stood stoic on the palace steps, looking on. Curious.

She had been searching for her son all morning, yet everyone she'd entreated was tightlipped as to the King's whereabouts. Perhaps they truly did not know, she considered, but perhaps it was more.

The sight at the fountain had surprised her the night before. It wasn't because he was alone with the exotic fiddler, for Cole had always preferred glamorous things. When he was a child, he favored toys which were novel and unique, and as he'd gotten older, he'd become more and more adventurous—traveling to places she had heard about but would never have considered visiting. So, to behold his immediate infatuation with the dark-skinned woman had not surprised her; rather, it was what she had felt as she'd approached the two of them.

Cole was smiling and laughing. Passion oozed from his pores. A feeling that he'd clearly been storing within the bowels of his belly, were now swirling around the garden like a mist after the rain. Before that moment, his mother had never seen such a spark in her son's eyes. How many beautiful women had she paraded in front of him, hoping they'd catch his eye

and produce this kind of response in him? Yet never once had he reacted in this way.

The boy talked of love, and while it was something she did not understand (for she did not comprehend its relevance) she could not deny that she wanted that for him.

But in the *fiddler*?

The girl was beautiful, yes, but she was far too common. Not only that, she was also foreign.

Cole is not thinking with his right mind, just like his father had been unable to.

King Cole finally descended from the royal carriage. Albie opened the other door, but the king refused to allow anyone to assist Nkenge to the ground, for this was an honor he wanted only for himself. An opportunity to touch her afforded him minutes of pleasure. To be certain, he could barely wait for the evening hours, when he would enter her body yet again. This time, he prayed to Gods that she would be open to the full extent of his affection, for he had much to give.

He took her hand into his and walked towards the steps. That was when he set eyes upon his mother who was standing on the porch under the marble arches.

Nkenge stiffened beside him but put a smile on her face.

“We did not play hide and seek this much even when you were a child,” the woman nipped, glancing in Nkenge’s direction. “You have been gone since before the sun rose, Your Highness. Was there business of which I was not aware?”

“I was forced to go on a spontaneous mission,” King Cole explained, “but do not worry. Albie traveled with me.”

“Was the journey dangerous?” she asked, still looking at Nkenge.

“It could have been,” the king replied, thinking about the alternative ways the undertaking could have gone, “however, I am pleased to say that I return to the palace having achieved that which I set out to do.”

Finally, he turned to Nkenge, who stood stiff at his side. “Mother, this is Nkenge Okyere, the Ghanaian fiddler who thrilled us last night with her performance.”

As was appropriate, Nkenge dipped into a curtsy. “The King’s mother...”

“Yes, I remember her quite well,” his mother acknowledged, staring down on Nkenge’s hair. She was studying her tresses, trying to determine how they’d come to be fashioned in such a peculiar style. “Please rise, child,” she instructed. “As my son has stated, your fiddling brought great joy to my company last evening. Apparently, it has also brought great joy to my son, The King. Perhaps he has requested your presence for another rendition?”

“And more,” King Cole responded, arching one of his brows. “Nkenge will be a guest in Luxemore Palace.”

“Oh?” his mother squeaked. “For how long?”

“The foreseeable future.”

“A few days.”

Both King Cole’s and Nkenge’s responses came at the same time, and his mother’s eyebrows drew, curious by the apparent divergence.

“If I may, Your Highness,” Nkenge requested, brushing her fingers over his arm, “I am scheduled to return to Ghana but have agreed to stay in Luxemore a little longer. King Cole has been a wonderful host thus far. I have learned so much about your country and look forward to seeing more.”

Cole’s jaw jerked, but he remained quiet, for he did not want to engage in a disagreement, especially not in front of his mother; however, he did not approve of Nkenge’s response.

King Cole’s mother cleared her throat in an attempt to disrupt the curious tension. “Very well,” she agreed, clasping her hands in front of her luxurious gown, which shimmered against the setting sun. “I shall have the servants prepare a room in the East Wing. I have no doubt that Miss Okyere will be very comfortable there.”

“There will be no need for that,” King Cole asserted. “I will personally see to her sleeping arrangements. The Southern Wing will do perfectly.”

“The Southern Wing, Your Highness?” his mother croaked, though the smile never left her face. “The rooms there are reserved for guests. Suppose we have visitors?”

“We do have visitors,” the king responded. “Nkenge is our guest, and she will be treated with the same level of prestige as any diplomat who comes through the palace doors.” Cole turned to Nkenge and smiled. “My friend Albie will take you to The Southern Wing, where you will be made comfortable,” he told her, running the back of his hand over her cheek. “There are a few things I need to attend to, but I will be next to you as soon as they are complete. At that point, we shall resume our... important discussions.”

Nkenge peered into his face, certain that the questions running through her mind were displayed there as well, but whether the king did not discern her worry or simply chose to ignore it, was something she did not know. She wanted to ask questions but figured it not to be the appropriate time, especially not with the way his mother was looking on.

She'd hold her questions until later that evening, she decided.

Cole snapped his fingers and immediately, Albie approached. He led Nkenge away, and King Cole watched after her the way a mother-hawk watches after her newly born offspring.

The minute she disappeared from sight, he turned his attention to his mother. “She is the one,” he snapped, walking in the opposite direction.

His mother followed. “What do you mean by this, Cole?” she asked, trying her best to match his pace.

“I mean that she is to be my wife,” he clarified. “I told you I would let you know when I found the woman and she is here. My plan was to introduce you to her last night in the Royal Garden, but unfortunately, it did not work out the way I'd envisioned.”

He marched through the courtyard.

His guards followed.

So did his mother.

“But what about Lady Charlotte?”

“Who?”

“And Lady Winifred?” his mother pressed, almost tripping over the hem of her gown. “She is the woman I presented to you last evening at the fountain. Perhaps you have forgotten. You were going on and on about entertaining someone, yet when we looked, there was no one there. Of course, I now know you were talking about the fiddler; and yes, she is a lovely girl, Cole, but surely, she cannot be the one you choose as queen.”

“Why not?”

“International relations.”

“What of them?”

“Her presence will weaken the alliances your father worked so hard to establish.”

“My father or you?”

Cole stopped walking and his mother smashed into his back. When he turned to look at her, his eyes were as hard as the sword he’d used to establish his transition into manhood when he was sixteen years old.

His mother gasped. “Cole—”

“Your Highness,” he corrected her, narrowing his gaze.

His mother exhaled and momentarily pinned her lips. “Your *Highness*,” she started again, “I am not attempting to offend you or the lovely fiddler. I am simply trying to provide guidance in the absence of Lord Finley and the rest of the Royal Council. Miss Okyere is a beautiful woman who complements you beyond measure.”

King Cole agreed with this portion of her statement.

“However, I am simply thinking towards the future,” she continued. “She is a commoner, Your Highness. She is well-

traveled and well-schooled, but she is not versed in the ways of a monarchy.”

“You are incorrect,” he advised. “Nkenge is very familiar with legal procedure and tactical strategy. Her father is the chief in her village.”

“Her village...” his mother scoffed.

The king stepped closer, hands fisting. “Not only does she complement me aesthetically, but our souls have also knitted. There are many things which we have in common—things I’m sure you’d care nothing about. She understands grief and loss. She has contended with ancestral mental illness and has proven that she can meet my emotional and intellectual needs.”

“Surely, Lady Winifred can meet those same needs, for she is a lovely woman, Your Highness. Not only that, but she comes from good stock.”

The King sucked his teeth and turned away, but his mother gripped his hand.

“I am only trying to assist!”

“And your assistance is not needed,” he shouted, snatching his hand from hers. Then he moved his face closer. “The fiddler will be my wife and the new Queen of Luxemore. No one—not you, Lord Finley, or any of the advisors on the Council—can convince me otherwise. So, for both our sakes, other than having the seamstress prepare your wedding garments, I advise that you leave this matter alone.”

And with that, King Cole marched away.

His footmen followed, but his mother looked on.

His advice had fallen on deaf ears. His father had worked hard to establish Luxemore. Not only that, but she’d worked even harder to aid in the endeavors. There was no way she’d allow her son to dismantle all that hard work. He did not understand in that moment, but he would later on. Not only that, but he’d also be grateful.

CHAPTER EIGHT

King Cole strode around the corner and headed to the Meeting Chamber, where the Council was assembled and waiting for his arrival. It was nearing the end of the calendar month, which meant certain business required his attention; but admittedly, the king's mind was elsewhere. His thoughts lingered on the beautiful fiddler who was waiting for him in the palace's Southern Wing. The image of her lovely face was seared into his mind, and he exhaled, savoring the anticipation of what was to come.

He was so exhilarated; he could almost taste it...

Taste her...

Close to midnight, he thought, when the moon was full and the stars were bright, he would bury himself in Nkenge's body once again; only this time, he'd ensure she experienced the full brunt of his manliness. He had been careful with her that morning, but there would be no hope of this happening tonight. Her body was designed for him now. Her pussy had been fashioned specifically for his cock. She belonged to him, and he vowed to spend the remainder of his days fulfilling her sensual needs; for in addition to running Luxemore, there was no doubt in his mind that this was what he'd been created to do.

But for now, he needed to attend to the business at hand. So, he adjusted his tightening cock and reigned his thoughts as best he could before being escorted into the meeting chamber.

The table was occupied with the twelve men who'd been designated as his Royal Council, and of course, Lord Finley was the head. They'd each been appointed by the king's late father and had served him well, so King Cole had seen no need to make adjustments. His transition to the throne had been uneventful. The crowning ceremony's pageantry had been one of the ages, but as they sat the crown upon his head, the only thing King Cole could think of were his father's words:

"The throne will be yours, but it will not be for long."

There were many things Old King Cole had said which unnerved his son on that fateful night, and this was one of them. Nevertheless, each Councilman had sworn their allegiance to the new king, and while Lord Finley (and even his mother) attempted to vocalize objections from time to time, there'd been no worrying opposition.

Upon his entry, the men stood to honor their king. Lord Finley, who was sitting close to the head of the table, rose as well, though his ascension was a little slower.

"Please, take your seats," Cole said, flapping his robe behind him. "Let us get down to business, as the hour is late."

"We were expecting you thirty minutes ago, Your Highness," lord Finley mentioned, looking at his dangling timepiece. "Indeed, we feared the meeting would be cancelled. Surely, this is unlike you."

"I apologize for my tardiness," King Cole said. "I was hosting a palace guest and lost track of the hour."

"A guest?" one of the men repeated, brows quirked. "I was unaware that distinguished companies were within the palace walls."

Lord Finley cleared his throat, but King Cole did not feel the need to elucidate on the matter. At least not in that moment. Instead, he invited the council to take their seats, and he did the same. Then, he addressed each item on the agenda with an uncharacteristic swiftness. In fact, the more rapidly the convening went, the tighter Lord Finley's brows drew.

“Have we covered all of the items on the table?” King Cole asked a mere forty-five minutes later.

“I believe we have, Your Highness,” Lord Finley confirmed, folding his hands, “however, I am concerned.”

“What troubles you?”

“I do not believe we’ve done our due diligence as it related to these important topics, Your Highness,” Lord Finley answered. “You appear rushed.”

“Perhaps, I am.” The King wet his lips and could not keep the smile from his face, to the extreme interest of the men surrounding him. He pressed his palms onto the table and the gawdy ring perched upon his pinky finger glittered under the glow of the candelabra. “In fact, this is a perfect segue into the subject-matter I wish to present before this distinguished council.”

The men settled into their seats and waited.

King Cole drew a deep breath. “I have found the woman who will be Queen of Luxemore, and we are deeply in love,” he announced, chest pushing forward. “I have patiently waited for this moment, as has my mother and perhaps each of you. Thanks to my father, the late Old King Cole, Luxemore is a flourishing kingdom; however, taking a queen will further secure our stability.”

He was thinking about all the things his mother had recited.

“The wait is now over,” he asserted. “In the coming days, I intend to take this woman as my wife.”

Murmurs of interest and glee rose from the table, but Lord Finley cleared his throat and sat forward.

“We are thrilled to receive this news, Your Highness,” he recited. “Do tell, who is the lucky lady?”

“She is Nkenge Okyere of Ghana,” The king answered.

“The Fiddler?” Lord Finley blinked and the murmuring ceased. “Surely, she is not a Lady, Your Worthiness,” he speculated.

“She is a Lady among Ladies, Lord Finley,” the king replied.

“Of course, Your Highness. What I meant was...” He huffed and straightened his shoulder. “Her lineage is unknown to us. To you,” he added, “Sure, her father is the chiefton of an African tribe, but really?” He chuckled, perhaps expecting others to join in, but no one did. “Unless, of course, there is something I missed and my investigations were not thorough,” he muttered.

“I do not believe your investigation were lacking,” King Cole assured him, “but to be clear, her status, no matter how grand or inferior, bears no impact upon my decision. She is the woman I have chosen, and as King, it is my decision alone to make.”

The objections fell away as King Cole eyed each of the men at the table. One by one, their gazes dropped into their laps; but Lord Finley held the stare for a little longer than was appropriate. Finally, it receded.

“Time is of the essence,” King Cole announced, tone low and decisive. “We are pressed to make the arrangements for my nuptials. It will be a fabulous affair, unlike anything the people of Luxemore have ever seen. It must be befitting of me, as the King of Luxemore and my Queen, Nkenge Okyere-Kamprad.”

Whether or not there was more to be discussed did not interest King Cole, and this was apparent as he rose from the table, a move which prompted the council members to follow suit. Then they watched him exit their presence and began discourse related to his command.

But Lord Finley did not join the discussion. In fact, he glanced towards the leftward exit and locked eyes with King Cole’s mother, who was standing there, listening.

CHAPTER NINE

Albie approached Nkenge and bowed his head. “My Lady. Please follow me,” he requested. Then, without waiting for her response, he escorted her away from the King and his mother and deeper into Luxemore Palace.

The sound of their footsteps was muffled by plush, green carpet as they passed through hallways, which boasted regal sculptures and oil paintings. Intricate designs patterned the walls, and ornate chandeliers hung from the vaulted ceiling. But when Nkenge saw an image of a dignified man wearing a robe and crown, similar to King Cole’s, her pace slowed.

Albie slowed as well. “My Lady?” he called out to her. “Is everything all right?”

“Aside from the worrying discussion I was unfortunate enough to overhear between the king and his mother? Yes, all is well.” She sighed and shook her head. “I apologize. I suppose I am a little troubled.”

“There is no need to be troubled, My Lady,” Albie assured her, walking closer to where he stood. “Do not let the king’s mother and her demeanor rattle you. King Cole is a very determined man. This means if he wants something, nothing will stop him from acquiring it. Not even the woman who birthed him.”

Nkenge smiled and her heart warmed.

She returned her focus to the oil painting before them. “This portrait is exquisite,” she whispered. “This man looks so very familiar.”

“Because It is Old King Cole Kamprad, I,” Albie said, smiling as he also gazed at the painting, “the king’s father.”

“They have the same eyes,” Nkenge noticed.

“And the same temperament as well,” Albie added. “He was a very noble man. I was privileged to have known him from the time I was a lad.”

“You are one of King Cole’s advisors?” Nkenge guessed.

“I am better than an advisor,” Albie answered, lifting his chin. “I am his friend, which means I have intimate knowledge of what the king desires. And I can assure you, My Lady, he desires *you*.”

“Apparently so, but if I am honest, I do not understand why,” Nkenge confessed, turning to face him.

“What do you mean?”

“Make no mistake, I am pleasantly overwhelmed by his affection,” she said, clasping her hands. “His passion leaves me speechless. The way he makes me feel when he looks at me takes the very breath out of my lungs; yet still, I am left to wonder if it is too good to be true. He mentioned something about dreams and his father,” she recalled. “I know that Old King Cole was very ill, but do you not think he has misinterpreted his father’s words? Do you think the king is making a mistake, and is he behaving rashly, the way his mother seems to believe?”

“No,” Albie answered, full of conviction. “The king’s mother is wrong. It is true that Old King Cole was very ill, but he was also a merry old soul, and never once did he lead his people astray, so how much less his own kin? I do not know all that was disclosed during that final conversation,” he said, “but one thing is certain, I have never seen the king so enamored. You are the thing he has been waiting for, My Lady. Whatever Old King Cole revealed to his son on that day, it came to pass the day you walked into his life.”

Nkenge gasped and tears pricked her eyes. “I am grateful for your words of encouragement, Sir Albie,” she said, voice just

above a whisper. “Your words of security mean everything to me in this moment. I don’t think I can thank you enough.”

“You do not need to offer thanks, My Lady,” Albie smiled, satisfied that he’d allayed the future queen’s concerns. “But let us continue. The king has given me a directive, and I do not wish to bear the brunt of his displeasure if you are not delivered to the Southern Wing.”

Albie and Nkenge continued their travels through Luxemore Palace, past grand foyers and ballrooms, and soon they were climbing a set of circular stairs until they reached the Southern Wing.

Nkenge’s room had already been prepared. In fact, her belongings had already been transported from the inn to Luxemore Palace, and when she arrived at the suite, they were there, next to her beloved fiddle. Her dresses had been arranged in the closet—a massive walk-in thing, many times larger than the room at the inn and thrice as wide—alongside a slew of others. Rows and rows of garments, their colors ranging from dark green to vibrant yellow, filled the space, making it impossible to see the end of the wall from the front of the closet.

And of course, there was clothing which had been tailored in Kente and Ankara fabric.

The actual chamber was yet another matter for discussion. A glittering chandelier with hundreds of tiny crystal drops hung over unsparing furniture, including an enormous bed with a richly decorated canopy and soft woolen blankets, which she wanted to touch. And finally (if one could call anything final in such a circumstance), the room was lit by glowing candles, which produced magical, dancing shadows. The sound of the water lapping against the stones of the castle moat greeted Nkenge’s ears as she ventured deeper into the room.

“Are the chambers to your liking, My Lady?”

“It is more than I could have ever dreamed of,” Nkenge said, wrapping her arms about her body. “I am grateful. Thank you, Albie.”

“The pleasure belongs to the king,” he replied, backing out of the room. “If all is well, I shall retreat and leave you be. His Royal Highness will see you upon the conclusion of his meeting. Be ready to receive him.”

He glanced behind her, where a loose-fitting nightdress and chemise had been placed on the bed, and then left.

When Nkenge was alone and sure that no one could see her trembling, she stood in the silence for a few moments, thinking about the brief conversation she’d had with King Cole’s best friend, before washing and slipping into the garments which had been laid on the bed. Thoughts of the moments she’d spent with King Cole hours earlier made her tummy flutter. Essence slipped from deep within her and a longing she’d never experienced before came upon her.

She supposed she had Old King Cole to thank for his son’s unwavering attention and the look of adoration that filled his gray eyes. No doubt, he saw the same thing when he looked into hers. Never had she felt so drawn to a man. Never had she wanted one so badly, and as she let the silk slide across her skin, she imagined it was the king’s fingers.

Her fantasies had taken control of her now. King Cole’s fingers slipped across her thighs and moved towards the center of her arousal. Not knowing what else to do with the intense feeling, she touched herself there. For a moment, she expected there to be blood, but of course, the king had washed it away.

Her fingers grazed her clitoris, and a moan passed her lips. She was attempting to recreate the feelings King Cole had produced. It had been an eruption, an overflow. She flicked the nub, waiting for the sensual burst.

“My King,” she whispered, eyes fluttering closed. “Please touch me. I desire you so...”

“Your wish will *always* be my command, My Love.”

King Cole’s voice made Nkenge’s eyes pop open, and when she saw him standing in the door, she yanked her hand away from her core.

An anguished expression had taken hold of his features, and his firm jaw shook, as he made his way towards the object of his desire.

“Do not stop,” he growled, advancing. “I do believe I will enjoy watching you pleasure yourself on my behalf.”

Nkenge blushed and attempted to straighten her posture, despite his comment. “My apologies, Your Highness,” she whispered. “I did not expect you back so soon.”

“You should have expected me sooner,” he confessed, approaching where she stood and removing his robe as he did so. “I was barely able to stay away. How could that be possible when I was aware of your presence in the Southern Wing?”

By the time he reached, the robe was on the floor. He removed the crown from his head and set it on a table next to one of his splendid bowls. Then, he dropped his mouth onto hers.

“I have missed you,” he sighed against her lips.

“Your Highness, it has barely been an hour since you departed.”

“And even that is too much time.” He rolled his tongue over hers and she whimpered.

This was only one of the moments he’d been waiting for—the one in which he’d inhale the beautiful fiddler and make her moan his name.

Nkenge’s neck strained back as she received the king, and his body slackened. She was a reservoir. A fountain. He had not known how much he’d been in need of her, but oh, how pleased he was to have discovered it. Surely, he’d need to send yet another word to her father because there was no way she would leave his side, especially now that he’d announced his betrothal.

“My King, please,” she requested. “I have waited my entire life for this.”

“Then, I shall not make you wait any longer,” was his response.

King Cole lifted the edge of her bed garment, exposing her bare thighs, and ran his fingers along the edge of her silk chemise, aching to feel the plump flesh of her cunt. He took her hand and cupped it against her sex. Then he guided her motions. Her fingers traced over her chemise until moisture seeped through the delicate clothing.

He inhaled, desperate for a whiff; yet somehow, her fragrance wasn't enough.

"You must be famished, My Love," he suggested, removing a strawberry from the bowl. The entire time, his eyes were pinned onto her glistening crotch.

"I cannot deny it," she giggled, glancing at the ripe fruit between his fingers, "but surely this morsel will not satisfy my hunger."

The king chuckled. It was dry and dark. "Do not be so certain." He touched the berry against Nkenge's lips, and they parted to receive it. King Cole watched her take a delicate bite. Her white teeth closed over the tip, and his cock jerked. She took a few more slow bites until nothing remained.

"I am exceedingly jealous of this strawberry," he admitted as he retrieved another, but instead of putting it against her mouth, he pushed her flat onto the bed and took hold of her ankles. Then, he slid her forward until her buttocks was suspended in the air, and he linked his arms under her thighs.

"You are... hungry as well, My King?"

"Exceedingly so," he muttered.

Her thighs quivered as he drew closer and closer to her vagina; and when his warm breath brushed across the nub she'd been toying with, her nails dug into the mattress. King Cole blew across her treasure. Then he placed the fresh fruit on her pussy and lowered his face to take a nibble of his own.

He licked the morsel as well as her natural honey, allowing his tongue to swirl between her folds. He sucked on her clitoris and wrote a letter of undying love on her soaking sex. The strokes of his tongue were firm and slow as he transmitted

these thoughts. Every now and then, he'd flick it (perhaps adding punctuation), loving the way she wiggled under him.

The breath shuddered from his lungs.

She gulped for air.

Nkenge was now on the edge. Her legs trembled, and her breaths came in quick, erratic gasps. Her hips bucked, needing more of his tongue. King Cole plunged deeper and licked faster, devouring both her and the strawberry in the process.

"Your Highness, it is... happening again," Nkenge panted, trying to brace herself for the inevitable ascension, but no preparation would have been sufficient. Her cries bounced off the ceiling and her juices spilled over the king's beard. Then, he swiped the back of his hand over his face and yanked her closer.

"Already I am addicted to your love, Nkenge," he said, eyes locked onto hers. "I need to be inside of you. Do not deny your king."

"I do not think it possible," she replied in a lust-ridden whisper. "Have your way with me."

King Cole hummed and tore the silk garment from her body. It had been cute. He'd wanted to see her in it, but the intention was never for it to remain. When he finally beheld her heavy, brown breasts, he dipped his mouth to one and collected it. He savored the flavor as his tongue rolled over the center, and Nkenge took hold of his mane.

"Oh, Your Highness," she purred. "Please don't stop. Make love to me." Her body withered against him. Her legs trembled. Her core spasmed. This would only be her second time knowing a man in this way, but already she was fully aware that his cock would be the only thing to cure her torrid symptoms.

"Let us make love to one another," he suggested. "I am just as ravenous for you as you are for me. Disrobe me."

Nkenge hesitated, surprised by the request. She'd been told that one never touched royalty, lest they be accused of something scandalous; but the king's voice, the look in his

eyes—his very command—required that she obey, and she didn't care if scandal were involved; for surely the thing he would do to her would be just that.

And she couldn't wait.

Boldly, she unbuttoned King Cole's linen shirt and removed it from his broad shoulders. Her hands shook as she unthreaded his heavy belt and took it from his sculpted waist.

The entire time, King Cole peered into her face as he toyed with her hair.

Finally, she pulled at the waist of his breeches and removed his cock, which sprang out, long, strong, and hard.

“Mount me.”

“Your Highness—”

“Sit on my cock, My Love,” he begged. “I want to feel you surrounding me. I want to lose myself in you.”

She smiled, feeling as if her heart were about to explode. Never had she done such a thing, but the fierce look in his eyes assured her that today would be the first time of many.

She crawled on top of his body. His rod stood as tall as any one of the four palace pillars; and as she eased herself onto it, her mouth trembled open, and her eyes rolled back.

King Cole took her hips. “Ride me,” he commanded.

Her hips rocked on their own. Either the king was a stellar teacher, or her body knew what to do with such a beautiful piece of flesh. Her fluffy buttocks collapsed over the king's lap like plush cushions. The silky hairs concealing her pussy brushed against his, and the king's teeth clamped over his lip. Every now and then, when the tips of her breasts were in line with his mouth, he'd flick his tongue across them, sending Nkenge into a frenzy.

“Jesus the Christ,” he mumbled, feeling the blood pulsing through his temple. “I love you, Nkenge Okyere, my queen.”

“I love *you*, King Cole Kamprad—my king,” she replied, though she was barely able to say the words.

The warmth radiating from her core was hotter than the fire in any one of the palace hearths. His desire for the woman was so intense, only moments remained before he released his seed inside of her. Surely, she would conceive on this very night.

Juices wept out of her and coated his shaft. And when she shattered upon his cock, her delicate cries made his ears ring. Nkenge collapsed against his chest as a wave of euphoria crashed over her body.

King Cole dragged his fingers through her red locks, before lifting her and bending her over. He peered at her round buttocks and stroked himself with one hand, while smoothing his palms over her brown cheeks with the other. The way her sensual flesh shifted under his manipulation excited him, and his cock grew harder.

“Are you not finished with me?” she smirked, looking over her shoulder at him.

“Will I ever be?” he muttered.

Nkenge barely heard him but was eager to feel his girth stretch her womanhood. If he was addicted to her, then how much more was she to him? Her core had been throbbing since the early morning hours. Indeed, had the king requested her body in the royal carriage, she would not have hesitated to give it to him then and there.

Then, the moment she'd been anticipating arrived. King Cole gently inserted himself inside of her. The way her vagina hugged him forced him to lick his lips.

Instinctively, Nkenge rocked back, yearning for the full extent of his length. Her fire-red dread locks splayed over the mattress as the king's testicles swung and clapped against her thighs like heavy pendulums. His abs began to contract, but before he could release, his fiddler's sweet squeals pierced his ears yet again. Her nails raked the bed as her body spasmed uncontrollably, and she fell forward, forcing the king on top of her.

“Greedy girl,” he growled, grinding his hips into her rear. “You said you would not deny me, yet you continue to do so.”

“Have your fill, Your Highness,” Nkenge sighed, smiling against the mattress. “I promise I am yours.”

It was all he needed to hear. He loved that he could bring the woman to completion so quickly, but he needed to ejaculate, and it needed to be inside of her.

His body covered hers and the mattress compressed as he drove his rod deeper. Now, he could not be gentle. He could not withhold the fullness of his need. A hot, tingling sensation crawled over the King’s body. Sweat broke from his pores and his penis throbbed inside of his fiddler; and he roared as he finally exploded against her walls.

Nkenge moaned as the pressure of his lovemaking stretched her to new limits, and the king collapsed on top of her, kissing her bare back. He set her hair over her shoulder and kissed that as well. The taste of coconuts touched his tongue, and he inhaled her rich scent.

Beautiful silence consumed the room as they held and caressed each other in the aftermath of their lovemaking.

King Cole nuzzled the crook of Nkenge’s neck. “I am in love with you,” he whispered, resting his cheek on her shoulder.

“The same is true of me, Your Highness,” she responded. “I do not know how it has happened, and I swear that it was not my intention to seduce you.”

“You do not have to tell me this, sweetheart,” he told her, chuckling “for it is I who has seduced you.”

She smiled and pulled him closer.

“Are you still hungry?” he whispered against her ear.

“I am,” she confirmed, smiling into his face, “though I am unsure as to whether it’s for food or more of you.”

His gaze darkened and he palmed her breast. “Very well. Then I shall provide you with both options,” he promised.

And then they made love again.

CHAPTER TEN

In a matter of hours, word have traveled throughout the entire kingdom that King Cole Kamprad, I had found a wife, and the royal wedding was scheduled to occur in three days. The king's subjects cheered, though certainly, many of the single women wept into their handkerchiefs, for this meant their aspirations of becoming the king's chosen had been dashed.

As the days passed, the king continued to delight himself in Nkenge Okyere, who never left his side. She attended royal engagements and met with the citizens. She was introduced to diplomats and officials, all of whom commented on how lovely she was to look upon, and they congratulated King Cole.

But the king's mother was not as pleased, and neither was Lord Finley. In fact, the evening after the official announcement had been made, she summoned the head of the council into the chamber. When Lord Finley arrived, she was staring out of the window, peering into the vast darkness.

Thinking.

"My Lady, you summoned me?" he confirmed, standing at the door.

"Indeed, I have," she replied, turning to face him. "Please, seal the door."

Lord Finley did as she'd requested.

The woman sighed and her shoulders tensed. "I am troubled, My Lord," she said. "My son is happy, and to be sure, I have

not seen him in this state since before his father passed, but I cannot say I share his exuberance.”

“I understand,” Lord Finley said, venturing deeper into the chamber. “When he made the spontaneous announcement, I was flabbergasted, yet I was certain he would come to his senses. I figured something would happen to turn the course of events. Alas, it never occurred. The Royal Chapel has been prepped,” he said, voice straining. “Invitations have been sent. Celebratory flags fly throughout the kingdom. King Cole is adamant about this wedding. He is like a madman who has lost his mind. Perhaps, he is like his father.”

“Perhaps,” the king’s mother agreed, jaw tightening, “and for this reason I have called on you for assistance. We must put a stop to this wedding, My Lord. We cannot allow my son to proceed with this ludicrous idea. The girl is lovely.”

“She is also fair,” Lord Finley mentioned.

“Yet, these qualities will not sustain a kingdom,” the king’s mother interjected. “I have tried to offer these suggestions to my son, but he will not hear of it.”

“Likewise,” Lord Finley said, shaking his head. “After the convening, I attempted to engage His Royal Highness in a private conversation. I mentioned our relationships with our allies and our plans to explore new territories. I suggested that her presence as a foreigner could potentially weaken Luxemore. She would be a pawn, something for our adversaries to use as leverage. Similarly, the counsel fell upon deaf ears.”

The King’s Mother huffed.

“He mentioned something about his father, My Lady,” Lord Finley said.

This revelation made the woman’s eyebrows quirk upward. “What of him?”

“Unfortunately, his words made little sense,” Lord Finley answered. “For this reason, I believe his father’s fate will be his own. Perhaps Old King Cole’s illness is hereditary.”

The King's mother pushed her fist against her bottom lip, possibly to stop it from shaking.

"How will we proceed?" Lord Finley wanted to know after a few moments of pensive silence. "Your son is king. This means there is little to nothing we can do to stay his decree, even if we do not believe it to be in his best interest."

"Unless he is no longer king..."

The king's mother whispered the words. Perhaps she was afraid to hear them in her own ears. Or perhaps the solution was one she'd considered in the past and the realization that now it could finally come to pass excited her. "There is something within the royal bylaws," she said, eyes flickering as she stared in Lord Finley's face. "Something which outlines the terms upon which we can oust my son."

"I am aware of these terms," Lord Finley confirmed, hand curling into a fist. "If the king is deemed to be unfit, we can make an appeal to the council, but first we must acquire evidence that this is so."

"His erratic behavior, as well as the suggestion that the illness that overcame Old King Cole will certainly afflict him in the near future, might be the thing," she said.

"Evidence, My Lady. We cannot merely make this suggestion."

"We can call upon the medic to determine this on our behalf," she replied, solution-focused. "He has worked with us before, has he not, My Lord?"

He had.

"And who will rule in his stead, My Lady?" Lord Finley asked, attempting to cover all the bases; though, for certain, this was a rhetorical question.

"Fret not upon this minor detail, My Lord," the King's mother replied with a grin. "I am certain we will find a sufficient replacement, perhaps in the persons of a certain Head of Council and royal mother."

Lord Finley grinned and scrubbed his jaw. “Are you sure this is the manner in which you want to handle this, My Lady?” he asked. “It is drastic. The last occasion on which you raised this potential solution was in relation to your husband.”

“Thankfully, we did not need to go that far,” the King’s mother muttered, “for he lost his wits long before it was necessary, which allowed you and I to operate in Luxemore’s best interest. But to answer your question—yes, I am certain,” she said. “Unfortunately, I believe this is the only way. We can do this, My Lord,” she asserted, staring into his. “Not only that, but we must. Our hand is being forced, just as it was before. Now, call upon the Royal Council. There is new business to discuss.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The night before the royal wedding proved to be a pleasantly balmy evening. The coolness of the air had settled upon the palace gardens, providing just enough of a chill for Nkenge to require a fabulous coat, which had been hand-tailored just for her. Lanterns lit the garden paths from the hanging trees, turning the dark night into a paradise, and the light of the full moon shone brightly, casting a luminous glow.

Nkenge looked at the king with admiration as they walked along the path, with the ever-present Albie languishing behind. This was the man she had chosen to be her husband. No, perhaps he had chosen her. Or better yet, perhaps it was his father, Old King Cole who had written their destiny in the stars, for according to her companion, it was him who'd prophesied their union. Regardless of the underlying circumstance, neither the king nor Nkenge could be more ecstatic and each looked forward to what would happen when the sun rose.

"Tomorrow night this time, there will be fireworks," King Cole said, as he strolled next to Nkenge and gazed into the starry sky. His fabulous robe fanned in the breeze, and Nkenge's gown fluttered alongside it. "There will be celebrations all across Luxemore, for you will officially be my wife."

"I am thrilled, Your Highness. I never would have imagined any of this to be possible, yet it is all true. I am so happy, I could shout."

“You may do whatever you wish, Nkenge,” he said, putting his arm around her small waist. “You are Queen of Luxemore.”

“I do not yet hold this title,” she chuckled, blushing under his appreciative stare.

“Perhaps not yet,” he reluctantly agreed, “but in a few hours, you will and there will be nothing to stop you.”

Their faces drew closer, and the intoxicating anticipation of a sweet kiss loomed in the space between them; but suddenly, three uniformed guards burst onto the scene.

Nkenge pulled back, a behavior which agitated the king, for he longed to connect with his woman; and when he turned to face the uninvited guests, he glared at them.

“I have not summoned aide,” King Cole said, stepping in front of Nkenge. “Explain your presence.”

“You are being summoned, Your Royal Highness,” one announced.

“By whom?” King Cole snapped as Albie hurried forward.

“The Royal Council,” another answered.

“For what purpose?”

“An emergency session,” stated the third. “We know no more than this, Your Highness, only that Lord Finley sent the order.”

Finley?

King Cole’s brow furrowed, and he turned to look at Albie. “What is the meaning of this?” he asked his best friend. “What has Lord Finley been up to?”

“I am unaware,” Albie whispered back, glancing at the men standing resolute in front of them, “however, perhaps you should make haste. Based on the presentation of these men, it appears urgent.”

King Cole stalled, thinking of all he’d heard and was inclined to agree. “Fine,” he muttered. Then he nodded at Albie. “See Nkenge back to the Southern Wing and then return to the meeting Chambers to accompany me.”

Albie nodded and began to guide Nkenge away, but she stalled, not liking the king's energy or the apparent tension which appeared to have come along with the unsolicited guests.

"But Your Highness," she whispered, touching his sleeve. "Are you certain you'll be all right?"

"I will be fine, My Love," he said taking her cheeks into his hands. "Go to the chambers and wait for me there. I will return presently."

He kissed her lips and then hurried away, leaving her to gape after his shadow.



KING COLE MARCHED through the halls with the soldiers trying to keep pace, and when he got to the chambers, he threw the doors open and barged in. Every seat at the table was occupied with his councilmen.

His mother was standing at the head, next to his empty seat.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked venturing deeper into the room, eyes narrow.

"We felt the pressing need to convene, Your Highness," Lord Finley said peering into his face.

"On who's command?" King Cole wanted to know. "Did *you* summon these men, My Lord?"

"No. I did." His mother's voice rose into the room, and she lifted her chin to match it.

Cole's eyes swung onto her just as Albie entered and took his place on the side of the room. "Please explain your cause," he requested, trying to keep his tone level.

"We are concerned, Your Highness," she said walking towards her son. "Tomorrow is your wedding day."

"If you are referring to the common jitters, then you need not be because I do not have them," he stated.

“And perhaps this is the problem, Your Highness,” his mother responded. “We do not believe you are making a judicious decision by marrying the common fiddler.”

“Common? Judicious?” The words forced his mouth to wrinkle. “I am in love, Mother,” he reminded her. “What other requirement is necessary for me to select a queen?”

“There are many,” she countered. “We have talked about this time and time again. I have brought my concerns to you, and you have disregarded them at every angle, and apparently, you have done the same to Lord Finley.”

“The two of you have been talking about this...”

“The kingdom’s stability is at stake,” his mother continued.

“Luxemore has never been more stable,” King Cole argued. “We have allies at every angle.”

“Only because they are convinced in the king’s ability to make prudent decisions,” she said, “but this marriage of yours, Cole...”

“Your Highness,” he spat, fists clenching.

His mother wet her lips. “There are many eligible ladies you could choose to adorn yourself with, yet you decide upon a foreigner who has little-to-no knowledge of our culture or way of life. How will she represent you?” she asked. “How will she represent us? How can you expect the people of Luxemore to truly accept her when she bears not even the tiniest resemblance to the everyday man?”

The king exhaled, trying to temper the anger which was developing in his gut.

“I love that you are in love, Your Highness,” his mother said, touching his cheek. “I find it to be an honorable characteristic; but love and leadership do not coincide. Furthermore, we do not believe you have Luxemore’s best interests at heart and have agreed that, if you decide to persist with these nuptials, we will have no choice but to deem you unfit to rule the Kingdom of Luxemore.”

“What does that mean?” he whispered, staring into her eyes.

“It means we will seek to have you dethroned, Your Highness,” Lord Finley bluntly clarified.

King Cole’s head snapped around to behold the traitorous man. “On what basis?”

“Insanity,” Lord Finley answered. “Like your father, Old King Cole.”

And to prove his point, Lord Finley took a sheet of papyrus from the table, which had black ink scribbled over it, and bore the signature of the palace medic.

The accusation lambasted King Cole in the stomach, and he blinked his stinging eyes. The awareness that the head of his council and his very own mother had been plotting against him was more than he could fathom. Yes, he knew of his mother’s reservations and mild disdain for Nkenge, but never once did he consider that she or Lord Finley would go this far to undermine him.

They were attempting to control him the same way they’d controlled his father in the years leading up to his demise. His mother didn’t believe he could lead Luxemore, he told himself. She didn’t believe him to be a suitable king.

She never had.

The entire chamber was deathly silent. Not a man moved or made a sound, and as King Cole turned his eyes onto each of them, their gazes shifted away from his. Shame cloaked their wretched features, making them appear as weak as the Luxemorian children who’d been fighting in the commons.

“Is this what you believe?” he asked them all, throat dry and voice hoarse. “That I shall turn mad, just as my father did, thus being rendered incapable of holding the kingship?”

No one answered.

He turned to Lord Finley. “Has there been a vote?”

“As you know, we cannot vote without your presence or consent,” he answered, lifting his chin. “If you are intent on marrying that fiddler, and if you say you will do so regardless of the concerns of your Council, we will, indeed take a vote,

and I can assure you that every man sitting at this table will consent to your being removed from the throne, Your Highness.”

“But!” His mother inched closer, and strange tears filled her eyes. Was she remorseful? Surely, this could not be so; for no woman who truly cared for her son would do such a thing. “If you say you will forsake this idea,” she said. “If you agree to forget about The Fiddler and turn your affections onto someone more suitable...”

The king’s jaw trembled.

His mother asked, reaching for his hands. “It does not need to be this way, my son. You can send the fiddler back to her country and it will be as though she never existed. There is still a chance for you to lead Luxemore the way your father intended.”

King Cole looked into his mother’s eyes. He tried to understand her concerns, and perhaps a small part of him did. This was her legacy. It was all she had. If he married Nkenge, it would diminish her presence. Then what would she do? Who would she be?

Yes, a small part of King Cole understood his mother’s plight, but a larger part did not care. So, he removed his hands from hers and took a step back. Everyone watched in astonishment as he removed his royal robe and took the crown off his head. He even stepped out of his handmade shoes and his stockinged feet touched the floor.

His mother’s jaw dropped.

Albie gasped but remained stoic in his position next to the king.

“There will be no need for a vote,” he told them, lifting his chin. “Neither will there be any need for you to dethrone me, for I will renounce my position as King of Luxemore. If being with the woman I love means I am not eligible to lead my father’s kingdom, then so be it, for my happiness is the only thing that matters to him. I know this because he told me so himself.”

Then he walked out of the room, wearing nothing but his breeches and white linen shirt.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“N kenge, My Love!” Cole bellowed as he dashed through the corridors in the Southern Wing with Albie hot on his heels.

“Your Highness, wait,” Albie requested, tugging the sleeve of his linen shirt.

“Do not refer to me this way, Albie. If anything, I am Lord Cole and nothing more,” he huffed, as he rushed towards the chamber.

“As you wish, My Lord,” Albie hastily agreed, “but perhaps we should stop and think this through.”

“There is nothing to think about,” Lord Cole opposed. “I am very clear on all that has transpired.”

“But My Lord, we cannot allow Lord Finley or your mother to usurp your God-given authority. It’s treasonous and they must be dealt with.”

Lord Cole continued racing towards the room which held the fiddler.

“My Lord,” Albie huffed, trying to keep up. “Do you hear what I am saying to you? Their feelings on the matter may be clear; however surely you do not believe that the majority of the council will agree. You inherited those men from you father,” he reminded him. “They are loyal to the crown. They will not all be in favor of dethronement.”

“Their favor or lack thereof is of no importance to me,” Lord Cole said as he reached the door. “My mother wishes to

control me, just as she did my father. In the past, I have been careful to consider her emotions, but on this occasion, I will not bow to her commands. If she and Lord Finley believe they can administrate kingdom affairs, they are welcome to do so. As for me, I will administrate the affairs of my heart, which dictate that I must be with the woman I love.”

Albie listened, moved by his friend’s passion and conviction, but still unsure that he was making the right choice. “Where will you go, My Lord?” he asked, staring into Lord Cole’s face. “You will not be welcome within palace walls if your title is stripped. All that you have amassed under your title will be relinquished. You will be relegated to the village and forced to live like the common man.”

“As long as I have Nkenge at my side, I do not care where I live,” Lord Cole refuted. “Now, let us leave this discussion alone and consider what will happen next.”

“Which is?”

“My wedding,” Lord Cole answered.

“Surely, those elaborate plans will not come to pass,” Albie commented.

“I do not require the pomp and circumstance,” Lord Cole informed him. “I only need the woman.”

With that, he pushed the door open to behold his queen. It was true, the way things were playing out meant that she would not be the king of Luxemore, but she would still be the queen of his heart, and this would never change.

When the door opened, Nkenge spun around, relieved to see that the king had returned so quickly, but when she saw his nakedness and the twisted expression on Albie’s face, she frowned.

“Your Highness, what has happened?” she asked, rushing towards him. “Is everything all right.”

“Everything is fine,” Lord Cole said, smiling into her beautiful face and running his hands up and down the length of her arms.

“Where is your robe?” she questioned, refusing to accept his answer. “And your crown?” Her eyes dropped to his feet. “And your shoes, My King? What has happened?”

Cole walked to the center of the room, and Nkenge followed, seeking answers. “The council is not happy with some of the decisions I’ve made of late,” he revealed.

“With regard to international business?” she asked, thinking about the discussions they’d had, as well as the people she’d met while in his company.

“No,” Lord Cole replied. “With regards to our nuptials. They do not believe you are the best candidate for Queen of Luxemore, and this has prompted them to enact a particular section of the royal bylaws.”

“And... what section is this?” she asked, even though she was afraid to do so.

“The one which spells out the cause for dethronement.”

Their gazes locked.

“Your Highness,” she whispered, touching her throat. “Please say it isn’t so. Please do not suggest that you are no longer king of Luxemore because of... me...”

“I cannot and neither do I wish to,” he asserted. “You are the woman I am destined to be with. I know this because of the words my father uttered upon his deathbed; but make no mistake, even if he hadn’t said it, I would have known you were the woman for me.” He took her hands and rubbed them against his heated face. “I love you, Nkenge Okyere, and you are the woman I wish to spend the rest of my life with. Whether it’s seated upon a royal throne or a lowly settee doesn’t matter to me. The only thing that matters is—”

Nkenge cut into his impassioned speech. “No,” she muttered, shaking her head so that her hair swung. “I cannot allow it.”

Lord Cole’s brows drew. “What are you saying, My Love?”

“I cannot,” she repeated, shaking her head so her locks swung. “I cannot allow you to forsake your heritage because of me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he chided her as anxiety climbed into his throat. “I am not forsaking anything. Quite the contrary, I am acquiring *everything*. I am acquiring you!” He reached to take her hand again, but when she stepped away, his hand closed into a fist. “Nkenge—”

“With all due respect, Your Highness—”

“Do not call me that,” he advised, tone tight. “There is no crown upon my head, which means I no longer bear that title.”

Nkenge wrung her hands in the air and turned away from her lover. “If anything happens to Luxemore, it will not be because of me,” she muttered, staring at the patterned wall in front of her. “My father blames himself day in and out for what happened to my mother, and I refuse to carry the same, shameful weight.”

“What are you saying?” he croaked.

“Old King Cole worked hard to establish this beautiful kingdom,” she said. “I have seen the sights and met the people. They have great respect for your father and for you as the current ruler. How do you think I would feel knowing I’d jeopardized that?” she asked him. “How could I sit next to you and smile knowing Lord Finley and your mother do not desire me as your wife?” She paused and her tone lowered. “And how do you think I would feel knowing that someday you’d resent me as well? I could not bear it.”

“You are being ridiculous,” he snapped.

“Am I?” she whispered in response.

Lord Cole strode to where she was standing and took her by the shoulder. “None of these things would ever happen,” he insisted, staring into her eyes. “I would never allow it. For this reason, I am taking this stance. Do you need see the sacrifice I am making for us?”

“I see it, but you shouldn’t have to make it,” she responded, eyes quivering with unshed tears. “If you take me as your wife, you will not be able to make these declarations with any certainty. We’re not even wedded, yet your hands are tied. How much worse will things become if I’m your wife?”

“Nkenge, please,” the former king begged, but she gently removed herself from his hold and walked to her simple suitcase. He watched, eyes flickering and jaw trembling, as she put the few items she’d brought with her into it and zipped it closed. Then, she walked over to her fiddle and took it into her hands.

“What... are you doing?”

“I am leaving, My Lord. I am returning to Ghana, the way I should have days ago.”

“But you said you would stay,” he reminded her, fists clenching. “You promised you wouldn’t leave.” He swallowed the lump growing in his throat. “You said you loved me.”

“I do, My King,” she confessed, tears falling face. “That is something that will never change. And *that* is why I am leaving—because I love you too much to allow you to abandon everything for me.”

She continued to arrange her belongings, and Lord Cole was stuck to the ground. He wanted to advance. He wanted to snatch the fiddler and command that she remain at his side. He even considered taking her as his prisoner and throwing her into the Luxemore Palace dungeon. Of course, he would ensure that her quarters were pleasant, but she would not be allowed to leave for as long as she lived.

But as he stared at her, a feeling he hadn’t experienced even in the chambers in front of the council and his mother fell upon him: it was defeat. He could not fathom a counterattack. He could not think of a strategy that would get the fiddler to change her mind. Her expression was stiff. Her gaze was resolute. She had made up her mind and, as far as he could tell, there was nothing he’d be able to do to change it.

When all her things were finally together, she swooped her hair over her shoulder and took them into her hands.

“The ship which will take me back to Ghana is at the dock, next to yours.”

Lord Cole opened his mouth intent on saying something, but no words would come. So, since there was nothing left to say,

Nkenge opened the door and walked out of the room, leaving a heartbroken king and his best friend.



UNFORTUNATELY, the fabulous royal wedding which had been announced throughout the kingdom and been anticipated by the Luxemorians, did not occur. Rather, at Nkenge Okyere's behest, Lord Cole Kamprad accompanied her to the dock in the commons and watched her board the ship which would return her to her faraway land.

Certainly, this was not before they shared a final moment of intense passion, during which he professed his undying love for her. He even attempted to dissuade her from boarding the boat. He asked her to reconsider her position. He reminded her of his father's prophesy and tried to assure her that, no matter what happened, he would always see to it that she was well taken care of. He was in love, he reminded her, and this meant more to him than a position in the palace.

But his fiddler was resolute. She told him that no matter how many seas separated them, she would never forget him or his hospitality. More than this, she would never forget the way he made her feel for as long as she lived.

Their final kiss was passionate. The king took her fire-red dreadlocks into his hand and tugged them gently, wishing he'd never have to let her go.

Nkenge crumbled against his hard body, and when she felt his stiff manhood pressing against her, she wished they could spare a moment to consummate their love once again. She wished he would eat fruit from her pussy and fill her with his cock. She wanted him to would make her scream his name so loudly, the boat crew would hear it. If she were honest, this might make her change her mind, for how could she be expected to find such passion elsewhere?

But the shipmaster bellowed out the final call for passengers to board and she pulled away from Lord Cole, trying to hide her tears of regret.

And as the ship approached the horizon, there was nothing the former king could do to hide his.

Albie touched his shoulder. “We should head back to Luxemore, My Lord, for there is much to do,” he whispered, careful not to disturb his friend’s final moments of reflection; but even after the ship had long disappeared, they were still standing there.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SIX WEEKS LATER...

Albie opened the carriage door and escorted Lord Cole inside before entering from the other. It took a few seconds for the driver to begin the journey to the eastern shore, but it wasn't long before they were on their way.

They had made this trip every night for six weeks. During the afternoons, Lord Cole would lock himself away in his room and pen a letter to his beautiful fiddler. Then, when the moon rose, he and Albie would make the ride to the shore, seal the document in a bottle, and set it amongst the waves.

Lord Cole would stand there for hours, watching it float away, and Albie was always at his side. Sometimes he would smile, and other times he would cry—his reaction to the exercise was never certain. He would imagine his fiddler's expression when she read his love notes. On one occasion, Albie had questioned whether Lord Cole truly believed Nkenge would receive his messages. The African continent was so far away, he said, and even if the bottle traveled a measure, surely it would strike the ocean's floor or be swallowed by a great fish.

But Lord Cole was tired of people doubting him, people like his mother and Lord Finley. And Albie. Even Nkenge doubted him, and for this reason, he found himself in the current position. He had released her. Was that not enough? Why could people not leave him to his fantasies and allow him to exist in peace?

And what *was* peace now that he did not have the love of his life?

This trip was no different than the others. Lord Cole removed his shoes and stood on the sandy shore. He took a second to gaze towards the place where the sky touched the ocean, for that was where Nkenge had disappeared. Then he knelt to set the bottle into the water. After a second, he released it and watched it bob haphazardly on the surface before drifting away.

His eyes followed it, but suddenly, he noticed something else. His gaze narrowed and he stumbled forward, peering ahead.

“Sixty nautical miles to the north. Fifteen degrees west. Only twice each day.”

His father’s ghostly words echoed in his ears.

Could it be so?

Albie frowned. “My Lord, what is the matter?” he asked, stepping next to his friend. “Do you see something on the horizon?”

“Could it be?” Lord Cole whispered.

“Could it be what, My Lord?”

“The... Glittering Cave...” he muttered in response. “The place my father spoke of.” Absentmindedly, he crossed the sand and stepped into the water. It splashed around his ankles and soaked through his breeches. “That was the name,” he rambled. “He called it the Glittering Cave. Twice a day.”

It was quite a distance away, but if Lord Cole narrowed his eyes he could see it within the cove of a bank, masked by rough waters. The entrance was shrouded in a glistening mist, like a veil of silk.

“I... do not understand, My Lord.”

“Neither do I,” Lord Cole agreed, “but it is a mystery we will solve today.”

Anxiety stabbed Lord Cole in the chest as he searched the area, looking for a vessel that would take them in the direction of the cave. That was when he saw an abandoned wooden boat with oars resting on the inside of it. Immediately, he headed in its direction, splashing water every which way as he went.

“Come, Albie,” he commanded. “We must make haste.”

Albie asked no further questions. He had no idea what was on his friend’s mind, but he obeyed the command and jumped into the rowboat. He grabbed the oars and plunged them beneath the water’s depths as he steered Lord Cole closer towards the mysterious cavern.

The water lapped against the side of the small fishing boat. Many times, it splashed inside of it and soaked the men's attire, but Lord Cole didn't care. The only thing that mattered to him was reaching the Glittering Cave so he could make complete sense of what his father had told him on his dying day.

They required seventy-five minutes to reach the bank. When they arrived, Albie used a rope to secure the boat to the rocks, and the two of them climbed out, drenched to the bone.

Now, they could clearly see into the hollow, for the entrance was illuminated by the light of the full moon and surrounded by bright green moss. They climbed over stones and trekked up a small embankment. Soon, they were at the mouth of the cave. Darkness obscured their vision.

"My Lord, do you have your pipe on your person?" Albie asked as they ventured inside.

Reading the man's mind, Lord Cole pulled out his flint and steel and lit a fire, which he used to illuminate their path.

"Perhaps I should go ahead of you, Your Highness," Albie suggested, following close behind. "We do not know what may be within these depths."

"We do not know, but my father would never lead me astray," Lord Cole responded.

Conviction pierced his soul.

Albie could not disagree.

Damp air snuck through their linen and clung to their bones, yet somehow, the fog felt like warm silk as it caressed their skin and pushed against them as they ventured deeper. Their fingertips slid against the mossy walls, cool and sticky to the touch.

Then, suddenly, they beheld a sight so astonishing it nearly stole Lord Cole's breath and made him freeze. Piles of ancient coins and gems were stacked on top of one another. They sparkled and glimmered in his widening eyes.

“Holy God...” Albie gasped, unable to believe what he was seeing. “My Lord, what is this?”

Cole stumbled forward and fell amongst the monies. They tinkered under his body and slid between his toes. “Old King Cole was right,” he muttered. “He was right about everything!”

He snatched up a handful of jewels and threw them into the air, unable to believe his good fortune.

After a second, Albie joined the celebration. The men rolled around in the treasure the way they used to when they were little boys in the palace gardens. They laughed and cried. They shouted, whooped, and hollered.

Then they settled.

“Do you know what this means, My Lord?” Albie asked, staring into his friend’s face. “Your fortune has been restored. The council has stripped you of your royal entitlements, but you do not need them. You can reclaim your wealth and live as the royal you are. God has smiled upon you, My Lord. The lord is with you.”

“Indeed, he is,” Cole agreed.

And so is my father.

“This also means you can return to the Luxemore Palace, My Lord,” Albie continued, considering his friend’s options. “Once your mother and Lord Finley see that you are a man of your own means, you can—”

“No,” Lord Cole whispered, sitting up. He looked towards the cave’s entrance and viewed the waters. Then he cast his eyes to the horizon. “I will leave this place, Albie. Luxemore is no longer my home.”

Albie’s neck moved forward. “Of what do you speak, My Lord? This is the land of your father’s birth, the place you were born and raised. Your birthright is here and now you can petition to resecure it.”

“My birthright may be here, but the love of my life is not,” he replied, resolute. His shoulders folded, but then straightened.

“I have a plan, Albie, but I want you by my side when I execute it. We have been together since the day we were born. Do I have your word?”

Quickly, Lord Cole disclosed the contents of his thoughts to his sidekick, and the more Albie listened, the more his heart shifted with respect and agreement. His eyes brightened and his gait transformed as the full revelation of the plan manifested itself. And after his friend finished relaying the details, there was only one thing left for him to say: “Perhaps your father was not mad after all.”

Lord Cole smiled.

“You have my word, My Lord,” Albie confirmed, respectfully bowing his head. “Now, let us make haste. There isn’t much time.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SEVEN WEEKS LATER...

S abir Okyere, the Chief of the village called Basusa—and the father of Nkenge Okyere—frowned as he watched his daughter languish around their home. She had been this way since her return from Luxemore, and although he had attempted to cheer her up, he'd been hugely unsuccessful.

In the beginning, the chief hadn't understood her behavior and wondered what could possibly have happened in Luxemore. According to the letters he'd been receiving from King Cole Kamprad, I, things had been going wonderfully. The man had fallen head over heels in love with his daughter (something which did not surprise the chief, for indeed, his daughter was the jewel of Basusa), and wished for her to remain in his country. The news had been unexpected, but Chief Okyere had never been one to impose upon his daughter's wishes. Her mother had always cherished her adventurous spirit, and Chief Okyere had done the same.

But then, suddenly, something happened. A foreign ship, bearing a strange insignia, had docked several yards off Basusa's shoreline, and his daughter had disembarked with tears rolling down her face. She ran into her father's arms and sobbed against his burly chest.

"Pretty Girl, what has happened?" he immediately wanted to know. *"Why have you returned? I thought you were supposed to stay in Luxemore with the king."*

"Circumstances have changed, Father," she sobbed.

Chief Okyere grimaced. *"Did he touch you, Nkenge?!"*

"...No," she replied. *"Nothing nefarious occurred. I have simply returned to Basusa, which is where I fit in—where I belong."*

Her words troubled his spirit, and he peeled her off his chest to look into her brown eyes. *"Does he not love you, anymore, Pretty Girl?"* he asked, though he did not see how something like this could be possible.

“It isn’t that,” she denied, shaking her head. *“Perhaps it is that he loves me too much.”*

Her father became even more perplexed.

“It doesn’t matter,” Nkenge relented. *“I am eager to return to normal life and plan for my next concert.”*

“Where will it be this time?”

“I do not know,” she sighed. *“As long as it is not in Luxemore, I will welcome the opportunity.”*

Chief Okyere paused before pressing a kiss to his daughter’s forehead, and then he released her; but seven weeks later, nothing had changed. The girl wasn’t eating. She was barely leaving the house. Her misery was deepening, and his anxiety was heightening.

Nkenge was his daughter, but it was more than this. She was the thing closest to his deceased wife. She was all he had left. He had not been able to protect his lover, and he’d vowed, to her and the gods who lived in the trees and the ocean, that he would do all he could to protect Nkenge. That meant both physically and emotionally.

When Nkenge arrived at the main village cabin after she’d been summoned one evening, Chief Okyere looked up from his desk. A piece of papyrus was in his hands.

“You called for me, Father?” she asked, making her way towards the man. When she reached him, she placed a kiss on his cheek and waited to hear what he would say.

“I did,” he confirmed. *“I am finished all I need to do for the day and figured we might spend some time together.”* He rolled up the paper and placed it on the desk.

“What did you have in mind?” she asked, feigning interest, for the truth was, spending time with anyone, including her father, was the last thing she wanted to do. Despite her fervent efforts, she still hadn’t been able to evade thoughts of her handsome King.

The events which had transpired in Luxemore disappointed her, but when she considered them closely, she had not been

surprised by them. She was very different than the Luxemorians, and while King Cole had appreciated these variances, it would have been too much to expect everyone else to as well. Yes, the people loved her. As she'd walked through the Commons and met his subjects, they smiled and laughed with delight at her presence. They commented on her beauty and told the king how lucky he was to have found such a stunning future queen.

But his mother had not felt the same way.

Neither had Lord Finley.

And despite King Cole being ready and willing to forsake it all, there was no way she could have allowed him to do it.

They would move on, she told herself. Time would pass, just like it had with her mother's death, and they'd forget one another. She had promised never to forget him, but that was before she'd known how painful it would be to remember. Now, she had no choice.

Her father rose from his desk and pulled her from her thoughts. *"I was thinking a walk on the beach might be nice,"* he said, gesturing towards the window. *"The seasons are changing, Nkenge. If we are lucky, we might catch a glimpse of Mami Wata grooming herself on the ocean's surface."*

Reference to the mythical water deity made her smile. It was a tale she'd repeatedly been told as a child. Anyone who claimed to be devoted to the goddess could embody her sacred powers and fulfill their own reality.

She thought of King Cole but shoved it out of her mind, for it made no sense to ruminate on him or what had been.

"That sounds lovely, Father," she finally agreed. *"I have not been out of the house for several days, and a walk on the beach might be very nice."*

"I agree," Chief Okyere said, smiling. He pushed back the desk chair, rose to his feet, and grabbed the piece of paper.

Nkenge's eyes fell to it. *"What is that correspondence, Father?"* she asked, brows pulled in. *"I realize that Basusa*

affairs are none of my concern, but that papyrus looks familiar.”

“It is nothing,” Chief Okyere said, placing the letter beneath his adinkra robe. *“Come. Let us go before the sun fully disappears.”*

Nkenge and her father walked side by side along the sandy shoreline, followed by a few of the Basusa warriors who never left his presence. He pointed at the sky and identified the constellations. They also broached other insignificant topics, but then he shifted the discussion to *Mami Wata* and invited his daughter to peer onto the ocean’s surface.

“Do you see her, Pretty Girl?” he asked pointing in the distance. *“Do you see the mermaid holding her looking glass, waiting to make your dreams come true?”*

Nkenge smiled, but it was lackluster. *“She is not real, Father,”* she chuckled, shaking her head.

“How can you say something like that?” he gasped. *“Of course, she is real. This is a story you have heard from the time you were a little girl. Look! I believe I see something sitting on the water!”*

Her father pointed a long finger forward, and Nkenge sighed. She cast her gaze onto the water, in a bid to appease her father; but when she spotted something strange sitting on the glassy surface like a trinket, her jaw slackened.

Was it...

“What do you see, Pretty Girl?” her father asked peering over her shoulder. *“Is it Mami Wata?”*

“Perhaps it is,” Nkenge whispered, stepping forward. *“But maybe...”*

Her words died away.

A foreign seacraft was advancing towards the shoreline, and the closer it got the more Nkenge was able to make out its details. The ship was a medium-sized vessel with three perpendicular masts and billowing sails, which snapped in the

wind. The closer it drew, the louder were its creaks and groans as the Atlantic waves shattered on her hull.

But there was more.

A tall and extremely handsome man was standing on the boat's deck. He wore no robe, and neither was a crown sitting on his head, but long, golden locks flailed in the wind. And good heavens—even from where she stood, she could see a set of liquid-gray eyes. Not only could she see them, but they were also arresting her, the same way the king's eyes had in Luxemore.

“My King?” she whispered.

Her father's muscles untensed and he smiled as he removed the letter from his robe. He stared at it for a second before slipping it into his daughter's loose grip. “*Your King has been sending you messages,*” he said. “*They've been coming in bottles, and I received this one most recently. I would have suggested you read it, but now it appears as though there's no need.*”

Not needing to hear anything more, Nkenge kicked off her sandals, let the letter flutter to the sand, and hastened into the water.

On cue, the handsome man who'd been standing on the deck dove in as well, leaving one other at the helm.

Water slapped her cheeks and hands as she swam towards him.

His arms moved through the currents with the effortless grace of an eel.

The water seemed to part as they moved forward together, each stroke bringing them closer and closer; and in a matter of minutes (though certainly, it seemed more like an eternity), they were face to face.

Breathless.

Lord Cole looked down at his queen, his eyes locking onto hers with an intensity that made his stomach flip. It was the same experience he'd had when he'd seen her playing that

fiddle in the palace—fascination and awe. Unadulterated need and desire.

Nkenge could feel the heat radiating from his body like a furnace against her own chilled skin, and when their lips met amidst the waves in a desperate connection, the questions on her tongue disintegrated.

Lord Cole devoured the fiddler with slow, deep thrusts of his tongue. His fingers raked through her soaking dreadlocks. His hands moved over her body, tracing every curve with a longing that left him panting.

Nkenge's arms tightened around his neck as she pressed herself into him, relishing the feel of his hard body; wishing that his cock would impale her under the water. Since returning to Basusa, she had attempted to induce pleasure upon herself, but it never equated to the way the King had made her feel. Now that she was in his arms again, she longed for the moment when he'd thread her needle.

A wave of bliss took over her body as his hands continued to caress her skin, and when their passion slowed, they touched their wet foreheads together and bobbed in the water.

"I love you, Nkenge Okyere," Lord Cole confessed, staring into her smokey-quartz eyes. Sopping hair stuck to his temple and neck. "How much I missed you is incomprehensible. This is why Albie and I made the journey to your country, and I swear I'd make it a thousand times if I had to."

"I am sorry," she whimpered, as shame filled her. "I was only trying to do what I thought was best."

"You promised to be my queen, yet you abandoned me."

"I didn't want you to give up the throne."

"That was not your decision to make."

"But your mother and Lord Finley did not want me in Luxemore."

"And neither is the decision theirs," he said. "The only thing which matters is that you are The One, and nothing and no one

will get in the way of me having you. The question is, do you trust me, My Love?”

She touched his wet jaw and gazed into his eyes. “Yes, I trust you, My Lord,” she whispered. “You have traveled all this way just to claim me. How can I not?”

Lord Cole pulled her close. When their lips touched, Nkenge’s heart melted into a puddle which disappeared amongst the waves. His strong arms supported her as they dipped in and out of the water.

Chief Okyere smiled from the shoreline and Albie grinned from the ship’s helm.

“Then, what do you say, Nkenge?” Lord Cole rasped, running his thumb over her trembling bottom lip. “Will you spend the rest of your life with me as my queen? Will you allow me to give you everything you could ever want or need? Will you have me right here? Right now?”

Nkenge Okyere’s eyes glittered under the rays of a New Moon when she answered Lord Cole Kamprad on that evening; but her response wasn’t *really* required, because what woman would deny the king?

Especially when it was apparent that he wanted her so.

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