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CRIMSON
KINGDOM

THE LOCHLANN FEUDS
BOOK THREE

CRIMSON KINGDOM

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In loving memory of Elle's ruptured gallbladder that nearly made finishing edits on this book impossible and to what is left of Robin's sanity from dealing with it all.

“All I do is get over you
And I’m still so bad at it.”

-A Little Bit Yours
J.P. Saxe





PROLOGUE



As it turned out, the journey through the tunnels was markedly faster when one was neither drunk nor dehydrated. Still, even in the flickering light of the lanterns, the blackness here was oppressive and suffocating, a mirror of how I felt on the inside.

By the second day, the relief of Davin and me being alive and safe had worn off long enough for Uncle Oli and Da' to start in with the questions.

The lectures.

The bone-deep disappointment.

“Did ye not think about a single stars-damned other person when ye decided to traipse down a tunnel that had collapsed once before? Did ye not think the family had been through enough, that the two of ye could risk your lives for something so trivial as vodka?” That from Da', of course.

“We'll be lucky if the rebels don't pull the nobles over to their side,” Uncle Oli took over. “Clamoring for war. And don't even get me started on your mother. Honestly, Dav. What the hell were you thinking, and taking your cousin?”

“Technically, I took Davin this time,” I said in a deceptively offhand tone.

“Dammit, Rowan,” Da' growled. “Is everything a joke to you, even now?”

He wasn't really looking for an answer, so I didn't bother to respond. Instead, I heard a different voice in my head, words hurled in a smuggler's cellar.

But life, death, laws, people. All of it is a joke to you. You make it impossible to take you seriously, then complain when no one does.

And then one that hit me like a punch to the gut.

Don't you think all of our lives would have been a lot easier if you had stayed your reckless arse in Lochlann?

That time, I had yelled back at him, but this time, I gave him a more sincere answer in my head.

Yes, Evander. Yes, I do.



The end of the first week found us in the Dorccha Forest, or as it was better known, the Thieves Forest. At least Da' and Uncle Oli had forgiven us, now that they had days in the tunnel to express their anger.

Fia took one look at my face, at the scar that laced over my shoulder to grace my collar bone, and shook her head with a rare bit of sincerity.

"The more things change, the more they stay the same," she muttered.

I slept in her cabin. Or rather, I didn't sleep.

Instead, I stayed awake, haunted by images of obsidian hair and storm-cloud eyes and an endlessly arrogant smirk.

I tried to push them away.

And every time, I failed.



It took us three weeks to get home.

When we did, Mamá wrapped me into her arms and collapsed into

relieved tears, then she moved onto my father.

And I realized that my little adventure had done more than cause them grief. Da' and Uncle Oli had been gone for weeks, in danger, in an enemy kingdom.

Avani looked at me with her gaunt face and her hollow eyes, her skin made paler by the fathomless black of her gown.

"I thought I had lost you, too," she said quietly.

The words were an accusation.

A truth that hit home with all the precision of one of her arrows.

Guilt choked me, thick and cloying, creeping up my throat like bile.

She embraced me once, then she turned around to walk back inside. Back to her dark rooms.

And I went to mine.



I gave myself one week to stay in my rooms. One week for my mother to come to my bed and run her fingers through my curls, bringing me pastries I couldn't quite bring myself to eat.

Then Taisiya arrived, carrying a letter with the seal of Clan Bear.

The pristine parchment held exactly one sentence in familiar, elegant script.

You forgot something.

Evander had figured out she was the spy, and he had let her live. Let her return, even.

I was grateful. Genuinely.

Even if I couldn't help but remember the way he had filled entire pages when he was writing the other clans regarding trade agreements, and yet, he had spared me only three, impersonal words.

Which was for the best, I was sure.

What was there really to say, after the way we had left things?

So that day, I got out of bed. I returned to my life, to normality, even if no part of it felt normal anymore.

Even if no part of it felt like it was mine.



Ten days after I got home, Avani finally consented to speak to me.

She sat on my bed as tears spilled down her cheeks and repeated what she had said the first day.

“I thought I had lost you, too.”

But this time it was quiet despair. It was an olive branch. She threw her thin arms around me, and I hugged her back.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“You’re home now,” she said. “You’re *safe* now.”

Safe.

That was something, even if it didn’t always feel true.

Even if I still woke up at night drenched in sweat and half-believing it was blood dripping down my back, spilling on the snow around me.

Even if the last time I felt safe was lying in bed with the man who stole me and wishing he wanted to keep me half as much as I realized I wanted to stay.



The days passed in a blur of teas with the ladies and sparring with Da’ and sneaking out to the villages with Davin. Of dodging cautious conversations with Mamá and quietly slipping into Avani’s bed like I had when we were kids to avoid sleeping alone.

Of going through the motions of pretending to be all right.

Forty-two days after I left Socair, I received yet another letter.
This one was from Theo, and was decidedly longer than three words.
It was a proposal.
Or, at least, a request to visit to discuss a betrothal.
I set it on my vanity and didn't open it again.



Seven weeks passed since the day I left, and more proposals came in. From Socair. From Lochlann. Rionne seemed to be the only one content to ignore my very eligible hand.

Rionne, and Clan Bear, of course.

It made sense, since Mamá had been reluctantly arranging my marriage right around the time Davin and I went down the tunnels.

Finally, the Council insisted on a welcoming home ball. A re-entry to society. Avani came out of mourning to stand at my side in solidarity, and together we prepared for the arduous event.

At least we were together, though. All of us.

At least I was home.

At least I had finally managed to banish the sardonic voice that never seemed to stop commenting in my head.

At least...that's what I told myself.

CHAPTER ONE



Things were going about as well as could be expected here in Lochlann. Which was to say, mediocre at best.

But at least I still had sparring.

I took another measured breath and blocked several hits from Avani's sparring sword.

We had been at this for the better part of an hour, but the bitter feeling of last night's nightmares still hadn't faded.

My sister brought her sword down again, this time a little harder than before, and I stumbled back from the impact. She had the advantage of my mother's build, several inches taller than I was with slightly broader shoulders.

Still, I should have been able to counter that hit.

"Fia would say you're babying those scars, little sister." She gave me a knowing look, and I rolled my eyes.

"How do you know I wasn't just taking it easy on you?" I asked, raising a challenging eyebrow.

Steadying myself, I took up the offensive fighting position that Fia had taught us, and Avani's emerald eyes lit up with wry amusement.

"Well then, by all means, Row, don't hold back on my acc--" She cut off as I threw myself at her in a flurry of movements.

A surprised laugh escaped her as she met my sword, blow for blow.

The movements did, in fact, tug at the tight skin on my back. The thirteen scars that were a constant reminder of my time in Socair.

Avani wasn't wrong. I had been babying my scars, both the visible and invisible ones.

It had been two months since I left Socair, and still, nothing but sleepless nights plagued by images of soulless emerald eyes and the cracking sound of a whip.

Which was only marginally less appealing than the way I spent my days, surrounded by whispers and rumors about how the wayward princess had set Lochlann on another path for war.

But it was fine.

I was fine.

My sister spun out of reach of my sword, forcing me to trip forward with my momentum, nearly crashing into the stone walls of the empty training room. She let out an arrogant chuckle, goading me.

But if I had learned anything in my time as a prisoner, it was how to play this waiting game.

Instead of going on the offensive, I waited for her to come toward me so I could feint to the side. As soon as she swerved, I took advantage of the angle to aim a powerful blow. After her last move, she wouldn't be expecting it.

My sword came down hard against hers, sending the blade flying from her hand.

Avani wrung out her wrist and laughed before falling to the floor in a heap of exhaustion. The sound warmed me after going so long without it, after wondering if she would ever laugh again.

I tossed my sword aside as well, collapsing next to her. We lay there in silence, only the sound of our ragged breaths filling the air around us.

"I see you haven't forgotten Mac's underhanded fighting techniques," Avani panted out after a moment.

It was a testament to how much had changed since I'd been back that her voice didn't even break when she said his name. That she could even say it at all.

She was healing. Slowly, but surely. And if she could do that, then surely I could move past everything that had happened in Socair.

And everything I left behind.

A dry laugh escaped between my rapid breaths.

"Mac always said it was fine to be underhanded if you were small. He called it being scrappy." I shrugged. "I think he would have been proud of that move."

She nodded and her full lips pulled back into a grin. "He definitely would be--"

"Doesna sparring generally require standing with your swords in hand?" The deep timbre of Da's voice interrupted us, and we both looked toward the doorway.

His massive frame took up nearly the entire space, his crimson topknot brushing the upper beam as he strode into the room.

"We were trying something new. Besides, Rowan cheated." Avani moved to stand, and I kicked her feet out from beneath her, knocking her back to the ground and rolling out of her reach.

"I would never." I made an X shape over my heart, and Da' shook his head.

"Regardless, mo nigheanan, it's time to get ready for the ball."

I glanced over my shoulder at my sister, and her face held the same resigned expression I was sure was reflected on my own features.

"Great." She drew the word out, pasting a false smile on her lips.

Neither of us were up for dancing these days, yet the council had insisted on a *homecoming* ball, as though Davin and I had been in Socair for a seasonal getaway.

I supposed it was better than reminding everyone we had been trapped

inside the mountain and taken captive. Twice, in my case.

Still, we tried to keep as many details from the people as we could, being that they hated the Socairans as it was. And this stupid ball would help further all that false good will we were trying to garner.

A heavy sigh escaped me.

“Come, my sister.” I bent down, offering Avani a hand up off the ground. “Our public awaits.”

Da’ chuckled at my dramatic tone and ran a hand over his face.

“If ye can manage to hold out for at least six dances, I will distract the council if you happen to leave after that.”

“Tapadh leat, Da’.” Avani thanked him, pressing a kiss on his cheek, and I followed suit.

Logically, I knew how important this night was supposed to be. I knew it was basically my re-entrance into society. Avani’s, too, since she was coming out of mourning early.

As soon as I came back, she had put away her black gowns. Though she still grieved, she said she didn’t feel it was right to mourn when I was home and alive.

It gutted me, having all of my fears confirmed about what my family had gone through while I was stuck in Socair. But there wasn’t a lot of time to dwell on it or anything else. The council went into immediate action to help quell the unrest that had begun when Dav and I disappeared.

Events to show off the healthy princess had been organized, beginning with the ball. Invitations had been sent the week after I arrived back at Castle Chridhe, and the date had been looming in our minds ever since, like a harbinger of tawdry, inebriated gossips, and backhanded comments.

I tried to make myself believe I could enjoy this evening, in spite of all of this. That I could at least lose myself in the simple joy of dancing, but I knew I couldn’t truly lose myself in anything these days.

Not when memories assailed me at every turn. The bad ones were enough

to siphon the happiness from any given situation, but sometimes...
Sometimes, the good ones haunted me more.

CHAPTER TWO



The low, excited chatter of the arriving lairds and ladies drifted in through the open balcony door. My younger sisters watched from the edge, commentating back and forth on the gowns, the hairstyles, and generally commiserating over the unfairness of not yet being out in society.

“It’s ridiculous! It doesn’t make any sense that we have to be a certain age to dance in our own castle,” Bronwyn whined, sinking down on my chaise lounge and blowing a wavy strand of red hair from where it had fallen in her eyes.

I knew she was speaking aloud for my benefit, since the twins were fully capable of communicating without speaking, courtesy of their fae blood. I shook my head, wishing for all the world that I didn’t have to go either.

“It’s only a few more years,” I told her. “And then you’ll go to so many balls you’ll be bored of them.”

Or just despise them, like I was beginning to. I picked up my glass of whiskey for a fortifying sip, examining my features in the mirror.

The twins had artfully arranged my mass of crimson curls, weaving the strands around a golden tiara embedded with sparkling amethysts. They applied light layers of kohl around my eyes, and my lips were a soft shade of berry.

It was amazing how much I had missed the small things. How much I had missed my sisters.

“Yes, I’m sure you’re soooo bored dancing with all of the handsome lairds,” Blair chimed in from where she was helping herself to my cosmetics. “Or maybe you’re just upset because you miss your piece of man-meat?”

I choked on my drink, sending whiskey spraying all over Bronwyn.

“Where did you hear that?” I asked.

“From Davin,” the twins intoned together.

“Of course you did...” I muttered with a chuckle.

Bronwyn laughed, wiping the stray drops of whiskey from her dress.

I was picking at a cheese tray Taisiya had brought up when Blair spoke again.

“Have you written him back?” she asked, holding up a letter from where it sat on my vanity.

It was the one from Theo, the request to visit to discuss a potential betrothal.

“Are you going to marry him?” Bronwyn added, her tone more subdued than it had been a moment ago.

Stalling to answer, I drained the contents of my whiskey glass. It was a loaded question. With everything going on at court, Mamá had said there was no rush for me to marry, and Socair was a long way away.

Still, I knew that wasn’t what was holding me back, not entirely.

“I...don’t know,” I said finally.

Blair nodded sagely, setting the letter back down on the vanity and moving to sit next to her twin.

Taisiya saved me from further response when she emerged from my closet with the evening’s ballgown.

“I’m glad you went with the purple one,” Bronwyn commented, critically eyeing the lace spilling from the sleeves of the navy dress still hanging on the door to my closet. “You’d probably just dip that one into your food.”

I feigned offense, but the way my life was going, she really wasn't wrong.

With a sigh, I dutifully stepped into the gown Taisiya was holding out, or rather, the *plat'ye*, as she had informed me. Perhaps because she, too, knew that Theo had written me, she had kept up with my Socairan lessons.

And I hadn't stopped her, because, *Stars*, with the way things were going, Socair was going to be a part of my life again sooner rather than later.

Whether it was through marriage or war.

CHAPTER THREE



Six dances had sounded like a decent deal before I actually arrived at the ball.

Yet here I was, a mere two dances in, and my tolerance for the evening's festivities had already reached its cap.

It hadn't taken the lairds long to ask me about my time in Socair. They unashamedly leaned into every possible rumor that had circulated since my return, many of which I hadn't yet heard.

"After the months of torture you endured, no one could blame you for giving up Lochlann's secrets," one helpfully consoled me.

Another patronizing old bastard looked me over from head to toe. "I can't believe a delicate little thing like you survived months in that tunnel on nothing but rats and cave water."

At least those stories were relatively harmless, though.

As I wound my way through the ballroom, more than one person made comments intentionally loud enough to reach my ears. They wanted me to know that they blamed me for bringing another war down on Lochlann after twenty years of relative peace.

Mamá caught my eye from where she was dancing with Da' across the room, shaking her head subtly like she knew how seriously I was considering telling everyone in attendance precisely where they could shove their rumors.

She looked especially regal tonight, an emerald crown resting on her deep brown waves. Sympathy shone from the spring green eyes that were the exact shade of mine, but there was a warning there, too.

This night was about a show of unity between the monarchs and our court, one we desperately needed.

Davin was in deep conversation with a few members of the council, playing his role far better than I was, as usual. He glanced in my direction, though, raising his eyebrows in question when he saw my dance partner.

Everyone knew who the old lecher was. But I didn't want to pull Davin away from doing what he was supposed to be doing just to come rescue me, so I gave him a subtle shake of my head.

Out of habit, I searched the room, and it took me far too long to realize I was subconsciously looking for Mac.

I visibly flinched at the thought of his name.

"Are you well, Highness?" Sir *Leers-Too-Much* asked, his imperious brow raising in suspicion.

"No," I answered without thinking. "I mean, I just realized that I've forgotten...erm...something. Would you please excuse me?"

I tried to keep my features straight, but I was abruptly assaulted by memories of the last time I had walked away from someone mid-dance.

What would you know of responsibility? Evander had issued the words like a challenge.

Had he been wrong, though? Wasn't I still managing to avoid that very thing?

I squeezed my eyes closed like it would shut out the echo of his condescending voice resounding in my head.

Forcing the thoughts away before they undid me entirely, I dipped my head at the laird. I murmured a preemptive thanks for understanding, pretending not to notice his bafflement, then practically ran in the opposite direction.

Here I was, proving *him* right all over again.

But he wasn't here to see it, and he never would be, if his precious, stupid, three-worded, stars-damned note was anything to go by. Which was a relief. *Obviously*.

Grabbing a flute of sparkling wine from a tray, I headed for the massive marble pillars on the outside of the room.

My shoulders sagged in relief as soon as I was relatively hidden between two of the columns. I took advantage of the rare break from scrutiny to throw back several long gulps of the wine, not caring about how the bubbles popped on my nose, or the way they burned my throat.

"You're going to give away my hiding place, little sister." Avani's voice startled me from behind, and I spun around to find her leaning against the other side of the pillar.

I darted a look around before sliding next to her, fully out of sight from the rest of the party.

"How long have you been back here?" I whispered.

Avani took my glass and finished off the contents in one swig.

"Since we arrived?" She matched my volume, shooting me a guilty look.

"Seriously?" My tone was laced with accusation. "I thought we were going to try to make it through six dances before bailing? You could have told me the plan changed."

She sighed, and I didn't miss the way her shoulders deflated.

"I know... I just..." She took a breath. "It's hard, without...Mac."

Pain shot through my chest, along with a hefty dose of remorse. When I opened my mouth to respond, though, the sound of voices drifted from the other side of the column.

"How can they control the kingdom, if they can't even control their own children?" an aged feminine voice asked.

Avani and I froze, her fingers tightening around the narrow glass in her hand.

A deep huff sounded in response.

“They have indulged them far too much, if you ask me.” The other woman’s stuffy tone grated on my nerves. “It’s been a year, and I heard the heir has barely left her bed. Still moaning over that common boy they allowed her to marry.”

My heartbeat roared a furious rhythm in my ears. I spun around, ready to tell them exactly where I thought they could shove their gossiping opinions, but Avani’s hand clasped my wrist.

When I looked back at her, she gave a subtle shake of her head. Reluctantly, I stilled.

“Then there is the *other* one,” the first voice responded. “That girl and her sullied reputation are going to march us directly into another war.”

“Honestly, Olivia, would that be such a terrible thing? The Socairan’s can’t imagine that stealing the princess, however debauched she may be, will go unpunished. It’s time we took the fight to them.” There was a beat of silence before the woman’s voice sounded again, her tone softer this time. “I know how much you lost in the last war, but Laird Wilson believes this may be--”

Avani’s grip tightened, her features hardening into a carefully drawn line, before she linked her arm in mine and calmly walked us around the other side of the pillar.

“Lady Olivia, Lady Fenella,” she greeted, sounding far more unfazed than I knew she was. Meanwhile, I ground my teeth in an effort to school my features. “What a pleasure it is to have you in attendance this evening.”

The two older women both donned expressions of utter shock and possibly—hopefully—embarrassment, as they dipped into curtsies.

“Indeed. We must have tea sometime,” I added with a grin that felt more like a snarl before we turned to walk away.

It was becoming clearer by the second that even six dances wouldn’t be enough of a show this evening.

Hell, I wasn't sure any amount of smiling or dancing would be enough to save our reputations from the vicious clutches of court.

Worse yet, I wasn't sure we would be able to stave off this war.

CHAPTER FOUR



There hadn't been enough coffee in the world to prepare myself for the cacophony in the council room the next morning.

Two hours of arguments turned into three, and then four, all while I narrowly resisted the urge to rub my temples.

Of course, I was the subject of conversation.

"I still dinna ken why we're entertaining an alliance proposal wi' the kingdom that trapped her in the first place," Laird Buchanan said from across the round table.

At least half of the council members nodded in agreement.

"Because..." Uncle Oli replied, running a tired hand over his face.

His blue eyes, the exact same shade of Davin's, were lined with fatigue. We were all tired, though. Of this situation. Of this conversation.

"The alternative is war," he continued. "Some of the lairds are already clamoring for it, worried their sons and daughters will be next--"

"And are they wrong?" Laird MacBay interjected. "They stole our princess, twice, and tortured her while she was there." Anger laced his tone.

Technically, that had been Ava, but that wasn't exactly common knowledge. The council members were some of the few people who knew about the flogging at all.

My mother spoke up next, her features tight. "Even if we were willing to

risk our people against their highly trained soldiers when they have the geographical advantage, with the structure of the clans, who would we even bring a war to?”

“We could start with the bastards in Bear and Elk,” my father suggested helpfully.

She shot him a look, but he only returned it.

“They took our daughter, and now they want to take her back? Who’s to say she will even be safe when she gets there? I agree with Camdyn.” He spoke in his usual authoritative, sure tone.

I didn’t bother chiming in again since I had made it clear on multiple occasions that I did not want a war fought over this. Over *me*.

There were more murmurs of agreement, and even Uncle Oli looked thoughtful.

Then MacKinnon cleared his throat. The room fell silent for the first time since I arrived. The former rebel had been a strong, present voice on this council for as long as I could remember, but losing his adopted son had taken its toll. He rarely spoke up these days.

Until now.

Even I held my breath for what he would say as he eyed my father with a mix of sympathy and disappointment.

“I think it is safe to say you are not the only one at this table who understands the fear of losing a child, nor the reality of it.” The fatigue of the last year lined his face, aging him well past his fifty years.

The reminder of Mac washed over the room in a wave of sadness.

“But when we set aside our differences two decades ago, it was for the sake of peace. The king and queen I serve have always worked for that.” He met my mother’s stare, then my father’s. “Are you willing to throw it all away now?”

“Is peace even a real option anymore?” MacBay interjected quietly.

“It is with a marriage alliance,” MacKinnon supplied. “Those who fear

retaliation would feel safer with an ironclad treaty in place, and those who want to attack out of vengeance would be forced to stand down when the very princess they would be avenging is allied with Socair.”

“Ye can’t be asking me to send my daughter back to the men who took her.” Disbelief widened Da’s deep green eyes and tightened his jaw.

MacKinnon ran an agitated hand over his graying beard before responding. “I’m asking you to consider what’s at stake if the lairds get it in their heads to march on Socair.”

He wasn’t wrong. Since shifting the monarchy to a council rule with my parents as the figureheads, the council could be persuaded to outvote my parents. And if they marched on Socair...they’d be going straight into Bear.

Da’ opened his mouth to respond, but I spoke first.

“I’ll do it.”

Everyone at the table turned to look at me.

My mother shook her head. “Row--”

“You wanted me to choose who I married.” I willed my heart to slow and my breaths to come out evenly. “I won’t just sit around waiting for the war I caused to wreck our people...and Socair’s.”

She blew out a slow breath. “You don’t have to decide that right now.”

“There really is no reason to put it off.” Except for the one I had been refusing to think about, but that hardly mattered in the face of war.

“So,” I addressed the rest of the council. “What would our next steps be?”

“Well,” Uncle Oli said, running a hand through his onyx hair. “As you know, we’ve had an offer from Clan Ram--”

I shuddered. “I believe I requested we return that one with a suggestion for him to shove it up his old, perverted--”

“I think the princess has made her feelings on Sir Mikhail’s proposal abundantly clear,” Aunt Jocelyn broke in, gesturing for her husband to continue.

“So that leaves Lynx and Elk.”

Luca had sent a proposal not long after Theo's had arrived, and I was almost tempted. No one in his family had tried to kill me. He certainly wasn't hard to look at, and Mila would be my new sister.

Ultimately, though, not only was an alliance with Elk better for my people, but I did care about Theo. There had been several reasons I wanted to marry him at one time, even if those reasons felt farther away than I would have liked.

Besides, I didn't believe that Iiro was a constant, present danger. What he wanted was for me to marry his brother, and once he got that, he had no real reason to cause me harm.

I took a breath to tell them my decision when MacKinnon spoke up again.

"Didn't we receive a bird from Bear this morning as well?"

Every molecule in my body froze, and I was certain I stopped breathing.

"That was for trade discussions," Uncle Oli clarified. "Not marriage."

Of course.

Of course, that's what Evander wanted.

Evander, who had kissed me like the world was on fire, and I was the only one who could douse the flames.

Who had accused me of kissing all of my captors.

He had been right...and he had been wrong. Two months had given me ample time and perspective to dwell on both pieces of that equation, enough time to realize that whatever had happened with Evander had nothing to do with convenient proximity or the unbalanced scales of power in our relationship.

At least, it didn't for me. Clearly, he felt differently.

Clearly, it doesn't matter now.

Just like that, the frozen parts of me promptly shattered into tiny, unsalvageable pieces.

Avani put a subtle hand on my knee under the table, grounding me in the moment. I hadn't told her—or anyone, really—much of anything, but she

seemed to have guessed a great deal about what happened during my time there.

Probably because of Davin and his not-so-subtle remarks.

“They kidnap our princess and push our people to the verge of war, and now they want to discuss trade?” MacBay scoffed, slamming his water glass down on the table with a little too much force.

“From what the princess says,” Oli gently chided, “the Bear Lord is the reason she came back alive at all.”

I deliberately did not think about the truth of that statement. About Evander’s strong hands gripping the hilt of the sword he pressed into my fingers so I could defend myself against the Unclanned. About the way he had kept my body warm with his when the raging fever threatened to drag me under.

About the way he had let me go.

“And,” my mother continued in a pointed tone, “opening up trade with them would send a powerful message to the people that we *don’t* want war.”

She exchanged a look with my father, who gave her a single, terse nod.

I was barely listening, though, over the sound of my rapidly thundering heart.

“May we see the letter?” my sister asked.

Uncle Oli furrowed his brow but got to his feet to retrieve the letter from the desk. He handed it to Avani, who promptly put it in front of me.

To Their Royal Majesties, King Logan and Queen Charlotte of Lochlann,

I request permission to send a delegation to Castle Chridhe to discuss resuming trade in a peaceful manner, led by Lord Taras and his wife, Lady Mila.

If you are amenable, they will arrive in five weeks' time.

Sincerely,

Lord Evander Stenvall

Heir to Clan Bear

And there it was.

The last, ridiculous, inane reason I hadn't been able to bring myself to accept any of the other marriage proposals, officially gone.

I heard Evander's voice in my head, just as I had last night. *What would you know of responsibility?*

It was well past time to put that to rest. *All of it.*

Clearing my throat, I addressed the room again in a carefully neutral tone. "So, we'll reply to Clan Elk. Tell Lord Theodore that he can come here where we can discuss the terms in person. If we can reach an agreement, we will...go forward on that front. Does that sound reasonable?"

I would have known I didn't sound like myself even without the cautious expressions coming from my family.

My parents exchanged a look.

"It does," Mamá said.

My father grunted what might have been an agreement, but probably wasn't. "I want it made clear in no uncertain terms that Iiro is not to set foot in this kingdom. The boy can come with a contingent of no more than ten soldiers." He glared at the offensive letter still sitting on the table. "And the same will go for Bear."

Just like that, my life was thrown off kilter all over again by the kingdom

of Socair.

CHAPTER FIVE



The next two weeks passed in a slow cycle of sleepless nights and days spent in the council rooms discussing each new wave of unrest that washed through the kingdom.

The people were growing restless, and calls for war or retaliation sounded in every corner of Lochlann.

They had even taken to protesting outside of the castle walls and declaring their thoughts on the matter during the days my family held court.

I wasn't sure which was worse. The sympathetic looks from those who considered me a delicate, innocent victim in all of this, and the way they wanted to use me as their banner child to go to war.

Or the accusing glares from those who didn't want to go to war, those who knew I had played a role, however unintentionally, in pushing us toward it.

Either way, it was clearer each day that I had made the right decision in inviting Theo to come.

As soon as I was dismissed from the council meetings, I headed straight to the sparring rooms to work off all of the tension I'd acquired there.

I barely noticed the way the movements tugged at my scars these days. Ever since that day with Avani, I had pushed myself harder and harder until I couldn't feel them any more.

Even my sister couldn't say that I was still babying them.

If I wasn't training, I often found myself in the nursery with my youngest sister. It was a calm reprieve from a castle full of expectations and realities I would just as soon not think about.

Auntie Clara smiled when I came in today, happily relinquishing Ellie to me while she found something else to do for Mamá. Sometimes she stayed to visit, but she seemed to sense that I needed space today.

"Wo!" Ellie yelled her version of my name as I spun her around before pulling her in for a hug.

I held her tightly, breathing in her scent of lilacs and fresh powder and sunshine. At least that hadn't changed, even if everything else about her had. When I left, she had been a crawling, toothless baby, and now she toddled around with a mouth full of teeth.

She giggled as my hair tickled her face, wrapping her tiny fists around my curls.

"You don't judge me, do you Elspeth?" I asked wryly, and her grin widened.

She shook her head, her deep red waves swaying with the motion. Of all of my siblings, her hair was the darkest, and instead of the green eyes the rest of us had, hers were the same striking shade of amber as Uncle Finn's.

I walked her around the room, moving toward the glass doors that led to the balcony and looking out at the Masach Mountains in the distance. Ellie didn't seem to care about them and instead devolved into another fit of giggles at the fistful of my curls she was holding.

It was nearly impossible to be in a bad mood when I held her, even as I stared hard enough at the snow-covered peaks that I almost believed I could see to the other side of them.

It wasn't only *him* I wondered about. I thought about all of them, Kirill, Taras, Yuriy, and Mila. Especially Mila.

The birds were technically reserved for official use only, so I had only

received one short letter from her.

I miss you, Scarlet Princess, but I'm glad you're safe now.

At least I would see her soon enough and hear all about the adventure her marriage to Taras had surely been. It was hard to imagine the very proper lord paired with my outspoken friend, but Mila was more like Davin in that she was better at quashing those tendencies when she needed to.

Unlike me.

Ellie tugged on my hair a little too hard, effectively pulling me from my thoughts of stupid Socair and its stupid Clan Bear.

“You’re right,” I told her as I carried her back into the nursery, shutting the doors behind us. “You’re always right.”

A small grin stretched over her mouth before she yawned, curling in a little closer to me. Warmth flooded through me. Not for the first time, I wondered what gift our fae heritage had given her.

Did I always feel better when I was around her because she was my little sister and endlessly adorable? Or was it something more? She seemed to sense whenever I was in a bad mood, and without words, she comforted me.

I shrugged, rocking her to sleep before it was time to make an appearance at the nightly court dinner. I supposed it didn’t truly matter either way. Maybe she was just more like Mamá, her warmth exuding from every fiber of her being.

Either way, I greedily soaked it up, grateful for this brief reprieve from the world outside.

CHAPTER SIX



A messenger came before I was even awake to let me know that Theo would arrive this morning.

Excitement and nervous tension flooded the castle as rooms were prepared. The ballroom was being decorated, and everyone waited for the first Socairan lord to step foot in Lochlann in over twenty years.

Taisiya helped me to dress for the day, pulling out a deep forest-green gown that came up high around my back and covered my shoulders before dipping low around my bust. It tapered at my waist with a woven gold belt, flowing into full skirts that grazed the floor.

Then she rested a golden tiara with large, sparkling emeralds upon my head. I looked every inch a Lochlannian princess. A far cry from the girl who had been a prisoner for months.

Albeit, a fairly well-taken-care of prisoner. Flogging aside.

Taisiya arranged my curls and applied my cosmetics as my mind spun around in circles. The last time I saw Theo, he had said he would fight for us. *For me.*

And that was exactly what he was doing.

He was traveling through a kingdom that despised him and blamed him for his brother's decisions, a kingdom that called for his head on a silver platter, all to ask for my hand in marriage.

The thought made my stomach twist and my heart pound. I let out a long, slow breath, trying to steady myself.

“Are you ready, Your Highness?” Taisiya asked from where she’d been standing by the doorway for the past several minutes.

I gave her a quick nod, and she opened the door, following me out into the hall.

Each step closer to the drawing room had my breaths coming far more quickly than I would have preferred. I counted the individual stairs as we descended them, timing my breaths with the measured steps.

This is a good thing.

Once we made it to the room, Taisiya went to wait with the rest of my family, who had very reluctantly agreed to allow me to greet him first.

Though I had been preparing for this moment, I wasn’t sure that anything could have ever truly prepared me to face it.

To face *him*...

It felt like a lifetime ago that I was in Socair.

Nothing had felt right since I came back, despite my family’s assurances. Something was still missing or wrong. Or maybe it was just me.

Either way, when the sound of the carriage wheels rolled up on the loose stones of the courtyard, I held my breath, bracing myself. The slow clacking of a pair of boots made their way across the main hall, echoing their way into the drawing room.

With each step, I wondered exactly what I would say, what he would say. Somehow in all of my imaginings for the future, I had never quite pictured him here, in Lochlann.

The footsteps halted, and the whispering of voices sounded just behind the door as the handle turned ever so slowly.

When the maid appeared, her face was a careful mask of neutrality, but her eyes told a different story.

“Your Highness.” She curtsied, meeting my gaze with apprehension.

“The Socairan Lord is here to see you.”

“Send him in,” I replied coolly, reminding myself that this wasn’t a yes.

His presence here was for us to consider a marriage alliance. I wasn’t locked into anything...yet.

She nodded and opened the door further. Seconds later, Theo’s broad frame filled the doorway.

His tawny skin contrasted starkly with his white-blond hair and hazel green eyes. He seemed taller than I remembered, and even more handsome, if that were possible.

“Your Highness.” His accented voice sounded as he gave a respectful bow in greeting.

“Theo.” His name escaped my lips on a whisper, and suddenly, all of the nerves I had been feeling vanished.

Somehow, I had been so steeped in the complications of this alliance, I had forgotten the effect he always had on me. He was the constant calm to my never-ending storm.

Regardless of everything else, he was my friend.

The corners of his mouth tugged upwards, revealing the dazzling smile I hadn’t realized I had missed until he showed it to me just then.

An answering smile spread across my lips. “Welcome to Lochlann.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



Theo took a hesitant step forward, then another until he was standing directly in front of me. He reached out for my hand, bringing my knuckles to his lips before pressing a gentle kiss against them.

It could be so easy to lose myself in this, in him, again. To let him chase away the rest of the world and protect me even from myself, just as he always had.

But even as I thought it, the idea twisted something inside me a little more. Perhaps it would be easy to hide behind him, as I had in Socair, but that didn't mean I *should*.

I met his comforting gaze once again. Theo would make a good husband, and it was clear in the way that he looked at me that he truly cared about me.

Still...

Slowly, I pulled my hand away, placing it back at my side.

His shoulders deflated ever so slightly, but his smile remained fixed.

“It’s so good to see you again, Rowan.”

“It’s good to see you, too,” I responded honestly, taking a step back, “but we can’t just pick up where we left off at the negotiations.”

This was about more than either of us. This was about our people, and we needed to focus on that first.

Besides...

“You ended things,” I continued. “And I understand why, but I won’t pretend it didn’t change things between us. Then everything that happened with Iiro, and now... I just want to be cautious this time.” The words were almost laughable coming from me, but he didn’t comment on that.

He only nodded sincerely. “I told you before that I would fight for us. And I am here to do that, for as long as you’ll have me, Rowan.”

There was something else in his features. *Hope?* My chest went tight, and I had to look away before something in my expression doused that emotion. Or encouraged it.

I wasn’t sure I was ready to do either.

“And what if it takes a while?” My voice was quieter than I wanted it to be.

Theo waited to respond until I returned my gaze to him, a slight smile gracing his lips. “Take all the time you need. I’m not going anywhere.”

Between his words and his expression, my resolve was already chipping away, little by little.

It could be so easy...

“I’m glad you’re here.” The admission tumbled from my lips, and his smile broadened.

“I am, too,” he said softly.

“Iiro doesn’t need you back soon?” I asked to fill the strange shift in the air between us.

Theo shook his head. “He’ll be fine without me, and if he needs something, he can send a messenger.”

His expression turned thoughtful, almost as if he were weighing his next words carefully.

“After you sent word for me to come here, I reached out to Bear.” His features darkened. “We still need their permission to marry...if you agree, of course. Iiro will send word when he hears back.”

The room tilted, and my heart pounded.

Was it anger? Something else?

Stars, Evander had tried to give me back to Elk *twice*. Had said my being there was a punishment to him. Had made it clear that kissing me was a mistake. Had told me to leave.

And now, now I had to obtain his *permission* before moving on with my life?

I took three steadying breaths, exhaling slowly.

This is fine. It would be fine. He would probably just send the same list of terms he had proposed at the negotiations, and I could put this all behind me, like I had already resolved to do.

“Are you all right?” Theo’s voice broke through my thoughts.

“Mhmm. Yes. I am...very great,” I lied quickly, and badly, before closing the space between us and linking my arm in his.

He narrowed his eyes in suspicion but didn’t say anything else as I led him out the door to the upper hall where my family waited.

“But I’m not sure you will be able to say the same after meeting my family.” I tried for a lighter tone. “They are not known for being either amicable or accommodating.”

I winked at him, and he chuckled.

The butterflies were back, furiously beating their wings within my stomach, as I tried to brace myself for what would come next.

I didn’t honestly imagine they would be unkind, or that Theo would make a bad impression, but still, I held my breath.

Because it all felt too real now. Too *permanent*.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Theo meeting my family went nearly the way I had imagined.

Avani was cautiously pessimistic but greeted him politely. Mamá was a pinch more welcoming, but Da’ was another story entirely, constantly glaring at the Elk Lord and grunting more than usual in response to anything Theo said.

And the twins, of course, had insisted on confusing him by swapping names whenever Theo almost had them right.

Theo had done his best to keep up with the chaos that was my family, though it was clear by his posture and the tense set of his jaw that he was overwhelmed. His family—stars, his *people*—were all far more subdued than mine.

He might actually die at one of our intimate family meals if he couldn’t handle them over a glass of port before dinner.

By the time we made it to the Great Hall for dinner, Theo strode in to speak with some of the high-ranking members of Elk Clan who had journeyed with him, likely relieved at the excuse of a break from my siblings and father.

“Either he’s a glutton for punishment, or he really, really likes you.” I turned at the sound of Davin’s voice and he shrugged. “Though I suppose the former doesn’t negate the latter.”

I elbowed him in the ribs, and he grunted.

“I’m just saying, does he not mind that King Logie-Bear despises him?” The answering snort that burst out of me was apparently what my cousin was hoping for, and he grinned.

“Don’t let Da’ hear you call him that, or you won’t be his favorite anymore,” I said, walking away to sit with Theo.

“He finally admitted it?” Davin whisper-shouted behind me. “I knew it... I knew it!” he tacked on.

Avani shot him an eyeroll, though there was affection in her glance.

I took my seat between Avani and Theo at one of the grand tables. All but one night a week, we ate with the lairds and ladies of court who were residing at Chridhe at any given time.

It was generally a stuffy affair where we were forced to smile and be appropriate, something which took considerable effort on my part.

Theo glanced down at his place setting, taking the napkin from his plate to lay across his lap.

“I suppose it’s my turn to tell you which spoon to use,” I whispered to him, and his mouth pulled upward as he looked at me from the corner of his eye.

“Will we be having borscht?” he questioned. “Or whatever you call Lochlann’s version of beet soup.”

I made a small gagging noise from behind my own napkin, and he laughed.

“We do not have a version of borscht, because we appreciate the taste of food and do not wish to punish ourselves by eating things that taste disgusting.”

Theo shook his head, his grin still wide.

Uncle Oli’s voice sounded across the table. Theo turned to answer his question while my head spun in a thousand different directions. It really *could* be so easy with Theo...

A glance at my mother and sister told me that they could even be won over by him. It wouldn't take much.

My father would probably never accept any man I married, so there was no love lost there.

I needed to marry into Socair either way, but even if I hadn't, I would need to marry someone.

Theo was here, fighting for me, offering me not just an alliance, but a relationship.

Looking at him now, laughing with my family, I could see that future. The way he would always be chivalrous and protective and kind. How he would adore our children and me.

The quiet nights I would spend wrapped in his steady embrace, and even the way I genuinely believed that when he was the one in charge of Elk, he would be willing to implement changes for the better.

Add to that the fact that this alliance would help both my people and his.

This would be for the best. For everyone.



Unable to sleep, I found my way to Davin's rooms down the hall. Before I could knock, the door swung open revealing a shirtless Davin and a startled Gracie MacBay.

I groaned internally.

Gracie pulled her loose sleeve up over her shoulder, a deep blush creeping into her pale cheeks.

"Princess Rowan," she greeted demurely, her tousled brown locks swaying with the motion of a shallow curtsy.

"Lady Gracie," I dipped my head in acknowledgment as she moved out into the hall.

Davin pulled her back for one last kiss, and I looked away. It was one

thing to know about his trysts, but I really had no need to see them firsthand. When she finally skittered down the hall to her own rooms, I looked back at my cousin.

His dark hair was disheveled, and his cobalt eyes sparkled with barely suppressed mirth. I just shook my head.

“Row,” he said with a satisfied grin stretching across his lips. “What brings you here at this hour?”

I pushed past him into the room, and he shut the door behind us.

“Boredom, mostly,” I hedged. “Which is clearly not a problem you’re suffering from.”

I walked over to sit on his sofa, gingerly removing the articles of clothing that covered it and placing them on the floor.

Davin poured us both a glass of whiskey, handing me mine.

“Listen, just because you’re in a dry spell doesn’t mean you get to judge me for making the most of the delightful ladies at court.” He eyed me over his glass, and the renewed amusement in his gaze told me I wouldn’t like what he said next. “Though I would think that wouldn’t be an issue for you now that your precious Lord Theo is here.”

I hit him with the nearest pillow, and he quickly moved his whiskey glass out of the way, laughing. Our joking aside, Davin had a way of goading me into the truth without actually asking me things, and now was no exception.

“First of all,” I said, “not everyone is you. There was never a spell to dry up from. And if there had been, I would not be rectifying that with Lord Theo now.”

“I take it you aren’t thrilled that he’s here, then?” He raised an eyebrow.

Groaning, I took another sip of whiskey before leaning my head back on the sofa, closing my eyes.

“I see.” He nodded sagely, like I had said something profound.

“Do you? Because I don’t,” I replied with a sigh.

If I was being honest with myself, this, more than boredom, was what

brought me here tonight. Even if he hadn't been my best friend, Davin was the only one who came close to understanding everything that had happened in Socair.

He nudged me with his shoulder. "Do you want him to leave?"

I thought about the question for a moment before shaking my head. "I don't know."

He made a thoughtful sound before uttering his next question. "And...is it an alliance with Socair in general you object to, or only *Theodope*?"

"I don't object to him," I muttered, deliberately ignoring the rest of his question.

"I see," my cousin repeated.

A solid minute ticked by in silence, then Davin slapped his hand on my leg twice, getting to his feet.

"All right, then. Let's go."

He threw on a shirt and splashed some water on his face. When he saw that I hadn't moved, he walked over to me and pulled my hands until I was standing, too.

"We aren't wallowers, you and I." He handed me a threadbare cloak before throwing a similar one around his shoulders. "Besides, the locals have missed us since the Socairans' arrival."

I downed the last of my whiskey before shaking my head. "You know Da' will murder us if he catches us leaving the grounds right now."

My argument was useless since I was already tying the cloak around my neck, determined to go with him.

"Let's not pretend that's ever stopped us before." With that, he flashed a smile, and we crept out of his balcony to sneak into town for the first time since Theo arrived.

I realized that he needed this, too. That for all his running around the court, Davin had spent six months imprisoned, just as I had, wondering if we would ever see home again.

That he, too, had returned to the scrutiny and judgment of our people and the guilt of what we put our family through.

But at least we didn't have to think about that tonight.

CHAPTER NINE



Before breakfast, I decided to go to the sparring room to work out the tension that had settled into my bones the night before, in spite of the momentary reprieve that getting out of the castle had offered.

It didn't occur to me that Theo would be there as well.

I stopped short in the doorway, my eyes darting away from the cream-colored shirt that clung to his broad chest as he went through a series of exercises with his sword.

"Rowan?" He sounded surprised, and I kicked myself for not leaving sooner.

Then again, why should I leave?

"What are you doing here?" he asked through panting breaths, using his sleeve to wipe the sweat from his brow

I gestured toward him. "The same thing you are. I had been hoping one of the guards would be around to spar."

A thoughtful expression crossed Theo's face.

He had seen evidence that I could fight before, when we were attacked on the road before the Summit. He also knew I carried both a sword and dagger, but he still seemed to find it a bit of a shock that I would utilize the training room.

"Would you like to spar with me?" he asked, almost shyly.

My mouth fell open at his offer, but I quickly composed myself.

“Sure,” I responded, trying for a casual tone.

I had already done my warm-up stretches in my room, so I moved to the wall to grab a practice sword before meeting him in the center of the ring.

“Are you certain you don’t mind sparring with a woman?” My voice was teasing, but I studied his expression carefully.

He wasn’t averse to change, precisely, but he had never seemed to embrace it either. And that’s what this was, a stark contrast from the ideals he had been raised with.

Theo arched an eyebrow, a mischievous grin tugging at his full lips. “Not if that woman is you.”

His words didn’t set any part of me on fire, but they did feel nice.

“If I didn’t know any better, I might think you were flirting with me,” I bantered.

He laughed softly, his golden green eyes meeting mine. “Would that be the worst thing in the world?”

His question hung in the air, and I swallowed hard. *Would it?*

Instead of answering, I launched at him with one of the offensive strategies Avani and I had been practicing for the last week.

Theo didn’t hesitate before defending himself, parrying my sword away again and again. We circled one another, but he was less sparring than he was fending off my blows, as if he took issue with the idea of attacking me.

With a sigh, I stepped back.

“I’m not one of your fancy jeweled eggs, Theo. I won’t break,” I mocked before lunging at him again.

He raised his brow just as I broke through his defense and thwacked his side with the back of my sword. With a laugh, he nodded to himself, launching into an offensive position, finally facing off against me in truth.

We went back and forth this way for nearly an hour before he managed to get the better of me. I stumbled back, and he reached out a hand to steady my

wrist, pulling me back upright.

Instead of using the leverage to tug me closer to him like I was afraid he might, Theo merely dropped my wrist as soon as I was stable, taking a polite step back.

He was giving me time, just as he said he would, and I was absurdly grateful for the lack of expectation. With panting breaths, we both launched into a series of cool-down stretches.

When I went to stretch my abdominals, a blush crept into Theo's cheeks, and he averted his gaze. A glance down was enough to tell me why. The dresses we wore in Lochlann were by no means provocative, but compared to the high-necked, stiff contraptions the ladies of Elk wore...

I bit back an amused smile.

"Is my stretching scandalizing you, Lord Theo?" I asked, pulling myself up into a sitting position.

"Well, I would expect no less." He said the words nonchalantly, but red still colored his cheeks.

I shook my head, though his reaction did bring a question to mind.

"Would you do this with me in Elk? If we marry?" I asked. "Or would the entire clan die of shock?"

Theo met my gaze, his own thoughtful. "There are private sparring spaces we could use, since your stretching would no doubt be distracting."

The corner of his mouth tugged up in a smile, and I let out a small laugh. That was more progress than I had been hoping for, and his point about my stretching wasn't entirely unfair.

Although, in the Elk dresses, that wasn't quite as much of a concern. Assuming I would have to keep wearing those dresses.

What *would* I be doing once we got there? Knitting?

"You know that I will never be Inessa," I told him cautiously. "There's nothing wrong with the way she is, but it isn't me."

It was difficult to meet his eye, but I refused to look away. His expression

turned more serious.

“I would never want you to be Inessa, or anyone other than who you are, Rowan.” He moved closer, taking my hands in his. “I know this isn’t going to be easy. I’m sure there are compromises that we’ll both need to make, but I am willing to try if you are.”

He brought my knuckles to his lips, pressing a warm kiss against them.

That was certainly fair. And I wanted to tell him that I was willing to try, also, but I couldn’t seem to force the words out. So, I made a joke instead.

“Even if it means I scandalize the countryside, intentionally or not?” I raised an eyebrow, and Theo chuckled.

“If you were truly so determined to scandalize me, I’m sure you would be dressing like the other ladies of your court.” He gestured vaguely to indicate the off-the-shoulder style that was so popular during the summer.

He was making a joke, making conversation, but my heart sank into my stomach.

He didn’t know about the flogging.

Well, he would certainly find out if we were married.

“I have scars,” I said quietly.

A line furrowed in his brow.

“I think I would have noticed...” he trailed off, his face hardening. “Something happened to you, in Bear?”

I squeezed my eyes shut, though I had to wonder how Evander had kept this under wraps with the guards’ propensity to gossip.

“The Duke caught me in his chambers.” I didn’t want to reveal the unusual power structure at Bear. “He had me publicly flogged.”

Pure fury overtook Theo’s features, more intense than I had seen even at the Summit when Evander claimed me. “He. Did. What?”

“It’s fine,” I said, the words coming out hollow.

He opened his mouth to argue, but I spoke over him.

“They’re healed now. I just...thought you should know, because...” I

gestured to my back, remembering how he had once kissed the smooth, unblemished skin of my shoulder where a ropey lash mark now resided. “There are scars.”

Theo’s fists clenched, and he took several measured breaths. I tried to look away, but he gently put a hand on my face.

“The only reason I care about any scars you have, Rowan, is knowing the pain you went through to get them. I should have fought harder to get you back. I thought...” He trailed off when I placed my hand on his chest.

“That was not your fault. You did try.” My voice lowered to a whisper. “And you’re here, still trying.”

Theo met my gaze, his arms moving slowly around me, giving me every opportunity to stop them.

I didn’t.

He pulled me into his lap, cradling my head under his chin and quietly holding me there. My eyes fluttered shut, and I allowed his comfort to settle into my bones.

It could be so, so easy.

CHAPTER TEN



It was a whirlwind two weeks of council meetings and dinners and dances where the courtiers not-so-subtly propositioned Theo the minute my back was turned.

This evening promised to be even more fun, because the Bear delegation was arriving. At least Mila would be here, even if I would have to spend the next week reminded of...well, *everything*.

I propelled myself forward into the ballroom, where Theo was already waiting. He smiled warmly when his eyes met mine, crossing the room to greet me.

“I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to you looking so proper all the time.” He gave my neatly styled curls a significant glance.

In fairness, it wasn’t that they were always unruly, just that no one in Socair had known how to style them. The twins were magic, though.

“Well, propriety is what every girl aspires to,” I joked, trying for a levity I couldn’t quite feel tonight.

“Forgive me.” He shot me one of his dazzling smiles, holding out his arm. “What I meant to say was, you look even more beautiful than usual tonight.”

I took his proffered arm and returned his smile with one that wasn’t quite as solid. My eyes darted nervously toward the entrance at the top of the

staircase where the Bear delegation would be arriving at any moment.

Theo tracked the movement, noting the turmoil in my gaze. His brow furrowed.

“I don’t know if Lord Taras is the one who gave you those scars, but your family would never let anyone here hurt you,” he said in a low tone. “And neither would I.”

I went still, casting a glance around at the Great Hall and all of the courtiers waiting for the evening's guests. Now hardly felt like the time to explain the nuances of any of my relationships at Bear, so I only nodded in what I hoped was a sincere manner.

“No, he isn’t,” I responded at last, putting my other hand on his forearm just as we got to our seats. “But thank you.”

Avani was at my mother’s right, and there were two spaces next to Da’ for Theo and me. A few of the courtiers still looked at him with some suspicion, but two weeks of dancing and dinners featuring his undeniably charming smile was winning them over, little by little.

Da’ was another story. He only acknowledged Theo’s presence when forced to by Mamá.

“Rowan.” Da’ held out a hand to help me sink gracefully into my seat, and I took it, leaning down to kiss his cheek.

He reluctantly gave the barest of nods to Theo, then returned to talking with Uncle Oli, who was seated next to Avani.

“I’m sure he’ll come around,” Davin leaned in from his place across the table, speaking in an overly congenial tone.

Suspecting that he was about to irritate Theo yet again, I kicked him under the table, but it apparently didn’t land hard enough because he went right ahead talking.

“He’s always a bit rough around the edges when someone’s family kidnaps his daughter, but he’s sure to get over it in no time.”

I glared at him.

“Indeed,” Theo said drily, an uncomfortable expression crossing his features.

This only made Davin’s smug grin grow wider, and I kicked him again, for all the good it did with my flimsy ineffectual slippers.

Thankfully, we were saved from further conversation by the announcement of the first dance, which my parents led out, as usual. It was a familiar song, one that Mac had loved.

I risked a glance at my sister. Her face was impassive, but she was clutching the arms of her chair, her golden wedding band cutting into her slim finger. There was no subtle way for me to go to her, but Jocelyn leaned over, placing a hand on hers.

Finally, the song was over. Davin cut in smoothly to ask Avani to dance before any of the many waiting lairds could do it, for which she shot him an intensely grateful look.

Theo held his hand out for me, and we swept our way across the floor. He towered over me by a solid foot, his broad shoulders spanning twice the width of mine.

I remembered what it felt like to dance in his arms at the Summit, the fluttering in my stomach and the warmth that flowed through my limbs.

It didn’t feel quite that way now, but it did feel safe. And feeling safe wasn’t something I took for granted these days.

I was tired of feeling unsettled, tired of putting off the inevitable. Hadn’t I already decided this was for the best? Hadn’t I run out of reasons to prolong this decision?

I needed to tell Theo I would accept his proposal tonight, contingent on stupid Bear’s stupid permission, and then tomorrow, we could inform the Council. All I needed to do was open my mouth and let the words spill out.

Any second now...

When I finally parted my lips to speak, a different question tumbled out of me instead.

“How do you know the dances here?” I asked awkwardly. “And the, well, everything. I hardly even got the opportunity to tutor you on proper spoon usage.”

I gave him a wan smile that he returned.

“Socairan lords have a fairly rigorous education.” He said the words apologetically, since the implication was that it was more rigorous than Lochlann’s. But I couldn’t really argue that, based on the results.

“We study language and etiquette from Lochlann, and Rionn as well, in addition to the training we do for the military.”

I thought about the words Evander had hurled at me back at the negotiations, one of the few times he had said something almost complimentary about Theo.

Of course, it had been followed by something insulting toward me.

It’s because we were brought up to have a shred of self-discipline, something you could stand to learn.

I had always felt like I had the best parents in the world, the best family in the world, the best kingdom in the world... But the digs the courtiers had been making melded with Evander’s, and even Theo’s gentle comment.

Had I been spoiled, all this time? Too wild and not nearly disciplined enough? Not even bothering to learn the language or culture of the countries right next to me?

In spite of the distance I had been trying to keep between us, I leaned into him, stepping closer than was strictly appropriate and allowing him to ground me from the chaotic feelings I couldn’t quite shake tonight.

But even Theo’s arms couldn’t protect me from the way my stomach clenched when the music slowed to a lull mid-song, when the herald beat his staff on the ground three times.

“Please welcome the Socairan delegation from Clan Bear.”

A curious sensation overtook me before I even turned around, almost like the pins and needles I got when it was going to storm, tension that thrummed

through the air in a feeling that was stars-damnably familiar.

I didn't have to turn around to know who would be standing there, and it sure as hell wasn't Taras or Mila.

Roaring sounded in my ears, nearly drowning out words like emissary and, worst of all, heir. I forced my head to turn, slowly, just as the herald called out his name.

“Lord Evander.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



If I had told myself a thousand times I didn't care anymore, I would have known every one of them to be a lie in this moment.
I couldn't breathe.

Evander was here, standing at the top of the staircase like he owned the entire castle.

As usual, he showed not a single sign that he had been travelling for weeks. His long black coat was pristine, his silver buttons polished to perfection. He was clean shaven with his midnight hair falling casually onto his brow.

From his posture and the arrogant tilt of his lips, I might have thought he was completely unruffled to be walking into a ballroom where I was still standing in Theo's arms, but his eyes...

They were pure murder, glinting like the edge of a well-sharpened blade. Then he blinked, and the expression was gone so quickly, I wondered if I had imagined it in the first place.

We had been trying to convince the court not to be afraid of Socair. I was fairly certain that Evander was undoing every single one of those strides as he swept down the stairs with predatorial grace, his perfectly chiseled features displaying all the emotion of the marble statues in the courtyard.

Instead of going to greet my parents, he crossed the room directly to me,

following the invisible tether that always seemed to exist between us.

His silvery gaze fixed onto mine as he drew closer, brewing with something infuriatingly close to contempt.

Theo's grip tightened around me. "Der'mo."

His muttered curse pulled me from whatever trance had overtaken me.

Moving out of Theo's arms, I straightened to my full, albeit insubstantial, height as Evander came to a stop within a few feet of me.

"Lord Evander," Theo's tone was neutral as he dipped his chin in greeting. "Your presence tonight is...unexpected."

But of course, Evander ignored him entirely, his eyes never leaving mine.

He gave a shallow bow, and I automatically sank into a curtsy, though my rapidly weakening knees protested the movement.

"Lord Evander." My voice sounded far away in my own head. "Welcome to Castle Chridhe."

It was surreal, the way we greeted each other like strangers, like I hadn't spent weeks in his room, in his shirt, *in his bed*.

"Thank you, Princess Rowan." Derision edged his tone, and I felt my features harden in response.

Turning, I led the way to my parents and sister. Theo's hand remained on my lower back, but it wasn't half as steady as I wished it was.

My father kept a tight leash on his fury at seeing Evander, but his emerald eyes burned, and his jaw was clenched. My mother and Avani were perfectly polite, though, eyeing him with interest after the stories they had no doubt heard.

Theo's arm tightened around me, and for once, I couldn't feel the warmth seeping into my limbs. They remained frozen. *Ice*.

Then a different hand appeared in front of me.

"I believe as a visiting dignitary, it's my right to request the next dance." Evander's tone was bland, and I narrowed my eyes, not moving.

Avani eyed us both before stepping forward, ready to take my place...but

people were watching, and we couldn't afford for this to become a scene. At least, that's what I told myself when I nodded, placing my hand in his.

Lightning shot up my arm. I forced myself to hold his gaze, forced my features into something close to the same detached expression he held.

From the corner of my eye, I watched as my sister stepped in to dance with Theo, absurdly grateful to her for smoothing things over. I watched my parents each agree to a dance partner next.

I watched literally anything to avoid looking at Evander's face for as long as I possibly could. And while I examined the room, Evander examined me.

His cool analysis rankled at me until finally, I turned my attention to him.

"We were expecting Lord Taras." It was the politest way I could ask, *What in the stars-damned hell are you doing here?*

"He had things to take care of in Bear." Evander's voice was perfectly aloof, his touch impersonal as he placed his other hand on my waist.

Which was something I also felt very nonchalant about. Even as my body responded to every point of contact between us. Even as my breathing hitched.

It was fine.

I was...fine.

The music started up, a reminder for me to wrench my gaze from the tight line of his mouth, so at odds with the expression I had gotten used to seeing there.

"So you came all this way yourself, for mere trade agreements?" I prodded, hoping he attributed my breathlessness to the spirited moves of the dance.

He led me around the floor with the barest pressure of his fingertips on my waist.

"There's nothing *mere* about the benefits of trading for my people, as you well know." His words were a chastisement, delivered in his favorite condescending tone. "So yes, I came myself. Why else would I be here?"

That stung more than I wanted to admit, so I pasted a polite smile onto my face before responding. “I thought perhaps you had come to offer congratulations on my upcoming betrothal.”

Something dark flashed in his eyes, and a muscle ticked in his jaw. “Well, that would be wholly unnecessary as you can’t possibly hope to finalize a marriage in Socair without my permission.” He paused, his tone a low, dangerous growl. “Or did you forget that I own you, Lemmikki?”

I told myself the feeling that shot through me at his words was anger.

Because what right did he have to sound possessive now?

It was just like Arès had said at the negotiations. He really was nothing more than a child with a toy. It didn’t matter how bored he had grown with that particular toy or if he even liked it, stars forbid someone else pick it up.

“Not here, you don’t,” I corrected, a bite to my tone. “You can’t stop me from marrying in my own kingdom.”

“Of course not.” He sounded far too pleasant as he paused to spin me away from him for the next step of the dance. “If Korhonan is willing to live out the rest of his life here, then you hardly need to worry about it.”

I cursed under my breath, fury overtaking me in truth this time.

“Theo has already said he’s willing to agree to the terms we reached at negotiations,” I reminded him through clenched teeth. “You haven’t given a single damn about me or our blood debt since I returned, and now you want to step in and be difficult because I’m--”

“Doing the very thing I took you to avoid in the first place?” he supplied in a deceptively neutral tone.

“With the caveats you agreed to!” I hissed.

“I would have agreed to anything to get rid of you that day.” He shrugged. “Circumstances are different now.”

Get rid of me?

“Fine,” I spat. “Then name your terms tomorrow at the council, but don’t drag this out, Evander.”

My people could very well start a war if he did, but there was no point in letting him know about that particular chink in our armor unless it became necessary.

“In a hurry to marry Korhonan?” His tone was patronizing. “Did you decide that two weeks was enough time to fall madly in love after all?”

Hearing Evander talk mockingly about me falling in love was enough to do me in. My stomach twisted and red lined my vision.

“Oh, we’ve had much longer than that now. Plenty of time to get to know one another, intimately.” I gave him another savage grin that I was sure didn’t reach my eyes.

At that exact, precarious moment, a familiar throat cleared behind me.

My father’s throat, to be exact.

Stars. Damned. Hell.

I tried and failed to keep a blush from blossoming in my neck and cheeks. Evander’s eyes, which had been darkening with my words, now sparkled with a trace of mirth as they tracked my reddening skin.

Aalio.

“I’ll dance with my daughter now.” Da’ stepped to the side of us, his face like a thundercloud.

Evander was taller than Theo, and nearly as broad. But even without taking into account the several inches his crown added, my father topped them both. More than that, he exuded the essence of a king.

So regardless of whatever claim Evander had asserted to ask me for this dance, I wasn’t surprised when he agreed without argument.

“Of course, Your Majesty.” He gave another shallow bow, and I curtsyed, both of us pretending for all the world as though we hadn’t just been quarreling like children in the middle of the dance floor.

And a child was exactly what I felt like as Da’ scooped me into his arms, moving me seamlessly around the dance floor. It took me a full turn around the room to finally risk lifting my eyes to his.

“I haven’t been...getting to know Theo...like that,” I muttered.

His shoulders relaxed a bit, and he shook his head. “*Stars, Row. Ye could’ve at least said it a bit quieter.*”

I let out a sigh. “Evander just...makes me furious.”

“I can see tha’.” His tone was matter-of-fact, but his features still reflected all the disdain he held for the Bear lord. “I’m sure yer Uncle Oli could come up with a nice diplomatic way to make him leave. Or I could come up with a less diplomatic way to make him disappear.”

Why did that thought give me nearly as much panic as him coming had? Swallowing, I looked away.

“I’m sure that would do more harm than good,” I assured him. “It’s nothing I can’t handle for a few days.”

Surely.

Probably.

CHAPTER TWELVE



I was determined to avoid Evander for the rest of the ball, but that turned out to be unnecessary.

Every courtier within fifty miles had apparently decided to fling themselves at him, effectively forming a barricade that he didn't appear eager to escape from.

So much for their unending terror of Socair.

"Rowan?" Theo's voice cut in again, and I realized I had missed something else he said.

"I'm sorry," I said sincerely. "I know I've been distracted tonight. It's just--It's maddening that we have to run this by him."

Theo nodded, his eyes troubled. "I know."

Lady Fiona let out a high-pitched giggle as Evander spun her around the room, showing more charm than I would have thought the *aalio* was capable of. Where had he pulled this diplomatic side from?

Of course, he had been raised for this, and in hindsight, he had danced with the other women at the Summit. It was only me he seemed to reserve his arseling side for.

"What is he even doing here?" Theo muttered.

"Whatever his reason for being here to begin with," I responded, "his feelings on an alliance between us haven't changed."

“So he won’t give his...permission?” Theo asked darkly.

“I don’t know what he’ll do,” I said honestly. “I suppose we’ll find out tomorrow at the council meeting. In the meantime, I’m sure he’ll just endeavor to make everyone as miserable as possible.”

“Not everyone,” Theo said, raising an eyebrow.

I followed his gaze in time to see Lady Fiona lean closer to Evander. Her elegant hand reached up to brush aside the strands of midnight hair that always tumbled onto his brow.

“No,” I agreed, no small amount of bite to my tone. “Just you and me, I suppose.”

Conversation with Theo was stilted after that. We were both too angry about Evander’s presence, and then there was the somewhat convoluted subject of whether or not Evander would allow a betrothal that I hadn’t officially even accepted.

Any plans I had to tell Theo I accepted tonight had effectively gone out the window when Evander arrived.

I spent the rest of the ball with a false smile pasted on my face as I danced with Theo and several of the other lairds in attendance.

At least when Sir *Leers-Too-Much* approached to ask me to dance, one of the palace dogs appeared and bit him on the ankle before running to hide under the curtains of the dessert table. I silently thanked my sister for that distraction as it allowed Davin to cut in instead.

“How are you holding up, Cousin?” he asked when we were far enough away from the rest of the dancers.

“I. Hate. Him.” I bit out through clenched teeth.

“Ah, well... hating Laird *numpty* isn’t new, so we must be referring to someone else.”

We dipped beneath the raised arms of one of the other couples before falling back into the steps of the dance.

“Evander, obviously,” I hissed at him, not sure why he was determined to

make me say it out loud when he knew stars-damned good and well who I meant.

My cousin's eyes lit up with amusement, and he made a thoughtful sound in the back of his throat. "Well, you certainly say his name like someone who hates him."

I glared up at him, but he only chuckled in response. We finished out our dance in a comfortable silence.

Evander didn't ask me to dance again, though he was never too far from wherever I stood, always close enough that I could hear Lady Fiona and literally every other woman in court giggle and swoon over him.

By the twelfth dance, Avani gestured with her head toward the door, and I nodded. I had more than enough playacting for the sake of peace this evening.

More than enough of this evening. Period.

She left first, and I made my excuses to an extra-stoic Theo, who insisted on escorting me out. Hairs stood on the back of my neck, and I felt someone's gaze following me across the room and back out into the hall.

I told myself that it wasn't Evander's. His eyes were probably glued to Fiona's willowy figure.

Besides, it didn't matter.

None of it had mattered, right?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Some nights I braved the solitude of my own rooms, but this was not one of those nights.

Avani and I were lounging in her large four-poster bed when a knock sounded at the door. Before either of us could get up, the heavy wood pushed open, and my mother came in.

She had a bottle of red wine tucked under her arm and three chalices in her hand.

“No pastries?” Avani asked.

“I thought tonight called for something stronger,” she said wryly.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Immediately, I saw Fiona’s fingers lingering on Evander’s forehead, and I popped my eyes open again.

“You thought right,” I assured her.

Avani nodded fervently next to me.

Mamá opened the bottle, pouring three generous glasses and handing them out before she settled on the bed next to us.

I took a long sip of mine without even bothering to let it aerate. It was bitter, but that was fine, because it matched my soul at the moment.

“So...” Mamá said. “Do you want to talk about what happened at the ball tonight?”

I mulled that over for a solid three seconds.

Did I want to talk about the man who kidnapped me and then saved me and then kissed me showing up, unannounced, after two months of silence, just in time to throw a wrench in my reluctant betrothal plans?

About what a complete *aalio* he was once he got here?

Better yet, what about the way he had danced a solid four times with Lady stars-damned Fiona? Not that I was counting.

“I do not,” I answered definitively, nestling further back into the plush pillows behind me.

Avani shook her head in support, and Mamá surveyed both of us for a moment before nodding.

“All right, then,” she said amicably. “But...do you want to talk about the feathered monstrosity Lady Fenella was wearing?”

“That, I can do.” I huffed out a hollow laugh. “I was just thinking I didn’t have enough feathered dresses in my wardrobe.”

Mamá made a mock sound of relief. “I’m glad you feel that way, because I went straight from the ball to commission matching ones for the three of us.”

“Well, at least make mine in something other than pink,” Avani chimed in. “Why do the seamstresses still think princesses need to wear pink even after a lifetime of watching it clash with our very red hair?”

“It’s better than the lavender one they made me last year.” My nose wrinkled in disgust at the memory.

The gray undertones had lent a sickly pallor to my skin that no amount of cosmetics could hide, and it had ballooned oddly around my middle. I had spent the entire evening fielding questions about whether I was in a delicate condition.

My mother winced in sympathy. “That was...unfortunate. But you know if you insult Madame Freya...”

“Not worth it,” Avani concurred.

A beat of silence passed, and then another, enough time for my bitter

thoughts to come creeping back in. My mother nudged for me to move over so she would have more room, and I obliged her, downing the rest of my wine as I moved.

A nasty feeling churned in my gut that had nothing to do with the alcohol.

“Well, I’d say based on the way things were going at the ball, this isn’t the only bed that’s...*crowded* tonight.” The words fled my mouth before I could stop them, and each one was soaked in bitterness, like cherries soaked in brandy, potent and undeniable.

Mamá and Avani both shot me sideways glances. They didn’t ask who I was talking about, which was almost worse than if they had.

Instead, my mother just eased her way back off the bed. “I think I’ll go get another bottle.”

My sister examined me before turning toward the doorway, calling after my mother. “Better make it two.”



After a while, Mamá left, and Avani finally drifted off to a fitful sleep. I stayed awake, though, tossing and turning until I couldn’t take the ugly feeling clawing its way up my throat anymore.

Clumsily throwing on a dressing gown and shoving my feet into a pair of soft slippers, I eased through the passageway door. My parents knew some of the secret walkways, but Avani, Mac, and I had spent our entire childhood exploring the deserted paths.

It was a long series of hallways on slightly unsteady steps, and I had to evade several sets of guards before I finally found myself in the narrow corridor leading to the hidden back entrances of the guest rooms.

I paused outside the doorway I was looking for. If I continued down the hall, I would wind up at Theo’s room. That would be, at least, marginally smarter than what I was doing now.

Of course, the reasonable and much more sober part of me knew I shouldn't be in this part of the castle at all, that I should turn around and go back to my sister. But I was driven by a compulsion I could hardly make sense of.

I didn't do any of the rational things.

Instead, I took a single, fortifying breath before pushing open the passageway door to Evander's rooms.

His hand was already on the hilt of his saber, his body halfway out of his desk chair, tensed for a confrontation, when he realized it was only me. His broad shoulders relaxed, though his eyes widened for a fraction of a second.

He let his sword rest gently back on the desk, easing back into his chair and adopting his arseling face once more. As usual, not a single thing was out of place in his room. Except...

"Lemmikki?" He said the word casually, as though he had run into me at the breakfast table rather than because I had burst unannounced into his room.

My eyes remained fixated on his bed, the way the covers were rumped on both sides when he was usually so impossibly tidy.

"Does that bed offend you?" he asked, raising a single eyebrow.

"I'm only surprised to find it so empty." As soon as the words spewed forth from my lips, I wanted to take them back.

Why, why, *why* had I said that out loud? I decided to blame it on the wine.

Evander blinked once, then twice. *Surprise? Irritation?* I couldn't quite tell.

"And yet you came in without knocking." He gave me a smirk that didn't reach his eyes. "How very voyeuristic of you."

A blush traveled from my chest to my cheeks, but I couldn't help but notice that he didn't deny my insinuation. I was in this now, so I didn't bother to stop the next thought from escaping my mouth.

“She left already, then?” My tone was more casual than I felt, at least, and my words were clear enough not to bely my slightly tipsy state.

He picked up a glass of whiskey from his nightstand, taking a long sip before responding with a small shrug. “You know how I feel about people in my space for too long.”

Ah. Another pointed reminder of how keen he was to be rid of me since saying it earlier wasn’t enough.

“Right.” I nodded like that made sense. “Because why have company when you can be bitter and alone?”

Evander let out a long-suffering sigh. “Did you need something, Lemmikki, or did you merely leave Korhonan’s bed to scrutinize mine?”

I couldn’t very well fall back on righteous indignation when I had come here to accuse him of the very same thing, but his assumption rankled all the same.

A cold smile graced my lips.

“Theo is asleep anyway,” I hedged, seeing no need to correct him, “so I thought it would be a decent time to drop by and make sure you aren’t leading the women of my court on, what when all you have to offer them is *temporary.*”

Something dark flashed over his features, breaking through the arrogant mask he usually wore.

“It’s noble of you to be so concerned about them.” His tone belied the words. “But you really shouldn’t trouble yourself. It’s only the clingy ones who have a problem with that.”

I froze, a sudden, sharp pain lancing from my chest all the way through to my fingertips.

When we were children, my cousins and I used to play a game where we took turns hitting each other with increasing force until one of us got hit too hard. Our parents would always shake their heads, marveling at the idiocy that we would first start the game then have the nerve to cry when we got

hurt.

That's how this felt. And once again, I was the idiot for starting the game.

For coming here when he had made his feelings clear and goading him into revealing a truth that I belatedly realized I could have gone my entire life without hearing.

"I see," I said quietly, shifting my face before he could see the full effect of his words. "Well then, by all means, do continue in your pursuits. I'll just leave you to it."

He squeezed his eyes shut. "Lemmikki--"

"No." I turned to go. "I should get back to Theo."

The words were as much to convince myself as Evander, but they were no less true.

I *should* get back to Theo. And I certainly shouldn't have come here.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



My stomach was churning before I even woke up the next morning.

Clingy? I was clingy?

If Evander didn't like people in his space so much, maybe he should try not taking them captive to begin with.

And now I had to go listen to the arseling tell me what he would *allow* me to do and on which of his precious, petty terms.

My sister looked at me askance as I furiously threw my hair into a braid. I had returned to sleep in her room after my unfortunate conversation with Evander, and subsequently woken up far later than I should have.

We made a mad dash back to my rooms, my insides sloshing with the remaining wine from last night. I groaned again, fighting for the churning liquid not to make a reappearance.

"Does this have something to do with where you were when I woke up to use the privy last night?" Avani asked in a deceptively mild voice.

"No," I lied obviously enough that it hardly counted, and she only shook her head.

"Here. Sit down." She pushed me into the armchair by my vanity. "You need to go into this meeting armed for Bear, not looking like one."

"I'll be late," I told her, my head pounding with the effort of talking.

“That’s why I didn’t call for Taisiya.”

Reluctantly, I made myself chug the rest of Aunt Clara’s tonic, pulling a face as I did so.

“Then be late,” Avani said with a defiant shrug. “It isn’t like Aunt Jocelyn -- or our parents -- will let them start negotiating your marriage without you.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but she tilted my face until I met her eyes.

“Listen to me, little sister. You are Rowan Pendragon, second in line to the most powerful throne in the world and daughter of the Warrior Queen. I know this alliance is for the best, and that you...want to marry Lord Theo.”

The hesitation in her voice was nearly as evident as my lie had been, but I ignored it anyway.

“But,” she finished up, “do *not* let him or Lord Arseling think they hold all the cards here.”

I couldn’t suppress a chuckle at that. “I see you’ve been talking to Davin.”

She nodded, a rueful smile on her lips. “You know how bored he gets now that...”

She trailed off, but I knew what she was going to say. Now that Mac was gone. I reached out my hand to squeeze hers.

“I missed you, big sister.”

She squeezed my hand back. “And I missed you.”



Apparently, I wasn’t the only one making a late appearance to the Council Room. My father’s heavy knock sounded on the door while Avani was still working her deft fingers through my curls.

I called for him to enter, and he strode in on measured, angry steps.

Not at me, though.

Mamá must have shared with him the reason for Evander's presence in the meeting this morning.

"Ye don't have to come to this meeting at all," he said without preamble.

"I do if we want this alliance," I responded carefully.

"To hell with this alliance," he practically yelled. "And with their entire stars-damned kingdom, and certainly with the man who thinks he can take advantage of my daughter being captive, then stride in here under false pretenses and try to dictate her life. *Again.*"

Though several of those were thoughts that had crossed my mind more than once, one thing did stand out.

"He didn't take advantage, Da'," I said, absurdly grateful that I didn't have to look him in the face while we talked about this.

Avani's hands moved more slowly in my hair, like she knew how much I needed that barrier.

"Mo bhobain, I willna force ye to speak of it." Da's accent thickened like it always did when he was upset. "But we both know where ye were sleeping when Taisiya came to fetch ye."

"*Sleeping,*" I said insistently. "That was it. Evander might be an arseling of epic proportions, but he was never going to...go there."

I couldn't see my father's face, but he made an uncomfortable noise in the back of his throat.

"And for what it's worth," I went on, hating myself for defending the *aalio* but not particularly wanting to start a war when my father murdered him. "I don't think he came on false pretenses. Theo sent his letter to Evander about the betrothal after we responded to the trade request."

"Then why did he come?" Da' demanded.

I finally turned to face him. "Evander is just here for his clan. That's why he does everything."

Did he hear the fatigue in my voice as plainly as I did? The lines around his eyes tightened, and I averted my gaze.

He opened his mouth again, but Avani cut in smoothly.

“Da’, perhaps you could let the council know that Rowan will be along shortly, so they don’t get things started without her?”

My father gave her a look that said he knew exactly what she was doing, but a glance at my expression must have convinced him it was for the best.

“Aye, I’ll do that.” The flush of fury had faded somewhat from his cheeks, though his emerald eyes still burned with ire.

This meeting was sure to be fun for everyone.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Between Avani's bolstering words and her careful attention to my appearance this morning, I strode into the Council Room twenty-five minutes late on sure, confident footsteps.

"Apologies for my tardiness," I said with a benign smile, gliding to my chair.

My mother looked like she was biting back a smile, and Aunt Jocelyn had an openly satisfied smirk on her face.

Because Avani had done her job well.

I cut a striking image in a deep red gown only a shade darker than my hair. Gold threads offset the fabric, shimmering when I walked and bringing more presence than my five short feet would normally allow for.

Then, of course, there was the rather impressive tiara, rubies and diamonds sparkling from woven gold branches. I was every bit the second-in-line to the largest kingdom in the known world today.

"I daresay it was worth it," Theo said, shooting me one of his luminous smiles.

I returned the expression, taking the seat next to him and ostensibly ignoring the arseling sitting across from us.

The table was emptier today since the entire council was not needed for these discussions. Instead, there was a carefully cultivated group, so

everyone's interests were represented.

My parents were here, of course, but Avani was holding Court in their stead. Uncle Oli was in attendance along with Aunt Jocelyn, MacKinnon, and Lairds MacBay and Buchanan.

Silence filled the room until finally, my mother addressed Evander.

"We understand you have terms for...*allowing* the alliance between Elk and Lochlann." She gave an irritable blink to show exactly what she thought of that. "To be clear, we neither recognize nor condone the fact that you essentially claimed our daughter as your property for things she had no control over."

She let those words linger in the air.

"Understood," Evander inclined his head respectfully, not bothering to argue.

"However," my mother went on, "we do recognize that we are not in a position to overturn a decision made by the Socairan ruling party. Additionally, we are conscious of the fact that you respected her decision to leave when you could have chosen not to. So, we have decided to entertain these discussions peacefully."

"For now," my father added, the threat evident in his glowering features.

Again, Evander nodded, his own face unreadable.

"Are there any questions before we begin?" My mother looked around the table.

"I have one," Theo spoke up, an uncharacteristically hard look in his eyes as he turned them on Evander. "What's to stop your father from sending his men in to overturn this decision, as he did last time?"

Evander's gaze snapped to mine, and I looked away, not wanting to admit I had kept a secret for him when he was being such a complete and utter *aalio*. Shoulders relaxing, just barely, he reached into his outer jacket pocket and pulled out an envelope.

"I have a letter with his seal, granting me full authority over these

discussions.” He handed it to my mother, who opened it and read it before nodding.

“What changed his mind?” Theo demanded.

Would I have noticed the slight pinching around Evander’s eyes if I hadn’t been looking for it? His father changed his mind from minute to minute with no rhyme or reason, but that was hardly common knowledge.

“It isn’t for me to question the Duke,” Evander replied smoothly.

Theo huffed out a bitter breath but didn’t respond.

“I also have a question,” Evander said, just a hair too casually. “What possible reason could I have for consenting to the very thing I went so out of my way to stop from happening?”

My mouth dropped open in offense. “Yes, I’m sure kidnapping me was a real burden on *you*.”

He shrugged, as if to say it was. I clenched my fists in my skirts to avoid throwing my water glass at his face.

“Funny you should ask.” Laird MacBay had been kind the entire time I knew him, affable, even, but there was no trace of that in his voice now. “It might interest you to know that our people have a great deal of love for their princess. That some of *us* took it quite personally when she was held hostage for months. There are many who believe retaliation is the only way to prevent something like that from happening again.”

His tone left no doubt that he was one of those people. A muscle ticked in Evander’s jaw, but he said nothing.

MacKinnon cut in. “Which is why the princess graciously agreed to entertain betrothal talks, once she realized some of the Lairds were ready to march on Socair if no one intervened.”

Thank you so much for that, MacKinnon.

Theo stiffened at my side, and I disentangled my hand from my skirt to place it on his.

“It wasn’t...only for that,” I said quietly.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, Lord Evander,” Uncle Oliver said in an overly pleasant tone. “But a march on Socair would lead directly to *your* territory, would it not?”

“It would.” Evander’s gaze snapped to mine, his eyes narrowing like he was trying to solve a particularly annoying puzzle.

I did my best to keep my features neutral, grateful all over again that Avani had insisted on getting me ready today. It was easier to hide behind a mask of cosmetics and a tiara.

“So, you can see it’s in your best interest to be obliging, then,” my mother summed up.

“I can,” Evander conceded. “As I understand it, then, the purpose of this arrangement is a peace alliance between Socair and Lochlann?”

“Exactly,” MacKinnon said, just as I said, “Not entirely.”

“You know perfectly well that Rowan and I were betrothed before this, and it had nothing to do with an alliance,” Theo growled.

“No, just the threat of execution hanging over her head,” Lord Arseling pointed out. “I also know that you called that betrothal off yourself.”

“Because *you* took her,” Theo protested.

“And *you* said it was of utmost importance that you marry quickly and produce heirs,” Evander countered. “So let’s not pretend politics doesn’t play a role here, shall we?”

Theo fumed, and I held a hand out.

“Yes,” I breathed the word irritably. “Obviously, the alliance is advantageous. Allowing it serves your people as well as mine, because not only will we avoid a war, we can resume trade. Isn’t that why you’re here?”

Evander nodded slowly. “The alliance is not restricted to Elk, then?”

I leveled a suspicious look at him. Was he really going to try to pawn me off on one of the other Lords just to keep me from marrying Theo?

“It’s true that we’ve had other offers,” Aunt Jocelyn offered. “Sir Mikhail from Ram sent one.”

“How ever did you resist that temptation?” Evander asked under his breath, and I almost smiled before I remembered how much I hated him.

“Lord Luca from Lynx,” Jocelyn went on.

That one seemed to give him pause, but he cleared his throat. “That’s hardly helpful to you, on the opposite end of Socair from the mountains.”

“Precisely,” my aunt agreed. “So, you can see that even if the princess’s preferences were not taken into account—and let me assure you, this decision rests entirely with her—Elk offers the most advantageous alliance for our people, and, quite frankly, yours.”

Evander nodded again, thoughtfully this time. “Yes, I can see that of those options, Elk would be the smartest choice for an alliance with Lochlann.”

There was a collective sigh of relief, and I almost joined them...but something brimmed in Evander’s storm-cloud eyes that I couldn’t quite read.

Something calculating.

I didn’t have to wait long to figure out what it was.

“Of course, *if* your primary concern is for the people,” he said dubiously, and I narrowed my eyes. “Then undisputedly, your best option would be an alliance with Bear.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



I blinked, sure Evander wasn't suggesting what I thought he was.

Several voices sounded at once, all talking over each other and sounding further away than they should have, drowned out by the blood roaring in my ears.

Evander went on like he hadn't just dropped a live viper in the room, ticking the reasons off on his fingers.

"It's no secret that Lochlann's coffers are running low after the rebuilding effort, and Socairans have favored military over farming to their detriment. Trade would benefit both of our people."

"Which is why you're here for *trade* discussions," Theo said in a low tone.

"But if you were going to pick one clan to align yourselves with," Evander continued as though Theo hadn't spoken. "Bear controls the pass, and no one is moving any substantial amount of goods or livestock through that tunnel. We're also the largest territory, with the deepest coffers, and we represent the single biggest military force in Socair."

"Elk's coffers are plenty deep," Theo argued. "And the pass is only accessible five or six months a year, whereas the tunnel could be improved to accommodate trade year long."

"It would take years to get the tunnel wide enough to fit a standard wagon

through,” Evander countered coolly. “And that doesn’t address the other points.”

I finally found my voice.

“You said you had no intentions of marrying.” I couldn’t keep the accusation from my tone as my words sliced through the air.

Theo went still, and Evander’s attention snapped to me, along with the rest of the table’s.

“I said I had too much chaos in my life for a wife,” he corrected. “And I find that these days that chaos has...largely abated.”

My lips parted with something between shock and fury.

So, he hadn’t been interested before, when I was at Bear and *in his bed* for months, but now...the second I was considering betrothal to Theo, he was suggesting marriage? For political reasons, in the most *aalio* way possible?

“You have got to be kidding me,” I said in a hollow voice.

“I can assure you, I’m not.” He spread his hands. “You need an alliance, and I’m offering one.”

“I wouldn’t need an alliance if you would just agree to the one I already had in the works,” I hissed.

He made a thoughtful sound in the back of his throat. “It was my understanding you hadn’t yet agreed. In any event, I’m not inclined to grant my permission when the end result is my enemy’s clan being strengthened.”

Of course, that’s what this was about. Rage thrummed in my veins.

“That’s why you let me go.” I shook my head. “All this time, I wondered how you could risk me marrying into Clan Elk, but it never was a risk. You were never planning on letting it happen.”

His gaze drifted to where my hand still rested on Theo’s. “I told you before, there was nothing I wouldn’t do for my clan.”

“So once again, all of this is about keeping Elk from getting something you don’t even want.” Not that it mattered what any of this was about when he, once again, held all of the cards.

Evander narrowed his eyes, opening his mouth to respond when Theo broke in with a different argument.

“Do you honestly think anyone at this table would let Rowan go back to Bear after what you let happen to her?”

His words sucked all of the oxygen from the room. My father shifted in his seat as if he, too, wanted the answer to this question.

“Remind me,” Evander said in a deadly quiet tone. “Was it *my* brother who trapped her in a tunnel where she could have died--nearly did, in fact--then brought her to a Summit that voted to hang her?”

“Iro made plenty of mistakes, but last I checked, he didn’t have her tortured and humiliated, stripped half bare and bleeding in front of his entire regiment.” Theo’s voice was more heated than I had ever heard it, and I realized he had surmised quite a bit just from the knowledge that it was a public flogging.

More than that, he had clearly thought about it, even agonized over it.

My father’s fists clenched on the table, and my mother sucked in a breath.

I had been in so much pain that day, I hadn’t really considered what the tattered remains of my clothing indicated, but now... The blood drained from my face, visceral memories hitting me like I was back in one of my nightmares.

Ava’s merciless smile.

The crack of a whip.

Blinding, agonizing pain.

And through it all, the pervasive, profound feeling of being weak. Helpless. Powerless.

I fought for composure, a battle I was surprised to see Evander losing for a change.

His face had gone flat with a rare display of rage.

At the memory? Or because Theo brought it up?

Several uncomfortable minutes ticked by in silence while I avoided

looking at anyone directly, still focusing on getting my trembling fingers under control.

“It’s safe to say there is risk on either side,” Uncle Oli boldly said, cutting through the tension.

“Clan wives are protected,” Evander said in an even tone, his anger locked tightly away again. “That’s true no matter who she chooses... But if the princess’s safety is a concern, she is welcome to stay in Lochlann.”

I studied his features. “You want to marry me, but you don’t care if I stay here, in Lochlann, while you reside in Socair?”

My stomach was hollow for reasons I refused to think too hard about.

“You would need to come for the wedding, of course, but after that?” Evander gave another infuriating shrug. “It hardly makes a difference to the alliance. As far as I’m concerned, your life is your own.”

“What a novel concept,” I muttered.

He looked like he knew exactly how hard I was fighting not to hurl his words from last night back in his face. *Did you forget that I own you, Lemmikki?*

But then Da’ would actually murder him, and there would be nothing peaceful about that.

“I suppose then you would get everything you want.” The benefits of a wife without actually having to make room in his life for one.

The benefits of an alliance with Lochlann without actually having to be with *me*.

“I wouldn’t go right to *want*.” His lips twitched into a smirk at the echo of his words the first time he had asked me to dance. “But sacrifices must be made.”

“Sacrifices.” I echoed the word in a bitter whisper.

Theo shifted, reminding me of his presence, and I shook my head.

“That’s very noble of you.” My tone was stronger now. “But entirely unnecessary as we’re supposed to be discussing stipulations for me to marry

Theo, not a counterproposal.”

“That *is* my stipulation.” Evander’s silvery gaze bored into mine. “That we discuss the merits of an alliance between Bear and Lochlann for the sake of both our people, that you give it genuine consideration. In return, I will give genuine consideration to granting my permission for you to marry Korhonan, in the event that you decide against an alliance with Bear.”

I wanted to refuse outright, but every member of the council had a speculative look on their faces. All except for my father, who looked like the only thing he was giving *genuine consideration* to was drawing his sword and ending the whole conversation right there.

And I was almost tempted to let him.

I knew, though, just as Evander clearly knew, that I had no choice here but to agree.

“Fine,” I said at last. “But I want a guarantee that *when* I decide against it, I will have more than consideration. You will grant your full permission to marry into Elk, provided they agree to the terms of the negotiations.”

I only choked a little on the word *permission*.

He quirked an eyebrow. “Very well. *If* you decide against it, I’ll grant your permission. But I want permission in turn to stay until I find another suitable alliance.”

I blinked several times, my mind not quite processing what he was asking for. “A what?”

“A wife, in Lochlann.” He enunciated the words.

When I didn’t respond, he expounded.

“Your own council just told me that marriage was the most binding way to make an agreement. It would give my clan reasonable protection against any moves from Lochlann, via Elk, and it could only benefit both of our peoples to have more alliances.”

“That’s true,” MacKinnon weighed in.

I had always loved the man like one of my uncles, but it took everything I

had not to glare at him now.

“Perfect.” Evander’s face was politely inquiring, but something in his eyes looked far too satisfied. “I believe you have an unpromised cousin?”

Last night’s wine threatened to make a reappearance, along with this morning’s breakfast. The headache from my hangover returned in full force, and I wondered why Aunt Clara’s tonic wasn’t working as well as it usually did.

“Gwyn doesn’t want to get married.” I forced the words out through numb lips.

“Lady Gwyndolyn knows she will need to marry at some point, just as all of you do,” Aunt Jocelyn gently corrected.

Wonderful. Evander could be my...cousin-in-law.

“Regardless,” he said, “I understand the lairds here have a great deal more power than those in Socair do, and I already received several offers last night.”

I’m sure he did.

“Yes,” I spoke before I could stop myself. “Lady Fiona seemed to be offering you a great deal last night.”

Uncle Oli choked on a laugh.

“As I said,” Evander responded nonchalantly, “I received multiple offers.”

“For all their talk of war,” my uncle cut in, “the ladies do seem to be quite taken with the Socairans. And though some of their fathers would prefer to go to war, there are plenty of lairds who won’t object to forming powerful partnerships.” He nodded significantly toward Theo, who blushed ever so slightly.

Apparently, Evander wasn’t the only one who had been approached at last night’s ball. I supposed I couldn’t be too upset with the ladies, given that Theo and I had not finalized our betrothal.

“So, I think we can agree that the request is reasonable,” MacKinnon

added.

Nothing about any of this felt reasonable.

My mother cleared her throat, like she sensed how close I was to exploding. “The Summer Festival is in just over a week, and we need to make a strong, united showing there. Not to mention, the people are, indeed, restless. Rowan, is that an acceptable timeline to make your decision?”

I nodded.

“Of course, she can always decide not to marry either of them,” Da’ added, a warning note to his tone.

“Yes, that’s an option as well,” my mother agreed, though she shot him a sideways glance. “Are there any objections?” she said in a louder voice.

No one spoke up. Though, in Theo’s case, it was because he was too busy glaring daggers at Evander.

And in my case, there was nothing I could say.

In one week, I would be officially betrothed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



I fled the meeting the very first chance I got, refusing to so much as look at Evander before grabbing Theo's hand and leading him out the door.

We got all the way to my mother's favorite tree by the lake before I finally turned to him. His hazel eyes were burning with emerald fire, more tumultuous than I usually saw them.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't feel like I had a choice but to consider it."

He ran a hand through his pale blond hair. "Are you considering it then, in truth?"

I took a deep breath, trying to make the world stop spinning around me.

"I...don't know. I need to at least hear the council out, when I'm the one who got my people into this mess." I looked up at him hesitantly, the reality of the situation dawning on me. "It isn't fair of me to ask you to just sit here while I decide, though. I would understand if you wanted to go."

"No." He shook his head adamantly. "You didn't get yourself into this mess. My family did. And I won't abandon you now just because things are getting complicated." He paused. "Unless..."

Theo held my gaze for a long moment, a line creasing in his brow.

"Unless what?" I prodded him, a sinking feeling in my gut.

"Unless you want me to." His tone was quiet. Sad, even.

"Why would I want that?" My voice came out a whisper.

He blew out a slow breath. “I’ve never asked you about the rumors, and I never will, Rowan. But I can’t pretend it hasn’t crossed my mind that there’s more than one reason he’s here.”

The rumors that Mila had mentioned at the cabin, he meant. The fact that literally all of Socair knew I slept in Evander’s rooms.

“It wasn’t like that,” I insisted. But I realized I owed him far more honesty than that, especially if he was willing to sit by while I considered another man’s proposal. “I mean, we did...kiss. One time.”

Theo squeezed his eyes shut, and I rushed to explain.

“It was after you ended our betrothal,” I said hurriedly. “Right before I left, in fact. And we had both been...” *Laughing. Playing. Staring at each other in the sauna.* “Drinking. We both acknowledged that it was a mistake, so that has nothing to do with why he’s here.”

Theo opened his eyes, looking at me with an expression I couldn’t begin to decipher.

“I don’t want you to go,” I told him sincerely.

With Theo, I knew where I stood. I knew we could make a real marriage work. And if I was being honest with myself, I knew he wasn’t going to break me.

Crossing the distance between us, I leaned against him until he wrapped his solid arms around me.

“Then I’ll stay.” He spoke the words into my hair. “It’s only one week. How bad could it be?”



It could be very bad, as it turned out.

Or at least, horrendously awkward, if the first day was anything to go by.

My family had taken it upon themselves to invite both Theo and Evander literally everywhere we went. Even our weekly family dinners were

apparently no longer sacred.

They used to be a reprieve from endless days of court dinners and functions, but now my family had made sure that was not so.

And by my family, I mostly meant my mother.

“I respect whatever choice you make,” Mamá said, placing baby Ellie in Da’s lap and handing her a bread roll. “But if what he says about the merits of the alliance is true...” She trailed off, waiting for me to confirm or deny it.

“It is,” I admitted.

“Then I think it’s worth at least considering.”

“You want me to consider marriage to the man who wants to make me his kept wife an entire kingdom away, and is holding the betrothal I actually chose over my head to do it?” Disbelief crept into my tone, in spite of what I had told Theo earlier.

She met my eyes with her nearly identical ones, her long brown waves swaying as she shook her head softly. “You are just like your father, and there is no reasoning with you in this mood, so let’s just say yes, for now.”

Da’ only focused his attention on Ellie, but his brows were drawn in a clear sign of displeasure.

“Regardless,” I hissed, “he doesn’t need to be around for me to consider it, seeing as he has no intentions of being around after our marriage.”

She raised her eyebrows in an annoyingly knowing way, and of course, that’s when Evander strolled casually into an event that used to be my safe haven from the day. Theo was right on his heels, looking decidedly unhappy about that fact.

Evander plopped down on the right side of me, and Theo took the seat to my left, leaving me in the middle of a very uncomfortable Socairan sandwich.

Davin laughed outright at whatever he saw in my expression, and I glared in turn at my mother.

She only pasted a polite smile on her face before addressing the lords.

“We don’t stand on ceremony here, boys, so help yourselves.”

Well, then. There was no need to sugarcoat things.

“Roll,” I yelled out, and Bronwyn tossed one from her side of the table.

I placed it on my plate, ignoring the way Theo’s eyes widened in what might have been amusement, but was probably horror.

My mother shook her head but didn’t bother to chide us. She knew we were being a bit excessive. She also firmly believed that it was up to anyone considering being part of our family to figure out how to exist within it. No pretenses.

Not that Evander *was* considering that.

I ignored him entirely until he called down the table, “I’ll take one as well.”

Blair gave him a hesitant look before obliging him. She tossed his a bit harder than Bronwyn had thrown mine, but he still caught it in one hand and placed it on his plate like this was how he received his food every day.

Holding my gaze, he took a slow, deliberate bite of his bread.

Jocelyn sighed, grabbing the bowl from in front of the twins. “There are civilized ways to obtain food as well, Lord Theodore.”

She passed them to him, and he nodded graciously before taking one.

When the chaotic process of everyone getting food was finished, conversation finally began. Which was, generally speaking, even more chaos.

“Finn and Isla should be here tomorrow,” Uncle Oli announced, much to the general excitement of the table.

“And the twins?” Davin asked.

Blair cleared her throat pointedly.

“I meant, the much older, much more boring twins, of course,” he clarified.

My sister nodded, like this was acceptable, and Avani laughed softly.

“Yes, and Gwyn and Gal,” Oli confirmed.

“Gwyn, the one who’s so good with the sword?” Theo asked, turning to

face me.

I smiled, surprised he remembered the random stories I told him when we were sheltering in that smuggler's hole. "Right."

I was going to give him an explanation of Gallagher, as well, but Blair's voice rang out across the table.

"Does this mean you have two pieces of man meat now, Row?"

The most adorable blush rose into Theo's cheeks, and I swear Evander actually choked on a bite of his roll.

"Dav," Da' sighed.

"That's exactly what it means," Davin helpfully answered.

"Ma-meet!" Ellie called out, her amber eyes sparkling with excitement.

This time, it was Uncle Oli's laughter that rang out the loudest while Jocelyn reached over to swat Davin on the back of his head.

"Apologies." He barely got the word out through his fit of laughter.

But he didn't sound remotely sorry.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



The rest of the dinner continued in the same vein.

Everyone passed around Ellie and made a game of attempting to teach her new words, having zero regard for whether or not they were strictly appropriate.

By the time my baby sister stretched her arms out for me, I was grateful for the distraction. Anything to pull myself out of my own head, even if only for a few moments.

Warmth flooded through me, just as it always did, when I pulled her in closer.

“Wo!” Ellie cooed, wrapping her arms tightly around my neck in a hug. I squeezed her, and she giggled.

When she backed away, I took a piece of my hair and tickled her face with it, making her laugh even harder.

Theo watched us with something like awe in his expression. Children were rare in Elk because of the effects of the plague, and it occurred to me that he had never actually interacted with one before.

“Ellie, can you say Theo?” I enunciated the syllables for her to latch onto.

“Tee-oh,” she tried, and I praised her.

“You’re really good with her,” he said warmly. “You’ll make a wonderful mother.”

It was a compliment. Logically, I knew that. But still, my smile waned.

Somehow, I had been avoiding the fact that if marriage was in my near future, so were children. That was...daunting, to say the least.

Before I could figure out how to respond, Evander made a noise in the back of his throat that I couldn't quite decipher, but it sounded suspiciously like a derisive scoff.

Why was I not surprised that he found the idea of my being a mother laughable, when he made it clear he didn't think I was *wife* material, either?

Ellie turned her attention on him, reaching up to tug on his hair with her tiny chubby hand, and annoyance surged through me.

"Ellie," I prompted her. "Can you say, *aalio*?"

Davin snorted, and Theo let out a startled cough.

"Ah-lo," she dutifully repeated.

"Aw, look. She knows your name." I glanced up at Evander with the intention of mocking him, but I was wholly unprepared for the rare, genuine smile he was giving baby Ellie as he gently pried her fingers from his hair.

I quickly averted my gaze, but his deep voice sounded from what suddenly felt like far too close a distance.

"Ellie," he said in the same tone I had used. "Can you say, Lemmikki?"

"Wem-kee!" she squealed like the tiny baby traitor that she was.

"Look," he deadpanned. "She knows yours as well."

I heard the smirk in his voice as clearly as if I had been looking at him. Pulling Ellie firmly back in my lap, I stabbed my dessert with my fork and wished it were Evander's stupid, smug face.

Perhaps it was hypocritical of me to be irritated that he taught Ellie to call me a pet when I had essentially just taught her to call him an arseling, but the difference was that I was no one's pet.

Whereas, Evander was certainly an arseling.



After dinner, my father pulled me aside, suggesting we take a walk in the gardens.

I jumped at the chance, even though there was likely a scolding coming my way. Anything to avoid the after-dinner brandy in the drawing room, wedged between Theo and Evander.

Still, awkward silence fell over us like a heavy blanket in the humid summer air.

We walked along the winding paths through the gardens, past the vines of wild roses and the sunflower field, all the way through the center where the memorial for my mother's parents stood.

"I see our sparring session earlier did nothing to lessen your anger," Da's deep voice intoned.

"Well," I offered. "After today--"

"Not just today, mo bhobain," he interrupted me. "It isn't like ye to be this way."

I closed my eyes, pulling my hand away from the memorial stone.

"Fine," I said quietly. "Yes, I'm angry. You're angry, too. Everything about this situation is infuriating."

Da' only shook his head, moving down the row of hedges. It wasn't long before I followed him, hoping we could get lost in the maze the way Avani and I had when we were younger, before she convinced a hedgehog to show us the way back.

Life had been so much simpler then. There were no Socairan lords. No weather-toes or floggings. Nothing that weighed too heavily on our minds or hearts.

"As I told ye before, give me the word, I'll send them back to Socair," he paused, looking thoughtfully at the castle looming above us. "And if ye give me two words, I will ensure that they return without their heads attached to their bodies."

I snorted, making a show of deliberating the offer I wasn't entirely sure

was a joke. But he wasn't done.

"Say no," he said in a more serious tone. "I will deal with the consequences."

"You don't want me to consider Evander?" I asked curiously.

"I don't want ye to consider either of them." He shook his head. "If it hadn't been for Rayan, we wouldn't have known the tunnel caved in, or that you were alive."

Rayan was the palace weapons maker, and he had an uncanny ability with stones. Judging by the fact that, like Fia, he hadn't seemed to age more than five years in the lifetime I had known him, I assumed he was first generation fae.

I hadn't thought to ask Da' how they knew the tunnel hadn't caved in on its own, hadn't wanted to talk about those months at all.

"We would have spent all that time grieving ye, and we nearly had to grieve ye in truth because of everything that happened over there." He huffed out a bitter breath. "No father in their right mind would want his daughter walking back into that."

I sighed, the fatigue of the day, the week--hell, the months--running on very little sleep, catching up to me. "The council made it clear that there weren't many options here, Da'. Even MacKinnon--"

"I will handle the council, and MacKinnon." His voice dipped into something low and deadly. "There are always choices, and I willna stand by and watch ye be forced into this when there is something I can do to stop it."

I took in the set of his shoulders, the way his fists clenched at his sides, and the sincerity in his eyes.

He meant every word. And on some level, I knew he wasn't wrong. There were sure to be other ways to stop this war, to fix things with Socair.

But that would take more time than we had.

Besides, whether or not Iiro had maneuvered things, I had made plenty of choices that got us where we were right now. I couldn't spend my life hiding

behind everyone who stepped up to shield me from myself.

Closing the space between us in three quick steps, I wrapped my arms around his waist. He cocooned me in his embrace, holding me there for a long moment.

“Thank you, Da’,” I said, looking up at him. “But I’m all right. No one is forcing me into anything.”

His lips formed a hard line before he bent down to kiss the top of my head.

“If ye change your mind, just say the word, mo nighean.” His tone made it clear that he wished I would, and part of me--the girl that wanted to stay here, safe, in my father’s arms--wished I could, too.

But I was not that girl anymore.

Socair had seen to that.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



By the time I trudged up to my bedroom, the morning's council meeting already felt like a lifetime ago. How had everything changed so much in a single day?

I replayed the last twenty-four hours in my head over and over again, looking for anything I might have missed about this entire convoluted mess of a situation, but it was like trying to see to the other side of a twister.

I was pacing my floors well past midnight when I couldn't stand the unanswered questions swirling around in my mind anymore.

Throwing on a dressing gown over my soft nightgown, I padded barefoot through the passageways until I once again found myself pushing into Evander's room.

Any concerns I had about waking him up, not that I cared, were dispelled when I saw the low lamp burning next to his bed. He didn't tense this time or reach for his sword, only raised a single eyebrow, leaning his head back against his arm.

His chest was bare, the tanned ridges of his abdomen shadowed in the light of the lantern, so I kept my gaze fixed firmly on his smug features.

"You're late, Lemmikki. I was expecting you hours ago." He took a sip from a glass of what I assumed was whiskey.

"Funny, I was expecting you weeks ago." What was it about standing in

this room past midnight that made me say the first thing that popped into my head?

His head tilted in a way that was too discerning for my liking, and I barreled over my words.

“Tell me something,” I demanded. “If this alliance was an option to benefit your people, why take the chance of waiting until I was...allied with someone else?”

He observed me thoughtfully before responding. “Believe it or not, Princess, there was fallout to deal with after you absconded into the night.”

In spite of all my anger, a wave of horror washed over me. He had said Ava wasn’t a danger to him now that he was an adult, but what if he was wrong? Or lying?

My eyes slid to his chest, as though I could see straight through to the other side.

“Did she--” I couldn’t finish the sentence.

“No,” he said, surprise coloring his tone. “I told you, she can’t touch me now.”

I peered at him, trying to determine whether he was telling the truth. Finally, I couldn’t help myself. I crossed the floor, ignoring his wary glance, and gestured for him to show me.

His brow furrowed, but he tilted sideways until I could see his entire broad back.

A slow, relieved breath escaped me when I beheld only the old, white scars. My fingers went to them unbidden, tracing the bumpy ridges like I needed to reassure myself that they were healed.

His startled breath broke my trance, and I snatched my hand back to my side. He eased against the pillow once more, meeting my gaze with consternation.

“When have I ever lied to you, Lemmikki?” he asked.

My mind roamed over the memories of the months we had spent together.

Evander may not have outright lied, but he sure as stars knew how to twist the things he said.

I shook my head, answering his question with one of my own. “When have you ever really told me the truth?”

Gray eyes met mine, and a charged silence filled the space between us.

“What is it you want to know?” His voice was low.

For all that I had accused him of lacking in honesty, I realized no part of me was brave enough to ask for the truths I wanted, so I hedged.

“I want to know, if this isn’t just about getting back at Iiro, how it is you didn’t find the time to mention that you were interested in a marriage alliance in the months I was in--Bear.” I stopped myself just short of saying, *your bed*, but his features sharpened like he heard it anyway.

“While you were betrothed to Korhonan, you mean?” Sarcasm coated his tone. “Or after that, when you were recovering from a flogging that nearly killed you?”

“Let’s go with after that,” I suggested with the same false pleasantry.

He let out a long-suffering sigh. “I’m not actually in the habit of proposing to my prisoners.”

“No.” I let out a bitter huff of air. “Just kissing them.”

His arrogant mask was firmly in place, but something dangerous churned beneath the surface, as it always did.

“A mistake I have already acknowledged,” he said quietly.

I let out a slow breath, determined not to let myself react to those words, outwardly or otherwise.

“Well,” I finally said, “I suppose your people can be grateful that’s a horror you’re willing to revisit, if only for a night.”

“Two nights, actually.” The bastard actually had the nerve to smirk. “I’m assuming you would want a wedding in Lochlann, and we would need another one in Socair.”

“Then it’s fortunate you’ll be spared both of them.” I turned to go, but his

obnoxiously confident voice sounded behind me.

“The week’s not over yet, Lemmikki.”



Gwyn and Gallagher arrived the next morning while we were finishing up breakfast. I had just polished off the last of several biscuits when they came gliding through the doors.

The twins were nearly identical, both tall and lanky with Uncle Finn’s light brown skin and Aunt Isla’s copper curls. Gallagher’s hair was cut short, and Gwyn’s was braided back tightly against her head, only emphasizing their similarities.

“Look,” I said under my breath to Evander. “It’s your future bride now. Perhaps you can come up with a proposal for her nearly as *aalio* as the one you made to me.”

Evander raised an eyebrow, sizing Gwyn up in a glance. His gaze traveled from her warrior’s stance to the sword she had strapped to her side and its well-worn hilt, but his features gave nothing away.

For all my hurling in his face that she didn’t want marriage right now, it occurred to me that Evander might be exactly what she was looking for. He was a skilled fighter with a strategic mind and a...passably handsome face.

Who’s lying now?

I ignored that inner voice, grateful for the distraction when Uncle Finn and Aunt Isla walked in so I could look away from his stupidly perfectly crafted features.

While my uncle had his characteristic congenial smile, my aunt’s features were more drawn than usual. Her eyes flitted around the room until they landed on...Evander.

And he was staring back at her, curiosity and something like wariness in his gaze.

Aunt Isla glanced at my mother, who nodded, then back to Evander. Of course, in another life, she would have been his stepmother.

It struck me that he might have had a happier childhood, even with his father's issues, instead of suffering years of abuse at Ava's hands. But then, Isla would have been married to a monster.

There had been no good choices.

Everyone else was merrily visiting, Theo already engaged in conversation with Gallagher, and Davin teasing Gwyn while my dad and Uncle Finn caught up.

But I watched, transfixed, as Isla crossed the room to Evander, and finally, I recognized the expression on her face.

It was guilt.

"Lord Evander," she greeted as he got to his feet. "I'm--"

"Princess Isla," he said neutrally.

She nodded, searching his features before throwing her small arms around him like she had done with her own children, with us, so many times before.

Evander's expression wavered ever so slightly as he stood frozen like a statue, unable to move for several heartbeats.

Then, he did something entirely unexpected. He hugged her back, his shoulders deflating as she spoke quietly enough that only he could hear.

Had I ever seen him hug anyone?

I forced my eyes away, a maelstrom of emotion making my chest go tight.

That moment wasn't meant for me.

And in spite of how much of an *aalio* Evander was being in general, I couldn't help but hope that he had been comforted by whatever my Aunt Isla had said.

CHAPTER TWENTY



After breakfast was finished, we headed to our first council meeting to discuss terms of a potential alliance between Lochlann and Clan Bear.

As Evander had helpfully pointed out, Theo was not needed for these meetings, so our number was one smaller than it had been the day before.

Theo assured me it was fine, and that he would spend the time with the men from Elk or getting to know the castle better. Though he smiled as he said it, his eyes betrayed his uneasiness.

I didn't blame him, though I mostly wished I was the one excluded from listening to the myriad of *aalio* ways Evander insisted on this alliance.

"I still don't understand why you think a handful of days will change my mind when I was already in talks with a perfectly viable alliance," I said after we had been talking for a while.

"Because, while Elk might be *perfectly viable*, it doesn't make nearly as much sense as Bear does." He raised a single, condescending eyebrow. "The better question is, why wouldn't you change your mind, when it's the superior choice for your people?"

"Because you're a giant arseling," I said matter-of-factly.

"Rowan." Mamá sighed my name, not quite bothering to chide me.

Evander only shrugged. "We won't have to be around each other if you're

concerned about that.”

I gritted my teeth. “Ah, yes. How could I forget about your glorious plan to inhabit different kingdoms? Because nothing says unity like a couple who can’t even live in the same castle.”

Was he actually going to double down on this plan? Was there any reason I thought he wouldn’t?

“You’ve brought up problems, and I’ve provided solutions.” He spread his hands wide.

Well, that answers that.

“Princess Rowan isn’t wrong, though,” MacKinnon offered. “If--”

“No.” My father’s voice was flat, his word cut off sharply at the edges. “Ye already pushed her into a marriage alliance. She’s doing what she can for her people, at your urging, and I willna stand for more than that.”

“She is indisputably safer here,” MacBay added, his tone a bit heated as well. “It would hardly add to unity if something else were to happen to her on Socairan soil.”

MacKinnon sat back in his chair, shaking his head softly while Uncle Oli leaned forward with his peacemaking expression.

“If Lord Evander is offering the benefits of the alliance with the added protection of the princess staying here, it isn’t a terrible thing to consider,” he said in a far calmer tone than everyone else had been using.

Then they all spoke at once, each of them debating the merits of this arrangement. While the council argued over this, my mother watched me curiously. I tried to keep my features neutral, regal, but I suspected she could see right through them.

She always did.

“What about heirs?” Jocelyn’s voice rang out louder than the rest, silencing the men at the table.

She was only a bit taller than I was, with straight blond hair and delicate features, but when she spoke, people listened. Probably because she chose

her words carefully, whereas I tended to say everything that popped into my head.

My father made a sound of displeasure in the back of his throat, and she shot him a pointed look.

“It’s a legitimate question with this proposed plan,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Evander looked directly at her, almost as if he were avoiding my side of the table intentionally. “Lord Taras is next in line for my position, and any heirs he produces with Lady Mila will be sufficient to continue the succession.”

“So, in the scenario you’ve proposed...Rowan would never have children?” my mother asked, no small amount of horror in her tone.

“If...the princess wants heirs, that can be arranged,” Evander answered, still not meeting my gaze.

I narrowed my eyes, wondering if it was possible for him to make *having heirs* with me sound any less appealing.

“Arranged?” I echoed in disbelief. “Tell me, will you be sending someone to provide a stud service, or will you come all this way yourself?”

Evander squeezed his eyes shut in exasperation, and he wasn’t the only one.

“Dammit, Rowan.” My father massaged the bridge of his nose.

Uncle Oli choked on a laugh, and Laird Buchanan let out a hiss of disapproval, but Jocelyn only nodded.

“In fairness, Rowan’s question is legitimate, also.”

Evander finally met my eyes, the expression in his own unreadable. “I would, obviously, be providing that service myself.”

He sounded as uncomfortable as I had ever heard him, and a cold, victorious smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. *Good*. He could be as miserable in these proceedings as I was.

“Well, no need to put yourself out,” I assured him coolly. “In the unlikely

event that we wed, I also have no need of heirs. The twins are next in line, then Davin, then Gal and Gwyn. We really have no shortage of heirs here.”

No one commented on whether Avani would ever have children, but MacKinnon’s eyes went distant.

“You still need to decide whether a potential child between the two of you would belong to the Socairan lineage or Lochlann’s,” Laird MacBay said gently.

Suddenly, I was very ready to be finished talking about this. Making Evander uncomfortable was one thing, but being forced to actually think about a future child with him was more than I had been prepared for today.

“Can’t we discuss this later, or more likely, never?” I suggested.

“It *is* part of narrowing down terms, which you agreed to consider,” Oli reminded me, not unkindly.

With a sigh, I glanced at Evander. He raised his eyebrows, as if to say it was my decision. I weighed my options carefully, even as I told myself my answer didn’t matter.

Realistically, regardless of who I married, my potential children would need extra protection. I could only imagine what a child who had fae blood and was in line for the throne of Lochlann would be subject to in the hands of someone with Iiro’s ruthless ambition.

“I don’t want any children I have with...either of them, in line for the Lochlannian throne,” I answered, holding Evander’s gaze as I said the last part. “There’s no need for anyone else to become a pawn in the games of Socairan men.”

That familiar muscle twitched in his jaw, but he didn’t respond.

Finally, we moved onto topics that had nothing to do with Evander reluctantly performing his husbandly *duties*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



I went straight from the council room to the sparring rings without bothering to change. Da' always said if you're going to be fighting in a dress, you need to be training in one.

Gwyn was already there, predictably, facing off against Avani, while Davin and Theo sparred in the other ring. Gallagher was stretching off to the side, likely waiting for his turn against one of them.

They weren't alone, either. Several Bear and Elk soldiers alike filled the training yard, including one who looked strikingly similar to Evander. He wasn't quite as broad, and the smile that graced his features didn't hold the same aloof arrogance as his cousin's.

"Yuriy," I called, and he looked up from cleaning his weapon.

"Princess," he nodded respectfully, but the word was warm. "It's good to see you again."

"And you," I replied, and meant it. "How has your visit fared so far? My cousins haven't robbed you of your coin over cards yet, have they?"

He let out a low chuckle and shook his head. "No, it's my job to keep an eye on the men down here. Besides, I'm not quite brave enough to risk playing against your family yet. I've got to keep some of my dignity, after all."

"That's fair." I laughed before gesturing to the swords on the wall. "How

about a sparring match instead?”

He started to nod before catching sight of something behind me, shaking his head again instead. “Better not.”

Sighing, I turned around, already knowing what had changed Yuriy’s mind.

Or *who*.

“Care to go at it again, Lemmikki?” Evander said in a voice far too amused to be casual.

Theo stiffened, and Davin got in a solid hit. I looked at Evander sharply.

He gestured to the ring, his features innocent. “I meant sparring, obviously.”

I knew I should say no, but I couldn’t turn down the chance to pit my new training against his impressive skill with a blade. Which was, obviously, the only reason I opened my mouth to say yes.

Fortunately, before I got the word out, another voice cut in.

“I’ll spar with you,” Gallagher cut in smoothly.

His features were neutral, but his tone was just a bit pointed. I wondered what he had heard that he felt the need to step in and save me...from Evander, or from myself?

“Of course,” Evander agreed easily, like it didn’t matter to him either way.

With all the rings full, I sank onto one of the logs off to the side to watch. Seconds later, Avani’s curse rang through the courtyard. She came to sit next to me while Gwyn picked another poor victim from the soldiers around us.

My sister pulled out her flask, offering it to me as the clashing of steel rang out around us.

“It must have been awful, being stuck in Socair with the two of them,” she said drily, looking between the Socairan lords.

I took the flask from her, surveying them both.

Evander was meeting Gallagher blow for blow. He had removed his black

jacket, so he wore only his trousers and one of the shirts I had grown so familiar with.

The light fabric accentuated the muscles in his shoulders every time he moved. His black hair was falling carelessly onto his brow, his gray eyes intent with focus.

Then there was Theo, whose biceps were straining the arms of his similarly crafted outfit. The sunlight brought out the golden flecks in his hazel eyes, and his solid arms flexed with every powerful arc of his sword.

“Mhmm.” I took a long swig of whiskey.

We sat in silence for a few more minutes, long enough for Theo and Evander to both win their respective matches. And Gwyn, of course.

Gallagher offered to spar with Theo next, and for some reason, I was expecting Davin to ask Evander, but he didn't. Gwyn did.

Which made sense, of course. She always liked to go up against the most skilled person in any arena, and it was fairly clear in this space that person was Evander.

Avani's eyes bored into me, but I ignored her, taking another long dreg from her flask. Davin wiped the sweat from his face, coming to join us, and we observed the matches for a few minutes in silence.

“My money's on Theo with Gallagher,” my cousin said.

“I'll take that bet,” Avani nodded. “Gal is faster.”

“Ah, but Theo is more motivated.” He glanced significantly in my direction, then paused to watch the other fight. “And, oof, the other one is tough, but Gwyn doesn't seem to have her usual advantage of being underestimated.”

“No,” Avani agreed. “He isn't letting his guard down, but I'm still not sure he's all in.”

She looked at me when she said that last part, pointedly enough that I glanced away.

“No,” I muttered. “He's not all in.”

We turned our attention back to the matches.

Gwyn pretended to tire and Avani yelled out, “She’s faking it, Evander.”

His chin dipped in a small nod of acknowledgement. Davin shouted something about Gallagher to Theo, and moments later, Theo came out victorious in that fight.

Then there was only Evander and Gwyn, moving at blinding speeds, neither of them giving up the advantage. I surveyed them for weaknesses.

Though he was skilled enough at traditional sparring, Evander fought best with two swords, whereas Gwyn had only ever trained with one. That would be an advantage to her.

And I badly, badly wanted to see him get his arse handed to him.

Even if watching them spar tugged at something inside me for reasons I refused to examine.

“I’ll put my money on Gwyn,” I told Davin, who was already pocketing his coins from Theo’s victory.

He met my eyes with a knowing look, giving me a nod, but said nothing as Theo and Gallagher came to join us.

Gal called out tips to Evander, and Theo surprised me by jumping in with a few for Gwyn.

Chewing the inside of my lip, I evaluated them carefully before saying anything.

Gwyn was trying to wear Evander down, which usually worked for her because she trained most of every day. But Evander was disciplined, and careful not to expend too much of his energy at once.

This could go on for hours at this rate.

“You need to end this, Gwyn!” I yelled. “His stamina isn’t going to flag.”

I registered what I said about four seconds *after* it popped out of my mouth, in time with Davin’s laugh and Theo’s sideways glance and Evander’s infernal, endlessly arrogant smirk.

My only consolation was that somewhere between his momentary

distraction and the advice I had shouted to Gwyn, she did, in fact, end it. Taking advantage of the barest hint of an opening he gave her, she came at him in a blur of movement, a burst of speed she had likely saved up for this very moment.

Then her blade was against his throat, and his eyes were widening in surprise.

“Impressive,” he said, raising his hands slowly in a show of surrender. “Again?”

As the coins clinked from Davin’s hand into mine, I tried to feel victorious instead of this curious hollow feeling threatening to overtake me. Gwyn opened her mouth, probably to agree, then Gallagher caught her eye.

They may not have had my sisters’ gift for communicating, but they had some form of wordless twin communication, nonetheless. One look at him was enough for her to shake her head.

“I think I’ll ride the high of this victory instead.”

He nodded, but I swear the aalio’s lips quirked up like he knew exactly what had just transpired.

Theo excused himself to go clean up for dinner, and thankfully, the rest of the men followed suit until it was only Avani, Gwyn, and me left in the courtyard.

“It *was* impressive,” I told Gwyn. “I’ve never seen anyone get the better of him.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Avani muttered, and I ignored her.

Gwyn glanced between us, shaking her head. “Row, you know that I would never, right?”

I cleared my throat. “I have no claim on him, Gwyn... And really, it would make sense. He wants an alliance but doesn’t care if his wife stays here. You want to be Captain and don’t want the actual entanglement of a relationship.”

“Ah. Well, then, you’ve convinced me.” She turned to Avani. “Can you

imagine what excellent swordsmen our children will be?”

My traitorous sister barely suppressed a smile.

“Indeed. And so tall,” she added.

“You’re both the worst,” I muttered.

Gwyn threw a sweaty arm around me, laughing.

“I have no interest in marrying, period, but if I do, please allow me to assure you it will not be to a laird my cousin *has no claim on.*” Sarcasm coated the last part of her sentence. “Now, if you’re finished being ridiculous, we can get ready for dinner, and then I think I’ll keep my winning streak going with a game of cards.”

In spite of myself, I laughed, too.

A game of cards with my cousins sounded perfect right about now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



As was true of most nights the twins were at Chridhe, we all found ourselves congregating in Davin's rooms.

All of us except for my two suitors, thank the stars.

My entertainment duties for them ended at dinner, and I wouldn't have Evander accusing me of playing favorites and not giving his proposal fair consideration. Besides, I liked this time with my family alone.

Davin had a velvet-covered card table in his sitting room and a bar stocked to the side, though he graciously brewed a pot of tea for Gwyn since she couldn't stand the taste of alcohol.

Gallagher set out some desserts he had smuggled from the kitchen while Avani poured drinks for Gwyn to hand out, and I shuffled the cards. We could have sent for everything, but it was worth our privacy to take care of things ourselves these evenings.

Even though Davin's manservant would have fainted from the impropriety if he found out the Marquess was brewing his own tea.

"Kings and Arselings?" I asked as everyone took their seats.

"No," Avani said quickly, and I flinched at having suggested playing Mac's favorite game.

"Let's go with Wharf," Gwyn offered, and everyone heartily agreed.

As I dealt the cards, Gallagher spoke up.

“So, Row,” he began. The overly conversational tone already had me bracing myself. “Care to share how you came back from Socair with two...how was it you put it, Dav?”

“Pieces of man meat?” It was Gwyn who answered.

“I would,” I shrugged. “But I wouldn’t want to take up all of Davin’s storytelling time of how he became known throughout Socair as the Eunuch Guard of Lochlann.”

Gwyn threw her head back and laughed heartily, the sound filling up the room.

“A myth I’ve spent weeks putting to bed,” Davin said. “Literally.”

That only made Gwyn laugh harder, while Avani and I rolled our eyes.

“Laird MacBay’s going to be putting you to death, literally, if he finds out.” Avani chuckled under her breath.

“Don’t think we didn’t notice that little bait and switch, Row,” Gallagher broke in, scooping up his cards.

“At the moment, I technically have no...*man-friends*,” I said more casually than I felt. “Let alone two.”

Gal shrugged. “Well, if you’re considering them both as potential *man-friends*, we should make a list of pros and cons.”

“I’m not considering them both,” I countered. “Only one. I just have to get through this week.”

Davin cleared his throat, a rare bit of seriousness on his features. “Maybe you should... consider them both.”

I scoffed in disbelief. “You hate Evander.”

He shrugged. “I hate *Theodope* also, in fairness, but...” He looked to Avani for support, and my gaze traveled slowly over to her.

She took a deep breath, like she was steeling herself against my ire. “I just want you to be happy, little sister. I think it’s worth thinking about, if only for the political implications.”

Gwyn chimed in. “Besides, you always said all you wanted was someone

who would let you spend time here, with your family, and I'm not sure Lord Theo is offering that."

"So, con," Gallagher prompted.

"All right," I set my drink down with more force than was strictly necessary. "You want to do this? Then, let's start with cons for Evander."

I ticked off on my fingers. "He kidnapped me. He's a giant arseling. And he doesn't actually want to marry me so much as he wants Theo *not* to marry me."

"So, what are Theo's cons?" Avani asked in a tone just a shade too neutral.

I straightened my posture, ostensibly surveying my cards. "He...doesn't have any."

"False," Davin interjected. "Aside from the fact that he's hopelessly stuffy and holds some old school Socairan ideals about the roles women play in politics, he also casually forgot to mention that he could marry you to avoid the Summit *before* you had to go."

"He was manipulated by his brother just like the rest of us were," I argued.

"That also feels like a con," Gwyn offered.

"All right," Avani broke in, using her unbiased monarch voice. "Pros, then."

"Theo is kind," I said. "He's charming and upstanding, protective, loyal...and a good kisser."

Davin made a face, and I glared at him.

"And Evander?" Avani quirked a single eyebrow, taking a careful sip of her whiskey. "Is he a good kisser?"

My face warmed, and I suddenly found my cards very interesting. "Why would you think that I would know that?"

Noises of disbelief sounded around the table, and I relented.

"Fine. He's...adequate, I suppose." More than, but there was no need to

bother with specifics.

Avani eyed me like she had heard everything I didn't say.

"Ach." She used our father's favorite non-word. "Well, if all else fails, we can always make the decision based on their...ass-sets."

"We're not talking about their *ass-sets*," I said, shaking my head.

"Why not? It isn't like you haven't noticed," Avani said, and Davin snorted.

Four sets of eyes challenged me until I, once again, gave in.

With a sigh, I considered the man-butts I had definitely not paid any attention to.

"Evander's is solid muscle." An image assaulted me of him walking out of the sauna right when the steam chose to dissipate. "Which, you know, is really not attractive."

Avani chuckled, clearly pleased that I was conceding to her. And honestly, seeing her smile was worth the ridiculousness of this conversation.

"But Theo's has a nice round bubble shape," I finished.

Though to be fair, I had only seen his through his fitted trousers.

"That's what we call a PWG," Gwyn chimed in, tossing three cards into the pile.

I shot her a questioning look.

"A probable weight gain," she explained.

In spite of myself, I laughed. "That's not a thing. You made that up."

Gwyn looked to Gallagher, who shrugged.

"I can confirm this is a medically valid fact," he said in a serious tone, throwing another card down.

"Well, I am not choosing my future husband based on arse shape," I said definitively. "Though I would be happy to rule one out based on arse personality."

Another round of laughter rang out, and gratitude surged through my veins. Maybe they were forcing me to talk about things I would just as soon

not think about, but at least my family made this whole thing feel just a little less daunting.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



The next few days were a series of council meetings, alternating between my two suitors.

Since the heirs discussion hadn't been fun enough with Evander, I got to have another one with Theo. Da' sat through it with the same clenched fist and generally uncomfortable expression he had been wearing for the first one.

"The princess has stated that if there are any heirs, they will relinquish their claim to the Lochlann throne," Uncle Oliver stated.

"If?" Theo asked, shooting me a sideways glance. "Is there a reason there wouldn't be heirs?"

"No," I said hastily. "I know you need them. It was just for..."

I stopped myself before I said Evander's name out loud, but Theo's face darkened as though he had heard it anyway.

"I see," he said quietly.

"So, heirs are important to you?" my mother asked.

Theo turned his attention to her.

"I'm not concerned about our children being heirs to Lochlann, but yes, it's important that we have them." He spoke with a straightforward earnestness that I couldn't help but appreciate. "My mother's family was killed in the coup, and my father was an only child. My brother is unable to

sire children, so I am the last of my family line.”

“That’s certainly understandable.” Mamá couldn’t keep a small bit of glee out of her voice, and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes.

The woman was crazy for babies.

“And not a problem,” I assured him. “So perhaps we can move on to official titles and duties, if only for Da’s sake.”

My father shot me a look, but he still hadn’t unclenched his fist.

Fortunately, we were able to move onto other topics, which was good because it gave me less time to dwell on the churning feeling in the pit of my stomach this whole conversation gave me.



That night, we had the immense pleasure of another court dinner.

The only upside to having dinner publicly was that Aunt Jocelyn had declared it wouldn’t reflect well on me to be sandwiched between the men, so they were seated across from me.

On second thought, that was not actually a benefit, since it made it that much harder for me to avoid looking at either of them. We were soon distracted, though, by the arrival of none other than the charming Lady Fiona.

She was pretty, if you liked tall people with small waists and delicate features and perfect hair that didn’t have a crazy mind of its own. Her blue eyes were lit up with unmistakable attraction when she looked at Evander, a coy smile playing on her lips.

Though no one else was seated at our family’s table, she murmured some excuse to be there, casually resting her hand where it brushed against Evander’s arm.

There it was again, that ugly, clawing feeling. My hand clenched around the handle of my fork hard enough that I was surprised it didn’t bend.

At her audacity, obviously.

Then again, maybe that would pay off for her. Maybe Evander would marry her. Hell, maybe he would even want her to go back to Socair with him.

Perhaps she would meet his standards for a clan wife in a way that I clearly did not.

Lady Sara accompanied her, but at least she didn't do more than shoot Theo a few covert glances that he did a valiant job of pretending not to notice.

Tearing into my dinner roll, I decided to follow his lead, something I successfully managed until Fiona's high-pitched laughter drifted across the table. Apparently, Evander was *hilarious* even when he was barely speaking.

A slipped foot connected with my shin, and I looked up to find Avani mouthing *fix your face*.

When I only raised my eyebrows at her, she shot Davin a beseeching look.

His calculating blue gaze swept over the table in a single glance, and with a determined expression, he got to his feet. Donning his most charming smile, he stepped over to where the ladies were standing.

"Lady Fiona," he practically purred her name. "Might you accompany me for a turn around the gardens?"

Only Davin could make that phrase sound inappropriate.

Fiona gave him an assessing glance before nodding. After all, he was the Marquess of the largest holdings in Lochlann and the son of the prince. Besides which, he was Davin, and I wasn't entirely sure I had ever seen anyone turn him down.

Lady Sara left when they did, and I went back to avoiding everyone.

Even if I did feel two sets of eyes staring at me from across the table.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



On the fifth day, we all met for breakfast in the family dining room. I had precisely one second to enjoy the warm feeling of my entire family together before Theo and Evander walked into the room, bringing with them the usual slew of awkwardness.

Aunt Jocelyn glanced pointedly at Davin, who shot me an apologetic look before he left his spot next to me, moving to sit on the other side of the table with Gallagher instead. Which, of course, left the two seats on either side of me free for the Socairan lords to occupy.

Theo gently nudged me with his shoulder, casting a subtle smile in my direction. It was easy to return. Meanwhile, tension crackled in the air on my other side, making it impossible to ignore Evander's presence.

It didn't help when he goaded me into speaking to him.

"Imagine my surprise when you didn't break into my rooms again last night." His words were quiet enough that only I could hear. "Weren't you curious whether or not my bed was empty?"

Something in the way he asked the question had me suppressing a shiver. Which, of course, he noticed. He raised one smug eyebrow in response, lifting his steaming mug of coffee to his lips.

There was a part of me—a rather large, violent part—that wanted to bump the mug and let the steaming contents slosh out and scald his stupidly

attractive face a little.

I resisted the urge, barely.

“Believe it or not, Evander, I don’t spend my days and nights wondering whose company you keep.” I wondered if he heard the lie. “I’ve had more interesting things to fill my time at night.”

My cousins, Avani, and I had gathered in Davin’s rooms every night since the twins arrived.

All traces of amusement vanished from Evander’s features. “Oh?”

His hardened gaze landed on Theo, and a sigh escaped me.

“I’ve been spending time with my family,” I said.

I told myself the only reason I clarified was so he didn’t accuse me of going back on our deal.

His shoulders relaxed incrementally, and I wished I could take the explanation back. I turned my attention to Theo just as Mamá’s voice sounded from the far end of the table.

“Today, I’ll need everyone’s help to prepare for the festival,” she announced.

Her eyes were lit up with excitement. The seasonal festivals had always meant so much to our family, but especially my mother. Baking for the people was a tradition that she began with Grandmother Bridget before I was born.

“Davin,” she looked at my cousin. “You and the older twins can make sure the Games are ready. Logan is taking the younger twins to help set up.”

My father nodded.

“And the four of you,” she gestured to Avani, Evander, Theo, and me. “Can help me in the kitchens this morning.”

Avani perked up at that. She loved baking as much as my mother did. And I loved spending time with my family, even if Evander would be here to ruin it.

I turned to Theo to explain. “We always bake--”

“Pastries for the festivals,” Theo finished with a smile. “I remember.”

“You...bake?” Evander’s tone was skeptical, and Avani choked on what I was fairly certain was a laugh.

“Why wouldn’t I?” I asked, my eyes narrowing in his direction.

“Because it takes patience, of which you have exactly none,” he said matter-of-factly.

I turned at the sound of my father’s slight cough, and sure enough, his lips were pursed with a suppressed chuckle. He at least had the decency to look disappointed in himself for finding amusement in the enemy.

I scowled at him anyway before turning back to Evander. “And you’ve gathered this from your ample knowledge of baking?”

“Apparently more ample than yours,” he muttered, taking a bite of his biscuit--something else I wanted to slap out of his hand.

He was bringing out all of the violent tendencies in me today.

“Well...today we’ll mostly be preparing the ingredients,” my mother cut in.

Which was a nice way of hedging around the fact that I most certainly had not inherited her baking skills, unless cakes were supposed to be black around the edges and raw in the middle.

“I confess I don’t have much experience in kitchens,” Theo said with a self-deprecating smile, and my mother beamed at him. “But I’m sure Rowan can show me around.”

Evander made a disbelieving sound in the back of his throat, and a few snickers sounded around the table in response.

I revised my warm feelings at having my family all together at this table, now that they were laughing with Lord Arseling.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



When we got to the kitchens, Mamá put Evander to work peeling apples while Theo and I gathered ingredients for dough.

She and Avani worked on preparing and combining the spices, since that was the part that required actual knowledge of baking. Evander expertly twirled the small kitchen knife between his fingers before he set to work, efficiently removing the thin outer layer of the apple.

“What do you do with the peel?” he asked.

“Just put it in the bucket right there.” Mamá gestured to a stainless-steel pail, but I knew what he was really asking.

“None of it goes to waste,” I found myself explaining. “They split it between the cattle and the pigs.”

He nodded, pulling another apple from the barrel and deftly taking the knife to it as well.

“So where do we start?” Theo’s voice startled me, making me uncomfortably aware of the fact that I had been staring.

Stars.

“Flour,” I told him, leading the way to the larder.

I pointed to an enormous burlap sack, and Theo hefted it up with ease. I couldn’t resist giving his bicep a little squeeze, like I had when I first met him.

I, at least, owed it to both of us to try a little harder than I had been, and staring at Evander wasn't helping, nor was it going to make him any less of an *aalio*.

"See, you're uniquely qualified for this job, whether you've been in the kitchens before or not," I assured Theo.

"I'm glad you can put my man-labor to some use." He shot me one of his dazzling smiles.

Once again, I couldn't help but return it. And once again, I couldn't help but reflect on how peaceful life could be if we could just get through this week.

We made several more trips for ingredients. Mostly, I was only here for the purpose of directing Theo on what to carry, something he teased me about relentlessly.

"So," he said as we returned to the kitchens. "I have to say, it was one thing hearing that you made pastries for the festival every year, but it's another seeing the work that goes into it. Wouldn't it be easier to let the cooks handle this?"

"Easier, probably," my mother admitted, "but Avani and I love baking."

Evander cleared his throat pointedly at her omission of me, and she shot him an amused look like the turncoat she was.

"And it means something to the people," she continued. "When we give them something we've made with our own hands. Of course, the kitchen staff will help also, considering the scope of the work, but a majority of it comes from us."

"That's a tradition worth carrying to Socair," Theo said earnestly.

I didn't have the heart to tell him that this would in no way be fun without my family, and no one in Socair wanted me baking their desserts. So, I just made a noncommittal noise in the back of my throat.

"Lord Theo, could I put those muscles of yours to use in the storage cellar for a moment?" my mother asked.

Theo gave a low chuckle.

“There are more of you,” he whispered, before saying in a louder voice, “Of course, Your Majesty.”

“Lord Evander, you can take a break from the apples to help Rowan.”
Subtle, she was not.

I shot her an irritated look that she pretended not to notice.

“Of course, Your Majesty,” he echoed Theo’s sentiment in a bland voice, coming to stand a few feet from me.

Mamá and Theo disappeared down the hall. I sighed, pointing to the wooden bowls I had just set out and listing what needed to go in each of them. He nodded, and we worked without speaking.

Avani studiously ignored us both, though that could have been because she was caught up in her own world, in memories of Mac joining us here for every festival for years.

She wasn’t the only one. Between missing my big brother and this mess I had landed myself in, my chest ached, and it was an effort to keep the emotions from my face.

Working with Evander was, at least, a seamless process. He measured out some ingredients while I gathered others. If I needed a particularly stubborn jar opened, I held it out and he wordlessly twisted the lid before handing it back.

Everything was going as well as could be expected until I spun around to grab a whisk at the exact same time he reached for the salt block on the shelf over my head.

My face collided with his chest, and I made the mistake of inhaling.

All at once, it hit me.

His familiar scent. Smokey and earthy and just a little bit sweet.

It was the way his bed had smelled for the weeks I spent nearly every waking moment there.

The way he had smelled when I had slept cradled in his arms the night

before Da' came.

I sucked in a sharp breath, my throat clogging and tears stabbing at the back of my eyes.

Evander froze, his solid body only inches from mine.

He peered down at me through those storm-cloud eyes, a rare bit of softness taking over his expression. "Lemmikki--"

"Oh, good, you're back," Avani said a little too loudly, just as Theo and my mother rounded the corner. "I need more cinnamon."

Evander didn't move, didn't move his gaze from where it was fixed firmly on me until I nudged his arm with the barest brush of my fingertips. I wasn't willing to risk touching him more than that.

Finally, he stepped aside, but not before I saw the shadow cross Theo's features.

"Well..." my mother bravely cut in. "Why does it seem like no matter how big a kitchen is, there's never too much space to bump into one another?"

"It does seem that way," Theo agreed in a quiet voice.

I looked away from him and Evander both, taking the coward's way out.

Wasn't that what I had been doing all along?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



It had been a long, sleepless night after I skipped dinner and hid in my rooms, not having to feign the churning stomach that kept me from having an appetite.

I wanted to hide this morning, too, and for the rest of the week, but Mamá had come herself to fetch me for breakfast.

I was blarily sipping my coffee, pointedly ignoring the men on either side of me, when Gwyn's voice permeated my hazy consciousness.

“So, what do you all think? We could steal away for the day.”

A quick glance at Mamá had her mouthing the word ‘lake’.

I perked up at that. The small loch just north of Castle Chridhe was one of my favorite places.

My mother smiled at whatever she saw in my expression before looking pointedly at the lords. Of course, we would have to bring them both.

I weighed the pros and cons of taking them while the next course arrived before giving her a subtle nod. Gwyn was practically radiating excitement when she looked at me.

“When?” she mouthed the question in my direction.

I took a moment to consider it, concentrating on what I could sense from the weather.

There was the barest trace of tingling along my spine, as if a ladybug

were walking up my back. It was going to rain, but not until late tonight or even early tomorrow.

“Today,” I mouthed back, mirroring the grin on my cousin’s face. Anything to make this week go faster.



So, we found ourselves headed to the sandy beaches of the loch. We had ridden out right after breakfast, taking only our horses and what we could pack in the saddlebags.

Avani caught my eye, a mischievous glint in hers that I hadn’t seen in...well, nearly a year now. I knew what she was going to say before she opened her mouth.

“Race you to the shoreline!” Her destrier sprang forward like an arrow loosed from a quiver.

Though Avani saddled and bridled her mare for show, she didn’t bother to touch the reins or give any outward commands as she sped ahead.

“That’s cheating!” I yelled.

“It’s called being scrappy,” she called back, laughing.

I may not be able to communicate with animals the way she did, but I nonetheless sensed my gelding’s irritation at being left behind.

“Let’s go,” I whispered into his mane, spurring him forward with my heels.

He took off like a bolt of lightning, flying down the road in a blur of movement. My hair streamed behind me, and the wind roared in my ears.

For a moment, I almost felt...free, which made me realize it was a feeling that had been missing since the day Davin and I were trapped in those tunnels.

Maybe even before that, when I had felt trapped by the chains of grief. I had sure as hell felt that way since.

But this feeling, right now, was everything.

A peal of laughter escaped me as I closed the distance between Avani and me, leaving everyone else in the dust behind us.

Of course, she won, which she likely would have done even if she hadn't taken off first. We dismounted, leading our horses to the water.

The sun lit up the crystal-colored lake and the southern beach where we stood, while a gentle breeze blew through the tall grasses and fields of heather surrounding it.

I hadn't been back to the loch since before the tunnels, before Socair. Even before that. Avani stepped up beside me. Her eyes were closed as she faced the sun, allowing its warmth to sink into her.

As excited as she had been on the ride here, a haunted look had crept back into her expression. The last time we were here was before Mac died.

I reached out to grab her hand, and she gripped mine in return.

We stood there like that for several breaths, savoring the sweet and woodsy smell of the heather around us until the others caught up to us.

Now that we were away from the prying eyes of the court, I removed the light cloak I had thrown over my pale blue summer dress. I wasn't ashamed of my scars, so much as I didn't want to further incite the people by showing them evidence of my mistreatment.

"You're going to burn," Avani warned, turning to join the rest of our group.

"I'll put it back on later," I said with an eye roll. "I just want to feel the sun on my skin...I missed it, while I was there."

She shot me a troubled look, probably at the reminder that when I accepted Theo's proposal, I would be gone soon after. Back to Socair.

Away from all of this, and away from her.

Pushing the thoughts out of my head, I followed her back to the group.

My cousins had laid out a large blanket and covered it with baskets of cheeses, fruits, bread, cured meats, and a few bottles of wine along with

sparkling cider for Gwyn. Evander was helping Davin pour drinks while Gwyn had tasked Theo with setting stones on the corners of the blanket.

Avani settled herself under the shadiest part of the tree, since her freckled skin burned even more easily than mine did. I looked at Theo, who was placing his last rock on the blanket corner.

“Is it sunny like this in Socair, during the Summer?” I asked.

He turned to answer, but the smile died on his lips when he caught sight of me. I tracked his gaze to the angry red lash mark that curled over my shoulder, ending at the edge of my collarbone.

“Rowan--”

“It’s fine,” I said dismissively, pulling my hair around to cover it. “I told you, they’re healed now.”

But he looked no less troubled. An awkward silence fell until Evander cleared his throat.

“It doesn’t get quite this warm, but yes, the sun shines in the summer, through early autumn.” He quirked his lips. “Though I’m surprised you didn’t know that already, what with your--what was it you said--interest in the weather?”

Every member of my family suddenly found themselves fixated on the grass around us.

“I just know what the clouds indicate.” I shrugged, forcing myself to maintain eye contact.

Theo snapped out of the mood that had overtaken him, smiling in spite of himself. “And here I had nearly forgotten about your weather-toe.”

Davin coughed on his drink, and Gallagher squeezed his eyes shut at the terrible lie. Everyone in my family knew how important it was to keep that secret, and it was possible that I had not yet found the opportunity to tell them about the ridiculous things I had to say to cover for it.

“Weather-toe?” Evander’s steely gaze lit up with something like amusement.

Clearing my throat, I nodded. There really was no choice now but to forge ahead, considering Theo was observing me closely.

Red crept into my cheeks, though I tried to will it back down. “Mhmm. It is...my toe, that I injured, and it...always acts up when a storm is coming.”

Avani gave the barest shake of her head, disbelief coating her features.

Evander knew perfectly good and well that it wasn't only storms I could sense. He had never outright confronted me about it, but he had taken to asking me about the temperature or the snowfall while I was at Bear.

He also knew, having seen my bare feet with regularity, that each of my toes was intact and decidedly un-injured.

“Indeed.” A muscle ticked in his jaw, a sure sign he was fighting back a laugh, but he didn't contradict me.

Thankfully, Gwyn cut through my awkward response and saved the day. “I think it's time for a game of *Clubball*.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Gwyn was celebrating her victory, and the rest of us were finishing up the snacks when Avani looked sharply in the direction of the stables.

She let out a low warning whistle, a signal my Da' had taught us.

Someone was coming.

My cousins and I froze, and the Socairan lords caught on quickly. Seconds later, a group of men crested the hill. They were dressed in navy and silver, and each of them was armed.

H'rian rebels.

Not everyone in our kingdom had taken kindly to the treaty at all, let alone to the roundabout way in which it was fulfilled. Through two decades of hard work, my parents had largely gained the trust and the respect of the kingdom.

But clearly, there were outliers.

Evander reached for one of the sabers on his back, but I put my hand over his, shaking my head. He held my gaze for a long, considering moment before lowering his hand, though it was clear he didn't like it.

"Is there something we can do for you?" Avani called to the ten men surrounding us.

"The Socairans took two of our own, Highness. We only wish tae return

the favor, since yer parents are too soft tae bother.”

“That isn’t going to happen,” Avani said. “And we both know you don’t want to attack a member of the royal family, let alone five. It’s an offense punishable by death.”

The leader spat on the ground. “The royal line has been tainted ever since that bastard took the throne.”

I sucked in a furious breath, though it was hardly the first time someone had said that about Da’.

“Then at least consider whether you’re willing to sacrifice your lives for this cause,” Gallagher said.

The man scoffed. “My men number far greater ‘an the four of ye, and I’m no’ too worrit about a few lasses.”

Even here, old ideals died a hard, slow death. Rather than take offense, Gwyn just let out a low, dangerous chuckle, and I almost felt sorry for the men.

Almost.

“All right, then,” Avani said, drawing her sword. “On your own heads be it.”

Once again, Evander went for his weapons, and Theo as well, but my sister hissed a warning.

“My lords,” she said under her breath. “Kindly do not put me in the position of having to explain why Socairans spilled Lochlannian blood on our own soil. Do not draw your weapons. Stand aside.”

Evander looked murderous, but he nodded, a single, sharp dip of his head. Theo looked more affronted than anything. I gave him a sympathetic look.

I knew what it was to be in a position to not be able to protect yourself, but Avani was right. It would do more harm than good.

The rest of us held our weapons at the ready, standing protectively between the rebels and the Socairans.

The rebels laughed, their lips stretching back over their yellowed teeth

before hurling themselves at us. Gwyn was the first to meet them, fighting off three and easily holding her own while Gallagher was at her back fighting two more.

That left five for me, Avani, and Dav, two of which were headed straight in my direction.

A low, fierce growl emanated from Evander, and I knew it was going to be impossible for him to stand back if we didn't end this quickly.

Theo wasn't faring much better. His fists were clenched at his sides while his eyes were locked onto the skirmish.

I advanced toward the two men, but Avani stepped in front of me. More clashing of steel sounded as my sister's blade met that of one of the rebels. She angled herself to block another as well, leaving three to rush past her toward Dav and me.

If we wanted the Socairans to stay out of the fight, we had to hold the line around them, so Dav and I fought side by side, meeting the three blades as best as we could.

These men weren't nearly as skilled as the Unclanned I had fought in Socair. And this time, I had my own perfectly balanced rapier, the one I had learned to fight with.

The rebels were still stronger than I was, so I would have to be faster.

With each measured breath, I focused on the movements of my opponents, trying to gauge their tells and figure out their next moves before they made them. Their outrage at how well matched our group was to theirs made them sloppy, and eventually, easily predictable.

Davin groaned next to me as two of the rebels focused all of their attention on him, wearing him down.

Without a second thought, I spun out of reach of my opponent, landing on the other side of my cousin's attackers and bringing my sword down hard on the man's sword arm.

He shouted out in pain, dropping his weapon long enough so that Davin

could gain the upper hand on the other rebel.

I turned back to meet the man I'd been fighting before, ducking out of reach of his blade before running my own through his middle. The man fell to his knees, and then onto his side.

Placing a foot on his chest, I tugged until my sword wrenched free. A shadow passed overhead, and I twisted around in time to see the man I had injured before running toward me, blade held high.

Before I could raise my sword to defend myself, Evander was standing behind him in a lightning-fast movement. His sabers were still strapped to his back as he grasped either side of my assailant's head and twisted hard to the right.

The rebel fell flat at my feet.

There was always a danger that lurked behind Evander's eyes, but it was blazing in full force as he looked me over, searching for signs of injury.

I shook my head in a silent answer before movement behind him ripped my attention away. Another rebel that I hadn't accounted for was charging toward Evander's back.

Evander started to turn, but I shoved past him, meeting the man's blade with my own. My arms shook with the vibration of the blow, and I parried his sword away.

In an unexpected move, the rebel hurled himself at me. I had just enough time to point my blade in the right direction before I was sent careening toward the ground.

Pain lanced through my side from the impact, and I gasped in agony as the man fell on top of me.

Evander was at my side before I could blink, lifting the rebel off of me and tossing him to the side. My sword was still embedded into the man's stomach, but that's not what Evander was staring at.

"Lemmikki." His voice was a low, furious growl as he knelt next to me.

I followed his stormy gaze to where it was fixated on my

abdomen...where the hilt of a dagger protruded from my side.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



My vision swam, pain pulsating through my veins and my head, staining the world around me red.

Evander shouted, though it sounded far away. My sister and Gallagher appeared at my side. Theo and Davin brought over the blanket from our picnic, and Evander gently lifted me onto it.

I sucked in a breath, steeling myself against the sharp, searing agony in my side. Dav held a flask to my lips, ordering me to drink, while Gallagher's hand went to my injury.

Evander's deft fingers were already ripping the fabric of my gown around the dagger when my cousin stilled, his eyes darting between the two lords.

"We need to move fast," he murmured, and I understood his predicament. He didn't want to risk them seeing him heal me.

"Theo, could you fetch Gal's medical kit from his horse." Avani gave Gwyn a pointed look, and she directed Theo toward the clydesdale.

"Evander--" Gallagher began.

"No." With one simple word, Evander cut off whatever errand my cousin had been about to send him on.

His gray eyes bored into mine, and I knew there was nothing anyone could say or do that would make him leave my side. If I was being honest with myself, I wasn't sure I even wanted him to go.

“It’s fine, Gal.” I bit out the words. “It’s nothing he hasn’t seen before.”
And it wasn’t.

He had seen my body. Had seen me wounded. And he knew perfectly well that my skill with predicting the weather went deeper than an interest in cloud patterns or a weather-toe.

My cousin looked dubiously between the dagger and Evander, but he nodded. He made me take several more sips of the whiskey before taking the flask in one hand while wrapping his other around the hilt of the dagger.

“Keep her steady,” he told Avani and Evander.

I braced myself as he removed the blade. Rivulets of blood spilled down my side. Gallagher poured the whiskey over his hands, apologizing before he did the same thing to my wound.

White-hot agony lanced through me. I fought to keep still, but my body writhed as something between a groan and a whimper escaped my lips.

Evander held me down with one firm hand, but the other closed around mine, squeezing it gently.

Warmth flooded through me, some combination of Evander’s hand and Davin’s whiskey and Gallagher’s healing. Evander was watching Gallagher work, his eyes widening slightly before he looked back to meet mine.

It was dangerous to let anyone know about our Fae heritage with people still out hunting the fae down, but I knew I had nothing to fear from him. Whatever else was between us, I did trust him with my life, and with theirs.

By the time Theo made it back with the medical supplies, Gallagher was ready to stitch me up.

He apologized before driving a needle into my skin in short, quick movements. I clutched Evander’s hand tightly, my vision going spotty until Gallagher finally tied off the sutures.

Theo’s expression was pained as he watched me. Then again, that might have been the cut on his cheek and the bruise blooming around it. It appeared Evander wasn’t the only one who couldn’t stay out of the fight.

“All right, cousin. We need to get you home to rest.” Gallagher looked at me pointedly.

I already felt the exhaustion sinking in. His gift of healing wasn’t an all-encompassing cure. Rather, he could encourage my body to heal itself faster, which took a lot of my energy.

“Thank you,” I offered, and he nodded, wrapping a bandage around me to protect the sutures.

Then I was moving.

Without a word, Evander’s hands slid beneath my legs and behind my back as he picked me up. Avani narrowed her tear-stained eyes at him and tore off the part of the blanket that wasn’t covered in my blood. She stood to cover me with it.

“It would appear you have trouble obeying orders, Lord Stenvall,” she said.

Evander shrugged. “I didn’t draw my weapon, nor did I spill anyone’s blood.”

“Indeed.” She almost sounded amused. “I suppose we should be grateful, in any event.”

Her gaze flitted from where my fingers were fisted in his shirt to where his arms cradled me against his chest, and she nodded to herself.

“If I can impose upon you further, perhaps you wouldn’t mind taking Rowan on your horse, so she doesn’t reopen that wound.”

“Of course.” He said it like it was obvious.

I shot her a grateful look. Evander would have insisted on taking me either way. By asking him, though, she had effectively preempted any tension surrounding that decision...from anyone.

“Perfect,” she nodded again. “Gallagher, you and I will go with them so we can explain to my parents what happened. Theo will come with us. Gwyn and Davin can alert the local magistrate.”

If she said anything else, I didn’t hear it. My head lulled against

Evander's chest, and the sound of his beating heart chased me into sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Gallagher's healing always took a lot out of me, and this time was no exception. After my father barreled out of the castle and carried me up to my rooms, I promptly fell back asleep for the next several hours.

Mamá was by my side when I awoke, reading in the chair next to my bed.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, coming to put a cool hand on my forehead.

"Oh, you know," I shrugged, wincing when it tugged at my abdomen. "Tired. Sore. Like I'm sick to death of looming life decisions."

"So, is this a bad time to tell you that there are two men who refuse to leave the hallway?" She looked somewhere between amused and sympathetic.

But really, this had gone on long enough.

"I suppose I should deal with that," I muttered.

"You don't have to see either of them," she told me, running her hand through my curls. "And you don't have to make your decision tomorrow... The people will understand if you've been injured, and so will the Council."

As tempting as it was to hide in my room from all of it, that would be unfair to everyone involved.

"No," I shook my head. "It's time."

I sighed, swinging my feet out of bed. The wound at my abdomen tugged, but Gallagher had done his job well. It was more soreness than sharp, agonizing pain, not enough to keep me from walking.

Still, my mother couldn't help but hover. She came over to put an arm around me, walking with me to my sitting room.

"So...which one would you like to see?" she asked cautiously.

It was a loaded question. Which one did I want to see? Which one *should* I want to see?

I took a deep breath. I had known for a while what I needed to do. Now it was just a matter of working up the courage to do it.

"Could you send Theo in?" I asked.

Even twenty years of being Queen had not entirely granted my mother the ability to hide her feelings. Her mouth pressed into a tight line, but she nodded.

"If that's what you want." For all that she had been trying to be neutral in this, she definitely had feelings about it. "I'm going to speak with your father about the rebels, and I'll be back to check on you later."

Her way of letting me know she was giving me privacy and space to deal with this, whatever her opinion on the matter.

I nodded and she left. Moments later, Theo entered.

"You should be in bed," he said, concern evident in his voice.

"I'm all right," I reassured him. "Besides, we needed to talk."

His nod was more resigned than I had been expecting.

"It's--" I realized abruptly that I had no idea where to begin.

"Evander," he finished for me.

I opened my mouth, then closed it, but something in my expression must have given me away. Theo sighed, shaking his head.

"I do love you," I told him earnestly.

"But you aren't in love with me." He didn't say it as a question, and I didn't respond.

I wanted to argue with him, to take away the pain glowing golden in his hazel eyes, but there was nothing I could honestly say to dispute his words. Still, I couldn't bring myself to agree, to drive the knife in deeper.

So I said nothing.

"You know," he said with a quiet shake of his head, almost as though he was talking to himself rather than me, "I think I knew. I knew there was something different with Evander from the first time you danced with him."

My lips parted. "There was nothing going on then. I wouldn't have--"

"I know you're loyal, Rowan." Theo looked away, sighing. "But you...you just moved in sync with him, and even when you were arguing, it was like the rest of the world ceased to exist."

I thought back on that day, the way that even in an unfamiliar dance, even distracted by our conversation, Evander barely had to guide me for my movements to mirror his perfectly.

The way that until Theo had interrupted us, I had all but forgotten we were on a dance floor at all, let alone at the Summit.

"And I tried to convince myself it was only because you were angry. But even that anger..." He huffed a disbelieving breath. "I didn't tell you we could have gotten married to avoid the entire Summit where your life was on the line, and you barely reacted. All Evander had to do was look at you wrong to make you furious."

"Because...he's infuriating," I said, though I wasn't sure why I was bothering to argue.

Theo leveled me with a look, and I averted my gaze.

"I'm not angry, Rowan," he said gently. "I don't blame you for something that felt inevitable. I just...wish that things could have been different."

Tears pooled in my eyes, and I looked up at him, giving him the most honest response I could. "So do I."

Because in a world where I had never met Evander, Theo and I might have been happy.

But now that was impossible. I couldn't be happy with Theo, and I would never be happy with the pieces of Evander he deigned to mete out.

I wished everything were different.

"I'm so sorry," I said in a shaky voice.

"So am I," Theo said. "But honestly, I've known where this was going from the minute he showed up here to marry you."

"That's not *why* he came," I insisted, wiping away the moisture on my face. "He just...likes to stake his claim, and he saw a way to do it."

The words felt false, but then, so had Theo's.

"This isn't about him or his feelings," I insisted. "It's about mine, and the fact that I can't, in good conscience, accept your proposal knowing that..." I trailed off.

"And I appreciate that, Rowan," he said sincerely. "You know that if you needed me to, I would still make this alliance. I would never leave you alone to deal with the situation my family put you in."

I did know that, and I appreciated it in turn. This straightforward offer was every single reason I should have chosen Theo, and part of me hated Evander for making that all but impossible.

Belatedly, I caught the barest edge of impatience in Theo's tone.

"But?" I prodded him, because there was definitely a *but*.

"But I think you know this is about his feelings as well as yours. He still calls you *lemmikki*," Theo said with a trace of exasperation.

"Exactly," I countered. "He calls me his pet, even now. He still feels like he owns me."

Theo furrowed his brow, sighing. "I don't think I'm the only one who has been lying to myself."

I glanced away again, not quite ready to face the truth of his words.

"It wasn't only that," I explained. "I really did want to give this a try. I thought--I thought we could make it work."

"Even if we could have, for now." He took a deep breath, meeting my

gaze solidly. “Do we really want to spend every Summit for the rest of our lives with me looking at you while you’re looking at him?”

I squeezed my eyes shut, the image flooding me with unimaginable guilt.

“No.” The word came out a rasp. “I could never do that to you. You deserve so, so much more than that.”

He put his hand on my cheek, but the gesture was more friendly than romantic. “I hope you know that you deserve everything, too.”

One last time, I wrapped my arms around him, burying myself in the safe, steady feeling of his embrace.

Then he backed away. “I’ll leave during the Council Room meeting tomorrow, to avoid a scene.”

Even now, he was protecting me. He hesitated just as he got to the door.

“Should I send him in?” he asked quietly.

Was I ready to talk to Evander? Did I even have a choice?

Taking a single, shaky breath, I nodded.

Theo gave me a terse dip of his head. “Goodbye, Rowan.”

It was hard to believe this was it, the culmination of everything that had transpired since I woke up in his dungeons, when I was just a reckless princess in way over her head, and he was the only person in that entire stars-damned kingdom on my side.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat, managing to speak just before he reached the door. “Goodbye, Theo.”

CHAPTER THIRTY



I knew I had done the right thing with Theo.

In fact, it was one of the few decisions in my life I did feel good about, making sure he wasn't more hurt than he already had been.

It was nonetheless nerve-racking, saying goodbye to a man who loved me in favor of one who wouldn't pull his head out of his arse long enough to admit he wanted an actual marriage.

If he wanted that.

If what Theo said was true.

And what if it wasn't? Would I really stake my life on maybes and somedays?

The word *lemmikki* plagued me with each heartbeat before Evander pushed open my door. He raked his gaze over my seated form, like he was trying to decipher the extent of any residual injuries before greeting me.

"Lemmikki."

There it was again. That word.

"You stepped between me and a sword today without even drawing your own," I began without preamble. "You could have died."

"And you would have died if I hadn't." His tone was matter-of-fact, like it was obvious that he would sacrifice his life for mine.

And maybe it should have been. Wouldn't I do the same for him?

But that had never been the missing piece with us.

“You asked me what I wanted to know, the other night.” When I had accused him of not being honest with me.

He narrowed his eyes, sinking gracefully onto the chair across from mine. “I did.”

I took a fortifying breath. “Then I have a question.”

His churning gray eyes were fixated firmly on mine as he nodded, a single, reluctant dip of his head.

“What *does* lemmikki mean?” My voice was barely a whisper.

He swallowed, something like a warning entering his gaze. “It, loosely translated, can mean *pet*, as Korhonan said at the Summit.”

There it was again. He didn’t lie, but he didn’t tell the truth, either. And this time, I wanted the whole truth. Needed it.

“And a better translation?” I pushed. “Tell me, Evander, what does it mean when *you* say it?”

He held my stare for what felt like an eternity. I didn’t know if he was breathing, but I sure as stars wasn’t. Tension stretched between us, a fraying thread pulled just before its breaking point.

Finally, he spoke, his low voice shattering the silence as surely as that water glass had shattered on the floor the night at the cabin.

“It means...*darling*.”

My heart stuttered in my chest, though I had half been expecting the answer ever since Theo’s strange look.

Pet, Theo had said. A literal translation in a tense moment from a man for whom the Common Tongue was his second language.

Not *a* pet. Not *my* pet. Pet. *Darling*.

All the times I had assumed Evander was merely reminding me that I belonged to him...

In hindsight, I could hear the thinly veiled panic in his tone as he searched me for injuries the first day we were attacked by the Unclanned. *Darling*,

where is it?

The casual, playful way he had taken to calling me by that name. *Darling, do you think you will leave bed today?*

And the growl in his voice after I bit his lower lip that night at the cabin. *Two can play at that game, Darling.*

Even Mila's raised eyebrow...right after he called me *lemmikki*. Not offense. Not outrage. Intrigue, and a bit of amusement.

Maybe Theo was right. Maybe I had been lying to myself for longer than I wanted to admit.

But I certainly wasn't the only one.

I shook my head, letting out a short, disbelieving breath. "So let me get this straight. You take me. You call me your darling. You kiss me like I'm the other half of your *soul*--"

Something dangerous crossed his features, but I went on.

"--and say it can never happen again. Then you tell me we were only ever temporary, and send me away when I know, *I know* that you saw that I was willing to stay." My heart raced with the admission, but there was only so much we could reasonably hide from, and I needed to know about that day.

"And how would that have worked, Rowan?" Though his features were still neutral, his rare use of my name belied his frustration. "You didn't know what you wanted. You had been in love with Korhonan five minutes before that."

Anger coursed through my veins. "I didn't know what *I* wanted? What about what you want, Evander? Do you even want to marry me, or do you just want to make sure that no one else can have what you already think is yours?"

"If I didn't want to marry you," he growled, "I wouldn't have proposed."

Another non-answer.

"Then why the hell did it take someone else getting there first?" My voice was stronger now. "When you left Bear, were you even planning on offering

this betrothal?”

The hesitation on his face was answer enough, even before he spoke the word that cleaved my chest in half.

“No.”

I looked away, taking a moment to compose myself before I outright scoffed. “Yet you have the nerve to accuse me of indecisiveness?”

His eyes blazed with fury.

“Need I remind you, Lemmikki, that when I did propose, your first inclination was to say no?” he asked sharply. “That you had to be forced into considering it at all.”

I made another sound of disbelief in the back of my throat. “Need I remind you what that proposal sounded like? ‘I own you, and even though I don’t want you, I don’t want anyone else to have you either, so I suppose I’ll make the sacrifice of marrying you for my people.’”

A muscle ticked in his jaw.

“That *does* sound familiar.” His sarcasm belied the agreeable words. “Not unlike when you burst into my rooms in the middle of the night in a fit of jealousy, then spent the entire council room meeting the next day clinging to Korhonan like I was the villain in a children’s tale come to steal you away in the night.”

My lips parted in outrage, and I leaned forward in my chair. “What was I supposed to do when Theo was professing his love for me and offering an alliance I *needed* while you were apparently sitting on your arse in Bear convincing yourself I didn’t know my own mind.”

“You *didn’t* know your own mind!” Evander was close to yelling now, a rarity for him. “You were a prisoner for months. You went through hell, and you went from being surrounded by your family,” he gestured around, “to only me. Of course, you thought--”

His words cut off, and he looked away, gritting his teeth.

“I thought what?” I prodded, waving my hand for him to continue. “Go

ahead, please, and tell me all of my feelings and how very unreasonable they all were.”

“I don’t know what you thought,” he said in a tight voice. “But I know that it would have been a mistake for you to stay, so if you’re expecting me to apologize for that, you’re going to be waiting a long time.”

“Don’t kid yourself, Evander.” I glared at him. “I would never expect you to apologize for anything because then you might have to pull your head out of your asshole and admit you were wrong about it to begin with.”

We stared at each other for a long moment, our ragged breaths the only sound in the otherwise silent room.

“Was that what you needed to know, then, so you could finally make your decision after a week of stringing us both along?” Bitterness coated his tone. “I’m surprised it took you so long, when you’re so very honest with yourself and the people around you.”

The hypocrisy of that coming from him was almost laughable, if I hadn’t been so outraged. I stood up to retreat to my bedroom before I could accidentally take out my booby dagger and stab him in his far-too-handsome *aalio* face.

“I had already made my decision when you came in.” My tone was, at least, marginally more calm than I felt. “I just wanted to know where we stood. And now I do.”

Without so much as a backward glance, I walked into my bedroom and shut the door.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



It was a long, sleepless night, wherein I obsessed over every word of my and Evander's conversation the night before.

It had left me with more questions than answers.

Did he miss me after I left? If so, was it just not enough to actually do anything about it? While I was grieving and falling apart over here, was he filling his bed with a series of Fionas?

Pressing a pillow against my face, I tried hard to drown that image out.

He had feelings for me. That much was clear. Stars knew I had feelings for him.

Strong ones.

Impossible-to-ignore ones.

But I didn't want to be all in if he still refused to be. Which put me in, as Davin would say, rather a pickle.

He had given me more than I expected him to last night, though, when I put it all together. It was something. It just...wasn't enough.

With a sigh, I finally wrenched myself out of bed to get dressed. My barely healed wound pulsed with the movement, but it was minor compared to the feelings churning deeper inside.

Taisiya brought breakfast to my rooms and helped me dress in a light-green gown the exact shade of my eyes. She topped it off with a silver woven

tiara, inlaid with pale jade stones.

It shouldn't have surprised me that the woman always saw far more than she let on, given what her job had been in Socair. I appreciated, nonetheless, the way she seemed to understand how important today was.

And how badly I needed an extra layer of armor for what I was about to do.

Avani met me in the hallway to walk me downstairs. She didn't say anything, didn't ask what decision I had made, just linked her arm through mine in a show of support.

At least I could feel confident in something when I walked down several sets of stairs to the Council Room on the second floor, since there were creatures far bigger than butterflies beating angry wings in my stomach with each step.

Avani gave my arm a final squeeze before dropping it to open the Council Room door.

Evander looked up sharply when I entered, and I couldn't help but notice that I wasn't the only one who didn't sleep last night.

Though he was as freshly shaven and put together as ever, his hair was just the slightest bit tousled, like he had run his hands through it one too many times, and there was a purplish tinge under his eyes.

He looked on with something like wariness when Avani took the seat Theo usually occupied, and I sank into the chair next to her.

"Should we wait for Lord Theodore to begin?" my mother asked uncertainly. Theo was never late.

"No," I said shortly. "That won't be necessary. I informed him of my decision last night."

Evander's features could have been carved from marble for all the emotion they showed... all but the barest, bitter twist of his lips.

"I've taken all the factors into consideration, and have decided that for the sake of our people, the people of Socair, and the general promotion of peace,

the most advantageous alliance is one with..." I met Evander's eyes, steeling myself, "Bear."

His lips parted in surprise, though wariness still coated his features.

"So," I took a deep breath, "I accept Lord Evander's proposal, assuming he is still amenable to that."

A wan imitation of his usual arrogant smirk fell into place before he responded. "If you're willing to make sacrifices for the sake of your people, then I could hardly refuse to do the same."

"Have you decided whether you will return to Lochlann, then?" Laird MacBay asked before I could respond to Lord Arseling's comment.

My gaze hadn't left Evander's, and I didn't let it waver now, either. I raised my eyebrows in a silent challenge, and he raised his right back.

Well, then.

"As much as I would love to make that decision," I said, all false pleasantries, "I'm afraid I couldn't possibly know my own mind well enough to know what to do. Thank the stars I have a big, strong, Socairan man in the room to tell me what's best, though. Lord Evander?"

I ignored the sideways looks nearly everyone in this room were giving me, although Uncle Oli definitely choked on a laugh, and my father sighed.

A muscle ticked in Evander's jaw.

It might have been fury, but I had a sneaking suspicion that somewhere underneath the supreme irritation that was emanating off of him in waves, he was just the slightest bit amused.

"Ordinarily, I would be happy to oblige your...needs." He paused meaningfully. "But I couldn't possibly think of making this decision for you, even if I did know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was making the right one."

I narrowed my eyes at him, about to throw back a response when my mother cut in.

"It doesn't have to be decided today," she said, holding out her hands in a

placating gesture. “Let’s just get through announcing it at the festival tomorrow first.”

Uncle Oli cut in. “You will need to put on a convincing show for the people, though. They are most certainly going to balk at this arrangement, and we need their support for this alliance.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Evander said with a wry tilt of his lips. “We’re both good at pretending.”

I narrowed my eyes at the echo of what I had said to him at the cabin in Bear, the night we kissed.

“Are we?” I parroted his words back at him.

He raised a challenging eyebrow but didn’t respond.

Avani just shook her head with a subtle sigh, and my mother mirrored the gesture before looking at Aunt Jocelyn.

“And I suppose we have a wedding to plan.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



T rue to his word, Theo had quietly left during the council room meeting today.

There was a part of me that missed his easy, steady presence, if for no other reason than because he had been my friend.

But mostly, I was grateful to have one less complication when things between Evander and I were convoluted enough.

After the meeting, I headed back up to my rooms, exhausted from my wounds and from this entire mess of a week.

Gallagher met me there to encourage my wound to heal a little more thoroughly, and I promptly passed out for the rest of the day. Apparently, for the rest of the night, also.

By the time Taisiya woke me, it was to prepare for the festival.

I usually loved the festivals, but this one was already different. Evander would be there for all of the people to see as we flaunted our engagement to the kingdom.

Taisiya helped dress me in one of the new gowns that Madame Freya had sent over, one the same dark purple shade of the violets that grew in the gardens.

The gown itself was elegant and understated. The only thing I added was the brown leather belt that housed my short sword. We always attended the

festivals unadorned so that we could wear the things we purchased from the booths.

Once my curls were smoothed out, braided in the front and falling freely down my back, Avani applied my cosmetics before I returned the favor.

Her gown was similar to mine, only a dusty blue, and her hair was pulled back in a ribbon that matched.

Her features were drawn, and she shot several longing looks at her bed, but she was determined to go. I gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

This was our first Summer Festival without Mac, but if anything, that would only intensify the scrutiny we were under. She didn't let go of my hand until we made it to the grand staircase.

We froze at the top of the stairs to inhale the scent of the summer festival through the open windows.

"Waffles," we both breathed out in unison, and the corner of her mouth lifted just a little.

The vendors had begun setting up their booths the night before, and the scents of our favorite waffles, roasted nuts, and spiced hippocras were already permeating the air. My stomach growled in anticipation.

As we descended the stairs, I scanned the familiar faces, landing on one in particular. I hadn't even realized I was searching for him until I saw him watching me descend the stairs.

Evander stood next to Uncle Finn, wearing the same outfit as the rest of the men in my family, a blue-and-green ceremonial tartan kilt paired with black leather boots and a formal summer jacket. To top it all off, a sporran was chained to his waist.

I swallowed, having been wholly unprepared for the sight of Evander in a kilt today.

As usual, his face was freshly shaven and his hair was swept aside, except for the one stray piece falling carelessly onto his brow. He didn't appear to be bothered by the fact that he was standing in what was essentially a man skirt,

waiting to face an enormous crowd.

Truthfully, I couldn't quite tell how he felt about it, since his features were carved into his usual arrogant mask.

Though there was nothing casual about the look in his eyes when he took me in.

Avani stepped a few paces away to talk to Aunt Isla while I made my way to Evander.

"Lemmikki," he greeted me.

Darling.

"Evander." My voice came out more breathless than I intended, and his eyes darkened.

Davin strode over, effectively breaking the tension.

"Is it drafty in here today or is it just me?" he asked, clapping Evander on the shoulder.

Evander's lips twitched in amusement. "A bit. A bit."

"I can imagine," I said, shaking my head.

"Just be careful on the sparring beam," Gallagher offered as he approached with his twin, earning a full-throated laugh from Gwyn.

I glanced at my sister to exchange an amused look, but her eyes were distant, her features pulled in sadness. Looping my arm through hers, I gently pulled her to where the rest of the family was waiting in front of the enormous front doors.

Mamá looked up from playing with Ellie to smile warmly at us, but my father's shoulders were tense, and he only deigned to acknowledge me with a grunt. He hadn't spoken to me after the council room meeting yesterday, but I had assumed that was only a timing thing since I had gone to bed.

Clearly, he didn't approve of my decision.

That didn't sting at all.

So, I ignored him right back, dropping my sister's arm to take my place next to Evander. Jocelyn looked everyone over, fixing stray hairs and

gesturing for them to move until she was satisfied.

When she got to Evander and me, she shook her head gently at the foot of space between us. “Take his arm, Rowan. Remember, today is about the people’s perception of you two.”

“And about a day for our people to celebrate with us,” my mother added.

“Yes, yes. And that, of course.” But she looked pointedly at me before mouthing, “For the show.”

I dutifully nodded, and she moved to stand in line with Uncle Oli.

Evander held out his arm, and I swallowed.

I had danced with Evander. Kissed him. Ridden with my body plastered against his in a saddle and woken up entirely on top of him.

So why did this simple, casual gesture feel bigger, somehow?

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



The roar of the crowd greeted us as soon as the doors were pushed open, though it dulled to a murmur when they observed Evander in their people's ceremonial tartan, attached to their princess.

I squeezed his arm, and we both waved before his free hand came to rest over mine. Tiny blasts of lightning shot from his fingertips to every piece of skin they touched.

"Breathe, Lemmikki," he said in a low tone.

Only then did I realize I hadn't been.

I couldn't.

But somehow, I forced my lungs to take in air, smiling for the sake of my people.

There were more guards than usual, some stationed around us and others throughout the crowd, thanks to the recent attack by the rebels and the general mood.

Generally, our people considered festivals as close to sacred as anything got in Lochlann, but nothing was outside the realm of possibility now that we were introducing a Socairan to the mix.

My father's voice rang out above the crowd. He greeted them first, and they roared in response.

Then they chanted for my mother, as they always did. *Warrior Queen.*

She obliged them, though her personal guard, Callum, stayed nearby with his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Next Avani spoke, a quick wish for a happy festival that sounded warmer than I knew she felt today.

And finally, they stepped aside, with Mamá taking the mantle again to announce our engagement officially before making room for Evander and me to move toward the center.

The excitement of the crowd wavered, a few of them obviously unsure about Evander, or any Socairan. I gripped his arm tighter, measuring each of my breaths as we waved to the crowd.

His expression remained impassive as always, though he did wave to the crowds, even those who scowled in our direction.

Those same people began booing and openly criticizing Evander and our engagement, encouraging others to do the same.

Evander tensed next to me, but his features didn't falter. He was used to the fear his presence brought to the people of Socair. But this was different, at least to me.

They didn't know him here. Who he was, what he had done, or what he was capable of.

Louder shouts of disapproval came from a row of villagers near the center of the crowd who were hurling accusations toward Evander, as well as my entire family for agreeing to such an alliance.

My mother raised her hands for silence, and the stern look on her face was enough to quiet some in the crowd. Her lips parted, but before she could speak, I stepped forward instead, releasing Evander's arm for the moment.

I raised my hands in a gesture similar to my mother's, and slowly, very slowly, silence fell. It was rare that I addressed the people, and I capitalized on their curiosity that I was doing so now.

"You deserve an explanation," I began.

Shouts of agreement rang out.

“It’s true that I was attacked in Socair.” Fury whipped through the crowd like a raging storm, and I held up a hand once again for quiet. This time, it took even longer than before.

I moved back to Evander’s side, linking my arm with his once more. His cool gaze assessed me in question, but I ignored him.

If today was for the show, we needed to give them one.

“I was attacked by rebels, just like we have here in Lochlann. But, Lord Stenvall,” I paused to look pointedly at Evander, “saved my life. If it weren’t for him, I never would have survived there, and I sure as stars wouldn’t be here with you now.”

I let them hear the truth in every word.

Though a few villagers and even some of the nobles skirting the edges of the crowd still wore dubious expressions, most of their features had softened.

“There has been animosity between Lochlann and Socair for so long that I think we have all begun to forget that there are other people on the other side of the Masach Mountains, not faceless, war-hungry monsters.”

Murmurs of reluctant agreement went through the people.

“Socair is not the enemy,” I said. “And my...future husband isn’t either.”

It was the first time I had actually thought of Evander that way. From the way his muscles tensed under my fingers, I wondered if that was true for him as well.

Breezing past that thought, I gave the people a blinding smile before I finished up my impromptu speech.

“I hope you will welcome him today. And treat him with the same love, kindness, and respect that you have always shown our family.”

The last part was probably a little too far considering the general disgruntlement of the people lately, but the message was clear.

Before I could brace myself, he lifted my hand to his mouth. His warm breath sent shivers down my arm and through my core before his lips brushed against my knuckles.

Heat flashed in his eyes at my sharp intake of breath.

A few in the crowd began applauding, and soon others joined them until the sound was nearly deafening.

“For the show,” he whispered, and I couldn’t tell if he was referring to the affection he showed just then, or to my speech.

Either way, I arched a single eyebrow in a challenge before echoing his statement. “For the show.”

We turned to stand back in line as Da’ made a few announcements about the day’s events, including the Highland Games that were the highlight each year. He welcomed everyone in attendance to participate along with him.

Each of the royals picked one event to compete in each year, and my father generally dominated the tree-trunk-throwing competition.

He also echoed my statement, making sure to remind the crowd, in a more diplomatic tone, that the Socairans would be granted the same respect and protection as any other member of the royal household.

Meaning, if anyone acted out of line today, they would find their arses in trouble with the Royal guard.

The crowd clapped their hands and gave mostly convincing sounds of approval, though it was clear that more than a few still had qualms.

Many qualms.

Hopefully, we had at least done enough to begin to change their thinking. In spite of his arseling tendencies, I knew all too well what it was like to be ostracized and despised in an enemy kingdom.

I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



We waved again, and Da' signaled to the musicians to play their instruments to open the festival.

As soon as the crowds began to disperse, Aunt Jocelyn was at my side once again, her face a mask of careful indifference as she looked between the two of us.

"That was well done, Rowan," she said quietly, eyeing the way my hands still clung to Evander. "I want you two to try to enjoy yourselves today, and spend your time focused on one another. Back up what you told the people about how you feel about him."

Turning to Evander, she narrowed her eyes slightly. "A smile or two today wouldn't go amiss, Lord Stenvall."

He raised his eyebrows, and a chuckle escaped me. "Let's not get too ridiculous."

She shook her head.

"At least the Games should help. Which one did you sign up for?" she asked him.

His brow furrowed, and I bit back a smile.

"Don't worry, Aunt Jocelyn. I signed us both up."

"For what?" His tone was wary--rightfully so.

"You'll see," I said cheerfully.

My aunt eyed us both for a long moment before turning to make sure the others were taken care of.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed a few of the older noblewomen watching us, whispering to one another about who knows what. A glance around showed that pretty much all eyes were on Evander and me today.

With a sigh, I leaned in closer to him.

“Well then, Lord Stenvall.” I peered up at his face, my hands running along the lapel of his jacket. “Where do you think we should display our joyous union for the entire kingdom to gawk upon first?”

“Is it joyous?” He asked the question like a challenge, his storm-cloud eyes meeting mine.

If that’s the way you want to play it...

Without waiting for a response, he trailed his fingers lightly from my shoulders to my waist. My heart beat a furious rhythm, and my chest rose and fell too quickly as he pulled me in closer, erasing the distance between us.

Part of me--the biggest part, if I was being honest--wanted to lose myself in this moment with him. But then I remembered why this was all for show.

I forced a nonchalance I didn’t feel, curving my lips up in a false smile.

“That’s an excellent question. I suppose, at least if I am to return to Lochlann, there will be plenty of stableboys to fill my time with. That could be joyous.” I brought my gaze back to his, looking innocently up at him through my lashes. “I’d be discreet, of course.”

His features barely twitched, though his eyes darkened to a charcoal shade of gray. They churned with the ruthlessness I knew always lurked just below the surface as he let out a low, dangerous chuckle, lowering his mouth to my neck.

Shivers raked over me at the whisper of his breath against my skin.

“The moment you wish to forfeit a man’s life, Lemmikki,” he said in a quiet growl, the movement of his warm lips setting my nerve endings on fire. “All you need to do is invite him to your bed.”

He pressed a kiss just below my earlobe.

The crowd around us disappeared as heat spread through every part of me. My entire body pulsed in time with my raging heartbeat.

Evander straightened to his full height, his eyes lingering on mine like he knew exactly how much he affected me. He stepped to the side and placed his hand on my lower back, gesturing for me to lead the way.

My heart gradually slowed to something only slightly faster than normal, and the noises of the festival crept back in.

“As long as you know the reverse is true as well.” My voice came out more breathlessly than I intended.

He nodded, a single, sharp dip of his head. “Then we have our terms.”

Do we?



Our regiment of guards followed us closely as we wound our way around the festival.

Tension thrummed between us, but my arm never left Evander's. We walked up and down the makeshift aisles, stopping to patronize the merchants and food vendors.

I took a deep breath through my nose, inhaling the heady aroma of sweet dough, custards, and chocolates before my feet were guiding us toward one cart in particular.

“Good day, Yer Highness,” the couple behind the cart greeted with a bow. Their expressions were more hesitant when they looked up at Evander.

“This is Laird Evander of Clan Bear,” I offered, and they dipped their heads in acknowledgement. “I thought he might enjoy one of your delicious waffles.”

The older woman gave a reluctant smile and nodded, passing over a glazed confection. I paid her husband handsomely, then reached out for the

treat.

“Thank you both.” I turned to Evander. “Van Van, you must try this,” I said, fighting a smile as I broke off a small piece of the sweet dough and brought it to his lips.

“Van Van?” he asked quietly, amusement dancing in his eyes.

I shrugged.

His full lips parted, and he accepted the morsel. I gently brushed my thumb against his lower lip, the barest whisper of a touch, before sliding my hand back to my side.

I told myself I just did it for his reaction, not because I wanted to feel the silky-smooth skin of his lips against my fingers.

He made a low murmur of pleasure before swallowing. My eyes went directly to the way his throat bobbed, and I wondered what the hell I had gotten myself into.

“Delicious,” he said in a low tone, turning back to the couple who was now smiling at him. “It was a pleasure to meet you both.”

“Ach, nae, laddie,” the woman said. “The pleasure was ours.”

Little by little, we worked our way around the festival. By the time we made our way to the games, several people had approached us to meet Evander or to offer their congratulations and well wishes.

With every interaction, we continued our show for the people of how invested we were in this engagement.

Or, at least, that’s what I told myself as Evander and I continued to challenge each other with small comments or displays of affection that absolutely were not bringing back memories of the way his lips felt against mine.

Though he still wasn’t precisely smiling, nobles and commoners alike seemed to be drawn in by him. When he spoke, people listened, and eyes followed us wherever we went.

I would have assumed it was because he was Socairan and a novelty had I

not seen it in action in his own kingdom.

Of course, there were the outliers, and more than a few people who didn't approve of me any more than they did Evander. The crowd gathered around the gaming arena was particularly opinionated.

"...Hooring around even before she went to Socair."

"Only one reason to marry that quickly."

"...and to think this is the second laird."

I rolled my eyes, having heard a version of all of this before. My reputation had been mediocre before I left, which wasn't entirely deserved. But then, it wasn't entirely undeserved either.

Evander's features, however, darkened to something far more murderous than his usual cocky smirk. His hand twitched toward his sword, and I shook my head.

"I know everything in Socair is punishable by death or dismemberment, but we don't react to a little gossip here," I said, though I was fairly certain he wouldn't have actually drawn his weapon. Probably. "Besides, you should hear what they say about Davin."

He appeared unconvinced, and the people standing closest to us were shooting him increasingly wary glances.

I sighed, but just before I leaned in to tell him to fix his resting *aalio* face, an unexpected voice sounded behind us.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



“**T**iny, gorgeous girl!”

My lips parted, and I turned to find one of my thieving uncles headed toward me in the crowd. Uncle Sai’s dark skin gleamed in the afternoon sun, his white teeth even more so.

“Cray,” he called in his heavily accented voice. “I found our girl.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked as he pulled me into a hug.

Evander was still at my side, surveying the situation with an intrigued expression. I had to admit he had done a remarkably good job of adapting to my crazy family, but the thieves were something else entirely.

Uncle Cray stepped up behind him. “Ye didna think we wouldna come to assess your man-friend here for ourselves, did ye?”

They both turned to the man-friend in question, and Sai gave a dramatic bow. “We are the Purloiners of the Piney Plantation,” he introduced them.

Cray reached up to tap him lightly on the head. “No’ again, Sai.”

He turned his narrowed gaze on Evander.

“We’ll nae force ye to donate your gold teeth tae the cause, Laddie, so long as ye be stayin’ on our girl’s good side.”

Evander raised his eyebrows, but all he said was, “I’m not certain I’m on her good side to begin with.”

“Decidedly not,” I agreed.

Before Cray could respond to that, a third unexpected guest arrived. White-blond waves framed an unusually gorgeous face, punctuated by one hazel eye and one that was blue.

“Fia!” I wrapped my arms around the woman who first taught me to wield a sword.

“Princess.” Her usual tone was dry as always, but I heard the affection in it as well. “Now, now. What do we have here?” she asked, looking at Evander.

He narrowed his eyes as his gaze swept over her, his brow furrowing. He was no one’s fool, though, and his wary stance told me he saw her for every bit the predator she could be when provoked.

Fia examined him in return, giving him a look that was equal parts threat and warning.

She had, in fairness, said she hated Socair.

He gave her a bare nod, and she returned it, apparently satisfied.

All right, then.

Da’ and Mamá came over before there were any more strange interactions, embracing the thieves in turn.

“Row,” my mother told me, “I think your event is one of the later ones, but Avani is about to start out the archery competition.”

“Does everyone know what we’re doing but me?” Evander asked.

I smirked. “Not everyone.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Can you give me a hint?”

A thoughtful noise sounded from the back of my throat. “I lost the sparring tourney last year, so I picked something we’ll win.”

“That doesn’t narrow it down,” he said with a cocky shrug.

I rolled my eyes, but one of the thieves spoke up before I could respond.

“And I’ll be competing in the caber toss this year against the king, to win my soulmate’s hand back,” Sai said with a dramatically wistful glance at my mother.

She laughed, while my father shook his head.

“Not this again, Sai,” Da’ said, echoing Cray’s words from earlier.

“Come on,” I tugged on Evander’s arm, finally rescuing him from them.
“Let’s go watch Avani.”



My sister won the archery competition, to the general surprise of no one. The younger twins managed to come in second in the three-legged race, narrowly defeated by a pair of siblings from the village.

Mamá and Isla also competed in that one. They weren’t real contenders with their height difference, but they seemed to amuse themselves a great deal, so there was that.

Gwyn was dominating the sparring log until Uncle Finn came along to defeat her, which she took with very little grace.

When they started to set up the obstacle course, I finally turned to Evander.

“It’s our turn,” I said, leading him to where the other couples were headed.

He raised a curious eyebrow, and my face split into a smile.

“It’s technically called the wife-carrying competition,” I told him. “But you don’t actually have to be married to compete. Avani and Mac...” I swallowed, trying to force back the memory.

Was it worse to remember how happy they had been, laughing and spattered in mud, even as they lost to Uncle Finn and Aunt Isla?

“In fairness, mo chridhe, he had a lot less to carry,” Mac said, laughing.

My sister swatted at him but couldn’t hold back her own giggle. “All I heard you say was, your muscles weren’t big enough.”

“No, I definitely said your arse was too big.”

She grabbed a handful of mud and ground it into his face. “Well, if

you're complaining..."

"Never," he said. "It's my favorite arse in all the world."

"Well, you're my favorite arse in all the world," she told him, kissing him in spite of the mud.

Evander's hand tightened around my waist, grounding me in the moment, and I went on.

"They competed two years ago," I finished. "Before they were married, and some of the betrothed in the village do as well."

"So, what does this game entail?"

"All you have to do is carry me through that obstacle course." I gestured to where the men were setting up beams and splashing buckets of water on the ground to make it muddier. "And we have to be the first across the finish line."

He sized me up with a considering expression.

"You chose this because you thought we would win?" Something in his tone implied that there had been another reason.

"And because I thought it would go the furthest with the people." I shrugged. "If you aren't going to do anything about your resting *aalio* face, then you leave me no choice but to find other ways to make you more approachable."

"If you say so," he muttered.

I didn't get the chance to respond before Aunt Jocelyn's voice sounded from behind us.

"Oli, you didn't," she protested.

"You said to sign us up for an event, and I obliged." His tone was pure mischief.

"You knew I didn't mean this one," she sighed.

I bit back a laugh. She hated getting muddy, and I doubted she was thrilled about being carted around like a sack of potatoes.

"Can you blame me if I want an excuse to have my gorgeous wife pressed

up against me?” he asked, eliciting a soft laugh from her.

Evander cleared his throat in what felt like a pointed manner, and I studiously ignored him.

Uncle Finn was overseeing the event this year, so it was his voice that called for us to take our places. We headed to the starting line while he announced the rules, which were largely obvious.

I stepped behind Evander, and he lowered himself enough for me to throw my arms around his neck. Then he put one firm hand under each of my thighs, bringing them around his waist.

And I had a moment of pure, intense, instant regret for choosing this competition.

Truthfully, the idea of a piggy-back ride hadn't seemed intimate in theory.

But the reality...

The reality was the warmth from his fingers that seeped all the way through the fabric of my dress.

The reality was my head on his shoulder, my lips inches from his ear.

The reality was that I had an unreasonable urge to close that gap, to put my teeth on his earlobe and see exactly how he reacted to that.

Before I could contemplate that too thoroughly, the whistle sounded, and Evander took off.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



We did, in fact, win the wife-carrying competition. Oli and Jocelyn came in fourth, but they were both laughing as they crossed the finish line.

Which made four of us. Even Evander couldn't fight back a chuckle by the time we were both spattered lightly in mud, surrounded by the cheers of the onlookers.

All in all, that had been a success.

Lanterns flickered to life around us as the sun blazed with fiery shades of pink and orange and purple. A smile tugged at my lips. I had waited all day for this part of the Summer Festival.

The village dances.

While the dances of the court were generally somewhat restrained, the village dances were always far more spirited. The first one was led out by my parents, who always acted like teenagers at the festivals.

Sure enough, only a few notes in and they were giggling, my father pulling her close to whisper something in her ear that made her blush with happiness.

Everyone applauded as the song ended, smiles on their faces as my parents bowed and moved away from the clearing.

The musicians had only played three simple notes before my younger

sisters started squealing, along with plenty of other girls. It was a dance for the women, and another contest of sorts.

Blair ran for Avani, and Bronwyn came to me, dragging us to the center of the dance space. Gwyn, Mamá, Isla, and Taisiya were already in one of the lines, leaving us to join the one in front.

The twins looked happier than I'd seen them in a while. Avani looked less thrilled, but a smile still tempted the corners of her mouth as she watched Bronwyn and Blair.

I looked up in time to catch Evander's bemused gaze before the music picked up speed. Then each of us was a blur of movement clapping our hands and stomping our feet in time with the music before launching into a series of kicks and fast-paced twirls.

All of this was done in synchronicity with the line of women behind us. The twins had clearly been practicing and were doing a decent job keeping up with the others around us.

After the tension-filled day and the constant attempts to ignore the rumor mill, dancing with my sisters was like a breath of fresh, exhilarating air.

Laughter sounded all around us as the tempo increased. Each dancer moved faster and faster in an attempt to keep up. The ones that couldn't rushed away from the dance floor, cheering the rest of us on.

By the time the song ended, only Avani, Gwyn, a handful of villagers, and I were left standing. The crowd roared with approval, and we fell into each other, panting and laughing.

Breathlessly, I searched the people around us until I found Evander again.

Though I didn't have to search for long. The force of his gaze was like a beacon, drawing my attention to him.

"Impressive," he said when I walked over to him.

"And here you doubted *my* stamina," I shot back.

He chuckled, but before he could respond, the musicians started up another tune.

Evander looked at me with a single raised eyebrow, holding out his hand. I took it, letting him lead me to the clearing for the spirited dance.

The upbeat music reverberated in my soul as his hands came around my waist, effortlessly picking me up and spinning me around before gently resting me on the grass again.

Not that it felt like I was firmly grounded anywhere tonight.

When he set me back down the second time, it was closer than before. For the show, of course.

That must have also been why my eyes didn't leave his face. Why my fingers tightened around his solid arms and my body moved so perfectly in sync with his.

The next song was a slower one. He wrapped his arm around my waist, pulling me close to him. I sucked in a sharp breath that he didn't miss, judging by the heated look that overtook his features.

His other hand captured mine, and my free hand rested on his chest.

Tension thrummed between us, but I couldn't look away from him, the way his eyes never left mine.

When the dance ended, one of the villagers stepped forward, holding out a mug of ale in his hand. "A kiss from the happy couple."

He gestured with his drink toward Evander and me, and the entire crowd cheered.

Evander didn't hesitate. He leaned down, pausing just before his lips touched mine long enough to whisper, "for the show," like the *aalio* that he was.

Then he closed the distance between us, claiming my mouth with his. Heat spread from my lips throughout my entire body, until my toes curled and fingertips tingled.

I let out an involuntary gasp just as Evander broke off the kiss. He straightened to his full height, stopping just long enough to murmur in my ear.

“I bet you aren’t thinking about stableboys now.”

My lips parted, and my eyes narrowed. Distantly, I heard cheers go up around us.

“As a matter of fact, I am.” I pasted a smile on for the crowd, talking through my gritted teeth.

He didn’t believe me, if his self-satisfied grin was anything to go by. Which was fair since I most definitely was lying.

Meanwhile, all I could think about was how impossibly stupid I was, because I had sworn that I wouldn’t be all in until he was.

But when it came to Evander, I wasn’t sure I knew another way to be. Which was a problem, in and of itself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



Evander and I reached an uneasy truce after the festival.

Or, rather, we got to a place where we didn't outwardly taunt each other quite so much. Tension still crackled between us, though that was nothing new.

I was learning to ignore it.

At least, that's what I told myself.

In any event, we spent the next few days thrust into the wonderful world of wedding planning.

Evander dutifully weighed in on everything from pastry choices to flowers, only stepping back when Madame Freya shooed him away from her designs. Even then, he only went as far as the adjacent armchair where he couldn't see.

I would need two dresses, one for Lochlann, and one in Clan Bear colors for Socair.

We started with the white dress. My mother and Aunt Isla flitted over, offering their opinions on the merits of each design until I chose one. Then came the black one, which I realized I was woefully underinformed to make a decision on.

"What kind of black dress?" I asked Evander.

"The wedding kind," he answered ever so helpfully.

I leveled a look at him. “Is there anything else I should know? Will I be flouting some unspoken Socairan law if I choose not to have a train? Are sleeves optional, or will I incur the wrath of the kingdom if I go with something off the shoulder?”

My mother and Isla snickered behind me, but Evander only gave me the bare twist of his lips that showed he was amused.

His voice, of course, came out as casual as ever. “Any black dress will do, Lemmikki.”

I let out a long-suffering sigh.

“Is it a small wedding?” I prodded. “Large? Formal?”

He gave a twin sigh to mine. “Formal, as are most events in Socair. And I wouldn’t say small, since all of the dukes and their families attend.”

I blinked, all traces of humor vanishing. “All of them?”

He shrugged, but there was tension in the movement. “Socairans and their traditions.”

So, Theo would be there. That wouldn’t be awkward at all.

Not to mention the disgusting Sir Mikhail.

Fabulous.

Another thought occurred to me on the heels of that one, even less pleasant, one that should have dawned on me a long, long time ago.

Ava would be there. Obviously.

The woman whose soulless smile still haunted my nightmares, the one who had left literal scars...physical ones, on my life.

And Evander’s. And Aunt Isla’s. So many people.

I hadn’t forgotten my vow to watch her die one day.

Looking at the proposals for the black dresses with their high, demure necklines and trailing sleeves, I felt my features harden.

“Any black dress?” I clarified, my voice colder than it had been before.

Evander tilted his head, assessing me. “Anything you want.”

Borrowing Madame Freya’s charcoal stick, I sketched some

modifications to the drawing and handed it back to her. She pursed her lips before opening her mouth to argue, but I shook my head.

“That’s the gown I want,” I said definitively.

The dressmaker looked at my mother.

Mamá surveyed my features for a long moment before nodding proudly.

“I think it will be perfect.”



After a long day of inane decision-making, it was finally time for family dinner.

The idea of being with my family instead of the entire court was a relief, right up until I realized it would be my first family dinner with Evander as my official betrothed. My mother was sure to make an ordeal of it.

Sure enough, flutes of sparkling wine were already on a rolling tray near the table when we walked in.

“We’re celebrating tonight.” Mamá’s words were pointed, with a sideways glance at my father.

He had been ostensibly absent from my three solid days of wedding planning, and even now, he wouldn’t look at me. A servant came in to pass around the wine, effectively distracting me from my surly Da’ for a few moments.

I turned toward Evander and subtly raised my glass.

“To our very platonic alliance,” I said under my breath, unable to hold back a small smirk.

His eyes lingered on my tilted lips before meeting mine. He lifted his own glass, a challenge in every single one of his features.

“To the sacrifices we make.”

I gave him a look to say *touché*, and he returned it in kind.

“Is the wedding really in just over a week?” Bronwyn asked, abruptly

pulling my attention to the rest of the table.

“And then you’re going to leave again?” Blair added, sadness tinging her usually buoyant tone.

“I have to--” I started, but Da’ cut me off.

“No, ye didn’t have to,” he growled. “I told ye I could take care of it, but instead of trusting me to do that, ye decided to traipse off and marry into the kingdom that repeatedly tried to kill ye.”

Evander tensed at my side. I opened my mouth to respond, but Mamá spoke over me.

“Logan,” she said somewhat sharply, “I’m sure Ellie is up from her nap. Why don’t you go fetch her?”

Da’ held her gaze for several heartbeats before he gave a terse nod, shoving back his chair and heading toward the door.

“I believe I’ll help,” Aunt Isla said, steel in her tone as she stood to follow him.

The door slammed shut behind her, and silence descended. Very, very awkward silence.

“I apologize for my husband,” my mother finally said to Evander. “He’s not usually...” She trailed off before she could finish the lie.

Avani sighed.

“There’s no point in sugar-coating it now, Mamá.” She looked at Evander with a semi-apologetic shrug. “You’re marrying into quite the temperamental family.”

“It’s all the red hair,” Uncle Finn chimed in with a shake of his head.

“Though I’m sure you never would have guessed that, what with Rowan being so amicable and accommodating,” Davin said blithely.

Evander’s lips tilted up in a smirk, though it was less solid than usual. “Those *are* the words I most often use to describe her.”

Conversation picked up again after that, at least until the door banged open several minutes later. My father entered first, holding Ellie, and Isla was

on his heels.

Aunt Isla cleared her throat as she made her way back to her seat, and Da' glared at her before picking up his glass.

“We are glad to welcome Lord Evander to our family,” he gritted out.

Another beat of silence passed.

This time, it was Uncle Oli who broke it, narrating in an overly dramatic tone. “Let the record reflect that on this day, the King of Lochlann hath shed tears of joy--”

Davin took over. “Many, many sincere tears, whilst welcoming his future son-in-law to the illustrious family.”

“I believe I see some even now, Brother,” Oli said, placing a hand to his heart in feigned sincerity. “Glistening in your very eyeballs.”

The twins giggled, and even Da' let out a low, reluctant chuckle, shaking his head.

“Ach, haud yer wheesht, Oli,” he finally said.

Evander's shoulders relaxed incrementally, and he took a sip of his wine.

After that came a more sincere round of congratulations and welcoming of Evander to the family, along with a few more jokes at my expense because my family never declined an opportunity to openly and relentlessly mock one another.

All the while, though, I couldn't stop watching Evander.

Each twitch of his lips, each word he spoke.

Whatever game he and I were playing, I couldn't help but feel like the stakes had just gotten even higher.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



By the time dinner was over, I was more than ready to retreat to Davin's rooms.

It was the one time of day I didn't feel pressured or tense, even if a traitorous, masochistic part of me missed the constant awareness of Evander's presence.

"So," Davin drew the word out as he dealt a round of cards. "King Logiebear was in quite the mood tonight."

"He's just protective of Row," Avani said. "Of all of us. And...he doesn't want her to go."

Sadness coated her tone, though she kept her features neutral. I reached over, touching her arm, but she waved me away.

"It's all right, Row. I'm all right," she assured me, pasting on a terse smile.

"Have you," Gallagher began gently, "decided whether you're staying or not?"

I suddenly found my hair extremely fascinating, fixating on smoothing out the ends of one spiral instead of making eye contact with him.

"We have not discussed that, as of yet," I answered.

"You two are ridiculous," Avani muttered with a shake of her head.

"Well, I hope you're talking about something, at least," Davin said under

his breath.

“Such as?” The way he said it had me on edge.

He took a long drink of his whiskey before responding. “I’ve just heard some interesting things about Socairan wedding traditions.”

“Like the black dress?” I asked.

He cleared his throat. “Not exactly.”

“What do you know?” I demanded, narrowing my eyes.

Davin was now the focus of everyone’s attention, something that normally didn’t faze him. But for some reason, this time, it made him shift in discomfort, which, in turn, had dread pooling in my stomach.

He straightened in his chair, taking a fortifying breath before responding. “You know how Aunt Charlie outlawed the witnessing of consummation...”

The blood drained from my face, as Gwyn chimed in. “Not that it stops the older families from doing it.”

“Let’s just say, I don’t believe it’s been outlawed in Socair,” Davin summed up. “And while I personally would have no problem with such an arrangement, I imagine it’s the sort of thing you’d need to work yourself up to.”

“No.” I shook my head. “Surely, Theo would have mentioned...” I trailed off, realizing that wasn’t quite true.

There were plenty of things he had waited to mention, and Evander wasn’t always much more forthcoming.

I looked beseechingly at Davin. “Can’t you...find that out? Isn’t that what you do, know things?”

He coughed on a dry laugh. “I’m flattered you think so, Row, but my sources on Socairan wedding rituals are largely lacking in Lochlann, unless you’d like me to go ask your future groom myself.”

“How would that conversation go?” Gallagher snorted. “Hello there, old chum. Care to talk details about your wedding night with my cousin?”

“I...see no problem.” I shrugged, and Gwyn erupted in laughter.

Avani ran a hand over her face, looking at me pointedly. “I swear, Row, you grew up a lot in Socair, but something about Evander seems to make you go backward in your maturity level.”

“Hurtful,” I muttered, tossing down a card.

“But true,” she bit back, rubbing her temples. “For stars’ sake, you’re going to have your first wedding night in just over a week. Don’t you think that merits a conversation?”

“Not really,” I said, smoothing out my curls again. “It won’t change anything.”

Her emerald eyes bored into mine. “I know that you’re afraid of letting him in, and I even understand why. I was there when you came home, Row.”

I looked away, any last unreasonable hope that I had hidden my grief those few months evaporating with her words.

“But don’t make choices now that you will regret for the rest of your life,” she continued. “Just...act like you’re an adult, about to marry another adult, instead of whatever the hell games the two of you have been playing this week.”

It was an uncomfortable echo of my thoughts earlier this evening.

“In fairness, that’s not one-sided,” Davin spoke up in my defense.

“No,” Gallagher agreed. “But someone needs to cave, and I get the feeling he’s not the caving type.”

“Then why should that be on Rowan?” Gwyn interjected, defiance in her tone.

“Fine.” Avani huffed out an irritable breath. “Enjoy your stubbornness, both of you. But at least talk to him about this, for your own sake, if nothing else.”

She shooed me away from the table, but Davin held out a hand.

“Wait,” he said.

We all looked expectantly at him.

He grabbed the bottle of whiskey, filling up my glass. “Take this

fortification when you go.”

I saluted him. “You’re a good man, Cousin.”

And with that, I was off to have a hopelessly awkward conversation with my fiancé.



I took the passageways until I found myself once again at Evander’s door.

Half the glass of whiskey was gone, and I still didn’t feel nearly ready for this conversation by the time I pushed into his room, more hesitantly than usual.

He glanced up casually from where he sat at the small desk. The sight of him with a quill in his hand was so achingly familiar that for a moment, I forgot why I had come to begin with.

Then his lips quirked into his usual bastard smirk, and I remembered. Unfortunately.

“We need to talk,” I blurted out.

He nodded. “About what your father said--”

“No, not that. Just...ignore him,” I muttered. “I am.”

“He isn’t wrong about the danger,” Evander said quietly.

“And you think that I don’t know that?” I looked up at him. “That I don’t have the reminder permanently etched into my skin?”

His features tightened. “I think that you have a habit of behaving recklessly, and we’re going to need to proceed with extreme caution, especially until our...alliance is official in Socair and you have the protection of a clan wife.”

Evander got to his feet, pouring himself a glass of whiskey high enough to rival mine. He gestured for us to go into the sitting room.

“Will that even matter, when Ava is a clan wife, too?” I asked, following him and sinking into a plush armchair.

I was happy to latch on to any distraction to keep me from what I actually came here to discuss.

“On the surface, yes,” he said thoughtfully. “Even the Dukes can’t harm their own wives. It’s probably the single limitation to their power, lest the people revolt. However, given Ava’s underhanded methods, it’s not a perfect solution.”

I met his gaze. “This is assuming your father even agrees to this.”

“I have taken measures to ensure that he will,” he said carefully. “Looking for a way out already, Lemmikki?”

I paused to take a small sip of my drink, mostly to hide my reaction to the endearment on his lips.

“Just wanting to be sure what I’m walking into.” Like a crowd of old perverts watching us on our wedding night. “Is there anything else I should know about, then? Any arcane blood rituals or sacrifices to the god of foul-tasting soup?”

He peered at me as if trying to figure out where I was really going with this. “No, from what I understand, it’s similar to weddings here.”

“And...” I took a deep breath, steeling myself. “What about the wedding night?”

Evander blinked several times, the only sign that he was surprised by that line of questioning. He took a long, slow sip of his whiskey.

“What is it you want to know?” he finally asked, his low tone indecipherable.

Already, I felt the heat trying to creep up from my chest. I willed it back down, willed myself not to think about the many directions that question could go.

“How is the consummation...verified?” It was an effort to keep my voice even.

His shoulders relaxed as my meaning visibly clicked into place for him. “Well, old Socairan law dictates that a room of witnesses is the only

reputable method...”

A vision flashed before my eyes, of Evander and me, bare, surrounded by a dozen Sir Mikhails. I blanched.

“But those laws are not generally adhered to anymore,” he went on, amusement glinting in his gaze.

Of course, the *aalio* had baited me on purpose.

“Even my dear father isn’t quite that archaic,” he explained. “It’s just the standard examination the next morning.”

“What standard examination?” I demanded.

Was this also to be in a room full of people?

He cleared his throat, taking another long dreg of his drink. “Of your...maidenhood. Or lack thereof, as the case may be.”

I nodded like this was no issue for me. “I see.”

Tipping my glass back, I swallowed another mouthful of whiskey. The alcohol burned on the way down, but it did nothing to detract from the intensely uncomfortable nature of this conversation.

Evander assessed me for a long moment before speaking carefully. “We don’t have to...do anything you don’t want to do.”

“So, we can forgo the charming exam?” I asked, a trace of sarcasm in my tone. “Which, for the record, is not *standard* here.”

“So I gathered by your line of questioning.” His tone was quietly sardonic. “And no, given Socairans and their traditions, we can’t forgo the examination and hope to maintain any sort of legitimacy. But we can...forgo the events the night before.”

My eyes narrowed. “Then how exactly would you expect me to pass the ever-important legitimacy examination?”

“Lemmikki.” He took a slow breath, running his hand through his hair. “Is there a reason you’re being inordinately difficult about this?”

I tilted my head, the pieces coming together. There was no part of him that believed I wouldn’t...pass that examination, whether we had a wedding

night or not.

Indignation slipped into the cracks in my mask of whiskey-infused calm.

“Is there a reason I shouldn’t be difficult about this?” I hedged. “Do you enjoy random strangers putting their hands in your...orifices?”

Evander choked on the drink he had just taken, and I couldn’t help a small, victorious chuckle.

“To clarify,” he said, gently scratching the stubble on his chin. “Both of those things are singular. Only one stranger...and only one orifice.”

A surprised burst of laughter escaped me. “Well, that’s much better then. Truly, I have nothing to be concerned about.”

“I’ll see what I can do about the examination,” he said, a ghost of a smile gracing his lips.

“No, no.” I shook my head. “As you said, sacrifices must be made. And I...can’t wait.”

I was only half joking.

“We both know we can’t afford for the legitimacy to be questioned,” I added in a more serious tone.

He eyed me over his glass. “Given the...rumors, I may be able to convince them that it doesn’t prove anything.”

I thought about what Avani had said, about acting like adults, about the things we needed to talk about.

Damn her for being right.

I took another swill of my drink, which was, indeed, fortifying, before looking Evander in the eyes.

“Does that bother you?” I didn’t know why the answer mattered to me when the rumors weren’t even true, but I supposed I wanted to know how he viewed women, *me*.

He didn’t ask what I was referring to. “A certain...lack of propriety has followed you around from the day I met you.”

“That’s not an answer,” I said.

“Does it bother me that you aren’t a paragon of purity?” He scoffed. “Storms, Lemmikki, I’m not that much of a hypocrite. What you’ve done in the past is your business.”

Something inside me eased at the admission, then tightened up again when I realized what he was admitting to. Perhaps it was I who was the hypocrite, because the idea of someone else ever being in Evander’s bed certainly bothered me.

Then, his features darkened. “Or are you asking if it bothers me that you were in Korhonan’s bed after you were in mine?”

I raised my eyebrows, trying to ignore the heat that surged through me at his words. He didn’t usually even acknowledge that I had been in his bed in any capacity, let alone say it so...possessively.

“I wasn’t,” I corrected him.

He sat up straighter, his brow furrowing. “What?”

“Theo hasn’t touched me since that day at the negotiations,” I admitted, taking a deep breath before I forced myself to expound. “And before that, we didn’t--I haven’t--”

I averted my eyes, not quite brave enough to look him full on in the face when I gave him the upper hand in this scenario.

Actual nudity in the sauna would be preferable to this feeling of being exposed any day.

Evander went still. “Did you not tell me in the tent that you and Korhonan were *hours away from a natural stopping point?*”

“Well, you were being an arseling,” I reminded him.

“And did you not imply again this week that you knew he was sleeping, thus indicating you were in his bed?” His tone was a low, dangerous growl.

“Please see my previous response for reference.” I swallowed, then added, “And if you’ll recall, I was certainly the only one being chaste that night.”

Bitterness crept into my tone, in spite of my efforts to keep it at bay.

“Lemmikki.” The word was softer than usual, and I forced myself to look at him again, forced my features not to waver.

“What?” I asked quietly.

“No one has been in my bed since you left it.” He spoke slowly, enunciating, like he was willing me to believe him.

“Then why were your blankets rumpled when you are so obsessive about them being neat?” I fired back, leaning against his desk.

Evander shifted uncomfortably, his stormy gaze boring into mine as if he was unsure of how to answer.

“Because I had been attempting to sleep in it before I gave up,” he said at last.

That gave me pause, but I narrowed my eyes in suspicion. Getting a straight answer out of him was proving to be as difficult as ever.

“You don’t sleep on both sides of the bed,” I pointed out.

Again, he paused. Then he shook his head. “No, but I sleep in the middle of it.”

I blew out a breath of disbelief. So much for him not lying.

“No, you don’t,” I argued.

He huffed in frustration, his voice louder when he spoke next. “Yes, I do.”

“I think I would remember--”

“I do since you left,” he all but yelled.

My lips parted. Several heartbeats of silence passed between us. He slept in the middle of the bed after I left... Because it felt empty? Because he *did* miss me?

I had shown more than enough of my cards for one night without asking those very revealing questions, though, so all I said was, “Oh.”

One stilted heartbeat passed, and then another, while we stared at each other from our respective chairs.

“Well then.” I cleared my throat, breaking the silence. “I suppose we’ll

both be making...sacrifices for our people,”

“Ah. Indeed.” A muscle twitched in Evander’s jaw, the one that meant he was trying not to laugh.

My eyes traveled from that strong jaw, covered in a day’s worth of stubble, to his full lips angled in amusement, and I abruptly got to my feet.

“I should get to bed.” Talking about beds felt dangerous, somehow. “My bed,” I clarified. “Alone.”

And now he was smiling outright.

“Goodnight,” I finished, all but fleeing from his room before I broke down and made that sacrifice this very moment.

The sound of his dark chuckle followed me into the passageway.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



The next morning, I headed to our weapons maker. Though Rayan was far more than that.

“Young Highness.” He greeted me with a smile, but no trace of surprise.

Rayan had a way with stones, almost as if they listened to him, and perhaps he listened to them as well. In any event, he always seemed to know things before other people did.

His white teeth gleamed against his deep umber skin, and his crystal-blue eyes lit up with amusement.

I smiled back. “Should I even bother telling you what I want?”

“Well, I can’t be expected to know *everything*.” Though his tone implied that he could.

“I don’t know about that,” I said, but I dutifully handed over my parchment with what I wanted on it.

Rayan looked from my note up to me, giving me a quick nod of his head.

“It shall be done, Your Highness.”

From there, I met Evander in the council room to finalize our wedding vows with language that both parties agreed on. Naturally, I had the word “obey” removed from mine, though I told him he was welcome to keep it in his.

He declined, and eventually, we settled on verbiage that was acceptable to everyone.

I got to my feet, preparing to head to the sparring room when my mother put a hand on my arm.

“I thought we could spend some time together this afternoon.” She looked meaningfully at my father, who still hadn’t bothered to speak to me other than what was strictly necessary, then at Evander. “*All of us.*”

We found ourselves in the sitting room of my parents’ suites. Avani, Evander, my parents, and I sat around the small, round table as my mother set up the board and pieces to Dominion.

It was a game of conquest, one my family had been playing for as long as I could remember. Da’ used it to teach us battle strategy. Plotting out moves in advance had never been my strong suit, though I did sometimes win through the sheer random, unexpected nature of my attacks.

And Mamá’s strengths lay more in winning the hearts of her people, so mostly, Da’ and Avani took turns winning.

Or Mac, when he had been here...

Mamá explained the rules, offering Evander a drink while she talked.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” he said.

“None of that. It’s Mamá now,” she said insistently.

Evander’s lips parted, and Avani shook her head. “There’s no point in arguing with her. It’s what Mac called her,” she offered.

“You don’t have to--” I started to say, knowing that the subject of mothers wasn’t easy for Evander, but he gave a terse nod.

“Mamá, then.”

“And you can call Logan--” my mother began, but Da’ cut her off.

“Your Majesty is fine.” He sounded grouchy enough that Avani let out a startled chuckle, and even Evander’s mouth twitched up.

But Mamá and I both glared at my father, something he steadfastly ignored.

“Newest member of the family can choose their color first,” Avani gestured to the miniscule painted soldiers in a valiant attempt to dispel the awkwardness.

“Black,” he said unsurprisingly.

She doled out the rest of the pieces, purple for herself, green for my mother, blue for Da’, and crimson for me. We went around the table, placing the soldiers on the part of the map we were claiming while my mother proceeded to ask Evander seventeen-hundred questions about himself.

I was learning all kinds of things.

Like that he had been in the military since he was fourteen, and that aside from Taras and Yuriy, he also had two older cousins from the uncle who had died in the war, both women, who were married and living in northern Bear.

It was an uncomfortable reminder that my father had killed his uncle. And his father had killed my grandparents.

So, all in all, we were always destined to have a really uncomplicated relationship.

With a sigh, I moved several of my little red men over into my father’s territory, picking up the attacker’s die.

“He’s baiting you into that,” Evander said under his breath, pausing in his conversation with Mamá.

My father raised an intrigued eyebrow.

There were no rules against collaborating. In fact, my sister and I frequently teamed up to take out Da’, even though that usually meant she wound up taking me down next.

Which meant my father’s reaction was because Evander was right. My turn wasn’t set in stone until I rolled the die, so I surveyed the board.

“Maybe,” I said. “But I don’t have another move.”

“Then fortify your borders,” he suggested.

I made a face at the inaction, and Evander chuckled under his breath.

“Sometimes winning requires patience, Lemmikki. And an actual plan.”

Da' looked between us, but he didn't say anything. I put the die back down, moving my pieces back and adding a few soldiers to my borders instead.

Play continued with Da', who advanced on Evander's territory in a manner that definitely felt pointed. Evander didn't react, though, just staged a retreat into Avani's part of the map, and Mamá's.

Or at least, that's what it looked like he was doing. As it turned out, he slowly and patiently crept through the sides of the map until he had Da' surrounded.

My father raised his eyebrows, reluctantly impressed at the strategy. He countered with a well-thought-out maneuver of his own, and Evander nodded in respect.

When Mamá's pieces were completely off the board, she got to her feet to order tea and pastries from the kitchens to tide us over until dinner.

"Evander doesn't like pastries," I told her.

He raised his eyebrow in surprise, but I had seen the grim determination with which he finished his dessert every night.

"Bread and cheese, then?" she offered.

I nodded, and a small smile tempted the corner of his mouth.

"That would be perfect," he said, still eyeing me curiously.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm just...surprised you noticed," he commented.

It was hard not to notice everything about Evander, but I wasn't about to tell him that and feed his substantial ego. Instead, I shrugged.

"It wasn't hard to guess that you would get no joy from something perfect and sweet," I teased.

"I don't deny that." He met my gaze solidly. "Why have perfect and sweet when you can have bold and unexpected?"

What he described was essentially the flavor profile of borscht, so it was possible the words were meant to be taken at face value.

But somehow, I didn't think so.

Warmth spread through me, and I couldn't seem to break our eye contact until Avani cleared her throat in a gentle reminder that it was apparently Evander's turn.

His muttered advice had at least kept me in play, though I was by no means in line to win. Finally, when more than an hour had passed and it was clear no one was winning, my mother declared a stalemate.

Which felt significant, all things considered.

When we got up to head to yet another exciting court dinner, my mother embraced Evander, giving him a gentle kiss on the cheek.

It was clear by his stance he was still somewhat uncomfortable with the affection my family doled out in overwhelming amounts, but then, it wasn't like he would have to deal with it very often in Socair.

Especially if I was here.

And he didn't have to deal with it from Da', since he declined to say more than a cursory *see you at dinner* to either of us.

I sighed, ignoring the sinking feeling in my chest.

Somehow, the several days until my wedding felt both too short and much too far away.

CHAPTER FORTY



The next couple of days were even busier. Or perhaps, I was just endeavoring to stay occupied.

Somewhere between avoiding any more talk of our wedding night with Evander, avoiding my father, and avoiding the memorial that was hanging over all of us like a black cloud, I managed to be constantly on the move.

Which is likely the only reason Evander and I managed to maintain whatever tenuous balance we had struck. When we weren't planning the wedding, we were greeting the guests who arrived, not to mention whatever business Evander continued to take care of via messenger birds and the time I was trying to spend with my family.

Of course, that was more difficult now that Avani had once again retreated to her rooms.

I went there this morning, as I had the past two mornings. And just like then, she told me she wasn't up for leaving. Guilt crashed over me in waves.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly, settling on the edge of her bed.

"For what?"

"For having my wedding so close to..." I trailed off.

She sat up to grab my hand. "Row, no. The thing is, this memorial...it will be hard, but it's not like a day goes by that I don't think about him. I want

what's best for you, and for Lochlann."

Sincerity shone from her hollow, red-rimmed eyes. She meant it. She would always do what was best for our people.

Even if it destroyed her.

"I want what's best for Lochlann, too," I told her. "I just hate this for you."

"I appreciate that," she said. "But honestly, please don't think that I blame you for doing this."

A bitter sound escaped me. "No, only Da' does that."

She sighed. "You should talk to him."

"He should talk to me," I shot back.

Avani shook her head. "Rowan, you're going to be leaving soon, and you're going to regret it if you don't sort this out. If you won't do it for yourself, do it for me. I can't have you two at odds for Mac's memorial."

Remorse flooded my veins. "All right, big sister. For you."



As I walked to my parents' study, I finally admitted to myself why I had been avoiding this conversation. It wasn't only stubbornness, though Da' had most certainly started whatever silent argument we were in.

It was that I couldn't handle hearing him put his disappointment in me into words when it already emanated from his every pore.

The door to his and Mamá's private study was ajar, so I rapped my knuckles against the wooden frame before pushing it the rest of the way open. Da' was sitting at his desk, staring intently at what I assumed was paperwork.

"Ach, ye want to speak with me now, mo nighean?" he said, barely glancing up.

Sighing, I closed the door behind me and took several steps closer.

“It isn’t like you came to talk to me, either,” I reminded him.

“No.” He made a bitter noise in the back of his throat. “Ye didn’t seem to have any need of me now. And why would ye? I’m only the one who raised ye for eighteen years.”

He still didn’t lift his eyes to me.

“Da’,” I protested. “You told me to make the decision, and I did. All my life, you have said that the people come first, and now when I do something for Lochlann, you’re upset with me?”

He squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head slightly.

“Ye know,” he said quietly, “when your older sister was born, I knew she would always belong to the kingdom, first.” He looked up, finally meeting my eyes. “But...you were all mine, mo bhobain.”

I was stunned into silence.

I stepped forward, close enough to see that what I thought was paperwork was actually a portrait of a much younger me. My curls were in disarray, and a mischievous smile graced my lips.

“I always knew ye would leave one day.” A whoosh of air escaped him. “But I didn’t expect it to be so soon, and I didn’t expect it to be so far.”

My chest broke apart with his words.

“Da’.” My voice was softer this time.

His mouth pulled into a grim line. “I can’t protect ye over there, mo bhobain.”

“But you taught me to protect myself,” I reminded him.

“Aye.” He nodded. “And I’m proud of ye, mo nighean. But ye cannot blame me for trying to keep ye.”

Tears pooled in my eyes, and I crossed the room, throwing myself into his arms. “No, Da’. I could never blame you for that.”

Whatever happened with Evander and me, I knew that my life would be forever altered after this.

So for now, I soaked up this moment, a space in time where I could be

just my father's daughter, his *bhobain*.
His darling rascal child.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



The day of the memorial dawned sunny and far too bright.

Grief hung in the air, suffocating us with its weight. But the weather didn't seem to care. It practically taunted us with its blue skies, pristine fluffy clouds, and gentle winds.

At least the animals were quiet. Avani's heartache was tangible, and they seemed to respect that. Not a single happy chirp from a bird could be heard anywhere near the castle.

Taisiya was silent, too, as she helped me into the emerald-colored dress that I had picked out the night before. It had been Mac's favorite color, so we would all be wearing it today.

It felt like a bad sign that tears were pricking at my eyes before I even had my tiara on. But then, I had always known this day would be impossible.

I headed into the private dining room for breakfast. It was a somber mood before I even opened the door. Most of the family was there already, eating in uncharacteristic silence in their various emerald-colored clothes.

Evander was among them. I realized it was the first time, aside from the kilt at the festival, that I had ever seen him wear anything besides black or one of his cream-colored shirts.

Somewhere through my haze of renewed grief, I couldn't help but notice the way the green tunic complimented his tawny skin to perfection, bringing

out the silver in his eyes and offsetting his midnight hair.

I looked away, my gaze landing instead on Avani's empty chair.

My mother rose from her seat, but my father put a hand on her arm. "I'll go, *mo leannan*."

She took a shaky breath and nodded.

Mac had grown up in this castle. He was like a son to my parents, who had been close with his father since the war. He was present for every meal. Every festival. Every family trip. Every good day, and all of the bad ones, too.

Lines of sorrow were etched into Mamá's elegant features. She had lost two boys now. Had lost a daughter to grief. And had thought she lost another to bad decisions and a cave-in.

I swallowed hard, trying not to think about the pain emanating from Davin, who had lost his best friend. Or MacKinnon himself, who sat still as a statue at the end of the table. He had raised Mac as his own son. Loved him as his own son.

And still, it was hard to imagine that anyone's grief could rival Avani's.

My eyes burned with unshed tears as I took my seat next to Evander.

Without a word, he passed me a plate already laden with all my favorite foods. The simple gesture nearly undid me.

"Thank you," I breathed.

He nodded wordlessly, and several more minutes of silence ticked by.

"You know," Davin began, his voice sounding too loud in the silent room. "If Mac were here...he would ask why we hadn't set the good whiskey out with breakfast."

I snorted on a reluctant laugh, my eyes landing on my baby sister.

"If Mac were here, he'd be doing his best imitation of Da' being a baby hog." I deepened my voice, using the thick Scottish brogue Mac had loved to tease my father with. "'Ach. That's no' how ye soothe a bairn, ye wee idget."

Everyone laughed, even MacKinnon letting out a sad chuckle.

“That’s the truth,” Isla said. “Though, he was no better. It’s a good thing there were two of the twins, or I’d have never gotten to hold them when he was around.”

Another chuckle went through the room, just as Avani walked back in the open doorway, my father at her heels. Her features were inscrutable, and I immediately tried to wipe the amusement off mine, afraid she would misread it.

Instead, the barest corner of her lips tilted up, though her eyes remained empty and raw.

“If Mac were here, he’d be making Da’ clear his throat uncomfortably while he planted a big ol’ inappropriate kiss right on my mouth for the whole room to see.”

“Aye, he would at tha’,” my father said, his voice rough with emotion. “He was a wee rascal, that one.”

“I wouldn’t go right to wee,” MacKinnon said. “The boy was taller than me before he reached twelve.”

“That’s when he started insisting on being called Mac,” Mamá chimed in, looking at MacKinnon. “He was so proud of the last name you gave him.”

The former rebel’s eyes filled with tears, but he smiled through them.

The mood was still somber, but it felt lighter, somehow. Or at least, bearable. For now.



When the meal was over, we made the trek from the dining room through the courtyard, then past the gardens to the royal mausoleum. With each step, a memory came back of a stolen moment in time with Mac.

Him teaching me to be scrappy when I wasn’t strong enough to hold a sword. Avani climbing into my bed to tell me about their first kiss. Him teaching us to fish at the lake house. The six of us sneaking out to his favorite

tavern, learning to play Kings and Arselings and singing bawdy drinking songs.

Tears filled my eyes, but a reluctant smile tugged at my lips until the final memory came. The day of the fire. The lingering smell of smoke in the air. The ashes on Avani's tear-strewn face...

My vision blurred, and I tried to shake the memory away. I needed to be strong for Avani, not crumble under the weight of my own grief.

Which I was clearly doing, because even my weather senses had been off today. The puffy white clouds in the sky had only given me a moment's warning before pelting our party with fat, depressing raindrops.

Resolving myself to do better, I lifted my chin and followed my family into the gleaming structure made of pristine white marble.

Avani's arm was linked in MacKinnon's, the man who was a second father to her, though I couldn't be sure which of them was truly supporting the other.

A warm hand slid over mine, and my fingers gradually unclenched. I hadn't even realized that I'd been squeezing Evander's arm until that moment. I glanced up at him apologetically, and he gave a gentle shake of his head.

We came to a stop in front of the marble pillar that stood as a memorial for Mac. One by one, each member of our family said a few words about him, just as we had done for his funeral a year ago.

When it was Davin's turn to step forward, his face was far more somber than I had ever seen it.

"We received a letter today," he said, pausing to take a fortifying breath. "It's from the family that Mac saved in the fire."

Immediately, my stomach went hollow. Evander's steadying grip was the only thing keeping me upright as Davin read the words from the letter, each line tinged with sadness and regret and eternal gratitude for Mac's sacrifice.

He had saved a father and mother and their two small children that day,

losing his own life when he returned for the children's grandmother. They vowed that they would never forget how his life had paid for theirs.

An endless flow of tears streamed down my sister's face, but she kept her head held high. My own face was wet as well, along with most everyone's in attendance.

Davin stepped away from the pillar. We spoke in no particular order. The twins each took their turn, followed by Mamá and MacKinnon.

Then I stepped away from Evander, heading to the pillar.

"Mac died the last time he saved someone, but it certainly wasn't the first," I said. "He was selfless like that, always saving people in one form or another. When he wasn't making it his personal mission to ensure that every village orphan was given a home, he was saving us in smaller ways. He saved me."

I swallowed back the lump in my throat. "From myself. From rebels who attacked us on the road. From the old perverts at court."

Everyone chuckled at that, even MacKinnon.

"So, I hate that my big brother is gone, but I also know that given the choice, he would have made the same one every time. To Mac." I raised my flask, and the family followed, echoing my sentiment.

I returned to Evander. Wordlessly, he took my hand in his, squeezing it ever so slightly. My aunts and uncles each said a few words after I did, and the younger twins shared a short memory. Then it was time for my sister to speak.

When Avani took her turn at the pillar, the room fell impossibly silent.

Her emerald eyes glistened in the candlelit room, her hands trembling at her sides, but her voice was remarkably even.

"I heard once that the saddest moment in life is when the person who gave you the best memories becomes nothing more than a memory themselves--" She cut off, clearing her throat. A small, pained sound escaped her before she continued. "And it's true."

Avani looked back at the pillar, her fingers outlining the ridges of Mac's name. *Arran Colin MacKinnon*.

"But at least we have those." She held up her flask, as we all had. "To Mac."

Again, we toasted him, then Da' gave the final word, handing off Baby Ellie to Mamá before he spoke.

"A day to come seems longer than a year that's gone." My father quoted an old proverb, taking a step closer to my sister and wrapping an arm around her shoulders. "Here's to the days to come where the pain will lessen, and the memories will only bring joy."

He gave my sister a reassuring squeeze and raised his flask a final time. The rest of us did the same, drinking once more to Mac's memory, to my father's words.

Even if sometimes it felt like those days would never come.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



After the memorial, the group set out to Mac’s favorite tavern, my family paying to close the place down for the day so the rest of us could have privacy.

All except Avani, who hadn’t left his memorial stone. I nodded to my mother to let her know I would stay, and Gallagher put a hand on Evander’s shoulder to lead him with the others.

When I went back into the mausoleum, Avani was seated with her back against the wall and her knees pulled up to her chest. I sank down next to her, mirroring her position.

“Is it weird that this empty stone is what we associate with him?” she asked. “There was no body left. No ashes to spread.”

“Well, there were a lot of ashes,” I amended. “But some of them were house ashes.”

She looked at me for a long moment, and I kicked myself for voicing the thought aloud, wondering if I had upset her. Then she let out a wry laugh.

“He probably wouldn’t have minded resting with a few house ashes. Especially if it was at least made of cedar wood.” She shrugged one shoulder with a half-smile. “Mac loved the smell of cedar.”

“Or if they were cooking roast that day,” I added. “He loved roast, too.”

With that, we both broke down into gales of laughter, the sound echoing

off the marble tomb walls and reverberating back to us. We laughed until our giggles turned into something closer to sobs, and Avani rubbed her hands over her face.

“You know, if Mac was here now,” she began, and I thought she was going to finish her sentence with something amusing. But she squeezed her eyes shut. “If Mac was here now, I wouldn’t feel like every single piece of me was shattering all over again every day.”

I clenched my hand tightly around hers, and she looked at me. “But sometimes, I think I get so caught up in that feeling that I didn’t realize what it was doing to you.”

“To me?” I shook my head. “Avani, no. You’re the one who lost your soulmate.”

“And you lost your brother.” Her eyes filled with tears once more. “And your sister, when I retreated into that room.”

“That wasn’t your fault,” I said in a low, earnest tone.

“Be that as it may, the thing is that I... I will never be whole again, but I do feel like I’m healing whatever pieces of me are left. Slowly.” Avani pierced me with her forest green gaze. “But you, little sister... Sometimes it feels like you’re still determined to be your own worst enemy.”

She tucked a hair behind my ear, softening the blow of her blunt assessment.

“I’m fine.” The words came out a whisper.

“No,” she said softly. “You’re not. And you haven’t been for a while.”

I swallowed, not responding this time.

“You know, Row,” she began wistfully. “I used to be so envious of you because you were fearless. I had to fight for the confidence I needed to rule. More often than not, I felt like Mac was lending me his.”

My lips parted. Avani had always been the epitome of a future queen. It never occurred to me that she felt like anything less.

“But you.” Pride filled her voice, her gaze. “You were always

unapologetically yourself, walking into every room with nothing but boldness. I honestly thought, even though I was older than you were, that there was nothing that scared you.”

I thought back to our childhood, wondering if that was true. It had been easy to feel invincible when we had the entire world at our fingertips. When we had been untouched by death and tragedy.

Avani wasn't finished. “But I see you with Evander now, and you're *terrified*. And I realize that after all these years, what's truly got you scared...is turning into me.”

“That's not true,” I said quickly.

But it was, in a way.

“It is,” she argued. “And it's all right. But I need you to understand something.”

She took both of my hands in her bigger ones, just like she always had when we were kids.

“Yes, I am broken and devastated and empty right now. I have been, for this whole past year.” Avani huffed out a breath, something between a laugh and a sound of disbelief. “I think, though, that you forget about the years before this one. Do you honestly think that I would give up a single second of my time with Mac?”

Now it was my turn to feel disbelief.

“To avoid feeling this way?” I asked. “Kind of...”

She shook her head again. “Life is so unexpectedly short sometimes. Even if I had known Mac was going to die that day, I never would have traded the feeling of loving him with everything that I had just to hurt a little bit less down the line.”

Her gaze felt more pointed with that last statement, and I sighed.

“You said yourself Evander wasn't all in,” I reminded her.

“Maybe that's true,” she allowed. “But neither are you, little sister. Not with anything, these days.”

I narrowed my eyes in a question.

“You don’t let yourself grieve.” Exasperation entered her tone. “Not for what happened in Socair, not for leaving now, not even for Mac, after all this time. It’s like you feel like you aren’t allowed to, but you loved him. He was your family.”

Her eyes still brimmed with tears, and I took a moment to consider what she said. I had never let myself face that sorrow, not really. It had felt like taking away from hers.

But I could see now that was never what she wanted. Probably not even what she needed.

“You’re wrong, you know,” I said. She opened her mouth to argue, but I cut her off. “You have always been brave, just like you were today. It was looking up to you that allowed me to feel that way, too.”

“But...” Tears pooled in my eyes. “You’re also right. And if Mac was here now...maybe I would still feel fearless.” I stopped, choking on a sob. “I miss him so, so much.”

“I miss him, too. Every minute of every day.” Avani wrapped her arms around me, and I squeezed her in return.

I hadn’t realized how much we both needed this, to grieve together instead of separately. But for the first time in the year since he died, I almost felt like I could breathe when I remembered my big brother.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



E ventually, Avani and I joined the others at the tavern, and we spent the evening telling stories about Mac. It was cathartic, but it was painful, all the same.

When we got back to the castle, I offered to stay in her room with her, but she shook her head.

“I think I need to be alone tonight with my memories of him,” she said quietly.

I hugged her one more time before walking ahead to my rooms. Taisiya was waiting already with a bath prepared. I sank gratefully into the warm water, willing it to soothe away the remaining ache of the day.

It didn't work.

Mostly, it just gave me too much quiet, too much time to reflect on everything Avani had said.

On everything Evander and I had become.

When I got out of the tub, Taisiya helped me into one of my summer nightgowns. This one was made of light creamy fabric, with a low bodice and flowing sleeves that ended at my elbows.

Being a spy must have given her a unique ability to read people, because instead of my usual nightly tea, she brought me a glass of red wine.

“Thank you,” I told her fervently, and she left with a short nod.

Then I was alone once again.

Every tick of the gilded clock in my sitting room felt like an accusation, like Avani telling me I was wasting precious time being afraid where I used to be bold.

I thought about the time before Mac died, the girl I was then, and I knew she wouldn't be sitting here right now.

As much as I missed my big brother, I missed that girl, too.

I missed loving freely and without reservation. I missed feeling like that kind of love made you invincible, instead of the other way around.

Avani had said she was healing a little bit each day. Maybe it was time I tried to do the same.



I had memorized this pathway by heart in the short time since Evander had come. Tonight, my feet seemed to take me down the winding hallways of their own accord until I finally ended up outside his door.

When I eased it open, he was lying on his bed, in the middle, just as he had said he did. He was propped up against several pillows, reading by the low light of the lantern on the table next to him, with his chest bare and his hair gently tousled.

He looked up casually when I entered, setting his book to the side.

At least, he was casual until his gaze actually landed on me. Whatever he saw in my features had his lips parting, no trace of their usual mocking lilt.

But for a change, he said nothing.

And I...I couldn't have spoken if I wanted to. I couldn't even really put into words why I was here, let alone find the breath to voice them aloud.

An invisible string had pulled me all the way from my rooms to his, and that same force propelled me to cross the distance to his bed. His gray eyes didn't leave mine, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

The silence in the room somehow felt both natural and endlessly strained, weighted down by everything that had always been between us.

I didn't break his gaze as I made my way onto the bed.

And he didn't move. Didn't speak. Didn't stop me or pull me closer. It was like he knew this... This stillness was what I needed.

My body seemed to move of its own accord, one leg sliding over him until I was straddling his hips. He was barely breathing now, which made two of us.

I realized this was why I had come. To feel closer to him. To feel his warmth and know that he was alive and real and, in whatever complicated, frustrating way, *mine*.

I reached up to run my hands through his hair, letting the silky strands ripple through my fingers. He gave a sharp intake of breath, his eyes intently fixed on mine, but he remained perilously still, as if he was afraid of breaking whatever spell had come over us.

With a featherlight touch, I trailed my fingers down his perfect face along the light stubble along his jaw. I traced his brow, his nose, the outline of his lips, from the dip in his top lip to the slightly fuller bottom one.

Then finally, slowly, I leaned toward him.

I hesitated, hovering with my mouth just outside of his, our breaths mingling in the space between. This moment was a precipice, and I wasn't sure I was ready to hurl myself over the edge.

"Lemmikki." He whispered it like a question.

A plea.

And *that word*. That word would be my undoing.

So, so slowly, I eased forward, my lips brushing against his with all the pressure of a butterfly's wings. I kissed first his top lip, then his bottom one, before finally pressing my mouth all the way against his.

Every connection I had ever tried to deny between us flared to life in this interminable moment, in this endless space where only he and I existed. My

mouth opened to his as I slid my tongue between his lips, tasting him.

He let out a soft groan. His hands came to rest gently at my waist, igniting me at each point of contact, but they didn't roam from there. While I explored his mouth with mine, my fingers took their time outlining each ridged muscle of his shoulders, his chest, his abdomen.

I felt everything in that moment.

And it was too much.

Maybe Avani was right. Maybe I had been terrified. Maybe when it came to Evander, I always would be.

I backed away, resting my forehead against his. Before I could stop them, before I could even think to move, two tears spilled down my cheeks.

“Lemmikki.” He said the word again, but this time it was filled with concern.

His thumbs came up to gently brush the tears away, and he pressed his lips against my forehead.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.” I shook my head. “Everything.”

I moved to slide off of his lap, to retreat from the situation I had flung myself thoughtlessly into, but his iron grip came around me.

I didn't want to cave more than I already had, wasn't sure I could bear a single moment further of this horrendously vulnerable feeling, but the rare sincerity shining from his gaze stole all of my resolve.

“You said no.” The words flew from my lips, unbidden.

“What?” His brow furrowed.

“I asked if you were planning on proposing when you left.” My voice was a quiet rasp. “And you said *no*.”

Evander squeezed his eyes shut in what might have been remorse, and I went on.

“I keep trying to get past it,” I said truthfully. “But what does that mean, exactly? That you're here out of convenience? Luck? Did you come out of

spite and then stay because I agreed to marry you?”

Opening his eyes, he reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, trailing his thumb along the side of my face before he spoke.

“When I got Korhonan’s letter about marrying you, I didn’t know what I was going to do,” he said slowly. “So many of your choices had already been taken from you in Socair. I thought this was the one thing you were choosing for yourself. Was it really my place to take that from you?”

“But you came,” I reminded him.

He expelled a huff of air, his thumb stroking my cheek in a slow rhythm.

“I couldn't seem to stop myself,” he admitted. “I needed to know...to see it for myself. And then I got here, and I realized that no matter what else was happening, you were still mine.”

I froze, that familiar ache searing right into my heart once again.

“Is that what it comes down to, even now, Evander?” I scarcely breathed the words. “The fact that you think you own me.”

“I do own you, Lemmikki.” His gaze bored into mine, but I glanced away, another wave of tears rolling down my face.

Of course.

He put a firm hand on my chin, guiding it toward him until I was forced to look at him once more.

“But you own me, too,” he whispered.

My lips parted, and I sucked in a breath, the words reverberating down to the deepest parts of my soul.

They felt right. Complete.

Hadn't I just been thinking that he was mine?

He shifted until he could close the gap between us, bringing his mouth to mine. Gently, he sucked on my bottom lip, and I gasped.

His lips slid to my jaw, my neck, my collarbone. Heat flooded my veins, lighting my core on fire.

He pressed a trail of tender kisses down my shoulder, then along the low

line of my bodice, taking his time with each one. Only his steady hand on my back kept me upright, kept me from melting entirely into him.

Gradually, he worked his way back up to my mouth, moving us until we were both lying on our sides with my head on his muscled bicep. I ran my hand through his hair again, pulling his lips even closer to mine.

I could stay like this forever.

The thought was unreasonable, but it felt no less true. I could remain here, in this bed, never eating or drinking or moving, subsisting only on the feeling of his body against mine and the taste of his skin on my lips.

We stayed that way for hours, until the sun was peeking through the curtains, and finally, he kissed his way back up to my forehead.

“We should get some rest, Lemmikki.” His voice was hoarse with sleep, and it made me want to do anything but rest.

He was right, though. I was exhausted, and we had another long day of wedding planning tomorrow. The last day, in fact, before our actual wedding.

So I nodded, and he pulled me against his chest, where I fell into my first dreamless sleep in months.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



A sharp knock at the door startled me out of a peaceful sleep, and Evander's arms tensed around me.

My face was buried in his chest, my legs intertwined with his, and the last thing I wanted to do was move, but...

"Your breakfast, Lord Evander," a polite voice called.

Right. Breakfast in our rooms, because our day was filled to the brim with last-minute wedding preparations. Which meant Taisiya was likely already in mine.

And since she worked for my father...

"*Der'mo*," I cursed under my breath, forcing myself to wriggle out of Evander's arms.

He was already alert enough to shoot me a questioning glance.

"I have to go before Da' finds out I'm here and murders you," I whispered, moving toward the edge of the bed.

That was only half the reason I was in such a hurry to move. If I stayed here, I wasn't sure I trusted myself not to cancel everything and say to the stars with all of our wedding plans just to spend a little longer in Evander's arms.

I avoided his gaze before he could see the very obvious longing in mine.

"Besides," I reminded him, "you have your stag hunt this morning, so my

cousins are sure to come barreling in at any moment.”

I ignored his probing gaze as I rushed toward the passageway, sprinting down the narrow hallways and hurling myself in my rooms just in time for Taisiya to enter with a silver tray.

“I was just...getting some air, before breakfast,” I lied badly.

She glanced from my rumpled hair and nightgown to my perfectly made bed, raising a single, sardonic eyebrow, before making a noncommittal noise in the back of her throat.

Well. At least, I had tried.

I wolfed down my breakfast, and Taisiya fixed my hair and face more hurriedly than usual, so I had just enough time to run by Rayan’s before my dress fittings.



Rayan was waiting with his usual expectant expression when I entered, but this time, there was no accompanying smile.

Dread churned in my gut.

“Young Highness,” he said, a gravity to his voice that wasn’t usually there. “Your order is ready.”

“That sounds like good news, Master Rayan,” I said carefully.

“They are some of my best work,” he responded, the barest hint of a smile pulling up the edges of his lips at last.

He handed over the wrapped parcels, and I didn’t bother to insult him by inspecting them. Besides, I was too busy trying to analyze his expression.

Rayan held my gaze with his piercingly blue eyes, taking out another parcel from beneath his counter. This one was in a rectangular wooden box, nearly as long as the first package he had given me and twice as wide.

It was secured with a hefty metal clasp. For reasons I couldn’t explain, no part of me wanted to know what was inside that box.

“I made you something else,” he said quietly.

I shot him a questioning glance, almost afraid to voice the question aloud.

“Something I suspect you will need,” he expounded.

The man had worked for the Luanian royal family since before my parents’ rule. He had hand-crafted every weapon in my family, imbuing them all with his tremendous skill...and perhaps a bit more.

He never openly spoke of his fae blood. Only his agelessness and the things he shouldn’t have known gave him away. Though, I had wondered more than once about my mother’s sword, the way it seemed more like an extension of her arm.

With a training sword, she was a decent sword-fighter at best, but with the one Rayan gave her, she became something else entirely. And he had given it to her before she knew she needed it.

So, what had he given me? And why did he look so unhappy about it?

“All right,” I said in a low tone, reaching for the clasp.

He put a hand on mine. “I am a cautious person, Princess. It is possible you will never have any need of what is in this box. So for your sake, wait to open it until and if that need does arise. I suspect you will know, if that time comes.”

I nodded slowly. “Thank you, for these... All of it.”

“Of course, Young Highness,” he said with a small bow. “And congratulations on your wedding.”

He gave me a sincere smile at last, and I tried my best to return it before I turned to go.

Whatever happiness I had eked out in the early hours of last night felt tenuous now, though, and I couldn’t help but wonder when the other shoe would drop.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



I stopped at my rooms to drop off the packages before heading to Madame Freya's. At least the long walk down the corridors to the eastern wing of the castle gave me time to clear my head.

It was always possible that something would go wrong, and so many things took us entirely by surprise. I would take Rayan's advice as best I could, not worrying about whatever he felt like I would need until the time came.

Besides, he said it might be *never*.

So, I would just...go with that.

The dressmaker's workspace was an open room with plenty of settees and chairs, which were already occupied by Aunts Isla and Jocelyn, Avani, Gwyn, and my mother.

"You look tired, Darling. Are you not sleeping again?" Mamá asked, standing to put a hand on my face.

A flush crept into my cheeks, and Avani raised a knowing eyebrow at me.

"Just all the excitement..." I said with a wan smile.

I took the opportunity to turn my face away from my mother, surveying my older sister instead. She also looked tired, but not as sorrowful as I expected. Yesterday must have been cathartic for her as well.

She seemed genuinely happy to be here, her lips tilted upward and her

eyes bright.

I was distracted from observing her when Madame Freya demanded I try on the first dress.

There was no modesty among the women in my family, so I stripped down in the main room, letting myself be calmed by their chatter. Aunt Isla handed out sparkling wine mixed with apple juice while the dressmaker helped me into the white dress.

Despite my misgivings about my visit to Rayan, I couldn't help a thrill of excitement running through me after last night. Especially when I remembered the way Evander's lips had felt against my bare skin.

Still, there was nervousness, too. Because last night had already felt...overwhelming in its intensity. And we hadn't even had our wedding night yet. There was a reason I had stopped short of that in the past, and now...

I was conveniently distracted by the arduous task of being wrestled into the mountains of fabric that made up this wedding gown. At least once I had my arms in the sleeves, I was permitted a sparkling drink of my own.

Taking careful sips, I stood on the platform surrounded by mirrors while Madame's assistant painstakingly fastened countless pearl buttons along my spine.

"Well, that will be interesting for Evander to get you back out of," Gwyn muttered under her breath.

But it wasn't quiet enough.

"Gwyndolyn," Aunt Isla chastised. Then, she gave the dress a considering glance. "True, though. It will certainly build the anticipation."

Jocelyn laughed softly, shaking her head, and my mother spoke around her wine flute.

"I don't know." She shrugged. "Looks like he has deft fingers, that one."

"Mamá!" My cheeks flamed from embarrassment...but also because I had thought the same thing, more than once.

“I’m just saying,” Avani added, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Did you see the way the man peeled those apples?”

“I did.” I sighed, remembering the way my eyes had been fixated on his capable hands. “I did.”



After trying on both of my wedding dresses, I moved on to a series of items for my trousseau that invited even more commentary from literally everyone in the room.

Even Madame Freya made a few choice remarks about the black lacy negligee she had designed.

While she left to fetch a few others that she had forgotten about, Aunt Isla wrapped a silky, cream-colored robe over my shift and plied me with chocolates and sparkling wine.

I was sitting on the settee eating yet another piece of the caramel-coated deliciousness when the door eased open on its hinges. My mother rushed in front of me to guard me from view, but I peeked around her far enough to spot my cousin.

Immediately, I knew that something was wrong. They shouldn’t be back until much later.

“Davin?” I stepped around my mother, taking in the blood on Davin’s tunic with mounting trepidation.

“Tell me that belongs to a stag,” I said.

“Would that I could, Cousin. We were attacked by another group of rebels.” His voice was calm, but there was something brimming behind his eyes.

“What else?”

“Evander was...somewhat injured, but he’s all right,” he hastened to add.

My heart dropped into my stomach, my blood roaring in my ears. He

wouldn't be telling me at all, let alone with that hesitant look on his face, if it was nothing to be concerned about.

Dav kept talking to explain, but I barely heard him. "The rebels were clearly targeting him--"

"Where is Evander now?" I interrupted him.

"In his rooms, I'd imagine--"

I pushed past him, making my way down the halls. After a couple of scandalized glances, I slipped into the passageways instead, all but running to Evander's rooms.

I barreled in through his panel door, and he looked up sharply from where he stood bare-chested with a bandage wrapped from his shoulder to his collarbone. Crimson droplets splattered his face and neck.

His brow creased in concern at whatever he saw on my face.

"Davin said you were injured," I blurted out. "Why didn't you come to get me?"

His features softened, and he crossed the distance between us. "Because it was nothing serious, just a scrape."

"Just a scrape that almost severed your head from your neck," I argued, my voice shakier than I would have liked. It was true, though, based on the location and angle of the bandage.

"What happened?" I asked.

My fingers went to the blood staining his skin, and he captured my hand with his.

"Davin and I wandered away from the guards to follow a stag, and we were surrounded," he explained patiently. "Just a few rebels trying to stop the alliance."

I found myself running my hands frantically across his chest, his abdomen, like I needed to assure myself he was whole and alive.

His features were calm, though amusement crept in as well. I scowled.

"I'm all right, Lemmikki." Then for the first time, his gaze traveled down

to the dressing gown that had come open in my haste to get here...and the very insubstantial fabric beneath it.

He squeezed his eyes shut. "Though I suspect you might be trying to kill me now." His voice was a growl that tugged at things low in my abdomen.

A reluctant smirk tugged at my lips as I wrapped the robe more tightly around myself and belted it into place.

"It's nothing you haven't seen before," I reminded him. "Let's not pretend that steam in the sauna was a real barrier."

He opened his eyes, answering my crooked smile with one of his own. "You sound like you're speaking from experience, Lemmikki. Perhaps you were the one looking through the steam."

"I wasn't *not* looking through the steam," I said boldly.

He groaned, shaking his head and skimming his hands along my shoulders. "If I kiss you now, are you going to run away again?"

My mouth dropped open in offense. "I did not *run away* this morning."

He leveled a look at me, and I averted my gaze.

"All right. Fine. I did. But only because..." I trailed off.

Evander's hand cupped my chin, turning my face back to his.

"Because?" he prodded.

His tone was teasing, but there was the barest hint of wariness in his expression.

It wasn't fun anymore, each of us making the other uncertain. I hesitated for less than a second before deciding on the truth.

"Because we had a busy day," I said softly, peering up at him through my lashes. "And if I had stayed in that bed another minute, we would still be in it now."

Heat sparked in his gaze, his lips parting with the same hunger I felt rising up in myself. Energy crackled between us for one heartbeat, then another, before he tilted his face toward mine.

"Der'mo, Lemmikki," he growled, just before his mouth crashed against

mine.

His hand trailed along the hemline of my robe, his knuckles grazing my skin on the way down. I gasped, fisting my fingers in his hair and biting down hard on his lower lip, pure need overwhelming any sense of restraint I had left.

He made a sound low in his throat, pressing further against me. I skated my hands down the sides of his neck until they hit his bandage, and it imbued me with just enough sense to pull away.

Even if it did take every ounce of self-control I never knew I possessed. But I needed to get Gallagher in here to look at his wound, because I in no way trusted his assessment about how minor it was.

“And that,” I said breathlessly, “is why I left quickly this morning.”

I didn’t say the rest, that as much as my body craved his, the idea of taking that final step with him filled me with a curious mix of elation and terror.

As always, though, he seemed to read it in my expression. His features softened, and he nodded, planting one final kiss against my forehead before backing away.

“I should get cleaned up, Lemmikki. And I can’t believe I’m saying this, but you...you should get dressed.” He said the words wryly, and I gave him another smirk.

“Fair enough.” I needed to go get Gallagher anyway.

And I needed a moment, or two, or a hundred, to compose myself before I was back in this room with Evander.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



Taisiya was already in my rooms when I arrived. She helped me throw on a dress, and I sought out Gallagher.

He was in his family's suites, having just gotten himself cleaned up from the battle.

"Would you mind seeing to Evander's wound?" I asked. "I know it's not fatal, but..."

"Of course, Row." He looked at me speculatively, getting to his feet. "You know, that's how I knew you were going to pick him. I mean, I knew you *should* before that, but that's when I knew you *would*."

I raised my eyebrows, and he expounded.

"That day when you didn't make him leave. You trusted him even when you thought you hated him."

That was true enough. In some bizarre way, I had trusted him from the moment I met him. That was why I had never been truly afraid, even trapped alone in a carriage with him.

"Then why did you stop me from sparring with him?" I asked curiously as we took off down the halls.

Gallagher chuckled under his breath. "Because you have a certain unrestrained quality about you, Cousin. And I wasn't sure any of us needed to witness that, least of all your other suitor."

I winced. That was also true enough.

“Thank you, then,” I said, just as we were getting to Evander’s rooms.

Gallagher knocked, and I realized this was the first time I had been to Evander’s front door. He opened it with his hair still damp from the bath, falling in his eyes, and his shirt laces undone.

My cousin’s words about my lack of restraint resounded in my head, and I fought to keep my features neutral.

I must have failed, if Evander’s self-satisfied expression was anything to go by.

“I thought I might look at that wound,” Gallagher said.

“Of course.” Evander stepped back to allow us entry.

He removed his shirt in one swift movement that I definitely did not track with my eyes, sinking gracefully into one of the plush armchairs near the fireplace.

Gallagher unfastened the bandage to reveal a deep, angry cut spanning from his shoulder all the way to his neck.

“A scrape?” I demanded.

Evander shrugged his uninjured shoulder, and I glared at him. My cousin looked from Evander to me, hesitating only a moment before lifting his hand toward the wound.

“May I?” he asked Evander.

Evander eyed him curiously but nodded. Gallagher put his hand over the cut, holding it there for several long moments. When he pulled it away, the skin had knitted itself back together, leaving only a thin white line where the red one had been.

“Shall I chalk this up to an interest in healing?” Evander said sardonically.

“Well, you certainly can’t blame Gallagher’s feminine needs,” I responded in the same tone.

“I’ll leave you two, but you should rest until dinner.” My cousin

interrupted our banter, laughter in his tone. “Healing takes a lot of your own energy.”

He left then, and I sighed. Evander deserved an explanation if he was marrying into our family, but I wasn’t sure where to begin.

“You know...about my weather...thing,” I began eloquently.

He studied me thoughtfully.

“Well, I know you have more than an interest in the weather, or an injured appendage.” He smirked before adding, “Or pressing feminine needs.”

I laughed softly. “Yet you never asked me about it.”

“I didn’t need to.” He shrugged. “I trusted you.”

The explanation filled me with a combination of warmth and confusion.

“Even that first time? Why *did* you believe me?” I didn’t know why the answer was so important to me, but I needed to know.

Evander leveled a look at me.

“Lemmikki, you looked me in the eye when the Summit spoke of dismembering you and made a joke about courier costs,” he said incredulously. “I kidnapped you, took you to a territory you had heard horror stories about, and you didn’t shed a single tear.” He huffed out a laugh. “Storms, when we were attacked and outnumbered, you unflinchingly wielded a sword and then stared me down defiantly with your torn dress and your blood-spattered clothes.”

His lips tilted into a small smile, amusement sparking in his gaze. “But besides all of those things, you are a terrible, terrible liar. So, when you looked at the clouds with something close to actual fear and told me we needed to stop for a storm, I didn’t know how you knew, but I would have been an idiot not to believe you.”

Evander had always possessed a unique ability to make me feel seen in a way that no one else ever had. I stepped between his knees, leaning my face down to his and pressing a quick kiss on his lips.

“Thank you,” I murmured against his lips.

“For what?” he asked.

“For not making me come up with a more ridiculous lie that day,” I said, backing away. “Because you’re right, I’m not great at it.”

I explained briefly about the reason behind the need for secrecy, the fae blood.

“The others are used to hiding their gifts, but in Lochlann, it was never really an issue for me.” I shrugged.

Evander furrowed his brow in confusion. “Why not?”

“The weather here is predictable,” I explained. “And that’s all I can really do.”

“Are you sure?” he asked after a beat.

I let out a short laugh. “I think I would have noticed something else by now.”

His features took on the analytical expression that meant the gears were turning in his mind.

“I assumed you influenced it, to some extent. At the memorial...there was no humidity in the air, and those clouds were hardly ominous.” He met my eyes. “Then you were grieving, and the rain came down.”

It was true that I hadn’t sensed the rain until right before it fell. The prickling awareness had overtaken me at the very last minute, but I had assumed that was because I was distracted.

“That must have been a coincidence,” I reasoned. “I’ve never been able to do anything like that.”

He made a thoughtful noise in the back of his throat, but didn’t press the issue, probably because his eyelids were fluttering shut.

“Come on.” I tugged on his hand. “Gal was right. You need to rest before dinner.”

He nodded, pushing himself to his feet, and I led him to his bed. Once he laid down, I curled up against his uninjured side, pressing a soft kiss against

his chest.

The knowledge that he could have died today edged out the last bits of concern I had that someone might find us in here.

Besides, tomorrow, he would be my husband.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



That night, dinner was another family affair so that Evander and I could exchange our customary ring and gift.

Normally, he would have proposed with the ring, and I would have answered with my gift, but of course, there was nothing normal about any of this.

So, I sat next to Evander at the table while my family watched us and tried to pretend it wasn't awkward, tried to pretend that giving each other gifts was something we did all the time.

That our relationship had been built on courting and mutual affection rather than politics and mutual stubbornness.

Evander eyed the long, rectangular package I put in front of him with curiosity.

Did he receive gifts often? Did he and his cousins exchange them at festivals or at random?

It struck me that I had no real idea what Evander's life was like, or what mine would be like...for however long I was in Socair. I didn't have long to dwell on that thought, though, before Evander reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small box made of engraved silver.

He handed it out to me with the slightest bit of trepidation behind his usual haughty smirk.

Even though I knew what it was, or maybe *because* I knew what it was, my stomach fluttered nervously as I took the box. Upon closer inspection, the engraving was the same outline of a bear that was on the shoulder of Evander's uniforms, but behind it was the rowan tree from my signet ring.

A smile tugged at my lips. I gently undid the clasp, feeling the weight of my family's eyes on me. Of Evander's eyes.

When I opened the lid, I couldn't help a small gasp.

I had never seen a ring like this one. The center stone was onyx and shaped like an upside-down kite. Brilliant sparkling diamonds were clustered along the lower sides, contrasting sharply with the deep black of the larger gem.

It was striking. Gorgeous. But edged with something just a little bit... ruthless.

Like Evander.

I lifted my eyes up to find him studying me carefully for my reaction.

"It's perfect," I said, turning the box back toward him.

His smile turned more genuine as he took the ring out. He held my left hand in one of his while he slowly slid the band onto my third finger, where it fit exactly right. Lightning crackled between us, sending scorching waves everywhere his skin grazed mine.

Then Davin cleared his throat, loudly and pointedly, pulling us out of whatever trance we were in. Evander released my hand, smirking, and went to open his gift.

I held my breath as he pulled the lid off of his box. When he efficiently peeled away the cloth wrapping, his lips parted in surprise.

Sensing my family's extreme curiosity, he pulled the first saber out of the box. Rayan truly had outdone himself.

The blade was lightweight and made of a reinforced black steel that Rayan had designed specifically for Evander. The handles were scalloped, edged in a dark silver that burst from the hilt like small flames.

And engraved at the base were two simple words: *Lord Arseling*.

When his eyes found the inscription, a chuckle escaped his lips in a huff of air.

“I just wanted to make sure you knew they were yours,” I said with an innocent shrug.

His eyes blazed into mine, like he suspected I was talking about more than the sabers.

And maybe I was.

“They’re exquisite,” he said, his gaze never leaving mine.

And I suspected he was talking about more than the sabers, too.



We left the family dinner, and Evander offered to walk me back to my rooms. His hand was on my lower back, warming me from the outside in.

When we got in the hallway, I turned toward his rooms instead of mine.

“Are we going to my rooms then? Through...the front door?” He smirked, but there was wariness as well.

I had, in fairness, told him my father would kill him if he knew we were in there together last night.

“We’re just stopping by to get that vodka I know is stashed in your trunks somewhere,” I assured him.

“And how would you know that?” He quirked an eyebrow.

“Because I could taste it on your lips,” I said with a wicked smile.

It wasn’t true. I had just seen his empty glass. But the way his features went slack with desire was more than worth the lie.

“Der’mo, Lemmikki.” He shook his head. “I swear, you’ll be the death of me.”

A low chuckle escaped my lips just as we were getting to his door.

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going with said vodka, or shall I

endeavor to guess?” he asked.

“You’ll see,” I shrugged.

I followed him into his rooms and shut the door behind us.

Instead of going to get the vodka, though, he set his swords down and spun around. Putting his hands on either side of my waist, he effortlessly lifted me up against the door until I was eye level with him, pressing himself gently against me.

He leaned in until his lips were barely brushing mine, then swept them over to my ear.

“I wonder what I’ll taste when I kiss you, Lemmikki,” he mused in a low, seductive tone.

The word *biscuits* popped into my head, but I could no sooner have spoken than I could have flown right then. He had effectively robbed me of every last bit of breath.

Evander brought his lips back to mine, this time pushing fully against them. He dipped his tongue into my mouth, tasting me in truth.

A sound between a whimper and a groan escaped me, and he chuckled against my mouth, backing away slowly and lowering me to the ground.

“I told you once before, two can play at that game, Lemmikki.” Amusement lit up the silver streaks in his pale gray eyes.

But I was not amused. “You. *Aalio*.”

“You started it.” He shrugged, turned to his trunks, and pulled out a full bottle of vodka.

I glared at his back, something he pretended not to notice, even when he turned to face me.

“Shall we, Lemmikki?” He gestured for us to go into the hallway.

The man was far too satisfied with himself. But no matter, because I was brainstorming ways to get him back before the door even shut behind us.



Gallagher was already shuffling a deck of cards by the time we pushed open the door to Davin's rooms.

Avani looked at the bottle in Evander's hands and gasped. "Is that?"

"It is," I nodded.

"Good man." She smiled.

Davin waved us toward the two empty seats with a wry grin in my direction. Clearly, they had expected us both tonight.

Gallagher dealt the cards while Evander poured everyone but Gwyn a glass of vodka.

"So," Evander looked at Davin after play began. "If Rowan has weather, and Gallagher has healing, what's your affinity?"

Davin scoffed like it was obvious. "The ladies."

"Honestly, Dav," Gwyn punched him in the arm.

"It comes through Aunt Charlie and Uncle Finn," Davin admitted, "so I don't have the woo woo powers."

He waved toward the tops of his ears, which were perfectly rounded compared to the subtly pointed tips of the rest of ours.

Evander reached out a hand to tuck my hair behind my ear, then traced the barely pointed arch. I swallowed, trying not to outwardly react to him in a room full of my family.

But as usual, his expression told me I had failed.

With a small smirk, he looked at Gwyn. "Yours is clearly speed, or perhaps reflexes?"

She gave a proud nod. "A combination of the two."

"And you..." He turned to my sister, face contemplative.

Avani stared back like she was curious to see what he came up with. She was usually better than the rest of us at hiding her abilities.

"Your horse has reins, but you didn't use them. And...the birds were silent yesterday. Something with animals?"

She nodded, evidently impressed. "Very good, Lord Evander."

“Just Evander,” he corrected gently.

“Though as of tomorrow, it will be Prince Evander,” Davin commented.

“He actually prefers Van Van,” I stage-whispered.

“I do not,” he responded. “But I do go by Van sometimes. Just Van.” He looked at me pointedly, and I gave him an innocent shrug.

Truthfully, I could never quite see him as Van, though I knew that’s what his friends called him. He was always just Evander to me.

“If you say so,” I said dubiously.

“So, *Van*,” Avani cut in. “What about Mamá?”

“That one, I have no idea on,” he admitted.

“Hers is tricky,” I said. “She and Uncle Finn took tonics as children, making their traits a little less evident, but she has some affinity toward nature--trees, specifically.”

“And Uncle Finn is like Gwyn,” Davin added. “Though he’s a bit more...” He trailed off at the defiant look on her face.

“I will beat him one day,” she said.

“Sure, you will,” Davin said, shaking his head no at the same time.

She promptly punched him in the arm again.

We bantered and joked, the others taking the opportunity to grill Evander more now that it was just us. He took their intrusive questions with surprising grace, even chuckling a handful of times.

We got so caught up in the rare bit of fun we were having, we lost track of time until the palace clock chimed twelve times.

“Oh no,” Avani leaned over, throwing her hands over Evander’s eyes.

“What...” Confusion laced his tone.

“It’s tradition,” I explained, turning around quickly. “We can’t see each other the day of the wedding.”

“What if I don’t like this tradition?” he inquired.

And it definitely did not give me any kind of fuzzy feeling, knowing he didn’t want me to go.

“Our parents didn’t obey that rule, and look what happened,” Gwyn said.
“War.”

“No one wants a war, Van,” Avani laughed, not moving her hands.

“All right, I relent,” he chuckled. “I’ll keep my eyes closed.”

“Then we will take Rowan back to Avani’s rooms,” Gwyn said.

“And we are going to go collect Van’s cousin and a few of his soldier friends and keep this party going in here,” Davin said.

“Only the soldiers, Dav.” My voice was firm, though not being able to glare at him somewhat detracted from that. “I mean it.”

“Cross my heart, Cousin.” He sounded far too flippant for my liking.

“Gal!” I called for assistance.

“I promise, Row.” Gallagher reassured me. “I won’t let him bring any of his lady friends.”

Evander’s low laugh sounded.

“All right then.” I sighed. “I will...see you tomorrow, Evander.”

I heard the smile in his voice when he answered. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Lemmikki.”

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



Sleep had been nearly impossible, but I didn't care. My mind spun with thoughts of Evander, his lips, his storm-ridden eyes, and the fact that he was mine.

Mine.

That single thought propelled me out of bed and had me going through the motions of the morning wedding preparations. Mamá and my sisters were the only other ones in the room with me as Taisiya dressed me in my gown.

I heard their voices, returned their smiles, and laughed or cried with them when the moments came. All of it, though, was through a haze of disbelief.

I was unrooted. Untethered. I was free falling, and I wasn't ready for what would happen when I landed back on the ground.

My mother wiped away the tears that pooled in her eyes, wrapping her arms around me as we looked at my reflection in the mirror. Somehow, the gown was even more beautiful than it had been at the fitting yesterday. The bodice was perfectly fitted, hugging my curves before flaring out into fuller skirts with a long train.

The scalloped bust was made of delicate lace that connected with a sheer, gauzy material. It rose up to form an elegant, fitted necklace. Not only was it gorgeous, but it effectively hid all of my scars.

Avani helped Taisiya to smooth out my curls and pin them into an updo

before applying my cosmetics. When they were finished, Mamá added a sparkling, diamond-studded tiara that came to a single point.

Her eyes glistened with tears as she pressed a kiss against my forehead. “You are a perfect bride, Row. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” I threw my arms around her.

Then Mamá and my sisters left me at the study next to the Great Hall, where Da’ was waiting. All of my resolve to hold back my tears gave way when I saw the way his face crumpled as he took in the sight of me.

He wrapped me in his strong embrace, careful to avoid my hair at Mamá’s insistence. His cedar scent enveloped me, and I felt the weight of every unspoken word these past few months. All of his worry, his despair, and even his joy when he brought me home.

Everything we had said, and all the things we hadn’t.

I squeezed him back for several long breaths until the music of the pipers began.

It was time.

When we reached the imposing doors of the Great Hall, my heart sped up, fluttering within my chest faster than a hummingbird’s wings. I knew what awaited me at the end of the room.

I do own you, Lemmikki.

The massive doors groaned open, and the musicians played us forward. I barely registered the green and blue banners waving high above us, or the petal-strewn aisle.

With each step, we slowly passed faces I knew I should recognize, but I only had space in my head for one person.

But you own me, too.

Evander stood at the end of the aisle in a formal black jacket and tie, accented only by the white tunic he wore beneath them. True to Lochlannian style, he had donned another kilt, but this one was black and white.

I smiled at the combination of the ceremonial garment worn by my

people, in the colors of his clan.

His silver gaze raked over me appreciatively, sending the faintest chills running up and down my entire body, as though he was trailing his fingers along my skin in a featherlight touch.

He was the most handsome man I had ever seen. Carved by the stars themselves into this painstakingly perfect creation.

And he was mine.

The rest of the room fell away completely when our eyes finally met. I took a staggering breath, exhaling slowly as I thought of every single thing that led us here, to this impossible moment.

We stopped at the end of the aisle once we reached him. Da' kissed my forehead before placing my hand in Evander's.

I was finally forced to wrench my gaze away from Evander when the magistrate began speaking, signaling for us to face him. Evander's fingers were laced in mine, his thumb rubbing a slow circle on my hand, anchoring me in this moment with him.

By the time we turned to say our vows, my voice felt too quiet, too small for such grand promises.

And then it was Evander's turn.

His tone was clear, confident, mesmerizing.

He echoed the vows that the magistrate spoke, his eyes never leaving mine. And still, as much as I melted with each word, something dark edged into the corners of my mind, tinging the moment with a bitterness I couldn't shake.

He was mine. Right here, in this moment, he belonged to me.

But what happened after this? What happened when we went to Socair? Would I have this small piece of him and then come back to Lochlann to live out the rest of our lives separately?

The questions plagued me even as I slid an onyx and silver band onto the third finger of his left hand.

Even as the magistrate announced us as husband and wife.

And even as he kissed me in front of the entire hall, a gentle, slow meeting of our lips that lit my soul on fire.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



The next thing I knew, we were dancing.

Sweeping across the floor in long, elegant steps, our bodies so in sync it was like breathing. I clung to Evander, willing us to stay in this moment forever, afraid of what would happen to me if it ended.

For his part, Evander did the same. Holding me as if I were the only person in the room, staring at me with hungry eyes that mirrored my own.

Even when we left the dance floor, his fingers stayed intertwined with mine, refusing to let me go.

Members of the court lined up to offer their heartfelt--and some not so heartfelt--congratulations, showering us with gifts and well wishes and their real or feigned excitement about this new friendship with Socair.

Many promises to visit us were made, leaving me once again to wonder how that would work if I was supposed to stay here.

Each time, Evander responded noncommittally.

All right, then.

By the time Davin appeared next to me, the walls felt like they were closing in around me.

“Row?” he asked, tugging me to the side.

I left Evander visiting with one of the lairds, following Davin to a secluded corner. He pulled out his flask, offering it to me, and I took a

grateful sip.

Then he pulled something else out of his pocket. A small, stoppered glass vial, filled with a swirling midnight liquid.

“Mamá asked me to share my stash with you,” he said, not bothering to look sheepish about it. “She seemed to think you might want them.”

Moontime herbs.

Davin kept them fully stocked for his lady friends, something Aunt Jocelyn was rather forceful about.

Did I want them? Did Evander? My head swam as I pocketed the vial.

“There’s more in your trunks, but you should only need one a month.” He eyed me cautiously, something in my expression apparently giving him pause. “Of course, you don’t have to--”

“No,” I cut him off. “Thank you. It’s...great. Perfect, even.”

Dav nodded, but the gesture was filled with sarcasm. “Seems that way.”

Before we could say any more, Avani announced that it was time for Evander and me to be very awkwardly ushered to the wedding chamber for the night.

Davin laughed outright, and I suppressed a groan.

Evander crossed the short space to me, putting his hand on my lower back to lead the way. Then, of course, the guests followed us back to our room, shouting suggestions and commentary.

Thank the stars, most of my family sat this one out, though my cousins and sister gleefully participated. I shook my head, mouthing, *you are all the worst*, over my shoulder.

Then the door closed behind us, and it was just Evander and me.

Alone. On our wedding night.

CHAPTER FIFTY



The room was perfect.

White petals trailed the way to an enormous four poster bed framed by a pale, gauzy canopy. Small, romantic sconces flickered along the walls, and a low table was already adorned with wine, grapes, and cheeses.

It should have all been perfect.

But my stomach still churned from the inconsequential weight of the vial tucked into my dress, the frustrating reality that I could feel so much but still have so little settled.

That for all Evander had shown me, he still held the most important card close to his chest.

Pretending not to notice his scrutinizing expression, I sank into one of the low chairs, my hands going to my tiara.

I should have thought to have someone else remove it for me. Instead, I had to take the time to painstakingly unwind my hair from the silver combs, doing my best not to acknowledge the increasingly uncomfortable silence in the room.

Evander moved to stand before me, reaching his hand out to help, but I leaned away.

“I’ve got it,” I told him.

He froze, assessing me with his too-discerning gaze.

I averted my eyes, knowing that every piece of me would crumble if I looked for too long at his unreasonably gorgeous face.

Wasn't that what always happened? I fell into him whenever he was around and managed to avoid the things that really mattered?

"Lemmikki." His voice was between a question and a warning, both of which I ignored.

I finally wrested the tiara free, setting it on the table next to me. Then I put my head in my hands under the guise of massaging it, unraveling the few curls that were still piled up and allowing them to go free.

A warm hand came under my chin, tilting my face upward.

"Lemmikki," he said the word again quietly. "Tell me what's wrong."

This was the last thing I wanted to talk about tonight, or ever. If I could take five minutes to compose myself, I would be...fine. So, I opened my mouth to deny anything was wrong, but he cut me off with a low growl.

"And don't say nothing, because as I have said, you are a mediocre liar at best."

Blowing out a slow breath, I willed the kind of bravery into myself that I didn't remotely feel.

"What happens after this?" I asked.

His eyes flitted to the bed, and I hastened to clarify.

"Not...*that*." A sigh escaped me. "After tonight."

"We return to Socair and have another wedding," he said evenly, his brow furrowed like he wasn't sure where I was going with this.

"And then?" I prodded.

Understanding dawned on his features, along with a generous degree of wariness. "Whatever you want to happen."

I nodded, looking away. He knew that I had objected to this plan, so his maintaining it as a viable option felt...pointed, at the least.

Pulling the small vial out of my dress, I spun it between my fingers.

“Planning to poison me, Lemmikki?” The corner of his lip quirked up, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“It’s to prevent...heirs.” I watched his face carefully, but his expression didn’t twitch. With a sigh, I went on. “You said you didn’t need them. Does that mean you don’t want them?”

He searched my features, his own carefully neutral. “It means, as I said, that it makes no difference to me.”

No difference.

While I was imagining a life and a future with Evander, was he content with the fact that we belonged to each other in some distant way, no matter where we were?

“Of course it doesn’t,” I breathed out bitterly.

He raised his eyebrows, but the rest of his face was carved into careful neutrality. “Am I to understand that you’re both upset with me for making decisions for you and upset with me when I don’t?”

For you. Not us. Me.

I abruptly realized that all the talking in the world wouldn’t force him to see this differently, and I was tired. Tired of arguing on our wedding night, tired of the push and pull that defined our lives.

“You’re right,” I said, willing my face to be as indifferent as his was. “I’m being ridiculous. You have made it amply apparent on now four separate occasions that it makes no difference to either you or the alliance whether I even stay in the same kingdom as you, so I suppose I’m the only one making an issue of it.”

“Feel free to recall that you wouldn’t even consider my proposal before I made that offer.” There was an edge to his voice.

“Is that what you think?” I shook my head in disbelief. “Evander, if you had come into that council room and proposed a real marriage, there would have been no question. No debate. No talk of territories or trade or advantages.”

He went still.

“Instead,” I continued, my voice rising, “you waltzed in talking about ownership and benefits and how little you cared if I was around. So I got to spend a week agonizing over whether to choose the man who wanted to share a life with me, even if I could never truly return his feelings, or the one who I loved with every last broken piece of my soul but refused to admit he wanted a real marriage with me.”

A lump rose in my throat, and my next words were barely a whisper. “And I am sick to death of trying to make you want things that you don’t.”

Evander’s eyes widened. He parted his lips as if to speak, but for once, he didn’t seem to know what to say.

Tears stabbed at the back of my eyes, so I got to my feet, turning around and gesturing vaguely toward the endless row of buttons on the back of my dress.

“Let’s just get this over with.” At least my voice was steady. “I won’t lie to my people, and we don’t even have the option of lying to yours. If we’re giving them an alliance, we can at least give them a real one.”

He still didn’t move, though, for long enough that I had time to reflect on the fact that the only thing worse than our wedding night as it was currently going would be if he rejected me on top of it all.

Then I felt his presence at my back, his hand going to sweep my hair across my neck, tucking it over one shoulder. Even that simple gesture sent energy humming across my skin.

A sigh escaped me, but I couldn’t be sure if it was relief or sadness.

What did I really expect him to say?

No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than he sucked in a breath to speak.

“You are not the broken one,” he said, deftly unhooking the top pearl button from its loop. “And the life you would have in Bear, away from your family, sharing an estate with a woman who tried to kill you--and very nearly

succeeded--dealing with Socairan prejudice and superstitions and politics, is a far cry from the one you have here.”

Something inside me splintered as I realized what he was saying.

Evander didn't believe he was enough of a reason for me to leave my life here behind.

He unfastened another button. “I thought that by keeping my own desires to myself, I would allow you to make that decision unburdened. I see now, that was an oversight on my part.”

It might have been the first time I had ever heard him admit that he was wrong about anything. I held my breath.

“But as for what I want,” he said, pressing his lips to the bare skin at the nape of my neck. “Yes, I want to share my life with you. And yes, one day, I would like to grow our family.”

He continued with his slow unbuttoning, kissing every inch of skin he exposed. “What I want is to hear your voice every day, talking to my cat, teaching my soldiers inappropriate card games and tavern songs. I want your cursed hair in my face and your clothes strewn messily on my bedroom floor.”

The tears that had been pricking at my eyes spilled down my cheeks.

“You don't want that,” I choked out.

“Maybe not that last one,” he amended, and I could hear the smirk in his tone. “But I would put up with it for you.”

He paused to pay special attention to one of my scars, setting my nerve endings on fire. “I want to spend every night exploring each inch of your perfect body, and every morning waking up with you wrapped around me.”

Heat washed over me, and my breaths came faster, but he wasn't finished.

“Most of all, I want the chaos and laughter and life that you bring with you everywhere you go, and I want it always. I want you, always. As my wife, in every possible sense of the word.”

He finally finished with my buttons, coming to step on the other side of

me.

His gray eyes were churning with intensity and the kind of vulnerability I had never witnessed from him before as he brought his thumbs up to brush away my tears.

“And, Lemmikki?” he said softly. “I love you with every last broken piece of my soul, too.”

With that singularly unguarded comment, any last wavering, prideful wall inside me came tumbling down.

I had never wanted a love that could break me. But, looking at Evander now, I knew that I would choose to be broken by him again and again for the rest of my masochistic life if that was the cost of loving him.

Of being loved by him.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE



My insides were still churning, but it was in anticipation now. My fists clenched nervously, reminding me that I still held the vial. “I want all of those things, too,” I told him. “And I do want to grow our family one day...but I don’t think I’m ready to share you yet.”

I studied his reaction carefully, wondering if that would bother him, but he only chuckled under his breath.

“I would prefer not to share you, either, just yet.”

Relief coursed through me, and I unstoppered the vial, swallowing down the bitter herbs. Evander poured me a glass of wine, which I gratefully accepted.

He waited for me to take a few sips and set it down before he leaned in, placing his hands on my shoulders while his lips traced a gentle line from my forehead to my mouth.

When his fingers reached the open sides of my dress, he backed away far enough to raise his eyebrows slightly, a request for permission.

All hesitation had vanished, as far as taking this step went. I trusted Evander. Loved him. Wanted him.

Now...there was only one small problem.

“I want you, Evander. *All* of you,” I said significantly, and his lips quirked into the cocky smirk that pulled at things low in my belly.

“But I...” I forced myself to meet his eyes. “I don’t know...what I’m doing.”

The words were quiet, and I fought to keep a flush from creeping into my cheeks.

His lips parted, probably at my uncharacteristic admission.

“Lemmikki,” he said in a low tone. “You could never be anything other than perfect to me. We’ll take things slowly.”

His words washed away the final dregs of my apprehension. I dipped my chin in assent, and he eased the dress down off my arms, his fingers leaving trails of fire along my skin.

Then the dress was off, pooling at my feet and leaving me standing in only my flimsy, lacey white underthings. His hungry gaze swept over me, the desire on his features so strong it made my breath hitch in my throat.

Suddenly, I wasn’t sure I wanted to take him up on his offer to take things slow.

I reached out, tugging his jacket down over his shoulders. My fingers went to the laces of his shirt, laces I had wanted to undo so many times before.

When his shirt had joined my dress on the floor, he pulled me against his solid chest, pressing his mouth firmly against mine before skating his lips down to my neck.

The feel of his hands on my exposed back and his lips on my skin was enough to make my knees give out.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, and he picked me up with two firm hands on my thighs, walking us over to the bed. Gently, he lowered me on top of the blankets, his lips meeting mine once more.

I greedily soaked in his kisses, in the feeling of rightness and wholeness and completion that washed over me whenever I was this close to him.

True to his word, he did explore every inch of my body. With his hands. His mouth. His tongue.

He seemed to know instinctively where to linger and where to sweep past. All I could think was that dancing was the least of how our bodies were in sync.

Finally, he kissed his way up to my lips, then backed just barely away, his gaze boring into mine with a question.

I gave him a single, solid dip of my chin, more sure in this moment than I had ever been about anything before.

There was a sharp, searing pain, and I gasped, my fingernails digging into his shoulders.

Evander went still, concern widening his eyes.

“Lemmikki,” he breathed. “Do you want me to st--”

“No,” I cut him off. “Don’t stop.”

The pain was subsiding already, my body adjusting to the feel of his and making room for another feeling entirely. Being this close to him...it was everything.

He bent his head down to kiss me tenderly, moving slowly once more.

I let out another gasp against his lips, but this time, it wasn’t from the pain.

And there was no more talk of stopping after that.



Wan shafts of light streamed through the drapes, enough to highlight the perfect, chiseled lines of Evander’s face.

It was one of the rare times I had seen him sleeping, and I couldn’t help but trace the lines of his forehead, his cheeks, his nose, and his lips.

He stirred, his hand coming up to cover mine. Gently, he kissed each one of my fingers. Even the simple gesture sent heat thrumming through my entire body.

I leaned over, my hair spilling onto his chest as I lightly peppered his face

with kisses before going purposefully to his mouth.

“Der’mo, Lemmikki.” There was amusement in his gravelly morning voice, and his eyes were still closed. “Aren’t you sore?”

It was a fair question, considering we had only fallen asleep a couple of hours ago.

“No,” I fibbed.

I was, but I wasn’t going to let that stop me from being with my *husband*. He opened his eyes at last, and they sparkled with mirth.

“Terrible liar,” he reminded me.

I pursed my lips irritably, and he let out a low, ridiculously sexy chuckle.

“Well, I’m fine, but if you aren’t up to the task...” I trailed off, and he raised a challenging eyebrow.

“I am always up to the task, Lemmikki, particularly whenever my wife is in the room.”

Every part of me warmed when he called me his wife.

“But I did request a bath be drawn for us.” He looked at the clock. “Right about now.”

I was about to protest when my mind snagged on that word. *Us*.

“I can live with that,” I said.

He chuckled again, bringing his lips up to mine before slipping out of bed. I unashamedly ogled him as he crossed the room, and he shook his head.

He peeked into the adjoining bathing chamber, one that had a separate door leading to the outside for the very purpose of the newlywed couple remaining undisturbed.

Whatever he saw must have been what he was expecting, because he came back to the bed and scooped me up in his powerful arms, carrying me to the bathing chamber.

The scent of herbs reached me just before Evander set me down in the steaming water. The bronze tub was enormous, easily big enough for him to settle in behind me, his legs on either side of me.

I leaned my head back against his chest, basking in the endlessly right feeling of his skin against mine. He ran his hands up and down my arms, kissing the top of my head.

The bath had been a phenomenal idea. I *was* sore, and whatever herbs were in this tub were slowly easing that feeling. After a few minutes of enjoying the gentle lapping sound of his hands moving in the water, I twisted in his arms, kissing my way up his chest, his neck.

“I love you, Evander.” I would never tire of saying that to him, never tire of the way his shield seemed to break apart a little more every time I did.

“And I love you, Lemmikki.” Hearing the words on his lips still felt like something out of a dream.

Even if there was a small part of me that couldn't help but panic at how perfect this all felt, wondering how long it could possibly last.

An image of Rayan's box flashed through my head, and I tried to stamp down the distant sense of foreboding.

We would be fine.

Everything would be fine.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO



I didn't even get to enjoy the lie I told myself for an entire day.

We were lying in bed, and I was lazily tracing each ridged muscle in Evander's abdomen when a sharp rap sounded at the door.

"Breakfast?" I asked uncertainly, just as Yuriy's voice rang out.

"Lord Evander!"

I exchanged a look with Evander, both of us flying out of bed to don our dressing gowns. He threw open the door, admitting a grim-looking Yuriy.

He held out a piece of parchment, and Evander took it. The blood drained from his face, and he passed the paper over to me.

Iiro has declared himself King.

We need you home now.

-Taras



Evander and I dressed and headed to the Council Room, where we had asked my family to meet us. Yuriy came as well, and a couple of the other high-ranking Bear soldiers.

"What does this mean for you?" Da' asked without preamble.

"It's impossible to say without being there," Evander replied evenly. "On

the surface, Iiro's claim itself is reputable, as the closest living relative to the defunct monarchy. But he would still need the support of the Summit, and I find it hard to believe he's gotten that..."

"But?" my mother asked.

"But Iiro is sharp, calculating," I answered. "So if he's doing this at all, he must have reason to believe he will succeed."

"And it certainly isn't a coincidence that he waited until I was here," Evander said bitterly. "Not only was I unable to interfere, but we haven't yet finalized our marriage in Socair."

"Theo must have sent word when he left," I added. "That must be why Iiro made his move, knowing he had no chance of allying with us now."

"Which still leaves the questions of why and how. I need to get back to find out and--" He shot me a look that made dread pool in my core.

"No." I said the word firmly before he could suggest what I knew he was about to.

He did it anyway.

"If he wants to stop this alliance, the last thing we can do is show up just as he expects us to with a target all but painted on your back."

"I am not staying here while you go back to Socair, back in danger," I protested.

"I'm not in any danger," he said calmly. "He isn't going to infuriate the other clans by harming an heir."

"Or a clan wife," I pointed out.

"Which you aren't yet," he reminded me.

"So, all I need to do is stay safe until then. We can get married right after I get back. It will be fine." Panic edged my voice, and he put a hand over mine.

"You might not make it past the border at this rate, Lemmikki." Frustration crept into his tone.

"Even Iiro isn't brash enough to risk the wrath of Lochlann," I shot back.

“Iiro doesn’t care about anyone but his own family,” Evander countered. “All he needs to do is close the tunnel and Lochlann would have to go through Bear and Wolf just to get to him. Even if I could work around my father’s orders, Wolf is never going to stand by and allow Lochlann to march through their territory, and Iiro has plenty of allies to further bar the way.”

“So, what?” I demanded. “You just want me to sit here in a bubble while my husband goes back to a war? What happened to fighting at your side?”

“There is no war yet,” he argued. “And no, I don’t expect you to sit here indefinitely.”

“What do you propose?” my mother cut in, signaling for me to be silent. “It sounds like you have a plan.”

I glared at her, and she gave me a hard look in response.

Evander took a deep breath. “We finalized the trade agreement. If I have a two-week head start, I can make sure everything is put in motion to assure safe passage for the caravans. No one is going to decline trade with Lochlann again when their people need food, not to mention, the agreed-upon dowry will be coming through.”

My parents were nodding thoughtfully, and I clenched my fists into my skirts.

“In the meantime,” Evander said. “I can ensure our wedding comes together. Our marriage is hardly a secret, but as long as no one knows where Rowan is—” He looked at me pointedly. “—they won’t be able to interfere. She can come in with one of several caravans, so she won’t be the only Lochlannian in the area, and she can arrive just in time for the wedding.”

“No,” I said again.

“Rowan,” Da’ cut in.

“No.” I shook my head.

“It’s a good plan, mo bhobain.” He gave Evander a nod of respect.

I didn’t care, though, because the tingling on my spine felt like more than the weather right now. It felt foreboding, and I couldn’t help but think that

this was what was going to set everything Rayan hinted at in motion.

“Rowan.” Evander’s rare use of my name snapped me out of my spiraling trance. He held my gaze with his own stormy one. “There is no other way. I told you before that I trusted you. I need you to trust me now.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, emotions overwhelming me in waves I could barely make sense of.

“Two weeks,” I gritted out. “And not a single day longer. Promise me.”

If I was two weeks behind him for a six-week trip, already, that would be two months apart. I *hated* this plan.

“I promise,” he said, putting his hand over mine.

“When do you need to leave?” my mother asked quietly.

Evander held my gaze, and I felt my features harden, because I already knew.

“Within the hour.”



The minutes flew past us in a mad scramble of packing and readying the horses until it was time for him to leave me.

Nausea twisted my stomach, and traitorous tears burned behind my eyes. It was an effort to remember the utter bliss I had felt only a few short hours ago when I believed I could keep him.

“Two months, Lemmikki.” Evander whispered the words into my hair as I clung to him. “Two months and we will be back together.”

I nodded wordlessly as he lifted my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze.

Without waiting for him to say anything else, I stretched up on my tiptoes and pressed my lips against his with an urgency I hadn’t known I would need this soon.

He kissed me back just as fiercely, and I tried to tell myself that it wasn’t a goodbye.

It wasn't the last time I would taste him, feel his skin, run my fingers through his hair.

It wasn't goodbye, even though it sure as hell felt that way.

Before he turned to go, I pulled the chain off my neck, the one with my signet ring on it, and slipped it over Evander's head.

"I can't risk having it on me. So keep it safe for me, until I see you again."

Because I *would* see him again.

He nodded, kissing me one last time before he got in the carriage to leave. To leave me.

I watched him and his men ride away from the castle, staring until I couldn't see them anymore. And I kept watching after that until the sun began to set and the cool night air kissed my skin.

Because even if it wasn't goodbye, the building pressure along my spine was like no storm I had ever felt before.

And I couldn't shake the feeling that it would be the worst one of all.

EPILOGUE



With every hoofbeat that drew us closer to the border, the disbelief in my bones settled into something more tangible, something more like fury.

Evander left me.

Evander is gone.

He's going to die.

And it's all Iiro's fault.

My spine tingled, and my heart beat faster in my chest. The thundering, panicked staccato was a familiar rhythm by now, a constant companion in a time where I had few others. A reminder of just how much I stood to lose.

Because after everything I did to avoid it, I knew what Evander and I had. The kind of love you went to war for.

And that's exactly what I intended to do.

READY FOR MORE?

Book Four, and the final installment is coming soon!

Pre-Order Obsidian Throne on Amazon today!

In the meantime, if you want to know where it all began keep flipping or [click here](#) for a sneak peek of the series that started it all.

Pronunciation Guide



Rowan	ROE-an (long O)
Davin	DAV-in (short A)
Theo	TJHEE-oe
Tiro	EER-oe
Avani	ah-VAJN-ee
Mila	MEE-lah
Venla	VEN-lah
Inessa	in-ES-ah
Evander	ee-VAN-der
Socair	soe-CARE
Lochlann	LOCK-lan
Chridhe	CRÉE
Hagail	ha-GALE
Borscht	borsht
Lemmikki	lem-EEK-ee



Clan Elk

Duke: Iiro

Colors: Navy & Tan



Clan Bison

Duke: Ivan

Colors: Orange & Gray



Clan Ram

Duke: Mikhail

Colors: White & Red



Clan Viper

Duke: Andreyev

Colors: Green & Gold



Clan Wolf

Duke: Nils

Colors: Gray & White



Clan Lynx

Duke: Arès

Colors: Teal & Gold



Clan Crane

Duke: Danil

Colors: Yellow & Black



Clan Eagle

Duke: Timofey

Colors: White & Brown



Clan Bear

Duke: Aleksander

Colors: Black & White

A MESSAGE FROM US



We need your help!

Did you know that authors, in particular indie authors like us, make their living on reviews? If you liked this book, or even if you didn't, please take a moment to let people know on all of the major review platforms like; Amazon, Goodreads, and/or Bookbub!

(Social Media gushing is also highly encouraged!)

Remember, reviews don't have to be long. It can be as simple as whatever star rating you feel comfortable with and an: 'I loved it!' or: 'Not my cup of tea...'



Now that that's out of the way, if you want to come shenanigate with us, rant and rave about these books and others, get access to awesome giveaways, exclusive content and some pretty ridiculous live videos, come join us on Facebook at our group; [Drifters and Wanderers](#)

ROBIN'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



These are always so difficult to do because so many people go into the making of every book.

But between health challenges and life challenges, this one presented a rather special bit of difficulties, and an amazing group of people who stepped in to help Elle and I make release.

First up, Emily, you are amazing and we have no idea what we would do without you. Thank you for holding our hands and handling our fragile little baby author feelings with the utmost care. These deadlines nearly destroyed us and we never would have made it through without you.

So, to our Beta Babes, the giantest of thank yous for listening to me ramble at great length about a single nuanced character point in Elle's absence. Thank you guys for your cheerleading and your error catching and your general hilarity!

Jesikah, the biggest thank you in the entire world for coming in to read and reread with very little notice, helping shape this book into everything we needed it to be.

To Jamie, for being endlessly flexible and keeping me from losing my actual mind. You will never know how much we appreciate you!

Amanda, you know what's coming. It's boobs.

But also, it's heartfelt gratitude for your support with this entire series. I'm glad we made you binge and laugh and cry and turned you over to the Rowander dark side. And also, we told you so.

Sophies, you are the bestiest besties to our bestie bestieship and we would be lost without your love, concern, support, and constant flow of laughter.

Steven, you have put up with more than any man reasonably should have to in order for this book to make it into existence. Thank you for your bottomless supply of support and patience during this, and so many other projects. I love you more than chocolate chip cookies.

To my co-author and bestiest boo. This book cost you your gallbladder and you still rocked it like the awesomest of co-authors that you are.

Lastly, I'd like to formally thank City Orchard for making North Rosé Dry Ciders. Without you, I never would have made it through.

ELLE'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



You would think this part would get easier over time, but it doesn't...

That's because there are always more and more people to add to the list, including you, our lovely readers! Thank you for continually reading our stories and loving them as much as we do <3

Robin: You are a freaking phenomenal author and co-author and you are more talented than you realize. I know that wrapping up this book and beginning the next was its own sort of stress, but you handled it like the boss babe you are.

I can't believe my freaking organ ruptured during crunch time... I honestly thought we would end up postponing CK and OT because of it, but you rose to the challenge without a single complaint, even though your sanity was fracturing by the minute.

You deserve allllllllll the wonderful and amazing things. <3

Next up are our bestest besties! Hannah and Tabitha (aka Sophie Davis): thank you for your endless support and constant stream of hilarious DM's, phenomenal playlists and being a listening ear when everything is going to crap and the world is on fire. We love you two so so much!

Emily Prebich: You are literally a lifesaver. You stepped into our lives and took on the role of personal assistant with a dogged determination to make our lives exponentially better! And you truly have! We could not ask

for a better member on our team, a bigger cheerleader, or friend! Thank you <3

Jesikah Faerie Queen Sundin: My sister from another mister, the other half of my potato-loving heart... there are not enough words in any language to convey how much I adore and appreciate you as a human, a fellow author and friend! You literally saved our booties with stepping in at the last second to help Robin with edits and beta reading! And then there is just your endless well of love and kindness that I treasure. Thank you for being you <3

Freaking Amanda Steele: Have I told you lately that I love you??? You have been a constant light in my life since before we even met! And now you are a permanent fixture/bestie/household name in the ElBin universe. Thank you for loving our characters as much as we do and for FINALLY admitting that Evander is BAE lol

To our beautiful BETA Babes: Rachel, Sarah, Hope, Michelle, Ali & Erin... There isn't a world that could exist where we would be the authors we are today, without you and your love, support and never-ending stream of commentary on our books and the weather. Thank you so much for being the best beta team we could ever ask for!

Lissa: You have been with us since Charlie's story and we will never not be grateful for you supportive messages, your book recommendations and the surprise gifts you send us just because. Thank you <3<3

And finally, to my Husband, my best friend and the love of my life.

I don't think you could ever understand the depth of my love and appreciation of you. You are everything to me. My soulmate, my better half and the best father to our children that I could ask for. Thank you for putting up with this deadline, and taking such good care of me when I had to be in the hospital.

You are my happily ever after and I love you more than all the words in all the books in all the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Elle and Robin can usually be found on road trips around the US haunting taco-festivals and taking selfies with unsuspecting Spice Girls impersonators.

They have a combined PH.D in Faery Folklore and keep a romance advice column under a British pen-name for raccoons. They have a rare blood type made up solely of red wine and can only write books while under the influence of the full moon.

Between the two of them they've created a small army of insatiable humans and when not wrangling them into their cages, they can be seen dancing jigs and sacrificing brownie batter to the pits of their stomachs.

And somewhere between their busy schedules, they still find time to create words and put them into books.



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THE WEDDING

I stared down at my dirt-covered hands. Blood trickled from a cut on my palm onto my beautiful wedding gown, the red contrasting starkly against pristine white velvet.

I hadn't even registered falling. All I felt was the frigid chill that sank deep into my bones.

Still, I couldn't seem to bring myself to move from this spot. It was supposed to be my wedding day. It was supposed to be the happiest day of my life.

But something had gone very wrong. My fiancé was gone, maybe even dead, and I had no idea how to get to him.

I had been moments away from walking down the aisle when they brought me the news. The Prince of Luan was gone.

Taken.

I ran toward his bedchamber, ignoring the shouts behind me.

No...

I stumbled through the castle, losing a shoe on the grand staircase and somehow tearing my dress somewhere along the way.

Not my Oliver...

Bursting through his door, I stopped short at the sight of his room in shambles. His trunk had been sacked and flipped over, the wood splintered,

the lock broken. His clothes were everywhere. The bedcovers were torn and thrown about the room. A lamp lay broken on the floor, oil pooling around shards of glass.

My chest tightened. *He fought, struggled to stay with me. How did no one hear? How did no one see?*

Something swayed in the corner of my vision, catching my eye. A flag had been left on the mantle, an imposing black X against a red backdrop. The symbol of the Aramach.

My breath hitched. *The rebels have him.*

Everything after that was a blur. I remember mumbling something about needing some air, and the next thing I knew, I was outside.

I had staggered to the sprawling willow tree — my tree — and fallen beside its naked, cascading branches. I stayed there, stunned, unable to go any further.

And now I was freezing. *How long have I been out here?* The biting cold had reddened my hands and numbed my skin, while violent shivers wracked my body.

Tears fell unbidden. I looked up at the sky, as if that would stop their flow, and a single snowflake fell onto my eyelashes in response. How could something so tiny, so delicate, seem to hold such weight?

A soft, bittersweet laugh escaped my lips. I had wanted it to snow today. I loved the snow. But this small flake felt like a betrayal.

I was supposed to be married today. It was supposed to be the happiest day of my life.

Instead, my world had been shattered.

CHAPTER ONE

“The Aramach have been causing trouble for the outer villages near Bala Dam again, Sire.” Captain Brodie’s demeanor was calm when he spoke to my father, but the barest undercurrent of exasperation laced his tone and a minuscule twitch disturbed his graying whiskers.

He must have been concerned enough to interrupt our weekly petitions with this news, but it hardly seemed urgent. The curious faces of our people, everyone from nobles to villagers, peered at the exchange from the edges of the throne room.

My family and I held open Court once a week. It was my favorite day, both because of the opportunity to do something good for my people and the rare chance to spend time with both of my parents.

“They are nothing but an inept ragtag group of children who aspire to be revolutionaries.” My father frowned. “Send a group to root them out and put an end to their antics. This is the last I expect to hear of it, Captain.” He looked every inch the King of H’ria. His dark waves were arranged perfectly under a golden crown set with emeralds. While his posture appeared relaxed and unbothered by the news he’d received, his regal amber eyes were narrowed in annoyance.

I was surprised he wasn’t taking our respected captain more seriously, but it was hardly my place to say so. Even though I would be crowned Queen in

just over a month's time, the daily running of the kingdom would still fall largely to my father.

"Right away, Sire." Captain Brodie didn't falter under my father's gaze. He was the epitome of a warrior, from his battle scars and missing hand to his proud, unruffled posture. After a moment, he bowed and exited the throne room, his expression unchanging.

I understood his frustration. The idea of the Aramach was frightening enough, though they sounded like faerie stories: Rebels who materialized from nowhere, appearing in the outer villages without warning, wreaking havoc, and disappearing just as suddenly.

My father wasn't wrong, however. They should hardly pose a significant threat to the entire might of H'ria.

Soon to be the might of H'ria and Luan combined.

My union to Oliver would unite the kingdoms once more, under our rulership. The coronation would take place only five short weeks after our marriage ceremony.

I'm getting married tomorrow.

I could feel my heart beat faster at the thought, and the corner of my mouth quirked up in a small grin.

My fate had been decided the week I was born, along with Oliver's and the future of two feuding Kingdoms. The treaty would reunite H'Ria and Luan into the Lochlann realm, ending decades of civil war, all with one union.

Arranged marriages weren't uncommon for either of our kingdoms. That Oliver and I were actually in love, though, was a rarity and not something I took for granted.

The warmth of my mother's hand gently rested on mine. Her slender fingers applied just enough pressure to grab my attention, all while never looking away from the villager speaking to her - us. A subtle reminder to stop my daydreaming.

Sitting up straighter, I allowed myself one final moment to swoon before turning my attention back to the business of the throne room.

Still, even years of lessons in decorum couldn't quash my hopeful grin.



I was still awake long after the rest of Castle Chridhe had fallen asleep when I heard a tentative knocking. Placing the book I'd been reading on the side table, I got up from my favorite overstuffed chair and rushed over to answer. Footsteps receded before I made it to the door, but a note had been slipped under it.

I grinned wildly at the twice-folded piece of paper. My name was written on top in Oliver's flowing penmanship. He wanted to meet.

Heart racing, I was nearly all the way to the passageway before I realized I was wearing nothing but a sheer nightdress. Still, I was too excited to do more than throw a fur cloak over my shoulders. Pausing only long enough to slip my feet into my similarly fur lined slippers, I skipped over to my fireplace.

The heavy tapestry there hid a narrow doorway. It had been built years ago as a means of escape from danger, and when I found it as a child, I had indeed escaped through it many times. It was far from the only secret passage in the castle, but as far as I knew, it was a family route, one of very few the guards were unaware of.

I padded as quickly as possible down the narrow stone hall careful to keep my breathing even and my balance steady. The last thing I needed was to trip and wake up the entire castle. I shook my head, if my parents or brother caught me sneaking to his room they were bound to think this was a far more scandalous visit than it would be.

Custom dictated that brides and grooms should not see each other the night before the wedding. Oliver and his convoy had only arrived late this

afternoon, and he had been whisked away to his rooms before we could catch a glimpse of one another. A single day would have been one thing, but half a year had gone by since we'd been together and I could hardly sleep knowing he was under the same roof and I still hadn't seen him. Apparently, he felt the same.

When I reached the hall leading to Oliver's bedchamber, his door was ajar. I beamed, certain he had left it that way for me. As I neared, though, low voices drifted through the small opening.

"... the best for you. Your happiness is important to me."

Oliver's Uncle Earc was just behind the door, facing away from me. He had a hand clasped on Oli's shoulder while they spoke. I didn't know the man very well. Business had kept Earc at his estate during most of my visits to the Luanian castle, but I knew Oliver viewed the former war hero as a second father, and that was enough for me.

Not wanting to intrude on this tender moment, I turned to walk away, but Oliver caught sight of me. His eyebrows raised just as the door whipped open. The older, dark-haired man moved into the hallway and gave me a polite bow.

"Your Highness," he greeted. "Lovely to see you again, Sweetheart."

I gave a slight nod of my head, my cheeks flushing at being caught presumably eavesdropping, and in my nightdress no less.

"Thank you, Laird Earc." I mustered up a smidgen of dignity. "I'm pleased that you made the journey to celebrate with us."

"I would not miss it, Highness." His gaze lingered on my frame a bit longer than I was comfortable with.

"Uncle." Oliver coughed, interrupting the awkwardness.

The older man turned back to my fiancé, clapping him on the back. "Goodnight then, Son. We will speak later."

We watched as Earc rounded the corner down the hall, then finally turned to face each other.

“I’m sorry, Oli... I had only just walked to the door. I didn’t know your uncle would be here.” I stumbled over my words a bit, my cheeks reddening at how my practically sprinting to be here had interrupted his time with his Uncle.

I probably should have waited.

Oliver responded by taking several large strides toward me, pulling me into his arms. He nudged his door closed with his foot and held on to me for a long while without speaking. I breathed in deeply, contentedly.

He was tall and lean, with his dark waves swept back, accentuating eyes the color of the midwinter sky. He really was the consummate royal. More than being merely gorgeous, though, Oli always made me laugh.

I savored this moment, inhaling his familiar scent of cinnamon and vanilla. Heat flushed through my body.

Oliver sighed in my ear. One of his hands ran lazy circles down my back while the other played with the loose curls at the end of my braid.

“Tomorrow suddenly feels too far away,” I murmured., looking up at him.

A long moment of silence passed between us while Oliver continued to play with my plait, eyes glossed over as if he hadn’t heard a word I said.

“Oli?”

“Yes. It certainly does.” He laughed, his breath suddenly warm against my cheek. “I’m sorry, Love. It’s a bit difficult to think clearly when you’re in my arms like this. I asked you here, because I haven’t seen you all day and I just wanted... to say goodnight.” He smirked.

“Oh? Well, goodnight then.” I laughed a little and turned away teasingly, knowing he wouldn’t have sent for me only to have me leave so soon.

“Indeed,” he said, grabbing my arm and spinning me back to face him, “but I’m afraid that just won’t do. In fact, I’m certain I can think of a better way to end the evening.” He pulled my chin up and placed his lips on mine.

Before I could halfheartedly mumble something about needing to go, he

startled me by backing my body against the wall next to the giant oak door. Our lips met again, more firmly this time. We had kissed before, but rarely with this sense of urgency and desire passing between every point of physical contact.

Stars, I could get used to this.

His hands trailed from my shoulders to the waistline of my pale, thin nightdress, knocking my cloak to the floor in one swift motion. He pulled me in even closer, but it wasn't enough. Picking me up and walking me to the bed, Oliver sat me down on the warm furs, never taking his mouth off mine.

He gripped the curves of my hips as he moved his mouth from my lips down to the base of my neck.

My eyes shot open with the realization of what we were allowing. I bit my lip and forced myself to speak up before we went too far.

“Oliver,” I whispered. It took more strength than I knew I possessed to bring myself to stop this.

He moved to lay me back on the bed, but I brought my hand up, placed it on his chest, and said his name with more conviction.

“Oli. I — I should go. We should both rest before tomorrow.” The words came out barely above a whisper.

Though we would be married tomorrow, I knew my father might just risk the Treaty if he found me in the prince's room, in the prince's bed, with the prince's mouth on my neck.

I leaned up and placed a gentle kiss on his forehead.

His chest rose and fell rapidly as he looked away from me. “Of course. I'm sorry, Charlotte.”

Oliver's use of my full name took me by surprise. Usually I was just Charlie. Remorse washed over me when I realized I had just hurt his feelings.

Brilliant, Charlie.

“Oli --”

“It's fine, Love.” He cut me off, giving me a cocky grin and a wink. “My

apologies. I'm afraid I find you quite irresistible.”

“And I you, apparently.” I laughed a little and placed my hand on his cheek. “Just one more day.”

“One more day.” He repeated my words with a tinge of sadness.

I smiled softly, grateful that starting tomorrow we would never have to leave each other again.

“I love you,” I whispered before closing the door behind me.

Our wedding truly couldn't come soon enough.

CHAPTER TWO

I awoke to my mother sitting next to me on the bed. Melancholy in her emerald eyes quickly gave way to warmth when she saw me watching her. I quirked an eyebrow, and she shook her head, a small, rueful smile on her face.

“It’s simply hard to believe the babe I held in my arms so many years ago is getting married today.”

I shot up in my bed. *I’m getting married today.*

A cursory knock sounded at the door, but whoever it was didn’t bother to wait for a response. My best friend’s fiery curls were the first thing I caught sight of before her tiny body came into view. Several servants followed in her buoyant wake.

From their disgruntled expressions, and the way many of them were still smoothing out aprons or readjusting their frocks, it appeared she had barreled over them in her quest to reach my chambers. Not that Isla seemed to notice. She had apparently abandoned years of practiced decorum today, completely focused on me as she was.

Really, seeing her this excited was the best wedding present she could have given me.

“You’re getting married today!” She squealed uncharacteristically, flouncing herself onto my feather mattress.

My mother laughed and shifted to make room for Isla, though my friend's personality occupied more space than her small frame did. Excited butterflies filled my stomach. Not only would I be Oliver's wife after today, but Isla's cousin in truth. I had longed to call her sister for years now, but cousin was not a bad consolation.

Clara beamed as she brought us our breakfast tray. I scarcely got two bites down before I was rushed into the bath and then to my immense vanity.

Isla applied a line of kohl to my eyelids and over my lashes to make my green eyes appear a little larger. She finished up by adding a combination of crushed berries to my full lips and cheeks. The color highlighted my fading freckles.

"Do you have something for these?" I asked Isla, pointing.

"You want to cover your freckles?" She lowered her brows.

"Just for today."

Isla shook her head but obliged, deft hands brushing paint on my face.

Clara was busy pinning the loosened braids of my dark hair up at the base of my neck when my mother approached and placed an unfamiliar tiara on my head.

"I had this crafted for your wedding day," she told me, leading me away from the others to stand in front of my full-length gilded mirror.

I gasped. My closet was full of jewels, but this was something else entirely. My mother smiled at me as I examined the glistening diadem. I could only describe it as silver snow caught in a circlet of jewels. A variety of diamonds rose and fell to form each individual snowflake, and small blue sapphires accentuated the delicate design.

My eyes drifted to my dress. The soft, crushed white velvet of the gorgeous gown hugged the length of my arms and fit nicely against my torso, complimenting my curves before flowing out into a trailing train. The only ornamentation on the dress itself was a simple crystal-studded silver belt that rested across my hips. Whoever had chosen this dress had chosen well.

I look like a Winter Faerie Queen.

When I turned back to my mother to thank her, the grave expression on her graceful features gave me pause.

“Listen, Charlotte...” She hesitated.

Unbridled horror flooded my veins. *Is she actually going to have this talk now, with my suites full of people?*

Besides, she was a few years late to this discussion. My governess had long since explained the mechanics of things to me. I didn’t want to go through such a conversation once more with my mother, let alone in front of a room full of servants.

Fortunately, before she could piece together whatever she was going to say, a solid booming noise made us both jump. She smiled and went to answer the door.

“Is she ready, Elspeth?” My father’s voice wasn’t much softer than the knock had been.

“She is,” my mother replied.

I admired the sight of them for a moment before stepping into the hallway, as well. His towering form dwarfed my mother’s petite one, and her sepia complexion made his own ivory tone even fairer by comparison. The contrast was beautiful.

My father cleared his throat and swallowed a couple of times as he shifted his weight back and forth, staring at me with a smile in his eyes. Wordlessly, he held out an arm and nodded to the hallway. I beamed at him. His features were severe and his manner gruff, but he had never given me reason to doubt his love.

Mother and Isla hurried ahead to take their seats, though the latter seemed to walk deliberately slow when she passed my brother. Finnian was waiting in the hallway, ready to walk at my other side. He had my mother’s darker skin, but his amber-colored eyes and sharp features were purely my father’s. His openly warm expression was all his own, and it turned warmer still as he

took in the sight of my best friend.

From the emerald gown that matched her eyes, to the golden circlet woven into her intensely crimson hair, I could hardly blame him for staring. My mother indulged them for half a second before shooing her along, leaving me alone with my father and brother.

This is it.

I walked at a stately pace toward the Grand Hall, arms linked with the two most important men in my life, after Oli. Their steadying presences helped to still my frazzled nerves. My whole life was about to change.

We were only a few feet from the entrance to the Grand Hall when Captain Brodie approached on hastened footsteps, alarm in his features.

“King Brannan —” The Captain stopped with a glance in my direction.

The butterflies in my stomach beat furiously, but this time, it didn’t feel like excitement. I felt the blood drain from my face. Though I hadn’t noticed it before, the cold of winter penetrated to my bones and a shiver ran up my spine. A lump formed in the pit of my stomach as I took in Brodie’s demeanor: sweat on the brow, eyes that wouldn’t meet mine, a slight downward hunch to his shoulders...

He never hesitates to speak in front of me. Something is wrong.

“Out with it, Captain,” my father commanded, impatience clipping his words.

“Of course, Sire.” Brodie resolutely avoided my probing gaze. “It’s Prince Oliver. He has been taken.”

CHAPTER THREE

I was freezing, and the snow was falling faster.

How long have I been out here?

I made it nearly all the way to the sanctuary of my favorite willow tree before I tripped over the voluminous skirts of my gown. Once I was on the ground, I found I had little desire to rise. My guards moved to help me up, but I ordered them away. They eventually retreated, leaving me more or less alone.

Which is what I wanted. *Right?*

Oli is gone. Has he been hurt? What about the Treaty?

I felt panic rise in my chest once again. I still struggled to steady my heartbeat when the sound of even footsteps approached.

“I told you to leave me.”

A throat cleared behind me. Even though he hadn’t said anything else, I would know that voice anywhere.

Stars, anyone but him.

“Now is hardly the time for your judgment, Logan. Feel free to be elsewhere.” I didn’t bother to turn as I addressed Oliver’s half-brother. It was still more courtesy than he generally afforded me, so I braced myself for his scathing response.

Instead, silence settled over us, thicker than the snow on the ground. I

finally glanced over my shoulder at him, raising an eyebrow.

His expression was unreadable, even with his scarlet hair pulled away from his face, but I could feel the disapproval emanating from him like venomous snakes poised to strike the moment they found a weakness.

I turned away. If he had nothing to say, then neither did I. Besides, it took all my energy to combat the chill that was permeating every inch of my being. Shivers wracked my body, and my hands turned from red to a pale shade of blue.

Still, we said nothing. At least I was numb now, from the inside out. Though I wasn't convinced the glacial temperatures were responsible for all of that.

“Will ye be walking back on yer own, or shall I carry you, Highness?” His voice sounded unnaturally loud in the wake of our unspoken standoff, and even more thickly accented than I remembered.

Logan's mother had been from the outer villages in Luan, and he had refused to let go of that brogue. Not that it in any way hindered the authority in his voice. Or the condescension, for that matter.

My panic was being overtaken by fury with each moment he stood there. I shot him a glare he didn't deign to acknowledge before clumsily getting to my feet amidst the snow tumbling off my dress.

He gestured gallantly for me to lead the way. I took several steps, or rather, hobbled. My bare foot had gone numb from its contact with the icy ground.

Logan watched me struggle without bothering to feign patience. After his third audible sigh, he leaned in to pick me up.

“Don't even think about —” I stepped away and simultaneously raised a shivering hand to stop him.

He acted for all the world as though I had neither spoken, nor moved. I could have been a statue for all the emotion on his face as he scooped me into his arms and walked steadily toward the castle without so much as a word.

“Put. Me. Down.”

No response.

I scowled at him.

“This is ridiculous and humiliating.”

Still nothing. Only his clenched jaw gave away any emotion at all. He was irritated.

Good. So was I.

“I can walk, Logan!” I tried again, but my chattering teeth detracted from the ire on that last one.

I’d never admit that part of me was grateful not to make the trek back on my frozen foot. Of course, another part of me hoped he pulled a muscle from the strain of carrying me.

I was hardly petite. Between my height and curvy frame, I had never been what one would consider dainty. I was far too cold to be self-conscious, though.

Just as I had accepted we would make the rest of the undignified trek in silence, he finally spoke.

“... incredibly selfish.” The words were quiet, barely more than a whisper.

“Excuse me?” I asked incredulously.

He hesitated for only a moment before continuing his scolding.

“All of Castle Chridhe is in an uproar looking for leads and makin’ plans fer what to do next, and what were you doing, Princess? Pouting and forcing yer guards to freeze to death.”

I was too shocked to even respond. This went beyond even Logan’s typical behavior. I knew he didn’t care for me and hadn’t for some time, but this was uncalled for. Not to mention the arrogant arse had clearly sent my guards away without so much as consulting me.

“How dare you.” I hissed the words through clenched teeth.

“Ach! Of course, Highness.” He had refused to call me by anything but

my title for the past three years. “How dare I even consider assaulting ye with somethin’ so trivial as the truth.”

I jerked away from him, forcing him to put me down. I may have also stomped on his foot as I hit the ground. He was upset about his brother, I knew, but I had just lost my husband.

Storming away from him, I limped the rest of the way back to the castle.

There was a time Logan would never have raised his voice to me. To anyone, really. He had been downright congenial when I met him, but his appointment to Captain of Luan’s Guard had changed that. I hoped my brother would retain his own kind nature when his appointment became official.

The life of a princess did not lend itself to many friends. The few my age at court were either wary of being too close to me or desperate to win my favor for reasons that had nothing to do with companionship.

I had spent most of every day alone in lessons with my tutors for as long as I could remember. The only respite from that schedule had been the three weeks of the year I spent in Luan, and the three weeks Oli and Logan would come here.

I didn’t know if I could handle losing another friend, let alone my brother.

The guards heaved opened the massive wooden doors for me, and I made my way toward the war room. If the monarchs were meeting already, to plan the next steps, that is where they would be.

I cursed under my breath as Logan fumed past me, easily outpacing my hobbled gait. He stomped into the war room and let the door slam behind him with a bang.

Bastard.

My mother found me just before I entered the meeting and motioned me toward the small alcove directly across from it. Worry lined her face.

“Mother, I’m...” I didn’t know how I was going to finish that sentence, but I didn’t need to. She reached out for my hand, placing it in both of hers.

The small gesture threatened to break my resolve. If my anger disappeared, I would be nothing but raw emotions again. A tear slipped down my cheek, and I looked away from her. I didn't know what she was thinking, but I couldn't bear it if she displayed a hint of pity.

My mother gently tilted my chin to face her and spoke in a clear, even voice. There was no trace of pity or sadness. Instead, I saw the Queen in her.

Strong. Determined. Wise.

“Darling, I know you are overwhelmed with sadness and worry. But all is not lost. Not yet. If anyone can bring Oliver back, it will be our armies. They would climb the Masach Mountains for you, my child, to bring home the man you love.”

The man I love. Who is gone. Panic surged once more through my veins.

She must have noticed. “Charlotte, they wouldn't have taken Oliver away if they wished the worst for him.”

She means death. My mind snagged on the word that my mother refused to say. I forced myself to focus on what she had said. And she was right.

This isn't over yet.

Taking a deep breath, I left the alcove and nodded to the sentries to open the doors to the war room. As an afterthought, I slipped off my other shoe and straightened my crown. I was disheveled and barefoot, but I would be damned if that kept me from doing everything I could to help Oliver.

Find the rest of the story here:
Winter's Captive