

ANGIE GRIGALIUNAS



THE
MIDNIGHT
PRINCE

ONCE UPON



A PRINCE

A CINDERELLA RETELLING

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ANGIE GRIGALIUNAS

THE
MIDNIGHT
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A CINDERELLA RETELLING

The Midnight Prince:

A Cinderella Retelling

Once Upon A Prince Book Five

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*For those who dare to believe in second chances
and those who ache to be given one.*

MAP



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CHAPTER
ONE

KIRRAN

My father gapes at the wine-red stains on my hands and forearms as if they're the sign of a curse. For an autumn fey, they might as well be.

“Kirran.” He rubs his fingers over his mouth and down his chin, curling his hand into a fist beneath it. With his other hand, he grips the polished wooden armrest of his throne. “What have you done?”

I stare at him, shoulders squared. “Won.”

My father grimaces and shakes his head.

His skin is brown, the dusty shade of dying leaves. The color my hands were when I left the palace seven years ago. When we kill, our sin inks us with barren branches stretching up from our hands, like our victim's blood silently crying out from our skin. Every life taken extends the marks, deepens the branches to a brackish red and beyond, until they mirror the darkness of a cavern.

I don't know any soldiers without at least a few branches. But the marks can evidently reach a point where the old bloodstains they mimic hit their apex, where the branches don't grow any darker or thicker or longer. Though it's not for lack of trying.

What have I done? It should be obvious.

Without taking his eyes off me, my father beckons a servant over. The man listens for a moment, bows, and scurries from the room.

A pace to my right, General Zeccar clears his throat. “If I may, Your Majesty. Prince Kirran’s presence on the frontline made the difference between victory and defeat on numerous occasions.” His folded hands flex at his back. Dozens of stains mar his skin, more than most other officers’. But his magic isn’t killing magic. He meets my glance with a half-smile and settles his attention on my father. “Merciless enemies must be met with mercilessness. You should be proud of him. He has honed himself into a formidable foe.”

Zeccar would know. His enhanced memory magic allows him to forget nothing, and since he stuck close to my side, he’s probably seen me kill more times than anyone else has. Both with blades and my mind.

“As you hoped.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Zeccar dips his head in a bow.

My father’s hard gaze slides between us. The stained-glass windows high above fling pale daylight across his crown and shadows over his face. “Unfortunately, a weapon’s place is on the battlefield. Yet here we are, in a palace. Tell me, what use is honed withering magic in a palace?”

I bristle but say nothing. Zeccar keeps his head down. His jaw tightens.

My father studies Zeccar for a moment longer, all the while idly tapping the armrest. The jeweled ring on each finger glimmers. “General, you may take your leave. I wish to speak with the crown prince.”

The air locks in my chest. Never before has that title been applied to me.

Zeccar salutes and turns away, flashing me the slightest wince where my father can’t see it. His steady footfalls soften in the distance.

The instant the main doors close behind him, my father pushes up from his throne. He steps down from the dais,

planting his hands on his hips as he scans me. If he tries at all to hide the way his focus lingers on the stains, he fails. When I left, we were about the same build. Whether time has strengthened me or simply shriveled him, I can't tell. Or perhaps it's due to his thirtieth year as king approaching its end.

In the weeks it's taken my army to return since the human king of Codrin surrendered, I did find time to clean my armor, at least. So he can't complain about that too.

"Am I to believe that this is how you will behave as king?" He gestures at my hands. It isn't concern in his voice, merely mockery.

"What, winning?" I allow a faint smirk to skim my lips. "Yes, I intend to keep winning."

"No, Kirran, being reckless and ruthless, refusing all diplomacy in favor of...carnage."

A cold laugh almost spills out. I settle for icy words instead. "What kind of diplomacy do you think happens on a battlefield? At least one path actually gets the job done." I shrug and start past him toward the back doors of the great hall. "Guess you should've had more sons so the crown definitely wouldn't get down to me."

"Kirran —"

I whirl back to face him, my boots scraping across the stone floor. "What?"

My father snags the pair of dust-colored gloves from the returning servant and holds them out. "You will wear these tonight."

"Tonight?" My plans for tonight include food, drink, and some much-needed sleep — none of which require gloves.

He blinks like he's unsure whether my response is confusion, a joke, or idiocy. "The masquerade."

A scoff escapes. "I'm not going to a ball. I'm going to bed."

His eyes flare, and he shakes the gloves at me. “You will in fact attend all three balls, Kirran.”

Back-to-back evenings. Even better.

“As is custom, this shall be a traditional masquerade — to honor your homecoming and celebrate our victory, as well as present you as the crown prince.”

I’m a little more prepared for the title this time, but it still lands like a blow to my gut.

“On the final night, also as per custom, you will announce your choice for a bride.”

I tense. An unbidden memory of sunlight-gold hair and river-deep eyes glimmers to the surface. I grit my teeth to repel it. Everything within me still coils as if to lash out.

My reaction is nothing more than being in this place again. Certainly not because of the word *bride*. Or the thoughts of the treacherous girl I’d once foolishly imagined marrying.

I wrangle the disgust and pointedly spread my arms. “Don’t you think my future wife should know exactly what kind of monster she’s marrying? Isn’t it deceitful to attempt to conceal such information?” My brows tick up, and I let my arms fall to my sides. “You are aware that every single soldier in the army has seen this, yes? Plenty of others here too.” I tip my head toward the nearby servant, who snaps his gaze away.

“Perhaps, but regardless, you will wear them. For the *duration* of the masquerade.” My father holds my stare without flinching and tips his chin up to meet my challenge. He thrusts the gloves out again. “It is not a request, son.”

For a prolonged moment, we don’t move. Then I snatch the gloves from his grasp and yank them onto my hands to cover my sins.

“Better?”

“Much.” He matches my sneering smile. “Get some rest and get cleaned up. You are to be presentable — and in a better mood — by dusk.”

I don't humor him with a response, just spin on my heel and stride from the throne room. A throne room that shouldn't be mine, yet will be. And far sooner than I can wrap my head around.

The reality of it all claws at me more with every step I take toward my old quarters. I lengthen my stride. As if my boots thudding across the smooth marble floor could drown out the memory of my eldest brother's earnest words mere days before his assassination.

"Father said he'll begin the transition ritual when I return."

Even now, I can see the compassion and resolve in Farrid's golden eyes as he spoke of taking Father's place, accepting the thirty-year responsibility of kingship. The knowledge that he'd be bound to the people and land had never daunted him. Even when we were all boys. Neither had the fact that, in his final year, as those threads started unraveling and his magic weakened, he'd have to relinquish the kingdom to someone else. Or the binding magic would kill him.

Just like it'll kill Father if he remains king a day beyond what the magic allows.

Of the four of us, Farrid had always been closest with Father. Always anticipated the day he'd relieve Father of the burden, allowing him to enjoy his final years with Mother.

If Father were that worried about my potential rule, he would've named a different successor years ago. Perhaps he truly considered such precautions unnecessary. After all, he had Farrid, his perfect reflection, down to their matching storm magic. And if not Farrid, then Sammir, the second-best, gifted never to grow tired and to imbue strength to others. Then Rassul, with his ability, like Zeccar, to remember everything. All of them suited for life at court or as leaders.

Me, fourth in line, gifted to extinguish life? Of course I'd never be king.

Each rapid step I take pounds in time with my heart.

Sammir and Rassul never left the battlefield. Farrid never made it home from negotiations with Codrin's crown prince. Now my father has three and a half months for a ritual that can take three.

And just me.

Servants skitter out of my way as I stalk down the hall. Some offer breathless greetings while others pin their gazes to the floor in reverence. I start to acknowledge them, but the instant I catch myself wanting to look for golden hair, I snap my gaze straight ahead and quicken my pace even more. I can traverse these halls with my eyes shut. Still, I don't dare close them, lest my mind betray me there as well, bring her face back to haunt me.

My chamber smells of stale dust and old leather.

Crinkled leaves litter the corners of the room, as if someone left the windows open and forgot I was coming back today. Or maybe that's how I left it, abandoned in rage. Maybe someone thought I preferred it in that state. Either way, it's somehow fitting. At first glance, nothing has changed inside the room. Yet decay lurks in the shadows and crevices. I don't want to pretend it isn't there, hasn't followed me here.

My hands are evidence of that, as Father so aptly implied.

For the first time in nearly two centuries, the autumn fey will have a killer for a king. One whose private rooms should stink of death.

I once thought of my people, my magic, as bringing change, offering quiet reflection and solace. Beauty. Growing up, autumn was beautiful. The turn of the seasons. Summer's vibrant, loud sun making way for a softer solace before winter's chill stepped in.

That was before I saw my powers siphon the life from people. Before I watched their bodies wither to shells at my mind's command. Before I became a weapon.

Behind me, the door creaks, and glass slippers clink against the floor. Familiar enough to recognize the woman wearing them.

I shift to face her and give a stiff nod like that will keep me from shattering. “Mother.”

“Kirran. My dear — my boy...” She extends a delicate hand and starts toward me, her crimson and amber gown sparkling in the patchy sunlight.

I take a step back, into the shadows my canopy bed makes on the stone floor between us.

Emotion floods my chest, pulling me down until I sink onto the mattress. The clean linen scent washes over me. That makes it worse — that the servants didn’t clean the room but did freshen the sheets. Probably in preparation for a woman to join me in it. Within days.

Like I’m ready for that. For any of this.

I press a hand to my forehead, flinch at the sensation of fabric, and rip off the gloves. They land on the floor with a soft pat.

My mother hasn’t moved from her spot near the doorway, but I can feel her gaze slide over my hands. Her dress rustles. “I’m so glad to see you, darling.”

“No.” It comes out choked. I grip my knees, my attention on the mahogany skin set against my black trousers. Shadows make my hands the inky color of wet leaf mold, but sunlight reveals the ruddy brown tinge — a sickening shade that sucks all light into it. “Don’t call me that.”

She inhales but falls silent.

She stays that way so long that I peek up to see if she’s still there.

Her tender smile meets me first. Unshed tears glitter in her golden eyes. She tips her head to the side, and the rubies on her crown glimmer. “Do you think I love you less than your brothers?” A soft step closer. “That my heart doesn’t sing to see you?”

“I know it doesn’t.” Bitterness I don’t intend for her laces the words, and I rip my gaze away. But I can’t stop talking, spewing feelings I thought I’d long since subdued. “How

could you be happy? How can you not —” My voice hitches. I grit my teeth and try again. “How can you not be... disappointed that *I’m* the one left?”

“Kirran.” Another rush of fabric, and she’s in front of me, kneeling. Her smooth, light brown hands grip my red ones. “I have *never* been disappointed in you.”

She waits until I look up, then smirks, mischief in her eyes that once mirrored my own. Before war ripped me to shreds and reassembled me as this.

“Annoyed with you at times, yes,” she says, “and exasperated, definitely. More often than I was with your brothers. But you are only joy. Seeing you...” She unwraps one hand from mine and touches my cheek. My breath falters, and I set my jaw. “I’m so deeply glad you’re home, my love.”

Everything in her manner melts too much of my resolve.

“Father’s not.” It comes out weak. Like a little boy’s voice. I haven’t been that in a long time.

She shakes her head and squeezes my hands as if she doesn’t notice the color or know what it means. “He is in his own way. Grief touches us all differently. As does fear.”

Grief and fear. Two things I know. Too well.

We sniff in unison, and she stands and shifts back. “By the way, this isn’t the room you were intended to stay in. Hence —” She gestures to the leaves and then the cobwebs in the canopy above me. I hadn’t noticed those before. Her expression turns solemn as she looks back at me. “You were to be brought to the bedchamber of the crown prince.”

A shudder seizes my chest, rebellion burning as sharply as the pain. “But I’m not —”

“You are, love.”

“I want this room.” I let out a breath and focus on the floor between us until I steady myself. “My room.”

She peers down at me, purses her lips, and nods. “Very well. I will inform the servants, then. For bathing purposes,

use your brother's room. Until they get everything ready here.”

It's slight, but I hear it — in the way she won't use Farrid's name. What must it be like to have had four sons and only welcome home one? We grieve the same absences, but she's right. We grieve differently.

She grieves as one who did not get to say goodbye.

I grieve as the one who watched two of them die.

Her voice pulls me from the ravaged battlefields, the human and fey soldiers strewn across the countryside. “You'll be able to retire here tonight, after the ball.”

I sigh and force myself to stand. “Thank you.”

She touches my shoulder and casts another purposeful glance over me like she's taking in what the last seven years have made me. Her grip tightens, and soft eyes search mine. Offering affection that I can't take hold of.

Then she glides out of the room without touching me again.

I remain there. Frozen in the empty place where I spent the first eighteen years of my life. A place that should feel like something beyond a hollow. But it doesn't.

The door opens. Two light-haired servant girls startle and gasp out apologies.

I wave a dismissive hand and breeze past them into the corridor before I try to get a good look at either young woman.

The sooner I leave my chambers, the sooner they can clean them, and the sooner I can leave my dead brother's room and return to this one. Return to a bed that is mine but no longer my own, in a palace that was once home but is more foreign than welcoming, in a kingdom I now stand as the next in line — no, as the only one in line — to inherit.

As much as I wish to leave such thoughts behind, they follow me to Farrid's former bedchambers, cramming their way inside with me as I crack the door and slip through. Mother was right about this room being cleaner. Daylight

floods in from four vaulted windows. No leaves or dust to be seen. Nor do I care to look.

I turn to the right and head toward the washroom. A handful of servants scurry around the tub, tossing different spices into the water. Another servant uses her magic to heat it. Within seconds of my approach, they scramble out of the washroom, bowing their heads in a flurry as they make their escape.

Steam wisps from the water, inviting me closer, but I don't move. The swirl of spices and oils darkens the surface. If I squint, it could easily be spilled life mixing with rainwater. Never mind that every time I've bathed in the last seven years, I've gone without spices or oils. Sometimes without warm water.

How am I supposed to do this?

I move forward on wooden feet, forcing away the instinctive feelings that I'm invading my eldest brother's privacy. If Farrid were still here, he wouldn't care, would have laughed at me for it. Yet if he were still here, I wouldn't be entering his chambers or taking his place as crown prince.

I could let my legs turn to branches in the washroom doorway, rooted in place. This place that is not mine.

Only until tonight.

Even as I think it, I know that's not what my mind means with its soundless cry.

This role is not mine.

With listless movements, I undress and step into the water. It flushes over me, scalding but not hot enough to burn my thoughts and cares away. How I can feel both nothing and everything at once, I do not know.

I tip my head back against the tub's smooth edge and finally let my eyes close. I brace myself for flashes of combat. For flaxen hair between my fingers and her soft lips smiling up at me. There's only darkness. And apart from the sloshing of water, there's silence.

It won't last, can't last, but for this moment, it remains.
And I wrap myself in it.

But my mind won't stay silent.

A masquerade ball. To celebrate my return and our victory over the humans who just don't know when to quit. That celebration part, I suppose I can accept. It's the other part.

Finding a bride...

Again, my insides tense at the word. Like any of this pomp matters. It's a waste of time, resources, food. Completely unnecessary and all for show. My father should've just picked a woman from our kingdom — even from one of the other fey kingdoms — and presented her as my bride.

Though he probably assumed I'd rebel against the woman he chose.

A younger me would have. A different me. This me, whatever husk of a man has come home from the frontline, can't even pretend to care who I marry. I won't be able to love her, so it doesn't matter who she is or what she is. She doesn't even have to be pretty or kind or close to my age — might be easier to ignore her if she's undesirable in nearly every way.

Though I'll still have to produce at least two heirs. I'd probably best remember that.

The notion turns my guts to ash.

Once, I would have cared. Had cared. Had wanted everything that came with romantic love. Once upon a time I wish I could forget, I thought I'd found her. Had been so *sure* I'd found her.

But now? Now, any woman is fine. So long as she doesn't expect anything from me. Least of all for me to want her. Marrying me — it's a dreadful fate for any woman who will attend over the next three nights. I already pity my wife. Not one girl knows what she's walking into. What kind of marriage she'll actually face if she's chosen. Maybe the splendor of being queen will be enough to appease her, give her a happy enough existence.

Still would've been better to make it entirely political.

Even a magic-based match would've been better. Because forest knows, she has to have magic.

I draw my hands up through the water to wipe my face. Bubbles fizz across my skin and lazily dissipate. Deep red hands and forearms, matching the bloodstains I no longer bear on my body. Decay encases the heart in my chest. Though I live and breathe, inside, I'm cracked and stone-cold and lifeless. The way I've left everything else I've touched.

So, no. I won't watch for that golden-haired traitor tonight or imagine that, somehow, she might have returned to work in this palace. I won't lose myself in the magnificence and clamor of the festivities and presume, for even a moment, that maybe I could find someone to be happy with.

I'll simply single out whatever acceptable woman seems the most like she doesn't want to be there, and that'll be it.

CHAPTER
TWO

ALIA

“Have you seen Kirran yet?”

Reena’s chirpy voice cuts through my concentration. I nearly drop the washing as I spin my head toward her.

“He’s back?” It’s a ridiculous question, and I know it the moment it leaves my lips. Of course he is. If he weren’t, she wouldn’t have asked.

But Reena, forest bless her, doesn’t tease me, just smiles and answers the question I should have asked. “He arrived a few hours ago. The general debriefed him, and then they probably met with the king. He’s likely in his chamber by now.”

A tightness constricts my limbs, but I force a smile back. “Ah.”

“Probably getting ready for the masquerade tonight.” Reena prances over, flipping her auburn hair off her shoulder as she sidles up next to me and leans to grab a handful of fabric. “I’ll bet he’s just as handsome as ever.”

I ignore the ridiculous burst of warmth in my belly and shoot her a grimace. “And as vicious.”

She pauses, head tipped to the side. Her hair slides down to reveal the gentle point of her ear. “You think?”

“If I know Kirran — which I do —”

“*Do you, now?*” She snorts and lifts her brows.

Now she’s teasing.

“Not like that, and you know it,” I say with an equally playful scowl.

“You’ve kissed him, which is a fair cry more than anyone else here has done.”

Thank the forest all we ever did back then was kiss.

Our mutual desire to wait for marriage was yet another reason I’d thought he was the one.

The simmering heat spikes, but I stuff it down — into the past of a foolish girl who no longer exists. “I’m quite certain he still cares as much for me as he did when I left.” I try to say it without emotion, as I speak of nothing more impactful than the fact that the palace is made of stones. But something still catches in my throat, an echo of pain that skulks at the back of my mind and haunts me in the darkest reaches of night.

I push that aside too. I’ve known for weeks that Kirran was returning. We’ve all known why and what it means for Hazal, the autumn kingdom. I’ve had plenty of time to prepare myself.

Reena rolls amber eyes and tucks her hair behind her ears. “Well, then he’s a fool —”

“Ree!” I snap my gaze toward the door and back to her. “Are you mad? You speak of the crown prince —”

“— and the cousin of my cousin’s brother-in-law, which makes me family, so I’m allowed.”

I shake my head. “None of that makes you Kirran’s family. Especially not since —” The words fail in my chest, and I freeze. Speaking of the deceased princes isn’t forbidden, of course. But it feels like it should be. Maybe that’s just because it’s so fresh still. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s not like any of them ever actually talked to me. And I’m not close with Coretta anyway.” She falls silent, yanking at the soaked clothes to rotate them, then nudges me

with her shoulder. “So, do you want to come with me tonight?”

I all but drop the washing again. Servants aren’t permitted to attend balls unless invited, even if I did wish to go. And my stepmother hasn’t dragged me to a public spectacle in years. I cannot fathom that she’d request my presence. Now that my stepsisters and I are adults, my stepmother’s image doesn’t require her to present three dutiful daughters.

“Absolutely not.”

“You don’t want to see him? Even at a distance?”

“No.”

A ripple of memory tugs at the fringes of my mind. The way his gold eyes cast me aside the last time I saw him. Seven years of silence can’t dispel the punch I still feel from that repulsed glance. I pity any battlefield enemy who found himself at Kirran’s mercy. For he has none. Not even for someone he claimed to love.

No matter how much distance I’ve put between us in my heart, even I know I haven’t fully healed.

Reena stays quiet for a moment longer, then sighs. “It’s a masquerade. You could go without looking like yourself.”

“And just why would I do that?”

She offers an exaggeratedly bewildered shrug. “To be there? Experience it? Pretend to be something other than this?” She flings her hand out toward the room, sending droplets of water across my cheek.

I study her. Words of protest linger on my tongue, because surely she remembers how I grudgingly accepted the dresses my stepmother sent whenever she needed to pretend she loved me. Then I get it. “Captain Harran will be there, won’t he? And you wish to dance with him.”

Her mouth drops open. Pink shades her cheeks. “The insolence. How dare you. I’ve never met a woman so — so —”

“Insightful?”

She wrinkles her nose at me, but nothing disguises the increasing blush. “— *insolent*.”

“Mm, yes, you said that. You also said before he left that he invited you to ‘the next ball he’d be able to attend.’” I snicker and flip my hair off my face. The distraction is far more welcome than the intrusive thoughts of Kirran. Though, speaking of his older cousin toes the line between the two. “So, you want me to come with you so you have someone to gossip with until you can make your move and get the good captain alone.”

Her mock-cold stare pierces me, and she purses her lips. “Even if that were the case, which it most certainly is not, I won’t indulge your fantasy of being right by agreeing to such preposterous —”

“Reena.”

“— and presumptuous —”

“*Reena*.”

She stops and huffs at me, flinging her arms out to her sides. “I’m in the middle of a rant, can’t you see?”

Giggles bubble out of me before I can stop them all. I cool my expression. “I can. But if we want to have time to get ready, we’ll need to finish up here sooner rather than later.”

She stills, her amber eyes searching mine before a gleam overtakes them. “Really?”

“Yes.” I shake my head and groan. “I’ll probably regret it —”

“Not a chance.”

“— and you’re a horrible influence —”

“I don’t deny that.”

I elbow her gently. “But yes, I’ll go — if only so you can have your moment with the good captain.”

“You’re the best, you know that?” She grins at me and tips her head back with a delighted sigh. “I can’t wait to see him. A year has been far too long.” Panic streaks across her face as

she looks back at me and knots one finger around a loose strand of hair. “Do you think he’ll remember me?”

I offer a reassuring nod. “He couldn’t forget you.”

Reena has fancied Captain Harran since before he was an officer and well before he ever left to join the battle efforts in the north, but they’ve truly spoken only a handful of times. Stolen moments, all of them.

Not that I know anything besides stolen moments, sneaking about, trying to keep a secret.

Captain Harran is a good decade older than us and rather grizzled-looking — not to mention he’s Kirran’s first cousin, which makes everything a bit more complicated — but I’ve seen the sparkle in his eyes whenever Reena is around. Even from afar. He will be just as happy to see her as she is to see him. And even if their pairing isn’t common, his rank should be more than enough to compensate for her lack of standing. Or likely raise it, since he’s a duke in the same way my father was.

Which means that, if she does marry him, I may be left alone again.

I smile at her back as she continues the washing. Of everyone I know, Reena has been the most consistent friend. An uplifting, healing presence. Always able to make me laugh, even on my hardest days.

Regardless of what it means for me, if true love exists, Reena deserves it.

We rush as best we can through the remainder of the washing. By the time we slip from the room, my arms ache something fierce. I grab fresh undergarments from my quarters, and then Reena takes my hand and pulls me toward her place down the narrow hall.

Like me, Reena is an orphan. Unlike me, she is autumn fey, and she didn’t get shoved into a family that treats her like manure to scrape off one’s boots before coming inside. Instead, she and her older brother, Tarriel, came here six and a half years ago — shortly after I returned from the spring

kingdom of Palla — and got jobs as servants. She and I were best friends before the end of her first day and have only grown closer. Tarriel worked his way out of the kitchens, through the guard, and now stands as a lieutenant. Reena recently took over as the laundress's assistant.

And I remain what I've always been: the half-human girl who helps wherever she can and tries to stay out of her stepfamily's way.

Once inside Reena's room, she readies two baths, each with a towel nearby. She used to have a roommate, Naama, a sweet woman a little younger than us, but she married one of the groundskeepers about a year ago and moved to the gardeners' quarters. We've only seen her in passing a few times since.

As the water heats, Reena rummages through her wardrobe. I float my way toward her shelves and parse through her new books. One with snowy white and pale blue swirls on the spine snares my attention.

"How do you have a winter fey book?" With the borders closed, winter fey items have become increasingly rare.

"I saved up." She flashes a playful grin my way. "You know, you could afford books too — or a decent dress — once in a while if you stopped giving things away."

My cheeks warm, and I lower my gaze. "Others need it more. What am I going to do with money?"

She snorts. "Buy books or dresses?"

I giggle once and flip through the colorful pages. "This must have cost two months' wages, Ree."

"Three." She sniffs and holds a blue dress against her body before tucking it away and glancing over. Soft eyes sweep across me, and she sighs. "You're right. You'd never be able to do it. Too sweet. I hope that someday, someone spoils you the way you deserve. Since you won't spoil yourself."

Reena primarily spends her wages on clothes and books and boasts an impressive display of both. I love books but don't care much about clothes. My stepmother used to have at

least half of my wages garnished for “proper” dresses so I wouldn’t “embarrass her by embarrassing myself” at social functions. She left me only enough for hygienic essentials. She doesn’t take as much anymore. And I don’t know what she uses the money for now.

“Here. You can wear this one.” Reena offers me a dusky orange gown, the color of a rusty sunset. She picks a bright yellow one for herself and prances off toward the bathing screen.

My reflection catches my eye. I tip my head to the side to study myself in the dust-speckled mirror. She’s right. The simple brown and tan dress hangs on my form. It’s so worn now that it almost appears too big. Maybe over the next few months, I’ll try to keep my wages so I can buy a new dress entirely.

Thoughts I’ve long since tried to bury pull at my awareness. Spiteful words spewed from the sisters I didn’t choose but have never been able to fully escape.

Vallda scans my gown and grimaces. “You’re wearing that? Oh, Ashalia, couldn’t you at least try to look presentable?”

My pulse races in my ears. “Stepmother bought the dress —”

Devikka cackles, silencing my protest. “She probably didn’t think it’d look so awful on you, though.”

I swallow hard and force back the condemning memory. A hundred more stand ready to take its place, mocking me from the mirror. Nerves wrestle for a hold on my mind.

Will they know me? They never see me, only look down at me, but is it enough?

Releasing a huff, I pull my gaze from the mirror. Shadows shifting on the wall behind the bathing screen indicate Reena getting undressed. With my heart pounding at the thought of what lies ahead, I take a deep breath and lay the dress over the back of a chair. Then I strip off my outfit and hurry through

my bath, though I take additional time to scrub my face and hair.

In the dim light, my wet hair looks more brown than blonde. When I was little, before Papa died, I used to wish I had darker hair. Hair like him and most of the other spring fey. He'd tenderly scolded me for it, told me I was who I was for a reason and that I shouldn't wish to be someone else.

Still, moving here with my stepmother and stepsisters when I was six — to live among the darker-haired and darker-complexioned autumn fey — only increased the desire to fit in. While there are a handful of human or part-fey servants on the castle grounds, I'm the only mixed girl who is *spring* fey. I've mostly grown out of caring if others accept me or not.

Even if my hair still more closely resembles wheat stalks than dying leaves.

I have my Derian human mother to thank for that, forest keep her. Though, that's only according to my dear father. I have no memories of her, only a spattering of things he said about her, one of which is that my hair is the same color hers was. I've gripped the charm necklace she left me and imagined her holding me, dancing with me, so many times that it almost feels real. Even though I barely remember him, I know I have his eyes — a mixture of blue and green that plants me squarely among the spring fey.

Between my hair, my eyes, my lighter skin, and my lack of magic — impossible because human blood neutralizes even royal fey blood — I'm mostly the spitting image of my mother. With just enough of my father to confuse people, make me even more otherworldly here in the autumn kingdom of Hazel.

I try to hold my parents so close, so tight. Yet as the years pass, I find them slipping out of reach. How can I miss people who only linger in a handful of my memories?

Perhaps the absence of a male presence in my life was what made me so susceptible to Kirran's charms.

The thought slithers through me, and I shake it from my mind. Yet my chest clenches, the defensive response rising before I can avoid it.

No, what made me susceptible to Kirran was him being my best friend for years, then him kissing me in the garden one evening and telling me he'd been "dying to do that for months."

I suck in a deep breath and focus on scrubbing the dirt from beneath my fingernails. It doesn't matter why I fell for Kirran's charms. All that matters is how he let me drop.

Not that it matters anymore. What's done is done, and there's no going back.

I rise from the bath, towel off, and reach for the borrowed dress, carefully sliding the smooth fabric up my body. It fits well. Snug but not restrictive, like all fey clothing is. I settle my necklace under the collar and dare a glance down at myself, then in the mirror.

My heart sinks. I've cleaned my hands, but nothing disguises that they're working hands, not soft and smooth like a courtier's should be. Like my stepmother and stepsisters' are. Even now, I'm nothing but a child playing dress-up in clothes far too fancy for her.

Just as I was once a gullible girl playing at becoming a princess.

Worse yet, I still look like me. I will stand out like a pig among swans.

Reena, dressed and glowing in her golden makeup, returns and grins at me before pulling me to the side to brush out my hair. With every stroke, she both dries and magically darkens the strands, until my hair glimmers a far more acceptable and inconspicuous strawberry russet. She cautions that it will only stay this way for a few hours, bringing us to about midnight when the enchantment will disintegrate. I assure her that it will be long enough.

If all goes as I wish, I'll be in bed and fast asleep by midnight.

For Reena. It's just one evening.

When she finishes tucking some of the strands up around my head, she dusts on a quick layer of makeup and leads me back to the mirror.

We stand side by side, staring at ourselves. I don't recognize myself even from a few moments ago. Gone are the tangled flaxen tresses, the sweat-stained slip of a dress that's due for another round of patches, the apron and worn boots. In my place stands, if not a princess, then at least a lady.

My hair looks as ordinary as Reena's. Its soft reddish-gold complements my fair skin. But one glimpse of my blue-green eyes, and I see the spring fey, the human, the servant. No mask or makeup will hide that.

Could I be something else, even for one night?

Fear twists my insides, but I try to rationalize what I'm about to do. Because I'll be with Reena until Captain Harran whisks her away, and then I'll leave. Because seven years have passed since I stepped foot in the ballroom while Kirran was present, and I'm no longer the naïve young woman I was. I've mostly healed from his rejection. I've grown a bit taller. Hard work has leaned my body more than it ever was before. My hair is magically altered, my figure naturally fuller. I won't speak louder than a whisper, so Kirran won't hear me, if he'd even still know my voice. He probably never memorized it in the first place. Not like I did with his.

After all this time, he's surely discarded every memory of me. Blotted me from his thoughts the way I blot up spilled wine.

And I'll wear a mask. It'll be fine.

Yet for as many times as I reassure myself, a deeper instinct plumes within me, whispering that the bejeweled mask will provide me no anonymity, that he will readily recognize me by my eyes, that I won't be able to avoid him the whole night.

And worse still, that everything will not be fine.

CHAPTER
THREE

KIRRAN

An array of banquet tables and people fill the room before me. Elaborate chandeliers boast dozens of candles, and bright lamps line the walls. The tables have been set up off near the pillars on either side of the room, leaving the middle open for dancing.

There are numerous men present — soldiers and courtiers and nobles, here to mingle and rub shoulders with those more powerful. But the vast majority of the attendees are eligible women at least sixteen years of age. Daughters and sisters and cousins of nobility. A handful are humans, but most are autumn fey. Some may be here hoping to get close to any number of the unattached men.

The rest have made me their goal.

Even before I step into the ballroom, the sense of being hunted overwhelms me.

I clench my teeth, lock my hands into fists, and force myself forward. Better to get it over with than try to slip away. My father would only drag it out another three days. Not that he has much time to waste.

I locate a spot at the far end of the tables and settle in against the wall, watching those around me chatter and eat and laugh. My insides churn too much to leave room for hunger,

though I should be hungry. I haven't eaten since early this morning, before arriving here.

A wave of something I can't name washes over me, and I peer down at my gloved hands.

Was it really just this morning? This time yesterday, I was still traveling. Still with my men. Life still made sense, was simpler.

I take a deep breath and push the thoughts aside.

I find my brothers' widows first, offering useless condolences that all three tearfully accept. While they're all pregnant, only Sammir's wife shows it. The three women stick together and don't talk with me long before curtsying to me and slipping away.

Understandable enough. I'm little more to them than a reminder that their husbands aren't coming home too.

The rest of the first hour or so passes in a flurry of nobles and sycophants, all eager to greet me, wish me well, get familiar with me. Future king and all. A handful of my soldiers pass by, their company far more welcome and comforting, but even they drift off to find women to socialize with after a while. A few try to get me to join them and whatever ladies they've singled out, but I wave them off and stay where I am. General Zeccar stops by with his wife and daughter before heading with them to join my father. Dozens of glances that feign at being furtive dart my way. More women than I can count approach to try to strike up a conversation.

I try. But it seems I only did part of what my father ordered — I bathed and changed clothes.

I did not change my mood.

Sometime during the second hour, I catch sight of two young women just beyond the dance floor, though not quite in the shadows behind the columns.

One in orange, one in yellow. My gaze sweeps over the taller one and back to the woman in orange. A good third of those in attendance wear some variation of autumn colors, so it's not strange, but something about this girl snares my

attention. Perhaps it's because her hair has a rosy hue to it, oddly contrasting the rust-colored gown. Though, if she's vying for my hand, of course she'd opt for being bold, do something to make herself a bit different from the rest. She surely enchanted her hair as well in an effort to stand out.

Draw the eye of the crown prince, secure a crown for herself.

It's all repulsive. Making sport of something this monumental, like it doesn't matter who shares my life. Marriages can and do dictate the fate of entire kingdoms; they should never be left to the whims of seductive, self-interested women. At least if the marriage had been arranged, I could imagine my wife would be in it for the good of her kingdom, same as I am. We could forge an alliance based on the mutual advantages afforded our people, instead of opening the door for all manner of sedition and trickery.

Then again, there would have been no assurance an arranged marriage would bring a kind wife.

I push the thought away. Kindness is probably a luxury at this point.

With the hundreds of women striving to steal my attention, how many would have even an inkling of interest in me if power was no part of it? How many would be honest about their intentions if I asked?

Not that I would believe *anyone* to be honest with me anymore. Fey can't lie, but we can still deceive by omission or clever words. And I definitely don't trust my judgment on whether a woman is genuine or not.

Add the fact that it's a masquerade on top of that...

I stifle a disgusted groan. My father seeks to either mock me or torment me. I'm not sure which is more like him.

I scrape my teeth against my tongue and focus on the girl in the orange dress again.

She has a pretty face, from what I can see of it around the glittering mask. Soft-looking pink lips. Smooth, fair skin framed by rose-colored curls. And the dress fits her...well.

An almost foreign heat spreads up the back of my neck, and I tear my gaze away from her like it's a crime for noticing. She's the one wearing a gown that clings to her figure. Surely, she seeks to be seen, admired. *Desired*. And by me. Because it's all part of the game every woman plays here tonight.

I shouldn't fall for it. Shouldn't want to rake my gaze over her the way I do.

I set my jaw and try to purge the image of the orange-clad girl from my mind. Yet she remains, burned behind my eyes. It's been years since I let myself appreciate a woman's appearance, and years before that when I felt any twinge of embarrassment or confusion over it.

The tangle of warmth and shame within me mirrors the first time I looked at my best friend and felt something *more*. More than just fondness, more than whatever our friendship felt like before we set it on fire. For years, she'd been no different from any of my guards, my brothers and cousins, my male friends. Softer and gentler, maybe. More delicate. Someone I felt more protective over, brutally protective at times, but just a person like them.

And then one day, she'd flashed a playful smile at me, and the sunlight hit those eyes differently, and she'd had to smack my shoulder to get me to stop staring. For months after that, it was a struggle to keep from moving closer, keep from touching her. To look at her and not stare.

The way I want to stare at this woman in orange.

It feels wrong. Like a betrayal.

As if I can betray a woman who abandoned me without a word seven years ago.

Still, I keep my gaze on the dark marble floor until the desire ebbs and it seems safe to peer back up. She hasn't moved other than maybe a pace back, closer to the wall. Her friend's shadow falls over her. As a nobleman approaches and tips his head to them, the woman in orange inches farther behind her friend.

Just shy? Or is that reluctance seeping through her pinched smile and clasped hands?

Is it possible she doesn't want —

“Good evening, Your Highness.”

Two young noblewomen stand before me, their dark hair pulled back and their lowcut dresses nearly identical but for the color. One wears deep red, the other gold. Shocking.

“Welcome back,” the gold-clad girl says. A different voice, so not the first one who spoke, though she looks and sounds familiar. She twirls a strand of hair around one finger and puckers her lips up at me like she's said something unique. A dozen and a half people have already said the exact same thing.

And none of them truly mean it.

I force myself to remember manners and tip my chin down. “Ladies. Thank you for attending.”

“Oh, we wouldn't miss it for anything.” The first girl — the one in red — says with a coy giggle surely meant to endear me to her. She seems familiar too, though I can't place her.

I fight to keep from grimacing. Of course they wouldn't miss an opportunity to parade themselves in front of me in hopes of being chosen as my bride.

I should've worn a mask and mingled secretly. May have been a better use of my time. Easier to weed through those who seek only power and status. Though, it's probably all of them. At least it would've been more efficient. Maybe even more fun.

Maybe I'll try that tomorrow.

“Are you enjoying the ball, Prince Kirran?” The gold-clad girl shifts a bit closer and tilts her head as if she's really interested in what I think. She keeps lazily twirling her hair. Her other hand lifts as if to brush my arm. “Is it everything you hoped it'd be? Has anyone in particular caught your eye?”

I study what I can see of their faces. They're pretty, definitely, and the way the gold-clad girl stands compels my

eyes toward certain areas of her body. Yet something about her — whether it's the attempted seduction in her stance, the dress that doesn't cover enough, or the questions she asks but doesn't want honest answers to — riles my nerves. The girl in red is no better, now biting her bottom lip as she bats her lashes at me as if it's somehow attractive.

Do they truly think they can win me over with such tactics?

A flare of wild defiance ripples through my chest, and I shrug. “The ball's enjoyment rivals the last time I found myself surrounded by strangers who all wanted a piece of me.”

Both smile, though a flicker of hesitation plays on their lips, like they don't quite know what I mean.

I take a step closer and lower my voice. “Though there was far less food involved — and far more screaming and dying.”

Their smiles falter in unison. I fight a smirk.

“Oh, did you think you spoke to a pampered, shallow prince who finds pleasure in opulence and enjoys being flirted with by women who can't bother to share their names before playing games? No, pleasure is draining the lifeforce from a dozen enemies at once and watching them turn to dust.” I level my gaze at each one and cross my arms. Neither girl budes, though the gold-clad girl's eyes widen. “Now, ask yourselves: am I truly the sort of man you want warming your bed? No? Then move along.”

For a heartbeat, they stay motionless. Then both give quick bows and dart away without looking back. I watch them and let out a slow breath.

It's not entirely true — war brought no pleasure — but if it keeps preying women away from me, I'll pretend to enjoy it. If someone cared enough to poke through the bravado, or even look at me like something beyond a means to an end, maybe I'd answer with the truth.

But the one girl who offered that slammed that door in my face years ago.

It's only fair to plaster over it and turn it into a wall.

On the other side of the room, one of my cousins and captains, Harran, has stopped beside the women in yellow and orange and struck up a conversation. From the way the girl in yellow looks up at him and the way he beams down at her, it's only a matter of time before he pulls her away for a dance. Her friend in orange stays a step back. Knowing Harran, he probably tries to engage with her too. I can't tell if she responds at all.

And then, just like that, she's alone.

Something like panic grips her form, tightens her arms. In the next instant, she catches herself, exhales a heavy breath, and shrinks back toward the area behind the tables. The movements tease me somehow, but all I can focus on is that she looks like she's about to run.

Might as well.

I don't pay much attention to the people around me as I stride toward her, but I get a sense that some are parting to clear a path. Like they think I've set my focus on her. Maybe I have. I don't know why I'm approaching her at all, other than the sliver of hope that maybe she too doesn't want to be here either.

A semblance of common ground with someone would be nice. Even if only to pass some time.

I stop a pace from her and clear my throat. "Hello, miss."

I don't say it loudly, and I'm sure she saw me approaching, but she startles anyway, like she didn't expect me to notice her. Her head dips down, sending the strands around her face farther over her cheeks. I catch a soft whiff of lavender and oakmoss. It isn't memorable, though something about her still tugs at the depths of my mind. Her skin is lighter than ours usually is. Milkier. And while her hair mostly suggests autumn fey, there's an odd tinge — a hint of white? Silver?

Autumn and winter fey, perhaps? The winter fey of Sarma have been isolated for years, increasingly so, but it's possible she shares some of their blood.

I pull myself from my inspection and lean a little closer, as if we share a secret. “You don’t seem to be enjoying yourself.”

She shrugs and avoids my gaze. Her hands knot around her dress. Firelight sparkles on the multicolored jewels sprinkled around the edges of her mask. A modest mask, nothing gaudy.

She doesn’t come from wealth, yet she dares ignore me?

Bewilderment prickles alongside the curiosity. “Do you not speak?”

A head shake. She still doesn’t look up.

“Ah. Forgive me.”

I can’t stop the frown. What noblewoman is part autumn fey, part winter fey, and mute? I let my gaze sweep over her again. She strikes me as so familiar. But I would have remembered such a rarity.

Might as well ask.

“Do I know you? Have we met?”

Something like a ripple goes through her. She stills, her hands relaxing. Her attention remains on the floor between us. Then, ever so slowly, she peeks up. And her river-deep gaze, the same swirling mixture of green and blue that I’ve tried for seven years to drown out, crashes into mine.

Her.

Here.

Nausea wars with shock. I recoil, scramble backward a step, clutch a handful of the nearest tablecloth.

She’s...beautiful.

Somehow even more beautiful than my dreams allow me to remember. Dizzily beautiful. Breathtakingly alluring in ways I had either forgotten or never seen. My skin pulses, aching to touch her, feel her hand in mine, caress her soft face. Wrench the mask off her face and kiss her until the wound she inflicted stops unraveling me.

I start to speak and nearly choke on her name, a name I've said more times than I can count. A name she first told me through a whimper when I found her crying in the garden. A name I've whispered against her feverish lips, snarled and moaned and screamed in the silence of my tent when the fire of her betrayal threatened to rip me apart. The name of a girl I want to erase, scrub from every facet of my mind, yet cannot take my eyes off of now that she's right in front of me again.

“Alia.”

With a shuddery sigh, she presses her lips together and tips her chin up to meet my gaze. I can't mistake the wince. “Hello, Kirran.”

CHAPTER
FOUR

ALIA

Reena was right. Kirran is just as handsome as ever.

He's broader in the shoulders and taller, with a ruggedness to him that surely has come from the years he spent at war. His gold eyes are just as piercing as I remember, a sharp contrast to his brown, black, and scarlet attire. Or is it in part a soldier's uniform? I can't look away from his face long enough to check, but he looks somewhere between prince and soldier.

Then again, he is now.

I allow myself a timid smile. For two breaths, he holds my gaze just like he used to. Before I take a third, he spins on his heel and is gone.

The image of his back as he storms away sends a chill through me. My throat tightens, but I can't make myself move. The memory hits like a kick to the gut, and I double over, one arm tight around my stomach as my insides protest what I've done in coming here where I am clearly unwelcome. Again.

It's too much. I can't do this.

I slap my other hand over my mouth and scramble my way past the masked attendees. Voices and puzzled remarks bleed through my ears. I squeeze my eyes shut as I plunge out the open balcony doors. I make it to the spiral-trunked trees just beyond the exit before the tears erupt.

Seven years ago, at his birthday ball, he actually spoke to me, said more than just my name. Though it couldn't be called a conversation so much as mockery and laughter. His words, I don't recall anymore. They've thankfully weakened with time. Or perhaps my heart, in its feeble attempt at comfort, has allowed me to forget the more brutal part of our ending.

But the way his eyes flashed then — and how they just did now — throws me back into the past, slamming me under a current I can't escape.

The beautiful memories come first, tricking me with their innocence, disguising the pain yet to come. The way he'd grinned at me as he invited me to his birthday ball, telling me of his intentions to introduce me to his family as his chosen bride. The dress he'd given me. The way I'd floated through the next two days, gotten ready for the ball, hurried there through the back halls.

I strain to stop, gripping the stone before me.

But the images streak free.

Running into King Abbas. Fighting through the sting of his pitying words to reach Kirran in the ballroom. And the utter disgust in his eyes as he turned from the courtiers to me. The girl who was beneath him. Nothing but a servant. Good for nothing but to be used as a way to pass the time until he married someone far more suitable.

The girl who was everything his father had claimed I was.

And then the last glimpse of him as I moved to flee — him turning away and laughing with his friends over how stupid I'd been. How easy to fool. How I'd actually *believed* him.

His callous laughter as my heart shattered.

I yank myself free from the thoughts. Back to the present, where the man I once loved has yet again rejected me publicly, and I have yet again let him wound me.

Night air wraps around me like a robe, crisp and breezy and scented with leaves and flowers. I tip my head back, letting the soft wind caress my face, tangle in my hair. I let it hold me, for it alone is what remains to hold me.

Tears fall in hot lines down my cheeks. I press my lips together, trying my best not to make a sound. When I was a little girl and we still lived in Palla, the spring kingdom, before my stepmother got the authorization to move her family back to her nation of origin, I used to cry silently to avoid upsetting her. Or alerting her to the way her apathy cut my young heart to pieces.

She'd told me I should be thankful she had kept me on as a servant instead of throwing me to the streets like another fey would have. So I tried to be grateful. To find the good in the work, even when it was grueling and my blisters hadn't yet become calluses. After all, my stepmother had allowed me to stay with her, in her family's home, though I shared no blood with her and my father had passed. No matter that she had no love for me, or that my stepsisters despised and ridiculed me.

I'd felt guilty for crying.

Little did I know what would await me here. At least now, they don't live anywhere near me.

"Why?"

Kirran's harsh voice rips through the stillness, and I spin, nearly tripping over the heeled shoes Reena loaned me. He stands off to my right, arms crossed, drenched in the patch of darkness beyond the reach of the ballroom's lights.

His eyes glow a soft gold, almost drawing me closer. I know better than to trust it, trust him. All that was once gentle and warm about Kirran has turned to jagged steel, razor edges of ice. Having grown up around them and being half them, I have never fully feared fey. Yet Kirran is as unpredictable as he is beautiful, and I can't let myself be drawn in only for him to shatter me again.

"Why what?" I whisper.

A moment passes, thick and cold. Then his eyes flare against the shadows, and he unleashes a hissed, "Why *anything*, Alia?"

I fight the urge to recoil, make myself smaller, and try to read the look on what I can see of his face. There's more to his

expression, I'm sure, but I can only discern a seething fury. A desperate wish rises on my tongue — that I could ask him the questions I will never have the courage to ask.

I thought we were friends, Kirran. When did that change? Why do you despise me so much? How could you treat me so cruelly? How could you go from loving me to being so repulsed by me?

My heart catches. Because it wasn't love, merely rebellion. Wasn't that how the king had phrased it?

How could you use me as nothing but a way to spite your father?

After a moment of wrestling back the thoughts, I manage a shaky breath. "I didn't want to come. I only came for Reena. She begged me." Emotion tightens my throat, but I push on. "I didn't want to see you. Or talk to you. I promise."

"That much is clear."

My chest aches like a hand is pressing me into the floor. I lower my gaze. The skirt of my borrowed dress just barely catches the radiance from the ballroom. "What was I supposed to do?" My voice hitches, and I take a step back. "Would you rather I had just walked away as soon as you came over? Without saying anything?"

His scoff sounds bitter, though I can't fathom why. "Wouldn't be the first time."

I stare, wait. He doesn't speak again. So I dare to. "What are you talking —"

"I'm not doing this. I didn't even want to come back here, let alone stand here with you and reminisce —" His words dissolve into something between a groan and a growl, and he starts to turn away. But then he stiffens. Another flicker of gold burns the distance between us as he glances at me. "I don't care what you do for the rest of the night, who you dance with, where you go afterward, or who you go there with. Just stay away from me."

And with that, he once more starts to storm off.

“I didn’t want to believe your father, you know.” The words tumble out before I can think better of it.

He doesn’t stop, but his steps slow.

Wisdom urges me to apologize and withdraw, but I have lived too long with silence as my only answer. “I hoped that — that *somehow*, it was all just a big misunderstanding. That...” The truth dies in my throat, and I lower my gaze. “But it wasn’t, was it?”

Kirran says nothing. But he’s not walking away anymore, has turned to face me.

“He warned me about you,” I choke out. “Said you were only ‘fooling around’ with me to anger him. ‘Spite and exasperate’ him.”

He stills at that, becomes nothing more than stone, apart from his eyes. Gold eyes that now lock on me as if I’ve torn the words from his own head and spewed them back at him.

My heart shreds itself, devouring any hope that I’m wrong.

But now that I’ve started, I won’t stop. “He said you weren’t serious about me, that any promise you made was just to... That I was just...a...” I don’t want to say the word, but he asked why. And I’m tired of games. “He said I was a *conquest* to you, someone to pass the time with until you found someone better, more worthy. I was practice for the woman you’d marry.” I sniffle and grip handfuls of my borrowed gown. “A game to amuse yourself.”

Through the tears blurring my vision, it takes a moment to search the shadows for Kirran’s reaction.

The place where he stood is only darkness.

I’m alone on the balcony. He didn’t even stay to respond, to explain anything. I matter that little. I shouldn’t be surprised, yet it still blasts against my awareness like winter wind.

A shudder goes through me, and I wipe at my tears. They keep coming. I compose myself as much as I can, glance toward the glowing ballroom, and hurry toward the staircase

leading into the firefly-blanketed gardens. Gardens I have traversed dozens if not hundreds of times during our clandestine meetings, stolen moments throughout the days and nights.

I have carefully avoided them for years, and now...

A sob catches in my throat, and I press one hand over my mouth to quiet myself.

Perhaps I am not as over him as I thought.

I make it back to my quarters without passing anyone except a handful of other servants. No one tries to speak with me. Once safely behind the door, I peel off Reena's dress and kick off the shoes. I set them all aside. Still wiping away persistent tears, I slip into my nightgown. And I cling to my mother's necklace until I manage to cry myself to sleep.

Just like I did last time.

CHAPTER
FIVE

KIRRAN

“I need to speak with you. Right now.”

My father blinks and shifts an annoyed gaze toward me. Several courtiers gather in a half circle before him. General Zeccar and his wife stand among them. Surprised glances pass between the people, though no one speaks.

“I am currently engaged, Kirran. As should you be.” His tone edges a bit harder as he lifts his chin. “Mingle with the ladies. Find a bride. Do the things you are supposed —”

“Right. Now. Father.” I set my jaw. A ripple of magic tugs at my fingertips, and the hair on the back of my neck stands on end. “Or I’ll make myself clear in a different way.”

His eyes narrow, but he purses his lips and tosses a look toward his companions. They all instantly snap to attention, like they haven’t been gawking between us since I came over. Zeccar’s face alone pinches with concern.

“Forgive me,” my father says, “but the crown prince requests my attention elsewhere. Do enjoy the festivities. Save some of the wine for me.”

I wait only until I see him actually move to follow me. Then I breeze through the fringes of the crowd and out one of the side entrances.

The instant we’re in the hall, he whirls toward me, face red and eyes ablaze. “Of all the reckless, irres—”

“Did you tell Alia she was nothing but a *conquest* to me?”

“Alia?” He freezes, lips parting in more of a sneer than he likely intends for me to see. “Servant-Alia?”

Long-buried protective fire spirals through my chest. “Yes, Servant-Alia! Alia, the ‘half-fey wench who’s only good for scrubbing the floors and keeping her face buried in the dirt.’ The woman I told you I intended to make my wife.” I stalk closer to him. “*That* Alia!”

He just looks at me. Disgust lingers in his eyes. Whether it’s over my words, my behavior, or the mention of the young commoner from my past, I can’t tell. “What about her?”

“Everything you said to me about her and what she meant to me a few months before I left — did you repeat it to her?”

He stares, inhales deeply, and lets out a huff. “*No*, Kirran. I have never spoken to the girl.”

I don’t budge. A knot squeezes in my chest. “She said you did.”

“Then she lies.” He scoffs and wrinkles his brow. Shadows carve deep lines across his forehead. “I did not speak with her. Did I contemplate it after that discussion? Yes, I did. Then I considered that perhaps she was using you as well to climb in rank —”

“She’d never do that.” The response snaps out, and I can only blink at him. I have no excuse for saying it. No reason to still care. No reason to feel one *sliver* of protectiveness over her.

So why do I?

“Regardless.” He waves a hand as if shooing away an insect. “If she had been, as I suspected then, you would have deserved the trickery for treating her with the same selfish disregard. So I decided to leave you to your own consequences to teach you a lesson of wit and desire.” He holds my gaze a moment longer and shakes his head. “Come now, Kirran. She’s half-human. Humans lie. You know this.”

I grind my teeth so hard my jaw aches. “I know that she repeated the *exact* words you used.”

For the first time in the conversation, uncertainty pulls at his face. Just as quickly, he holds out both palms, giving a bewildered shrug. “I can’t explain that, Kirran. Perhaps she overheard us. Or maybe one of her friends did.”

My gut clenches at the prospect. If she heard us speaking and thought it was true — and as poorly as she viewed herself back then, of course she’d think it was true — then maybe that was why. Maybe that explains everything.

“But you asked me if I spoke with her, and the answer is no. I never saw her, spoke with her, or anything of the like.” He squares his shoulders. “Now. You will return to the ball and resume your search for a bride. You have three nights only, Kirran. Don’t waste tonight excavating or fantasizing about the past. Choose a woman and get on with your life. If you need some help determining what to look for, I’d be glad to introduce you to some of the most advantageous matches. Or, if you’d rather I choose for you, I can manage that as well.”

Without another word, he spins on his heel and strides back into the amber glow beyond the doors. I take a moment to steady my breathing and brace myself to see her again, then head the other way, toward the balcony where I left her.

Naturally, she’s not there anymore.

I return to the ballroom, ascend the dais, and sweep my gaze over the area. With no coves or inlets, I can see everyone in attendance, including the seductresses in red and gold. Everyone except Reena, Harran, and Alia.

She’s gone.

I shouldn’t care. It shouldn’t matter. I should be relieved she’s out of the ballroom, that I’m in no danger of coming into close proximity with her again tonight. I should put the past behind me, bury it in the grave it belongs in, and forget she exists. Forget her excuses, her lies, her voice, her face, the way her hand felt in mine, the way she used to giggle against my

kiss whenever I joined her in our garden meeting spot and spun her around.

I should let her go. Let it all go. I want to. So much of me wants to.

But I can't.

Seven years of telling myself I don't need answers, of carving her betrayal into my heart until I finally felt nothing — all unraveled in one moment by seeing tears in her eyes.

All because she looked at me as if *I'd* hurt *her*.

The remaining hours of the masquerade pass in torturous strides. I can't focus on anyone else who comes over to speak with me. It likely doesn't matter. They're all there for the same reason anyway. I do notice the gold-clad woman from earlier with Zeccar's wife, finally connecting her in my mind as his daughter. Sovanna, he'd said. And the woman in the red dress stands too long with Alia's stepmother to be anything but one of hers. Whether it's Devikka or Vallda, I'm not sure. The fact that I remember their names and still dislike all three members of that family grates on my nerves.

At the first stroke of twelve, I spin to leave. By the third stroke, I'm out in the hallway, in the dim light. By the final stroke, I can't hear the hubbub beyond my footsteps. Several turns later, my door stands before me.

The thud of it behind me settles something in my gut. I lean back against the thick wood and exhale.

My room sprawls out before me. A reprieve or a prison. Perhaps both.

The only light shines in from the lamps in the garden below. Closing the curtains requires me going over to the windows, and if I go to the windows, I'll search for her among the flowers and bushes. Not worth risking it. I don't bother with anything else, just undress by the muted glow, slip into

my more comfortable trousers and a loose shirt, and slump under the covers.

My bed is at once too soft and too lumpy. I stare at the canopy above me, cleared of the cobwebs but still enchanted to mimic a starry sky. Having slept under the stars more than a few times during the war, it's close enough to the real thing to disorient me. I could trick myself, pretend I'm still there. Where life ripples with tension and can explode into violence at any moment but at least makes sense. Where pomp is stripped away and only survival matters.

But here... What matters here? Impressing the council members? Indulging flattery? Gossip? Feigning interest in those who seek to use me for their own benefit?

The last time I was here, I had my brothers. Guards I considered friends. Cousins. And best of all, a sweet, beautiful girl who always listened and tried to understand and so often offered a new way to view things.

Now, there is only the yawning coldness of a room I've both outgrown and feel so very small inside of.

And forest curse it, I can't get her face out of my head. Whether I close my eyes or stare at the false stars, I see her. Those eyes, glittering with tears, aching with — with what? Betrayal? Confusion?

The bitter hurt and frustration in her voice singe my nerves.

I can't read her anymore. Can't wrap my head around it. None of it matches. My father was not lying, yet Alia didn't seem to be either. She's never lied to me before, except at the end. I would swear no servants were anywhere nearby to have overheard our conversation. Yet she knew the precise words and phrases he'd spit at me.

Both things cannot be true. Someone must be fabricating events, and fey can't lie.

Teeth gritted, I rehash the exact responses my father gave. And the exact comments Alia leveled at me. Then I go through it again. And again.

Yet still, I arrive at nothing. Nothing but the same gnawing conclusion that something doesn't fit, and I have no idea *what*. The thought of what I must do to find the truth curdles in my stomach like spoiled meat. But not knowing might be worse. I can't let myself consider the fact that there are no answers at all.

I have to know. Either way.

With a strangled growl, I shove up from my bed and cross to the door. Though I didn't ask for it, two guards stand outside. Whether it's to keep me safe or keep me in, I'm unsure. Probably depends on whether Zeccar or my father ordered it.

Both jump as I wrench the door open and peek out. They instantly jerk to attention.

"Prince Kirran? Is everything all right, sir?" Harran blinks at me and frowns. His saffron eyes sweep over me. One hand lingers near his sword.

Leave it to Harran to worry, even here. I shake my head. "I'm fine."

Both soldiers relax, though Harran's frown deepens.

I brace myself and force out the words. "I need one of you to do something for me."

CHAPTER
SIX

ALIA

A soft, hollow knock rouses me from my tangled sheets. I stare at the door for a moment to make sure I'm not hearing things.

The knock repeats — three taps. Then a low voice.

“Milady Alia?”

Fear tightens my muscles, but I push myself up, grab a shawl, and wrap it around myself as I crack the door open.

A soldier looms in the hall. His yellow eyes mirror the fire from the lantern he carries.

Captain Harran, still in his dark brown and red uniform, his armor glistening with gold. The gruff-seeming but kind soldier I last saw leading Reena away to a more private area of the ballroom. Reena, who I left without finding and who didn't stop by my quarters to let me know she had returned.

My heart leaps into my throat, and I grip the doorframe with my free hand. “What's wrong? Is Reena all right?”

“Yes, of course.” Captain Harran blinks at me and shakes his head. “Nothing's wrong, milady. You have been summoned.”

A shiver washes over me. Surely, if I'm in trouble for attending the ball, they'd wait till morning to punish me. “By who?”

“Prince Kirran, milady.”

My blood chills to ice. I dig my fingernails into the wood frame. “Why?”

“He...” Captain Harran blinks and cracks a faint, self-conscious smirk. “I apologize, Miss Alia. He did not say, and I did not ask.”

I don’t move.

His smirk shifts into more of a smile. He tips his head toward the dark corridor beyond him. “If you would, milady.”

I squeeze the shawl tighter around myself. Clutching my mother’s necklace for courage, I force a nod. “Of course, sir.”

With a deep breath, I step out into the hall.

I am no stranger to sneaking out after hours — at least, at one time, I wasn’t. But even though my nighttime excursions were to see the same man, this walk is different. My heart won’t relax. Hurrying to our clandestine meetings once felt like dancing on air. Tonight, every step I take down the dim halls feels like trudging through waist-deep water. Or how I imagine seaweed to be.

The distance between us used to be the enemy. Now Kirran is no friend.

All that remains is the vicious understanding that there will be no giggling and handholding or sweet kisses or firefly watching or stargazing tonight. Kirran’s “love” made way for those things, brought a sparkle to my heart and a bounce to my stride even as I stole through dark halls and secret passages.

But I don’t know what his hate will bring.

As my mind scrambles to comprehend what’s happening, I latch onto the only distraction I can find: the man I’m with, and the girl he was with earlier.

“So Reena is definitely okay?”

Captain Harran half-smiles. Puzzled maybe, but also sly, like he carries a secret just beneath his skin. “She is, milady. I saw her to her quarters myself a few hours ago.”

“Did you get to dance with her?”

A soft chuckle floats from him, and he nods. “We danced, yes. Until midnight. Then we looked briefly for you, and I dropped her off. She figured you’d be asleep and didn’t wish to wake you.”

“Will you see her again?”

Another chuckle, and this time, he looks over. Delight softens the harder edges of his face. In the lantern’s glow, I notice for the first time that his left ear is split at the point, and a chunk has been torn from the bottom section. He doesn’t bear much resemblance to Kirran, except for the autumn fey coloring.

“I intend to, yes.” He scratches the back of his neck. His attention darts away from me, toward the dark walls and corridors. “Now that I’m home, it’ll be much easier from here on out.”

I smile, but a pang resounds in my chest. Kirran is home too, but it’s only made everything so much worse. With more to come, I’m sure.

Captain Harran slows. I shoot my gaze from him to the sprawling corridor before us. Pale starlight streams through the tall windows. Up ahead, a large door surely marks Kirran’s room, especially given the soldier standing guard outside it.

Any distraction I’d gathered during the walk spirals away. I knot both hands around my shawl.

Captain Harran stops at the door, glances at me, and knocks twice. Then, without waiting, he grabs the handle and pushes.

The door cracks, and a sliver of candlelight slips into the corridor. It’s not enough to see by. The fuzziness in my vision only intensifies the dizziness swarming over me. I fight the urge to recoil and instead stand straight, strong. Yet nothing hides my shudder.

Captain Harran’s gaze lingers on me, almost pained, but he clears his throat and gently nudges me toward the door.

Prince Kirran's even voice splits the quiet. "Thank you, Harran. You and Vaddik may take your leave."

"As you wish, Your Highness." Both men speak in unison.

Captain Harran guides me through the open doorway and removes his hand from my upper back. The door shuts behind me with a click.

And just as quickly as we made our way through the halls, I find myself standing in Prince Kirran's bedchambers. Alone, except for him — the man I once loved, the man who hates me.

I have never stepped foot in Kirran's bedroom before. Once, the mere thought would have turned my face to fire and my thoughts to a garbled mess of wishes and panicked modesty.

Now, my heart prepares to beat right out of my chest. My hands knot tighter around useless fabric.

What he wants with me, here, I cannot fathom. But it cannot be good. It cannot be kind.

Like mere hours ago, his eyes glow in the darkness, and he stands with his arms crossed. Staring me down. When he speaks, it's a gravelly murmur. So very different from the way he used to speak to me.

"Come closer."

I swallow hard.

"I'm not going to yell across the room, Alia. Come here."

"Why?" It comes out in a choked whisper, and I tighten the shawl around my body. "What...what do you want?"

All fey are dangerous and unpredictable, but the Unseelie fey — the autumn and winter kingdoms — are the worst. I don't dare even peek toward his bed, lest it give him some horrible idea. Surely, he can't want me for that. And he wouldn't want blood all over his room, so he likely isn't planning to kill me either.

But still...

A lantern sparks on the table before him. In its radiance, I don't miss the way his gaze sweeps over me. Where he once looked at me with adoration, only coldness remains. Coldness and...

Is that confusion?

"Nothing your mind conjures." His frown deepens, and he swipes one hand across his eyes.

My breath catches. His hands are dark red, almost black in the candlelight. The color rises up his forearms in jagged lines, like leafless branches.

A wave of nausea slams into me.

I'm not autumn fey. I don't know everything about how their magic works. But I know enough. And it sends me reeling back a step.

"H-How many people did you..." I can't say the word.

He stills, then jerks his hand away from his face and tucks both against his chest. "I simply want to talk."

The room falls silent. So quiet I can nearly hear the flame hissing inside the lantern.

I dare to take a few steps closer. "About what?"

Those gold eyes lock on mine. Even though his gaze remains hard, something deeper seems to crumble. His brow furrows, and he takes a breath.

This time, when he speaks, though still a murmur, it's rougher. Shaky. Desperate in ways I can't grasp.

"About us."

CHAPTER
SEVEN

KIRRAN

A bout us.

Even as the answer leaves my tongue, Alia stiffens.

I stay motionless. But tension constricts my body, wrenching against the words. Because there is no *us* and hasn't been for years. If there ever truly was for her. And because I don't want to talk about it. Don't want to think about. Definitely don't want to see her in little more than undergarments, in my room, in the middle of the night.

Then again, I'm the one who summoned her from her bed.

She takes a step to the side and lowers her gaze. "What about us?"

I set my jaw and jab my hip harder against my desk's edge. "When did you speak to my father?"

Her eyes snap back to mine, and she frowns. "Mere minutes before I spoke with you. Or tried to speak with you."

"No," I grind out. "*When.*"

"Before the ball."

"Tonight?" I press a finger to my temple and drill in. Could that be the disconnect? My father not specifying which ball? Or me not specifying? They'd both made it sound like it was the ball years ago, before she left. Before *I* left. But perhaps there is a misunderstanding in there somehow.

She presses her lips together. Her brows knot even more. “No — the ball where...” Her voice cracks, and she sighs.

“Alia.” I tighten my arms over my chest and stare her down. “Which ball?”

“The one you invited me to. For your birthday.” Once more, her eyes meet mine. This time, something sparks in them. Not anger — pain. “The one you tricked me into coming to so you and your friends could mock me in front of everyone about how stupid —”

“Stop. Just stop.” I relax one arm enough to wipe my hand over my face.

I sense her gaze following the movement, taking in the deep mahogany stains again. Shame swells, but I shove it aside before it can snare a hold. It doesn’t matter what she thinks of me.

Only the truth matters now.

“You’re telling me you spoke with my father before my birthday ball seven years ago? And he told you all those things you said earlier, about you being a conquest and practice and...”

I can’t finish it. But I don’t need to.

“Yes.”

“And then you — then I...did what?”

“Are you serious?” Another wave of disgust glints in her gaze. But this time, it comes with welling tears. “I can’t... believe you’re doing this.” Her whispered voice sharpens, and she pulls the shawl around her even more. “You rip me apart mere hours ago, then drag me out of bed in the middle of the night to just — to just what? Make me relive this?”

I blink. “*Relive* it?”

She just stares at me. Like I’m the one who’s gone mad, blabbering nonsense.

Confusion hums in my chest with the pinch of a splinter, whispering that something’s wrong, out of place. I struggle to

take a breath. “Fine. What did you wear? To this ball?”

“The dress you gave me. The brown dress.”

Another ripple of that *something* burns inside me, like a fraying thread tearing through my skin. I stalk closer toward her. She shrinks back the same distance I bridge but still glares.

The feistiness is somewhat new, though I’ve seen glimpses before.

“You were to be announced as my bride. Why would I give you a *brown* dress for that?”

“No, it wasn’t — it didn’t start off brown. I don’t remember what color it was originally, but it was definitely brown by the end.”

Again, something snags in my mind. I can’t fully catch my breath. Nor can I look away from her.

How could she forget that? Blue is her favorite color.

“I had to get to you, though, and — but then I saw your father first, and he...” Her expression crumbles, and she finally rips her gaze from mine. “He said those things. And I didn’t want to believe him, so I went to find you anyway. We spoke. You — you publicly rejected me. In front of hundreds of people.” A single tear trickles down her smooth cheek. She wipes it away at once. “Do you truly not remember what I was wearing? Do you not remember mocking me and...and...”

My throat strangles the air from me, but I force myself to speak past the block. “Alia, you never *came* to the ball.”

Her eyes go wide. “What?”

“You stood me up.” My voice barely scrapes out. “Humiliated me in front of my family and the members of the court who knew of you. They all knew I’d be presenting you as my chosen bride, and you never showed up. You promised you’d be there, and then you...broke that promise.”

“No. No, I —” She blinks once, twice, and shakes her head. “*What?*”

“And then I find out you actually left the day before? Without saying goodbye? Without...saying anything?” Heat stings the backs of my eyes, and I steel myself against it as much as I can. But the instant I continue, my control slips. She blurs before me. “Like I meant nothing. Like everything between us was just...*nothing*.”

“No,” she whispers. As if she says it enough, it will make it true. “No, I left after the ball. After you rejected me —”

“Alia —”

“No, I *never* would’ve done that to you! I promise. I promise!” She inhales shakily and takes a step closer. “Kirran, I *wanted* to marry you. I loved you. I still love —”

She freezes, lips parted. The room chills. Or maybe that’s just me. Prickles of something I can’t discern sweep over my skin and cool my blood. Cool that ache rippling through me.

It takes no wisdom to finish her sentence.

But I can’t.

I force myself to swallow, to wrench my gaze from hers. Lock it on the floor between us until I regain enough control to dare to look at her again. She stands with her fingers against her forehead, chin down, golden hair cascading over her shoulders and cheeks.

“I remember being there, Kirran,” she breathes.

“And I know you weren’t.” I bite back the rising pain. “So where does that leave us? We can’t both be right.”

“I...” She snuffles and ducks her head away, fumbling with her mother’s necklace like she’s done countless times before. “I don’t know. I don’t understand.”

I let my eyes close and focus on steadying the crashing in my chest. At least until she speaks.

“Okay.” She nods and tucks her hair behind her ears. “I know it doesn’t make sense, but I...I was *there*. The king can vouch for me.”

“He said tonight that he’s never spoken to you. That he didn’t tell you anything.” I study her, then push away from the desk and stride closer. This time, she doesn’t jump, just watches me approach. “Did you or someone else overhear us talking? Did you conjure something up in your head? Imagine this whole —”

“No, I spoke to him. He — maybe he doesn’t remember —”

“Fey don’t lie, Alia.”

“I know, but I’m not lying either.”

“Did someone else tell you of the conversation? Another servant?”

“No. I spoke to *him*. Your father. I promise.” Even as tears trickle down her cheeks, she holds my gaze. And forest curse it, my fingers itch to brush her pain away, draw her against me. Forget anything ever happened to shatter what we once had.

If she still loves me, then maybe we can just start over —

But I can’t let myself hook onto her words. That inadvertent admission. Who knows if she actually means it. And in trying to latch onto it, I’ll only maul myself. Carve out my own heart again.

Her feelings don’t matter. My feelings don’t matter. Truth is the only goal tonight.

And I hold more of it.

“Even if, somehow, we’re both right, you still left.” I try to keep any trace of a growl from my voice, but I’m not sure I manage it. “Without a word.”

Her eyes flash, defiance rushing back to the surface. “You had the final words. And they were cruel. Why would I stay here?”

My hands curl into fists. “I did *not* reject you. You did not *come* —”

“We’re going to go in circles.” She huffs. Her grip on her shawl relaxes, and she crosses her arms. “If you didn’t reject

me, if you still...cared...then why didn't you ever write to me? You had to know where I was."

Alarm licks up my spine. I take another step closer. "I did."

A second passes. Then her eyes lock on mine, and her lips part again. Her chin quivers once before she sets her jaw and releases a sharp breath. "You did what? You wrote back?"

"Back? No, I wrote you first. You never tried to contact..." My mind spins, and I grip the back of my neck, digging my nails in until pain flares. "So in your version of this, I never wrote to you? You never got any letters from me?"

Now her lips pucker, and she twists them to the side. "No."

"I wrote to you." My voice falters. Forest curse me, I can't control it. Can't make it stop breaking. "I — I sent two letters, separate times, and you..." The ache coils within me, and I strain to keep my words steady enough to keep going. To get it out. Make her understand. "I couldn't keep writing, Alia. I had to — it was too much...torture. I had to try to let you go. I thought..."

Once more, she stares at me. Now like she doesn't even know me. Maybe she's never known me.

Then a shudder goes through her, and she presses a hand to her mouth. Her brow furrows. "I never got any letters from you, Kirran. I swear."

"I never got any from you."

"Then..." Her head tips down, and she buries her face against her palm. "What's going on? How is any of this even possible?"

I watch her, taking in her dismay. This beautiful woman that I imagined marrying, loving and cherishing for the rest of my days, having and raising children with.

She had been everything.

And then, in an instant, gone. Not a word. Not a glance back. It cut deeper than I ever wanted to admit.

Could it be true that she didn't do what I thought she did?

I fought for her then, as best I knew how with my heart and world in fragments.

But this is different. This is something else. Something sinister enough to prick the hair on my arms and simmer in my chest. Just skewed enough to draw attention to itself.

Before I can think better of it, I close the distance between us. Dark red streaks through my vision as I lift my hand toward her, and I stop. For a breathless moment, my fingertips nearly graze her shawl and the waves of golden hair spilling over her shoulder.

My skin aches for the contact. But all I see on it is the lives I've taken.

Alia has always been innocent, life-giving. The opposite of my magic. If it was forbidden to touch her before, how can I do so now? With these stained hands?

I swallow hard, curl my hand away from her, and pin it back at my side.

Her river-deep eyes linger on mine, almost questioning. But she didn't recoil. I'm unsure what that means.

"I don't know what happened, Alia," I force myself to say. "But we're going to figure it out."

CHAPTER
EIGHT

KIRLAN

My words hang between us in my dimly lit quarters. Alia just looks up at me, as if searching my face for sincerity. Then, ever so slightly, a sheen glitters across her eyes. The air around us somehow presses in, thicker, heady. My skin tingles with something I can't name. As has already happened numerous times this night, I can't look away from her. But there's a different edge to it now.

Is it tears in her eyes? Or just disbelief? I can't tell, and almost as quickly as it appears, she blinks and averts her gaze.

The room still feels too warm, and something like a breeze tickles against the back of my neck.

"All right." I clear my throat and step back again. "If our memories separated at some point, we need to find where they last matched and then where they converge, if they do. Besides the ball tonight."

"That makes sense." She nods and fixes her attention on the windows beyond us. At last, she draws in a breath. "On the day you invited me, I was...we met in the garden. It was morning, early. Before I had to be at work. We had agreed the evening before to meet, because you'd said you had something to ask me." She pauses and lifts her gaze back to mine. Searching again. "Did that happen like that? For you."

My chest tightens at the memory, the lightning nerves streaking through me even though I knew she'd say yes. I manage a nod. "Yes. And that morning, I invited you to the ball — taking place three nights from then."

She opens her mouth but hesitates. "Three nights including that night?"

I blink and rub at my temple. Her gaze drifts toward my hand once more, and I yank it back to my side. "We should write this down. Map it out." I don't wait for her response, just spin on my heel and return to my desk.

She joins me but stays out of accidental touching distance. I grab a quill and parchment and start at the top.

"It was the middle of the week, Wednesday. The ball was to be on Saturday evening." As I write it out, she leans forward, frowning at the parchment. Or perhaps my writing. I pause and meet her gaze. "What?"

"Just..." She sighs and straightens, pulling the shawl around herself again. "I don't see how the timeline will be off."

I don't either. A wave of nausea climbs the back of my throat as if mocking me for thinking I could find truth here. I push through it. "That's what we're going to learn. What happened next?"

She studies me a moment, then sighs and holds out her hand for the quill. I offer it, careful to keep our fingers from brushing. The instant she plucks it away, she sidesteps around my desk and rotates the parchment toward her. Her left hand knots in the shawl to hold it in place as she leans down. A loose strand of hair slides down over her cheek.

I clear my throat and force my mind back to the task at hand.

The truth. That's all that matters here.

"And you asked me to the ball," she says as she writes an abbreviated version. "You said you wanted —" Her voice falters. She tips her head even farther away, and her hand stills.

I wait, but she says nothing. “Alia. Focus.”

Fire sparks in her eyes before they drop back to the parchment. Again, she expands aloud on her summarized response. “You wanted to name me as your chosen bride. You wanted to introduce me to your family as that.” A trace of bitterness leaks through. She straightens and sets the pen down. Her expression verges on wilting. “Did you actually tell me that?”

I plant my palm on the table between us. “Yes.”

She doesn’t even glance at my hand, just holds my gaze. This time, there’s no mistaking the glimmer of tears, somehow different from the expression mere minutes ago.

It takes too long before I can make myself shift back. “Then what?”

For a breath, it looks like she wants to protest. Then she sighs again and grabs the quill. “You asked me to the ball. I promised to be there. Then we kiss—” Her voice cracks, but this time as she returns the pen to its holder, she ducks her face away. Like she’s ashamed. Or repulsed. “Can’t you just go through your timeline, and I can tell you if I remember something differently?”

My chest throbs. “Fine.”

For the first second after I pick up the pen, it retains her hand’s warmth.

I stamp the feeling down and keep my voice even. As if the word I’m about to say means nothing. “We kissed, yes. Then you went to work. You left first, but I left a moment after. I joined my father and brothers and handled court issues for the rest of the day. I didn’t see you again until the next morning, Thursday...” I trail off and flick my gaze up.

She nods. “Yes. That’s how I remember it too.”

“I gave you the dress.”

The faintest hint of a frown tugs at her brows. “And it wasn’t brown.”

“No.” I swallow hard, but the lump remains like claws inside me. “It was blue. That sort of sky blue you like.” I can’t keep looking at her eyes, so I lower my attention to the parchment. “Or liked.”

Silence hangs between us like a thick curtain.

“I still like it,” she murmurs.

I glance over, but she has her gaze on the candle now. The soft amber glow makes her hair shimmer. Shadows play across her face and body, bending my mind toward a far different reason to have her here alone with me.

I clear my throat as best I can and focus on writing down the memories we just relayed. “We were at your stepfamily’s quarters. When I gave it to you.” I dip the pen in ink again.

“Yes, and I put it —” For half a breath, her expression blanks. Then she shakes her head and stifles a yawn. “I hung it over the chair beside my bed.”

I shift to face her more. “Not in your trunk?”

“No, I got it off the chair when I dressed for the ball. I didn’t want it to wrinkle.”

“Right.” I watch her for another moment. “And your stepfamily didn’t bother it?”

Now she frowns. “No. They rarely came in my room.”

Part of me wants to ask more, though I can’t understand why. Nothing about her story is different than it should be. Everything adds up so far. Yet an unsettledness lingers in my chest, sliding through my fingertips even as I write out truths that don’t deviate from each other.

“So two days after I gave you the dress, you put it on for the ball?”

“Yes. In the evening, after work. I bathed and put it on, and I used my stepmother’s mirror to see how it looked.”

Another prickle of that something. “Did she catch you?”

“No. No one was there when I got ready. They’d already left for the ball themselves.”

Defeat taunts me, but I scribble her words down. “And once you were dressed, you went straight to the ballroom? No shortcuts, no detours?”

“Nothing. Other than seeing your father.”

I strain to think back on when I’d seen my father in the ballroom, but the only memories that stand out from that night have nothing to do with him. “And you’re sure the dress was brown when you looked at yourself?”

“I think so. I don’t really remember that part.” She winces and gives me a bewildered look. “But I don’t remember it ever being blue. Sorry.”

Unsure what to make of that, I nod and write it down as well. “And you’re sure this was Saturday? I invited you on Wednesday, gave you the dress Thursday, saw you only briefly on Friday, and then it was the day of the ball.”

“That’s exactly how I remember it. Except for what happened at the ball.”

I groan and set the quill aside, pressing a hand against my forehead. “So there is no divergence except for...” Another groan wrenches out. I tip my head back. The ceiling in my room also mimics the night sky. A soothing image if I were at all able to be soothed.

“Yet your stepmother said you left the day before the ball. Friday.”

She stares, her eyes wide again. Then she presses her lips together. “But I saw you that day.”

“In the morning. Friday morning to Saturday night is a lot of time. According to her, you were in a carriage by Friday mid-morning with no intention of coming to the ball.”

Seconds pass. Then she closes her eyes and wipes her hands over her face. “Nothing makes sense, Kirran. I was *there*.”

I fold my arms and lean back against the desk. She wasn’t at the ball. So how could she remember it? Certain autumn fey

can manipulate memories and create illusions, but there are limitations, criteria that has to be met.

I resist a sigh. My gaze hooks on my bed — or, more importantly, the trail of my clothes leading to it. “What did I look like that night? What was I wearing?”

She stares at me long enough that I open my mouth to repeat myself, but she shakes her head before a word escapes me. “Crimson and black. And gold. At least part of a soldier’s uniform.”

An expected answer to a pointless question. Of course those would’ve been the colors I wore. Anyone would’ve known that, even someone toying with her mind. I can’t remember anything more specific to my wardrobe that night to use as a test.

“What did I say to you?”

Her expression pinches, and she averts her eyes. “I don’t remember all the words, honestly, but it was...awful. I’ve tried for years to forget how cold and cruel you were. I remember disgust and mockery and you laughing at me with your friends.”

I straighten. “Do you know who I was with?”

“No. I can’t remember any specific faces.”

“Men? Women?”

“Men, I think. Two or three. Maybe four. One definitely had black hair. I remember at least thinking that they all seemed about your age.”

Three or four young men my age, one with black hair. Also useless. It could’ve been any number of people. Nobles, soldiers, even some of my brothers or cousins.

I grit my teeth. *Not that it even happened. Or would have happened. I never...*

Like before, something jabs inside me, cold and hollow. Like a cavern opening in my chest.

What if it’s my memories that have been tampered with?

The thought chills my bones. Instinctive magic thrashes against my veins. Meddling with the perceptions and memories of a prince is an act of treason. Especially as it relates to matters of marriage and political maneuverings. If someone did something to either of us, if magic is involved, then it should be that someone's head.

Alia stifles a yawn with the back of her hand and clears her throat. "So, I'm getting rather tired..." Hesitation ripples across her face, and she turns her head away. "You, um — you don't expect me to stay here tonight, do you?"

"No." It comes out harsh, and though I meant it with some harshness, it's probably too much, because her shoulders tense. While I can trust Vaddik and Harran not to reveal anything, I would never hear the end of it if my father found out Alia had visited my quarters in the middle of the night.

But that's not the only reason all of me tenses at the thought of her staying here.

I'm not ready to consider spending the night with any woman. Let alone this one.

I almost expect her to argue — though about what, I'm not sure, because nothing in her form implies she'd want to stay either.

Instead, she nods. "It's just that you sent the guards away, and if I'm caught alone out in the upper halls..."

"I'll escort you to your room."

She blinks at me. Then she presses her lips together and, once more, pulls the shawl around herself.

"What? Don't want me to know where you sleep?"

"That too." She exhales what could be a self-conscious laugh, if we weren't ourselves and our vicious ending didn't still throb within us both. "I also don't want you to get in trouble."

"Crown princes don't get in trouble. We're untouchable." I keep my tone flippant, but I feel her gaze on me.

“Okay. If you’re sure.” She shifts her weight between her feet. “Did you have any other questions?”

“No. It’s fine. We should both sleep.”

“What’s the plan for tomorrow?”

“I’ll investigate the magic possibilities. See if we can determine what we’re dealing with. And whose memories are wrong.” I tap off the excess ink from the quill and cap the bottle. “If it’s mine, someone else has to remember our... interaction. Think you can talk with the servants who were at the ball to see if they saw anything? Know anything?”

“Of course.” She nods, the movement deliberate. “I don’t think I should come to the ball again. I’m pushing my luck with my stepfamily noticing me.” Uncertainty flickers on her face. “Maybe we can just meet after?”

“All right.” I hold out a hand toward the door. “After you.”

She takes three steps and stops. I jerk back to avoid hitting her. Her hair flutters off her cheeks as she spins to face me. “Can I ask, though — the conversation with your father. Between you and him, I mean. The things I remember him saying... That actually happened, didn’t it?”

I don’t move.

“Because you acted like it. Like those words were familiar. And, well, you made it sound like...”

My throat tightens at the niggling instinct of where this is going. What it may require me to admit. I force a nod. “Yes. We had that discussion.”

“But I wasn’t those things? To you.”

“You were my best friend.” My voice almost cracks, and I lift my chin. “Or maybe not, if you actually have to ask that ___”

“I just want the truth, Kirran. The words in my head are so loud. So strong. I can’t just pretend —”

“No.” It rips out of me. She stills, eyes searching mine in the candlelight. I resist the urge to step closer to her. Or grab

her arms and pull her closer to me. “No. You weren’t any of those things. Nothing he thought or said about you and me was true.”

For a moment, she stands there, unblinking, studying me like she’s considering how to repair broken pottery. Like before, when I told her we’d find out the truth, something gleams in her eyes. A translucent current. I don’t know what to make of it. She’s never displayed it with me before tonight. Yet it draws me, calms me somehow. Softens the pain in my chest, the ache that has made itself my constant companion, burrowed itself inside me until I’m entangled with it, part of it.

Whether it’s the look in her eyes or her eyes themselves, I can’t tell. It makes me want to let go, relax, tip my face toward the sun. Which is stupid. There is no sun here; it’s the middle of the night. Dim light and shadows wrap around us both. Standing there in her nightgown and shawl, she is...

The desire to touch her face burns in my fingertips. My breathing quickens despite myself.

How is she so beautiful? So life-offering, even now?

I could change my mind. Have her stay. Tell her I want her to stay. Take her hand and lead her —

I tear my gaze from hers and huff out a sharp breath. Heat swarms through me. It takes far too much effort to keep my attention on the floor.

What was that?

“Kirran?”

Not quite ready to dare a glance, I just grunt in question.

“You were about to escort me to my quarters?”

“Right.” I swallow back as much of the simmering want as I can and sidestep her. “Yeah. Come on.”

Once out in the hall, she takes the lead. I trail a step behind. We don’t speak, and my gaze keeps jumping from her to the dark walls around us. We pass down several staircases before she stops at a door.

“This is it.” She opens the door a crack and pauses. “I suppose...I’ll see you tomorrow night?”

“Yeah,” I say through an exhale. “I’ll research everything I can.”

“And I’ll talk to as many people as I can.”

“Think you can meet me at the middle fountain? Say just after midnight?”

“Yes.” She peers at the open door and back at me. Silence etches itself along the stones in the narrow corridor. “Um, thank you, Kirran. For being...willing to...you know.”

Willing. It’s not so much willingness as it is desperation, burning, reeling still.

Or maybe I am willing. To seek the truth, if nothing else. Talking to her tonight ended up being less painful than it would’ve been to lie awake in bed all night with my thoughts tormenting me.

Words scald my throat, but I nod. It takes a moment to gather my voice. “You, too.” A ripple of cold slices down my back from the restrained responses, and I move a step away from her. “See you tomorrow.”

Her arm twitches. For half a heartbeat, her fingertips brush my forearm, warm against my skin. In the same instant, she withdraws.

I freeze, unable to bring my gaze back to her.

“Goodnight,” she whispers. Then she ducks into the room. The door clicks shut.

And so she leaves me standing there in the hall — my throat tight, heart pattering in my ears, and the phantom of her touch sizzling through me.

Seconds trickle away. All I can do is stare at my stained arm as if part of me expects to see a smear where the color transferred to her. But of course, it remains, marring only me.

I try to lean into the surprise of that. Feel nothing else. Yet beneath it, another current simmers. And no matter how

fiercely I try to rein it in, the reality remains.

She touched me. On purpose.

CHAPTER
NINE

ALIA

As soon as the door shuts, I tip my head back against the wood and close my eyes. My chest heaves, and though the feeling is fading, my fingertips still tingle from brushing Kirran's arm. He's stronger now. Even a glimpse of him earlier tonight should have told me that. But the rigid muscle of his arm, the warmth of his skin — I had forgotten so much about him.

I'd tried to forget everything about him.

My eyes sting. A shuddery breath breaks free.

"Alia, you never came to the ball."

A wave of emotion crushes me, and I slide down the door and draw my knees up against my chest. The sobs come out strangled but relentless, wracking my body. I have cried over him so many times, but it's usually been trickling tears down my nose and onto my pillow. Quiet whimpers in the middle of the night when I've woken from yet another dream that scrapes the scabs off my heart's deepest wounds. Probably my mind, forever trying to make sense of what happened between us.

But I haven't cried like this since that night.

Few of his words remained over the years. It's mostly his expression that haunts me: the disgust in his gold eyes, the curl of his lip. And the way he and his friends laughed, like it was a

game they were all in on. Faceless friends, people I either never knew or don't remember. I've tried to run from my past. Tried to forget I was not only friends with the youngest fey prince but that he was my first...everything.

Not merely my first love — my only love — and first kiss, but my first true friend.

I met Kirran the same day I became a woman. Because I became a woman, and my stepmother did nothing to prepare me for it. Perhaps because I was only twelve and she thought she had more time, since Vallda was a year older and hadn't bled yet. Perhaps because she didn't care whether I would think I was dying or didn't think it important to explain to me how these things worked.

Lady Esilla, the quartermaster, had swept me aside as soon as she'd noticed, helped me clean up and gathered fresh clothes for me, and shown me how to deal with the flow. But it was the words she'd said afterward that cut my heart to pieces.

"You poor darling. You so desperately need a mother."

I'd smiled at her through brewing tears and slipped away, fled through the gardens, and finally crumpled at a fountain. Kirran rarely dressed like a prince, never wanted to wear the elaborate clothing. That day, he'd looked like little more than a soldier in his simple black shirt and pants. Especially with how he'd come running with a knife glinting in his right hand. Ready to defend a sobbing girl and demanding to know who hurt me, what my assailant looked like.

As soon as he realized I was alone, that I wasn't in danger, his demeanor shifted.

Where another boy might have gone to find a woman to assist, he instead sat down beside me, offered a handkerchief, and asked for my name. Through my sniffles, I managed only that. But he stayed with me until I gathered myself.

It took a few years before I confessed the true reason I'd been crying that day.

We had a good laugh about that. At least the bleeding part of it. But he never forgot Lady Esilla's words about how I

needed a mother. Or how negligent my stepmother had been toward me.

“When you marry me, my mother will become yours. You’ll love her. And she’ll love you.”

It had seemed so certain back then. Yes, he was a bit on the wild side and certainly mischievous, but he was my dearest companion. Our encounter at his birthday ball had been the brutal realization of every single insecurity and fear I had never consciously allowed to take root in my heart.

I sigh. The room before me is especially bleary in the dim light. My chest aches like someone has trampled it, and my stomach remains tight, knotted.

I’d loved him. Completely. Not because he was a prince, not because he was so beautiful I couldn’t always think straight around him, and not because he made me feel special — though he did. But because we could talk to each other. About anything. Because even silence with him was comfortable. Before he’d ever kissed me, he’d been my best friend, my heart’s match. The one I trusted with every fiber of my being.

All this time, he’d believed I’d abandoned him. That I’d left without a word, after accepting his invitation to the ball. After accepting his proposal, in a manner. Though, back then, I’d had the feeling he was planning to officially ask me at the ball, in front of everyone.

The ferocity in his eyes, in his voice — it makes sense.

I would hate me too. Just as I’ve hated him.

Now, I simply ache to hold him, to make him believe me. To press my face against his chest and have him somehow make it all right, like he always did.

There may be no righting this, though. Even if we can determine what happened, nothing will be the same. Whatever friendship we had, whatever romance had bloomed between us — it’s gone now. Dead.

And dead things don’t come back to life. Not even the most powerful spring fey has the gift of resurrection.

I wipe my eyes, brush off my damp palms against my nightdress, and shuffle over to my bed. Part of me wants to hold my mother's necklace, cling to it until I relax enough to fall asleep. The rest of me can't bear to touch another thing that represents loss.

So instead, I simply squeeze it for a few seconds, curl up under my blanket, and will myself to stop thinking of the pain in his eyes. To stop repeating his words.

But for what feels like hours, my mind won't allow me to let go. I finally push through the brokenness in his voice and find the resolve. And I cleave to those words instead.

"We're going to figure it out."

CHAPTER
TEN

KIRRAN

The sensation of Alia's touch lingers as I traverse the dark halls, but once I'm back in my chambers and catch sight of the parchment on my desk, the feeling dissipates. I study the paper, scouring the tangle of words that match more than they should until my vision clouds.

I finally sigh and slump back into bed.

Hours slither away. I flip from one side to the other, until I'm sure I'm more likely to rip the stuffing from this mattress than get some rest upon it. The room is at once too hot and too cold. I can't bear the way my loose shirt bunches up beneath the blanket. Removing the shirt helps, at least enough to allow me to get more comfortable.

But I can't sleep.

Instead, my mind plows through the list of possible magics at work. No one can make time pass or slow. Hypnosis is rare but not unheard of among the autumn fey, though no one in decades has had the gift. Nor does this fully match the work of an illusionist or memorist. Illusions are temporary — and as real as they may seem or feel, they only hold sway as true if someone *believes* them as truth. As soon as an illusion is questioned or doubted, it begins to disintegrate. The more it fades, the clearer the truth becomes. And the more ridiculous the illusion.

Memories are trickier to pin down, but those who can manipulate them fall under one of two categories: those who can change the ones that exist and those who can craft wholly new ones. Yet, like autumn itself, there is always a give and take. Changing memories requires the cooperation of the one whose memories are being touched, as the memorist can only access the memories they are granted permission inside of. Yet even those can't be completely altered or removed — merely softened or enhanced. The changed memories always retain a hint that something has shifted, even if the original no longer registers. Not only that, but the person whose memories were touched would know there was once a conversation with a memorist concerning those memories.

Neither Alia nor I have that moment. So it can't be that.

Newly crafted memories require removal of the old ones. Since memories cannot just be removed and thrown out, they must be captured in some sort of magic-imbued object. Only a handful of fey have access to those types of talismans. A fewer handful know how to use them properly.

And I have absolutely no idea how Alia knows of the conversation between my father and me.

I sigh and scrape both hands over my face until my vision turns silvery. Then I stare at the enchanted stars above me.

Alia was right. None of this makes sense.

I force my eyes to close. But sleep does not take me until the first hints of dawn glimmer beyond the windows.

In my hazy half-sleep, something bangs. I snap awake, hand lurching at once to my side as I shoot upright. No weapons. I fling myself off the bed, bracing to use my magic instead, but once I'm on my feet, blinking in the bright light, it hits me.

I'm in the palace.

I let my hand sink back to my side.

The thumping sound comes again.

“Prince Kirran? Are you there?”

I lumber toward the door and yank it open as the person starts another round of knocking. “What?”

The dark-haired servant girl jumps back, her eyes widening as I lean against the doorframe. She can’t be but sixteen. In a flurry, she bows and knots her hands in her skirt. “Um, forgive me, Your Highness. His Majesty the king requests your presence at brunch. He told me to...” Her gaze flicks up and away. Now her hands wipe against her dress. “He told me to...retrieve you. Y-Your Highness.”

I press my fingers to my temple. Her stare follows the movement, then sweeps over me again. Her cheeks darken as she once more ducks her face toward the floor.

My hands. I’m not wearing the gloves.

A jolt ripples through me, and I yank my hand behind my back. Warm skin meets me.

That’s when I remember I’m also not wearing a shirt.

“Oh, I’m — sorry, miss.” I shift farther behind the door and clear my throat. “Now, what’s this about brunch?”

“The...the king requests your presence. In the small east dining room.”

I bite back a yawn and tilt my head against the carved wood. “When’s brunch?”

“Um, right now, Your Highness.”

The groan slips out before I can stop it. Of course he demands my presence immediately. “All right. Inform him that I’m on my way.” Without another word, I close the door and head toward my wardrobe. I grab fresh clothes and the gloves, clean up in the washroom, and head into the hall, adjusting my sword at my hip as I go.

Beyond the reception halls and the servants’ mess hall, we have four separate dining rooms. Two on the east side of the palace and two on the west. More often than not, we follow

the sunlight and eat by either sunrise or sunset. While I understand the sunrise and sunset thing, the number of places to eat in this palace always felt excessive growing up. After being gone for years and living out of tents, the opulence borders on absurd.

The instant I step into the dining room, my father and mother look up. Three antler chandeliers hang above the length of the table, but none of the candles are lit. With the risen sun streaming in the wall of windows, candlelight is the last thing anyone needs.

My head pangs as if I need the reminder I barely ate or slept yesterday. I wince and start toward the far end of the table, where my parents sit with food in front of them but none on their plates.

Several servants stand along the wall opposite the windows, ready to jump in should any of us need drink refills or more food. As if we can't get it for ourselves. War has spoiled me to these formalities. On the battlefield, where you only have minutes to eat most of the time, waiting on someone else to serve you what you are perfectly capable of serving yourself is asinine.

My father, naturally, sits at the head of the table. Mother sits at his right. I sink into the chair across from her and stifle another yawn as I push my sleeves up. Which looks ridiculous with the gloves barely reaching the middle of my arms. Every branch is visible. It's ridiculous that my father even wants me to wear the gloves at all.

“Late night?” my father rumbles.

I blink at him, grimace again in the full sunlight, and regret my decision to sit across from the windows. “Couldn't sleep.”

“Mm.” His gaze bores into me. Without breaking eye contact, he flips his hand. Three of the servants appear, scooping sausage and chunks of cinnamon bread and fruit onto our plates. One pours wine for me with shaking hands and ducks away before I can meet his gaze.

“You didn’t have to wait for me.” I stare at the food, but though my stomach growls, I don’t move to start eating.

“It’s quite all right, darling.” Mother’s gentle voice draws my gaze up, and she smiles. “It’s wonderful to have you home.”

I try to match her expression, but I can’t. My eyes sting. Probably from facing the sun. I shake out my shoulders and take a sip of wine before picking up the fork. I don’t quite wolf down my food, but I still make it through almost half my meal before Father sets his goblet down with a pointedly loud clink.

Fight instinct spikes within me. It takes a second to make myself relax.

“Did you have a nice time last night?” he asks.

“At the masquerade?” I stab my fork into a peach chunk and pop it into my mouth. His left eye twitches at my lack of decorum as I add while chewing, “Not particularly.”

“No, after it.”

I slide my gaze toward my mother, whose lips pinch, and back to him. “Excuse me?”

He stares for a moment and shrugs. “I truly care not about your illicit escapades, Kirran, but you will respect the marriage covenant once you make it. Is that clear?”

My skin bristles. I tighten my hold on the fork. “What are you talking about?”

Mother tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and leans toward me, her voice soft as she speaks. “You were seen leaving the servants’ quarters in the middle of the night.”

“Indeed.” Father’s brows lift as he peers at me over his goblet. “I suppose you patched things up with her, then?”

My stomach twists for more reasons than I can pinpoint. Of course he’d have someone keeping watch, someone to spy for him, lurk like an insect on the wall amid private conversations. I probably should’ve expected that. Royalty affords little freedom or solitude.

“What I did last night has nothing to do with you.”

Mother inhales, but he speaks before she does.

“But what you did has everything to do with Servant-Alia.” My father shakes his head and glances toward the arched window laden with amber and red glass. “As I said, I care not. So long as you stop doing it after tomorrow.”

“I did nothing with her.”

He casts a knowing yet cold look my way and chuckles. “Think what you will, son, but I am no fool. When a man argues as intensely as you did back then, well — it stands to reason that there is a reason. And now that you’re back, of course you seek to rekindle that passion. Who could blame you?”

I just look at him. Heat crawls under my skin. Beside him, my mother tips her head down and presses her fingertips to her forehead. Her shoulders rise and fall with a lengthy sigh, like they spoke of this already.

My father stares back at me, something between amusement and annoyance tugging at his face. Then his golden eyes harden. “However, I’ll not have whispers among the court of your extramarital indulgences with the half-breed help. You must produce at least an heir and a spare *before* you start bringing illegitimate offspring into the fold.” The side of his nose wrinkles. “Especially ones with no chance at magic. Thank the forest that none of your previous dalliances with her were fruitful.”

I stiffen my spine and stay silent as he resumes his meal like he’s said nothing inappropriate or presumptuous. Mother avoids my gaze but appears less disturbed by the topic than she is exhausted by it. I’m sure she’s heard more than a little of his ranting this morning. He and I have had this argument a few times. He’s never believed that Alia and I weren’t intimate. Surely, if I’d rebelled against him by choosing a servant, I must have abandoned the morals of my upbringing too. Not one of our conversations has ever resulted in him listening to me. Or caring what I think, what I want. And what I absolutely do not want.

Yet I am no fool either.

For I know the natural laws of the fey. In order to pass on magical capabilities, royal blood requires the same. Or, at the very least, noble blood. Alia's spring fey father was a duke with impressive healing magic. Had he married a spring fey — or any fey, really — Alia likely would've inherited something significant as well. Spring fey may be our opposite in every way, and there is no shortage of simmering animosity amid the grudging alliance we have with them, but fey are fey. And among my people, royal blood recognizes royal blood.

Regardless of her father's status, the fact that she's half-human, the daughter of a common human ambassador, means she has no magic. She can't produce a magical child, even if she married royalty.

Our marriage would end my magical bloodline.

When I was the fourth prince, it wasn't as much of a concern, yet my father still wouldn't hear of it. He would lose his mind if I broached the subject of marrying her now.

Disgusted thoughts blare through me.

Are you truly that pathetic? That desperate? Have you forgotten the last seven years of heartbreak and betrayal?

I grind my teeth together, but my mind isn't finished.

You're willing to give in so easily — just because she touched you?

My chair scrapes across the floor as I shove up from the table. Mother offers a regretful smile and looks away. Without acknowledging my father, I spin on my heel and blow out of the dining room. Every step unleashes another snarled thought, borne of a defensiveness I thought I'd severed from myself years ago.

Because it isn't the touching. It's the talking. Her words, her warmth. Her willingness to seek the truth with me when she has lived the last seven years thinking I rejected her and feeling like I broke her heart. And cruelly. It's the fact that she was afraid of me but stayed to converse with me anyway. It's

how she still holds on to a sliver of hope and doesn't let go of it, no matter what stands against her.

Her touch has always undone me. But it's never been about her touch — it's only ever been *her*.

I can't let myself think beyond today. Can't consider the fact that being with Alia would require failing the parents who have no other son, who have already lost so much. It would possibly mean abandoning the broken family I have left — and leaving my nation and its people vulnerable, at least until a proper heir could be named, from among my cousins or even the unborn children my brothers' widows carry.

Maybe there is something in that. A loophole somehow. For now, all that matters is getting to the heart of whatever happened. If I can fix it, I will.

We'll find out the truth and go from there.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

ALIA

“I still can’t believe he summoned you to his *quarters!*”

Reena’s shriek cuts through the hall as we step into the laundry room. Several other servants glance our way.

I slap a hand over her mouth and shoot her a scowl. “Shush, you! Could you be any louder?”

“Don’t tempt me, missy.” She wrestles free and stares at me with wide, dancing eyes. “How long did you stay?”

“I don’t know. We talked for a while —”

“And then he brought you back.” She presses her palm to her chest and tips her head back, eyes closed. “So romantic!”

I wrinkle my nose at her. “I think you’re more enthralled with this whole development than I am.”

“Probably.” She unleashes a little cackle, but just as quickly, she sobers and straightens. “So what happens now? You said you need to talk to people who were there? To learn what they saw?”

I nod and take my normal spot at the washbasin. “Or didn’t see. At this point, we’re not sure who actually remembers it all correctly. We just know something’s off. If there was an explosive moment like I remember, then I can’t be the only one.”

Reena pauses with her hands on either side of her head, halfway pulling back her hair into a tail. Serious amber eyes search mine. “And you truly think he’s sincere? That he didn’t do what you’ve thought all this time?”

Kirran’s gold eyes burn in my mind again. The shakiness in his voice fills my ears. The anguish as he told me his side of what I had never doubted was the truth.

“Alia, you never came to the ball. You broke that promise.”

For years, I hadn’t questioned his rejection, had never stopped to let myself consider that my best friend wouldn’t do that to me. Dwelling on it all hurt too much. So after some moping in Palla, I’d pushed the memories aside until I could at least try to get on with my life. I eventually returned to Hazal. It wasn’t exactly home, but it felt more like home than Palla had.

Yet, if I were honest, Kirran had haunted me every step of the way. If not in my waking hours, then in my dreams, where my heart broke over and over again.

Could it be possible he had felt the same way? That while I was trying to heal my shattered heart, he was also picking up the pieces of his?

My throat tightens. *How much time we’ve wasted.*

“Alia?”

I snap my attention back to Reena and offer a weak half-smile. “Sorry. Um, yes. I think so. He seemed sincere.”

She watches me, veiled emotions swirling in her eyes. Then her brows furrow, and she matches my expression, though far more worry lurks in hers. “I don’t want him hurting you again.”

I touch her shoulder. At this point in our lives, Reena is more of a sister than a friend. “I know.”

Kirran’s words flood my thoughts once more.

“Like I meant nothing. Like everything between us was just...nothing.”

I swallow hard and pull at my dress. My nose smarts anyway. I stare at the stone floor beneath my feet until I'm sure I can speak without choking on the words. "I don't know what the truth is. But I know I hurt him too. That much was clear — is clear. He looked and sounded so...broken, Ree. I've never seen him like that. He's always been so sure of himself. Untouchable."

A shiver prickles up my spine. I didn't mention anything to her about his hands or arms on our walk to the laundry room. But my mind keeps replaying the way he'd tried at first to hide them. Like he was ashamed.

Given what the stains mean, he likely is.

Growing up, Kirran was reckless, prone to action and backtalk and impulsive ideas I was always certain would land us in trouble. But he wasn't violent. Though he trained among the soldiers and enjoyed that training, said he saw himself pursuing a military career, he never showed a thirst for bloodshed. Not like some of the soldiers did. I have seen men returning over the years with a few or even a couple dozen distinct branches on their hands and arms. For Kirran to have the marks he has, and for them to be the sickening color they are, means he did not kill merely a handful of times.

No, it is evidence of thousands.

The thought elicits another tremor.

I knew him well once. But it's been over seven years. And in that time, he has ended more lives than anyone could know. He is not the same person he was before. Though I don't feel like I've changed much, I'm sure I have. Even if we can discover the truth of what happened between us, do I truly want a man who carries the deaths of so many on his hands?

Does anything of the old Kirran remain?

And if what I loved about him is gone, can I love who he is now? Should I even try?

The noise from the laundry room pulls my focus back, and I follow Reena inside. Voices rise and fall in a soft hum, sprinkled with occasional exclamations and spurts of laughter.

This early, most of us haven't shaken sleep fully or rallied ourselves for the day. But those who have make up for it.

Reena grips my shoulder. "The hall is probably fine. I'll send them out to you one at a time."

"Thank you, Ree."

Reena claps her hands at least five times before the murmurs die down. "Good morning, everyone! I have a request for you. Seven years ago, King Abbas held a ball for Prince Kirran's eighteenth birthday. If you were working in the ballroom that night, please come see me immediately." Reena winks at me, then grins at the silent crowd and claps once more. "That is all!"

The murmur gradually resumes. A handful of servants make their way toward the front of the room. I take a deep breath, steeling myself for whatever they may say, and slip out into the hall.

A moment later, the first woman steps out.

We smile as our eyes meet. Shivva is old enough to be my great-grandmother, yet she shows up faithfully every day to a job she didn't choose. I've never once heard her complain or begrudge her station in life. It's no wonder her magic provides comfort and aids relaxation. There may be any number of servants who have answers for me, but few could be more forthcoming than she will.

I keep my tone bright. "Good morning, Lady Shivva. I wanted to ask you some things about Prince Kirran's birthday ball."

Shivva told me years ago that she's worked here since she was my age. Her husband is one of the groundskeepers. More than a few times, he covered for Kirran and me when we either snuck out to meet each other or tried to get back before anyone noticed we were gone. Deep wrinkles line her tan skin, and silver hairs sparkle against the black ones. After years of labor, her body is frail and thin. But her yellow eyes always hold a twinkle.

At least, they usually do — just not right now.

She doesn't move away, but something about her almost shrinks in on itself. "Oh, you're — you're asking questions about it." Her reedy voice falters, and she folds her hands against her apron.

"Yes." I offer a reassuring smile. "Just a few questions. Nothing major."

"Right..."

"You worked the ball that night, correct? Where were you stationed?"

Her gaze darts away from me, like she expects someone to pop up behind her and yank her into the shadows. "I — I'm sorry, Alia. I cannot tell you."

I frown and study her. Cold creeps along my spine. "Cannot because you don't remember?"

"No, I — we were..." She presses her lips together and flicks her watery eyes to me. "We were forbidden to speak of it."

"To speak of what?"

"Forgive me. The ball itself. At least as it related to you."

My heart skips a beat, and I lean forward. "Really? Who forbade you?"

Her mouth opens, closes, and opens again. The corners of her eyes wrinkle, though not in delight. "Prince Kirran, my dear."

My throat locks, and I can't bring myself to swallow. I sense my hands clench and unclench against my skirt. "You — you're serious?" Disbelief tangles within my words, turning my voice to scarcely more than a whisper. "Why would he do that?"

"I do not know, honey. He didn't say, and of course, we would not question him." A shimmer of worry lights in her eyes. "We dare not cross him."

I wet my lips and shake my head. I can't fault her for anything. "Kirran wanted me to ask, though. I'm sure it's fine

to tell me now.”

The corners of her eyes pinch even more. “I am sorry, Alia. I believe you, but... Well, Prince Kirran was quite adamant. Unless he himself retracts it, I dare not.”

I sigh and force a nod. “Very well. Thank you, Shivva. I understand.”

“Of course, dear.” She takes a step back and does a quick curtsy, as if anyone has ever needed to curtsy in my presence. “Do forgive me.”

I smile though she doesn’t meet my eyes. “There’s nothing to forgive.”

“Forest bless your efforts, dear.” Without another glance at me, Shivva ducks back into the room.

After three more servants repeat nearly the same sentiments, I tip my head back with a groan. I can get nothing out of them apart from various comments about not wishing to “cross” Kirran. There’s no solution but to find him, though I can’t imagine he’ll be able to easily lift his gag order. Maybe he can do so with just a word. It still seems that it’ll take far too much time.

Regardless, there is no other option.

I steel myself with a sharp breath and slip between servants to Lady Esilla. “Good morning, Mistress. I know it’s early, but do you mind if I take a break?”

She studies me. “Is this to do with Prince Kirran’s ball?”

“It is.” No reason to pretend otherwise.

She sighs and waves a dismissive hand at me, not bothering to disguise her teasing smile. “Go on. Try to be back before midday.”

“Thank you!” I shoot out the doorway and into the hall. Before I make it ten steps, I skitter to a stop. The castle is massive, with more rooms and corridors than I have fully explored. Or have access to.

If Kirran is researching magic, he's likely in the library. Or meeting with his father's ministers or advisors.

Or maybe he's not doing anything at all to try to find the truth because he already knows what he did. He probably sent you on a wild goose chase, knowing full well you wouldn't find answers from the servants.

The thought burns in my chest, and I shake it away. He can't lie. He was earnest last night. I know it.

I make it another few strides and stop again.

If I go to Kirran, what then? Even if he retracts his order of silence, will it be useful at all? The servants may have seen something, if indeed there was something to be seen. But if they didn't and we waste hours trying to get information they don't have, we'll be no better off than if I try something else now.

My blood chills, and instinctive tension knots in my shoulders. There's only one other person who might have answers for me.

If she is willing to talk.

I steady myself and head toward the nobles' wing. Not every noble lives in the castle, but the advisors and their families do, as well as a handful of other prominent fey lords and ladies that King Abbas wants close at all times. They all reside in the southern section of the castle, where I used to live when we first moved from the spring kingdom of Palla, before I found more solace in the servants' area downstairs and gradually shifted my residence there.

The nobles' wing, where my stepmother and stepsisters still live.

At this time of day, though, my stepmother is likely to be in one of two places: either in her lavish sitting room with a few other highborn ladies, sipping cinnamon tea and pretending to solve the world's problems; or out on the terrace, munching on crackers with lime spread and reading a book I was never allowed to touch.

I can only hope that, by this hour, my stepsisters have decided to entertain themselves elsewhere.

The vast ceiling and beams above seem to close in on me the farther I go. But it's the familiar voices floating from somewhere ahead of me that stop me dead in my tracks. The back of my neck pebbles with a rippling chill.

So much for my stepsisters not being here.

Vallda's exasperated tone reaches me first. "...*course* they didn't go off together. I told you, he went after her but returned to the ballroom very soon after. She didn't." A snicker, cold and mocking like she usually is. "Probably went to her room to cry herself to sleep. What a little worm."

My breath catches, and I stiffen.

"Worm!" Devikka lets out a sharp cackle and falls quiet like she shushed herself. Her muffled words only serve to further the image. "Like spring and mud. I get it!"

Vallda says something I don't catch. Maybe it's more of a sigh.

"But you said he spoke to the king." Devikka's nasally words carry more easily through the corridor, even as their footsteps hurry away from me. Heeled shoes clack in near unison on the marble floor. "That's a problem, isn't it? What if he still —"

"He doesn't. He was angry. Or at least upset. I don't think we have anything to worry about there."

I ease back against the wall, just so I'm not standing so conspicuously in the center of the corridor, but I don't dare to peek around the corner yet, lest they spot me.

It's been a long time since I let their remarks truly penetrate my heart. And I'm not going to give them the pleasure of knowing I overheard them.

Devikka gasps. "Oh, did you *see* her dress? And her hair? It looked awful together. Orange should never be worn with reddish hair. What was she thinking?"

“She probably didn’t want him to recognize her. More proof she wasn’t invited.”

My face goes hot, then cold. That stings a bit more than it should.

They fall silent. A soft thud follows. I wait another moment before creeping to the corner. An empty hall greets me.

Taking a deep breath, I resume my trek forward, until I stand in front of my stepmother’s door. My hand quivers more than it should. Intermittent murmurs filter from the other side. Tightness spreads through me. Whether my stepsisters’ words hurt as much as they used to or not, the notion of facing my stepmother and the two of them, all together, ignites every nerve in my body.

I roll my shoulders back and concentrate on the door with its autumn tree carving.

I’m here for the truth. I deserve to know the truth.

We both do.

I knock. The titters beyond the thick door fall quiet.

My stepmother’s muted voice answers. “You may enter.”

I brace myself against the door and push until it creaks open. It thumps shut behind me. And I stand before my stepmother in all my servant frumpiness.

As expected, my stepmother, Lady Indirra, sits at the elongated table in the main room. My stepsisters and two other fey women sit around her. Whether it’s clothing or jewels, not one is without something that shimmers or glistens in the morning light. I don’t recognize the severe-eyed one closest to my stepmother’s age, but she easily could be the mother of the equally unfamiliar young woman.

Devikka blinks at me. Vallda uses her finger to trace some unknown design atop the smooth table. My stepmother stills, a goblet halfway to her lips. Her amber eyes widen and dart toward my stepsisters before settling back on my surely taut face.

Fighting the trained instinct to recoil and run, I swallow hard. “Please forgive the intrusion.” I dip into a curtsy and straighten as quickly as I can.

“What are you doing here?”

I focus on the woman who bears the name *mother* but has never been anything of the sort. “I have some urgent questions for you.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

KIRLAN

The palace library seems larger than the last time I was here. Dark wooden bookshelves shaped like trees stretch up the walls toward the arched ceiling. Vaulted windows on the east and west walls spill a mixture of pale daylight and rosy sunrise over the area. Dust particles float about like they belong there.

I've never been one for reading. I much preferred to traverse the halls of history, a place deeper within the palace where the tales of our ancestors have been magically preserved through memory extraction and storyweaving. There, at each statue lining the corridors, the most prominent moments or lessons of the past can be experienced, relayed endlessly for any who care to listen.

Apart from sneaking books to Alia, I rarely frequented the library. It's too vast, too quiet, too solemn. Beyond that, most of the books on its shelves are old, falling apart, or plain drudgery to read.

My "distaste for knowledge" was one of the reasons Father preferred Farrid, considered him the golden son. That, and him simply being the firstborn. I've always been an afterthought, extraneous. My father barely provided tutors for me. Though, to be fair, it was likely also because I skipped out on so many lessons.

It was always a given that I would never hold any prominent position in the court. Even before I met Alia, the

military was my path, the best use for someone with my magic. Learning diplomacy never used to matter.

Mother's face yesterday burns behind my eyes, and I tip my head down. My steady footsteps echo through the expanse.

She can deny it. Father can deny it, though he likely wouldn't. My people surely feel the same.

Disappointment.

I'm not the prince they want. Not the king they'll need. I'd probably be doing them all a favor if I abdicate to marry a half-human servant. Harran or any of my other cousins would be better than me. My brothers' unborn children would be better.

With a sigh, I quicken my pace along the rows until I reach the section about magic.

No fewer than twenty thousand books fill the space before me. I groan, shake out my shoulders, and start my search.

Hours slip away. The sunlight streaming through the eastern windows melts from orange to a pastel yellow as the sun rises higher and finally hides beyond the library's roof. The dozen books splayed out on the floor around me have yielded nothing useful. Nothing apart from confirming what I already know.

Illusions are temporary.

Changing memories requires willing access into the memories that will be changed.

New memories can only be created if access has been granted and there's an enchanted object to contain the old, extracted ones.

No living fey has the gift of hypnosis.

I scoot back against the shelf, close my eyes, and press my hand over them. Hopefully, Alia has had more success with the servants. Though somehow, I doubt it.

Doubt.

My mind hooks on the word. It contorts within me, cold and hollow.

What if she isn't even trying?

I tense and straighten, knocking my boot into a couple of the books.

She has to be trying. I can't do this alone.

But I can't find enough truth to counter the swelling dread. Can't figure out what the truth even is. Worse still, something else nags at me, a whisper that it doesn't matter what she's doing. Like there's something I should know but can't pin down.

She'd acted genuine last night. Apart from abandoning me as she did — which evidently didn't happen — she's never lied to me. Even though she can lie, it's not her. I know it's not. Alia has always been innocent, humble, the epitome of good. What does she stand to gain by deceiving me, tricking her way back into my life? She doesn't want to be a princess. Definitely doesn't want to be queen. And she couldn't be anyway. Not now that I'm the crown prince and have to be able to pass on magic to my children.

We can't be together. So she has no reason to lead me on. No reason to pretend to care.

Even as I flip through more useless pages of yet another book, my thoughts distort, edging toward something far more insidious. Because while Alia doesn't seek power, others do.

Who stood to gain from tearing us apart?

My father always seemed more exasperated by our relationship than outright antagonistic. Subtle sabotage isn't his manner. There are at least a few dozen eligible brides among the nobles alone. Daughters of respected men and women. Any of them — or their parents — could be suspects. As could any number of others throughout our kingdom.

But back when I was the fourth prince? If someone sought political power through marriage, I was far from the logical option. No one could have known my brothers would die. No one would set their hope on *me* as a path toward power. And

even if any of my cousins or someone else had schemes for a coup, they wouldn't have needed to remove Alia from my life. They'd just need to kill my brothers and me.

Maybe they hoped I'd die in battle.

Chills leech through my blood. The shelves and books around me spiral into a hazy cloud. My breath accelerates to match my driving pulse, and the book on my lap slides to the floor.

Though I haven't been able to confirm it, Farrid could have only fallen to an assassin. Perhaps someone's plan was for the rest of us to fall that way, but under the cover of typical warfare to disguise the culprit. Conceal any conspiracy, make it all but impossible to trace.

I hadn't wanted to leave Alia. Perhaps someone manipulated us, tore her from me, drove me to war — that I might die there too.

Another thought strikes me.

Or maybe the better question is who stood to lose if we had stayed together.

Alia's stepfamily is the unconscious answer. Even when Alia minimized their neglect and mistreatment of her, I never did. Perhaps they feared what I'd do to them when she officially became my wife. In normal circumstances, such a marriage would've served to elevate their station. They should have preferred to weasel themselves into our good graces instead of breaking us up. Especially in a way that could be considered treason.

I release a huff. There are no answers in this swirling speculation. Everyone's motives are questionable. Except maybe Alia's.

And I'm not ready to trust her.

I haul myself to my feet, put the books away as close to their original spots as I can recall, and head toward the library's center. Reading may be boring, but world maps fascinate me. Especially the one on the large, leaf-shaped stand, with its magnifying magic for those like me who like to

see every detail. I study the aged parchment, letting my gaze trace over my own nation before sliding toward those of our enemies.

Codrin, the forested empire to our north that stretches up half the continent's western side. They've been hostile toward all fey as far back as I can remember. But they especially hate us and the winter fey of Sarma. If there's a reason for it beyond our mere existence, I don't know it. Maybe one of us did something to them years ago and it's all been revenge since. Maybe we're both just in the way of their conquest.

Deria lies to the east, past Sarma. A large, curving expanse of land that resembles a fishtail. The Derians have little in common with Codrin, apart from their humanity. With Sarma's borders locked down and vicious death meeting anyone who gets too close to them, it's been only Hazal's armies, fighting along every shore to keep the humans of both nations at bay.

I magnify Hazal first, creep my way over the mountains and rivers and shorelines. I repeat the process with Codrin. Then Deria. Sarma's real-life magic barrier won't allow me to peer more closely inside its drawn version. But it's almost impossible for Sarma to be involved in any of this, so that doesn't matter.

I revisit landmarks and cities until my shadow begins inching over the table and my vision blurs from concentrating.

A few months ago, Rassul and I were pulled from the Codrin frontline and sent to quell the Derian advance along Hazal's southeastern border. Sammir had been there already. Weeks later, they both fell to Deria's second prince and his soldiers. Humans whose blood branded my skin the instant I pulled the life from their bodies — an instant too late to save my brothers.

Sunlight peeks past the top frame of the western windows, shadowing the map even more and distorting the colors in a way that sends shivers through me.

Farrid's murder not even a month after that left me as the lone heir.

Was that by someone's design?

Nearly eight years ago, Codrin declared war against us. Because of Alia's "abandonment," I was on the frontline within months of that declaration. My brothers didn't arrive till much later.

Deria joined the battle sometime during the last two years. Maybe not even that. And for the first part of Deria's campaign, they were on the other side of the fighting, nowhere near the Codrin frontline. I had no interaction with Derian forces until the days leading up to Rassul and Sammir's deaths.

Yet the moment their prince disintegrated before me, the remaining army withdrew.

Why?

Did they just want to see what I'm capable of?

Deria's king has been in power at least as long as I've been alive, and he's never taken issue with us until recently. So how is it that *Deria*, not Codrin, is the nation responsible for the deaths of two of my brothers?

It was never Deria's fight. Why did they even get involved?

If I ever knew the answer, I can't recall it. If Codrin and Deria were even allies until the past several years, I don't remember hearing that either. And the uncertainty simmers along every nerve, like there's something important there, lying just beyond my reach.

Three fey princes of autumn, eliminated within weeks of each other. Retreat ordered moments after the enemy soldiers witnessed my magic.

There has to be something to that, right?

Prior to the war, most of what I knew of Deria consisted of Alia's mother being from there. But before marrying Alia's father, she spent most of her life in Palla. Though she was an ambassador for a time, she wasn't of notable status, and she died nearly two decades ago. Even if Deria took issue with her

death for some unknown reason, they'd take it out on Palla, not us. They probably never knew Alia was even born, let alone that she and I were involved.

I scrub my hands over my face and shift to face the sun. Its radiance envelops my skin, and I let my eyes close. The threads of Alia's heritage may somehow connect to everything else, but they're far too thin for me to make any sense of right now.

What will come of foreign relations over the next months and years as our nations recover, I don't know. Whether someone truly did plot to kill all four of us remains to be seen. Whether Deria will seek revenge for my actions remains to be seen as well. Yet if they seek to avenge the slaying of their prince, we could do the same. Double-fold. They must know that. Won't dare.

Regardless, they still have a crown prince. Though so, apparently, do we.

None of us lie in ruins. And crippling us had to be the goal.

Unless someone just wanted me in power. Though to what end, I can't fathom.

I step away from the map. I could go on this way for days, tear my mind apart trying to make connections. Surely Hazal's national enemies have nothing to do with Alia and me. And even if they did, there's no way to figure it out anytime soon.

My attention is better utilized elsewhere. I've already wasted too much time asking the wrong questions.

Internal sabotage from someone in the court is much more believable than outside forces.

As I leave, the library door shuts behind me with a loud thud. I wince, gaze snapping to the halls. No one in sight. Not that being in the library is forbidden, but I don't care to explain myself to one of my father's advisors or any other noble.

Especially since I don't know if any of them are trustworthy. It's better to consider everyone a potential traitor than to confide in the wrong person.

I'm even less likely to run into anyone in the halls of history. It's still plenty light out, so I have time. The ball won't begin until nightfall. I only need to change clothes. Though, another bath might be somewhat relaxing. One without all the spices and oils that meld my memories with the water.

Even I can tell I need to relax.

But there isn't time for relaxation, and I don't remember how to do it anyway.

The halls of history take up much of the first level of the northern wing of the palace, just beyond the throne room and my father's study. Leading up to the halls, everything in the palace looks normal and cozy, every decoration indicative of autumn. In most rooms, the heady scents of cinnamon, apples, and clove linger. Others smell more of coffee and vanilla mixed with various baked goods.

It's...overwhelming.

Beyond the arching double doors, the rich aromas fade to stale hints. No candles or windows light the halls of history, just a simple glowing bauble at each statue. The baubles, like many of the magical lights throughout the palace, are gifts from the summer fey, undying fire encapsulated inside glass.

It gives the whole wing a somber atmosphere. As a boy, I didn't pay attention to that part, just liked the interactive way of learning about the past. Now, it's more like home. Like the restless waiting before a storm or skirmish.

The silence yawns around me, humming and deep. A silence so consuming that it no longer feels like silence. Within it arises the familiar sensation that I'm not alone anymore, that I'm being stalked. Buried in the fringes of my hearing, screams and clashing weapons echo. Distant, fading. But ever present.

Shudders ripple through me, and I pause. Concentrate on breathing. Whispers pull at my mind, aching for freedom I can't give them. Even when I'm completely isolated.

With my mind still shaking, I redirect myself toward the statues. Redirect myself like I did at General Zeccar's

encouragement when the loss of Alia threatened to undo me.

“If you can’t let her go, let the rage you feel drive you. Let it focus you.”

Much of what’s here relates to battles. Political maneuverings. Outwitting enemies. Uncovering treachery. Securing prosperous deals for our people. Some of the statues relay more reflective truths, kings of old sharing their wisdom through storyweaver-enchanted journals, bottled illusions meant to bring the past to life, or recalled memories — given from kings on their deathbeds to memorists with enough skill to parse through a lifetime and pull out the most vital pieces of information.

When my brothers and I were boys, this place unnerved Sammir and Farrid, because the statues talk without being alive or moving their mouths, and the illusions and recalled memories make one feel like they’re experiencing battles and droughts and whatever else lurks here. Rassul and I always thought it fascinatingly eerie.

Now, having lost so many good men who never had a chance to save their memories in a place like this, the creepy factor has faded. There is only profound wisdom in it.

Though if any of that wisdom will help me, I don’t know.

I meander through the dark halls, noting each name in passing. Some are related to me, great-great-great grandfathers and uncles, grandmothers and aunts. Others belong to another line of royalty, before the king died without leaving an heir and my great-great-grandfather assumed the throne.

I make it through the entire main hall before I realize that I haven’t stopped at one station, haven’t taken in one memory.

Defeat curls around me like dying leaves. I should have expected it. None of the answers to mine and Alia’s past will be here. While I’m sure other princes have loved women they weren’t allowed to love, no one I know of has experienced what we have. There is no one else to give guidance on this.

What am I even doing here? What am I trying to prove?

Maybe it's just the desperate, foolish hope that I'm wrong. That I've been wrong for seven years. Because if it's simply that I'm wrong, it can be fixed. *We* can be fixed. Changed.

Salvaged somehow.

I close my eyes with a groan.

I have no idea what I'm looking for. Or what I want from here. Truth, yes. But anything beyond that, the impulses that surge through me every time I think of her...

Would I be considering any of this if she looked different? If a glance at her didn't promise to unravel all my senses? As much as I want to be logical with this, objective, I can't remove attraction from my mind. Can't pretend she's undesirable in any way. If I could, would I still care about making sense of our ending?

If she wasn't physically beautiful, how much easier would she be to let go of? Would I be able to stop wanting her, accept whatever woman my father decides is acceptable, and perform my duty as crown prince and eventually king? Why does the thought of anyone else repel every instinct within me, sour my insides like the first time I saw death?

Other women are pretty. Beautiful. Attractive. Even kind.

Why do I still want her?

I slump to the ground. My arms sink against my knees. In the dim light, the stains are like ink, spidery and jagged. Chilling and disgusting in ways I won't let myself acknowledge. Can't acknowledge. Because there's no one around to talk me down from that cliff. I spiraled once, collapsed in unrelenting panic that I couldn't break myself out of.

Rassul held me through it.

Two days later, I held his body.

My brothers are gone.

My breath turns to shallow gasps. I curl farther into the corner, behind the final statue in the hall. The flickering light from the bauble plays over my skin. Not cursed, yet cursed

just the same. No one will enter this hall. But if anyone does, they won't see me. Even if they notice me, they won't *see* me.

With these stained hands, these arms, no one will ever see *me* again.

I'm so sorry.

If I wasn't trapped inside this monster I've become, could I...

I squeeze my arms tighter. Dig my fingernails in until they pierce. But I don't stop, not even when blood bubbles to the surface. Can't stop my mind from fracturing further.

Could I be whole again?

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

ALIA

I follow my stepmother onto the terrace. The mid-morning breeze bears a slight chill, but she requested we speak out here, so I oblige, though I can't bring myself to settle into one of the chairs. Not when she strides straight to the stone railing, places her hands on it, and tips her head back with a sigh. Her wavy hair flutters across her back and upper arms.

“Precisely what is so urgent?”

A deep instinct begs me to apologize for interrupting her, for even coming to her in the first place, and scurry away like the mouse she wishes me to be.

Instead, I swallow hard and stand firm.

“It's about Prince Kirran's birthday ball seven years ago.”

Several moments pass. Each one scrapes at my fraying nerves.

She finally angles a frown at me. “Why do you seek answers about this now? Why not upon your return?”

The months I spent away from Hazal, either in Palla or traveling to and from it, seemed like ages back then. On this side of things, everything just feels like it was ages ago.

I inch forward a step but don't dare to join her at the barrier. “I didn't want to speak of it then. Or think of it. But I need to know.”

“Well, you may find my answers lacking.” She flips dark brown hair off her shoulder. “I barely remember that ball. I have been to many since.”

“That’s fine. Anything you can tell me will help.” It’s likely better to make her think she’s helping, even with miniscule information. It’s more than I currently have. And a better option than letting her think she’s completely wasting her time. “First thing — did I go to the ball?”

She blinks at me like the question is absurd. “Are you asking if I saw you there or if you went? Because I did not see you there, but...Alia...” For a sliver of a second, her expression falters with something I can’t read. Then she straightens and places her hands atop the stone wall again. “I imagine you did attend. Though *why* is another matter altogether. Surely you knew what would happen.”

I shake my head. Uncertainty twists within me. “Please. I need to know. Was I there? Did Kirran...”

“You never said in detail what Prince Kirran did or didn’t do.” Her lips tighten. “You said little upon your return that evening, in fact. But you were intensely distraught, Alia. Moreso than when your father died.”

No. What happened at that ball wasn’t real. It couldn’t have been.

I force back the thought. “Do you remember what I wore? What I was wearing when I returned from the ball?”

Annoyance flashes through her eyes. “Really, Alia? You expect me to remember a single dress from seven years ago?”

“A single dress *I* wore. There have only been a few.”

She stares at me and finally huffs. “Fine. Let me think. It’s not like my magic is memory-focused...” She huffs again. Her gaze tips toward the sky.

Sky blue. My favorite color.

Silence laps around us like water from an ocean.

Like the Sallica Sea, where the rising sun glistens...

I jolt and drop my gaze to my feet. I've never been to the ocean. Not even since moving here, where the Charna Sea cradles nearly three-fourths of the nation. And not before, either time I lived in Palla, whose eastern border is the Sallica Sea.

And yet...

A shiver goes through me. I let my eyes close as something akin to a memory touches my mind.

A sunrise, magenta and gold. Rays bursting past the thick pink clouds. Water sparkling like gemstones, stretching so far. Farther than I can see, kissing the horizon. The taste of salt on my tongue, in the breeze. And large, warm hands around mine, keeping my arms straight up as I prance awkwardly through the soft sand.

Just as the inviting tide rushes over my feet, above me shines a familiar face, a man's face with green eyes. Beside him, halfway engulfed in sunlight, a blonde woman who looks

"It..." My stepmother's voice yanks me back.

I scramble to pull myself from the thoughts, to focus on the woman I'm with.

"Brown, I believe," she says. "The dress was brown. Like dust. Not very pretty, truly. I do not know why you chose to wear it to such an occasion."

My heart sinks to my toes in a cold rush. I slump into the nearest chair, a chair so plush it threatens to devour me. I wish I could lose myself in that recollection of the ocean. Let its waters sweep over me and take me back to a time where everything made sense.

"All right." I clear my throat and grip my knees, squeeze a few times, and meet my stepmother's eyes. "Did you see me before the ball? That day?"

"Yes, you —" Her expression pinches, almost like an insect flew into her face. "Well, no, maybe it..." She trails off and shakes her head.

I wait, but she doesn't continue. "What were you going to say?"

"Forget it." She waves a dismissive hand. The jeweled rings on her fingers twinkle red and blue in the sunlight. "I simply confused days."

My heart thrashes in my chest, and I snap up from the chair. "What?"

"Well, it's not like you don't wear the same dreadful garb every day. It's easy to mix —"

"No, wait, please." I draw in a shaky breath.

She scowls but stays silent.

I force myself to calm down. To think straight. "Start from — from two, no three, days before the ball. Can you remember that, specifically? You've always had such a mind for detail." I wait for her to acknowledge the compliment, but she doesn't. "The ball was on Saturday. So the Thursday before it. Do you remember Kirran bringing me a dress? In the morning?"

"Alia. I do not have time for —"

"Please!" I surge forward, both hands up to keep her from leaving, though she hasn't tried to do so. "I need you to help me understand this."

Her amber eyes narrow like she's going to argue, but she just lifts a brow. "Understand what?"

"How Kirran and I have different memories of that night." I swallow hard, but nothing eases the lump in my throat. "He said I never came to the ball, but I remember being there, and I — I don't...understand how any of this is possible. I'm just trying to figure out what happened to me. Or to him. We don't even know who's right."

She sighs and crosses her arms. As she leans her hip against the smooth stone barrier, her gaze drifts toward the gardens below us. "How do you think I am to know what you did or did not do, Alia? There were delegates and other distinguished guests flooding in. Most of the time, I was not even here. Especially not when you were."

I knot my hands against my dress. Warning curdles in my gut like sour milk. “If you have nothing to hide from me, then why won’t you answer my questions?”

She holds my gaze, scowls, and looks away. “Very well.” Silence falls, and she stares off into the gardens below. Unreadable emotions play across her face, pulling at her forehead as she thinks. “Prince Kirran stopped by on Friday morning. Briefly. I never saw him, but I heard your voices. I think you were about to head to the servants’ quarters. I was readying to leave to meet with the chieftain from Port Urdina. I have no idea what you two did or discussed, and by the time I came out of my room, you were both gone already.”

Something trails along the back of my neck. Like a gust of cold air, yet it’s not.

“When I retired for the evening, you were in bed. I didn’t see you until after whatever happened had happened.” She waits for a moment and ticks her brows up. “Anything else?”

“And after the ball, what did I say?”

“The next time we spoke, you told me you wanted to leave Hazal. You insisted, would not listen to my very reasonable advice. I could get a little out of you, only enough to understand that Prince Kirran was the culprit of your apparently broken heart. You provided no details. However, I arranged for you to board a carriage heading toward Sarma. From there, you were to be picked up by another carriage and taken to Palla.”

I hold my breath. “When did I leave?”

“The following morning.”

“So not until Sunday?”

She frowns again. Almost scowls, like she finds both my expression and my question annoying. “I’ll have you know that these things take some time to secure. The world didn’t stop because you were upset. You demanded to leave and cried yourself to sleep, I made arrangements as quickly as I could, and in the morning, I put you on the carriage to Palla.”

Gooseflesh creeps up my back. “Kirran said that you told him I left the day before the ball.”

Her brows wrinkle, and she blinks a few times. “I spoke with him shortly after you left. I told him you’d left that morning.”

“And I left *Sunday* morning? You’re sure?”

She tips her head back and lets out a groan. “I’m *sure*, Alia. One would think that if he wanted to stop you from leaving, he would have gone after you then.”

I fight the instinct to crush my head between my hands. Letting it go is better than trying to argue with her, and screaming my frustration the way I want to won’t accomplish anything. If the days are wrong, that has to be part of whatever happened.

“And I was in Palla how long?”

“Nine months. Give or take. I can’t remember how long your travels took. It was about nine months from the time you left to the time you returned.”

That part, at least, adds up. Though I barely recall the trip there or the first several weeks of being in the spring kingdom. I’d stayed in the house of Lord Golzarr and his wife, but after languishing away in the guest room for a few days, Lady Adsilla shooed me off to make myself useful among the other servants.

Nothing else there seems amiss.

Though, if it was, would I even know it?

I smooth my hands over the thick arms of the chair. The rough upholstery tickles my skin. “Do you know about any letters between us?”

My stepmother tenses. Then she lowers her gaze.

I can’t breathe.

“Do understand, Alia.” She puckers her lips like she tasted especially tart cider and avoids my gaze. “You were intensely distraught. We could barely get a word out of you between

your fits of weeping and wailing. Your few intelligible responses implied some sort of betrayal, real or imagined. Not surprising, I must say, given the prince's...reputation."

My skin heats. Kirran's sneaking around caused more talk than my own, but it still cuts too closely to what King Abbas said to me. Or, rather, didn't say to me, but did say to Kirran.

I push through the feeling but can't bring myself to speak above a whisper. "Did you block our letters?"

My stepmother's eyes flick over to me. Apart from my father's funeral, I have never seen her display sorrow. Nor has she ever carried even a hint of remorse.

Until now.

"I believed it to be best for you if there was no further contact. Lord and Lady Golzarr agreed to shield you from any letters Prince Kirran might send." Her gaze drops to her hands, and she pulls a couple times at the skirt of her forest green dress. Perfectly styled brows rise, wrinkling her brow. "They also agreed to discard any you might seek to mail out to him."

I lean against the chair, pressing one fist to my mouth. Lord Golzarr and Lady Adsilla had become friends. I'd never suspected a thing. Never believed they'd deceive me or take that choice from me. Though, given the way my stepmother likely explained the situation to them, they surely thought they were helping.

At least we know what happened with the letters.

She watches me a moment longer, then squares her shoulders and wipes her palms over her thighs. "I apologize if this was the wrong course of action."

That's the closest I've ever gotten to true regret from her. For anything.

"Okay." It comes out breathless, strangled with more tension than I want to reveal to her. "Okay. Thank you for telling me that."

Her eyes glimmer with curiosity now, but I can't — I won't — give her any answers she may seek. Not with my

heart throbbing like it's about to burst from my chest and her betrayal alive inside me.

“Thank you for taking the time, Stepmother.” I wrench myself away from the chair. “I apologize for interrupting your meeting.”

I start toward the double doors. Just as I reach to open them, daylight glints across the mirror on the opposite side of the room. A mirror that fills the entire bottom half of the wall. The mirror where I caught my disheveled reflection seven years ago — seconds before I ran to my bed and collapsed in tears.

The mirror where I saw my dress...

My skin goes cold. My dress — not merely brown, but *decaying*, disintegrating, hanging from my frame in patches.

I spin back toward her. “One last thing. Kirran said the dress he gave me was blue. Do you have any idea what could have turned it brown, made it sort of fall apart?”

A single manicured eyebrow quirks. “Fall apart meaning what?”

“I guess sort of...decay?”

Understanding crosses her face. She offers a contemplative nod. “Well, that sounds similar to withering magic.” The words hang between us. She glances toward the trees beyond the terrace. “You know, like Prince Kirran’s.”

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

KIRRAN

Though somewhat empty, the ballroom is no more welcoming than it was last night. Dozens of servants scurry about, readying all the food, and the first few guests filter through the far doorways. Yet again, mostly women.

I return to the spot I claimed last night and settle in to wait it out. Soldiers gravitate toward me, each one a welcome sight. A few women approach, but when I don't respond well to their inane questions, they move on. When I finally decide to eat something, one of the soldiers hurries to gather a plate for me. He returns with far too much food, so we pass it around our circle.

I endure the first couple hours with relative ease. Probably only because my father doesn't notice me amid the cluster of other uniformed men.

But then he does.

"Kirran!" my father's voice booms. The soldiers around me fall silent. He stands a few strides away, an array of women behind him.

My stomach twists. This can't be good.

"Won't you come join us?"

I glance at the women, at my soldiers, and settle my gaze on him. "No, thanks."

My father's broad smile falters, and his voice drops to more of a rumble. "Kirran. Come join us." One brow twitches. The candlelight sparkles across his crown as he tips his head to the side. "Or I'll make myself clear a different way."

Our stares hold. A ripple awakens under my skin. I lift my chin.

Then I force myself away from my soldiers and toward him.

His faded smile returns as a smirk. He faces the women as I reach them. "Since you seem to be having a hard time socializing with women, even though that's your express objective these nights, I wanted you to meet some of the most eligible ladies of the court and noble houses."

I sweep my attention over them again. My gaze lingers on the three who don't match, both from their lack of masks and their ages. "Some of them are a bit old for me, don't you think?"

A couple of the younger women's lips pinch like they're holding back amusement, and one in a shimmery red dress readjusts her hands at her waist. My father lets out a clearly fake guffaw.

"Always such a jokester, this one." He shifts so the women can't see his face and flares his nostrils and eyes at me. Just as quickly, he grins again and spins back to the crowd he's gathered. "The mothers are present to meet the man who may choose one of their daughters as his bride."

I blink once. "Great."

"First, you may remember Lady Indirra and her exquisite daughters, Vallda and Devikka." He flourishes a hand toward them, his expression bright and fake smile wider still.

I don't take my gaze from him. Don't spare them a glance. Both hands clench before I can restrain myself. I've never looked at myself when I'm angry, but Alia once told me that my eyes glow gold. I don't doubt it. I've seen other powerful fey display something similar.

With the way heat spirals through my chest, I can only imagine what expression fills my face right now.

“Oh, I remember them.” I all but spit my response between clenched teeth. My glare rests on my father a second longer before snapping to Alia’s stepfamily. The shorter daughter flinches. “Ladies. You look...lovely.”

The shorter daughter — Devikka, I think — dips into a curtsy. As if her action reminds the others of propriety, both her mother and sister lurch to do the same.

Like they could do anything to change what I think of them.

My father breezes on as if I’ve greeted them with warm embraces. Then he blabbers out the other names of equally uninteresting young women, pausing after each family so I have ample time to acknowledge them.

Even as I manage to make my escape, back to my soldiers, the girls’ eyes follow me. Wanting me for the reasons I don’t want them. Because of what I symbolize. Or what now accompanies me. Luxury. Power. Prestige. A kingdom and servants at their beck and call.

Temptation enough for any woman.

Except Alia.

The thought hits like a rock, but I don’t resist it. I can’t. She’s never wanted power. Even if she could become queen, she’d never lord her rank over anyone. She’d remember what it’s like to be the invisible servant. She’d continue to be compassionate.

If I were nothing, no one, Alia would’ve still wanted to be with me. She is nothing, no one in this kingdom. Yet she was all I wanted.

My throat tightens. I loved her before I ever desired her.

I have no other answers. No truth to cling to. Regardless of how my body betrays me, it isn’t desire and attraction driving me. For better or worse, it’s far more than that. It always has been.

I'm not sure what to make of that realization.

But like the night before, before the third stroke of midnight, I'm gone.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

KIRRAN

A lia waits for me, her golden hair glowing in the lamplight. A soft breeze pulls at her threadbare dress and sends blonde strands fluttering across her face. She lifts a hand to brush them away. In the same moment, she stills.

“I hoped this was the fountain you meant.”

“Yeah. It was.” Amber splashes sparkle across the otherwise dark ripples as I stop beside her.

Never mind that it’s always been one of our meeting spots, largely due to its isolation.

Never mind how many times I’ve kissed her beside this fountain.

I clear my throat, yanking my gaze away from her. If I start thinking about that, I won’t have the mental fortitude to push through the lies we need to untangle.

“Hi, by the way.” Her dress rustles as she shifts away from me. Or maybe it’s to face me more. I’m not ready to look. “How was the masquerade?”

“Irritating.” I tip my face toward the stars, eyes closed against the cool breeze. “How was your investigating today? Learn anything helpful?”

She stays silent long enough that I have to look at her.

As soon as our eyes meet, she winces and gives a sheepish shrug. “Um, so, none of the servants told me anything about the ball. They said they were sworn to silence.” Her expression wanders somewhere between frustrated and sad. “By you.”

It takes a beat for the words to sink in. For me to remember what I’d done. For it to connect to the nagging instinct from earlier in the day.

I drag my palm over my face. Curses spill between my lips.

I tip my chin down and focus on the stones beneath my boots. Though she watches me, she’s not standing within even an arm’s length. Fair enough. “I’m sorry. I forgot I...did that.”

“What exactly did you forbid them to speak of? And why?”

Shame branches through me to match the stains I bear. “The ball itself, and you not showing up to it. I didn’t know who may have known among the servants. Or who overheard gossip among the nobles who expected you. As for why...” I lower my gaze. “I never wanted to hear your name again.”

“So you gathered all the servants and ordered silence, on the chance that someone might say something about me.” She exhales a strained chuckle. “That’s...a bit excessive.”

I close my eyes as if that will quell the stinging inside me. “It was.” The sound of crickets fills the quiet. When I look over at her, she meets my stare. “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have sent you on some fool’s errand if I’d remembered that.”

A faint smile quirks her lips. “Thank you. I figured it out rather quickly.” Her voice turns contemplative. “I spoke with my stepmother, though.”

My shoulders tense with that ridiculous protective instinct as my gaze snaps up. Alia just stares deeper into the garden.

“I thought maybe we’d get some answers from her since she was there. But if anything, she...confirmed my version of events.” She tilts her head away with a sigh. “She mentioned something about confusing days that gave me a strange

feeling. The biggest odd thing was that she said I left the morning after the ball. And she said she told you this when you came to see her that same morning. She was very clear that it was Sunday.”

The memory twists through me. My throat tightens. “No. She said you left the day *before*. Yes, I spoke with her the morning after the ball, but it...I specifically...” The words dissolve into a groan, and I set my jaw.

I’d been precise in how I’d asked. Hadn’t she been precise in how she’d answered?

My mind spins over possibilities. Could an illusion have accomplished the disparity? If I didn’t actually talk to *her*, but someone pretending to be her, would that explain the wrong information being relayed to me?

Defeat scrapes at my chest. *How deep does this all go?*

Alia holds my gaze for a prolonged moment, then nods. “There has to be something with that. But she couldn’t have lied. Fey can’t —”

“We can still deceive.” I swallow hard. “You know that.”

“I don’t know if she was being deceptive. But I think she was honest about blocking our letters.”

All thoughts of illusions and different days collapse. I snap toward her. “She *what?*”

Her expression falters, and she recoils a step. “She said she thought she was doing the right thing at the time. From her perspective, you broke my heart. I can’t fault her for doing one thing to protect me.”

I can and I will. But it’s not the time to say anything about that. Not when Alia already seems ready to shrink into herself.

Another curse breaks free, snarled this time. I grip the fountain’s edge with both hands. “This whole situation is madness.”

“It is.” She sniffs and settles herself against the stone edge as well, staring into the darkened expanse and the palace

beyond. “Did you figure out anything with the magic involved?”

“No. Nothing new or solid.”

Her breath catches, but she says nothing. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see her fidgeting with her mother’s necklace and its miniature shoe charm. Her hair cascades down to shield her face, revealing the slight point of her ear. My fingers itch to brush the strands from her cheek.

I roll my shoulders and tighten my hold on the stone barrier.

“Kirran? I need to ask you something.”

“Sure.”

“Did you do something magical to my dress? The one you gave me?”

Tension spreads through me as I shift to face her. “Like what?”

“Like...” She shrugs and turns her head away from me. “Made it change color.”

I manage to restrain the scoff, but I can’t keep my gaze from darting toward my hands. I step back from the stone wall and cross my arms. “That’s not what my magic does, Alia.”

“No, I know. But when I asked my stepmother what could turn a blue dress brown and make it decay, she said it sounded like —”

“Decay?” I blink at her, trying to ignore the heat building under my skin. “You never said it was *decaying* —”

“I didn’t know before. But I remembered when I was there, talking with her. I remembered seeing myself in her wall mirror, and the dress was falling apart, not just brown.” She stiffens, chin up as she stares me down. “Answer the question, please.”

I dig my fingernails into the fountain’s stone edge and lean toward her. She flinches away. “Exactly why would I *do* that,

Alia? Give you a dress only to enchant it to crumble off you in front of hundreds of people?"

She narrows her eyes. "You tell me."

My teeth jab into my tongue, nearly drawing blood. "For the last time, I gave you a blue dress — a dress your favorite shade of blue — to present you as my chosen bride. If whatever happened hadn't happened, if you'd actually come to the ball like you promised, you would've been my wife within the *week*." I shouldn't move closer, but I can't stop myself. "Whatever you think I did, I *didn't*."

This time, she doesn't withdraw. Fire sparks in her stare. "You're the one treating me like I'm an enemy. Like I betrayed you when I swore to you last night that I'd never hurt you like that."

Seconds pass, neither of us backing down.

No words seem right. She's not wrong. And I can't stop doing it.

I look away first.

Her murmured words tangle with the breeze. "I know it's hard to let go of, Kirran. But this isn't fair. If we're going to get to the bottom of this, we both have to extend some trust toward each other. I want to believe you. I need you to believe me too."

Midnight envelops the garden around us. Fireflies and magical lights break through the darkness, winking and fading only to return to taunt me. Being here with her is so achingly natural. Or at least, it should be.

Yet all of me just knots further.

She sighs and wraps her arms around herself. As if to shield herself from me.

I unwind my stance.

"And I know I'm probably treating you the same way." Her arms tighten around her body, and she glances up. "I asked her what could turn a blue dress brown and make it decay, and she said it sounded like withering magic. I kind of

panicked. Assumed the worst in you. I'm sorry for that. I don't want to be like this. But even if it's a stupid question, I need you to answer it."

"Numerous different magics can change the appearance or state of things. That's literally most of what autumn magic —" I stop, release a sharp sigh, and soften my tone. "To answer your question, no. Withering magic doesn't affect fabric. Just the living. I can't suck the life from your dress."

Alia frowns but still holds my gaze.

"Even if I had that ability, I wouldn't have used it against you. No matter what you did." I lower my voice even more and inch closer. "I'm sorry too. I don't...want to be like this either."

"All right." A tremor goes through her as she inhales. "So what could have done it?"

"Rot induction, probably." My words dissolve into a weary groan, and I force myself to straighten, move back from her. "The decaying part definitely would've been useful to know earlier."

She frowns, then shakes her head. "Sorry. I didn't know that's what it was."

"No, can't fault you for that. I should've put it together the first time you said the dress was brown." I close my eyes and focus on the cool air tickling my face. It only underscores the defeat pulsing inside. "Any other memories come back?"

"I wish, but no."

"Anyone in your stepfamily happen to have rot induction that you know of?"

"We never discussed magic, and they never used it in front of me." Her frown deepens. "Though maybe one of them does."

Part of me latches onto that, ignites with the instinct to go find out, right now. Rip all three members of her stepfamily out of bed and demand answers. Yet if there are others

involved, a rough interrogation may alert them to our investigation, and we'll never find the truth.

Alia tucks her hair behind her ears. "I guess I could...talk with her tomorrow too. Ask about that."

The resignation in her voice eclipses the fire in my chest. "No, let me do it."

She stills, curious eyes shooting up to me.

"If she's involved or covering for someone, she'll have had all day to think of ways to cleverly evade any other questions you may have. I know more about magic. And the consequences for deceiving me are far more severe than they are for deceiving you."

"True enough."

"I need to talk with her anyway to clarify what day you left. You don't have to put yourself through that again." Our gazes hold, her eyes searching mine. I blow out a breath and step back. "So, for right now, all we know is *something* happened. Sometime between my invitation and your departure."

"And here I thought, 'It's just a few days. That should be easy.'" Alia lets out a little laugh. Like the kind that once made her eyes sparkle, though her smirk betrays the sarcasm.

I allow a sliver of a smile to break free and avert my gaze until the emotion fades. "Rot induction helps with the dress discrepancy. It's likely illusions are involved with the day inconsistencies, that someone presented themselves as her to give me false information. But neither of those things explain the memories or what happened in the first place. So we're looking at potentially three different types of magic involved. If not more."

"Is it possible someone just...changed my memories? Or took them away?"

I can't hold back the sigh. "No. Removed memories have to be contained somewhere. In an enchanted object. Usually books. Or weapons. And you'd know if someone changed your memories, because they have to ask to do it."

“Oh.” She mirrors my sigh. “So not the dress?”

“No. Objects enchanted to hold memories are difficult to destroy. They don’t fall apart.”

“Maybe I’ll remember more as time goes?” She touches the glowing petals of a nearby purple moonflower and studies it like she expects it to do more than simply glow. “The memories do feel hazier somehow. Fragile or something. The images I have of you and your actions seem less...plausible. Almost transparent. Dreamlike, if that makes sense.”

“It does. That would again imply illusion, but...” I let my voice trail off. Because ultimately, it doesn’t matter. We’re not one thread closer to uncovering the ultimate truth than we were before. And there isn’t time to keep digging into it. There isn’t time to let her memories correct themselves.

I have to choose a bride by tomorrow night. Maybe my father would back down if I fought for more time, but we don’t have much to spare. More likely, he’ll choose someone for me.

And he absolutely will not choose her.

Yesterday, I didn’t care. Or at least I told myself I didn’t. But now...

My gaze returns to the woman before me. Moonlight glistens in her hair, shines on her cheeks. I’ve seen Alia under starlight so many times. Yet having been away so long, it’s like I’ve never seen her. Never touched her.

One hand curls into a fist, as if that will keep me grounded. Keep me from thinking what I’m thinking. From wanting what I’m wanting.

The memories of betrayal, of abandonment — they threaten to kill any attraction between us. Suck the life from us like my magic does. Yet if she didn’t betray me...

I can’t.

I need more time. I need to know.

But does it even matter? Does knowing the full truth change the fact that what I thought, what I’ve failed for so

many years to get over, isn't what happened? Even if I don't know why or how, isn't knowing it's inaccurate enough?

The symphony of flowing water and night noises envelops the area, and I again let my eyes shut. Without the truth, there's only moving forward. No understanding, no fixing — just a fresh start. New life, like she's always brought me.

“What did you write in your letters?”

Her sudden murmur startles me enough that I flinch. Knots grind in my chest, and I set my jaw. “I don't know if I'm ready to say.”

“That's all right.” Her sweet voice caresses my ears. “You don't have to.”

“They weren't...kind things, Alia.” I hesitate, throat tightening. “Most of them.”

She flashes me a wide-eyed look. “Given your words last night, I can imagine.” Her shoulders raise as she inhales deeply, and she shakes her head. “I've been angry at you too, you know. Which you've probably gathered. I think it's understandable. On both sides.”

“It is.” I nod once and look away. “And you're right. It's not easy to let go of.”

Silence stretches between us, thin and fragile like a worn ribbon. Part of me wants to make it snap, see what happens if we unleash everything, fight and accuse each other until we have nothing else to say. But there's no point in it. The resentment between us doesn't need somewhere to go.

It just needs to go.

“I'm sorry,” I say, glancing over. Her eyes lock on mine in an instant. “For everything you've been through in the last seven years. Even if the reason wasn't real, the pain was. You didn't deserve that.”

“Thank you.” Her expression pinches, and she twists her lips to the side. “I'm sorry for what you've been through too.” Another wave of quiet passes between us. “And I'm very sorry about your brothers. I know you were close with them.”

Unexpected heat stings my eyes. I tip my face away. No one has wanted to talk about them. Including me. Yet somehow, part of me wants to. Aches to. Losing them once is bad enough, but losing them again because no one dares mention them to me is just as gut-wrenching. Acknowledging that they're gone hurts just as much as pretending they never existed.

“And I’m sorry for...making it all worse.”

That catches me. “What?”

“You went to war while dealing with all of this from me. I can’t imagine that was...that it didn’t affect you. I’m sure it put you in danger.” A shudder goes through her. She lowers her chin until her hair once more slides over her face. “Or even got others injured. Or worse.”

“Nothing like that. Not that I could pinpoint.” I clear my throat as much as I can, but the emotion remains, thick and heavy. “But that’s why I only wrote twice. Why I tried to let you go.”

Her gaze drifts across me and lingers on my hands. Then her gleaming eyes find mine. I brace myself, but no accusation or disgust shines there. Only pain. “You wouldn’t have gone, would you? If it wasn’t for me.”

“It was my choice either way.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

I swallow hard. “I don’t know the answer, Alia.”

She nods. Tears well in her eyes as she half-smiles. “I’m so sorry. Truly. Also for everything.”

I don’t move.

Again, the questions roll through my mind like storm clouds.

What if we simply started over now? Moved on from this place of unresolved hurt and uncertainty? What if we let the past rest, push aside whatever secrets it contains, and begin anew from here?

Could I do that? Could she?

What would it look like to simply forget? Let it go? Release whatever remnants of a confusing past we hold and instead take hold of—

I pull my gaze from hers and force the thoughts aside as much as possible. “I should’ve known you wouldn’t lie, wouldn’t break that kind of promise. I should’ve trusted you more. Questioned it all more.”

“I should’ve trusted you more too. I’m the one who fell for whatever illusion or magic or whatever this is.”

“We don’t know I didn’t too. Maybe we were both stupid.”

“No,” she says softly, so softly I have to look over. Her gaze meets mine and holds. “Not stupid, Kirran. Afraid. It’s a vulnerable thing, giving someone the power to break you.”

The quiet settles around us, thick and isolating, though we still stand near enough that we could touch. If we reached for each other at the same time, at least. Once, it was all we could do to keep ourselves from touching, whether it was holding hands or touching faces or leaning against each other’s shoulders.

How can I even imagine that we could bridge the divide between us?

Even without the confusing parts, the lies or illusions or whatever they are, over seven years apart, without a shred of contact...

How do we overcome that?

“Alia...” My voice hitches. I clear my throat. “What if there are never answers?”

She frowns. Her gaze searches mine, but I find no response there, only thoughtfulness.

“Would you be able to be...” The final words won’t come, but she knew me well once. And can apparently still read me.

“Would you?”

An ache builds in my chest. I scrape my teeth against my tongue again. “I don’t know. I’d rather figure out the truth before we make any decisions about...us.”

She nods once, as if taking that in. Then she shifts a small step closer. “I’d prefer that too. It’s difficult to consider, you know, being with you again. I feel like I don’t even know you anymore.”

I tense before I can stop myself. “Ah.”

Her attention snaps to my hands and then back to my face. “It isn’t...just that.”

But the uncertainty in her bright eyes gives her away. Perhaps my father was right to keep my hands and arms covered, at least until a wedding took place. Until after the binding was irreversible.

No. Honesty is better. Anything else is trickery.

I’m sick to death of deceit.

I keep my gaze on a nearby fountain as the soft light sparkles across the water. “It’s all right. I don’t expect you to want to get involved.”

Alia settles herself at my left and stares the same direction as me. Fireflies blink in lazy circles around us, and one halfway tangles itself in her hair. Without hesitation, she plucks the insect free and lets it crawl to the tip of her finger. Tenderness plays on her lips as it flies away.

“I simply mean that I don’t know this new you,” she says. “I can’t imagine what you had to do, what decisions you faced. And perhaps I’m looking at it wrong — maybe we need to think about it as getting to relearn everything about each other. And then some.”

A soft breeze swirls around us, teasing the strands of hair I can’t help but stare at. The scent of the nearby lilacs washes over me. I shift closer to her on instinct.

“We both shattered,” she continues, her voice wistful, “and we picked up our pieces, as much as we could. And if we’d

done it together, it'd be different. It'd be something that drew us closer. But we each did it alone. We had to survive alone.”

I swallow hard but have no response. Her words echo my own uncertainty.

“How did we reassemble ourselves? Are there any traces left of who we used to be? Or what we used to have?” She offers a sad, seeking smile. “What if we decide to try, but we're too different from who we were before?”

My voice comes out thick, halting. “Maybe we can't compare it.”

“Right. So maybe...” She tucks hair behind her right ear and lets her fingers drift down to twist the ends. “Maybe we just start over.”

What if it hurts too much?

I draw in a slow breath and gaze out over the darkened garden. Once so familiar, like her. But now, after years, it's slanted against my memories. More overgrown in places and designed differently in others. Different foliage, new fountains, old ones no longer where they once were.

But it's still beautiful, isn't it? Even if it's different?

“I guess we have to decide if it's worth it.” My voice shakes, cracks. I ease another step closer to her. “If I have to marry someone, I still think...I would like it to be you.”

Her lower lip trembles as she smiles up at me. Silver glistens in her eyes.

“If you think you'd still like it to be me,” I add in a whisper, shifting even closer.

She sniffs once, inhales a quaky gasp, and nods. “Yes.”

I take another step closer. Then I tip her chin up and lean down until our lips touch.

We've kissed in the gardens dozens of times. Most quick and stolen. Or sweet and tender on the nights when we had a bit more time.

This one is different. Broken somehow. Like I can't catch my breath. Like I have never done this before. Yet her soft lips against mine — it's familiar in so many ways. As natural as always. Still, hesitation churns within me in ways I wasn't hesitant before. Even the first time I kissed her. Nerves I can't pinpoint patter against the fire spreading through me.

Her palms linger on my chest for only a moment. Then she slides them around my neck and shifts to her toes, leaning into me.

I squeeze my eyes shut tighter and tilt my head away from her until I gather enough control to risk opening them. The ground blurs before me. I take a deep breath and shift back enough to look at her.

The hopeful smile on her lips almost settles me. Then she closes her eyes, relaxes against my palms.

I blink back the emotion and swipe my thumbs over her cheeks. "Can we try again?" The words come out breathless, halting. So much for control. "Please?"

Her eyes shimmer as she looks up, and like last night, a trail of warmth reaches out to me. Yet stronger now, more grounding, filling the space between us the way flowers find a way to grow through the cracks in walls.

"I know it's fast." Now I'm whispering. "Too fast. I wish we could know. But I can't risk losing you again. I-I can't... lose you." I breathe her in and let my forehead rest against hers. Wispy hairs tickle my face. I let my fingers tangle between the smooth tresses and draw her a little closer. "Come tomorrow night. Come dance with me. Let me announce you. Let me fix this."

For a few seconds, she doesn't speak. Doesn't move. Then, with our foreheads still pinned together, she nods.

"I will." She presses a soft kiss to my cheek. And with painstaking movements, she takes my red-stained hand in hers, threading our fingers together. In the moonlight, those river-deep eyes nearly glow as she locks her gaze on mine. "I *promise*, Kirran."

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

ALIA

Seven years ago, when Kirran invited me to his birthday ball and said I'd be meeting his parents, he introduced me as his bride, I'd floated through the remainder of the day and practically danced my way home after work.

I do the same this time. Only this time, I don't have to go to work afterward, and he slips through the halls with me, our hands clasped. Even though we don't speak once we enter the castle, barely a trace of awkwardness lingers. When he stops at my quarters, says goodnight, and kisses my cheek, I can almost forget that we were ever apart.

Even with all the uncertainty and unanswered questions, even with all the rage and feelings of betrayal, now that we're united in purpose again, it's almost like we're picking up where we left off.

I know it won't be easy. That we will struggle and fight and have moments where pain steals our breath — but for right now, I lean into this hope the same way I leaned into his kiss.

Hope that we can heal. That we will be okay in the end.

That we *are* worth fighting for.

My heart patters too intensely for me to sleep. So I stare up at the ceiling, twirling my mother's necklace between my fingers and relaxing as much as I can into my bed. When sleep

finally wraps me up in its cocoon, for the first time in a long time, it's sweet and restful.

The next morning passes in a flurry. Nerves build in the back of my mind as time ticks down to the final ball. I do my best to focus on the task at hand. Kirran's assurance that the king will let us marry still doesn't settle in me — not because his plan is weak but because King Abbas is unpredictable. Kirran didn't explain in great detail before he dropped me off last night, but he plans to speak with my stepmother and then give the king some options. All of which end with me as his wife, but only one of which ends with him as king. When I protested it, told him I couldn't possibly let him abdicate for me, he'd scoffed and said he'd never wanted the throne anyway. That his people would be better with someone else.

The defiance sparking in his eyes then made him appear younger. More like the young man he'd once been. He also promised to send guards to bring me to the ball so no one would be able to prevent my attendance.

Reena is all smiles through our workday as well, but I don't get a chance to talk with her until we're heading out of the laundry room for the day. Two soldiers wait in the hall — Reena's brother Tarriel and the man who had been outside Kirran's room two nights ago. The one he called Vaddik.

They greet us and fall in step just a stride behind.

Captain Harran had not only asked Reena to come to the ball tonight to meet his parents, but he'd presented her with a gold and crimson gown to wear and a necklace of glittering jewels. We stop by my room to grab fresh undergarments and then head to hers, Vaddik and Tarriel trailing all the while.

Like we did two days ago, Reena and I bathe and dress in our gowns. But she doesn't change my hair color this time. Fully made up and ready to go, we stand side by side to survey our reflections.

I look like myself. Somehow, that doesn't seem like such a bad thing anymore.

“And you’re *sure* you don’t mind if I go with him now?” Reena tugs again at the bodice of her dress, her concerned amber eyes on me.

I shake my head and smile as I adjust my own dress in the mirror. “No, I’ll be fine. They’ll bring me up in a bit. Go meet his parents before everything gets chaotic.”

She watches me for a moment and smiles. “I’m proud of you, you know. Two nights ago, you were so nervous and unsure, and now...” She mock dabs a cloth beneath her eyes and flutters a hand over her chest. “So grown up and brave, conquering your fears.”

I roll my eyes. “Kirran’s there. There’s little to be afraid of.”

“Ah yes, the man you hate and love and love to hate — or something like that.” She expels a dramatic sigh, and her smile morphs into a teasing smirk. “Again, it’s madness how quickly things shifted with you two. Before, him being there was precisely why you *didn’t* want to go.” She tips her head, and an auburn wave tumbles across her cheek. “And you’re sure he means it? All of this?”

“Yes.” I draw in a shaky breath. “I still don’t remember everything, but I can tell that what I thought happened isn’t real. I knew him better than that. It’s sickening to me that I even fell for it at all. I should’ve trusted him more and known something was off.” Warmth cradles my chest, and I smooth both palms down the orange dress. “The more time passes, the more ridiculous it becomes, and the weaker the illusion is, too. It’s like a fading dream. One of those ones that feels real in the moment, but once you wake up, you can see how foolish it was.”

Reena nods. “That sounds accurate for an illusion.” A moment of silence, then she grins. “Well, I’m happy that you’re happy.”

“I’m happy that *you’re* happy. And meeting his parents already!” I match her expression in the mirror, then turn to face her as she blushes. She can’t seem to stop smiling. “You

look beautiful, by the way. And Captain Harran is a very kind gentleman.”

“You look beautiful too.” A sly sparkle ignites in her eyes, and she flips her hair off her face. “But I can’t in good conscience say Prince Kirran is kind. Or a gentleman.”

A laugh spurts out of me, and I cover my mouth. “Fair enough, I suppose.”

A knock at the door silences us. Reena presses her lips together to restrain a squeak. I give her a quick hug and push her toward the door. As she fluffs the skirt of her dress and straightens her shoulders, Captain Harran’s voice filters through the door.

“If you aren’t ready, I can wait. It’s not a —”

“No, no — I’m ready!” Reena flings open the door. Past her shoulder and the firelight gleaming in her hair, I catch the delight blooming in Captain Harran’s eyes as he takes her in. Just to his right, Tarriel and Vaddik exchange a teasing smirk.

Captain Harran heaves out a breath and offers his bent arm. “Milady.”

Reena shoots me a scrunched-face, eye-disappearing grin that he can’t see and tucks her hand around his elbow.

Captain Harran’s attention flicks to me, and he nods. The smile on his face shifts from lovestruck to simply pleasant. “Milady Alia.”

“Captain.” I dip a quick curtsy and wave as Reena glides into the hall. The door shuts behind her, and I face the mirror again.

Two nights ago, I hardly recognized myself as I studied my reflection.

Now I see only me.

In a fancier dress than I normally wear, of course, once more on loan from Reena. But my face and hair are solely mine. Flaxen waves tumble across my shoulders.

I shift back and forth, testing my appearance from different angles. As if perfecting my appearance could somehow keep the nerves from chewing my insides to pieces. Within the hour, I will be officially meeting the king and queen. And not merely as one of their employees. I will hold Kirran's hand, probably cling to his hand, as he presents me to them as his chosen bride. The king may fume over the impossibility of our union. Kirran will level his arguments. He will win his father's acceptance, if not his favor. We may even dance with countless eyes on us. While we've danced before, it's always been in the garden, with only the shadows and statues and fireflies to keep us company.

But beneath all my dizzy excitement, beneath the anticipation and anxiety, something cold lingers. Something empty. Hollow. Like a specific, vital piece is missing and I didn't know until right now.

Why don't I remember these feelings?

This entire situation should feel like déjà vu. All of this almost happened before. If I got ready for a ball where I expected to meet the royal family and advisors, where I expected to dance with my betrothed in front of hundreds of people, then there should be a familiarity to this. Instead, there's just a blank, dark space of nothingness. A shallow, shadowed place in my mind between Kirran giving me the dress and me running into the king on my way to the ball.

My throat tightens. I stare at myself in the mirror until my vision blurs. I told him of getting ready, but I should *remember* getting ready. I should remember the nerves, the excitement, the disbelief that this was happening, that I was going to marry my best friend. Elation that he had chosen me to love forever.

I try. Strain my mind. Yet nothing lives within the hollow. No feelings arise.

Only a hole remains where my memories should be.

It has to be me. It's my memories they tampered with.

Whoever "they" are.

I shudder and tip my head back. My nose still smarts. For the first time since Kirran summoned me to his chambers and told me my reality was not true, the weight of it all bears down on me again.

Someone took this moment from me before. From us. Part of me, part of him. Ripped from us both. A part we can never get back. My memories, my delirious joy, my hope — *stolen*.

Stolen and replaced with a lie.

But as the thought spears through me, another slithers in behind it, equally cold but more insidious.

What if they didn't steal this moment because it never happened?

I don't know yet if Kirran was able to gain clarity from my stepmother about when I left. There are so many pieces to this that we cannot decipher. So many questions that have no answers.

Kirran's whispers from last night sear my heart. "*What if there are never answers?*"

Fear lurches up inside me, grappling for a hold.

Can I be with him, if we never know? Can I accept that I may never remember?

Can we truly just start over from here?

I close my eyes and will myself to calm. In the stillness of Reena's room, my mind wraps around what I know of Kirran. He was once a wild boy, rebellious and passionate, deeply interested in military training and the kingdom's history. I can only assume he still likes history. That he still loves maps as much as he once did. His years of war have darkened him, hardened his heart, burdened his mind. Yet he always sought the good of his people.

The marks on his hands and arms may claim otherwise. But he is fierce yet good, brave, and reaching for hope. Those parts of him are the same.

I meet my eyes in the mirror again.

A fresh start is a good thing. Maybe it's what we need so we can truly heal.

With a steadying exhale, I tuck my hair behind my ears, shifting to readjust the waves over my shoulders. Several strands snag in my necklace's chain, and I grunt as it pulls tighter. Pain ignites along the back of my skull. I shift to loosen the pull, fumbling for the clasp.

It finally unhooks, but it takes some more struggling to get it untangled from my hair. I watch my efforts in the mirror until there are only a few knotted strands left. Wincing, I rip it free. I pull at the broken hair, loosening the strands around the chain, and then hold it up to the light to make sure I got them all off.

The charm is gone.

My heart skips a beat. I spin my gaze to the floor. My heel sinks down. Something crunches.

No —

As my stomach plummets, the image of another room splinters through my head, too fractured and fuzzy to make sense of. Yet somehow familiar.

I lift my foot and scramble away from the thing beneath me. But I know before I even look. The charm of my mother's necklace, the only remaining connection I have to her, lies on the stone floor. The pale blue glass glitters in the lamplight. A miniature replica of the glass slipper she wore — and lost — the night she met my father.

It's had a single, hairline crack for years. But now several cracks spread out from that original one, like tiny spiderwebs.

"No." My whisper peels between my lips. My vision blurs with it. "No, no, no."

With a trembling hand, I start to scoop it up. It cracks more.

Another scene swirls through me, around me, and I press a hand to my head. But the colors don't settle. Familiar, lavish rooms — rooms I lived in, spent time in, hurried through so I

didn't have to see my stepsisters and face their disparaging remarks. Yet darker, twisted somehow. Distorted, like I view the memories through water. And straining. Something straining. Or someone.

To break free?

A chill goes through me.

Straining, fighting. Pleading. The feeling of hands on my arms, pulling me —

I gasp and scramble backward, crashing against Reena's bed. Its frame creaks. I snap my gaze to the broken charm. A sliver seems to be disconnecting from the rest. A glow burns inside the charm. Soft and greenish. A glow that...pulsates.

Like a frail, weakening heartbeat.

I swallow hard. It's never had that before. Nor has touching it ever brought images of anything else — merely comfort, like it somehow keeps my mother close.

But it's also never truly broken.

Kirran's words prick through me. *"Removed memories have to be contained somewhere, in an enchanted object."*

My heart freezes, and I stare at the glass charm.

The magic of a dear spring fey friend had enabled my mother to attend the ball, where she met my father. Her entire outfit had been magically transformed out of her simple attire. The glass slipper that had been lost remained enchanted even after the magic wore off, even after my father returned the shoe to my mother. Supposedly because it hadn't been with the rest of the ensemble.

If it had been altered once, why couldn't they have reduced its size to enable her to carry it with her always?

The charm isn't a charm.

I send up a prayer of regret and press my foot down on the shoe charm again.

More images streak through me. Faces of people I'm certain that I know, intermixed with those I sense I once knew.

Then hands grabbing at me again, holding me down. Blinking lights, colors churning like I'm spinning. Hands on either side of my head. Warmth and icy chills at the same time, a bitter mix of something between summer and winter.

A voice I can't remember asks me something. I answer with a nod.

Gasping in a breath, I withdraw my foot from the pendant. The inside glows a touch brighter. The pulsing still mimics the double-beat of a —

My throat goes dry. No, not a *dying* heartbeat. One that's waking up.

Coming back to life.

My memories.

I grip the edge of Reena's bed and haul myself to my feet. And then I stomp down on the tiny shoe again. More memories invade. A muted conversation between Vallda and me. And a friend of hers — a friend with wavy black hair and sharp gold eyes. The girl seems familiar, and though she smiles kindly at me, a buzzing noise fills my ears.

Leave. Leave now.

Whether I didn't hear it then or just ignored it, I stay. I see her take my hand as I sink into one of my stepmother's chairs.

Teeth gritted, I slam my foot down once more. The crunch echoes, and within it, a new voice crackles...

"The stroke of twelve shall break the spell."

The murmur floats around me from nowhere. Yet somehow, it lives inside me too. Part of my past in a way I cannot understand. Or maybe it isn't my past, or isn't only my past. But as quickly as it fills my mind, another voice counters it. A voice that brings me to my knees. For I know this one, have held it in my heart all these years.

Papa.

"And she will be safe? Her grandfather will never know she exists?"

A singsong, haunting female voice answers. “Yes, yes, royal blood shall be bound till trod on the ground. But then all the truth will thus be loosed.”

The voices fade out, and I stare at the floor. My eyes sting. The charm is somehow not dust yet, though that makes sense according to what Kirran said of enchanted objects. It still bears only deep cracks but is otherwise intact. The green glow has tripled, and the beat has quickened. Not so sluggish. Not so dead.

That’s five so far, isn’t it?

“I’m so sorry, Mother,” I murmur.

Then I crush the shoe again. *Six. Again. Seven.*

With each crunch, another moment ripples through me, taking its rightful place in the past. My father’s voice asking about my mother’s heritage. An older, different woman admitting that she and her husband found my mother as an orphan. Then her again, her voice hushed now, relaying rumors of the Derian king searching for an illegitimate, firstborn daughter.

Eight.

Vallda and me as little girls, playing under a flowering tree.

Nine.

Rot spreading from her hands. The ground turning brown around us.

Ten.

Decay surging into the tree. White petals raining to the dead grass. Spiraling around Vallda and flooding her face. Screams for help.

Eleven.

Me standing there in tears, trying but unable to make the petals stop.

Air catches in my throat. The memories swirl against intrinsic, returning knowledge. Vallda’s friend wasn’t just a

noblewoman but a memorist. A memorist who had offered to enter my memories so I could understand why Vallda hated me so much growing up. So we could heal our relationship and maybe become civil stepsisters. Even friends.

A moment they must've stolen from me, so I wouldn't know. Wouldn't remember that I gave them that permission. That I granted them access into my mind.

But they didn't just tamper with those old, forgotten memories. They crafted new ones.

Struggling to control my breathing, I raise my foot once more and bring it down as hard as I can.

Twelve.

Like an almost translucent cloud has consumed Reena's quarters, I am no longer fully in her room. I also stand in my stepmother's quarters.

And I'm not alone.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

KIRRAN

While Alia's stepfamily evidently — and condemningly — left the palace for the day as if they knew I'd want words, my father is right where I expect him. As the first cool tones of dusk envelop the world, I find him in his study with General Zeccar and a handful of other officers. At my entry, they fall silent and look over. The door shuts behind me with a thud.

I step to the right of the entrance and fold my hands behind my back. "Gentlemen. Father."

The soldiers greet me with salutes.

"Kirran." My father folds his hands atop his desk. His eyes narrow in thought.

Zeccar peers between us and offers my father a quick bow. "If it pleases Your Majesty, we will take our leave."

"Yes." My father waves a hand at him. "I'll find you at the masquerade, General."

"Very good, sire." Zeccar motions to the other officers and spins on his heel. They file out in front of him. As he passes me, he winks and mutters under his breath, "Hope I left him in a good mood for you."

"Thanks." I exchange a smirk with him as he slips into the hall.

Fading sunlight slants across the floor in wide beams, and dust sparkles in the air. The scents of leather, woodsmoke, and tobacco linger, as they always do in this room. As a boy, before my father and I grew to resent each other, I loved the smell. Now, it carries the suffocating weight of his expectations.

My father's chair scrapes across the stone floor. He steps around the desk. One hand remains on the edge of it, unmarred fingers trailing along its polished surface. "Have you come to tell me that you've chosen? Or do I need to remind you that you're down to hours?"

"I'm aware." I straighten my spine and follow him with my eyes as he meanders toward the windows. "And yes, I have."

"Oh?" The glance he shoots me over his shoulder mirrors the surprise in his voice. Like he truly thought I'd fail to do so. Perhaps he wanted me to fail so he could choose for me. "Good, good. What's her name?"

"Alia."

He stills mid-stride. I don't move or breathe. He doesn't seem to either. Then a cold gleam overtakes his eyes. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

"Then my ears deceive me."

"No. You heard correctly." I cross the room and stand in front of his desk, mere paces from him. With the arched windows at his back, he's little more than a silhouette. But nothing disguises the wrinkled exasperation on his face. "If you wanted me to choose a specific woman, you should have arranged it and not given me the choice."

"You cannot — *she* is not —" He sputters and shakes his head. In a rush, his demeanor calms, and he returns to the desk. "She is ineligible, Kirran. You know that. She has no magic. No chance of magic." Another glitter of frigid resolve fills his gaze. He braces his palms against the glossy wood. "You will choose another."

I cross my arms. “No, I think not.”

“You will if I make it an order.” Golden eyes bore into me.

“No.” I don’t even hint at flinching under his glare. “I will not choose another, and you will not interfere with my decision. You don’t get to go back on your word simply because you don’t like my choice.”

“It is beyond being about your choice. This is the fate of our kingdom.” His nostrils flare. “By the forest, Kirran, you’ve squandered these days as if there’s endless time for the transition ritual —”

“I’m aware of the situation. Perhaps you would be interested to know that there is treason at work here. Which is far more pressing than whether or not my chosen bride has magic.”

His eyes widen. He turns his head, as if he isn’t sure he heard me. “What treason?”

I level my gaze at him. “We were severed on purpose. To what end, we don’t know yet. But her memories are coming back. And I promise you, I will find the traitor who tried to take her from me.”

Silence hangs between us as he studies me. Long enough that my skin chills.

If Father has been involved this whole time...

“What convinces you of treasonous motives?” His voice lowers until only a threatening edge remains. “What has happened?”

It takes a second to recognize the deeper concern in his tone. Genuine concern. Any remaining inkling that he’s responsible in some way melts away from me.

Even so, my magic ripples beneath my skin. Because someone is to blame. If it isn’t my father, there are still dozens of other possible suspects.

“Our memories don’t match, and hers indicate the touch of an illusionist. Likely a memorist as well. We haven’t been able to pin down the exact magic used, but we know someone did

something.” I grind my teeth together. “Her stepmother misled her yesterday to cover for one of her daughters. They made her dress rot. And surprise — not one of them remained in the palace today when I tried to question them.”

His lips part, but he just watches me.

“Had we not separated, had Alia not left, I likely wouldn’t have gone to war. A war where two of my brothers fell and the third died trying to end it.” Images of battle blaze within me, scraping for a hold on my mind. I wrangle my focus back to him. “Don’t you find that even a little suspicious?”

“Soldiers often die.”

My mouth snaps open, but he holds up a hand before I can protest.

“I do not say that dismissively.” Something hardens in his eyes, and they pinch at the corners. “I mean only that your brothers dying at war proves no grand conspiracy.”

The scoff scrapes out. “And Farrid? You’re going to tell me that his assassination was, what, an accident?”

“Your brother —” He lets out a slow breath and dips his head. “Kirran, it is almost certain that Farrid was not the assassin’s target.”

All of me stills. Chills branch across my spine.

“Prince Mikal lived long enough to relay to the healers that Farrid was killed while protecting him from a ‘white-haired’ assassin.”

My stomach drops. White hair means winter fey. But that can’t be. They’re allies.

Or at least, they were.

Now my father’s eyes gleam gold, though there’s a thoughtful glint to it. “Farrid’s sacrificial actions, combined with Prince Mikal’s dying pleas for peace, are what finally propelled King Johan to agree to a treaty.” He holds my gaze a moment longer and folds his hands at his back. “I will not have you threaten this peace by weakening our nation through a fruitless union.”

Silence again. Yawning, dangerous. My mind whirls over the new information, the throbbing reality that of course Farrid would give himself to save another.

I swallow hard and push through the revelation as much as I can. “Then no one knew Farrid would be there? No one leaked it?”

My father shakes his head, but though the motion speaks of exasperation, his voice remains even. “You ask questions no one has answers for.”

“But questions that should be asked.” I cross my arms once more and lift a brow. “Maybe whoever is behind Alia and me is working with our enemies to dismantle our kingdom. Maybe someone from the court informed the assassin’s master that Farrid would be traveling for negotiations.” Emotion catches in my throat. Yet a deeper understanding of my brother’s death changes nothing about the immediate circumstances of a bride for me.

My father scrutinizes me and waits.

I stamp down any stray nerves. “So yes, especially in light of all this, I will marry Alia, as I should have done seven years ago. You have two choices when I do. The first option is that you will accept my immediate abdication and name one of my cousins as heir instead. The other is that I assume the throne and reign until one of my brothers’ children is of age, at which point I will step down without resistance. Or, if you fancy, a third: you coronate me, I immediately relinquish back to you, and *you* reign until one of your grandchildren comes of age.”

He purses his lips and shoots me a dismissive scowl. “You know the magic can’t be deceived.”

“Then that makes your choice even easier.”

His mouth tightens, but he doesn’t respond.

I don’t wait long. “If I had married her seven years ago and all three of them still died, you’d be in the same situation you are in now. Faced with the same predicament. Only, we likely would’ve had children by then to further complicate matters. Be grateful that isn’t the case.”

He groans deep in his throat and pushes off the desk. His glare settles on the floor for a second before lifting back to me. “But we are not. *You* are the crown prince, and you are unattached. If what you speak of regarding treason is true, then we cannot risk weakening our kingdom —”

“We won’t. I can stay crown prince. I can become king. You can start the transition ritual this very moment. Or we can proceed with one of the other possibilities.”

His glower melts into something more like curiosity.

“Three days ago, you asked if my rule will be reckless. The answer is no.” I pause to let the word resonate. Then I lower my voice. “But hear me now, Father: I will be ruthless. I will protect this kingdom and its people by any means necessary. I will not stop until I uncover every thread of treachery.” I take a step closer to him. “And I *will* have the woman I want as my wife.”

Another step toward him. His throat tenses, and he lifts his chin.

“And if I find out that you had something to do with tearing her from me before — or if you even *attempt* to tear her from me now — you will face a much greater problem than an unruly crown prince who wishes to marry a servant.” My eyes surely glow, but I don’t care. “Don’t forget, Father, that for the last seven years, I have lived and fought and bled alongside the army of Hazal.” I tip my head toward the door to indicate the men who left just moments ago. “Do you wish to see who those soldiers will side with if you push me to war?”

“You’d go to war over this girl?” He sucks in a sharp breath, but the gravity in the lines of his face says he knows the answer full well. “Against your own people? Your own family?”

“I advise that you don’t push me hard enough to find out what I’d do for her.” I offer a faint smile. “The better course of action would be to concede to the choice you said was mine, decide how you want to proceed after the wedding, and focus your ire toward finding the criminals who put us in this situation in the first place.”

If I expect anything, it's annoyance. I definitely don't expect the somehow triumphant, even proud, smirk to play across his lips.

He dips his head and rolls his shoulders back to make himself taller. We still aren't eye level. "Your negotiation tactics could use some intense polishing, but I suppose that can grow in time. I will consider the options carefully, and we will discuss this in the days to come. Is that acceptable to you, Prince Kirran?"

"It is."

"May I presume that your chosen bride will join us this evening?"

A flicker of doubt grips my chest, but I ignore it. "Yes. She'll be there."

"Very well. I shall look forward to meeting this... delightful young woman of yours." He gives a short bow. His cloak billows behind him as he strides toward the windows again.

I turn to go.

"And Kirran..."

I stop and face him, bracing myself.

For a moment, he just studies me. Then his placid expression falters, and he averts his gaze. He settles his hands behind his back and looks down at the gardens. "Your mother informed me that you believe me to be disappointed in you."

A knot forms in my throat, travels into my chest, but I can't make myself move.

He shakes his head, still speaking toward the glass. "You are mistaken. Though, I grant that I haven't shown this well. The loss of your brothers has been...devastating. When initial reports came, I feared...that it was all four of you."

His words float like early morning mist, hovering long enough to turn the world silent.

I remain a tree in his presence, rooted in place.

“You are my son. The same as your brothers. Despite our differences, I’m proud of who you’re becoming. I am glad you’re home.” He stiffens and angles his gaze toward the back wall of his study. Bookshelves fill the space. His voice softens even more. “I’m glad you’re home.”

“Thank you, Father.” The words come out thick, but I force them anyway.

A quick tip of his head, a flash in his golden eyes as he finally glances over. “You’ve surprised me. I hope you will continue to surprise me.”

I meet his gaze with a wry smile. “I’ll see you at the masquerade.”

“Very good, son.” His chuckle follows me out the door.

I arrive at the ballroom early enough to torment myself with anticipation. My father’s words bounce around in my head, too unexpected to pin down. But beyond that, my thoughts roll over everything I studied that morning. I hadn’t dared return to the halls of history. Not with yesterday’s panic still burning inside me. And after it became clear that Alia’s stepfamily had anticipated my interrogation plans, I tried the halls of records instead and searched through countless family trees.

Not every fey has manifestable magic, but many do. While magic doesn’t always follow bloodlines, it often attaches itself to them, leaving children with gifts similar to their parents’. Yet like nature itself oftentimes surprises, families with no hint of memory or illusion magic can produce a child with it. Just like a man with storm magic and a woman with the gift of song can produce a son whose magic is killing.

I confirmed that both Alia’s stepsisters are gifted with rot induction. Her stepmother’s magic of preservation isn’t all related to what happened between Alia and me, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t otherwise involved.

Beyond that, I learned nothing else helpful.

I sigh and try to push the thoughts away. It doesn't matter right now. What matters is announcing my bride and marrying her. We'll figure everything else out later.

But a cold hiss lurks at the back of my mind, insisting that what we don't know might change everything we think we do. That nothing is what it seems at all.

I do my best to suffocate the doubts.

The first minutes of the ball creep by with no sign of Alia. As my insides churn, the sun fades beyond the windows. The world outside grows pink, then violet, and finally settles into a deep blue. Amber light silhouettes dancing guests against the darkened glass.

Nothing.

A few times, I catch glances darting my way — my father's, my mother's, some of the advisors he surely informed. I stand silent and alone, waiting. Begging the doorway to reveal her. My thoughts tangle themselves up to match my stomach, and memories from seven years ago swell to burn my throat. Heat engulfs my chest until I can barely see straight.

I don't want to believe it. Can't accept that history has simply repeated itself.

She promised to be here. She promised. She knows what this night means to me, to us. For us.

I stop myself dead, both hands balling into fists.

No, I sent soldiers. If she's not here, something's wrong.

Magic sizzles through my veins, itching for release. Seething with a resolve fierce enough to steal my breath.

I won't fail her again.

I signal to Harran and several of the other nearest guards and blow out of the ballroom. Puzzled shouts and voices rise behind me, but I don't look back. Barely look over as soldiers either fall in with me or move to secure the room.

Someone did this to us the first time. Someone is trying to keep us apart. Someone may even be using her as bait to get to me since they failed to kill me on the battlefield.

Regardless of any danger, this time, I will choose to believe her. I will find her. I will find *them*.

And I will end this.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

ALIA

I stand in a sky blue dress in the main living area of my stepmother's quarters. Sunlight blazes across the wall of mirrors to my right. Giddiness and nerves fight for equal space in my belly. Tomorrow night at this time, I'll be with Kirran in the ballroom. Our love won't have to hide in the shadows anymore. And if this plan of Vallda's works, I may actually have a family to celebrate the engagement with as well.

"Sit here, Alia." Vallda's chipper voice pulls my attention to her. She motions to one of the dining chairs.

I oblige, poking my fingernail into the curving branch that makes up the chair's arm. "And you're sure this will work?"

She winces and pulls out a chair to sit on my other side. "We've never tried it before, but in theory."

A nervous chuckle escapes me as I tuck my hair behind my ears. "Okay."

"Are you ready?" Vallda's friend, Sovanna, steps around the table. Her black hair glimmers in the daylight. I've seen her in passing before. Her severe gold eyes soften as she peers down at me, and I offer a weak smile back.

"I think so," I whisper.

Sovanna pulls a chair around in front of me, sits, and leans forward. She holds her hands on either side of my head

without touching me. Her stare makes my mind spin. I grip the arms of the chair.

“Alia, do you give me permission to enter your memories?”

My mouth turns dry, but I manage a nod.

Her cool palms settle against my head. A wave of chills mingles with tingling heat inside me. My eyes close on their own. The darkness churns like storm clouds, wrapping around me.

Then, in a rush, my mind clears.

I stand, a little girl, barefoot and dressed in green and blue. In a field of vivid wildflowers behind our old home in Palla. Massive trees dot the landscape, and Devikka plays nearby with two dolls. Aromas fill the air. Sunlight baking the dirt. The blossoms around us. The salty tang of the Sallica Sea, just beyond the rolling hill.

Beside me, Vallda touches the nearest tree and closes her eyes. A second passes.

Then a chill branches through the ground and up my legs. All the grass in a wide arc turns brown, and a chasm of rot surges up the tree trunk. Vallda’s delighted gasp engulfs my ears. Overhead, the branches shrivel, and the white flowers wrinkle, turning gray as they die. Falling to the grass around us.

Something erupts in my chest.

“Stop!” The scream rips from me. I stumble as I lunge toward my stepsister. “You’re killing it!”

We collide, tumbling to the base of the tree. Vallda shoves me off and jumps to her feet. I stay on the ground, my fingers digging into the grass amid the dead flowers. Something pulses deep within me, wrenching and twisting until I can’t hold my breath any longer.

The exhale slips out. With it, every dead petal surrounding me bursts back to life. Pure, blazing white. The flowers shoot straight up into the air.

And then they descend as a tornado upon my stepsister.

Vallda's panicked screams make the hair on my arms rise. She throws herself backward. Rolling, choking. Flowers fill her mouth, cover her nose. Cleave to her skin.

"No!" I lurch upright, grabbing at the swirling flowers, trying in vain to hurl them away. "No, stop! Stop!" Tears consume my vision. Through the haze, Vallda still thrashes on the ground. Cries out for help even as I scream for the flowers to leave her alone.

The flowers don't listen. Like they've taken on a life of their own to protect their tree, they continue to swarm her. I scramble backward and press both palms to the rough bark.

"Please, stop!" My throat aches like it's bleeding. "Someone help!"

"Be still!" Papa's command thunders across the field. Movement pitches toward us. He slams both hands to the tree trunk. "Peace. All is well."

The flower storm buckles, and the white petals flutter to the ground like snowflakes. They melt off Vallda's face. She stays on her side, curled up. Red scrapes fill her cheeks and around her lips from where she'd fought to save herself.

Heaving breaths wrack her body, but she breathes.

"Papa!" Still bleary-eyed and sniffling, I fling myself into his arms.

My father tucks me against his side and spins toward Vallda, dropping at once to his knees beside her. He pulls her close with his other arm and bows his head over her trembling form. I can't hear his whispers, but her gasps gradually subside. She sinks against his chest. A shaking hand grasps at his pale tunic.

I peek past his arm at the tree. The rot still spikes up its trunk. The white petals spilled around its base form a halo. The smells of moldering wood and flowers overwhelm me.

Papa lets out a slow, even breath. "What happened?"

Vallda looks between us. Her chin trembles. Then, with a wail, she lurches out of his embrace. “She tried to kill me! With the flowers!”

Papa’s searing green eyes lock on me. “You did this?”

Stinging overtakes my nose, my throat, and I bow my head. “I-I don’t know — I don’t...”

“Alia.” His voice sharpens. “Did...” The words trail into a huff. “Vallda, sweetheart, are you all right?”

A sniff. I glance over and shrink at the terror still glinting in Vallda’s amber eyes.

“I’m fine. Just — just keep her away from me!” With that, she spins on her heel and takes off.

“Vallda!” Papa stands us up and takes a step after her, then sighs and looks down at me. “Are you all right?”

More tears fill my eyes. “I-I didn’t mean to —”

“I know, love. I know.” He scoops me into his arms and presses my cheek to his chest. “It’s all right.”

The memory crumples, and through a mist, Sovanna stares at me. Her eyes narrow in thought. She touches another spot on my forehead. Her whisper eludes me. Perhaps she speaks to Vallda, not me.

Beside her, even harder to see with the mist, Vallda’s brows draw together. She snaps her gaze away. One hand drifts toward her mouth.

A cold, unfamiliar female voice tinges the air. “Do it.”

Sovanna’s touch shifts. The room tilts sideways. Sovanna now grips my head between her hands and murmurs something about time. From behind me, another touch comes. Slender fingers stretch over my skull. The same sensation of cold and hot streaks through me. But as if my bones have turned brittle, I can’t make myself move away from it.

A groan slips out of me. Then a whimper.

The images in my head sparkle, distort. And once again clear.

I stand alone in the halls just beyond our quarters. The heels of my glass slippers clink on the stone as I hurry toward the ballroom. As I hurry to meet Kirran. Down halls I know, though I don't pass anyone I recognize. Or really anyone at all.

Just before I reach the ballroom, a figure appears in the corridor ahead of me. Tall, dark, and dressed in fine golds and reds. The crown glitters atop his head.

My steps slow as he shifts to face me.

The king —

“Wait!” My voice cracks from somewhere outside of me, and I try again. “Wait, this isn't what you said —”

Fingers dig against my head from every side, voices rise in an unintelligible flurry, and I sense myself falling backward. Sunlight flashes. Brown and red all around me. All of me straining, struggling to break free of iron holds. Ripping fabric as the dress Kirran gave me catches on one of the branches of the chair. Words I can't make out. Something about fixing the dress.

My own voice, begging them not to do this. To please let me go.

And then everything fades beneath the sound of the king's voice as the world darkens around me.

I lurch upright. Heaving breaths rip through me. It takes a moment for the room to materialize before me. I'm on the floor in Reena's room. Alone. With the crushed enchanted shoe beside my right hand. The green glow of memories has vanished. Only glass shards and dust remain.

I have destroyed the one thing my mother gave me.

An ache engulfs my heart. I stare at the pieces long enough that my vision hazes over. “I'm sorry, Mother.”

My throat burns like I've been screaming, though I can't imagine I have. Because there are soldiers outside in the hall, aren't there? And surely, they would have barged in had I screamed.

A shiver goes through me, and I heave myself to my feet, smoothing my orange dress as I make for the door. The truth threatens to cripple me, but I cannot stop to think about precisely whose betrayal has caused all of this. About who has done this.

Just one drive pulses through me.

I have to tell Kirran.

The door creaks as I pull it open. Vaddik and Tarriel snap to attention, hands folded at their backs. I swallow back the blistering emotions and smile up at them.

"I'm ready for the ball."

Vaddik takes a step back, and Tarriel holds out a hand to usher me in front of them, his amber eyes glittering. He looks so much like Reena, apart from the stubble lining his jaw.

"After you, Milady Alia," he says.

I tip my head to them and start off. We don't make it to the end of the hall before someone emerges from a room just before the staircase. A dark-haired woman, dressed in scarlet and gold — a dress far too ornate and glittery to be any of the servants.

She situates herself in the hall facing us and crosses her arms.

Goosebumps ripple over my skin. I didn't know her yesterday at my stepmother's quarters. But I know her now: Lady Tajanna, Sovanna's mother.

My steps falter. I inch back toward Tarriel and Vaddik. Tarriel's hand curls around my arm, drawing me closer to his side.

In the same moment, Vaddik steps in front of both of us. "We are under orders to escort Miss Alia to the ball."

“Are you, now?” Lady Tajanna’s manicured brows lift.

Footsteps approach from behind. Vaddik and Tarriel shift around me to guard from both sides. One of them draws a blade. I can’t see past them enough to tell how many people stand there, but I catch enough of one face. Enough to confirm the sinking dread inside me.

Vallda.

My heart plummets to my toes.

In front of us, Lady Tajanna speaks again. “Preparing to join the prince?” I meet her steady gaze without flinching. Her painted lips draw into a cold sneer. “Oh, little Ashalia. We can’t have you doing that.”

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

ALIA

I wake to blackness, blinking a few times to make sure I've actually opened my eyes. I have. A soft pressure tickles my face, and I shift to brush it away.

I can't move my arms.

Panic lances through me, and I turn as much as I can. It's no use — my arms are tied behind my back. The darkness and pressure indicate a blindfold. I work my jaw, praying that my attackers overlooked that.

But no. I'm gagged too.

I will my heart to calm. Try to decode my surroundings, to isolate a smell. All I can make out is sweaty clothes and shoes, mustiness, and dirt.

Fractured memories flit through my head.

Lady Tajanna stopping us. Tarriel and Vaddik protecting me. Too many people attacking, grabbing, overwhelming them, ripping me away from them, and then —

Fear writhes like worms inside my veins. *Are they hurt? Are they even alive?*

My head aches. I have no idea how much time has passed or if I'm alone, but given how late it was before I stepped on my mother's necklace, I have to be missing the ball.

I stood him up again.

Tears sting my eyes, dampening the blindfold, smearing regret over my cheeks.

He'll never forgive me now. It's over.

Voices filter into my awareness. I freeze and strain to catch words.

“— right, he’s asleep again. Mother should be back any moment.”

“This is all pointless anyway. He’s not going to let her go.”

I know that voice well, too well. Vallda.

My breath falters, and any feeble hope that I was wrong fades to nothing. She’s hated me all our lives. But enough to do this? To betray me in this way?

Footsteps stomp closer, and another girl speaks. “It’ll be fine. I’ll make him forget her.”

A shudder entangles my body. Sovanna. The memorist friend.

Silence. Then Vallda scoffs. “You don’t even *like* him. Why do you want to marry him?”

“Why do you think? Now he’s even the *crown* prince. My father said that when he returned, he’d be mine.”

“Your father doesn’t want —”

“No! He *promised*.”

“But this is...” Vallda’s voice shifts. Maybe toward me. I hold my breath. “It’s beyond what we did before.”

“It’s still part of it. We have to see this through to the end.” A little laugh. “Unless you want him to find out.”

“That’s my point. He’s going to. Her memories are already coming back. She won’t let you back in her mind. We don’t even know if you *can* change her memories again.”

My heart lurches, and I fight the instinct to struggle against my binds.

“It feels wrong,” Vallda adds.

“Well, it’s —”

Somewhere beyond me, a door creaks. Stillness envelops the area. Footsteps approach, and without warning, the blindfold rips off, pulling strands of hair with it. A woman stands before me. Her dark hair frames her face. Gold eyes gleam down at me.

“Change of plans, girls. It has to be here.”

I blink at her. Lady Tajanna, the illusionist who forced lies into my head. Who tore my heart — and Kirran’s — to pieces.

She holds out a hand toward me, and the air vibrates, shudders. Pricks of light and colored images I can’t make out start to swirl together. My heart races in my ears.

She’s going to force an illusion on me. Make my mind dull to the truth. So they can take me again, ruin Kirran and me again. Win whatever objective they seek.

I straighten as much as I can and force my command through the gag. “*No.*”

Lady Tajanna’s expression falters. She tips her head to the side as she tries once more, grimacing in concentration.

I dig my heels into the dirt floor. *An old secret passage? Or an illusion?*

She tries again. And again. Then she shrieks and slams her fist against my head.

I crumble forward. My chin smashes into my chest. The silvery remnants of some attempted illusion flicker and dissolve almost immediately.

Lady Tajanna levels a glare at me, pressing one palm to her temple. “She’s *fighting* me somehow.”

“The necklace broke.” Vallda again. Matter-of-fact. Almost cold. Disdainful.

Sovanna rolls her eyes. “She has no idea how to use it.”

“Yet it seems like she’s resisting just fine.” Vallda shrugs and crosses her arms over her chest. “Spring fey are our foils,

after all.” Her voice drops to a mutter. “Used it pretty instinctively the first time.”

“Then we’ll go with the original plan.” Lady Tajanna lifts her brows at the girls, then rewraps the blindfold around my head. Tight enough that it hurts, pulls my hair.

My arms fall loose from the bindings. There’s a rush of movement, and I’m on my feet.

“Let’s go. Do not make a sound, Ashalia.”

The tip of a knife presses against the middle of my shoulders. I don’t fight, just stumble down the passage with them at my back. The women exchange a few more comments I can’t follow, and then we reach a cooler section that feels wider, like a fork in the path.

A distant yell pricks the hair on my arms and the back of my neck. I spin my head halfway toward the call.

“Not one word,” Lady Tajanna hisses in my ear. She shoves me another few steps.

Again, the call comes. Muffled and indistinct, too hazy to make out the actual words. But I memorized Kirran’s voice years ago. And he sounds closer.

He’s coming for me.

I wrench from her hold and collapse forward, wildly scraping my shoulder against my face until the gag loosens enough.

And as dust chokes me, I cry out with as much strength as I can.

“Kirran!”

CHAPTER
TWENTY

KIRRAN

Alia's distant call echoes from somewhere to the right. I charge into the nearest room, dodging toppled tables and chairs, yelling for her again. Some detached part of me recognizes the scene as one of a struggle, but I don't let it penetrate. Maybe I can't acknowledge what that means.

Another cry, closer this time.

I barely stop in time to avoid slamming into the wall. It takes only a second to find the trapdoor, still somewhat ajar. I wrench it open. Darkness stretches out before me. At the end, where the path bends, there's a little light high on the wall. Just enough to see by.

"Alia!"

Silence. Breath held and ears straining, I wait.

Then she *screams*.

It lasts only a split second and cuts off. I tear down the passage, my soldiers on my heels. Light flickers ahead. As I round a second corner, I make out two women, struggling with a third. One, General Zeccar's daughter Sovanna. Two, Alia's stepsister Vallda.

And my bride.

The instant Sovanna and Vallda see me, they recoil from Alia. Vallda sinks to her knees, empty hands up, but Sovanna

whirls to run.

I'm on her before she can take a second step. Her head smacks the tunnel wall, and she gasps for air. Whether from my hand around her throat or the magic boiling in my veins, I'm not sure.

"I-It wasn't me!" she rasps. "It wasn't my idea!"

My vision crackles at the edges. The space around me shudders even more. Instinct thrashes against my splintering control. "Whose was it?" I keep my voice quiet.

If I yell, I'll erupt.

"I-I —"

"Answer."

A wheezing inhale. "My father just wanted —" Her words dissolve in a whimper.

Father:

Chills leech through my spine at the implication, and the corridor tilts even more. But I know where the general is. I shove my way through the plummeting in my gut and focus on the woman cowering before me. "Is your mother involved too?"

Tears stream down her cheeks. Wild golden eyes refuse to hold mine, but she nods. "She ran. She left me —"

"Harran." I keep my gaze on the traitor. "Stay with Alia. Hold these two. You four stay with him. Find out where Vaddik and Tarriel are." I gesture to the guards closer to Harran. "The rest of you, with me."

As Harran restrains the girls and one of the other men moves to Alia, I start down the narrow corridor. Darkness and light flicker more the farther we go. Numerous doors pepper the walls. Zeccar's wife could be anywhere.

Despair coils around my brain, unexpected, paralyzingly intense. Dread rises with it, insisting that we won't find her. She'll have run, hidden somewhere. She'll lie low until she

can make her escape. She may even manage to get to Zeccar, warn him.

If they escape the palace, we may never find them.

But something about where we stand feels off. Too dark in places, yet light in others, like something shifts it. The doors don't look right either, are too warped and hazy. Beyond that, the emotions swirling in me don't feel like mine.

It's not real.

Like daylight cresting the trees, the illusion fizzles before my eyes.

Tajanna stands at the end of the hall. At the dead end she wants us to think continued through yet another doorway. Her lips keep moving, crafting a whispered tale of falsehoods. Melding illusion and storyweaving. Creating something new, a blended magic, nearly impossible to unravel or withstand. Surely what she did with Alia.

A glance behind us reveals far fewer doorways. Most appear to be yawning black holes, opening into storage rooms with no other exits. Everything in this place is twisted, conjured from her mind. Her desperate attempt to hide that she has nowhere to go.

Without letting on that I see her, I continue forward. Pretending to check doors. Only when I'm an arm's length from her do I snap my gaze to hers.

For a split second, she stares through me. Then she shifts. Catches a breath and stills. Her eyes slide over to meet mine.

Not even my brothers' killer looked at me in such terror.

Magic sears like molten steel inside me. Before she can do anything but gasp, I catch her hair and wrench her sideways. A dozen emotions blast across me within her shriek. They fade as she sinks to her knees. Pleas and blubbers stream out.

I ignore it all. Keeping a hold of her hair, I yank her to her feet and force her forward. Back down the hall. Back to my bride, who now waits with Harran in the room we'd entered. Vaddik and Tarriel sit among the other soldiers, nursing

wounds. Nothing about the scene communicates life-threatening injuries. I let my gaze sweep over Alia, match her pained smile with my own, and shove Tajanna toward the other traitors.

She crumples beside her daughter and gapes at me. Wide-eyed and trembling like the rodent she is.

I spin away from them and yank Alia into a tight hug. She clings to me, her face pressed against my chest, whispering that she's okay. Over and over.

I barely hear it. Every instinct in me aches for devastation. Destruction in the way that only I can create. Past Alia's head, I meet Harran's grim stare.

“Bring them.”

Soldiers wrench the three women to their feet. I move Alia to my right, grip her hand, and assume point out of the room. With every step we take toward the ballroom, my magic surges deeper. Until my breath shudders. Until my vision darkens. Until it doesn't matter if Alia is safe at my side.

Because they went after her. Again.

I lead us in the back way. Kick the double doors open without breaking stride. The slam echoes above the musicians. All falls silent. My soldiers drag the three women to the middle of the gathering and hurl them down in front of me. They hit the ground, scrambling to right themselves.

“No one leaves,” I tell my men. Several join the other guards at the doors. I step in front of Alia and focus on the traitors. My voice comes out in a guttural snarl. “Do you have any *idea* who you're dealing with?”

I give them no chance to respond.

As I raise my left hand, bands of translucent darkness erupt around them, like crumpled leaves from ages ago, reduced to little more than dust. They clutch at their throats, their bodies. Gasp for air as their skin wrinkles and thins. Turns gray. Edges toward ashen.

As expected, Zeccar's voice cuts through the whirlwind in my head.

“No, *please!*”

I freeze, arm still outstretched. My magic halts with me, spinning dust suspended in midair. The women gulp for their next breaths, their lungs too shriveled to allow them a full inhale. All of them too weak to move, to fight back, to do anything but flounder like shored fish.

Part of me revels in it. The rest hungers for more, to watch them turn to bones at my feet.

I focus on the general I once trusted with my life. My fingers tremble with restrained magic. My voice mirrors it. “You wanted me dead too, is that it? End the line, take the throne for yourself?”

“Want you dead?” Zeccar blinks several times and shakes his head, holding out both palms as he inches closer. “Kirran, you were the greatest military asset I've ever seen.”

Ice splinters my spine. The ballroom tilts around us. Years of battle. Using my magic, transforming me into a killer. A monster. Stained if not cursed.

“You just wanted me.” The instant I say it, everything cold in me reignites. “You ripped her from me so you could use me as a weapon?”

Panic writhes in his eyes, and a shiver goes through his body. “We needed you to win —”

I flex my right hand. Zeccar's head jerks back, and he grasps his throat as dust encircles him. He crashes to his knees mere paces from his family.

“K-Kirran, please.” His voice cracks, no more than a breath. “Have...mercy...”

“You made me *merciless!*”

The room shakes under my roar. Ragged breaths tear out of my chest. I grit my teeth. All of me strains to finish the job. Finish it like I have so many other times.

Avenge Alia. Avenge myself.

My gaze slides from the dying enemies to my arms. The deep red branches will forever mark me as a murderer, a monster. The stains will take the remainder of my life to fade. If they fade at all.

But my words ring hollow. Zeccar encouraged me but didn't force me to become anything. I made myself merciless. At his urging, maybe. But it was still my choice.

It's still my choice now.

I look at Alia. She stares back, her hand over her mouth, pained eyes glittering. The eyes of my best friend. The eyes that offer me a different life than what I know.

These people took her from me once. We can't go back to that time of innocence. Can't change how the last seven years have unfolded. But we agreed to let ourselves start over.

If *we* can start over, then maybe so can *I*.

Whether I remain crown prince, become king, or step down entirely, one thing can be true.

I don't have to be this anymore.

With a growled curse, I let my arms drop. The traitors collapse, faces to the ground as they gulp in air. Frozen dust still encircles them, poised for my next command. Murmurs rise throughout the ballroom, but I don't move. Neither do the condemned people before me. They just stare up at me, wheezing and waiting.

And like she can read the desperation in my stance, Alia steps toward me.

"Kirran." Her hand moves over mine. Gentle, inviting. Like the first rays of sunlight on a spring day, after the bitterness of winter has begun to loosen its grip.

I can't take my eyes off the traitors. Can't fully unleash my magic or the instinct to extinguish those who dared raise a hand against her.

But she doesn't let go of me. Instead, she tightens her grip.

“Kirran.” With careful movements, as if familiar with wild animals, she steps in front of me. Between me and them.

My throat tightens at the gesture. Tightens more at the urge to push her back, place myself between them and her again. But I don't. Her river-deep eyes lock in, and she steps closer, reaching for my other hand.

“It's okay. I'm okay.” Her fingers coil around mine, thread between them. Warmth prickles up my arms. “I remember everything now.”

“They hurt you.” I choke as I speak. “They hurt *us*. This is *treason*. They *deserve* —”

“I know.” She squeezes my hands. Tears fill her eyes. “I know what they deserve. But they're people, Kirran. They need to stand trial. Justice must be impartial. They have information we need.” Her chin trembles, but she holds her ground. Holds my hands like they're not stained with all the blood I've spilled. “Killing them right now isn't justice. This is the right choice. You don't have to bear more lives on your conscience.”

I peer past her shoulder at the cowering, half-dead women. Then at Zeccar, whose gaze remains on the floor between his hands. He shivers more than the others. He alone would know how close they came to death. How easily I could end them even now, in seconds, with one thought or flick of my hand. He's surely the one who overheard my father and me talking about Alia, wouldn't forget a single word we'd said. He'd probably decided then how to get me to join him on the frontline.

He *should* tremble before me.

“You all stand as witnesses.” I glance around the ballroom.

Faces of twisted horror and shock gape back at me. A handful of the women cover their mouths or touch their foreheads. Whether it's because of my actions or my bare hands and arms, it doesn't matter.

“These four conspired against a prince of Hazel — twice — and sought to gain power through deceit and illegal

illusion-casting. They have interfered with a royal engagement — *twice*. And tonight, they also kidnapped and attempted to murder the betrothed of the crown prince.” I lower my voice. “I would be remiss to ignore the possibility that their plans share ties to the assassination of Crown Prince Farrid. As well as the deaths of both Prince Sammir and Prince Rassul.”

Gasps sweep through the crowd.

Tajanna begins to protest. I take a step toward her. She shrinks away from me and puts her face back to the floor. A shudder goes through her.

“I hereby charge them all with treason.” I level my gaze at each of the three in turn, though none meet my eyes. “My bride insists that you are to be given a fair trial. In the days to follow, the depth of your treachery will be exposed, as will any remaining co-conspirators who think they will escape me. Your cooperation — or lack thereof — will determine your ultimate fates. Do not assume that because I have shown mercy once that I will not level all the power of the law at you.”

Silence engulfs the ballroom. I don’t look, but surely every eye is on me. Like I’m the enemy, the monster. I don’t care. I know what I am.

And I know what I want to be.

“Bring a healer,” I order.

A handful of fey peer around. Another handful separate themselves from the crowd and start over. I signal to some of the soldiers nearby.

“As soon as they’re fully healed, take them to the dungeon. If they try anything, chain them up.” I scan the ballroom until I find Alia’s pale-faced stepmother and other stepsister in the crowd. “Take Lady Indirra and Devikka too.”

The older woman’s face blanches more, and she levels dagger-like eyes at Vallda. Her daughter doesn’t meet her blazing stare. Devikka’s face crumbles.

The soldiers nod in unison, and I shift to face Alia.

But she has her gaze on my hands — my bare hands. I'd stripped off the gloves when I left to find her. My stomach lurches on instinct. Though there's no hiding it now.

“Kirran...” Her whisper sets me on edge. “Look.”

I follow her stare. And my blood chills.

The color hasn't changed; the inky mahogany still mars my skin. Yet amid the stain, shimmering green vines swirl, rising from my fingertips and reaching beyond where the red branches stop. Flowers adorn the vines — pink, purple, yellow, orange, white.

But mostly, sky blue.

“I don't...” I frown and try in vain to blink back tears. “What is this?”

“Life.” Alia's soft voice bears the same incredulousness mine does. Tears glimmer in her eyes as well as she lifts them to me. As does that sheen, a living current. “It's...my magic. To bring life. To restore it.”

I swallow hard. Repeat the words in my head. Then shake it and clear my throat instead. “How...do you have magic?”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

KIRRAN

Alia starts to answer me, but an airy, weak voice splits the quiet first.

“Because she’s of royal blood.”

I spin my attention back to the traitors. Tajanna is in the worst shape, her skin little more than paper. Vallda looks almost back to normal.

Except that her whole body quivers. But she keeps her gaze locked on Alia. Her brows furrow. “When we were children, she almost killed me — on accident. It was an accident. Neither of us could control our magic. I didn’t... remember that part. Maybe I made myself forget.”

Beside me, Alia’s breath catches. I tighten my grip on her hand.

“Sovanna and her mother researched it, found obscure legends that revealed how a human and a fey could produce a child with magical abilities. It’s possible if both the human and the fey are of royal blood.” Vallda’s eyes glitter, and she closes them. “That’s how she has magic. That’s another reason we had to get her out of the way. Because she’s a better match than Sovanna ever could be. The best match. A perfect complement. We couldn’t let you know. And we couldn’t let you two be together once Alia’s memories started coming back.”

Vallda's lips pinch together as she peeks up at me.

I don't budge. Alia leans closer, pressing her arm against mine.

"I'm so sorry," Vallda whispers. "I've been angry with her for so long, and I didn't even remember why, and I...I'm so sorry."

I hold her gaze a moment longer and face Alia. "You said you remember everything. Is this true?"

She nods once and grips her necklace, though it's only the delicate chain. "My royal blood was bound to conceal my magic, to protect me. But that part was years ago. My father did it. I think it has something to do with...my human nation of origin." She shakes her head. "It's sort of a long story, but yes, she's telling the truth."

I level my gaze at Vallda again, then glance at the guards around her. "Give her a better cell." She whimpers. I clear my throat and give her a pointed look. "Continue cooperating."

The guards pull her to her feet. A second later, they draw Sovanna, Tajanna, and Zeccar up as well. Sovanna glances once at Vallda, who meets her look with a cold glare. Sovanna lowers her head.

Without any sort of fanfare, soldiers take all four from the room. Silent stares follow them. Once the doors shut behind them, those gazes slither toward Alia and me.

I wait a moment and roll my shoulders back. "In case you didn't gather, Alia will be my bride." A few scattered claps, but mostly just stunned stares and wide eyes. "You may resume your activities."

I don't wait for anyone to respond, just draw Alia through the crowd — which parts for us — and toward my parents. Mother sees us first. She greets Alia with a mutual curtsy and a hug. Then Alia and I turn as one to my father.

Her breath shudders out of her, and she inches closer to me.

My father looks between us a few times, glances at my hands, and squares his jaw. “You know there are implications to this.” He lifts his brows at me and then Alia.

I shift halfway in front of her. “Remember our conversation.”

His eyes narrow. But he nods once. “Indeed.” Then he flashes a genuine smile at Alia. “Milady. A pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Your Majesty.” Alia smiles back and curtsies.

“I trust you will continue to keep him under control, eh?”

She chuckles softly but says nothing.

He clears his throat as he turns away. “We shall discuss what comes next tomorrow, Kirran. Try not to stay out too late.”

Without another word, he takes my mother’s hand and leads her deeper into the crowd. We watch for a moment. A few others glance at us, but none approach. Not till Harran and Reena shuffle between people.

Reena and Alia hurl themselves at each other, and Harran sidles up to me as Reena dissolves into tearful apologies for ever leaving Alia.

“Would you like an overview of the intelligence we uncovered?”

I watch the two women beside us as they embrace again. “Does it affect anything right now?”

Harran shrugs. “Not really. Vaddik said the soldiers who grabbed them were an illusion, though, which I found interesting.”

“Tajanna seems to like her illusions.” I sweep my gaze over the ballroom before settling on Alia.

Reena stands back from her now, though she has her hands out toward Alia’s disheveled dress. In the few seconds I watch, the orange fades to blue, and the shimmering, translucent shapes of flowers spread across the skirt.

“No,” I tell Harran. “We can talk tomorrow. Go have fun.”

“As you wish, Your Highness.” Harran dips his head in a bow, turning to Reena as she steps back from Alia’s transformed dress.

Alia inspects her clothing and grins at her friend. They embrace once more. With a quick curtsy to me, Reena slips her hand into Harran’s offered one, and they glide away toward the dancing couples. I drink in the sight of my bride in her restored dress and step close, slipping my arm around her.

She leans against me and closes her eyes with a deep sigh.

We linger like that a while, neither of us speaking or moving. After a bit, we gather a plate of fruit to share and hang back near the columns. Night glimmers beyond the windows, an invitation and taunt both.

Alia slips her fingers between mine. “Do you want to get out of here?”

I squeeze her hand and glance down just long enough to note the impish glint to her eyes. “Absolutely. I’ll meet you in the hall?”

“Only if you hurry, Your Highness. Otherwise, you might have to catch up.”

She winks, pulls free of me, and spins away. Her dress furls about her as she darts between people.

I don’t hesitate. With a nod to whoever’s still looking our way, I take off after her and break right to head her off. Mere seconds before she bursts into the corridor, I lurch into the hall from another door, and she squeaks as we nearly collide. I grab her hand and lead her toward the nearest exit, onto the terrace, and to the wide stone staircase leading into the gardens. As soon as we reach the bottom, we break into a run. Dodging flowerbeds and fountains, ornamental bushes, and glowing lampposts.

We are shadows in the night, making our breathless escape.

In the middle of the garden, I pull her to the left. We plunge down darkened paths until we reach a stretch of the walkway where fountains on either side throw arcs of water to each other. Amber light glitters against the streams, and I finally stop, spinning to face her — just as water shoots over our heads and douses us in the spray.

“Kirran!” With an amused shriek, she throws up her free hand in a feeble attempt to block the mist. She shoves me away with the other. “This isn’t my dress!”

I stifle a chuckle but don’t attempt to hide my grin. “It’s just water —”

“You’re awful.” She wrinkles her nose at me, hikes up the skirt with both hands, and pointedly shakes out the dress.

A few water droplets land on my skin, but I don’t take my eyes off her. Can’t take them off her. In the glow from the moon and intermittent lamps, with her skin cast in the fountains’ faint haze, she shines. Fully alive. More beautiful than she’s ever been.

And she’s smiling up at me like we were never apart, like neither of us broke the other’s heart, like the years haven’t passed at all. Smiling at me the way she did when I asked her to be mine the first time.

“In my letters,” I begin, my voice dropping to a murmur, “I accused you of betrayal, of lying and breaking the most meaningful promises, of being someone I didn’t know.” My heart threatens to beat out of my chest, but I hold her gaze and take a step closer. “But at the end of them, I said I still love you.”

She stills. Her expression softens, turning more serious as she releases the shimmering folds of her dress. Light glistens on her eyes.

“I meant it, Alia.” Another step. “I love you. I never stopped.”

Her shoulders lift and sink with a shaky sigh. Before she can do anything else, I catch her face between my hands and press my lips to hers.

Unlike the kiss last night which left both of us in anguished tears, this one burns through me like sunlight piercing between leaves. I sense myself moving, pulling her against me even as we stumble closer to the fountain's stone wall. Plunging my fingers between the strands of her soft hair. Deepening the kiss until my head spins and my hands shake and I strongly consider hauling her off to find someone to marry us tonight.

A gentle push on my chest draws enough of my attention to make me pause, and Alia shifts back. She exhales a giggle. “*You* are going to knock us in the fountain, Your Highness.”

I speak through a ragged breath. “Who says that wasn't my plan?”

She chuckles again and pushes a little harder. I keep my fingers tangled in her hair. Her eyes gleam as she searches my expression.

“I'd really rather not ruin Reena's dress.”

“Take it off, then.”

“*Kirran!*” Nothing disguises the pink flush of her cheeks.

But she's laughing.

She's laughing, free and sparkling. And there is no sweeter sound amid the chirrups of insects and bubbling fountains than her laughter.

I find her hands and draw her close, tilting my head toward hers. “What? I'm being considerate.” Our lips brush as I add in a murmur, “Not inappropriate.”

She rolls her eyes, but her cheeks flush more anyway. “You're always inappr—”

I cut her off with another kiss, dropping her hands to scoop her up. With a shriek, she interlaces her fingers behind my neck and leans back, letting me spin her around. The mist surely dampens her hair and the borrowed dress, but she doesn't protest anymore, just relaxes against my grasp and tilts her face toward the stars.

I stop well before either of us can get dizzy and let her slide down until her feet touch the ground. The instant she's standing, she wraps her arms around me and buries her face against my chest. I embrace her in return, squeezing until she squeaks and giggles.

In a gentle rush, her demeanor grows solemn. She shifts back, wrapping her hands around my wrists. My bloodstained wrists that bear more than just guilt now.

"I said the same in my letters," she says.

"What's that?"

Her eyes sparkle, though the seriousness remains. "You know."

"What do I know?"

She flashes me a playful scowl and lets go of one wrist to touch my cheek. "That I love you. And I never stopped."

Everything in me screams to kiss her again. To whisk her away from here. But I know better than to tempt myself right now. So instead, I take her hand in mine, kiss the back of it, and draw her with me toward the nearest bench.

We sit in silence and lean back in the stone seat. Night noises envelop us. The fountains' gentle burbling rings like a lullaby. Alia ruffles her dress, then slides off her shoes and tucks her knees up against her chest. In nearly the same breath, she curls herself against me, shuffling her way under my arm.

I kiss her hair and pull her in tight.

After a moment, her whisper floats on the soft breeze. "Kirran?"

"Hmm?"

She withdraws enough to look at me. "I'm glad you're back."

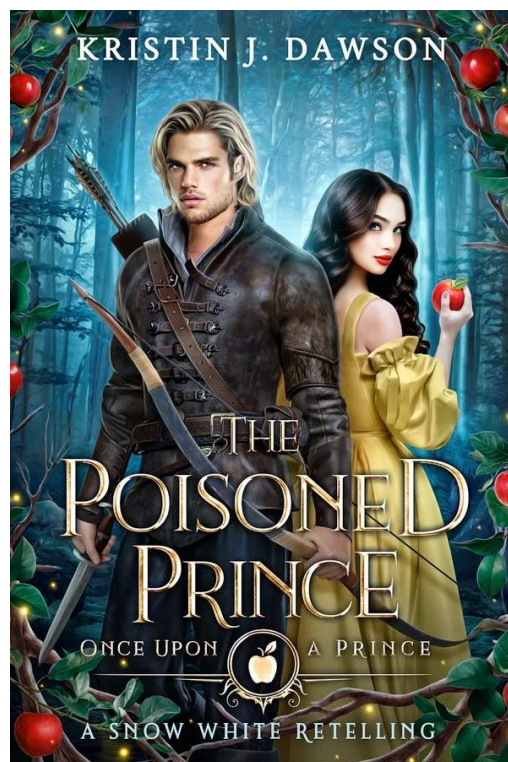
I lean forward until our foreheads touch. Our eyes close in unison. "So am I."

For longer than I know, we sit there like that, hands clasped, leaning on each other.

Whatever the next days bring, whatever threats rise against us, whatever conspiracies our investigation unearths, we'll face it head on. And we'll continue healing.

Together.

NEXT IN ONCE UPON A PRINCE



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A royal huntsman. An illegitimate daughter. And one heart — delivered on a silver platter.

Max is training to become the royal huntsman, a respected position his lineage has held for generations. Between his mother's noble family and his father's prominent appointment, he has no end of invitations and offers of friendship. But, he much prefers bantering with the intriguing Snow White every morning in the kitchens.

Orphaned Snow is an unremarkable palace servant of questionable origins. With the ability to sense moods at a single glance, Snow won't risk feeling Max's emotions and ruining their unlikely friendship. Besides, as soon as she scrapes together enough coin, she must journey to find out what happened to her mother.

When the king winds up dead, the best friends are thrown apart. Between Snow's bloodline and her fae-gifted ability, she tip-toes on a blade's edge. The kingdom devolves into chaos under the queen's rule—and Snow is a threat to be eliminated.

The longer Max juggles the plotting traitors, lies, and unstable queen, the more he realizes he must choose between his family and Snow, the woman he's grown to love. And it's painfully clear that he can't save both.

The key to saving the kingdom may lie in Snow's unraveling of her past, but her heart lies in the hands of the queen's huntsman.

***The Poisoned Prince* is a best friends to forbidden romance retelling of Snow White and is book 6 of *Once Upon A Prince*, a multi-author series of clean fairy tale retellings. Each standalone story features a swoony prince fighting for his happily ever after.**

[Read *The Poisoned Prince* here!](#)

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THE POISONED PRINCE BY KRISTIN J. DAWSON - CHAPTER ONE

Snow White scurried through the palace kitchens like a scullion, assisting with the king's evening meal. She drizzled the buttered breadcrumb sauce over the boiled asparagus, a favorite delicacy. Everything about the royal dish, from the texture to the colorful presentation, was fit for a fae.

Despite the importance of her task, as Snow worked, the weight of the allowance in her pocket itched to be secreted away. But she couldn't leave—not yet.

Finally, servants marched up to the royal wing, carrying trays laden with fine food. With her responsibilities done for the day, Snow wanted to dash into the forest. But the brief lull in the kitchens provided the best time to teach.

Before servants returned to help clean up, Snow placed a slip of parchment on the table between a dirty bowl and herb scraps.

“You're a darlin', Snow,” said Dottie. The cook used her height to oversee her sizeable staff, and her humor made the endless work more enjoyable. “You have the patience of Attuned watching unruly children.”

“Well, Dottie, no one accused you of being a child.”

Dottie barked a laugh. “An unruly adult, then. Fair enough.”

“I'm happy to help,” Snow said sincerely. “Soon, you'll be able to send and receive proper missives on your own.”

Dottie smiled as she wiped her hands on her apron. Her brow scrunched as she worked through the parchment scraps that Snow had collected, containing words to expand the cook's vocabulary. Ever since Snow had been offered a position in the royal wing, her honorable, new duties had her running all over the castle. So, she relished any time back bantering with her old friends. Too soon, the kitchen servants returned, ready to wash dishes.

"Now, be off with you," Dottie said to Snow as she signaled to a scullion to clean the counter.

"Well then, I'm off to rumple clean laundry and harass the king's dogs," Snow teased.

"Have a jolly time, lovie," the cook replied with a wink, "I'll keep thy secret mischief safe as a vixen minding her kits."

"Thank you!" Snow grabbed her cloak and ran into the courtyard.

The cool, early spring afternoon was a stark contrast to the fiery kitchens. Snow gathered the cloak tighter around herself, glancing up at Clarus Castle. The structure perched on the side of a mountain and was split into two perpendicular wings with a balcony stretching across the eastern side's second story. Between the castle and the outer wall, a lone tree stood in defiance of the rocky mountaintop, a feat of magic combined with the sheer determination of the gardener keeping it not just alive but thriving. Snow passed the gardener as he inspected the spring buds on his prized charge, the precious apple tree.

"Will ye be back before dark?" he called out to her. The aging gardener tended to fret about the safety of the younger servants when they left the protection of the castle walls. Some found his questioning annoying, but Snow didn't mind.

Snow turned, assuaging his worry. "The cook will listen for me tonight as the pots are polished. I won't be locked out."

The gardener put two fingers to the tip of his brow, near his cap, signaling his approval. Snow waved and jogged out of the courtyard through the enormous open gate. From the mountainside vantage point, the sun lowered, nearly kissing

the tops of the distant, unending forest. Below, farmland lay like a skirt fanned out around the base of the mountain. Beyond the treeless buffer in the west, the city of Caston sprawled between Clarus and the nearest port. To the east and south lay the King's Forest. Further still, at the bend in the distant mountain, the keenest eye could spy where the forest turned into a thicker, darker mass.

Snow jogged down the mountain road, zig-zagging toward the valley. By the time Snow entered the forest, the light changed, taking on a warm golden hue, signaling the coming sunset. She didn't have long. Glancing over her shoulder, making sure she was alone, she darted through the trees. Listening as she went, she wove an irregular pattern until she reached her hiding spot. Then, she quickly dug up all her savings wrapped in burlap. She was overly cautious, but she wouldn't let a careless mistake keep her from her dreams. As lovely as Clarus was, she longed to return to her childhood home. Only there would she find the answers she needed.

"Do you need a lookout?" a voice said right over her shoulder.

Snow let out a yip and jumped to her feet, her coins dropping into the dirt before her mind registered the speaker. Just two steps away, Max stood with his arms crossed and a smirk on his face. Dappled light danced upon his tousled sandy blonde hair and accentuated his broad shoulders. Dressed in his worn hunting attire, the earthy tones of his clothing blended seamlessly with his surroundings, and the hint of stubble on his chiseled jaw was evidence of a recent hunting expedition. "Max!" Snow shouted, stepping forward and giving him a good shove. "You gave me a fright, you troll!"

"Aww," Max said, his piercing gaze holding a mix of mirth and warmth. "Such flattery. Besides, you'd be lucky if I were a troll and not a fae. They may be pretty, but they're twice as dangerous."

"Pft! You underestimate the fae."

Max chuckled and helped pick up the coins she'd dropped, not bothering to wipe the grin off his face.

"I swear, Maximilian Hunt, if you ever do that again, I'll shave your head one night."

He laughed, handing over her bronze.

"And an eyebrow," Snow added. "But only one."

Snow wrapped up the coins in the sack, shoving her treasure back into its hideaway. She should have known Max would show up. And not because his family's cottage was nearby. But because Max was her confidant and closest friend. He'd taken her under his wing ever since she'd arrived at Clarus when she was eleven years old. Max's father had fetched her over five years ago, after the attack, and she'd never been back home.

Though, one day, that would change. She needed answers, and the distant town of Isolzing held them.

"You could stop sneaking around and just hide your treasures at the cottage," Max said as he helped her disguise her hiding spot.

Snow was tempted to allow herself to feel Max's emotion, to know if there was something more behind his casual teasing. But instead, she stood up and brushed off her hands, as well as his kind suggestion. She'd already been too much of a burden on his family.

"You're such a spider—how long have you been spinning your web?" she asked, changing the subject.

"You give me too much credit." Max put his arm around her neck, almost like he was wrestling a brother, and tromped back through the forest at her side. Snow enjoyed the comfort and friendship, drinking it up as he continued. "I knew the royal staff got paid today. And you get this way every spring. Jumpy."

She knew what he meant, and she didn't deny it. "I can't help it. This time of year brings back so many memories," she said. "So much of childhood is repetitive between chores and

schooling. But once a year, around my birthday, Mama chose a day and made it all about me. Special.”

“Tell me a story,” Max said, with genuine interest. Snow had already shared her birthday tales a hundred times, but she was always glad when he asked.

“Every spring, after the tulips faded, Mama bought the most expensive lamb on the market,” Snow began. Like most commoners, only the great Abundant Ones, the three goddesses, knew the exact day of her birth. “Not the biggest piece; the perfectly marbled loin. And wine far beyond our means. Then, she’d go to the finest dressmaker.” Snow skipped the part where Mama got measured in the back room, away from the windows. She wasn’t good enough to be seen by shopping nobles, but merchants took Mama’s coin without reservation. Instead, not wanting to dampen the mood, this time, she only retold the happy parts. “Mama made a delicious stew and invited the neighbors. We all laughed, danced, and ate. Oh, Abundants, did we *eat*. Then, later, she would take her new dress from the year before and sew matching dresses for me and my doll.”

Snow reached up and gripped Max’s forearm, which still hugged near her neck, and she let the glow of the past wash over her. She sensed a quick rush of tender emotion from Max, but she blocked it out, as she’d learned to do. As a child, the emotions of others had overwhelmed her, but she’d been taught how to keep them out. It was for the best.

Besides, Snow had goals. One day, she’d have enough money to investigate the night her life had changed. The night she’d been scooped up and moved across their island kingdom of Solinsel. Sharp memories from that night were broken fragments, like a jar shattered against the rocks. Her best chance of finding clues lay in Isolzing, where she’d grown up. Despite the six years that had passed, Snow hadn’t given up hope that someone knew the truth. She needed closure; otherwise, that night would never stop haunting her. Snow’s sensitivity to others’ moods was a distraction she’d never been able to afford, especially not now if she planned to traverse the kingdom.

As they neared where the forest met the fields, Max slowed, pulling his arm away, and rested a hand on her shoulder. “I have an idea to get you out of Clarus and save you a few coins. But it involves you asking the king for a favor. You’ve served the king for two years. He trusts you.”

Earning enough trust to work for the royals was a rarity, a coveted honor unlikely to be repeated. When Snow left Clarus, she would forfeit her position. Getting an offer to work in the royal wing was a shock—not even Dottie expected the steward to offer Snow the position. Hundreds of merchants, servants, guards, and officials hurried through the castle each day. How had the steward even noticed her?

“When the king’s health returns, I’ll arrange the perfect hunt with my father,” Max continued. “The king will benefit from fresh air, and you’ll ask to join his retinue. Then we’ll travel deep into the king’s forest. To the edge, in fact.”

“To the Wildwood,” Snow breathed the word, almost a curse on her tongue. The king’s forest abutted the magical woods filled with deadly plants and strange, wild creatures. Few ventured inside and survived. Snow had read many books about the dangers and wouldn’t risk entering. Instead, she’d take the King’s Road that circumvented the whole treacherous forest on her way to Isolzing. Even the main road could be dangerous; occasional attacks happened, regardless of station, status, or even the time of day.

“I could take you myself—”

“I’d never ask you to do such a thing. It wouldn’t be fair.”

To you. Snow kept the last thought to herself, quickly adding an excuse. “The Wildwood is far too dangerous.”

Snow’s parentage limited her prospects. Abandoned by her father, Snow’s mother had told her the same thing every fatherless girl was told—that she was the child of a great man who loved her—lies, of course. Unlike Snow, Max came from a respectable family. One day, he’d earn his father’s title and be the Master of the Hunt, the Royal Huntsman of Solinsel. She wouldn’t mar his reputation by asking him to travel alone with her. Nor did she have the funds for an escort. Not yet.

“We’ll stay on the roads,” Max said.

“Aww, the chivalry! Offering to brave the roads *near* the creepy magic forest,” Snow said as she skipped away, teasing over her shoulder. “There’s a chance I may not need to shave your eyebrow after all.”

“Not the eyebrow!” He mockingly protected his face with his hands.

Snow laughed and jogged across the field to the main road. Max was the one person she never tired of, and she would miss him when she left Clarus. Part of her wanted to know if there could ever be more between them, but she shoved the thought aside. She was leaving. Once she got the answers she needed, she’d return. She’d lose her position in the royal wing, of course, but her work was far less precious than her friends and the Hunt family. She wouldn’t risk losing Max forever. Not for anything.

A thought bubbled up in Snow’s mind as she climbed the mountain, one she’d never dared voice—she was beginning to suspect that the king himself had requested her. The idea was ludicrous. Yet, King Friedrich Albrecht often spoke to her, and not just commands for linens or food. They spoke on many subjects. In fact, he’d even asked her *opinion* on occasion. Only the queen knew of their discussions as she was present for a few of them. With a snap of her fingers, Queen Agnes could have Snow removed for impertinence.

Snow never spoke to Max about her casual conversations with royalty. Max would mention them to his father, who happened to be the king’s closest friend. She bit the inside of her cheek, imagining a conversation between them. Snow sensed that Heinrich wouldn’t approve of the king treating Snow with such familiarity. Though some servants had jealously reacted to Snow’s appointment, she had expected Max’s parents to celebrate the news. But they’d given Snow strained smiles, and she’d caught the wary look between them. So, Snow kept her interactions with the king to herself; the last thing she wanted was to be a source of contention between the hunter who’d rescued her from destitution and the most

powerful human in the kingdom. That couldn't be good for her or for Max's future.

To continue reading, check out *The Poisoned Prince* [here!](#)

ONCE UPON A PRINCE BINGO

Front goose	Licking soap	Cover with fireflies	Radish-stealing gnome	Cover with roses
Sunburst	Cover with arrows	Cover with pottery	Cover with frost	Sweets
Painting	Cover with ribbons		Cover with a frog	Honey caves
Braids	Cover with an apple	Cover with a cat	Cover with glowing eyes	Masquerade balls
Cover with tentacles	Dragons on the beach	Cover with shoes	An extremely fluffy rabbit	A ratty hat

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PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

People

Abbas — *ah-bas*

Alia (Ashalia) — *all-ee-ah (ash-all-ee-ah)*

Devikka — *deh-vee-kah*

Esilla — *eh-sill-ah*

Farrid — *fare-id*

Harran — *hah-ran*

Indira — *in-deer-ah*

Johan — *yoh-hahn*

Kirran — *keer-an*

Mikal — *mih-call*

Naama — *nah-mah*

Rassul — *rah-sool*

Reena — *ree-nah*

Sammir — *sah-meer*

Shivva — *shee-vah*

Sovanna — *soh-vah-nah*

Tajanna — *tah-jah-nah*

Tarriel — *tare-ee-el*

Vaddik — *vad-ick*

Vallda — *vall-dah*

Zeccar — *zeh-car*

Places

Codrin (human kingdom) — *cod-rin*

Deria (human kingdom) — *dare-ee-ah*

Hazal (autumn fey kingdom) — *hah-zahl*

Palla (spring fey kingdom) — *pah-lah*

Sarma (winter fey kingdom) — *sar-ma*

Urdina (autumn fey city) — *ur-dee-nah*

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