

A glowing rose is the central focus, surrounded by flames and smoke. The rose is a vibrant orange and yellow, with its petals appearing to be made of fire. The flames are a deep red and orange, and the smoke is a dark, swirling grey. The background is black, making the fire and smoke stand out. The overall mood is dramatic and intense.

TWIN ELEMENTS

M E L L E I G H T

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Twin Elements

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Twin Elements

Mell Eight

Chapter One

“I’ve been invited to some drinking party tonight,” Rhory said with a sigh of disgust. “Don’t they realize I want to spend my evening relaxing with a book, not drinking and schmoozing for some sort of political claptrap?”

Tycen laughed. “That’s what happens when you’re the younger brother of the king.”

“By only ten minutes,” Rhory muttered angrily. “How do I tell them to leave me alone?”

“Dearest brother, why would you ever turn down an opportunity to drink to your heart’s content?” Tycen vanished into the dressing room, but his voice was still clear. “If you won’t go, then I will.”

Tycen returned to the main room and twirled around, grinning cheekily at Rhory. He had changed out of the red and gold lightweight linen robes that marked him as king, and into the deep purple and blue that marked Rhory as honored prince. The different robes were the only visual indication that designated them as two separate people. They were completely identical otherwise.

Tycen’s wide blue eyes were shining with mischief, whereas Rhory knew his were currently cold with disdain. They both had the deep blue-black hair common among the people of their country. Tycen had pulled his into two thin braids, each running from his temple to behind his ear, which kept his hair out of his face and out of the ink of the documents he worked on every day. Rhory usually used one of

the ornate, jeweled clasps Mother had left him to pull his hair back into a thick bun at the back of his head.

“You realize as long as you continue to attend these blasted parties pretending to be me, I’m going to keep getting invited?” Rhory sighed, but he was already carefully detangling the clasp from his hair and holding it out for Tycen to take.

Tycen swiftly unraveled his braids. A few quick twists had his hair up in a bun, and he jabbed the clasp through to hold it all in place.

“That’s the point, brother dear. No one ever dares invite the king to little get-togethers. It’s always formal balls or meetings. You get invited to the fun things all the time!”

Rhory couldn’t refute that, but he had to add in a reminder. “Don’t forget tomorrow is Sunday. We have the prayer session at dawn.”

Tycen nodded. “I won’t forget. I probably won’t have gotten to sleep yet by then, but I promise I’ll be there.” He twirled one last time, grinning cheekily, before heading out the door.

Rhory sighed and tucked a loose bit of hair behind one ear. He settled back on the couch with his book, glad to have the rest of the evening to himself. Unfortunately, duty called, so he only relaxed an hour before heading to bed. Still, even snatching an hour after a long day was better than normal. Rhory was feeling relaxed and happy as he slid into bed, and he fell asleep quickly.

The good feelings were still there in the morning when the servant knocked on his door an hour before dawn. Rhory stretched, warm under his blankets, and let out a yawn. As much as he wanted to stay in bed, he knew if he didn't get moving now, he would run out of time. He rolled out of bed and padded into the bathing room. Once he felt clean, he went into the dressing room, which was shared between his room and Tycen's.

The suite of two rooms they used was actually the king's private residence. Rhory occupied the queen's room, the room their mother had once used before she and father passed when the cold-fire fever rampaged through the kingdom five years back. When Tycen had been forced to take Father's room, he had asked if Rhory would take Mother's. They had never been separated for very long, so Rhory had agreed. He knew one day Tycen would marry and Rhory would need to find other quarters, but for now they shared the space.

Except Tycen wasn't in the dressing room, fumbling through the shelves, looking for a clean set of robes, still partially drunk. Rhory frowned and abandoned the purple set he had been holding, then headed through the other door and into Tycen's bedroom.

The room was dark, but the bed was empty and neatly made. There was no sign Tycen had been back. Rhory pushed through the main door, his heart starting to thump loudly, hoping to see Tycen passed out on one of the couches. He wasn't there.

Rhory swallowed hard. If Tycen had promised to be back in time for the morning ceremony, he would have kept that

promise. He should have been back by now.

Rhory rushed to the suite's main door, but then froze with his hand on the handle. No one could know Tycen was missing. The king vanishing would cause widespread panic, but his younger brother going missing wouldn't be nearly as bad. Well, Rhory had pretended to be Tycen before, and he could do it now until Tycen was found.

Decided, Rhory took in, then let out two deep breaths. He smoothed his expression, and once he was certain he appeared outwardly calm, he pulled open the door.

The usual two guards standing there immediately straightened to attention.

“Have Captain Adda report to me at once. I have some concerns about the security of this morning's ceremony.”

“At once, Your Majesty,” one of the guards said, bowing before turning and trotting off. Rhory nodded to the remaining guard before closing the door.

Captain Adda would arrive in a few minutes, which didn't give Rhory a lot of time. He sprinted into his own bedroom and quickly tugged the sheets and blankets into place, trying to make it look like his bed was the one that had not been slept in. Then he rushed into the dressing room, where he yanked on a set of Tycen's red robes. The bed in Tycen's room took only a few moments to rumple. Rhory was standing in front of the mirror in the main sitting room, carefully braiding his hair, his breathing back to normal after the rush to set things up, when the knock came at the door.

“Enter!” Rhory called.

Captain Adda stepped inside. He bowed and waited.

“Captain, come in and close the door,” Rhory said. Adda obeyed. Once the door was firmly shut, Rhory continued. “My brother Rhory went out drinking last night. He was invited to the Blue Blaze Tavern by three minor nobles. The invitation is on the sideboard to your left,” Rhory added. He finished the first braid, tied it off, and turned to look at Adda directly. “Rhory has not returned, which is incredibly unusual. I need you to mount a discreet search party. I want him located and brought back to the palace before the end of the Sunday ceremony.”

“At once, Your Majesty.” Captain Adda bowed, and when Rhory nodded, he turned and left the room.

Rhory hurried to finish getting ready. He couldn't be late for the Sunday ceremony, especially since he was going to be impersonating Tycen. Rhory schooled his face to peaceful blankness before he left the room, hoping the coming ceremony would help him push aside the worried churning in his stomach.

Chapter Two

Rhory lifted his bare hands up to the sun, where the first rays were peeking out over the horizon. He spread his fingers wide so every onlooker in the plaza below could see nothing coated his skin. He was standing over one of the many vents that released the warmth-giving lava that kept his city and country alive, one foot on either side of the rock bed that guided this particular lava flow down into the city.

“As a new day dawns, the gods reaffirm our continued existence in this harsh, beautiful land!” he called, his voice the echoing cry Father had taught him and Tycen when they were children, loud enough to overpower crowds and fill an entire room with his presence. The onlookers below heard him perfectly.

Rhory kept his hands outstretched as he carefully knelt, the high priest offering a steadying hand on his elbow. The hem of Rhory’s robes hung dangerously close to the blazing river below him as the high priest and his chief acolyte pulled up the sleeves of his robe and carefully pinned them to bunch around his biceps.

This wasn’t the first time Rhory had stepped in for Tycen for this duty. He wasn’t particularly concerned that the gods would turn their backs on him because he wasn’t the king, only the spare prince. However, never before had he stepped in because Tycen was missing. Always, it was because Tycen had a hangover, the flu, or some ailment that kept him from being able to perform his duties. Rhory swallowed reflexively,

hoping the gods were still with them, as he bowed his head for a moment of silent prayer.

When he lifted his head again, he gazed down at the small crowd in the plaza below the rocky outcropping. “Oh gods of fire and water, sun and moon, reaffirm your love for your people in this sacred right. Bring another month of peace to our lands, with good harvests and your life-giving fire and lifesaving water!” *And bring Tycen back home safely*, he added silently.

Proclamation done, he thrust his bare hands downward, elbow deep into the flowing lava.

Warmth enveloped him, starting from his submerged fingertips, and traveling up his arms and into his body, until he practically hummed with it. But it was no different to lying in the sun on a warm day.

Everyone in Aish had had experiences with the dangers of lava. The flowing lava wasn't always a calm stream. It often spat and jumped like a burbling brook, leaving behind terrible burns that pockmarked skin and made the burn remedies Aish created the most sought-after in the world. Rhory had quite a few of the scars himself, and he, like all the people of Aish, had a healthy respect for the lava that kept the freezing snow and ice away from their lands, gave them fertile soil to plant, and regularly took the lives of the unwary. Yet all he felt now was soothing warmth as the gods blessed him and all the people of the land.

When the requisite ten seconds passed, Rhory lifted his hands back up into the air so the onlookers could see them. The high priest and chief acolyte gripped him at the biceps,

helping him stand. He carefully stepped over the lava, moving ten feet to the right where a wide stream of clear water flowed—freezing snowmelt from the mountains that surrounded their country—until he was straddling the water exactly as he had been the lava.

“The gods have reaffirmed their blessings,” Rhory called, still showing his hands to the crowd below. From the elbows down to his fingertips, he glowed cherry red, lava coating his skin like a pair of long gloves.

He plunged his hands down, as deep into the stream of water as he had the lava. Steam immediately billowed around him, obscuring his vision. A shot of icy chill ran down his spine, chasing away the soothing warmth. When his fingertips were numb and his teeth were chattering, which only took about ten seconds as the water was that cold, Rhory lifted his hands again. The steam dissipated as the high priest lifted a small, gold-and-silver-plated ceremonial hammer into the air.

The lava coating Rhory’s hands and arms had hardened into smooth black rock. Each of his fingers, the delicate bones in his wrists, and the length of his arms were outlined as if he were one of the meticulously carved statues that decorated the palace and temples throughout the country. Most volcanic rock was porous and lumpy, but it never behaved as lava should during the sun ceremony.

The high priest gently tapped the ceremonial hammer once on the back of each of Rhory’s hands. The rock rang like a bell, then crumbled away from his skin like ash blowing away in the wind. He held his hands out for the crowd below to see

not even a speck of ash remained on his unmarred skin. They cheered.

Rhory stepped away from the stream, standing in the clear area between the lava and water. The sun had risen; no part remained obscured by the mountain rims on the horizon. Rhory dropped his hands to his sides and bowed to the sun, his chest nearly parallel to the ground. He rose and turned, walking to the far end of the plateau where a set of steps had been carved. He climbed down into a different plaza, this one private and only accessible by the royal wing in the palace and the priests' cloisters.

"A perfect ceremony," the high priest said. He clapped Rhory on the shoulder, but didn't stop to chat. He and the chief acolyte headed for the set of stairs to the left that would bring them down into the cloisters.

Rhory went straight ahead, to the set of wide double doors that led into a sitting room. Rhory usually waited for Tycen to finish the ceremony there, and he was hoping Tycen would be sitting on one of the overstuffed chairs, grinning sheepishly for being so late. Instead, Captain Adda was standing by the door that led into the royal wing, his face set in grim lines.

"Tell me," Rhory said.

"We found him, and he's still alive," Captain Adda replied, his voice as grim as his face.

Rhory swallowed hard. "How bad is it?" He was surprised how steady his words were, considering his chest was tight as worry set in.

"He's in the healers' wing," Captain Adda said instead.

He waved one hand in the direction of the door, so Rhory began walking, heading out into the royal wing and through the palace toward the healers.

“We found him about a block from the tavern, facedown in the gutter. We suspect he was left that way to make it look like a mugging gone wrong, except they didn’t touch his purse or any of his jewelry.”

And even the most ignorant or desperate mugger would know better than to touch someone wearing royal robes, particularly someone wearing the robes in one of the most affluent areas of the city.

“Was he hit in the head, or too drunk to walk?” Rhory asked, wondering why, exactly, Tycen was in the healers’ wing.

Captain Adda shook his head rather than answering. They walked down the remaining flight of stairs and three more hallways in silence. Captain Adda pulled the heavy door open when they reached the healers’ wing, holding it for Rhory to walk through, then followed Rhory inside.

An argument of some kind immediately halted when Rhory appeared, but he ignored the group of healers standing in the middle of the room, instead heading directly to the bed where Tycen lay. At first glance, Tycen looked like he was only sleeping. A second glance said otherwise. He was breathing shallowly, in puffing breaths. The corners of his lips and the inner corners of his closed eyes were an odd shade of blue, like the blue of a sputtering candle flame seconds before it ran out of wick.

“Poison,” Rhory stated. Tyacen had been poisoned last night, a poison meant for him.

“We suspect so, Your Majesty, but we cannot identify the culprit.”

Rhory turned to look at the speaker. He was apparently the leader of the group of healers who had been arguing in the middle of the room moments before, a man in his midforties, with high cheekbones and a pronounced, pointed nose. He wore the white robes of a healer, but the insignia on his breast was only that of the healers’ college.

“Where is the chief healer?” Rhory asked.

“He passed away four months ago now,” the man replied. “He did not name a successor, so I have been acting in that capacity. Your majesty’s missive indicated you were planning to take care of the matter in the coming weeks.” He looked a little too hopeful, as if Rhory would declare him chief right then. He looked like a noble’s son to Rhory, a younger child who wouldn’t inherit. In fact, the entire group of men and women in white healers’ robes looked like younger children of nobles, children who had taken advantage of their parents’ money and station to obtain entrance into the prestigious healers’ college, and then a place in the palace healers’ wing. If these were the only options, Rhory understood why the previous chief healer hadn’t appointed an heir in his will.

“I’m telling you, it’s fire flower berry poison!” a new voice called from the very back of the group.

The healer in front of Rhory spun around, fury written in every deep line of his face and the tight line of his shoulders.

“Fire flower poison exhibits with an extremely high fever and the skin turning red, as if the victim were burning up from the inside! You can clearly see it is not fire flower!” he shouted, as if this was an argument he thought he had firmly ended a while ago. “How dare you flaunt your ignorance in front of His Majesty!”

“It’s not the flower; it’s the berry!” the mystery speaker insisted.

The crowd moved aside and Rhory was able to see the second person. He was much younger than the self-proclaimed acting chief healer, baby-faced, but likely in his early twenties, and he was wearing the light gray robes of a healer trainee. He had the dark-tanned skin and purple eyes of the people of the villages in the far north regions of the kingdom, where the lava burned brightest as the sun only rose for a few scant weeks a year. The fire flower bloomed there, fed by the strongest of the lava flows.

“The berry is not poisonous. It’s a rare delicacy served for special occasions!” the acting chief snapped, his face going red as if he had ingested the fire flower himself.

“It is carefully peeled first, before anyone eats it!” the younger man insisted. “If you take the berry skin, mash it up into a paste, then strain the liquid and put it in a strong drink to mask the bitter flavor, this is the result.” He waved one hand in Tycen’s direction. “We need to have him throw up before more gets absorbed into his system!”

Even Rhory knew the first thing to do for someone who had swallowed poison was to force them to expel it. Regardless of what the poison might actually be.

“You are nothing but a jumped-up trainee from a Podunk town too far north to know basic herblore, let alone high level ___”

“Get a bucket. Now!” Rhory cut in before the so-called acting chief healer—soon to be ex-acting chief healer—could spew more vitriol. “Now!” he repeated when no one moved.

One of the other healers scurried off, while a third headed toward Tycen to help prop him up.

“Here,” the trainee who had been arguing said, holding out a vial to Rhory. “Activated charcoal to absorb the poison in his stomach and make him throw it up.”

“Give it to him,” Rhory said, stepping aside.

The trainee’s eyes went wide for a brief moment of surprise before his lips firmed, and he nodded. The third healer already had a long tube of some kind in hand. She popped Tycen’s mouth open and began carefully sliding it inside. The trainee measured out the charcoal, mixed it with water, and once the tube was in place, began slowly pouring it down Tycen’s throat. The second healer returned at a run, a large metal bucket in hand. He dropped it next to the bed, then moved to help the woman remove the tube and bend Tycen’s body forward so his head was over the bucket.

For a long moment, nothing happened. And then Tycen’s torso convulsed, his mouth opened, and he vomited out copious amounts of black sludge. Within that sludge, Rhory saw brilliant streaks of bright blue, the same blue as the color marring Tycen’s face and the color of fire flower berries before they were peeled. Every time Rhory thought Tycen was done, his stomach heaved again and more came pouring out. Over

and over until Rhory almost wished he had a bucket of his own as his stomach roiled in sympathy.

Finally, Tycen appeared to have finished. The trainee came forward with a damp cloth, gently cleaning Tycen's face, wiping away black splatter and sweat. The healers laid Tycen back down on the bed, and the one who brought the bucket picked it up and walked away.

"I'll begin analysis of the contents," he said, as he went past the ex-acting chief healer, less like asking for permission than simply stating his plan.

Rhory went to the opposite side of Tycen's bed from where the woman and trainee were working on making Tycen more comfortable. His breathing had evened out into long, slow breaths as if he were asleep, but the blue spots hadn't changed. Tycen was still poisoned, but it didn't appear he would continue worsening.

"Is there a cure?" he asked.

The woman shook her head. "I don't know, Your Majesty. They don't cover fire flower berry skin in the poison course at the healers' college." At least she was being honest. Rhory appreciated that.

Rhory looked at the trainee, who also shook his head. "The wise woman who provided my initial training didn't mention it. That doesn't mean there isn't. I just don't know it."

Rhory nodded. That made sense. A poison without a cure was a perfect way to hurt the king, yet Rhory couldn't think of any sort of motive behind it. Why would anyone want to

poison the king's younger brother? Kidnap him for ransom, certainly, but poisoning?

Rhory looked around at all the milling people and mentally straightened up. He needed to act like the king here, directing everyone so they would stop standing around like cows.

“You,” he said, pointing at the ex-acting chief healer. “You’re fired and remanded back to the healers’ college.”

The man gasped. “Do you know who I am?” he spluttered out.

“I don’t care,” Rhory cut in. “Your inaction could have killed my brother, your prince and current heir-presumptive. Your arrogance prevented help occurring as quickly as possible, potentially crippling him instead. You will leave here now, or I will have you escorted out. Captain?”

Captain Adda waved his hand, and two soldiers standing by the door jumped to attention. They hurried over to stand next to the ex-acting chief healer who huffed and spluttered for a few more seconds, as if expecting Rhory to abruptly change his mind, before spinning on one heel and stomping off.

“What’s your name?” Rhory asked as he turned to look at the woman still fussing over Tycen’s blankets.

“Shartha, my lord.” She stood and gave a perfect curtsy, showing she was trained in upper-class manners. Another younger sibling, Rhory assumed.

“Shartha, you’re the new acting chief healer until a permanent one can be located.” Her jaw dropped open. “I want you to prioritize analyzing the contents of that bucket to double-check it is actually fire flower berry skin. I also want

you to rally the entire healers' college. Tell them to drop everything and focus on researching whether a cure already exists and, if not, developing a new one.

“Captain?” Rhory turned to look at Captain Adda.

“Your Majesty, I already have my best investigators searching the city. We will have identified and interrogated everyone working at the tavern last night and will also have the names of the party attendees as soon as possible.”

“Good. I also want you to send a contingent of soldiers to every single village in the north. That is where the fire flowers originate, so someone must know of a cure or even a home remedy. Tell your soldiers to fill a bag with the plant as well. I suspect the healers' college will need samples. Consult with Ms. Shartha before you send them out to ensure they know exactly what to collect.”

Captain Adda snapped off a salute. “At once. I will return as soon as I have the soldiers organized.” He left the room at a jog.

Shartha had apparently recovered. Her jaw firmed and she squared her shoulders before curtsying again and rushing out of the room. A moment later, her voice filtered through the door, issuing orders.

Which only left the trainee. “What is your name?” Rhory asked.

He stood and bowed perfectly. “I am Aidyn, the sixth child of the Duke of Magnus, Your Majesty.”

“I see,” Rhory replied. Duke Magnus only had daughters, nine of them, which explained why his *son* had chosen to

travel to the capital rather than attending school at one of the prestigious academies in the north. “Be welcome in Aish. I hope you will continue to look after my brother. Your care may have saved his life today. Name your boon, and I will grant it.”

Aidyn was already shaking his head in denial before Rhory finished speaking. “Your Majesty, your thanks is more than enough. I have a secure roof over my head, and I am training for a job I truly enjoy. I need nothing more.”

Thanks might be all Aidyn said he needed, but the weary tone in his voice said obtaining the security he spoke of had taken far more effort than most spare children of nobles needed. Rhory would have to look into it, but later. First came rescuing his brother.

“If you would continue looking after my brother, I would greatly appreciate it. Please don’t hesitate to let me know if you ever need anything. Should anyone come looking for me, I will be in my office.”

Rhory nodded politely to Aidyn, took one last look at Tycen, who was still breathing easily, apparently asleep, before tearing himself away. He was the king now, and it was his younger brother lying helpless in bed. He needed to remember that fiction; needed to repeat it until it became the truth. And he needed to remember no matter the difficulties, the king had duties to the kingdom that must be done. Rhory was the only one who could do them.

He left the healers’ wing, heading toward Tycen’s office. *His office*, because he was Tycen now. This was more than having an identical face, wearing Tycen’s robes, and reciting

some easily memorized lines. No, he was the king and needed to fulfill that role as well as Tycen always did.

“Bring all of Rhory’s secretaries here immediately,” Rhory said to one of the runners standing ready by the door as he walked inside. The runner dashed off to Rhory’s office down the hall. The muted whispers and shocked gossip faded as everyone noticed him standing there.

“Clear the room of anyone who does not work here,” he instructed. Off to the left of the doorway was a sitting area where other nobles and high-level officials could wait for an appointment with the king. Lady Olivia was sitting there, waiting for some sort of morning appointment, but she must have heard the rumors floating around as she didn’t protest. She left, and Sir Rerks, who had opened his mouth to protest, snapped his mouth shut and meekly followed. No one crossed Lady Olivia, which made Rhory a little concerned she had been waiting for an audience, but he had bigger problems to focus on at the moment.

The runner returned, trailing Rhory’s secretaries. He had to pretend not to know them since Tycen wouldn’t have, so he carefully schooled his face into blank calmness.

Once the door shut behind Sir Rerks, Rhory let out a breath and spoke. “Many of you have likely heard the rumors, but for those of you who have not, I will confirm them now. Rhory was poisoned. He is alive, but will remain under a healer’s care for the foreseeable future. I will need a proclamation written to assuage the fears of the populace and of the lords and ladies in residence in the palace. My brother was gravely hurt, but that will not change the day-to-day

running of our beloved kingdom.” He waited a few moments for the shocked gasps to fade away. “I also need requests drafted to our neighboring kingdoms. Our own healers work to devise a cure, and our healers’ college is a truly excellent institution, however, I believe the more studied minds working on a solution the better. Should our neighbors have a healer able to solve this mystery, they would receive our eternal gratitude.” And they would correctly interpret that statement to mean fewer tariffs on trade goods and other favorable deals. “I need all of that ready for my review this afternoon, so postpone your other projects for the moment.”

Announcement done, Rhory nodded politely to the crowd. He headed over to Nina’s desk, Tycen’s head secretary.

“I’m going to need your support the most,” he told her in a low voice, trying to act like he was taking her into his confidence. However, what he really needed was her unwitting help if he was going to pull off his subterfuge. “I’m more stressed by this than I want to admit. I don’t remember what I had on my calendar today, let alone what projects I was hoping to complete.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” she said, her voice full of understanding. Nina was a hard worker, organized and extremely smart. Tycen wouldn’t be capable of ruling the kingdom as well as he did without her support, and Rhory was going to take full advantage of her excellence while he filled in. “I’ll make sure you’re briefed before each meeting and event, so you can spend most of your focus on your brother. We’ll get through this.”

“Thank you,” Rhory said, sounding far more relieved than he meant to even though that helped his act. He waved over his secretaries now that he had her support. “If you can complete any of the projects you were working on without Rhory’s assistance, please continue. Otherwise, Nina, if you could incorporate my brother’s secretaries into this office until my brother returns?”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Nina replied. “We can certainly use them.”

Rhory smiled at them all, although he didn’t need their looks of sympathy to know it was more of a strained grimace, before heading for Tycen’s private office at the back of the room. It was time to get to work.

Chapter Three

Maya let out a breath, happy for the brief moment outside the carriage to stretch his legs and look around. The change in the landscape in the last few hours was startling, to say the least. When they had crossed the border into the country of Aish, heading to the same-named capital city, if there hadn't been border markings, Maya would never have known. Lush, verdant green fields and small farming hamlets had lined the road for the entirety of the previous day. They had even been able to rent rooms at a local inn the previous night—and Maya had definitely appreciated the bath and actual bed, rather than the tent and bedroll he had been using for most of the journey.

Yet sometime in the last few hours, the fields had been replaced by pockmarked black rock. There were still plants growing, and he could see another farming village in the distance off to the right, but the view had become harsh and unyielding. Maya could almost believe the rumors that the land had more fire than sun, but so few people ever traveled to Aish he was never able to confirm all that. Or, at least, he hadn't thought the rumors true when he started the journey, but he was beginning to doubt his conviction now.

Maya took one last look before turning to his contingent of soldiers, who were guiding him for this journey. "Shall we?" he asked.

"Yes, Your Highness," Travis, the lieutenant in charge, replied. "We will stop again for lunch in a few hours and should reach the waypoint this afternoon."

“We are making excellent time,” Maya replied, smiling at the soldiers in thanks. “Let’s continue until lunch, then.”

He climbed into the carriage, but he pushed the curtain back from the window so he could watch the changing scenery. The black rock became more and more evident the farther they went; however, the verdant fields returned. The long grass was darker, tinted by the black rock it grew from, yet the cows and sheep grazing on it didn’t appear to mind. They passed long rows of vegetables, wheat, and oats, all growing through the black rock as if it were normal dirt.

After lunch the road began to rise, at first a gentle slope, and then into arduous switchbacks as they climbed into the mountain range surrounding the capital city. The air also began to warm. It was midsummer, but this far north Maya had worn a jacket as the wind was still brisk. He shed the jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves while trying not to become seasick as the carriage rocked along the switchbacks.

Finally, the carriage came to a halt. One of the soldiers opened the door and helped him out.

Maya gaped. They were stopped at a guard tower carved from a massive, yet strangely lumpy outcropping of the black, porous rock. They were in a narrow pass in the middle of the mountains, made of what Maya would have previously said was average gray stone, but similar to the guardhouse, outcroppings of the black stone dotted the landscape. The horses shifted as if uneasy, and no wonder, as Maya’s feet immediately began to warm uncomfortably.

“Your Highness,” Travis said as he approached from the direction of the guard house. “They have accommodations

prepared, and I have paid to have appropriate footwear ready for you in the morning when their specialized transportation will convey you the rest of the way.”

“Lieutenant, you and your men have done me a great service, bringing me this far. Return home with my thanks.”

Travis bowed, then waved over a woman who was wearing a dark-gray uniform with three red stripes on her sleeves. “This is Station Master Graunde. She will ensure your safe arrival at the palace.” He bowed again, then left to go supervise the soldiers unloading Maya’s trunks from the carriage.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Maya said, speaking in Common, the language shared across the continent, rather than in his mother tongue.

She looked at him for a long moment, disapproval evident in her unwelcoming frown. Still, he apparently passed muster because she gave him a perfunctory bow.

“This way.” Her reply was in curt, unaccented Common. She didn’t wait for his acceptance, instead, turning and striding off at a stomp.

He followed her into the building. Dim, but surprisingly cool inside, it was sparsely furnished. She led the way up a flight of narrow steps and down a hallway to a room at the end, where she held the door open for him to enter.

“This is Kurt,” she said to introduce the young man standing just inside the door. “He’ll help you get acclimated.”

Duty apparently done, she left. Maya turned to look at Kurt.

“I have a manservant who will be joining me momentarily,” Maya tried explaining, as he wondered why Kurt was there.

Kurt grinned and replied, his Common only slightly accented by the harder vowels in Aish’s native tongue. “Welcome to the hot parts of Aish. We have plenty of water, but it’s too cold to use for much outside of cooking. My job is to teach you how to bathe, what cloth won’t survive the climate, and to not touch the pretty red rivers; they’ll melt the skin off your bones. I’ll teach your manservant, too, since he’ll be helping you at the palace.”

How to bathe? Was Maya expected to strip naked? Kurt walked over to a pair of basins and two pitchers sitting on a side table across the room and beckoned for Maya to join him.

“This is scouring sand. It absorbs oils and dissipates smells far better than our soaps, and the rough texture is really good at working dirt out of skin. We rub it over our entire bodies and then we dip a cloth in water,” he gestured to the cloth sitting next to the second pitcher and basin, “and wipe the sand away.” He grinned. “When you return home, you’ll never feel as clean again. I promise. Now, clothing. Take a look at the bottom of your shoes.”

Maya leaned against the wall for balance and lifted his left foot so he could see the sole. Despite only being outside the carriage for a few scant moments, the hardened cloth looked abraded and the glue that held the seams together had failed, leaving gaping holes.

“The clothing you’re wearing right now is fine for inside, particularly inside the palace. Outside, though, you’ll want

some of our specially treated cloth. We'll have proper boots for you by morning—your soldiers paid for them on your and your retainues' behalf—but you'll have to obtain appropriate outdoor clothing on your own.

“Now, about those red rivers. You'll see them as soon as you cross to the other side of the pass in the morning. When rock superheats, it melts into a river, and if you touch it, you will be burned.” He pulled up one sleeve to show Maya a deep, rutted pockmark easily an inch in diameter burned into the muscle there. “Got too close. They spit sometimes. You fall in, you're dead. Only exception is the king, and that's only when the gods' hands are on him.” He looked around the room. “I think that's everything. You'll learn as you go, and the servants at the palace will make sure your manservant learns everything he needs to know to keep you all spiffed up. I'll let you have a bit of time to refresh yourself. Dinner will be served in about two hours. I'll come get you then.”

Kurt bowed, unlike Graunde, and let himself out of the room. Maya looked around. The table with the basins was set against one wall near an open door leading to a bathroom. A bed and small side table were on the far wall. For a guest room that served overnight, it was more than adequate. Maya was going to explore the scouring sand, as his face was distinctly sticky, and maybe enjoy a nap. There wasn't much else he could do while he waited to begin the last leg of his journey.

Chapter Four

The lava rivers Kurt mentioned glowed at night, which Maya discovered while trying to get to sleep. The sky where it was visible around the mountain peaks glowed an eerie, unsettling red. When they reached the first river in the morning, Maya could see why.

The new carriage was open at the top, so he was able to view everything. The breeze was nice, considering how hot it was, although the light wind only served to stoke the heat higher. The creatures pulling the carriage weren't horses. Instead, Aish had domesticated a massive birdlike animal. Harnesses fit around the torso, under the flightless wings, then were attached to the leads on the carriage. The birds had short feathers that looked greasy, coated in something. Maya didn't really want to touch to find out what. Their legs were wide, much wider and sturdier than any bird Maya had ever seen before, and scaled. They didn't appear to notice the heat underneath their six clawed toes on each massive foot.

The carriage followed a wide path carved into the gray stone, and more and more of the massive blobs of black rock dotted the landscape until the black rock completely replaced the gray stone. The first red river appeared after only a few minutes. A few feet wide and a brilliant cherry red, but unlike water, it was thick, viscous, and slow-moving. Dark streaks shot through the red and the mass roiled as it continuously flowed. A bridge spanned over the river, each end set into the solid rock far away from the banks. The carriage was also at least thirty feet above the river as they crossed, but the heat

was oppressive. Maya felt he ought to be melting into the cushions, and he wouldn't have been surprised if the wooden carriage burst into flame beneath him, but whatever the carriage was treated with apparently prevented that. The first inhale of air burned in his lungs, so Maya held his breath until the carriage returned to solid road on the far side.

“The whole country has these?” Maya asked, mostly to himself as he panted for air.

Sergeant Lee was riding on one of the birdlike things in an odd sort of saddle that jutted off the back of the bird. She grinned at Maya.

“Beautiful, but deadly. That's Aish in a nutshell. Once you learn that, you'll have figured us out completely.”

Maya had to concentrate to understand her Common. He had been studying the Aishen language from the moment he started planning this trip, but he still struggled with the nuances of their accent. His own language was fluid, like song lyrics, while Aish's was more staccato. Still beautiful, but Maya's ears would have to get used to deciphering it very quickly.

The rest of the ride was uneventful. They crossed a couple more bridges with lava streams of varying sizes, and a handful of streams of actual water. Both types of streams appeared to crisscross the country in equal amounts. They ate lunch on the move, and by early afternoon they reached the ridge overlooking the capital.

The city below sprawled across miles and miles of flat ground, the buildings built around the meandering streams of lava and water, which created the illusion of complete

disorder. Maya knew better though. The way the main road wound through the city was definitely a defensive measure that prevented an army from moving quickly or having a direct route to the palace.

And the palace! It soared over the entire valley, built into the side of the mountain, with massive black towers that were smooth-sided so they weren't built of the same porous rock as everything else. Colorful flags hung everywhere, breaking apart the starkness, and one tower was completely covered in tiny pink flowers growing on pale-green vines.

The city and palace were as different as possible from the palace at Maya's home, which was white stone, delicate spires, and massive stained-glass windows, partially built on top of a lake even larger than the valley the entire city of Aish was built in. Yet, both had their own unique beauty.

The city was bustling, but the foreriders cleared the way for the carriage so they made good time through the twists and turns and over the wide bridges spanning the rivers. They clattered under a curtain wall with a raised iron gate and into the forecourt of the palace just as the sun began to dip behind the highest mountain peaks.

Their party was almost immediately surrounded, and a servant in pale purple livery appeared at Maya's side almost as soon as his booted feet touched the flagstones.

"Your Highness," the servant said in perfectly clear Common. "Welcome to Aish. I am Rev, and I have been assigned to assist your own servants with understanding the palace and our great city. If you would follow me, I will show you to your room where you can freshen up. Given the late

hour, His Majesty, King Tycen, invites you to a private dinner tonight in welcome.”

Linus appeared, carrying Maya’s day bag, so Maya nodded to Rev. “Please lead the way.”

Maya followed Rev inside but stopped in the doorway, staring at the entrance hall as his mouth dropped open. If the outside of the palace was stark with gentle, softening touches, the inside was gentle, with the occasional hard touch to balance it. The floor was white quartz shot through with pink, and a rose-gold star was inset into the center. A golden chandelier hung overhead, making the star seem to glow. The walls were also painted white, with more white and pink quartz columns spaced evenly around. The hardness came from a set of gigantic wood doors on the far side of the space, stained dark golden brown and carved with fanciful creatures. Beyond the open doors was a huge staircase, and Maya finally tore his eyes away to follow Rev up the stairs and into a carpeted side hallway.

“You are being housed in the same wing as other visiting dignitaries,” Rev explained once they had traveled far enough along that the crowds had dissipated. “There are guards stationed at every corner, so if you get lost, just ask one of them where the green hall is located, and they’ll point you in the right direction.”

They kept going and going, down hallways and up staircases until Maya was thoroughly lost. The palace was definitely far larger than it appeared from the outside, a warren of hallways dug deep into the mountain. Finally, they reached a hallway with four guards stationed at the end. The carpet

was cream-colored and the walls a tasteful light green. Mirrored sconces, filled with herbed oil, burned at even intervals along the wall.

“This is the dignitary’s wing,” Rev explained. “We are one flight down from the royal wing.” He went to the fourth door on the left and pulled it open.

Maya walked inside to find a sitting room with more of the understated elegance of the rest of the palace. Servants bustled around, as somehow his trunks and bags from the carriage had beaten them there. Two doors were on opposite walls, but Maya decided it would be best to wait out of the way, until the servants finished, before investigating.

“They’ll be done unpacking in a few minutes,” Rev said. He pulled a key from his pocket and passed it to Maya. “This is the key to your room, Your Highness. The head servant of the dignitary’s wing has a key, and I will ensure your man here obtains one as well,” he nodded to Linus, who was following a servant carrying a trunk into one of the open doors. “Meals are communal. There are three dining halls: the wood hall, the crystal room, and the king’s hall. When His Majesty dines in public, he usually attends the king’s hall. The majority of the dignitaries do as well; however, it is acceptable to attend the crystal room. The wood hall is entirely informal, so I recommend you only dine there on rare occasions. There is a charge if you prefer to dine in your rooms. A minor one for breakfasts which can be paid monthly, and lunch and dinner are paid per occurrence and cost more. You can also rent out a private room if you want to have a dinner party.” He nodded over to the left where a small dining table with two chairs was pushed against one wall, plenty of space away from the pair of

overstuffed couches and a glass coffee table that filled the center of the room. “I will let your man know how to go about setting all of that up, as well as arranging for laundry and cleaning services.”

That was a lot of information to absorb, but all of it very important. He needed to know how the palace was run if he was going to fit into the life here. Still, Maya hoped Linus would get the same lecture, since Maya only remembered maybe half of what Rev told him.

The servants finally began trickling out, until finally only Maya, Linus, and Rev remained.

“Dinner with His Majesty will be served promptly at seven. I will come by around six forty-five to guide you there.” Rev bowed, then followed the servants out of the room.

Now that he was alone, Maya let out a very heavy breath. Traveling was exhausting and the mass of people and the new place was completely overwhelming. Exciting, but overwhelming. At least the traveling portion was finally done, and he had a few minutes to organize his thoughts.

He walked through the door, where Linus was still puttering around, to find a very well-appointed bedroom. A massive four-poster bed filled the space, with small tables on either side. There were two windows, the curtains pulled back to let in light and air. The back of the curtains that faced outward looked strangely oily, much like the birds’ feathers had looked, and Maya was starting to guess the oil was fire or heat resistant. Another door led into a large dressing room, where servants had hung Maya’s clothes and laid out his jewelry cases. There were two additional doors in the dressing

room, one which led to a bathroom with the now-familiar pitchers of scouring sand and water. The second door led to a small servant's room, where Linus would be staying.

Maya went back out into the sitting room and through the other door, which led into a mostly empty office. One window provided light for a heavy wood desk, chair, and empty bookshelf. The servants hadn't unpacked anything in this room because Maya hadn't brought anything office-related with him.

Back in the sitting room, Maya let out yet another breath. His rooms were beyond excellent. Now, all he had to do was convince the king to allow him access to the poisoned prince. Luckily, the king had already provided an opportunity to do that.

"Linus," Maya called as he walked into the bedroom. "I need to be prepared for a private dinner with the king. Can you lay out my clothes while I take a quick bath?" He had a little over an hour to get ready.

They made it on time, barely. Maya was still getting used to using the sand, and getting all of it off with the damp cloth was a definite challenge.

Rev was waiting in the hallway when Maya emerged from his rooms. Linus closed and locked the door behind them; then he bowed and headed off in another direction to find the servant's mess hall. Rev bowed as well, gesturing for Maya to start walking. They didn't go far as they didn't have to use a staircase, Rev stopping with him in front of a door in another wing after only a few minutes. Rev knocked, waited a few

seconds, and then pulled open the door and held it wide for Maya to enter.

“His Royal Highness, Prince May’yim Ahyekil, of the Kingdom of Ahye,” a crier announced as Maya stepped inside.

The private dinner was apparently not one-on-one; however, there were only ten place settings at the dining table. Maya looked around the room as six people bowed to him. Two people had yet to arrive. And the tenth who wasn’t bowing...

Maya sucked in a breath. He had heard tales of the beauty of the twin royals, but those tales did no justice. King Tycen was exquisite. His blue eyes seemed to glow against the blue-black of his hair, pulled back from his face by braids. The red and gold of his robes served to emphasize the width of his shoulders. People in Ahye tended to be built on slender lines, much like Maya, who was best described as wiry. The word stocky wasn’t entirely correct to describe King Tycen, yet there was a heft to him that said the weight of the world might lay on his shoulders, and it would be the world that bent in the end.

Maya remembered his manners, thankfully, before his staring became too obvious. He walked over to the king, stopped a polite distance away, and bowed the short bow from a prince to the monarch of another kingdom.

“Thank you for your warm welcome to Aish,” Maya said in clear, albeit accented Aishen. When the king’s lips quirked as if he were suppressing a smile, Maya ran the words through his head again, and his cheeks heated in a blush. He had said

warm, thinking he was saying kind, but had used the wrong clause, so warm instead meant temperature.

“May our warmth be a light on your path,” King Tycen replied, but he also used the incorrect clause as his eyes twinkled. “Please, I would be honored if you would join me for dinner.” He held out his arm, so Maya placed his hand on his elbow, as the king escorted him to the table. He waved away the servant who stepped forward and pulled Maya’s chair out himself. Even though he was supposed to wait for the king to sit first, at King Tycen’s urging, Maya sat. The rest of the table waited until King Tycen took his spot at the head of the table to Maya’s left before they sat as well.

“Prince May’yim, may I introduce you to Lady Olivia,” King Tycen said, gesturing to the woman sitting across from Maya. “She is the duchess of—”

“Do you think this will distract me?” Lady Olivia snapped, cutting King Tycen off. “You must produce an heir. Will you at least entertain some of the ladies on the list I presented you?”

“Lady Olivia, this dinner is to welcome Prince May’yim to our humble home,” King Tycen replied. “I doubt he wishes to hear our dirty laundry on his first night.” Although his voice was even and calm, there was real steel there that had Lady Olivia shutting her mouth.

“My apologies, Your Majesty, Your Highness,” she said with an awkward seated bow to them both. “My emotions overcame me. Please, tell us how your travels went. Was it a long journey from Ahye?”

“Two days across the sea by boat, and an additional two weeks on the road,” Maya replied. “But we took some time to

sightsee on the way, which extended the length somewhat.”

“By sea?” King Tycen asked. “Then it’s true Ahye has more water than land?”

“Ahye strives for balance in all things,” Maya explained. “But in comparison to Aish, we have a lot more water.”

“We have plenty of fire though,” Lady Olivia joked.

Servants poured wine and a pale pink liquid into what was usually the water glass and served a salad course.

“The fire is amazing. I’ve never seen anything like your lava. My older brother studies fire, and he was incredibly jealous our father allowed me to travel here.”

“Studies fire?” Lady Olivia asked.

“You specialize in an element, correct?” King Tycen asked.

Maya nodded. “Yes, that is part of our balances. We are one with the world, so we learn to become closer with it. My brother chose fire, but I chose earth. I specialize in plants.”

“Yes, the letter you sent requesting to travel here said that,” King Tycen said. “You think you can use your knowledge to help my brother?”

“I would be honored if you would allow me to try.” Maya didn’t mean to sound breathy, but King Tycen had looked so incredibly sad for the briefest moment, as if the jovial attitude was a façade. He wanted to lay a comforting hand on King Tycen’s arm, as if the king would want such a daring advance. The salad plates were cleared away, replaced by a main course of some sort of meat with delicately sliced potatoes and carrots

with a sauce that would have had Maya closing his eyes in ecstasy had he not been in the middle of a difficult conversation.

“You may come see him after breakfast tomorrow.” King Tycen’s response was curt, but not unkind.

“Let’s talk about something happier.” Lady Olivia insisted, so despite the fact that he wanted to ask more about what had happened to Prince Rhory, he turned his attention to her. “You must go see one of the magma vents while you’re here. I’m sure your brother would appreciate you being able to tell him about it.”

Maya doubted it, but he wasn’t about to air his kingdom’s dirty laundry out on his first night. Still, if the magma vents were as beautiful as the lava rivers, he wouldn’t mind taking a look.

The rest of dinner passed by without any more drama, but Maya was still glad to follow Rev back to his room and fall into a sinfully comfortable bed for the night.

Chapter Five

At dawn, Rhory arrived at the private room at the far end of the healers' wing, where Tycen was staying, to find the room and hospital bed empty. Rhory knew better than to worry though. Instead, he took a seat in the chair pulled up to the side of the bed. He only waited a few minutes before Aidyn appeared, one of Tycen's arms thrown over his shoulder while Aidyn's arms steadied Tycen around the waist.

Tycen wasn't awake. His eyes were closed, and his steps wobbled, but he stood when prodded and followed where led. He was literally sleepwalking, which had the healers completely baffled.

Over the last three and a half months, the healers had tried cure after cure, potions and concoctions and treatments, none of which had done anything to wake Tycen. Instead, they had settled into their current status quo routine. Every morning either Aidyn or Shartha—most often Aidyn—guided Tycen to the bathroom and back, after which they would have Tycen sit up for a while. Rhory visited for a bit in the morning, and when Rhory left, they would feed Tycen breakfast, and once he was done eating, they moved him to an upright chair by the window for a few hours. At some point, they would bathe him and change Tycen's clothes, and if Rhory had time, he tried to stop by to visit for a few minutes before bed.

And all of it wrenched Rhory's heart. His vibrant, happy twin was gone, replaced by a lifeless doll. Three months—nearly four now—of losing hope, of watching and waiting, and now Rhory had to pin all of his desperation on some too-pretty

foreign prince who claimed to know something about plants. Prince May'yim wasn't the first person to make such promises, but all who had come before—each making grand declarations of their prowess—had failed. Still, if there was a chance—even a slim one—that Prince May'yim might find a solution, Rhory had to let him try.

Prince May'yim was exactly what his letter had implied. A fine prince of the Ahye line, thin boned and willowy as if a stiff wind would blow him over. Rhory had once heard the royal line of Ahye all had colored hair, but May'yim's was a simple, elegant shade of brown, fashionably long and kept in a loose braid that fell halfway down his back. His eyes were brilliant sea blue with a touch of green, a color Rhory had never seen before. One look into those eyes the night before and Rhory had nearly lost all sense; they were that mesmerizing.

However, no matter how pretty Prince May'yim might be, Rhory knew better than to let his interest show. May'yim might be a prince, but Rhory had met far too many nobles who believed the station granted them by birth meant more than their actions or abilities. He would have to wait and see when it came to the pretty visiting prince.

Aidyn finished settling Tycen back in bed, sitting him upright in a cushion of stiff pillows against the headboard. He bowed to Rhory and left the room, shutting the door softly behind him.

“Ty,” Rhory said, his voice soft in the off chance someone might be listening at the door. But he paused, wondering what he ought to say. Platitudes that Tycen would be better soon fell

flat, and Rhory didn't have the energy for faux cheer. "You could have warned me Lady Olivia would be on the warpath. She's insistent on finding you a nice girl to marry so Aish can have an heir. I'm running out of ways to fend her off, so if you have any ideas..." he trailed off, unable to give up on the faint hope that maybe this would be the time Tycen replied. After a brief moment of silence filled only by the sounds of Tycen's slow and even breaths, Rhory continued.

"Yesterday was day court. I remember you once told me there was some sort of elaborate bribery scheme involved that ensured certain projects or people were at the front of the line. I don't know what you were planning to do to fix that, but I've started ignoring the provided list and calling on petitioners randomly. It's caused a bit of consternation." Tycen didn't comment back, although normally he would be hysterical over such an understatement. "Yesterday I welcomed Prince May'yim Ahyekil to Aish. He claims to be some sort of healer, so maybe this time we'll find a solution. I'm going to keep fighting for you," he added, his tone turning desperate. "You have to wake up. You have to." He swallowed back a sob, forcing the tears away by clearing his throat and pinching the bridge of his nose. He had to be strong and present an image of impenetrability. One hint of weakness would have the political vultures swirling, but he also didn't want Tycen to hear his despair. No, Tycen only needed to know Rhory was doing everything possible to support him in Tycen's time of need so Tycen could recover.

Luckily, he had himself under control when a knock sounded on the door.

"Enter!"

Aidyn opened the door, took one step into the room and a second step to clear the doorway. “Your Majesty, Prince May’yim has arrived,” he said with a bow.

“Call me Maya, please,” Prince May’yim said as he followed Aidyn into the room. He bowed to Rhory. “No need for formality when I hope to be working so closely with you both.”

Maya seemed sincere about his request, but Rhory had seen the familiarity tactic used as a ploy to get people off their guard. He wouldn’t let it sway him.

“May I examine Prince Rhory?” Maya asked.

Rhory stood and stepped aside. “Please.”

At Rhory’s agreement, Maya moved to Tycen’s side. He didn’t immediately start poking and prodding, which was unusual. Most of the so-called healers had started by stripping Tycen and touching him with far too much familiarity. Instead, Maya bent close to look at the blue spots on Tycen’s face.

“That isn’t an indication of loss of oxygen, and blood wouldn’t naturally pool in those locations,” Maya murmured, as if he was speaking his thoughts aloud. He gently lifted one of Tycen’s hands where they had been left resting in his lap and pressed two fingers to the pulse point in Tycen’s wrist. Maya’s lips moved as he counted silently to himself.

Rhory was going to be late for his breakfast meeting, but he couldn’t pull himself away. Maya’s touch was so gentle as he finished counting and carefully returned Tycen’s hand to his lap. When Maya bent Tycen’s head to the side so he could press his fingers to the pulse point in Tycen’s neck, he did it

with an equal amount of care. He also wasn't surreptitiously glancing over at Rhory every few seconds, as if he needed to gauge Rhory's reaction to him in order to curry future favors. All of his attention was focused solely on Tycen.

"His pulse is marginally slower at the neck than wrist. Nothing that ought to cause any issues, but perhaps something to speed up his heart rate?" Maya frowned as he spoke his thoughts aloud again, but then he suddenly looked up at Aidyn and Rhory. "Can I see all the research you've completed so far? I don't want to try something that has already been attempted. I also want to see this fire flower plant."

"Give him whatever he needs," Rhory replied. He was impressed by the competence Maya had shown so far, but that didn't mean he would throw caution to the wind. "I expect regular updates," he added.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Aidyn and Maya replied together.

"Aidyn, please go help Maya get set up," Rhory added.

They both bowed and left the room, Aidyn closing the door behind them. Rhory returned to his seat next to Tycen, even though he was running so late. He took the hand Maya had held a moment before and gently squeezed Tycen's fingers.

"Ty, I'm struggling not to like him. No, don't laugh," Rhory interrupted himself because had Tycen been awake he would have been howling, "I know it's been a while since I expressed interest in anyone." In fact, while Tycen liked to play the field—discretely, of course, since a king couldn't be seen as flighty—Rhory was content with the occasional dalliance. Finding people who sparked that sort of interest in

him was rare. “But he seems competent too, so maybe he’ll be able to help you.” He let out a sigh. “I guess we’ll see. I have to get to my breakfast meeting now, but I’ll try to stop by again tonight.” Rhory gave Tycen’s hand one last squeeze before getting up and leaving.

There was no sign of Aidyn or Maya in the main healers’ wing as Rhory walked through on his way to the door, which likely meant they were in the lab one floor down, accessible only by a staircase internal to the wing. When he left the wing, Nina and Captain Adda were waiting in the hallway.

“I cancelled your morning meeting,” Nina said the moment she saw him. “What Captain Adda has to say is more important.”

“Captain?” Rhory asked.

“We found the poisoner,” he said, his voice sharp.

Rhory sucked in a breath, and his eyes narrowed. “What has he told you?”

“Nothing yet. He was brought to interrogation an hour ago and we’ve been letting him stew. Would you like to watch?”

“I’d like to strangle him, but I’ll agree to simply watch,” Rhory replied, his tone dark, but he followed Adda through the hallways. They took back stairs and dusty, unused hallways to keep out of view of the rest of the castle residents. No one else needed to know what was going on, not until Rhory had the entire plot and all the conspirators ready for a traitors’ execution.

Unfortunately, that was going to take more time. The investigation so far had come in dribs and drabs. At first, it

had seemed like it would be easy; the invitation had specified who hosted the party and where it was held, so all Captain Adda needed to do was interrogate everyone present. The problems began when they quickly realized that, while the get-together was supposed to be a small event of maybe ten people, over forty had shown. Identifying those without invitations was an ongoing nightmare. Then there was the venue. The salaried staff had been easy to find, but the Blue Blaze Tavern had hired a dozen more waiters, chefs, and bartenders to cover the event. Locating the extra dozen temporary hires had also proven difficult.

Captain Adda had torn the tavern apart, looking for any sort of clues. Lost amid the beer-soaked rushes, one of the guards had found a thimble-sized glass bottle. The remnants inside had confirmed their guess of berry poison even before the examination of the blue components of Tycen's vomit had been completed, but then the investigation had stalled. Captain Adda had been looking for the owner of the bottle ever since.

They reached the bridge that connected the castle to the dungeons. Captain Adda unlocked the palace door, held it open for Rhory, then locked it behind them. The bridge was completely enclosed and sloped sharply downward, although not so much that they needed stairs. At the bottom, Captain Adda unlocked another door, and then locked this one behind them as well.

The dungeons only had two entrances, one from the courthouse and the other from the palace. Both were heavily guarded; in fact, Captain Adda led Rhory directly into the main living quarters of the guards posted in the dungeons. The four guards lounging on the couches jumped to their feet to

salute when they saw Adda, and immediately, awkwardly, switched to a bow when they saw whom Adda was escorting.

“At ease, gentlemen,” Adda said, saluting them in return. The guards didn’t move, holding their stiff position while Rhory and Adda walked past and through the door at the far end. The interrogation rooms were just down the hall.

Two guards were standing outside a closed door. Captain Adda nodded pointedly to them, but he stopped one door earlier along the hall. He opened it and held it for Rhory.

“Be quiet,” Adda whispered. “He’ll hear anything louder than this.”

Rhory nodded and walked over to the false wall that separated the two rooms. The wall was made of wood, painted dark and then dusted with rock shavings while damp. The wood had been shaped to appear like unevenly carved stone—what the dungeons were built out of—which allowed for large holes. Those holes had been covered with special fabric that was thin enough to see through, but dark enough someone on the other side, in the angle of lighting the interrogation room used, wouldn’t notice.

Rhory studied the man sitting on a chair in the other room. Midsixties and balding, he was also fleshy in a way that said he had once been fat but had lost the weight too quickly, and his skin hadn’t recovered.

The door in the interrogation room opened and a guard stepped inside. She was wearing a standard guard uniform; the one red stripe on her sleeve marking her as a sergeant. The prisoner gave her a lewd once-over, his eyes drifting down to her hips, then up to her breasts, where they remained as she sat

in the other chair with the table separating them. She didn't make any outward appearance of noticing, but Rhory vowed to remember to tell Adda to give her a bonus of some kind, once the interrogation was over.

Instead of saying anything, she gently placed a small, green glass bottle onto the table. Rhory studied the man for a reaction and saw his lips thin for a brief moment before his nonchalant expression returned. Rhory knew that bottle; he had handled it himself after it had been found. The green glass was deceptive, looking like an ornamental perfume holder from the outside, however the glass was unusually thick to prevent it breaking and harming the bearer. The type of glass was common for medicines and poisons.

“What's that got to do with why I'm down in this shithole?” the man asked, his voice creaky from inhaling too much spike smoke—nasty-smelling cigarettes popular among the lower classes, although plenty of the upper classes smoked too; they just wouldn't admit it in public.

“This bottle has quite the story, Mr. Stite, if you would permit me to tell it to you,” the guard said. She didn't wait for him to answer. “You see, about a year ago there was a string of burglaries in the glass district. They stole expensive pieces—vases and other decorative things. We caught them almost immediately as transporting delicate glass like that was too big a job for the culprits. However, one of them took the opportunity to fill his pockets with small, but expensive medicine bottles. He was able to sell them off before we caught him.”

Rhory glanced over at Adda, wondering where this was going, but Adda's face was set in grim lines as he watched through the false wall.

“We traced that sale to an underground apothecary, the proprietress of which was selling snake oil. She had an interesting story to tell about this bottle, when we arrested her a month ago. Apparently, a man came in and bought the bottle, and then a day later he returned to the shop and the bottle was full. He paid her a handsome sum to hold onto the bottle for him, and to give it to the person who approached her with the correct code words. Unluckily for you, you had dated her cousin about six years ago, and she recognized you. When we asked, she gave us your name. And that, Mr. Stite, is why you are down in this shithole. And if you ever want to get out again, you are going to finish my story for me. I suggest you start talking.”

She had provided all that extra detail to prove to Stite that he didn't need to say anything at all—she knew the rest of the story already. That was completely untrue—they needed a lot of the finer details, including who had hired him—but the illusion would help convince him to talk.

“Why would talking help me out any? You already know I dumped whatever brew was in that bottle into the king's drink.”

“Tell us all the details you know about who hired you,” the guard continued. She didn't correct Stite, no doubt not wanting to break the rapport, but Rhory was already backing away from the wall, one hand over his mouth to hold in his yelp of surprise.

“What is it?” Adda hissed, joining Rhory as far away from the interrogation room as possible in their smaller viewing room.

“How did he know Tycen was at that party?” Rhory asked, shock preventing him from censoring his words. “I was the one invited, but Tycen likes parties more than me so we switched places for the night. But that cretin knew?”

“Prince...Rhory?” Captain Adda asked, an incredulous note in his voice.

Rhory rubbed a hand over his eyes, cursing internally for his one moment of distraction. The cat was out of the bag, however, so he dropped the ruse and nodded.

“We’ve always switched places like this, each of us handling the tasks we liked with no one the wiser. Tycen was always the more boisterous of the two of us so he always went to the parties. But Tycen was wearing my robes and my hairstyle at that party; no one should have known.”

“You’re certain no one knew?” Adda asked, apparently putting the deception aside for the moment, although the way he was frowning said he wasn’t going to put it aside for long.

Rhory nodded but then switched to shaking his head. “We didn’t tell anyone on purpose, but Tycen has come back drunk a number of times. I don’t know if someone was able to use that to figure it out.”

“Either way, they knew King Tycen would be attending when they planned their attack. The question is why would they want to hurt their king like that?”

“To destabilize the country?” Rhory asked. “That’s why I continued the charade. It’s taken every second of the last five years since our parents died for Tycen to get the conservatives off his back, particularly the ones who insisted Tycen was too young to take the throne and wanted to install one of their stooges as a steward or regent.”

“What would they benefit from by removing Tycen?” Adda asked. “Was he pushing some reforms or a project they didn’t appreciate?”

Rhory shook his head. “Nothing Nina’s mentioned to me, but we’ve barely been handling the flickering flames of keeping the kingdom running, let alone the entire inferno. If Tycen was working on something like that, Nina and I probably had to set it aside. I’ll have to ask her.”

“You do that,” Adda said, but he was frowning as another thought intruded. “They might not know whether it’s you or King Tycen lying in the hospital wing, but they do know having your brother incapacitated helped with their plans. They’re going to want to ensure he stays that way. I’m tripling the guards stationed around the healers’ wing.”

It also explained why they had used a poison to incapacitate, rather than kill. Tycen dying would have been terrible, but it also would have been finished. After the funeral, Rhory would have been crowned and taken over where Tycen left off. Instead, Rhory was constantly distracted and spending time away from work with Tycen. There was no telling how many things had slipped through the cracks. Nina would be able to tell him though.

“Let’s go,” Adda said, already heading for the door.

Rhory took one last look over at Stite, who had apparently progressed to spilling his entire life's story, and followed Adda without protest. They would both get a copy of the interview transcript, and figuring out the motive behind the attack was much more important than listening to the man blather for any longer.

Chapter Six

Maya turned the page, frowning at what he was reading. The journal was new but already stained and bent from hundreds of hours of the healers pouring over it. Every attempt they had made to heal the prince had been meticulously documented, as well as any results. This was Maya's second time reading through it, but this time he had Shartha with him to ask questions. He turned the book around and passed it to Shartha, the recipe on the page the one that had jumped out at him the most often during his first read through.

"Why didn't this one work?" he asked.

She looked at the page and let out a heavy sigh. "We have no idea. We were certain it would work, but when Aidyn and I administered it, nothing happened."

"Nothing?" Maya asked, surprised. "With that much thundervine in it?" The shot of adrenalin to his heart should have sent Prince Rhory flying across the room. "Is there a component in the fire flower berry skin that counters thundervine?"

"Not that we've identified, which is why we were surprised to have zero reaction." Shartha rubbed her hand across her eyes, her exhaustion showing in her slumped shoulders.

Maya pulled the book back over to read the recipe again. "Perhaps it was the method used to administer it? It says here you dried the material and packed it together into a pill, but perhaps the pill absorbed too slowly in the bloodstream? A

paste might be more effective. I'll have to think about it." He flipped a few more pages down to another recipe. "It says here this one made his fingers and toes start twitching and it took three days for that side effect to wear off. What do you think caused that?"

Maya continued asking his questions and noting Shartha's answers for the next few hours, until they had completed a full review of the book. Then he pulled over a second book, which contained the thorough write-up of every test they had conducted on the fire flower itself to fully understand its nature.

"Explain this line to me: *The roots must be touching lava as they obtain their nutrients from fire rather than water.* I've been near the rivers of lava and they're too hot for anything to touch and survive. You're saying the fire flower is the exception? Is there anything else I ought to know about this apparently amazing plant?"

Shartha suddenly grinned at him. "Have you heard the story of our founding?" She tutted. "You did say your home country is a two-day sail from the continent, so I guess that makes sense. Okay. Long ago, when humans lived in roving bands, traveling across the continent in constant search of sustenance, a great leader arose. He built the first city, the capital known as Harmony, and convinced a significant number of the tribes to cease warring and join his new society. His empire was peaceful up until his grandson took the throne. The grandson wanted to expand the empire by forcing the remaining independent tribes to join. They resisted and the empire eventually fell apart. Whether the founding members of Aish were one of the independent tribes fleeing or a group

of people escaping the destruction of Harmony has been lost to time. Our history books instead talk about the difficulties we encountered. To escape the violence, we fled north, until we reached a land so remote the sun no longer rose. We were caught in a terrible dilemma. We feared returning south where the armies warred but knew we could not stay in the north as the crops we needed to survive could not grow without the sun. We continued journeying even as our despair increased and hope wavered, and one day we saw a glow in the distance. Thinking we might have passed through the dark and found the sun again, that the gods had guided us to a place of safety, we hurried onward and found absolute glory.”

She reached out to a small, shriveled plant in a clay pot sitting in the center of the table where they sat, her fingers trailing across the closed bud at the top before she cupped it in her palm. After a second, the plant reacted to her body heat, the bud slowly opening to reveal petals a brilliant mixture of reds and oranges, swirling around the flesh until it looked like actual fire. The very center of the flower was shaded in deep blues and purples, much like the innermost portion of a fire.

“If this flower was planted near lava, it would glow like a star fallen to earth,” Shartha said. She took her hand away and the petals closed again. “We knew this was a sign from the gods that they had guided our steps to this new homeland. We followed the rivers of lava and water up into Aish, our first city, and our kingdom has prospered since. King Tycen and Prince Rhory are direct descendants of our leader, who listened to the gods and led us here all those hundreds of years ago.”

“The gods?” Maya asked. He had heard they worshiped some sort of all powerful, ethereal beings in Aish, but this was the first time he had heard about them directly. In Ahye, they believed in the power of earth and air, fire and water and strove to keep the elements balanced within their own lives. The kingdom’s founding was far simpler: that of a people looking to have someone to help guide them to keep their balances even. Maya’s father had earned the title of king after decades spent in hardship with the elements themselves, which had then chosen him as the successor.

Shartha grinned at him. “You’re in luck. Tomorrow morning is the Sunday ceremony. You should go see our gods in action.”

See the actual gods in action? Maya’s curiosity was piqued. “I’ll go see,” he said. “Thank you for telling me that story. It helps me understand this flower a bit better.”

He reached out to touch the closed bud, but before he could make contact, he felt heat radiating from the flower. Whether the roots actually drank from the lava, Maya couldn’t say for certain, but the plant definitely thrived in the immense heat. It explained why fire flower poisonings usually exhibited symptoms like a high fever.

“Do you have a berry, by any chance?”

Shartha nodded. “Of course. Hang on.” She stood and headed to the other side of the room where a massive set of shelves with dozens of small drawers was set against the wall. From one of the drawers she pulled a small packet. She also brought down a basket from the top of the shelf. She handed Maya the basket first.

“These berries were picked a few days ago. We have two sets of guards who are assigned to travel north and retrieve fresh ingredients for us. When the first set returns, the second set leaves, so it’s a constant stream.”

Small blue berries filled the bottom of the basket. If Shartha hadn’t told him otherwise, Maya would have assumed they were ordinary blueberries. Shartha took one of the berries and sliced it open on the table, showing him the inside, which was a lovely—and startlingly familiar—shade of pale pink.

“Yes,” Shartha said, laughing at his look of consternation. “They serve fire berry juice at all noble dinners in the palace. Since you’ve been invited to eat with His Majesty, you’ve been served it multiple times, I’m sure. It’s not poisonous,” she added quickly. “It’s the only part of the plant that isn’t.” She pushed the packet over to him. “You peel the skin from the berries to make them safe. Tradition states the skin belongs to the gods, so we must throw it into the fire to return it to them. It also helps keep the unwary from accidentally eating it. In fact, poisoning cases from the skin are almost unheard of. The healers at the college had to go into some of its oldest archives to find the records about it. Unfortunately, mice and pop bugs got into the archives about a decade ago, so they lost a lot, including any record of a potential cure.”

“Pop bugs?” Maya asked, picking up the sealed packet.

“Yeah, little red pill bugs. They nest in massive colonies. When one is startled by what it thinks is an attack, it pops itself, sending hot and incredibly sticky goo everywhere. The sacrifice of one allows the rest of the colony to survive, because, trust me, once you’ve got pop bug goo on you, you

won't ever want to go near them again. Anyway, the healers' college couldn't find a cure in their records, so we had to start from scratch. You're holding some of the skins we harvested and dried. Figured the gods would forgive us for waiting a bit longer than normal before throwing them to the fire."

The fronts of the dried skins were still blue, and the backs were the same shade of deep purple as the flower's center.

"You mash up the skins and pass it through cheesecloth to extract the oils," Maya mused aloud. "This is blue and purple, though." He frowned, looking over at the closed bud of the fire flower. "Shartha, do you know, when people get the usual fire flower poisoning, is it just from eating the petals and leaves?" While the leaves were a shade of dark green-black, the veins running through shone red, even in the withered plant. The petals were also red. Only the center was blue. "What happens when someone ingests the blue portion of the flower instead?"

Shartha's eyes widened. "I have no idea!" she gasped out. "But, I promise you, we're going to find out!" She yanked over a scroll of the specially treated parchment used in this climate and began scribbling on it. When she finished, she stood. "I'm going to go grab someone to run this over to the healers' college. Are you okay alone for a bit?"

"Yes. I want to take another look at the cure using thundervine. I'll let you know what I find when you get back."

Shartha left, and Maya pulled the book closer, muttering to himself as he read through the ingredients and processes again, wondering what the healers had missed that didn't allow this one to work as it ought.

Chapter Seven

Maya had asked Rev to find out whether he was allowed to view the Sunday ceremony, and first thing in the morning a servant arrived at Maya's door to guide him there. Maya followed, leaving the familiar areas of the palace he had learned to navigate the last few days: the hallways between his rooms, the crystal room where he ate, and the healers' wing. They went clear across to the other side of the palace, then out a side door with two guards standing next to it that led to a gravel pathway. The path ended in a wide plaza, the floor of which had been tiled in gray granite. At least a dozen paths coming from different directions converged on the plaza, so Maya made certain to note which path led back to the palace before he ventured any farther. A cliff rose about one story above the plaza. Two beautiful waterfalls cascaded over the edge. In the dim light of predawn, the waterfall of lava glowed, darker streaks flowing amid the brilliant reds and oranges. This waterfall was slow, but steady, and everyone in the plaza gave it a wide berth. They also avoided the second waterfall though. Clear, sparkling water just starting to reflect the first light of the sun flowed in tinkling splashes down the cliff face. Maya had been told the stream water was so cold, drinking it could kill him and touching it could cause hypothermia. The water was barely a single degree above freezing; liquid ice, he had heard it called. Aish used it for their drinking water, since it did warm up eventually, but gathering it in large amounts for things like baths was dangerous, let alone incredibly time-consuming to wait for that much to warm enough to be usable.

Both waterfalls terminated in wide pools below the cliff, but since the pools weren't growing as he watched, Maya felt safe assuming they drained to somewhere in the earth.

“As a new day dawns, the gods reaffirm our continued existence in this harsh, beautiful land!”

Maya looked up as King Tycen's voice echoed across the plaza, then backed up a few steps so he could see. King Tycen was standing over the flow of lava, straddling the river. Maya's jaw dropped as two people in priest's robes carefully rolled and pinned his sleeves out of the way and then Tycen knelt over the lava. He said a few more words, then plunged his hands elbow-deep into fiery heat capable of burning the flesh right off his bones!

Maya stifled a yelp, although he didn't hear a single other sound of surprise or worry from any of the other spectators. His gaze was glued to Tycen, whose lovely dark hair was safely pulled back and whose face appeared serene even as he slowly pulled arms and hands out of the lava. The skin glowed cherry red and Tycen kept his hands in view as he stood and walked over to straddle the water instead. This time when he plunged his hands down into the river, steam erupted, attesting to just how hot his hands and arms had gotten.

A layer of smooth black rock encased Tycen's limbs when he lifted them again. The head priest lifted a tiny hammer that glittered in the rising sun. Maya didn't expect something so silly to do anything, but with only a tap a bell rang out and the rock turned to ash and drifted away on the breeze, revealing completely unmarred flesh underneath.

“The gods have blessed us for another month,” a man standing near Maya said, reverence in his voice.

“How can the gods have blessed us when his brother is lying on his deathbed?” a woman asked, her voice scathing.

“If we had lost the favor of the gods, Aish would erupt in fire and brimstone, and certainly King Tycen would not have survived the ritual,” a third voice interjected. “Remember you’re living in the blasted-out basin of an active volcano, and only the blessings of the gods—as affirmed by our rulers—ensures the volcano doesn’t kill us all.”

The third man was wearing the pale purple robes of an acolyte, and he glared at the woman who had spoken earlier.

“You’re right, Magmet,” she said, holding her hands out in apology. Magmat was the term for full priest, Magmet for acolyte, if Maya remembered the Aishen terms correctly. “I’m only concerned, as is the rest of the city. If Prince Rhory doesn’t awaken soon, I can’t help worrying the gods favor has been lost.”

Maya didn’t stay to hear the rest, instead, heading back inside and following the servant in the direction of the healers’ wing. He knew some of the recent history in Aish, particularly how the previous king and queen had died young, leaving King Tycen to battle a number of courtiers to be allowed to take his throne without the interference of regents or stewards. Maya had heard Tycen was a fair but strict king who had eventually won the hearts of his people and enough of the court that they stopped fighting him. Prince Rhory had been a significant reason why all the plots against Tycen had failed, or so Maya had been told by the history instructor he had hired

to give him a brief overview of the country he was going to visit. And now Prince Rhory had been lying in the healers' wing for months, with no cure in sight. It was no wonder the people were starting to worry, and Maya could easily guess there were a number of courtiers vying to take back the power they had lost when Tycen bested them only five years ago.

The only way Maya could help was to find a way to wake Rhory, so he hurried his steps to the healers' wing. He and Shartha had worked late cutting and grinding plants with the thundervine to remake the recipe from before. Maya wanted to try turning the mixture into a paste rather than a pill and see if the different absorption would be more effective.

When they reached familiar hallways again, where Maya knew he could find his own way to the healers' wing, Maya paused to thank the servant. "I know the way from here. I won't keep you from your normal duties any longer."

The servant bowed and left, and Maya hurried onward.

"Forgive me for being forward, Your Highness," a voice said, and a second later a man stepped into the hallway from an adjoining one to Maya's left. "I fear I must warn you before it is too late."

Maya paused, trying not to grind his teeth at the delay. However, the man was wearing a set of white healers' robes, the college crest on the breast. Perhaps this was someone Shartha was working with.

"I am Grigori, son of Marquess Black of the Blackstone Valley. I fear it is my duty to warn you about the snake in your midst."

Maya noticed Grigori didn't say he was the heir, which explained why he was a healer. Younger sons in this country often had to find their own way in the world. They didn't have the elements to guide them to their destined path. It definitely appeared their gods did not have as much of a direct hand in their lives as the elements did in Ahye.

"The healer trainee is not what he seems. His very existence is a lie, and I cannot stay silent on this matter any longer! You see, Your Highness, he claims to be the son of Duke Magnus, but Duke Magnus only has daughters. So, who is he really?"

Grigori made a valiant attempt to look distressed and genuinely concerned, but there was something dark in his eyes that said his mental state was unbalanced. Still, Maya couldn't afford to be rude to even a younger son of the local nobility.

"I appreciate the warning," he said. "If you'll excuse me?"

"Your Highness," Grigori said, bowing as he stepped out of the way.

Maya hurried onward, trying to put such a confusing conversation out of his mind. He was much more interested in confirming with Shartha that his idea was worth trying.

The four guards manning the doorway all bowed when he approached and one pulled the door open for him. Sometime during his first day, the number of guards on the door had doubled, but Maya didn't know why, and it wasn't his place to ask. Instead, he nodded his thanks and went inside.

Aidyn was helping guide Prince Rhory across the room, heading in the direction of Prince Rhory's private rooms after

a morning sojourn to the bathroom. Prince Rhory inched along, which gave Maya too much time to study Aidyn, Grigori's words all too fresh in Maya's mind.

Aidyn wasn't hiding anything, as far as Maya could tell. He had transitioned well, and only because Maya knew to look did he notice Aidyn didn't need to shave or that his smaller stature denoted something other than his having not yet reached his final growth spurt. Switching genders was common in Ahye. An imbalance between the internal and external self could not be tolerated. Maya didn't know how it was handled in Aish, but neither Shartha nor King Tycen had batted an eye, and they must have realized. If that was Grigori's only issue with Aidyn, then he was blowing smoke, and Maya felt perfectly justified in ignoring him.

Shartha walked through the main doors a moment later, stopping at Maya's side. "Has King Tycen arrived yet?" she asked.

"I haven't seen him," Maya replied. "Do you think today is a good day to ask him for permission to try our new cure?"

"What new cure?" King Tycen asked as he strode through the doorways. "Have you already discovered something new?" He didn't quite sound disbelieving, but the look he gave Maya was very flat. "You've only been here a few days."

"Your Majesty," Shartha replied with a bow, which Maya quickly copied before he forgot all propriety.

Disbelieving he might be, but King Tycen was still the most beautiful man Maya had ever met, and he sent Maya's brain scrambling every time they were in close proximity.

“Prince Maya has completed reviewing everything we have already attempted. He suggested we make a second attempt at a previous cure, this time using a different delivery method,” Shartha continued with Maya nodding in agreement.

King Tycen frowned in thought for a long moment before nodding. “I assume this is one of the attempts that did not have negative side effects?”

“As far as we can tell, this one had zero effects at all, Your Majesty,” Shartha replied. She turned to Aidyn as he walked into the room. “Aidyn, run down to the lab and retrieve the blue bowl. It should be full of a mixture, so be careful. Then get us everything we need to make a paste.”

“Of course,” Aidyn said, before dashing off into the depths of the room where the private stairs led down to the lab.

King Tycen, Maya, and Shartha went into Prince Rhory’s room to wait. King Tycen took a seat in the chair pulled up to the bed and reached out to take his brother’s hand. Seeing Tycen’s completely unmarred hands was shocking after what he had seen this morning, and Maya still double-checked just in case.

King Tycen saw where Maya was looking and grinned. “I heard you attended today’s service. As you can see, the hands of the gods are still protecting Aish.” He held out his free hand for Maya to see there wasn’t a single scratch or burn on it.

“It’s the craziest thing I’ve ever seen someone do, and my brother eats fire.”

“Someone eats fire?” Tycen asked, his tone incredulous as if he thought it was only a joke.

Maya nodded, then shook his head. “I think the translation into Aishen isn’t completely accurate. He can take a lit torch and lower it into his mouth and choose whether to extinguish the flame or allow the torch to continue burning. Fire calls to him as earth calls to me. Although, he was incredibly jealous when father agreed to allow me to travel here. The elements guided me here, but my brother will walk a different path.”

“We have far too healthy a respect for fire here to do something like eat it,” Tycen said with a shudder.

“I do not believe even my brother would dare tempt fate with your particular type of fire,” Maya joked back, aware he was flirting, but not able to stop himself.

Tycen grinned and opened his mouth to respond, but Aidyn rushed into the room and the moment was lost.

“Here’s the bowl,” Aidyn said, handing it to Maya. “And I got some purified water.” He set a small pitcher down on the rolling table currently positioned at the end of Prince Rhory’s bed, and then headed over to the medical cabinet in the corner to get the rest of the supplies.

Maya walked over to the table and was about to set the bowl down next to the pitcher when something caught his eye.

“Get me a stirring rod,” he snapped, bringing the bowl closer to his face, but trying not to inhale in case any of the contents were dangerous.

“What is it?” Shartha asked.

Aidyn pressed a rod into Maya’s hand and Maya used it to shift around the contents of the bowl.

“There’s no thundervine in here,” Maya said, looking for any sign of the bright yellow plant they had chopped up. Even so small, the yellow should have been obvious, but Maya didn’t see any of it. “Were there multiple bowls downstairs?” Maya asked.

“No,” Shartha replied. “Everything in that lab is being used for Prince Rhory and the mixture with the thundervine we formulated last night should be the only one.”

“That was the only bowl with any contents,” Aidyn added. “I double-checked.”

King Tycen’s lips were pressed tight, and he was scowling. He suddenly stood and strode past them, heading out the door and through the ward until he reached the main door. He pulled one of the doors open and demanded, “Bring Captain Adda here immediately.”

“Sabotage,” Shartha gasped, sinking against a wall with one hand on her throat.

“Who would do such a terrible thing?” Aidyn gasped out, his eyes wide with shock.

“We’re about to find out,” Tycen said as he strode back into the room, his voice and his face dark with fury.

A few minutes later, Captain Adda rushed into the room. “What happened?” he asked.

“Someone switched the contents of the bowl for the cure we were about to attempt,” King Tycen explained. “Prince Maya, do you know what they were attempting to do? Is it another poisoning attempt?”

“I don’t know,” Maya said, finally putting the bowl down. “The pieces are too small for me to be able to tell what plants they’re from on sight. All I can say for certain is there is no thundervine in here, and there should be.”

“Captain, I want you to find out who had access to this wing last night. Question the door guards. If someone was attempting to use us to hurt my brother again, I want them caught.”

A sudden thought flashed through Maya’s mind, and he picked up the bowl again. This time he took a chance and sniffed the contents.

Oregano, dill, tarragon, perhaps a touch of lemon grass.

“Prince Maya!” Shartha gasped.

“Harmless herbs,” Maya said in explanation since everyone in the room was staring at him. “I could use this to baste a chicken.” He set the bowl down again before continuing. “I don’t think this was an attack against his highness. Perhaps it was a delaying tactic, someone worried our cure might work, but I had another thought. Aidyn, you were on night duty last night, correct?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Aidyn replied.

“I was stopped this morning by a healer named Grigori, who claimed he needed to warn me of the fact that Aidyn is not who he claims to be.” Aidyn’s face went pale and his cheeks pink. “I can see it is clearly Grigori who is the liar, as you appear to be in perfect balance to my eye. I simply find it interesting he chose the morning after Aidyn was on duty, as well as the morning we were going to attempt a cure.”

“Could Grigori have known about the cure?” Captain Adda asked.

“He knew,” Shartha cut in. “After work yesterday, I briefed our progress to the healers’ council. Any full healer has the right to sit in at council meetings, and I do believe he was present.”

“Captain, apprehend Grigori at once; however, I want every aspect of this investigated. Grigori might be innocent, or he might not be working alone, and I don’t want the fact that he’s a piece of slime to bias us from the truth.” King Tycen let out a heavy sigh, then turned to Shartha and Maya. “Can you recreate your work?” he asked.

Shartha and Maya both nodded, but Shartha replied, “Presuming the plants we need are unharmed, we can have a new batch put together in twenty minutes.”

“Good,” Tycen replied. “Go. Captain, I would appreciate if you could do me a favor and send someone to ask Nina to cancel my breakfast meeting?”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Captain Adda said. Maya, Shartha, and Aidyn left the room, heading down into the lab as quickly as they could walk.

The cabinet where the record book was kept was locked and unharmed. Shartha was the only one with the key, and she turned the lock and brought the book over to the table, already flipping to the correct page.

“We’ll need the thundervine,” she said, listing off all the ingredients. Aidyn knew the layout of the cabinet better than Maya, so Maya instead went to find clean cutting boards and

knives and pestles, carefully checking each for residue or potential sabotage. They were clean, and Aidyn and Shartha declared the plants clean as well, so they got to work chopping and mincing and grinding until they had enough to make a thick paste.

“Thank you for standing up for me, Your Highness,” Aidyn said softly as he and Maya watched Shartha gently mix the final ingredients together in the bowl. “I know I’m not normal and you had every right to believe Grigori—”

Maya gently cut him off. “In Ahye, your choice is a common and well-respected one. The inside must be balanced with the outside. I have no understanding of why Grigori might think your choice shameful, and I do not believe King Tycen thinks so either.”

“No one with a brain in their head would think so,” Shartha added. “We all know Grigori wasn’t known for having a brain. This is ready. Get some fresh water so we can make the paste.”

Aidyn drew up a small bucket from a well in the corner and then poured the water into a pitcher. Rather than pouring from the pitcher into the bowl, Aidyn passed Shartha a small ladle and she carefully measured water to ensure the ratios were correct. A little stirring had the thick paste they were hoping for, and it was liberally shot through with bright yellow dots of thundervine.

“Let’s go see if this works,” Shartha said as she led the way back up the stairs to where King Tycen and Prince Rhory were waiting.

Chapter Eight

Sabotage. Rhory sank down into the chair at Tycen's bedside, horrified shock making goose bumps erupt up and down his arms even as a burning fury grew in his stomach. How many of the previous attempts at a cure had been sabotaged? How many times had they found the answer, only for someone to switch it with the contents of a spice bowl from the kitchen? Could Tycen have been saved months ago?

Prince Maya seemed certain Grigori was behind it, trying to discredit Aidyn and Shartha in order to get himself reinstated. There was a fair chance Maya was correct, since Grigori hadn't exactly been a paragon of model behavior the last time Rhory had seen him. Yet, Grigori hadn't come across as smart enough to plan something like this. No, Rhory was pretty certain someone was pulling Grigori's strings.

Captain Adda would have Grigori in interrogation imminently, so they would find out soon enough. First, though, Rhory wanted to see if the cure Prince Maya had found would work.

He thankfully didn't have to wait long before Maya, Shartha, and Aidyn returned, this time carrying a bowl with neon-yellow dotted through the contents of varying shades of green. That must be the thundervine Maya had noticed was missing.

"Let's paint his gums and tongue with this," Maya said, setting the bowl down on the table before pulling the table closer to the head of the bed where Tycen was sitting up, yet still asleep.

Aiden brought over a small paintbrush. He held it out for Maya to take, but Maya shook his head.

“You’ve got medical training. I just know plants. You’ll do it better.”

Aidyn didn’t argue. While Shartha gently tilted Tycen’s head back and opened his mouth, Aidyn coated the brush with the paste in the bowl. He covered the entirety of Tycen’s mouth; his gums, teeth, tongue, and even lips were practically oozing the paste, and Aidyn continued to dip the paintbrush, even then, until the bowl was empty. Tycen’s mouth squelched when Shartha gently closed it again.

“What now?” Rhory asked, staring at Tycen as if there should be some sort of immediate sign.

“It shouldn’t be long,” Shartha said, her gaze fixed on Tycen, as if waiting for the slightest muscle twitch.

Rhory glanced over at Maya, who had his arms crossed as he frowned thoughtfully. He didn’t look worried, but he was also studying Tycen as if something would change soon. Rhory turned his head away from looking at Maya, knowing—but refusing to admit—why he had even looked over at Maya when all his attention should be on Tycen and Shartha.

Was the blue in the corners of Tycen’s eyes fading? That could be desperate hope, but Rhory bent closer to look. Maybe the blue was fading a bit. It certainly looked a little less stark.

Suddenly, Tycen took in a gasping, roaring breath, and immediately started coughing as he choked on the goop in his mouth. Aidyn dashed forward, catching Tycen before he could fall out of bed. He kept one hand soothingly on Tycen’s back,

while the other held a cloth which he used to wipe away the paste as Tycen coughed it up.

“Wha—” Tycen gasped out in between coughs.

“You were poisoned,” Rhory explained, reaching out to grip one of Tycen’s hands in his.

“Poi—” Tycen tried again. His coughing had slowed as Aidyn finished mopping up the paste, but he was still struggling to get words out.

Aidyn folded the cloth to find a clean bit and wiped the last of the paste off Tycen’s face. Tycen’s coughing turned into an occasional wheeze. His body slumped against Aidyn, who still had a steadying hand on Tycen’s back. When the coughing completely stopped, Aidyn helped Tycen sit up, but when he let go, Tycen slumped back down, unable to hold himself upright on his own.

Aidyn caught him, with a gasp, and then gasped again when Tycen started shaking uncontrollably.

“What’s going on?” Rhory forced out, backing away to give Shartha and Maya room to work.

“C-c-col—” Tycen forced out despite his chattering teeth.

“He’s freezing!” Aidyn said. “His core temperature is plummeting.”

“What? Why?” Maya asked even as he joined Shartha at the medical cabinet to pull out blankets.

Aidyn had draped himself over Tycen, sharing his body heat. The rest of them tossed blanket after blanket over them, trying to get Tycen warm again.

“We need hot water bottles or hot rocks,” Shartha explained as she dashed out of the room.

“Nothing in the cure has this sort of side effect,” Maya said, muttering under his breath as he tucked the pile of blankets around the huddled forms of Tycen and Aidyn. “Which means it’s not the cure causing this. It’s the cause.” He paused, frozen in place, staring blankly at the far wall. “The berries are blue,” he breathed out, his eyes popping wide as some sort of realization came to him. Then he dashed out of the room.

Left alone with no idea what to do, Rhory bit his lip, thinking furiously. They were in a land comprised of heat and fire, but he couldn’t think of anything to help Tycen.

“Are the blankets helping?” he called to Aidyn, desperate for any direction. “I can get more from another room.”

“I’m sweating,” Aidyn called back, his voice muffled. “But His Highness is still shivering. If you can get more blankets, that might help.”

“I’ll be right back,” Rhory said, already heading toward the door as he spoke. However, Maya reappeared in the doorway carrying a shriveled plant and a small knife. He dropped them both on the table, then cupped his hands around the closed bud. He bent to breathe on it, too, and a second later, the petals unfurled to reveal it was a fire flower. Maya grabbed the knife and slashed off one of the brilliantly red petals, and then carefully carved a small chunk out of that petal.

“No time for a mortar and pestle,” he said, probably to himself, as he reversed the knife and started slamming the

wooden butt against the petal chunk, turning it into a pulpy mess.

“I need his mouth,” Maya called to the combined lump on the bed. He didn’t wait for Aidyn to respond, yanking the blankets away. He ignored both Rhory and Aidyn’s cries of alarm. Instead, he swiped his pointer finger through the pulpy mess, gathering a layer of the goop. With his other hand he gripped Tycen’s jaw, popping his mouth open wide enough to thrust the goopy finger inside.

“That’s fire flower!” Rhory gasped out, lunging forward too late to stop him.

“What?” Aidyn gasped.

Except, as Maya pulled his finger free, the shivering began to slow.

“What did you do?” Aidyn asked, uncurling from around Tycen to glare at Maya. Aidyn looked sweaty and disheveled, but Tycen was pale and clammy. His lips were blue and his body was clenched tightly into a ball. As the shivering slowed, his body relaxed, stretching out again, and the blue faded completely from his face.

“I’ve got the hot—” Shartha said as she rushed into the room, but cut herself off at the sight of them all standing around. “What happened?” She placed her towel-wrapped bundles down and walked over, looking first at the cut-up flower and then over at Tycen.

“Eating the petal causes someone to burn up uncontrollably, but so far none of His Highness’s symptoms have been related to heat,” Maya explained.

“The blue parts of the flower and berry!” Shartha exclaimed, apparently understanding Maya far better than Rhory did.

“I need you to provide more than that for an explanation,” Rhory said sharply, his eyes on Tycen to see if he suddenly started sweating profusely.

“It was the ceremony from this morning that made me think of it,” Maya began. He carefully wiped his finger on a cloth to remove any residue. “The fire and water elements were in perfect balance when you touched the lava and the water. I wondered how a flower of the land that wrought that ceremony could be so out of balance.”

“But it’s not at all,” Shartha added eagerly. “We only know what happens when someone eats the petals—the red parts. We couldn’t find any records of what happens should someone eat the blue.”

“The berry skin must have put him into some sort of frozen stasis,” Maya continued. “Ending that stasis allowed the effects of the poison to take hold, but he started shivering instead of burning. So, the blue parts of the plant must be ice to balance the fire!”

“And you decided to force him to eat a poisonous flower on a guess?” Rhory asked, trying to contain his growing fury. “You could have killed him!”

“M fine,” Tycen rasped out, lifting his head to look blearily around him. He tilted his head to the side to look up at Aidyn, whom he was still leaning against. The slow smile that spread across his face as he looked at Aidyn was full of appreciation and no small amount of want, and Rhory was just

so damned glad to see Tycen awake he didn't bother commenting about things like instant attraction being an utterly ridiculous fairy tale. For all of his philandering ways, Tycen had always been the more romantic of the two of them.

"You're not fine," Rhory finally replied. "You've been in a coma for four months!"

"Four!" Tycen gasped, looking away from Aidyn toward Rhory. "But what about—" He cut himself off, no doubt seeing Rhory was still wearing Tycen's gold and red robes. "I see," he finished. "I think my brother and I need to have a chat. Healers, would you mind giving us a few moments?"

"Before you go, let me provide introductions," Rhory cut in. "This is Prince May'yim Ahyekil, of the kingdom of Ahye. He is the one who helped find a cure to wake you."

"Call me Maya, please," Maya said with a bow.

"And this is the current acting chief healer, Shartha... I'm afraid I don't know your last name," Rhory added sheepishly.

"Shartha Te, Your Majesty." She also bowed to Tycen.

"And healer trainee, Aidyn Magnus." Aidyn had detangled himself from Tycen and helped prop him up against the headboard, cushioned by several pillows. He bowed as well, and Tycen's eyes were a touch too sharp as he took in Aidyn. Rhory assumed it was because Tycen also knew Magus only had daughters and correctly interpreted Aidyn's transition.

"Thank you, all of you, for your help," Tycen said. While he smiled at all three, it widened when he looked directly at Aidyn. He was such a damned romantic. Rhory sighed.

Shartha, Maya, and Aidyn left, Aidyn closing the door behind them.

“I can’t believe you’re awake and talking,” Rhory said, gripping one of Tycen’s hands between both of his. “You can’t imagine how hard the last few months have been, waiting to hear you had died.”

“It’s good to know all the practice you’ve had over the years pretending to be me was helpful,” Tycen said, grinning at Rhory, who frowned unhappily back.

“I still can’t believe you’re here again, but I’ll be very glad to hand the kingdom back over to you,” Rhory replied with a heavy sigh. He sat in the chair pulled up to Tycen’s bedside. “You’re banned from attending any more nighttime parties.”

Tycen let out a wheezing laugh, then pressed one hand to his sternum as he winced. “I’m going to need a few more days to recover before I can return to being king,”

“You can take as much time as you need,” Rhory replied. “I’m so glad you’re awake again.” He swallowed hard to force tears back. “Besides, it’ll take me that long to catch you up on everything you missed.”

“It’s been four months. Yeah, I’m sure there’s a lot you have to tell me.” Tycen let out a long breath, tilting his head back to rest against the headboard. “Four months. Damn. Have you caught whoever poisoned me?”

Rhory shook his head, and then shrugged. “We caught the person who slipped it in your drink, but we still don’t know who gave the orders. We do know they were targeting you,

though, not me. They somehow knew we had switched roles for the evening.”

“That changes things,” Tycen said, frowning. “If they were targeting me, there are a couple of projects I’d been working on that whomever it was might have wanted halted. For example, I wanted to set term limits on the Lord’s Council to ensure all members of the nobility had a chance to be represented, rather than only the most powerful.”

“I’m sure someone didn’t like that plan,” Rhory said, only half joking. He had met far too many of the most powerful nobles and knew they would be incredibly displeased with such an idea, particularly since some of those nobles were the ones who had opposed Tycen’s right to inherit the crown five years ago. “Do you feel up to telling all this to Captain Adda? He might be able to piece together a couple more clues from what you can fill in.”

Tycen nodded. “Yeah, I’d like to speak with Captain Adda, and Nina, too, if she can find a free moment to stop by. I’d like to hear what you’ve both been working on, so we can figure out what projects fell to the wayside. There might be more than just the term limits.”

The last thing Rhory wanted was to leave Tycen’s side. Still, duty to the kingdom always came first. He stood but squeezed Tycen’s hand one last time before heading to the door. He luckily didn’t have to go far. Captain Adda and Nina were both standing in the reception area. They jumped to their feet when Rhory walked in, bowing perfunctorily before hurrying over to him.

“Come,” Rhory said, not wanting to discuss anything in the open. They followed him back to Tycen’s room.

“Your Majesty!” Nina gasped out when she saw Tycen awake.

“Nina?” Rhory asked, wondering how she knew. While he had accidentally revealed the truth to Captain Adda, Rhory had definitely not told Nina.

“Sorry, Your Highness. You’ve done a fine job pretending to be your brother, but you’re two distinct people. I don’t think anyone else noticed, but I’ve been working closely with His Majesty for much too long not to notice the extreme personality switch.”

“Captain Adda, you don’t seem surprised?” Tycen asked.

Captain Adda laughed. “I’m running the investigation into your attack. Of course, I would figure it out, although it helped that Prince Rhory blurted it out a few days ago.”

Rhory’s cheeks heated, especially when Tycen chuckled at that. He reclaimed his seat at Tycen’s bedside, but aside from that was more than happy to let Tycen shine again.

“Nina, please draft a proclamation stating Prince Rhory has woken. Thank our excellent healers and Prince Maya, and mention that the investigation into this cruel attack will conclude soon with all culprits behind bars,” Tycen said. “That should quiet the concerns I’m sure have been building up in the city about whether the gods might have abandoned us. Perhaps speak with the priests to see if there is language you could use that would help us out. Also, since you realized I’m the one in this bed, I’m sure you’ve been keeping an account

of everything you and Rhory have accomplished? I'd like to read that," he finished after she nodded. He looked over at Captain Adda next. "Captain, I need you and Nina to find time to sit together to make a list of all the projects that lost my attention the last few months. It's very possible delaying or derailing one of those projects is the motive behind why I was incapacitated rather than killed."

Nina and Captain Adda bowed to show their acceptance.

"Rhory and I will need to continue our deception until I am well enough for us both to return to our original roles," Tycen added. Rhory thought Tycen was starting to droop, although he didn't think Nina or Adda noticed the way his eyes were closed for a moment longer when he blinked or how the pillows were holding him up rather than him resting against them. After being in a coma of sorts for the last four months, Rhory was surprised Tycen had been able to accomplish so much after just waking.

"I need to go see whether we have located Master Grigori. I'll come find you in an hour?" Captain Adda asked Nina, who nodded. He turned back to Tycen and bowed again. "By your leave."

Tycen nodded and Captain Adda and Nina left. Tycen was definitely starting to droop now. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the headboard as if he needed the extra support. It was time for Rhory to leave him to rest.

"I'll let the healers back in," Rhory said, gently patting Tycen's hand.

"I appreciate it," he replied as Rhory stood. Tycen reached out to grab Rhory's arm, stopping him from leaving. "Thanks

for stepping in for me,” he said, his voice soft. When he opened his eyes to look at Rhory, they were damp.

Rhory bent and gave Tycen a hug, glad when Tycen’s arms wrapped around his back. “I’m just so glad you’re awake again,” Rhory said, his voice choked as the tears of relief and from the last four months of pain finally slipped out.

“I’m sorry I let this happen. I should have paid more attention, or at least taken a guard with me.” Tycen awkwardly patted Rhory on the back, his hand shaking from too much exertion.

“This kingdom is so safe, though,” Rhory replied, leaning back so Tycen didn’t have to push himself. He wiped his eyes on one of his trailing sleeves. “Even when they were trying to keep you from claiming the throne five years ago, there was never a threat to your life. They would have been happy to declare you incompetent and lock you up ‘for your protection,’” he added with a scoff. “But they never would have actually hurt either of us.”

Tycen nodded. “Something’s changed. Between you, me, Captain Adda, and Nina, the four of us will hopefully figure it out before something worse occurs. I think I’m going to need to sleep on it for a bit though,” he added with a wry grin.

“Let me get Maya and the healers,” Rhory gasped out, appalled at himself that he had been so busy crying he forgot Tycen needed his rest.

“Maya, is it? Awfully informal.” Tycen laughed, one eyebrow raised as he grinned cheekily at Rhory.

“Hush,” Rhory replied, his cheeks hot. “Don’t think I missed how you were looking at Aidyn earlier.”

Tycen’s laugh turned into a soft chuckle as Rhory left the room to let the healers know it was okay to return to helping Tycen. It was also long past time for Rhory to get to work. Since Tycen needed his rest, after he found Aidyn, Rhory headed for Tycen’s office, donning the role of king once again. Except, this time he knew Tycen would return soon, which lightened his steps and made him smile, the first real smile he had worn in four months.

Chapter Nine

“The healers’ college finished their analysis of the blue versus red portions of the fire flower,” Shartha said as she walked into the lab beneath the healers’ wing. She dropped a loosely bound sheaf of papers on the table before taking her usual seat across from Maya.

Maya slid a bookmark into the Compendium of Aishen Plant Life and set the tome aside before picking up the papers.

“Did they find anything interesting?” he asked, flipping through and skimming for the moment, although he would definitely read it in full when he had some free time. He stopped when he reached a section headlined “Berry” to actually read it.

“Just that your solution for the berry skin poison was likely the most effective one. Use the thundervine concoction to wake the victim from the stasis, and then administer a small amount of petal.” Shartha grinned at him. “They think eating some of the skin or the blue center might be the most effective means of combating poisoning by the petals, but only after preliminary findings. They’re planning to conduct a more in-depth study next. Are you interested in participating with the research?”

Maya shook his head. “I’m not interested in that level. I just want to understand the plants. Is there a reason they didn’t conduct an analysis on the berry flesh here?”

“I think they were only focused on the dangerous parts of the plant. Why?”

Maya grinned at her. “I’m trying to figure out why it’s impossible to make alcohol from pressing the berries. None of the traditional techniques of making wine or spirits work, and I want to know what about this berry is so unique.”

“How so?” Shartha looked interested even though there was no healing application for his research.

“Why is the berry flesh pink?” he asked in an apparent non sequitur. “The flower is red, but the skin is blue; if that was combined, the flesh ought to be purple and poisonous, but it’s not. Something is filtering out the blue, most of the red, and all of the poison, leaving a berry that resists fermentation. I want to know why.”

“You think you’ll be able to find out?” she asked, and her raised eyebrow said her question implied more than whether the science was possible.

Which was actually why Maya was hiding downstairs in the lab rather than spending time elsewhere: he didn’t want to go home.

Home was water and familiarity, but it was also Father and expectations and, quite frankly, boredom. He had the same routine, day after day, and Father constantly looking over his shoulder, ensuring Maya did nothing to upset the family’s balances. Father very much wanted the elements to choose one of his children as successor, which meant all of his children must be perfect. The pressure was crushing, particularly since Maya had zero interest in being chosen as king. All he wanted was to research his plants in peace, not be pranced around among the people or compared with the accomplishments of his siblings. Maya had pushed and fought to be allowed to

travel to Aish, and he wasn't about to go home until someone forced him.

The sufferance of King Tycen was all that allowed him to stay, but now that Prince Rhory was awake, Maya's reason for remaining in Aish was gone. At some point King Tycen would have to start asking uncomfortable questions about why Maya was floating around the palace like a frayed leaf in a pond.

He was therefore trying to avoid being noticed. Shartha and Aidyn had Prince Rhory's recovery well in hand, which meant Maya could avoid King Tycen while in the healers' wing. He was also eating in the crystal room, which Tycen never used. Except, Maya didn't actually want to avoid Tycen at all. Despite only speaking with him a few times, Maya thought Tycen was beautiful, kind, and very interesting. Maya wanted to learn more about him, to see how a king could rule so successfully while still maintaining such a gentle nature. Tycen's balances were off, but that appeared to only make him stronger; Maya wanted to know how that was possible.

Finding out whether the way his heart thumped faster and his palms grew slick when Tycen looked at him could grow from an awkward crush to real feelings was also something he wanted. But that then led him full circle back to needing to hide from Tycen. Aish was a hereditary monarchy, not elective like Ayhe, and Tycen was therefore required to have children via marriage. Maya had been born male and no plant in the world could make him capable of bearing a child. His awkward feelings could not lead to anything, so he did his best to bury them and keep them buried by avoiding Tycen as much as possible.

Shartha let out a heavy breath. “Your grimace is answer enough. Look, if King Tycen or the council start giving you grief for staying around here, I’ll talk to the healers’ college about getting you a research position with them. At least you’ll be able to stay in Aish that way, although you might have to move into the dorms where Aidyn and I live. But I don’t think it will come to that. You singlehandedly saved Prince Rhory’s life, after all. King Tycen isn’t the sort of person to throw out a savior like that.”

Maya sighed. “I guess I can only hope for the best.”

“Exactly. Now, what do you think about the dissection the college conducted on the veins in the fire flower’s leaves? Maybe what you’re looking for is in there?” She waved one hand at the papers in front of Maya, so he dutifully flipped to the correct section. Shartha might be on to something, after all.

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Maya’s head was spinning on dozens of thoughts as he bid Shartha good night and left the healers’ wing to go find dinner. When cut open, the veins in the stem had released a viscous liquid that was hot enough to blister skin, but was not lava. The liquid wasn’t as vibrant a red as the flower, as if something had diluted it already, which meant the roots of the plant might be some of the cause of his mystery. Maya planned to start research on fire flower roots in the morning.

He found a seat at a mostly empty table in the crystal room and poured himself a glass of the pink juice from one of the communal pitchers placed on all the shared tables. He sipped, savoring the gentle, fruity flavor with an almost cinnamon-like kick at the end. One of the servants assigned to the crystal

room brought over the first course, placing a bowl of green-colored leek soup in front of him. Maya put the glass down and picked up his spoon, absentmindedly dipping it into the soup.

He paused to blow on the spoonful, waiting for the steam to stop billowing, idly wondering whether he might be able to look at some soil samples as well. He was about to put the spoon in his mouth when a faint whiff of a slimy, sour smell hit his nose.

Maya dropped the spoon, which landed in the bowl with a splash that sent soup pouring onto the previously white tablecloth. With the liquid reduced, Maya could see shriveled green-brown leaves at the bottom of his bowl, the hexagonal pattern of the veining only slightly obscured after having the hot soup poured over top of the fresh leaves.

“Choke vine,” he gasped and stood, thrusting his chair back so hard it tumbled over. “There’s choke vine,” he gasped again, thankful he could speak because he hadn’t ingested any of the soup containing the deadly plant. Choke vine made the throat swell immediately, brutally suffocating its victims.

“Your Highness, can I help with something?” a servant asked, a different servant than the one who had served the soup.

“Where is the servant who waited on me?” Maya asked, looking around the room, where all the diners present were staring at him. The mirrors on the walls, the reason for this being the crystal room, showed no trace of anyone else in a servant uniform, which meant Maya had lost him. By now,

they had probably changed clothes and were safely hidden amid the palace residents.

“I am assigned to serve this table, Your Highness,” the servant replied.

“Then who gave me this bowl of soup?” Maya’s wave toward the poisoned bowl and destroyed tablecloth should have been superfluous, but the servant glanced over and his mouth dropped open.

“I don’t know, Your Highness,” the servant replied when he recovered himself, but Maya was already striding away toward one of the guards who stood unobtrusively along the walls.

“Someone just tried to kill me,” Maya told the woman in light armor who had been standing closest. “Summon your captain and shut down the palace before anyone who doesn’t belong here escapes.”

The guard’s eyes widened, but she obeyed, trotting off at a fast clip. She sent some sort of signal to one of the other guards in the hall because a man in the same style armor hurried over to Maya’s side, one hand on the hilt of the sword at his hip.

Maya returned to the table, where the servant stood haplessly next to the mess, and then pointed at the soup.

“Those leaves are choke vine,” Maya explained to the guard, who definitely needed to be told why he had been sent to Maya’s side. “Ingesting them causes the throat to immediately swell shut, and the victim suffocates. It’s a terrible way to die.” He was babbling, too, but that helped

stave off the shakes. *Someone had tried to kill him.* That thought kept wailing through his head and only by locking his knees was he able to remain standing.

The first guard returned after a few minutes, and Maya recognized Captain Adda behind her. Behind Captain Adda was... Maya stifled a gasp when he saw. King Tycen's hair was down from the two braids over his ears, the length instead gathered together at his neck in one loose braid, leaving strands free to frame his face. His red and gold robes were fastened properly, yet still gave off the appearance of being hastily donned. Tycen almost looked as if he had been roused from bed, but that thought sent Maya's mind in directions he didn't want it to go. Especially since even with Tycen's utterly distracting appearance, Maya's wobbly knees and stuttering breath still had more to do with the contents of the soup bowl than with his overexcited libido.

"Prince Maya, are you hurt?" Tycen asked when he finished winding his way through the tables and got to Maya. He reached out with both hands, and Maya placed his own hands into Tycen's.

"No. Thankfully, I noticed the odd scent in time. But using the leaves like this was very cleverly done."

Tycen had to feel the shiver in Maya's hands, but he didn't let go, gently squeezing Maya's fingers. His grip said "It's okay. I'm here," and Maya wanted to sink into that acceptance, to pull Tycen close and turn hand-holding into a proper hug. He couldn't though. Instead, he squeezed back briefly and pulled away.

“They placed choke vine leaves into the bowl, then poured the boiling-hot soup over them,” Maya said to Captain Adda, who was carefully leaning over the table to look at the mess. “That released the deadly oils. Luckily for me, while leek soup has the color and consistency to hide the leaves, the leeks’ scent isn’t strong enough to conceal the stench of the oil.”

“Did you see who delivered the soup?” Adda asked, then frowned when Maya shook his head.

“I was thinking about the mystery of why fire flower berries don’t ferment,” Maya explained. Tycen chuckled and Maya’s cheeks heated. He had lost most of his past lovers when they became jealous of his plants, but so what if he found plants fascinating! At least, that’s what Maya would think if that laugh had come from anyone else. Maya tried to balance his personal life with his plants, but no one had ever really motivated him to succeed. Perhaps Tycen could be that person, but Maya wasn’t allowed to find out.

“I’ll have to interview the kitchen staff,” Captain Adda said with a sigh. “Maybe they saw someone. You can clean this up,” he added to the table servant. Captain Adda bowed to Tycen and Maya before hurrying off.

“Um,” the servant said, eyeing the table and looking worried.

“Choke vine is only dangerous when ingested. Thoroughly clean your hands when you’re done, and you’ll be fine,” Maya explained.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” the servant said, bowing low.

“Come. Both our dinners were interrupted. I was about to eat with my brother and he’s sworn off poisons from now on. I promise it will be safe,” Tycen joked with a smile that made Maya’s heart thump faster. He waved toward the door for Maya to go ahead of him.

Chapter Ten

Rhory followed Maya out of the crystal room, then hurried to catch up so they could walk side by side through the hallways toward the healers' wing. Maya was still a little pale, but otherwise thankfully unscathed. He walked with his head held high, even as the whispers and devious rumors started slithering around the tables and through the corridors behind them. Rhory had never met anyone as strong as Maya before, had never really noticed anyone in the way he was noticing Maya now.

But Maya was a prince of another country. There was no way he would be interested in staying in Aish, where the fires ran hot, when he was from a land of water. Besides, Maya thought Rhory was King Tycen. Their current relationship as friends was based on a lie. When Rhory and Tycen switched back, Maya would think Tycen was the one he was friends with, not Rhory, and their relationship as friends would be lost.

Some people would have to be told the truth eventually. Shartha, for one, because after Rhory and Tycen switched back, Tycen would need regular checkups. She would need to know. Rhory suspected Aidyn would also need to know, since every time Rhory walked into Tycen's room, Aidyn was there, and he and Tycen were making calf eyes at each other. In fact, Rhory wouldn't be surprised if Tycen had already told Aidyn the truth—Tycen wasn't the type of person to wait around on things like that.

When they walked through the doors into the healers' wing, Shartha was waiting for them. Word of what had

happened to Maya must have reached her, since she was frowning as she blatantly looked him up and down.

“It’s been at least fifteen minutes, so if you’re not showing any symptoms, I say you’re safe. I think a hot toddy while you’re waiting for dinner to be brought is all the medicine you need,” she finally said, shaking her head slightly. “I’m glad you’re okay,” she added with a small smile. “I mentioned your idea to one of my colleagues at the healers’ college, and he told me he was going to speak with the dean of the engineering and research college over at the main university. You might end up with funding.”

Rhory was happy to listen to them chat, glad Maya was making friends. Perhaps, if he had friends and a task, he might be interested in staying? Except, that was probably wishful thinking.

“Is this about the berry research you mentioned earlier?” Rhory asked.

“Oh yes!” Shartha replied, an eager grin erasing the worry lines on her face. “Can you imagine the implications if we can figure out how to ferment the berries?”

The juice from the pressed berries was delicious, but not exportable. It went bad too quickly, so couldn’t be transported over long distances. With alcohol to prevent that? Their neighboring countries would be clamoring to import it as an expensive delicacy.

However, a twinge of responsibility as the current king gave him pause. Rhory had been dipping his hands into boiling, deadly lava for the last four months to honor the

promise between the people of Aish and the gods. He wasn't going to forget that any time soon.

“The berry skins go to the gods,” he reminded Shartha and Maya.

Shartha nodded. “Absolutely, Your Majesty. I'll ask my friend to consult with the cloisters too.” She bowed to them both. “I'll go order your toddy.”

She left and Rhory led the way into Tycen's private room. The space had transformed in the last few days, no longer stark and empty. A small table with four chairs had been placed in the corner, blocking access to one of the storage cabinets. A lovely patchwork-style quilt in shades of purple and blue had been added to the bed to cover the white bedspread. Rhory already had plans to steal that blanket for himself when he was no longer pretending to be Tycen. Someone had also hung a needlework in bright colors of red and gold of the official flag of Aish on one of the walls to break up the stark white there too.

Tycen was sitting up in bed where Rhory had left him when the guard had burst into the room looking for Captain Adda, who had been reporting on the progress of the investigation at the time. Rhory's chair was still pulled up to the side of the bed and papers were scattered across the bedspread.

Tycen looked up from the stack of papers he was reading when they walked in and a relieved smile spread across his face. His cheeks were rosy and his eyes bright. He no longer looked exhausted, even at the end of the day, although he had taken a nap after lunch.

“Never try to poison one of Ahye’s plant mages with a plant,” Tycen joked.

Maya grimaced good-naturedly. “I’m not a mage; I’m just educated.”

Tycen laughed. “That’s not what I’ve heard about the people of Ayhe. Once you specialize in your element, you practically become one with it. Plants will tell you things in ways I doubt even our highest educated university professors could emulate.”

Maya’s cheeks were red and he ducked his head bashfully, and Rhory had to tear his gaze away from how damned cute that was. Instead, he glared at Tycen to tell him to stop teasing Maya. Although, Tycen had succeeded in taking Maya’s mind off his near-death experience, so the teasing had been effective.

Aidyn walked into the room carrying a steaming mug, which he handed to Maya.

“Shartha said this was for you?” he asked.

Rhory could smell the whiskey from two paces away, so it was apparently quite the toddy. Maya blew on it for a bit, then took a sip. His eyes widened and he let out a quick cough.

“It’s great,” he wheezed out. He blew on it some more before taking a second sip. “I think I need to eat something before I drink any more of this,” he said, putting the mug down on the table.

Tycen finished laughing and let out a breath. “I’ll bet you Nina had a hand in making that. She’s got a heavy touch with the booze. Aidyn, would you do me a favor and close the

door? I want to talk to all of you in private for a moment,” he added, suddenly serious.

Rhory had no idea what Tycen had in mind. There were courtiers who thought Tycen was all laughs and jokes—some of whom tried to take advantage of what they perceived as frivolity—but when Tycen dropped that facade there was no doubt why he was an excellent king.

When the door was closed, Tycen continued. “I am planning to leave the healers’ wing tomorrow morning, which means, Rhory, your time as king has come to an end,” he finished, looking directly at Rhory as he said the last bit.

Both Maya and Aidyn’s jaws dropped, which meant Rhory was wrong and Tycen hadn’t told Aidyn the truth.

“I plan to eat breakfast in our sitting room and then conduct business from the couches there,” he continued, blithely ignoring their reactions, although the twinkle in his eyes said he was enjoying it. “That will give us the opportunity to switch back and give me more time to heal up in relative privacy, where Rhory and I can disappear behind locked doors if I need a break, all while ensuring the work of the kingdom continues. I hope to return to my office by the end of the week, at which point we’ll be back to business as usual.”

“You’re— You’re King—” Aidyn spluttered.

Tycen’s familiar cheeky grin lit up his face. “Yes, I’m King Tycen. Rhory has done an excellent job keeping the kingdom running while I’ve been incapacitated, but I know he’s eager to hand it back over to me.”

Rhory nodded, although he was frowning. “You sure tomorrow isn’t too soon? As much as I want to return to being Prince Rhory, I don’t want to overtax you and have you end up right back here.”

“That’s why I’m only going as far as our sitting room. I can take a break whenever I need to.” His grin went even more mischievous as he looked at the three of them, finally focusing on Aidyn. “Once I’m back to being me, I plan to very subtly start courting you, which means the entire kingdom will know by lunchtime.”

Aidyn’s face went pink, and then white. “You can’t pick me,” he whispered. “I’m just a healer trainee who ran away from home. Technically...biologically, I can produce heirs. If that’s the only way we can be together... Yeah, I will make that work. But would anyone really accept me?”

Tycen scoffed, although not in dismissal of Aidyn’s fear. Rather, as if he didn’t care what the rest of the court might think, which Rhory knew was very true. Tycen had refused to beat to the narrowminded drum of the court conservatives since before their parents had passed, and the court liberals would embrace Aidyn regardless of his gender.

“You are the son of one of the kingdom’s most powerful dukes, which makes you an excellent choice for King’s Consort. The majority of the court won’t care about your gender, and anyone who might will suck it up. Whether you choose to have kids or we hire a surrogate is entirely your decision, and I’ll happily punish anyone who says otherwise. I like you, Aidyn, and I want the rest of the court to meet you because I know they’ll like you too.”

Aidyn's cheeks were pink again and his eyes shined with unshed tears. When Tycen held out his hands, Aidyn rushed forward, falling into Tycen's arms for a long hug. Tycen murmured something into Aidyn's ear, but Rhory didn't listen, letting them have their private moment. He was grinning, glad for Tycen and so very happy something good had come out of what had been such a terrible situation.

"Which leaves you two," Tycen continued when Aidyn pulled away, although they were still holding hands.

Rhory swallowed hard, worried about what was going to come out of Tycen's mouth. He glanced at Maya, who had gone pale again.

"Prince Maya, I would like to increase Aish's diplomatic ties with Ahye, especially after you have performed such an amazing service for Aish. If you and your father agree, I would like to negotiate a political marriage between you and Rhory. It would mean your staying here in Aish indefinitely although, of course, I expect you to take Rhory to visit Ahye and meet your family." Tycen smiled when Maya stared at him, his jaw hanging open and his eyes wide with shock. Rhory had the same expression on his face and could only hope Maya also felt the same warm bubble of elation growing in his chest.

"I don't want an answer now. You and Rhory should take a few weeks and see if you both like the idea. If you don't want to get married, I can find another way to open diplomatic relations with Ahye, but I figured I should give you both a chance." Tycen grinned at them. "Now, one of you open the door so dinner can be served—this time with no poison."

Dinner was quiet, all of them squeezed around the small table. Tycen had apparently used up all his energy on sly tricks, and neither Maya nor Aidyn were inclined to talk. That was fine with Rhory, as he wanted to take the time to process.

Maya was beautiful and so intelligent. He was kind and friendly. Rhory liked him a lot, and the main reason he hadn't attempted to pursue those feelings was because he had been lying about his identity. Tycen had very neatly fixed that issue. Now the only obstacle was Maya himself since Rhory couldn't force Maya to return his regard. Tycen had given them a few weeks, though, so Rhory had time to figure it out.

Tycen was yawning by the time servants cleared away the dishes. Aidyn made noises about helping Tycen change into pajamas while Tycen complained about the sun not having fully set yet. Rhory quickly decided the best thing for he and Maya to do was absent themselves from the budding argument. They left the healers' wing together, heading in the same direction for a while before Maya had to go right to the diplomats' wing and Rhory to the left and up another flight of stairs to the royal wing. The silence between them stretched, the space aching to be filled, so Rhory did.

"It's a lot to take in," he said, the first thing of substance either of them had brought up since Tycen's revelations.

Maya laughed, but it was a strained sound. "I don't even know where to start. If I were home, I'd call for a hot bath and let the heat relax me until I could think straight again."

Whereas in Aish, baths were done with sand. Was Maya missing home? Reading between the lines made Rhory think

Maya just needed time and space. But a hot bath was a possibility. Rhory bit his lip but caved immediately.

“Tycen won’t mind if I share the royal hot springs with you,” Rhory said after a quick glance around to double-check they were completely alone in the hallway. “This way.”

Maya looked perplexed but obediently followed Rhory down a shortcut to the royal wing. “What are hot springs?” Maya asked.

Rhory grinned at her. “You come from a country that is mostly water, but you don’t have hot springs?” he asked. “I guess you do need extreme heat to make hot springs possible though. There are three ways the fire and water in Aish interact. The most common one is that they don’t touch...ever. Lava and water have carved their own separate paths through the country. On occasion, the two meet and we end up with massive steam vents. The steam is so hot it’ll boil your skin off your bones in seconds, although I’ve heard a couple of our villages have an annual festival where they erect a gigantic spit over one of the steam vents. Steamed beef is supposed to be delicious.”

They reached the guards standing outside the royal wing. Since Maya was with Rhory, they didn’t stop him. Rhory led the way past the empty rooms and the nursery, where Tycen and Rhory’s children would one day live. The sitting room below the Sunday ceremony cliff was empty, too, as Rhory led the way deeper into the wing. They stopped at a door not far from the set of rooms Rhory and Tycen shared. Rhory would have to figure out their living arrangements if Aidyn

moved in, since Rhory was currently occupying the queen or consort's bedroom, but that was a problem for later.

The door opened onto a long, private staircase that only had three doors along its length: one here in the royal wing, one seven flights down on the ground floor leading to a set of caves that went under the mountain for emergency escapes, and the third two floors below that in the hot springs.

“On extremely rare occasions, the lava and water find perfect balance, where one doesn't overpower the other,” Rhory explained as he took one of the lamps off the hallway wall and they started climbing down the stairs. “The lava heats the water, but not to boiling or evaporation levels, and the water cools the lava so it doesn't melt the surrounding rock. When that occurs, we get hot springs.”

They were quiet the next few minutes as they focused on the many stairs, but it wasn't long before Rhory led the way into the entrance chamber. A long, long time ago, likely back when the palace was first being built, the space had simply been a massive open cavern, lit by glowing lichen. Someone had since cultivated the lichen so the lamp in Rhory's hand wasn't needed. They had also built curtained partitions with carved rock basins to hold clothes. Rhory led the way to the closest one.

“There should be a white robe in there. Change into that.” He held the curtain aside for Maya, before hurrying to the next partition over to change too.

Maya was waiting for him when Rhory emerged, both of them in belted lightweight white robes, suitable for wearing

into the springs. Rhory had taken a bit more time to tie his long hair up in a knot at the top of his head.

“This way,” Rhory said, trying to be polite and not look at the hint of firm chest peeking out of the edges of Maya’s robe. He led the way past the changing partitions to the back of the cavern where a set of three pools had been carved into the rock. The floor had a slight slope to it. The original pool was highest on the slope, although it had definitely been enlarged at some point. That pool had a carved lip at the lowest edge, where it drained into a second pool, and the second in turn drained into a third.

“This one is the hottest,” Rhory explained. He carefully stepped down into the first pool, hissing happily as the heat enveloped his legs. Two more steps and he reached the shelf where the depth dropped from knee-deep to waist-deep. He sank down, sitting so the water draped over his shoulders and using the higher shelf as a place to rest his elbows. A splash and a second hiss told Rhory Maya was following. A moment later, Maya took up a spot to Rhory’s right, his eyes closed and his face blissed out as the heat worked its way into tired muscles and joints.

“If I had access to this, I would come every day,” Maya murmured, his eyes still closed.

Rhory laughed. “Tycen and I spent a lot of time down here as kids. After our parents died, we were too busy. And we were too tired for all those stairs,” he added, his tone wry.

Maya finally opened his eyes and shifted so he could look at Rhory. “So you really are Prince Rhory? How did switching with King Tycen even happen?”

Rhory laughed again. “We’re identical twins. We’ve been switching places since the moment we could walk. Used to drive our nurses crazy. Then Tycen became king when we were so young and sometimes it was too much for him. I’d attend parties or ceremonies pretending to be him just to give him a break. I’m sure you’ve heard the story of how he was poisoned; he was attending a party and someone doctored his drink? He went to the party pretending to be me because small get-togethers like that gave him an excuse to drink and relax, and pretending to be me removed a lot of the pressure from his shoulders for a few hours.” Rhory sighed, but it was easier to rehash that terrible morning now that Tycen was awake and on the mend. “There were a couple of times when he drank too much and needed me to step in for any early morning duties. I figured that was what he needed until Captain Adda found him passed out in a gutter. The fiction that Rhory had been poisoned was better than King Tycen being hurt; it kept people from panicking. I never expected it to last this long,” Rhory added, his voice choked as his throat closed up over tears he held back. “You have no idea how grateful I am you were able to rescue him.”

“I—” Maya cut himself off and shook his head. “I’m happy I was able to help, of course,” he finally said. “But that’s no reason to want to marry me! I had my father’s permission to come here, but I basically ran away from home. My balance was off, and I needed to get away before my instability hurt someone else. Ahye is a quasi-democratic society. Via the balances—our elementals—the people vote for the next king. My great grandparents were fishermen, but my grandmother was voted king, and my father, the current king,

was her second son. My father wants the dynasty to continue, but for that to happen his children must be in perfect balance or one of them won't be chosen. I couldn't handle that, so when the opportunity to help your brother came up, I told my father I was leaving and he could either give me permission, or see the balances be upset by my disappearance. After that sort of blackmail, he had to let me go.”

“If you want to make a home here, Tycen and I will ensure it. Marriage to me or not,” Rhory cut in quickly. “But...” he trailed off, then clenched his fists and found his courage. “I'd like it if you would still consider me. I don't...feel attraction for many people. You've captivated me from the first moment I saw you, and every time since as well. I would like to get to know you better.”

“I'd like that too.” Maya's voice was only a little louder than a whisper, but a small smile brightened his face. Although Rhory wasn't certain whether the red cheeks were because Maya was blushing or whether he had been in the hot water too long.

“Time to move to the second pool,” Rhory said, dragging himself up and out of the enveloping heat so he could climb down into the next pool. He held out a hand for Maya to take and blushed when he realized Maya was looking at where the weight of Rhory's wet robe had caused it to slip open, revealing most of the left side of Rhory's chest. Maya blinked and focused on Rhory's hand, taking it and letting Rhory help him over the lip and into the slightly cooler water below. But, as Maya put his second foot down, it slid out from under him. They both went splashing down, sending water flying everywhere.

Rhory grabbed for Maya. Even if Maya knew how to swim—which he very probably did—the heat could be disorienting. That was why most people didn't dunk their heads below the water in the hot spring. Rhory yanked them both up, holding onto Maya until he could get his feet steady in the waist-deep water.

“Thanks. Oh,” Maya said, blinking in surprise when he realized their faces were only a few inches apart. Their chests were pressed together, Rhory's arms wrapped around Maya's back to hold him steady.

“Sorry,” Rhory gasped, releasing Maya, then gasped again when Maya's eyes went from light green-blue to deep emerald and he suddenly pressed his lips against Rhory's. The kiss was swift and chaste, yet still managed to turn Rhory's blood to boiling lava as heat rushed through him from head to toe.

“Your brother called it courting, I believe?” Maya asked, stumbling over the unfamiliar Aishen word. “I would like to try that too—with you.” He stepped away, carefully sinking down to relax in the water.

Rhory's brain took a few extra seconds to reengage. He sat down far less gracefully, pushing his sodden hair off his forehead. The knot had come loose at some point.

“I would like that too.”

Chapter Eleven

Maya's muscles felt like butter, loose and relaxed to the point he didn't feel any residual aches even after climbing up all those stairs to return to the royal wing. Prince Rhory had then escorted him to the entrance to the diplomat's wing where they had shared a very awkward wave goodbye, cognizant of the guards watching. Maya had returned to his room alone. However, while his body might be relaxed, Maya's mind was anything but.

That kiss and his audacity at initiating such intimacies! Maya couldn't believe himself, and yet one glance at the way Rhory had looked—water dripping down his exposed chest and hair beautifully disheveled from their fall and the banked heat suppressed behind his blue eyes—and Maya had lost all reason. The quick press of lips, sharing warmth and touch for that brief second, felt so right. Maya had been off balance for so long, searching for something, anything, to set him even again, and one chaste kiss had fixed it all.

He wanted Rhory in a way he had never wanted anyone before. No one else had ever felt so right in his arms. And then, to top it off, Rhory had admitted he returned Maya's feelings!

Maya stripped out of clothes, slightly damp from donning them over wet skin, and changed into pajamas Linus had laid out for him. He fell into bed, his head bouncing off his pillow before sinking in deep, and yanked the lightweight sheet out from underneath him. He curled up and let out a sigh.

Truly, it had been a crazy day. Between his research idea and Shartha's agreement to help, the attempted poisoning, and now Rhory's attentions, Maya didn't know what to focus on first.

He easily put aside his research idea; there was no reason to work on it from bed and it would still be waiting for him in the morning. The poisoning attempt was more pressing, yet at the same time, there was little he could do about it. Maya didn't know why he had been targeted. Possibly for revenge over his role in saving King Tycen? He hadn't done anything else that would motivate someone to harm him. At least, he didn't think so. Although, no one had attacked Shartha or Aidyn for their roles in saving King Tycen. Maybe his poisoning was in retaliation for outing Grigori? Yet, Grigori's main goal had been to discredit Aidyn, so attacking Aidyn still made more sense.

Maya rolled over and rubbed one hand down his face. Captain Adda would have more educated theories anyway. As long as Maya stayed with guards and was careful, no one else would have an opportunity to hurt him. Still, he would have to find time to speak with Captain Adda in the morning to see what, if anything, he had found. Knowing why someone had chosen to target him would go a long way toward assuaging his fears.

Which left that kiss and the shivery, wicked thump of his heart at the memory. Wanting Rhory was easy. Falling in love with him would very likely be as well. Marrying him wouldn't be easy at all. It was one thing if their marriage was only about emotions and their desire to spend the rest of their lives together, but they were both princes. Political marriages came

with contracts and expectations. Entire trade deals and international economies could very well hinge on their making the relationship work. Admittedly, negotiations would take months—if not years—which would give them plenty of time to explore any issues. Still, it was a lot of pressure.

And yet, Maya very much still wanted to try. Rhory made him feel balanced and as if ever, at any time, Maya might start teetering, Rhory would be there to set him right again. He filled that empty space inside Maya that had sent him running from Ahye. Exploring where that might lead was exactly what Maya ought to do, and would do. And, based on that wonderful, far too brief kiss, he'd enjoy himself along the way.

He was smiling as he leaned over to blow out the lamp on his bedside table. The red glow around the tapestry covering his window was soothing tonight, so Maya watched the light undulate as his eyes grew heavier and he slipped into sleep.

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“**Y**our Highness, the servants have brought breakfast,” Linus said, poking his head through the bedroom door as he spoke.

“Thanks,” Maya replied with a nod. “I’ll be right out.”

He yanked the cuff at his wrist into place and turned to look at himself in the mirror. He was wearing a new outfit, commissioned as soon as he learned how harsh the environment could be on the clothes he had brought with him. His clothes were in the same style of pants, shirt, and jacket he was used to, rather than the robes favored in Aish, but the fabric was so light he kept feeling as if the clothes were going to float right off his shoulders. He couldn’t say how such

insubstantial fabric held up to the ash and fire of Aish better than the sturdy fabrics of Maya's previous wardrobe, but he was definitely feeling a few degrees cooler than before, so he didn't want to question it too closely.

Satisfied he looked decent, Maya abandoned the mirror and headed into the sitting room. A small breakfast service for one had been laid out at the dining table. Linus had finished his morning duties and had already left to find his own breakfast at the servant's mess hall. Maya tucked in happily, knowing it was almost impossible to poison eggs over-easy and toast. He drank the accompanying fire flower berry juice, savoring the sweet bite and hoping one day he might unlock its secrets. When he was done, he relaxed back into the padded chair, giving himself a few minutes to digest before he headed to the healers' wing to speak with Shartha.

Or, maybe he ought to go speak with Rhory and King Tycen first? Maya bit his lip, wondering which would be best. Rhory already knew Maya was interested in pursuing a relationship, but they ought to make it official for King Tycen, since it was King Tycen who was asking for a diplomatic partnership as well. But it was also King Tycen's first day back, so Maya should probably give him some time to settle in. He would go to the healers' wing first, and after lunch would ask for an audience.

Maya stood and headed in the direction of the bathing room to wash his hands and face before heading out. A knock sounded on the front door, so he changed direction to answer it, wondering who would be calling on him so early. The only people Maya could think of were Rhory, King Tycen, or

Captain Adda, so he hurried to grip the knob and pull the door open.

“Can I help you?” he asked the stranger standing there.

A moderately sweet, floral smell wafted by. Maya had the briefest moment of panic to think *dream rose* before everything went black.

Chapter Twelve

Rhory stood out of the way, leaving the servants plenty of room to rush around him as they hurried to get the king's chambers set up. Both bedrooms were being cleaned. Rhory's because the room had sat unused for four months and needed a serious dusting, and Tycen's because Rhory wanted it fresh for Tycen's arrival—although he had told the servants since they were doing one, they might as well do the other. The sitting room was also being rearranged, furniture pushed aside so two larger desks and four smaller, secretary's desks could be squeezed in. Another contingent of servants were setting up breakfast for Rhory and Tycen in the dining area.

Most of the servants had left, and Rhory finally felt safe moving away from the wall, when Tycen walked in, escorted by Captain Adda.

“Thank you, Captain,” Tycen said. “Would you like to stay for breakfast?”

“No, thank you,” Captain Adda replied with a bow. “I need to go over security procedures with the guards for this floor again. I'm stationing two right outside this door and four more down the hall. They have orders to summon me if anything happens.” He bowed, then left, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Tycen shrugged. He headed into his room, Rhory following.

“I cannot wait to get out of this hospital gown,” Tycen said with a happy groan as he pulled the pale-blue robe over his

head, dropping it on the floor. He went into the shared dressing room and returned a moment later, a red and gold robe halfway over his head. He handed a purple and silver one to Rhory.

Putting on the purple and silver again lifted a massive weight off Rhory's shoulders, as if he had been surrounded by smoke and was finally able to take a breath of clean air again. He smoothed the fabric in place and sighed happily.

"I am never switching places with you again," Rhory said, his fingers busy unraveling the hair braids he had put in that morning. He led the way back into the sitting room where breakfast was waiting.

"Even if Lord What's-His-Name forgets to invite you to the annual library luncheon again?" Tycen asked, grinning cheekily.

"Well, maybe then, but hopefully Head Librarian Tolpin doesn't make the same mistake a second time."

Tycen looked fit and ready for a full day of work, but Rhory was fully prepared to keep an eye on him, hence why he had requested the second desk. Between Rhory and Nina, Tycen would not overwork himself. They sat and started eating.

"Is there anything pressing I should know for this morning?" Tycen asked.

Rhory swallowed and shook his head. "You should be caught up on all the big things. Nina will know everything else."

As if speaking her name had summoned her, a knock sounded on the door, and a moment later Nina stepped inside.

“I’m early,” she said. “You finish eating. I just want to get things set up here before the rush begins.”

“The rush?” Rhory asked.

“Prince Rhory is healthy again,” she replied. “People are going to want to confirm that, so you’re going to have visitors.”

Rhory could understand that, so letting them in was a necessary evil, but... “Keep it to a minimum. Tycen doesn’t need that much drama on his first day back.”

“But, Rhory, they’re not interested in me. They all want to see you!” Tycen said, laughing. “I’ll be left completely alone.”

Rhory groaned and focused on his eggs, hoping the day wouldn’t be too excruciating.

Luckily, the morning wasn’t too painful. Nina had apparently stationed a secretary with the guards at the end of the hall and was carefully screening who was allowed in. Only those with legitimate concerns made it through. Rhory was able to spend most of his time on reacquainting himself with his own work, sadly abandoned for the last four months. His secretaries had done an admirable job keeping up with it, but some things—like the bridge project Rhory had been spearheading for one of the eastern provinces—required signatures before money could be allotted and contractors hired.

Tycen spent the morning buried in paperwork. He was working to catch up on everything Rhory had done on his

behalf while also continuing the projects Rhory hadn't been able to keep up with. They were both far too busy.

The occasional person whom Nina allowed in spent far too much time scrutinizing Rhory, as if looking for any signs of weakness. He was glad to be able to present himself as hale and otherwise recovered, especially as it meant no one was looking too closely at Tycen, who by late morning was starting to droop.

"Let's call for lunch," Rhory finally said when the paling shade of Tycen's skin was starting to concern him. Tycen's sigh of relief was inaudible, but his shoulders relaxed from where he had them hunched by his ears.

"Good idea," Tycen said. "And we ought to invite Prince Maya, to see how he's doing after yesterday's scare. I'm sure he'd prefer to eat with us, where he knows the food will be closely monitored before it's served." Rhory grinned at that idea. He hadn't seen Maya all morning, and after last night's adventure, he definitely wanted to spend more time with him.

Nina stood and clapped her hands briskly. "Go request lunch for three," she said with a wave to one of the secretaries. "And you go invite Prince Maya," she added to a second secretary. "Once those tasks are complete, we're all going to take an extended lunch. Reconvene around two?" she asked Tycen, who was frowning at her. Luckily, logic—or Tycen's realization that he wouldn't make it through the afternoon without a nap—won and Tycen nodded.

Nina's two undersecretaries bustled off. The third began organizing his desk as he prepared to leave. Nina walked over

to Tycen's desk to drop off another stack of papers for him to review.

"For this afternoon," she said firmly to him before returning to her desk.

Rhory had stood up to stretch, hands over his head as he contorted his back muscles, when a knock sounded at the door. Rhory dropped his hands and looked at Nina, who was frowning. The door popped open a second later, revealing the secretary stationed with the guards at the end of the hall.

"Lady Olivia has sent a missive requesting an audience," the secretary said, holding out a folded piece of paper. Nina took the paper and passed it on to Tycen.

Rhory groaned and rubbed his hands down his face. "What does she want this time? More of the same?"

"Has she been an issue?" Tycen asked, looking up at Rhory curiously. "She's always been one of the quiet nobles at court."

"Really? That surprises me. She's been stopping by weekly, sometimes multiple times a week, demanding I—meaning you—marry and start producing heirs. I've started avoiding attending events where I know she's also been invited."

"Marriage? Why the heck would she be pushing that? Aside from the fact that she's not on the nobles' council—and they're the only ones who have the authority to push that—she'll destroy the delicate unofficial balance that's been keeping everyone happy these last few years."

“Balance?” Rhory asked, wondering if Tycen was referring to Maya somehow, except that didn’t make sense in context.

Tycen laughed and his grin was mischievous. “Haven’t you noticed just how many younger sons and daughters have so conveniently managed to find appointments in the palace? They make for very good spouses for any heirs who might be unattached, and those heirs spend a lot of time at court. I can’t think of a single office in this palace that doesn’t have at least one child of noble birth working in it, all for the hopes of attracting a good marriage.” His grin faded into a more serious expression. “Lady Olivia’s own children are included in that. Her oldest spends a lot of time shadowing her and a lot of time at court, her second oldest works in the library, her third is on the seneschal’s staff, and her fourth...is somewhere. I don’t remember. It makes no sense that she’d start pushing me to marry when she knows that might entice other nobles to do the same, which could ruin any connections all the younger children have already made.”

“I know I don’t look it, but I’m the sixth child of a baron,” Nina added. “Shartha’s mother is a baroness as well, and Aidyn’s father is a duke, just to name a few. Aidyn aside, our parents helped sponsor us to these positions, and I know my father was hopeful I’d catch Tycen’s eye even though I’m fifteen years older. Instead, I fell in love with the second child of a baronet, and we’re quite happy, but that means I’ve been far removed from those political maneuverings. I didn’t realize, but Tycen’s right.”

“When did she start pushing for marriage?” Tycen asked.

Rhory frowned as he thought. “Not long after you were poisoned. Wait! She was in your office that morning. I thought she had an appointment previously scheduled, so I told Nina to reschedule her. When she brought up marriage, I just thought it was the continuation of a previous conversation.”

“It’s not,” Tycen replied, frowning as well. He looked up at Nina. “Summon Captain Adda and tell the kitchen to delay lunch. I think it’s time to take a deeper look into Lady Olivia.”

The secretary who had delivered the letter stepped out to speak with the guards. The door had barely closed behind her when it popped open again and the secretary who had gone to find Maya rushed in.

“Your Majesty, no one can locate Prince Maya,” he said, gasping for air.

“What do you mean?” Rhory asked as the bottom dropped out of his stomach.

“Healer Shartha hasn’t seen him today. He’s not in his rooms or any of the dining halls, and when I asked around no one knew where he might be.”

Rhory strode past the secretary, through the door that was still open wide after the secretary’s abrupt arrival. “Get Captain Adda here now!” Rhory snapped out. One guard had already left to go find Captain Adda, thanks to the earlier secretary. The remaining one dashed off too.

Rhory returned to the sitting room, pacing around the tables and chairs and pushed-back couches. He wanted to search for Maya, start banging on doors, and turning over every rock, and he didn’t dare. Besides the fact that he was

supposed to have been laid up in bed the last four months and wouldn't be capable of running around like that, having a prince act so frantically could stir up panic and actually make it more difficult to find Maya. Besides, what if Maya was simply taking a stroll through the gardens, and all of Rhory's worry was misplaced.

Far too much time elapsed, and Rhory's chest grew tighter with every passing minute. The guards outside the door returned, but only to retake their posts rather than to share any information. Tycen was sitting in his chair, his head tipped back as he stared at the ceiling. He probably would have liked to pace as well, but the wan color to his cheeks said he had overdone it this morning.

Finally, Captain Adda strode into the room. He glanced around, saw only Tycen, Rhory, and Nina—Nina had sent the two undersecretaries away while Rhory was pacing—and shut the door.

“I spoke with Prince Maya's manservant,” Captain Adda began. “He said Prince Maya was getting dressed when he left this morning, and when he returned to the rooms, Prince Maya's breakfast had been eaten, but Prince Maya was not there. He assumed Prince Maya had already gone to the healers' wing, as that was where he spent most of his time. I had already sent a guard to speak with Shartha, and the report I received confirmed your secretary's information. Shartha has not seen Prince Maya today. I then spoke with the guards stationed outside the diplomat's wing, but they are insistent that Prince Maya did not leave this morning. Neither guard is known to take bribes, and I had assigned them to that shift because I believe them to be trustworthy.

“With the manservant’s permission, we conducted a thorough search of Prince Maya’s suite and found no evidence of violence or a struggle. We also didn’t find any indication of a previously unknown hidden passage.” Captain Adda paused to take a breath. “I therefore have to conclude that Prince Maya is still somewhere in the diplomat’s wing; however, I have sent out guards to discretely comb the palace for any sight of Prince Maya, just in case. We searched all the empty rooms, and I have assigned a sergeant to politely request entrance into each diplomat’s room to continue our search. Once I have a list of any that refuse, I may need a royal writ to continue the search.”

“What about the servants’ stairs?” Tycen asked. Rhory groped for a nearby chair and collapsed into it.

“Those also have a set of guards assigned, neither of whom saw anything,” Captain Adda responded. “Prince Maya cannot have been taken very far, and I promise I will find him.”

Rhory barely heard the last through the roaring in his ears, but he focused enough to croak out a response. “Find him. He and I agreed to pursue a marriage contract last night, so he’s a presumptive prince of Aish as well.”

Captain Adda’s eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed again in thought. “That changes any potential motives,” he murmured. “But not the current search parameters. I’ll go oversee—”

A knock sounded on the door, cutting him off. The door opened before anyone could go answer.

“Hello?” Lady Olivia called as she stepped into the room. “I sent a request for an audience, but I haven’t heard back yet. I thought I might be able to stop by instead? Oh!” she added, looking at the serious faces in the room. “Am I interrupting?”

Chapter Thirteen

“Lady Olivia, do come in,” Tycen said, practically purring the words.

The last time Rhory had heard that particular tone, one of the conservatives had gone too far in his attempt to keep Tycen off the throne. Tycen had effectively destroyed him in one of the first acts that had proven he had the mettle to rule. Captain Adda apparently recognized the tone as well, since he shifted into a parade rest rather than leaving as he had been about to do a moment earlier.

Lady Olivia either didn't recognize that tone or didn't care as she nonchalantly walked into the room and took a seat in one of the visitors' chairs placed on the far side of Tycen's desk.

“How can I help you, today?” Tycen asked. The excitement or adrenalin had brought color to his cheeks so he looked healthy again.

“I am tired of tiptoeing through the lava flow,” she declared. She pulled a piece of paper out of the folder she was holding and pushed it across the desk. “I have a list of potential candidates who would make excellent spouses. You must choose one.”

Tycen didn't bother looking at the paper, his gaze focused on her. “What makes you think any of these people would be of interest to me?” he asked. While his tone was nonchalant, his eyes were sharp as he studied her.

She wasn't fidgeting, and her fingers were loose over the folder rather than clamped, but the way she leaned forward to persuade Tycen had a hint of desperation.

"They're all young, educated, and of the right social status," she responded. "Look, I'm as happy as anyone that Prince Rhory has recovered, but the terrible experience should have cemented the fear that should you both perish, there is no viable heir. You must choose a spouse from that list today!"

"And if I say I have already chosen the person I wish to marry?" Tycen asked.

Lady Olivia shook her head. "Political marriages are for younger sons. You are king, so you must choose a spouse who will strengthen your status in this country, a child of Aish, not an unknown from a pond two weeks' travel away."

Rhory sat up and Tycen's gaze sharpened. "I'm courting one of the children of the Duke of Magnus, who I believe falls under your parameters, even if I doubt they are on your list. Why would you assume I'm interested in Prince Maya?"

She scoffed. "Don't bother lying to me. You were seen just last night cavorting with that prince."

"That was me," Rhory cut in. "I snuck out of the healers' wing and wore Tycen's robes so no one would catch me."

She scoffed again, rolling her eyes. "You can't cover for your brother, Your Highness. That water prince is completely unsuitable and your people will never allow him to become King's Consort. Your nobles will rebel and you'll be forced out in a coup."

“The last person who threatened a coup was stripped of his titles and sentenced to ten years labor in the northern mines,” Tycen said, all geniality gone from his voice.

Lady Olivia’s shoulders tightened, but she otherwise didn’t react. “I’m not threatening anything, Your Majesty, merely making an observation that your choice for spouse must be a wise one. The best options are on that list.”

Tycen finally picked up the piece of paper, reading slowly down the list of names. “Interesting options,” Tycen said after a few long minutes where Rhory wanted to cross the room to strangle him. Maya was missing, and Tycen was actually entertaining this nonsense? Except, Rhory knew Tycen better than that; he had something up his sleeve. “Every single one of the families of the people listed here have some sort of connection to Lord Carlti, either as his allies, subordinates, or those he has under his thumb. How is Lord Carlti controlling you, Lady Olivia?”

Rhory swallowed a gasp as Lady Olivia went white. Her hands started trembling until she clenched them into fists. Lord Carlti, Marquess of Canonadeve, was the leader of the court conservatives. He had taken over that faction after Lord Lowe had attempted a coup and been sent to the mines. Rhory didn’t like him, but he didn’t like any of the conservative faction. Something about Lord Carlti had always set him on edge, but Rhory had always assumed that was because they had absolutely nothing in common and because Rhory disagreed with just about everything Lord Carlti stood for.

After the Lord Lowe near fiasco, Tycen had made it a priority to know everything there was to know about the

conservative faction, particularly its leaders. Rhory wouldn't be surprised if Tycen knew how Lord Carlti took his coffee, let alone his allies, subordinates, and lackeys. Rhory couldn't have looked at that list of names and come up with Lord Carlti, but Tycen had that and more memorized. Rhory doubted anyone else could hold that much information in their minds without going crazy, but Tycen had always been special.

“You have exactly one chance to avoid a jail cell,” Tycen continued. The weight and menace in his voice even sent a shiver down Rhory's spine. “Tell me, right now, why Lord Carlti is able to force you to be the front for his political agenda.”

Lady Olivia swallowed hard as her eyes filled with tears. “He owns my debt. That money keeps my people fed and in their homes, and he threatened to call it in immediately if I didn't convince you to marry one of his chosen spouse candidates.”

“Owns your debt? You received a loan from the crown for when the lava river changed course and destroyed your fields and half of that town.”

Lady Olivia shook her head. “I received the paperwork stating a royal loan had been granted, but no matter how many times I visited the financial office, I never received any actual money. I was forced to take out a personal loan, which I only realized was financed by Lord Carlti when he handed me the proof a few months ago.”

Rhory and Tycen were both frowning. If she had the paperwork, she definitely should have received the money, which meant there was some sort of corruption in the finance

department as well. If Lord Carlti was able to use that to force someone as powerful as Lady Olivia to do his bidding, who else did he have under his thumb?

“Can you think of anyone in the diplomat’s wing with whom Lord Carlti might have a connection?” Tycen asked.

She shook her head, wiping her eyes with the back of one hand. “Lord Carlti doesn’t spend time with people outside his political circle. The diplomats shouldn’t hold any interest—” She cut herself off, frowning. “Except, I saw him speaking with the ambassador to Ahye two nights ago.”

“Ahye?” Rhory asked. “Do you know why?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t. I was on the opposite side of the King’s Hall, hoping Lord Carlti wouldn’t notice me.”

Tycen leaned back in his chair. “Thank you for being honest, Lady Olivia. I suggest you return to your rooms and remain there for the next few days. Plead illness if you must. Don’t try to contact anyone, and if Lord Carlti inquires about your progress, tell him the truth: that you delivered the list of names and are awaiting my response. You will be under discrete guard, so we will know if you try to disobey me, at which point Captain Adda will walk you directly over to the prison. Do you understand?”

“Thank you for your leniency, Your Majesty.” She stood and bowed low. “You won’t have any cause to doubt me, I promise you.”

Tycen shot Captain Adda a quick glance. He nodded and followed Lady Olivia as she left the room. He would set up a watch on her and return.

“Why would Ambassador Eaton be involved with Maya’s kidnapping?” Rhory asked. “He was very happy when I informed him Prince Maya would be visiting Aish.”

“You’ll have to ask him. When Captain Adda returns, go with him and supervise the search,” Tycen replied. He waved Nina over. “How long would it take your department to clandestinely audit the financial department?” he asked her.

She sighed heavily. “Months, if not years. Money is involved with every single aspect of Aish, so there must be thousands of documents from just this year alone.”

“And if I could provide you with specific people to audit instead?”

“Depends on how much work they’ve done, but not more than a few weeks, I think?” she replied. “Who do you have in mind?”

Tycen held out the list of spousal candidates. “Two of the people on this list work in the finance department. Let’s start with them and see what turns up.”

She grinned at him. “Based on what I just heard, I bet I’ll find something interesting. I’ll let you know when I have results.” She nodded to them both, went over to her desk to grab a stack of papers, and left.

Captain Adda held the door for her, stepping back into the room once she was gone. “I have full surveillance set up on Lady Olivia. Luckily, her rooms are in an area where my guards can stay hidden. Where do you need me now?”

“I tasked Nina with digging into the finance department, so when she has anything, I’m sure you’ll be able to make some

arrests there. For now, please go with Rhory and have a chat with Ambassador Eaton. Finding Maya is our top priority. The rest can wait until after that.”

Rhory led the way out of the sitting room and the royal wing, covering the distance to the diplomats’ wing as quickly as he could without losing any decorum. Guards were everywhere, some standing around, some walking the hall, and others going in and out of rooms. Captain Adda left for a moment and returned with one of his lieutenants.

“Lieutenant Droue is in charge here,” Captain Adda said by way of introduction.

“Lieutenant, how goes the search?” Rhory asked, aching to blurt out that they needed to interrogate Ambassador Eaton right now, while knowing doing so would only incite the guards surrounding them into a potentially dangerous frenzy.

“All the empty rooms have been searched, and the majority of the ambassadors have allowed us entrance into their rooms. There has been no sign of Prince May’yim, but we are still looking.”

“Which ambassador’s rooms remain?” Rhory asked.

“The ambassador of Ching took a retinue to the city this morning, so I have dispatched some guards to request access. The ambassador of Ahye claimed he was holding a vigil in the hopes the balances would reveal who committed such a heinous crime, and asked us to return when the vigil was complete. The ambassador—”

Rhory held up a hand to cut him off. “Perhaps I can convince Ambassador Eaton to speed up his vigil. Which

room is his?”

Droue led the way to one of the dozen doors along the hall and knocked. Shartha appeared at Rhory’s side while they waited for an answer, the bag hanging from her shoulder bulging at the seams.

“I’m ready when we find him,” she said, her chin set.

“I told you, I am mid vigil and you can search my rooms when I’m done!” Ambassador Eaton yelled as he yanked the door open, his brilliant blue hair disheveled and his eyes wide and frantic. He gasped and stumbled back a step when he saw Rhory standing there.

“Where is he, Ambassador?” Rhory asked, his voice firm. He stepped forward, crossing the threshold into the ambassador’s rooms. “The balances have spoken. Show me where you’re keeping him.”

“I— I don’t—” he stuttered.

“Now,” Rhory snapped.

“I can’t disobey King Ahyekill,” Ambassador Eaton wailed. “He demanded if it appeared Prince May’yim showed any indication that he wouldn’t return to Ahye, I was to use any and all means to return him.”

“Where is he?” Rhory snapped again. He didn’t care what King Ahyekill wanted; only Maya’s will mattered, and Rhory knew Maya didn’t want this.

Ambassador Eaton’s shoulder’s slumped. “He’s locked in a trunk in my manservant’s quarters,” he whispered.

“The key?” Droue asked, holding his hand under Ambassador Eaton’s nose.

Ambassador Eaton reached under his shirt and pulled out a key on a string hanging around his neck. Droue took the key and led the way through the suite, Rhory, Shartha, and Adda tight on his heels. They walked past packed trunks and bags; it appeared Ambassador Eaton was planning to leave very soon, and it sounded like Maya would have been concealed with the luggage.

The trunk sitting in the middle of the manservant’s room was far too ornate for a servant to own, the sides and top carved and stamped, with leather straps holding it closed. Droue fit the key into the lock and slipped the straps off. He carefully heaved the lid open, revealing Maya, curled up on a nest of blankets and pillows, bound with rope at the wrists and ankles. His eyes were closed and his breathing even, but he didn’t wake at the sudden light or jostling.

“Is it safe to move him?” Droue asked.

Shartha pushed forward. She ran her hands down his spine and over his head, checking for something. She found the pulse in his neck and counted for a few moments, then held her wrist over his mouth to feel his breaths puff against her skin.

“Yes. Move him to the bed and cut him free,” she instructed once she was satisfied he didn’t have any serious injuries.

Droue and Adda gently lifted Maya out of the trunk and placed him on the small servant’s bed in the corner. Adda cut the rope, and Shartha straightened Maya’s limbs so he was

lying flat. Maya still hadn't woken and hadn't even made a sound of protest at being moved. Rhory's heart was beating in his throat, and he tried to swallow his panic down so he didn't throw up.

Shartha took Maya's pulse at the wrist and then at the neck again, frowning as she counted. She tapped a few times on his chest with one knuckle, leaning close to listen, and carefully pulled up one eyelid. Rhory had no idea what she was looking for, but since Maya wasn't blue anywhere, he felt safe in assuming this wasn't fire-flower-berry-skin poisoning. Shartha gently opened Maya's mouth and waited for his next exhale, which she wafted toward her nose with one hand.

"That's dream rose. I'm sure of it." Shartha dug in her bag, sending rolls of bandages and wrapped packages tumbling onto the floor. She came up with a small, corked vial.

"How do you know it's dream rose?" Captain Adda asked before Rhory could clear his throat enough to force words out.

"His breath smells like roses," she explained as she started working the cork free. "Even chewing on rose petals or swilling rose perfume won't cause a scent that strong."

The cork released with a pop, and Shartha held the open end underneath Maya's nose. For a long, awful moment, nothing happened. Then Maya's nose crinkled, and his mouth twisted as if he smelled something awful. His eyes flew open, and he shot up into a sitting position with a gasp. His hands patted along the bed as if searching for something as he panted, but then his gaze lost the vague look and he focused on the room. He looked around until he saw Rhory and then let

out a heavy sigh. Rhory fought to keep his knees, weakened in relief, from collapsing underneath him as he smiled at Maya.

“Dream rose is better than some of the alternatives, but still less than pleasant,” Maya said, his voice clear and strong. He rubbed his eyes and then ran his hand through his hair. “Thank you for finding me. Do you know who attacked me?”

“Your ambassador,” Captain Adda replied, his tone dry as he waved toward where two guards were holding Ambassador Eaton.

“What? Why?” Maya gasped out, turning a glare on Eaton.

Ambassador Eaton wilted immediately. “Your father sent a missive. You were required to return home, so if I saw any indication otherwise I was to change your mind or return you by any means necessary.”

“My father wanted to *what?*” Maya’s jaw hung open, and fury was building in his eyes. That fury matched the anger building in Rhory’s chest, a fire that blazed and fought to explode out of him.

“I knew you wouldn’t miss a plant-based poison, and I figured a serious threat to your life would convince you it was time to leave, so I had my manservant serve you the choke vine. When that didn’t work, I knew I had to take drastic action. King Ahyekill needs you to return home.”

Maya snorted in disbelief. “My father needs no such thing. He’s an arrogant old man desperate not to lose the crown. Clearly, his balances are off. You will tell him my balance has been restored, thanks to my coming to Aish, and I have no intention of leaving.”

“Tell me about your conversation with Lord Carlti,” Captain Adda cut in when Ambassador Eaton only spluttered in response to Maya’s orders.

“Lord Carlti?” Ambassador Eaton asked, grasping desperately onto the non sequitur. “His advice since I arrived here three years ago has been invaluable.”

“Tell me about the advice he provided about Prince May’yim,” Adda continued.

“About Prince May’yim?” Ambassador Eaton asked, already shaking his head. “No, he only warned me Prince May’yim was consulting with one of the local colleges regarding starting research for a long-term project. That’s how I knew I needed to convince Prince May’yim to return home immediately.”

Rhory took in and let out three very slow breaths, attempting to control the raging inferno inside that wanted him to strangle Ambassador Eaton. He needed to be a prince in this situation, rather than Maya’s friend or love interest.

“Ambassador Eaton,” Rhory said, using his most officious tone. “You have broken at least a dozen Aishen laws to include kidnapping, extortion, and attempted murder. You will spend the rest of today drafting an official missive to King Tycen outlining exactly what you did to Prince May’yim and why. You will include every single person you spoke with about the issue or about Prince May’yim’s activities while in Aish, including any conversations you had with Lord Carlti. You will be under guard and are not allowed to leave your suite. Tomorrow morning you will be escorted to the border. If your missive to King Tycen provides exacting detail, Aish will

allow Ahye to send a replacement. If King Ahyekill wishes to have continued diplomatic and trade relations with Aish, your missive will be exacting.”

Rhory let out another breath as he turned away from the trembling Ambassador Eaton to hold out a hand to Maya.

“Do you feel up to walking?” Rhory asked.

Maya nodded. “Yes. Dream rose only causes very vivid dreams. Once a swampbloom concoction is administered, there’s no further side effects.” He placed his hand in Rhory’s and let Rhory pull him to his feet, but he turned to speak with Shartha instead. “Your particular concoction was excellent. Very potent. I’d love to have your recipe.”

“Of course,” Shartha replied, grinning at Maya. “I’m so glad it was an easy solution.”

Maya laughed. “Me too. Shall we leave Eaton to his letter writing?”

Hand in hand, Rhory and Maya walked out of the room, heading back to where Tycen and a long-delayed lunch were waiting.

Epilogue

Maya settled into the hard wooden chair on the witness platform and placed his folder on the lectern in front of him. He was wearing his crown, which had been tucked away in a locked jewelry case since before he left Ahye, and a suit with a sash, ribbons, and pins on the breasts.

“Prince May’yim Ahyekill, do you promise to tell the truth as you know it, to honor your gods and your people by providing accurate statements to the best of your knowledge?”

The judge’s voice was stern but not unkind. Maya held one hand out, the palm parallel to the ground, so everyone could see it didn’t shake; his balances were perfect.

“I so swear,” he replied.

“Thank you,” the judge said. She turned to where Captain Adda was sitting at one of the two tables in the center of the room. “Your witness, Captain.”

The room was packed with people. Captain Adda and a royal lawyer sat at the table to Maya’s left, Lord Carlti and his own representative at a second table to Maya’s right. A low partition separated the tables from the rest of the room, which had dozens of evenly spaced benches. Every bench was full, and people were standing along the walls and by the back door. Tycen, Rhory, Aidyn, and Shartha sat in plush chairs up in the royal box to the left of the room, which was one floor up and only accessible via a separate hallway. Maya had been sitting with them until he was called to testify. A second raised dais was to the right of the room, accessible via a staircase that

terminated near Lord Carlti's table. Sixteen nobles sat on that dais to hear the witnesses and decide on the guilt or innocence of the accused.

Captain Adda stood and walked to the cleared space in front of the witness stand. "Prince May'yim, you are here to bear witness not only to what happened to you, but as a representative of the Kingdom of Ahye. Tell us about the morning of the attack."

So much had happened over the last year, including some truly momentous occasions, but Maya still vividly remembered everything that had happened that day, almost exactly twelve months ago.

"I had just finished eating breakfast when someone knocked on my door. When I answered, I smelled dream rose. The danger of dream rose is once you can smell it, it's too late. When I woke after Chief Healer Shartha administered the antidote, I was in the servant's quarters in Ambassador Eaton's suite."

"Explain how you learned Ambassador Eaton tried to kidnap you," Captain Adda said.

"He explained the plot himself," Maya started, then continued to explain everything that had happened that morning.

"When did you learn Lord Carlti was involved?" Adda asked next.

"Objection! Leading the witness!" Lord Carlti's representative yelled.

“I’ll rephrase,” Adda replied. “Tell me what Ambassador Eaton said in regard to Lord Carlti.”

“He said Lord Carlti had indirectly informed him of my plans to remain in Aish, which went contrary to my father’s demands that I return to Ahye. Based on that warning, Ambassador Eaton knew he had to act.”

“Prince May’yim, you have in front of you the official, signed declaration of Ambassador Eaton regarding his decision to attack you. Please read the section regarding Lord Carlti.”

A court clerk walked up the stairs to the nobles’ dais and passed out official copies of Ambassador Eaton’s statement. Maya opened the folder in front of him and started to read.

“At the time, I was incredibly glad Lord Carlti approached me to warn me about Prince May’yim’s intentions. It was as if he knew I was desperate for any information, as if he heard the call of the balances to come to my aid.”

“Prince May’yim,” Adda continued when Maya finished reading. “Why do you believe, to the best of your knowledge, Lord Carlti was interested in facilitating your removal from Aish?”

“To the best of my knowledge? I know I was seen in the company of King Tycen on multiple occasions leading up to Lord Carlti’s warning. I believe people either misconstrued our friendship, or confused King Tycen for Prince Rhory, since they are identical. In my opinion, if someone like Lord Carlti saw me as an impediment to his plans, engaging Ambassador Eaton was the easiest way to remove me from the picture.”

“What plans might those be?” Adda asked.

“If Lord Carlti was concerned I was getting too close to King Tycen? To prevent King Tycen from marrying me and thereby preventing one of Lord Carlti’s minions from being chosen instead.”

“Objection! Conjecture!” Lord Carlti’s representative called out.

“Given he stated that as an opinion, I’ll allow it,” the judge declared. She frowned at both Captain Adda and Lord Carlti. “But it is on the cusp, so I am delivering a warning.” She waited for both Captain Adda and Lord Carlti’s representative to nod. “Continue.”

“I have no further questions,” Captain Adda declared before returning to his seat.

“Very well. Do you have a rebuttal?” the judge asked Lord Carlti.

Lord Carlti’s representative stood and took Captain Adda’s place in the cleared space in front of Maya.

“Did you view this so-called interaction between the disgraced Ambassador Eaton and Lord Carlti?” he asked.

“I did not,” Maya replied.

“Which means the only evidence you have is a letter written by a man desperate to ensure Aish did not use his terrible actions to cut diplomatic ties with Ahye?”

“I was awake when he confessed verbally,” Maya disagreed. “He did not know then that he was being banished.”

The representative waved a hand as if brushing Maya's words aside. "He was an ambassador. It was his job to know that was exactly what would occur. If you have no actual proof of your accusation, then I have no further questions. The defense rests for this witness."

"Very well. Prince May'yim, thank you for your testimony. You may return to your seat. What witness will you call next, Captain?" the judge said.

"I call Lady Olivia, Duchess of Lava's Bend." The audience gasped. She would testify about how Lord Carlti coerced her into participating in his scheme, followed by the clerk in the finance department who had made her money disappear. The clerk had agreed to testify against Lord Carlti in return for a lighter sentence.

Maya closed his folder and stood. He left the witness box, walked out the side door and down the hallway until he reached a staircase with four guards stationed in front of it. They nodded to him and stepped aside, letting him pass.

An entire year since he had arrived in Aish, Maya mused as he climbed. That much time passing was hard to fathom, especially since with so much going on it had flown by. Three months ago, Captain Adda and his team had simultaneously arrested twenty-three people, rounding up Lord Carlti and his entire network in one afternoon. Since then, almost every activity had been for trial preparation. First was the trial for Lord Carlti because a guilty verdict for the leader would go a very long way toward securing guilty verdicts for the rest of his network. Maya was one of the earlier witnesses as Captain Adda slowly built the story of Lord Carlti's scheme.

The entirety of it boiled down to Tycen's attempts to make the nobles' council more diverse, allowing in different people on a rotating basis and thereby ousting the long-standing members until their turn came around again. Lord Carlti and the court conservatives had long held the majority vote and had used their positions to further enrich their own coffers for decades.

Lord Carlti's plan was simple, yet devious at the same time. By hurting but not killing Tycen, he had rightly assumed Rhory would take over to keep the kingdom running smoothly. Lord Carlti thought Rhory would then be vulnerable and easy to manipulate; Rhory's inexperience as king combined with the stress of Tycen being incapacitated meant Rhory would be desperate for any and all guidance. Which was where Lady Olivia came in. She was powerful and well liked—an old friend to Tycen and Rhory's mother—so her advice to choose a spouse should have convinced Rhory to consider it. After Rhory started entertaining potential marriage candidates, there would be no going back. Rhory would have to choose one and marry, all while pretending to be Tycen. Lord Carlti had ensured Tycen wouldn't wake by mentioning to Grigori the best way to get back at Aidyn for discrediting him was by ruining their medicines. When that part of the plan failed and Tycen returned to the throne, he would be forced to continue the marriage Rhory had started. The queen or consort would be Lord Carlti's stooge, who would then manipulate Tycen into forgetting about reducing the power of the nobles' council.

Had Rhory been a bit less savvy or stubborn, the plan might have worked. But then Maya had also arrived and

started appearing at Rhory's side while he was still pretending to be Tycen. The entire plan hinged on Rhory choosing one of Lord Carlti's stooges, and Maya's presence dropped a rock in that lava pit. Lord Carlti needed to remove Maya from the picture before the plan fell apart.

That Captain Adda had unraveled the entire plot was beyond impressive. He was quickly becoming a friend, and Maya wouldn't be surprised if he was promoted when the position above him opened up.

Maya emerged onto the balcony and retook his seat between Rhory and Aidyn. Rhory reached out to take Maya's hand.

"You did great," he whispered, grinning. His crown—which he and Tycen only wore for official occasions—was slightly askew, so Maya straightened it.

"You did," Aidyn agreed. His hands were clasped in his lap, the brilliant engagement ring on his finger practically glowing. The main stone was a red ruby, surrounded by garnets in an ombre from light red to deep burgundy. The final stones were dark sapphires, and all of it was worked into the shape of a flame.

Six months ago—three months prior to the arrests—Tycen had popped the question. Maya had been busy helping out with wedding preparations since, including being present when Aidyn's father and sisters arrived, all of whom completely and unsurprisingly apologetic for how they had treated Aidyn. Tycen was still figuring out what to do with them.

Of course, Maya had his research on top of all that. Nine months ago—three months after his kidnapping was solved—he had cracked the idea that the fleshy interior of the fire berry’s roots might ferment without poisoning everyone. Mixing the fermented roots with the berry juice created a cocktail that had the entire court raving, including ambassadors requesting to send casks back to their home countries as gifts. Setting up supply lines to grow and then transport the berries and roots to a facility to press them, cask them for fermentation, and then ship them was an insane task. Maya had four secretaries of his own now to help him.

And there was Rhory. They had agreed to wait on any engagement news until after Tycen and Aidyn’s wedding, but Maya’s feelings for Rhory had only grown over the last year. He knew Rhory felt the same.

Rhory placed his hands on top of Maya’s to stop him fussing with how the crown was lying and smiled. He brought their clasped hands down, then released one so they could turn to watch the proceedings below. He held on to Maya’s other hand, squeezing gently, and Maya smiled. Rhory was his balance, and he was Rhory’s, and they had the rest of their lives together to prove it.

About the Author

When Mell Eight was in high school, she discovered dragons. Beautiful, wondrous creatures that took her on epic adventures both to faraway lands and on journeys of the heart. Mell wanted to create dragons of her own, so she put pen to paper. Mell Eight is now known for her own soaring dragons, as well as for other wonderful characters dancing across the pages of her books. While she mostly writes paranormal or fantasy stories, she has been seen exploring the real world once or twice.

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