



ON
SILVER
WINDS

DUET OF SNOW AND SILVER

AVA SMIDDY

On Silver Winds
A Duet of Snow and Silver
Ava Smiddy

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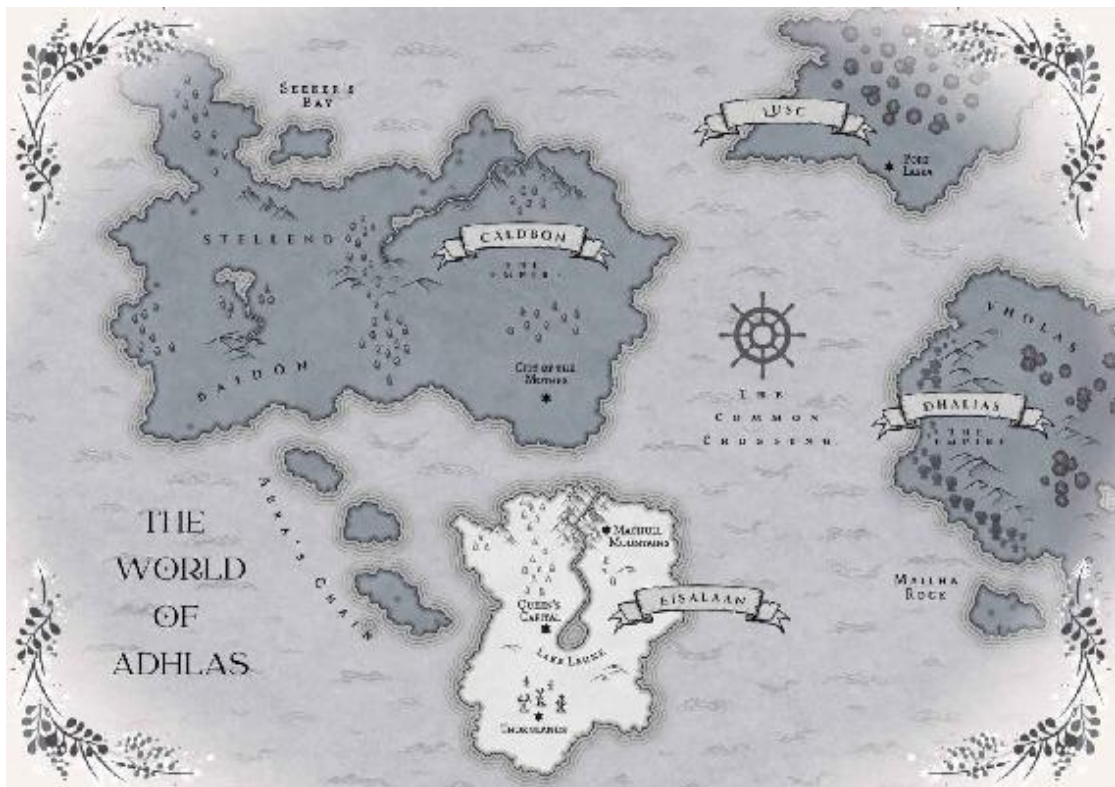
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Map of Adhlas



Pronunciation Guide

Places

Adhlas

pronounced: Add-lass

Eisalaan

pronounced: Esh-ah-lin

Caldbon

pronounced: Cal-bon

Machull

pronounced: Mack - ool

Dhalias

pronounced: Dall-ee-ahs

Names

Beira

pronounced: Bae-rah

Cumhaill

pronounced: Kuh-wall

Cerwyn/Ceri

pronounced: Kerr-a-win/Kerry

Mareda

pronounced: Mah-red-ah

Iseult

pronounced: Iz-ult

*For Brian,
You make it so easy to write love stories*



Prologue

13 Winters Past

“Is it a love story?”

The little girl sniffed, and rolled over in her bed, peering up at him with red-rimmed eyes.

It was there, in the bedroom of his quietly heartbroken eight-year-old daughter, that Silas truly considered committing treason for the first time. He set the storybook down on her bedside table, and brushed the wispy cloud of curls back from her forehead.

“*Every* story is a love story,” he told her. “From the pages of your fairytales, to the stories of everyone in this palace and

beyond.”

He needed her to believe it. To believe that this life was not her *whole* life. That her story was not yet written.

She sat up, the thick covers tenting as she drew her knees to her chin. In her little round face, his own brown eyes were mirrored back at him, though hers were wide and shiny with tears.

“Every story?”

“Every story. It’s all about love, one way or another. If you want to understand someone’s character, Adeline, look to what they love the most.”

She was silent for so long that he worried he’d been too cryptic; that he’d lost her with his subtle lesson in the nuance of human nature, and what made us behave as we did. What made a grown woman treat a child of her own blood with such bone chilling cruelty.

As though Aera herself were listening, a gentle gust pressed at the window, the wind heaving a low sigh beyond the palace walls. Across the room, the windowpanes were blurred with frost, snow clinging neatly to the frame at the corners and cross-sections. Silas shivered despite the warmth of the room, the pop and roar of the small fire in the grate behind him.

Winds guide me, he prayed.

Eight years in, and he still didn’t know how to do this. How to be everything to this child, who asked for so little and needed so much more than he alone could give.

Bring her home, his family had written, time and time again. *Bring her to Dhalias*.

And he wanted to. He had never wanted to run as badly as he did today, on Adeline’s long-awaited Blessing Day.

For most children, a Blessing Day might mean a ceremony at the temple and a meal shared with friends and neighbours. For the second-born Princess of Eisalaan, it meant a citywide event.

She had run off to the kitchens that morning, tucking herself out of the way as she so often did when the bladed pendulum of her mother's attention came swinging towards her. She lived a lonely childhood, always just slightly too young for her sister and the older children of the Queen's closest courtiers. But there was one girl her age in the palace, the child of a porter; a sweet-natured little wisp named Elsie. They shared jokes and warm bread rolls, and she was Adeline's only true friend.

Silas had been overrun with preparations, and foolishly left his daughter to keep herself busy. He had not seen her find the tray of goblets set aside for the family dining table. He had not known she would dust the goblet rims with silvered sugar, some little trick she planned to play on her sister. He had not guessed that the Queen of Eisalaan would drink from a dusted goblet, and deliver a Blessing Day speech to the entire city with a silver pencil moustache upon her lip. Nor that the laughter of the crowd could bring such a warmth to her cold blue eyes; a burning, raging warmth. The blue heart of a flame. A fire that caught too quickly.

She acted fast.

By the time they set down the desserts, the Queen had sent a message to the kitchens; a message to be delivered to Elsie's mother with great haste. And, as Adeline said goodnight, and the Queen took the girl in a rare embrace, Silas felt a prickle of unease roll down his spine. He stood frozen, rooted as he watched her lips move, as she poured soft, venomous words into his child's ear.

Adeline fled the hall in tears.

Bring her home, that's what his family would have told him.

But he couldn't.

Not even now, not even after what she'd done.

"What about you then, Papa?" Adeline asked finally, drawing him back to himself. She fixed him with a sly, sideways look, impish beneath the dewy shine of her tears. "What do you love the most?"

Silas swallowed against the tightness in his throat, and fixed on the warmest grin he could find within.

“Why *you* of course, little Mischief. The sound of your laughter? That’s *my* love story.”

And with that, he lunged at her, tickling mercilessly at her ribs and under her arms. Adeline screeched and giggled, and writhed out of his grasp, scrambling among the pillows to escape him. Safely out of reach, her laughter slowed, and she was silent for another long moment. And as she caught her breath, Silas held his. Knowing, somehow, what would come next.

“What about my mother?” She tilted her small face up, chin lifted high. “What does she love?”

Try as he might, Silas could not keep the smile on his face. He would not lie to her. Not about this. He took her hand and spoke gently.

“Your mother is a Queen first and foremost,” he said. “She loves her Kingdom most of all.”



Chapter 1

Adeline

A sea of elbows.

That's what the tavern had become; a too-tight tangle of joints for her to weave through, a bog of sodden cloak tails for her to trip and skid past. It was too bloody hot in here, despite the fresh snowfall gathering outside the breath-fogged windows. The air was thick with sweat and cider, humming with music and overlapping chatter. Her ears rang as she pushed through the crush, so loud she could barely make out Gerard's voice behind her, bellowing her name over the heads of the crowd, calling for her to stop, to wait.

Leave it, Adeline!

But she couldn't. It wasn't will that moved her after all, but something sharper and edged with fear. She could taste it, acidic on the back of her tongue.

“Stop!”

Adeline shouted at the top of her lungs, and the ringing command carried her voice enough that several heads swivelled towards her as she passed, even with the muffling roar of music and chatter that hadn't stuttered when the commotion broke out.

He didn't turn.

The Captain's back was squared off to her, long grey cloak rippling like stormy waters as he moved; graceful, somehow, like violence was a dance he knew well. His leg swung smoothly, and the drunken man in his grasp fell to his knees; she was close enough now to hear the *thunk* of his head hitting the brass railing beneath the bar. A sickening *pop* that might have been his elbow joint, his wrist still tight in the Captain's white knuckled grip. He was convulsing; *sobbing*, she realised when she caught a glimpse of his reddened face between the Captain's knees. And still the Captain lifted one heavy booted foot to the man's shoulder and –

“DON'T!”

“Adeline, *wait* –”

Her hand landed on the Captain's arm and he dropped the drunk man immediately. She might have felt relief at that, if given the time to feel anything at all. As it was, in the split second that followed, the Captain finally whipped around to face her.

And sent her crashing into the bar.

Patrons scattered beneath her like wooden pins. Pain came in an afterthought, a sharp crack across her jaw, a spike of fire all the way up her arm. Her wrist had caught the edge of the wooden counter when she stumbled back under the blow. Gerard was yelling her name from across the tavern, and unfamiliar hands steadied her from behind. Adeline caught her

breath with a wheezed “*Fuck*”, and the air around her stilled, the music finally dying down, voices scattering to a solid hush. In the shocked silence, she had the briefest impression of the Captain’s cold, iron stare narrowed on hers, his arm cocked back as though he’d strike her again. Her nerves shrank away from her skin, that fiery resolve wilting at the snarl tugging his thin lips. But then he blinked. His eyes widened, only slightly, recognition flashing, arm lowering. All this in just a moment, just one long breath - before a wall of outraged patrons surged around him and the hold of his stare released her.

Then all hell broke loose.

The summons arrived as Adeline was stepping out of the bath.

She’d struggled to wake that morning, her mind peeling from the depths of sleep to a body more battered and aching than seemed fair. *No good deed*, and all that. But she wasn’t going to let a throbbing wrist and a mild hangover spoil her mood; not today.

She’d dragged herself from her nest of blankets, and a long soak in hot water and fragrant, herbal oils had soothed the pain in her wrist enough that she could ignore it as she wrapped herself up in her fluffiest robe. Padding through the early morning stillness of her home might have been a rather relaxing start to the day, if she weren’t already humming with an anxious sort of excitement. Because today was New Winter’s Eve – and tonight, she would be with her sisters.

It was easy to hold on to that excitement, if she focused hard enough. Like so many people her age, Adeline found that holiday visits to her family home could be... well. Complicated. But Goddess above, it would be worth every second of tension, every barbed remark and sideways glare. She’d take all of it for the promise of those quiet, untouchable moments with her sisters on that frosty balcony.

When she got to her room, a mug of tea had appeared on her dresser, still steaming and sweetened so heavily she could

smell the honey wafting on its warm fumes. She knew who'd set it there; had heard Gerard fumbling noisily with the front door to her apartment at the arsecrack of dawn before collapsing in the living room, too plastered to risk sneaking back into the barracks.

He must have roused himself from his hungover sleep to fetch her morning tea while she bathed, and she found a smile tugging on her lips and heart at the thought. This was New Winter at its core really – little gestures of love for the people who mattered most. She was still smiling as she reached for the mug.

Her smile dropped when she saw the corner of parchment poking out beneath it.

Ah. Not just a sweet gesture then, but a placating one – for that thin slip of paper, so neatly pressed and folded, was sealed with the pale blue wax of the palace stationary.

Adeline narrowed her eyes at it.

Then snatched it up and ripped it open.

Her breath hissed out of her at the short, pointed words, all that cheer deflating in her chest.

“Oh, fuck *off*.”

She crumpled the parchment into a tight ball and lobbed it at the fireplace, but managed instead to hit the little pewter stand to one side. The stand wobbled dangerously, and a tangle of fire pokers and tongs clattered to the smooth stone hearth, the echoing crash of metal on tile making Adeline flinch and scowl. The racket was enough to stir up a familiar set of footsteps from the living room.

“Everything alright in there?”

On the other side of the door, Gerard's voice was amused, rough with sleep and just wry enough that Adeline caught herself, mid-scowl. He was good at that; she could never take herself too seriously with Ger around. It was half of what had drawn them to one another in the first place. Life felt lighter when they were together. Brighter.

She glanced around at the mess she'd made in her lapse of temper, and had to laugh despite it all.

"Just muttering idle treasons," she called. "Don't mind me."

His answering hum was a knowing one.

"What does she want?"

Adeline stooped to retrieve the little parchment ball from the hearth. She smoothed it out, let her eyes flick once more over the three curt lines of neatly curving ink, and resisted the childish urge to crumple it again.

"You know what, I'll let you read it yourself."

The door handle twisted and Adeline squawked indignantly, dropping the letter to clutch at her half-open robe.

"Ger! You can read it in a *minute*, I'm only half-dressed."

She heard the soft brush of his shoulder and the creak of the old wooden frame as he leaned against the door; could almost picture the sly grin, too, as he crooned: "Nothing I haven't seen before."

"Nothing you'll ever see again," she shot back, though she was sure he could hear the laughter framing every word.

He laughed right back.

"Your loss, Princess."

When she opened the door a crack to thrust the letter at him, Ger flashed his broadest smile, all faded freckles and bright eyes. The effect was only somewhat undercut by the faint scent of whiskey and the golden scruff on his jaw that confirmed he hadn't been home since she'd last seen him.

"Late night?"

"Can't complain," he smirked. Then, softening, he leaned into the gap in the doorway. "You should have stayed, though."

They'd got a head start on the celebrations last night, since Ger would be on duty for New Winter's Eve. It had been fun at first, as it always was when they were together. Laughing

and loosened with wine, sampling the most outrageous tourist-trap cocktails and dancing to the rousing, rowdy music in the packed little tavern. But when she'd spotted Captain Doran and his latest victim, the night had taken an unexpected turn – as had her tender wrist. As far as Adeline was concerned, she'd left at precisely the right time.

She gave Ger a look, then nudged him back so she could shut the bedroom door between them.

“I think we both know I should *not* have stayed,” she called out. “Besides, if I'd been out drinking til all hours of the morning, I might have missed that *delightful* New Winter greeting in your hands.”

Ger just grunted distractedly, so she left him to his reading and turned away from the door. Her hair was a mess, the humidity of the tavern and her scorching bathwater working together to create a storm of dark curls exploding around her face. She'd have to find a way to tame it before tonight, but for now she twisted it atop her head and pulled on her softest woolen day dress, not even bothering to lace a corset over the top. Might as well spend a bit of the day in comfort, while she could get away with it.

Ger was still frowning down at the sheet of parchment when she opened the door, her mug cradled in her good hand.

“Well?”

“Well,” he said. “It's short but not all that sweet.”

He glanced down at the letter again, reading off the parchment.

“*“Adeline, you will recall that you are expected to attend to your duties at the palace tonight.”* That's it. And then I think she drew you a cute little abstract snake. That's nice at least.”

“That's her signature, love.”

Adeline patted his shoulder, then immediately winced at the dull throb in her wrist. She brushed past before Ger could notice, heading for the living room and speaking over her shoulder to him as she went.

“A *summons*, Ger.”

The settee was still rumpled with knitted blankets from Ger’s makeshift bed; Adeline settled instead on a bank of colourful cushions scattered beneath the huge round window. Her home, with its faded green wallpaper and hanging baskets strung from the ceilings, had always put her in mind of a fairy’s burrow. It was colour and chaos; her sanctuary from the relentless perfection of the Silver Palace. This windowsill was her favourite place in the tiny apartment by far. She loved the light that poured in, no matter the hour. Come Mid-Winter, she would spend entire days here, basking in the buttery yellow warmth of the sun shining off the snowcapped roofs across the street. But this was New Winter’s Eve, the coldest day of the year giving way to the longest night. In the early morning snowfall, the light was soft and otherworldly.

Ger followed and sank down in the pile of cushions across from her.

“A fucking *summons*,” Adeline said again. “Can you believe her?”

“I’d answer, but this feels like a dangerous line of questioning.”

“It’s fine, it’s just—” Adeline broke off, and forced a breath through her teeth. She *hated* feeling like this. Hated that her mother could still *make* her feel like this, with just a few scratches of ink. She wore her irritation like an ill-fitting jumper; hot and prickly and rough. It didn’t suit her and she knew it; she wanted to rip it off, swath herself in the cosy joy she’d grown so accustomed to.

“Of course I’m going to be there! Of course I’m going to see my family, my sisters. I’ve spent every New Winter’s Eve on that balcony since I was eight years old. Why would this year be any different?”

Ger opened his mouth, but she quickly reached out to hold a finger over his lips; they twitched instead into a rueful smile, and she matched it with her own.

“That was rhetorical.”

He grabbed the mug from her hands and took a sip, cocking an eyebrow at her over the rim as if to say; *You know why this year is different.*

And she did.

The arrangement was quite simple; her mother granted Adeline permission to live a life beyond the palace walls, but her leash was a short one and her role would remain unchanged. She was a Senior Royal, a representative of the Beira family and, as her twenty-second birthday loomed ever closer, a potential heir to the throne.

For now.

Adeline shook out her arms and shoulders, a physical attempt to shake away the irritation she simply did not want to feel, especially not today. It worked – sort of. She made herself smile, gritting her teeth a bit with the effort.

“Anyway,” she said brightly, leaning over to steal back her mug. “Enough of my family drama. How was the rest of your night?”

Ger grinned, showing every gleaming tooth.

“Excellent. Your little showdown earned me *several* free drinks. I was a hero by association.”

Adeline smiled sweetly.

“And by association only.”

She’d been teasing, but Ger’s smile slipped, and watching it drop was like missing a step on a steep staircase; her stomach lurched.

“Oh Ger, no –”

“I’m sorry Ade.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for!”

She waved his apology away - a touch too emphatically, immediately wincing at the pain in her wrist.

Ger frowned and scooted closer. Despite her protests, he took her hand in his, turned it over gently – and scowled. A

bruise had bloomed where she'd collided with the bar. A storm cloud beneath her skin, rising from her forearm to the side of her palm.

"It's fine," she insisted.

He wasn't listening, didn't hear her over the irate growl rising in his throat.

"I should have grabbed Doran by the throat and –"

"No you should not," she said, voice firm. "Let's not give Captain Doran a reason to take his grudges out on you, alright? You're a darling of the Gard, and we'll keep it that way."

"You're a princess," he countered.

"Which is why I walked away relatively unscathed."

She pulled free of his grasp, and when he didn't stop scowling at the bruise, tugged her sleeve down over her hand. Ger kept glaring at it regardless, and she knew he sat with his anger about as comfortably as she did.

"Wonder what your mother will make of it all," he grumbled.

"Why on all of green Adhlas would I tell my mother?"

He laughed then, dry and nearly humourless – as humourless as Ger ever was, at least.

"If you don't, someone else will. You know how word travels in the Silver Kingdom, Ade. We're a nation of storytellers, after all."

She pursed her lips around a sip of tea.

"They're not going to hear about my rowdy escapades all the way up at the palace."

At that, Ger gave a delighted little snort and threw an arm around her shoulders, the light creeping back to his eyes, twinkling wickedly.

"Oh please, *please* remember this moment. This *exact* moment. Ready?"

He cleared his throat, and spoke each word with gravity, enunciating every syllable like he was delivering some great prophecy.

“They will absolutely hear about this in every corner of the palace, without a shadow of a doubt.”

She shoved him away, scowling, but Ger just laughed and caught her hand in his once more, threading his fingers between her own.

“Mark my words, won’t you? You know how I love being right.”



Chapter 2

Adeline

Ger, as it turned out, would be thrilled.

He'd called it; the story made it to the palace. She'd barely set foot in the family drawing room that evening before her older sister was upon her, hands curling tight on her arms, her lovely face crumpled with distress.

“Adeline! I’ve been so worried, is it true?”

Adeline blinked, more taken aback at the sudden assault on her space than anything else.

But Mareda just gazed back at her, blue eyes wide and imploring. You could drown in those eyes and whatever depths

of feeling they held, as Adeline often had. If weren't for Ger's uncanny knack for predicting palace gossip, she might've found herself pulled under once more, fighting uselessly for the space to breathe.

She'd never tell Ger he was right of course, but she sent up a silent prayer of gratitude for him all the same. Then, missing barely a beat, she pulled back and wrinkled her brow, a mirror to Mareda's own. Her sister's frown deepened, a score in the marble smooth skin of her forehead.

"Please tell me it's not true."

"Oh, Marry," Adeline sighed. She shook her head, glanced away, bit her lip as she stared into the middle distance: "We were going to talk to you as a family but... I suppose you're old enough to hear this now."

Mareda's grip on her arms loosened, confusion flickering over her features. Adeline let the tension thicken a moment, then gave another theatrical sigh.

"The Snow Saint isn't real; your father is the one who delivers the presents on New Winter's Eve. I'm so sorry."

Mareda released her, perhaps a bit forcefully.

"Ade, be serious."

"Where's the fun in that?"

Adeline flashed a wide grin and stepped around her sister, into the room.

It was strange to be here; home, but not. Familiar, but with none of the life and warmth of her own apartment, even with the soaring flames in the gigantic marble fireplace. Everywhere she turned was hard white stone and palest blue silk. She often felt that walking the halls and rooms of the Silver Palace was like wandering around inside a giant snowflake; glittering and blinding. Sometimes, when she spent a little too long here, returning to the vibrant bustle of the city made her dizzy.

She hung up her cloak, the traditional white of New Winter, and when it melted into the surrounding blankness, she found

herself wishing she could have worn her emerald green one – if only to see it hanging there, a dark stain marring the walls of the Silver Palace.

Smirking at the thought, Adeline turned to the drinks cart and set about pouring from a warm jug of spiceberry wine; a stick of cinnamon in her glass and a slice of orange in Mareda's. Plenty of fragrant, steaming wine in both. Something told her they'd need the buffer tonight. She could still feel her sister's eyes on her back as she poured; could practically feel the fretful, nervous energy rolling off her, making Adeline's own shoulders tense.

But she'd already decided she wasn't going to talk about this, not when she knew it would end in a quarrel. After the summons came this morning, she'd had to *claw* back that New Winter feeling, that warm, shimmering joy. She wasn't ready to let it go.

“Nothing happened.”

Adeline sang the words out sweetly and turned on the spot, glasses in hand. Mareda had wandered closer, and was watching her with one golden brow arched. She reached for her glass.

“You didn't get into a brawl with the Captain of the Queen's Gard last night?”

At that, Adeline couldn't help the bark of laughter that burst from her.

A brawl? *That's* what people were saying?

“*Adeline.*”

She wiped at her eyes with her free hand, still quietly shaking with laughter, but at the anxious look on Mareda's face she made an honest effort to breathe through it.

“It wasn't anything like that! I grabbed his arm to get his attention, he threw me off without meaning to. That's it.”

“There was no bar fight then?”

“I—” Adeline faltered. Her lip twitched up again, no matter how hard she fought it. An image had risen to her mind

unbidden, Captain Doran's grey face suddenly red and flustered as a scrawny pair of youths – far too young to even *be* in the tavern – leaped upon his back and hammered their skinny fists at his head and shoulders.

Not funny, not funny.

Do. Not. Laugh.

She swallowed. “It was a misunderstanding.”

Mareda rubbed delicately at her temple beneath her long, fair hair.

“Marry, you’re making a blizzard of a flurry. He knocked me back. It was an *accident*. A few onlookers took issue with him laying hands on a princess, but the rest of the Gard broke up the fight within minutes.”

Mareda stopped massaging her head, though she didn’t look entirely convinced.

“I don’t mean to needle at you.” Her teeth caught at her lip. “It’s just that Doran spoke to mother. He told her he was making an arrest on grounds of treason - and that you stopped him.”

Bollocks.

That absolute prick.

That was what the Eisalaan Gard considered treason these days, then. A drunk tourist, calling a toast to ‘*the Ice Queen*’. Somehow, she suspected her mother had heard a lot worse in all her years on the throne; she’d said as much to Captain Doran too, when he tried to excuse his actions. But he’d gone running off to tell tales to her mother all the same.

Adeline realised she’d stiffened at the revelation, and she forced herself to life again with an exaggerated shrug; a deep, deep sip of wine. A soft chuckle.

“Like I said,” she went on brightly, waving a hand. “Just a misunderstanding. High spirits, too much cider. You know how things can get in the Capital.”

It might have been a bit mean of her, truth be told.

She knew that Mareda had no idea how the Capital could be; she had no point of reference. It wasn't that her sister didn't care about life beyond the castle walls, of course she did. Mareda loved her country. Serving Eisalaan was all she'd ever dreamed of, even as a little girl. She'd just never been particularly interested in *living* a life outside the Silver Palace, never craved that distance in the way that Adeline had.

The comment took hold though, mean or not. Mareda gave a tight smile, twisting her hands together, a tangle of delicate silver rings and long pale fingers.

"I just worry about you, out there on your own."

"I'm not on my own. I have Ger, and Imogen, and I'm here almost every day—"

"I've missed you, Ade."

Oh. Guilt twisted at Adeline's insides. This had always been the hardest part; knowing that moving on with her life came at a cost. And that she wasn't the only one who'd pay it.

"Marry..." She set down her wine on a side table and reached out to tug Mareda into a hug. Her sister returned it fiercely, until they were holding each other so hard it hurt. "I've missed you too."

A small voice bubbled from the doorway.

"But who did you miss most?"

They broke apart at once, Adeline squealing and dropping to her knees just in time to catch the little blur of white tulle and copper curls that came barrelling into her. Mareda just smiled down at them both, and reached out to ruffle Iseult's hair.

"You're home," Adeline cooed, then grabbed her little sister by the shoulders and held her back so she could look her over. At eight years old, Iseult was still rosy cheeked as a toddler, though her grin had grown keener in the past few years. She spent months at a time across the sea, studying with her usual tutors at her grandfather's court in Caldbon. Adeline had to wonder what they'd been feeding the girl, for her to shoot up as she had in just a few months. "You're so *tall!* Slow down, will you?"

“I’ve already asked,” Mareda sighed.

“And I already told Marry,” Iseult piped up. “Not a chance.”

Adeline laughed, and pulled her close again, breathing in that familiar scent of sunlight and honey.

“I missed you both *equally*,” Adeline mumbled into her little sister’s hair.

“Me too,” said Mareda.

Iseult giggled.

“Liars.”

Often on nights like these, Adeline would hear her father’s voice in her mind – at least, when he wasn’t standing beside her speaking the words outright:

Every story is a love story.

He hadn’t tired of it to this day, that phrase that reminded him so much of home. *If you want to know who someone really is, he would say, look to what they love.*

He would smile at her then, as he always did, as only a loving parent could; like she was a revelation he couldn’t wait to share with the world.

That’s how you’ll write your own story one day, little Mischief. You’ll follow what you love.

And she tried. Even if it wasn’t quite in the way he meant, Adeline tried her best to live her life by those words, to follow what she loved. As it turned out, opportunities to follow your heart were thin on the ground for a daughter of Eisalaan’s infamous Snow Queen.

Not that she was complaining. She would’ve been a terrible fucking person to complain, spoiled rotten to her core. She’d had the grand fortune of being born to the Silver Kingdom; and being born a princess, at that. Even if she did thank the Goddess and her Daughters every morning that she was the

second-born child, Adeline knew how lucky she was, how privileged. She knew that being bored with her life was a petty complaint, knew that so many would die – *did* die – for even one of the opportunities afforded to her. Just for being born to the right people.

So, she did her best to follow what she loved in every little way she could. It was easy tonight.

Tonight, she loved hot spiceberry wine. She loved the fresh flurry of snow dusting the heads and cloaks of every person gathered outside the palace. She loved the lyrical roar of the crowd below, and the warmth of her sisters against her – little Iseult tucked into her side, and Mareda’s slim arm around her waist in a genuine, if rehearsed, show of affection. Adeline loved everything about New Winter’s Eve.

Iseult turned wide eyes up at her; slightly manic eyes, gleaming with the suppressed urge to sleep. It was her eighth Winter, and the first New Winter’s Eve she’d been allowed to stay up for the countdown, gracing the balcony with her sisters to greet their people as they celebrated another long, cold year in the Silver Kingdom. Below them, the crowd called out greetings to the little Princess, merry and adoring.

Iseult! Princess Iseult!

“They know me!” Iseult said – and promptly wriggled out of her sister’s grasp, trying to climb the railing for a closer look.

Mareda gasped out a sharp *Oh!*, but Adeline lunged, catching the frilly hem of Iseult’s dress before she could get herself into any real danger. She risked a glance down into the heaving courtyard, where the Queen presided over the festivities from a central dais; she hadn’t seen them, entirely absorbed in the dancing beneath her, along with whatever sweet nothings Iseult’s father was whispering in her ear.

Adeline tugged her sister down, guiding her a safe distance back. Aloof though she was, Adeline was sure the Queen would be none too pleased if her youngest daughter fell to her death – on New Winter’s Eve, of all days.

Iseult turned a pout up at her, but Adeline just smiled and pinched her baby-round cheek.

“Of course they know you, Iz. You’re their princess.”

She swung the girl up into her arms with only a slight grunt of effort, and together they peered over the balcony. Iseult waved heartily, and little cheers rose up from the steady swell of noise.

Iseult!

Mareda!

Adeline!

At the sound of her own name, Adeline grinned; the merriment was catching. This was the Eisalaan she loved, the Kingdom that folded you into its fairytale; the snow, the magic, the stories. She was glad to be here with her sisters tonight – even if a childish part of her had always wished she could be down *there*, let loose, unconcerned with her posture and the preservation of her crisp white dress. She wanted her mess of dark curls freed from this too-tight braid, her ribs freed from the pressing cage of the corset made to flatten her curves. Wanted to sing and scream herself hoarse, breathless instead with dancing and laughter.

She let her eye rove the rolling sea of merrymakers, some with their goblets thrust high in the air, some laughing with their heads thrown back to the open skies, their frozen breath clouding and spiralling above them.

Her gaze snagged on the corner of the dais, where a stiff, suited Gard stared right back at her, a grin carving into his careful, stoic expression. Holding her eye, Ger clapped a hand over his heart and gave a theatrical wink. She clapped her own hand over her heart, then blew him a kiss on the tips of her fingers, stirring up a rowdy roar of approval from a few of the revellers. They both laughed aloud, but at a nudge from the Gard beside him, Ger schooled his features and stared sternly ahead once more, lips just barely twitching.

Iseult giggled in Adeline’s ear, but Mareda sighed. She gave her a soft, almost disdainful look.

“You’re a princess too, Ade,” she said, then resumed her demure pose, hand lifted in a barely rippling wave. She pretended not to notice the finger Adeline flipped up in answer.

Perhaps she had a point, though. It was Mareda who truly enchanted the people of Eisalaan with her grace and golden beauty. Alone of the three sisters, Mareda resembled their mother; willowy and fair. From this distance, in the dim light of the approaching midnight hour, she could be the Queen’s double. They smiled the same smile, Mareda gentle and serene, while the Queen allowed herself a moment of imperious amusement at the jig that had broken out before her.

It was such a rare expression on that beautiful, empty face that Adeline couldn’t help but stare at her mother, some old ember of interest flickering deep within her at the sight. The Queen turned her head, as though she could feel the weight of that single gaze so high above. The bare curve of her lips flattened as their eyes met. Slowly, she lifted her cup in greeting, then turned back to the crowd. Adeline felt the stirring within her chest freeze over once more.

She shook it off.

Fine. It was fine. Two full decades she’d gone without a scrap of maternal affection, what difference did it make now? She had all she needed.

She tightened her grip on Iseult and tugged Mareda into their little huddle with her free hand, ignoring the meek protests that gave way to reluctant giggles.

She had her sisters. As the crowd below finally sang out the countdown to midnight, she held them tight in a muddled embrace, smiling into someone’s hair as someone else pressed a kiss to her forehead.

And when the bells rang high in the moon-white towers of the Silver Palace, Adeline made herself a promise to never forget what her father had told her all those years ago. Not about love stories, but about her mother; what *she* loved, and what that said about her.

Her father had been gentle, held her hand as he told her the truth.

Your mother is a Queen first and foremost. She loves her Kingdom most of all.

It was, to this day, one of the few things she knew about her own mother. She was Selma Ashalynn Beira, the Queen of Snow and Silver – and she loved Eisalaan above all else.



Chapter 3

Adeline

Mareda was unimpressed.

Iseult's nursemaid had come to dress her for bed shortly after the countdown, but the poor child had stormed and cried and Adeline's heart had broken just a little bit.

"Let her stay, Bethany," she'd pleaded with the older woman. "We'll make sure she gets to sleep soon enough."

The nursemaid had gladly taken off with the briefest of curtsies, eager to join the party in the snowy courtyard or perhaps even collapse into bed herself. But Mareda watched her go with pursed lips – then tutted once they were alone, and

asked beneath her breath if Adeline planned to spoil the girl by giving in to her every whim. She only shrugged and ushered Iseult inside. Iseult spent three quarters of the year abroad; she deserved a few extra hours with her family, especially on a night of celebration.

The family drawing room was bright and warm after hours spent on the wind-chilled balcony, and the heat of the hearth sent a pleasant shiver cascading down Adeline's limbs. She hummed contentedly, feeling the blood return to numbed toes and fingertips, the fresh scent of the cold outdoors still clinging to them as she peeled off Iseult's cloak and hung it alongside her own.

Outside, the revelry raged on; it would be a long while before the Queen or any of their fathers made it upstairs.

"Shall we swap gifts?" Adeline whispered to Iseult.

Without replying, the girl ran for the pile of lace-bound packages piled high by the marble hearth, diving right for the largest parcel with her name attached. Adeline laughed, settling down beside her on the deep, thick rug.

"Not so fast, you little rogue."

She took the parcel from Iseult, pressing a smaller, heavier package into her twitching hands. Behind them, Mareda gave a delicate wince as the lace wrapping gave way under Iseult's tiny claws.

"Here," said Adeline, fishing another small parcel from the pile. She shuffled across the rug and held the gift up to Mareda where she sat in her usual spot on the vast settee, one ankle tucked neatly behind the other. Ever poised and perfect, even here amongst her closest family; ever the Heir-in-training. "Show her how it's done."

Raising a pale brow, Mareda took the parcel and carefully unravelled the ribbon, letting the pretty lace packaging fall open. A beat. Confusion and hope chased across Mareda's lovely face before her hand flew to her mouth, quick to contain whatever sudden swell of excitement had made it to the surface. Adeline's heart tightened a bit at the learned

behaviour, the suppression of that very human response – but *there*; a smile curved her sister’s rosy lips, ever so slightly.

“Gloves, Ade?”

She touched them tenderly, rolling the fine fabric between her fingers.

“To wear to your Coronation some day.”

Mareda’s head snapped up, her clear blue eyes shining. For a moment she was speechless, moved to silence. She reached for Adeline’s hand, but before she could speak, Iseult barrelled into them with a squeal, ducking under their outstretched arms.

“It’s magic! *Real* magic!”

She clutched the ageing tome of fairytales to her chest, practically levitating with joy. Adeline pressed a shower of kisses to her copper curls. Her heart was glowing in her chest. This was how every New Winter should begin. *This* was why she was here instead of down there, lost in a sea of dancing bodies under the soft flurry of snow.

To see her sisters alight with joy. To set off her eagerly awaited twenty-second Winter on the right foot.

“Real magic,” she confirmed.

She’d found the enchanted book at the Lake Laune Market, at one of the few stalls that didn’t peddle ice charms to wide-eyed tourists. The travelling Merchant claimed to have found the book at an old museum in Caldbon; one of many treasures stolen from the Silver Kingdom several hundred years ago, when it had rested under Caldbon’s thumb. Adeline wasn’t sure he’d procured the book by strictly legal means, but she’d paid the Merchant with no questions asked and gladly taken it home.

Mareda leaned over, her careful poise forgotten as Iseult opened the book and thrust it under her eldest sister’s nose.

“They’re fairytales, Marry,” said Iseult, “but the pictures fill in as you read!”

Mareda actually allowed Iseult to tug her to the floor, sliding down to perch beside them on the rug and turning the pages in

wonder.

“Not only that,” said Adeline. She paused for effect, gently tapping the very tip of her baby sister’s nose, still pink with the winter chill. “The illustrations are different for every reader. Taken from your own imagination and painted on the page as you read.”

Iseult raised a hand to her brow and fell back into Mareda’s lap, pretending she’d fainted from sheer delight. Marry only smiled wryly at Adeline, stroking her littlest sister’s curls back from her forehead.

“And how am I to follow such a gift?”

Iseult remained in her dramatic pose, only peeking one eye open to say; “You could always get me a kitten.”

The book told stories of Eisalaan before the Frost. Old tales of rolling green lands, of a lyrical time when lore was as good as fact. Stories of sentient forests, and monsters guarding treasures of the Goddess, long forgotten by humankind.

The hour was so late that Adeline’s eyes were drying out in her skull, and it seemed increasingly unlikely that she’d make it home to the city tonight; she’d have to sleep in her old rooms and wake up here, in her old home.

Especially when Iseult refused to go to bed until they promised to read her at least one story. This time, Mareda didn’t fuss when Adeline gave in to their little sister’s whims. They took Iseult to her rooms and coaxed her into bed, settling down on either side of her.

“You read, Marry,” said Iseult. “You have the loveliest voice.”

Adeline clutched her chest in mock outrage, but Iseult only grinned and snuggled in against her shoulder.

Mareda set the book on her lap, and opened it up, clearing her throat with a gentle hum.

“The First Frost,” she began.

“Once upon a distant time, Eisalaan was lush and green and the Laune teemed with a magic-blooded race we called the Merrow. One very dry summer, a handsome Merrow Prince left his home in the lake to pay a visit to the palace on land.

“On entering the King’s Court, the Merrow Prince found a beautiful sorceress conjuring a flurry of snowflakes. A gaggle of hot and parched children crowded around her, laughing as they caught the ice on their tongues, her own laughter ringing above them like a song of silver. She was the Princess of Eisalaan, a rare beauty beloved by all. The Prince was at once enchanted by her kind, caring nature, and invited the Princess to visit him at the lake –”

“It’s me!” Iseult’s cry was distorted by a yawn, but she stabbed her finger at the illustration. Adeline only saw a willowy blonde princess curtsying before a tall prince with ruffled, dark hair. But this was the magic of the storybook at work; as the Merchant had promised, they would each see something entirely different.

“I bet you’re as lovely as ever, Iz,” she said.

Mareda went on.

“They spent the summer on the grassy banks, swapping charms and falling in love. But they were not discreet in their joy. The King was a proud and prejudiced man, and he became murderous at the thought of Merrow blood tainting his own lineage, pure as the fallen snow. He locked the Princess away, and sent his men to carve out the heart of the Merrow Prince.

“With the help of her magic, the Princess escaped, and ran to warn her love. As she approached the lake, she saw the King’s Gard entering the water, unsheathing their swords and sharing bloodthirsty grins.

“Knowing she would be too late, the Princess felt her heart crack open with the weight of her devastation. Her magic came flooding out; the ground froze where she stood, and the clouds above her burst with showers of ice.

“As the desperate flurry stilled, the Kings Gard crept from the shelter of the forest. The Kingdom was transformed, one white expanse adorned with the silver shimmer of frost. The Princess was lost to them, frozen where she stood, with her cracked heart pouring ice into the earth ever after. Eisalaan has been frozen ever since. Some say the Merrow are still encased beneath the Laune to this day, forever safe from the wrath of the Hateful King.”

The story was not a long one, but Iseult had drifted off to sleep by the final sentence. Adeline kissed her brow and wished her dreams of magic and Merrow.

Mareda set the book down on the bedside table, and together they slipped out the door. A Gard patrolled the hallway outside and bowed to them as they passed, his soft grey cloak sweeping forward with the movement.

They bade him a happy New Winter and walked on in silence. It wasn't until they rounded a corner that Mareda glanced back over one shoulder, seeing that they were alone.

She wrung her hands, casting a sideways glance at her sister, before speaking in that soft, measured way Adeline knew so well.

“Adeline, the gloves,” she began.

“Pretty, aren't they?”

Mareda reached for her hand, pulling her up short. Her pale brows pulled together in a gentle crease.

“This will be your twenty-second Winter –”

“I'm aware.”

“– so you could have your own Coronation to consider. You have every right to campaign.” She hesitated. “If you wanted to.”

And there it was. Mareda had announced her campaign almost three Winters ago. This was the closest she'd ever come to asking Adeline outright if she, too, dreamed of being named the Queen's Heir. It had just hung between them, Adeline wishing she would ask, Mareda plainly afraid of her answer.

"I don't want to," she said simply.

Still Mareda did not release her hand. She held Adeline's eyes too, like her piercing blue ones could see into her mind if she only peered hard enough.

"Why?" she asked finally. Uncertain. Almost whispering.

Adeline did not answer for a long moment. There was a reason it had taken them so long to get here, to have this conversation. The same reason she hadn't wanted to talk about what happened last night at the tavern.

Mareda was her sister. They had grown up in the same palace, both princesses, with the same education and opportunities and only three years between them. And yet, there was one thing that set them on different paths, one cold, looming figure casting a shadow over their shared childhood.

She had to be careful, so very careful.

Adeline squeezed her sister's hand, looking down at where their fingers joined as she picked over her words.

"Our mother's legacy is... not one I feel particularly attached to."

Mareda tensed. She knew, heard the repressed scorn behind the truth. Adeline went on though, not giving her a chance to pick up that old, worn out thread that had so often pulled taut between them.

"But *your* legacy, Marry... A legacy of goodness, kindness. When historians and poets write of the Beira dynasty, *yours* is the chapter I want to be a part of."

Her sister softened. And when Mareda leaned in to kiss her cheek, Adeline heard the soft breath of relief that escaped her, and was glad for it.

“Thank you,” said Marry. “For the gloves.”

The rest of the royal court had made it upstairs by the time the sisters returned to the drawing room. They entered to find the Queen already settled among a few of her ladies, but Adeline’s father, Silas, caught sight of them and beckoned both girls to his side, subtle but quietly urgent. Mareda’s father stood on his other side, glaring into a mostly empty tumbler of whiskey. Edward glanced up as the girls approached, still frowning; that was just his natural brow, furrowed even as he offered a gruff smile to his daughter, and to Adeline.

“Your mother has been asking after you,” Silas said quietly. “The court have been told to settle in until your return.”

“We were putting Izzy to bed,” said Adeline.

They looked around, and several pairs of eyes flitted away as they turned.

“Bollocks, what is it now?” She muttered.

Edward harumphed, and Mareda whipped at her skirts reproachfully. But Silas gave her a grim smile, turning his head enough that only she could hear him.

“Whatever it is, she requires an audience – I’d suggest you find yourself a cup of wine.”

Adeline murmured in agreement, then quickly kissed his cheek.

“Merry New Winter, Papa.”

“Merry New Winter, Mischief.”

Adeline followed Mareda to their usual settee, and courtiers parted for them, eyeing them with open interest. From the few whispers she could catch, they had indeed been told to wait for the princesses, and nobody seemed to know why.

Adeline had the fleeting idea that perhaps it had to do with her run in at the tavern; with what the Captain had told her

mother. But a public scene was not the Queen's style; if she was to face any consequences for stopping the arrest, they would be doled out in private.

Mareda nervously twirled a golden lock of hair between her fingers.

"Have you done something, Ade?" said a sweet, bemused voice.

Lady Imogen came up behind the settee, bearing a smirk and three crystal goblets carefully balanced between two hands, each steaming with curling fumes of fragrant wine. Adeline gladly accepted a glass.

"I was hoping you could tell me," she said. "I've been on my best behaviour all night, haven't I Marry?"

She turned to her sister, but Mareda had somehow slipped away past a gaggle of courtiers in the split second since Imogen arrived.

It was... not the first time.

Imogen smiled thinly. "Something I said, perhaps."

"She's just –"

Adeline cast about for some excuse.

Until rather recently, Imogen had been more Mareda's friend than her own. Whatever rift had come between them, Adeline wasn't privvy to the details. Mareda didn't want to talk about it, and her friendship with Imogen was new enough that she wasn't yet sure if it was her place to ask. She was glad when Imogen waved her off.

"Overwhelmed by my very presence, I'm sure."

Adeline grinned. It wasn't outside the realm of possibility, even for Mareda. Adeline had certainly been intimidated by her when they were children, the prettiest and sharpest of her older sister's friends. Even all these years later, Imogen was still a darling of the court; a talented Wielder, and the Queen's favourite dressmaker. She took up the space that others didn't bother to fill - sometimes literally. Her dress tonight was so outrageously huge, Adeline wasn't sure how she'd remained

upright. Cascading layers of white silk lay in bright snowy contrast to her dark skin, and her skirts billowed out like the petals of a gigantic rose. The bodice was wreathed in a delicate web of ice spun from Imogen's own magic-Wielding hands, shimmering wherever she caught the light.

Adeline gestured at the dress.

"You're a masterpiece," she said.

Imogen set the spare cup of wine down on a side table, and shrugged a dainty ice-laced shoulder.

"Aren't I always? Can't sit down though, which is quite literally a pain in the –"

A chime rang through the room, and all chatter died abruptly.

The Queen stood, her ladies scattering at a wave of her ring-laden hand. Her face was marble, cold and unyielding, a beautiful mask of ice.

Until, abruptly, that mask flickered, like a torch set alight behind her pale eyes - and she turned a rather saccharine smile on all those gathered.

Two smiles in one night; Adeline swallowed hard.

"Friends," the Queen said, in some borrowed, honey-coated voice. "I have happy news to share, and there's no greater night than New Winter's Eve. A time of new beginnings."

Adeline felt her spine tense, straightening so fast that Imogen wordlessly leaned over to pry the sloshing wine cup from her hand. She looked around, feeling the room for her sister's gaze, and found it.

The last time their mother had shared happy news had been after the war against Caldbon; peace terms agreed, and baby Iseult growing in her belly.

Holding Mareda's eye, Adeline raised a brow and discreetly passed a hand over her own stomach.

Mareda shook her head minutely, then took a slow, deliberate sip of wine and turned her eyes back to the Queen.

Adeline followed her gaze and – *ah*. The Queen, too, was toasting the room with a glass of wine. Not a baby, then.

She nodded her understanding, and their silent conversation passed by unnoticed by those around them.

Their mother savoured the tension, letting the silence stretch to the point of discomfort before she continued.

“It has been a happy and prosperous twenty-six years, for us all. Many an enemy has come to our door with a jealous face - wanting for our magic, for my crown. Or simply burning at my audacity. A Queen unwed! A woman, bearing the might of the Silver Kingdom, *refusing* to take a King!”

She laughed then, and Adeline almost flinched at the hollow sound. Indeed, around her there was a slight scuffle as though a few startled courtiers had done just that. Then a nervous chuckle from someone by the door, that rose and died on a breath.

Adeline could not imagine where she was going with all this talk of crowns and prosperity, this song of her successful reign, unless –

She shot her eyes at Mareda again, and saw that her sister was so very, very still. Her porcelain cheeks blazed, though, and Adeline knew that she was wondering the same thing. Was the Queen about to step down, with Mareda her one and only declared contender for the throne?

Adeline’s stomach gave a sick swoop. A rush of relief, perhaps.

Saves me a conversation, she thought.

Yet for some reason, her stomach hadn’t quite recovered from that sudden, nauseating drop. Before her thoughts could spiral further, the Queen went on.

“But Eisalaan is thriving, and I have quite proven my worth to the world. So, why not give them what they want? What *I* want. Friends,” she paused again, relishing another beat of captivated silence. “This is to be the Winter that I finally invite a King to share my throne.”

Nobody spoke, or moved, or even breathed, and even as Iseult's father stood and took the Queen's outstretched hand, Adeline hadn't caught up with the meaning of it all.

A King, in Eisalaan?

"Sebastian and I are to be married."

Silence. Silence, as they all scrambled to make sense of it. The infamous Snow Queen, rumoured to have taken a vow to the Goddess herself never to wed. Through spite or sheer bald nerve, Selma had always seemed determined that Eisalaan would thrive by her hand and her hand alone. And now...

Still nobody reacted, not a soul brave enough to break the too-long silence. Adeline was sure she wasn't the only one bracing against a cold thrill of panic, because surely this wasn't the reaction the Queen had hoped for.

But then Selma threw her head back, baring the pale, ice studded column of her neck and *laughed*. Laughed, knowingly, until her court stuttered into laughter too, and then clapped and cheered.

Imogen's elbow to the ribs startled Adeline out of her seat, and she caught sight of Mareda weaving through the well-wishers and walking into their mother's open arms.

"Go," Imogen hissed, and Adeline stumbled after her sister.

Selma regarded her without a single shift in her expression; just opened a second arm and waited. Adeline stepped into her embrace. She smelled of bitter pine and her cheek against Adeline's was cool, despite the hearth at her back.

"Congratulations, mother."

The Queen patted her cheek vaguely and turned to the next well-wisher. Beside her, Sebastian was flushed with happiness, his cheery, youthful face almost as red as the curls he shared with Iseult. And as Adeline stepped up to embrace the would-be King, she found herself casting around the room for another face.

She couldn't help but seek out her own father, though only the Goddess and her Daughters knew why. Silas had been

quite content in the years since his own affair with the Queen had ended. He was granted a title, and the lands in the city on which Adeline now lived. He had made friends in the court and served on the Cold Council. He had made a home here, a life beyond their short-lived romance. But even so, it couldn't be pleasant - to be told there would never be a King of Eisalaan. To be told that a Dukeship and a place in her court was the most she could offer. To then see her marry the next Consort to sire a child...

But Adeline found her father's eyes, and he smiled reassuringly, clapping along with the courtiers around him.

It wasn't Silas she had to worry about.

From behind them came a wet crash, and Adeline spun away from Sebastian to see Edward standing in a pile of shattered crystal, a dangerous purple flush creeping up his ruddy face. Shards glittered menacingly around his feet, and the white settee his daughter loved so much was splattered with an angry amber pattern.

In her periphery, Mareda tensed, and Adeline grabbed her wrist in warning.

Don't.

She couldn't go to him, not at this moment, as much as she might want to. She could not choose him, in full view of the Queen and her court, even if Mareda knew – if they all knew, had always known – that Edward had never given up hope for the woman he'd loved his whole life. Until, perhaps, this very moment, with a tumbler of whiskey thrown down in fury.

Edward glared at the Queen, and for a moment it seemed as though he might even dare to scream at her, the veins standing out on his neck and his shoulders heaving. But then he turned on his heel and stormed from the room.

The Queen did not move; her pale, clever eyes simply tracked her former Consort and watched the slam of the door, the way it shuddered in its frame. Not so much as a flinch.

After a terrible weighted pause, she raised her hand in a curt wave and turned away, dismissing her court and family from

her presence.



Chapter 4

The King

His rage did not burn fiery hot. He wished that it did; it might keep him warm as he waited.

Rage was the ice in his lungs and the endless depth of black behind his eyes. It was his numbed skin and the slowed beat of his heart that echoed in his ears long after his own voice in his head had gone silent.

His rage did not burn hot, but it did burn. It was that same cold burn that enveloped him, that cradled him, that preserved him in the dark for an eternity.



Chapter 5

Adeline

With the frosty dawn came the day of the great New Winter feast, usually an eventful morning full of bustle and anticipation. The events of last night, however, seemed to weigh on the court, heavy enough to suffocate any chatter or excitement. And so, Adeline awoke in her childhood bedroom to a tense and quiet palace.

Home sweet home.

She would have given her title, her inheritance, and maybe even her left foot, to have woken up in her apartments instead.

But then again, at her apartments, she wouldn't have Mareda softly padding into her bedroom first thing in the morning with a bowl-sized mug of sweet tea in one hand and a parcel in the other.

Adeline sat up and took the tea gratefully, gulping at it right away, and savouring the slight burn at the back of her throat, the honey on her tongue.

"Bliss," she sighed. "You're a gift from the Goddess."

She flipped back the thick downy covers to let her sister share in her early morning warmth, but when Mareda's toes brushed her bare legs she almost jumped free of her skin.

In a crisp, woody clearing just a few feet back from the banks of the Laune, there was an ancient statue that was almost sacred to Eisalaan. The Sorceress was legend; an eerie marble effigy of the Princess fabled to have cast the First Frost. She was so beloved that a Shrine of sorts had gathered around her over several lifetimes. The Sorceress heard many prayers, and she listened with her hands cast to the heavens, offerings of silver and flowers scattered at her bare, frozen feet.

And still, those feet could not have been as frigid as the two that pressed into Adeline's sleep-warmed skin.

Adeline shrieked.

"Gah, Marry," she gasped, flinching away. "Why are you so bloody cold? It's like snuggling with the Sorceress!"

Mareda pulled back, but Adeline just huffed and shuffled over, pressing her shins to her sister's toes. It was a time for kindness, after all. Especially after the night they'd had.

But Mareda's smile of thanks didn't quite reach her eyes, which were pink-rimmed and raw.

"You alright, Marry?" she asked softly.

"I'm cold."

"You know that's not what I meant."

Mareda pointed her chin up – demure and defiant. She didn't want to talk then. But if Adeline knew her sister, she'd come here in search of *some* comfort. Even if she couldn't ask for it outright.

So Adeline changed tack, nodding at the parcel in her sister's lap.

“Is that for me?”

Mareda picked at a corner of the lace, sniffing softly. “I didn't have it with me last night, but – here. Merry New Winter.”

She handed it over, and Adeline tugged at the ribbon, letting the lace fall away to reveal a large, plain wooden box. Beneath the lid were swaths of silver packing paper, and Adeline dug through them to find tough, polished black leather.

“Boots?”

She pulled one out and turned it in her hands. Beautiful snow boots; well made, with thick soles and stronger leather sewn in a brace to protect the heel and ankles. Soft grey wool lined the insides and folded over the cuffs in a pretty weaving stitch. Perfect for her Sunday morning walks around the Laune Market with Ger.

“They're lovely,” she beamed. “Like they were made for me!”

“They were,” said Mareda. She reached over and took the boot, turning it in her hand so the sole faced up. She pressed a little silver tab that Adeline hadn't noticed, nestled at the seam of the heel. With a soft hush of metal on leather, the black sole erupted with rows upon rows of steel spikes.

Adeline flinched, but then immediately squealed.

“You genius!”

It was a pain point for years, for both of them. They'd been training with practice swords forever; armed as soon as they could toddle with enough coordination and sense not to swing their blades around with abandon. But when Ger passed his initiate training, he told Adeline that the Eisalaan Gard learned

to fight on smooth ice, so they could defend their Queen on any terrain within the Kingdom.

Intrigued at the challenge, Adeline had told Mareda, and they had swaggered out to an icy patch one morning to try it for themselves. In the main courtyard. In front of the entire Queen's Gard, and much of the Palace Gard, too. Adeline's arse still stung at the memory, almost as much as her burning cheeks.

Mareda managed another small smile, her face lifting just a little more as she, too, remembered the painful incident.

“Never again. Not with these. I had them custom-made, right under your nose. Right beneath your apartment, in fact.”

Adeline had scooted to the edge of the bed and was pulling one boot on beneath her nightgown.

She paused and raised an eyebrow.

“Imogen made these?”

Mareda hummed non-committally, not meeting her eye.

Interesting.

They'd been on the outs for long enough now that she could barely imagine Mareda holding a conversation with Imogen, and certainly not for long enough to place an order. Had she gone to the store herself? Had they discussed colours and fabric? Made small talk while Imogen wrapped the boots up in this lovely silver paper? What would they even have to say to one another these days?

But she only asked; “Where are *your* boots, then?”

Mareda wrinkled her nose and took a sip of Adeline's tea. “Let's see how you fare on the ice first.”

Adeline laughed, then lobbed a pillow at her.

“Well, what are we waiting for?”

It took little to convince Mareda to steal away to the Laune for the morning – not when Adeline framed it as a way to escape their solemn parents for a while before the feast.

“Mass begins in an hour, Ade, we’ll be expected at the Temple. We can’t miss it.”

Adeline rolled her eyes at that.

“Sure we can. You’ve been through more than twenty years of New Winter blessings, you know how it goes.” She raised her hand, palm out, and rotated her arm in a slow circle winding inward, imitating the High Priestess as she solemnly intoned; “Mother Goddess hold you. Daughter Isa cleanse you. Daughter Lasra warm you. Daughter Tala feed you. And may Daughter Aera carry your soul on Silver Winds. A New Winter has dawned; go forth and be blessed.”

“Mother won’t be happy.”

Mother is never happy, Adeline wanted to say. But Mareda hadn’t said no, so she knew she’d already won.

She grinned instead.

“Come on, Marry. Let’s take one hour to ourselves today.”

Mareda allowed herself a small smile.

The frozen laketop would be deserted for New Winter’s day, the one day of the year that every merchant at the Laune Market could be counted on to pack away their wares.

It was the perfect arena for a bit of light sparring on ice, and a trial of Adeline’s new boots. With the added benefit, of course, that not a soul would be within shouting distance – nobody to come running if they were to fall on their arses again.

Mareda hurried off to her rooms to change, and Adeline dressed quickly too. She was thankful, for once, that her father had convinced her not to fully commit to her move to the city – not until her milestone birthday, which loomed ever closer yet still seemed an eternity away. At the very least, it meant she had a few abandoned clothes to choose from in the half-empty wardrobe. She thumbed past her usual training leathers

and pulled out the warmest things she could find; a pair of fleece-lined breeches and a wine-red woolen jumper she hadn't worn in years, which was now just a *little* too tight across her chest.

Adeline rolled her eyes as she wrestled with the neckline. *Years* spent wishing for the bosom to match her curving hips, and now that she had them, all it meant was an aching back and clothes that didn't fit right. That and the occasional barbed comment from her lovely, willowy mother about her *womanly figure*.

She glanced in the age spotted standing mirror by her door to give the jumper one last tug, then gave up and turned away. Adeline passed through her private parlour on her way out, and snatched up her cloak from where she'd tossed it on the faded blue settee. She tucked her mass of curls beneath the hood, then finally took off to meet Mareda at the stables.

The ride to the lake was gloomy; both the grey sky above them and the silence now hanging between them. Mareda had stopped to check on her father before she left, and whatever small amount of joy Adeline might have coaxed from her that morning had been reeled in once more. And still, Mareda said not a word about it. So, Adeline trotted along, chattering aimlessly about the outrageously drunk court nobles she'd spotted in the courtyard last night.

“And little old Lady Marjorie is a rowdy one, isn't she? Ger told me she drank two young Gard initiates under the table before the clock even struck midnight.” She laughed, light if a little forced. “I mean, they had to have a third Gard carry her home later on, but still –”

Mareda spoke over her, not even looking around.

“You needn't fill every silence, Adeline. Sometimes we can just *be*.”

Her laughter died on the wind.

Adeline certainly didn't fill the silence that followed.

In fact, she very nearly turned her mare around and fucked off home, to her *real* home, ready to let Marry sulk all she

liked – new boots be damned. She set her jaw and raised the reins in her hands, ready to do just that - but a breathy snuffle carried on the brisk wind, and she caught herself before she could give in to the sting.

Stop. Breathe.

What happened last night was awful. She couldn't begrudge Mareda her feelings. She could withstand a few verbal jabs if she had to.

So she stayed, and swallowed the sour retort rising in her throat like bile.

They slowed their horses at the tree line across from the lake's edge, and Adeline hopped down, leading her mare to a sturdy-looking tree. Papou snorted and nudged at her as she passed, somehow reading her mood. She made a show of leashing her to the tree, of settling her with a few gentle scratches at her snout and ears – busying herself with this gentle creature as long as she could to avoid the suddenly prickly creature behind her.

“Ade,” Mareda said quietly.

Finally she turned – and her temper cooled all at once. Mareda wrung her hands before her, eyes bright and doleful. In that moment, framed by the shadow of the barren trees in the snow, she seemed years younger; pale, and lost, and dejected.

Adeline was moving before she'd even decided to.

“It's alright, Marry. I know.”

She went to her sister, gathering her into a hug, squeezing tighter when Mareda shuddered with a suppressed sob. Adeline shushed her, gently, rhythmically, a mother rocking her babe to sleep. They stood that way for a long moment, the wind a chorus to Adeline's soft hushing breath.

“I'm sorry,” she murmured. “For you, and for Edward. If she was going to break his heart, she could have at least done it in private. She can be so very cruel sometimes.”

Mareda bristled in her arms.

This, apparently, was the wrong thing to say.

Her sister wriggled away, untangling herself. Her eyes still gleamed with tears, but they were hard now, the red rims suddenly dangerous rather than tragic.

“Don’t.”

Adeline really tried.

She *told* herself not to roll her eyes, but she couldn’t help it. It was a deeply ingrained reaction to something she would never, ever understand. The one thing they would never, ever agree on.

Because even grieving for her father’s pride, Mareda wouldn’t hear a single word against their mother. The baseless, undeserved, unrequited *loyalty* just beggared belief. Went beyond logic or reason – or even any kindness or love as far as Adeline could tell. Unless you counted the love Edward had for Selma, the tragic love story Mareda had been raised on. Yet here it was, a treasured fairytale shredded before her eyes and still her sister couldn’t accept that the Queen held no regard for her own family whatsoever.

It never failed to set her teeth on edge. She gritted them now.

“Fine,” Adeline said flatly. “You’re right. She’s perfect, and that wasn’t at all humiliating for everyone involved.”

She turned to Papou again, shucking off her cloak and slinging it over the horse’s back to trap in some extra warmth beneath her thick blankets. And to keep her hands busy, so she wouldn’t be tempted to grab her sister by the shoulders and *shake* some self respect into her.

“That’s not the point. You forget that she’s our Queen.”

Adeline snorted. “Trust me, I don’t. Queen first and foremost, mother when it suits her. I’m well aware.”

Mareda folded her arms, her lips a hard line.

“Will you speak so terribly of me, when *I’m* your Queen?”

Adeline’s hands curled into fists at her side.

“If you are my Queen one day, Mareda, I won’t consider you above judgement. The rules of common decency won’t cease to apply to you because you’ve got an *effing* crown on your head.”

It took physical effort to censor herself, and even in doing so, she knew it was still too much. It wasn’t the half-uttered curse that had Mareda’s eyes flashing either.

It was the *if*.

If you are my Queen one day.

Adeline swallowed hard, but she glared right back. She’d conceded enough for one morning.

Her sister just shook her head.

“Let’s get started.”

Mareda stalked away, shrugging her cloak off into the powdery snow as she went.

“Let’s,” Adeline called at her retreating back.

She stooped to snatch up Mareda’s cloak and quickly draped it over her sister’s horse before she followed, stepping off the snowy banks and onto the solid laketop. With a kick of each booted heel, the steel spikes shot out of Adeline’s soles and at once she noticed the sturdy brace beneath her every step. Though up ahead, Mareda was still managing just fine as she prowled further toward the centre of the lake.

The Laune was a well-worn surface. Every day, hundreds of feet passed over the laketop, boots dragging thousands of paths into the ice. Wooden stalls gouged divots in the solid lake, and enchanted steel firepits melted shallow puddles that froze over every night. It wasn’t hard to find traction walking over the Laune at a casual pace; but Adeline was eager to see how her sister held up against the slippery early morning frost while dodging a sword point.

And yes, perhaps that curiosity was whetted against the sharp edge of the words they’d exchanged on the banks.

So when Mareda turned smoothly on one heel and unsheathed her sword, Adeline couldn’t help the wicked grin

that rose to her lips like a retort.

She pulled her own sword from the sheath at her hip – and lunged.

To be fair, even without a steel grip to brace her, Mareda held her own. Normally, Adeline flattered herself that she had the slightest edge on her sister. She was more talented in combat and – usually – quicker to temper. But Mareda had to be perfect in everything she did. *Had* to be. She wasn't driven by competition so much as compulsion. She studied form and technique with the intensity of a scholar, fighting by the book no matter how many times Master Ellis warned her that a real opponent would not pay her the same courtesy. But in the training room, against Adeline armed with a dulled practice blade, it worked. They were often evenly matched, and today was one of those days.

Adeline prowled toward her sister like a cat, and though Mareda's feet slid beneath her here and there, she blocked each blow, parrying back and back and never losing her footing.

On and on they fought. The further the sun crept over the treeline, the meaner they became, both of them growing tired and aching as the morning wore on.

Leaning hard into her boots, Adeline feinted to one side and almost sent Mareda sprawling with the unexpected swing of her blade. Mareda scrambled back, snarling in a way that was rather unlike her, and in a hot and frustrated moment, she lashed out. Proper form meant nothing in that split second; sword forgotten, she lurched at her sister and *shoved*.

Adeline landed on her back, the air whipping out of her lungs with an inelegant *oomph*. It might have ended there, but Adeline's pettiest instinct kicked in - she rolled, still winded, and kicked out hard. Mareda's legs went out from under her, and she finally slammed backward into the ice.

Then there was only the harsh sound of their breath, freezing on the air and hovering above their faces while they panted at the clouded sky.

“Peace,” Adeline wheezed, as Mareda felt around for her blade. “We’ll call it a draw.”

Mareda turned her head on the ice so that Adeline could see her face. She was flushed and bright-eyed, but the tightness and despair had faded; melted away by the same fire that had fuelled her through this savage session. Even as she raised a brow, there was no real ire behind it.

“Convenient, since I was the last one standing.”

“Yes, because you pushed me!”

“Just putting *your* usual tactics to practise, dear sister.”

Adeline had to laugh at that, and even Mareda’s lips began to twitch – but then her smile dropped. Her brows furrowed.

“Do you hear –”

Abruptly, they both shot to their elbows, heads cocked to hear the juddering call building somewhere beneath them. The ice seemed to shudder, the trembling call rising to a roar that ended in a long clap like thunder.

Adeline didn’t think, just scrambled back and dragged Mareda along by the wrist, then by the waist as something jagged and dark raced along the ice towards them. Marry’s scream was lost to the thunder as Adeline yanked her back, back, *back*.

The thing stopped just short of Adeline’s leather-clad toes. The thunderous clap echoed and died until there was nothing but silence and Adeline’s own ragged breath in her ears.

It was...

It was a crack.

A dark chasm cleaved across the solid centre of the Laune.

The ice – the solid, centuries-frozen lake – had cracked. The sisters stared at the deep black split in roiling, dizzying horror.

Then skidded and slipped to their feet until, together, they turned on the spot and fled.



Chapter 6

The King

Shudder.

Splinter.

CRACK.

It echoed through the Cold Black, shaking his bones. His slowed heart gave a quick, shocked thump. His mind peeled out of the not-quite sleep and a flurry of thoughts skittered around his skull like leaves in a windstorm.

I... I heard...

Heard. He hadn't heard anything in quite some time.

I see... Trees?

Red branches in a dark sky. The veins in the backs of his eyelids. There was a light.

There could be no light.

His heart slowed again, too numb with cold and time to even feel heavy at what should have disappointed him.

He let the fog take him, the not-sleep came again.

But after some years, or perhaps moments – time was strange in the Cold Black – something licked his hand. No, not licked. Trickled. Water? His thoughts did gather this time, slowly.

If there is water trickling down my hand, and light behind my eyes...

He tried to lower his arm from where it was held outstretched above his head. It did not move. The muscles flexed belatedly, as though forgetting how to move at his will – yet still his arm lay trapped above him.

But – his fingers.

In the dark, his fingertips slipped against something solid and wet, no longer pressed on all sides by the ice. There was a whisper of space around his hand.

Kai's heart gave an almighty, painful thump and his pulse kicked up ever so slightly. He allowed himself a sliver of foreign hope, and another when his wrist was free enough to rotate. Another sliver of hope when he felt a trickle of ice water run down his forehead. When he blinked slush from his eyelashes and a dim grey light filtered through the ice before him. The bundle of hope was kindling for the aching, cold hollow of his chest.

Distantly, he knew it would become a raging, fuelling fire once he was freed. He would see Eisalaan crumble to nothing but cinders and smoke.

But for now, he could only wait.

And hope.



Chapter 7

Adeline

They went to Edward at once.

One of the few nobles blessed with ice magic, Edward had been Commander of the Palace Wielders since before Mareda's birth. He led a small team of talented Wielders who pledged their gifts in service of Eisalaan; a position that saw him held in high esteem as one of the most powerful men in Eisalaan. And really, given the scarcity of magic outside the Silver Kingdom, one of the most powerful men in the world. If there was anyone who could repair the damage to the Laune, it was the Commander and his team.

If they could rouse him from his heartache, or his hangover.

Adeline was quite sure Edward would have stayed in bed for anyone but Mareda, but as it was he staggered out of his rooms at the sound of her cries, still sodden from a night of drowning his sorrows. Bleary-eyed and ruffled, he wrenched the door open beneath his daughter's frantic fist, and scowled at the pitch of her voice.

“Goddess above, what do you *want*?”

They spoke hurriedly over one another, babbling like frightened children, and Edward pressed a hand over his eyes, groaning. It took several attempts to get through to him.

The Laune has cracked.

Quick father, please, the ice has broken.

The fucking lake has split in two, Edward!

They could read almost the exact moment it sank in, by the way Edward's hazed eyes widened and cleared. Sobered, all at once.

He pushed past them and ran without a backward glance, still in a bed robe that fluttered dramatically around his hairy ankles in a way that might have been comical at any less harrowing a time.

Without a word to one another, the sisters rushed down the spiraling stairway of Edward's tower and raced to the South gallery, an open-air corridor with an unobstructed view of the courtyard.

Before long, Edward emerged from the stables on horseback, having found pants and a cloak from the Goddess knows where. Behind him, a small procession of Wielders followed. Adeline could not hear what it was he shouted to them over his shoulder, but the foreboding scowl on his thick brow said enough. As did the hand he shot at the gates, before the procession filed out onto the Capital road beyond.

Adeline and Mareda watched until their cloaks were just a dark smudge on the blank white landscape.

“What do we do now?” said Adeline. She hadn’t realised she was shivering until her teeth chattered against each word.

“Now,” Mareda said calmly, “we dress for dinner.”

That had been hours ago, and the New Winter feast was now well under way. Adeline had dressed in the floaty, softly shimmering blue dress Imogen sent to her palace rooms. She had tamed her hair and draped a delicate set of silver chains across her forehead. She’d layered her throat with the ice diamonds the Queen gifted each of her daughters every year.

She let the Herald announce her at the doors to the Grand Hall. Exchanged pleasantries with the nobles of the court, and the guests come from further afield. Picked her way through two extravagant courses before the traditional salted roast and mild honey wine.

Still they had heard no news.

Adeline couldn’t help but fidget as she watched the doors.

“Eat,” said Mareda. “*Ade.*”

Adeline felt Mareda’s cool fingers around her wrist, prying her hand down and laying it on the table beside an ornate silver fork.

“The sprouts are excellent tonight,” Mareda said lightly. “Eat your food and not your own skin. Please.”

Adeline frowned down at her ragged fingers; she hadn’t realised she’d been chewing on a hangnail. She picked up her fork and speared a sprout, but it hung in the air halfway to her mouth.

Iseult giggled. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Nothing,” said Mareda. She nudged a bony elbow at Adeline’s ribs. “Isn’t that right, Ade?”

Adeline swallowed down the sprout in one painful gulp, wincing even as she nodded. “Nothing at all.”

Iseult’s tiny nose wrinkled in disbelief, but she hopped down from her seat and wandered away from the head table, evidently bored with her sisters and their strange mood.

“They should be back by now,” Adeline said, once their littlest sister was out of earshot. Sebastian was on the other side of her empty seat, but entirely preoccupied with the Queen, his bride-to-be.

“We should tell someone.”

Mareda laid a soothing hand over her wrist again, once more pulling Adeline’s fingers away from her teeth.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Mareda said, gently as one speaking to an overwrought toddler.

“What if someone gets hurt, Marry?”

“It’s New Winter’s Day! Nobody will set foot on the Laune today, I promise.”

That soothing tone was beginning to grate.

“*We* set foot on the Laune.”

“Well, unless there’s another young woman between here and the Capital with a new pair of boots and a point to prove – I think we can stand to breathe, Adeline.”

Adeline sat on her own hands to keep from chewing at that sore and peeling hangnail.

“Nobody will be hurt, Ade. My father has it in hand.”

Mareda might have needled her further, but the doors to the hall swung open, and in strode Edward, flanked on either side by two of his most senior Wielders. Adeline bolted up in her seat, and even Mareda seemed to tense beside her as they watched the Commander approach the Queen. He dropped to one knee at her side, and she let him rest there for a long, painful moment. The Wielders on their knees behind him shifted uncomfortably on the stone floor. Finally, the Queen turned in her seat and deigned to meet his eye. Adeline couldn’t hear the words that passed between them, but beneath the overgrown brush of his beard, Edward’s lips strained upwards, a reluctant smile tugging at his every word.

“I think he did it,” she whispered to Mareda.

“I told you he would,” her sister hissed back.

Selma levelled Edward with a stare that chilled the very air around them, and Adeline watched as the Commander was cowed, his smile flattening to a tense line. But then the Queen reached out, and as her hand passed over Edward's where it lay on his bent knee, the iciness around them seemed to thaw. Edward smiled in earnest, and bowed his head. As he rose to his feet, the Queen beckoned a nearby attendant and Edward had a drink in his hand within a moment, turning at a loud cheer from his fellow Wielders and raising his cup in a toast. Adeline watched them and smiled, relief spreading warmth through her chest – but no further.

Because the cold air that had captured Edward just a moment ago had changed course; over Mareda's golden head and Edward's raised cup, the Queen had turned her cold stare on Adeline.

And all of a sudden, she was seven years old again, shrunk down to four feet tall, cowering without the cover of the tapestries she would so often hide behind when her mother's slow footfalls would echo through the palace hallways. Waiting, as ever, to hear how this latest fuck up was her fault.

And hers alone.



The berating never came.

The Queen took to the dance floor, and Edward was soon deep in his cups, pontificating in his usual stern way to a gaggle of rapt Wielders and even a few doe-eyed courtiers, while Silas watched on with affectionate bemusement. Marry had politely taken the hand of a courtier's noble young son and let him lead her out onto the dancefloor, and though her smile was somewhat forced, Adeline thought her sister was quite enjoying herself. In the end, the festive flurry of the feast worked well to distract the whole court. The music was magic, the spread exquisite.

The tension of the previous evening was seemingly forgotten, an irresistible contentment having settled over them

all; only Adeline hadn't fallen under its coaxing net. She couldn't forget – perhaps the events of last night, but not their ordeal this morning. Even if Mareda was content to let it go. Even if Edward was flushed and grinning unusually wide, his booming laughter carrying across the hall to the head table where Adeline now sat alone.

The lake had cracked. *Cracked.*

She had seen it, had hauled Mareda from its jagged maw before the frozen lake could swallow her whole. And now they were to accept that all was well? She couldn't. It would be like watching the earth beneath the palace itself cleave in two, and stepping neatly over the chasm on her way to breakfast.

What in the name of Aera's arse happened out there?

Adeline's thumb was raw and bloodied by the time she caught Edward alone, staggering past the head table, no doubt on the way to relieve himself of many litres of wine.

He stumbled at the weight of her hand wrapped around his elbow, and blinked blearily up at her, taking a moment to focus.

“Hullo.”

She pulled him into the seat beside her, casting aside all the civility and formality that came with her role as a Senior Royal. Right now she felt like a scared little girl, and she needed a moment of reassurance from her sort-of Uncle.

“Did you fix really fix it, Ned?”

The old nickname fell easily from her lips, and she saw how he warmed to it, the tension in his brow softening at once. Edward clapped a hand over Adeline's where it rested on his arm.

“We've been celebrating all night, little Ade. I can barely see straight for celebrating.” He laughed, a rough guffaw that she knew well enough, despite its rarity. He was drunk as an old grape, flushed and sweaty with his shirt hanging open wide enough to frame his thickly bristled chest and the age-dulled silver pendant he wore.

“Was anyone hurt?”

“Not a soul to be seen,” he assured her.

“Do you know what happened?” She pressed. “*How* did it happen?”

At her needling, some of the merry glaze seemed to clear from Edward’s vision, and Adeline almost felt bad for dragging him down from his high. But then he raised a thick brow and said: “Well no, I don’t. But I have to assume it had something to do with two grown ladies scampering about the ice with their blades drawn.”

Adeline swallowed against the sting.

He was right. She was almost twenty-two years old, and Mareda already twenty-four. They knew better. They *should* have known better.

Still, she had to know; “Is that what you told the Queen?”

Edward glanced out at the dancing crowd, where Sebastian spun Selma around the floor, her skirts whipping out around her and her laughter ringing off the domed ceiling high above their heads.

“I told her that yourself and Mareda brought it to my attention, and that my Wielders brought it under control.”

Adeline squeezed his arm, pressing her gratitude into his skin even as a twinge of shame coloured her cheeks. All these years later, so much closer to a life of her own, and still she was that same mischievous child. Drawn to mayhem and impulse and poor choices, yet frightened as ever of her mother’s wrath.

“Thank you, Ned,” she said simply, hoping he’d feel the full weight of her thanks.

From the gruff edge to his voice, she thought he probably did. “Anytime, little Ade.”

Edward drew himself up in his chair, still staring hard at Selma as he tidied himself up, drawing his shirt closed over his pendant and brushing the hair from his eyes. They sat in

thoughtful silence a moment longer, both locked on the laughing, dancing, carefree Queen.

New Winter was always a time of carousing and indulgence, but there was an almost manic edge in the air tonight. It was as though the whole court felt the joy radiating off their newly engaged queen, and had gorged themselves on it, messy and drunk on glee. Selma had been smiling wider, dancing longer, drinking deeper. But as Adeline watched, her mother's laughter grew too loud, her dancing slightly off kilter.

She was overbright.

“Is there something wrong with...?”

Not knowing how to form the question, Adeline turned to Edward, but he was locked on the Queen still, a frown even deeper than normal pulling at his bushy brows. She leaned forward in her seat instead, looking around for Mareda, until a scuffle and flurry of movement pulled her attention back to the floor.

Selma was wrenching her arm out of Sebastian's grasp as he tried to coax her to him, murmuring something soft and soothing. She danced out of reach, wobbling just slightly, holding her glass aloft as wine sloshed gently over the rim and dripped down her bare white arm like blood.

“And who are you to tell me it's time to sit?”

The Queen was smirking. Taunting. Her familiar, lyrical voice was raw and jarring in its sudden volume.

Chatter around the room softened, eyes all over the hall drawing to the mild commotion. Although she couldn't hear Sebastian at this distance, Adeline could read the shape of the words; “My love”, as he reached for her again.

“No, no, no!” Selma danced backwards once more, spilling another gush of wine down her arm. Her pale eyes were wide and glittering, almost feverish. “I'll dance as long as I please, thank you. You're not King yet, Sebastian!”

The Queen laughed herself breathless, mute, laughter wracking her slim frame so hard that she doubled over, and then –

Her glass slipped slowly from her slackened grip to crash in a shower of red and crystal on the marble floor.

She swooned.

The courtiers nearest to her surged forward, and at Adeline's side, Edward leaped to his feet as though he'd vault the table to get to her. From somewhere across the room, Mareda shrieked; "*Mother!*"

But Sebastian had caught her, and the Queen was already upright again, blinking dazedly at the shocked faces around her.

"My darlings," she gasped out, then cleared her throat on a soft laugh. "Nothing. It's *nothing*. Too much wine and merriment!"

She smiled a slow smile, and the nobles around her gave a nervous titter. Adeline caught movement at the edge of her vision, and glanced up to see Edward storming off, a scowl now firmly fixed in place of his soft, drunken glaze.

On the floor, Selma finally allowed herself to be led from the dance, and Adeline slipped quietly away from the head table before her mother and Sebastian took their seats.

The Queen did not rise again for the rest of the evening.



Chapter 8

Adeline

In the slow days that followed New Winter, the kingdom fell back into its everyday rhythm. Workmen carved sheets of ice from the mountainside to send across the seas to hotter climates. Merchant Wielders practiced charms and spells to thrill the market-goers with their magical wares. Among the bustling crowds at her shrine, the Sorceress saw tributes and gifts, and many prayers for a longer, colder Winter.

And all too soon, Iseult was shipped off to the misty shores of Caldbon to reunite with her tutors and her grandfather, the King. Adeline and Mareda woke at the crack of dawn to see her off at the gates, their goodbyes as long and tearful as ever.

“You’ll write to me, won’t you?” Iseult had asked, lip wobbling and her eyes dewy. “Every week?”

“Of course,” said Mareda, before Adeline bundled them both into one hug.

“Every day, if I can manage it,” she swore.

And she would, even if it killed her. Which it very well might. She had barely a moment to breathe as it was. If she wasn’t attending royal appearances at local schools and distant villages, she was at the palace, completing the rigorous hours of combat and dance training the Queen had always insisted upon.

We are leaders first and foremost, she would say. We will see as many a ballroom as a battlefield in our lifetimes.

Absolute bollocks, as far as Adeline was concerned - but the training was not the worst of her mother’s demands.

Now that she was to be married it seemed the Queen wanted to play house, and they were all expected to play along too. She was to host a family dinner. An intimate affair between the Queen, her betrothed, her two former lovers, and her eldest daughters.

Cosy.

When dusk drew in on the day of their awkward little dinner, Silas came to greet Adeline at the carriage house on her arrival from the Capital. She had dressed in blue as her mother preferred; the unofficial uniform of the royal family. Only Adeline’s dress was not the pale icy colour of the Eisalaan flag, but a sweeping gown of bright cerulean layered with cream lace, like crashing ocean waves beneath a warm sun. A petty, pointless move overall, but it was all she had.

Pettiness, and the overfull glass of wine she’d choked down before leaving her apartment.

“You’re in unusually good spirits,” her father noted as she stepped from the carriage and took his arm.

“Liquid courage,” she grinned.

“Ah. Well, I can’t say I approve, but you won’t be the only lush at the dinner table.”

“Edward?”

“Drunk as a wheel-barrow.”

Adeline grimaced. Who could blame him? She didn’t remember a time when she *hadn’t* known Edward was in love with her mother. It was common knowledge, an inexhaustible source of gossip for court and kitchens alike.

The longing looks, the open pining, the depths of darkness he had sunken to when the Queen returned from the Caldbon War with a Prince in tow and his baby in her belly. Edward had come to love Iseult as they all did, but Sebastian was another story.

Adeline shot a side-long glance at her father as they walked.

“You’re not bothered by it. The engagement, I mean. Not in the same way as Edward.”

It wasn’t a question really, but Silas had always been prone to indulging her curiosity. He answered her, a thoughtful furrow between his brows as he watched the snow sink beneath their feet with every step.

“No, I can’t say that I am. Selma and I had deep feelings for each other for a fleeting moment, but it ended when it should have, and we parted as old friends. But for Edward—”

He hesitated, and Adeline implored him with a soft nudge at his side. He tucked her arm closer, wrapping her cold hand in the warmth of his cloak before he went on.

“They were childhood sweethearts. Of all before Sebastian, he came the closest to sharing her throne, and no one quite knows where it all went wrong. It’s as though she woke one day and simply... stopped loving him. And he, of course, never stopped loving her. It’s hard on him, but Mareda is a potential Heir, so there’s been no escape. Though I’m not convinced he’d take it if there was.”

“Why not?”

Adeline couldn't wrap her head around it, even beyond the pleasant fog of the wine. Could not imagine that total and utter surrender of your pride. To love someone so much it destroyed you, yet still want them close.

Silas shook his head, and sighed, his frozen breath swirling on the breeze.

"I think a part of him always thought Sebastian's hold on her heart would fade, as mine had. He hoped that one day, Iseult would claim her grandfather's throne in Caldbon and they'd leave as nothing more than neighbouring allies."

"Seems less likely now."

They stopped just short of the bleached white walls of the palace and as Silas paused to open the heavy side door, he gave her a grim smile.

"Just a bit."

The dinner was awful.

Not the food. The cook, Marie, was so spectacularly talented that Adeline would almost have sworn she was blessed by the Goddess if any trace of magic still existed in the world, outside of Ice Wielding.

No, the roast was exquisite.

Just about everything else was terrible.

Edward was so drunk he could barely keep his eyes open. Mareda, usually their mother's biggest champion, was visibly souring moment by moment while the Queen paraded her young companion for them, cooing and fussing, and already calling him her King. Sebastian, to his credit, looked almost as uncomfortable as the rest of them if the flush across his cheeks was any indication. He returned the Queen's attentions all the same, with mooning gazes and lovesick sighs. Although it was rather overwhelming for them all, Adeline could see how especially hard it was for Mareda, to watch her father crumble

in on himself with every kiss and touch that passed between the Queen and her betrothed.

But the true twist of the knife came when their mother finally tired of performing her pantomime – and turned her attention to Adeline instead.

Adeline felt the shift like a change in the winds, the warning of a blinding snowstorm to come. She stared rigidly down at her plate, sawing at a piece of meat and trying to ignore her mother's eyes where they pierced at her shoulders and pinned her to her seat. When she didn't let up, Adeline finally met her gaze.

The Queen smiled; sort of. Her lips lifted, and she allowed her eyes to drift over Adeline in cold appraisal, swilling her wineglass in one hand while her daughter waited and braced.

“How are you enjoying your new home, Adeline?”

Adeline set down her fork, lest the tension in her hands should cause it to snap in two.

“I'm very happy in the city, thank you, Your Majesty.”

“So I've heard,” the Queen cooed, too sweet. “Your escapades have kept you busy as ever, have they not? Between the love affairs and the drunken brawls, I feel I've barely seen you these past two years.”

Silas set down his own fork.

“Selma,” he said. “The Tavern was a misunderstanding. Adeline has answered every summons these past two years. She's barely left the palace since New Winter—”

The Queen lifted a hand, and Silas fell silent at the barest gesture.

“You know,” she went on, as though the Duke had never spoken, “Mareda has attended meetings of the Cold Council since her sixteenth Winter. Have you no interest in your country's governance? I've seen neither hide, nor hair.”

Her eyes raked pointedly over Adeline's head, and though she cursed herself for it, Adeline couldn't help but smooth her hair back from her face. It was fraying out of its braid, she

knew, a dark cloud of frizz exploding around her forehead and tickling at the nape of her neck.

She wanted to shrink into her seat but there was no making herself smaller or neater, no escaping that shrewd gaze. So, she did as she'd learned over many years of weathering her mother's disdain, the thing that would irritate the Queen the most; she held her head high, fraying braid and all.

Through pursed lips, the Queen hummed her discontent. She took a long sip of her wine, and still no one spoke, each of them somehow understanding that she was not yet done with Adeline.

"Well. I must say, it's a poor way to begin your campaign for heir."

"I have no plans to make a claim as your heir," Adeline said, flat and cool as she dared. Silas turned sharply, but said nothing. Mareda went very still.

The Queen blinked her pale eyes, face impassive as ever.

"What a bold decision," she said, finally. "But a shame nonetheless. You may have made a fine leader one day."

...*What?*

Mareda flinched, but the Queen went on.

"I suggest you consider attending the next meeting all the same. You have all Winter to change your mind, and if you don't, you may still take a place on your sister's council in years to come."

Adeline quickly closed her gaping mouth. She nodded, though a swift glance at her sister suggested that, right now, Mareda would not mind if she *never* joined the council. When Mareda excused herself after their meal, Adeline slipped out behind her and rushed to catch up in the hallway.

"Marry, wait!" She caught her sister's elbow and pulled her to a stop. "I meant what I said. I don't want to be Queen, you know that."

Mareda eyed her doubtfully. "Are you *certain?*"

Adeline threw her hands up, dragging in a breath. There was too much she could never say to Mareda. Too much to tiptoe around.

She thought of her mother, of a childhood spent clambering for the attentions of someone who had nothing to offer but criticism. She thought of a youth spent literally dodging behind tapestries and suits of armour to escape her judgement. Nothing Adeline accomplished had ever been enough, nothing she said had ever interested her mother if it didn't *directly* contribute to the glory and prestige of Eisalaan. Passions and hobbies were a distraction, friendships a waste unless they were strategic. Alliances with influential nobles were acceptable; acquaintances with her handmaidens or the Palace Gards far less so. When the Queen found out about Ger, Adeline honestly thought she'd be ex-communicated - and perhaps she would have been, if her father hadn't stepped in.

Adeline thought of all it would mean to inherit Selma's cold legacy, to have to uphold that level of prestige for their kingdom for the rest of her life, even if it meant sacrificing happiness and family and, Goddess, some semblance of a *life*. She wasn't sure she could do it, not if there was any chance she'd turn into someone bearing even a passing resemblance to her mother.

But Mareda had spent her whole life longing for the throne, and all the love and acceptance that came with it. She was a natural Queen. She would not lose herself to a crown, not in the ways that Selma obviously had, that Adeline never wanted to. So Adeline took her sister's hands in her own and assured her once more.

“Yes, Mareda. I am certain.”



Chapter 9

Adeline

The day after their tense family dinner, the Queen took to her bed with a sudden flu, and Mareda, with Edward's guidance, stepped in to oversee the public court in her place.

For the next few days, Adeline would arrive at the palace to find their training had been delayed or even cancelled. With little else to do, she spent much of her time in the palace kitchens. It had been a favourite haunt of hers as a child, one of the few places she could guarantee the Queen would never set foot. She'd grown close to Marie over the years, too. The cook was famously grouchy, but tough wasn't the same as cold. It wasn't the same as cruel.

So, just as she had in her childhood, Adeline mucked in with the quick young porters, and Marie soon grew tired of reminding her it was no job for a princess.

Adeline enjoyed the work, loved the rhythmic lull of the knife on a wooden board and the puzzle of matching the right herb to whichever sauce she was stirring. She was also in the best position to sneak fresh bread rolls from the oven when they were still hot and ever so slightly doughy in the middle.

The kitchen was unseasonably warm for early Winter, and the doors and windows were open all day to let the heat out and air in. The scents and steams from Marie's cooking enticed hungry staff from all over, and though Marie grumbled and tutted, she usually fed them in exchange for whatever tidbit or story they brought from their own part of the palace. Adeline usually made sure to work in a quiet nook, or keep her face turned toward the stove to avoid being noticed, aware that the gossip would come to a swift stop if anyone realised the royal company they kept.

Such outrageous gossip it was, too.

According to a local footman, the Countess he served – a married cousin of the Queen's – had been seen cosy in the hay with a Palace stable hand some ten years her junior. A baby-faced Gard had told, in awed tones, how one of his brothers on late night sentry had been regularly abandoning his post to enjoy the frenzy and frivolity of a notorious alehouse, and then sneaking back, eyes glazed, in the small hours of the morning. Adeline thought this sounded suspiciously like Ger, but when probed he had nothing to offer but a shrug and a coy smirk. He also didn't invite her to said alehouse, which was really quite rude.

But just that morning, they heard the strangest tale yet from Jack, one of their own kitchen porters on his return from the market.

Before his own eyes, he said, a young merchant had come tearing across the lake in a panic and collided with a neighbouring stall. As the merchants pitched in to clear the damage, the terrified woman had told them all how she had

returned from her morning prayers at the Shrine, when the patch of lake before her began to crack and crumble and a great dark creature climbed from the ice.

The kitchen erupted in laughter and sighs, many rolling their eyes or wishing the poor confused soul well. But Adeline's bones had turned to stone.

A crack in the ice.

Hadn't Edward and the Wielders fixed it? Shivering, she craned her head around the nook where she sat peeling potatoes.

"What sort of creature?" She called to Jack. Though her voice was hoarse, it carried, and some of the laughter died as a knot of soldiers and one chambermaid noticed her. Some started in their seats and others simply stared. The maid gaped at the potato in Adeline's hand. The kitchen staff, however, were well used to the princess by now, and Jack grinned easily as he turned to face her.

"A monster, Your Highness." He pulled a grotesque face and lifted his arms above his head, curling his hands into claws. "A great shaggy thing with blue skin and deep gashes at its throat. She said it looked like a walking corpse."

Marie flicked a cloth at the boy's head, and he hissed in pain and dropped his arms. "Enough of that nonsense, you'll fill her head with nightmares. Pay no mind to these silly whisperings, Princess!"

Adeline forced a laugh. "Marie, really! Of course I won't. Walking corpse indeed."

Marie narrowed her eyes, but seemed satisfied enough to continue her work after another quick scowl at Jack. He was still rubbing his head, and scowled right back at her.

As the mealtime conversation continued – haltingly now, with nervous eyes watching her – Adeline's thoughts stayed with the lake. A crack in the ice was, she now knew, not so far-fetched. Unheard of to the best of her knowledge, but obviously it could happen, *had* happened. Was this their doing, hers and Mareda's? Edward had sworn it was mended. And the

crack they'd seen was in the centre of the ice, nowhere near the Shrine. No. A coincidence then. A crack in the ice one day, a trick of the light the next – a frightened woman with a sharp imagination.

But even so.

Adeline dug her nails tight into the raw potato in her hand. By the time it was peeled and washed, she had decided. When she finished with the peeling, she would take her leave. She had already planned to find Ger and invite him to the Queen's Village for lunch, so what harm was a short detour?

To the lake.

To the place where she and Mareda had seen that black chasm.

Just to check.

But when she set down the knife and wiped her hands on her apron, she turned to find Marie watching her with folded arms.

"You look troubled."

"I'm not," Adeline said, too quickly.

The cook gave a stiff smile.

"Well and good, then. I need a hand." She beckoned Adeline to the counter, where there sat a small tray bearing broth and thickly buttered bread. "I thought you might deliver your mother her lunch today, since you're so eager to help."

Adeline looked to Jack, who usually delivered the Queen's meals. He met Adeline's look with a shrug, but Marie said; "I need Jack elsewhere today. Besides, you'll want to see that your mother is eating well I'm sure? Getting her strength up?"

Adeline fought the twitch of her eyebrow; it seemed highly unlikely that after tutting and sighing to the point of breathlessness, Marie had suddenly changed her mind and decided to give Adeline some real work to do - but she knew better than to say so. She took the tray, and Marie guided her to the door. As Adeline manoeuvred into the hall, the cook leaned through the doorway and spoke under her breath.

“You forget I’ve known you your whole life, Miss. I know you can’t help your curiosity, but you’re a clever young woman. Too clever to go chasing after silly ghost stories, wouldn’t you say?”

She turned back into the kitchen, and left Adeline scowling at the closed door.

Her arms were aching by the time she reached the Queen’s quarters, but when the Gard standing sentry offered to take the tray from her, she declined – Marie had given her a task, and she’d be damned if it got back to the kitchen that she hadn’t completed it.

When she edged inside, her mother’s bedroom was dim and silent, the curtains drawn and a slim figure tucked deep into the swaths of blankets on the vast bed.

“Your Majesty?” No response. “Mother?”

The shape in the bed stirred, but did not rouse. Adeline set the tray down at the table by the fire, and turned hesitantly to her mother. Should she wake her? Slowly, she approached the bed and peered over the fold of the blankets. Her mother was pale; not her usual glowing porcelain but a translucent greyish-white. Her eyes moved feverishly beneath thin eyelids, the skin around them so dark they looked bruised and painful. Her lips were parted to rake in weak gasps of air, the corners cracked and dry. Adeline’s heart slid into her throat. This was a simple flu?

“Mother?”

The Queen whimpered, and without opening her eyes, clawed one small white hand free from the blankets and reached out for her daughter. Adeline froze at the unfamiliar gesture; and then, without knowing why, she took her mother’s limp and clammy hand in both of hers.

She didn’t know how long she stood like that, holding the sick Queen’s hand, barely daring to breathe too loudly, or even

to move, her legs slowly stiffening beneath her. She thought her presence, her touch, brought some small comfort to the frail creature in the bed, so unlike the mother she knew. At the same time, she feared any movement would wake the Queen, bring her wits back to her, and see Adeline dismissed from her rare company. And so she stood, warming her mother's hand between her palms. After some time, a door slammed from within the Queen's quarters, and Adeline quickly pulled her hands free. She turned to see her mother's chief handmaid come hurtling through the inner doors, dropping a hasty curtsey as she went.

“Your Majesty – Oh!”

She gave a second curtsey.

“Princess, please forgive the intrusion,” she said, addressing her own feet.

Adeline waved her up, though honestly she was grateful for the split second to compose herself. She was hot and flushed, and for some reason, reminded of the time that Mareda had poked around her desk and found the terrible romance novel she'd tried to write aged seventeen. As though she'd been caught doing something shameful.

She breathed through the uncomfortable squirm in her chest. “Is something wrong, Tara?”

The handmaid hesitated. “There is a visitor. To see the Queen.”

Adeline blinked at her. As the only Senior Royal not currently unconscious or attending public court, she supposed this was her problem to solve.

“Oh. Okay. Er,” she paused and glanced over her shoulder at the feverish Queen, barely moving but for the weak rise and fall of her chest. “Well, my mother is ill and Princess Mareda is holding court. Could you ask this visitor to return tomorrow morning?”

The chambermaid didn't move. “He is insistent. Your Highness, I fear he might be quite mad. He is – an odd sort of man. He insists he travelled here from within Eisalaan, but

claims he's –" She flushed slightly, like Adeline was forcing her to repeat a dirty word. "A King."

"A King?" Adeline said, but the chambermaid was now watching the bed with wide eyes, and quickly dropped into yet another curtsy. Adeline turned.

"Mother – Your Majesty."

"Adeline."

The Queen had opened her eyes, and dragged herself halfway to sitting.

"I would like you to go and greet our visitor on my behalf," she said. She spoke slowly, gasping slightly between words like a winded athlete. "Address his concerns to the best of your ability. I will be with you shortly."

Adeline frowned.

Her gravely ill mother was going to humour this madness? Why? Who exactly was she expecting to find at their gates? Adeline began to shake her head, more in disbelief than denial, but –

"Please," said the Queen, quietly.

She paused. It was a word rarely heard from her mother's lips. Adeline hated that this was all it took to convince her.

"Certainly, mother."

After stopping to fetch her cloak, Adeline had rushed through the palace and arrived breathless and hot at the entrance hall. She took a moment to compose herself, drew herself up and folded her hands at her waist, calling to mind images of perfect posture and effortless grace; of Mareda, and of the Queen.

The Gards on duty stared sternly into the middle distance, bowed in unison, and heaved the doors open. Adeline stepped outside and screwed her eyes at the sudden white light of the

midday sun bouncing off the blankets of snow and the clean, bleached stone of the castle walls. The scene of the courtyard was blank and still, save for a far corner by the gates; a flurry of darkness against the snow, a swell of noise in the thick white silence.

Three long, broad figures stood bearing down on something gathered between them. Poise forgotten, Adeline edged closer. The hushed voices and rigid posture made it hard to tell, but she was sure that the figures fought a struggle at their feet. As she came nearer, some sort of scraggy creature reared above their heads with a raw yell, and they forced it back, groaning, to the ground. Adeline cried out in shock, but the men did not turn. They were uniformed in the thunder grey of the Queen's personal Gard, like shadow made solid. The tallest of them wore the broad white sash that marked him as their leader – and Adeline's stomach twisted when she realised who stood before her.

“Captain Doran,” she called. She was quite pleased that her voice didn't quiver.

The Captain turned and bowed in one motion, as though he had known she was there, had been waiting for her to call on him. He stood to meet her eye and she stifled a shudder, that old unease clinging to her nerves even after so many years. She didn't know which had come first; her terror or his hatred. It had always been this way. He had been Captain of the Gard for as long as she remembered, and a close family friend at that; a cousin of Edward's. Perhaps it was his open distaste that had wormed its way into her stomach and sprouted that terror in the pit of her belly. Or perhaps it was her fear that had soured his feelings toward her, because who would dote on a child that cowered in their presence?

All she knew was that this man had played a recurring role in her childhood nightmares. Captain Doran was a cruel faced man with as much steel in his eyes as there was in his greying hair. When he spoke, his voice was thin and hoarse, as though years of screaming on the battlefield had left his lungs a ruin.

“Good afternoon, Princess.”

The creature on the ground seemed to convulse, and Adeline took several steps forward before the Captain swept into her path.

“A moment, Your Highness,” he said, and his cool tone turned confidential. “I had rather thought the Queen would attend to this matter. He is dangerous –”

“Who is ‘he’?”

Adeline sidestepped the Captain just as the dark, quivering shape on the ground wrenched an arm from the grip of one Gards and sprang to his feet with a roar. His feet were swiftly kicked out from beneath him and once again he was pinned, face first, to the cold stone path.

Her stomach lurched.

“Stop!” She yelled, tearing forward, but the Captain shot out an arm to block her once more. The gesture was impatient, and he was too slow to wipe the scowl from his face. She saw it, beneath his grim grey smile. This was the second time in as many weeks that Adeline had called a halt to Captain Doran’s fun, and it seemed he hadn’t forgotten their latest encounter either.

“Forgive me, your highness, but the Queen –”

Adeline glared at him. “The Queen – *my mother* – is resting with a flu,” she said. “And as you well know, her Heirs have every right to act in her name.”

It was a bold move. Adeline had chosen not to petition as heir, and with the way gossip spread in this castle it may even be a known fact. The Captain’s eyes flashed, but he gave another short bow.

“Indeed, forgive me. I only thought to warn you, Princess. This man is not... ordinary.”

Adeline pushed past impatiently, barely listening.

“Release him, for the love of Aera!” She shouted at the Gards. “Let him up!”

Captain Doran nodded, and immediately the smaller of the men released his grasp on the prisoner, falling back a step. The

other, the broad, hulking Gard, lingered a moment longer, his knuckles whitening around the man's arm.

"Release. Him," she gritted out.

She caught a brief glimpse of the Gard's clenched teeth, but with a half glance to his Captain, he finally did as she asked.

Adeline watched the captive man as he struggled to his knees, shaking with rage.

No, not shaking, she realised – violently shivering. He was bizarrely dressed for the Eisalaan cold, in a thin, old-fashioned cotton tunic. His knotted black hair hung in damp waves, snaking about his ears and under his collar. His feet were bare, raw and red against the crisp snow.

Adeline winced at the sight of his ice-burned skin, and quickly fumbled with her thick cloak where it fastened at her neck.

"Princess," the Captain called warningly.

She ignored him, sweeping the cloak from her shoulders as she moved forward. The Gards made slight, identical movements – reaching for the sword hilts at their waists. Adeline came to her knees in front of the freezing man and draped the cloak over him as best she could - it enveloped her quite comfortably, but would barely close over his broad back.

"Bit small," she mumbled, frowning.

"Princess!" the Captain called again.

The stranger lifted his face to her; her first glimpse was a flash of electric hazel, the shadowed, feverish eyes of someone long estranged from their bed. Dense black bristle crept up his neck and along his jaw, and a ferocious frown knotted his thick, dark brow. Her pulse stuttered. She tried for a hesitant smile, but it was unreturned.

Adeline rose slowly to her feet. All at once, she absorbed the full tension of the Gards poised around her. As though she were a child approaching a rabid beast, and they waited for the moment he would bare his teeth. She swallowed hard and

drew her shoulders back; she was here now, and she would not look away.

After an agonising pause, the stranger stood up. And up – he was impossibly tall, and it finally occurred to her that Doran was right when he claimed this was no ordinary man. Ordinary men didn't wear the sun as a crown when they drew to their full height.

The Gards hands twitched at their scabbards, and Adeline could take the silence no longer.

“Have you come to seek shelter?” she asked him. Her voice came out small and breathy. She sounded like a little girl. She drew her back even straighter.

The man tilted his head to one side and considered her. His eyes were too much, too intense. She could swear he was seeing through her skin to the muscle and sinew and the uncomfortable rush of hot blood in her veins. He took a step and the air rang with the sound of metal as the Gards unsheathed their swords.

Adeline threw her hand up to halt them, but the man had barely flinched. He continued his approach, and Adeline waited, willingly rooted, though she couldn't say why. He stopped just a step before her, and his heavy gaze dragged across her face.

When he spoke, it was not the half-frozen croak she'd expected, but a deep and rich lilt.

“You are not who I expected.”

Adeline blinked, exhaled slowly. “Right. Well, I'm sorry to disappoint.”

The stranger's lips twitched under the black bristle, though Adeline suspected it was not so much a smile as a grimace. As they stared at each other through the stretching, looming silence, she had the distinct impression that the stranger would not allow himself to be charmed - he had come here with a bone to pick, and from the dark way that he watched her, perhaps that bone was to be her spine, viciously torn from her body.

Which put her at a complete loss, if she was entirely honest. She wasn't going to let Doran and his men assault this man for sport, but she couldn't exactly invite him inside for tea. Not if he kept looking at her like he wanted to rip her nails from her fingers and use them to claw out her own eyes.

Fortunately, she was saved from contemplating the potential loss of her eyeballs when the doors to the palace were suddenly flung open.

The Queen swept into the courtyard, white cloak billowing behind her like a snowstorm, hands held wide and palms up in welcome. The Gards each dropped to a bow, and Adeline lowered her head respectfully – the stranger moved nothing but his bright, violent eyes.

The Queen smiled at them all, and Adeline's head snapped up. Just minutes ago her mother had looked like a feverish child. Now she was almost back to her luminous self, if a bit dimmer. A bit worn.

“Adeline, my darling, I thank you for your assistance. Captain Doran, good afternoon. And who is our guest?”

Adeline and the Captain began to talk all at once.

“Your Majesty – ”

“Mother – ”

But one voice drowned out all others, demanding to be heard, to be answered.

“I'll not be turned away until I've spoken to a Beira. No one else.”

The Queen smiled stiffly, though not without grace. “I am *the* Beira. I am the Queen.”

At that, a flicker of shock widened the man's eyes, the long lines of his body tensing. His gaze swept quickly over the palace, darted between Adeline and the Queen. At last he seemed to reach some conclusion in his mind, and moved into a fluid but shallow bow, Adeline's cloak swinging on his shoulders.

“I am Kai Cumhail.”

Adeline looked to her mother a second too late – the Queen was already composing herself, arranging a beautiful blank mask across her face.

“An honour,” the Queen said earnestly. And then, slowly, stiffly, as though she had never attempted the gesture in her life, Adeline’s mother bent into a slight curtsy.

Adeline’s mouth hung open. From the corner of her eye, she thought she saw the Captain flinch.

“Captain, please escort our guest to my parlour.”

“Your Majesty?”

“And have your Gards bring word to the kitchen; ask Marie to prepare a spread. Pastries, wine, meat and cheeses, and any sweets leftover from the festivities.”

Captain Doran stared incredulously at the Queen, but she seemed not to notice. She turned to Adeline, who had been holding her breath, hoping to avoid being noticed and dismissed.

“Adeline.”

She felt her shoulders sag. The Queen smiled softly, and reached to brush a stray curl from her daughter’s shoulder. Adeline stiffened, surprised. “You have been such a help, my love, but I must speak with our guest in private.”

My love?

But all she could manage was a mute nod. She curtsied to the Queen, gave an uncertain dip in the direction of the stranger, stood upright and made for the castle.

“Adeline, a moment,” the Queen called.

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

The Queen moved closer and murmured so that Adeline alone would hear. “Should you find yourself at the palace, I would be grateful if you would deliver my midday meal tomorrow, as you did today.”

Adeline pulled back to stare at her, but the Queen’s face was unreadable. So, she simply nodded. “As you wish.”

Her mother patted her shoulder; a dismissal, but not the kind she'd expected.

As she walked away, Adeline felt a pair of eyes on her like the weight of a hand on her shoulder, willing her to turn. She did so at the door; the stranger's frown had become a crease between his dark brows and he watched her still as the sentries pulled the doors shut behind her.

Who in all of Adhlas, she wondered, was Kai Cumhail?



Chapter 10

Kai

The Beira Queen was golden-haired.

That was all that went through his mind. All he had to gauge the time that had slipped past him above the ice.

Golden, not the Beira black he had come looking for. A gene so strong, so enduring, that the King's many bastards were known at once by their raven hair. There was a saying, common throughout Eisalaan and even below the Laune itself; "Black as a Beira."

Adhlas only knew how many years of breeding it had taken, for that endless, enduring black to turn to gold.

A century perhaps? More?

A fresh surge of rage rose through him, and Kai gripped at the soft edge of his pristine white seat, savouring the pain in his hands after years within the ice, feeling nothing at all. The split skin of his knuckles cracked and bled anew, and he was glad for the blood that smeared the perfect, rich fabric beneath his hands.

In the stretching, pressing silence, there was movement above him. The golden Queen set a small cup of tea down in front of him and took a seat across the low table.

He raised his head to meet her stare. Although she held tight to her poise, he could swear she reeled ever so slightly at what she saw when his eyes met hers, and he had to admit - it gave him a savage satisfaction.

These Beira women, he thought. When will they learn not to invite the monsters home with them?

The Queen cleared her throat gently.

“I would like to help you, if you will let me. I would like to help the Merrow. I know that there were many of your people among you that day.”

“You know nothing of my people,” he ground out. “You know nothing of that day.”

The Queen set down her untouched cup of tea and folded her hands in her lap.

“I always thought it strange when the stories would say there were no survivors. Of course that’s not true. The fairytales came from somewhere. Someone must have lived to tell the tale, mustn’t they? And now, after all this time, we know that you survived, too.”

She smiled pleasantly, for all the world as though he were a cherished guest and not an ancient lake creature glowering at her through the frost that clung to his eyelashes.

“I’ve studied accounts from that day, you see. And as for what I know about your people... I know all that *she* knew.”

Kai said nothing, gave no indication he knew who *she* was. He was frozen, too intent on grappling with the murderous impulse that had suddenly flooded him. Too focused on holding the snarl that pulled at his lips and teeth.

Don't speak of her.

But the Queen could not read his silence.

“When I ascended the throne,” she continued, “I inherited an invaluable gift.”

Kai’s heart stuttered and snatched at his breath. *A gift.* His eyes darted to the Queen’s pale throat, but – No. There was nothing.

“I inherited a trove of prized journals. Avette’s journals.”

He would have flinched at her name.

Would have, had his entire body not seized when the Queen reached across the table and gently patted his hand where it rested on his knee. He looked down at her pale fingers over his scraped and bloodied ones, and his brain would not make sense of the sight. He stared blankly.

Avette.

The Queen had spoken her name to him with a sad smile. With something like pity.

What in the name of the Mother had Avette written in those journals? Not the truth. He would not be here if this woman knew what he had done. He would not be drinking tea and accepting comfort from a Beira Queen if Avette had written anything close to the truth.

Yet here he sat, hand in hand with her distant ancestor.

“Who was she, to you?”

Kai heard the hoarse edge to his own voice, that angry tightness.

“My ancestor. An aunt several times removed, or a twelfth cousin perhaps. I never was very good with lineage. I can tell you there are *many* generations between us, at least.”

“How many?”

“Seventeen. Or eighteen maybe, I’d have to check.”

Around them, the room seemed to tilt. That was many, many Beira ancestors. Many more than he’d expected.

“How long has it been?”

For the first time, the Queen hesitated. Kai leaned forward in his seat, some of that roiling anger slipping from him as he did, like a cauldron boiling over, hissing with rage like steam.

“How long?”

She held his gaze, not so much as a blink at his rough tone.

“A little under six hundred years.”

Six hundred years.

Six hundred.

The centuries rushed him all at once, draining and crushing him, pressing him down to nothing, to dust.

Yet here he was.

He did not know how much time had passed as he sat there, held in the truth just as he had been held in his ice prison. Perhaps it was another six hundred years.

“I understand this must be difficult for you.”

Kai’s head moved to meet her gaze before his mind caught up, and he found himself staring blankly at the Queen.

“Six hundred years,” he said, numbly.

She nodded.

“And Avette?”

The Queen understood what he was asking, and bowed her head.

“That very day. I’m so sorry.”

Dead.

And the Queen was *sorry*, for his loss, for his pain, a pain he did not feel.

He should have felt something.

He felt nothing.

Nothing but the determined panic that had gripped and buoyed him all the way from the Laune to the brutes at the palace gates. The fear for the Merrow he had left behind, huddled and shivering, hidden in the barren clearing that had once been a deep, lush forest.

“There must be a way.”

“A way?”

“A way to end the curse. The everwinter.”

The Queen’s smile was tight, sadness and determination warring at her fine features.

“The Frost is no curse, Your Majesty. Though of course, I am sympathetic to your ordeal. I do understand why it might seem that way to you and yours, really I do.”

Kai could only stare. “To me and mine? Your country has been *frozen* for six hundred years.”

“And we have thrived.”

No.

No, no, no, no, *no*.

“My home is beneath the Laune,” he said hoarsely. “You said you wanted to help.”

“And I do. I want to help the Merrow find their place in this world, and I will do everything in my power to make it so. But we have built our economy on the magic of the Frost, right on the surface of the Laune. Without it, Eisalaan would fall to ruin.”

Kai was on his feet before he could stop himself.

“And *with* it, my Kingdom is lost to the depths.”

He hurled the words at her, straining not to roar them, but even at that, a rustle sounded in the hall, a burly sentry opening the door to peer inside.

The Queen calmly waved him away again. When the door clicked shut, she raised her eyes to Kai. The rage that coursed through him was familiar, the friend that had kept him company through centuries of endless dark. He gave in to it. Let it flood him now, let his shoulders heave with it.

“Please sit down, Your Majesty.”

When he did not, she sighed a tired sigh and stood, gripping her seat for support. She could not match him for height, but somehow she managed to meet his eye as though she towered over him. She spoke to him in a firm, clipped tone that cut him down to size.

A true Beira; he could see it now.

“Allow me to speak to you as one ruler to another. You are young. Your reign was brief before the Frost but, by my ancestor’s account, you are a good King and a better man. Avette seemed a brilliant woman and I would like to believe she would not allow herself to be blinded by love.

“So, live up to her word. Be the man she believed you to be. Save those you can save. Do not drag your surviving people through a war they cannot win, for some shadow of a hope that your lost Kingdom survived six hundred years under the full, frozen weight of the Laune.”

Solemn silence followed, and Kai let it close around him. He was shaken to his core, his cherished rage suddenly suffocated.

He did not trust himself to answer, but when she reached for his hand, he let her take it.

“I have ruled this country for twenty-six years. I’ve led my armies through countless wars. Trust me when I say that there is always more to lose. Always.”

Still Kai did not speak. Dropping her hand, he slowly sank into his seat and held his silence as the Queen sat across from him once more. She offered another sad smile, and he answered only with a slight nod. But as the Queen went on to

detail the aid and shelter she could lend to the Merrow, Kai retreated into the numbed ruin of his mind.

She would not help him.

His Kingdom was lost.

His people, stranded.

Avette, dead.

Yet the Beira still reigned. Avette's line lived on. And if he could not have her, he would take what he needed from her blood.



Chapter 11

Adeline

“He came to the Cold Council meeting.”

Mareda spoke in a hush, though they were alone in Adeline’s room. They’d climbed into her bed, like they so often had as children; sitting cross-legged with their heads bent together, a dark crash of waves in a golden stream. Drawn around the bedposts, the pale drapes were like the walls of a cave, firelight and shadows flickering in answer to their whispers.

“What was he like?”

Adeline hadn’t caught so much as a glimpse of the stranger since his arrival, though she knew he was living somewhere in

the palace. It was, perhaps, half the reason she'd agreed to stay a few days when Mareda asked. She wasn't sure why her curiosity burned so fiercely; he had, in hindsight, been sort of terrifying.

As if echoing her thoughts, Mareda shook her head with the air of one telling a ghost story; her eyes wide and voice pitched ominously low.

"He never spoke. Just sat at mother's side, and watched us all."

Adeline was quiet for a long moment, lost in thoughts of all she'd learned over the last week – which was barely anything.

The palace rumour mill, while working furiously, had been failing her. Hushed conversations fell to a guilty silence on her approach, and she was coming to suspect Marie's hand in this. She'd been more or less banned from the kitchens too, apart from the suspiciously quiet lunch hour.

Adeline picked at a hangnail on her thumb until Mareda eventually pried her hand away and squeezed it, prompting her even though she had nothing useful to contribute.

"He showed up wet and shivering," she said, for probably the fourth or fifth time, but then added: "Captain Doran said he was dangerous."

Mareda jumped on the minor detail like it was the stranger's written history laid out in ink and parchment.

"Do *you* think he's dangerous?"

"I think," Adeline said slowly, considering, "that Captain Doran believes he is."

Mareda's brow went flat with something close to disappointment. She chewed her lip.

"I don't know, Ade. There's something in the way mother talks to him. He's important. She wants to keep his favour."

At the mention of the Queen, Adeline gave a non-committal murmur and resumed picking at her thumb, dropping her sister's eye for just a moment.

Thankfully, the moment passed without remark, and with no further details to rehash, the conversation shifted to lighter topics. The Mid-Winter Faire; Iseult's next visit; the pretty heiress Marry had been talking to at their last ball.

But when Mareda eventually fell asleep, Adeline lay awake, queasy with guilt.

Because she *had* returned, after that strange day in the courtyard. She'd arrived at her mother's rooms, as promised, with a lunch tray in her arms. And the following lunchtime too. And the next.

It was only half an hour here and there, but Adeline had been careful to tiptoe around the topic of their mother these past few days. Every time she found herself on the verge of bringing it up, something stopped her – Mareda's face, in her memory. She recalled how her sister had reacted to that scrap of praise the Queen had granted her.

A shame. You may have made a fine leader.

If Mareda learned of their cosy private lunches, Adeline wasn't sure what she could say to make her sister understand. She wasn't sure she understood herself, truth be told. And until she did understand, Mareda could not find out.

If she did, Adeline knew with aching clarity, something would come undone between them.

It was difficult for Adeline to reconcile the feverish waif she tended to each day with the formidable Queen she'd hidden from throughout her youth.

Mareda clung to distant memories of a warm and playful mother, from a time when Queen Selma was as delightful behind closed doors as she was in the open court; a time before the weight of the crown took its toll. So while Adeline learned quite easily to steer clear of their matriarch, Mareda could only cling closer, work harder to win her approval.

But this version of Selma was not the same vaguely disdainful woman they had grown to know. The sickly Queen *listened* to Adeline, asked her questions about herself and her life in the palace, watched her with genuine, almost impatient interest. She came to understand that her mother was trying to get to know her; to make up for lost time.

When she was too tired to needle Adeline with questions, the Queen listened instead to the few stories her daughter picked up around the palace – the cleaned up versions, anyway. But day by day, Adeline found there were fewer wild tales to edit as the collective focus narrowed to just one grave concern.

“They say Eisalaan is thawing,” said Adeline one lunchtime, as she drew a chair to her mother’s bedside.

The Queen gave her a sharp look, and shuffled higher amongst her bank of pillows. “Nonsense. Where in the world would anyone get that idea?”

“The Laune is layered in slush, mother. Something isn’t right, and people are scared.”

Her mother closed her eyes and was still for so long that Adeline began to think she had fallen asleep; but when she blinked again, her eyes were bright and focused. “What does your sister say?”

Adeline gave an equivocal mutter.

“Mareda has still been holding court in the mornings, has she not?”

“Yes. But I don’t know what she makes of the Thaw –”

“*The Thaw*,” the Queen chuckled weakly. “Aera save us, Eisalaan is surely on the verge of a mass hysteria.”

Adeline didn’t laugh, and the Queen narrowed her eyes. “Why are you not speaking to your sister?”

“Don’t know where you got that idea. I speak with her daily.”

“You don’t talk of the court proceedings?”

“She doesn’t tell me about the court proceedings.”

“And yet you’re clearly both curious and concerned,” she mused. “So why won’t you ask her? What is it, Adeline?”

“You need to eat something.”

She moved away from the bed, grateful when her mother pried no further. She retrieved the lunch tray from the table by the fireplace, then sat again and set the tray on her lap. Adeline scooped a steaming, aromatic spoonful of soup and held it to her mother’s lips. The Queen took in a small sip, and her pale, cracked lips curved into a slight smile.

“I remember feeding you like this,” she said. “When you were just a baby.”

Adeline arched a brow before she could stop herself, and the Queen gave another hoarse laugh.

“Don’t look so shocked. I wasn’t always so...” She paused, seeming to struggle for the word.

“Cold?”

She hadn’t meant it to come out so bitterly.

It was just the truth, as widely accepted as the fact that the sky was blue and the Laune was frozen solid. The Queen of Snow and Silver *was* known to be cold; beyond the borders of Eisalaan, her enemies whispered that her heart was frozen harder than the lake itself. This would not have been the first time the Queen had heard it said.

Selma winced all the same.

The answering silence was utterly airless, pressing painfully on Adeline’s ears. She gathered another spoonful of soup, clattering the spoon loudly against the bowl. Her mother didn’t look at her as she sipped it.

“I’m sorry,” Adeline said finally.

The Queen shook her head. “No. That is entirely fair. I haven’t been myself for a long, long time. I suppose I can’t be surprised to hear that you’ve never known me any other way.”

She finished the soup in silence, and Adeline gathered the lunch things on the tray. She had reached the door when her

mother called her name.

“Adeline, wait. It’s not too late, is it?”

When she turned, her mother was pale as her own bed sheets and her forehead shined with the effort of sitting upright. The Queen licked her dry lips. “It’s not too late for us to get to know each other now?”

Adeline didn’t trust herself to answer at first. She wanted to say that she wasn’t sure. That she’d had almost twenty-two years to get to know her. That it would take more than a fortnight to forget a lifetime of neglect.

She didn’t say any of that.

She set the tray down on the windowsill, moved to the bedside and gently coaxed her mother to lie flat. She smoothed the pale hair away from her face, and the Queen closed her eyes, sighing at the gentle touch.

Adeline took her hand.

“No,” she said. “No, it’s not too late.”



Chapter 12

Kai

“What’s the plan, Kai?”

Os crouched before him in the snow. He wasn’t smiling, but that in itself was not out of the ordinary. What mattered was that he looked warm. Well-dressed in wools and a long, thick cloak, sturdy leather boots. His lips were no longer blue, and his hair had finally dried, fluffy and blond as a golden pup.

Safe. He was safe. They were all safe. Weren’t they?

When Kai didn’t answer, Os threw a glance over his shoulder at Alun, who stood leaning against a tree, watching them. He wasn’t smiling either, and on Al, that *was* a cause for

concern. He'd been standing there silent and unmoving for so long, a dusting of snow had settled in the waves and ridges of his tight black curls, in his long eyelashes. He looked like a fairytale Prince, ice and ebony.

Maybe they should have written the stories about Al, Kai thought. Maybe they would all be better off if Alun had been the one to meet Avette all those lifetimes ago.

At some cue from Os that Kai could not see, Al seemed to come back to himself, an imitation of his usual bright smile flickering into place.

“Is there a plan, Kai?”

Kai looked past them both, looked out over the unmoving surface of the Laune in the distance, and the heaving bustle above it. A market, where their lost home should be. And below it, suspended in ice, the magic that once ran through the veins of every Merrow like wild waters through a river.

The smooth white scar across his palm throbbed, one vague and aching pulse. He flexed his hand like he could shake away the pain.

“How is Ceri?” He asked dully.

He pretended not to notice the look that passed between Os and Al. He knew he was being frustrating. They wanted answers. He didn't have them, not yet.

It was Al who eventually answered. He shook his head, showering a thin spray of half-melted snow onto his shoulders.

“She's fine, Kai. Bored, but fine. You know Ceri.”

He nodded.

“And – and has anyone managed to...?”

He let the question hang.

Os answered this time.

“To Wield?”

He didn't miss that tightness creeping into his cousin's voice. Os might be nearly unreadable to most, but Kai

recognised the hoarse rasp; as though his throat was rough with a thirst that could not be quenched.

He knew; he felt it too.

“No.” Os swallowed and went on. “No, it’s gone. I’ve called the waters for hours on end, but the Mother never brings them forth. Not for any of us.”

Kai sank his head into his hands. The silence ringing them was solemn and heavy. After a moment, he felt a broad, warm hand land on his shoulder. On his other side, the fallen log beneath him groaned as Al’s weight settled beside him.

“If there *is* no plan, that’s fine too. Perfectly understandable.”

Though he made not a sound, Kai got the impression that his cousin had sent some look over his head when Al went on hurriedly.

“Understandable, but we need to know. We need to know the next move, the goal. Even if that goal is just surviving another few weeks with the Earl of the Thornlands.” Al paused, a faint yet familiar note of amusement threading his words. “Did you know he has *eight* daughters?”

Kai dragged his face over his palms to finally peer up at them, both of them. His friends and advisors, two thirds of his modest court. Os, who’d been constant as a shadow by his side for as long as he could remember. Al, a friendship forged in their youth, surprising everyone when it had endured beyond those wilder years. They were the only people he trusted in this new Eisalaan, along with Ceri. The three of them, the only people who had witnessed those final moments with Avette.

And not one of them had ever judged him for it. Not even six hundred years later. He had made a mistake that cost them their lives and their magic and their Kingdom, and they forgave him, because they believed he would set it right.

It was the least he could do, to try.

“The plan is,” Kai said finally, “to stay safe. I need you to spread the word to the others. Can you do that? Tell them to stay safe, while I find us a way home.”



Chapter 13

Adeline

Days passed with a slow dawning fear of what became widely known as The Thaw. A well-liked merchant took a terrible fall on the wet surface of the lake, breaking his back in two places and destroying much of his priceless ice flatware and ornate glasses, each of which took months of careful Welding to craft.

Mareda had become so flustered by the angry crowd at the public court the next morning that she burst into hysterical tears, and the Queen had to be roused from a fitful sleep to take her place and defuse a potential mob.

Mareda was still sniffing and shaken as she and Adeline watched the proceedings from a shadowed corner of the upper gallery. But the Queen's performance was a thing to behold. She listened attentively, treated each concern with care, but kept a perfectly calm countenance even when the citizen's voices rose with anger.

"Our livelihoods are slowly melting around us, meanwhile *creatures* are emerging from the depths of the lake—"

"Creatures?" The Queen interrupted.

The man before her flushed a ruddy colour, but nodded emphatically. He was not a Wielder but a salesman, one of many who transported ice past Aera's Chain to the hotter Southern continents. The Queen was patient while he found his voice again, and he finally muttered: "I know how it sounds, Majesty, but it's not just me that's seen them. Ancient, water-breathing things they are."

Several people nodded behind him, a few murmurs of agreement rising in a low hum above the crowd. Up in the gallery, Mareda gave an indignant sniff, but Adeline found her breath had escaped her.

Creatures emerging from the lake, the man had said. The image niggled at the back of her brain, a memory trying to shift itself free.

Below them, the Queen was now faced with her final meeting; a broken old man, an artist and Wielder who managed to express between gasping sobs that he could no longer perform the enchantments that preserved the sculptures he carved into blocks of ice. It was agreed that he would temporarily pair with another Wielder, who would perform the magic in exchange for a small share in the old man's profits. Once this was settled, Selma rose from the polished silver throne and made her laboured descent from the dais.

Mareda fretted and wrung her hands as she followed Adeline down the stairs, and through the halls to their mother's room, where they'd been asked to meet her. Mareda was whispering furiously as they walked, quietly scolding herself under breath.

“Mother will be *livid*. What a soft, silly thing she’ll think me.”

But as they entered the Queen’s parlour a few minutes later, Selma rose from her seat by the fireplace to welcome both girls at the door. Mareda froze as their mother moved to enfold them, unable to reel in her surprise, and it was just a fraction too late that Adeline noted how readily she herself had accepted the Queen’s embrace. Mareda watched her with an odd expression.

Their mother was oblivious to it all.

“We must host a gathering tonight, my darlings,” she told them, with a little pat of Mareda’s cheek that had her eyes rounding in soft surprise. “Our guest must be formally introduced to our family. Our little society.”

“King Cumhail?”

“Is he really a King?”

The Queen glanced at the open doorway where her Gards stood sentry, then inclined her head, gesturing for her daughters to take a seat.

The Queen shut the door, and sat across from her daughters before she finally spoke again.

“Yes,” she said, a little breathlessly. “Kai Cumhail is a King, among his own people.”

Adeline frowned.

“His own people? When he arrived at the palace, Tara told us he’d come from somewhere in Eisalaan.”

At the word ‘*us*’, another questioning glance from Mareda had Adeline cursing inwardly.

Careful, she reminded herself.

The Queen sighed. “He *is* from Eisalaan. The Cumhail family were once our counterparts beneath the Laune. Kai Cumhail is King of the Merrow.”

There was a stretch of muddled silence before anyone spoke.

“The Merrow,” Mareda said slowly, eyes narrowing.

Adeline’s brows pitched.

“From the *fairytale*?” She blurted.

“From the *history* of our kingdom,” said the Queen. She paused then, eyes closed, and massaged the faint crease between her brows. “The Merrow are surfaced, and as you can imagine, they’re frightened.”

Surfaced.

That image at the back of Adeline’s mind shifted again, and she realised it all at once. She’d *heard* this before; the merchant at the public court, all that grumbling about creatures clawing free of the Laune. And weeks back, hadn’t she heard about a creature climbing up from a crack in the ice? It was the very day the Prince - the *King* - had stormed their courtyard, in fact. A merchant had seen him and had the fright of her life; they’d laughed about it in the kitchens that day.

All the fucking Daughters.

“I’ve been working closely with King Cumhaill,” the Queen went on. “To help them find their place in a world that has long forgotten them.”

The Queen leaned heavily on the armrest of her seat, and the flicker of movement pulled Adeline from her thoughts. Her mother’s perfect posture was slipping with every passing moment, giving way to exhaustion. Adeline wanted to comfort her, to take her hand and guide her back to the safety of her sickbed, but she forced herself to stay still and silent under Mareda’s keen eye.

“I need your help too, my loves,” said their mother. “If we welcome King Cumhaill into our court tonight, we acknowledge a kinship with the Merrow. That is *crucial*. Our family must forge that bond, so we might set an example. A message to our people.”

Mareda leaned forward keenly.

“And what message is that, mother?”

Adeline felt an awful little twinge at the syrupy sweetness of her sister's voice; a voice she only used around the Queen. But Selma met their eyes in turn, Mareda first, then Adeline, her piercing blue gaze impressing just how critical this was to her.

“The message that there is nothing to fear from the Merrow. That they are our countryfolk.”

One of the benefits of living above Imogen's store was that Adeline didn't have far to look for something beautiful to wear. A gathering hosted by her mother, after all, would not be a cosy evening spent playing cards in her parlour. The Queen of Snow and Silver didn't do 'cosy'.

After their mother retired to the inner chambers of her rooms to rest, Adeline first sent off a quick note to Ger inviting him to be her guest for the night, then hurried down to call a carriage home. As they rolled away from the palace, she watched the blank landscape pass by until the salted roads gave way to the slippery, frosted cobblestone of the Capital, snowbanks and pine trees thinning out into brightly painted storefronts.

Adeline hopped out on the main street, and stepped under the awning of a small apothecary to find her bearings. After the muffled silence of the snowy drive down from the Queen's Village, the noise and bustle of the small city almost knocked her back, and she needed a moment to just breathe it all in. The smell of eucalyptus wafting from the cool, dim store behind her, the warm scent of sugared hazelnuts from a cart across the road. The chatter, and footfall, and echoing, carrying calls of street vendors enticing people to their carts. A playful tune played on the fiddle and drum burst out of a nearby tavern as a giggling couple stumbled through the door, arm in arm and rosy cheeked.

Adeline watched it all, her home of the past two years, the one starburst of colour in all of Eisalaan's silver and white.

People came from all over the world to see Lake Laune, the so-called *Heart of Adhlas* – and perhaps it was.

But to Adeline, the Queen's Capital was the heart of Eisalaan. The messy, bleeding, beating heart, pulsing with joy and revelry and life. Adeline stepped onto the cobblestones and was one with the crowd.

Twenty minutes later, she headed back to Imogen's store, strode in, and plonked down a bottle of honeywine and a box of caramelised hazelnuts on the desk. Imogen looked up from the pedestal across the room, where she was busy pinning a bright blue Blessing Day dress on a sweet-faced little girl of around seven or eight.

Imogen nodded at the desk with an arched brow.

"I take it that's a bribe, and not a reward for being an excellent tenant."

Her tone was made even drier by the pins clenched between her teeth. Adeline grinned.

"My mother's hosting a ball tonight, and I need to make a good impression."

Imogen snorted delicately.

"You know, most dressmakers require at *least* a few weeks notice. Janet here isn't taking the Blessing for another two months."

Janet smiled, her little round cheeks flushing as she waved at Adeline's reflection in the big gilded mirror before her. Adeline winked and waved back, then shifted her gaze to catch Imogen's eye in the mirror.

"And most landladies require rent, but as agreed, I'm more than happy to be paid in outrageous last minute requests."

She batted her lashes, and Imogen scoffed through her mouthful of pins. Adeline wished she wouldn't. She'd inhale those things if she wasn't careful.

"We agreed you'd be paid in *dresses*. And only because you've returned every single envelope I've ever slipped under your door."

“Goddess above, let me have those.” She hurried over and held her hand out for the pins. “I’m terrified you’re going to impale your tongue – and how would you snark at me then?”

Imogen let the pins drop into her hand, then turned her bright brown eyes up to Adeline and pursed her lips in a way that *would* have looked quite stern if it weren’t for the soft dimpling of her cheeks.

“This counts for *three* months of rent. Which means your credit for outrageous requests is suspended until Mid-Winter, understood?”

Adeline beamed, and flew at her friend until her flurry of kisses had Imogen batting her away, and little Janet in a puddle of giggles.

They both knew Imogen had an entire rail of pieces reserved just for Adeline, but she loved to be wooed. And talented as she was, Adeline had no qualms about doing just that.



Adeline was quite content to float aimlessly around upstairs while she waited. She pottered around making toast and lit some candles here and there, then settled down in the pile of cushions on the windowsill. The street below, colourful storefronts and snow-caked cobblestones, was glittering in a layer of frost beneath the dim light of the gathering dusk.

Imogen found her there some time later, curled up against the window in a silk robe, a book in one hand and a slice of toasted potato bread in the other.

“Good call,” Imogen said, by way of greeting. “You’ll definitely want to eat *before* I get you into this dress.”

Adeline grimaced at the thought of having her ribs crushed all night, but she polished off the last bit of toast in one bite and eagerly clambered up to follow her friend into the bedroom. Imogen had hung the dress off the small fourposter, and Adeline felt both her eyes and mouth rounding as she took it in.

“Oh, Imogen.”

Imogen’s gift never failed to awe her; the dreamy creations she crafted from fabric and ice. This dress was no exception, with its shadowy blue skirts spilling from a dark velvet bodice, curling gently at the ground to give the impression of floating wisps of cloud. Tiny diamonds of ice dotted the fabric, Wielded by Imogen’s own hand so that every ripple of the fabric had them winking and shimmering like stars in a clear night sky.

“This is...”

“I know,” said Imogen. She cocked her head to one side, and a smile played at her lips as she admired her own handiwork. “Well, come on. On it goes, and you can tell me what a gifted, inimitable visionary I am.”

They worked together to get the bodice up past Adeline’s hips, and she had to brace herself against a bedpost while Imogen yanked at the laces to strap her in. When she was done, she took Adeline by the shoulders and guided her to the mirror.

“It’s gorgeous, Imogen.” Adeline said, and meant it, though she hesitated. “Is it a bit *low*?”

“No.”

“But you can see my rib cage. Among other things.”

Imogen was non-plussed.

“Those other things are your tits, darling.”

Adeline tried to laugh, but the vice grip of the dress would only allow for a sort of wheeze. She grabbed the peaks of her bodice and tried to hoist the whole thing up; Imogen smacked her hands away.

“Stop that, it’s perfect!”

“I’m not sure this is what my mother had in mind, is all.”

“You said you wanted to make an impression,” Imogen reminded her.

“A *good* impression.”

Imogen shrugged daintily. “I fear we’re going round in circles here, Ade.”

Adeline turned to face the mirror and blew out a slow breath, turning to see the dress from every angle. It *did* look good, once she’d got past the excessive cleavage. When you grew up with curves, you quickly learned that even the slightest slope to a neckline could have *quite* a dramatic effect, but with the soft fall of the long skirt it didn’t even look particularly lewd, just... gently alluring.

“Ok,” she conceded. “I suppose I trust your judgement over my own.”

Imogen grinned. “Damn right you do.”

“But I think I’ll need a glass of that honeywine.”

“Damn right you do,” Imogen called over her shoulder, already on her way down to fetch it.

They drank deeply, Imogen perched at the end of the bed, sipping contentedly and offering suggestions delivered as firm instruction while Adeline gathered her curls in a silver hairpiece and brushed smokey shades of powder over her eyes.

“Just one piece of jewellery,” Imogen said. She was leaning against the bedpost, her third glass of wine slowing her words and relaxing her posture. “If you’re wearing one of my dresses tonight, you’ll need to wear it properly. Do me proud.”

Adeline turned in her seat, eyes widening. She’d assumed her friend was fitted for a fine party, but it was hard to tell sometimes; Imogen always dressed like a fairytale Queen, forever wreathed in glittering ice and fine fabrics.

“Are you not coming?”

Imogen took a long, deep pull from her wine. “*Goddess*, no.”

It was barely an answer, but her tone was firm and pointed enough that Adeline didn’t voice her disappointment. She was quickly learning that Imogen would do as Imogen pleased - and honestly, as someone brought up on endless duties and obligations, she admired that.

“That’s a shame,” she said lightly.

Adeline brushed off her own curiosity, and turned instead to face the mirror, touching the bare skin above her cleavage.

“A necklace?”

Over the rim of her glass, Imogen smirked.

“And distract from *other things*?”

They dissolved into giggles, little more than a pair of tipsy youths. Adeline was warmed with memories of Mid-Winter nights passed, when Imogen would coax Mareda to sneak off and drink stolen wine in the library while their mothers preened at court. Adeline would trail off after them, and Imogen always convinced Mareda to let her join in. She’d sneak her wine then, too, young though she was, and they’d giggle just like this. The three of them drunk and giddy and content.

Perhaps there was some good to be taken from her many years at the Silver Palace after all.

And as she kissed Imogen goodbye, slipped on her shoes and hurried down to meet her carriage driver, Adeline thought the best part of her night was probably already behind her.

Time to make an impression.

“Where have you *been*?”

Mareda *tsked*, then hurried over to grab her hand. She dragged her to the broad doors of the ballroom, but Adeline stumbled at the sudden lurch forward. She righted herself, giggling a bit at her own clumsiness.

Mareda nodded to a Gard, who slipped into a side door to alert the Herald that they were ready. Once he was gone, her sister whirled on her.

“Are you drunk?”

Adeline snorted. “Barely.”

“After mother took great pains to impress upon us just how crucial this evening is? What on all of Adhlas would possess you, Adeline?”

“Oh calm down, Marry. I had three glasses of wine over several hours. I’m *fine*.”

“You’re late.”

“Again, barely. I didn’t drive the carriage myself, you know.”

“No, but you did decide to go all the way to the Capital.”

“I *live* in the Capital. I went home.”

Mareda pursed her lips, but said nothing. She didn’t need to; Adeline knew how she felt about her move to the city. Even two years on, she still believed it was a temper tantrum that had to come to an end eventually.

“Just *stop*, would you? I’m almost twenty-fucking-two years old.”

Mareda sniffed. “I’m aware.”

Adeline stiffened. If she’d been slightly tipsy before, she was certainly sobered now. She glanced around the hallway, confirming they were alone, then met Mareda’s hard stare with one of her own.

“You want to do this right now? I told you, I’m not campaigning. You can stop looking at me like I’m your competition. I’m your *sister*.”

Mareda had the grace to look slightly cowed, but all she said was: “No, you’re right. We shouldn’t talk about this right now.”

Why do we have to talk about it at all?

But Mareda just shook her head and hurried over to the door to take her place.

A horn sounded within and, muffled through the iron and wood, they could hear a booming voice announce them.

“Presenting Princesses Mareda and Adeline Beira; Heirs to the Queen of Eisalaan.”

Mareda froze.

Ah, bollocks.



Chapter 14

Adeline

Heirs to the Queen, the herald had said.

Both of them.

That was sure to sweeten Mareda's sour mood.

They entered the small ballroom to modest applause from the courtiers, but Adeline remembered to look dignified and graceful for all of one moment before she became distracted and stared openly around. The room usually glittered with the traditional wintry beauty the palace was known for, but tonight the Queen had set a different scene entirely. The sparkling ice and blinding white decor had been eschewed,

and they stepped instead into a soft, dim world of silk and shadows. Lengths of wide cobalt ribbon hung loosely across the ceiling, lacing and overlapping low above their heads. Large lanterns of coloured glass threw dappled blue-green light across the walls, and the ground beneath their feet was softened with a thin scattering of dark golden powder.

“Sand!”

Adeline practically squealed. She’d seen sand only once before, many Winters past, when her father had been granted leave to take Adeline to his homeland and she’d experienced a warm summer on a sunny blue coast.

With a fond grin, she scuffed the toe of her silk slipper across the gold powder.

Mareda raised an eyebrow, but didn’t stop to comment before crossing the room, drawing eyes, as always, as she went. Her hair was twisted up on her head leaving her creamy neck bare, and she wore a long white dress with a lace train that trailed dreamily behind her and dragged a path in the sand as she walked. Mareda stopped before the Queen, who was talking to a very tall man with very black hair. They both turned to face Mareda and she slipped into an easy curtsy. As her sister dropped her golden head, Adeline caught the eye of the man and felt a shock of recognition in his dark, wired gaze.

His Majesty, King Kai Cumhaill of the Merrow, stared back at her.

As Mareda rose from her bow, he took a small step backward and craned over her head. He was saying something, apparently speaking to the Queen and her eldest daughter – so, Adeline thought it rather rude that he still held her gaze so firmly from across the room even if she couldn’t quite bring herself to look away. Until a serving boy emerged to her right and hurried forward to present his tray to the King. *Ah, right*, she thought, as the King selected a glass goblet for her sister, and one for her mother.

“That’s him, then?” came a familiar voice.

Gerard appeared at her side.

“I suppose it must be,” said Adeline, still staring. She frowned slightly. “That’s not what he looked like when I met him.”

“Well, sure. If he’d turned up looking half as devastating as he does right now, they’d have had no choice but to let him in.”

“Mmm,” she returned, still watching distractedly as the King nodded politely at something Mareda said, hands folded behind his stiff, straight back.

“Don’t mind me, I’ll wait,” said Ger. “We can exchange pleasantries whenever you’re done ogling.”

Hearing the smirk in her friend’s voice, she finally turned to grin at him, and found her grin mirrored in the boyishly handsome face she knew so well. He lunged without warning, and a squeal escaped her as he pulled her into a ferocious embrace.

“Hello, gorgeous,” Gerard growled. His signature bone-grinding hug squeezed the little air from her lungs that hadn’t been crushed out by her bodice.

“Ow, Ger, my dress,” she wheezed.

Gerard let go, and stepped back. His eyes bulged unashamedly and even though it had been *years* since she’d craved his attention like that, she couldn’t help the ghost of the blush that rose to her cheeks.

“Daughters fuck me sideways,” he exclaimed.

“Ger!”

“Are you *sure* that’s a dress? Is some of it *missing*?”

Adeline tried to nudge him in the ribs, but he dodged her elbow and grabbed at her hands, spinning her out in front of him.

“I’m teasing, you look beautiful.” He bit his lip. “In fact, I may have made an awful mistake, not proposing when I had the chance. You may have given me some thinking to do—”

“Think all you want love, it’s never going to happen.”

“Never going to happen *again*, you mean? I’m almost certain that’s what you said the first time, too.”

She reached up and ruffled the tousled sandy blonde hair that he had clearly spent some time arranging. Ger cried out and dodged her again, grumbling about a truce. A serving girl passed by and he took two tall glasses from her tray, toasting to their temporary peace.

It was for the best; they did have a tendency to regress around one another, and Adeline was supposed to be the portrait of royal grace and poise tonight. Perhaps it hadn’t been the wisest idea to send that invitation to the barracks, but she couldn’t find it in herself to regret it. As she said in the letter she’d sent him that afternoon; she missed her best friend.

“Thanks for coming,” Adeline told him. “No Gard duties tonight?”

He scoffed.

“I swapped with Bryony. An invitation to court? A front row seat to the social debut of the *legendary* Merrow King? Wouldn’t miss it. Plus, you know, I missed you too I suppose.”

Adeline nudged him with her hip, and he conceded with a warm arm slung around her shoulders. And it was easy, *so* easy to fall back into their comfortable, tender dynamic. No matter how many weeks or months it had been since they’d last seen each other. No matter whom may have broken who’s heart, however many years ago.

“What is this?” Ger said, smacking his lips at a sip of his drink. “It’s delicious.”

Adeline looked down into her glass. It was clear and cool and smelled of the sharp, sweet fruits Silas had served her every morning of that warm summer in Dhalias.

“I’m not sure,” she said, then gestured at the room at large. “It’s all a bit different tonight. I think it’s supposed to be a way to welcome the King, you know? Water instead of ice.”

Ger looked around. “Oh it’s a *theme*. Okay. Silk and lights to look like water, sure. You’ve lost me at the brown sugar all over the floor though.”

Adeline spluttered hard into her drink.

“It’s sand, you twit.”

Ger kicked a small spray of sand at her shoes, earning himself another childish shove.

Unfortunately, Mareda passed by at that particular moment and paused in her path to tut at them.

“Ade, really? You need a playmate, tonight of all nights?”

“Mareda!” Ger boomed merrily. “Pleasure as always.”

Mareda pursed her lips. “Gerard.”

She moved on, and as Ger waved merrily at her retreating back, Adeline had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. She chastised herself inwardly.

Composure, and decorum, and whatnot.

Mareda was right; their mother had been very clear about what she expected from them tonight.

“Best behaviour,” she warned Ger. “You’ll get me in trouble.”

“That’s completely unfair. I live for getting you in trouble, Ade. Always have.”

But he traced the sign of the Goddess over his heart all the same, a solemn promise to behave.

They had drained their second glasses and Adeline was just beginning to enjoy the spreading warmth of the fruity liquor, the loosening of her tight neck and shoulders, when music suddenly swelled from a shadowed corner of the room. An orchestra had settled neatly into one of the curtained alcoves, and begun to play. The music was fast and dramatic and when Ger suddenly whipped around to grin impishly at her, Adeline could only giggle at the familiar look on his face.

“Oh no,” she said weakly.

“Oh yes,” he said, nodding emphatically.

He grabbed her hand and she allowed herself to be dragged to the centre of the room. Other couples had begun to gather

already, but they instinctively cleared the way as Ger approached, for he had the look and air of someone who might command the dancefloor, strapping and lively as he was. Unfortunately, as he haphazardly spun a breathless Adeline around the floor, they soon realised that this handsome, graceful lad was not so much a natural dancer as an *enthusiastic* one. He made a great spectacle of leaping and lunging and gyrating, and seemed not to notice the wide berth that other dancers allowed him, nor the panicked cries as he stumbled slightly too close by them. It was only from years of formal dance lessons that Adeline avoided breaking her toes under his rapid feet.

By the time the first song ended she was winded; both with effort and with helpless laughter at the clumsy shapes Ger had thrown across the floor. She was quite relieved that the next song was mellow and slow.

Gerard slung his arms around her waist and they swayed on the spot, chatting quite contentedly while other guests warily filled the space around them again. Adeline told Ger about the troubles at public court that morning, ignoring him when he sniggered at Mareda's tearful breakdown: "*Honestly, how is she going to be Queen if she cries every time someone's mean to her?*"

He updated her on his slow-burning romance with a fellow Gard, which after many months of uncertain flirting had finally culminated in a rum-soaked kiss.

"Is that why you're not inviting me to the alehouse?"

Ger grinned. "Ah, Ade, are you jealous?"

She raised a brow at him, then scowled when he pinched her chin and said; "Chin up, buttercup. You're still my favourite. It's just... well, you know."

"No, I don't."

"Ah, you do though. People always think we're *together* when we're together. How was I ever going to get anywhere with Barry when I have a stunningly beautiful Princess draped all over me at any given moment?"

Adeline rolled her eyes. “Well I’m glad you finally got your kiss.”

“Got a lot more than a kiss. We live in the barracks together, remember?”

“Goddess spare me.”

“She won’t, and neither will I,” said Ger, and he proceeded to regale her with details of their drunken encounter in the barracks.

Adeline felt a rueful smile curl her lips. Once upon a time, in the wake of their own doomed romance, this story would have been a gently twisting knife through her heart. Now, his happiness brought nothing but warmth to her chest. Still though, she could have done without hearing the particulars of Ger’s wandering hands, nor the memories it evoked.

“Come on, Ger.” She grimaced. “I don’t subject you to such detail about *my* sex life.”

Gerard spun her so that the cloudy tail of her dress flared out, then pulled her back to him.

“Presumably because you don’t actually *have* a sex life these days.”

“Rude!” She slapped his shoulder for emphasis. “Rude and untrue. I happen to have an aggressively adequate sex life.”

“I see I’ve chosen a less than opportune moment to interrupt,” said someone behind them, and Adeline’s stomach seemed to shrivel up and crawl away.

The Queen stood with her hands clasped too-tightly in front of her and her lips slightly pursed. Adeline whipped around again to find Ger trembling, turning a worrisome shade of purple; such was the effort of not laughing. She pushed him away, perhaps a little harder than necessary, and forced her face into what she hoped was a dignified – or at the *very* least nonchalant – expression.

“You seemed to be having such fun, I thought perhaps you could invite our guest to join you for a dance?”

Adeline looked around; the King stood to one side, watching the ball in a sober, detached sort of way. Adeline made a face, nonchalance forgotten.

“Yes, simply itching to get out here, isn’t he?”

The Queen smiled as if she’d said; *Yes, I’d be delighted!*

“Thank you darling,” she said, and gestured for Adeline to follow her. Her mother paused after a step, seeming to deliberate, then added a touch dryly: “Perhaps spare him further discussion of your sex life?”

A delighted crow from behind them told Adeline that Ger had finally given in. She shot him a dark look, and stalked off after her mother.

The Merrow King held himself unnaturally straight and still, his hands folded rather formally behind him. He wore an embroidered doublet, dark and high collared, over a crisp white shirt. The elegance of it far removed him from the shivering, raging stranger she’d met only a few days ago, but the difference almost ended there. His jaw, though neater, was still dark with stubble and his hair, freshly trimmed, was still somewhat dishevelled in its overlapping waves. He was rested and well groomed of course, but not quite the neatly pressed gentleman you might expect of a King. He looked up as they approached and offered a grim smile, a slight nod to the Queen; she placed a hand warmly on the crook of his arm.

“Kai dear, you remember my daughter?”

He turned to face Adeline, and an immediate thrill raced across her skin; each of her nerves pulsed at once. It was an odd feeling, an echo of the first time he had looked at her with that wild, angry, searching gaze. No matter how clean and smartly dressed he now was, there was no hiding those eyes or the way they sought to raze everything they beheld. She almost squirmed beneath the heat of them.

Perhaps he realised it too, for the King broke eye contact all too quickly and swept into a smooth bow. He straightened, determined not to meet her eye again, but then his gaze grazed her bare shoulder and immediately darted away, a frown flickering over his brow.

Well, that's the last time I listen to Imogen.

Because as beautiful as it was, the dress had been a mistake. She could see that now – for this particular occasion, with *this* particular guest of honour. Adeline could only imagine what she looked like, to a man displaced in time, centuries out from everything he'd ever known.

She'd seen countless paintings of old Eisalaan after all. In the portrayals of the King and his lover, the Sorceress wore flowing, high-necked gowns that might pass for frumpy nightwear in this day and age. Adeline doubted whether even Old Eisalaan undergarments were quite as revealing as the pretty scraps of fabric bound over her bare chest.

But the King didn't seem flustered as such – he was almost put out; irritated. As though having to actively avoid contact with Adeline's eyes or the expanse of her bared skin was a huge imposition. She bit her lip to keep from either smirking or grimacing, she wasn't sure which. All she could think was that he'd surely break into a sweat if his gaze travelled any lower than her collarbone.

Remarkably, the Queen didn't seem to notice. Or perhaps she was just more gracious than Adeline.

“King Cumhaill, this is Princess—”

“Adeline,” the King said, addressing a pillar a few paces to her left. “Yes, I remember. I still have your cloak.”

Adeline didn't know what to say to this, but the King didn't seem inclined to go on. Not a *thank you* or even *I'll return it soon*. He just idly watched the musicians in the far corner, took a small sip from his drink and let the silence stretch on.

“Adeline wondered if you might join her in a dance,” said the Queen, when the awkwardness grew too much even for her.

At this, he glared out at the dancing couples with such distaste that Adeline half expected him to launch into a black soliloquy, detailing how his entire family had been massacred on a dancefloor. Instead he said, with not a hint of even feigned enthusiasm; “Of course.”

With a dutiful nod to the Queen, he moved to offer his arm to Adeline. She almost didn't take it; let him stand here sulking all night if he liked. He needn't do her the favour of sharing his cold company. But the Queen inclined her head ever so slightly, eyes wide with meaning, and with a slight lurch, Adeline recalled that this was the entire reason she was here tonight. She had promised to help, to welcome this sullen stranger to their court. So, she plastered on a smile, laid her hand on his elbow, and let him lead her slowly onto the floor like he was marching them both into battle.

Charming.

They turned to face each other; the King looked past her still, though this time his gaze seemed to actually fix on something in the distance. Deep and lilting though it was, his voice was entirely flat when he spoke.

“Won't your husband mind sparing a dance?”

“My husband?” Adeline followed his line of sight to the main doors, where Ger leaned against the banister, speaking in a low hush to one of the Gards on duty - presumably the passionate *Barry* she had heard so much about.

“Oh Goddess, no,” she laughed, surprising herself. “*Not* my husband. That's just Gerard.”

Funny, she supposed Ger had been right; people did assume they were *together* when they were together.

Adeline turned, still grinning, and was relieved to find that the King had allowed himself a small smile too. It softened the sombre line of his lips; took some of the fire from his eyes, and made him far easier to look at. Very easy, in fact.

Daughters damn her, he really *was* quite handsome.

“Well, then,” said the King.

He lifted his hands slightly, then dropped them again. The song was soothing and melodious, music made for revolving on the spot. She waited, but he made no move to lead her, instead casting looks at the dancers around them. His dark brows were furrowed. He looked almost confused.

And Goddess help her, even with his decidedly chilly manner toward her, Adeline couldn't help but soften for the little lost lamb expression on his face.

"Here," she said, and closed the space between them, reaching for him. King Cumhaill jolted slightly at her touch, but he let her take his hands and she guided them to her sides, curving his fingers gently around her waist.

She had barely felt the warmth of his touch before the King recoiled with a swift backward stride, and Adeline stumbled into the empty space.

Heat threatened at her cheeks, but she forced a smile.

"Is something wrong, Your Majesty?"

He bowed, eyes turned down once more and his brow knotted tighter than ever.

"My apologies, Princess. I think I should – You'll have to excuse me," he said.

And with that, he turned and strode away, leaving Adeline to gape bemusedly after him. Turning back to the floor she caught several pairs of eyes averted just a second too late, and felt a confused swell of giggles building in her belly.

Well, this is humiliating.

"Well, that was humiliating."

Ger's voice echoed her thoughts as he appeared at her side, clearly having seen the whole thing. They looked at each other; his face broke into a rather unhelpful grimace.

And Adeline could not fight the laughter that burst from her.



Chapter 15

Kai

The door shut behind him with a violent thud.

Kai ripped open his too-tight collar and dragged in his first unimpeded breath in hours. The damned shirt was an affront. A hideous modern garment, high-necked and rigid, gently strangling him all night and chafing right beneath his gills until he fought not to wretch.

He sank to the bed and closed his eyes as cool relief flooded his lungs. A breath in. A breath out. That was all he had, before relief gave way once more to the panic that had driven

him here, away from the shimmering, echoing ballroom and the warm touch of the pretty Beira girl.

He'd staggered away from her, and kept walking. Hadn't stopped even to thank the Queen or bid her good night. Walked right out of the ballroom and all the way to his borrowed suite of cold, white rooms, several wrong turns turning him around and around in the maze of identical marble hallways. Even now, the walls around him were as vast and barren as the snowy landscape they invoked, despite the ornate silver moulding, all the fine furnishings. He hated these rooms.

And yet here he sat, alone. Alone because he refused to bring the Merrow past these gates, to be gawked at in enclosed, guarded Beira territory. Alone because he couldn't stand another moment in that echoing hall with those gaudy strangers, that rigid collar like a noose around his throat.

Discomfort sank through him that had little to do with the hideous shirt. His veins were dry and aching, blood running slower without even the barest trace of magic. His heart was a wild thing trapped in his chest, every beat a protest.

Thump, thump, thump.

Avette, Avette, Avette.

Kai set his hand over his racing heart. *I tried*, he told it – and he had. He'd searched, as best he could. The Queen had not worn the pendant, on this night or any other. Princess Mareda wore nothing at her throat but a simple diamond of ice. And then there was her.

Princess Adeline.

She doesn't have it, he told himself.

He would have seen it, bare as she was. Nothing circling her throat, nothing glittering against her collarbone; just the smooth, warm column of her neck, her gown a thin swath of shimmering blue beneath her shoulders. A pretty frame for her skin, for the soft swell of –

Stop.

Kai fell back on the bed and dragged his hands roughly down his face, an irate growl ripping free of his throat. He took a breath. Another. Another, until the heat unfurling within him faded to the vacant chill he'd grown so used to. The scar across his palm pulsed as though in warning, and even if it was all in his head, he knew he'd be wise to heed it. He couldn't *do* this. He was here with a purpose, and there could be no distraction.

But Mother damn him, that woman. That laugh.

That dress.

Avette, Avette, Avette.

He kneaded at his chest.

I know, he told his raging heart. I know.



Chapter 16

Adeline

When the Queen deemed herself well enough to relieve Mareda of the morning court duties, the Beira family quickly settled back into their usual routine. Adeline's limbs had begun to feel tight and weak, and she was almost relieved to be back in the training rooms under the merciless instruction of their weapons master.

Master Ellis had trained their mother in her youth, and walked into many a battle on the Queen's heels. He was scarred, grey and craggy but still strong, still quicker than many of Captain Doran's youngest men. He barked instructions and scoffed at complaints of exhaustion or aching

muscles, but there was a thread of affection woven into his brash manner – he'd seen the Princesses grow from clumsy children to elegant warriors. Ordinarily, Adeline would flatter herself that he favoured her ever so slightly for her relative skill, but in the past few sessions Mareda had brought an unfamiliar spirit to their matches. By mid-morning most days, Adeline's muscles were screaming as her sister flew at her again and again, blades glinting, beautiful face hardened in concentration that almost passed for rage.

In a particularly heated match one morning Adeline found herself flat on her back, and still Mareda advanced on her, eyes flashing, raising her blunt training sword –

“Goddess and all the Daughters,” Master Ellis grumbled, darting between them. “Stop! Blades away.”

Mareda scowled at him, shoulders heaving.

“I said *blades away*, Princess, she's done,” he growled. Though honestly, if Adeline didn't know any better she'd say he looked almost impressed.

Lovely.

Mareda's sword clattered to the floor and she stalked away. Adeline got to her feet, rubbing what was sure to become a painful bruise above her sacrum. She snatched up her axe and spun around to glare at her sister, who stood by the mirrored wall, calmly pulling her pale hair out of its unravelling braid.

“What in the hell is wrong with you?” Adeline spat.

Mareda stared boldly back at her, but continued to style her hair without answering. Master Ellis shuffled uncomfortably toward them.

“I think we may call it a day.”

Neither of the Princesses moved or even looked at him, still locked in one another's glare. He threw up his withered hands.

“Ach! Enough of this. Out of here, *now*,” he snapped, and began herding them both toward the door.

He snatched the axe out of Adeline's grasp and shut the door behind them, grumbling about *petty children's squabbles*.

Mareda made to turn away, but Adeline grabbed her by the elbow.

“Want to tell me what that was about?”

Her sister’s expression was cool and blank, save for her wide and oddly bright eyes. She spoke in a velvet hush, mockingly gentle.

“Was I too hard on you, little Ade?” she said, tilting her head. “Perhaps you should run off and tell mother. See if she can’t offer some comfort.”

Shit.

Adeline’s grip slackened and Mareda wrenched her arm free, stalking away.

Shit shit shit.



Adeline wanted nothing more than to go home.

Mareda knew.

Somehow, her sister knew she’d not only been spending time with their mother, but had been stupid enough to keep it from her, too. It looked *bad*, but she knew her sister well enough to know that Mareda would need some space before they could talk; and Adeline could do with the time to decide what she was going to say. To figure out *how* she was going to explain that she’d kept it from Mareda only because she knew her sister would jump to conclusions - if she didn’t implode with jealousy outright.

Unfortunately, space wasn’t an option, and it would be hours before she could curl up in her warm apartment above the quiet murmur of Imogen moving about the store, the tell-tale rustle of the wind as she Wielded ice to weave into her creations.

Today, the Queen had made her swear she would finally attend her first Cold Council meeting. Her mother had been suggesting it for weeks now, but she had been particularly

eager to rope her in this morning; she'd even sent Silas to plead on her behalf, and they hadn't let up until Adeline promised she'd be there.

So, back in her childhood bedroom, Adeline washed up and changed into a moss green dress with long sleeves that covered most of her bruising. With about twenty minutes still to spare, she headed to the family dining room to grab a cup of tea and a scone before the meeting – training always left her ravenous, and today her stomach was gnawing anxiously at itself, hunger and stress warring uncomfortably in her belly.

But of course, Mareda had worked up an appetite too, and so she found the dining room occupied with the very person she most needed to avoid. Her sister sat facing away from her, a neat golden braid hanging down her back and bobbing slowly as she nodded along to whatever her father was saying across the table, his face pinched with concern.

Adeline tried to quietly back out of the room, but the old hinges groaned as she pulled the door to, and Edward's eyes snapped up to meet hers. For a moment, he said nothing; his eyes flicked from hers, to Mareda's, and Adeline wondered if he would pretend he hadn't seen her at all. It was quite clear from the cool beat of silence that he knew something was going on between them.

She took another step back, just as Edward gave her a gruff smile and waved her into the room. Mareda hissed something under her breath, and he ignored her.

"Afternoon, Ade," he called, gesturing to the free seat at the head of their table. "Tea?"

She swallowed a sigh.

No escaping now.

"Thanks, Ned."

"Lots of milk and honey?"

"Yes please."

She sat and he poured hot, steaming tea from the pot before him, then reached for the milk jug.

“I always say, Ade’s tea isn’t a beverage; it’s a dessert.”

He gave a stilted, uncomfortable laugh at his own joke, and Mareda rolled her eyes while Adeline prayed for the Winds to spirit her away.

As they drank their tea, Edward tried valiantly to keep the creeping chill between them at bay. He had been reading a book, he told the stony silence, about the political relationship between Caldbon and Eisalaan. When Adeline made the mistake of encouraging him with a polite hum of interest, he proceeded to detail the events for them both, ignoring the fact that they had covered the history extensively throughout their childhood tutoring – and the fact that they’d lived through the latest war, less than a decade ago.

He went so far as to whip the book out and read full passages from it, while the sisters quietly sipped their tea. He read to them about Caldbon, their powerful neighbours to the North who had once been their colonisers, many centuries past. They’d fought a brutal war against them, too, when Adeline and Mareda were little. Now, they were one of Eisalaan’s biggest partners in trade. All this, Edward mused, was the very reason the girls each had a scone on their plate, baked from flour made with Calbonian wheat.

After what seemed an age, Edward finally closed his book.

“Well, as I said, quite a read. Quite a read indeed.”

Still, neither sister answered. He cleared his throat.

“Marry and I had best be going. The Cold Council meets in a few minutes.”

Adeline set down her cup, bracing herself.

“I’m going too,” she said.

Edward glanced up at her in surprise, but his daughter merely scoffed.

“*What?*” Adeline snapped.

Mareda tossed her hair, stood and smoothed out her skirt. “Nothing,” she said sweetly. “I’m entirely unsurprised that you’ll be joining us, Adeline. I suppose Mother invited you?”

Adeline looked away too quickly, and shrugged. She busied herself with tidying up her plate and cup.

“Well,” said Edward, in a bright tone that didn’t suit his generally grumbly demeanour. “That’s nice, then. We can all go together.”

The walk to the meeting room was mercifully short. A few of the Queen’s advisors were already seated; Adeline’s father raised a hand in welcome as she entered, and she hurried around to meet him, nearly sagging with relief as she dropped into the seat beside him. Mareda swept by, ignoring the empty seats either side of them, and walked the length of the table to settle near the top. Edward gave an uncertain nod to Adeline’s father, and followed his own daughter to the head of the table. Silas turned to face Adeline as they passed, one eyebrow raised in question.

She scowled.

“Mareda thinks I’m conspiring against her.”

She didn’t trouble to keep her voice down, and felt a sharp prickle of satisfaction to see her sister bristle far across the room and turn pointedly away in her seat.

“I see,” said her father. His voice was decidedly more hushed, and he drummed his fingers lightly on the table. “How so?”

Adeline glanced around.

The seats were filling as councillors filtered into the room. Grand-Aunt Johanna now sat across from them, but the table was wide and she was rather hard of hearing. Much more concerning was Captain Doran a few seats down. Though he faced away, he sat so rigid and still that she felt sure he was listening raptly to every word. Paranoia stroked at her nerves, and Adeline couldn’t help but recall the sharp glint in his eye that day in the courtyard, when she’d implied she was an official Heir.

“Later,” she muttered to her father.

The door of the inner chamber opened, and everyone shoved back their chairs and rose to their feet. King Cumhaill was the

first to emerge, ducking slightly to pass through the doorframe. Adeline straightened; she hadn't seen him since he left her stumbling into thin air in front of half the Queen's courtiers. She fought the silly urge to smooth down the frizzy halo emerging from her hair, cursing herself for forgetting he attended these meetings. Then cursed herself again for caring, for a moment, what someone so stiff and sullen even thought of her hair.

Sebastian followed next and sat at the opposite side of the table, which happened to neighbour Edward. Adeline saw Edward's calloused fingers, resting on the table, curl into a fist; Mareda's small pale hand covered it gently, though it wasn't clear whether she was hiding the reflex or comforting her father.

"Good afternoon, all," said the Queen, gliding toward her chair at the front of the room. She sat, and all around the table the Council members followed suit.

The meeting was, for the most part, quite as ordinary as Adeline imagined. Her mother shared her attention around the table while Council members stood in turn and reported the issues or progress under their jurisdiction. Others chipped in with the occasional comment or question, but to Adeline it was all a foreign language. Aunt Johanna, Councillor of Coin, droned on about "*the fifth and sixth tiers of ice merchant income tax*", and Adeline wondered how in the world one could be expected to follow any of this if they hadn't spent the past few years in this room.

King Cumhail, she realised as she stared idly around, seemed to have far less trouble focusing. He leaned forward with fingers steepled, brow tense, and listened to each of the speakers with the enthralled look of a young boy hearing a swashbuckling bedtime story. Adeline didn't know how long she watched him before he noticed, but when the King eventually looked up and found her eyes on him, he quickly leaned back from the table and crossed his arms tightly, glancing away so quickly she could almost hear his neck crack with the force.

Well then.

He's certainly made his mind up about me.

She smirked to herself, ignoring the slight stab beneath her ribs – just a stitch, from her morning training. Certainly not disappointment.

Captain Doran was the next to speak. As Councillor of the Gard, he would head the arrangements for the biennial Tourney, in which young initiates violently battled for a place on the Queen's personal Gard. He spoke about the bloodsport with audible relish. Having built his career on the Caldbonian battlefield, it was widely suspected that Captain Doran would create opportunities for bloodshed where they did not exist before. Adeline didn't have to suspect, of course; she'd seen it first hand.

The excited gleam in his steely eye made her feel a bit sick, really. She looked away on impulse, only to find Mareda watching her with pursed lips.

For fuck sake.

Adeline rolled her eyes at her sister, reading exactly what that look meant. It was traditional for any prospective Heir to take part in the Tourney as a matter of ceremony – a symbolic demonstration of their strength for the world to see. Mareda would participate; Adeline, despite what her sister believed, would not.

“Thank you, Captain Doran,” the Queen was saying, while the Captain took his seat. “Now before we go, there's one more thing we ought to address.”

The Queen turned an encouraging smile on King Cumhaill, and there was a quiet chorus of shuffling as the Council members leaned forward in their seats.

The King looked around at them all, and as his eyes passed Adeline, she grinned a sharp grin right back at him. He quickly looked away, and she smiled even wider.

Petty, so petty.

She wasn't sure if she was chastising herself or delighting in the savage pleasure of getting under his skin.

The distraction it provided her.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” said the King, getting to his feet. As he stood, his posture changed; his shoulders drew back and he held his hands wide, addressing the room at large. His deep, lilting voice gained a subtle gravitas. “And thank you to you all, for welcoming me to your homeland.”

Further down the table, Captain Doran’s grey face grew tight with disdain, but King Cumhaill went on.

“I know there has been some speculation about me. Who I am and where I came from. So, I’d like to take this opportunity to confirm what some of you may consider an outlandish rumour. The truth is,” he paused and his throat bobbed, as though the words had to work their way up from his chest. “The truth is that my father was the late King Mael Cumhaill. I understand he plays a part in many of your legends and campfire stories, but – he was real. He was my father. I am King Kai Cumhaill, of the Merrow.”

There were no gasps, no shocked faces. The councillors hung on every word with rapt attention fixed on the young King, and while he didn’t quite smile, the tense line of his brow did smooth minutely.

“I take it this is not a revelation.”

There was a smatter of nervous laughter.

“Then you may also have guessed that I am here because the Laune is no longer habitable. Our Kingdom remains buried beneath the ice. But thanks to your kindness, my people have been welcomed into homes across Eisalaan. I don’t intend to trespass upon your hospitality for too long. We will build our own homes, and in the meantime we’ll earn our keep. Our numbers are small; less than a hundred Merrow survived the Frost.”

He paused again, but there was no softness in him now; his eyes blazed, though he blinked their heat away.

“Of those Merrow remaining, all who are strong and able will train for the Gard or serve Eisalaan in some way.”

“This is not the Eisalaan we remember, but it is the only home my people know; we want nothing more than to rebuild our lives. To find our place in this new world.”

He nodded his thanks to the Queen once more, and took his seat as she rose to her feet. Many of the councillors had been scribbling notes. Some of them sat forward, eager for their turn to respond. Captain Doran had two hands braced flat against the table.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” said Queen Selma. “And thank you all for coming. Sebastian will be in touch ahead of our next meeting.”

Adeline glanced at her father but he was frowning at her mother; he shook his head just slightly and Adeline knew not to comment just yet. The other councillors cast doubtful glances amongst themselves; surely the Queen was not dismissing them without the opportunity to discuss all that King Cumhaill had confirmed?

Nobody moved.

Selma smiled stiffly. “You may take your leave; I wish you all a pleasant evening.”

There was another half second of confused silence, and then Aunt Johanna scraped her chair back and struggled to her feet. Reluctantly, the others followed, and from there the room quickly emptied out, everyone eager for the privacy to discuss the Merrow King’s speech.

As Adeline made to stand the Queen called out to her. “Adeline, darling, a word?”

Before she could answer, Adeline caught a glimpse of her sister by the door. Their eyes met for a moment; Mareda’s were blue as deep ice and twice as cold. She turned away, and her long gold braid whipped out of sight.

“Bollocks,” muttered Adeline.

“Adeline!” said the Queen reproachfully.

But she had already darted around the table and now dashed into the hallway, ignoring her father calling her name.

Mareda moved faster in her anger, but Adeline's longer strides caught her up just two corners on.

"Marry, come *on*," she huffed as they drew level.

She was red faced and hot, but Mareda was cool and poised as ever.

"I've said all I intend to say to you, Adeline."

"You're being ridiculous! You can't really believe I have some nefarious agenda against you."

Adeline tried for a laugh and immediately regretted the nervous, breathy sound that escaped her. Mareda stopped walking and turned to face her, one eyebrow arched.

"Alright, yes." Adeline nodded slowly.

Honesty. Honesty was the only way out of this mess, this tangle of omissive lies.

"Yes," she said again. "I've been visiting her. She's sick, and she's our mother –"

"Oh, *now* she's our mother? No longer a cold stranger? No longer the cruel Ice Queen you've always claimed her to be? Amazing. What a momentous change of heart you've had."

"I *have* had a change of heart. She's different. For the first time I can remember, she actually *wants* me around."

Mareda laughed very softly, without really smiling.

"Of course she does. We all heard her: what a *shame* that you're not campaigning for Heir. What a *great* leader you could have made one day. Tell me, what else have you changed your mind about, Adeline?"

"Marry, stop it," Adeline groaned, screwing her eyes shut. "That's not what this is about for me."

"*Then why didn't you tell me?*" she hissed.

But Mareda did not lose composure, ever. She was only slightly flushed, her voice only slightly raised. Adeline didn't speak. What could she say?

I didn't tell you because I know how insecure you are.

Because I know what it looks like.

Because I didn't know how to admit I was wrong.

She felt like something was slipping from her grasp, like there was a perfect choice of words that would save the moment, fix it all and keep Mareda from doubting her. But Adeline's voice seemed to sink away into her stomach, weighted by panic – by a fear that this was something she couldn't undo.

Mareda's eyes flicked searchingly across her face, though Adeline couldn't say what she found there. Whatever it was, she nodded, and looked away, as though she spoke her next words very quietly to someone standing far down the hallway.

“Well. Whether you choose to campaign by deceit or good faith, I wish you all the luck you deserve, Adeline. Excuse me.”

She walked away, spine straight and chin held high.

Adeline took a step back, feeling for the solid stone behind her, and finding it, she leaned against the wall, blinking hard. A lump in her throat tightened her breath. That was how Silas found her moments later, slumped against the wall and breathing hard, one hand trying to massage the ache from her throat. She looked at him, still blinking stupidly.

Her father held his arms out to her.

“No, don't,” she groaned. “You'll make me cry.”

“You look halfway there already, my love.”

He wrapped his arms around her, and she buried her face in his shoulder.

“Shout at me instead, then,” she mumbled into the cloth of his doublet. “Go on, I walked away from my mother's order. I - I swore in front of the Queen.”

He laughed then, the sound a comforting rumble beneath her cheek.

“You're a grown woman, and your mother has heard a lot worse. I think she was more concerned that you'd scandalised

King Cumhaill. Although –” He pulled away from her and raised a stern eyebrow. “I believe you were already making quite the attempt at flustering the poor man.”

Despite herself, Adeline snorted.

“I did no such thing.”

“Hmm,” said Silas, sounding less than convinced. But he took Adeline’s hand and placed it on his arm. “Come. I think we could both use some of Marie’s pheasant pie.”

And as they headed together for the dining hall, with the promise of a full belly and distant thoughts of the Merrow King’s flustered scowl, Adeline found her spirits perhaps slightly lifted.



Chapter 17

Adeline

When Adeline arrived at the weapons hall early the following morning, the room was cold, dark and utterly still; Master Ellis hadn't come early, as he usually did, to light the torches and set up the training space.

Thinking little of it, Adeline lit the room, made the fire, unlocked the brackets of glinting blades on the brick walls and then poked her head out the door to glance down the hallway.

No sign of either of them.

At a loss, she spent a few minutes stretching her tight, shivering muscles until they were loose and warm. By the time

she had worked up a light sweat practicing her footwork, it became clear that neither Mareda nor Master Ellis would be joining her.

“Might have let me know,” Adeline grumbled to herself, thinking longingly of her bed back in the city.

She set about locking up the weapons again, and was just about to put out the fire when the door swung open.

“Good morning, darling!”

Adeline turned at once, her knees dipping into a curtsy before she even registered that the Queen had entered the room. Lifetime habits were hard to break.

“Morning, mother,” she said. She straightened up to see a tall figure ducking through the door behind the Queen. “And King Cumhaill. Good morning.”

“Good morning, Princess.”

He met her eyes only briefly, and then seemed to become preoccupied with the weapons wall, striding away to examine the brackets so that Adeline and her mother were left alone.

“I take it you don’t know why we’ve joined you,” said the Queen.

“I don’t. Though if you’re here to partake in our combat training, you’ll be sorely disappointed.” Adeline folded her arms. “Apparently Marry and Master Ellis have seen fit to cancel this morning’s session.”

“Yes, well I did tell them that the weapons hall is yours for the morning.”

“Mine?”

“Yours, every morning. Your sister and Master Ellis will take an afternoon session from now on.”

The Queen’s lip twisted at Adeline’s blank expression. “If you hadn’t hurried off yesterday, this wouldn’t come as such a surprise.”

Adeline shook her head; she wasn’t surprised, just confused. “I’m to train by myself?”

“You’re to train alongside King Cumhail.”

“*What?*”

The Queen shushed her, sparing a glance at the young King, who stood only a few steps away but seemed curiously unmoved by Adeline’s outburst, as though he hadn’t heard her at all. He was apparently absorbed in inspecting the blade of a large axe hanging on the wall. Adeline forced her hanging jaw closed, but she couldn’t quite organise the stream of protests that bubbled to her lips.

“Mother – why would – I need a tutor and – I wouldn’t even know how to – *Besides*, shouldn’t he train with the Gard, if he’s to join their ranks?”

“He is a *King*, Adeline,” her mother tutted. “He’ll join the Gard as a Commander. I won’t ask him to drag a practice blade into the training yard.”

“Why not? *You* did.”

“Because *I* am the Queen they have sworn to protect,” she said. She pitched her voice low as a hiss, stepping closer to keep the words between them. “And I have never been manhandled by the Eisalaan Gard. Or don’t you recall our guest’s violent greeting at the palace gates?”

Adeline cast her eyes down, shame flooding her cheeks. Of course she remembered. At her silence, Selma took her hand and spoke softly.

“Master Ellis assures me that you are more than ready to graduate from his training. He’s quite confident in your abilities.”

“But even for the King, surely Master Ellis is the highest calibre partner –”

Selma’s patience snapped, and her pale eyes flashed.

“*Adeline, I will argue with you no further.*”

From the corner of her eye, she could see that King Cumhail had turned away, the broad line of his shoulders tensed.

Adeline shut her mouth.

There's the mother I know so well, she thought.

But then Selma shut her eyes and rubbed at one temple with a slight tremble to her white fingers. Adeline felt the brief tightness in her chest melt away, a niggling worry left in its place.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Are you well?"

Adeline took her free hand again; this one was trembling too, and cold. She closed both of her own hands over her mother's thin fingers, enveloping them in her warmth.

"Fine, darling. I'm fine." The words were reassuringly steady. She smiled softly and patted her daughter's cheek. "It's early, and I'm tired. I may return to my bed for an hour or so. I'll leave you to your training."

Adeline swallowed, but dropped her mother's hand and nodded.

I guess that's decided, then.

Selma passed the King with a light touch of his arm and a quiet word, to which he nodded and smiled faintly.

And then they were alone.

Adeline swung her arms at her sides.

"So. Good morning."

We did that bit already, she reminded herself. "Er, again."

But the King nodded politely at the wall behind her head, and said, "Good morning, again."

Good grief.

The brooding outsider bit was beginning to wear thin.

Adeline's eyelids twitched with the effort of not rolling her eyes - though he probably wouldn't even notice if he insisted on staring at the bloody wall.

"You know, it'll be quite difficult to train together if you refuse to look at me."

She immediately regretted it. His eyes shot to hers, and she found them widened with mild surprise. Adeline winced.

“Look,” she began. “Maybe that was a bit harsh, but –”

“No,” he said. “You’re quite right.”

“Oh.”

Right then.

He took in a breath but then faltered, the air catching in his chest. It was as if the words he’d been about to speak had simply scattered away in a great gust of wind. He broke eye contact for a moment, his dark brows pulling together as he tried to gather his thoughts.

She waited.

With his face turned away, Adeline found her gaze catching the sharp angle of his jawline. It couldn’t be helped, really. He was, in some ineffable way, vastly different from any man she’d ever known. Not that she hadn’t known handsome men before - she’d known many. But the King was not handsome in the sunny open way that Ger was, nor was he as refined and polished as the noblemen she’d flirted with over the years. He was unhewn and intense, and somehow all the more beautiful for the frown on his face and the slight jut of his bottom lip.

When he turned back to her she jolted a little at being caught staring, but if he noticed, he didn’t react. His own gaze was as steady as his deep voice.

“I apologise if I’ve been less than polite. I am...” He paused again, clearly weighing the words. “I’m having difficulty with some of your modern customs.”

King Cumhaill stood tall and stately with his arms folded neatly behind his back, but the tight line of his lips betrayed a deep discomfort as he forced himself to hold her eye. Adeline almost wished she could take it back, that he’d look away. She’d nearly forgotten the weight of those crackling hazel eyes, the heat of them.

He went on with that same deliberate air, every word chosen with care.

“Your ancestors had rather strict values. I’m accustomed to a world where it would be improper to be alone with an

unmarried Princess, especially one I am not formally courting. I don't quite know where the line is anymore."

"Improper, huh?" Adeline nodded seriously, crossing her arms. "Well, not to worry. It seems my mother trusts you not to defile my virtue."

The King looked aghast, his lips parting in horror.

"I would *never* –"

He caught the smirk on her face and paused. "You're joking."

"I am," she smiled. "And I understand. But to answer your question, there isn't really a line anymore, or at least not a firm one. Men and women can be alone together. We can work together, have friendships, behave as *improperly* as we see fit." She arched an eyebrow. "So you needn't worry about my virtue."

The King looked like he might combust on the spot and be quite glad for the fiery mercy.

Adeline had meant what she said – she *did* understand – yet somehow she couldn't quite bring herself to feel too sorry for riling him. He made it far, far too easy.

He finally dropped his eyes from hers, and gestured vaguely to the weapons wall.

"Yes, well." He cleared his throat. "Perhaps we should begin."

Adeline chewed on a smile as she followed him to the wall.

They went over each weapon and discussed the ones he was most and least familiar with. He claimed to be proficient with a blade, and Adeline helped him choose a longsword from the wall to demonstrate. She held her own sword up in a defensive stance and waited. The King advanced; his footwork was light and practiced, as elegant as an ice dancer on the glassy laketop of the Laune. He struck, and she blocked just in time, the ring of their blades jarring down her arm. He *was* quite good. Though a bit rusty, as he explained breathlessly while they parried back and forth.

“I’ve had precious little time to practice in the last few centuries.”

It took Adeline a moment to realise he had made a little joke, delivered in his usual low, serious tone. So when a burst of surprised laughter made her stumble, it was all too easy for him to slip gracefully behind her and gently nudge the sword point between her shoulder blades.

“I believe I’ve won,” he said. She could *swear* she heard a smile beneath the words.

She lowered her blade and lifted her free hand in surrender.

“It would seem so. Not bad. Even if you did cheat.”

“Is swordplay not as much a battle of wits as of blades?”

Adeline turned carefully until the sword point hovered above the swell of her breasts. It was with no small amount of satisfaction that she noted the way his eyes flicked to her chest and quickly back up to her face, a flush threatening at his collar.

“I wouldn’t count on the advantage of flirty banter on a real battlefield, Your Majesty.”

She tilted her chin and let her eyes drag appraisingly over him, head to heel. “Especially if you plan on hiding all of *this* behind a suit of armour.”

King Cumhaill flushed, blinking hard as though she’d jabbed him in the eye, and Adeline seized her moment. Raising her sword at speed, she landed a hard strike low on his blade. The impact shocked his slackened grasp wide open, and he dropped the sword with a clatter.

King Cumhaill looked at the sword on the ground, and slowly back at her. Then he raised both hands in reluctant surrender.

Adeline grinned. “It’s not a bad strategy for the training room, though.”

The King did not return her smile, even as she lowered her blade between them.

“Again,” he said, a little roughly.

Adeline’s grin spread, delighted.

“Oh *dear*,” she crooned. “You don’t like to lose, do you, Your Majesty?”

The King bent to pick up the fallen sword, and when he rose over her once more, he seemed to move closer without taking a single step. She had to raise her face to meet his eye and though something in her stomach gave an odd little flip at the sudden closeness, she held both her ground and his gaze, her chin held high. For a split second, his lip curled in as though he had to physically bite back his retort and Adeline found herself wanting to hear it; whatever it was. The thought of a snarky little jibe from this cold, restrained man sent a small tendrill of warmth curling through her chest.

But the King was as civil as ever.

“Again,” he said, in a tone that was, at most, a touch wry. “Please.”

Adeline bit her own lip in a vain attempt to tame her taunting smile, and it was only when the King’s eyes darted down to catch the movement that he seemed to realise the lack of space between them. His gaze shot away across the room but before he could get too flustered Adeline took mercy on him, taking one sweeping step back and a little bow over her sword.

“As you wish.”

Adeline won every round from there on out, though it was made that much easier by the King’s reluctance to come within arm’s length of her for the rest of the morning. Still, he held his own for a long while; they sparred until the light began to come level with the windows, warming the room to the point that Adeline would normally have stripped a layer and continued to train in her vest. For today, however, she thought it better to send the young King away un-scandalised by her bare skin.

“We should focus on swordplay for now,” Adeline said confidently, as they tidied away the weapons. Privately, she had no idea if swordplay *was* the best place to start. It made little difference for her own purposes, but who was she to decide what was the most important skill to hone for someone who may eventually lead his countrymen into battle?

Adeline had no idea why *she* was doing this anyway. Did the King even know who he was sparring with; that she’d apparently graduated from her training that very morning?

It made no sense.

She had to seek out Master Ellis and convince him to speak to the Queen, make her see the foolishness of this plan. She still needed his guidance, and the King – well, the King needed to train with someone experienced. Someone who had just as much at stake as he did.

Across the room, he had knelt to extinguish the fire in the grate and now rose to his feet, dusting his palms together.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. His eyes travelled from a torch beside Adeline’s shoulder to fix on her own. He was trying; she could appreciate that. “I am grateful for your help, Princess.”

And he was certainly well-mannered.

She shook her head. “Call me Adeline.”

He eyed her, a hint of intensity creeping back into his careful gaze. With his clothes rumpled from exertion and his dark hair in disarray, he was almost recognisable as the wild man she had met in the courtyard.

Now that the fire was out, the cold rolled in beneath the door and Adeline could feel goosebumps rising up her arms as he considered her.

“Are you certain that’s—”

“It is perfectly proper, I swear.”

The King nodded.

“Then you should call me Kai.”

“Kai,” she repeated, and swore she saw his throat bob. She couldn’t help but wonder if she’d pushed him well beyond his limits, when it came to that ancient sense of propriety he clung to.

He didn’t object.

“Adeline,” he said quietly.

She shivered.

Funny, how it got cold in here so quickly.



Chapter 18

Adeline

Ger was grumpy with her for being late to their lunch plans. The meat buns he'd swiped from Marie were still warm, but the flask of hot tea tucked into his vest had cooled considerably as he waited for her by the palace gates.

"I'm sorry," she said again, as he took a swig from the lukewarm flask and pulled an exaggerated face of disgust. "I've had a busy morning!"

They were walking to the village to browse the wares of the Laune Market, a favourite lunchtime excursion of theirs –

often derailed by an innocent stop at the alehouse on their way home.

Ger held up a silencing hand, spraying her with crumbs from his bun.

“Please. Do not ask me to pity you for a sweaty morning spent with an aggressively handsome *unmarried* King. Approved of by your mother, no less.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Then what is it like?”

Adeline sighed. “I can honestly say I don’t know. It’s strange. It *is* strange, right?”

“It’s strange,” Ger agreed. “Great as you are - and you are great, Ade, you make an excellent sparring partner - Master Ellis should be overseeing his training. That’s what makes sense. He’s a King, and soon to be a Commander.”

“Thank you!” Adeline kicked up a shower of snow. “My mother doesn’t want to hear it. I can’t get her to see sense.”

“Do you *want* her to see sense?”

“What do you mean?”

Ger pressed his lips together, flattening a smirk. “I think you know what I mean.”

Adeline snatched the flask from him and took a deep swig of tea. Stalling, very obviously stalling, but Daughters help her, what could she say to that?

Had she enjoyed her morning with the King? Surprisingly.

Did she relish the sight of him rumpled and panting? Maybe.

Had she felt a savage thrill to see him flushed and distracted in that odd, electric moment when his eyes had landed on her lips? Immensely, yes.

But even so, her conscience bristled when she thought of stringing him along, misinformed about her abilities and disastrously ill-prepared for some future battle to come.

Because there was *always* some future battle, whether it came months or years from now.

Adeline went to take another swig, and Ger pried the flask away from her.

“Stalling,” he tutted.

Adeline wiped a trickle of tea from her chin, scowling.

“Fine! I had fun. I like riling him up.”

Ger chuckled. “Of course you do.”

“But I don’t think that’s reason enough to impede his training. It’s important. I don’t want to be the reason he gets himself speared on the sword of a properly trained soldier.”

“Fair,” Ger allowed.

The woods around them were thinning, the Shrine of the Sorceress coming into view between rough dark tree trunks, and the vast lake glittering beyond. They weaved through the last of the trees in a pensive silence broken only by Ger’s chewing.

“I think I’m going to have to corner Master Ellis. I’ll catch him after his training with Mareda, see if I can get him to talk to my mother.”

Ger shuddered. “Better you than me. Hateful old codger.”

Adeline gave him a funny look. “Sweet little slightly-crabby Master Ellis?”

“If you say so,” he snorted.

Adeline stopped dead in her tracks. Her voice was a hoarse gasp on the breeze.

“Ger.”

Ger rolled his eyes. “Look, I’m sure for the Princess of Eisalaan he’s sweetness and light itself, but that fact is that I know him to be a bigoted little raisin of a –”

“*Ger!*”

She jabbed a finger impatiently at the Shrine ahead of them. The Sorceress was usually surrounded by a few offerings, her

upraised arms trailing garlands of flowers, baskets of fruit and tiny icicle charms laid at her feet. Occasionally you might come across someone bent in prayer to her, with many believing her to be Daughter Aera herself.

Today, the space around her was overrun. A forest of flowers, an orchard of fruits, a river of ice trinkets - and more substantial tokens too. A sack of grain, sprinklings of gold *puint* coin – someone had even tied a live goat draped in evergreens to the nearest tree.

And more gifts were coming.

A line of worshippers waited to pay their respects, so many of them that the path to the Laune was blocked by a queue that snaked halfway down the road, and Adeline and Ger had to jostle and squeeze to get past them all.

“Here, boy,” Ger called to a young lad toward the end of the queue. “What’s happening?”

The boy rolled his eyes. “Waiting to pray to the Sorceress.”

“Yes, I’d figured that much out, thanks,” Ger grumbled.

“He meant to ask; why is the shrine so busy?” Adeline said, a little more gently.

The boy turned his rolling eyes on her, and then blinked them abruptly. “Er – Princess – Your Highness –”

He started to bow, but Adeline shook her head quickly. By now, the people of the Queen’s Village were as used to her comings and goings as her neighbours in the Capital, but the last thing she wanted was to draw the attention of the unexpected crowd. She didn’t need to distract from whatever was happening here before she got the full scope of it.

“No need. I’d be grateful if you could tell us though, why is there such a queue today?”

Ger harrumphed at her pleasant tone, and she nudged his arm without looking around.

“It’s been this way for days now, Princess. Maybe weeks. Since the Thaw began, really.”

Adeline's stomach lurched.

She'd known from watching her mother at the public court that people were worried, but this... This was more than worry, worse than fear.

This was desperation.

Adeline tried to get a handle on her own dread, to school her features into something careful and neutral as she thanked the boy and bid him goodbye.

"May you soar on Silver Winds, Princess," the boy called after her.

A popular Eisalaan phrase, but the poignancy at this particular moment made Adeline shiver.

"May the Winds bless us all," she returned, and she and Ger walked on in silence.

Their visit to the Laune was strange.

The place was magical as ever, still alive with music. Ice dancers still weaved through the crowds, ducking beneath garlands of glittering icicles and Eisalaan-blue bunting strung between the wooden stalls. Tourists, all bundled up in woollen layers against the cold, skittered around clumsily on the ice with pink cheeks and bright, darting eyes, trying to take in all the wonders of the market at once. Children lined up at a cauldron filled with molten chocolate and were sent away with steaming mugs cupped in their mittened hands.

But still, everything was just *off* somehow. Adeline's boots shone wetly in the slush that coated the once solid laketop. The walls of the market had been moved, crushing the stalls closer to warden off a section toward the middle of the lake, where a vein of shallow jagged cracks webbed the smooth surface of the ice. Off in the distance beyond the walls, a team of Edward's Wielders stood clustered together. Their black cloaks were a smudge against the Laune, their backs to the market as they drew the Winds to their hands and worked on the surface of the ice.

Adeline could not help noticing the absence of one of her favourite stalls, too. It was run by a merchant Wielder who

carved tiny ice palaces and gave them to her young daughter to paint and stain with multicoloured dyes. They lit the little castles by candle from within so that each one cast flickering auras, and the shelves of the stall looked like a glittering fairytale village. Adeline had hoped to send one to Iseult for her birthday, a pretty little reminder of home.

She cast another glance around the market for the little stall as she and Ger headed home, having decided to skip the alehouse for today.

Perhaps they'll be back, she thought.

The voice in her head was unconvincing.



Chapter 19

Kai

Kai,

I've made the rounds of the host houses, and all is well. You'll receive word from each of them within the next day or so.

Can't comment on Ceri's wellbeing, as I haven't seen her. Al was eager to make the journey to the manor in my place. You'll no doubt hear a full report from him in due course.

Will check in again next week.

Take care,

Oswalt

PS. Really take care of yourself, please.

Dear Kai,

How are things at the palace? I can only imagine how surreal it must be ~~to live among the Beira like nothing ever happened.~~

I hope you're coping well enough.

Os asked me to check on Ceri and Eda at the manor, so I thought I'd give you a quick run down. Eda is the same as ever. She read my airs and told me I'd feel the waves on my skin again soon enough, so there you go! I know you don't hold much stock in the Elder's prophecies, but I hope you can take some small comfort just knowing she believes in you.

We all do.

Ceri is well, but she's getting restless and I hate to say it, but I'm not sure how much longer you can count on her staying put. She wants to see you. I think she's worried, but I know for certain that she's bored out of her tree.

I wondered if you've thought about moving her to the Thornlands? She'd get on splendidly with the Earl's daughters, and I could watch over her. I know Os has been kept busy keeping up communications with the host families, and I'm sitting idle until we're called to the barracks to begin training.

Just let me know how I can help.

Al



Chapter 20

Kai

In his dreams, Kai was still in the ice. Each night his mind went numb and cold, the blackness pressing in on his eyelids from all sides. Time meant nothing as he slept; it was a fluid thing, a pale mist that eluded the frozen grasp of his fingers just as it had when his body hung suspended in the solid lake. He was simply dreaming forever, just as he'd hung in the ice forever.

But then he would wake to that resounding, world splitting *crack* – he remembered the exact cadence, the rhythmic shudder of it, like a song twisted into his ear and hummed again and again until it drove him mad.

Shudder, splinter, CRACK.

And so he lived out his sentence again and again. Each night was a hundred lifetimes. The only difference between the dream and the true, waking nightmare was that he did not fight his way out of the darkness every morning. He did not have to count lives as he dug the Merrow from the lake, ice shards biting into his fists and arms, and drawing blood.

Other than that, his bright white suite in Selma's palace might as well have flooded and frozen every night, trapping him for another eternity lived beneath Eisalaan. No concept of days or hours, years or centuries, barely able to form a complete thought.

That was another thing taken from him, he supposed. The ability to dream.

Shudder, splinter, CRACK.

He woke.

He was warm. He could feel his arms and legs, turn his head. There was light behind his eyes, and when he opened them there was space all around him, nothing but the thick white blankets against his skin.

CRACK.

Kai vaulted from the bed, but his feet had already touched the cool stone floor by the time he realised what he'd heard. A knock. Just a knock at the door. He sank back onto the bed, bare legs shaking with more than the sudden cold.

“Your Majesty?”

A timid voice at the other side of the door. His young valet Simon, come to wake him. A member of Selma's household staff, assigned to serve and assist him during his time at the palace. He had explained to her, perhaps a touch bitterly, that the Merrow monarchy was not as grandiose as their Beira counterpart; that he didn't expect servitude. But, the Queen had insisted.

“He's here regardless, and I pay him a good salary,” she had said. “You could use the help, as you acclimate.”

The valet knocked again; “Your – Your Majesty?”

Kai looked up from where he’d sunk his head into his hands.

“Yes,” he called hoarsely. He cleared his throat. “Yes, thank you, I’m up. Just a moment.”

On his first morning at the palace, the poor boy had come into the room unbidden, expecting to find some soft, preening royal guest who needed assistance to wash and dress their own body. He had quite the fright when a shaggy, stark-naked Merrow King leapt from the bed with a thundering roar of alarm that knocked him on his ass.

They quickly came to the agreement that Kai would dress himself in the mornings. Kai tried to speak gently to him now, and had since shaved his beard and cut his hair; he was well aware that the boy was not the first person he’d startled with his wild appearance.

Kai washed and dressed quickly, and opened the door to the valet. Simon held a heavy breakfast tray balanced on his thin, wobbling arms. Kai took it from him at once and the boy sagged with relief.

“Thank you, Simon. You can leave it at the door for me next time, I’d rather you didn’t injure yourself.”

He’d rather the valet didn’t deliver his meals to him at all and had told him as much – but this was another insistence of Queen Selma’s. Apparently it was her attempt to rebuild Kai’s strength, and so the trays had continued to come each morning, laden with more food than he would eat in a day. Porridge with berries, fresh fruits cut in artful arrangements, herb crusted potatoes, steamed eggs, thick cut bacon, half a dozen pastries, strong black tea and several slabs of hot buttery toast.

Land dwellers ate stodgier foods than the Merrow; potatoes and bread and heavy, hearty meals rather than the light fare of fish and foraged greens his people would graze on throughout the day. It had always been that way, but over time, with the wealth Eisalaan had acquired... it seemed excessive, to say the least.

“Such an extravagant spread,” Kai muttered to himself. And then to Simon: “I won’t finish all of this, would you like some?”

The boy gaped at him. “I shouldn’t, Your Majesty.”

“A pastry, go on.”

Simon reached tentatively for a cinnamon bun. Kai smiled in what he hoped was an encouraging manner, but he must have been quite out of practice, for the valet gulped as though he’d snarled at him and clutched the cinnamon bun tight, sprinkling icing down the front of his tunic.

Kai sighed.

Time to wrap this up and send the poor child on his way before he expired of fright.

“Any messages?”

The twitching boy produced a fistful of letters from the messenger’s pouch slung across his slim torso. The wax seals came in a rainbow of colours for each of the noble houses where the remaining Merrow people had sheltered. Kai sipped and read, hot tea and relief loosening the tight knot in his chest as each response assured him of what he needed to know; they were safe, they were well, they were comfortable. They were adapting. He fished out the letter he’d been most anxious for, the one with the evergreen seal, and tore it open, setting down his cup so he could grasp the parchment with both hands.

Koo,

When can I come to stay at the palace? The Marchioness has a frightful singing voice and a truly evil cat, sent from the Underking himself to torment me. The spiteful little thing has crawled into my bed and rubbed long white hairs all over my sheets. Did you know you could get a splinter from a hair if it’s thick enough? Well, that is a thing I now know.

Send help! Failing that, send books and rum.

All my love,

Ceri

Kai chuckled under his breath. What he wouldn't give to have Ceri here with him. She could tell him how to act, what to say, how to make it so that these people didn't find him so strange. She could help him with the day to day, so that he might find what he was looking for and get them home.

But it wasn't safe. Not yet. The last time he'd become too friendly with the Beiras, he had landed his family, his people, in a prison of eternal ice. These Beira ancestors had been welcoming, but he wasn't going to mistake poise and noble manners for kindness and decency, not again.

Ceri couldn't come here. Not yet.

“Your Majesty?”

Simon still stood by his side. “Your combat practice. With Princess Adeline, sir. She'll be waiting for you by now.”

The loosened knot in Kai's chest pulled itself tight once more. Of course the Princess – Adeline, as he was supposed to call her – was waiting for him. He'd forgotten about their session. No, that wasn't true, he hadn't forgotten, he had purposely shoved it from his mind, knowing the thought of it could drive him to distraction. Adeline, with her wicked smirk at odds with her soft brown eyes. He'd been meant to train with the old man, but – Well. That arrangement had fallen through, and here they were.

He cleared his throat.

“Training, of course. Thank you Simon, I'll go directly.”

Scooping up a pastry to eat on the way, Kai turned for the door. He caught his reflection in a large mirror on his way out - and doubled back, glancing at Simon's turned back before taking a moment to flatten his hair and straighten his shirt. As the sole representative of the Merrow, it was important to look presentable, he told himself. That was all.

When he arrived, Adeline knelt by the grate, stoking the fire. She glanced slightly over her shoulder at the creak of the door and her hair, roped in a thick, fraying braid, swung over her spine as she moved. From her profile, lit in the warm glow of new flames, Kai saw the soft curve of her cheekbone lift in a smile.

“Good morning, Your Majesty,” she said.

She took her time pushing to her feet, back arching slightly as she went, then slowly turned on the spot and planted her hands on her hips. Though he managed to suppress it, Kai had to scold himself for the groan that rose in his throat. Why was it that her every move seemed like a performance, a dance? He turned his eyes to the fire for a long moment, spots flaring in his vision when he turned to face her.

“Good morning, Princess.”

“Adeline,” she reminded him.

“Kai,” he returned.

She laughed, and the sound was throaty and rich. For some reason, it called to mind the long summer nights he’d spent drinking stolen rum by the fire with Al and Os, sprawled on the grassy banks of the Laune with a canopy of stars overhead. He watched her for a moment, revelling in the warmth of that laugh and the memories it stirred, forgetting himself entirely.

Kai realised a beat too late that she had stopped laughing. He was just staring at her now. She stared back, unreadable.

“Kai it is, then. Well, go ahead and choose your sword, Kai.”

Adeline’s cheeks had pinked slightly, but it wasn’t like any blush he’d ever seen. More as though she’d suddenly warmed. She held his gaze steadily, still completely at ease.

“Go on. You can’t spend *all* morning batting your lovely eyelashes at me.”

“I wasn’t –”

She cocked her head at him, lips pressed together to keep from smiling. *Ah*. He felt the familiar prickle of heat rising

uncomfortably up his neck. She was poking fun at him, again.

He really had to get better at reading that tone.

Kai turned quickly to the weapons wall, searching the rows of blades even as he worked to smother the heat rising to his face. By the time he had unhooked a sword from the wall and returned to the training floor, he was somewhat more composed – but the blinding beam of Adeline’s smile had dimmed. She watched him with her head tilted to one side, braid slipping over her shoulder, her face still and inscrutable.

“You can tell me if it’s too much, you know.”

“Too much?”

“If *I’m* too much.” She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, a gesture that was already so familiar he knew she was holding back that ever-present smile. “Like the other day.”

The other day.

So she *had* noticed it; the moment when he’d let his composure slip in the heat of their training. Got close enough to see the barely-there freckles on the bridge of her nose, to catch the dent of her teeth in her bottom lip and think, for just one fleeting, dangerous moment, about biting it himself. Just this morning, those same intrusive thoughts had him staring into the blazing fireplace, willing his eyeballs to melt from their sockets just to maintain a scrap of sanity. Kai knew he had let himself too comfortable in her personal space, and he’d wanted to believe the Princess thought nothing of it but –

“I’m sorry,” said Adeline.

Kai’s inward spiral came to an abrupt halt. He frowned.

“*You’re* sorry?”

“I am,” she nodded, still struggling to flatten that tilt to her lips. “It wasn’t fair of me to tease you like that.”

Kai was not entirely certain she didn’t tease him still, with the curve of her mouth and the lovely, laughing lilt to her tone. He didn’t know what to say.

“I have no objection to you teasing me, Adeline.”

He should not have said *that*.

He especially should not have let his voice fall so low, the words almost guttural, heavy in the air between them. What was *wrong* with him? Worse still, he'd let his eyes drop to her lips, *again*, now slightly parted as she gazed up at him. Kai wanted to look away. He *had* to look away. But the slow dawning glow of her smile was too warm; too inviting. He wanted to know what else he could say to keep her looking at him just like that; wanted it so fiercely it shocked him.

And made him hate himself for having to fix it.

Ruin it.

Kai cleared his throat, and his mind along with it.

"It is an honor, after all." He bowed stiffly, a poor attempt at clawing back some sense of decorum. "To have the company of an Heir of Eisalaan."

There. Her smile dropped. Fixed – ruined. Adeline took a half-step back.

"I'm not an heir," she said quickly.

And perhaps he'd overcompensated, blundering fool that he was, for he didn't think he imagined the tension in her tone.

"I meant nothing by it, Your Highness –"

"Adeline."

She sighed, but her stony expression melted as swiftly as it had set. She took a few more steps away from him and picked up her sword where she'd left it resting against a pillar, perhaps needing the distraction – a reason not to meet his eye. "It's not you, I just – I'm not an Heir *yet*. I turn twenty-two this Winter. I don't have the right to campaign until then."

Kai frowned.

"You're not yet of age?" Another mental note to tuck away, in his study of this new Eisalaan. "Your people used to mark adulthood by the eighteenth year."

"Oh, we still do." She smiled wryly, now tracing the rings of the sword handle, and still not meeting his eye. "But

everything to do with the crown is *dripping* in symbolism. Twenty-two is the age the Sorceress was when she died, so –”

Adeline cut herself off with a short, sharp wince, and screwed her eyes shut.

“Bollocks, that was incredibly thoughtless. I’m – I’m *so* sorry.”

For a moment, he had no idea why she was apologising. But then Kai recalled, with a jolt, who *the Sorceress* was in their modern folklore. His heart sank, as slow and cold as though his body were the bitter depths of the Laune.

Avette, Avette, Avette.

His voice was so hoarse he might have emerged from the ice only moments ago.

“It’s quite alright.”

Kai had been breathing the cold Eisalaan air for weeks, and it had never felt so frigid, so tight around his gills as it did in that one, long moment as the reality of his situation came flooding over him. It was nearly unbearable. Adeline watched him quietly, reading something in him as the blood drained from his face. The Princess did not much resemble her mother, but in that moment her face could have been a mirror to the Queen’s. It was the same look her mother had worn when she’d told him Avette’s fate; knowing and sorrowful.

Adeline spoke softly.

“It must be hard. Reminders everywhere.”

“Yes,” he said, the words still grating on the way up. “It is.”

And Kai found that he was grateful for the tightness in his throat, the rasp that ringed every word. This was how he should sound; the lovelorn hero of Eisalaan folklore. This was the man she thought he was; who they all thought he was.

So when Adeline gave him a final, sad smile and turned to the training floor, he knew he should be glad for it. He couldn’t do this, not with her. No more flustering and pining. No pathetic, longing stares. He had his part to play, after all. He was the Merrow King; strong and capable, but bound to

loyalty by his long lost love. That was how he got out of this palace with all that he needed.

That was how he got his people home.



Chapter 21

Adeline

“Look sharp now, Your Majesty. I can hear your joints creaking from across the room.”

The King paused at the edge of the floor, blade dropping to his side and his thick brow creasing as it rose almost into his hairline

There we go.

Adeline very nearly laughed with sheer relief.

It had been a long, tense, quiet morning. She'd been baiting him for well over an hour now, teasing and taunting with far more vigour than she had in their last session.

And although he'd claimed not to mind it, something was off. There'd been no give and take. She'd hit a sore spot, clumsily tripping over the subject of the Sorceress. That was when he'd gone quiet, wasn't it? She'd upset him, offended him perhaps. Whatever it was, the King had decided not to rise to her needling today. No stammering. No averted glances. No endearing blush around the ears. It was, for some reason she couldn't quite put her finger on, incredibly frustrating. He hadn't exactly been easy company before, but Goddess, it had been better than the chill that hung around them now.

She wanted to make it right. She wanted to see those cracks in his courtly mask; those moments he allowed a smile to hint at the edges of his lips, fluttering and uncertain, before he reigned it back in.

Adeline knew it was borderline childish, but his sudden reticence had set her a personal challenge. She hadn't told him so, but today would be their second and final session together before she went to speak with Master Ellis.

And she was going to win that smile if it killed her.

The King remained frozen where he stood, still frowning, waiting for her elaboration. When she didn't offer one, his eyes narrowed.

"Did you – are you suggesting I'm elderly?"

She allowed her grin to overtake her for just a moment, then shrugged delicately, raising one shoulder.

"Didn't mean to offend, Your Majesty."

And there it was; that little flutter – but no smile. *Damn it.* He schooled his features once more, and set his swordpoint to the ground, leaning slightly into the hilt.

"Oh, I'm not offended. It wasn't long before my time that the Merrow were ruled by a Council of Elders, you know." He gave her a stern look, which probably should not have made her insides go all wobbly. "Ageing isn't a curse."

"I quite agree," she said, gesturing broadly at the King.

Another flicker. *Come on, one smile.*

“Tell me then Princess, just how old do you think I am?”

Adeline gave a long hum, barely fighting the giddy triumph that tugged at the corners of her lips and made her cheeks ache. She sauntered closer, trailing her blade behind her and making a show of splaying out her fingers on her free hand, counting each one off and mouthing numbers at random. There was just a sword's breadth between them when she finally caught his eye and gave in to the pull of her grin.

“I'd put you around six hundred years older than me, give or take a few years.”

The second the words left her mouth, she wanted to swallow them back down. His face. *Shit*. Why had she thought that would be funny?

Kai's brows twitched, then pulled together as he stared at her and for one long, nauseating moment she thought she'd been irreparably rude, beyond insensitive. Her stomach flipped, sick with nerves. But then – so subtle she almost missed it beneath the shadow of his dark stubble – his lips pressed together, pursed against a smile.

Oh thank the Goddess.

“A fair assumption,” he said, nodding with mock seriousness.

Adeline's stomach flipped again, though the sick feeling faded into something warm and fluttery.

“Unfortunately, I can't claim six centuries worth of wisdom. As far as I'm concerned, I'll be twenty-five this summer. Or not summer, but –”

He frowned, casting about for some forgotten phrase.

“Mid-Winter,” she supplied.

He nodded. “Mid-Winter, then.”

“Twenty-five,” she mused, then cocked a brow. “Care to prove it? Because I've been going easy on you all morning. Even my Grand-Aunt Johanna might have claimed a round by now.”

This little jibe brought her no closer to that evasive smile; quite the opposite, in fact. Something hot and tense chased across the King's face and - goddess, he was scowling at her. *Scowling*. That was new. Adeline laughed, delighted.

If anything, his scowl deepened.

“What makes you think I haven't been going easy on *you*?”

She drifted closer until she was at his side, leaning against the wall with one arm and beaming openly at the reaction she'd provoked. It wasn't a smile but she'd take it. It did rather suit him, truth be told.

“I would *absolutely* believe you've been going easy on me, gentleman that you are. But again; I invite you to prove it.”

Adeline saw his fingers twitch at his hilt. Then he took a step out onto the floor and turned to face her, crooking one finger to beckon her forth.

“If you insist.”

He took his starting position where he stood and she eagerly followed his lead and lifted her sword, neither of them bothering to move to the middle of the training floor.

It was only when the King advanced that Adeline realised her mistake.

The wall was just a few steps behind her; she had no space to move, to maneuver her body around his. And Daughters damn him, he *knew* it too, from the way his lips twitched behind his careful, stoic mask. He pushed and pushed and pushed, until her back hit the wall and it was all she could do to shield against his blows.

“*Shit.*”

Adeline gritted her teeth around the word, frustration spilling over.

But the King let slip a short huff of laughter, natural and bright. Adeline's pulse echoed the sound with an offbeat stutter, and for a moment, time seemed to slow around them. Then all at once, Kai's smile caught and spread like wildfire, and for as much as she'd been chasing it, Adeline was entirely

caught off guard. Her hilt twisted in her clammy grasp, and when she fumbled her sword, Kai did not hesitate. His fingers curled around her free wrist, and the moment she lost her grip on her blade he pressed her into the wall, leaving no space between them for her to duck and grab the sword before it thunked against the ground.

In reality, the noise was probably not as jarring as it seemed. Far more bewildering was the sound that followed; the harsh rise and fall of their shared breath, heaving and entirely in sync for several endless seconds. Adeline was frozen. She couldn't twist away, couldn't hide whatever face she must have pulled to have his eyes gleaming with such vibrant triumph. She could do little more than stare up at Kai, hyperaware of his hand pinning her own. His swordpoint was tucked under her chin with his fingers curled tightly around the hilt, knuckles warm where they brushed her hip and rose a thousand unseen goosebumps up her side.

And he was *grinning*.

Practically ear to ear, all that rough bristle parted by a gleaming, triumphant smile and the laboured breath that lifted his chest just a whisper from her own. So there it was. It was with a rushing, heady sort of clarity that Adeline realised that she'd never *actually* seen him smile before, not a full smile. Not like this. She would have remembered, if she had.

She swallowed, rough and loud. His smile curved higher, and she knew there was not the slightest chance he didn't hear it. He was *very* close, after all. So close she took in his scent with every breath, the smell of cold winter air and something soft and herbal, unfamiliar but intoxicating.

"Well," she said, trying and failing to force a bit of cheer into the taut, crackling air between them. It was a challenge to sound as though her stomach and lungs had not knotted themselves together; as though she frequently found herself pinned to the wall by a towering Merrow King.

"Well," he echoed, soft and low. He tilted his head, still with that dangerous light behind his eyes. Adeline could not read his intent. Not with his warmth wreathing a fog around her

thoughts, and not with the tip of his sword still hovering at her neck. She swallowed again, and it was hard to miss the way his gaze slowly dropped to catch the movement of her throat, arched beneath his blade. Especially as his eyes stayed fixed there through her next few breaths, his own still as harsh and heavy in the pressing silence.

“I – I guess we’re even.”

Maybe it was the pathetic, breathy cadence of her voice that did it.

Kai’s eyes flicked back to hers, unreadable as he dropped her wrist like she’d burned him. He stepped away and took his warmth, his smile, and that clean, heady scent with him. He drew on those stately airs like a neatly pressed cloak, drawing his shoulders back. When he spoke, it was with the same careful, considered manner he’d been using all morning.

As if nothing had happened.

“I suppose we are,” was all he said.

And without another word, the King turned away and resumed his starting position. Adeline took a long moment to steady her breath, her confused, skittering heartbeat.

Alright, she told herself. *It’s alright. New training partners, getting used to one another and all. That’s always a bit disorienting.*

Bullshit, said a dry little voice at the back of her head. It sounded an awful lot like Ger. She ignored it.

Which was easy, because it was *wrong*. King Cumhaill had spoken barely a handful of words to her. He could hold her eye for all of ten seconds. And above all else, he was tragically, eternally, *famously* in love. Even if all the stories hadn’t said so, she’d seen the way he dimmed at the mention of the Sorceress. Her loss must have broken him in a way Adeline couldn’t begin to comprehend.

So she’d annoyed him, then. Despite what he’d said, the taunting had become too much and – *fuck*. She’d made such a mess, in just two short mornings. The sooner she spoke to Master Ellis, the better.

“Are you ready?”

She jolted a little at the words, a little clipped; overly polite bordering on curt. So that was that, she supposed. And it was fine, it really was. She'd speak to Master Ellis this afternoon, and set things right. That was the right thing to do.

Grimly satisfied, Adeline turned to face the King and raised her sword for one last battle.

“Ready.”



Chapter 22

Adeline

At the end of her afternoon session, Mareda sailed out of the training room and straight on past her sister without so much as a flicker of recognition. It was almost impressive – she had to have known Adeline was waiting outside, to have summoned that wintry façade so easily.

Adeline allowed herself a moment to feel the cold bite of that snub. She fisted her hands, took one steadying breath, then shook her fingers out.

One disaster at a time.

Her sessions with the King were growing more difficult by the day, for several reasons – most of which she didn't care to look at too closely. So right now, what she really needed was to get the Weapons Master on her side.

She slipped into the room and found Master Ellis shuffling about, picking up discarded battle arms and returning them to their brackets and shelves. The training floor was a mess. It looked like they'd used every single weapon in the room – probably preparing Mareda for her appearance at the Queen's Tourney.

Adeline stepped carefully over a triple ended flail and winced at the thought of Mareda swinging the evil looking thing over her head, pale eyes hardened to chips of ice.

“Princess Adeline,” Ellis croaked. “Thought you'd be taking the room in the mornings from now on?”

“That's what I wanted to talk about, Master Ellis,” said Adeline. She stooped to gather up a set of throwing daggers and handed them to him hilt first.

“Aye?” He took the daggers and slotted them into place.

“My mother has me training with the Merrow King in the mornings.”

For a moment, Adeline thought Master Ellis flinched, but when he turned his craggy face to her, his expression was impassive.

“She says you told her I'd do fine with a training partner.”

“Aye, I did.”

Adeline followed him across the room. “Couldn't you have told her I still need tutoring?”

“I'm not in the habit of lying to my Queen, Miss. You're a skilled fighter. You excel at target work and swordplay, and you have for a long while now. You could join the Queen's Gard tomorrow if you so wished. You've no further need of my help.”

He bent to heave a heavybag from where it had toppled to the floor and Adeline grabbed the other side of it, helping the

old man lift and ease it back onto its hook.

“That’s flattering and all,” she groaned, struggling under the weight of the bag. The hook caught and she stepped back, dropping the suspended bag into the air. “But still, don’t you think we should talk to her?”

Ellis peered around the bag at her from beneath a bushy frown. “To what end?”

“To what *end*?”

Adeline frowned right back at him. This was not going how she’d expected at all. She’d come here to find an ally, someone to sigh and raise their eyes to the Winter skies along with her, to help her decide the best way to approach her unreasonable mother.

“Master Ellis, he’ll be commanding armies. I’m not a fit sparring partner for a King!”

Ellis was silent for a long moment. Adeline watched with growing unease as his thin lips slowly worked into a disdainful curl. When he spoke, his voice was sour and dark.

“He’s no King.”

Adeline stared at him.

It seemed a bizarre, bitter thing to say. Although Kai had grown on her – significantly, perhaps – she could attest that he was not the easiest company. But world-famous grump Master Ellis would be one to talk. And to outright deny his title?

“What does *that* mean?”

Master Ellis shuffled away again, snatching up a fallen sword with a little too much vigour. “The Queen has seen fit to allow that creature into her palace, and that is all well and good. A kind woman she is, kinder than I have any will to be. Me? I’ve too much respect for *my Queen* to treat that man – no, *Merrow*, whatever he calls himself – as anything more than what he is; an imposter. King, my scabby foot.”

Adeline recoiled. “He *is* King, to his own people.”

“Bah!” Master Ellis slashed the sword through the air impatiently. “Next I’ll be asked to train the King of the Salamanders, will I? Maybe the Queen of the Eels? Aye, let’s arm all manner of slimy dripping creatures and allow them to sleep under the same roof as our own Royal Family. A fine idea.”

He huffed with the exertion of his own rage, shuffling to the wall and muttering more to himself now.

“Brings the world as we know it to its knees, melts the very ground beneath us, and I’m expected to mould him into something *deadlier*? Sooner drown in the thawed lake, I would.”

She could do nothing but gape, a slow dawning horror creeping across her tensed shoulders. Who *was* this man? Where was the crabby Weapons Master she’d known her whole life? The tutor who’d barked at her to do better and work harder, but scooped her off the training floor and nursed her injuries as tenderly as any loving grandfather? Who’d pressed chocolate nuggets into her hand at the end of a successful training session, and nearly wept with quiet pride when she’d hit her first bullseye at age eleven?

“That,” Adeline said tersely, “is a hateful thing to say, Master Ellis.”

Ellis shrugged, scoffed quietly. “Forgive me, Princess. Regrettably, I am not young enough to know everything. Do as you will, but I’ve told the Queen, and now I’ll tell you; I don’t believe that creature needs a sword in his hand, and I won’t teach him to better wield it.”

Adeline had no response, no words she trusted herself not to yell at the old man. She shoved past the heavybag and left it swinging dangerously in her wake.

The Queen was taking lunch in her rooms today, and after facing Master Ellis, Adeline was late to collect her tray from the kitchen. Marie handed it to her wordlessly, sending her on

her way at once. Adeline knew she must have looked thunderous if the cook refrained from so much as tutting at her.

She flew up from the kitchen, twice nearly tripping up the stairs and once knocking a young patrolling Gard into a wall as she swung too quickly around a corner. When she reached the Queen's parlour she darted between the suite of plush white furniture and dropped the tray onto the centre table, the tea sloshing over the edge of the cup. The Queen had been drowsily reading from a stack of letters, and gave a sharp start at the abrupt clatter.

“Adeline!” Her mother called reproachfully.

Adeline dropped into the chair opposite her mother's long white settee. “Mother, I've just spoken with Master Ellis.”

The Queen shut her eyes wearily and leaned back in the cushions. “Oh, Adeline.”

“So you know then? He told you why he won't work with Kai?”

At that her mother opened her eyes and raised a golden eyebrow.

“King Cumhail,” Adeline amended quickly.

Selma sighed and dropped the letter to one side. She eased forward gingerly in her seat and reached for the cup and a crisp serviette, wiping a droplet of spilt tea from the handle before taking a long, steady sip. Adeline watched her with one knee bouncing impatiently under her skirts. Finally, her mother looked up over the gilded rim of her teacup.

“Master Ellis is a very old man, Adeline.”

“And what does that matter?”

“It matters because prejudices aren't born overnight. He has spent a long, difficult lifetime defending Eisalaan from outside threats. We can't now blame him for seeing threat in an outsider when that has always been his role.”

“So he's allowed to be hateful simply because he's always been that way?” Adeline scowled. “Do you hear what you're

saying?”

Selma fixed her with a hard stare. “You forget yourself, darling.”

“I –” But Adeline stopped herself and pursed her lips, swallowing the growl that trembled in her throat. She gripped the edge of the seat cushion to steady herself. “I apologise. Your Majesty.”

Her mother softened.

“I don’t mean for you to never disagree with me, Adeline. It is commendable that you would speak up when you see something wrong –”

“If you agree it’s wrong, why allow Master Ellis to make that decision? Why allow him to hold his position at all?”

“It’s complicated, Adeline. You yourself have noted that people are frightened by all that has happened. Ellis’ view, his mistrust and suspicions about the Merrow, are not uncommonly held.”

“You said we would send a message of kinship. Isn’t it up to us? We need to be the ones to reassure Eisalaan. They should know that the Merrow need our support, not our fear.”

A strange look passed over Selma’s face then, a pull at the edges of her lips almost as though she wanted to smile, but her pale blue eyes remained wary.

“If you feel such a strong sense of duty towards Eisalaan and our new allies,” she began, speaking slowly. “Perhaps you may reconsider petitioning as my Heir.”

Adeline stood abruptly.

“I’ve told you, no.”

But Selma was not discouraged. She rose, wincing, to her feet, gripping the back of the settee for support as she came level with her daughter.

“I know you have, darling. I simply thought after the time we’ve spent together... you might see things differently.”

Adeline stepped around the chair, putting it between her body and her mother's as she threw her hands up.

"Why does *everyone* seem to think that's my motivation? Is it so unbelievable that I might just want to know my mother, now that she finally has time for me?"

A stinging silence.

Selma sat again, suddenly looking very small and frail among the expanse of white fabric. She picked up her letter and resumed reading it, though her eyes flickered across the page too fast. Adeline felt a warm flood of shame creep across her cheeks. Why could she not let it lie? Why did she have to keep picking at these old wounds?

"I'm sorry."

The Queen waved a hand, quietly dismissing her apology. "I understand."

Adeline shifted uncomfortably. She *was* sorry, but her regret didn't dissolve her anger.

"May I go?"

The Queen nodded without looking up from her letter.

And so, Adeline left.

The fire in her veins seemed to power her limbs, moving her body through the halls towards the East Library before she'd even fully formed her plan. She couldn't become Master Ellis overnight, but she could do everything in her power to be the partner King Cumhaill truly needed.

That's more than that hateful old codger would do.



Chapter 23

Kai

CRACK.

Kai woke.

It was not the ice, just the valet knocking at the door. He dressed and went to greet Simon, who stood in the hall with his arms about to give way under the breakfast tray. The boy produced letters from his pouch. Ceri's hand was among them under the green seal, asking again when she could join him at the palace. He ate. Simon reminded him of his session with the Princess.

Kai felt a prickle of unease at his throat, and dampened it with the burn of his tea swallowed in three deep gulps before he left his room. Too quickly he had settled into a routine with nothing to show for it but vapid court parties and useless palace exhibitions. His people were waiting, their home encased in ice – and here he was, growing complacent. Not yet having found what he was looking for.

None of the Beira women wore the pendant.

He knew better than to ask them outright. The Queen had been quite explicit; if it was within her power to stop it, the Thaw would not continue. But if there was even a slight chance that Selma and her family knew nothing of the pendant - its history or existence – there was still some wisp of a hope for the Laune.

And then there was Avette. At the back of his mind, always, was Avette. They were Avette's blood, even Adeline. Adhlas, *especially* Adeline. The resemblance had shocked him at first, through eyes bleared by the ice in his lashes, the blinding white snow, and his unearthly exhaustion.

He had simply seen a Princess with a mass of dark curls and wide brown eyes, and projected Avette's face onto her young ancestor. But Adeline was not Avette, in looks or manner. She was taller, softer, less poised but with an easier grace. Her skin was warm as pale gold, where Avette's had been cool, stark white. Adeline's hair was a storm of curls, and though her eyes were dark, they were warmed with the gleam of unspilled laughter.

Mother Adhlas save me.

This was a dangerous line of thought. He did not want to think about this. Not of Avette, and certainly not of Adeline. Kai tried to stop, but memories of their last session rushed him all at once; her warm eyes wide, her pulse thrumming hard beneath his palm, her lips parting with her fractured breath.

How easy it would have been, to lean in.

Stop. Reckless.

He had reached the door to the training room, and he did not want to risk walking in there if his thoughts had somehow been sketched across his face. Especially with how odd and awkward their last session had become, even before he'd pinned her to that wall. Kai took a moment to compose himself, to summon his most Kingly bearing.

But the door swung open before he could reach for it.

Adeline darted halfway out, eyes wide but ringed with a shadow of exhaustion. Her curls were rolled into a thick knot at the top of her head that bobbed with her every move.

“Kai! Come in, quick.”

Kai stared at her, forgetting himself for a moment. She was wired, slightly jittery, as if she'd been awake for too long. He stepped inside and she closed the door behind him, wafting a dark warm scent as though she'd bathed in strong black tea.

“Are you... quite well?”

Adeline managed a grin.

“Mostly. I haven't been to bed yet and I've just drank at least a jug and a half of coffee.”

Kai didn't know what coffee was, but he gathered it wasn't liquor or wine from the way the lines of her body practically hummed with tension. “What have you been doing all night? I don't mean to pry –”

Adeline waved his half-finished apology away. “I've been researching. Strategy, weaponry, that sort of thing, just trying to get a sense of where to begin with our training –”

“I thought we'd begun. We're focusing on swordplay, as I recall.”

Adeline had wandered over to the windowsill to pick up a steaming cup the size of a bowl, filled with something black that smelled strong and earthy. She took a few small sips, scrunching her nose.

“Bleh. I hate coffee. Give me honeyed tea any day over this bitter muck.”

Kai didn't understand what was happening. Why was she losing sleep over their sessions? What had he missed? He was no coward, but truth be told he hadn't expected to actually have to fight Selma's wars. He thought he'd have his people home beneath the lake long before they caught even a breath of the wind that rustled through the battlefields. The thought that he might have to endanger them, the thought that war was coming to Eisalaan...

"Prin- Adeline," Kai corrected himself before she could, and went on, straining to keep his voice even. "What is this about? Why the sudden urgency?"

Adeline put down the cup more slowly than seemed strictly necessary, obviously biding time. When she turned to him, the gleam in her dark eyes was dulled by... something. He didn't know what, and she wouldn't meet his eyes, so he couldn't search hers.

"Is there a battle?"

"There's no battle. I just think that you deserve the training befitting a King. You deserve to train alongside a partner with actual experience, someone who knows what they're doing. But my mother wants you training right here in the palace, and since Master Ellis isn't... available... Well, I need to be better."

There was something about the way she spoke those words: *I need to be better*. Stubborn, but forlorn, and from the inward curve of her shoulders as she fidgeted with the handle of her mug on the windowsill, a hint of embarrassment.

And now Kai understood.

"Did you speak with Master Ellis?"

Adeline's head swivelled, the knot of her curls bobbling madly. She looked at him, understanding dawning on her as it had on Kai just moments ago, wrinkling the smooth skin of her brow.

"You know, then? Why he won't train you?"

Kai inclined his head gently.

“Yes. It seems some things have *not* changed during my time in the ice. The Merrow are no strangers to prejudice, Adeline. We’re different. Different is frightening, and fear can be ugly.”

Adeline dragged a hand over her face, shook her head with her palm still masking her mouth. Then she crossed her arms and said dryly; “That’s awfully magnanimous.”

He mirrored her, folding his arms across his chest.

“Is it? Should I leverage my bloodline to force him into training me? It seems to me that I’ve been fortunate. I could be spending every morning in the company of someone who hates me for the very air I breathe and the freshwater in my veins, but instead I have –”

He stopped abruptly, swallowing the breath around the next word. Adeline cocked a brow at him, looking much more like herself than she had all morning.

“Me?”

Kai could feel his lips pulling, straining to form the word and against his better judgement, he let them. “You.”

Her smirk became a different kind of smile altogether, curving beneath the soft pink apples of her cheeks and setting her dimmed eyes alight once more.

Some of her jittering eased, Adeline gave a long, catlike stretch and pulled the tie from her hair, letting it loose around her shoulders. She winced as it fell and rubbed at her sore roots so her curls bounced and swayed around her face. A wispy tendril fell over her eye and Kai was halfway to brushing it behind her ear before he caught himself. She eyed his raised hand, but he gestured quickly at the weapons wall and let his arm drop to his side.

Pathetic.

“We’ll continue with swords, then?”

He was pleased at the steadiness of his voice, at least.

Adeline shook her head and her curls sprang and swung once more, dark coils of ribbon caught in a breeze. Kai didn’t wait for her answer before turning to the fireplace, pretending to

warm his hands so he could stare into the flames, as had become his habit. Perhaps he was trying to burn the image from his sight. Or sear it into his memory. He wasn't sure. He needed the distraction of a sword in his hand, something to occupy his body and mind so he wouldn't keep falling under the thrall of her wild hair and warm eyes and... everything else. A small and very distant voice in his head whispered; *She's not Avette.*

Whether this was encouragement or warning, the voice did not specify.

“No, I meant what I said. We need a *real* regime. It wouldn't do for your Merrow men to be better equipped for the battlefield than their own King.”

Kai could see her from the corner of his eye where she'd moved to his side to speak to him, hands planted on the curve of her hips.

“It may surprise you to know that I do in fact have some experience of battleground strategy,” he said, smiling into the flames. “I am a King, after all.”

“I'm sorry, were you talking to me or the fireplace?”

Kai laughed then. He couldn't help throwing her a glance.

“Must I stare at you at all times, Adeline?”

She wagged her brows suggestively.

“What's not to like about that?”

Kai tried to speak, maybe to say something dignified and regal, but all that came out was a sort of choked laugh. Adeline rolled her eyes.

“Alright, alright, enough then. I know how you like to keep things - what was the word? *Proper.*”

He felt a pang of regret even as relief loosened his throat.

He'd been here before, convinced against his better judgement that it was acceptable, safe even, to want a Princess of Eisalaan – but it wasn't true with Avette, and now... Well.

Now he didn't know. But it was a risk he was unwilling to take.

So he let Adeline cast him as the upstanding, *proper* King who would never dream of compromising her virtue, when the truth was that all too often, he found himself lost in thoughts of doing just that. Even now, he stood staring deep into the fierce orange glow of the fire until his eyes ached. All so that he wouldn't see the loose spill of her dark hair and imagine knotting his fingers into the curls at the nape of her long neck, backing her into the wall, tilting her head so he could press his lips to her throat and –

Beside him, Adeline moved her hands to the small of her back and arched so that her spine made a series of clicks. Her moan made his jaw tighten, but mercifully the sound was swallowed up by a yawn.

“Look, I know it's my own fault, but I'm exhausted. I don't think I have it in me to swing a sword around today. Let me just show you what I've been reading, and maybe you can tell me about your training. That's probably where we should have started in the first place, isn't it?”

She spoke over her shoulder to him as she walked, beckoning him to the windowsill where she'd piled a stack of books beside her mug. Kai followed and reached past her to take the thick tome atop the pile; *Adversaries and Allies: A History of Eisalaan*. He flicked through the first few pages, wondering how far back the histories spanned and whether he would find any familiar names.

“That's a good place to start for some context, things you might have missed while you were... Well...”

“Frozen,” he finished, closing the book and tucking it under his arm.

She nodded. Then her lips parted, but whatever words had been poised to fall from them, Adeline seemed to decide not to speak. She closed her mouth, and Kai was glad for it. He thought he knew what she wanted to ask him, and he really did not want to talk about his years beneath the ice. Not now.

Instead, Adeline hoisted herself onto the windowsill and clapped her hands together briskly.

“Right then. Tell me; what does the Merrow King know of battlefields?”

That conversation was not much better, but it would have been strange to refuse, and he was actively trying *not* to be strange, or intimidating.

He leaned against the opposite edge of the window and affected a thoughtful expression as he looked up at her, biding time while he decided how to approach this. When he spoke, it was carefully, slowly, as though he had to stop and think of the details of so long ago - when in actuality his memories were as perfectly preserved as his body. Perhaps another side effect of the ice prison.

“Before my father died, he and the old King Beira, your ancestor, were allies. It was in the interest of the Merrow to defend Eisalaan, so we manned the rivers that pour into Lake Laune, kept watch for enemy fleets that might try to sail into our waters. And they came eventually, of course.”

Though the true enemy needn't sail into our waters when they could simply wade right in from the lake's edge.

Adeline was rapt, waiting silently even as he paused to think; he wondered again how much of this history was covered in the volume at his side. Not much, judging by her captive attention.

“When I was eighteen,” he went on, “my father thought it was time I joined the ranks of our waterside defence. I trained with the Merrow men who patrolled the nearby rivers and streams. We used –”

This was the difficulty – one of them, at least. It was his magic that ultimately tangled him into the dangerous web of the Beira monarchy to begin with. But then Adeline surely knew that Merrow possessed certain powers. Or *once* possessed powers, before the well of their power was eternally frozen.

“We used our connection to the water as our main defence,” he edged. “But we knew that any land-dwelling enemies would approach with blades and weapons, so we worked on wielding those, too.”

She nodded, urging him on. If she noticed his sidestepping the topic of Water Wielding, she did not mention it.

“All was peaceful for a few years, but territorial disagreements with Caldbon escalated slowly until –”

“That part I do know,” she cut in. “About the battle anyway. There’s peace now, but it wasn’t the last time we went to war with Caldbon. I never knew about any Merrow involvement, though. I suppose the historians couldn’t record accounts they had no access to.”

A thoughtful silence passed between them.

“You fought against Caldbon?”

Kai shook his head. He would have to say this next part quick, before his face or his voice could catch up with his words.

“When it came to it, my father would not allow me on the battlefield. He died in that battle, and I was crowned shortly thereafter.”

Adeline’s brow pitched up. Her eyes became too round and knowing, and she reached across the books to grab his hand where it rested on the brick sill. Her fingers were lightly calloused but her palm over the back of his hand was soft and warm. “I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine.”

“It was a long time ago. Hundreds of years.”

“Not for you it wasn’t.”

She was sincere. Perhaps it was written on his face, but somehow she understood that the loss of his father was not erased by the passing of time and the icy embrace of the lake. He turned his hand over and grasped hers, one quick squeeze.

“Thank you, Adeline.”

Adeline was unreadable, but her eyes darted down to his fingers wrapped around her own. They both lingered just a split second longer, and Kai knew he should pull away. He really should pull away. But then Adeline drew her hand back and briskly hopped down from the window.

There was colour high in her cheeks, and he told himself it was heat from the sun streaming through the window. Just the heat.

“Right,” she said. “We need a plan.”

Ultimately, they came to the agreement that Kai would show Adeline all he knew, and she would research as much as she could to fill the gaps for them both. Though Adeline made Kai promise he would read through the stack of books himself. She helped him pile them into his arms, and as she did she outlined each book so succinctly he wasn't sure he'd have any need of them.

“And this is just what was available last night! There'll be more whenever the Gard trainees return their borrowed books to the archives.”

“The archives?”

Adeline's tired eyes lit up.

“Haven't you been? It's a wonder, you really should visit.” She paused and her spine straightened, eyes widening. “Oh! You really *should* visit. It would be such a help to you, you'd have all the context of the last few centuries in one place. It's not just books either, there's historical records of the Kingdom, volumes of ancestry, even ancient artefacts and old weapons dug up from before the Frost. All the overflow from the public exhibitions; it's like a private museum. I'm not really selling it, am I?”

She laughed her warm, rippling laugh but for once, Kai barely heard her.

An archive room. Of course. Historical records and artefacts. Crown jewels and neatly preserved accounts of monarchs passed.

The archives would lead him to Avette's pendant.

They had to.



Kai spent every evening of the next few weeks hunting through the archives at length. His obsessive habit might have roused suspicion had Adeline not introduced him to the archivist herself, and stressed that Kai was to have full access and total peace while he studied Eisalaan's history.

He tried not to feel the insistent guilt that prickled at him, tried to shove it aside or bury it under logic: he was only doing what he had to. Even so, the few times she had accompanied him, he burned with shame in her presence, wilted under the shining light of her trust. And all the while, the Princess chattered amicably with a lying stranger who spent his nights pawing at the carefully filed secrets of her ancestors.

It was all for nothing, for the pendant was nowhere to be found.

Kai turned over jewels and baubles that seemed like the glittering, gaudy things Avette might have worn. He leafed through correspondence, and studied inventories detailing her belongings.

It was as though it had never existed, and if Kai didn't have the scarred palm to prove it, he might have believed it was so. There was no mention of it even under accounts of what Eisalaan's historians called The First Frost.

At most, the books gave him an insight to the romantic portrait history had painted of him. Selma had told him that he and Avette had their place among Eisalaan's fairytales, but he could never have imagined what their story had become.

They called him The Drowned Prince, and wrote of his deep and unending love for Avette Beira, the Last Sorceress. The woman who, they said, had split her heart open and burst into a violent flurry of snow, casting their Kingdom into an eternal winter to protect him. Kai read story after story compulsively, even when the flood of images turned his breath to a sickening dry heave.

Despite his poor luck, Kai couldn't help but feel that he was circling the truth of Avette's lost treasure. He entered the archives with fresh hope each night, ready to shift through dusty tapestries and eroding metals, to read more epics about their great love story, no matter how sick and breathless they left him.

When his vision blurred with rage and nausea, he told himself it would be worth it. That every saccharine lyric, every late night, every little white lie drew him closer to the pendant, to the end of this Winter.

To his homecoming.



Chapter 24

Adeline

The coldest winter days unfurled like the petals of a white rose falling away to reveal their warm yellow centre.

Mid-Winter was approaching and Iseult would soon be home where she belonged. Adeline would soon hear her sister's tiny, insistent voice babbling breathlessly in her ear, she would soon scoop Iseult up into her lap and bury her face in her sweet-smelling halo of copper hair. How was it that the girl always managed to smell like sugar, like she'd slept in a vat of honey? Adeline could never figure it out. She only knew that missing her baby sister was a physical feeling, like an itch she could never reach.

Of course, missing her older sister was a physical feeling too, a new one; an emptiness. As cold and vast as the space beside her where Mareda used to be.

But Mareda was not there, not at Adeline's side, not anymore. Iseult soon would be. Just a matter of days, her father told her one morning. He'd come to break his fast with her in the family dining hall before her morning training. It went unsaid that he was there so she would have some company should Mareda decide to waft in and drift past Adeline's seat as if she weren't there. Happily though, they had the room to themselves thus far.

"Sebastian sent a boat for Iseult just this morning," her father said.

Adeline did a little seated jig and the table trembled with her, setting her mug of milky tea to rippling.

"I won't last! I'm going to die for want of cuddles before she even gets here."

"Well you won't have long to wait," he said, spreading gooseberry jam on a thick roll of bread. "Sebastian says she'll be home with us by the end of the week."

Adeline felt a soft smile play at her lips. *Home with us*. He may have sired only one Beira child, but Silas truly cared for her sisters, and doted on Iseult in particular. Adeline suspected that her cheeky little sister reminded him of her own youthful mischief in years long passed. Although when she'd expressed that thought to him, he'd assured her that he had nothing to be wistful about. In his words, she was still as wilful as ever.

"How is Sebastian?"

She hadn't seen him in quite some time, and though she didn't know the man as well as she probably should, she knew her father had taken him under his wing; and more recently, acted as a buffer between Edward and the groom-to-be.

"Well enough," Silas nodded slowly. "He's still coming to terms with the prospect of ruling Eisalaan one day. He tells me he spends much of his time thinking about what it would mean to be King."

Adeline snorted.

“I doubt he’ll have much to worry about. Mother’s not one for delegating, is she, illness aside? I mean, she’s spent most of her life telling the world there won’t even *be* a King Beira, I can’t see her going one further and letting him *actually* do anything other than sit at her side wearing a nice shiny crown.”

“Mmm,” her father said vaguely. He wasn’t listening. He picked up his coffee - black, unsweetened, and pungent enough to make her eyes water – and took a long sip with the trepidatious air of one about to ask for a bank-breaking loan.

“And what about you, Ade? Have you given any thought to the prospect of ruling?”

Adeline narrowed her eyes. “Sebastian didn’t really say all that, did he?”

Silas busied himself, slicing open another bread roll to avoid her eyes.

“I read between the lines,” he said.

“Hmm. And what *lines* has my mother scripted for you?”

Silas dropped the bread roll and all pretence along with it.

“It would be foolish not to even campaign, Adeline, and after this Winter passes, you won’t get another chance. You’re a smart young woman. You’re well liked, and you’re passionate. Your mother thinks – and I wholeheartedly agree – you would make a magnificent Queen. Truly.”

Adeline sat back in her chair and folded her arms.

“And what about Mareda?”

“Adeline,” her father sighed. He glanced up at the ceiling as though willing the right words to fall from the sky. “I know that you love your sister. I know that you feel a sense of loyalty to her, and that you want her to have the crown she’s always dreamed of. But you’re not children. You’re not grappling over a toy, you’re fighting for a Kingdom. If, Goddess forbid, something happened to your mother, Eisalaan would need a leader. Do you think Mareda is a leader?”

No.

The answer came unbidden to her mind, and Adeline immediately told herself that she didn't mean it, that she was just hurt by her sister's absence. *Of course* Mareda was a leader. She was a natural Queen, she was always going to be a Queen, there was no question about it.

But was she a leader?

Adeline was aware of Silas's dark eyes studying her, but she didn't *want* to answer his question. She snatched up a thick chocolate pastry studded with chopped walnuts and took a giant bite, so her mouth was so full she could barely close her lips

Silas raised an eyebrow and Adeline shrugged and gestured at her billowing cheeks, as if to say: *Sorry, I'd love to chat, but what can I do?*

He shook his head, pursing his lips against a small smile. "Alright. I'll leave it alone for now Ade, but... Think about it?"

She tilted her chin up with a kind of non-committal shrug, but it seemed to be enough for Silas. He picked up his bread roll and resumed spreading his jam.

While it wasn't as grand a celebration as New Winter, the upcoming Mid-Winter Faire was another opportunity for Eisalaan to come together with wine and food and music, and revel in the magic and prosperity of their beloved Silver Kingdom. Only this year, Adeline worried that the creeping Thaw would dampen some of that festive spirit.

For one thing, the Faire was usually hosted on the lake, but with the freshly repaired crack in the ice the Council had thought it unwise to apply the weight of all of Eisalaan to the surface at once. Instead, the celebrations would be moved to the snowy banks along the lakeshore.

“Just a few steps closer to our favourite tavern,” Ger said, gesturing around broadly.

“Always looking on the bright side, Ger.”

He winked.

They’d met up in *Maggie’s*, a shabby little pub between the Capital and the Queen’s Village, kept afloat by a handful of regulars. Maggie herself was quiet and warm, just like her tavern. She laid out bowls of seasoned crackers with every order, and ageing decor aside, she kept a tidy space. Ever since the incident with Captain Doran, this hidden gem had become their regular haunt.

They sat in a dim corner, each nursing a spiced cider – their usual order, with a warmed tankard and sugared rim.

“Poor Izzy will be disappointed though, she wanted to go skating on the Laune,” Ger said, fishing the stick of cinnamon from his drink. He, like everyone else, was entirely under little Iseult’s spell. “When does she arrive?”

“My father says she should be here within the week.”

Ger leaned an elbow against the table and cupped his chin.

“And how is darling Silas?” He cooed.

Adeline rolled her eyes.

“Bit old for you, isn’t he? Not exactly your type.”

“My *type*? Charming, dark curls, great laugh, eyes like sunlight and chocolate?” Ger said, grinning. He puckered his lips at her and blew a lazy kiss. “You of all people should know that’s *exactly* my type.”

Adeline wrinkled her nose; if she really wanted to, it was easy to forget she’d ever held a romantic thought in her head for Ger. But there was a time – *years* ago, mind – when her stomach had dissolved into a cloud of butterflies every time she saw him, when she hadn’t been able to help but whisk him behind a tapestry or pull him into a dark corner of the palace to steal a few breathless kisses. Back then he’d been Gerard, the irresistibly handsome and charming Gard in training, but now he was *Ger*, lovable oaf and her very best friend. The memory

of those dark corners and their roaming hands made her squirm.

“You know I don’t talk about that.”

He wiggled his eyebrows again, even more suggestively now. “Nah, you just fall asleep dreaming of it.”

She kicked him under the table – maybe a *little* harder than the playful nudge she’d been trying for.

“Shit,” he hissed through his teeth. “It was a *joke*, Ade!” Ger winced, ducking in his seat to rub at his shin. He peered over the edge of the table, eyes slitting.

“Why are you so grumpy today?”

“I’m sorry,” she muttered.

“Yeah, you sound it. Really, what’s going on?”

She sighed and got up, dragging her stool around the table to sit beside Ger. Adeline reached for his leg and pulled it up into her lap, then planted a kiss on his shin like he was a child who’d fallen over.

“Better?”

He gave an indignant sniff, but said; “Better.”

She shifted his leg off her lap and folded her hands in its place.

“My father thinks I should campaign for Heir.”

Ger just looked at her, and when she didn’t elaborate further, he frowned. “And?”

She frowned right back at him.

“What d’you mean ‘and’? That’s it. He ambushed me about it over breakfast this morning. My mother put him up to it of course, but he agrees with her so there’s double the pressure -”

“Adeline,” he interrupted her, waving a hand. “Wait. With everything that’s happened between you and Mareda, with how she’s treated you and how she’s handled the public court

in the Queen's absence... are you telling me you're still going to concede to her?"

"She's my sister, Ger."

"And this is your *Kingdom*, Ade."

The jovial warmth he usually radiated was suddenly drawn in, like someone had pulled down the shutters behind his eyes.

"Please tell me you're not going to throw away your shot at the crown because Mareda's throwing a tantrum? Surely Eisalaan's future deserves more consideration than that."

"It's not like that at all, you're not being fair. The people love Mareda."

He scoffed. "The people love her pretty face. She's a lovely, distant doll to them. She's basically an ornament wrapped in glitter, hanging off the balcony on New Winter's Eve. Mareda is part of the Eisalaan fairytale. You're part of *Eisalaan*, just as much as me, and Imogen, and that fellow over there." He pointed randomly across the bar, and a sodden, white haired old man peered blearily up at them over the rim of his pint glass.

Adeline's lips twitched, but Ger went on. "Don't underestimate the importance of your life outside the palace. You know this country. You could be great, Ade."

He was so earnest; it was unnerving.

"Ger, I - I can't," she said, faltering. She didn't have anything else to say. What he said made a bewildering sort of sense and she didn't want to look at it too closely.

For once he didn't push her, just sat back and took a deep sip of his cider. He nudged her own tankard toward her and she drank. Ger licked sugar off his lips.

"Look, as a subject of the Beira monarchy, I know I would much rather bend the knee to the sister who actually gives enough of a shite about this Kingdom to become a part of it." He grinned slyly. "And as you've already bent *both* knees to me, it's about time I returned the favour."

"How about I *break* both your knees?"

He dodged her kick this time.



Chapter 25

Adeline

Having cycled through every weapon on the wall, Kai and Adeline had turned their focus to hand-to-hand combat. Adeline was frustrated to find herself at a complete disadvantage. She had always bested her sister in combat lessons, and could wield much of the weapons wall with more skill than Kai – maybe even take them on two-to-one if she was feeling particularly fierce.

And had the right tool in hand.

But Kai's height and broad build made him a considerably more difficult adversary than dainty Mareda. Even the handful

of times she'd wrestled with Ger, they'd been more or less matched for size, and even with his greater strength, he hadn't posed *this* much of a challenge.

Kai's years under the ice had weakened him, he said, but in the books they'd gone over they learned that muscle held a kind of memory, and it was clearly true as with every passing day at the palace he grew stronger and faster. Adeline ended many of their sessions flat on her backside, and he'd pinned her so often she'd taken to chewing mint leaves in anticipation of his closeness. And combing a bit of makeup through her eyelashes. And yes, if she was honest with herself, perhaps she'd *let* him pin her a few times when she might've avoided it.

This morning though, he was off his game, distracted. Though she resolved to ask him what was wrong later, Adeline took full advantage of the rare opportunity, blazing a path to glory as she pursued him across the training floor. She darted around Kai again and again, making him spin to block her advances until finally she caught him off balance, hooked her leg behind his and tackled him to the ground.

He fell hard, and the air left his chest in a *whoosh* of breath as Adeline steadied herself against his chest, letting her knees fall either side of his hips. She had him pinned, and he seemed to realise his defeat at the same moment she did - while Adeline whooped, he raised his hands slowly to either side of his head in surrender.

"I did it!" She cried. "Ha!"

Adeline drew back suddenly, hovering above him. "Did you let me win?"

"No," he smiled, a little ruefully. "Your victory is all your own."

She grinned at him, but her smile faded at the look on his face. "It's not though, is it? I wouldn't have won if you weren't so distracted. Something's off today. What is it?"

"I –" He sighed and rubbed the creased space between his brows. "It's nothing."

“Kai, I’m not getting up until you tell me what’s wrong.”

Until that moment it didn’t seem to have occurred to Kai that Adeline was straddling him. She felt his heart stutter where she braced her hand against his chest, and his ears went a sweet shade of pink, like strawberry cream. But he composed himself quickly - he was getting much better at that - and raised one thick brow defiantly.

“You truly believe I couldn’t throw you off if I wanted to?”

Adeline smirked. She could still feel his pulse kicking beneath her palm.

“You must not want to, then.”

It had been a throwaway comment. For all his quiet, flustered stoicism, Adeline had accepted that it was never anything personal. Kai was just... from a different time. A time of propriety and discretion. He’d told her as much.

So she couldn’t say why the strawberry flush darkened and spread to his cheeks, or why his throat bobbed with a hard swallow. When he spoke, his voice was deep and low, and sent heat washing through her.

“Maybe I don’t. Maybe I have you precisely where I want you.”

Adeline blanched and tried not to show it. Had he *really* just said that? Composed, proper King Cumhail?

Kai’s eyes locked on hers and Adeline felt a thrill shoot through her, setting her skin alight. He raised himself slowly to one elbow and the movement shifted their bodies closer, his hips pressing into her inner thighs. A soft breath that might have been a gasp escaped her, and she hoped he didn’t hear it, though his face was drawing nearer to hers, his free hand cupping the back of her head.

And then suddenly she spun and was flat on her back, with Kai’s face over her split in an all-too-familiar, triumphant grin.

“Kai!”

She shoved a hand against his chest, and he rocked slightly to one side, shaking with laughter as he held himself above her.

“I can’t believe you just did that!”

Adeline covered her face with her hands, groaning. The fresh heat of her skin pooled in her face in a shamed flush. Goddess above, she’d actually *gasp*ed at his touch. She may as well have moaned out loud.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Of *course* he hadn’t meant to kiss her. He could barely look her in the eye half the time. He was *famously* in love with her long-dead ancestor. What in the fuck had got into her?

Kai pried one of her hands away from her eyes, still laughing.

“What can I say? You taught me well.”

She couldn’t look at him.

“I didn’t teach you to use my tricks against me,” she said.

His grin softened, and his laughter slowed. He brushed away the hair that had whipped across her face in the tussle. His hand was gentle, fingers lingering on her too-hot cheek.

“You’re blushing,” he said quietly. “Really blushing.”

“Of course I am, you absolute arse!” Adeline propped herself up and tried again to shove him away, but this time he caught her hand at his chest. She looked up at him, warily. His face was blank save for a slight pull between his brows, but she swore his eyes flickered from hers to her lips. Almost hesitantly, he laced their fingers together.

And the door creaked open at that precise moment, because of course it did.

Of course it bloody would.

Kai bolted to his feet, yanking Adeline up along with him. A mousey boy with a thin face was peering meekly around the door frame.

“Oh! I didn’t mean to interrupt your, er... session. I apologise, Your Majesty – Your Highness.”

“No need, Simon,” Kai said shortly. “You didn’t interrupt anything.”

Adeline’s eyebrows twitched, almost arching at his words, but she schooled her features into a demure look. A look she imagined might belong to someone who hadn’t been sharing breath with their sparring partner only moments ago.

Her mind was reeling. He had been about to kiss her. *Had* he been about to kiss her? She was almost certain he—

“It’s just that you have a visitor, Your Majesty.”

This was enough to cut through the muddle of her thoughts.

“A visitor?” Adeline said. She couldn’t help but perk up with interest. She’d never known Kai to entertain guests at the palace. He’d led a quiet life these past few weeks. He went to Council meetings and training, toured the public exhibitions and library archives, and generally kept to himself. From what she heard at least; it wasn’t as though she’d taken much notice of his comings and goings. “One of your Merrow subjects perhaps?”

“Perhaps.”

Kai’s voice was suddenly tight. He cleared his throat and turned to her abruptly – his face was ashen. Gone was the pink flush and the soft smile. If it had ever really been there to begin with.

“Princess, if you’ll excuse me, I’m afraid I must cut our session short today. Please accept my apologies.”

Adeline gave a silent nod, not trusting her voice at this particular dazed and uncomfortable moment.

He bowed stiffly and strode from the room without another word, Simon scurrying after him.

Although they hadn't used a single weapon, Adeline took her time tidying up the training room, drawing it out as long as she could. She put out the fire and swept up little crumbs of burnt firewood from the hearth. She lined up their glasses beside the half empty jug of water. She stacked the reference books they'd been using in a neat row on the windowsill.

It took her about ten minutes total. Surely that was enough of a head start?

She'd planned to call a carriage home after their morning session, but Kai had made it quite plain that he did not intend to introduce his mysterious visitor, so the last thing she wanted was to stumble upon them on her way out.

Surely by now, Kai would have met his guest and led them away to somewhere more private. Adeline dawdled as much as she could on the way down, and even took a longer route, winding across the palace and back. When she reached the entry hall, her chest swelled with relief; not a soul in sight but the silent sentries either side of the door.

She nodded to them out of habit as she passed, though not once in her almost twenty-two years had she ever known them to nod back.

As expected, they pulled the doors open and stared silently past her as she slipped out into the cold. It was a beautiful day, even for Mid-Winter. The sky was a broad canvas of soft blue and swirling white, the early shadow of the moon a slice of silver in the sky, as though the Goddess had painted it all with the colours of Eisalaan on her palate.

Adeline took in a breath of crisp air and stepped out into the snow.

It was only as she left the shadow of the arched doorway that she spotted him; Kai, several feet away, whispering angrily at a cloaked figure almost as tall as he was. His visitor shoved back her hood, a frustrated gesture, and Adeline caught a glimpse of the beautiful Merrow woman scowling back at her King.

She ducked back into the shadows before the thought had even fully formed in her head: *Not my business, not my business.*

But before she could slip back inside, Kai glanced around with a stricken expression and it was all she could do to stumble deeper into the shallow arch before his eyes found hers.

“Did you see that?”

The girl’s voice was accented with the same melodic lilt as her King’s. Adeline screwed her eyes shut, as though they wouldn’t find her if she couldn’t see them. There was a beat of silence.

“Adeline, is that you?”

Bollocks.

“Adeline,” Kai sighed. He sounded exhausted, and she didn’t think it was from their short combat session. “I know you’re still there. I can see your hair.”

She peered sheepishly around the archway. The Merrow woman flashed a sparkling grin. “Hullo.”

Adeline stepped out into the courtyard. “Er, hello. This is embarrassing. I don’t normally lurk in the shadows, I swear.”

The woman’s smile broadened, and it struck Adeline as strangely familiar, though she wasn’t sure how they could have met.

“Adeline, this is Ceriwyn.”

“Ceri,” the woman said, extending a hand.

“You need to curtsy,” Kai told her under his breath.

“No, she doesn’t,” said Adeline. She reached for Ceri’s hand and shook it. It was slim and cool, soft against Adeline’s hilt-hardened callouses.

“I’m sorry. I really didn’t intend to eavesdrop, I was just on my way out and – Anyway,” she stopped herself, and allowed a grin. “I’m glad to meet you. King Cumhail is the only Merrow guest we’ve had to the palace so far.”

Ceri threw her King an accusing look. “Is that so? Keeping all the royal comforts to himself, is he? Holed up in his room hoarding rum and books?”

“Ceri,” Kai said warningly.

Adeline swallowed. Why in the name of Aera had she not waited just a few moments longer? She’d walked right into a quarrel positively humming with intimacy, and immediately managed to kick the hornet’s buzzing nest. Her stomach clenched with an odd sort of queasiness, and she shoved it away.

Ridiculous.

“I’ll leave you to your visit. It really was nice to have met you – ”

“Oh please stay!” Ceri called, as she began to back away. “It’s been centuries since I spoke to anyone even remotely close to my own age. I’m not being dramatic, am I Kai? Literally, centuries.”

Adeline gave a hesitant laugh, and shot a quick glance at Kai. His hazel eyes were tense, but he nodded slightly. *Stay.*

“Well,” Adeline said slowly. “You’ve come all this way, I’m sure we could offer you some books and rum for your trouble. Maybe some cake too?”

“I don’t think –” Kai began.

But Ceri swept past him to loop her arm through Adeline’s. “There’s the warm welcome I expected. I think you’re my favourite person in this courtyard.”

Kai dragged a hand over his forehead and groaned quietly.

They headed first to the kitchens, where the air was thick and sweet, warmed by a day spent baking in preparation for the Mid-Winter Faire. Marie greeted them amiably, which struck Adeline as rather odd, but she didn’t complain as the cook threw together a large package of spiced rum, fresh tartlets and salted honey almonds. She pressed the package directly into Kai’s arms, beaming at him with her round cheeks glowing in a very un-Marie-like manner.

“A little feast, Your Majesty, to welcome your lovely guest. Please, enjoy.”

Kai thanked her, apparently unaware that a giddy impostor seemed to be running Marie’s kitchen. He turned for the door, and as Adeline passed the Cook, Marie nodded in Kai’s direction and gave her a knowing wink. She snorted, a surprised and irrepressible laugh.

Ceri and Kai turned to her with identical, quizzical brows as she followed them into the hallway, and she walked a little ways down the hall, beckoning them to follow.

“I think His Majesty has an admirer,” she confided teasingly.

Ceri laughed, but Kai frowned, glancing around as though searching for his supposed admirer. The Merrow woman rolled her eyes.

“She’s talking about the Cook, you dolt.”

Adeline fought the twitch of her lips. On the one hand, she still desperately wished she hadn’t managed to insert herself into this visit, but on the other - it was strangely *nice* to hear someone speak to Kai like this, like he was not just a King but a person. Not just the Drowned Prince, but someone with friends, and a life beyond his legendary tragedy. A little glimpse into the world he had pulled up alongside him through the ice.

And if Ceri’s familiarity bothered him, it didn’t show. Kai either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“Of course not,” he said, not sounding altogether too certain. “She was just being kind. Not everyone has an ulterior motive, Ceriwyn.”

“You’ll have to forgive him, Adeline,” Ceri said in a stage-whisper, leaning in close over Adeline’s shoulder. “He has very little experience with the fairer sex.”

“Shut *up*, Ceriwyn.”

Adeline bit down to keep from laughing aloud. It had finally dawned on her just who Ceriwyn must be to him, and she could kick herself for not guessing it sooner. The goading, the

uncannily matched expressions, the coal black hair and towering height. And the way Kai looked at Ceri was all too familiar to her; she looked at Iseult just the same.

When they entered the East library, Ceriwyn shed actual tears of joy. It was a little alarming, but she didn't even seem to notice them streaming down her face as she hurried halfway down the central hall and spun slowly on the spot, mouth hanging open.

Seeing it all through Ceriwyn's eyes was a nostalgic sort of magic. Adeline had always thought the library to be the most beautiful room in the whole of the Silver Palace. It wasn't sparkling white or cold marble, for one. The floors were carpeted in soft, deep red and the polished wooden shelves branched off from a centre hall in long aisles, each lined with a thousand colourful leatherbound spines. A narrow balconette ringed the soaring walls with yet more shelves nestled under an arched ceiling, and at the end of each aisle was tucked an alcove with a plump armchair and a shaded wall torch for reading. Each set of shelves was guarded by a shimmering frosted bust in the likeness of various royal ancestors, each of whom Adeline had given fantastical life stories and prettier names than the ones dug up by historians.

When Ceriwyn spoke, it was in a reverent hush.

"I don't even know where to begin."

Adeline grinned. She knew the feeling.

"Some of my all time favourites are over there," she said, pointing past the bust of Evangeline the Bold. "If you like adventure and romance?"

Ceri's answering squeal was pitched so high, Adeline wasn't entirely sure what she said as she raced away.

"I think we're going to be good friends," Adeline laughed, but the smile on her face flickered and died as she turned to Kai.

Apart from retorts levelled at Ceri, he had been strangely quiet since the courtyard, even for him. Walking the halls, he

had glanced around skittishly when anyone passed them by. Even now in the empty library, he held himself still and tense.

The queasiness came rushing back to Adeline's stomach. She really shouldn't be here, should she? The air was taut between them, stretched thinner than it had been even on the floor of the training room. It dawned on her, slow and creeping, that the tension between them was not what she'd thought it was. She'd felt it as a crackling, building heat, but – what if it was the opposite? A cold and awkward silence, just like this one.

Oh, all the fucking Daughters, of *course* it was. Was she really so arrogant? His star-crossed love story was woven into the very fabric of her world. She'd grown up on stories about it. He was eternally devoted to another woman, and she'd gone ahead and straddled him, leaned into his touch, *gasped* for wanting him –

Adeline shuddered at herself, and the flicker of movement seemed to draw Kai back to himself. Still, he turned only slightly toward her.

“Thank you,” he said distantly, still staring into the stacks where Ceri had disappeared. “You’ve made her very happy.”

As the sun touched the highest windows of the tall library walls, Kai withdrew even further.

“Come, Ceri,” he said finally, stalking up the aisle to interrupt her spirited delivery of a passage from one of Adeline's favourite romance novels.

Her performance was sincere and melodic, but when it came to the dialogue, Ceri affected the most ridiculous, theatrical voices. Adeline laughed so hard she could barely breathe, and she'd almost forgotten about Kai skulking around the mouth of the aisle. Now, the laughter shrivelled in her lungs.

“I want you back at the manor before nightfall.”

Ceri pouted, and it occurred to Adeline that she was, perhaps, not long past the angst of girlhood - eighteen, or nineteen at most, despite her relative height and grace.

“It’s barely a minute into sunset, Koo.”

“Please,” was all he said, face unmoving.

Ceri rolled her eyes and set the book down on the considerable pile she’d built on the seat of the armchair.

“Let me call you a carriage,” Adeline said, overly bright for the dimming mood. “You can’t carry all these books and the hamper between you.”

Ceri’s eyes shone. “I can *take* the books?”

“Of course! But you’ll have to bring them back when you’re done – mostly so I can recommend another dozen or so to read next.”

Ceri beamed. “We have an agreement.”

“Excellent,” said Kai, dryly.

Adeline excused herself to call for a carriage, glad for a reason to leave the two Merrow to their squabble. When she returned, they were still quietly hissing at each other. Kai said something Adeline didn’t hear, and Ceriwyn scowled and pulled her hood up.

“Happy?”

“Thank you,” he said tightly.

Adeline helped them carry the food, rum and books down to the carriage house, and they bid Ceriwyn goodbye.

Ceri threw her arms around Adeline, almost toppling them both as she squeezed the air from her lungs.

“Ceri, that’s not –”

“Oh shush, Kai, we’re friends now.”

Adeline gasped out a laugh, still crushed within the embrace.

“That we are,” she agreed. “Will I see you at the Mid-Winter Faire?”

Ceri's smile when she pulled back was glowing.

"I'll be there," she said, at the same time as Kai said: "She can't attend."

"I can and I will," said Ceri, eyes flashing dangerously. "I'm a grown woman, Koo."

"Barely."

"And besides," she went on, as though he hadn't spoken. "The Marchioness speaks of little else. The *entire* household is attending, and it would seem I'm part of the Marquess's household now, aren't I?"

When Kai said nothing to contradict her, some of the frost melted from Ceri's glare, and she dragged him into a hug too. He sighed, but wrapped his arms around her back and squeezed just as hard.

"Be safe, Ceri," he said softly.

"I'm not going into battle, Koo, I'm going to sit in a manor and read some books."

"I mean... in general. Be safe. No more spontaneous visits. No spur of the moment adventures."

Ceri made a face, but said; "Fine. I promise."

Adeline pretended not to notice the two fingers crossed behind her back as Kai turned to open the carriage door. With a final wave, Ceri hopped into the cabin and they watched as the driver snapped his reins and rolled away from the carriage house. The sun was setting, casting the thickly blanketed grounds in a shimmering bronze glow. The usual bustle of the palace had slowed as staff and Gards went home to their families, or to the kitchens for their supper, and the silence between the Princess and the King was broken only by the muffled crunch of the horses trotting across the snow toward the darkening horizon.

Kai watched as the carriage disappeared into the white folds beyond the gates, then slowly turned his blank stare on Adeline. Her heart spiralled slowly into the pit of her stomach. All those mornings spent carefully drawing him out, teasing

him, testing his boundaries – she had the sick feeling she'd ruined it in one awkward afternoon.

“So,” she began, when it became clear that he was going to stare at her in total silence. She thought it was the most eye contact they'd had since that first day in this very courtyard.

“So,” he echoed. He sighed so deeply that his cloak shifted over his broad chest, then dropped his gaze to the powdered earth beneath them. “I should explain.”

Adeline squinted at him, but just as she opened her mouth to ask what he meant, another voice rang out along the path from the carriage house. A familiar, hoarse voice that sent cold fingers creeping across her shoulders.

“Your Majesty. Princess Adeline.”

Captain Doran swept a shallow bow as he approached. He barely broke his stride.

Adeline felt Kai stiffen beside her and an image flashed in her head, of a dark and shivering figure pinned to the icy flagstone while the steel eyed man stared coldly on.

“Captain,” Kai nodded, folding his hands behind his back.

The King stood tall, shoulders broad and tight; he had drawn on the formal airs she recognised from their council meetings, wore them like battle armour. Adeline resisted the mad urge to grab his hand.

The Captain mirrored Kai's stance, arms behind his back, and considered the peachy wash of the sky over the castle walls with what Adeline supposed he meant to be an appreciative air; as with everything Doran did, it came off detached and severe.

“Lovely afternoon, is it not? Uncommonly *mild*.”

The Captain smiled, a thin slash in his grey face. His flinty stare passed over Adeline and settled on Kai with an odd, excited gleam.

“Though I suppose that's to be expected these days.”

“Well it *is* nearing Mid-Winter,” Adeline said.

Yes, she was aware the Kingdom was slowly thawing, but she didn't think she was imagining the implication behind Doran's words, the borderline taunt in his tone. But Captain Doran simply dismissed her with a smile, as one might a babbling toddler, and turned again to the King.

"I'm sorry to have missed your guest," he said, looking past them to where Ceri's carriage had vanished into the distant snow. His thin voice was too soft, almost a hiss. "It's curious. You see, my Gards made a visit to the host households today, concerned for the welfare of your Merrow people. But each of their number was accounted for, safe and well in the homes of their noble hosts."

He pulled his gaze from the gate and turned his sharp face to Kai. Kai didn't move, didn't speak, but Adeline swore she felt his tension humming beside her, like a thin wire pulled far too taut. He was fraying, threatening to snap under the cruel blade of Captain Doran's stare.

"That couldn't be, though, could it?" He spoke even quieter, barely a rasp. "How could *every* Merrow be counted by my men if a Merrow woman was seen wandering the grounds of the Queen's palace? After all, you yourself provided a full record of the surviving population."

Adeline rather imagined she could hear Kai's pulse skittering, or maybe it was her own. She didn't dare look around to find out. Kai drew in the breath to speak, but Adeline got there first.

"She was my guest, actually."

Both men snapped their attention to her, hazel eyes wide, steel eyes narrowed.

"The Marquess's niece," she continued, easily threading an irritated tone beneath her words. "She's an old friend from my childhood tutoring."

Doran shook his head once, not a dismissal but an irate tic, like he was shooing off a bothersome fly.

"I see. I had heard there was a Merrow woman here to see the King –"

“I didn’t take you for one to indulge in palace whispers, Captain,” Adeline said, tilting her head to one side. She smiled sweetly. “But I’m sure there are many more titillating rumours to be found, if you listen well enough. The kitchen maids always know the best gossip.”

The Captain’s jaw squared, but he bowed, a little deeper than before.

“I meant nothing by it, Your Highness.”

“Captain Doran,” Adeline laughed.

It was the airy, admonishing laughter she’d heard from her mother countless times before, whenever a member of her court stepped out of line. Doran seemed to recognise the sound too, by the way his shoulders stiffened.

“Of course you meant nothing by it. What could you have meant? That my mother’s guest and ally fed false information to the Queen’s Gard? A clever man like you would know better than to make such a bold accusation. And directly to the King himself, at that. Ridiculous.”

She shook her head and laughed again, and this time Kai joined her, threading the same lofty tone into his own deep chuckle.

Good, she thought at him, wishing he could hear her. *Very good*.

Captain Doran’s jaw looked as though it might break from the pressure of his grinding, but he curled his lip and forced out a flat *hum* that could have passed for a laugh.

“Quite right, Princess. Thank you,” he gritted out, bowing again so that he wouldn’t have to look at her, “for your understanding.”

“Of course,” she said, with a gracious nod. “Now, if you’ll excuse us, it’s supper time and I am *famished*. Your Majesty?”

Kai offered her his arm and they swept away without glancing back at the Captain, though from her periphery Adeline could see him standing rooted to the same spot,

glaring after them. She tightened her hand on Kai's elbow, pulse jumping in her tight throat.

They walked in terse silence for several minutes before Kai tugged gently on her arm, pulling her into a quiet alcove. She let him, waiting in the dim while he paced the mouth of the alcove, clasping his hands in front of his chest as though in furious prayer.

"We should probably go to the dining hall."

Kai stopped in front of her, cocking a brow. "I'm not hungry right now."

Adeline shrugged heavily. "Well no, neither am I, but Doran's gards –"

"Please –" Kai threw up a silencing hand, more exasperated than she'd ever seen him. What was *wrong* with her that the gesture made her want to lean over and bite his lip?

"Please, a minute. I wanted to thank you, while we're alone. And to explain myself."

"You don't have to explain anything, Kai. Ceriwyn, your people, that's entirely your business."

"I *want* to explain."

He frowned a little – to himself, she thought. Almost as though he was surprised at his own words.

"Captain Doran wasn't wrong; the Gard have no record of Ceriwyn's survival. She's all I have left, and she has to be safe. I don't want to offend you, Adeline, your family has been good to me but... you have to understand, I emerged from the ice with no idea what world I was stepping into. I didn't know what stories had been told of my people, of what happened between my family and your ancestors, and I had to - "

"Kai," she said gently. He was spiralling, and she worried his heaving chest would collapse if he didn't breathe. "That's entirely understandable."

She reached through the shadows and took his hand, and though she felt him flinch, he quickly laced his fingers through hers.

“She’s your sister?”

“Yes,” said Kai. “How did you guess?”

Adeline’s lips curved. “The way she speaks to you.”

He gasped out a laugh.

“And the way you look at her. I have a little sister, too.”

“Iselt?”

She nodded. He was still holding her hand, and he turned it over in the dark, studying the pattern of her fingers overlapping his. Goddess, was hand-holding a fixture of Merrow culture? A gesture of pure and platonic friendship she wasn’t aware of? She tried to ignore it even as her heart gave a quiet little leap in her chest.

It’s nothing. He’s just relieved, and grateful. It’s nothing.

“When the Marquess offered his home, I asked him to house a family of two. The Gards account only for the head of each household; as far as they know, Ceri is a little girl. The grandchild of our Chief Elder, Eda.”

“Clever.” She pulled on his hand, urging him to look at her. “I want you to know, as far as *I’m* concerned, Ceri is Eda’s granddaughter and nothing more. You can trust me.”

Even in the low light, Adeline could see the soft look that passed over Kai’s face. He brushed his thumb over the back of her hand. “I know I can.”

Nothing, she told herself again, despite the quickening that had taken root in her chest. *It’s nothing.*



Chapter 26

Kai

Cerwyn had her way, of course. Despite his protests, she would attend the Faire. Just as she had ignored his pleading letters and waltzed right into the palace courtyard, forcing him to tell Adeline the truth – though he wasn't sure he regretted that.

“I don't know why you're so cross,” Ceri had written in her most recent letter. *“A charming little sister could only endear you to Princess Adeline – and I'm not stupid, I know that's what you want.”*

His sister was far from stupid, but she was stubborn and troublesome. Ceri had also taken it upon herself to arrange a Merrow gathering at the Faire, and it was far too late for Kai to call it off. They would reunite in a nearby clearing adjacent to the main festivities, to drink and dance and share stories of their new lives as land dwellers. Attracting mass attention and separating themselves from the citizens of Eisalaan; an altogether disastrous idea.

“Invite your Princess,” Ceri wrote, underlining the words several times. *“She’ll love us, and then maybe she’ll love you.”*

He’d crumpled up her letter in frustration - and then immediately retrieved it from where he’d tossed it across the room, smoothing it out guiltily. Ceri was lonely, and she worried that he was, too. She wasn’t being malicious.

He knew that.

On the morning of the Faire he rose early, giving up on a poor night’s sleep spent jolting awake to find his body tensed and thrumming. He would face the surviving Merrow today with nothing tangible to offer for their comfort while they waited for him to make things right. Of course he had made no promises, told no one the truth that might save them all – not a soul knew about the pendant, not even Ceri. Not even Os, or Al.

But even so, he was their King. They would look to him for answers and assurances that his strange land was truly the same Kingdom they’d left behind. That its citizens didn’t truly hate them for breaking free of their eternal ice prison.

Kai knew it was unlikely that he would find Avette’s pendant in the few hours before the Faire began, but he couldn’t stand to wait idly in his room. He passed Simon in the hallway with his breakfast tray, and stopped to pluck up a warm scone and cup of tea, then thanked the valet and continued on his way to the archives.

He never made it that far. As he strode by aisle after aisle of bookshelves, sipping his tea, he heard a little voice call out after him.

“Is that the Prince?” The voice was a yell with the cadence of a whisper. “Just like in the book?”

He doubled back, turning toward the gentle ripple of Adeline’s laughter. It spilled like a warm spring from the end of the aisle where she was seated in a cosy armchair, a little red-haired girl perched in her lap. She looked up as he peered around the nearest shelf, and her smile spread, curving under the apples of her cheeks.

His heart gave an odd twitch mid-beat.

“Good morning, Adeline,” he said. “And I presume this is Princess Iseult?”

Adeline nodded, and he swept into a bow. “Good morning, Princess.”

“Izzy, this is His Majesty, *King Kai Cumhaill*, of the Merrow.”

“Hullo,” Iseult said, muffling the word against her sister’s shoulder. Then, seeming to remember something, she hopped off Adeline’s lap and knelt in a rather graceful curtsy. “I’ve been practicing at school,” she told him, sticking her chin up proudly.

“I can tell. That was an excellent curtsy. Best I’ve seen in all my years as King.”

She nodded importantly. “I’ve been practicing dancing too. Ade says I’m a natural dancer. Would you like to see?”

She held her arms aloft and rose up on her toes, poised to leap towards him. Adeline grabbed her arm, lips pressed and curling. “Not in the library, love.”

“Are you going to the Faire?” Iseult called boldly down the aisle, her momentary shyness forgotten.

Kai moved toward them, hiding his smile behind a sip of tea.

“I am.”

“Well I’ll show you then. You can come ice skating with us, can’t he Ade?”

“Er, maybe,” Adeline edged, put on the spot. “If he wants to, Iz. He might have plans, or people to see.”

“Morrow people?” Iseult’s eyes flashed excitedly. “Can I meet the Morrow people too?”

“Well I suppose if you wanted to join us –”

“Can you all breathe underwater? Do you have a house under the lake? Can you talk to fish?”

“Iseult!”

But Kai could feel a rumble of laughter growing in his chest, shaking loose some of the tightness and exhaustion. He could see why Adeline had missed her sister, could see how close they must be; Iseult was almost a rose-haired Adeline in miniature, as preening and playful as her sister.

“Those are all very interesting questions.” He took another contemplative sip of tea. “Well first of all, yes, I can breathe underwater. See these scars, here?”

He gestured to the underside of his jaw and Iseult moved closer, craning her neck. He held his breath and flexed; the thin scars at his throat peeled open and pulsed just once.

“Gills!” The girl gasped.

Adeline blinked wide enough to flash a ring of white around her dark irises, and Kai released his breath too fast, coughing as his gills sealed once more. Heat prickled at his ears. He shouldn’t have done that.

Show them your human side, fool. Appeal to your shared nature. Don’t remind them of what you really are.

But Adeline’s shocked eyes relaxed, then creased in a slow grin. “That’s *amazing*.”

Oh.

He nodded, not sure if he should thank her, and instead turned quickly to Iseult. He didn’t want Adeline to notice the traitorous flush that was surely creeping down his ears - although she was likely rather accustomed to it by now.

“I’d quite like to introduce you to my sister, Ceri,” he told the girl. “I’m sure she’ll be delighted to answer all of your questions.”

“Does she have gills too?”

Adeline hauled Iseult onto her lap and clamped a hand over her mouth while Kai doubled over, nearly spilling his tea into the thick carpet as his body quaked with compressed laughter.

“We were just about to have some *quiet* reading time before the Faire,” Adeline said loudly, as Iseult wriggled indignantly against the muzzle of her sister’s palm. Adeline yelped and pulled her hand away, wiping it quickly on her skirt. “Did you *lick* me, you little beast?”

Iseult ignored her. “Come and read with us! Ade got me the most wonderful book for New Winter. It’s *magic*. Real magic.”

Kai hesitated, throwing a glance over his shoulder toward the annexe where the archives were held. He really should make use of this last hour or so before the Faire, he thought, but Iseult was still chattering excitedly.

“The pictures are enchanted so that everyone sees the story as if it’s drawn from your own imagination! My favourite is the Princess in the *First Frost*, she has red hair like me but it’s so long that it reaches all the way down to her bum—”

Kai’s attention snapped back to her.

“The First Frost?”

He knew the name as well as his own by now. It was the title Eisalaan had given to his story; his and Avette’s. Her final moments on Adhlas before her ice magic had consumed everything in its path. Had consumed him, and still did.

“I’d like to read that. Will you show it to me?”

The look Adeline turned on him was radiant, eyes shining. She’d mistaken his keen interest for kindness toward her baby sister, of course. He shoved aside his shame as he always did, as he had to, not meeting her eyes.

Adeline picked up the cream tome from the table beside her chair, and Kai set down his teacup in its place. He knelt beside

the Princesses and peered over the armrest as Iseult opened the book. Her small hand fumbled with the pages until she spread them open to reveal curls of ink in grandiose, near-illegible font that may have spelled out *The First Frost*. Beneath the title was a passage of text, and on the opposite side, a blank square.

Adeline inhaled theatrically, and began to read in a rather practiced manner – she'd clearly read this same story to her sister many times before. As she spoke, strokes of colour and inked lines swept across the blank square, an illustration taking shape before their eyes.

Kai loosed a sharp breath, touching his fingers to the page carefully. He had seen the charmed ice around the palace and at the market, but this was different. This was a complicated enchantment. He couldn't imagine what elements the Mother would have brought forth for its creation, nor who might have Wielded them. *Real magic indeed*. It had been so long, so very long since he'd seen real magic. His very veins seemed to contract at the sight, a sick, dry feeling spreading across his limbs, puckering at his gills, aching to be quenched with the trapped magic of the Laune. He snatched his hand away.

Adeline read on, oblivious. She spoke of the kindly Princess, the chivalrous Merrow Prince, and their first meeting at the Beira King's court. An invisible hand sketched out their faces; his black hair, her dark eyes framed by a spidery fringe of lashes. As Avette's face filled out in front of him, Adeline gave a soft *Oh* of surprise.

“What is it Ade?” said Iseult.

Kai tore himself away from the disorienting portrait of their first encounter; his long body bent in a bow, Avette's pale hand clutched demurely to her chest, a pretty flush kissing her cheeks. Here, beside him, living and breathing Adeline was frowning at the illustrated square. His stomach clenched, until he remembered that she wasn't seeing what he was seeing.

“I think it's me,” she said, wonderingly. “Last time I read this, the Princess was fair and pale like Mareda, but she's different now. She's me.”

“Mine looks like me, too,” Iseult piped up. “And my Prince is handsome, like Ger. Who does your Prince look like?”

Adeline went still as a hunted animal, then suddenly came to life with an exaggerated shrug. “Nobody I recognise. Red-haired fellow. Very short, with a long nose. Moustache like a walrus.”

Iseult wrinkled her own nose. “He doesn’t sound very handsome, Ade.”

“Well, beauty is subjective, Iz.”

She turned the page hastily and read on, speaking at a rhythm just a half second faster than before. The illustration kept up with her, ink and paint filling out quickly. Kai and Avette practicing their magic on the banks of the Laune on this page, Avette’s scowling father on the next, Avette in Kai’s arms – he had to look away at that, the scone and tea lurching in his stomach. When he looked back, Avette was mid-flight, hurtling down the grassy banks, her hand grasping a glittering blue oval at her neck. Kai shot up to his feet, and leaned on the armrest for a closer look, barely noticing when Adeline paused to catch her breath in a short gasp.

The pendant.

Iseult turned the page and as her sister read, the pendant was sketched out again, in much finer detail than the rest of the image. Did no one else notice the staggering detail? A tapered glass vial that shimmered with the movement of water within, like a teardrop framed in soft blue light.

Avette, with her arms spread wide, pendant glowing as the sky above her greyed.

That was it. That was definitely it. That, around her delicate white throat, was the glass pendant that had bitten into his fisted palm all those centuries ago, when he had struggled so fiercely against the current, fighting the press of the deepest, blackest depths of the lake to retrieve that one drop of water that Avette had begged of him.

Hot bile rose in his throat. He wanted to tear the page from the child’s book. He wanted to reach through the paint and

paper and close his hand around the pendant, snap the chain. The page turned and began to sketch out an image of his own stricken face, hand outstretched before him as the ice closed above his head. Kai was distantly aware of the pain building in his chest, and he forced himself to look away again. Sweat prickled at his hairline. This had been a terrible idea.

“As the desperate flurry stilled, the Kings Gard crept from the shelter of the forest. The Kingdom was transformed, one white expanse adorned with the silver shimmer of frost. The Princess was lost to them, frozen where she stood, with her cracked heart pouring ice into the earth ever after.”

Wait.

He had never heard this version before. The historians had written that there were no survivors. That Avette disappeared with the flurry. But there she was, rendered in quick strokes of paint with her slim arms held aloft, hair fanned out around her white-blue, glittering face. Frozen, an eternal living sculpture. Kai watched again as the illustration filled in the teardrop shape of the pendant against her solid ice skin – and then the blue glass gave one deep, deliberate pulse. He flinched.

“Some say the Merrow are still trapped beneath the lake to this day.”

Adeline winced.

“Sorry. That wasn’t terribly tactful. We should have it rewritten to say you escaped.”

The story over, she finally peered up at him and seemed to startle slightly at whatever she found in his face.

“Kai? Are you alright?”

He blinked. The pendant was no longer pulsing, just innocently lying against the collar of the ice sculpture that had once been Avette.

“I’m fine,” he said slowly. “That was just a bit... surreal, I suppose. It’s my story, but it’s not.”

Adeline bit her lip and nodded. “I’m sorry. Maybe this wasn’t the best idea.”

Kai waved her apology away, coming back to himself, hastily gathering his composure under Iseult's worried gaze. He smiled reassuringly at the girl.

“That’s quite a book, Iseult. How lucky you are to have such a treasure.”

She beamed.

“I’ve never heard that version before, where Ave—” He stopped himself. He couldn’t say it, even now. “Where the Princess becomes a sculpture.”

Adeline gave him a small, sad smile.

“I think it’s the author’s way of tying in the Shrine,” she said, gently.

He didn’t like the careful, knowing way she was speaking to him, as much as he knew he should lean into it.

Heartbroken, human, vulnerable, trustworthy.

But Kai didn’t know how to be any of those things in this moment, with the truth so close he could almost touch it. Didn’t know what he could possibly say other than: “Oh? What’s that?”

“The Shrine of the Sorceress. It’s an old monument to the First Frost, but it’s become a place of worship. Some people believe she’s Aera herself.”

Aera. One of the new gods, under the Faith of the Goddess. Her daughter, if he remembered right, or one of them at least.

“You haven’t seen it?” Iseult squealed. “Oh, then you *must* come ice skating. We’ll quickly show you the Shrine, and then you can watch my dance at the stream, and then you can go find your sister.”

Iseult marched up the aisle, still planning aloud. Adeline caught Kai’s eye and grinned. He was slow to return her smile; he hoped it didn’t look too forced. His mind was racing ahead, out of the palace and blindly through the trees in search of the so-called Shrine.

Had the pendant never left Avette's throat? Could it really hang there still, fixed by frost above her eternally frozen heart?

Adeline got to her feet with one long stretch, and tilted her head toward Iseult's dancing form at the end of the shelves.

"Looks like you've got a busy day ahead of you."

Let's hope so.



Chapter 27

Kai

The splendour of the Mid-Winter Faire was enough to distract him, briefly, from all that Iseult's book had unveiled.

The palace staff had created a wonderland from the blinding blank canvas of Eisalaan. They had trailed a vast length of stained glass lanterns leading from the palace courtyard to the depths of the woods and out toward the banks of the Laune. The coloured lights were strung from tree to tree, weaving in and out of the branches and looping trunk to trunk until the whole forest flickered gently beneath the grey sky. Each clearing they passed spilled bustle and chatter in their path; on this side, children skidded up and down a frozen stream,

laughing and squealing. On the other, music swelled over the scuff of booted feet dancing in the snow. As they walked, the forest thinned and a throng of people huddled around something Kai couldn't see. They seemed to be waiting for something; many of them clutched steaming flasks, shuffling side to side to stay warm and chatting with their neighbours.

“Oh no, look at the queue,” Iseult moaned. She turned her pout up to Adeline. “I wanted to go skating.”

“Well we can always show him later, Iz,” said Adeline. “We'll come back when the queue dies down a bit. Is that alright with you, Kai?”

It wasn't until she turned to him that he realised what they must all be waiting for - a Shrine, Adeline had called it. These people, with their sacks of grain, and jewellery slung over their arms, were waiting to pay tribute to Avette. Maybe even pray to her, as though she were a disciple of Mother Adhla herself.

No, not a disciple of the Mother, but a child of the Goddess. A Daughter, as they said in today's Eisalaan. Avette would have relished the thought.

Kai swallowed against the sour thickness in his throat. Adeline was looking up at him expectantly, and all he could do was nod in what he hoped was a casual enough manner. As they walked by, he craned his neck to catch a glimpse over the crowd, but all he could see was a white billow of hair and one slim outstretched arm.

“Kai, are you coming?”

He dragged himself away. He would come back. Avette was not going anywhere and the revelation was still so raw it stung. He hadn't had a moment to breathe around it, let alone form a plan. It would be better if he faced her alone. Safer.

Later, then.

Kai followed Adeline and Iseult around the outskirts of the crowd to the end of the forest, where wooden stalls snaked the treeline above the lake, every one of them draped in purple silks and silvered garlands. Iseult clutched at Kai's cloak,

pointing everywhere, her small voice reaching an inaudible pitch in her excitement. He tried to drag his thoughts away from the Shrine and rally inwardly, pulling on a smile and dutifully looking here and there as she pointed out all of the stalls offering their unique wares.

Adeline's soft, admiring gaze did make it somewhat easier to hold that smile in place.

The merchant closest to them sold living ice miniatures, and as they passed he bustled around to the front of the stall, kneeling in the snow to present Iseult with a tiny horse carved from ice that galloped in place on her small hand. Iseult's rounded eyes took up half her small face, and Adeline tried to press a few gold *puint* on the merchant, but he refused.

"A Mid-Winter gift for the Princess," he said, waving her hand away.

Iseult flashed a bright grin and dashed away, clutching her new frozen pet.

"Iseult, say thank you!"

The merchant gave a bellowing laugh, shaking his head fondly after the little Princess. Kai and Adeline thanked him again, Adeline apologising ruefully. They set off after her sister, craning to keep track of the girl's red hair whipping here and there as Iseult weaved through the slow moving press of the Faire's crowd.

"She's so cheeky, honestly."

Kai couldn't help the short gust of laughter that escaped him.

Adeline narrowed her eyes. "What?"

He cut her a sideways glance. "I was just thinking that she reminds me of you."

"I'm not sure I like your implication, Your Majesty," she said, lip twisting. "I'll have you know, I am a paradigm of regal poise, and ladylike manner, and what-have-you."

"You're a rogue," Kai said dryly.

“A *rogue*?” She echoed gleefully. She turned her whole body to him, walking sideways to peer up at his face; whatever she found there sent a wicked smile along the curve of her lips. “My, I’ve really got under your skin, haven’t I?”

He declined to answer, finding himself glad for the cool air on his suddenly hot neck.

Ahead of them, Iseult picked up speed, kicking up powdered clouds of snow and running full tilt toward a solid figure standing still among the crowd. The young man grinned and dropped to his knees in the snow, arms held wide to catch the Princess and swing her up in his arms. Kai faltered a half-step; his blood seemed to pick up speed, thundering through his veins and making his muscles seize at the sight of that grey cloak draped around the man’s armoured shoulders; the uniform of the Gard. He drew himself taller and unclasped his hands behind his back, holding them loose and ready; for what, he did not know. He only knew that he did not ever want to find himself ill-prepared in the face of the Queen’s Gard again. But Adeline called out merrily, and the man turned a bright, open face toward them. Kai exhaled. He recognised him, vaguely; it was Adeline’s friend, Gerard. His cloak was the soft, dove grey of the Eisalaan Gard, not the unforgiving iron that collared the throats of Captain Doran’s men.

Gerard shifted Iseult to the side, like a mother balancing an oversized babe on one hip. As Adeline came toward him, he turned his cheek in wordless invitation, and she reached up to grab his neck and plant a swift kiss on his face. As easy as that.

Meanwhile, Kai could barely hold her gaze half the time, and the other half, when he did look her in the eye, it was far from easy. He forced himself to look away now, jaw tightening as he stared out over the cold surface of the lake, smooth as the blue glass of Avette’s lost pendant.

“Oh, and you’ve brought a *friend*.”

The Gard whispered something Kai didn’t hear, but he looked back just in time to see Gerard dodge an elbow to the ribs from Adeline. Iseult giggled into her hand.

Gerard's grin was impish, but he composed himself as he set Iseult down and turned to Kai in a smooth bow.

"Merry Mid-Winter, your Majesty."

Kai folded his hands behind his back once more. If there was a greeting to be made, he wasn't sure what it was. Mid-Winter wasn't a festival Eisalaan observed before the Frost. He could only imagine it stemmed from the summer festival of Glasfeil, but somehow it seemed inappropriate to wish an Eisalaanian *many weeks of green and gold* in the depths of yet another Winter.

"And to you," he returned instead, with a small nod.

"The King is coming ice skating with us, Ger!" Iseult whispered excitedly, tugging at the young Gard's cloak.

Gerard cocked a fair brow, but didn't make whatever comment was poised on his tongue.

"Well let's get a move on, shall we?"

Without another word, Ger took off at a sprint and Iseult tore after him, shrieking something about *rotten cheats*. Adeline shook her head fondly, and fell into step beside Kai once more.

"I'm honestly not sure which of them is more excited," she said, eyes soft and warm as she watched them race ahead. "It's Izzy's favourite time of year. I'm so glad she's home."

"She would have liked it before the Frost, I think," said Kai. He immediately wished he hadn't. Perhaps that old storybook had thrown him more than he realised. He'd always been careful not to discuss the Eisalaan he knew unless asked outright. After all, he was committed to his future here, no longer living in the past – that was what the Beira family wanted to believe. But now Adeline turned to him and her eyes lit with interest, her body swaying slightly closer so that her arm brushed his. And just like that, without deciding to, he heard himself go on.

"We'd be celebrating Glasfeil today, and the woods would be thick with wildflowers. You could taste them on the air. It used to make Ceri sneeze uncontrollably. It's a shame she'll never see that."

Adeline nodded. “Ceri having a sneezing fit.”

He raised a brow, and she laughed. Mother drown him, he could have lived on the sound for another six hundred years.

“Eisalaan in bloom,” he clarified.

They crossed the treeline once more, and Kai reached out to hold a particularly thorny tree branch out of Adeline’s way. She braced her hand on his arm as she passed under the branch – and then left it there as they walked on.

“I bet it was beautiful.”

He nodded, unsure what his voice would do if he tried to speak. He was a grown man, and a King at that, flushing head to toe because a pretty girl had her hand on his arm.

“Glasfeil is a summer festival, isn’t it?”

Kai nodded, then cleared his throat and forced out a quiet; “Yes.”

“I’ve only ever had one real summer. My father took me to Dhalias, where he grew up. There were flowers everywhere there, too. *Everywhere*. They’re known for it, as much as Eisalaan is known for snow and frost.”

She paused, and looked up at the overlapping bare branches over their heads, eyes alight as though she saw something else entirely.

“There was this little blue flower I fell completely in love with. It lives under the earth, but if you put your hands to the ground, it would bloom under your palm and twine around your fingers.” Adeline looked at him then, squeezing his arm. “Did that grow here, before the Frost?”

“I’ve never heard of anything like that. It grows *under* the earth?”

She nodded, then hummed thoughtfully.

“Maybe it’s the heat from your skin that draws it out. I’ll have to ask my father what it’s called.”

Kai frowned. “That almost sounds like –”

“Ade!”

Up ahead, Iseult had stopped at the mouth of a clearing, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet while Ger made wide, arching waves with one arm, beckoning and impatient.

Adeline rolled her eyes, though there was no ire behind it.

“I suppose we’d better hurry.”

The stream was the same one they had passed earlier, with children roaring and whooping, skidding into each other and collapsing into giggling piles of flailing limbs. Gerard found another stall beneath a bough of pine branches, and came back with an armful of thick steel blades on leather straps. Adeline bent to help Iseult strap the smallest pair to her boots. Gerard held a pair out to Kai.

“Thank you, but I’m quite content to watch from the banks.”

“You don’t want to skate with us?”

Iseult turned round, imploring eyes on him, and he crumbled inwardly. He didn’t want to disappoint the girl - or really, by extension, her sister - but nothing would convince him to step onto that ice. He had no desire to feel the splinter and grind of it under his feet; he knew the feeling too well already. It juddered his bones every morning that he woke up shivering, forever fighting his way from the frozen embrace of the lake.

Mercifully, Adeline intervened.

“The King can hardly skate and watch your dance all at once, can he Iz?”

And so Kai stood, an awkward sentry among the chaos and merriment, arms tucked behind him and back straight as a rod. The Princesses twirled up and down the stream like spinning tops, with Ger clumsily darting after them. Twice the Gard landed on his backside at Adeline’s feet and she raised her lovely face to laugh up at the clouds; Kai was surprised that the warmth of her laughter didn’t melt the grey from the sky. He must have stared too intently because she looked around as though someone had called her name, and her laughter slowed until she was simply smiling. She tilted her head to one side as they locked eyes.

Kai hastily reached for the timepiece the Queen had gifted him, and fumbled it; too eager to look as though he hadn't been studying the curve of Adeline's throat and the cascade of curls pooling into the hood of her cloak. He stared intently at the little clock face without really seeing it - but then his eyes focused and he gave a short start. All this time he'd been mooning like a lovesick youth after the Princess, when he should already be halfway to meeting his people.

"Do you have to head off?"

Adeline had skated over to the bank. Her cheeks were pink, her curls loosened and lifted in the breeze so they formed a dark halo around her face.

Kai dragged his eyes back to the timepiece, nodded, and tucked it away. "Yes, I'd best go meet Ceri and the others."

"Oh. Well, thank you for coming with us, I know Iseult loved having you here." She smiled, and turned to go.

Invite your Princess, Ceri had urged him.

"Adeline?"

His own voice in his head tutted at him, even as Ceri's voice hummed approvingly.

She spun on the spot, a small shower of ice arching from her bladed boots.

"I don't suppose you'd like to join us? Gerard and Iseult are welcome, too, of course."

Her smile split her face.

"Yes, Kai. I'd like that very much."

It was not, as Kai had worried, a separate and conspicuous meeting of the Merrow. Ceriwyn and the others had gathered in that same clearing where Eisalaan folk danced and revelled. Some of the younger Merrow had attached themselves to other

groups of youths, and Kai even saw Alun weaving a pretty Eisalaanian girl around the crowd of dancers.

Ceri rushed to greet them as they entered the clearing, but immediately pushed past Kai to grasp Adeline by the hands.

“I’ve just finished reading *The Nightingale Jewel* and I could die!” She cried, in lieu of a greeting.

Adeline sighed. “Isn’t it tragic?”

They nodded fervently at each other, looking the furthest thing from saddened. Kai felt a tug at his cloak and turned to see Iseult half-hidden behind his legs, smiling shyly up at him. Ger leaned over her head, speaking from the side of his mouth; “I believe Her Highness would like an introduction.”

A chuckle swelled in his chest, but Kai held his face straight as he bowed his head to Iseult. “Of course. Ceriwyn?”

She turned, hands still held to her chest in a display of heartache over the book she and Adeline were gushing about. “I’d like to introduce you to Princess Iseult of Eisalaan.”

Ceri’s cheeks dimpled as Iseult stepped out from behind Kai’s legs, falling once more into her small, graceful curtsy.

“It’s an honour Your Highness,” Ceri said earnestly, dipping her own curtsy.

“You’re a princess, like me, aren’t you?” Iseult said in a small voice.

Ceri glanced at Kai; she’d never really been called a Princess among the Merrow, just as he had never been a Prince. Their father was the King only because he was elected to represent their people on land. Then he had died, and Kai had taken his place. Princes, Princesses – they weren’t titles that sat naturally with the Merrow.

But Kai nodded and Ceri beamed at him, then at the little girl.

“Yes, I suppose I am.”

Iseult glanced hesitantly at her elder sister. She took a step past Kai and leaned over, and Ceri dropped to her haunches in

the snow to hear the girl's whisper. Adeline narrowed her eyes, and Kai fought to keep his face still, certain he knew what Iseult was asking. When Ceri threw her head back and laughed, he knew he'd guessed right.

"Would you like to see?" said Ceri.

Kai stiffened.

But Iseult's copper curls bobbed emphatically and Ceri loosened her cloak at her throat, turning her head so that the girl could see the faint pink scars beneath her jaw.

Kai cast a sharp look around them; the clearing was full and bustling. Gerard was leaning curiously over Adeline's shoulder, and people danced past them close enough to dust Ceriwyn's cloak with snow.

"Ceri, I'm not sure it's advisable –"

Adeline spoke too; "Iz, I told you that's not polite -"

But each of their sisters ignored them. Ceri's shoulders rose up beneath her cloak and stiffened as she held her breath; her gills pulsed, a small flash of deep pink.

Iseult gasped just as she had at Kai's demonstration.

"That," Ger breathed from behind him, "is incredible."

Ceri sealed her gills and grinned up at him, nodding her head in a mock bow.

"One might even call it... breathtaking."

Only Kai and Adeline didn't laugh.

"I like you," Ceri chuckled. She held her hand out to Gerard and he pushed past Adeline and Kai to bow and press a kiss to her fingers.

"I'm Gerard, Princess. Makes a nice change to meet a royal with a sense of humour."

Adeline caught Kai's eye and shook her head in wordless apology. She was plainly mortified, a completely alien expression to her warm, laughing face.

Kai's answering smile overtook him. Some impulse within him called out to smooth the pinch of her narrowed brow, and though he could feel that it was too soft a smile, too intense, it didn't matter to him in that moment.

She blinked, a slow flutter of her feathered lashes, and then slowly smiled back.

"Eurgh," said Gerard pointedly.

"Quite," said Ceri, wrinkling her nose.

Iseult glanced from the Gard to the Merrow Princess, wide eyed as a fawn.

"Come," Ceri said to the girl, shaking snow from her cloak as she stood. "I've just discovered the dreamiest thing - have you ever had molten chocolate?"

Ceriwyn and Iseult walked off hand in hand. Gerard was far less subtle.

"I'll just leave you to it, shall I?" He boomed, then flashed a broad grin and strolled off toward a cluster of his Gard brothers and sisters in grey.

Adeline watched him go, shaking her head.

"He doesn't mean to be so tactless." She smiled wider and added; "Actually, I'm not sure that's true."

Kai didn't know if he should laugh or not, but he was saved the need to answer by a flicker of movement from the corner of his eye. A shrivelled little woman wrapped in layers of blankets and cloaks sat perched on a thick fallen log among a throng of Merrow, her toes barely touching the snow. She waved to him, kicking her feet merrily. Several others followed her eye and turned bright faces to him, beckoning and waving their arms above their heads.

Kai's throat bobbed.

"They've missed you," Adeline said. She watched him with a curiosity that lit the gold and amber rays in her brown eyes and Kai felt his chest contract, his heart tugged every which way; to the Merrow, to the pendant, to the lake, to Adeline.

“Would you like to meet them?”

He offered his elbow and Adeline didn't hesitate to lay her hand on his arm, letting herself be guided to the corner of the clearing where many of the Merrow gathered beneath a canopy of bare branches, a small fire flickering in the centre of their loose circle. The Elder Council sat on the log, Eda at the centre of the gaggle of grey and white old women.

“Mael!” She cried, holding her arms wide for him. Kai couldn't help but wince, even as he leaned into her embrace and patted her curved back with his free arm.

“It's me, Eda. It's Kai.”

Eda drew back and cupped his face, her papery skin soft against his cheek.

“Bah! My old eyes and withered brain.” She looked up at him, face crinkling merrily. “You do look so like him, you know.”

Kai swallowed.

He did know. Before he'd shaved and tidied himself up for Eisalaan's court, he had peered into the silver framed mirror of his palace bedroom and nearly wept with shock. Warped by exhaustion and the dark rust of age that speckled the mirror, it was his father's face that stared back at him, separated by centuries and ice and glass. He felt Adeline's hand tighten at his elbow, a soft, reflexive squeeze, guiding him back to the moment.

“Is this the famous Eda?”

Eda's hazy blue eyes darted from Kai to Adeline with a wicked glint. “Well now! Was there ever a prettier pair? Come, girl, sit. Right here, beside me.”

She shuffled over to make space on the log, and patted the rough wood beside her urgently; either not realising or far from caring that she was demanding the audience of a Princess of Eisalaan. Adeline was quickly folded into the brood of clucking hens, blankets strewn over her lap and thin, wilted arms circling her back. She flashed a smile at Kai before turning her attention to the Merrow elders, and within

moments she was theirs, winning them with her ease and her genial way, as though she had been reared among their own darling grandchildren.

It was captivating to watch, but Kai had barely a moment to spare before his attention was, quite rightfully, called to the gathered Merrow.

They took their turns greeting and embracing him, some stopping a moment to chat about their new homes or the friends their children had made, or to ask about his life at the palace, allowing their eyes to flicker knowingly toward Adeline. Not one person probed him for answers or enquired about his plan to return them to their lost home in the Laune, and yet their sentiments hung around every word, buoyed by unconditional trust; that this was temporary, that he would save them. A young mother cheerfully told Kai how it was a shame that her husband couldn't have joined them at the Faire; her husband, who was among the hundreds walking the bed of the Laune on the day the lake froze. Kai's weariness settled into his bones with each reunion. The Merrow spoke of their missing loved ones as though they were not lost to the depths. They expressed their gratitude to the Queen for her hospitality, as though they were honoured guests rather than mere creatures of folklore and fairytale to much of Eisalaan. He couldn't tell if they were in denial or feigning optimism.

He should be able to tell.

The sun inched across the clearing, and as the light turned gold and his people settled back into their natural social clusters, he found himself with a quiet moment at last. Ceri was dancing with Gerard, shrieking with laughter as he whipped her haphazardly around the clearing. Adeline sat near the small fire, deep in conversation with Alun while Iseult sat at her feet, quietly piling snow on her boots when she wasn't watching.

“Well, now I know why we haven't seen you in so many weeks, cousin.”

Kai turned at the familiar voice, and found Os at his side. He was clutching a cup of steaming wine, flushed and merry with

a rare smile carving long lines into his ruddy cheeks. But he looked up at his King and the smile gave way to his usual pensive frown.

“What’s wrong? I’m only poking fun.”

Kai shook his head. “No. You’re right, it’s been too long.”

“Kai.” Os shifted uncomfortably, and raked a hand through his mop of sandy hair. “There’s no precedent here. We’re all finding our way; King or not, that includes you.”

But they weren’t finding their way. They were waiting, all of them. Stuck. Patient, blessedly patient, but as trapped here on land as they had been beneath that ice. Kai watched the mother he’d spoken to earlier; she sat bouncing a babe in her lap, singing something they couldn’t hear over the chatter and the crackle of the fire. The babe grabbed her cheeks in both round hands and cooed wetly in her face. Both of them merry enough – and yet the woman subconsciously held a space open beside her where no one sat. The untouched cup of wine wedged in the snow by her feet had long stopped steaming, and her eyes, though bright, were ringed with strain.

“There’s something I must see to,” Kai said, dragging his gaze away from the mother and child. “Cover for me, if anyone asks?”

Os nodded once, then jerked his head toward the treeline. “Done. Go on, while it’s quiet.”

Kai made to move away, but his eyes caught on Adeline, as they so often did, and he paused. Where they sat together, Alun leaned toward her, gesturing broadly and flashing a gleaming white grin; the flickering firelight caught gold along her cheekbones as she laughed.

“Is there something else?”

Kai drew himself up decisively.

“Yes. Don’t let Alun dance with her.”

Os huffed a laugh.



Chapter 28

Kai

He found his way back to the Shrine easily, even in the half-light. The woods were quiet, the clearing by the stream abandoned; the laughter and bustle now sounded from the other side of the trees, by the lakefront.

The statue was a white beacon in the dim light of the setting sun and the sparse shade of the few evergreens that enclosed the Shrine. Kai pulled his hood up as he took his place behind the worshippers, bowing his head in what he hoped was a passing imitation of reverence. If anyone cared to look, they might recognise the Merrow King for his height, but there was

little to be done on that front. He found himself slouching slightly, just in case.

The patrons before him seemed to take an age. He stood back to afford them their privacy, but a few words of their quiet prayers caught on the breeze. Each of them begged for an end to the creeping Thaw, or for the return of their livelihoods. A pair of young women knelt together, holding hands as they recited some lyrical passage in unison. One of them struggled through her prayer, her breath catching every few words in a wet gasp. Each ragged breath sent a spike through Kai's chest.

The Thaw was happening anyway, he told himself, and as hard as the Commander and his Wielders might try, there was no stopping it. All Kai wanted was to accelerate the magic that would naturally take hold over the next few years. That was all.

And keep the monarchy from discovering the pendant that could preserve their Silver Kingdom.

He pushed back against that cresting wave of guilt. They would be fine. He *had* to do this. Queen Selma's devotion to her country was legendary, even to his own limited knowledge of this new world. She would find a way to navigate the change. She would save her people; and he would save his own.

The women climbed to their feet, and the quiet one took the crying woman's face in her hands and kissed her gently until her breathing evened out. Hand in hand, they came away from the statue and the calmer of the two nodded at Kai; "May you soar on Silver Winds."

Kai stiffened. His hands twitched to pull his hood lower over his face, but he was clearly expected to say something, to complete the blessing.

"And you, also."

It was the wrong thing to say. The woman frowned, but her companion was walking still, tugging on her hand. She gave one last confused nod, and the pair of them disappeared

through the trees to the banks of the lake, leaving Kai quite alone.

No. Not alone.

His legs trembled beneath him as he took his first slow steps toward her. Finally, he allowed himself to look up. Forced himself.

It was Avette. It really was Avette.

The woman he had once thought he loved.

She looked exactly as she had that day. Her long dress billowed around her ankles in the same invisible wind that lifted her hair, and her arms were held high above her head. Every part of her was encased in white; the same ice and frost that had held Kai captive for so long.

He felt a small, sickly stab of satisfaction.

“You did this,” he told her, his voice low. A tremor in his throat shook the words as they came out, but he went on through gritted teeth. “If you can hear me, Avette, I want you to know that you deserve this eternity, and all the madness it inspires. You did this to yourself.”

He paused, dragging in a breath that shook above the hammering in his chest. He thought of the crying woman, her ragged gasping as she sobbed quietly at Avette’s feet.

Kai swallowed hard before speaking again, steadier now.

“But you did it to your people, too. And I will make sure they know that. You might one day thaw, in only the most superficial sense – but you will never be free of what you’ve done.”

With a last glance around the still, evergreen enclosure, Kai dropped his hood and moved closer to the statue. Her pointed chin was tilted toward the darkening sky but he towered over her just as he had in life; she could have been looking up at his face if her eyes had not been closed. Her spindly eyelashes rested on her skin like pale spider legs, and her frosted rosebud lips curved in a small, taunting smile. A smile. His stomach heaved. She had doomed thousands of Mellow to a cold,

lonely purgatory – children and babes among them – and smiled as she did it. Kai doubled over with a sudden and violent retch, clapping a hand hard over his mouth as the sickness wracked his body.

There's no time.

Someone could be along any moment now to offer their prayers to this pretty monster. He had to get control over himself, over the hot roiling in his gut. He clamped down against the nausea, tightening his throat, his gills flickering weakly with the effort.

The pendant.

He needn't even look at her, he just needed to somehow work the pendant free. Kai shuddered as he reached for her throat, letting his fingers blindly scrabble along the cool white column until they found her collarbone.

No.

Bare. His head came up too fast, spine whipping straight. Nothing. Nothing at her neck, nothing hanging below her collar. Her hard white skin was smooth, no sign that anything had been pried from her chest. He pushed closer even as his stomach heaved again, his boots scattering offerings of jewels and candles, and crushing the silver and evergreen garlands that lay at Avette's bare feet.

No.

She had been wearing it, he remembered, she *had*. He searched her beautiful, sickening face wildly, almost willing the ice to splinter, for her eyes to fly open and -

Her eyes.

Kai realised then what he hadn't seen before in his reluctance to really *look* at her. Those long thin eyelashes didn't rest on her skin; they were carved into it. He lifted a hand tentatively, touched a finger to the tip of her chin. Cold, but not ice. A grey vein ran through the stark white of her cheek. Marble. A marble statue.

Kai staggered backward, nearly tripping over a sack of grain. He righted himself and stared at Avette's face from this new angle – and it *was* her face, exactly her face. How could that be? The sick stirring in his gut burned and became something else, something dark and feral that rumbled up his chest and opened his throat in a growl. He turned and snatched up the sack of grain in one blurred movement, hefting it easily into his arms and spinning on the spot to lurch it at Marble Avette with a roar that stirred birds from their bare nests in the depths of the forests.

“Kai!”

He dropped to his knees in the mess of wheat and seeds, barely registering the patter of Ceriwyn's boots on the snow as she rushed to his side from nowhere. She fell to the ground and threw her arms around his shoulders, drawing him to her like a mother scooping up her injured child.

“Koo, what – *why* would you come here? How could you think this was a good idea?”

Kai's eyes gazed, unfocused, at the statue's billowing white skirts.

“I thought it was her, Ceri,” he said flatly. “I thought it was really her.”

Ceriwyn hugged him tighter, and he felt her chin brush his scalp as she turned to look at the marble princess. “No, Koo. She's gone. You're safe. You're safe.”

He shook his head once, but then stilled. Ceri, Os, Alun; they had been treading water at his side that day, had heard the angry words that Kai hurled at his former love. They'd seen her spread her arms to the heavens before the vicious wind pushed them all below the surface and the ice closed above their heads. They were the only ones, aside from Kai, who knew who Avette really was, and what she had done.

But they didn't know what *Kai* had done for her; they didn't know about the pendant. And so, all those centuries later, when he swore them to secrecy about his final moments with the Princess, they had pried no further, had no reason to. Now

Ceri shushed him and whispered reassurances, and it was with no small amount of shame that he held his silence and let his sister comfort him. He turned his head to her shoulder and closed his eyes and Ceri stroked his hair.

After some time, he stopped shaking – he hadn't realised he was until his hands stilled at his sides – and Ceriwyn drew away from him.

“It's only old stone and frost, Koo,” she said gently. “There was an ice statue here once, but it's long gone.”

“Gone,” he repeated, not quite a question, without even the energy to rouse an interest. What was the point? Every time he got any closer, the world fell out beneath his feet like the cracked ice on the Laune. And he could drown no longer.

Ceri went on: “Stolen and melted decades ago, the Marchioness says. So it couldn't have been her. She's really, truly gone.”

The Marchioness was wrong. Ceri was wrong. Oh, Kai had no doubt there had been an ice statue here once. That eerie marble effigy could have been carved from nothing but her own likeness. So there must have been a true, frozen Avette in these woods once upon a time. Someone had looked upon her cold face and sculpted it out of stone.

Something echoed in the hollow of his chest, and he was surprised to hear the flat laughter that fell from his lips.

She held him still, really. Avette had faded away with a smile on her lips, and still Kai walked the blank wasteland that was her legacy, tormenting himself.

Perhaps one day, he would find that pendant, if it wasn't already lost, buried under six hundred years of snow.

Until then, by the grace of Mother Adhlas, he would allow himself to live.



Chapter 29

Adeline

Adeline didn't know what she had expected of the Merrow, but it hadn't been this. Gathered by the fire in an eclectic group of old and young, couples and children and beautiful youths, teasing and laughing and swapping stories and even bickering with barely contained smiles. Perhaps in the back of her mind she thought they'd be somewhat stuck in time, as Kai often seemed to be. But if she'd thought the Merrow would be preoccupied with courtly manners and archaic formality, she was proven entirely wrong. There was none of the posturing of the Silver Palace; they pressed together in groups that shifted and changed like waves on the shore.

Eda had relinquished Adeline to the company of Kai's friend Alun some time ago, and he held her attention still with stories of a misspent youth shared with his King.

"He wasn't always so serious," Alun promised her, with a bright grin that showed every gleaming tooth. It was a smile that would charm the Queen herself, and *had* charmed many young women at the Faire; Adeline had seen him dancing with a bevy of beautiful girls of both Eisalaan and the Laune, several of whom still watched their conversation with sour looks. She didn't bother to return their glares; they had nothing to fear from her, handsome as Alun was – and he was very handsome, almost ethereally so. He seemed to draw all the light around him and hold it in a silver glow along the near onyx contours of his face.

But he had caught her in a comfortable lull from her conversation with Eda, just as she'd been chancing a look across the fire at Kai. Alun had slipped between two of his elders to drop into the space beside her with no introduction, and immediately began talking as though picking up an earlier thread of conversation.

"The thing to understand about our Kai," he'd said, following her eyes over the orange glow of the flames, "is that he wasn't raised a King. Not in the same way as you Princesses in your pretty ice palace."

"And how do you presume to know how I was raised?" Adeline asked, pursing her lips against a small smile.

Alun cocked an eyebrow at her. "Please. I've been living with the Earl of the Thornlands for nigh on three months now, I know how finely trained you noble ladies are. Do you know the Earl has eight daughters? *Eight*. I don't know why Kai thought I was the man to send to a home of eight daughters." He leaned over with an arch grin. "I suspect I've done something to offend him and he's hoping the Earl will murder me in my sleep."

Adeline threw her head back, laughter overtaking her. She liked Alun. His puckish airs reminded her of Ger, though he was far less blunt and perhaps a touch more gracious. He sat

with her a long while, talking of years past and all the trouble Kai had got into before he was crowned. Many of these stories seemed incomplete, but Adeline suspected he was censoring himself, as he kept throwing glances to where Iseult sat playing at Adeline's feet.

If Alun was to be believed, Kai spent his adolescence sneaking past the Merrow sentries of the Laune to swim in the wide oceans beyond, or convincing his friends to camp in the lakeside forest and drink aged rum stolen from the Beira King's cellars. Adeline wasn't sure she *did* believe him. It didn't sound like the cautious, virtuous man she'd come to know.

When Iseult ran off with two little Merrow girls, Alun shifted closer and spoke of the night that sixteen-year-old Kai had got Alun and their friend Os riproaring drunk, and taught them a bawdy limerick he'd learned in an Eisalaan tavern. Adeline physically reeled with disbelief.

"Kai recited dirty poetry? Tall, perfect posture, blushes so hard it's a wonder he's got the blood left to operate his limbs? That Kai?"

She was coming to suspect she didn't know the Merrow King at all. By Al's account he was someone else entirely, behind all the formal airs and chivalry.

"*Blushes?*" Alun propped his elbow on his knee and his chin in his hand. "Fascinating. What have you been doing to make him blush so?"

Adeline's own cheeks heated then, but the light was dim enough now that she stared boldly back at him and shrugged. "Standing nearby. Saying hello. Smiling. Doesn't take much."

Alun clapped his hands once at that, rubbing his palms together in a wicked, gleeful gesture. Adeline had a feeling Kai would be ridiculed later on, but before she could take it back, Alun jumped to his feet, spying movement at the line of bare trees across the glen. Ceriwyn emerged between two trunks, Kai close behind her. Alun's grin was sharp-edged.

“If you’ll excuse me, Princess, I’ve yet to greet my *blushing* King.”

Adeline’s jaw clenched in a brief grimace. *Whoops.*

She watched closely as Alun sauntered around the edge of the loose throng of dancers to meet the King and his sister. Ceri brushed past and laid a casual hand on his shoulder as she went, without really looking at him. At her touch he paused and lingered where he stood for a beat longer, turning to watch her go. *Interesting.* Adeline filed that away for later, some small suspicion to counteract the whole *blushing* thing, if needs be.

Alun shook his head slightly and moved on to greet Kai. They met in a gruff embrace, clapping each other on the back and pulling apart to talk for just a few moments before parting ways.

Kai continued on toward the Merrow, and as he came close enough for the firelight to fall across his face Adeline caught a flash of hazel trained right on her. She stood – and immediately stumbled backward, falling onto the log again. Her feet were trapped under an anchor of snow.

Someone giggled behind her and she whipped her head around to see a mane of copper disappearing behind a tree.

She growled. “*Iseult!*”

“Are you alright?” Kai was by her side, a hand at her elbow. She kicked one foot loose just as he tried to free her, tugging her over the little lump of snow and sending her stumbling against him. His hand came around to catch her, and her fingers gripped his arm for a moment. Tensed under her weight, his upper arm was taut and solid. Adeline resisted the stupid impulse to squeeze, and managed instead to right herself and drop her hand.

“Thank you. I’m fine.”

But Kai didn’t let go. His fingers were splayed at her back, and he wasn’t blushing. His eyes were determined, the green-gold ring at their centres burning in the cast of the nearby flames.

“Good. Will you dance with me, then?”

She stared at him, vaguely aware of the crease pulling her eyebrows together. He wanted to dance? Right now?

“Is that a no?”

His fingertips brushed her spine ever so slightly, and her breath caught in her throat. She shook herself mentally, swallowed her breath, and forced a small shrug.

“I’m considering. You’ll recall the last time I tried to dance with you, you abandoned me to the mercy of my mother’s court. And Gerard.”

He bowed his head solemnly. “I never did apologise for that. I’m sorry.” When he looked up though, there was a glint in his eye. “Although as *you* no doubt recall, the last time I tried to dance with you I could hardly hold your eye without – how had Al put it? Blushing like a maiden?”

Adeline pursed her lips hard, refusing to smile or look away. “I wonder where he got that idea.”

“Dance with me, Adeline.”

There was something urgent about the way he looked at her, the way he was holding her. The hand at her elbow had travelled down to fold her fingers into his palm. Eda shuffled past them, tutting loudly.

“Oh by Mother Adhlas’s sagging bosom, stop your cuddling and go and *dance*. You’re blocking the fire and my joints are aching.”

Kai grinned, and Adeline was too busy fighting a sudden swell of laughter to resist as he pulled her toward the musicians playing at the heart of the clearing. The band was as an unlikely crew of palace Gards and Merrow youths, on instruments both familiar and strange; a fiddle, a calfskin drum, what looked like a pronged flute carved from a tree branch, and even a pair of large silver spoons drummed between hand and thigh. An Eisalaan boy led them all with a voice like a chorus of silver bells. It was, for all the world, as though one of them had sat down and started to play, and the others had wandered over to join him, coming and going at

their own pleasure, not playing any particular song but a weaving river of unending melodies.

Kai came to a stop and drew Adeline in front of him - and just as he had that night, so many months ago, he hesitated. The music was slow and lulling. The dancing couples around them were chest to chest, revolving where they stood.

Adeline took one of his hands and held it aloft.

“Take my waist,” she reminded him. He reached for her. His palm was warm above her hip, even through her thickly lined cloak. “Now I’m going to put my other hand on your shoulder, and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t run away.”

She rose up and braced her arm against his chest, hand on his shoulder. A smile tugged his lips.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

He tightened the half-circle of his arm around her and they swayed there in the snow, melting into each other bit by bit until they were almost cheek to cheek. Kai’s fingers grazed the small of her back, drawing a hot shiver down her spine.

“I regretted it right away,” he said, his low, soft voice in her ear doing little to ease the shivering. “Not dancing with you that night. I wanted to, Adhla knows, but... I wasn’t ready to make a fool of myself on my first night in a foreign court. People just didn’t dance like this before the Frost. And you were wearing that damned dress - ”

“Goddess above,” she said, trying for a stern look, though the effect was quite ruined by the heat rising to her face. “*That damned dress*. Is that any way to speak in front of a Princess, Your Majesty? Most improper of you.”

He bit back a smile. “Are you going to taunt me forever? Is there something so wrong with chivalry?”

She thought of the training room, of his lips a breath away from hers, of his hands splayed on her thighs, that unresolved moment of painful tension.

“There’s a time and place for chivalry.”

He looked at her now in a way that said he quite agreed, the green flecks in his eyes charged and vibrant. She was pinned by that look, every time.

She cleared her throat quietly.

“Tell me then; how did people dance before the Frost?”

Kai dropped her gaze, freeing her, and then releasing his hold on her hand and waist too. She very nearly pouted, grown woman though she was.

But then he bowed low, tucking one arm against his chest, and making a slight gesture with his other hand. Adeline realised that he wanted her to curtsy, and she quickly bent her knees.

“Good. And then, without touching – just hand to hand.”

He lifted his palm, and she mirrored him, their hands just close enough that she felt the whisper of warmth from his skin. He bent his free arm behind him and moved slowly, drawing a wide circle in the snow, and Adeline followed, her eyes on his. He turned and offered his other hand, and they moved the opposite way, painfully slow, never looking away from one another.

“At most,” he said quietly. “With all these people watching, I might have dared to hold your hand.”

He took it now, and drew her just a step closer, dropping their clasped hands between them. Her heart leapt, but Kai kept moving, guiding her in that same lazy arc. It was, somehow, far more intimate than standing chest to chest with their faces turned away. His eyes were bright; so very bright she burned beneath them. Despite their unhurried steps, her heart came a half beat faster against her ribs.

“I think I prefer the other way,” she said, not caring that her voice was a tremor.

A lazy smile matched his leisurely movements, but at the end of that slow circle he paused and guided her arm to his shoulder. There was less space between them than before; if she took a breath, her chest might brush his.

But when she looked up, and found his gaze locked on her lips and his own slightly parted, it didn't matter. Because Adeline could not breathe.

"I think I do, too."

The glen had dimmed somewhat when they finally pulled apart to a chorus of voices calling their names. The lanterns now cast coloured light on the snow and bark around the treeline, and gold flames burned in small fireplaces that were scattered like dying stars around the clearing.

Ger, Ceri, Alun and a few other Merrow she hadn't yet met were the last of the group they'd left huddled around the warmth. Ger waved an empty tankard over his head, beckoning with his free hand. Adeline thought Kai lingered at her back, almost reluctant to let her go – but then he did, and her skin was cold where he'd held her.

"Where's Iseult?" Adeline asked. The last time she'd seen her little sister, she'd been teaching her Merrow playmates how to play *Winds and Waters*, and the whole lot of them had been weaving in and out of the treeline chanting the old nursery rhyme while Eda watched them thoughtfully. But now, as she took a quick catalogue of the group, Adeline realised both Eda and the children she'd left her sister playing with had gone home. She stiffened, but Ger brushed her concern away with a quick wave.

"Her nursemaid came for her," he said. "Betty?"

"Bethany."

Ger clicked his fingers, a gesture of confirmation.

He was handing out clean tin tankards from a basket at his feet, and a large copper pot sat on a plate above the fireplace, wafting a perfume of apples and cinnamon.

"Where did you get a giant pot of spiced cider?"

Gerard tapped the side of his nose. “I am a man of many talents.”

“He went to the kitchens and told Marie you requested it,” said Ceriwyn.

“Lying is one of my many talents.”

He filled a tankard with cider and thrust it into her hands before she could chastise him. Ceriwyn patted the bare stretch of bark beside her, and Adeline sat, glad for the Merrow girl’s quick, fluid chatter as she pulled her swimming head together. The cider didn’t help that. Nor did the shimmering heat rising off the fire. Or the fact that her eyes seemed to move independent of her brain, roving the edges of their small circle to find Kai, drinking deeply from his own tankard and laughing with Alun and another sandy-haired Merrow man. She’d never seen him laugh like that, open-throated and loud, his whole face – his whole body – transformed. His eyes crinkled and softened and his broad shoulders shook and loosened.

And if he caught her staring, he didn’t seem too surprised. Simply held her eye and kept nodding or speaking, still listening, still engaged with his friends. She felt his eyes on her at times too, as she tried to listen to what Ceri was saying about a pet of the Marchioness, whom she professed to hate, but whose sweet antics she described in loving detail.

“You’re not listening at all,” Ceri accused.

“She’s not,” Ger confirmed on her other side.

“I am! The Marchioness’s dog –”

“Mister Flurry is a cat,” Ger said with an indignant sniff.

Ceri tutted and turned in her seat. She drew in a huge breath and called cheerfully across the fire. “Koo! Drop the brooding stares for a moment, won’t you? I’m trying to talk to the Princess.”

A roar of laughter rose around the fire. Ger nudged Adeline playfully in the side and she winced, face burning and tight. She looked up; Kai was laughing that same laugh again, the easy, open one. He winked at her. *Winked*. Just how much

cider had he had? When exactly had they swapped roles? She wasn't sure she liked being the blushing, flustered one.

She looked hurriedly away.

It was far too hot. The cider was hot, and the fire was hot, and... It was just too hot. She shucked off her cloak and draped it beside her, then snatched up her tankard.

"So," she said, turning back to Ceri. "Mister Flurry, the cat."

Ceriwyn beamed.

Eventually Ger tired of all the kitten talk and drifted off to refill his tankard. Barely a moment passed before Kai dropped into the empty seat. Ceri groaned.

"Hello to you too, darling sister."

His eyes were shining with cider and mirth and warmth. "Adeline."

She took a sip of her quickly cooling cider. "Mmm?"

"I thought I'd offer to escort you back to the palace. Whenever you're ready, of course."

She almost inhaled her next sip, and spluttered into her tankard while Ceri helpfully thumped her back.

Daughters save me, what is happening?

"Erm, well," she finally choked out, wiping a drop of cider from her chin as daintily as she could. "I was actually planning on heading home tonight, but—"

"You don't live at the palace?" Ceri chimed in.

"It feels like it sometimes," Adeline said, just a shade ruefully. "But no, I have an apartment in the city."

Ceri's eyes went wide. "All to yourself?"

Something about the plain longing in her tone pulled Adeline up short. An apartment all to herself, sitting empty half the time. She met Kai's eye, and something clicked.

This was the answer.

He'd wanted Ceri safe, and out from under the nose of the Queen's Gard. Ceri wanted her space - from everyone apart from, perhaps, Mister Flurry.

Adeline grabbed the girl's hand.

"You should stay there!"

When Adeline glanced his way, Kai frowned, and opened his mouth as if to protest - but Ceri cut across him, tugging Adeline's hand to draw her attention back, her voice pitching excitedly.

"Could I really? Mother above, I'm *dreading* the ride back to the manor after all this cider."

"No, I mean, you should *take* the apartment, for as long as you need. The Marquess and his wife are a host family, aren't they? So why don't I host you instead? I have my rooms at the palace, and I spend most of my time there anyway. You can be closer to Kai, and the library. Lots of books, no more cat hair splinters -"

Ceri squealed. "Adhlas, really?"

She flew sideways at Adeline, almost knocking her into the snow, and then hauling her upright again.

"Really," Adeline laughed. "Ger has my spare key, get him to show you the way when he leaves for the barracks."

"So I *can* stay tonight then?"

Adeline stole a glance at Kai, who had watched this plan unfold between them with an almost unreadable expression.

"Yes," she said. "Of course you can. I'll stay at the palace."

Kai got to his feet, that unreadable look lifting into the slightest smile.

"Well, the offer stands. If you're ready."

Faint amusement danced like the flickering of the fire in his eyes, but he said nothing more - just held out a hand. Adeline spared a quick glance at Ceri, whose lips were tugging up reluctantly.

“Go on. I’ll just have to bore Al and Os with my cat stories.”

Somehow Adeline didn’t think Alun would mind. She grinned, planted a quick peck on Ceriwyn’s cheek, waved to Ger where he stood at the copper pot, and let Kai guide her away through the trees.



Chapter 30

Adeline

They walked in charged silence.

A light snow had fallen earlier in the evening, and the path through the forest was crisp white and untouched. The glass lanterns had frosted over in the cold night air, their glow softened and spread like melted butter. Adeline hugged her arms around herself, teeth chattering.

“Where’s your cloak?”

She glanced down. *Bollocks.*

“I left it by the fire.”

“Should we turn back?”

She shook her head. She didn't want to turn back. She didn't know what was happening, but she did know they were alone – *really* alone – for the first time since that moment on the training room floor. Alone after an endless day of soft touches and long, weighted looks, both of them loosened by the heady effects of the cider and sweet spices.

She wanted to see what would happen, even if a voice in her head hissed that *nothing* would happen. She half imagined the voice wasn't hers at all, but her ancestor's; the lost Princess walking between them, Kai's heart forever clenched between her smooth marble fingers.

Adeline shivered again.

“Take my cloak, then.”

She stopped beneath a broad, bare tree. Kai came closer and the swinging lanterns cast an unearthly glow upon him. Midnight hair, green-gold eyes, moon white skin. He had never looked more like a fairytale creature than he did in this precise moment.

“Won't you be cold?”

Kai smiled. “There are few winter nights that compare to centuries encased in ice. I rarely feel the cold anymore, Princess.”

He undid his cloak and shrugged it off, holding it up to her. When she didn't move he tilted his head imploringly. Adeline went to him and he swept the cloak over her shoulders; she sighed a little at the sudden warmth as the fur lining settled against her back and absorbed some of her shivers. Kai drew the fabric tighter around her shoulders, and nudged her chin gently so she would look up at him while he fastened the clasp at her neck. His long fingers brushed her throat and she seized on the goosebumps that threatened to erupt across her skin.

Kai's eyes met hers, and all at once she was reminded of their first meeting, in the courtyard. When she had fastened her own cloak at his neck and he had met her with those same electric eyes.

His lips curved a little; reading her, she realised.

“Bit big,” he said quietly.

Adeline didn't remember deciding to speak; the next moment she simply heard herself blurt it out.

“It was you.”

Kai frowned. “What?”

He was drawing back warily, but his hand hovered at the clasp of the cloak, and she caught it against her chest, the words surging through her faster.

“I lied before, about what I saw in Iseult's book.”

He paused where he stood, a half-step back from her. He didn't pull his hand away. “You said you saw yourself in the Princess?”

“That part was true.” She hesitated. “I lied about the Prince.”

Under the dark frown, his hazel eyes ticked sideways as though searching through memories. “The short Prince with the big nose?”

“Yes, him. I mean, *not* him. That's not who I saw. It was... someone else.”

The frown remained. Then – something dawned over Kai's features, and for a second his lips quirked like he might smile, but his face remained placid. His voice was light with polite interest.

“Someone you recognise then?”

She looked down at his hand in hers. He rubbed his thumb along her knuckles, coaxingly.

“Yes.”

“And?”

She sighed. “Cider makes you insufferable, do you know that?”

The smile took root this time, but he said nothing, still waiting.

Adeline bit her lip. She was losing her nerve, and her voice came out too small. “Do I really have to say it?”

“You really have to say it.”

She couldn’t bring herself to scowl at him. Her voice was so strained she wasn’t sure he would even hear her.

“It was you, Kai. I saw you.”

Kai’s face split in an unfamiliar grin, broad and cocky, and in that moment she thought she glimpsed the man that Alun described. She wished it didn’t suit him so well. And then he took a step toward her and she wished nothing of the sort. He could grace her with all the cocky smiles he wanted; she wouldn’t complain.

“Why would you lie about something like that, Adeline?” He said quietly. Teasingly.

She raised an eyebrow - or tried to. Honestly it was an effort to spare her attention to such gestures, all while steadying her voice against the quake in her throat, and restraining herself from grabbing Kai by the shirtfront. Which, she now realised, he’d half unbuttoned at some point in the night, by the heat of the fire. The Mid-Winter breeze tugged at his shirt, revealing the hard and elegant lines of his pale collarbone.

She quickly averted her eyes, though it wasn’t much easier looking up at him. What was his question?

Why would she lie?

She forced a breath of laughter.

“We did read the same book, didn’t we? Do you think I needed Izzy to know what I was seeing, with an illustration of us kissing on every second page?”

Kai blinked, some of the warm haze of the cider clearing from his eyes. “I suppose I wasn’t paying as much attention as I thought. Was there really that much kissing?”

“Yes,” she said quietly. She was too hot again, Kai’s long cloak trapping the heat of the blush creeping along her neck and colouring her cheeks.

“Well. I’m sorry to have put you through all that. It must have been disconcerting.”

She rolled her eyes, another forced gesture. “I think you know it wasn’t.”

“Do I?” He took another half step forward and her breath caught mid-sentence.

“It was in-intriguing.”

“Intriguing,” he murmured, eyes on hers.

Goddess, why hadn’t he kissed her yet?

“Kai.” It was barely a whisper, but he heard the reprimand and smiled, triumphant. Playing with her, like a bored cat pinning a mouse.

“Ask me then.” That cocky smile again.

“Ask you what?”

“You know what.”

No.

She couldn’t say the words. Could not physically force them up past her tongue. Adeline squirmed at the idea of begging him like that, and almost began to laugh -

But Kai bent his head to hers and gently kissed the very edge of her lips, the curve of her smile, and her breath seemed to evaporate into the cold night air; she couldn’t laugh, couldn’t sigh, couldn’t *think*. Her arms came up around his neck unbidden, crushing their chests closer together as though that would help her sudden breathlessness.

“Ask me,” he said against her jaw, half-groan half-whisper.

She turned her head to fully catch his lips, but he pulled back, just a bit. His hand came up to frame her face, thumb brushing warmth over her lower lip.

“Ask me to kiss you, Adeline.”

His mouth hovered above hers, his thumb between them pressing down on the pillow of her bottom lip like he was holding his place in a book, a promise of what was to come.

And Goddess did she want him to turn that page.

“Please,” she whispered against the pad of his thumb, too weak on the thought of his lips to care that he had her actually *pleading*. “Please, just kiss me.”

And finally, finally, he did. Softly, so softly, his fingers light at her jaw. She had never been kissed so sweetly before, not even by Ger. It was wonderful and infuriating. Each brush of his lips tightened her chest further, held her breath just out of reach, dizzied her. Kai slipped beneath the borrowed cloak, one broad, strong hand tight on her waist, seeping heat through her dress. The air swept back into Adeline’s lungs in one breathy gasp, and the sound seemed to stir him something in him. His dazed, reverent kisses deepened. He pressed her backwards, urgently, bracing his free hand above her head as they fell against the tree. He tasted of sweet apples and warm spices, and his tongue swept into her mouth, a little frantic, a little less gentle.

The very air had changed around them, no longer still and silent but heavy and crackling. Everything moved a little faster. Adeline slid her hand under Kai’s loosened shirt collar and spread her fingers against his bare chest, drawing a deep groan from the back of his throat that made her ache. It was a lit match to the empty, wanting hollow of her stomach, heat soaring through her like the lick of flames. His hands were in her hair, digging into her thigh, hitching her leg over his hip. She gasped freely into his mouth as he pinned her hips with his own, and didn’t trouble to quiet her stuttering breath when his lips left hers to brush along the curve of her jaw, the hollow beneath her ear, down her throat. His teeth grazed the skin of her shoulder and she crushed herself to him, arching her back against the rough bark and lifting her hips to drive him closer, *closer* to that building, needy ache between her thighs.

His hand scrabbled impatiently at the hem of her dress, shoving it up over her knees to further part her thighs for him, and when she ground against him, he loosed a low, muffled groan into her shoulder. His hips bucked in response to her, just enough that she felt him, thick and hard against the heat of

her core – and then her feet hit the forest floor and his warmth was ripped from her.

She gulped down a breath, head swimming.

“Fuck, I’m sorry,” he managed, raggedly, breathing hard. He’d stepped back several paces, eyes wide and dark. One hand raked through his hair while the other fumbled at the buttons of his shirt, trying to do it up.

Adeline was so disoriented she almost didn’t notice she’d heard him swear for the first time ever. Would have ignored it completely if it didn’t send a strange thrill spiralling through her, all those pretty manners chafed away by his frantic desire. Desire for *her*.

“Sorry for *what?*”

“I got carried away. Far, *far* away –”

“Not far enough.”

He stilled at that, his hand dropping from his hair as he looked up at her warily.

“You’re not leading me astray with a few drunken kisses in the forest, Kai.”

He arched a brow.

“That was a little more than a drunken kiss. You’re a Princess of Eisalaan, and I should know better. You asked me to kiss you, not fucking ravage you. We both know I would have had you right there against that tree if we’d kept going.”

Obviously she had known where they might end up, but to hear him say it like that, like it was inevitable... She had to bite down on the inside of her lip and let the wave of heat pass before she could speak again.

“I told you, you’re not responsible for my virtue. And I wanted you to – I want *you*.”

Her breath was still coming fast, and she didn’t miss the way his eyes caught on the rise and fall of her chest with his cloak still askew around her throat.

“Oh,” was all he said.

Somehow she found it in her to rouse a coy smile as the tension finally melted from his shoulders. He stopped trying to do up his shirt.

“Good, I prefer it open. Feel free to lose a few more buttons too, if you like. Since you’re so accustomed to the cold.”

“Adeline,” he shook his head, but a slow grin dawned on his lips, and he stepped closer, moving slowly until he was crowding her once more. “Feel free to do it yourself.”

Oh, she definitely liked cocky Kai. She reached up and fisted her hand in his shirt, dragging his mouth down to hers, and they both stumbled against the tree again. But she had barely brushed her tongue against his when voices sounded from further down the path.

Singing.

It was several people, stumbling up the path, Ger’s off-key crooning among them. Adeline dropped her head against Kai’s chest and growled her frustration. She felt a low chuckle rumble through him.

“Come on. I promised to walk you home, and I’m doing a terrible job.”

“Depends who you ask,” she mumbled, but she let him take her hand and drag her away.

Kai walked her all the way to her rooms, where the Gard standing sentry in her hallway tactfully excused himself to refill his waterskin. The King watched him go with a scowl.

“What if my intentions were any less than honourable?”

“One can only hope.”

He turned to her then, amusement lighting his eyes. He took a step, and anticipation zinged through her blood like a current as he pressed her back against the door. But Kai kissed her as gently as he had the first time, one kiss pressed to each cheek, another at each corner of her mouth.

She sighed, closing her eyes at the flutter of his lips. “You’re not coming in, are you?”

He rested his forehead on hers.

“I want to.” He pressed another lingering kiss to her mouth. “I’m not sure I could express how fucking badly I want to.”

There it was again. That strange thrill coursing through her. *Ridiculous*. It was just a word - a word she personally used with abandon. But Kai Cumhaill debasing himself with foul language while he lost himself in her was, somehow, completely obscene. In the best way.

“Then do,” she breathed between his kisses. “Come in.”

He sucked her lower lip between his teeth and released it, so slowly.

“If I come in, there’ll be no sleep.”

“Is that a promise?”

She felt his grin against her mouth, but then Kai pulled back and nodded at the small window at the far end of the hall. The sky beyond was pink and purple, blushing and bruised. It was almost dawn.

“We have a meeting of the Cold Council in a few hours.”

Oh Goddess, *why*. Adeline groaned aloud. A cold, dull end to the longest night of her life, *and* a Council meeting in the morning?

Kai nudged her chin up.

“There’ll be other nights.”

She restrained herself from pouting like a child, and wrapped her arms around his neck instead. “Is *that* a promise?”

Kai’s eyes flashed, caught between hunger and amusement. He swallowed up the space between them once more, his lips coming down hard on hers.

“It’s a promise,” he said, a little force behind the quiet words. “Other nights. Much longer nights.”

Adeline crushed herself almost painfully to him as he kissed her for the final time that night, slowly still, savouring, but not gentle. His tongue swept her mouth and his hands tangled in her hair, and as they lost themselves in that parting kiss, the sun inched over the windowsill another little bit.

“Ok,” he said, punctuating his words with a few more parting kisses. “I have to go.”

She unclasped her hands from behind his neck and pressed them against his chest. “Go on,” she said, pushing him away gently.

He took a few steps back, looking as dazed as she felt, but his lips tilted as though he might start laughing at any moment. He didn’t turn his back to her until he was halfway down the hall, and even then he turned again at the corner to grin at her.

“Good night.”

“Good morning.”

He chuckled low in his throat, and that last ember of heat in the pit of her stomach glowed.

“Good morning, then.”

He turned to go, but something made him stagger mid-step, pausing for a split second at the corner of the corridor. His hand flew to his collar, pinching it together, and he nodded a greeting at someone Adeline couldn’t see.

She straightened, suddenly rooted to the spot. Should she dash into her rooms? Was there any point? It would be obvious where he was coming from, to whoever had spotted him. Her stomach lurched. Actually no, it wouldn’t – it would look as though he were sneaking out of her quarters in the early hours of the morning. She took an uncertain step toward the door, her fingers fumbling for the handle, pushing it halfway open.

Kai threw her one last glance as he disappeared, and Mareda stepped out behind him, rounding the corner.

The moment seemed to stretch thin, ready to shatter. Mareda paused and considered her sister, frozen in her doorway with swollen lips, and hair that was even wilder and more tousled

from where Kai's hands had raked through it. Mareda took it all in with her pink, painted mouth parted in a soft gape.

And then she closed her mouth and drew her shoulders back, continuing down the hall toward her sister.

“Good morning.”

Adeline stammered some quiet greeting back at her, not meeting her eyes.

Those were the first words Mareda had said to her in weeks. Yet somehow, Adeline couldn't quite bring herself to feel relieved.



Chapter 31

Kai

Kai was awake. The sun was spilling pale light through the rift in his heavy curtains, stretching ever more insistently across the floor. Dawn had broken, and a new day truly begun.

He had stripped off and lain in bed with his eyes closed, but sleep never came. Instead, a carousel of images whirred behind his lids, stuttering and inconstant. Iseult's storybook with that invisible hand sketching a pendant at a white throat, pulsing with life; a young Merrow mother speaking words of hope with those dark circles beneath her eyes; women sobbing at the feet of a statue; Avette's triumphant marble smile.

And Adeline.

Adeline watching him across the fire. Adeline arching her neck under his mouth. Adeline, dishevelled and pink and breathless, and “*I want you,*” she had said.

His mouth had gone dry at that. “*Oh,*” he’d replied, wholly incapable of further syllables.

He wasn’t completely oblivious. She’d arched into him, touched every inch of his bare skin she could reach, moaned at the barest brush of his lips at her throat. He had known she wanted him, but he had also known that with one more roll of her hips against him, with one more whisper of friction between their bodies, he would have had her skirts around her waist in the space of a breath – a thought that was as terrifying as it was intoxicating.

When his room was glowing with clear morning light, Kai finally gave up any attempt at rest and got up and dressed for the long, agonising morning ahead. Hours of sitting in close quarters with not only Adeline, but a handful of her closest family; talking about politics and trying not to look as though he’d spent the small hours of the morning with the echo of her breathless moan ringing in his ears.

He might not survive it.

Kai was early to the council rooms. Only two others sat at the long table; Mareda and her elderly aunt, Johanna.

Mareda.

He’d nearly forgotten their encounter, though it was just a few hours ago. Kai willed himself to keep moving, forced his legs not to freeze up and hold him where he stood in the doorway when Mareda glanced up at him.

“Good morning, Your Majesty,” she said, her face entirely blank. For all the world as though she had never come across him outside her sister’s bedroom with his shirt hanging open.

He mirrored her politely blank stare, leaning into a short bow.

“Good morning, Princess. Lady Johanna.”

Johanna started softly, and blinked bleary eyes up at him. She'd been dozing in her chair.

"Prince Cumhaill," she smiled, then yawned daintily behind a small, withered hand. "Good morning."

"He's King Cumhaill, Aunt Johanna," Mareda said, and Kai looked up at the slight chill to her words. Her tone held the same hint of imperiousness as the cool gaze with which she now considered him.

So she hadn't forgotten, then.

The old woman reached out and placed a hand gingerly on Kai's arm. "Oh, I do apologise, your Majesty," she said.

Kai looked away from the princess, and gave Johanna a small smile and a gracious nod. "Not at all, my Lady. I have difficulty wrapping my own head around it some days."

Johanna beamed. She tugged gently on his arm, urging him into the seat beside her as a few more council members filed in. Adeline's father Silas was among them; Kai's insides curdled, but he folded his hands on the table in front of him and tried to listen to what Johanna was saying about Queen's Village rental properties. Silas moved past him to sit at the other end of the table, and Kai's chest loosened. The worst discomfort was yet to come, he knew. When the Queen arrived, he would have to look at her, speak to her, all while holding the knowledge of what had happened with her daughter in that forest. What he was certain would have happened had they not been interrupted.

But Kai was wrong. The worst discomfort came when Adeline herself slouched into the room, dragging her feet and yawning openly. It was quite plain that she hadn't slept either. He chased his thoughts from that dark corner of his mind that wondered if she'd spent her morning the same way he had; thinking of all that had and hadn't happened between them. Adeline rounded the table and sat beside her father, and though Kai's eyes ached in their sockets with the need to follow her...

He could feel Mareda watching him.

Something about her steady stare made him certain that it would be a very bad idea to acknowledge Adeline in this precise moment. He met Mareda's eye instead, and feigned a polite, quizzical expression.

Yes?

She looked away.

The seats around the table filled out, and with Selma and Sebastian's arrival, the meeting was finally underway. These sessions, never a place of warmth and welcome for Kai to begin with, had become insufferably tense as the weeks went on. As parts of the Laune continued to melt, as more and more Merchants found their magic disrupted and businesses floundering, the Council found less time to talk of anything but the Thaw.

Today, the Commander of Wielders told the Queen and the room at large of how his team had recruited several young apprentices. The youths were to be rushed through their training and qualified within the month, so great was the urgency for more magic-Wielding hands to help repair the centre of the lake. The thinning ice that had once been a shattered chasm through which the surviving Merrow escaped.

Kai did not miss the casual brush of several pairs of eyes darting to and from his face throughout the Commander's briefing.

"Excellent work, Edward," said Selma, once he concluded his report. "Please do pass our well wishes on to the trainees. Any assistance we can find at this time will no doubt be greatly appreciated."

Edward gave a gracious nod and opened his mouth to thank her, but Mareda's voice rang out over him, melodic as a silver bell and just as jarring.

"What of the Merrow, Your Majesty?"

Those casual eyes throughout the room stopped darting and landed firmly on Kai; she was not addressing her mother, he realised with a jolt.

He recovered quick enough, raising one eyebrow to mirror hers. “I’m not sure I understand your question, Princess.”

Mareda smiled, patient and sweet. Too forced. A wary tension knitted itself across Kai’s shoulders at that smile.

“Well, my father has just explained the Wielder’s dilemma. They’re desperate. They don’t have the manpower to repair the extensive damage to the Lake.”

That slight inflection on the word *damage* was an accusation in itself. The damage that *he* caused, he supposed, by daring to excavate his frozen, half-dead kin from the splintering ice.

“What’s your question, Mareda?”

This, growled from Adeline at the other end of the table, turned several heads. He didn’t look at her; he was too concerned with the swift look that passed between Mareda and Edward at Adeline’s interjection. A wordless conversation. Although he seemed somewhat reluctant, Edward nodded minutely, and Mareda smiled again – something affirmed.

“I’m simply asking,” she said, turning back to Kai, not Adeline. “Are there no Wielders among the Merrow?”

Kai did not know what to say. It was true that he’d never wanted to bring his lost magic to the attention of the Beira; had wanted to learn from his mistakes of centuries past. But in the back of his mind, he’d still assumed they all *knew*. This was an integral part of the folklore to which the Merrow had been cast after the Frost, wasn’t it? Part of what had made them worthy of legend, and kept them from being entirely forgotten. So, painful as it was, he might have spoken about the water magic in his blood if pressed.

But Mareda’s careful, taunting line of enquiry was enough to give him pause.

From the head of the table, the Queen caught his eye and opened her palm to him with a slight nod, in gentle offering – giving him the choice of how much he would share with the Council. Kai swallowed, slowly so as not to let his throat bob and give away his growing dread.

He met Mareda’s gaze.

“All Merrow can Wield magic to some extent, Princess.”

There was no collective gasp – rather it was as though the room had gone entirely airless.

“Although I regret that we would be of little help to your father’s efforts.”

Mareda didn’t miss a beat.

“Oh dear, that’s a shame,” she said, cocking her head to one side. Threads of pale gold shimmered in her hair at the movement, a halo around her head. This was what she wanted, he thought. Golden Princess Mareda, an angel in mortal form. Which, he supposed, made him the gilled demon from the depths of the Laune. “You’re sure there’s *no one* who could lend a hand?”

Adeline’s growl came again, from the other end of the table.

Stop, he pleaded with her mentally. Because every reaction from Adeline seemed to bolster Mareda somehow, brightened her eyes and pulled her proud chin higher.

But Adeline couldn’t hear his thoughts. She went on: “There are plenty of Merrow lending a hand, Mareda. They’re working in the mountains, serving in the Gard –”

Someone - perhaps Silas - hushed Adeline, and coaxed her back from where she’d been leaning with her hands flat against the table and her shoulders squared.

Kai watched from his periphery, and only when she was seated again did he say to Mareda; “We were Water Wielders.”

Mareda pulled her delicate features into a soft crumple, the very portrait of innocent confusion. “Forgive me, King Cumhaill, but what *is* ice, if not hardened water?”

Someone coughed, covering a snickering laugh. Captain Doran, he was almost certain.

“Mareda,” said Selma, her tone sharp with warning.

Kai raised a reassuring hand to the Queen.

“It’s quite alright. I understand the... curiosity.” He let them all hear the heavy inflection there, mirroring Mareda’s

accusation with one of his own - she was not *curious* about him, she was needling him, looking for a rise. Why, he could not say. This was the longest conversation he had ever had with the eldest Princess. He turned back to Mareda. “Our power is drawn from the Laune, Princess. From the currents that surround our home, deep below the laketop. While it remains Frozen, we can Wield no magic.”

“I see,” Mareda said, with a slow, calculated nod, exuding airs of grace and regret. “So you have tried, then? To reverse the Thaw?”

Selma spoke low words of warning. Adeline hissed something beneath her breath.

Kai and Mareda ignored them both, eyes locked.

“I have tried and failed to Wield my power, yes.”

“In what manner, Your Majesty, if you don’t mind my asking? Have you tried to alter the ice?”

Alter the ice.

Not *reverse the Thaw*. But not quite *reverse the Frost* either.

They all knew what she was asking. The room held its breath, and Kai could say nothing.

“Forgive me, I suppose that’s not a reasonable question. What would you stand to gain, after all?”

She had overdone it; her barbed words were not coated thickly enough in that syrupy-sweet tone to hide the sting of accusation. Selma called her name once more in reprimand, joined this time by Adeline’s outburst; “Goddess, Marry, do you fucking hear yourself?”

Someone winced. Beside him, Johanna gave a soft hiss that might have been a wheeze of laughter.

Selma pinched the bridge of her nose, groaning both of her daughter’s names now. Kai risked a glance; Adeline was standing, leaning into the table again, as though she’d vault it to get at her sister. Her father wrapped a hand around her arm, and she shrugged him off. Her cheeks were flushed as she stared boldly at the Queen.

“Are you going to let her speak to him like that?”

“Sit. Down.” Selma gritted the words out with no small amount of tension, her eyes still closed against her palm.

Adeline did not move.

“He’s a *King*. You’re the Queen, and if she spoke to you like that –”

Selma’s eyes flew open, and her voice thundered along the length of the table, low and furious. Several of the council members pressed themselves back in their seats.

“I am well aware that I am the Queen, Adeline, although *both* of my daughters seem to have forgotten that fact. Sit down, now. Right now. Mareda – that is *enough*. You have said your piece, and quite thoroughly embarrassed me in the process, as your mother *and* your Queen. Hold your tongue.”

Adeline settled in her chair, still glaring at her sister. Mareda, for her part, radiated a quiet contentment, though she bowed her head regretfully at her mother, and then at Kai. She didn’t meet his eye, but he caught the flash of triumph in hers.

“Now. Aunt Johanna,” Selma sighed, making a notable effort to leash her anger as she turned to the old woman. “Have you any updates from the Treasury?”

Kai paced the training room. The meeting had ended with still a few hours left before Master Ellis would reclaim the space, and though they hadn’t discussed it, he had hoped Adeline would think to find him here when she was through being reprimanded by her mother.

He had been here for twenty minutes, wearing a path in the soft wooden floorboards. He glanced out the window distractedly. If she didn’t turn up soon, he could check the library, or perhaps Gerard would know -

The door slammed open and Kai spun just as Adeline came storming into the room, her eyes crackling and dark, thunder

and lightning. For a bewildering moment, he thought she would rage at him as she had Mareda. But when her pace didn't slow, he caught her in his arms at the last second, and her momentum carried them both until his back hit the windowsill. Her mouth was on his in an instant, arms locking around his shoulders and using that leverage to pull herself up and against him in a fierce kiss.

Kai was dazed, caught off guard by the sudden, unyielding press of her tongue against his. There was an edge to the way her lips landed on his, almost a defiance.

Defiance against what?

Because Kai certainly wasn't stopping her. There was only one other person who knew about whatever this was between them, only one person who had seemed eager to tear him to shreds after seeing them together.

The thought came to him half-formed, and evaporated again as Adeline's teeth grazed his lower lip.

It was only when he found her skirts gathered in his fist at her hip that he caught himself, breaking their kiss with a sharp breath.

He couldn't do this.

Not without understanding what it meant.

"Wait," he managed to croak, and she froze against him. He opened his fist, dropping his hold on her skirt. "The Council meeting. I want – I want to understand what that was."

Adeline seemed to deflate from the shoulders inward, but she nodded and leaned her forehead against his collarbone. For a moment, she was silent, though he could practically hear her mind ticking over the words. When she parted her lips, they spilled out in a slow, reluctant trickle.

"I'm sorry she ambushed you like that."

Kai swallowed. "I'm... not unaccustomed to it."

Adeline lifted her chin, and her usually warm brown eyes were dark and troubled.

“That’s the problem. You’re accustomed to it – I’m guessing that’s how our ancestors treated you. King Beira?”

Kai stiffened, but he couldn’t fight the harsh laughter that barked out of him. He didn’t acknowledge the truth of it, a truth beyond anything Adeline knew of her ancestors. She nodded to herself anyway.

“And that was hundreds of years ago. Shouldn’t we have grown in all that time? Shouldn’t we know better by now?”

Her eyes slid away from his, narrowed by the same pain that pinched each word from her hoarse throat. Kai’s chest contracted; he laid a gentle hand on her cheek and she covered it with her own, her eyes fluttering closed.

“I didn’t mean for you to end up comforting *me*. I want to make things better for *you*.”

“You already do.”

He said it without thinking, and when her eyes flew open, Kai’s stomach gave a quick, queasy lurch at his little revelation, at the low note of tenderness that had crept into his voice. Too much of himself, revealed too soon – but Adeline turned her face into his palm and kissed it, and he wondered if perhaps it had been the right thing to say, in that moment.

He cleared his throat quietly, grasping for something, anything to fill the gentle silence that echoed his too-soft words.

“Why *did* Mareda ambush me, as you put it? We’re hardly close acquaintances, but she’s been nothing but civil before this morning.”

Adeline had taken his hand from her face with both of hers, and now studied his scarred palm as though reading a map inked into his skin. She didn’t answer, and Kai’s stomach dropped in an entirely new way; several steps missed on a steep descent.

“It’s because she saw us together last night,” he said. The voice that came out of him was not his own; it was stoic, hard as steel. He could taste the bitter metal, and the words that followed were just as sharp edged.

“She disapproves. Of course she does – *another* Princess of Eisalaan sullyng herself with a creature of the lake.” He laughed, humourless and harsh enough to scratch his throat on the way out. What an utter fool he was. He’d feared history might repeat itself, and yet he’d gone ahead and carved its path. “Perhaps we’re lucky she didn’t go straight to the Queen. I knew – I *knew* – I should never have put you in such a position and I did it anyway–”

“Kai!” Adeline’s eyes were round with shock. She gripped his collar, forcing his eyes to meet hers. “There is nothing we did last night or *could ever do* that would warrant Mareda’s behaviour this morning. You’re right that it’s because she saw us together, but – *but*,” she raised her voice desperately as he opened his mouth again. “It’s not what you think. She couldn’t care less where you came from or *when*, she’s just trying to discredit me.”

“Discredit you? Why?”

Adeline loosed a long, weary breath. Whatever it was, she plainly didn’t want to say the words aloud.

“She thinks I’ve been quietly campaigning for our mother’s crown.”

“But you haven’t,” he guessed. “Quietly or otherwise.”

“No, I haven’t. I much prefer a simple tiara myself.” She looked up at him beneath her brows, one of them cocked wryly. “Are you going to tell me I *should* be campaigning?”

By the way she said it, he imagined she had heard that a lot.

Kai shook his head once, firmly.

“I know a little something about inheriting a crown you never wanted.”

Adeline buried her head in his chest, and for an awful moment he thought she was crying. But her breath was shuddering not with tears but nervous laughter as she whispered; “Well, I wish you’d told me that sooner.”

He grabbed her gently by the shoulders and she let him lean her backwards so they were eye to eye once more. “Adeline?”

She lifted her chin higher, and her eyes gleamed.

“Mareda’s brought forth her own worst nightmare.” She grinned savagely, and for a wild moment Kai wanted to press his lips to the pointed edges of that smile. But he waited, barely breathing, because he knew. Somehow he knew what she would say next.

“I’ve announced my campaign as Heir.”



Chapter 32

Adeline

Heir.

The word – *the title* – followed Adeline around, slipping from shadow to shadow and whispering its warm breath in her ear. Some of the whispers were real, of course. Courtiers and palace staff alike, watching her as she walked the halls and gardens, the news of her declaration passing between them in hushed voices.

Yet again, Adeline marvelled at the speed with which gossip travelled in her mother's palace. She had told Kai right away of course, Ger and Imogen not long after, but without a formal

announcement the only other people who should have known were those who had been in the room at the time.

After that dreadful Council meeting, Selma had called her daughters forward as the councillors filed out of the room.

“Stop. I want to speak to you two. Alone.”

But Edward had moved to Mareda’s side, and Silas immediately went to Adeline. The Queen glared at them both, but allowed it. Sebastian, future King that he was, did not move from his seat. So, it was to be a family meeting. They all gathered by the Queen’s side, exchanging hard stares while the room slowly emptied out. Adeline had watched Kai close the door behind him, only briefly meeting her eye. He looked exhausted – no, more than that; weary. As the latch clicked behind him, the Queen hissed out a furious breath.

“What,” she demanded, “is the meaning of all this?”

Adeline had simply stared at the closed door; let Mareda speak first, since she had so much to say.

“I wanted to establish the King’s loyalties, mother,” Mareda said quietly.

Adeline couldn’t help herself. She whirled from the door. “That is not your place.”

Silas placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, but the Queen seemed to agree, even if she stiffened at the outburst.

“Your sister makes a valid point. Do you think me incapable of vetting my allies, daughter?”

Mareda dipped her chin, deferential for a moment. Then she lifted it high and stared their mother down, for what Adeline was sure must have been the first time ever.

“Of course not. But respectfully, Your Majesty, I don’t think you’re immune to their charms. Nor, as it happens, is Adeline.”

Every eye in the room landed on Adeline. Her father’s hand dropped from her shoulder.

Adeline’s cheeks blazed.

“Adeline?” said the Queen.

She side-stepped the question that hung between them. She wouldn’t have known how to answer it even if she wanted to; and she did not want to.

“Is that what this is about?” Adeline half-whispered, staring at her sister. “That spiteful little scene was supposed to humiliate *me*?”

“You are a Princess of Eisalaan, Adeline. Perhaps in the past you could get away with these careless little affairs, but King Cumhaill is a good deal more prominent than the low-ranking Gards you normally favour.”

Adeline couldn’t help the flinch that jerked her shoulders back – but her sister wasn’t done.

“You’d do well to take care who you chase around, and how it reflects on our family. I’m simply concerned that your choices could end badly for us all.”

But Mareda didn’t look concerned. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes gleamed with the same merry glow she’d found on many a New Winter’s Eve, warmed by a hot glass of spiced wine on their mother’s balcony. She was enjoying this.

“Bullshit.”

Mareda just scoffed gently, but Edward rounded on Adeline, and the cold look in his eye should have been enough to mend the Laune in an instant.

“Watch your tongue,” he hissed, in a voice so unlike his own warm rumble. Adeline couldn’t help but recoil under his glare. “You are speaking to the Heir of Eisalaan.”

“Watch your tone,” Silas returned – quietly, but not softly. His eyes were freshly lit coal, dark and blazing. “You are speaking to my daughter.”

“Gentlemen, stand down,” Sebastian warned.

“She’s not the Heir,” Adeline cut in before the argument could devolve. Her family quieted. “Not yet anyway.”

Mareda's lips sagged at the edges like wilted petals, even as a flash of triumph brought cold light to her eyes. She raised her chin high, almost nodding, as if to say; *See? I knew it.*

And you were right. Is that what you wanted?

Adeline turned to her mother.

"I claim my birthright. I want to campaign for the title of Queen's Heir."

With just weeks to go, Adeline's name joined the list of participants for the Queen's Tourney. *Her Royal Highness Adeline Roseen Beira* slipped in among the ranks and titles of dozens of highly trained Gards and Gard initiates.

Three days, three battles, with the final round bringing Adeline and Mareda head to head.

It was entirely ceremonial, of course. Just a way to kick off the campaigns that would last for as many months or years as it took their mother to make a decision. The outcome of the tournament wouldn't decide who would be named Heir; only Selma could do that. But, as Silas had warned his daughter repeatedly, the tradition wasn't unimportant.

"If you're going to do this, the support of the people within and without this palace is going to hold a lot of weight. You know your mother, Eisalaan is everything to her."

They'd had some variation of this conversation every morning since Adeline had announced her campaign. She peered wearily at her father over the rim of her tea cup. "I know."

"And the head of the country is also the head of the royal forces, so it stands to reason that the people of Eisalaan will rally around the strongest –"

"Father, I *know*. Everyone loves a champion – I get it."

Silas wilted, the anxious energy seeping from him like a gust of air.

“I just want you to prepare yourself.”

She took his outstretched hand and squeezed it, softening.

“I will. I *am*. I promise.”

And she was. Her sessions with Kai had moved to that same clearing in the woods where they’d taken Iseult ice skating at the Faire. The arena for the tournament was to be built on the outer edges of the Laune, so to prepare, they’d taken to training directly on the ice surface of the little stream.

And often with company, as was the case later that same morning.

“Put your weight behind that sword or he’s going to take your damn arm off!”

Adeline spun on the ice to glare at Ger, said sword raised menacingly before her. Training on ice was even harder than she remembered. It wasn’t like skating, with the glide of the blade propelling her body in smooth, graceful lunges. There was nothing to brace against. At least when she’d fought Mareda on the lake all those months ago, she’d had her custom-made boots, and they’d both had the benefit of the deep grooves and scratches from the daily bustle of the market. This stream, on the other hand, had been frozen over to mimic the conditions of the tournament. Imogen had grumbled about being coaxed from her bed before she opened her store each morning, but she’d shown up day after day and worked her hands over the stream’s surface until it was smooth as glass.

Now Adeline was slipping and flailing like a babe on new legs, but Kai was as frustratingly composed as ever – and Adeline was not enjoying being flattened over and over again. At least, not with an audience to her defeat.

Ger had spread his cloak out on a flat rock and sat with his arm amiably draped over Ceri’s shoulders, sharing a bag of sugared chestnuts with Os, and heckling Adeline between mouthfuls. Alun leaned against a tree a few feet away with his arms crossed, looking rather sullen.

“Why don’t you hop in and show her how it’s done?” Al suggested. Adeline swore his words were gritted out between his teeth, but Ger didn’t seem to notice.

Kai gave a sweeping gesture of welcome, and made way. Adeline couldn’t help but note how the tension melted from the taut line of his shoulders as his feet left the stream and fell on the powdered snow. Her heart gave a strange little twist; she knew he couldn’t stand the ice, for reasons far more complex than her own, and yet he’d braved it for her. Every morning. Wouldn’t hear of turning indoors, not when he knew this was what she would face in a few weeks time. At the edge of the stream, Kai turned and met Adeline’s eye; whatever he saw made him shake his head slightly, lips quirking beneath the bristle.

I’m fine, he seemed to say.

She smiled back, shrugging a little.

I know.

Oblivious to the moment, Ger grinned and brushed the sugar from his hands. “Why not? We’re probably overdue a tussle.”

“It has been a while,” Adeline agreed, as Ger took up Kai’s sword and planted his feet wide on the ice. She smiled sweetly, unable to help herself. “As I recall, the last time we sparred, I knocked you on your ass so hard you cried.”

Ger pointed his sword at her, swinging the heavy blade easily through the air with one arm. He was trying to fix her with a stern stare but the way he lowered his brows made it look as though two golden brown caterpillars had taken up residence on his eyelids.

“First of all, you only knocked me on my ass because you tripped me,” he said, a reluctant smirk tugging the corners of his lips. “Do that in an official tournament and you’re fucked. There are *rules* once blades are drawn, you have to fight clean. And second of all – of course I cried, it bloody hurt.”

“Poor darling,” Adeline drawled, suppressing her own grin.

They tried to glare at each other, but Ger broke first, a little huff of laughter falling from his lips like white smoke on the

frigid air. “Alright Princess, let’s get to it.”

She braced herself, digging her heels in for as much purchase as the slippery ice would allow. Ger’s sharp-edged smile turned his handsome face feral; clearly he was going to make her regret taunting him.

He came at her with a feint to the left, throwing his weight at the last moment and sliding gracefully across the ice to come at her open right side. She managed to block him, but just barely, and the split-second panic had her stumbling, nearly performing the splits on the glassy stream. She just about managed to catch her balance before she was forced to jump and skid backward again, avoiding Ger’s sword-point across her navel by a hair’s breadth.

“Go Adeline!” Ceri called from behind her book.

Adeline heard Kai bemusedly ask; “Are you even watching?”

But she didn’t wait to hear Ceri’s reply, still trying to regain the grip of her boots on the frozen stream as Ger made his way steadily towards her and lifted his sword again, higher this time. He bore down on her from his slight height, sending his sword crashing downward so that she had to lift her arm above her head to block him. His full weight went into the blow, and the clash of blunt metal sang through her practice blade and jolted the very bones in her arm, turning her joints to rubber. Her sword fell with a clatter and spun away, several feet down the hard, shining ice.

Adeline clenched her jaw and braced, knowing Ger well enough to expect the foot swiftly hooked behind her ankle, but shrieking nonetheless as her ass smacked into the biting cold surface of the stream.

Fucking OW.

“Congratulations, you’re avenged.” She scowled up at him. “Happy now?”

“Immensely,” he grinned, offering his hand.

He yanked her upright, steadying her until she found her feet.

“You see what I mean about putting your weight behind the blade though? When you block, you’re entirely focused on holding your sword like a shield, and that’s worked out okay in the training room - but on the ice you need to be bracing your entire body, the whole time.”

“Your centre of gravity is off,” Os offered mildly.

“Your centre of gravity *is* off,” Ger said, clicking his fingers and pointing at Os in agreement.

Kai was frowning, considering her with his usual intensity, eyes roving over her rather thoroughly. It might have made her blush if her arse weren’t throbbing with the promise of an almighty bruise.

“They’re right,” he said finally. “You’re holding your weight too low.”

Ceriwyn lowered her book to exchange a look with Adeline, rolling her eyes to the bitter grey heavens. They were all such experts.

“Any other pointers, gentlemen? Al, perhaps you have some thoughts on my choice of boots?”

Al grinned. “As a matter of fact -”

Kai shot his friend a look, then stepped in front of her. He reached for her waist, but paused before he touched her.

“Can I show you?”

Adeline raised an eyebrow. As though she was suddenly going to have a problem with his hands on her. Though it had certainly been long enough since she’d last felt them. She nodded impatiently and a smirk flickered over his lips.

He laid one hand on her waist. Ger began a low whistle, but Adeline bared her teeth at him and suddenly the sound became a tune that carried him away in a nonchalant slouch with his hands shoved into his pockets.

“Walk for me.”

She moved, and he came with her, his hand still hovering at her middle.

“Now, see how you’re propelling your body from here?” He drew a careful line from her hip to her stomach as he spoke, erupting a thousand unseen goosebumps beneath her training gear.

“Mm-hmm,” she nodded, not sure she wanted to risk a wavering voice in front of Ger and the others.

Kai’s dark brows narrowed as he brought his fingers to the arch beneath her ribcage, hardly seeming to notice that her chest rose and fell in uneven stutters beneath his hand. “You want to centre yourself from here instead. And it helps if you lean forward, like this.”

His touch was warm, always; so much warmer than one might expect of a man newly liberated from the icy embrace of the Laune. He pressed his other palm between her shoulder blades and the heat of his skin sank through the leather of her protective vest and her thick undershirt. She clenched her jaw against the pleasant shiver that rose beneath his hand all the way to the nape of her neck, the fine hairs standing in salute to him. Perhaps he’d been right to warn her before he’d touched her. Not that it had made much of a difference.

“Good,” he said quietly. Very quietly, in fact.

She glanced up at him over her shoulder, and found his hazel eyes startlingly close. She’d never seen them in full daylight, never seen all the glimmering hues that bound his irises; the greens and golds and autumn browns. It brought to mind thoughts of warm sunlight filtered through green leaves and young bark - a forest unknown to the icescape of Eisalaan. Her gaze drifted to his lips, parted and slightly shimmering, like he’d licked them as he watched her study his face.

Goddess save her, she wanted to kiss him. When was the last time he’d been this close? A week? Two? It was like her immunity to him had faded in those few short days, and she was just as dazed and breathless as that first night in the forest. The impulse to lean in swelled uncomfortably in the tight hollow of her chest, rising up until she almost choked on it. She swallowed down the urge with some difficulty, and turned away.

“Thank you.”

Kai seemed to hesitate for a moment, but then let go of her and stepped away. It wasn't the time, nor the place. They had yet to really talk about their kiss in the woods, or the one in the training room the next morning, and nothing had happened in the days that had passed since then - save for tense moments like this one.

The thing was, she sometimes got the uneasy feeling he was keeping her at arm's length, shutting the door on those longer nights he'd promised. Other times he looked at her as though he'd devour her given half a moment alone; she went a bit lightheaded just thinking about it.

“Ready when you are, Ade,” Ger called jovially, though his eyes danced like he knew just what she was thinking. He probably did, to be fair.

She released a long breath and steadied herself; then planted her feet and leaned forward slightly, holding her weight from beneath her ribcage like Kai had shown her.

“Ready.”

It wasn't quite as bad after that. She still wasn't nearly as graceful on the ice as Kai or Ger, but she didn't need to be. She just had to be better than Mareda - and maybe not get landed on her ass in her first two matches, where she'd be up against the champions of the Eisalaan Gard. Or even a Queen's Gard champion, if she was particularly unlucky.

“Maybe you'll be picked as champion and you can let me win,” she said to Ger, thinking aloud.

They were walking back toward the palace, having left the Merrow back at the clearing. There'd been a sticky moment after Adeline said goodbye to Ceri, Al and Os where she'd hung back a moment too long before realising that Kai was not, in fact, relacing his boots, but avoiding having to leave with her. Ceri's stare had nearly burned a hole in her brother's

back, and Adeline wished she'd burn the ground beneath her instead and let the stream swallow her up and carry her away. But Ger had stepped in, smooth as ever, and loudly announced that he was ready to go, as though he was the one Adeline had been waiting for. She was grateful for the lifeline, and to Ger for going out of his way to see her home.

But now he snorted at her wishful thinking.

“What? You're young, strong, and talented, it's highly likely you'll be picked.”

“Oh I have no doubt I'm in the running.”

“So?”

“So? Everyone's seen us together for years now, Ade. There's even less chance of Doran pitting me against you than there is of me letting you win.”

He was right, of course, and she'd never *actually* expect him to throw a match for her pride, but she rolled her eyes anyway.

“Supportive as ever.”

He grabbed her arm, pulling her up short.

“Hey.” Ger shuffled from foot to foot, frowning as though he was trying to translate his thoughts in a foreign tongue. It took him several seconds. “I *am* proud of you, you know.”

Adeline blinked at him. She did know. He'd wanted this chance for her for a long time now, long before Mareda had thought of centering her campaign around the Merrow. When she'd told him, Ger had whooped and roared and she swore she'd even caught a vaguely wet glimmer in his eye before he'd lifted her off the floor in a bone-breaking hug. He'd shown up to almost every training session since, giving up his days off from Gard duties and missing training of his own, all so he could goad and taunt and bully her into better shape. He'd stopped talking about Barry altogether, and when she asked, Ger told her he'd grown sick of waiting alone for him at the barracks night after night while Ger spent hours at a time in the company of his former lover. She'd felt incredibly fucking guilty for that, but Ger had just scoffed, and said good riddance to him if he couldn't see how important this was.

Of course she knew he was proud of her, he didn't have to say it – and he clearly didn't much enjoy saying it either.

There was only one acceptable response, really.

She wrinkled her nose pointedly, knowing he wouldn't miss the smile beneath it.

“Ew,” she said, and he laughed and looped her arm over his elbow.

Ger wrinkled his own nose right back at her. “I know. Disgusting.”



Chapter 33

Adeline

Adeline had dressed for the occasion, waist corseted in Eisalaan blue and thick coils of hair braided and held up by so many pins her scalp felt like it was clad in a helmet of blunt needles. One more family dinner, her mother had decreed – insisted, really. One night to set their squabbling aside, to break bread together and pour one another's wine in good faith. To start this journey, these campaigns, off on the right foot.

When Mareda didn't bother to show up, she told herself she'd expected it. *She hates you*, some unhelpful voice within

her whispered rather gleefully, *you betrayed her just like she knew you would. Your own sister.*

Adeline drowned the voice with a deep gulp of wine as Edward bowed to the Queen and made his excuses on Mareda's behalf.

"Our daughter regrets that she could not join us tonight," he said, "however she has quite exhausted herself with preparations for tomorrow's battle, and needs her rest."

Judging by the winged angle of her golden brow, Selma was about as convinced as Adeline. "I hope you had the equanimity to advise *our daughter* of how this would reflect on her campaign – defying her Queen's wishes on the eve of her first tournament."

Edward bowed lower, forehead dangerously close to the table's edge. "Majesty, truly, I know she would love nothing more than a fair and balanced race. But as you will see tomorrow, she has worked tirelessly these few months past. To forgo the proper rest now would only put her at a disadvantage."

Selma pursed her lips, but Sebastian took her hand and said; "Come, my love, the girl is being sensible. There will be plenty of time for merrymaking after the tournament."

The Queen's sharp chin sliced the air as she turned from Edward bowing before her, to Sebastian patting her hand placatingly at her side.

"You're quite right, *my love*," she said evenly. "We will postpone our family gathering."

Sebastian smiled, and her answering smile was thin.

"Gentlemen, you may retire and take supper in your rooms."

Sebastian's smile dropped. "My love?"

"Adeline and I will dine alone."

Silas was the first to stand and obey, squeezing Adeline's shoulder before going to nudge a stunned Sebastian from his seat. Edward rose slowly from his bow, eyes passing

unfathomably over Adeline and then the Queen. But he simply nodded and said; “Of course, Your Majesty. Good luck tomorrow, Adeline, and goodnight to you both.”

The men filed out and Adeline lifted her cup to her lips once more. The bitter burn at the back of her throat must have been from the wine, and the wine alone. Her eyes were burning from the sharp aftertaste of the smooth and mellow honeywine. *It's just the wine.*

She set down the glass, blinking hard, and speared a bit of pastry and shredded boar on the long tines of her fork. Selma was watching her, waiting for her to look up. She put the fork in her mouth and chewed until it tasted of nothing.

“I am sorry,” her mother said finally. “I understand now; this is what you were afraid of all along.”

“Yes,” Adeline said simply, although it really wasn't all that simple. “It is.”

Selma stood from the head of the table. Her seat was a dining throne, a heavy and intricately carved tower of wood that she scraped back with some difficulty. She had been better lately, livelier, but still prone to pushing herself too hard, as though her still-frail body would bend to her will like everyone else did. Her Chief Healer had begged her to slow down. Apparently the flu had worked a dangerous infection into her lungs, and though she was past the worst of it, her body needed rest that she was simply not taking – no matter how often the Healer, her court, or her family tried to coax her.

When she sank into the chair beside Adeline, her breath was slightly too shallow, but she pushed through, her words coming out soft and laboured.

“I can't pretend to understand what either of you is going through. I never had anyone close enough to contest my claim to the throne. I never had a sister; never had anyone growing up really, apart from Edward.”

Adeline set down her fork. She felt heavy throughout, too heavy to handle the gilded cutlery or the weight of the food on

her plate when it slid, leaden, into her stomach.

“But I know what it is to lose your dearest friend. They’re a cornerstone of who you are, and when that’s chipped away, the whole structure you’re built on becomes unstable. That much, I understand.”

That was it exactly. That empty space, a crumbling foundation. Whatever you wanted to call it, it amounted to the same thing; a piece of her, torn away. She looked at her mother, and this time it definitely wasn’t the wine that burned beneath her lashes; she took in Selma’s pale and solemn eyes and found they were brimming, gleaming just as she knew her own must be. Adeline blinked, surprised, and sent a rogue tear rolling over her cheek.

“Are you talking about Edward?” She half-whispered, as her mother took a napkin to her face and dabbed carefully.

“We were companions,” she said, by way of an answer. “The only two children at my father’s court, at the time – and the very best of friends. And then, of course, even more than that. We were everything to one another.”

Adeline tensed, some old instinct within telling her to tread carefully, to avoid turning her mother’s attention. She knew the stories, knew what had come next but - she wanted to hear it. Wanted some explanation for the person Selma had become, for the mother she had lost and found again. Perhaps Edward was her own crumbled cornerstone, the dangerous shift in her foundation.

“What happened?”

“Well, I was often sick as a child, and Edward was always there for me. But some time after Mareda was born, I fell rather seriously ill and - ” Selma frowned, eyes flickering side to side as though sifting her memories for some lost detail. Finally, as though it explained everything, she shrugged, and said; “And things changed.”

Adeline wanted to tell her that it made no sense. That love didn’t work that way. She wanted to tell her that she’d been sick and feverish plenty of times, and when she healed she’d

still laughed with Ger and Imogen, read stories to Iseult, still wanted Marry at her side. She'd still loved her father, and yes, even her mother, even the cold, lost woman she'd been. She wanted to tell her all this, but she didn't. She waited – and after a moment, Selma frowned again, distantly.

“I changed, but he changed, too. I grew tired of being weak, and he had become this fearful, possessive stranger. His fear changed him, and my fearlessness changed me; we did things we hadn't believed one another capable of. We didn't know each other anymore.”

Adeline's chest tightened even within the confines of her corset. *We didn't know each other anymore.* Maybe Adeline *had* changed; maybe they both had. There was a time, mere weeks ago, when the thought of denying Mareda the throne she'd wanted and worked for all her life would have seemed the height of sisterly treachery. And the Mareda of months past trusted her beyond anything; the Mareda she knew was kind and regal, incapable of the blind prejudice she'd shown the Merrow. Were they each doomed to crumble without the other?

As though she'd spoken aloud, Selma took Adeline's face in her slim, cool hands. “You are nothing like me. You are so much stronger than I was, both of you. Braver than Edward has ever been. You will find your way through this.”

Adeline only knew she was shaking by the funny way her breath shuddered in and out of her. She allowed herself to be drawn into her mother's arms, pulled from her chair to the seat of Selma's lap where she curled up as though she were a child even younger than Iseult, not a woman both taller and broader than the frail Queen who cradled and rocked her. Once the tears came, there was nothing to do but let them roll through her.

When Adeline was little, her father had given her an iridescent blue conch the size of her fist; a shell from the shores of his homeland. He'd taught her to seal the cool stone to her ear and listen to the lap of waves sounding across all of Adhlas. *A different kind of magic*, he'd said. She'd treasured it, believing it to hold an enchantment entirely different to the ice

magic of Eisalaan. Now that she knew better, she treasured it still, for the reminder of her innocence and the soothing sound of the ocean that had once called to her from a world away. The sobs that moved through her now reminded her of that shell, breath coming in great waves, her mother's gentle shushing like the lulling drag of water over sand.

"All is not lost," she promised. "All is not lost."

They sat like that for a long time, until Adeline had cried every tear she'd blinked back since that first fight with Mareda. She was tired, weakened by the physical toll of several months worth of pent up sobs, but she sat up and shifted back to her own seat, though she kept her mother's hand in hers.

"You could put an end to all this, you know," she said, sniffing. "If you asked me to step down, I would. You could name Mareda your Heir and we might all be happier for it."

Selma smiled sadly. "Do you truly believe that?"

Adeline shook her head, not wanting to hear herself say it.

"Then this is how it must be."

You could ask Mareda to step down. She hated herself for thinking it. She knew it was wrong anyway; it didn't work that way. *The support of the people is going to hold a lot of weight,* her father had said. He was right, and so was Selma. This is how it must be.

"Thank you," Adeline said instead. "For the motherly wisdom."

Selma laughed then, and for a moment she looked like a woman never touched by illness a day in her life. "Ah, well, I have plenty more pearls to share, Queenly wisdoms among them. *Womanly* wisdoms too," she said, almost slyly. "If you'd like to hear them?"

Adeline stiffened.

Goddess above.

"I'd have no need of them, mother," she muttered, hoping her face wasn't as red as it was hot.

But Selma laughed again. “I’m not sure I believe you, but very well – I won’t put you through that particular torment. You may retire without my priceless pearls, dear daughter.”

Adeline stood gratefully, understanding herself to be dismissed – but Selma squeezed her hand one last time.

“I’ll make no presumptions, Adeline, until you tell me otherwise, but – he is a good man. I hope you know that I’ll gladly stand behind you if that’s where your heart lies. As your Queen *and* as your mother.”

Without any answer to offer, Adeline squeezed back and kissed her mother’s cheek. Then she went to bed, bone weary and confused over just about everything.



Chapter 34

Kai

Kai could stomach little more than tea for breakfast, and this he sipped throughout the morning. A herby, floral brew that Marie had sent up from the kitchens with the note; *To soothe your nerves*. How the Cook knew his nerves were in need of soothing, he could only guess, and at present it didn't seem to matter much; the tea helped. Simon had found him a flask that sat comfortably in the pocket of his cloak and did double the work of warming him through his layers on his walk to the Laune.

Alun and Os waited for him outside the arena, and hiding ineffectively behind them was Ceriwyn. He couldn't spare the

mental energy to scold her, and he wasn't sure what good it would do anyway. Ceri did what she liked, evidently. Whether he was her King or not was of little relevance.

“Could you at least keep your hood up, Ceriwyn?”

“Good morning to you too,” she said primly. “Openly drinking now, are we?”

“It's barely an hour past dawn,” Alun tutted, but his dark eyes lit up as he grabbed the flask from Kai's hands and took a deep swig. He immediately spluttered.

“Adhlas, what's the *matter* with you?” Os grunted, Ceri leaping behind him with a squeal to avoid the spray.

“It tastes like hot leaves,” Al said thickly, clamping a hand over his reddened lips. Kai swiped the flask away and thumped at Al's back while he coughed and choked.

“It's tea,” he ground out between thumps. “For my nerves.”

“*Your* nerves?” Ceri said, raising an eyebrow. “Are *you* stepping into the arena today?”

When Kai couldn't even muster the energy to glare at her, Ceri softened.

“She'll be fine, Koo. She knows what she's doing. I think.” Ceri looked uncertainly to Os, waiting for confirmation. He gave a minute nod. “Yes, see? Os is always right about these things. Adeline will be fine. Better than fine, she'll probably win!”

Os shrugged diffidently at that last part, half-nodding but with a frown that said he was not entirely convinced.

“She'll be great,” Al wheezed. One of his gills flickered weakly, like a tiny pink wing against his midnight skin. “Can we go sit down before I collapse a lung?”

The arena had been built on the edge of the Laune, where the ice was both shallow and more reliably solid than the splintering heart of the lake. The Commander - Edward - had taken a team of Wielders to the shore at dawn to refreeze the surface that was to be the battleground between the competitors; between the two Heirs, and Captain Doran's

champions. An impressive wooden structure had been erected around the perfect oval of untouched ice, with tapestries of pale Eisalaan blue strung from every pillar, and tiers of seats ringing the space like an amphitheatre. The crowd, hundreds of nobles and townsfolk alike, streamed in through one end of the oval under a banner of glittering white flags. At the other end of the arena, the tiers were divided by a sheltered podium upon which the Queen and her consorts of past and present were seated. Notably, little Princess Iseult had not been called back from Caldbon to watch the bloodshed. Kai, on the other hand, had been invited to join the family atop the Queen's podium.

It would have felt wrong to accept.

I caused this. He let the knowledge settle sickeningly in his gut, then took another sip of tea in some vain attempt to soothe it. It would have been wrong to sit at Queen Selma's side and watch her daughters tear each other apart. It felt wrong to watch it from any angle, but if it had to happen, he would at least keep a distance from the Royal Family. He didn't need to know if they felt, as he did, that this was all his doing.

Kai let Ceri lead him to a section of seats close to the middle of the arena where many of the Merrow had settled already, Eda and her kin quite comfortable in the lowest tier at the very front. He greeted them with as much warmth as he could muster, grasping hands and offering smiles as he passed, but was quite glad to sink into the bench three tiers up among the camouflage of his friends. He tugged up the hood of his cloak and wedged himself between Ceri and Al, the latter apparently still sour over scalding his throat. Kai nudged him, trying for their comfortable back and forth, little though he wanted it right now.

"It's your own fault, you know," he said lightly. "You've forgotten that summer we discovered gooseberry wine. What good could come of grabbing a flask out of my hands? Without pausing to ask what I'm drinking?"

Al frowned like he hadn't heard him.

"What? Oh – er, yeah, duly noted."

On Ceri's other side, Os shook his head and mouthed; *Leave it*. Kai shrugged inwardly. He had tried, and that was about as much attention as he could spare at this particular moment. Because that low, long call that shuddered the wood beneath him and silenced excited chatter throughout the stadium – that was the resounding blow of a horn.

The tournament was about to begin.

The first round was not nearly as bad as Kai had expected. As the eldest, Mareda had taken to the ice first, marching out with her shoulders held back and her golden hair twined into a coil atop her head that shone as bright as her polished silver breastplate. Her opponent stood about a head taller than her, but with his slight, wiry build, they were closely matched for size. At the Queen's order, they drew their swords, bowed to one another - and darted forth, blades clashing. She was much better than he'd expected based on her general demurity and the few sly jibes Gerard had offered about her skill. Ger was clearly biased. She was, in fact, very good with a sword.

But Adeline is better, Kai had realised with a grim satisfaction that had him gritting his teeth. He hated pitting them against one another, even in his mind, knowing that was exactly what Adeline had wanted to avoid. But that was the point after all – she didn't have to best the champions, so long as she outperformed her sister.

It took less than twenty minutes for the young champion to take Mareda's feet out from under her with a clever spin on the ice that had the Princess twisting too fast to catch up. She accepted defeat gracefully, allowing the Gard to pull her upright and turning an elegant bow on the gathered crowd; but Kai had caught the glimmer of panic in her eyes as she went down. It had ended too soon, and she knew it. Her sister had the edge already.

He didn't know if the whole arena held its breath as Adeline stepped onto the ice, or if it just felt that way. He only knew

that when he saw her his chest tightened beyond breath, and beside him Ceri let out a quiet, “*Oh.*”

She wore armour like her sister before her, but Adeline’s was a burnished bronze that seemed to gather all the sunlight to her, winking golden light along the deep ridges of engravings that decorated her breastplate; twisting vines and sunbeams spiralling around tiny shining orbs. Her dark curls had been brushed and slicked against her head, gathered at the nape of her neck in a long braid that snaked farther down her back than Kai would allow himself to notice. Without the usual coiling dark cloud to soften the angles of her face, she seemed older, more resilient. Her jaw was set in a hard line, but her eyes, wider and darker than ever, glittered with a familiar roguish light.

She was ready; she was determined. Though the knowledge did nothing to loosen his chest, he hoped it would make it easier to watch as she faced her opponent. But as Kai took in the man bowing to Adeline, his heart gave a painful lurch. This man – for a man he was, no youth like the fresh-faced Gard who had faced Mareda – towered above Adeline, half as broad as she was tall. There was something familiar about the menacing set of his brow. An impression of the man’s quietly wrathful face lingered in some peripheral part of Kai’s mind, though he couldn’t quite grasp at the memory.

“Are they serious?” Ceriwyn breathed. “He’s twice her size, he’ll *crush* her.”

“Maybe not,” Os said, although even he didn’t sound convinced by his own words. “They could be matched in skill. She could use his size against him - ”

“Kai, hush,” whispered Ceri.

He hadn’t realised he was groaning aloud. Kai buried his face in his hands, but then the Queen called out ‘*Begin*’, and he sat bolt upright. They bowed to each other, and the brute shot forward before Adeline had fully drawn her sword.

“No!” Ceri cried angrily.

Someone hushed her peevishly, but others were crying out in similar outrage.

Adeline managed to evade him and unsheathe her blade, then immediately squared off her body against his next attack. Kai could see the tense lines of her shoulders and spine as she planted herself firmly in place and used her sword to shield – and then to push him away with an almighty shove. She stumbled a bit beneath the force, but it was enough; the Champion skidded backwards with his own weight as momentum, giving her the space she needed to catch her balance.

Adeline was the one to strike this time. And the next strike. The next too, somehow battering the mountain of a man back and back and back. They turned in a wide circle as they fought, and Kai caught sight of her face; of the sheer *fury* that knotted her brows together and pulled her lips back from her teeth in a perversion of her ever-present smile. She was *snarling*, raging, almost terrifying to watch. Kai could not say where this fire came from, but he was glad for it, if it kept her upright and unbroken.

Ceri was watching from between her fingers and carefully peeked over her own hand. “Oh Mother Adhlas, she’s actually win –”

“Don’t say it!” Kai hissed. The last thing they needed was for this stroke of luck to turn.

Alun had his hands wrapped so tightly over the forewall of their row that the wood seemed fit to splinter. Ceri reached around Kai and gently dislodged Al’s fingers from the barrier, taking his hand in hers and squeezing it. Kai had the fleeting thought of asking them to kindly remove their hands from his personal space, but he couldn’t spare the seconds it would take to form the words. Not when Adeline was driving the Champion closer and closer to the solid podium upon which the Queen peered down with her face impassive, but her eyes darting back and forth with each exchange of blows.

The Gard had no choice but to press his back to the podium, and block Adeline’s relentless blade. The fight seemed

destined to hang in this tense, uncertain pattern, but as Adeline's temper boiled over she grew sloppier, angrier, her moves less calculated until finally the Champion saw his moment and burst forth in a wave of triumphant rage – and stumbled into thin air as Adeline fainted to one side and circled him. She'd baited him. She'd waited for the light of victory to overtake him, and now she had her sword pressed firmly to the bare nape of his neck.

A discordant gasp rose and echoed throughout the arena as the crowd realised what was happening.

Her lips moved, and though Kai couldn't hear her, he thought he knew the single word she spoke.

Kneel.

The Champion's shoulders and chest heaved in great angry stutters, and his broad face was turning a sour shade of purple. But after a long moment, he bent one knee – and then the other – and then held both hands above his head in surrender.

Adeline grinned.

And the crowd erupted.

Ceri shrieked something Kai couldn't make out over the roaring in his ears, but he let her yank him to his feet and knock the remaining breath from him with a vicious hug. She let go and shoved past him to hug Al. Kai didn't take his eyes off Adeline, even as she sheathed her sword and helped her opponent to his feet. The Gard glowered as he bowed, but Adeline was the picture of grace as she returned the gesture, every trace of that inexplicable rage burned up into nothing but a small, regal smile.

Across the stadium, Captain Doran got to his feet and entered the arena, trailed by a stone-faced Mareda and an oddly pale Gerard. The Captain clapped his Champion on the shoulder in dismissal, then performed his own bow to Adeline, before taking her by the wrist. He raised her arm high in the air to renewed screams from the audience, sunlight shining victoriously off the coppery links of her chain-mail sleeves. Captain Doran released her, then held his hands up for silence.

The cheers and whoops petered out, and the Captain stepped forward, a long grey shadow cast across the bright white ice.

“Congratulations to our beloved Princess Adeline on her triumph in this, the first round of the Queen’s Tourney.” He held his hand up as the cheers rose once more. “Today, the Heirs faced two of our most promising young Gards.”

Ceri scoffed and shot a look at the edge of the arena, where Adeline’s opponent stood quietly glowering. “Promising? How long has he been keeping that promise?”

Doran went on.

“Tomorrow, we will see how they fare against the deadliest members of the Queen’s Forces. Princess Mareda will battle Sir Gerard Leman.”

Gerard smiled grimly at the polite applause. Beside him, Adeline cast a quick glance around the arena, a slight frown tugging at her brow as she looked for someone who wasn’t there. Kai realised a second before she did.

Captain Doran smiled, thin-lipped and tight. His eyes glittered with steely promise.

“And I myself will battle Princess Adeline.”



Chapter 35

Adeline

“Forfeit.”

“I can’t.”

“*Fine.* Say you’ve fallen ill – tell them you’ve caught the Queen’s fever.”

They sat in the parlour of Adeline’s rooms. Well, Adeline sat. Ceri stood behind her, pulling apart Adeline’s fraying braid; Ger perched silently on the armrest at the other end of her settee, one hand cupping his own jaw and fingers splayed over frowning lips; Kai was pacing. Pacing and occasionally pausing to panic in a new corner of the room.

“I’m not withdrawing, Kai.”

He turned away from her with his lip curling over his teeth in a sharp grimace, and his eyes landed on Ger. “All those training sessions on the stream, and it didn’t cross your mind to warn us?”

Ger dropped his hand from his lips, but did not shift from his slumped, defeated posture. He raised a brow.

“I found out exactly five minutes before the rest of Eisalaan. Tell me, should I have run out onto the ice and ducked under Ade’s blade to break the news? Or just scaled the walls and shouted it from the Queen’s podium?”

“Snapping at each other won’t help anything.”

Ger shrugged, but Kai finally stopped pacing and sat on the armchair by the fire. He dropped his head into his hands and grumbled an apology into his palms.

“It’s fine,” Ger said stiffly. “This is shit.”

Ceri dropped Adeline’s newly braided hair and took hold of her shoulders with a gentle squeeze.

“Is Captain Doran really that bad?”

“Yes,” the others chorused.

Kai looked at her. Desperation pulled at his features, brows narrowing and lips flat.

“If you step foot on that ice tomorrow, Adeline, he *will kill you.*”

She rolled her eyes. “Since when are you this dramatic? He’s not going to *kill* me in front of my mother and all of Eisalaan.”

“He’s not going to hold back either Ade,” Ger said, grimacing. “By the laws of the tournament he doesn’t have to. He’s *encouraged* not to, to help you show everyone what you’re made of. And – well, you know he’s not one to forgive and forget.”

He raised a meaningful brow, and Adeline glared at him.

Of course she knew Doran had never forgotten, would never get over how she'd humiliated him at the tavern all those months ago. But bringing it up in front of an already wound-up Kai was the opposite of helpful.

Kai stood. "I would like a moment alone with Adeline."

From his suddenly Kingly bearing and the resonance in his voice, it was clear that this was not a request. Adeline nodded at Ger's wary glance, and after a moment he and Ceriwyn had stepped into the hallway, the door clicking shut behind them.

Kai closed the distance between them and knelt before her, taking her hands in his.

"Please don't do this."

Adeline looked from the King to the closed door. He hadn't wanted them to see him on his knees, she realised. She wasn't sure she wanted to see it either. She swallowed, shaking her head.

"If I forfeit the battle I may as well forfeit the crown."

"Then forfeit the crown."

Her eyes snapped to his, and found them defiant and steady.

"You never wanted it anyway."

"I know my sister. She's the most obstinate person you'll ever meet." It was true. The unwavering loyalty to their mother even when she didn't deserve it, couldn't appreciate it. Her dream of one day wearing a crown, play-acted through pretend coronations since she was six years old. Her friendship with Imogen, ended without a backward glance. Once she set her mind to something, that was it. Sealed into her heart and mind forever. "Mareda isn't going to let up until one of us is on the throne. You saw how quick she was to paint you as a false ally, in a room full of the most influential people in Eisalaan. It could be years, decades of *your* people being subject to her petty tantrums."

"If it comes to that, we'll leave."

She tensed. "You could do that? You could just... leave?"

Adeline heard the way her own voice went pitifully small and saw something shift across his face in answer, something *far* too soft and understanding. She quickly added; “Eisalaan is your home.”

The softness dissolved into nothing. Kai stood abruptly.

“Our home is buried beneath an impenetrable wall of ice, and hundreds of years removed from us. There’s no going home for my people anymore. So yes, I could leave.”

Adeline tried not to flinch; it didn’t make sense for his words to sting so. Of course this wasn’t the home he knew. Of course he should do what was best for his people - and so should she.

She stood too, bringing her gaze almost level with his.

“Well I can’t. No matter who is named Heir, I’m not going anywhere. Neither is Ger, or my father, or Iseult. So I can either forfeit and we can all risk a life under Mareda’s rule, now knowing the lows she’ll stoop to – or I can fight. My mind is made up, Kai.”

He raked at his hair so hard it was a wonder he didn’t rip it from its dark roots.

“That behemoth was ready to flatten you today,” he said. He searched her eyes with such intensity she almost swayed, and immediately wished she hadn’t stood up. “Do you know what it was like, to watch that?”

“I can imagine.”

The look he gave her was bleak and disbelieving.

“It’s not so long ago that I watched him flatten *you*,” she said.

“Me?”

Kai stared at her. Was it really possible that he hadn’t recognised the Gard? The man Adeline fought today had been among those to greet Kai when he first arrived at the palace - by pinning him to the courtyard floor. She cocked her head and watched the realisation dawn over his face.

“I didn’t know.” His expression hardened. “We didn’t spend much time exchanging pleasantries.”

Maybe it was the wrong choice in that moment, but Adeline reached for Kai’s hand without a second thought. He looked at their joined hands and then up at her, unreadable.

“You recognised him in the arena. That’s why you were so —”

Kai broke off, but the truth hung in the air between them, buoyed by those unspoken words. Because yes, that *was* why she’d become so ferocious in today’s battle. It had taken her a moment to recognise the brute, but once she had, it was like a poisonous fog descended over her. A blinding rage had taken hold, and she had known that mastering that rage would be a tightrope act. She’d needed to let it in, just enough for the anger to fuel and drive her, but not so much that she lost sight of the massive Gard’s advantage.

Rage would only get her so far – but truth be told, she was quietly hoping the same fury would carry her through her battle with Doran. It had to; what else was there to defend against his own cold fury?

Kai looked down at their still-clasped hands again and ran his thumb gently over hers. “You were brilliant,” he conceded.

“I know,” she grinned. “So this argument is pointless. I’ll be brilliant again tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow is hand-to-hand combat.”

“And?”

“*And*,” he said, not meeting her eyes. “As skilled as you are with a blade, I’ve beaten you at almost every close contact battle in the last few weeks.”

Adeline snatched her hand away. “Well maybe *you* should fight him then.”

Kai went still. It was plain that he was trying not to react, but she caught the slight, hopeful tilt of his brow before he turned away.

“That wasn’t a serious suggestion Kai!”

He faced her, relenting.

“Why not? I’m well able for him. I’ve got several inches over him. You don’t think I’d relish the opportunity to beat that condescending smirk clean off his head?”

His hand fisted at his side like he was imagining doing just that, a muscle ticking beneath the stubble on his jaw. Adeline thought she should probably not feel such a dizzying wave of heat at the sight of his obvious bloodlust; concerning, but something to scold herself over later. She shook it off.

“And if you went to my mother and offered to fight in my place, then what? How would that look?”

“Chivalry may be rare in this day and age, but surely not altogether extinct.”

“But chivalry toward *me* and me alone. It would look like you fear for my safety well beyond the scope of inter-territory relations. There would be no coming back from that, not after all that Mareda has implied about us.”

The silence throbbed.

Kai’s brows pinched.

“What has she implied?”

Bollocks.

She’d left that part out. In her retelling of the moment that she’d declared her campaign, it hadn’t really seemed appropriate to add; *By the way, my sister told the entire royal family that I took you to bed.*

“I – she just – she voiced a suspicion about our feelings for one another.”

Bollocks, bollocks. The way he was looking at her – somewhere between quiet alarm and like someone had doused him in ice water – made her wish she could swallow the words back down. Why had she phrased it that way? After weeks of blowing hot and cold, and flat out avoiding being alone with her, perhaps his feelings weren’t something that needed calling into question.

A handful of heated kisses and she'd let herself lose sight of the very thing Kai Cumhaill was known for. The Drowned Prince and the Last Sorceress; a tale as old as the Silver Kingdom itself. Her whole country, her whole *life*, had risen from the ashes of his doomed love story.

Our feelings for one another – it implied so much that he'd never outright said, and she'd been a damned fool to presume.

“I mean, my feelings for you.”

But that was somehow worse. She winced, barely bothering to hide it.

Kai was unreadable, so carefully blank but for the slight bob of his throat before he quietly murmured; “And what feelings are they?”

She recognised the tight, fleeting frown that followed; he wished he could take it back, un-ask the question. Very well then. She didn't much feel like answering it, either.

She shook her head.

“It doesn't matter. My point is, you'd be playing right into Mareda's hands –”

“It does matter.”

She threw her hands up, exasperated. *Fine*, it seemed they were going to do this after all.

“Well, what are your feelings for me, then?”

He shot her an incredulous look that bordered on concern. Kai looked at her like she'd feverishly asked him the colour of the sunlit sky, like she was raving nonsense, a danger to herself. When he spoke, it was slow and pronounced, with painful clarity.

“Adeline, I have never imagined –”

A pounding at the door drowned him out. “Aren't you done yet?”

Adeline shut her eyes. She was going to smother Ger in his sleep.

“Why are you hovering at the door Gerard?” she yelled.

“The King told us to wait outside! Hurry up, we need to strategise.”

When she opened her eyes, Kai was glaring at the door with similar intent written all over his face. He sighed and scrubbed a hand across his brow like he’d wipe away the scowl there.

Whatever he had been about to say, the moment had slipped past and scattered. He stood staring at her, hands limp at his sides. Helpless.

“I cannot convince you to withdraw, then,” he said.

“You can’t.”

“And you will not permit me to fight in your place.”

“I won’t.”

He nodded, that scowl still clinging to his brow. “Very well. I suppose all I can ask is that you stay safe. Please.”

Kai half made as if to reach for her, but seemed to think better of it and folded his hands behind his back instead.

“We should probably talk about – the rest of it, too.”

The rest of it.

“Okay,” she said weakly, and then added; “I mean yes, we should.”

They both jumped as Ger began pounding on the door again.

Adeline crossed the room and wrenched it open. Ger stood with his hand still raised in a fist, a hint of a grin ghosting his lips.

“All done?”

The plan was simple; stay upright for as long as possible.

Doran would expect her to lure him into a loss, like she had with his Champion. Her best bet, she and Ger had agreed, was

to stay standing as long as she could.

And not let him kill her.

Meanwhile, Ger would do whatever he could to floor Mareda in twenty minutes or less. Then all Adeline had to do was withstand Doran for longer than her sister had managed to fight.

Adeline waited alone in her tent on the outer wall of the arena, straining to hear the crowd through the thick canopy. She could just about make out their whistles and roars, but it was difficult to tell what those sounds meant – or, indeed, if it was not just the blustering wind she heard. She counted the minutes as they trickled sluggishly by. Twenty minutes, and no one came to lead her to the arena. Twenty-five minutes. Thirty. Adeline peeled away from the wall of the tent and forced herself to sit in the small armchair that had been set in one corner by a portable pewter fireplace. She picked up the book she'd brought along with her and alternated between gazing blankly at its pages and staring into the glowing grate. Forty-five minutes and Mareda was, it seemed, still holding her own against Gerard.

Fuck.

She had wildly underestimated her sister.

Just under an hour had passed before a young Gard initiate came to fetch her. She shot to her feet and hurried close on the Gard's heels.

“What happened? Who won?”

The girl shot her a reproachful, almost pleading look and Adeline gave herself a quick mental scolding; she would have been told not to speak to Adeline, and especially not to tell her the results of the match, just as Mareda wouldn't be permitted to watch hers.

She held her hands up; “You're right, I'm sorry.”

The Gard led her to the edge of the arena, bowed, and disappeared beneath the stands, hurrying to put some distance between herself and the Princess.

Adeline gazed out on the mirror-smooth ice. It wasn't too late to walk away.

Except that it was, because Mareda was that far gone. So now, she was going to have to let Doran stain the snow red with her blood – but not without putting up a fight.

A roar rose from the crowd as she moved past the entryway and cleared the stands. She walked mechanically onto the centre of the ice, her legs moving like they were set on stiff hinges. The chorus of cheers rose, and she forced herself to turn in a slow circle, one hand raised in as sunny a wave as she could muster. From this distance, hopefully they couldn't tell a grimace from a grin.

A flicker of shadow from the corner of her eye told her that Captain Doran had entered the other end of the arena. She made herself turn from the warmth of the crowd to face him head on. She was freezing without her cloak, but the shivers hid some of that irrepressible shudder that stole through her whenever she saw the Captain, and for that she was grateful.

“Good morning, Princess,” he called as he approached.

A harmless enough greeting, but in his cold husk of a voice it almost sounded like a taunt.

“Good morning, Captain.”

That, it seemed, was to be the extent of the niceties. Captain Doran dipped an exaggerated bow, and Adeline glanced over his bent back at the clockface set above her mother's viewing tower. It had been an hour since the beginning of Ger's spar with Mareda. So, she had to keep the Captain fighting for a full hour, at the very least.

Adeline returned his bow, and before the Queen had closed her lips around the word *Begin*, Captain Doran was lunging, yells of shock and protest rising from the crowd. But Adeline was not shocked; she was ready. It was only yesterday that she'd fought his apprentice in brutality, after all. Adeline spun away and let the Captain fall into thin air, then planted a foot into the small of his back to send him stumbling. Only he didn't stumble - just absorbed the blow of her kick with a tight

growl before spinning to meet her again, shoulders squared and spine straight.

Shit.

She was not going to keep this up for fifteen minutes, let alone an hour.

She adjusted her stance, legs wide with one foot forward, arms poised to block the next blow. Doran prowled toward her, slowly edging this way and that, looking for an opening. She should have lunged right then, and she knew it. This was her moment, while he was within reach and too arrogant to bother with a defensive stance. Attacking was a risk though; not part of the plan. She was supposed to stay standing for as long as she could, with as little damage as possible.

Don't let your ego take over, said the voice in her head, sounding uncannily like Ger. *You don't need to win this tournament, you don't even need to do well. You just have to be better than Mareda.*

She hesitated too long. Doran came charging at her like a great grey bull, his head bent low as his squared shoulder collided with her chest and sent her sprawling. The air whooshed out of her lungs, mingling with the gasp of the cringing crowd.

“Adeline!” Someone shouted.

“On your feet, Princess!” Roared another.

But she couldn't breathe. How long had it been, four minutes? Less? She sucked down an unsteady breath and rolled to one side. Doran was a few feet away, upright and prowling once more. He could have pinned her while she was down, but he'd walked away.

Captain Doran wanted to savour this as much as she needed to drag it out. *So I've got that bit of spite working in my favour,* she thought grimly.

She heaved to her feet, taking care to hold her weight high in her ribs and her legs wide for balance. It didn't make much difference. After she'd narrowly dodged a series of rapid jabs, Doran finally grabbed her by the arm and threw her bodily into

the wall of the arena, sending a cluster of spectators scrambling and screeching as her shoulder splintered the thin wooden barrier. She detached herself, gritting her teeth to yank a massive chunk of wood from the soft skin above her elbow. Blood ran freely down her forearm, and in a moment of blind rage, she threw her fist into Doran's jaw.

His head rocked back like it was balanced on a spring, but when he looked down at her again his smile was smudged with her own blood.

“An excellent shot, Your Highness.”

The prick.

Don't rise, she reminded herself. Defend.

She circled him, arms up to block her upper body from his next attack while she lured him away from the shaken onlookers, now taking their seats behind the cracked barrier. She stopped moving when Doran's back was to the podium, and chanced a quick glance beyond him. Eight minutes. It had only been eight bloody minutes.

Doran's brow narrowed and pinched, and she knew she had lingered too long. He followed her gaze over his shoulder, staring past the Queen's box, up and up until he fixed on the pale clockface looming over them like a small white moon.

Dread sank through her shoulders to settle heavily in her stomach.

Strike him. Do it now, while his focus is split.

She moved just as he turned, and his eyes glinted like a triumphant blade slashing through the air. Adeline drew her arm back and swung, but she was too slow; Doran dodged her fist, grabbed her upper arm and yanked her ahead of him. In one whip-like movement, he locked her own arm across her body, pressed his forearm to her throat. He pushed up against her chin, forcing her gaze toward the clock, just in case there was any doubt in her mind that he'd guessed her play.

“I think this has gone on long enough, don't you?”

“Not nearly,” she managed to hiss through her crushed throat.

Adeline scrabbled for purchase on the ice, gouging at the skin of his arm with her one free hand. He only crushed her windpipe harder.

“Yield now, Princess, and you could still go out with grace.”

But she fisted her free hand and flailed, aiming blindly behind her, lungs burning while her mind flickered like a dimming candle. She tried to stomp on his feet but he'd parted them wide, tried to throw her head back against his nose but her neck was shackled in the crook of his arm. Her vision began to swim, the faces of the crowd blurring into a heaving sea. It was no use; he had her. She had no options but to tap out, or black out.

Or...

The vague idea floated weakly from her flailing, deprived brain even as her limbs continued to shudder and twitch uselessly against Doran's hold. It went against every fibre of her being to stop fighting, and if it didn't work she couldn't even say she'd gone down swinging.

But in a moment she wouldn't even have the option. Adeline's arms went limp. Her legs stopped twitching, and her body went slack, pulling even more weight against her throat. For a moment nothing happened, and she thought perhaps she really had passed out. She felt Doran shift his weight, but he did not immediately loosen his hold; he probably would have held on a few moments longer had an angry hiss not risen from the stands all around them. His split second of hesitance was all she needed; Adeline burst from his iron embrace, stumbling forward and landing hard on her knees as air ripped through her aching chest. Her head swam and her throat throbbed, but she forced herself upright and put as much space as she could between herself and the Captain.

He advanced with a face like thunder, not even bothering to hide his irritation. This was it. He would toy with her no longer now that he understood her game. There was no evading him. She was slower now, weaker, lightheaded with

the sudden rush of air to her lungs. She couldn't stop him as he backhanded her, sent her sprawling facedown. She pushed to her knees, her cheek stinging where her face had skidded against the ice. Doran approached, and she turned just in time to see his boot lift, poised to kick her down again; she reached out reflexively and grabbed his shin, pulling his legs out from under him. He hit the ice with a satisfying thud, and for a wild moment, as she scrambled to her feet, she thought she might even have the chance to pin him. But the Captain rocked forward, thrusting his legs out, and his body seemed to roll upright in a powerful wave that brought him face to face with her.

Adeline slapped him.

A reflexive, petty, open-handed slap with a satisfying crack that swelled in the air throughout the stadium.

He blinked.

A small swell of snickers chased around the stands, and Adeline couldn't help it; she laughed too, high and hysterical and yes, maybe a little taunting.

Humiliation burned an ugly red brand into Doran's grey cheeks, and he grabbed Adeline by the arm and hurled her against the podium wall. There was a wet, gravelly *pop* - and fire forked through her shoulder, the kind of fire that melted bones and tempered steel. Adeline's scream rent the air, and it wasn't the only one, but she was certain it was the loudest. Her *arm* - it wouldn't move, and when she tried to force it, the muscles twitched grotesquely, stoking the flame still burning through her useless joint. A single sob escaped her, and then rage burned the tears away and she screamed again, roughly, needing the raw air in her lungs to distract from the pain. She would not cry. Captain Doran would not have the pleasure of winning *and* watching her cry. She cradled her limp arm, gritting her teeth against the blinding wave of pain that crested with each twitch of her shoulder.

"Yield," he said gently, in a mockery of pity, as he prowled toward her.

She should have. She really should have. She couldn't see the clock anymore, but it couldn't have been more than twenty minutes and she wouldn't last another forty with one arm and a steady tide of agony threatening to pull her under. She should have yielded.

She clenched her teeth.

"Fucking make me," she said.

Captain Doran nodded grimly, though the sharp line of his lips tilted up. He spun on the spot, and as he came full circle his leg kicked out high, one large boot connecting with her dangling arm.

The next wave of pain to break over her was black and silent.



Chapter 36

Adeline

Popping the joint back into her shoulder hurt so badly that Adeline’s vision actually went black again for a split second. Next to that, the needle stitching the skin of her elbow back together was nothing. The alcohol swiped across the grazes on her hands and cheek barely stung.

The Healer piecing her back together tutted and sighed, and called breathless requests to her two assistants who flapped efficiently around the tent gathering supplies.

“You won’t need a sling, at least,” said the Healer, gingerly touching her shoulder.

“Well, that’s something,” she managed, along with a forced grin.

One of the assistants handed Adeline a deep wooden spoonful of something thick and too-sweet smelling that stuck in her throat and made her gag - but as soon as she managed to swallow it, the ache in her reset joint eased.

“Better?”

She nodded, lifting her shoulder cautiously. “Much, thank you.”

There was a soft rustle of commotion on the other side of the tent and then a hand shoved the canvas apart and Kai ducked inside. His eyes were wild and bright as they roved the tent and paused over the Healer’s shoulder to land on Adeline.

“You can’t be in here – oh!” The Healer dipped her knees in a curtsy as she caught sight of their intruder. “Your Majesty.”

“Apologies for the intrusion,” said Kai, but he strode further into the tent anyway, still locked on Adeline. The Healer edged reluctantly out of the way and Kai’s eyes narrowed as he took in the scratches on her face. His jaw clenched tight enough to set a muscle ticking at its hinge.

“Are you badly hurt?”

“I’m fine.”

“Her shoulder –” one of the assistants began.

“Is fine. I don’t even need a sling, remember?”

“Anything else?” said Kai.

“A few scratches, some stitches. I’m *fine*.”

“Good.”

And with that, he took her face between his hands and kissed her.

Perhaps she ought to have pushed him away or gone rigid with shock that he’d be so brazen in front of the Healers - she hadn’t missed their collective gasp - but it was without a

second thought, or any thought at all really, that her arms came up around his neck and she sank deep into his kiss.

“Your shoulder needs time –” someone said.

“Leave them be,” said the Healer.

There was a flapping of canvas as they exited the tent, and then, as though he’d been holding back for it, Kai tilted her head and slipped his tongue between her lips and she was lost.

When they finally came up for air, he ran a thumb over her mouth and Adeline could only stare up at him. *He* had stormed in here, *he* had kissed her; if there was something to be said, she would let him say it.

“There was a moment, out there, when it seemed Doran was intent on splitting your skull across the ice -”

The thumb on her lip was trembling; his whole hand was, she realised. Adeline took it and laced their fingers together.

“He didn’t. My head is entirely intact, see? I’m still here.”

He looked down at their hands. “This time you are. But last night you asked me about my feelings for you, and I... Watching that, I honestly wondered if I’d ever have another chance to tell you.”

She nudged him under the chin with her free hand until he met her eye.

“Then tell me.”

“You terrify me.”

She laughed; she couldn’t help it. He hadn’t missed a beat. Of all the things she thought he might say, this wasn’t it.

“In a good way I hope?”

He didn’t smile, glancing again at their entwined fingers. “In an entirely too-distracting way.”

Not quite the romantic declaration she’d been expecting after that dramatic entrance. Disappointment swept through her, leaving her muscles weak in its wake; her fingers went limp in his and her hand fell from his face. She started to pull away,

but Kai gathered both her hands up urgently and pressed them to his chest.

“Adeline, no, this isn’t coming out how I mean it to. I just –”

He broke off; took a deep, shuddering breath.

“Watching Doran crush your throat, my heart stopped. *Stopped*. I spent six hundred years drowning under that ice. I’ve spent months on land, choking on fog and frost. And somehow, the only time I’ve ever truly wanted for breath is when I’m with you. When I thought, even for a moment, that I might lose you – that was suffocating. It felt like I was dying. Even after everything I’ve lived through, watching the light dim from your eyes felt like the end for me.”

Kai hesitated, pausing as if she might stop him. But Adeline couldn’t have spoken if she’d wanted to; she *didn’t* want to. She watched him nod slightly at her wide-eyed silence, steeling himself, his throat bobbing before he spoke again.

“And if it’s not obvious by now; I’m yours, Adeline.” He shrugged, helplessly. “Heart, breath, all of it belongs to you. Everything.”

His heart was thundering under her hands, and her own pulse echoed every beat, reverberating throughout her body, roaring in her ears until it was a wonder she could hear him at all. But she could.

She heard every word.

He leaned in, his hand releasing one of hers to cup her face.

“Everything.”

He emphasised that last word again, his too-bright gaze holding hers, searching for understanding. And after the slow passing of a moment, she thought perhaps she did understand.

He was hers.

Hers, no matter what the stories said. He wasn’t heartbroken and lovelorn, he didn’t belong in some tragic fairytale. He was hers.

Adeline wasn't sure she'd drawn a breath in several minutes, every thought eddying from her mind except for a vague 'Oh'. Beneath her palm, Kai's chest was stuttering with each uneven breath.

"I'm yours, whether you'll have me or not. I wish I could say it was without caveat, but I think we both know it's always going to be harder for people like us. More complicated."

People like us. Leaders, he meant. Like she was already on par with him, like she'd already won the fight for her Kingdom.

"And that scares you?"

She'd been quiet for so long that her voice came out weak and faint, but at the sound of it Kai's chest lifted with a relieved sigh. His own voice steadied all at once, underlined by a sudden determination.

"I'm not scared of feeling this way. I'm scared of how badly I want to be selfish when I'm around you, to just pretend that it would be easy. That I could just *be* with you and it wouldn't mean anything for my people, or for your campaign, or your family."

She shook her head, not denying, just – processing.

If Kai was selfish, Adeline didn't want to think what that made her. Because it had barely occurred to her that giving in to this thing between them would be anything but... relief.

He was right. It would never be that simple. He had a lost people to lead and a new home to build from nothing, and Mareda, her own blood, and one of the people she loved most in this world despite it all, was not making that any easier for him.

And then there was the inevitable fallout when Mareda found her suspicions were true. Those whispers about the Merrow were insidious, and Mareda was fanning the flame. When she found out her *opponent* was indeed involved with the King of the ancient, mysterious people she claimed Eisalaan was so afraid of, Adeline had no doubt her entire campaign would hinge on their relationship. But she

remembered what her mother had said. *He's a good man. I'll stand behind you.*

If the Queen of Eisalaan thought it could work, who was she to believe any differently?

“We’ll figure it out, Kai. Because you *are* mine. Alright? And I’m yours too. Caveats and all.”

She brought her lips to his, and felt his smile curve against her mouth. “Alright. Caveats and all.”

He kissed her again, slow and sure. A leisurely brush of his lips over hers, of his hands exploring the ridge of her spine and the curve of her waist, knowing that they had all the time in the world.

Adeline had no way of knowing how much of that time had passed. They had slowly ended up half-reclined on the medical cot, Kai bracing a hand behind her while his lips and tongue traced the line of her throat. When the canvas flapped again, they broke apart guiltily, Adeline sitting bolt upright so quickly that her just-healed shoulder screamed in protest.

“Your Majesty,” said Kai, somehow managing his usual sober, regal tone even with his lips red and swollen and his shirt riding up on one side where Adeline had raked her hands down his bare back. She didn’t even want to think how she might look as she slowly raised her eyes to her mother’s – and father’s.

Oh Goddess no, spare me.

Selma was not often taken by surprise; it was clear she didn’t quite know what to do with it. Her lips hung open and she seemed frozen as the marble statue of the Sorceress. Only her eyes moved, darting back and forth between Adeline, slowly melting in a pool of shame, and Kai, surreptitiously smoothing out his shirt.

“Well,” she said finally. “I see your Healers have done an exceptional job, Adeline. You seem perfectly well.”

Her lips twitched around a stifled laugh, and Adeline covered her face with both hands, muffling a groan.

“Your Majesty, if I could explain –”

“I think we’re well past an explanation, Kai, thank you.”

Silas made an odd *hmm* noise that seemed to mean he quite agreed.

Selma crossed to the lone armchair by the grate and Silas moved to help her sit, stiff and wincing as she was. She patted his arm gratefully and turned back to her daughter and the King.

“I do hope this is more than a dalliance – it’s a rather careless one, if not.”

“It is, Your Majesty,” said Kai. “It’s more.”

Adeline peered up at him from between her fingers and smiled, even as a part of her wished for a well-placed strike of lightning to set the tent ablaze so she’d have a reason to run from this cosy little chat.

“Well then,” Selma smiled, genuine and warm. “I trust you both to proceed with the tact your positions demand. Let’s speak no more of it, or we may need to call the Healers back to reset your father’s jaw.”

Silas stopped massaging the hinges of his clenched jaw, and turned an apologetic shrug on his daughter.

“I just... would have preferred to hear about this rather than see it.”

“Me too,” Adeline muttered.

He pressed his lips together, but then nodded at her with softer eyes. “How’s your shoulder?”

She rotated it subconsciously. “It’s alright. Smarted just a bit at the time though.”

Silas glowered.

“Yes, well,” Selma said. “The Cold Council will open an investigation into Captain Doran’s actions. The tournament is designed to showcase your abilities, and that can be rather vicious, but even so. Doran is too used to fighting Gards and initiates, men and women who enter this Tourney to prove

themselves worthy of the Queen's Gard. His method of victory against a potential Heir to the throne was... questionable."

"*Questionable*," Silas muttered, and the Queen shot him a withering stare.

"Look, I'm entirely onboard with the investigation – I look forward to it, really – but I feel fine. A good night's sleep and I'll be in fighting shape by morning."

The others swapped significant looks; disbelief and surprise from her parents, mild discomfort from Kai.

"I hadn't told her yet," he said.

"Told me what?"

Selma sighed. "The tournament is over. Your final battle is to be postponed. Likely for several months, while your sister recovers from an injury."

Adeline rose. "What? Is she alright?"

She hadn't realised she was moving toward the exit until Selma lifted a hand to halt her.

"Mareda will be fine, my love. She broke her leg, but she's with the Healers now. They believe she may need to see a surgeon too, so we're unsure how long it will take to heal."

"It was not a clean break," Silas winced.

He looked positively green. *Goddess almighty.*

"What happened?"

When Silas glanced away and Selma's lip puckered, Kai answered for them. "They rushed each other at the same time. Mareda went one way; Gerard and her leg went the other."

Adeline squirmed. "That's horrific."

"This was a particularly gory round, all things told," said Silas. "I think we'll all be glad for a reprieve."

"A reprieve from the tournament, yes," said the Queen. "However, tomorrow's ball will go ahead as planned."

Adeline blanched. "Seriously?"

“Selma, is that wise?”

“I am both serious and wise, yes. We have other victories to celebrate. Dignitaries visiting from afar, gentry travelling from the countryside, and preparations are in full swing within the castle. It’s far too late to cancel.”

She rose unassisted, bolstered by just a few minutes of rest. That was promising, at least.

“We shall celebrate the new additions to my Queen’s Gard – your lovely Gerard among them, Adeline. And, instead of announcing a victory, we’ll revel in the declaration of my *two* prospective heirs.” She grinned then, a familiar glimmer of mischief that Adeline couldn’t quite place. “And our alliance with the Merrow – apparently now stronger than ever.”



Chapter 37

Kai

Kai had thought his welcoming party to be a grand affair. It had been a grand affair. The Eisalaan courtiers had attended dripping in finery, the ballroom had been transformed into an underwater fantasy, and although he'd left early in the night, he knew the Queen's guests had danced and drank until sunrise.

This, apparently, had been just an intimate approximation of the Beira family's usual, more extravagant ball. That same small ballroom opened out to two further chambers and a heated gallery overlooking the snow capped treetops of the forest. The silks and gold dust used to build the watery haven

had been replaced by lights and mirrors, glass and ice, strung in shimmering garlands or chandeliers, with carved pillars that trapped the light and seemed to glow. The whole effect was rather like stepping into a hollow diamond.

But the décor wasn't the biggest difference between Kai's first Beira ball and tonight's. Last time, the Queen had encouraged him to invite the members of his own court, and he'd fobbed her off, not yet ready to risk their safety with the monarchs he'd yet to fully assess. This time, the invitations had gone out directly to every noble home in the country. Everyone from Eda to the eight daughters of Thornland Manor would be there. Ceri would be here, at the Palace, undisguised and surrounded by the Queen's Gard.

And Kai had made his peace with it.

Doran couldn't step foot in the palace while he was under investigation. And even with one potential Heir out for his blood, he didn't believe that Selma would allow Mareda's campaign to fully take root – didn't believe she intended for anyone but Adeline to inherit her throne, even if traditions had to be observed.

Even if Adeline wasn't ready to hear it yet.

As if summoned by his very thought, the herald's announcement rang Adeline's name throughout the ballroom. Kai turned to the entrance, and there she was; a wish granted by Adhla herself.

The bustle around him should have spun to a halt. The chatter should have dissolved into sighs and gasps at the sight of the Princess descending into their midst. At the very least, Kai was sure that if he'd been willing to look away, he would have seen many more eyes on Adeline, framed as she was between the marble banisters. She wore the Eisalaan colours, a white-blue skirt spilling like cool water from her waist, and soft white lace clinging to a gauzy bodice that tapered into thin ribbon at her bare shoulders. A delicate crown of silver and pale sapphire sat like a halo among her loose curls. He'd never seen her in a crown before; the rightness of it stole his breath and made his chest ache.

She caught his eye halfway down and grinned openly. Adhlas save him, but that smile seemed to tug at something in the very centre of his being, leading him forward until he found himself waiting at the last step, one arm held out for her.

Her smile stuttered, lips parting in surprise – but she reached out and laid her hand in the crook of his elbow.

“That’s a rather bold move,” she said quietly, as she stepped down beside him. Some of that smile still slipped into her voice, the words light and teasing. “Whatever will the court think, to see the Merrow King receiving an unmarried Princess of Eisalaan?”

Kai leaned down and kissed her cheek, then brushed his lips against her earlobe and murmured: “Whatever they’re thinking could not possibly compare to what *I’ve* been thinking.”

At the soft shudder of her breath, Kai suddenly wanted to bury his face in her neck and see how else he might make her gasp.

Time and place, he reminded himself.

Adeline had once told him there was a time and place for chivalry, and though she’d meant for him to drop the propriety, the truth was that, sometimes, it was a much needed reminder. He was a King, for Adhlas sake, a little decorum shouldn’t be so difficult to master. So, with effort, he took a step back and held her hand, then led her into the heart of the main ballroom.

Whispers brushed past them as they went, eyes lingering on their clasped hands then darting up to find their contented smiles. Eda hobbled over to kiss them both squarely on the forehead, pulling each of them down by the shoulders so she could reach.

“A beautiful couple,” she said, beaming.

Ceri was somewhat less gracious.

“I bloody *knew* it! I knew it all along! This is how you decide to tell your own sister? Or rather *not* tell your own sister?”

Kai raised an eyebrow at her. “I thought you said you knew all along?”

Beside her, Os fished something from his pocket and pressed it into her hand with a loaded sigh. She took it between her fingers and brandished the gold coin at them.

“Koo, I knew before you did. This one,” she jerked her head at Os, “thought you were *political allies*.”

Os shrugged, unabashed. “Kai *said* they were allies.”

Ceri snorted.

“Now where’s Al? He owes me three *puint*.”

“You took bets?” Kai half-growled, but Ceri was already moving.

Beside him, Adeline pressed her lips together in a bemused smirk.

“I want to hear what Al’s bet was,” she told Kai, then swiftly kissed his cheek and chased off after his sister.

He was dimly aware of the smile tugging at his lips as he watched her go, but at least he had the presence of mind not to touch his fingers to his cheek, still warm and tingling where Adeline had kissed him. He’d had his tongue in her mouth and her hands on his skin – imagined and planned much, *much* more – but this casual, intimate gesture spoke of something else. Something he’d never dared hope for, not from her.

He turned back to Os – and felt the smile slide away at the look on his cousin’s face.

“What is it?”

Os shook his head. He looked rather like a grumpy, overgrown puppy with his sandy hair falling into his eyes.

“I’m happy you’re happy.”

“Os, what is it?”

“It’s nothing, just – I’m nervous.” He shrugged helplessly. “I like Adeline, and I trust you, Kai, I do. I’m sure you’ve thought about this –”

“Extensively.” That hadn’t sounded how he meant it to. But while Al might have laughed or jeered at him, Os didn’t waste time with banter, good natured or otherwise. So, Kai moved on. “This wasn’t something either of us rushed into.”

Os swallowed, then met his King’s eye and said slowly; “It just feels very familiar.”

Kai went cold.

His heart plummeted like a stone tearing through shifting waters. It had been his greatest fear, the sole reason he’d held back for so long, when really he’d wanted Adeline from the moment he saw her.

And Os, who knew him so well, had dug that fear out from its shallow grave and tossed it at his feet like it was nothing.

“She is *not* Avette.” He couldn’t keep the bite from the edge of his words, not when he already had to struggle to keep his voice low enough for only Os to hear. He stole a glance around them, but nobody appeared to be eavesdropping. “And I’m not the same man who went under that day.”

Os gripped the back of his neck and looked away so Kai wouldn’t see his brows arching beneath his mop of hair. A familiar gesture that he’d seen one too many times since they were young. It meant: *You’re wrong, but I’ll say nothing.*

Kai flexed and clenched his hands, mastering the swell of irritation that rose in him at his cousin’s gentle disdain.

“*What,*” Kai said again, practically hissing through his teeth now.

Os didn’t so much as flinch. This was familiar territory for them; Os had long been Kai’s most trusted confidant, his unerring voice of reason even if the King didn’t always like what he had to say.

“You walk chest-first through life, Kai, without a scrap of armour. You lead with your heart, you always have.”

Kai opened his mouth to answer – to say what, he wasn’t sure – when a bemused voice at his back beat him to it.

“Surely there are worse ways to lead.”

They turned as one, and the Queen offered a polite smile, either unaware or unconcerned that she'd interrupted a very private discussion. Kai's heart clawed its way up his throat, and he swallowed it back down with difficulty. How much had she heard? She hadn't been there a moment ago, he was sure - but what had she made of Os' reprimand?

Kai couldn't tell, for Selma turned away and gestured behind her, calling another woman to her side.

It was a wonder his eye hadn't passed over the woman until now, dressed as she was in velvet swaths of rich plum and violet that stood in vivid contrast to the white and silver wash of the ballroom. The colours called up childhood memories of summer fruits, of laughing mouths stained with mulberry juice. He was sure he had never seen her at the Queen's court but there was something awfully familiar about the woman. Her dark eyes and wide lips were framed by faint creases, suggestions of a youth spent smiling, leaving her forever amused. That ever-present smile nudged at something peripheral, something in a far corner of his mind.

"King Cumhaill, this is my dear friend, Empress Eleni Vanjir of Dhahlias."

The woman bent her head, lifting her skirts as she curtsied so that the gold lace embroidered at her hem would not touch the ground. He returned the bow and fixed a smile on his face with difficulty. His jaw was still clenched tight from his talk with Os.

"A pleasure, Empress Vanjir." He gestured backward to Os, not ready to look him in the eye just yet. "May I introduce my cousin and advisor, Oswalt?"

She offered Os a warm enough smile and a nod, but her attention immediately shifted back to Kai.

"The pleasure is mine, Your Majesty. I'm sure you know, the story of your resurrection has gripped the world even beyond these borders."

He hadn't known, but he nodded politely - even if the word *resurrection* made him cringe inside. Avette had not killed

him; he had lived through the whole damned thing.

“Eleni is something of an historian.”

The Empress bowed her head humbly, but her dark eyes glittered.

“Indeed I am. If you could spare a moment, Your Majesty, I would be so grateful for a chance to discuss your memories before the Thaw.”

Selma watched him, and when he glanced her way she inclined her head. Offering him the choice, just as she had when Mareda questioned his power to Wield. Once again, he understood that it was *his* history to discuss, and she would respect his decision either way. Kai gave the barest nod, then turned a smile on the Empress. “Of course.”

She beamed and those laughter lines fanned out deep around her eyes.

The Empress suggested they find some spiced wine and speak outside in the warmed gallery, away from the din of the ballroom. Queen Selma excused herself, gliding off toward another dignitary, and the Empress swept toward an attendant with a tray of drinks. When Kai turned to follow her, Os grabbed his arm. His eyes were troubled beneath his furrowed brow.

“I don’t want to leave it like this –”

“It’s fine. You’ve said your piece, consider it heard.”

He shook Os off, consciously loosening his tight shoulders and fixing that faintly polite smile back in place on his way to the door.

The gallery was dim and quiet after the bright bustle of the ball, host to just a few hushed conversations held around wide silver firepits of softly burning logs that stood dotted around the deck. The Empress stood by the furthest fire with a goblet in each hand, gazing out on the Queen’s Village and the city beyond.

“It is quite lovely, isn’t it?” She handed him his wine and turned back to the snowy view, cupping her own warm goblet

in both hands. “In a very... *clean* sort of way.”

It was too dark to be certain, but Kai thought her nose might have wrinkled distastefully at the word *clean*.

He side-stepped her comment, much as he agreed with the overall point of view. The Silver Kingdom was lovely to look at, until you had to keep looking at the same glaring sweep of snow and frost, blank and white, day in and out. No signs of life beneath the ice, not a hint of vibrant, budding green.

“Eisalaan was beautiful in a very different way before the Frost,” he said instead. She had wanted to hear his memories of Old Eisalaan, after all. “Where the village now sits, these lands were fields. Green and lush. And the forest was overgrown with wildflowers in the summer –”

The Empress turned to face him fully, and Kai stopped mid-sentence at her expression. It was not quite sheepish or regretful, but something a little more imperious. Almost proud.

“I must confess, I didn’t drag you out here to discuss your country’s history.”

Kai stiffened.

“I see.”

“As fascinating as it is,” she amended, eyes glittering with her own unspoken amusement. “But that’s a conversation that can wait. Your future, on the other hand, seems rather more pressing.”

Kai sipped his wine, waiting, willing his tense brow to smooth. He had obviously been more distracted by his talk with Os than he’d thought, if he’d allowed himself to be led away by this stranger with no clear reading of her intentions. He cursed himself silently for his carelessness, but did not speak aloud. Until he knew what the Empress wanted with him, he would give her nothing at all.

“Selma tells me you plan to make a home here in Eisalaan. On land.”

“Well, yes. The Laune is lost to us, along with any life we once led beneath the waters.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And you’ve accepted that?”

Kai took a deeper sip of wine, trying to ease the warning prickle at the base of his skull. He did not like this particular line of questioning.

“What other choice do we have?”

Something fleeting lit her eye in the dim glow of the fire. “I hear Eisalaan is thawing.”

A simple enough statement.

Yet alarm rose the hairs at the nape of Kai’s neck. He resisted the impulse to look around for a glimpse of golden-blond hair or steel grey cloaks – resisted reacting at all. This was not a conversation he could afford to have, certainly not in a public place. *Certainly* not with this enigmatic stranger.

He forced himself to hold her gaze firmly. “The Queen’s Wielders are doing their best to rectify the situation,” he said, voice steady. “You would be best speaking to the Commander if it’s the Thaw that troubles you, my lady.”

He turned away, but she called out to him, calm and commanding.

“I am not here to accuse you of anything, Your Majesty. I want to help you.”

“Queen Selma has been generous. We have everything we need.”

“You *need* waters to call your home.”

This time he did glance around. Was she *hoping* to see him tried for treason? The last thing he needed was a witness to whisper to Mareda about a suspicious conversation held in the dark. It was enough that half the Council already believed he was involved in the Thaw.

Never mind that you truly did plan to aid the Thaw.

He brushed the thought aside, as he’d grown so used to doing. It didn’t matter now. The pendant was gone, his people were adjusting. He had done nothing tangible, nothing but

prod around the archives and privately hope that the Laune might one day thaw.

“The Laune is gone,” he gritted out, under his breath. Perhaps she would take the hint and keep her own voice down. “Eisalaan is our home now.”

Unbelievably, the Empress smiled.

“Did you know that Dhalias is a coastal kingdom?”

Kai blinked at the change of track, his mind taking a moment to catch up.

No, he had not known. The world maps had changed since the days of Old Eisalaan, new alliances built and kingdoms revealed. If he had once known the kingdom of Dhalias, he wouldn't have known it as it was now.

“Have you considered making a home in the sea?”

He stilled, silenced for a moment longer. Yet another unexpected turn in the conversation he'd assumed they were having.

And yet, he was still unsure what it was she wanted. To sell off her ocean territory? Why? He had nothing to offer. No land, no Wielding power, no money, no army. He shook his head and stood taller, as though that would help him ground himself in the discussion.

“As I said, Eisalaan *is* our home. And in any case, the environments are entirely different; saltwater versus freshwater.”

“But both are habitable?”

“In theory.” He'd spent a fair bit of time sneaking off to explore the wider ocean in his youth, and would come back with his lungs burning and his tongue dry as sand. Just the thought of breathing in saltwater made his gills pucker.

“There may be basis to that theory; Dhali fisherman have long reported sightings in the deep waters just past our bay. It's rumoured there's a Merrow settlement beneath the current.”

Kai found himself silenced once more. The Empress inched closer, knowing she had his attention now.

“If you wanted to explore the possibility, Dhalias would gladly open its waters to you.”

At what cost, he wanted to ask. Instead he said; “Why the secrecy? If all you want is to help, why hide that from the Queen?”

The Empress gave a tinkling, graceful laugh, entirely at odds with the mischievous light behind her smile. Once again, Kai was struck with a strange sense that he had seen that smile even if the face itself was brand new.

“Selma is a dear, dear friend, but I have known her since I was little more than a girl. You may have gathered she’s rather patriotic. The suggestion that anyone might lead a better life *outside* the Silver Kingdom would surely prickle her pride.”

Her tone was a confused cocktail, dry with amusement, perhaps a touch bitter, but sweetened by fondness. This woman unsettled him more than he could fathom; he still had no clear intuition about her other than a vague idea that they’d met before.

“Why? We don’t know each other. What do you stand to gain from helping us?”

The Empress turned away, casting her eye out on the glittering cityscape. The amused lines around her eyes faded as her lips flattened. When she spoke, it was almost as though Kai were not standing beside her; as though she were murmuring the quiet, bitter words to herself.

“When it comes to the Silver Kingdom, the line between guest and captor has always been far too thin for my liking.” She huffed a humourless laugh. “Thin as a hairline crack in the perfect, shining ice.”

Kai did not know what to say. That hadn’t answered his question whatsoever, but she didn’t elaborate and he found that he did not truly want to know what she meant.

“I will think on it,” he said finally. “Thank you. For the generous offer.”

She shook herself from the dim reverie that encased her, pulling that unreadable smile back into place as she faced him once more.

“I leave for Dhalias tomorrow, but you may write to me when -”

The Empress fell silent, as the glass doors opened and music and noise spilled out to stir the silence of the gallery. He turned to see Silas stepping halfway onto the frosted deck, talking over his shoulder to an elegant courtier who laughed delicately into her palm at something he'd said.

Silas turned just as Kai raised a hand in greeting. The older man froze in the doorway, one foot in and one out, the smile sliding from his face. Then he turned heel and led the courtier back inside.

Ah. Perhaps he wasn't quite over the incident in the tent. Not that Kai blamed him.

He hid a wince behind a sip of wine, but if the Empress had noticed anything off about Silas' swift exit, she had the grace not to mention it.

“I'll leave you to your thoughts, Your Majesty,” she said quietly, sounding rather as though she was drawing back into her own thoughts. And then she smiled, suddenly magnanimous. “I hope I've given you much to think about.”

Apparently this was not so much a goodbye as it was a dismissal. The Empress gathered her shawl, a deeper, gentler purple out here in the lowlight, and pulled it tightly across her shoulders. Then she turned her back, once more looking out over the glittering rooftops and frosted spires of the Queen's Village.

The cold breeze rustling through the gallery had been barely noticeable until Kai stepped back into the warmth of the ballroom. His face stung at the sudden change, and he could feel the blood returning to his frigid cheeks.

“Blushing again, Kai?”

Al appeared on his right, peering sideways at him with a broad grin. “What happened? Did Adeline glance in your general direction?”

Despite himself, Kai huffed a small laugh. “I’m glad you’ve become such fast friends,” he said dryly. “And I’m not blushing.”

“No,” said Al, narrowing his eyes. “You’re brooding. Again. What is it?”

Kai drained his wine. Was he brooding? He’d barely had time to fully contemplate what he’d just learned, not between his argument with Os and his confusion over the Empress and her intentions. Now that he thought over it all, he didn’t know what to feel.

But he did know what questions to ask.

“Your grandparents. They came here from a settlement near the Southern waters, is that right?”

Al wrinkled his brow, thrown for a moment by Kai’s change of topic, but he nodded all the same.

“Yes,” he said, drawing the word out curiously. When Kai didn’t elaborate, he shrugged and went on. “They came from a lake they called Mbalu. The surrounding Kingdom is known as Imbani today, from what I’ve heard.”

Kai nodded. He wasn’t familiar with Imbani, but if it was in the Southern waters, Al’s family would have crossed half of Adhlas to get here.

“A long journey. They must have swum for weeks.”

“If not months.”

Kai turned in toward Al, until his back shielded them both from the slow moving crowd of the ballroom. He leaned in and lowered his voice.

“Did they ever come across any ocean settlements?”

Al’s eyes widened slightly, then creased in a wry smile, finally grasping the line of Kai’s questioning.

“I’m guessing that’s not a rhetorical question.”

“The Empress of Dhalias seems to think there are Merrow living just beyond her waters. She’s offered us access to her coast.”

The words seemed to take a minute to settle, and Al frowned before his brown eyes blew wide.

Kai nodded once more at the look on his friend’s face; he was sure he’d worn the same expression just minutes ago. It was something between disbelief, and shock and – perhaps a touch of longing.

“I know,” said Kai.

Al leaned against the wall, shaking his head.

“Do you think it’s true?”

“I don’t know.”

“What will you do?”

“I don’t know,” he said again. Kai paused. “What would *you* do?”

Al blinked at that, and Kai couldn’t blame him. Al was a dear friend, but this was normally the sort of conversation he would have had with Os, normally Os that he would have sought out for counsel. But Os wasn’t here right now, and maybe it was unfair of him, but Kai didn’t really want another opinion from his cousin at this particular moment.

Besides, Al was just as much a member of his court and kingdom. Just because he enjoyed a life of frivolity shouldn’t mean he had no say in the wellbeing of their people.

Al blew a gust of air between his lips, hands landing on his hips. “Adhlas save me, I’ve no idea Kai. What would be the plan? Find the settlement? Settle ourselves in the sea?”

“That’s an option, yes,” he hedged.

“Or stay here?”

“Or stay here.”

Al stared beyond Kai, at nothing, as though watching the pieces slot together in thin air.

“Well then, I suppose the obvious thing is to put it to a vote. I can see it going one of two ways, you know? Eisalaan may have changed, but it’s still the only home any of us have ever known, and I know some of us would want to be here just in case –”

He faltered, a rueful expression knitting his brow. It was unfamiliar on his open, laughing face, and the sight of it made something twist painfully in Kai’s gut.

“In case the Laune is ever recovered,” Kai said carefully.

“Yes.”

Kai reached out and squeezed Al’s shoulder gently. They’d never spoken about it; what might have happened to those encased deeper in the lake. But Kai knew that many of his people still held out hope. Al, it seemed, was among them.

“So we’ll hold a vote?”

Kai hesitated.

So much about this didn’t feel *right*.

Or perhaps it doesn’t feel right because you don’t want to leave either.

He tucked the thought away; he was having to do that a lot lately. It was becoming rather exhausting, tearing off pieces of himself and tucking them away for safekeeping. If he kept at it, what would be left of him?

“In due course. But before I bring this offer to the others, I want to be sure it’s genuine. Do you think you could ask around, discreetly? I want to know everything I can about the Empress Vanjir before we make any promises.”

Al grinned gamely, the beaming brightness of his smile melting away that uncomfortably sombre mask he’d been wearing. “The Earl’s daughters do love to gossip.”

With something of a plan in place, they parted ways. Kai had no sooner turned away from the privacy of his huddle with Al,

than Adeline was suddenly upon him, eyes bright with laughter as her hand closed around his arm.

“Come on,” she urged, grinning, and of course he could not resist.

Gerard had apparently cleared a space for them all by flailing like an angry fish until the crowd around him stepped back by several feet.

“I’m not familiar with this dance,” he intoned to Adeline, eyeing Gerard’s rhythmic convulsions. “What are the steps?”

Adeline grabbed his face in both of her hands, pulling him down to kiss her. He could feel her smile curved against his mouth, barely suppressed laughter humming between them.

“That’s just Ger. There are no steps, you just *dance*.”

She took his hand and lifted it, twirling under his raised arm. Beyond her, Ceri had linked arms with Ger and the two of them spun in a wide and dangerous circle, given a generous berth by the other guests.

Adeline held her hand out to him now, a question in the arch of her brow. And maybe it was the wine, or the uncertainty that now hung above him, or maybe it was just the fact that Adeline had asked and he couldn’t bring himself to deny her.

Adhlas save me, why not?

He took her hand and drew her to him with one quick tug – and they danced.

He spun her in circles, dipped her backward so her back arched over his arm and her hair nearly brushed the ground. He swayed with her held tight to his chest and rested his lips on her forehead. And as one song spun into another, the crush of people around them grew. More friends of Adeline’s, Lady Imogen and a porter named Jack, joined their number, and Al dragged Os into the fray, too. All around them their friends danced, everyone laughing and embracing, switching partners and cheering each other on as they grew bolder and drunker on merriment alone.

And Adeline looked up at him with the softest, most contented smile, and he *knew*, he knew in a way that seemed to sink through his chest and force his heart to fight its way up from the depths of that knowledge.

Kai knew that he wanted to make her smile like that more than he wanted to draw breath. Knew that no matter what the Merrow chose, he could never bring himself to leave her.

And that, ultimately, was the problem.



Chapter 38

Adeline

“You’re all clearly jealous,” Ger called out over the overlapping shouts and delighted crowing. “I am an excellent dancer.”

“You’re a hazard,” Os grumbled, to another burst of laughter.

“I don’t know, I think he’s got a certain talent,” Jack offered.

Ger dropped a smug smile into his cup as he drank, though he didn’t spare the poor boy the glance he so clearly craved. Adeline looked at Jack’s bright, lovelorn face and felt a deep pang of sympathy. It had been less than two days since she and

Kai had had their talk in the Healer's tent. She had not yet forgotten that feeling; the pining and uncertainty.

He sat behind her now, and she put her hands over his where they rested around her waist, pulling his arms so his hold on her tightened. He kissed her forehead in response. It was nice.

More than nice; it was the very definition of bliss to be lying here on this couch, half-reclined across Kai's lap with his steady heartbeat at her back. And maybe, if they'd had a moment alone since the Healer's tent, it would have been enough.

But it *was* nice.

There was a certain kind of contentment in the chaos of the crowded parlour. It was one those rare moments in time, just bright and loud enough to distract her from that silent, empty space where Mareda should be. For that, at least, she was grateful. But as the ball had begun to wind down and they'd been among the stragglers still swaying determinedly on the dancefloor, Ger had taken it upon himself to round up their friends and invite them all to share a nightcap in Adeline's rooms. Al and Imogen took turns singing rowdy drinking songs by the fire, Ceri having roped Os into keeping time with her using the silver spoons she'd found while rooting quite comfortably through Adeline's drawers. Ger played the gracious host at the drinks trolley while Jack made doe eyes at him from across the room.

Perfectly nice, she told herself again, though even in her head she couldn't help but add: *If a bit crowded*.

It was almost on reflex that Adeline leaned her head back to look at Kai – and when she did, she found him already watching her. His hazel eyes drifted over her lips and throat, his pupils spreading like an ink stain as he took her in. His hand came up under her chin, and he spread his fingers against her throat, guiding her back into an upended kiss. Her stomach came alive with flutters, heat washing through her until her face grew warm and flushed.

It was only the briefest brush of lips, but they broke apart to whistles and catcalls, and a disgusted groan from Ceri. Adeline

lobbed a cushion in the general direction of the noise, and someone yelped in protest.

“You’re making quite a habit of these public displays,” she said quietly to Kai, as she settled back against him. She pressed a hand to her hot cheeks, glad that he couldn’t see how flushed she was from that one brief kiss. “Whatever happened to all those courtly manners?”

“Deepest apologies, Princess,” Kai murmured against her forehead. She could feel his smile on her skin, and wondered if he could feel the heat of her skin after all. “Forgot where we were for a moment.”

She turned in his arms, as much as she could, twisting to face him.

“We’re in my rooms. There just happen to be several other people here.”

His smile widened, then melted away as he held her eyes just a moment longer. And then, speaking so low that only she could hear him, he said: “Pity.”

The air had very suddenly leeched from the room. She could not breathe, and with her brain starved of breath, she couldn’t think of a single damned thing to say; no response that was clever or alluring enough.

“Alright Princess, let’s get that dress off.”

Shock bolted through her. Adeline sat up so fast she teetered at the edge of the seat and was saved only by Kai grabbing a handful of her skirts.

Imogen stood over them, one fine eyebrow raised.

Adeline managed to recover herself with a gasp of breath disguised as a laugh, and as she gazed up at her friend, she batted her lashes.

“Rather presumptuous, Imogen,” she said, the tremble of her voice just about passing for amusement. “Aren’t you going to woo me first?”

“Oh Ade,” Imogen patted her cheek, almost consolingly. “My love, if I was flirting with you, I wouldn’t need to *ask*

you to undress. But you're not going to get out of that thing by yourself, and I'm going to bed."

"You are?" It might have sounded a touch hopeful. "I mean; oh, is it that late already?"

Imogen's lips twisted to one side. They were still perfectly painted, even this side of midnight; a feat Adeline was sure could only be achieved by the most skilled of Wielding hands.

"I know what you meant. And yes, it is that late. I'm going to have to skip about half of my creams *and* my face massage. But I have to get to sleep, unless I want to wake up with eye bags big enough to sling over a saddle."

"Face massage?" said Os. He frowned, and rubbed absently at one cheek.

"It's a beauty regime, you numpty," mumbled Ceri. She had dropped her spoons, and now curled up on the armchair closest to the fire, watching drowsily as Os continued to poke at his own face.

Imogen clapped her hands briskly.

"Well, come on, off with it."

She pointed towards the bedroom, and Adeline followed dutifully, squeezing Kai's hand as she went.

Imogen had been right to insist on helping her, of course. The dress buttoned down the back in dainty little pearls that Adeline doubted she had the dexterity to undo, even if she'd been able to see them. Beneath it, she was strapped into a corset that would have taken her an age to unlace, and she'd probably risk popping her newly healed shoulder out of its socket if she tried to reach the cords.

"Right," said Imogen, as Adeline gathered the loosened corset to her chest. "I think I've saved you both about half an hour."

Adeline blanched.

“It’s not – We’re –”

“Oh, please,” Imogen drawled.

“No, honestly,” Adeline insisted. She clutched the open corset closer to her without really knowing why. Perhaps it was harder to get her point across while her clothes were literally falling off. And for some reason, she *really* wanted to get her point across. She didn’t want to get her hopes up; didn’t want to be disappointed. “Getting me out of my dress is the furthest thing from Kai’s mind right now, I guarantee it. You haven’t spent much time around him, but I can tell you; the man is *made* of chivalry.”

She sounded a little bitter even to her own ears, but Imogen was still smirking as she picked up the discarded dress and carefully shook it out.

“Is he?”

“Yes.”

“So I didn’t just see him take you by the throat in front of half a dozen people?”

Adeline squirmed, and said nothing. She didn’t know what to think. *Pity*, he’d said, that they weren’t alone out there. But she remembered how he’d wrenched himself away from her in the forest, how he’d left her outside her rooms that night despite how entirely, dizzyingly obvious it was that he’d wanted her. How he’d avoided her for weeks afterwards.

I’m accustomed to a world where it would be improper.

He’d said that, too.

And all this, before she even let herself consider whatever cracks her ancestor had left scored across his heart.

“Look,” Imogen went on, oblivious to the warring of Adeline’s thoughts. “All I know is that the tension out there is positively suffocating, and I wasn’t about to let one of *my* dresses become a casualty. Do you have any idea how long it takes me to create a single ice pearl? If your Merrow King snapped even *one* of these, I’d have had no qualms about Wielding the winds to freeze his bits off.”

Adeline gave an indignant groan, but Imogen just smiled sweetly, despite the wicked glimmer in her eye.

“You can take it from here, I trust.”

Then she kissed the air around Adeline’s burning cheeks, and swept from the room in a flurry of pearl-studded skirts. Once she’d gone, it took Adeline longer than usual to dress herself for bed, rattled as she was.

She’d taken her hair down, and her curls were wild with the warmth and flurry of the ballroom. Her eyes were bright, cheeks stained a deep and stubborn pink with the heat that refused to drain from her face.

The tension is suffocating.

Goddess above.

Adeline caught her own eye in the mirror and imagined her reflection glaring sternly back.

Get it together.

She nodded at herself, and drew up tall.

She hadn’t expected to have to host half a dozen people in her parlour before bed, but she’d found one of her least revealing nightgowns, a white one that hung almost to her knees, and draped a matching cotton robe over her arms and chest for good measure. Then she turned to the door, trying not to think about what would or would not happen once that room full of people emptied out.

But when she opened the door, there was no wave of music or chatter to greet her. No Ceri dozing by the fireplace, or Ger holding forth to an indulgent audience, gesturing with wild abandon.

There was only Kai.

Right where she’d left him, facing away from her on the couch with one hand nursing a tumbler of dark rum on the armrest, an elbow propped up on the seatback behind him. He looked so at ease, so far removed from his usual perfect posture and tense frame. If it weren’t for the clinking of the ice

in his glass, she wouldn't even have noticed the way he was rocking his wrist distractedly from side to side.

She pulled the bedroom door behind her, letting it click shut, and he glanced over his shoulder at the sound.

Neither of them spoke.

Kai's eyes drifted slowly from Adeline's face to the hem of her robe. The fireplace crackled beyond him, lighting the contours of his face on one side; one hazel-gold eye reflecting the flames as he lingered on her bare legs for just a moment longer. Then he turned away and picked up his glass, throwing back the last of the rum as Adeline rounded the couch.

The butterflies in her stomach had taken flight, and the heat in her cheeks had grown scalding, but she managed a smile as she cast a look around the empty room.

"Was it something I said?"

He breathed out quietly, almost a laugh. "Imogen rounded them up. Ceri was starting to snore, so she had Os and Al take her home."

She took the empty glass from him and set it down on the end table.

"And Ger and Jack —" Kai's breath hitched a little as she stepped in front of him and her leg brushed his knee. He cleared his throat, and pushed on. "Ger was hungry, so Jack agreed to sneak him into the kitchens."

A genuine laugh escaped her at that, and Goddess it felt good; a relief to have some of that tension rushing from her chest.

"I'm sure that took several seconds of convincing."

She stood in front of him now, almost knee to knee. As he watched the sway of white cotton around her thighs, Adeline swore she saw Kai's tongue pass over his lower lip.

"You stayed," she said.

When he looked up, his eyes were darker than she'd ever seen them, greens and golds lost against the endless depth of

blown black pupils. He seemed to consider her very seriously for a moment, a problem to be solved – then reached up and wound his hand into the ends of her belt, tugging hard.

When Adeline fell astride him, the air dissolved from her lungs, a shimmering wave of heat curling through her in its place. She might have gasped, if she'd been able to breathe at all.

“I stayed,” Kai said, his breath warming her lips as she leaned into him, “because I thought I might like to kiss you in private for once.”

One hand was woven firmly into the curls at the nape of her neck, the other still tucked into the belt of her robe.

Adeline swallowed a breath, with difficulty. “You stayed because you want to kiss me?”

He released her belt then, smoothed his hand over her hip and grazed her thigh, toyed with the bunched up hem of her robe. Her mind was a haze, wreathed in warm fog.

“At length. Did you have something else in mind?”

He tugged gently on her hair, guiding her head back so her throat was arched beneath his mouth. Every brush of his lips sent another flutter soaring through her, and she was so painfully, acutely aware of those fingers playing against her thigh.

Higher, she willed him, not yet ready to plead with him out loud. Not ready to believe he wanted what she wanted.

He pulled back, and in that split second she could have cried – but then he was undoing the tie of her robe, peeling it slowly back from her shoulders. She shook it off with a little less care, letting the whole thing fall and pool at his feet. Adeline shivered, and it wasn't just the cool air on her arms, but the hungry way that Kai's eyes trailed across her thinly clothed chest, growing more pained as her breath swelled and stuttered in her lungs, her breasts peaking under his gaze. His hands twitched at her hips, like he ached to reach up and touch them.

But he looked away, looked up at her. He cupped her face in his hand, stroking a thumb along her jaw, her lips. He took a

single curl and ran it all the way through his fingertips, watching intently as it sprang and swayed against her cheek.

“So beautiful, Adeline.”

Adeline froze, completely caught off guard. The heat simmering and pulsing throughout her body was so overwhelming, she could barely think around it but –

Beautiful.

She must have known he'd think so, in the back of her mind, but to hear the word fall from his lips in that soft, low tone was something entirely different. It made her chest hurt, a gentle, fluttering agony. It made her throat burn with words that wouldn't come. So she kissed him, trying to press all the words she couldn't find into his lips.

Kai let her claim the kiss, tilting his head back for her, parting his lips so she could stroke her tongue along every inch of his mouth. And all the while, his palms skated up over her thighs, under her nightgown, past her hips, rough new callouses from his weeks of training brushing her skin and trailing goosebumps up her sides. Her kisses grew harder and clumsier the more he touched her, until he finally grabbed her by the waist and drew her whole weight down on him, grinding himself none too gently between her thighs.

Her mind scattered like snowdust at the feel of him.

The hard, unyielding feel of him aligned with her aching centre, the press, the proof that he wanted this just as badly as she did.

She broke away, gasping, but he chased her mouth, drawing her lower lip between his teeth as he angled his hips against hers. She moaned into his mouth, and even as he pulled away to bring his lips to her ear, he ground deliberately against her, still stoking the frenzy that pulsed through her at his every movement.

“You give me more credit than I'm due,” he half-panted. “I am *not* made of chivalry. Not when it comes to you.”

Fuck, she thought distantly. *He heard that.*

Yet strangely, Adeline found she didn't even have it in her to care.

Not as he caught her lips again. Not as he gripped her hips and guided them, rocking her slowly over the length of him until she was scraping his bottom lip between her teeth to keep from moaning. Her nightgown had ridden all the way over her hips, and her undergarments were soaked and tight with friction. If they kept going on like this, she was going to shatter and melt right here in his lap.

It was too much, and not yet enough.

“Did you really stay because you wanted to kiss me,” she managed to gasp out. “Or was it so you could tease me off the brink of sanity?”

He laughed, low and hoarse. “*I’m teasing you?*”

“Tell me why you really stayed.”

She wanted him to say it.

Kai sat up, groaning slightly as her weight shifted against him. His breath in her ear was hot and unsteady.

“What is it you want to hear, Adeline?”

Then, so quickly she couldn't think, he braced her thighs in his hands and spun them both, leaning her back into the settee. He hovered over her, a devious smile playing at the sharp corners of his lips.

“Do you want me to say that I stayed so I could finally, *finally* touch you the way I want to?”

He ran his hand up the inside of her leg, firm at first and then lighter, lighter, *too* light, just his fingers playing at the edge of soaked lace.

“Should I tell you that I've wanted to know what you taste like as long as I've known you?”

He slipped a finger into her undergarments and hooked them to one side, baring her almost entirely. She tensed against her own body, fighting the urge to writhe, though she couldn't bite back the whimper that escaped her as his knuckle brushed over

her centre. *Fuck*, she wanted his weight on her. Just wanted him to touch her, fill her.

“Or how badly I wanted to be inside you that night in the forest? And every night since?”

She was beyond patience, beyond pride. At this moment in time, she cared about nothing more than feeling her body stretch around him, feeling him move inside her.

“Please,” she breathed.

As if something inside him had snapped at her broken plea, Kai swore and reared back. “Take it off,” he rasped. She didn’t hesitate in reaching for the hem of her nightgown and yanking the whole thing over her head as he did the same with his shirt.

And for a moment, they paused. Indulged in one drawn out heartbeat of drinking each other in. Kai, his broad shoulders lifting with every heavy breath, was made up of all the hard plains and long lines she’d imagined, but she hadn’t expected the fine dusting of dark hair that ran from his navel to somewhere beneath his belt. She wanted to reach out and trace that line, to follow it all the way to its end. But she made herself look up at Kai, just a moment before he dragged his own gaze from her body, his eyes now hooded in a way that made her sway where she knelt; she grabbed the back of the settee for balance.

“We used to chew a leaf,” Kai said, and for a moment, with his voice so low and uneven, she could barely understand him. A leaf? “Have you something similar?”

Oh.

She had no idea what was in the herbal tonic she took on the first day of every bleed; maybe it was the same leaf. She only knew that Marie had started sending it to her rooms shortly after she met Ger. She’d taken it ever since, out of habit.

Adeline grinned, though she felt her lips flicker at the effort; the restraint.

“Taken care of.”

And that, apparently, was all he'd been waiting for.

Kai was upon her the moment the words passed her lips, pressing her back against the cushions again, pulling her underwear over her hips as she struggled with his belt and finally worked it free. He pushed his trousers the rest of the way off and kicked them to the floor and then there was nothing between them at all, and Adeline's back bowed off the sofa as she felt the heat of his skin on hers, as his stiff cock pressed against her, his movements so slow and tender it bordered on torment. Kai's teeth caught at his own lip, frowning and heavy lidded as he pored over her face, consuming her every gasp and moan. He slid his hard length up her slick and swollen centre and back again, slow, *so* slow.

"I thought," she gasped out, "you weren't teasing?"

A spent flicker of a grin. "I never said that."

But he bent his head to her lips, and let her wrap her fingers around him. And Goddess, now that she held him in her hand and felt just how thick he was, she could have sobbed with sheer want as she guided him to her. She was so ready, so achingly wet for him, that it took just one swift thrust for Kai to bury himself deep inside her.

Their voices mingled together, Adeline's cry so loud in her own ears that she almost missed the groan that dragged from Kai's chest. Neither of them moved at first, revelling in this small relief, this delicious new torture. Her body fluttered and tightened around him, adjusting to the way he fit inside her, filling her so wholly that she could barely catch a breath. She rolled her hips just once, and he exhaled raggedly, pinning her in place with one hand.

"Wait," he gasped. "Fuck, I – I need a minute. I just – *Adhlas*, you feel too good."

She whimpered, gave a broken nod, and raked her hands down his back, biting her lip with the effort of holding back.

Kai was breathing hard as he slid his hand between their bodies, his fingers slipping in the wetness between her thighs, tracing slow, wide circles. He kissed her neck, her collarbone,

the swell of her breast and then - when his tongue drew her nipple against his teeth, her body moved of its own accord, arching into him, and he finally drove himself deeper inside her. She was starting to tremble beneath him already, but Kai was moving now, building a steady rhythm, withdrawing and returning to her, hard but slow so she could feel every inch of him as he set her alight. She crossed her ankles around his back and lifted her own hips, needing him deeper, deeper.

Adeline's throat was becoming hoarse with wave after wave of moans ripping through it. She tried to meet each of his thrusts with the rise and fall of her hips, but release was building with every wet circle Kai teased between her thighs, every groan he breathed into her neck.

His fingers narrowed, those circles growing more erratic with each thrust into her body, but closing in, his thumb just barely brushing her swollen bud.

When he pulled back to watch her, bracing his free hand on the back of the settee, his eyes were lit with that wild, electric intensity she'd come to understand he normally smothered within himself. The fierce, burning light she'd come to crave. And she was burning too, burning from the inside out, the flames of her own want and his chasing one another, consuming her whole.

"Look at me," he said, and it was the King who spoke to her, commanding and sure and a little taunting, even as his words broke on his fractured breath. "I need you to look at me, Adeline."

She moaned something unintelligible even to her own ears, but Kai just grinned that rare, wicked grin.

"I want your eyes on me. Watch me while I make you come."

The words undid her.

The unexpectedness of Kai, *her* Kai, courtly and upstanding, demanding her pleasure for himself. It was like he'd given her body permission to tighten desperately around him and topple them both over the brink, her climax rippling through her in

waves and spasms as Kai pressed them both harder into the cushions just to stay inside her. He moved faster and more erratically as she neared the edge of her orgasm, until he drove into her with one final surge and a hoarse, brittle groan.

She wrapped her arms around him, drawing him to collapse against her as aftershocks ran through them both. She smoothed her hands down his back as he caught his breath, and when he did, Kai turned his face and kissed her, slow and sweet.

“So,” she said, minutes later, when she’d found her voice once more. “That was why you stayed?”

His laughter was muffled against her bare shoulder.



Chapter 39

Kai

He was being selfish. He knew he was being selfish.

The Empress Vanjir's offer hung around Kai's neck, growing heavier by the day, making it harder and harder to draw a comfortable breath. He had to make peace with Os and tell him about the rumoured settlement off the coast of Dhalias. He had to cast a vote among the Merrow.

He had to tell Adeline.

There was a strong chance he would have to leave for Dhalias, if that was what was best for his people, and he had to tell her.

It wasn't as though the moment hadn't presented itself, time and time again. They'd been together more often than not in the days following the tournament. He'd gone to bed in her rooms every night and woken beside her every morning. They'd spent lazy hours talking about nothing at all, and there'd been many times when he'd felt the words moving through him, when it would have been so easy to tell her.

Last night, she'd lain across his chest, her heart filling in the beats between his own, her hair tickling his cheek. An untouchable moment. He'd wanted to tell her then, but she'd looked up at him with sleepy brown eyes, and suddenly he wasn't so sure what would come out if he opened his mouth.

I would've destroyed your kingdom to save my own.

The frost was my fault.

I'm falling in love with you.

I might have to leave you.

Somehow it seemed safer to keep his mouth closed. He'd wrestled with himself until Adeline's eyes fluttered shut and the decision was made for him. He would tell her in the morning, he swore to himself. He would tell her.

But the morning came, and Kai woke to Adeline's voice in his ear, her teeth grazing his lobe, and he could think of little else but the hand that swept slow, taunting lines down his abdomen. His body was thrumming with want and tension already, accustomed after just a few days to starting every morning this way. He reached for her, but Adeline leaned away, climbing to her knees. She pulled the sheet away from him as she moved, and settled between his legs with a smirk.

"Good morning," he grinned, crossing his arms behind his head.

She smiled sweetly. "It will be."

Her hair spilled over his hips as she bent over him, and Kai couldn't see her, had no warning before her tongue suddenly swept the rigid length of his cock. He groaned, the entire world around him narrowing to the wet heat of her mouth.

By the time she was through with him, Kai could barely move. Adeline laid her head down on his stomach, smug and satisfied, and caught her breath.

“I need a few minutes to recover.”

She raised her head to look up at him, eyes glinting mischievously. “And then?”

He reached down and took her chin between his thumb and forefinger. Maybe he’d need less than a few minutes. “And then, Adeline, I’m going to lay you down on your front and –”

Thump thump thump.

A knock at the door sent Adeline scrambling for the sheet, and together they dragged it frantically over their naked bodies. She wiped her mouth with the back of one hand, and behind it, Kai could see a suppressed giggle lifting her lips.

“Adeline? Can I come in?”

“No!” Adeline yelled.

On the other side of the door, Imogen muttered something they couldn’t hear. “Well you need to come out then, if you want my help. You’re going to be late for the banquet.”

“Bollocks,” Adeline sighed.

“It’s barely an hour past dawn, what banquet?”

He’d been speaking to Adeline, but Imogen answered. “Adeline’s birthday banquet. It’s breakfast with the court.”

Kai stiffened. “It’s your *birthday*?”

But Adeline was already up, scrambling around for the nightgown that Kai had thrown somewhere over his shoulder last night. She disappeared under the bed and came up with the shift already halfway over her head, chucked Kai’s trousers onto the bed, then called out to Imogen to wait for just a moment.

He followed her frantic lead, dressing as fast as he could. “It’s your birthday?” He asked again, as he buckled his belt. “You didn’t tell me.”

Adeline spun with her robe half on and landed a hurried kiss on Kai's forehead.

"I'm sorry, I honestly forgot! You'll be there though?"

Disorienting as this morning was becoming, he nodded without a moment's hesitation. Of course he would.

Adeline beamed at him, flushed and beautiful.

"Family dining room, in about an hour."

"Forty minutes," Imogen called.

Adeline's eyes rounded. "I'd better get ready."

She kissed him again and herded him toward the door with one shoe on and the other clutched in his hand.

"Get changed into fresh nightclothes, the nicest ones you have – it's my little birthday tradition."

In the other room, Imogen sat, neat and poised, in the armchair by the empty fireplace. She rose into an even curtsy and Kai returned a lopsided bow, his poorly laced shirt hanging open as he bent.

"Good morning, Your Majesty. Apologies for the intrusion."

He started speaking, meaning to assure her that he'd just been *visiting* with the Princess and she hadn't intruded at all, truly. The words died on his lips at the barely concealed smirk the dressmaker gave him, and he shrugged helplessly instead.

"Good morning, Lady Imogen. I think she's ready for you."

He nodded over his shoulder, then stepped aside to hold the door open as Imogen passed him.

He pulled it shut behind him, and no sooner had it settled in its frame than he heard Imogen's muffled exclamation.

"Well, well, well."

A swell of giddy laughter was all Kai heard before he hurried from the room.

The family breakfast was a strange affair. Before Adeline, Kai had never courted anyone - not like this, not openly. He had imagined that being an official consort to the Princess of Eisalaan would be more formal. But also, somehow, *less* formal. The Beira family were, as Adeline had warned him, dressed in an odd mix of nightgowns and fine jewels, bed robes and elaborate hairstyles. He tugged absently at the black velvet robe that Simon had found for him, and wished that he hadn't worn his slippers.

He couldn't have imagined that this relationship would see him the honour of being seated at the Queen's table during a family celebration, while cousins and courtiers were relegated to further corners of the dining room. At the same time, Kai had been half-dreading some kind of audience with the Queen in which she'd expect to hear his intentions with her daughter. Instead, she greeted him warmly as Adeline led him by the hand to the table, then turned to envelope her daughter in a hug as the family all around them called out their birthday wishes.

In fact, the only person at the table to even blink at his arrival was - of course - Mareda. The eldest Princess stiffened on sight, then pursed her lips and uttered something short and sharp to her father. Edward paused with a piece of bacon speared on the fork that was halfway to his lips, and glanced in Kai's direction. His expression was not quite apologetic - perhaps more uncomfortable, as though he weren't so much embarrassed at his daughter's abrasiveness as he was embarrassed she'd been caught out.

"Kai, come sit," Adeline whispered up at him, tugging on his velvet sleeve from her seat at the table.

He offered Edward a slight nod, then took his seat beside his Princess.

With Mareda resolutely ignoring them both, the rest of the morning passed by rather pleasantly. Adeline was bright and glowing under the attentions of her family, and their love for her translated to warmth and welcome to Kai. The Queen fussed over his plate, stacking it high with hot scones and creamy scrambled eggs, and even Silas seemed to have

forgotten the discomfort of their encounter in the Healer's tent, happily engaging Kai in a discussion about the theory of Wielding.

“And then of course there are those who claim that the Laune is the magical beating heart of the world, and that our rivers and oceans act as arteries,” Silas was saying. “Some scholars believe that's why magic is no longer found outside of Eisalaan. The heart is frozen, so the magic does not flow as it once did.”

“Mm,” Kai nodded, as non-committal as he dared. “An interesting idea.”

He gripped his fork tightly, determined not to react. This definition of magic was all too familiar. Almost too close to his own unsavoury experiences with the phenomenon. If he thought on it too long, he could hear Avette's honey-sweet voice in his ear. Could feel the press of the deep water on his eardrums, the sting of the glass vial biting into his palm.

Silas smiled apologetically. “Forgive me, I'm blathering. It's refreshing to have a new sounding board you see; Adeline has heard my theories *ad nauseam*.”

Adeline grinned at him over the rim of her teacup. “Surely not *ad nauseam*. Close enough though.”

Silas reached over the bread basket to ruffle his daughter's hair fondly, and she dodged away laughing, curled into Kai's side, and stayed there.

They were the last to leave the table, with Adeline having to sit and receive well wishes from each of her guests. Kai kept her cup full of the hot honeyed tea she seemed to favour, and sat patiently as she embraced a flurry of aunts and uncles, cousins and courtiers.

When Mareda passed by, slow and careful on her crutches, without even sparing a glance at her sister, it didn't escape his attention that Adeline's spine and shoulders stiffened. And then dropped. He reached out for her, not sure what good it would do, but at the feel of his hand at her back, Adeline turned her head and smiled.

“Thank you,” she said, and then reached up to cup his cheek.

The look in her eyes was somehow both fierce and soft, the light in them warm as melted caramel.

“I am so glad you’re here,” she whispered earnestly.

Kai couldn’t speak, entirely held by her gaze. From the weight of her tone, he knew there was more she wanted to say, and it dawned on him that she wanted to tell him something – perhaps the very same *something* that had been on his own mind just last night.

His chest ached.

And suddenly, he wasn’t so sure he wanted her to say it. Not if she’d regret it when he told her... Well. Everything else he needed to tell her.

“Kai, I –”

He was saved from having to stop her when a grizzled figure suddenly loomed over them.

“Ade, happy birthday.”

Adeline blew out a quick breath, fixed a smile to her lips and looked up at Edward.

“Thank you,” she said warmly, reaching out to squeeze his hand.

Edward nodded, his own smile tentative and tight. Then, hesitantly, he leaned closer, bracing a hand against the table to create a quiet huddle between the three of them.

“I also wanted to take this opportunity to speak to you privately. To apologise, I suppose. Mareda is hurting. I know she loves you, even if she doesn’t quite agree with your –” He paused, his eyes flicking briefly to Kai as he weighed his words. “Your politics.”

Adeline bristled visibly. But, when she spoke, her voice was forcibly cheerful. “That’s quite alright, I don’t agree with her *politics* either. Or her behaviour.”

Edward tugged awkwardly at the loose collar of his robe, his fingers catching against a dull silver chain. Kai did not hear

his dolefully muttered reply. Because there, unearthed from the low line of the Commander's silk bedshirt, was a pendant.

A hollow glass vial, pulsing with faint, barely-there blue light. The air in the dining hall seemed to cool, to press against Kai's skin, to roar in his ears like a tumultuous tide.

He was aware of Adeline speaking only because she laced her warm fingers through his own, breaching the chill that gripped him.

“Respectfully, if *I'm* owed a few sorry words, it's Mareda I expect them from. And Kai can surely expect a full blown apology.”

Edward's gaze slid back to Kai – and only a moment too late did he realise that he was still staring at the pendant. The Commander blinked down at his own chest. He straightened abruptly, and all too casually, tucked the pendant deep beneath his robe and bedshirt.

“Yes, well.” He cleared his throat. “Many happy returns, Princess.”

Adeline watched him go, shaking her head.

“Do you *believe* –” She paused, eyes narrowing on Kai's face. “Kai? What is it?”



Chapter 40

Adeline

Adeline was trying to be patient, but Kai had not spoken in at least fifteen minutes. His pacing was making her tense, and the scones and tea in her belly were curdling under the steady drip of dread that flowed through her.

“Kai,” she said finally, barely managing to keep the strain from her voice. “Please. The longer you spend wearing out my carpets, the worse I’m going to build this up to be in my head. Put me out of my misery. Sit down.”

He stopped pacing, but didn’t sit.

“Tell me what’s going on, Kai.”

His hands, when he dragged them through his hair, were shaking. *Goddess*. Maybe it was as bad as she was imagining. Maybe it was worse.

Kai crossed the room, and though she scooted over to make room for him, he sank onto the chair across from her.

“I don’t know where to start.”

“At the beginning.”

He nodded, not meeting her eye. “That was several hundred years ago, but - it’s a story you’re already familiar with. The First Frost. The Last Sorceress. Avette.”

Avette.

He’d never spoken her name aloud, but Adeline knew who she was. Avette was a Princess. *The Princess*, the Goddess-blessed saviour of Eisalaan and Mellow alike.

Kai’s great, lost love.

She watched him closely, but his face didn’t betray any hint of longing, or warmth, or... anything really. He went on.

“What happened between myself and Avette was not quite the fairytale it’s become over time. I don’t want to speak ill of your ancestor, but it’s important that you understand that it wasn’t some grand love story. I suppose I must have thought it was at the time. She was beautiful, and beloved and I’ll admit her attention was more than a little flattering. Add to that the fact that the King had forbidden us from seeing each other, and she became more or less irresistible.” He stopped for breath, seeming to steady himself for whatever came next. He rubbed absentmindedly at the small scars that laced his palm, brows pinching as though they pained him still. “I got swept up in it. She asked something of me, something impossible, and I made it happen. And then she made me regret it.”

“What did she want?”

“A pendant. Not just any pendant. It was laced with the purest magic imaginable, imbued with water from the deepest heart of the Laune. She gave me a small glass vial and had me travel to the depths to fill it. She was going to use it as

leverage, a way to bolster her own magic so she could intimidate her father into leaving us be. She told me we could be happy together, and that my people would be safer if the King wasn't calling for my head on a spike. So I did it, and I almost died doing it – even as a Merrow, at those depths, in those kind of tides, I –”

He trailed off, shuddering, then laughing without a trace of humour.

“And it was all for naught. She didn't go to the King after all – or maybe she did, since as it turns out I wasn't entirely privy to her plans. Maybe they'd planned it all together. All I know is that she came to the lake with that pendant around her neck, and the power of the Laune pulsing all around her, and she tried to create a prison to hold us – to hold our magic, and my knowledge of who she was. Only she must have misjudged the pendant's strength, combined with her own. She created the Frost.”

He looked up from his study of his scarred hands, finally meeting Adeline's eye. “And I helped her do it.”

Adeline exhaled slowly, trying not to let her relief show.

“Kai, you didn't know what she was planning.”

She reached across the space between them, trying to take his hand, but he shifted away.

“There's more. I think – No. I have believed for some time now that the pendant could aid the Thaw, and restore the Laune.”

Adeline tilted her head; she didn't understand.

“I stopped looking for it before anything ever happened between us,” he said quickly. And then she did understand, though she wished she didn't. She wished he would stop talking. He went on. “But I know where it is now - Edward has it. I saw it on him, just this morning. I think he's been using it to strengthen whatever Wielding power he was born with –”

“You were going to complete the Thaw.”

How had her throat gone so dry and tight in a matter of moments?

Kai had been staring at his scarred palm again, and it seemed to take him an age to look up, to meet her eyes. His were tight and dim, the light behind the shocking hazel muted.

“I didn’t think I had a choice, Adeline. I didn’t want to hurt you, or your Kingdom –”

“But you *would* have. If you’d found it, you would have undone everything that holds Eisalaan together, destroyed the livelihoods of thousands, and then *fucked off into the Lake.*”

She didn’t realise her voice had risen until Kai flinched.

“Adeline...”

She stood, needing to not be at his eye level, to put some distance between them. Her chest *hurt*, panic and heartache assaulting her ribs with every beat of her heart.

“You cast me in your part, do you realise that? Avette used you? You used *me!*”

She hated that her voice cracked, hated even more that he had the sheer fucking nerve to shake his head.

“You can’t possibly compare –”

“You did what she did!”

“*No.* She purposely lied and manipulated me against my own people. I would *never* have made you complicit. I never asked you for anything, I made sure of that.”

“No, but you accepted the help I naively fucking offered up, didn’t you?”

“I wasn’t angling for your help.”

“No? You said you were looking for the pendant. Where?”

Kai stared up at her, his bristled jaw ticking.

“Where did you look, Kai?”

He spoke carefully, low and reluctant.

“At first, I expected to see the Queen, or perhaps you or Mareda, wearing it around your necks. You never did, so I checked the palace exhibitions.” He winced. “I searched the archives. Then you told me about the Shrine, and I thought...” He scrubbed a hand over his face, worn and weary. “It doesn’t matter what I thought. I was sure it would be there, and it wasn’t. That’s when I gave up. At the Faire, I decided it was lost, and I committed to making a place here for the Merrow.”

At the Faire. The day he’d charmed her little sister, danced with Adeline by the fire, felt her up in the dark forest.

“Bollocks,” she half-whispered, and sank into the couch.

They sat in silence for a long time.

“I know how this looks, but it’s not as though I went pawing through your room while you slept, or stole your mother’s jewellery box. I only looked where I had free access.”

“Oh yes,” she spat. “Thank you Kai, for being so respectful in your complete betrayal of my trust.”

She stood again, crossing the room until she reached the door, where she stood with her arms folded.

“I’d like you to leave now.”

“Adeline.” His voice broke on her name. “I’m sorry.”

And she believed him. She really did believe he was sorry. He looked sorry. He looked heartbroken, really, like a man torn in two. But what did that matter? She’d also believed that he’d never do anything to hurt her, and here they were.

“I’m glad you’re sorry. I’d still like you to leave.”

He got to his feet, but didn’t move any closer to the door, hesitating until she understood that there was something more he wanted from her.

“I am not going to tell the Queen anything you’ve told me. Your people are still safe here. Your sister is still welcome to stay at my apartment. But *you* need to get out of my room.”

To his credit, he didn’t try to plead or argue any further before he took his leave. To hers, she kept her hot and rageful

tears at bay until the door had shut between them.



Chapter 41

Kai

Kai didn't know what the Commander was doing with that pendant at his throat. The Wielders fought so vehemently against the growing Thaw, he had to believe that their Commander had no idea of the extent of the power he held. If he knew, the Silver Kingdom would surely be colder and starker than ever. If he knew, the ice would be mended, and Mareda would have no cause to villainise the Merrow as she did.

So it hardly seemed to matter if Edward had the pendant that had ended the world as he knew it.

All that mattered was that Kai was going to fix his mistakes.

He had come clean to Adeline, like he'd sworn to himself he would, and it had cost him just as he'd feared.

But it had also untethered him. Alun had written to Kai – days ago now - with all that he'd learned of Dhalias and Eleni Vanjir, and both the Empress and her offer appeared genuine.

And so the time had come to hold court with the Merrow.

They gathered in that same clearing in the forest, the one where they'd hidden away while he stormed the palace searching for a Beira to hold accountable; where he'd first brought Adeline to meet his people. It seemed like a comfortable middle ground; close to that ghostly echo of the Laune's call that they all pretended not to hear, but not so close that they had to stare into the glassy depths of their lost home.

It hadn't taken long for Al to answer the summons that Kai sent out with Simon, and between them they'd herded the others together by dusk.

Os and Ceri had come straight to the clearing armed with fresh firewood and borrowed blankets, setting up in a shaded corner of the clearing before the modest crowd descended in a small sea of faces shining with hope. And now, with the remnants of his subjects huddled together with trust in the eyes they turned toward him, Kai took a deep breath and broke the news.

“First of all, I want to thank you all. You've been... *inordinately* patient and understanding in the face of what has been a rather bewildering turn of events, to put it mildly. I know it hasn't been easy.” He fought the urge to glance around, though he did lower his voice. “And I know the welcome hasn't always been warm.”

“Nor has the bloody weather,” Eda crowed from her place by the fire, and a soft chorus of laughter rose up among them. Kai smiled, despite himself.

“No, nor has the weather. So you'll be pleased to hear that you may feel the sun on your skin soon enough. We've been

offered access to the open waters of Dhalias, where it's been all but confirmed that there is a Merrow settlement living in the ocean."

Save for the gentle rustle of wind through the evergreens above them, there was silence.

"We're... leaving?"

Kai recognised the speaker by her tired eyes and the babe dozing against her shoulder. He remembered how she had spent the night of the Faire saving an empty space for someone who would not – *could* not – join them. He inhaled against the pressure in his chest.

"We will send envoys to seek out the Dhalias settlement, and if relations with our fellow Merrow are favourable – and the conditions of the waters are liveable – we may consider leaving."

Half of the crowd looked up at him with longing – the other with open horror.

"Nobody will be forced to leave," he said gently. "And we will not give up on our true home. This move may even open up more opportunities to us. We could explore other routes to the Laune, perhaps swim to the mouths of each river and determine where the ice ends and the sea begins."

He paused, giving the Merrow the room they needed to let his words sink in, to challenge him, or put words to their fears or – he dared to hope – perhaps even celebrate. The silence stretched on. And on.

Kai cleared his throat, glancing down for a moment to get control over his expression – he could not let them see that he'd expected a warmer reaction. This was not about him.

"Before we make any firm decisions, Alun will lead an exhibition to Dhalias and report back to us all."

Al's head shot up at the mention of his name – they'd discussed this at length of course, but his dark eyes still widened at Kai's words. Nervous, to be entrusted with something so important. But hopeful. Kai smiled with all the warmth he could muster, and Al got to his feet eagerly.

“Yes, so.” Al clapped his hands together and grinned, standing tall. “I leave for Dhalias in three days’ time. We’ll travel by coach, kindly loaned to us by Thornland Manor, and enjoy the hospitality of the Empress Vanjir on our arrival in Dhalias, before sailing out to the open waters in one of her fully serviced ships. Any takers?”

The number of hands that flew into the air was all the reassurance Kai needed. They might be apprehensive - how could they not be? But this was what the Merrow needed from him – what the Beira family needed from him, too.

This was the right move.

Even if it felt like he was burying half of his heart here in Eisalaan. If all went well, he would still send the other half, bleeding and off-beat, across the ocean to start anew.



Chapter 42

Adeline

Keeping Kai's deception from her mother was even more difficult than Adeline expected – not least because their lunchtime arrangement had resumed, with Selma taking her meals in bed once more. This course of bedrest was at the behest of the Chief Healer, backed by Sebastian's own growing worry.

"I am perfectly well," the Queen insisted to anyone in earshot.

But the Healer was concerned that she had yet to shake the weariness that came with her flu. She'd pushed herself too far,

he said, resuming the stresses of her role before she was fully healed and therefore setting back her recovery, again and again.

And so the Queen conducted her business from her rooms to the best of her ability, holding only the most important meetings by her bedside and trusting the Cold Council to take care of the rest.

“How was the court this morning?” She asked one afternoon as Adeline set down her luncheon tray.

Adeline busied herself for a moment with preparing the Queen’s tea, adding milk and a generous dollop of honey – one thing she’d learned in the last few months was that she’d inherited her insatiable sweet tooth from her mother.

When she turned, Selma was eyeing her intently. Adeline raised a brow as she passed her the steaming cup.

“I suspect you’ve already heard all about it from Sebastian.”

The Queen outright grinned – an expression Adeline wasn’t sure she’d ever grow accustomed to seeing on those once immobile features.

“Perhaps. Tell me anyway.”

That morning, Adeline had held public court for the first time, under the supervision of the Council. As the race was not yet settled, the Queen planned for her eldest daughters to trade off, each taking their turn to sit on the Dais and address their countrymen’s concerns. Adeline remembered watching Mareda fluster and cry, cowed by the righteous anger of the Eisalaan people who came before her looking for help and answers. So, she’d walked onto that Dais ready to let their rage and frustration land, willing herself to be calm and empathetic.

And it had worked.

Their anger turned to venting, and by the fourth address, her mother’s subjects began to approach her with grace, allowing her their time and patience as she did her best to answer their queries and ease their grievances.

“It went... very well,” Adeline said.

Selma gave a pointed smirk, setting her daughter’s eyes to rolling.

“Oh, just drink your tea, will you?”

Just months ago Adeline would never have dared speak to the Queen in such a way, but today it had rolled naturally off her tongue and her mother took it in stride, smiling as though she almost enjoyed her daughter’s irreverence. She sipped her sweet tea through pursed lips, her eyes alight even if the skin around them was sallow and thin with exhaustion.

A light knock at the door had Selma setting her tea cup down on the bedside table, a tiny slosh spilling over the edge as her hands trembled with the movement.

“Are you sure you’re up to taking meetings?” Adeline asked.

Those circles under her eyes really were quite dark.

The Queen waved her shaking hand dismissively. “I’d be up to running a lap around the Laune if they’d allow it. See my guest in, won’t you darling?”

Adeline moved reluctantly to the door, making sure to shoot her mother a disapproving look as she went.

She was still glancing over her shoulder as she pulled the door open, and when she turned she found herself face to face with Kai.

They greeted each other only with shocked silence.

Though they’d found themselves in the same room on several occasions, Adeline had made every effort to avoid coming quite so close to Kai. This was the first time they’d made eye contact in weeks.

Kai recovered first, sweeping into a quick bow.

“Princess, good afternoon.”

She resisted the urge to smooth down her hair, forced herself to meet his gaze. Aware that her mother was watching, she curtsied.

“Good afternoon, Your Majesty. Do come in.”

She turned and strode back to the luncheon tray, trying to steady her pace so it wouldn't be so obvious that she needed to be out of this room *right now*. She unloaded the teapot, cream, and honey jar onto the bedside table and tidied up her mother's empty plates and cutlery, making her excuses as she went.

“I'll just run these down to the kitchen and leave you to your meeting.”

Adeline pressed a quick kiss to her mother's cheek, hefted the tray up in her arms and made to leave. But Kai, ever courteous, stood holding the heavy door open for her, and as she passed, his hand landed gently on her elbow.

“Adeline,” he began, voice pitched so low it made her shiver. “Might we –”

She shook him off quickly.

“No,” she said under her breath, tone as neutral as she could manage. “No, we might not.”

A quick glance over her shoulder saw the Queen arching a curious brow. Adeline fixed a tight smile to her face, knowing well that her mother would have questions later, but still adamantly pretending there was nothing to question. She nodded in lieu of another curtsy and left the room.

“He asked after you, you know. King Cumhaill. Asked how you were.”

Selma smiled, faint laughter lines creasing into the bruised hollows beneath her eyes. She had called Adeline back to her rooms for supper, under the guise of wanting some company while Sebastian caught up with her correspondence. But this, Adeline knew, was what she really wanted. She'd known it was coming from the moment she shut the door on Kai that afternoon.

And her mood had not improved since.

“I told him I’d expect him to know better than I did, but he didn’t seem to agree.” Selma waited expectantly, and when Adeline did not answer, she set her fork down on her bedside table and sighed, folding her hands atop her blankets. Her tired eyes were keen, unrelenting. “What’s happened, Adeline?”

“Nothing.”

She sounded flat and distant even to her own ears, but Adeline tried for a breezy smile all the same. Her mother, unsurprisingly, was not convinced.

“Has he done something –”

“No!”

The word snapped out of her. She knew she sounded like a stroppy youth, and honestly, she didn’t much care. She was tired. She was tired of being good, of being gracious. Of being walked all over until she was worn thin. Maybe she was due a bit of a strop. Maybe she was owed a bit of grace.

She poked at a piece of pastry in the dish on the bedside table, chasing it around the ceramic tray.

“No,” she said again, more quietly. “Now can you leave it alone, please?”

The Queen pursed her lips.

“I can, but I’d rather not. You’re upset, and I want to help.”

Adeline laughed, the sound dry as it ripped painfully from her chest with no humour to soothe it.

“And you always get what you want, don’t you? Being the Queen?”

Selma’s pale brows pulled together, both pinched and arched. She looked so delicate, with her wide, hollow eyes and crestfallen expression. Perhaps it should have soothed the sickening anger roiling inside her, but Adeline found it only made her grit her teeth harder.

“I just want you to be happy, darling.”

She laughed again, even harsher than before. “Do you?”

The Queen frowned. “Of course.”

Adeline dropped her own fork into the dish, a little forcefully, and watched her mother flinch at the sudden clatter.

She relished it.

“Do you remember Elsie?”

The Queen tilted her weary golden head, puzzled, and the angry youth within Adeline’s chest reared up. This would be entirely too satisfying.

“Elsie?” She smiled faintly, politely apologetic. “No, I’m afraid I don’t.”

Adeline smiled back, a too-sweet smile that almost hurt her teeth.

“Elsie was my friend. Her mother was a porter in the kitchens.”

Nothing at first. But then her mother’s puzzled smile went slack, and Adeline watched as she paled further, even the faint, fevered flush draining from her cheeks.

“I remember.”

She said it quietly, so quietly that it was easy to go on as though she hadn’t spoken at all. So on Adeline went, bright and over the top, grinning with all her teeth.

“On my Blessing Day, I tried to play a joke on Mareda. Nothing particularly sophisticated, just a stupid little trick. I ran down to the kitchens, and Elsie helped me find the tray of goblets to be served at our table.”

Selma squeezed her eyes shut.

“Adeline,” she whispered, as though it pained her. As though *she* was the one who hurt.

“I painted the rims with silver icing sugar – all of them. I didn’t know which one she’d pick, you see, and I wanted to make absolutely sure that I got her. Not the brightest plan, in hindsight, but I *was* only eight.”

“Adeline. I’m sorry.”

She ignored her, smiling forcefully still, even as heat pricked at the back of her eyes.

“And when you delivered my Blessing Day speech, and the crowd started laughing, you laughed too. Do you remember that? Someone brought you a mirror, and you laughed at that stupid silver moustache, and then you didn’t even wipe it off. You played up to it for a bigger laugh. But you didn’t think it was funny, apparently. By the time they served dessert, Elsie and her mother were gone. You hugged me goodnight – for the first time in years, I might add - and as you held me close, you let me know that they were gone, and that it was all my fault.”

“It wasn’t.”

Adeline caught her breath. It was heaving in and out of her, the rush of it so forceful that she couldn’t help but let her mocking smile slip away.

“Well, I know that now.” She sniffed. She didn’t know when she had started crying; hadn’t realised she still held tears over this, all these years later. “Where did you send them?”

Selma looked down at her knees, two thin peaks beneath her shroud of blankets. She didn’t look like a queen in that moment, or a mother. She didn’t look strong and constant, she looked scared. She looked like a child.

“The Machull Mountains. Edward has a cousin there, a Marquess. He had just inherited an estate and needed staff. He’s a kind man, and generous. I won’t pretend that’s why I did it. I knew it would hurt you. I thought that was the same as discipline, and discipline was all I had.”

She would not look at her. It was maddening.

“Why?” Adeline’s voice was thick, but the anger hadn’t quite sapped from her tone. Selma smiled sadly down at her blankets.

“I don’t know. I wish I did. Something – something broke in me, shortly after you were born. People said it was my heart, that I’d encased it in ice to match my frozen Kingdom. They weren’t far off.”

She roused up a laugh, the sound dead and hollow. Adeline said nothing. They were circling something, she knew it. Something she had always needed to understand. Something her father had tried and failed to answer in a way that made any sense.

When Selma finally looked up, her pale eyes were swimming, though she still fought to hold her smile.

“I think,” she said carefully. “I think I was just sad. Sad all the way down into my veins, and not allowed to feel it. So I didn’t feel it. Any of it. And because I couldn’t feel anything, I missed out on all the moment that made you. Just gave them away. To nursemaids. To your father. He did an outstanding job, of course, wonderful man that he is. That only made it worse.”

Adeline swallowed hard, the words lining up in some ineffable way.

Didn’t feel it. Any of it.

“You were sick?”

Her mother nodded only slightly.

“I’d heard it could happen; they called it *the baby blues*. I felt it a bit after Mareda, but it eased. That was normal, the Healer said. It was supposed to go away like it had before, but,” she paused, and rubbed at her chest with the heel of one hand as though she held that sickness still, within her ribcage. “It never really did.”

Adeline ground her teeth. The anger within her had not simmered away, but changed, turned to a burning bile that stung her throat as it rose and rose.

Sad and not allowed to feel it.

Sick.

Her mother had been sick. She was the Queen of the Silver *fucking* Kingdom, and she had been sick for years, and no one had known. No one had helped her. They’d only made up stories about her frozen heart; never tried to help it thaw.

Adeline didn't even know who to be angry with. She felt a sob rip free, and curled her nails into her palms until they bit into her skin. Selma reached for her hand and shakily pried her fingers out of their fist, but she went on.

"I knew, deep down, in a place I could no longer reach, that I had ruined things between us before you'd even said your first word. I didn't know how to reach you either, but that was never your fault. None of it was your fault. And I'm so sorry, Adeline."

The Queen was crying in earnest now, far beyond the dignified glimmer in her eye that was as much as Adeline had ever seen. Her frail shoulders were shaking with it, each word trembling off her lips like the tears that spilled from her ice blue eyes.

"I'm sorry I didn't swallow my pride and ask for help. I'm sorry I didn't try harder to get better. I'm sorry it took me so long to heal, and I'm sorry I made you suffer for something that was happening to *me*. I will never not be sorry, and I know it's still not enough." She gasped out, one long ragged sob, and then shut her eyes tight. "I know that."

Adeline reached for her without a second thought, clambering up onto the bed and gathering her mother in her arms as she broke entirely, desperate sobs wracking her thinning frame.

"It's enough." She kissed her forehead so hard it left a little pink mark on her pale brow. "It's enough. You're enough."

Selma only cried harder. Cried as though she'd had these tears building up for more than twenty years. Cried as though she'd never stop.



Chapter 43

Adeline

The next few days Adeline spent in near solitude. Kai didn't press her again, but each time their paths crossed he gave her the same lingering stare, the one that seemed to plead silently with her to meet his eyes. Whatever it was he wanted to say, she was not ready to hear it.

Was not ready to field questions about the Merrow King, not from anyone, but especially not from her mother. Not with the little seed of shame unfurling in the pit of her stomach at how she'd lashed out like a child, forced her mother to reveal parts of herself she clearly hadn't had the nerve to face yet.

She wasn't ready to talk to her mother about any of it.

Wasn't ready for Ger's well-meaning jokes, or Imogen's blunt words meant as comfort.

Wasn't ready to discuss her campaign for the crown with her father.

So, between Council meetings, court, and mealtimes, Adeline tucked herself away in her favourite corner of the library, at the end of the aisle lined with tales of adventure and romance. Perhaps not the most ingenious hiding spot, but she'd normally escape to her apartments when tensions at the palace rose high, and that was no longer an option with Ceri now firmly settled there. Besides which, the smidgen of pride she'd clung onto wouldn't allow her to *actually* hide away, frightened and heartbroken and just a little bit pathetic. Though honestly, at the occasional sound of passing footsteps she'd often considered leaping into the dark little gap behind her armchair, where the shelves stopped just a few feet shy of the wall and she could slip out through the opposite aisle if anyone came looking.

In any case, when Ger came across her on her third day of hiding, she didn't have it in her to take her escape route. He strolled up the aisle looking mildly peeved, then stopped when he got close enough to see her face under the dim and flickering lantern at her side. He frowned at her, his lips turning down in an exaggerated pout.

“What's up, buttercup?”

Ger perched on the arm of her chair, then slid down into the seat, jostling her until they were both wedged tightly in the too-small frame.

“Ow, Ger! Get off!”

He ignored her, struggling to turn his head against one awkwardly raised shoulder to glare down at her.

“You know, I'd be offended if I hadn't heard you were giving the silent treatment to just about *everyone*. Do you know that your mother actually wrote to me at the barracks?”

At that, Adeline ceased shoving at him and glanced up.

“What?”

“She’s not stupid Adeline. I like to think I’m not, either.”

“Debatable. We may actually need someone to come and carve us out of this bloody chair.”

“Something’s happened with *His Majesty*, hasn’t it?”

She shoved at him again, but he didn’t budge.

“He’s been asking about you too, you know.”

“*Don’t* tell him where I am!”

Ger rolled his eyes. “He knows where you are, you fool. Everyone knows where you are, we’ve just been giving you the space you so clearly desire.”

“*This* is giving me space?”

“No, you’ve had enough space now. *This* is me fulfilling my duties as your dearest friend, breaching your space to tell you to stop wallowing and *talk* to somebody.”

“Imogen is my dearest friend.”

Ger reeled back a bit, cocked an eyebrow.

“What a hurtful lie.”

It *was* a lie, but he was being even more irritating than usual and she’d yet to recover her patience after her outburst at her mother the other night.

“Ger, please.”

“Alright, look.” With an almighty yank and a bit of grunting, Ger freed himself from the armchair and stood to look at her. “I’ll leave you in peace, but – at least get in touch with your mother, alright? If she’s looking to *me* for reassurance, she must be really worried.”

She nodded, not looking at him.

Ger sighed, and bent down to brush a brief kiss to her forehead.

“You can talk to me too, you know. When you’re ready. I’ll always be here, Ade, when you want me to be.”

And with that, without pushing her any further, he turned and strode away.

She was going to talk to her mother.

She was.

She *would*, even if she didn't yet know what to say, how to explain that she'd put an end to her foolish romance with their Merrow ally. How to explain *why* it had ended without betraying Kai – because for all that her mother had changed in these last few months, she couldn't see Selma forgiving his deceit, even if it had amounted to nothing in the end. Eisalaan was *everything* to her, and no threat against the Silver Kingdom could be tolerated.

With no plan in place, Adeline had sent a note to the Queen's rooms that afternoon, asking for an audience.

Mother,

I'm sorry I haven't come by in a few days – hope you haven't gone hungry without my lunchtime visits.

Maybe I could deliver you some dessert this evening?

Adeline

She'd yet to receive a response, but at least it gave her time to think. Maybe too much time – too many thoughts.

She ate a quick supper standing at the kitchen counter, Marie watching her with her grey brows deeply furrowed, though she said not a word. And for that, Adeline was grateful. After washing up, she retreated to the library again, settling in her shadowed alcove and picking up the book she'd set down on the table the night before. She was eager to get lost in the story, to switch off her aching, worn out brain – she'd know what to say when the moment came.

Or she hoped she would.

But Adeline must have exhausted herself spinning circles in her mind, because she woke in the dark with her book in her lap and her lantern barely glowing, a faint orange ember. She was lost for a moment, barely aware of where she was or what had woken her - until the soft echo of footsteps in the main library turned down the corner of her row, and her stomach lurched. Was this the response she'd been waiting for?

She stood, hurrying forward to meet her mother's valet in the shadow of the shelves. But it wasn't the valet.

Kai stopped short just a few feet before her, his face so open and hopeful it set her stomach crumbling into an open, yawning pit.

"What are you doing here?"

She hadn't quite meant to blurt it out like that, but the hopeful look reeled itself in, his face suddenly carefully blank.

"I just meant - I'm expecting a message," she said.

"Oh." Kai glanced back over his shoulder. "I haven't seen anyone else, but I don't know that you'll receive it anytime soon. It's just after two in the morning."

A little shock jolted through her at that. *Two in the morning*. Goddess, she'd been asleep for hours; no wonder she felt like she was dreaming.

"I was waiting for you by your rooms. When you didn't come back I thought you might be here."

They looked at each other for a long moment, each waiting for a cue of some kind.

This silence was all wrong; Adeline wanted to reach for him. She wanted to turn away until his footsteps retreated and faded out beyond the book aisle. She did neither, but finally, gently this time though not with a note of weariness she asked; "What *are* you doing here, Kai?"

"I'm leaving."

Adeline sighed, too tired to hold her exasperation pent up in her chest.

“You don’t have to *leave*, I’m just saying you’ve come looking for me for a reason –”

“No, Adeline.” He took a step closer, voice low and careful like he really needed her to understand what he was saying. “I’m leaving the palace. Leaving Eisalaan. I told you I’d fix this, and this is the best I could come up with. Alun sent word a few days ago; we’ve been granted refuge in a Merrow territory off the coast of Dhalias.”

“Dhalias?”

She echoed him numbly, out loud and in her head.

Dhalias?

Her father’s homeland; seas so blue they washed into the skies, salted air and sunbaked shores. Clusters of bleached stone towns laced in pink and yellow flowers, and green, so much green. All of it framed by a peaceful scape of mossy mountains in the distance. It had always seemed an entirely different world to her, and she happened to know it was over a week’s journey. Adeline had been only once, when she was very young, so on the few occasions that Silas had gone without her she’d ached for his return for what felt like months at a time. But he’d always come back.

Unless she was quite mistaken, Kai wasn’t coming back.

Her head swam with a sudden flood of questions, several of them spilling out at once.

“When are you – *how* did – there are other Merrow?”

Kai straightened his cuffs, putting on that distant, regal air he normally reserved for Council meetings and gatherings of the Queen’s court. He seemed to consider for a moment, then selected the easiest from her muddle of questions.

“Os will leave with most of the others tomorrow. I’ll stay a few days to settle some business with your mother, but by the end of the week, Ceri and I will join them.”

Adeline was vaguely aware that she was staring at him. She blinked to break her frozen gaze, and turned around, finding her way to the armchair and sinking into it on shaky legs.

Dhalias. She'd wanted her space and now here it was; soon enough, there would be vast stretches of land between them, forest, farmland, rivers and entire oceans keeping Kai as far away as she could reasonably ask. It was the solution, the only answer to all the problems that arose from her knowing what he'd done. What he'd *meant* to do. Whether he'd changed his mind or not, he'd intended to spur on the Thaw, and she, as a member of the Beira family and a potential heir to the Kingdom, now had to live with that knowledge. Live in fear of it.

If he stayed, she could not keep this information from her Queen.

If he stayed, she could not protect him from the backlash that would ensue from her already frightened countrymen, as their world melted around them.

If he stayed, she could never quite trust that he wouldn't one day bury her Kingdom for some slim, glimmering hope of unearthing his own.

And yet –

“I don't want you to go.”

The words tore out of her unbidden, spearing through the space and silence between them.

Kai didn't move an inch, but for a brief moment she had the impression he'd been knocked backwards. Then he stiffened, and his voice lowered.

“That,” he said, “is not fair.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

His face was very carefully blank, but there was no missing the undercurrent of tension thrumming through his tone.

“I made a mistake, and I fixed it.”

“A mistake?” Adeline rose slowly to her feet again, fingers digging hard into the armrest to steady herself. “You made a *decision*. Day after day, you made the decision not to tell me

something that you *knew* would hurt my family, my campaign – my entire fucking *country*, Kai.”

“I have already admitted I was wrong.” His teeth were gritted now. “But – *Adhlas fucking spare me* – Adeline, are you honestly telling me you wouldn’t have done the same thing in my place? Would you have left Eisalaan to lie sunken under centuries of ice?”

No.

She wouldn’t have. She knew that, but she couldn’t accept that it was an impossible situation. There was always a choice, and she hadn’t forgiven him for choosing wrong. Not yet.

“You should have trusted me enough to tell me what you really wanted.”

“I do trust you. *Now* I trust you. But the last time I let myself get close to a Princess of Eisalaan, I lost my entire Kingdom. I condemned us all, and I couldn’t let that happen again.”

“It certainly *sounds* like you trust me.”

“And I’m to believe that *you* trust *me*?”

“Of course I don’t trust you, Kai. I can’t, as much as I want to. You’re a King. You said it yourself, remember?”

She gestured into the gaping space between them, alarmed to find that her hand was shaking. “This isn’t without caveats. It can’t be.”

“I don’t know what more I can do.” He spoke roughly, every word pained, pulled from him reluctantly. “You’re angry that I put you in an impossible position, so I uprooted what’s left of my people to put you at ease. Now you don’t want me to leave, but you couldn’t trust me if I stayed.”

She threw her hands up, no longer caring how they shook.

“You’re right, there’s nothing you can do. How could I ever trust that you won’t watch Eisalaan drown to save the Laune?”

“I wouldn’t do that to you.” He ground out. “Not now.”

“Why *not* now? You planned to in the first place, you even know *how* to do it now, so why on all of Adhlas should I

believe –”

“Because I’m in love with you.”

It burst from him all at once. He yelled it at her, each word hot and angry, each word given the weight and volume to knock her back. “Does that really need explaining? I’m keeping my people from their home, from any real chance of ever finding their way back because *I’m in love with you* and I don’t want you to lose what I lost.”

Adeline hadn’t felt the breath leave her lungs, but now her chest ached with its absence. He was too loud, his words tumbling heavy as rocks in the strange, dark stillness of the library. He didn’t seem to care. He didn’t stop. While she couldn’t breathe, he was breathing hard enough for them both.

“I chose *you*. Over dozens of my own people. That is how very fucking selfish I’ve become, and it’s because I love you.”

The distance between them had narrowed and Adeline couldn’t say which of them had moved.

He was alight, wild and agitated, but as the silence finally sank and settled around them, Kai seemed to realise what he’d said. He blinked a few slow, dazed blinks and began to stumble back from her, but before the charge in his eyes could flicker and fade, Adeline reached for him, on impulse. Instinct.

Love.

He *loved* her.

And he was leaving.

Kai looked down at her fingers circling his wrist, then slowly back up at her. His eyes were hard, hot as burning coals.

Something passed between them, a current in the silent air.

Then, with unspoken coordination they fell against each other, lips slanting together, his hands in her hair, then at her waist, hauling her up and against him. Her back hit the edge of a shelf and a few books tumbled to the ground.

“Don’t go,” she gasped against his lips, barely aware of what she was saying, let alone what she truly meant by it.

“I’m here,” was all he said.

Then he buried his face in the crook of her neck, the harsh bristle of his jaw and the soft brush of his lips sending shivers down her spine. Adeline clung to him as his tongue drew clumsy, desperate lines up the length of her throat, as his teeth closed around her earlobe and his hand found the collar of her simple day dress, yanking it off one shoulder. He was rough and frenzied, like he couldn’t touch enough of her at once.

His palm curved around her bare breast and she arched beneath him with a soft cry, more books toppling from the shelf, and more again when he dipped his head and caught her nipple between his teeth and tongue, sucking hard. The hollow thud of the books echoed in the empty silence around them, drowning out her breathy moans and Kai’s answering growl as he tugged at the front of her skirt and pulled it up, pushed it back over her hips.

“Hold,” he demanded, low and urgent, pressing her skirts into her hands. “And don’t make a sound.”

Then he dropped to his knees, and Adeline caught her breath between her teeth and held it there as he hooked his thumbs into the band of her undergarments and rolled them with forced, trembling gentleness down her thighs and over each ankle.

She watched him slide his shoulder beneath her knee, and when he looked up at her with that burning, impatient reverence, she had to catch at the shelf behind her to keep from swaying where she stood.

“Not a sound,” he said again, the words so rough in his throat she just about heard him. And though she was certain their raised voices and the cascade of books hitting the floor would have alerted any late night dwellers to their presence by now, she nodded breathlessly. She could not deny him anything, not when he was like this. She didn’t want to.

Kai's eyes softened, urgency giving way to a lazy smile. He leaned in and brushed a kiss to her hip bone and for a moment there was only the warm caress of his fractured breath over her too-sensitive skin. Then his tongue. His tongue, torturous and soft and slow as he parted her with one long, languid stroke right up her centre. She nearly broke her promise right then and there, clapping a hand over her own mouth to stifle a sobbing moan.

“Good,” he murmured, then nipped at her inner thigh, making her twitch. “Very good.”

He licked her again, that same long, torturous path right through her throbbing core. And again, and again. She was panting, knuckles tight and stiff where they curled around the shelf. Hot, sweeping lust beat a rhythm through her blood and in her ears; it pulsed at the apex of her thighs, growing and growing, more and more frantic with each lazy stroke.

And in that moment she could forget it all. Forget that he'd lied, that he was leaving. Everything narrowed down to this moment, her mind fractured and sifted away until it was only this, only the feel of Kai's mouth and the soaring heat throughout her that answered to him, and only him.

Kai's lips closed around her throbbing bud, and she bucked, whimpering into her own palm, but still she managed not to cry out loud. His hand was firm around her thigh, holding her open for him as he sucked and licked, and her hips rolled against his mouth. It wasn't until he slid a finger inside her that Adeline had to grab at the shelf with both hands, and her moan rent the stifling air.

Kai pulled back, a little breathless but grinning darkly up at her, his hand still slowly pumping between her thighs.

“And you were doing so well.”

He flicked his tongue against her – then swiftly filled her with a second finger.

“*Fuck*, Kai –”

Kai tutted.

All at once, his hand and mouth withdrew, and she was aching empty for the briefest moment before he reared up and crushed her into the shelves, stealing the last of her breath as their chests pressed together.

“I told you to stay quiet, Adeline. Do I need to *help* you stay quiet?”

He pressed his hips to hers until she felt the thick, hard outline of him against her belly and nearly whimpered again. She nodded fervently. Yes, she wanted that. Wanted him to silence her, wanted him in her mouth, wanted him moaning and helpless as she had been. She reached down in the tight space between their bodies to run her palm up the rigid length of him, and Kai bucked against her with a grunt – but then he caught her wrist.

“I want to fuck you. Now. Here.”

She shivered. His voice was granite, ragged at the edges, but he was asking. Waiting for her answer as though she weren't standing before him with her thighs coated in her own lust, already just as far gone as he was. More so.

“I don't want to wait to get you back to my bed.”

Adeline reached for his waistband. “Then don't wait.”

Kai had barely undone his belt before she had her hand down the front of his trousers and wrapped around his cock. His lips were bruising on her mouth as she stroked him, once, twice –

“*Now*, Adeline,” he growled into her mouth.

He grabbed her by the waist and propped her against the very edge of the half-empty shelf, and then her hand was sliding in the mess of arousal between her legs as she held herself open for him and Kai sank into her with a deep and guttural groan that almost swallowed up her own exalted sighs.

Almost.

Kai managed a flickering grin.

“Quiet now, love, remember?”

She nearly scowled, but then his hand landed over her mouth, and she felt herself twitch and tighten around him, drawing another deep hum from his chest. He nudged his nose beneath her jaw, and she felt his grin against her throat, breathless and taunting.

“You like that,” he teased. “Being told what to do.”

Smug bastard, she wanted to say, but that hand tightened over her mouth and without waiting for her answer, he drove into her, over and over, filling her so completely she forgot what she’d been about to say, forgot everything that wasn’t *this*. Kai groaned and panted openly, and her own muffled noises spilled into his palm.

“Touch yourself,” he demanded, now just barely audible above his own racing breath.

She resisted for just a split second, one aching, agonising moment of defiance – then moaned in frustration at herself as she gave in and slid her hand between her legs, coated her fingers in her own wetness, teasing herself as Kai pumped into her.

He watched with greedy approval, his thrusts gaining pace in time with her hand as they both stared down at the place where their bodies joined, his cock slick with her wetness, disappearing into her body over and over as her fingers blurred above him.

“*Fuck*, I love you,” he gasped, the words ripping from him as he buried himself deeper still inside her. “I love you, Adeline.”

And though she heard him, she couldn’t speak, not with his hand at her mouth, and not while she barrelled over the edge, body convulsing as she shattered completely, her entire being scattered into the Winds, until she knew nothing.

Nothing but that Kai was here. Still here, in this endless moment, pulsing between her thighs as he spilled himself roughly inside her, and told her again and again that he loved her.

He was here, and he loved her.



Chapter 44

Adeline

She woke in Kai's arms for the first time in weeks.

They'd ended up in his rooms, barely speaking a few words between here and the library. She wasn't ready to break that silent spell just yet, so they lay in bed gazing sleepily at each other – it might have been sickeningly sweet if it didn't feel so sad and final. The room around them was bare of belongings with a stack of trunks packed in one stark white corner; a reminder that he really was leaving.

Kai smoothed her hair back from her face, then licked his lips and took a breath – but before he could speak, Adeline

clamped a hand over his mouth and shook her head. His lips curved under her palm, and his shoulders shook in a muted chuckle. She felt an answering swell in her own chest, and then they were both laughing. Laughing at nothing at all, both of them increasingly giddy at the absurdity of laying here together, naked and furious and heartbroken, and helpless with laughter. Adeline laughed until she couldn't breathe, couldn't see through tears of mirth, and when she managed to draw down a solid breath, Kai leaned over and silenced the last of her laughter with a long, slow kiss.

She let her mind sink, lost in the languid slide of his lips over hers. His arms framed her, warm and solid beneath her shoulders. Nothing disrupted the perfect stillness of their silent bubble, save for the soft pealing of a bell in the distance.

Ring.

Kai sat up.

She gave a vague sigh of complaint.

“Don't you hear that?”

“It's nothing; just the bells.”

Ring.

“But what are they ringing for?”

She shrugged a bare shoulder and reached for his, running her hand down his arm to coax him back to her.

“We usually ring them at midnight on New Winter's Eve. Must be some mischievous Gard having a bit of fun.”

He relaxed a little, leaning over her again and kissing her temple, then her cheek.

“A friend of Ger's no doubt.”

He nudged her chin with his nose until she arched her neck beneath his lips.

“Could we not talk about Ger right now?”

She felt him breathe a laugh against her throat. “As you wish.”

Ring.

Adeline sank her head into the pillows and let her eyes slide shut.

Ring.

Ring.

Kai's tongue ran a lazy line along her collarbone.

Ring.

Adeline opened her eyes.

Ring.

"It *is* odd that they're still going."

Kai raised his head. "Are they only rung at New Winter?"

"It's the only time I've ever heard it."

Kai propped himself up on one elbow. His brow creased as he called up some distant memory.

"I recognise the sound, it used to carry all the way down to the Laune on a still day."

Ring.

He cocked his head.

"Before the Frost, they'd use it all the time for various messages. Six tolls on a day of worship to let the congregation know that the Temple of Adhlas had opened its doors. Three long tolls when the King's Court was in session. If you can believe it, they rang the damn things forty-three times when –"

Kai choked on his words, suddenly pale. He rolled away, vaulting to his feet, and Adeline quickly sat up, scrambling after him with the blankets clutched to her chest.

"Kai? When *what*?"

Kai snatched her shift up from the floor and tossed it to her.

"Your mother, Adeline," he said, his throat inexplicably hoarse.

“Kai, you’re scaring me,” she snapped, even as she pulled the shift over her head. “What are you talking about?”

“They rang the bells forty-three times, one for each year of the old King’s reign,” he managed, “on the day he died.”

Adeline was moving before she’d managed to form a coherent thought other than; *No*. She ran barefoot through the frigid marble halls, her thin shift bunched in her hands so her legs could move faster, *faster*. Cold panic plummeted through her, but it was no use to her right now so she clenched against it and *ran*.

Kai had to be wrong.

Ring.

How many tolls is that now?

He had to be wrong, because she’d written to her mother only yesterday. She was still waiting for a reply, and how could Selma reply if she was – *No*.

How long did she reign? How many tolls has it been?

She’d had a flu. It was only a flu.

Ring.

Someone would have come for her, she would have known.

But you weren’t in your rooms last night.

Even the voice in her head was breathless and scared.

No.

Somehow she willed her legs to run faster, telling herself that if she made it to her mother’s quarters before the bell stopped ringing, she’d find her there, sitting up in her bed, sipping daintily at a cup of tea with a stack of letters scattered across the covers.

Ring.

She ran up the flight of stairs to the Queen’s quarters, scraping her shins against the steps in her desperate haste. She was almost there. It would all be alright in just a moment.

Ring.

A keening wail rose up from the far end of the hall, and Adeline stumbled as a shocked sob tore through her chest. She ran still, haltingly, her eyes blurring with tears, but not so much that she couldn't make out the willowy blonde figure at the door to her mother's rooms.

As she came to a stop, she knew who she'd find, but when she blinked the tears away, her chest stung all the same.

“Ade?”

Mareda's voice was thin and wavering. In the rooms beyond her, the wailing continued; someone else or perhaps several someones offered up their soft, trembling sobs in harmony.

“How many tolls has it been?” Adeline said numbly, only distantly aware that it no longer mattered.

Mareda's lip wobbled. “She's gone, Ade.”

For a moment, Adeline thought the deep, shuddering crack in her chest had actually sounded outside her body; it took her a moment to realise that the sound was Mareda's wooden crutch hitting the floor, dropped so that she could hobble forward to catch Adeline in her arms.

And then they were holding each other up, holding each other together, both in danger of coming apart but for the circle of one another's arms.

High in the towers of the palace, the bells pealed prettily, each toll marking an end to the reign of Selma Ashalynn Beira; the Queen of Snow and Silver.

The days passed in a blur of arrangements until one morning, after yet another sleepless night, Adeline donned the bruised blue mourning dress Imogen had delivered to her rooms, and followed her family to the lakefront.

The Parting Breath was Eisalaan's mourning ritual. It was performed by Wielders, said to help the soul catch on to Aera's winds and drift away to join the Goddess above. While other

countries buried their dead, Eisalaan froze them down to snowdust and watched them scatter into the air. There was, Adeline thought, something much more final about it.

On the solid shores of the Laune, the Beira family sat arranged in a neat arc on one side of the ice coffin. On the other side, a sea of forlorn faces stared back at them, the people of Eisalaan gathered on the banks a short distance away. Sniffles and gasps carried on the wind. Someone was keening. It was surreal; as though they were performing a terrible play and nobody was sure who was actor or audience. Adeline clung tight to Iseult in her lap, the little girl's arms a vice around her neck. At the fore of the crowds on the bank, Kai and Ceri had found Ger and Imogen, and the four of them stood huddled together, a dark smudge of mourning blue against the snow. Though she couldn't look at them for fear of breaking down, it was a small comfort to have them in her periphery. A small flutter of warmth in the numb she'd sunken into in order to get through the day. For now, she stared over Izzy's shoulder at the unmoving, ethereal figure.

Encased in panes of ice as smooth and clear as glass, Selma looked every bit the Fairytale Queen that the world had imagined her. Her golden hair was laced with a silver wreath, her hands folded over an airy white bouquet of snowdrops and baby's breath. She might have been sleeping; awaiting the salvation of her true love's kiss.

But Selma had never needed that. She'd never wanted to be saved by a fairytale love. Only saved from herself, finally allowed to feel something.

As the Priestess led the mourners in a hymn of farewell, Adeline could only mouth nonsense words with her eyes still snagged on her mother's face. Entirely and eternally still.

Finally, the moment came for the family to step up to the Queen's side and bid their farewell. The Priestess invited the congregation to send a final kind thought to buoy the Queen on her journey, and then Adeline, her sisters and the Dukes stepped aside for the two Wielders and their Commander.

They watched as Edward stood at the head of the coffin and placed his hand above Selma's head. Watched as frost spider-webbed from his fingertips to join the ice magic spreading from the Wielder's hands at each side of the coffin. Watched as the frost laced above their mother's face until a fog of patterned ice blurred her features entirely. The Priestess had begun a low, continuous chant to Daughter Aera, and the breeze had picked up in answer, stirring slowly and awaiting Selma's spirit.

A ragged sob in Adeline's ear jolted her back to herself, where tiny, broken Iseult was shaking in her arms. Sebastian reached out and the girl scrambled from Adeline to her father; perhaps too big now to be passed from person to person, but certainly far too little to be mourning her mother. Adeline wasn't sure *she* was old enough to weather this loss; she didn't know how to do this. Shouldn't she be crying, sobbing like Iseult or like Mareda gently dabbing stray tears away with a lace edged handkerchief? Her eyes were dry, but her chest ached – all the more noticeable now without her arms wrapped around her little sister. She wrapped them around herself instead, holding her chest together beneath her cloak. As tiny cracks began to form in the ice of the coffin, she was sure they masked the soft splintering sound deep within her ribs. She couldn't breathe. She was shivering with the rising wind as the Priestess chanted faster and faster. Her arms weren't strong enough to hold all her pieces together and she was going to splinter apart and disappear into the ether along with her mother's spirit –

But then two sets of arms circled her from either side, someone at her waist and another around her shoulders; Kai and Ger. She wasn't sure how they'd known she needed this, and she didn't ask, just clung to their arms. The splintering of the coffin was turning to a low groan - any minute now the whole thing would collapse into shards of ice and rise to meet the gently wailing winds.

But minutes came and went, and the ice held strong.

Beneath the wind, a murmuring rose across the bank. Sebastian raised an eyebrow at Edward, who now had two

hands laid at the head of the coffin and a sheen clinging to his brow. Was he sweating, despite the cold breeze stirring around them? The Priestess faltered slightly in her chant, and Edward scowled at her.

“Keep going,” he barked.

The other Wielders were sweating now, too. One of them dared a glance at the Commander.

“My Lord –”

“Keep. Going.” He made a swift, irritated gesture towards the banks, and two more Wielders rushed across the ice, peeling off their gloves as they went.

Edward now led a team of five Wielders crowded around the frozen block; another shuddering groan slipped from the ice, but still the coffin held.

Iseult sobbed harder.

“Will Aera not take Mama’s spirit?”

Sebastian hushed Iseult gently, but his tone turned harsh as he called out; “Edward, what is this?”

“It is under control.”

“It’s not enough, my Lord,” the same Wielder spoke up again, more firmly now. “I’m approaching depletion; we all are.”

Ignoring the young woman, Edward stepped back from the Queen and swore into his reddened hands. His head snapped up and he glared across the coffin, anger simmering in his exhausted, sunken eyes. “You,” he hissed.

Adeline was bewildered to find his eyes on her, until Kai stiffened at her side and she realised that Edward was addressing the Merrow King. *Blaming* him.

“I hope you’re happy.”

Adeline’s was not the only voice that growled back at the Commander, a furious medley of “Edward!” and “That’s enough!”

Iseult was bawling now, and Sebastian had given in too, shoulders shaking as he buried his face in the girl's copper curls. Mareda had pressed her handkerchief against her eyes, either to stem the flow of tears or to shield herself from the ugly scene unfolding around their mother's body.

"Selma wouldn't want this, Edward," Silas said quietly. He stood behind Adeline, and she wasn't sure the Commander would hear him over the winds, but his shoulders sank as though he had.

There was a flurry of movement across the bank, and then Imogen was striding over the ice, several people in tow, some of whom Adeline recognised as Merchants from the Laune Market. She approached the head of the coffin, and laid a hand on the crook of Edward's elbow, murmuring something softly. Edward remained rooted to the spot for a moment longer, tensed and scowling, but Imogen patted his arm gently once more and he seemed to deflate. He nodded, and stepped back, motioning for his team to do the same. Imogen and the Merchants took up their vacant places, hands on the ice, and spilled their magic into the coffin. It began to crumble slowly from the topmost corners. When one of them began to flag, another Merchant would come across the ice to take their place. Imogen held out the longest, her smooth brow deeply creased in concentration, cheeks flushed with effort until finally Edward joined her again at the head of the coffin, and with one final surge of magic, the ice crumbled to fine, sparkling snowdust.

The swirling wind tightened to a whistling, spiralling gust and finally, *finally*, Selma joined the breeze, her snowdust shimmering against the vast grey sky, up and up and up until she simply winked out of existence.

The Beira family stayed a while on the Laune as the crowds dispersed, accompanied only by a few close friends and Council members. Kai stood close to Adeline's side, though she could feel the tension thrumming through him.

“Are you alright?”

The smile he gave her was barely a smile, but his eyes simmered with warmth.

“You needn’t worry about me in this particular moment.”

She ignored this.

“Edward didn’t mean it, you know. He’s just grieving.”

“I absolutely meant it.”

Edward’s low growl rose up from behind them, and Adeline turned to see him shaking off the grip Silas had on his shoulder. As he stalked towards them, Kai stepped smoothly in front of Adeline, and the movement seemed to stop Edward in his tracks for the briefest moment. Then he sneered, looking entirely unlike himself.

“You think I would harm her? She’s my family. *You’re* the monster here, Merrow King.” He jabbed a finger into Kai’s chest. “You’re the reason the Kingdom is melting. Our Queen is dead because of *you*.”

“Stop it Ned,” Adeline cried out over his ranting. But Mareda had appeared at her father’s side, and was looking warily up at Kai as she reached a hand out, gently beckoning to her sister.

Adeline looked down at the pale fingers reaching out for her and frowned.

“What?”

“Ade *come here*. He’s right.”

“He’s not fucking right, have you lost your mind?”

A few stragglers had stopped on the bank, watching with open interest at the scene unfolding on the ice.

“He’s *right*. I’m so sorry, Ade. We didn’t want to tell you until mother was at rest.”

Adeline’s chest went cold as her heart plummeted.

She glanced at Edward’s collar, looking for the familiar glint of silver at his neck. He’d taken off the pendant. Had he

learned what it was? That Kai had been searching for it?

Mareda was crying now, still reaching out for Adeline's hand. She took a step out from behind Kai, drawn by her sister's pain.

"The Healers performed an autopsy before Mother was encased. She didn't die of the flu Ade - her heart was weak, for a long, long time. They said it became tethered to the magic of the Frost, and when the Thaw began, her heart began to thaw too, to weaken and wither."

Her head swam. "What does that have to do with Kai?"

Mareda gave an exasperated sniff that might have been a scoff – it was hard to say with that lace handkerchief pressed to her face. "The Thaw began when the Merrow appeared."

"Do you think we were casting spells beneath the ice?" Kai cocked his head to one side, affecting a painfully polite tone that only underlined his thinning patience. "If I had that ability, why under all of Adhlas would I have waited six centuries to Wield it?"

"Who can say how long you were working on your escape?" Mareda shot back in that same tone, dropping her handkerchief to her side and leaning into her crutch.

"You're being ridiculous," said Adeline.

"Or why you were imprisoned in the first place," Edward added darkly.

Kai's head snapped towards him.

"Oh, I think you of all people know *exactly* why I was imprisoned."

Edward bristled as the Merrow King took an imposing step towards him, and another, until he was close enough to lower his voice to a menacing hush.

"I know what you found, Commander. And I know what you did with it."

The older man turned as pale and grey as the trampled snow around them. Silas breached the tense circle, hovering just

beside the Commander and the King with a wary look on his face.

“What is he talking about?”

“I have no idea,” Edward said stiffly, and then spat at Kai; “I *loved* Selma. Everyone knows I loved her.”

Adeline exchanged a frown with her father.

“Was that ever in question?” Silas said.

But the two men were locked in some battle of insinuation that made little sense to anyone around them. Kai’s shoulders were squared, Edward’s fists clenched and trembling.

Kai simply nodded, unreadable. When he spoke it was with a gentleness that almost seemed sincere. “I’m sure that’s why you did it, to begin with. But if you’re honest with yourself, Edward – you didn’t *undo* it for anything remotely close to love.”

The whistling of the wind had settled some time ago, but the silence seemed especially stark now; even the breeze held its breath.

Adeline felt Ger’s hand at her elbow and realised she had been swaying where she stood. She recalled her mother’s voice in her head, as clear and urgent as though she lingered on this plane still, whispering in her ear.

He had become this fearful, possessive stranger.

Edward’s jaw was working, his chest heaving as though he might be sick.

We did things we hadn’t believed each other capable of.

Adeline wasn’t feeling too well herself. Realisation was sweeping through her like hot, roiling nausea.

“Out of my sight,” Edward breathed hoarsely. Nobody moved. Then he bellowed; “*GET OUT OF MY SIGHT!*”

Iseult shrieked from somewhere nearby, and Silas yelled out a warning.

Adeline didn't see him surge for the Merrow King until Kai staggered, knocking into her so hard that her feet slipped and shot out beneath her, landing her hard on her ass.

Commotion broke out, raised voices and skidding feet.

Ger and Kai hoisted Adeline to her feet, but no sooner had she scrambled upright than Kai swung around to brace for a second assault. Silas wrestled Edward back, Ger skidding over the ice to grab his other side, the three of them flailing on the slippery lake as they struggled in opposite directions, and Mareda screamed at them to *let him go*, even as the Commander roared at the Merrow King again and again.

He was so incoherent with fear, and rage, and sorrow that Adeline could barely make out what he was saying.

At first.

She had no time to process it. Mareda whirled on her then, openly sobbing. Imogen had drifted cautiously to her side and now gently touched her arm, but Mareda shook her off almost viciously. Her eyes were angry red slits in her beautiful face and her teeth were gritted against the wracking sobs. "Get him out of here," she hissed at Adeline. "Now."

For once, Adeline didn't argue. She tugged on Kai's arm and after a moment he stumbled back, let her lead him to the banks where the last of the gawking stragglers quickly scattered. Behind them, Edward was screaming himself hoarse.

"Do you hear me, Creature? I loved her!"

Even at this distance, his fury launched the words against their backs like the lash of a whip.

"I loved her! *I loved her!*"



Chapter 45

Adeline

There was a memorial feast to be held that evening, hosted by Selma's closest courtiers. In light of all that had been said and done on the Laune that morning, Adeline had elected not to attend. The court had plenty to gossip about now; no need to provide them any further dramatics. She found herself, instead, in Kai's rooms, kneeling before him on his bed and pressing ice wrapped up in a soft cloth to the bruise blossoming across his cheekbone. One of Edward's rings had gouged his skin too, leaving a small streak of blood in its wake.

Adeline scowled.

“He could have taken your eye out,” she said.

“I am so sorry, Adeline.”

“You didn’t ask him to hit you.”

They both knew that wasn’t what he’d meant, but when she wouldn’t meet his eye, Kai just said; “You could argue that I did. I goaded him; your sister certainly thinks so.”

She set down her cloth on the bedside table.

“My sister doesn’t know what we know.”

Kai curled a finger under her chin, easing her face up until she looked at him. He didn’t say anything. Just waited, his hand curving over her jaw and his thumb brushing her cheek, coaxing, soothing.

Adeline breathed through the tightness in her throat that would not go away, no matter how many times she tried to swallow it down.

People said it was my heart, that I’d encased it in ice.

Her mother’s voice echoed in her head, even now.

They weren’t far off.

“What you said to Edward,” Adeline said finally. “You think he used the pendant to keep my mother from dying. And then again, years later, to thaw her heart.”

It wasn’t a question really, but Kai nodded all the same.

“She knew the whole time,” said Adeline, with a certainty that steadied her every word. “She knew he’d Wielded his ice magic to prolong her life. And I think he assumed it had worked too well. He must have believed what everyone else believed; that her heart was frozen - not just the living, beating parts of it that kept her alive, but the part where her soul lived too. The part of her heart that let her love, and feel. That let her love *him*. Maybe he thought that’s why she left him all those years ago, because she couldn’t love him any longer with her frozen heart, but he was wrong. That’s not why she left.”

She didn't tell Kai what she now knew, about her mother's struggle within her own mind. It wasn't her story to tell, and it wasn't part of Edward's story either – wasn't the reason he'd lost her.

“She knew what he did to keep her,” Adeline said slowly, thinking aloud, “and she couldn't get past it.”

We did things neither of us had thought the other capable of.

Edward had played with her mother's life, tying her to the magic of the Frost because he couldn't bear to lose her. He'd used his own power to claim the one power she possessed – the power of choice. A Queen's decisions were her own.

“Do you think Edward understood what he did? That freeing her heart would set off the Thaw?”

“I don't think he cared,” said Kai. “Not at the time.”

No, of course he didn't. He'd just wanted her to feel something, to hurt like he hurt. Adeline's throat was still thick, forever aching with the tears that wouldn't come. It made her voice small and pitiful when she croaked out; “Why didn't he stop it? When he realised what was happening?”

Kai was silent for a long moment.

“I don't know. But I'm concerned that he's not wearing the pendant any longer. Either he's finally realised the extent of its power and he's keeping it hidden...”

“Or?”

Kai shook his head. “Nothing. I don't know.”

It was obvious to her that Kai had more to say and was holding back, but before she could press, he gathered her hands in his and urged her closer to him. His eyes darted between hers, somehow both soft and wired; golden brown, electric green.

“Come with me.”

“Kai...”

He leaned his forehead against hers, and she felt her eyes flutter and close with something like relief at the tenderness in

that gesture.

“Please,” he murmured.

She shook her head carefully, her brow rocking over his.

“This is my home. I’m still campaigning the Cold Council for the crown, I can’t just hand the entire country and all of these people over to Mareda and Edward – *especially* not now. If he can’t control the Thaw, things are only going to get worse from here on out.”

“It’s not safe for you here any longer. Edward has the pendant that cast this Kingdom into a centuries long Winter and –” He paused, and squeezed her hands gently, like he knew his next, half-whispered words would hurt. “And he used it to end your mother’s life. All because she chose someone else to share her throne. Imagine what he might do to claim that throne for his own daughter.”

“Mareda wouldn’t let him hurt me.”

She wanted to believe that. So badly.

“I don’t know that she’d have much of a say, Adeline.”

She lifted his hands, still curled around her own, and brought them to her heart, squeezing them tight.

“I can’t go with you.”

His nose brushed hers, his breath on her lips.

“I’m not above begging.”

Desire rose and fell gently in her stomach, crushed by the sinking of her heart as his mouth brushed hers ever so slightly, and she had to force herself to drop his hands, to pull back.

Kai caught himself in the sudden space between them, and when he opened his eyes, the look in them speared right through her. Hurt, followed by a slow dawning understanding. He straightened.

“You can’t come with me, or you don’t want to?”

Her breath shook. “Both.”

The moment seemed to stretch on and on. But then Kai simply stood from the edge of his bed, and said; “Alright.”

Adeline watched him warily, waiting for the moment he would turn around and reach for her. She rose up beside him.

“Nothing’s changed.” Her chest hurt as she said it. “I know the other night –”

Kai did turn then, holding up a hand, closing his eyes as though weathering a sudden wave of pain.

“Don’t. You don’t need to - I understand.”

She swallowed. Nodded. Resisted the overwhelming call resounding through her blood and her body, the agonising need to reach out for him.

“So that’s it?”

He smiled, a little sad and perhaps a little worn out, too.

“I don’t think we need to keep doing this, Adeline. I want you to come with me, not only because I love you –”

The words came so easily to him now, and even if he paused at her sharp intake, he was gracious enough to ignore it. For as many times as he had told her that night, it was not any easier to hear, with the twin flames of longing and sheer panic sparking inside her at his words. Because she had meant what she said: nothing had changed. He had still lied. He was still a danger to her Kingdom. And she still could not trust him.

“Not only because I love you, Adeline, but because I don’t believe you’re safe here. But I can’t force you to come with me, I know that. So yes; I think we’ve said all there is to say.”

It was almost a question; she saw it in his eyes, and the hope he held there all but crushed her. *Have you said all you need to say, Adeline?*

But she couldn’t say it back. Couldn’t.

She didn’t know if she was punishing Kai or herself when she turned away. She paused at the door only to wish him luck and happiness, and meant it with every fibre of her being.

And then she left.



The halls were empty, not even the sentry Gards stationed in their usual corridors. It was as though the Silver Palace was a mere extension of its Queen, and with her passing, the noise and life and presence had drained from every corridor. Like she was the heart, no longer pumping lifeblood through the veins of the palace. Logically, Adeline knew that life went on. The palace still stood; the Gards had simply been stationed elsewhere for the Parting Breath, the courtiers and palace staff off paying their respects to the Queen.

There would be tributes held within the palace and without, but after the scene the Beira family had played out on the Laune, Adeline didn't particularly want to run the risk of bumping into her family tonight, nor did she want to find out just how quickly word had spread about their shameful carry on at the Parting Breath.

So, she had little choice but to return to her own rooms. She hadn't been back to her quarters in days, save for a few minutes here and there to change her clothes. She couldn't stand the heavy silence and the way it seemed to press against her skull and force her thoughts to leak into the forefront of her mind, where she'd been diligently pushing back against anything that wasn't of immediate concern. She'd spent every night with her sisters instead, the three of them all piled into Iseult's too-small bed. If she was wiping Izzy's tears, she needn't wonder why her own refused to fall.

But the time had come, and on the walk from Kai's quarters to hers, she tried to make her peace with that. Her mother had joined the Winds. Tomorrow morning, Adeline would move back to her vacant apartment in the city. Before that could happen, there was packing to do.

Even accepting these truths, she found she had to steel herself to open the door and slip into her parlour. It was just so quiet, somehow even more so than the silence of the halls. Perhaps it was the stillness; the certainty that she was alone. Entirely alone. Her footsteps as she crossed the parlour echoed

in a way she'd never noticed before, even with the thick rug beneath her feet. The door to her bedroom was slightly ajar, and as she stepped inside it was obvious that someone had come by to tidy up.

The curtains around her bed had been drawn and the covers changed from crisp white to soft, Eisalaan blue. She thought there had been a few extra pillows added, too. The pile of books on her nightstand had been neatly arranged in a standing row beside a thick stack of letters, a fresh jug of water and, she noticed with a stinging jolt, two clean glasses instead of one.

Two.

Trust the palace rumour mill to churn out news of her budding romance, without catching wind of its untimely end. Adeline found herself staring at the stupid glasses for a long moment. Then she turned on her heel and strode to the closet. She hauled out her trunk and began lining it with her clothes, folding each and every item meticulously. She made a meal of it; mindless, repetitive work that occupied her weary head. She folded, and sorted, and stacked; folded, and sorted, and stacked. Only when the dust from the very back of the closet had her wheezing did she stop and catch her bearings.

It was late. Her eyes were dry and itchy with the need to sleep, and from the shadows coating the arches of the windows, it seemed the lanterns in the courtyard had already been dimmed for the night.

Adeline rose stiffly from her crouch by the trunk and went to the nightstand to pour a glass of water - but as she lifted the jug, her name caught at the corner of her eye, like someone had called it out; *Adeline*, in solid black ink.

Her stack of letters.

She picked them up as she drank, thumbing cautiously through the thick envelopes. She had packed all she really needed, and though she knew sleep would not come for hours, if at all, she was worn out, tired down to her bones. Perhaps this would be her next mind-numbing task; some correspondence to catch up on while she lay awake in bed.

Oddly satisfied to have a bit of mundane purpose, she washed and dressed and climbed under the covers. It took only two opened letters to realise what a colossal mistake she had made.

They were condolences, of course.

Letters from courtiers, councillors, distant family, all wanting to reach out with the best of intentions, to tell her how very sorry they were for her loss. And just like that, her short-lived relief was gone, her throat as tight as it had been while she watched her mother's body pressed down to snowdust only hours ago. The sadness and fear crept back into her chest and tightened it, taking up all the empty space in her lungs. Still the tears would not come; and it fucking hurt.

She leafed through the envelopes, and her breath came in pathetic little gasps, dry and painful. Was there not even one letter dated earlier than this week, not even one distraction from the dizzying churn of her thoughts?

She would take a record of public court proceedings, *fuck*, she would take a Cold Council summons to discuss the bloody Ice Merchant tax tiers, *anything* –

She flipped over the last letter in the pile, and her heart plummeted at the sight of the blue wax embossed with a bold *S.B.* in silver lettering. Anything, it turned out, but this.

Adeline's hands shook as she tore the Royal seal without thinking and almost ripped right through the letter before she could shake it out.

Adeline,

I received your note –

She dropped the page without reading any further. Her knuckles found her chest and kneaded hard between her ribs. Her breath was trapped. She sank back into the cushions and screwed her eyes shut, because she couldn't do it. She couldn't do it. She couldn't read her mother's final words to her.

The door was creaking open on that part of her brain, the dark and cramped little room in her mind where she'd shoved all those thoughts she didn't want to look at.

If she read that letter, she would have to open the door to all of those thoughts, every last one.

She didn't want to think.

She wanted to cry.

Adeline wanted to cry for all she'd lost; for the mother who had wanted to love her, and the sister who had wanted to trust her, and the man who had wanted to stay with her. She wanted to cry until she could breathe again, cry until she could sleep.

But the tears wouldn't come.

She had only echoing, aching emptiness and the pain that came in place of her lost breath. Adeline folded the letter in one hand and wrenched the sheets back with the other, stumbling desperately to her trunk to rip out a neatly folded robe.

It was stupid, so stupid, but as she was intent on *not* thinking right now, stupid was all she had. So, Adeline pulled on her robe, stuffed the letter in her pocket, and slipped out the door to find the only person she knew would want to hold her as badly as she needed to be held.



Chapter 46

Kai

Kai was swimming, at long last. He hadn't realised how tight and wrong his skin had felt until he sank his shoulders into the water and a cool rush of relief washed over him. The ocean water in Dhalias was blue as the sky above, and clear as glass, and he glided through the waves like a bird among the breeze. But when he ducked his head and let his Merrow instincts take over, he couldn't breathe. The seawater stung, and he could feel the salt clinging to the edges of his gills, crystallising and clogging them until his throat ached. He thrashed, trying to propel himself upwards with a mighty kick of his legs, but they were pinned against – against –

Adeline screamed.

Kai rose to the surface all at once, emerging not from the ocean but from a dream. Here, in his bed, his throat still ached and his gills fluttered weakly against the rough, broad palms wrapped tight around his neck, hands that belonged to a hooded, faceless stranger who loomed over him in the dark. He thrashed harder, the sudden surge of adrenaline from his dream lending him a split second of strength, just enough to buck the assailant halfway off his body and roll to the far side of the bed before he was caught once more by an arm against his throat.

“Fuck sake, you didn’t give him enough. You said he’d be out for hours,” a strained voice grunted above his head.

From this angle, he had a clear view of Adeline, trembling in her nightgown on the floor, another hooded figure holding her down with a dagger to her throat.

“Stop,” he croaked – or tried to. He must have made enough noise, however, because Adeline’s attacker looked up, their face still cast in shadow.

“It’s nothing personal.”

He didn’t recognise the vaguely amused voice –didn’t know if the comment was directed at himself or Adeline.

His head swam. The arm against his throat tightened, a deathly, stifling embrace. Adeline was quietly sobbing on the floor, and he fought, he really did. He fought with his whole body, even widening his eyes as the edges of the room started to blur and dissolve, as though that would stop him from sinking into the nothingness. Then Adeline’s cries started to fade too, and he could almost believe he was back in the suffocating waters of his dreams, the world above muffled and distant.

Clang.

The sound rang, jarring and reverberating against the inside of his skull as a sudden rush of air swept into his lungs. A shout and a crash followed, and then the sound of scrambling,

and Adeline was hauling him upright, dragging him into her lap.

“Call for my Gards – no wait, don’t! Ger, call for Ger! Meet us in my father’s quarters.”

“Adeline –”

He could barely croak out her name, but she stroked his hair back and shushed him, her own voice cracking.

“It’s alright. Can you move?”

He nodded. The room was coming back into focus. The pins and needles in his arms were fading, and he could feel Adeline’s cool fingers around his wrists as she eased him to the edge of the bed and up to his feet.

A cloaked man lay half slumped on the bed behind him, an ornate silver breakfast tray discarded near his head. A mess of fruit and porridge and shattered dishes was splattered across the floor and walls, like it had been flung from the tray at speed.

“Was this Simon?” The words rasped out, and Adhlas above it hurt, but he pushed past it. “Simon attacked them?”

Adeline hugged her arms around herself, but she nodded. “He hit that one on the bed with the tray. The other jumped up at the noise, but he let go of me and I managed to trip him over. He hit his head. I think he’s just passed out. I hope they’re both just passed out.”

Of course she did. They’d tried to kill her, but being Adeline, she was worried she’d gravely injured them in defence of her own life.

Kai reached over and yanked the assailant’s hood back, none too gently.

“I don’t know him,” Adeline said, answering the question he hadn’t asked. “I don’t know either of them. But the cloaks...”

“Doran’s men. The Queen’s Gard.”

She nodded again, then shivered and wrapped her arms tighter around herself.

“Come on,” she said. “Before they come to.”

The halls were dark and still – Adhlas only knew what hour it was, but it certainly hadn’t broken dawn. Kai kept close to the walls, not only for the scant light of the fading torches, but because his head still felt as though it were wrapped in layers of wool. His feet seemed to need a moment to respond before each step. The castle was boundless – endless, impossible flights of stairs. It seemed an age later that they finally reached Silas’s quarters.

The door was already open, and the Duke paced back and forth just beyond it. When he saw Adeline, his eyes went wide on a deep gasp of relief, and he tugged her to him, grabbing her face in his hands and looking her over for signs of injury like she was a little girl who had taken a tumble in the play-yard.

He ushered them both inside after many assurances that they were mostly unharmed.

“How did you know we were coming?”

“Imogen. It seems she’d been out toasting to the Queen’s memory, and she ran into His Majesty’s footman on her way home.”

“He’s not my –” Kai started, but it didn’t matter and his throat was on fire. “Simon.”

“Yes, Simon. He told her what happened and she hurried up here to meet you.”

“Where is she now?” asked Adeline.

He waved his hand, a little too quickly. “She’ll be back in a moment. Never mind that now.”

He took Adeline by the hand and gestured for Kai to follow them to the small parlour outside his bedroom, where the two of them sat on a small loveseat across from the Duke’s armchair. He leaned in urgently, still gripping his daughter’s hand.

“Tell me what happened.”

Adeline recounted the events, more than a bit shakily. She'd come to Kai's room, but when she knocked and called out for him, it wasn't Kai who came to the door. One of them had dragged her inside, the other already on top of a drugged and unconscious Kai.

"So they didn't intend to kill you."

Adeline shook her head.

"They did. You know when you're about to meet your death and – that man was going to kill me, Papa. He was waiting for something."

She glanced at Kai, and he didn't miss the loaded, entirely terrified expression there.

"They were waiting until I was dead."

"I think so. They were pleased I'd shown up. They laughed. Thanked me for making their night that much easier."

"They would have – they would have made it look as though I was the one who had –"

"Killed me," she finished. "And then yourself."

The three of them sat with that revelation for an endless moment.

"It was Edward."

"Kai, for the love of all the fucking Daughters –"

"I think he's right, Adeline," said Silas. He clenched his fist against his armrest, but not before Kai noticed how violently his fingers shook. "Who else stands anything to gain? He has Doran's ear; you know they're old friends. Through the Captain, he has access to the Queen's Gard, and Kai as good as accused him of regicide, before the eyes and ears of several powerful witnesses - they may not have understood what was said, but Edward certainly did."

"And so did you," Kai said, before he could stop himself. It was hoarse, but not quiet.

Silas met his gaze, unblinking but sorrowful. "I have known both Selma and Edward for many, many years," was all the

explanation he offered.

“I didn’t mean –”

Silas waved him off. “I am not slighted, but I will call on your remorse to ask a favour of you, Your Majesty. Your carriage leaves just after dawn?”

Kai nodded. Adeline stiffened in her chair, apparently already knowing what would come next.

“Take my daughter with you.”

“*No.*”

“I would love to, Your Grace, believe me. We’ve discussed it. But Adeline makes her own decisions.”

Silas slammed his fist into the armrest and Kai surprised himself by jumping. He couldn’t help but be startled at such an impatient gesture from this gentle, quiet man.

“We don’t have time for this,” Silas said, a quiet fire giving volume to his words.

At that moment, Imogen swung around the door frame, hauling a trunk behind her.

“Alright - your trunk was half-packed already, but I’ve rearranged it so you have enough for the journey, and the Empress will surely see to it that you’re fitted for a new wardrobe once you arrive in Dhalias.”

“I’m not going to Dhalias.”

“Of course you are,” Imogen tutted, then scowled when Adeline shook her head. “Of *course* you are, don’t be stupid.”

Adeline was on her feet, but Silas immediately blocked her way in a quick, catlike movement that had Kai wondering just how many ways he had misjudged the Duke.

“Ade, please be reasonable. Edward has an ancient power in his possession, an army at his feet, a brand new grudge to settle, and he has just tried to have you murdered in your bed.”

Adeline glared at him for a long moment, before her face began to crumple.

And she began to cry.

That was how Kai knew she saw the sense in what Silas was saying; she wasn't fighting him anymore. Just giving in to her fear and heartbreak.

She was coming with him, just as he'd wanted. But Adhlas above, he hadn't wanted it like this.

At the sound of footsteps in the hall, Silas whipped Adeline behind him even as Kai and Imogen moved to shield her too – but it was Ger who hurried through the doorway. He beelined for Adeline, bowling impatiently past the others in his way and bundling her into a bone-crushing embrace.

“Ade, Ade, Ade,” he murmured again and again, while the Princess sobbed into his chest.

Kai stepped away, trying to ignore his own chest aching. She was comforted; it shouldn't matter whether that comfort came from him or not.

He was glad for the distraction of Simon peering sheepishly around the doorway.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, with no preamble. “If you hadn't been – well. What *were* you doing?”

Simon ducked his head, mumbling. “You said your carriage would leave at dawn. I'd come to bring you some oats to break your fast for the journey and – and to ask – ”

The lad flustered and hummed, until Kai nudged him with a gentle; “To ask?”

“If you might need a footman in your service, Your Majesty. In Dhalias.”

Kai blanched. “You want to come to Dhalias to wait on me?”

The boy nodded.

“You realise I'll be living in the sea a few weeks from now?”

“Perhaps I could serve you on your journey, and at the Empress Vanjir's manor?”

He was at a loss for words, but Simon shrugged, grinning slightly for the first time that Kai could remember. “I don’t much like the cold, Your Majesty.”

He had to stifle a laugh against his hand.

“Very well then. My baggage is already onboard – can you manage your luggage along with Princess Adeline’s trunk?”

Simon hurried eagerly over to Imogen and took the luggage from her before striding purposefully from the room.

Over Adeline’s head on his chin, Ger was speaking in a low, urgent voice to Silas.

“I sent Briony and Thomas to His Majesty’s rooms – they’re newly appointed Gards, but trustworthy. And discreet. They’ll be able to name the attackers and – hold them.”

Silas nodded grimly. Then he patted Adeline’s back, joining the effort to soothe her.

“We’ll get you home, my love. We’ll figure this out.”

Adeline only sobbed harder, as though some everlasting dam within her had crumbled to nothing. As though all her pain and fear would come rushing out and drown them all.

Adeline’s goodbyes were tearful, but brief. He wanted so badly to hold her hand on the brisk walk from the castle, but she walked deliberately ahead of him to the waiting carriage, where Ceri was peering out, confused but somehow understanding that it wasn’t the time for questions. She shifted over to make space for the Princess, then pulled out a box of chocolates and set them on the bench between them. Adeline gave her a watery smile.

Simon clambered aboard, and the carriage lurched forward, rolling away from the still-sleeping palace. Kai peered out the window as they passed the gates and trundled on to the icy roads beyond. At this distance, to gaze upon its glittering white turrets and spindling, skyscraping towers, one might

never guess at the quiet, murderous power struggle that was unfolding within the fairytale palace.

He wouldn't miss it, but his chest felt tight as he watched the castle fade into the blank white landscape of Eisalaan. Perhaps it was partially the recent attack on his lungs, but mostly he ached for Adeline. Even after he'd chosen her happiness and abandoned all hope of aiding the Thaw, even after he'd ruined anything between them for a slim chance at her future happiness, she'd lost the one thing he didn't have, the one thing he'd wanted to preserve for her; her home.

Kai could understand why she didn't glance back at Eisalaan as they crossed the Village borders, continued past the turn for the Capital. And in the next moment, he was glad she hadn't – for she didn't seem to notice the quiet pelting sound on the carriage roof or the droplets streaming down the window panes.

The snow beneath their wheels was turning to an icy greyish mush – it was raining in the Silver Kingdom.

The Thaw was growing stronger.



Epilogue

Eisalaan was a country built on magic. Not only the ice magic that made their shimmering Kingdom famous, but the storytelling magic that brought all the old fairytales to life. Everyone knew the stories and told them again and again; the Princess whose broken heart buried a Kingdom, the Goddess whose tears filled the lake, the first Wielder who drew his powers from a pearl as old as Mother Adhlas herself.

That very day, in a grey and mourning Eisalaan, a new fairytale began to take root on the slushy banks of the abandoned Laune.

A Princess awoken, they said. Frightened and heartbroken, it seemed, but powerful beyond all reason. She was at the palace

even now, some said. Others swore they had seen her; shivering and wet, wandering the halls until she found her way to the Grand Hall and curled up on the old silver throne like a cat. They said the Beira family welcomed her, bowed to her. The Commander even gifted her a glowing pendant, and her joy brought warmth and light to her ethereally beautiful face, the blue light of the pendant pulsing in time with her slowly waking heart.

The lost Princess, they called her.

Sorceress and Saviour, others whispered. *Come back to save us from the Thaw*.

Our rightful Queen, some hissed in the darker corners of the market, and around Captain Doran's barracks.

By the end of the day, there wasn't an Eislaanian who hadn't heard this latest fairytale.

They even knew her name, uttered it to each other with hope and joy, and something close to reverence.

Avette.

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Ava Smiddy never really grew out of playing make believe, and now writing is the only way she can stop herself from daydreaming all day long. She has a soft spot for magic and romance, whether she's reading it or writing it. Ava lives with her husband and their lovely little family in Ireland.

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