

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

By Anna Callari

A Senior Comprehensive Project in Creative Writing

Submitted to the Department of English at Allegheny College

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Bachelor of Arts Degree

12 April 2019

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Professor Jen Julian _____

Professor John Miller _____

I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities as defined in the Honor Code and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the college community as a whole.

Anna Morgan Callari

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What is the secret of the timeless vision? From what profundity of the mind does it derive? Why is mythology everywhere the same, beneath its varieties of costume? And what does it teach?

— Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*

PREFACE

Something Borrowed

The best writing advice I've ever heard told me to write the stories I want to read. Those words have been my source of inspiration for years; they perfectly capture the frustration I often feel when I'm browsing a bookstore and absolutely nothing sounds intriguing. Sometimes it feels like I'm seeing the same story told over and over, but not in new or fresh ways. While I might not go home with a new book that day, I do leave with renewed determination to get my writing out into the world.

Much of that writing inspiration, then, comes from the desire to see a story I know told in a different way. The question I often ask upon finishing a book that entertained me to the end but wasn't earth-shattering is "Cool, but what if it was queer?" Maybe I'm just starved for decent representation in literature, but in my opinion, almost every romance plot can be improved by reimagining it with a queer couple.

This was the same thought I had while and after reading Beroul's 12th century version of *The Romance of Tristan* for my Junior Seminar. I loved the story as it is, but the more I wrote about and analyzed it, the more I was tempted to retell it with a female knight and a princess.

Conveniently, I also needed an idea for my senior project around that same time. It was meant to be.

Every single one of us wants to see ourselves in the books we read. Whether that be through a direct connection to a character, or a similar life experience, or a simple point of sympathy, we naturally search for personal relationships to characters in literature. But no writer can speak for

everyone, which is why diverse voices are so important. I certainly can't speak for every queer kid out there, but I can add my voice to the mix.

I retold and changed the plot of *Tristan* not because the original author didn't do a good enough job, but because I wanted a fresh version of it that vibes better with contemporary young adult literature and the themes that genre carries. As someone who's trying to publish in YA, I know firsthand that the genre wants fresh voices, diversity, and stories from historically marginalized groups. By taking a classic tale and retelling it with these contemporary values in mind, I'm bringing a new perspective to a familiar narrative. And that's part of what makes fantasy as a genre so compelling.

Fantasy is arguably one of the most popular and beloved genres in YA and adult fiction alike. In a preface to her writing guide *The Fantasy Fiction Formula*, Deborah Chester describes fantasy as "an enormous, elastic genre that carries its share of beloved traditions, stereotypes, and dear old writing masters. Yet it's adaptive enough to span what's hip and edgy, deconstructed fairy tales, Goth, punk, and alternate history. New writers are shaking up old concepts all the time, keeping fantasy alive and fresh" (xi). Chester puts it perfectly: fantasy is limitless because of its flexibility. Additionally, much of the reason for our fascination with it is a desire for escapism. Sometimes our world kinda sucks, so luckily we have all these great books that allow us to escape to a different world, if only for a few hundred pages.

In my opinion, though, our love for fantasy goes beyond escapism. Sure, it might be great to steal away to Narnia or the magic-filled world in *Harry Potter*, but what about other beloved fantasy worlds that aren't ideal? Would you *actually* want to be caught up in the plot of *Game of Thrones* or tagging along with Frodo Baggins and the rest of the Fellowship? Maybe the adventure aspect would

be fun, but otherwise the situation in those worlds is far from a fictional utopia. Most of the fantastical worlds we love are ultimately divided by war, a.k.a. the plot, and that plot often revolves around the protagonist overcoming the dangerous obstacles in their way (some more successfully than others). We don't necessarily read those stories with a longing to be in the protagonist's shoes. We want to follow them rather than be them. It's their journey that matters to us, and the archetype of the Hero's Journey is one that continues to be relevant in contemporary fantasy, even if it's almost subconscious.

The Hero's Journey was defined and described by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, which goes into remarkable analysis of our beloved myths and why they're so timeless. Campbell says of the fairy tale, "...it will always be the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story that we find, together with a challengingly persistent suggestion of more remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told" (3). Campbell puts it beautifully, this idea of the myth being universal and familiar, of every story that stems from a beloved archetype, no matter how it's altered and reworked, having some inescapable nod to every tale that has come before it. The same has happened to the Hero's Journey; I know I have unconsciously used that plot model because it is so ingrained in our collective memory. It's a natural progression of development in a protagonist, and it feels right because it feels familiar.

And let's be real: there are few things more satisfying than throwing a character into impossible odds, watching them get beaten down to their breaking point, and then somehow they drag themselves up and plod forward. That struggle, that battle against the odds, is what makes the obstacles worth it and makes the ending fulfilling.

The Romance of Tristan is a tragedy. It's a tale about a knight and a princess who are never meant to be together and yet accidentally fall under the influence of a love potion. That bit of magic sends them running from their homes and fighting for each other against impossible situations. The reader repeatedly roots for Tristan and Yseut as they make their ways back to each other through a series of genius plans, but at the end, we're left wondering if it was all worth it. Because spoiler alert, they both die. Not quite as pointlessly as Romeo and Juliet, but it's the same idea: they die because of each other, both of a broken heart. So why is this story so alluring? Is it *because* of the tragedy? Why can we excuse our love for happy endings in this case? Perhaps we're just as drawn to tragic endings as we are to happy or fulfilling ones. What's interesting about famously sad endings such as *Tristan*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and even *Titanic* is that you know going in that it's going to end in tragedy. So why keep reading? Is it out of some tiny hope that maybe — just *maybe* — the ending will be different this time? Are we hoping for a twist that makes the ending diverge from what we've been told since page one? Maybe so, but I think tragedies play a different part in our literary interests.

Especially in fantasy, these stories add a shock of reality to an otherwise otherworldly setting. So the protagonists fight and claw their way out of rock bottom, but in the end they still fall short of their goal. They lose. Or maybe they win, in some capacity, but the cost is too great to call it a victory. It's tragic, and disheartening to read, but these narratives add a touch of our mundane "real world" to the fantasy setting, reminding us that these made-up, magic-filled worlds are not exempt from the harsh truth that even the hero doesn't always win.

I was drawn to *Tristan* for several reasons, but the ending was a particular point of fascination. Despite being reminded throughout the story that it would inevitably end in tragedy, I was still mad — and, strangely, a little surprised — when it actually happened. Without the

narrator's frequent commentary on the plot that hints at the ending, the reader would think that this is a story in which the protagonists beat the odds. And they do, time after time, obstacle after obstacle. It's a story in which the characters should deserve to reach their goal — in this case to be with each other without worry of discovery. Even understanding the literary reasoning for the tragic ending, it still seems unfair that after everything Tristan and Yseut went through, they were not ultimately victorious. I disagreed with the ending not because it was disappointing on a shallow, emotional level, but because I felt let down.

Largely for that reason, I rejected the original ending in my retelling. But that change also required me to make other narrative decisions so the story didn't read like a happily-ever-after Disney movie. There's value to those kinds of endings, of course, but personally I find stories that require the protagonists to suffer and fight until the end far more fulfilling than a simple happy conclusion where everything turns out okay. I want to feel like the characters have earned that satisfactory ending. I maintain that Tristan and Yseut deserved better than they received, so I knew from the beginning that my versions of them would not ultimately face the same fate.

Perhaps the biggest reason for my refusal of Beroul's ending to the story was because I replaced the narrative's heterosexual couple with a queer couple, and I am sick of seeing queer characters in fiction end up dead. And yes, that is a legitimate phenomenon. I did not want my characters, Farjae and Marié, to be added to the mix of heroic, admirable, but ultimately dead LGBTQ characters in the media. Even if they weren't a queer couple, I still resent the ending of *Tristan* enough that I would've changed it regardless. But the fact that I rewrote this classic tale with queer characters is by itself a significant move that carries a number of implications related to the themes within the original story.

My initial reasoning for queering the narrative was simply, “Why not?” Most of the stories I write are led and carried by characters somewhere on the LGBTQ spectrum, not because I’m pulling a diversity card, but because that is how they naturally appear in my head. So even if this project had been something entirely different, I can guarantee there would be at least one character (probably more) that identified as queer. It’s not something I plan or think about when I begin a writing project, so I didn’t see the significance of making this retelling queer. It was just how it was always going to be.

The more I thought about it, though, considering what each character symbolized in the original story — especially in terms of gender roles — I realized that my natural choice to tell the story with two women truly turns the original narrative on its head. Like much of the literature from the Middle Ages, *The Romance of Tristan* relies on a “damsel in distress” archetype (or rather, trope) for its heroine. Yseut is mostly a passive character without much autonomy or individuality until nearly the end. That said, there are points in the story where she is more logical and rational than Tristan. For a medieval tale, it does carry some hints of female empowerment, which I found both curious and refreshing. Still, though, the gender roles are clear: Tristan is the brave, chivalrous knight, the hero who must initially complete a difficult task in order to meet Yseut. I wouldn’t call Yseut a stereotypical helpless maiden, but it’s clear that the story is Tristan’s.

Therefore, by replacing Tristan with a female knight, I’ve disrupted the gender balance and thrown those roles directly into the trash (where they belong).

While Farjae, my knight, and Marié, my princess, have somewhat similar personalities to the characters who inspired them, they are certainly not carbon copies of Tristan and Yseut. Marié is far from a helpless, passive character. She’s dimensional, has a personality, and isn’t written for the sole

purpose of being a match for Farjae. Their paths cross, of course, and their relationship is a crucial part of the plot, but I deliberately expanded each of their lives beyond the plot on the page.

I never intended for my protagonists to be copies of the original stars of the story, and in the beginning I actually got stuck while writing it because my characters and plot had become too similar to the source material. That roadblock made me start completely over, at about 10,000 words in, and rework the plot so I wasn't following the original narrative so closely. I was getting bored, because with the same plot points as Beroul's story, I knew what was going to happen. After I rewrote, the majority of the story became a surprise to me, unraveling as I went. I had a few certain places and scenes toward which I wanted to direct the narrative, but everything else — even the ending — was a mystery until I got there.

The ending was a battle all its own. As I said before, I didn't want my story to mimic the ending of the original. No dead protagonists! (Well, almost none...) But that raised the issue of how it *would* end. I rewrote the last chapter four times before I had something satisfactory that worked with the rest of the plot. It is not a happy ending, but it's not a tragic ending. It's fitting, it's bitter, and it's hopeful. It's an ending that lets you believe that the world, the characters, and the larger plot can continue beyond the reach of the pages. That, I've learned, is a crucial aspect of writing a believable story: life must go on after you've closed the book.

Such an ending also allows me to expand this project into a novel, as I will inevitably do, but it still serves as a conclusion to the arc of this piece of a larger narrative. I joke about my inability to write anything shorter than 50,000 words, but the truth is that this project being a weird middle ground between short story and novel raised a number of legitimate challenges for me. Novels — long fiction — are my comfort zone, and I appreciate that this project forced me out of that zone,

but there were times over the past few months when I didn't feel like I was writing at my best because I was restricted by a certain number of words and pages. I had to teach myself how to tell a complete, developed story in a far smaller margin than I'm used to, and that caused me to struggle with pacing, character development, and how much plot was too much. This story still has a lot of moving parts, and would perhaps feel more comfortable in the virtually limitless confines of a novel, but I kept that complexity because it adds depth without being confusing, and broadens the story as a whole, again adding to the verisimilitude of it.

Much of my guidance throughout the process of writing this came from the influence of favorite books and authors I look up to. The first introduction to the fantasy genre I can remember was reading C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* when I was younger. It was the adventure within those pages that first intrigued me, and then when I read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* again when I was older, I was able to appreciate the world of Narnia for what it is: a place that carries a story enjoyable for children and adults alike. As a kid, I loved Narnia because of the magic and mythical creatures and talking animals, and while those are still fun aspects, I can look deeper into the books now and understand why that series is such a staple of fantasy. The first book in the series, *The Magician's Nephew*, became a particular inspiration for this project because of how Lewis builds the world and introduces the readers to a magical place that is idealistic enough to provide an escape from our world, and yet has its own dangers and imperfections to give it a more realistic touch.

Then I discovered *Harry Potter* (though I was a little late to the party with that one), and that series made me remember how much I loved reading, as well as how much I loved fantasy. From there I read every fantasy book I could get my hands on, but the next significant favorite was *The*

Hobbit (though it took me years of picking it up and putting it down to get through it), and *The Lord of the Rings* series (admittedly watching, not reading it). Thus was my introduction to high fantasy, with all its complex plots and vibrant world building that have inspired me for this project as well as the other novels I'm writing. *The Hobbit* essentially follows the Hero's Journey archetype to a T, and then complicates the plot beyond just that structure. I modeled this project using the Hero's Journey (though at first it was subconscious), so having Tolkien's work as another influence guided me toward crafting a dimensional plot set in a vivid world.

Today, YA fantasy is the majority of what I read, and some of my greatest inspirations now that I'm serious about writing and publishing in the genre are Leigh Bardugo and Audrey Coulthurst. If you know me and have dared to bring up the topic of books with me, you know that my go-to recommendation is Leigh Bardugo's novel *Six of Crows* and the rest of the series within that book's world. My love for this book goes beyond just an enjoyment of the story, and I've read it enough times that I can use the way it's structured to help my own writing. I've used it as a model for a first chapter, especially in terms of how to frame the book in a way that is introductory and also intriguing enough that the reader wants to keep turning the page. *Six of Crows* is the book that made me understand that in an effective opening scene, the reader should get the notion that they are walking into a setting that already exists, and was not simply built around the characters. Rather, the characters are living, moving parts of the world around them.

While Bardugo's books helped me on the structural side, Audrey Coulthurst's novel *Of Fire and Stars* was a more direct plot influence for this project. I referenced this novel in terms of building the romance between my main characters, and also took some tips on how to describe a palace setting. It helped, too, that the main couple in Coulthurst's novel has sort of the same dynamic as

my protagonists, including the detail that they are two ladies never meant to end up together. The book has a similar overall feel to my novella, so it was a useful influence and guide.

Deborah Chester's brilliant writing guide, *The Fantasy Fiction Formula*, was also a direct influence for this project, and her book is one I will definitely be referencing in the future as I continue crafting my writing. This book covered nearly all the bases of writing fantasy — and just writing a novel in general — but the chapters I found most useful to this project (since it is not, in fact, a novel) were about scene, setting, and character motivation. Chester's multiple chapters on writing effective scenes helped me when I inevitably had to trim down my manuscript and cut out some unnecessary fluff. From there I used Chester's advice to make sure every scene was efficient and completed a certain goal, which was something I'd never thought about. Likewise, if each scene has a clear motive, so should each principal character. Of course they should, and I knew that, but motivations are difficult to dig out of the character sometimes, and it took me two complete drafts of this novella to figure out what exactly my protagonist wanted. Using a character development method from Chester's book, however, I was able to pin down my protagonist's backstory and motives.

This novella is the product of four months of drafting and editing and rewriting, of reading and rereading, and doing all of these things when I probably should have been sleeping instead. It is the product of many influences, some of which I couldn't name if I tried, and some of which are clear inspirations. But despite the models, despite it being an intentional retelling, my novella has become something entirely its own, all at once something old, something new, and something borrowed.

ONE

Any Means Necessary

The streets of Craydon were quiet, but the Salty Salmon tavern burst with enough noise to fill every corner of the royal city. Farjae pushed through the crowd of bodies, nodding at the faces she recognized as fellow regulars here, and settled at the back corner table where her friends and fellow knights in training waited for her. Andrei spotted her first and raised his foaming mug of beer, then waved her over and slid a glass her way as she sat down. “Everyone quiet down,” he said, gesturing toward Milot and his sister Bronwyn, who’d barely looked up from their heated discussion when Farjae had joined them. “Our star and savior has arrived!”

“Savior, huh? What have I saved you from, aside from getting yourself more drunk?” Farjae made a grab for his glass, but he jerked it out of her reach.

“Hey! This is only my second one!” Andrei took a long sip. “I’m not even drunk.”

“Right, that’s just as likely as me being your savior,” Farjae said.

“Well, you did successfully put Bartram in his place this morning,” Milot said. Apparently he’d abandoned his argument with Bronwyn, and now had slid over so he was sitting directly across from Farjae. His drink was nearly untouched.

“Exactly!” Andrei said. He raised his mug again. “A toast to Farjae! The only one of us who is man enough to beat the shit out of Bartram Beaumont!”

Farjae laughed, but inwardly cringed. “Please. All of you could take him down just as well. Besides, it wasn’t even a real fight.”

Bronwyn scoffed. “Not even I would challenge him like you did. And Milot here would let Bartram knock him unconscious, and then apologize to him for the inconvenience.”

“Not true!” Milot retorted. “*I* wouldn’t cross his path at all.”

Farjae shrugged. It had been a personal victory over Bartram this morning, even if it had gotten her in a considerable amount of trouble with Commander Gawain. Usually the commander didn’t allow Farjae and Bartram to spar, since they were not known to get along, but today Bartram’s usual partner was absent and Farjae was the only one who volunteered. Bartram had been getting on her nerves all week — more so than usual — with muttered taunts and sneers every time she saw him. She’d been itching for a reason to bloody that pinched face of his.

She hadn’t meant for their swordplay to get out of hand this morning. She’d only wanted to best him in a fair fight, but before she could stop herself, she’d thrown down the practice sword and gone at him with her fists instead. That had gotten her dragged away by the commander, which was exceptionally humiliating in front of Bartram, but at least she’d left him with a bruised jaw and bloody nose.

“Look,” she said to her friends, “if Bartram had mocked and teased and belittled all of you as much as he’s done to me for the past six years, you’d use every ounce of strength against him too. Bartram has been a thorn in my side for far too long. He’s gotten comfortable, and I needed to make sure he knew I haven’t stopped fighting back.”

“I think you made that clear today,” Andrei said. He drained his glass, then flagged down the barmaid and called for another round. Farjae quickly finished her drink, happily taking another from the server’s tray as she returned. But as Farjae turned back to her friends she caught a glimpse of the tavern’s entrance, where none other than Bartram Beaumont had just walked in with his friends.

Andrei apparently noticed them too. “I’d tell you to challenge him to a rematch, but it looks like he brought backup this time.”

“Probably too scared to face her alone again,” Milot added.

Farjae turned away before Bartram could see her, but kept an eye on him as he strode across the room to his own corner. Thankfully, he didn’t seem to notice her.

While Farjae was confident in her ability to best Bartram in a fight, he still managed to get under her skin in other ways. After all this time, it really shouldn’t have bothered her, but it hadn’t taken him long to figure out exactly what to say to shatter her confidence.

Some part of Farjae knew that she was one of the best in training, and would soon become one of the strongest in the Ivory Knights. She had fought hard for her position since she was thirteen years old, and had admired the Ivory Knights from afar for as long as she could remember. They were an elite sect of soldiers within the king’s army, hand chosen by the king himself as the strongest, most intelligent, and most skilled fighters. Farjae was lucky to have made it as far as she had, and despite the rumors and sneers — from Bartram and others — she knew she’d earned her place through her own merit, not because it was handed to her by the king.

King Barnabus was generous to all of the Ivory Knights, but he stood by his word to never choose favorites, especially when it came to accepting trainees. Farjae was no exception, even if she was his niece.

She wanted to believe that, and most days she did. There were times, though, when she’d lose a fight or make a sloppy mistake and every cruel remark from Bartram would haunt her for the rest of the day. *You don’t belong here. You didn’t earn it. You’re only here because your uncle pitied you. You’ll never belong with us.*

It was so stupid. But the doubts crept in, even now among her friends. She appreciated their praise, but some part of her continued to doubt how genuine it was.

“Uh-oh. Farjae—” Milot’s voice brought her out of her thoughts in time to spot Bartram heading toward their table with his usual jaunty step and smug expression.

Farjae stood up. “What do you want?”

“Oh, nothing, really. Just to congratulate you on your win today.” He smiled, but it looked no less mocking than usual. Farjae was at least pleased to see that the bruises on his jaw and nose looked worse than they had this morning.

She narrowed her eyes. “Congratulate me? I’m surprised you’re acting so noble after a sore loss.”

He shrugged. “It’s only fair that I let you win every so often. It feeds your delusion that you’re better than everyone else. And it keeps me entertained.”

Farjae made a lunge for him, but Andrei caught her arm and held her back. “Not worth it!”

Before Farjae or Bartram could say anything else, the tavern’s front door burst open and she heard her name billow in with the cool air. “For God’s sake,” she muttered. Four palace guards were marching toward her, looking awkward and out of place among the tipsy civilians. “Farjae Sheridan,” the man in the front growled, scowling down at her. “Your uncle demands your presence at the palace. Immediately.”

“And this was necessary?”

“His Majesty the King has ordered your timely return,” the guard said. “By *any* means necessary.”

Farjae frowned. It was odd of her uncle to use his royal guard to fetch her from the city; usually he only sent a squire. King Barnabus was boisterous and extravagant on any given day, but he knew when to be subtle. Apparently this was not one of those times. And clearly he also didn't care that Farjae enjoyed her anonymity in this tavern, which was now ruined by this entourage of royal guards escorting her to the king's doorstep.

"Fine," she sighed, tossing a coin toward Andrei for the drinks. "I'll see you all tomorrow morning. Don't stay out too late."

"Yes, Mother," Andrei snickered.

Farjae followed the guards across the room toward the door, staring at the ground to avoid making eye contact with any of the people she knew were staring at her. She could feel their gazes and hear their muffled laughs. *The king's lost puppy gets dragged back to the palace.* It was like having a roomful of Bartrams watching her, and it certainly didn't help that he was among them.

"Why does the king want to see me?" Farjae asked as they wove through the narrow streets and up the hill to the palace. "What's so urgent that he can't wait until tomorrow?" There had been occasions in the past when King Barnabus had appeared at Farjae's training sessions, standing in the sidelines until she had a break. That was usually when he delivered important news or asked favors of her. Such an urgent call as this was starting to wear at Farjae's nerves, and she wondered if there was something truly wrong.

"You will be told everything once we reach the throne room," the lead guard said.

"Just tell me one thing," Farjae insisted, stopping short. She waited until he had turned to her before she went on. "Is he well?"

"His Majesty?"

“Yes! The king — is he well? Is this an emergency?”

“He seemed... agitated,” one of the other guards said. “When he gave us the orders to locate you, he was in one of his emotional moods.”

Farjae groaned. So it was just her uncle being his dramatic self, then. She should have known it was something so trivial. But she could only imagine what the source of his woes was this time.

The guards left her at the gates of the palace and Farjae went the rest of the way through the main ballroom, across the portrait hall, and into the throne room. King Barnabus was pacing the floor in front of the dais, anxiously rubbing at his beard. Farjae stopped in the center of the room, clicking her heel on the floor to announce her presence.

King Barnabus looked up with a start, and instantly rushed to her. “Oh! Farjae, thank the gods you’re here. I hope my guards weren’t too rough with you. I know how they can be. But I needed you here urgently. I’m afraid I’m having a crisis.”

Farjae tried not to roll her eyes. Her uncle was historically prone to frequent existential crises. She couldn’t grasp how someone so secure in his path could possibly second-guess his life, yet here he was. “What’s going on, Uncle?”

“My dear niece, are you aware that the anniversary of my birth is just four days from now?”

“Your birthday? Of course. It’s a kingdom-wide holiday,” Farjae said. She had not, in fact, realized that the day was so soon.

“And do you know how many years your uncle has lived?”

She shook her head. He couldn’t have been that old; his hair had barely begun to gray, and there were only shallow wrinkles etched into his face.

“I am forty-two years old, Farjae,” the king said wearily. “Forty-two! Can you imagine! And the— the *tragedy* of it all is that I am not married. My time is running out for such things, I’m afraid. But with you being a fine young knight... I couldn’t possibly give the throne to *you* when I die. No, I need an heir. That is the only way. The kingdom would not take kindly to such a distant relative as yourself ruling over Craydon. The king of Mossley would surely not keep our partnership if I do not have a direct blood relative on the throne after me, and if King Simond decides we are his enemy, then the Levalon Region will be torn to pieces! And it’ll make us all the more vulnerable to attacks from that wretched Dreanythian kingdom. Don’t you see, Farjae? It’ll all end in ruin! Ruin and horror!”

Farjae just stared at him and blinked. Craydon had never had tension with the kingdom of Mossley in the far north; the two ruled opposite corners of the region of Levalon, and had never had so much as a skirmish as far as Farjae knew. They kept to their mountainous lands and the people of Craydon kept to the forests and coast. Farjae was also fairly certain that a kingdom as small as Iverness, in the south of the Dreanyth Region, wouldn’t dare advance on King Barnabus’s armies. The Ivory Knights had defeated Iverness’s forces easily in a bloodbath of a battle ten years ago, and Farjae was certain King Rolandus was not keen to test Craydon’s forces again.

Barnabus was overreacting. The safety of their kingdom was not at stake due to his marital status.

“Uncle,” Farjae said gently. She didn’t know where to start. “With all due respect, Your Majesty, I hardly believe you’re past the age for a wife.”

“Ach, but who would marry an old man like me?” Barnabus shook his head, scratching at his beard again. “Even if I were to send for the kindest maiden, she would shudder at the sight of me!”

“I doubt that, Your Majesty.” Farjae watched him as he resumed his pacing, and an idea began to hatch in her mind. Perhaps her uncle’s emotional crisis could provide her an opportunity.

“Uncle, might I offer a suggestion? Or rather, a proposal?”

“Ha! It’ll be the only one of those I receive in my entire life.”

This time Farjae did roll her eyes. “If I might, sir.”

“Yes, yes, of course, dear.” The king paused his pacing and faced her. “And do treat me as your uncle rather than your king in these types of circumstances. I need as much familial support as possible.”

Farjae nodded. “I’m only wondering, Uncle, if I might be able to help you on this... quest for a bride.”

The king frowned. “How so? What, you’ll ride across the region — across the entire land! — until you find a woman willing to marry me? Ha! I shall never see you again, Farjae. And I cannot lose my finest knight in training.”

Farjae smiled. “You flatter me, Uncle. And I urge you to remember that my fellow trainees are just as capable as myself.”

“Sure, sure. But Farjae, it’s only once in a generation that I meet a young man or woman with such distinct promise for a shining future and honorable career. I know a brilliant knight when I see one, my niece. You are the star in my ranks.”

“Uncle, I believe we’re straying from the subject,” Farjae said with a small laugh. While she did, of course, appreciate her uncle’s compliments and understood that they were not given lightly, she couldn’t begin to articulate a response to such praise. She was used to the occasional compliment from Commander Gawain. Not from the king himself.

King Barnabus set his hand on Farjae's shoulder and smiled at her fondly. "Tell me what's on your brilliant mind, dear."

"You've already said it, Uncle," Farjae said. "I could search the kingdoms — all six of them if I have to — for the most beautiful, kind, and intelligent woman who would be honored to be your queen."

"You can bring any woman back here, Farjae, but no matter how kind, you can't make her love me."

"I doubt I'll have to," she argued. "You're a charming man, Uncle. And you're a good and just king. You have many respectable and admirable traits. By comparison to some of the kings out there, any woman would be lucky to have you."

He suddenly perked up as though he'd had a revelation. "Of course! I know who you must find, Farjae. I have been unable to banish her from my thoughts for months, and you are right — she *would* be lucky to have me! Do you remember my visit to the kingdom of Draycott?"

Not personally, because you invited Bartram to tag along instead of me, she wanted to say. "I do," she told him instead. "You said it was successful in securing trade with the Kinada Region."

The king waved her words away. "Yes, yes, that's true. But did I tell you about the princess?"

"You did not."

"Princess Marié." He smiled as he said her name. "She's a remarkable woman. Should've been in the king's meeting room right beside her father and me. Smart, clever, definitely has a mind for strategy. If she was in my court, she'd be my most trusted general. But you know how Kinadians are. Still think all women are demons."

Farjae rolled her eyes. She didn't know much about Draycott or the Kinada Region, but the country was a little infamous for its strict adherence to a religion whose gods were all male and devils were all female. Clearly that mythology had bled into Draycott's politics, too.

"I spoke briefly with King Hadrion about his daughter," Barnabus went on. "He said she was beginning to worry him, since she refused every suitor who asked for her hand. He seemed eager to have her married as soon as possible."

Farjae had already guessed where this was going. "Did you ask for her hand?"

"Regrettably, no. But there is no time like the present, Farjae!" He turned to her with an eager smile. "I can't very well go to Draycott myself and be away from Craydon for the weeks it would take to travel there and settle all the matters of marriage. But you, Farjae, could be my messenger."

She took a step back. "You... want *me* to go to Draycott and fetch Marié for you? Why not just send a message with your proposal? Or better, go yourself and have Commander Gawain handle your affairs during your absence. Between him and Commander Mylla, I'm sure they can manage."

The king shook his head. "No, that won't do. Where is the romance in that, Farjae? It would be far too bold of me to ride into Draycott myself. If I send you, the princess will see that I am so inconsolable with my love for her that I can't possibly leave my palace. Thus you become the hero — the angelic knight to deliver my beloved to me!"

Farjae let out a long breath. "Are you sure, Uncle, that this is how you want to go about your proposal? I am more than happy to do as you wish, but... well, your methods are a bit unconventional."

"Have they not always been, Farjae?"

He had a point there. Still, Farjae wasn't sure how she would go about explaining any of this to the princess, or the king of Draycott, for that matter. And it didn't help that he probably wouldn't listen to her, anyway. Knight or not, he'd look at her and see only her gender. Farjae could get around that, but the rest of this plan was just ridiculous. It would be completely insane for her to walk up to King Hadrion and ask him for the princess's hand... on behalf of someone else. Would the princess even agree to such a thing?

Would she even have a choice?

Farjae wanted a different plan. She usually wouldn't go against what the king told her; he was the king, after all, and could easily strip her of her place in the Ivory Knights and send her to the ranks of the general army instead. Or worse, strip her of her status entirely before she was even officially knighted. That wasn't a risk she could take, but in this case she might have to make an exception. It would benefit the king in the long run, and keep him from making a fool of himself.

Although, it was possible she could change his mind without going behind his back at all. "Might I suggest just one more idea, Uncle?"

He shrugged. "Go ahead."

"What if you held a royal ball?" Farjae smiled as the idea came together in her head. What was more romantic than that? "An extravagant party, held right here in our castle, with Marié and her family as the honored guests. You don't even have to invite anyone else if you don't wish to, but the more the merrier to witness your heartfelt proposal at the height of the event."

Barnabus was quiet for a minute, frowning at the floor as Farjae spoke. But then his face gradually broke into a smile, and he turned back to her with a wide grin. "You are brilliant, Farjae! A ball, of *course*! Not even I thought of that. Yes, we'll begin planning immediately. Have the

invitations sent at once! I want a letter to every kingdom in the land — Oh! Except that rotten King Rolandus, of course. No Ivernessians in *my* castle! But everyone else is most welcome, just ensure Princess Marié gets her letter before everyone else!”

Farjae was momentarily overwhelmed by the immediacy of his enthusiasm, but that was quickly replaced by relief — and a touch of excitement — that he’d agreed to her idea. “When will we have the ball, Uncle?” she asked.

“As soon as possible! Have it on my birthday! Oh, that’s too soon, isn’t it?” He frowned again. “No matter. Tell them to come at once, as early as they can! Let’s say in three weeks’ time.”

It was an absurdly short amount of time to plan such a party, but Farjae was sure Barnabus would make it work. And if he let her help plan it, she could do so far more efficiently than he could. “Three weeks. You’ve got it. I’ll have the invitations out at dawn.”

“You are brilliant, my dear!” he said again. “Excellent. How can I thank you? Consider this a distinct honor, Farjae. Few of your peers have been offered such a task, least of all Bartram Beaumont.”

Farjae raised an eyebrow.

The king smiled. “I understand the two of you have been at odds since your training began. Let’s say that if the ball is successful and I am engaged to Marié by the end of the evening, I will see to it that you graduate from your training long before Bartram even dreams of it. And when he does, he will be placed in a sector entirely separate from yours. You’ll likely never have to interact with him again. Now doesn’t that sound like a dream come true?”

Farjae took a hesitant step back. No, that was too good to be true. What was the catch? How could he promise her a reward that was *exactly* what she wanted?

“Well?” he pressed. “Do you accept?”

“Of course,” she said. “Thank you. I— I don’t know how to thank you enough.” For the first time, her goal — her *dream* — seemed tangible. It wasn’t a distant future anymore. She could have everything she wanted within reach in just a few short weeks.

And absolutely no one was in her way.

TWO

The Ball

Within the next two weeks, Farjae had already received responses from most of the other kingdoms: the royal families of Mossley and Draycott would both be there. Much to Farjae's and Barnabus's relief, King Hadrion had responded with a cordial acceptance to the invitation. Along with them, the prince of Dawsbury would be attending alone; apparently the king and queen were busy with other matters. The only remaining city was Colchester, neighbor to Draycott, and Farjae hadn't gotten a response at all from them.

In the days leading up to the ball, her job was more or less over. The king was handling the rest of the planning, and Farjae had never been more glad to be a knight rather than palace staff; Barnabus had them scurrying around the place making sure every inch of it was sparkling. She felt a little sorry for them, but did not envy them.

That didn't stop her from helping with the planning when she could. When the day of the ball finally arrived, Farjae spent most of the morning rushing around the castle to make sure — again — that everything was in order. She ran into Barnabus more than once, and eventually he told her to quit fretting and stay out of the palace until the guests began to arrive.

"I was just trying to be helpful," she complained to Andrei as they went back to the barracks after their training. "He did say I could be part of the planning."

"And you have been," Andrei said. "You sent the invitations, you've been policing the palace staff just as much as the king has, and you obsessed over the food for two whole hours. What more do you think you have to do?"

“I don’t know,” Farjae shrugged. “I was expecting to be more involved, I guess.”

“Such a control freak,” Andrei teased. “If I was the king, I’d bar you from the palace, too. We have the whole afternoon to relax before the party. Why don’t you enjoy it?”

“Commander Gawain would have let me help more,” Farjae muttered.

“Commander Gawain isn’t the king,” Andrei countered. “Why do you want to be in charge so badly, anyway? I’d be happy to have a mostly free day to myself.”

Farjae sighed. “I just want to be sure it won’t be a disaster.”

Andrei nudged her shoulder. “Come on, it’ll be fine. And that’s coming from me, who worries about everything. It’ll all go smoothly, and this will be the grandest party Craydon has ever seen.”



The ball was set to begin in mere minutes, and Farjae could not find the king. She rushed through the palace corridors, only partially certain of where she was going, and ducked into every room with an open door. A clock at the opposite end of the hall struck the hour, and Farjae muttered a curse. Andrei would be waiting for her, and he would panic if she was late.

But the ball couldn’t exactly happen without its host.

Farjae turned down another corridor, but paused as she caught a glimpse of a light flickering through the crack of a door slightly ajar. She inched closer, peering through the narrow opening, and spotted someone sitting hunched over in front of a dying fire. The figure turned their head to the side, and Farjae saw that it was Barnabus.

Her first response was to be annoyed. What the hell was he doing holed up in this dusty sitting room when the party he was so excited about was waiting downstairs? But the longer she watched him, the more she could tell that he was upset. His usual confidence was gone, and in place sat a side of Barnabus that Farjae didn't recognize. And clearly it was a side of him she was never meant to see.

With slow, soundless footsteps, Farjae backed away from the door and made her way back down to the grand ballroom. She shoved through the gathering crowd until she spotted Commander Gawain, and hurried to him.

"Andrei is looking for you," he said in place of a greeting. He was dressed in his usual armor, though it looked like the metal had been shined, and he wore a gold cape pinned at his shoulder with a white and gold brooch in the shape of an elephant's head — the symbol of the Ivory Knights.

"I know," Farjae said. "I'll go to him in a moment. But I need a favor."

He glanced at her, but barely moved his attention from the milling crowd. Apparently Barnabus had told him to monitor the castle's security for the duration of the ball. That was strange; usually Gawain was at the king's side rather than watching the doors. And he clearly didn't seem happy about this arrangement. "What is it?" he asked with weariness in his tone.

"Could you go to the king and somehow get him down here? He's in the old library on the second floor of the north wing. I didn't think it was my place to disturb him—"

"You're correct."

"—but you could," she continued. "And he needs to get here soon. As in, should have been here half an hour ago."

Gawain stayed silent. His gray eyes scanned the crowd. “The king and I have everything under control, Farjae. You shouldn’t concern yourself with any of this.”

“But—”

He sighed. “Go find Andrei before he worries your entire unit into a frenzy. I’ll talk some sense into the king.” He signaled to Commander Mylla at the other end of the room, and she began making her way toward them.

Farjae pushed through the crowd of knights, generals, servants, advisors, and numerous other nobles. Somewhere within this chaos were three different royal families, including Princess Marié, whom Farjae had yet to see or meet. She made that a goal for the night, to introduce herself to the king’s eventual bride, perhaps even before he made his proposal.

For now, though, she made her way to Andrei, whom she found on the far side of the room, glancing around like a lost and nervous puppy. He noticeably relaxed when he saw her. “Where have you been? And where the hell is the king? Every other royal family is here except ours. Look, there’s the prince of Dawsbury. He’s probably wondering where the host is!”

Farjae followed his gaze to the young man standing idly near the food tables. He was dressed in a deep blue coat, its front glittering with various medals. He didn’t look particularly friendly, though, or perhaps the scowl on his face was directed toward the wine he was holding. Or maybe Andrei was right and he was already disappointed in the ball.

“Why do you think he’s here alone?” Farjae muttered. “I don’t believe such a vague response as the king and queen were *busy*. All royals are busy, and that didn’t stop the entire families of Mossley and Draycott from being here.”

Andrei shrugged. “I don’t know. But you don’t think it’s anything suspicious, do you? They couldn’t be planning a war, could they?”

Farjae sent him an odd look. “No. You are far too quick to jump to conclusions, my friend. I was thinking more along the lines of a scandal, not a war. Gods, Andrei, I don’t know how you sleep at night with all these worries. Oh! Look, there’s the royal family of Mossley now.”

Farjae had never met them in person, and didn’t even know what they looked like, but they could not have been more obviously from the north. King Simond was the only one without the typical blonde hair and blue eyes; his darker features were more typical of this area of the Levalon Region. Still, the king, queen, and young princess were all dressed in thick furs as though they’d expected to leave one wintry climate and enter another.

Farjae glanced at Andrei. “Looks like they’re regretting their clothing choices, eh?”

Andrei cracked a smile at that. “Speaking of which, what on earth are *you* wearing?”

She looked down at her clothes, a plain tunic and dark trousers paired with the knee-high boots she’d spent nearly an hour shining. “What’re you talking about? Did you expect me to wear my armor? We’re off duty, and it’s uncomfortable.”

“I just thought you’d wear something a little... more formal, that’s all.”

Farjae narrowed her eyes. “Don’t tell me you were expecting me to wear a dress.”

Andrei shrugged, then glanced at her and quickly shook his head. “No! I mean, I dunno...”

Farjae couldn’t help but laugh. “Please, Andrei, after twelve years I thought you’d know me better than that.”

“Look,” he said, nodding toward the crowd. “The king is here.”

Farjae hardly heard him. “No, *look*. Princess Marié is here.”

King Barnabus had told Farjae a bit about the princess of Draycott. He'd said she was intelligent, observant, stubborn, and clever. And he'd spoken of her beauty, of course, but no description could have prepared Farjae for how gorgeous Marié actually was. She had bright blue eyes, silvery-white hair, and jeweled earrings framing her round face. She wore a deep crimson gown, and her hair was coiled and pinned at the back of her neck, beaded with tiny, delicate pearls. Crowning her head was a thin golden tiara with a deep sapphire at the center that matched her earrings and necklace. But what struck Farjae most was how *young* the princess was. Farjae had been expecting a woman close in age to Barnabus, but Marié barely looked older than Farjae herself.

Gathered around Marié was the rest of her family, all of whom shared her silver hair and blue eyes except for the queen, whose hair was dark as a raven's feathers. Both King Hadrion and Queen Penelope watched the crowd of couples dancing with blank expressions that Farjae took to mean they were somewhere between bored and disapproving, but Marié and the prince looked around with wonder. Farjae wondered if parties such as this weren't commonplace in their home kingdom.

"I'm going to go talk to them," Farjae said, and drifted away from Andrei without waiting for his response. She wove her way through the crowd, stepping out of the way of the dancers, and followed Marié and her family to the edge of the room. Just before Farjae reached them, the king and queen headed for the food table, leaving Marié and the prince alone.

Just as well. Hadrion and Penelope were more than a little intimidating.

"Princess Marié." Farjae smiled as she greeted her, and then nodded politely toward the prince. "Forgive me; I don't believe I know your name, Your Highness."

He gave her a bright smile. He was almost as beautiful as his sister, but their looks were where their similarities stopped. Unlike Marié, the prince was energetic and jovial. He seemed far more carefree than his sister, which Farjae found curious. She imagined he was in a demanding position; he basically held his kingdom on his shoulders. But maybe he had learned to handle the stress, or was simply good at hiding it.

“I’m Jori,” he said cheerfully. “Ah, and I suppose there’s a ‘Prince’ attached to that, but please, just call me Jori. None of that ‘Your Highness’ business, either. Consider me your friend. It’s very kind of your king to invite us all the way here for a ball.”

“But you’re the one who sent the invitations, were you not?” Marié asked.

Farjae startled. “I— Er, yes,” she stammered. “How did you know?”

Marié shrugged. “Kings are busy men. I imagine he wouldn’t have taken the time to write such eloquent notes to five kingdoms.”

“Fair enough,” Farjae said, “but how did you know it was *me*?”

“Because you’re the only other one here who recognized us.” Marié smiled. “What’s your name?”

“Farjae Sheridan,” she said, and then added, “Soon to be Knight Farjae.”

Marié exchanged a brief, surprised glance with her brother. “Knight?” she asked, and Farjae waited for some sort of *That’s no occupation for a lady* remark, but instead Marié looked impressed. Maybe even a bit jealous. “That’s wonderful. I wish you luck in your training.” She started to turn away, then paused, glancing over Farjae again. “Jori, would you give us a minute?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” He headed for the nearest servant carrying a tray of wine glasses.

Farjae looked at Marié curiously. “Was there something you needed, Princess?”

“Not particularly. My brother tends to take over conversations. I’d like to speak with you without his interruptions and tangents.”

Farjae smiled, unsure how to react to Marié’s wish to spend time with her specifically. She’d have to make sure it didn’t go to her head. This was Barnabus’s queen, after all.

But Marié didn’t know that yet.

“Are you enjoying the party so far?” Farjae asked as they began to drift through the crowd.

“I am. We’ve never had anything like this in my kingdom,” Marié said. There was still wonder in her eyes as she gazed up at the golden lanterns and crimson ribbons decorating the already elaborate chandeliers above. “My father doesn’t see the point in such indulgences. He believes parties are a waste of money and time, and serve only to show off a kingdom’s triviality. I disagree. I think it’s healthy to have a bit of fun now and then, don’t you think?”

Farjae nodded. “I agree. We don’t have parties often, but King Barnabus does like to make them extravagant when they do happen. This is the first one since I’ve lived on the palace grounds.”

“And where did you live before?” Marié asked. “When did you decide to become a knight?”

“Well, I wouldn’t call it much of a choice,” Farjae said. “It was sort of my only option after my father passed away. He was a wealthy noble who served in Barnabus’s court for years, so we lived here in the city. I don’t remember much about my father, only that he was constantly traveling. When I was younger, I wanted nothing more than to go with him out to sea, but that dream vanished when he died. King Barnabus allowed me to live among the servants until I was old enough to start my training.”

“We have something in common, then,” Marié said. “Palaces are all we’ve ever known.”

“Do you ever wish you’d had a different life?” Farjae asked. “I mean, do you ever think about what you might have been if not a princess? I sometimes wish I could have been born at a different time, or in a different part of the world, just to see what I would do with that life. Does that make me ungrateful?”

Marié glanced up at her and smiled. “Not at all. I often wish to be something other than a princess. Unfortunately that’s all I will ever be. With Jori in line for the throne, there’s a slim chance I’ll ever bear the title of queen. Not for my kingdom, anyway. I suppose I’ll be somebody’s queen someday.”

Maybe sooner than you think, Farjae thought with a grimace. Marié was such a curious and adventurous girl; she’d waste away within these walls, staring out with longing at the sea, just out of her reach.

“Farjae... could I—?” Marié cut off her words with a sigh, turning away from her. “Oh, never mind. Foolish thought.”

Farjae shrugged. “I doubt any thought of yours would be foolish, Princess. I’m told you’ve got a sharp mind. You should speak your thoughts.”

Marié glanced up at her sheepishly. “I... fear it’s not an appropriate question.”

“All the more reason to ask it.” Farjae grinned. “And I can assure you that this conversation is strictly between the two of us. You can trust me, Marié.”

She nodded, then looked down at the floor. “I just wondered... Does your king intend to propose to me?”

Farjae blinked, taken aback. She hadn’t expected the princess to ask that, or even suspect it. But she didn’t think she could even give her an answer. “I truly don’t know,” she said, because

perhaps that was somewhat true. Maybe Barnabus no longer intended to ask for Marié's hand. Maybe seeing her again reminded him how young she was, and he would find a more eligible queen.

Marié tucked a loose strand of her hair back in place. "I didn't think you would know. I can't help but wonder, though. He seemed taken with me when we last met, and now all he has done tonight is speak of how wonderful he thinks I am. It is... a bit overwhelming, I admit."

"I'm sorry if he's been a bother," Farjae said. "He does tend to smother. I hope he learns to rein in such enthusiasm."

Marié nodded absently, then shook herself out of her thoughts and stood up a little straighter, casting away her worried expression. "Well, I suppose only time will reveal his intentions. It was lovely speaking with you, Farjae. Thank you for... Well, for listening. I should get back to my family." She offered a small smile, then was swallowed into the crowd.

Farjae watched her go, though part of her wanted to follow, or call her back, or do something to keep her away from the king just a minute longer. Well, what she really wanted to do was keep Marié *completely* away from Barnabus. But that wasn't an option, wasn't her job, and all it'd accomplish was cracking a rift between herself and her uncle. She certainly would not be graduating early if she interfered at all with Barnabus's pursuit of the princess.

So why was she beginning to wonder if that mattered at all?

"Knight Farjae! We meet again."

She turned and found Prince Jori beside her, happily carrying a half-empty glass of wine. "Where's Marié? Did the wine tempt her away, too?"

Farjae smiled. "I think she just needed a minute alone."

Jori finished his wine, set the empty glass on a servant's tray, and offered his hand to her.

"Care for a dance, Knight?"

"Not quite a knight yet," she reminded him, and took his hand. "But sure."

Jori swept her into the crowd, and failed to hide his surprise that Farjae actually knew how to dance. "Where'd you learn?"

"I've lived in and around palaces my entire life," she replied. "I picked up a thing or two."

"If you're this light on your feet with a sword in your hands, you'll make a brilliant knight."

Farjae lifted her head. "I already am."

Jori laughed. "That you are!"

They continued their sweep around the room, nimbly swirling in time with the crowd of swishing dresses. Farjae mostly looked around at the other dancers, but every so often glanced at Jori, trying to figure out what his intentions were with this dance. Was he just being friendly, or did he have some other motive? Was he, like the king, on the hunt for a queen?

"You're wondering why I asked you to dance."

Farjae met his eyes. "A little. Why me? Why not any of these other ladies?"

"Because this is not just a dance," Jori said, directing them toward the edge of the room. "I'd like to talk to you about my sister."

Farjae frowned. "What about her?"

"I know the king plans to propose to her. I'm going to tell you now that it's a terrible idea. Marié has refused every proposal she has been offered. If King Barnabus asks her to be his queen at this ball tonight, she will say no. Especially if he makes a spectacle out of it, she will say no. And not only is that an embarrassment to the king, it's also an embarrassment to my family. The only reason

my father agreed to attend this ball was in hopes that Marié would walk away with an engagement ring.”

Farjae had been afraid of that. Especially after her conversation with Marié, she had a feeling the princess wouldn’t accept such a public proposal, especially not from a king with whom she was more annoyed than enamored. “So what do you suggest I do? Tell the king to forget it?”

“You could,” Jori shrugged. “Or I could give you something to solve that issue.”

“How?”

“I might have something up my sleeve.” He smiled. “Care for a glass of wine?” He directed them through the swirling crowd and toward the back corner of the ballroom. They broke away from the other dancers and Jori pulled her aside. A servant hurried by and Jori plucked two glasses from his tray, then thought better of it and called the servant back to grab a third. He handed one to Farjae and set the other two down on the table beside them.

“Is your plan to drink yourself into a coma so you don’t remember a single detail about this inevitable disaster?” Farjae went to take a sip.

“Don’t drink it yet.” He dug into his pocket and drew out a small vial of clear liquid, then leaned closer to Farjae and dropped his voice to a whisper. “This is a powerful love potion. Two drops in the king’s and princess’s drinks will have them head over heels for each other in mere minutes.”

Farjae stepped back. “You would put your sister under the influence of magic to convince her to marry a man she doesn’t love?”

“To avoid disaster to both of our kingdoms, yes.”

Farjae shook her head. “I won’t be part of this.”

“Wait.” Jori took a step closer to her. “I don’t need you to give it to Marié at all. Only the king. For the potion to work, both of them have to drink it. The king has no reason to trust a glass of wine I’ve brought to him, but he clearly trusts you wholeheartedly. All you’re doing is intensifying what he already feels for my sister. You don’t have to be involved in Marié’s share.”

“How can you be unbothered by this? How can you *force* your sister to love someone?”

“What other solution do you have?” Jori searched her eyes. “I’m doing Marié a kindness. The potion is not trickery. It will allow her to see the positive qualities in the king and let her love him. And the goal is for her love to become so genuine that she doesn’t notice when the potion wears off.”

“How long will that take?”

“Two drops is four years.”

Four years. One sip of wine determined the princess’s fate and controlled her feelings for four whole years. It was bad enough she’d be trapped by a marriage to the king. Now she’d be trapped by her own heart too.

And yet... Farjae hated to admit it, but Jori was right. She couldn’t see another way out. And perhaps, in some respect, the potion was kinder than being chained to a loveless marriage. Even if the love was fabricated by magic, at least it would be there.

“Fine,” she said, holding her glass toward him. “I’ll give it to the king. But not Marié.”

“Keep that one for yourself,” Jori said with a nod to the glass. He handed her the one from his left hand. “This one is for the king.”

“All right. Where’s the potion?”

“Already there.”

Farjae frowned and peered at the wine. The potion had been clear, but she swore the wine was a shade darker. She didn't bother asking when Jori had dropped it in. She just wanted to get this over with.

"Farjae," Jori said as she started to walk away. "Thank you."

"I hope you know what you're doing," she said.

He smiled. "I do."

Farjae pushed her way through the crowd and found her uncle chatting with Commander Gawain, who seemed to only be half-attentive to the king. Barnabus was oblivious to his divided attention, and certainly did not seem to need more wine. But his face lit up when he saw her.

"Ah! Farjae! Enjoying my party?"

She put on a smile. "Very much so, Uncle. I wondered if you'd like a fresh glass of wine, but perhaps you're past your limit."

He roared a laugh. "Nonsense! The party's only just started."

If you say so. Farjae offered him the wine, pausing briefly to ensure it was the right one. She took a sip of her own drink, then held her breath as the king gulped down his.

"You look so troubled, Farjae," he said. "It's a night to have fun. You have done well. Relax, be young, and enjoy yourself. You do not have to be a knight tonight."

"His Majesty is right," Gawain said, a bit wearily. "You're off duty." He eyed Farjae's wine longingly. "Enjoy it."

She took another sip and tried to tell herself to relax. Maybe the potion would take some time to take effect. It was out of her hands. Her job was done.

She downed another gulp and decided to go find Andrei. At least he could sympathize with her anxieties.

Instead she found Marié, and the sight of her nearly made Farjae lose her grip on her glass. She still looked stunning, of course, but there was a fiery spirit in Marié's eyes that Farjae hadn't seen before. Earlier, Marié had been shy, withdrawn, and almost reluctant to meet Farjae's gaze. Now Farjae saw the princess her uncle had described: proud, confident, and standing at the top of the world.

And she understood why her uncle had been instantly enamored.

Marié locked eyes with Farjae, and started directly toward her. Farjae's first instinct was to flee into the crowd, but as the princess drew closer she couldn't get herself to move. Marié was actively seeking her out, and Farjae wanted to revel in this single moment when *she* was at the front of Marié's attention. That fearless gaze was directed at Farjae alone. She would not turn away.

When Marié stopped before her, her unwavering confidence had been replaced by a mix of surprise and confusion. But before Farjae could ask, the princess grasped the front of her shirt, pulled her close, and kissed her.

And when Marié pulled away, Farjae could only meet her eyes for a heartbeat before she turned and bolted out of the ballroom.

THREE

A Certain Shade of Treason

Somehow, Marié found her.

Farjae was hiding in the orchard, curled up against the trunk of the sprawling tree that reigned over the rest of the smaller fruit trees. It was one of the only places on the palace grounds where Farjae knew no one could easily find her, but she should've expected that Marié would figure out her hiding spot.

"Knight Farjae." Marié's footsteps stopped a few feet away.

Farjae reluctantly looked up at her. Damn it all, she still looked beautiful. Maybe it was Farjae's imagination, but her hair seemed to glisten in the pale white light from the moon.

"I want to apologize," Marié said. "I don't know what came over me, but what I did was... horribly out of line. I hope you can forgive me."

"You don't have to apologize," Farjae said. "I should, after leaving you to the wolves. I hope the king wasn't watching." Then a thought occurred to her: if Marié had already drank the wine from Jori, why hadn't she gone directly to Barnabus? And why hadn't he sought her? Jori had said the potion would make them head over heels for each other, so why—?

Unless...

"Oh, no." Farjae scrambled to her feet. "Marié, did your brother offer you a glass of wine shortly before you found me?"

She blinked. "Er... Yes? Why?"

I drank the wrong wine. Farjae burst out laughing, then found herself unable to stop until she couldn't breathe. She leaned on the tree for support as she struggled to keep her composure.

Marié, on the other hand, did not look the slightest bit amused. "Farjae. What's going on? What did Jori do?"

Then suddenly nothing was funny. How could she tell Marié what her brother's plan had been? There was no kind way to coat the truth that Jori had planned for Marié to falsely love the king. "I—I have no idea," Farjae lied. "But there's a chance he may have altered our wine."

"Altered how?"

"With a potion that might be a slight problem."

Marié shrugged. A small smile played over her lips. "I don't think it's such a problem. If it's between you and your king, well... I think you're far more charming. And just between us, much prettier. No doubt smarter, as well. Enough so to be queen."

Farjae didn't know what to do. It wasn't as though she'd never been told things like this; when she and Andrei had briefly been together a few years ago, he'd said these things all the time. *You're so beautiful, Farjae. And smart and strong and brave and...* Name an adjective, Andrei had said it. But Farjae had never seen them as genuine, even if they might have been. She'd liked the validation, but never really taken his words to heart. Now, hearing those short compliments from Marié, she could believe them. And she could forget it was the potion talking.

"Kiss me again," Marié said, drifting closer to her. "In earnest this time."

"But—"

"Farjae." Marié met her eyes. "Nobody has to know."

True as that was, Farjae knew even through the haze of the potion that she had everything to lose by making this mistake. Her position, her honor, her chances at early knighthood, her uncle's favor, and possibly her life. That was an extreme to which she wasn't certain the king would go, but if stealing the king's intended bride was considered treason, Farjae's punishment would be no different from any other traitor's.

And yet...

Nobody has to know. Besides, it wasn't as though she was marrying Marié on the spot. They could find an antidote to the potion, and in a few days this would be over and all would go back to normal.

For now, though... screw it. When would she have this chance again? They were alone, Marié was the most beautiful girl Farjae had ever seen, and Farjae was oddly aware of her emotions in a way she rarely allowed herself to be. So she kissed her, and at once forgot every worry. Maybe this potion wasn't such a problem after all.

"Well, I knew this little party would be *interesting*, but I could never have guessed at *this*."

Farjae jumped away from Marié and her heart sank with dread at the sight of an all-too-familiar, blonde-headed pain in her ass. "*Bartram?* What the hell are you doing here?"

He arched an eyebrow, icy eyes watching her closely, and said nothing.

Farjae reached to her hip, but found her sword missing. Right, of course, she'd left it in her room. She was supposed to be off-duty.

Bartram barked a short laugh. "Should I consider that an intended threat? Shame you *don't* have your weapon. I could've shown you once and for all that you're not the strongest trainee, despite what your uncle might say."

Farjae narrowed her eyes. His taunts all but bounced off her at this point, but that didn't mean the impact didn't sting. "What do you want, Bartram? Satisfaction? For me to feed your ego?"

He scoffed and shook his head. "No, no. I just want to know what I walked into."

"Nothing that is your business," Marié said.

"Really? Because to me, it seems like I've just witnessed a certain shade of treason. And as a faithful Ivory Knight of King Bartram, I believe that is very much my business."

"You're no more a knight than I am," Farjae snapped.

"Perhaps not yet," Bartram conceded. "But when I tell the king how I saved his beloved Princess Marié from capture by a shockingly traitorous trainee, His Majesty just might offer me a hefty reward for the princess's return and *your* head in a basket."

Farjae laughed shortly. "You plan to tell the king that I've *kidnapped* Marié? He'll never believe you."

"Won't he? Then perhaps I'll tell him what I truly saw. He's let you have a number of things you don't deserve, most of all a place among the Ivory Knights. But I'm certain he'll draw the line at stealing his queen."

"Enough." Marié took a step toward him. "I am nobody's queen. Even if King Barnabus had proposed, I would have refused."

"How naive of you to think you would've had that choice." Bartram turned his cold gaze back to Farjae. "Both of you have tough stakes against you. But I'm willing to compromise. Maybe we'll all get what we want."

Farjae knew better than to trust such a thing. But she still couldn't tell what exactly Bartram planned to report to the king, if anything. So she played along. "I'm listening."

“I won’t tell a single word of what I saw here tonight,” Bartram said. “You can carry on with each other and the king will be none the wiser. You have my word that I will keep your secret. However.” A malicious smile curved across his face. “You must step down from the Ivory Knights. Quit your training. Return to the lower ranks where you belong.”

Farjae stared at him and had to bite back the immediate *No!* that nearly spilled from her lips. She wanted to laugh in his face and call him insane. But he was suddenly holding her future in his hands, and the slightest hint of refusal would send him running to Barnabus. She would not let someone as condescending as Bartram Beaumont ruin the future she’d worked so hard to secure. “And what happens if I refuse?” she asked. “What happens if I don’t want to give up my whole life?”

“Who said anything about giving up your life? In a way, I’m doing you a favor. You keep the princess, I keep your secret, and you still get to be a knight. I don’t see what’s so wrong with that.”

“Because I’m not a knight if not an Ivory Knight,” Farjae said. “I am better than the lower ranks, better than any soldier Commander Mylla has trained. And keeping my secret is not keeping my happiness, or Marié’s freedom. She would still have to marry the king, and you would hold this over my head for the rest of my life.”

“You think so little of me when I *am* offering you your happiness.”

“It was never yours to offer.” Farjae glanced at Marié. “My answer is no. I will not have my future controlled by someone like you.”

Bartram narrowed his eyes. “Why are you so inclined to make me your enemy? I would’ve been a valuable confidant, Farjae. You’ll regret this.” He started to turn away, but Marié went after him.

“So what now, then?” She stopped just short of where he’d paused. “You run back to the king and tell him everything? You ruin Farjae’s reputation and future, and shred my and my family’s honor? And for what? So you can get a pat on the back from the king?”

Farjae could’ve kissed her again. She’d never thought Bartram was worth the energy of telling off, but now she couldn’t think of anything more satisfying. She just wished she’d had the nerve to do it herself.

But something was off. Marié was glowing, but it wasn’t the potion talking this time; she looked as though the light from the moon was gathering around her, or rather, coming *from* her. The air felt charged, like the moments before a thunderstorm.

“I’ve dealt with the likes of you before, and I know that the only thoughts that cross your mind are for your own gain,” Marié went on. “But I’ve had a lifetime — nineteen *years* of being conditioned to stand up straight and smile in the faces of people like you while they decide the direction of my life. And I’ve had *enough*. I will not let you stand here and destroy both of our lives for your own entertainment!”

Her words literally exploded into the air. With her voice rang a deafening *crack* that shook through the earth and threw both Farjae and Bartram to the ground. Farjae sat up, blinking against the blinding light surrounding Marié. She was still standing, staring at her luminescent hands with horror.

Bartram pushed himself to his feet, one hand covering the right side of his face. Blood dripped between his fingers. “You... *Both* of you will regret this.”

“Marié.” Farjae ran to her, catching her arm. The princess hardly reacted; her eyes were still on Bartram as he turned tail and fled.

“*Marié*,” Farjae said, more urgently. “We have to go. We need to get out of here right now.”

When *Marié* still didn’t move, Farjae grabbed her wrist and dragged her across the garden. Before they could reach the edge of the orchard, Jori appeared and hastily directed them deeper into the rows of trees.

Marié snapped out of her shock. “*Jori*? What the hell are you doing here?”

“How much did you see?” Farjae demanded.

“Keep your voices down,” he said in a harsh whisper. “There isn’t time to explain. You’ll both just have to trust me. I know a place we can go where you’ll be safe, and *Marié*, you can get some answers.”

“Answers would be great!” Farjae couldn’t hide the panic that seeped through her words. She turned to *Marié*. “What the hell was that, anyway?”

“I don’t know.” *Marié* still looked rattled, and deathly pale. “I... I’ve never seen that before.”

“I suspected you’d realize your powers soon,” Jori said. “I’ll explain later, I *promise*, but right now, we have to go.”

“My *powers*?” *Marié* gasped. “You don’t mean...? Jori, you know that practice is evil.”

Farjae was struggling to keep a steady mind. She’d never felt so close to unbridled panic; Bartram was probably telling the king everything right this second. In mere minutes she could be kicked out of the Ivory Knights, out of the king’s army entirely, disowned, or possibly dead. And on top of all that, she had a princess with powerful magical abilities she neither understood nor trusted.

How had her life become *this* in a matter of hours?

“Listen,” Jori hissed. “If either of you wants to get safely out of here before all hell breaks loose, you have to follow me. *Now*.”

“Wait,” Farjae said. “Where is this place? Another kingdom? Another region?”

Jori hesitated. “In a way.” Without another word he pushed ahead through the orchard.

Farjae had a horrible feeling about this. There was only once place in the land where magic was most powerful, and that was the very reason for the downfall of that kingdom. If Farjae was right, Jori was taking them to the Forbidden Isle.

Only legends knew what lay in store for them there.

FOUR

Elephant in the Room

Jori had led them out of the city via the back roads through the forests. They weren't unguarded, but there was significantly less surveillance there than there would have been if they'd marched out of the city on the main road. Farjae was still constantly glancing over her shoulder the whole way, convinced that one of the guards would recognize at least one of them and come running with the king on his heels. But as the three of them wove through the trees and headed for the coast, not a sound followed them. Farjae began to believe they'd really get out.

Reaching the docks at the harbor only confirmed to Farjae that Jori was taking them to the Forbidden Isle. She could see it in the distance, hazy out on the water and appearing as ghostlike as the spirits that were said to haunt it. Farjae wasn't sure how much Marié knew about the Forbidden Isle and its single, abandoned city, but even she looked unsettled as Jori bargained with a gondolier to take them across the bay.

Farjae watched the city slip away as the boat cut soundlessly through the glassy water. The night was silent, and even the gentle lap of the water against the gondola was hushed. Clouds blotted out the moon and stars, and a thin fog had settled around the shore, dimming the city's lights. Farjae wondered if this was the last sight she would ever have of Craydon, and if she'd walked out of its gates for the final time.

"Jori." Marié shattered the silence, even with her voice at a whisper. "Explain."

He glanced at the gondolier and shook his head. "Later."

Marié clenched her jaw, fixing her brother with a cold glare, but stayed silent.

The ride across the bay took only an hour, but the minutes stretched by excruciatingly slow. No one spoke another word until they reached the shore of the Forbidden Isle and Jori thanked the gondolier. Farjae watched the boat drift away, back to the mainland.

“Let’s get to shelter, and then I’ll explain everything,” Jori said. He glanced once more at the bay, and then started up the shore toward the dense trees.

Farjae couldn’t help but laugh. “Shelter? We’re on an uninhabited island with nothing but wild animals and an abandoned city. What shelter could there possibly *be*, Jori?”

“Just trust him,” Marié said quietly, though she still sounded suspicious herself. “He must have something up his sleeve.”

“Aren’t you the least bit unsure of this?” Farjae asked her as they reluctantly began to follow the prince. “I trust that he knows more than he’s letting on, but I wish he’d tell us *something*. He does sort of have our fates in his hands.”

Marié let out a light sigh. “There are worse hands our fates could be in.”

They traveled through the dark forest in silence. Insect chirps and the occasional coo from an owl filled the air alongside their footsteps through thick patches of bushes and ferns. For awhile, all that surrounded them were endless trees, rising like long shadows into the sky. But as Farjae searched ahead for any sign of civilization, she realized that there were dark shapes in the distance that were far too geometric to be trees. In fact, they looked miraculously like buildings.

“It can’t be,” she muttered. “Is that...?”

“The Forgotten City of Perthlochry?” Jori glanced over his shoulder and flashed her a grin. “It sure is. We’ll take shelter in a place I know just outside the city, then perhaps tomorrow we can get my sister some more practical clothes, perhaps a weapon, and Farjae a sword.”

Farjae still didn't entirely trust him, especially now that they were about to enter a city that was supposedly abandoned over a hundred years ago, but she did really want a new sword.

"Hold on," Marié said, though she didn't stop walking. "How do you know all this is here? You're speaking of this place as though you frequently come here. What the hell have you been up to, Jori? And how can we even *be* here? Perthlochry is supposed to be a myth. Are you just blindly living in fairy tales from our childhood?"

Jori didn't answer, just laughed softly to himself as he led them on. Before Marié could chide him further, the trees tapered into a wide clearing along the bank of a gray river. On the other side was an ancient city Farjae had only seen in storybooks: Perthlochry, once called the Lost Kingdom, now Forgotten.

The city was mostly dark, with lanterns burning in only a handful of buildings. A few rickety boats bobbed on the river, but no horses or wagons clambered down the streets, no voices rang out from taverns within the village. It was silent as death, just as an abandoned city was meant to be. Farjae had almost expected it to be as alive and booming as Craydon, somehow surviving all this time with the outside world completely oblivious.

Farther down the bank, almost engulfed by the trees, was a little cottage that Farjae didn't notice until Jori started walking toward it. The windows were dark and shutters closed, but Jori walked up to the door as though he lived there. Farjae had the distinct suspicion he did.

"Does someone want to tell me what the *hell* is going on?" Marié demanded as she stalked after her brother. "Jori! I'm through waiting. I want answers."

"I know," he said, drawing a key out of his pocket. He unlocked the door of the darkened cottage and shoved it open.

Marié sent Farjae a withering glance before both of them followed him inside.

Jori lit a lantern by the door and bathed the room in pale yellow light. Everything was coated in dust and cobwebs, and Jori eyed them with a scowl as he went around and lit more lanterns. The cottage was only one story, with most of the space taken over by the sitting room and kitchen, but a door at the back of the kitchen opened to a small bedroom. It was a perfect space for one person and maybe a dog, but Farjae couldn't guess how the three of them would hide out here comfortably for an indeterminate amount of time. Farjae was more than happy to be in such close quarters with Marié, but if the glare she was directing toward her brother was any indication, the two of them wouldn't tolerate each other for very long.

"Marié, my dear sister, it appears you have magical powers." Jori fell into one of the chairs in front of the empty fireplace. "It runs strong in our family, so I'm not surprised in the least, but I imagine you're a bit shocked."

Marié looked ready to explode, but thankfully this time she wasn't glowing. At least not yet. "*Shocked?* Jori, I'm appalled! You know what magic does to a person! It's evil, an unnatural force that should not afflict anyone with a kind conscience! The mere fact that it's infected me can only mean there's something wrong with me. I might as well be already damned in the eyes of our gods."

Farjae frowned. She hadn't realized Marié had been brought up in a place that so clearly detested magic. Craydon — and the Levalon Region in general — was indifferent to it. Magicians were welcome, even in Barnabus's court, and had never been persecuted as far as Farjae knew. Apparently Draycott was far more different a world than she realized.

Jori watched her evenly, nodding. "There's nothing I can tell you to change the ideas we've both been raised to believe, but I want to be the first to tell you that everything our parents have

taught us about magic is sorely wrong. It's not evil, at least not when wielded correctly by someone who has embraced and nurtured their powers. If you were to do that, your magic would never be a threat to you or anyone else."

Marié shook her head. "No. I don't want to embrace it. It's a sickness, for gods' sakes. I don't know where it came from, but I don't want it in me. Tell me how to get rid of it, if you're so knowledgeable."

"It's not something that appeared out of the blue, Marié," Jori said gently. "It's always been in you. It's something you're born with, not that you acquire."

Marié fell quiet for a moment, hugging her arms around herself. "I've always been like this? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wasn't sure if you'd have powers at all," Jori said. "It's hard to tell unless the magic shows itself. Right now yours is unstable, only coming out in times of distress or high emotion. But if you learned to control it—"

"I don't *want* to control it!" she snapped. "I want it gone, Jori!"

He tapped his fingers on the arm of the chair. "You can't get rid of your powers. They're as much a part of you as your blood."

She turned away from him, running her hands through her hair.

"What does she need to do?" Farjae asked Jori. "Can you help her learn how to control it?"

Marié turned on her before Jori could answer. "I've already told you, I don't *want* to learn anything about it! Why is that so hard to understand? I thought you of all people would listen to me, Farjae."

“You—” Jori began, but Farjae silenced him with a look and he sank back in the chair, biting his lip.

“Marié.” Farjae went to her and reached for her hands. It felt strange, even with such a small gesture, to show this kind of tenderness that Farjae wasn’t used to expressing to anyone. But for Marié she could make an exception, even if Farjae was certain it was the potion making her want to be close to Marié. “You don’t have to do anything with your magic if you don’t want to,” she said softly. “But Jori is right; it’ll always be a part of you. That doesn’t mean, though, that you can’t go on normally with your life as though it wasn’t there.”

“But—”

“Shut up, Jori,” Marié snarled. She met Farjae’s eyes again. “I can’t get it out of my head that... I can’t go home like this. If my parents ever found out, I’d be put to death. That’s just the way it is in my kingdom.”

“We’re not going to let that happen,” Farjae said. She turned to Jori. “How have you hidden your powers all this time?”

“Mine are different,” he said. “They’re more in my mind than they are a physical power I can wield.”

“Don’t tell me you can read minds.”

Jori flashed a mischievous grin. “No, but I can read feelings. Much easier to hide than the spectacle you put on in the garden, Marié.”

She sighed and paced across the room to the window, then back to Farjae. “It’s just... earlier tonight, in that orchard, I felt... powerful. More than just physically holding powers, I felt like I could... Oh, I don’t know, be someone *else*. I thought maybe this magic might open opportunities

for me. But it's just another shackle chaining me down. I can't go home, can't show my face in Craydon again, and I can't stay here forever. So what do I have?"

"You have me." The words slipped out before Farjae could stop herself from saying something so stupid. She winced as Marié glanced at her with a strange look. "I mean that I understand. I'm in the same place. I can't go home, and can't stay here. So... at the very least, Marié, you're not alone."

She smiled faintly, taking Farjae's hand again and giving it a squeeze.

"One more question, Jori," Farjae said. "Why are we here? Why the Forbidden Isle, and how the *hell* did you know this place was still... well, *alive*?"

Jori nodded. "Right, well, it's a lot to explain. And I will explain, but not tonight. You're both exhausted. Get some sleep. Tomorrow, I'll tell you everything. I promise."

Farjae exchanged a glance with Marié and sighed. He was right; she was exhausted. But she still wanted an answer as to how she could possibly be standing on a dead island. It wasn't exactly mythical, as Marié had said; it was visible enough from Craydon that its existence wasn't a question. What was more shrouded in legend was what exactly had happened here to label it forbidden. Farjae herself couldn't remember most of the stories; many of them were just tales to scare children, anyway. But something terrible had happened here, that much was certain.

"Well," she said to Marié, "at least we know no one will think to look for us here. As long as everyone thinks this place is haunted or cursed or otherwise unwelcoming, we're safe."

Marié nodded, glancing at the door. "I hope you're right."



Farjae was jolted awake by the sound of hoofbeats and shouts outside. She scrambled to her feet, still blinking away sleep, then remembered where she was. Right. Jori's cottage, the Forbidden Isle. She was safe here. And, it appeared, she now had a means of defending herself in case that safety wasn't so secure.

Leaning against the sofa where she'd spent the night was a shining new sword with a decorated scabbard lying beside it. Jori had clearly left it out for her to admire, and though Farjae would have liked to have picked it out herself, she had to admit that she'd have chosen this one above all others. It was nothing truly fancy, but it was elegant and light, with a comfortable leather grip around the hilt that would hopefully give her far fewer callouses than the worn brass hilt of the sword she used at home.

Farjae was so caught up in the gift that she forgot about the noises outside until they happened again. This time more hoofbeats, as though a unit of soldiers was circling the cottage. Farjae tried to stamp out the fear that it was somehow the Ivory Knights; there was no way they could find Farjae and Marié here.

Was there?

"Marié?" Farjae whispered. She padded across the room and ducked into the small bedroom, but it was empty and, unlike last night, free of dust. Clearly Jori had been busy this morning. Where was he, anyway? And where was Marié?

Farjae went back to the main room, grabbed the sword and, steeling herself, wrenched the door open and darted outside. First she saw only that they were knights. Five of them, three on

horses and two on foot. The two on the ground had Marié cornered against the horses, but she was holding them back with a dagger in one hand.

“Marié!” Farjae called to her, but the princess barely acknowledged her. One of the knights advancing on her, however, did.

He lowered his sword and turned around, lifting off his helmet at the same moment Farjae saw the elephant’s head brooch pinned to the front of his cloak. The symbol of the Ivory Knights.

“Well, what a coincidence this is.” Bartram approached her with a smug grin that was partially distorted by the fresh scars that cut across his face — undoubtedly the result of Marié’s magic.

“How did you find us?” Farjae demanded. “How could you have possibly known?”

“The palace has ears everywhere,” Bartram said. “Even in the gardens.”

Farjae swore under her breath. She should have been more cautious, should’ve guessed that he’d been listening. “What do you want?”

“I think you know. Surrender the princess, let us take her back where she belongs, and no blood needs to be spilled. Easy as that.”

“What about me?” Farjae asked. “What does the king want of me?”

“To give his queen back without trouble.” Bartram’s lips curled into a sneer. “Your presence is no longer required at court.”

The words felt like a stab through her chest, but she shoved that matter to the back of her mind. Her expulsion from the Ivory Knights wasn’t exactly her biggest problem at the moment.

“What happens if I refuse?” Marié shoved past the other knight, who, apparently reluctant to harm her, let her pass. “You can’t kill me. What if I say no?”

Bartram briefly glanced at her, then before Farjae could think he disarmed her and pinned her to his chest with his blade across her throat. Farjae fought to free her arm from his grip, but he held fast. “Let go of me, you bastard,” she snarled, continuing to fight until she felt the sharp edge of his sword bite into her skin.

“If you refuse, Princess,” he said coolly, “we have no problem with taking you forcibly. The king said to bring you back alive, not necessarily unharmed. And he said nothing about his runaway puppy.”

Farjae gasped in a breath as Bartram pressed his sword harder; a thin line of blood dripped down the blade. She barely dared to breathe as she met Marié’s gaze.

The princess was frozen to the spot. She stared at Bartram with a mix of fear and hate, but after a heartbeat of hesitation, she dropped her dagger.

“No.” Farjae meant to shout it, but the word only came out as a whisper. “Marié,” she gasped, wincing as the blade cut into her again. “*Marié... Don’t.*”

“Make your decision, Princess,” Bartram said. “Before your precious kidnapper bleeds out on my sword.”

“Fine.” Marié took a step toward Bartram. “I’ll go. Just leave Farjae unharmed.”

Bartram was silent. Farjae closed her eyes, her heart thundering as she waited for the slice across her throat, but it never came. The sword fell away and Bartram released her arm.

Farjae didn’t hesitate another second. She leapt out of Bartram’s reach, grabbed her sword from the ground, and lunged at the other knight, sending him stumbling back for a moment before he recovered his footing and quickly retaliated. The world narrowed until it was only the shrill strike of metal against metal and the jolt through her arms each time her sword met his.

Out of the corner of her eye, Farjae was vaguely aware of Bartram inching toward her, clearly meaning to catch her off guard, but when he was within reach, she whirled around and struck at him, catching her blade on his wrist hard enough to disarm him. But she was only allowed a heartbeat of satisfaction before the other knight was on her again. Farjae's sword again clashed with the knight's, and she gritted her teeth as he pushed against her blade. In a smooth motion, she twisted around and out of his grip, letting his momentum carry him forward. But he caught himself nearly flawlessly and swung his blade back toward Farjae. She leapt out of the way just in time, but he matched her move and again their blades collided. He drew back, feigned right, then darted left and jabbed at her, nearly taking her hand off as he tried to hook his blade on the hilt of her sword to disarm her.

Farjae faltered, stumbling back. She knew that move, had *taught* that move. It was her key to winning any duel, when done correctly. And the only person who had ever gotten it so closely was—

Bartram slammed into her, sending her crashing to the ground, scattering her thoughts. She blinked stars out of her eyes and quickly got back to her feet, willing away the dizziness. She dodged another strike from Bartram, another from the other knight, and then from Bartram again. Farjae knew she couldn't hold both of them off much longer. One of them would have to go.

She fought hard against Bartram, who was proving to be a tougher opponent than the other knight, and tried to find an opening to wound or disarm him. She was so focused on his attacks that she didn't notice the other knight's strikes until a blinding pain tore through her side. She stumbled, gritting her teeth against the pain, but forced herself to keep fighting. Marié was depending on her. She couldn't let her down, couldn't lose to Bartram Beaumont. Not now that it actually mattered.

But all it took was a hard shove from Bartram and a low swipe of his blade that caught her leg, and she went down hard.

“Farjae!”

Marié. Farjae’s head swam, but she had to get up. *Just get up. She needs you.*

There was so much blood.

“Take the princess and go.” Bartram’s voice cut through her muffled thoughts. “She’s as good as dead.”

Shuffled footsteps. Horses snorting. Someone shouting her name, only to be suddenly cut off.

“Let’s *go*, St. Claire. I said leave her.” Bartram’s voice again, but who was he talking to? St. Claire... Farjae knew that name. If only her head wasn’t spinning, she could think straight. *Light on his feet, copied my move, St. Claire...*

She blinked, unable to make sense of anything. But... “*Andreï?*”

“I’m sorry, Farjae.” His voice was the last thing she heard before her mind entirely blacked.

FIVE

Remember the Forgotten

When Farjae came to her senses, the first thing she felt was an agonizing pain through her entire body. She groaned; her head especially throbbed, but she forced herself to open her eyes. The first thing to come into focus was a familiar, beautiful face, and Farjae's heart leapt. "Marié?"

"Not exactly."

Farjae blinked. Blue eyes, silver hair, but harsher, more angular features. "Jori?"

"At my best, yes." He smiled. "Though you're certainly not at your best. How are you feeling?"

"I'm still not certain I'm alive," she said. "Where are we?"

"Not in that dusty old cottage, that's for sure," Jori said. "We've been promoted to much more comfortable lodgings. Welcome to the royal palace of Perthlochry."

Farjae tried to sit up, but her body harshly reminded her of her injuries, and she fell back with a groan. "How did we get here? I thought I was dying."

"You were." Jori lightly touched the back of his hand to her forehead. "You would've bled out if I hadn't found you when I did. And Farjae, I'm sorry. I can't help but feel at fault for what happened to you and my sister. If I'd been there this morning, you wouldn't be in this state and Marié wouldn't be gone."

"Yes, where exactly were you when we needed you? I can usually stand on my own two feet, but we were outnumbered. Marié couldn't seem to do anything with her magic. And I... I was up

against people I trained with, who are just as skilled as me and probably even more so. We could've used your help."

"I'd gone into the city to look for someone who might be able to help Marié." Jori sighed, staring down at the floor. "I know I should've been here. For both of you, yes, but especially for my sister." He chewed his lip, then looked back up at Farjae. "I suppose the best I can do now is fix you up so you can get back to her."

Farjae narrowed her eyes as a thought occurred to her. "Hold on. You're the reason we're in this mess at all. *You* gave us the love potion."

"Mhm, yes, but I'm not the one who forgot which glass it was in."

"I didn't forget," Farjae retorted. "You told me the wrong one. You wanted me to drink the potion, and you wanted Marié to fall in love with me. That was your plan from the start, wasn't it?"

Jori was quiet for a moment, then he shrugged. "It was a better alternative to her falling for the king, was it not?"

"No!" Farjae said. She held her breath against the pain in her side and forced herself to sit up. It took her a moment to focus again as the nausea subsided. "Nothing about this was a better alternative," she hissed. "I did not agree to drink that potion, and neither did Marié. You tricked both of us, and now our lives are in danger. That's not an exaggeration, Jori, it's the truth. You said yourself that I almost died. Marié could be facing any number of consequences back in Craydon, and I'm here unable to even breathe without my head spinning. Tell me how any of this worked out in our favor."

“You had each other,” Jori said. “For awhile, anyway. I don’t think you needed the potion to see something in Marié you’ve never seen in anyone else. I saw the way you looked at her at the ball. That was not magic’s doing.”

Farjae huffed a laugh. “Sure, we had each other for a grand total of ten minutes when we weren’t running or fighting for our lives.”

“You could still have each other in the future.”

“*How?*” she demanded. “Really, Jori, tell me how. We were never meant to be together at all. You can believe in us all you want, but it doesn’t change the reality that we were never meant to care for each other. You must have known that. How could you ever think otherwise?”

He grew quiet again, then soundlessly stood and shuffled across the room. He paused and turned back to her with his hand on the doorknob. “So, what? You’re giving up? On yourself and my sister?”

Farjae sighed and sank back into the pillows, letting the tears spill over her cheeks. “There’s nothing I can do.”

The door opened. “I’m disappointed. I really expected more fight out of you. For a knight.” Jori’s footsteps retreated, and the door softly shut.



Three days later, Farjae could sit up without dizzying pain. Another two days and she could stand and walk a little. Jori must have used some type of magic to make her heal faster, because the mess of mending wounds and scars on her ribs, stomach, and back should have had her down for weeks.

Jori was right; she was lucky to be alive; Bartram's sword had been inches from slitting her artery, and Andrei's blade had nearly gone clean through her.

Farjae still didn't want to believe that Andrei was the one who had attacked her. Bartram she could understand would jump at the first opportunity to pursue her and eliminate the one person he knew was a threat to him. But Andrei... why would he do it? Did he have a choice at all, or did the king simply order him to accompany Bartram? Were the other knights, who'd never dismounted their horses or removed their helmets, also her friends? Had all of them needed nothing more than a promise of official knighthood to agree to turn their backs on one of their own?

She'd thought better of them, especially Andrei. Maybe that'd been foolish of her. Maybe she'd been damning herself from the start by forming an attachment to any of them. But when she was a child of seven, reeling from the death of her father and suddenly dropped into the largest city in the Levalon Region, Andrei had been the only thing that made her think she'd be okay. He didn't share her situation, but it was enough to have someone her age who was just as out of place in a noisy city. They looked out for each other, spent their entire days together, and had only grown closer when they started training. Farjae had never had many friends, but since she had Andrei, that didn't matter. As long as she had one person she could trust with everything, she didn't need anyone else.

Now even Andrei had turned his back on her, and she had no one. And maybe that was for the best.

Farjae sighed, staring at her reflection in the ornate mirror on the wall of this plush, luxurious room. Everything was trimmed with gold — the quilts on the bed and the canopy over it, the curtains, the edges of the carpets. Even the clothes that'd been left for her had gold motifs

around the cuffs of the sleeves and hem of the shirt. She'd never touched such expensive fabric in her life, and she decided it was time that Jori coughed up some answers about where the hell she was and how this place could have all the luxuries of the world's wealthiest kingdoms.

She went out of her room and padded down a long hallway with polished marble floors and walls cluttered with portraits. Most of them were faded, some even torn, but the paintings made up a timeline of rulers of this place. When she got to the end of the hall, though, the portraits stopped with it. The last one showed a young man with golden hair and eyes, but there was a troubled expression on his face, something off about the way the artist had captured his likeness. It was strangely unnerving; Farjae continued on her way.

Thankfully, she didn't have to go far before she found other people. She entered a wide, bright sitting room that could have held the entirety of the Ivory Knights with room still for servants, all six royal families, and then some. Even the palace in Craydon didn't have rooms this massive, and yet this one was only occupied by two people.

Lounging in one of the chairs by the windows was a young woman who looked so strikingly like Jori that Farjae almost thought it was Marié; her heart gave a little jump even as she realized it wasn't her. This woman had the same silvery white hair as Marié and Jori, and it was a wild mess, only slightly held in place by a red scarf tied around her head.

Seated across from the woman was an older man with dark hair streaked through with gray. A wide, pale scar sliced down his face from his left eyebrow to the right side of his jaw, narrowly missing his eye and curving over the center of his nose. His skin was dark, close in tone to Farjae's own complexion, and she wondered if this impossible inhabitant of the Forgotten City might have come from somewhere close to her home.

The young woman noticed her first. “Ah, you’re on your feet. Good! That’s good progress. How are you feeling?”

Farjae frowned, shuffling closer to the pair. “Sorry... do I know you?”

The woman looked confused for a heartbeat, and then burst out with a laugh that was undoubtedly, unmistakably Jori’s.

Farjae was massively confused.

“Right, sorry, forgot to mention,” the woman who was but wasn’t Jori said. “I’m not always Jori. I was feeling less like a prince today. You can call me Lilly.”

Farjae nodded slowly, still not quite grasping what was happening. “So... you *are* Jori?”

“Sometimes. And sometimes I’m Lilly.”

Farjae blinked. “Okay then, Lilly. Yes, I am feeling better. Still a little stiff, still mostly disheartened about this entire situation, but hey! At least I’m out of bed.”

Lilly exchanged an amused glance with the man. “By the way, Farjae, this is—”

The man inhaled sharply, staring at Farjae as though she’d just grown horns. “*Farjae*? Is that—? No, you can’t be...”

Farjae stared back at him. “All right, I don’t know what the hell is going on, but yes, my name is Farjae. Am I supposed to know who you are?”

Lilly cleared her throat. “Uh, Farjae? That’s the king of Perthlochry.”

“And your father.” His expression softened into a smile, and he reached out toward her.

Farjae staggered back, catching herself on the back of a chair. A nervous laugh escaped her lips. “*Excuse* me? What kind of game are you playing? My father has been dead for twelve years, and

Perthlochry has been abandoned for a century. It most certainly doesn't have a king, and I most certainly do not have a father."

She whirled around and retreated out of the room, letting the double doors fall shut behind her with a hollow slam. She found her way back to the long hall of portraits and paced up and down the corridor, listening to the echo of her footsteps on the floor and trying to put together the puzzle her life had become.

"That is *not* my father," she said, partially to herself, partially to the silent paintings on the wall. Her voice echoed dully with her footfalls. "He died on a voyage twelve years ago. If he was alive, I wouldn't have grown up with my uncle. I wouldn't have become a knight. I wouldn't be *alone*." She sighed, pausing a moment, and looked up to find she'd stopped in front of the painting of the troubled-looking king. Or prince. Or whatever he was. Unsettling as the image was, Farjae felt connected to that one. It wasn't a blank expression. He wasn't staring off into the distance. He seemed to stare directly at Farjae, his brass-colored eyes tracking her movement up and down the corridor.

"Who are you?" she asked the painting. "And who is that man who calls himself the king of this place?"

The painting stared back silently. Farjae knew the only person who could give her answers was Jori — or rather, Lilly — and that man himself. She still refused to call him her father, because he *wasn't*. Because if he was, why had he run away? Why had he left her?

Not ten minutes after she'd left, Farjae went back to the sitting room. She closed the doors softly behind her and leaned against them, waiting for someone to say something.

“You made such a grand exit,” Lilly said. “It’s a shame you came to your senses and returned.”

“I didn’t come back for snark,” Farjae shot back. “I came for answers. And you owe me a *lot* of them.”

Lilly gestured at a chair beside her. “Take a seat, make yourself at home. King Marden and I will explain everything.”

Marden. So it was him. Farjae sat back in her chair, suddenly exhausted. She just wanted to get this over with so she could go back to bed and pretend her life was normal.

“I’m going to start by pointing out the obvious,” Lilly began. “Perthlochry is not and never was abandoned. The city was in a state of chaos for years after the magical incidents, yes, but it rebuilt and adapted. Since then it’s been thriving like any of the mainland kingdoms, but every ruler since has vowed to keep the place and its people secret.”

“Even now there are few who live here,” Marden continued. “The city is nowhere near as populous as the likes of Craydon or Mossley. But our people are happy here.”

“How did you know it was here?” Farjae nodded at Lilly.

“I travel often,” she said. “Much to the exasperation of my parents, I like to slip out of the palace and get a breath of fresh air every so often. Once I landed here by accident after a storm veered my ship off course. Thankfully, King Marden is a generous ruler and allows me to come and go as I please. Though, of course, I am under the vow of secrecy.”

Farjae glanced at Marden. “And how did you happen to end up here? More than that, how did you end up as the king?”

“First let me ask you, Farjae: who is the ruler of Craydon?”

“King Barnabus.”

Marden nodded slowly. “I should’ve known he would keep the throne to himself.”

“He’s been the king for as long as I can remember,” Farjae said.

“Yes, and was only meant to be for eleven years, until you were of age.”

Farjae blinked. “What?”

“He didn’t tell you?” Marden frowned. “What do you know of your past?”

“Not much,” she said. “I put it behind me after Barnabus took me in. I remember you, though. You traveled often, but always promised you’d come back. Except one time you didn’t, and I was told you’d died at sea.”

Marden was quiet for a minute. His gaze fell to the floor and his expression was etched with worry and a tiny hint of regret. “There is some truth to that,” he said softly. “I nearly did die at sea after my ship was sacked by pirates. The only reason I lived was because I ended up here. Unfortunately by the time I recovered, word had already been sent to Craydon that I’d been killed and Barnabus was to be king until you turned eighteen.”

Farjae’s mind was reeling. She glanced between Marden and Lilly, searching for some hint that this was all a cruel joke. But no, it was somehow true. The castle-like house she remembered, with its long hallways and grand dining halls, had really been a palace. She hadn’t spent half her childhood as the daughter of a noble; she’d spent it as a princess.

“Barnabus was always the jealous one,” Marden continued. “As the second born, he knew he would never have a path to the throne, so he tried to put himself in our parents’ favor in other ways. He learned how to play the part of the charming prince, tailoring his expression to always be friendly

and jovial. He knew how to gain the people's favor — and most importantly, their trust. I imagine there was not much complaint when he took the throne.

“That all being said, I would never have expected him to keep the throne that is rightfully yours. Despite his envy, he respected me. He knew I didn't ask to be the firstborn. He acted the way he did to remind the kingdom — and, often, our parents — that he existed. He never showed any ambition for the throne.”

“Marden,” Farjae said. She took a moment to revel in his brief look of disappointment that she didn't call him ‘Father.’ He didn't deserve that yet; he'd have to earn that place back. “Barnabus never told me any of this. I had no idea I was a princess. I—” She breathed a laugh. “I still don't really believe you.”

Marden frowned again. “Then what did he tell you?”

“Nothing. I knew he was my uncle, I knew he was my only family, and I was grateful he took me in. I lived among the servants' quarters and out of the way until I turned thirteen and started training for the Ivory Knights.”

“But he stole the throne from you when you didn't even know what you'd lost.” Marden shook his head. “I can't believe he would do such a thing.”

“No,” Farjae said, “he stole the throne from *you*. You're the one who should be ruling Craydon. Why didn't you come back? If you were alive and able to be king of this place, why couldn't you be king of your *actual* city? How could you abandon that? How could you abandon *me*?”

“I never wanted to,” Marden said. “I meant to return as soon as I recovered. But—”

“No you didn't.” Farjae stood up, ignoring the ache in her side. “If you meant to, you would have. You let them believe you were dead. You were never going to come back.”

“Farjae—”

“No. Don’t. I’ve heard enough.” She turned away from him and stormed toward the doors again. “If you won’t go take back what’s yours, then I will. Barnabus has stolen from me for the last time.”



That night, Farjae dreamed of explorers and queens.

One of the first memories she had was of her longing to be an explorer. She watched her father depart on long voyages into the open sea, and every time she begged him to go too. But no, it was always “Not this time, Jay Bird” or “When you’re older,” and she’d stay home with only her nursemaid for company.

Then as she grew older, she decided she wanted to be a queen. It was a word she’d heard since she was young, mostly directed toward her father, though in a way she had not yet understood: *Will you take a new queen?* But as soon as Farjae learned what a queen was, she wanted to be one. She took to walking around the halls with a quilt draped over her shoulders like a cape, and made herself crowns of flowers and leaves.

But both of those dreams had died with her father, and her new dream appeared as the only option she had: become a knight. It was either that or be married off to some courtier’s son or unremarkable soldier or lord. So Farjae gripped that new dream and held on until she’d convinced herself it was what she’d always wanted.

Now, though, with her father alive and her future changed, was it time for her dream to change, too?



Farjae woke with the sunrise the next morning and, ignoring the lingering pain from her injuries, got up and went to find Jori. Or Lilly. Or whoever they were today. Farjae didn't care; she just needed one more thing.

Farjae passed by elegant sitting rooms, dusty libraries, and towering walls made entirely of windows. She found Jori — who was the prince again — on a wide balcony outside a smaller sitting room. Thankfully, Marden was not with him.

“Is it wishful thinking to ask if yesterday was just a bad dream?” She stepped onto the balcony and went to the railing, taking in a view of the Forgotten City for the first time. It was just as quiet and still as it had been the night she and Marié had arrived, and Farjae found herself longing for the noise and hum of Craydon. She also wished she still had Marié with her; she would know what to say to get Farjae to make sense of all this chaos.

Jori looked vaguely surprised to see her. “Would it crush your wishes to say that it was all real?”

“Not exactly.” Farjae sighed. “Not when everything these past few days has been a living nightmare. The ball feels like it was months ago.”

“What of Marié?” Jori asked suddenly.

Farjae turned to him. “What about her?”

Jori watched her carefully. “How do you feel?”

“How do I *feel*?” Farjae scoffed. “I don’t know. I’m just tired. I want this to be over.”

“Is that all?”

“What are you trying to get me to say?”

“Nothing, if you don’t want to. I’m trying to get you to talk.”

Farjae shook her head. “I don’t need to talk. But I do have a favor to ask.”

“Of course, anything.”

“I need an antidote to the love potion.”

Jori’s smile faded. “What?”

“It’s best for both of us if there is no *us* at all,” Farjae said. “The potion, this incident with Marié... it’s all just another problem. Another obstacle. I know you know that. Why is it that I can accept it and you can’t?”

“Because I am clearly more in tune with my emotions than you are.”

Farjae put her hands on her hips. “I am quite in control of my emotions, thanks.”

“Exactly,” Jori said. “You’re in strict control of them, but you’re not *in tune* with them. You don’t treat them as part of you. They’re pesky things that you like to box up and shove onto a dusty shelf.”

“Are you done with the metaphors?”

“For now. But my point is that you won’t let yourself see what you want. What *do* you want, Farjae? If you could have anything in the world with no consequence, no impossibility, what would it be?”

She shook her head, breathing a short laugh. “I don’t know! Same as I’ve always wanted, I guess. To be an Ivory Knight without people like Bartram Beaumont getting in my way and chipping away at my confidence. I just... want to feel like I belong there without question.”

Jori nodded slowly. “Hm. See, I don’t think you actually want to be a knight.”

Farjae drew back. “A knight is *all* I want to be.”

Jori raised a challenging eyebrow. “Is it? What about when you were young, before you thought you lost your father? What did that adventurous little girl want to be? Because I don’t think it was a knight. You just said it yourself: all you want is to belong somewhere.”

“I didn’t say that,” Farjae snapped. “I said I wanted to belong with the Ivory Knights. Which I do, because I *am* one of them, even if Barnabus is too blind to realize what he’s lost by expelling me.” She sighed, rubbing her eyes. She’d had enough of being psychoanalyzed by someone who had no business knowing all this about her. Jori had said he could read feelings, but this was ridiculous. “Just... get me an antidote to the potion. Please.”

Jori looked stricken, and again Farjae saw the resemblance to Marié in his features. Even that small glimpse of the princess’s likeness made Farjae’s heart feel heavy. She did care for Marié, and wanted nothing more than to see her again, but she knew that all of this foolishness was the result of the potion. She couldn’t truly love Marié. She didn’t now, and couldn’t ever.

She just wished that sounded less like a lie.

“Is that all this is to you?” Jori asked. “An obstacle? A puzzle for you to solve? You didn’t come here for m— For Marié, did you? It was your plan to find an antidote to the potion all along.”

Farjae leaned on the balcony and crossed her arms over her chest. “No. I was truly concerned with getting Marié and myself to safety. But the potion has done nothing to make my life easier, and everything to make it harder. I want you to reverse it.”

“I can’t.”

“You must have *something*.”

Jori shook his head. “No. I—I can’t. Damn it...” He sighed, then met Farjae’s eyes. “I can’t do it, because I’m not Jori.”

“Okay, then, Lilly—”

“No. Farjae, it’s me. Marié.”

A beat passed, and then Farjae laughed. “Yes, sure, and I’ve actually been King Barnabus this whole time. Seriously, Jori? You’ve already brought me to a city that shouldn’t exist and raised my father from the dead. How much more do you want me to believe?”

She expected Jori to laugh, for that perfect grin to split across his face while he teased her for falling for his prank. But the smile never came, and he just stared at her helplessly. That was a look Farjae had never seen on either sibling.

“I don’t know how to convince you,” Jori said softly. “But it’s me.”

Farjae wanted to believe it. She wished she’d figured it out earlier, so that instead of longing for Marié to be here, she could have recognized that she was here the whole time. But if this was Marié, then... “Then where *is* Jori?”

“In Craydon. He’s the one the Ivory Knights took with them.”

“But... how?”

“We worked it all out the morning the knights arrived, while you were sleeping.”

“What about Lilly?” Farjae asked. “Is she your invention?”

Marié shook her head. “No, Jori really does prefer to go by Lilly sometimes. I've known that for years.”

“But why did you play that part?”

Marié shrugged. “It’s dreadfully hard to breathe with my chest bound so tightly. Far worse than a corset.”

Farjae smiled. “I wouldn't know.”

“Yes, consider yourself lucky.” Marié did nothing to hide the playful jealousy in her tone.

“I still have more questions,” Farjae said. She really wanted to know how the princess and her brother had managed to pull this off.

“I’ll explain everything later,” Marié said. “Now—”

“You sound just like him.”

Marié smiled at that, and Farjae wondered how she had ever mistaken that smile for Jori’s. His was an easy, often-used grin that took little effort to light up his face. Marié’s was different, quieter, but that made it more brilliant.

“Was I supposed to figure out that you switched places?” Farjae asked. “Does Jori have a plan?”

“I hope to the gods he does,” Marié said. The smile had slipped away, replaced by a more serious, determined expression. “He claimed he knew exactly what he was doing, but that’s easier said than done. My brother is clever, and knows how to charm his way out of a sticky situation, but he’s also an idiot.”

“Which means he’s probably waiting for us to burst in at the last minute and save him.”

“Save him? No. He won’t let us do that. But we are meant to meet him back in Craydon.”

“What’s he planning?”

“For you and your father to overthrow the throne.”

SIX

Something to Fight For

It took nearly an entire day of convincing, but Marden finally agreed to go back to Craydon. Marié didn't know what Farjae had said to him to make him concede, but as soon as she had a yes, she'd stormed out of the palace and waited at the gates for Marié and Marden to be ready.

Now they were back on the mainland, back in Craydon, and King Barnabus's castle was straight ahead.

It was a wonder they hadn't been caught yet, especially with Farjae leading the way directly up the main road. They would have to get caught eventually, for Marié's plan to work, but not until they'd gone through the palace gates.

Sure enough, the king's guards were waiting for them. Marié hung back, but Farjae walked up to them as though she owned the city.

Marié didn't know how she did it, but she wished she had half the confidence Farjae had.

It took the guards all of a minute to have ahold of Farjae, pinning her arms behind her back. For once she didn't fight back, but Marié could tell she wanted to.

"You're foolish to show your face back here," said the guard holding her. "Don't you know you're wanted for treason? And what's all this? Who are the others?"

"I am Prince Jori of Draycott," Marié said. "I'm here to see my sister."

"Princess Marié will see no one," the second guard said.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Marié retorted. Jori’s unwavering certainty in himself was even harder to mimic than Farjae’s, but Marié hoped these people wouldn’t know Jori well enough to notice. “Take me to her,” she told them.

Both guards ignored her. The one holding Farjae nodded toward Marden. “Who’s the third?”

He stepped forward. “I am Marden Sheridan, the rightful king of Craydon. Would you kindly unhand my daughter?”

The guards exchanged a brief, stunned glance, then burst into laughter. “What kind of nonsense?” the first scoffed. “The old king has been dead for years. Allard, bring the traitor and this old fool inside. His Majesty can decide what to do about them.” He shoved Farjae toward the other guard, who caught her and roughly spun her around, grasping her arms again. Then he leveled Marié with a mostly indifferent yet vaguely suspicious look, and sheathed his sword. “Follow me, Your Highness.”

Marié briefly met Farjae’s gaze as she passed, then followed the guard up to the doors of the castle. He led her through the main entranceway, then down a narrow hallway and finally through another door that opened to a long set of stairs. It was dim and damp, unmistakably some sort of dungeon.

“Despite what it seems, the princess is not our prisoner,” the guard said. He stood aside of the door. “I will wait here for you.”

Marié nodded, unable to shake the nauseating feeling that this was supposed to be where *she* was being held. Not her brother. This was where Barnabus would have thrown her had she and Jori

not thought to come up with the plan they had. And while she was grateful it wasn't her trapped down here now, she hated that Jori had to be here in her place.

At the bottom of the stairs, the space opened into a short hallway with a single, slightly open door at the end. Marié ran to it and slowly pushed it open, then paused. She had no idea what she might find in this room.

She told herself she was worrying for nothing. If the king still thought Jori was Marié, he'd be fine and his usual upbeat self. Marié would walk into the room and Jori would ask what took her so long, then jump to his feet and keep their plan rolling.

Taking a breath, she went into the room. What she found was nothing like what she'd assured herself she would see, and the sight of her brother stole the air from her lungs. "Oh, *gods*, Jori..." She rushed to him where he was curled on the ground, facing the wall and breathing unevenly. First all she saw was blood, *everywhere* — smeared on the stone floor, stained on his torn clothes, fresh on the swollen welts on his back. When Marié set her hand gingerly on his shoulder, he flinched and gasped in pain, shying away from her.

"Jori..." Marié didn't know what to do. His wrists and ankles were shackled, apparently chained to the wall. Marié didn't even want to ask if he could move.

She touched the back of his head, softly smoothing his hair. It appeared to be the only part of him that wasn't injured in some way. The chains binding him clinked and scraped as he shifted around to look at her. "Marié? You're here?"

She nodded as a pair of tears slid down her cheeks. Jori's face was bruised, his lip split, and all the mischievous life was nearly faded from his eyes. She'd never seen her brother so defeated, so vulnerable. He'd always seemed untouchable.

“I’m here,” she mumbled. “What happened? I thought—”

“Princess Marié.” Heavy footsteps followed the sudden voice down the stairwell, and a moment later the guard from earlier appeared in the doorway, flanked by three others. “And Prince Jori. The two of you are more trouble than you’re worth, and have fooled us long enough. King Barnabus demands your presence in the throne room at once.”

Before Marié could protest, two of the guards had ahold of her and the other two unchained Jori and dragged him, groaning, to his feet.

He managed to catch her gaze once before they were shoved up the stairs.



Barnabus had not been happy to see Farjae, but the expression that crossed his face when his gaze landed on Marden was nothing short of hatred. He didn’t even look shocked, which Farjae resented more than anything. It meant Barnabus had known — or at least suspected — that Marden was alive. And still he’d said nothing.

“You... can’t be here.” Barnabus stood from his throne, but didn’t descend the dais or move closer. He almost looked afraid, but the emotion was gone before it took hold.

“Clearly I can, because I am,” Marden replied. “And I’m twelve years too late.”

“We received notice of your death,” Barnabus said. “I’m a little surprised to see you alive and well, Brother.”

“Yes, well, there was some confusion.” Marden took a step closer to the throne. “But I haven’t come to catch up, Barnabus. I believe you know why I’m here.”

The king's eyes fell on Farjae for a split second before returning to Marden. "I see you've brought my niece with you, despite my very clear message to her that she is neither welcome nor wanted here again." Barnabus sat back in his throne again. "You know, she would've made a fine knight if she hadn't turned out to be a traitor."

Farjae narrowed her eyes, but kept her head held high. The palace guard had said that too. *Don't you know you're wanted for treason?* Had Barnabus really labeled her as a traitor to the throne? How ironic.

"It's funny, though, that she should show up," Barnabus continued to address Marden, speaking as though Farjae wasn't there. It made her want to march up to him and challenge him herself, but she held her ground. For now.

"Just as well," the king went on. Finally his gaze landed on her. "I have something she wants."

"You have something each of us wants," Farjae retorted. "Neither of which is rightfully yours."

He glared at her for a moment, then snapped his fingers and the far doors swung open; four guards entered, followed by three Ivory Knights, dragging with them two familiar silver-haired siblings.

Farjae swore under her breath at the sight of Jori — the real Jori — who was unable to even stand on his won. *Gods, what the hell did they do to you?* This was all Farjae's fault. She could've resisted the potion if she'd wanted to; instead she'd let it take over her logic. She'd thought it was harmless, but she was so, so wrong.

Marié, thankfully, looked unharmed. She had the slightest hint of a static charge around her, though, and Farjae hoped to the gods she'd somehow keep her magic under wraps. That was one more disaster neither of them needed.

“Beaumont, come here,” Barnabus ordered.

Bartram obeyed, standing before the throne. He did not acknowledge Farjae, but she stared daggers at the back of his head.

Barnabus got up and stepped off the dais, muttering something to Bartram that Farjae couldn't hear. A tense, heavy silence settled over the room and put Farjae more on edge than she already was. Marié's plan was beginning to unravel, and Barnabus's next move would decide if it would entirely shatter.

Farjae's anxiety only grew worse when Bartram turned away from the king and drew his sword.

Barnabus nodded toward Marié and Jori. “Kill the bothersome prince. I've had enough of his charades.”

“NO!”

It was over before Farjae could react. Jori fell forward, collapsing in a growing puddle of his own blood. Marié's shriek shattered the silence, and then everything seemed to happen at once.

Marié's magic exploded with a crack like thunder. Shouts erupted from the guards and knights as they were thrown to the floor. Farjae stumbled but stayed on her feet, and ran to Marié. She was visibly shaking, her hands alight with magic.

“Marié.” Farjae carefully reached for her. “Marié, it's— it's okay. Just... let go of the magic.”

“No,” Marié gasped. The glow around her hands grew brighter. “He killed my brother, and he’s just declared war on my kingdom. I’m going to end it before it begins.”

“Marié, no,” Farjae pleaded. She touched Marié’s arm but recoiled when a shock shot through her hand.

“You want an easy line to the throne, Farjae?” Marié raised her hands. “Take it.”

Farjae’s shout of “No!” was drowned by the crack of magic that shot across the room with a blinding light. When it dissolved, Barnabus was collapsed on the ground, clutching a bleeding wound on his arm, but still alive. He stared at Marié with the same fiery hate he’d turned toward Marden.

“Farjae, go.” Marden appeared beside her, keeping an eye on the king as he spoke. “Both of you, get out of here and get to safety.”

“No,” Marié said again. She started toward Barnabus, but Marden caught her. If he felt the shock, he didn’t show it.

“Marié, listen. This is not your battle. You’ve done enough, you’ve both fought long enough. It’s time to let me handle this for you.”

Marié wrenched her arm out of his grip, but didn’t move toward the king again.

Farjae handed Marden her sword. She hated to part with it, but she could get a new one and he needed it now more than she did. Part of her wanted to stay, to fight for her family’s kingdom alongside her father. But it wasn’t her battle, either, not yet. And she had Marié to care for.

Marden took the sword and gave her a curious smile. “What’s this?”

“Possibly an offer of peace,” Farjae said. “Take care of it, trust in it, and the blade will land true.”

Marden closed his hand around the hilt. “Go to the island. I’ll...”

“Take back what’s yours.”

He nodded. “Go.”

Farjae took Marié’s hand and made for the doors. The remaining knights did nothing to stop them, but another blocked their path before they could exit the palace.

“Andrei.” Farjae was too exhausted to feel the weight of seeing him again after their battle.

He took in the two of them, their bloodied clothes, the aftermath of Marié’s magic still clinging to her, their clasped hands. “I’m sorry,” he said softly, then finally looked up and met Farjae’s eyes. “I am truly sorry.” He faltered a moment, as though unsure what to do, and then removed the elephant’s head pin from his shoulder and pressed it into her hand.

She stared down at it. For as long as she could remember, all she’d wanted was to hold this exact pin in her hand, too see it pinned to her cloak. It’d been the symbol of everything she *wanted* to be but didn’t believe she *could* be.

“You deserve it more than I do,” Andrei said. “You were always meant to be a knight.”

Farjae closed her hand around the pin. “Thank you.”

Andrei nodded and let them pass. Farjae only looked back once.

The night was dark, and by the time they reached the harbor, clouds had rolled over the moon. Farjae spotted the gondolier from before, who appeared to be waiting for them.

“The others?” he asked.

Farjae just shook her head.

He nodded and invited them onto the boat.

As soon as they sat down, Marié collapsed into Farjae and let out a sob. Farjae held her, letting her cry, and watched the city as it quietly slipped away. Before, she hadn't known if she would step foot in Craydon again, but she should've known she couldn't run away from the damage she'd caused forever. Now, she knew this escape was also only temporary. Her father was there, fighting for his kingdom and for his life. Andrei was there, and though she couldn't forgive him yet, she would. She wanted to.

"We'll go back," she said quietly, as much to herself as to Marié. "When it's time."

"How can we ever?"

"It'll be different," Farjae told her. "When my father is back on the throne, it'll be different."

"We've made such a mess, Farjae. And Jori..." Her voice broke into another sob.

Farjae held her tighter. "I know. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault. I think..." She sniffed, then wiped at her eyes. "I think he knew what he was doing. I think it... it was part of the plan."

Farjae didn't know if she believed that. Jori was clever, yes, and would sacrifice anything for his sister, but he wasn't self-destructive. If it helped Marié, though, to say it was planned, that he knew from the start he wouldn't be on this boat, then she could agree.

"Barnabus will pay for it," Marié said. "I know it's not the fault of your kingdom, only its king, but I will find a way to avenge my brother."

"I'll be there fighting beside you," Farjae promised.

"Against your own people? Your own family?"

Farjae nodded. "I was never close enough to him to really see him as family. He was never the father I lost. And after all he's done, to my family and to yours, I'll stand up to him without hesitation."

Marié was quiet for a minute, letting the gentle lap of the water on the sides of the boat fill the silence. Then she looked up at Farjae with worry in her eyes. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course," Farjae said.

"You said yesterday that you wanted an antidote to the potion," Marié began carefully. "Is that... still true? I know you didn't know you were talking to me, but if that's how you really feel..."

Farjae sighed and turned away from her. "I'm sorry I said that. Obviously I wouldn't have, if I'd known it was you. It's just... I don't feel like myself with this potion messing with my emotions. I don't have control over what I feel, and that... scares me."

"What would you feel without the potion?" Marié asked.

"I don't know." Farjae forced herself to look at Marié again. "Do you?"

She nodded. "I don't think I'd feel any different. Maybe it wouldn't be so strong so soon, but I'd feel something for you, Farjae. I can tell when someone important comes into my life, and I felt that when I met you, even before the potion. I... wanted to think you felt a connection, too. Or maybe that's silly."

"It's not silly," Farjae said. "I—" She sighed, frustrated with herself that she couldn't get the words out when they needed to be said. But the truth was, she was simply afraid. "All my life, I've trained myself to reel in my emotions, to never show vulnerability, to never betray what I'm feeling. It was how I survived, how I was taken seriously. I have never felt anything as strong as what this potion has done to me, and it terrifies me, Marié. I don't know how to handle it."

“I don’t think the potion *made* you feel anything.” Marié took her hand and laced their fingers together. “I think it just let you feel what was already there. And that’s not such a bad thing.”

It definitely was, but Farjae knew she couldn’t make Marié understand. Maybe in time, but not now.

“So what does it mean then?” Marié asked. “For you, and for us? Is there even an *us*?”

Farjae took a breath, trying to calm her heart. She had to say this. If she didn’t want to lose Marié, she had to learn how to be open with her. “I want to be with you,” she began softly, staring down at their clasped hands. “But I still don’t see how we can be.”

Marié squeezed her hand. “Farjae, we’ve been running for so long, even beyond these past few days. Both of us have been running from one thing or another for our whole lives. I think it’s time we start running *toward* something.

“I don’t know what the future will bring us — hell, I don’t even know what tomorrow will bring us. But through the battles we still have to fight and the messes we still have to resolve, in the end you are what I’m running toward. I don’t care if the future keeps us on this island or drops us back in Craydon or somewhere else entirely. If you’re with me, I can take any life fate decides to give me.”

Farjae smiled. It was small, mostly to herself at first, and then spread across her face with a warm feeling of affection toward Marié. She hadn’t exactly answered Farjae’s question of how a wayward ex-knight labeled a traitor and a runaway princess could ever find their ways back to each other, but it wasn’t an answer that really needed to be said. Already they’d been thrown together by a twist of fate, so Farjae could believe — and she wanted to believe — that they’d make it work if they wanted to.

And Farjae did want to. After everything, she didn't know who or what she was meant to be — knight, princess, queen, or all of the above. But wherever she ended up, she was certain she wanted Marié there. Maybe she needed the potion to make herself admit that, but Marié was right; the feelings were not at all fabricated.

She looked out at the dark, glassy water, the nearing island, the now distant city of Craydon. Farjae could barely remember a time when the city and palace had felt like home, and the Forgotten City was far from a homey place, but maybe soon, when things were different, she could make one of these places her home. With her father, with Andrei, with Marié.

And then, there, she knew she would belong.



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