Trick

a foolish love story

Natalia Jaster

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by Natalia Jaster

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For Roman, my beloved troublemaker

* * *

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Prologue

Jester

Come here, my sweeting. I have a story to share. I shall amuse you, I promise. ’Tis what I do best. If you consider my costume, with its frills and thrills, ’twill be more obvious.

Ay, come to me, and fear not, for I’m renowned. My nails are groomed, my skin is fair, and my smile wickedly pretty. Courtiers say so while tittering behind their goblets. Their teeth scrape over the rims, their lips tinted from wine as they talk of my skills: the ones I perform in halls, as well as in beds, with assorted tastes and . . . companions.

I know what people think, for I’m attuned to the whispers in this castle. They float around on giddy breezes, easy to catch if you’re sly.

Have I not mentioned that I live in a castle? You’ll learn more about that soon.

Indeed, I have your attention. Splendid.

My name is Poet. What is yours?

Hush. Let me guess.

Now allow me to list my attributes. I can flip across a floor like liquid, juggle circles around you, or steal your breath with a twirl. I speak with the silver tongue of a trickster. If you ask nicely, I shall delight you with a rhyme, a few lines of verse spun from gold. If you ask even nicer, I might grace you with that rhyme in private. As you like.

I’m a trinket, a servant of the Crown. I’m a riddle, a hidden agenda.

The better to outwit you.

I’m the finest jest you’ll ever know. If you irritate me, I’ll best you with words, for swords are the toys of knights, whilst I use more creative weapons.

That doesn’t mean I don’t know how to handle a blade. For I can. And I have. Many times, I’ve carried one with me whilst sneaking out of this stronghold, passing in and out of shadows, with the guards none the wiser. A knife has been necessary on those nights, and reaching my precious

destination, my dearest little secret, has been worth the risk.

Still, my wit is sharper than a dagger. And oh, that is the grandest triumph, because it bests even the most regal of this kingdom. For only a clever man knows how to play a fool. I've spent my life, all nineteen years of it, learning how.

Yet none of these skills can steel the heart, nor protect it from breaking. Recently, I've learned that lesson well. So let me tell you a tale of how I lost a battle of wills.

Not to my King. Not to my Queen.

Nay. I lost to a girl.

1

Princess

I took a deep, floral breath and held it. Held it good and tight.

In the distance, beyond the castle walls, sunset gathered on the horizon. A gust of wind laughed its way through the landscape. Blossoms sang and grasses clapped.

Surrounding this stronghold was the lower town. Surrounding both, the wildflower hills. And surrounding the hills, the floral forest where petals sprouted from the trees.

A nation of rebirth and artistry.

Gripping the balcony's ledge, I exhaled and stared at the view. Father used to say most fondly that this place brought out the sprite in everyone. In me, especially.

If he were alive today, if he knew me now, he would be wrong.

A fortnight of travel had brought me to Whimtany, the Spring Kingdom, the so-called merry world away from the perpetual Autumn of my own land. Every year, the Royals traveled to this region for a truce gathering between the four Seasons.

It was an important cause, but I still felt that same exhausting tug in my soul that I always felt being here. I didn't want to be a Spring guest. I didn't want to attend the welcome banquet tonight, nor did I wish to drink or to dance.

Most certainly not to dance. Not at all.

Of course this wasn't about me. And a princess never sulked.

Glancing away from Whimtany's vista, I returned to the confines of my suite: vases filled with cherry buds, musical instruments on display, linen bedding as light as butterfly wings, and Spring's colors of green and pink. The kinds of colors that seemed to wake you up the moment your eyes landed on them.

I was raised on sensible reds and browns. Mista, the serene Kingdom of

Autumn. My home.

One month. One month in this castle, and then I could return.

My traveling trunk had been unpacked and my clothes stored. Wrapped in a dressing gown, I stepped toward the wardrobe to choose something to wear for the evening.

That's when I saw it. A scarlet ribbon tied into a bow. It quivered atop my bed pillows.

I turned a full circle, scrutinizing the room.

No one. Alone.

But somebody *had* been in my chamber. And they wanted me to know it.

None had bestowed a welcome favor upon me yet. Was this ribbon some newfound style of Whimtany greeting? Was an Autumn shade chosen specifically to acknowledge me?

I was no stranger to this kingdom, with its taste for revelry, but this was odd. Truly odd, even for this sprightly land. And the only other person who'd been in here was a maid, a chatty bird of a girl who'd come bearing linens and gossip.

The ribbon could have been a random oversight, a misplaced decoration or mending supply. Except that I could not remember it being there a few minutes ago, long after the maid had left.

The door would have groaned if someone else had entered—someone who'd had the *nerve* to enter without my permission. And I should have heard the noise from the balcony.

Whoever it had been, he or she must have moved soundlessly behind my back.

Who would take such liberty? A noble?

I did not trust a token given anonymously. Pursing my lips, I walked over to the bed, snatched up the ribbon, placed it in the nearest drawer, and wiped my hands.

There. Onward now. I would address the cheeky item later.

The door swooped open. My mother skipped inside, flew straight to the bed, and threw herself onto it. "Mmm," she cooed, her eyelids fluttering

closed as she pawed at the blankets. “Your bed is comfortable.”

I set my hands on my hips. “Mother.”

“All these feathers.”

“Mother.”

“Yes, dearest Daughter?”

“You are not sleeping here tonight.”

She snuggled into the down. “Oh, so soft. So queenly. I shall have a good rest tonight.”

“I know you heard me.”

My mother, Queen Avalea of Mista, released a dramatic whine. “You don’t understand. My suite is facing north—it’s a full moon and thus bad luck to sleep alone. We must join forces. A woman never knows when a phantom might sneak into her chamber to claim her in the dead of night.”

“You’re of age now,” I answered. “You’ll manage on your own.”

“So strict to your mother. What have I done to deserve it, Briar?”

Even her pouty voice sounded buxom. I regarded her expression, feeling a rush of tenderness. I loved her. She loved me. That wasn’t the problem.

Father was the problem. His memory lived between us, slumbering in our rooms, feasting at our table. Daily, he strung us together and tore us apart. A long time ago, I’d done my worst to him. I could not undo it, and he was gone—and no matter how many years passed, no matter how I tried to atone and fix myself, to be perfect for the leftovers of our family, the guilt was eternal.

I did not deserve Mother. I would not permit myself to get close to her.

Because what if I lost her, too?

She made a show of stirring, not just with her sparkling eyes but with her whole body, with her limbs stretching to the end of the bed and the crisp scent of apples from home infused into her hair—red like mine, but aged to rust. Aside from our tresses, we were nothing alike. When I was born, the people of Mista had foreseen another jewel. They got me instead.

To the naive and the uninspired, princesses were supposed to be lovely, from their slippers to their tiaras. A princess possessed the desired traits: long curls, a rosette mouth, actual height. Royals were the pinnacle of beauty.

No one imagined a princess ugly or plain. Or, Seasons forbid, sharp. A princess was the bud of the flower, not the thorn.

The assumption was quite stupid. Mista had not anticipated a girl like me. A short, knobby-elbowed, simple-faced eighteen-year-old bramble with dull irises, pinched features, and the body of a twig. I didn't see a problem with this, except it made me appear too much like my dead father and not enough like my living mother. Her subjects wanted the future queen to be honorable, but also a duplicate of Mother: radiant and overflowing with what they called sociability.

She was a wise ruler, but she had her amiable ways of getting things done. And I would have my own someday, exercising sound judgment and a steadfast mind. I wouldn't require the people's adoration, only their respect and loyalty.

In the meantime, I needed to be home, not here losing the chance to make contributions where I could. Although I was next in line for Autumn's throne, the peace talks excluded offspring. As part of the custom, the meetings were restricted to the current rulers. Impractical, if one asked me.

Ages differed between the lands' children. Summer's boy was in his eighth year. Because Winter had two queens, their successor was an eleven-year-old grandnephew. And Spring's daughter was still in the nursery. There was no basis for us to meet and bond yet, so to that end, I remained the only Royal youth who attended this event.

Mother wanted me close. Her hope to share my bed had nothing to do with full moons and apparitions, and everything to do with recreating the first time she brought me here, when I was six and needed her beside me in order to rest. Back when we were a complete family. When this place didn't yet hold painful memories.

Since then, she has tried to rekindle that night, like it might be a cure. It has come to the point where her attempts and my refusals have morphed into a ritual. She nudged, and I made the excuse that she kicked in her sleep.

"Oh, no," Mother said. "You look cross. What is it this time?" She patted the space beside her. "Come. Join me amidst the fluffy. Tell me all about it."

The sight of her spreading her arms to my troubles choked me with longing. I wanted to curl up with her and explain myself, my words kept safe against her breast. I wanted to tell her that she should have left me behind in Mista, where I could help run the kingdom in her absence instead of leaving it to her advisors.

I refused to, though. The very act of confiding anything, to anyone, made me queasy.

The mystery gift bestowed upon me was another inexplicably vexing matter. But if I showed the ribbon to her, she would only tease me for taking the gesture too seriously.

I retreated to the wardrobe while saying, “We need to get ready for the banquet.”

A ninny’s remark, since I was the only one not dressed. It also came out sterner than I’d meant it to.

A vanity mirror hung above the dressing table. As I chose a sober but stately gown of maroon velvet, in the reflection I saw Mother flinch, chafing me with remorse. I opened my mouth to apologize just as she forced a smile onto her face. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and sashayed toward me, her hips jutting from side to side. How did she move that way so effortlessly?

“Is that what you’re wearing?” she asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

“No,” she said. “Not in this kingdom.”

Reaching over my shoulder, she thrust her hand into the wardrobe, crowded with the fall colors of Mista. She withdrew an alternative, a new design that she’d ordered from the seamstresses.

I dutifully let her button me up, trapping me in it. The ruby silk gown had elbow-length sleeves and a square neckline—a *low* square neckline. The bodice had a gap running down the center, allowing an under panel to peek through. The hem bustled around my knees while a longer skirt of lighter, blushing silk flared out beneath.

Two embellishments followed: a belt made of rubies shaped into leaves

and a matching pair of hair clips. Mother argued with me, declaring the clips should sweep half the hair off my face, letting the rest tumble recklessly down my back, in the fashion of Whimtany ladies. The very idea made me uncomfortable. An Autumn girl did no such thing—plaits and headdresses reigned in Mista—and allowing my hair to run rampant across my back was a recipe for tangles.

In addition, my flaming tresses would draw the sort of male attention that I did not care for, despite my being unwed. At the dressing table, I tore a brush through my hair, wove my locks into a braid at the crown of my head, and secured it with the clips. I was a future monarch, not a mermaid.

Mother threw up her hands. “Oh, Briar. I give up.”

Not a moment later, company arrived in a whirlwind of petal-woven gowns. Seven courtiers, all my age. Spring girls. Some of them had tanned skin, kissed by the sun, while others had darker skin, like rich sable. By comparison, I was as pale as flour.

They dashed into the room so fast that when they stopped, they skittered across the floor and bumped into each other, then burst into a collective chortle that could have split the ceiling.

Cadence. Fae. Lisette. Vale. Posy. Questa. Rhiannon.

A row of curtsies:

“Your Majesty.”

“Your Majesty.”

“Your Majesty.”

“Your Majesty.”

“Your Majesty.”

“Your Majesty.”

“Your Majesty.”

A pause. I waited as the Silly Seven finally remembered themselves. “Your Highness,” they said to me in unison, but not with the same joy as they’d addressed Mother.

They went straight to her, surrounding her like bejeweled puppies wagging their tails, yipping over each other in excitement. “Welcome back,

Your Majesty," and "We've missed you," and "I'm swooning over the banquet," and "There's going to be such levity," and "I'm in love," and "She's always in love," and "But I'm in *real* love."

The Seven listed the guests coming tonight, every nobleman and woman. However, they kept going back to the entertainment, hinting at a grand performance while withholding the details. They cast each other knowing glances and gushed over the delicious secret of it.

A fine line existed between distinguished fun and Spring fun. No doubt we were going to be subjected to a sword-swallower with ogre arms.

I remained at the vanity, watching as the group modeled their gowns, spreading their skirts wide. They hummed a tune and began to dance, circling one another airily.

As Mother laughed with them, I squeezed my hands in my lap. I felt like a child locked inside my room, glaring at the children who played outdoors.

"Join them, Briar," Mother encouraged. "Go on. For me."

I had wounded her once already. I could not refuse.

I partook in the dance, self-conscious because this would not end well. Though bred to walk with grace, dance lessons had been wasted on me. This had been clear from childhood, as I lacked natural rhythm. I hadn't the ability to spin as the other girls did, each bone in my body tensing like I'd been nailed together.

Mother rose from her perch by the hooded fireplace. "If you'll excuse me, ladies," she announced, the tassels around her waist knocking together. "Do keep Briar company."

She bobbed her finger toward me and mouthed a silent *stay*, then left.

I grumbled inwardly. I was quite sure the others did as well. They did not verbally react to me treading on their toes. Instead, they beamed to my face, though I spied them trading very different looks over my shoulder.

Posy slid away from us and began to nose around in my things. My shoes lined beside the wardrobe. My basket of handkerchiefs. My favorite quill.

Then she trotted to the window and unfastened it. Not an instant into her daydream, she gasped, "Oh, my Spring! It's him!"

The dance broke apart. Pandemonium ensued. The girls stampeded over to the sill—what in the world?!—squishing their heads through the gap.

“Your Highness, you must have a look,” Posy whispered.

“A long look,” Fae purred.

“Your Highness, may we watch him from your balcony?” Questa pleaded.

“Are you mad?” Vale asked, winding her dark arm around Posy’s waist. “He’ll hear us there.”

“If Posy’s squeal didn’t alert him already,” Rhiannon said.

“He’ll see us, too,” Lisette added.

“No, he won’t,” Questa argued. “He’s . . . busy.”

Cadence ran her finger across the sill. “Devil, take me.”

“Take me prisoner,” Fae amended, earning a round of giggles.

“Your Highness,” Posy chirped. “You shall miss him.”

No, I would not. I took my time reaching them, hardly in the mood to fuss over some buck. The group parted, allowing me to peek out the window and feign interest for their sake. The view spanned not only the hills of Whimtany, but also one of the castle gardens below. High bushes and low dahlia beds.

And, like a sudden quickening of the pulse, there he was.

2

Princess

Somewhere in Spring's lower town, a storyteller penned a fable, a florist arranged stems, and a beekeeper inspected his hives. Life revolved. It moved on, as did the clouds.

And yet it stopped. Life halted everywhere except for in the garden, where a dahlia was plucked by an outstretched male hand. Nimble fingers twirled the flower, then tucked the stem behind the ear of a maiden whose head lolled back on a rapturous moan.

The couple embraced. My mouth fell open, warmth filling my cheeks.

Him. The back of him, at least. He was too preoccupied devouring the crook of his consort's neck to provide a clear prospect.

Dark layers of thick, unkempt hair teased his nape. That knightly head of hair did not, however, belong to a knight. A man-at-arms did not sport black paint on his short nails, nor a stack of ribbons fringing around his wrist.

Above his dusky hose, a striped tunic molded to his shoulders and arms, with red cuffs rolled up his forearms. A brief moment in which he twisted to the side revealed an unusually high collar dyed the same red as the cuffs.

Red. Autumn.

Yet he couldn't be from Mista. Mother and I had traveled with only one council member and a small entourage of knights.

Plus, I would be hard-pressed to forget a person dressed like him. He was definitely a Spring citizen, though his wardrobe struck me as too brash and theatrical to make him a noble, even in this kingdom of creativity. Yet despite my vantage point, I knew expensive material when I saw it. That ruled out the possibility of him being a humble servant.

One of the court artists, perhaps? A sculptor or a painter?

The Seven wrestled each other for a glimpse. Cadence muttered, "I don't recognize her."

"Maybe she's a new resident acrobat," Vale guessed. "She has the body of

one.”

“No. He doesn’t bed the tenant performers.”

“Oh, I know! She’s the falconer’s niece,” Posy said, as if suddenly remembering.

Based on the pair’s movements, they weren’t . . . well, they *weren’t*.

Nevertheless, how dare I take part in this! I berated my conscience and was about to wrench the casement closed when the boy untangled himself from the girl and then snapped his fingers. The noise, spry but so cavalier, ricocheted off the stone walls, promptly dismissing his companion. I felt myself frown as the girl departed through a gate.

At the same time, a small and elongated creature sprung from a floral bed. When it did, the boy straightened his attire and followed the animal’s trail. A blast of air sent petals swarming around the boy’s booted feet as he walked—no, that was wrong. Walking was too commonplace a description for how he moved. Fluid and stealthy.

This amounted to crumbs. What inspired me to keep observing him, as if more indecent displays might happen any second, I knew not. The princess in me huffed aloud.

And that’s when he paused.

Clamping their hands over their giggling mouths, the courtiers ducked. I hadn’t thought to do that. I stood there, grasping the sill.

His head slanted sideways in awareness, hinting at his profile. I prided myself on having fine eyesight and caught a slice of a grin forming.

He heard me. He knows I’ve been watching.

I thought he might turn and look up at me. Instead, he kept going. He crossed the garden, along with the creature that darted around his heels, and vanished through a door at the opposite end.

The Silly Seven popped back up. Cadence made a feral noise, a wanton experiment between a sigh and a whimper. “I know other places he might snap those fingers.”

The courtiers cackled.

Fae said to her, “You are shallow.”

“Not where it matters to Poet.”

I would have startled at the crude remark had I not been distracted. Poet. Was that the boy’s name? What sort of ridiculous, pretentious signature was that?

Again, his attire did not pass for a servant’s, nor an aristocrat’s, but a person belonging in an entirely different class. A boy who sported ribbons around his wrist.

One of them had been red. Scarlet.

Cadence misread my expression. “Forgive me, Your Highness. That was unsavory of me.”

She did not sound like she regretted it.

“I must dress,” I heard myself say, too gripped by anxiousness—I wanted a second look at that ribbon in my drawer—to remember that I was already clothed.

My announcement ushered the girls out the door. As they trotted down the hall, a muffled remark and the courtiers’ answering laugh wormed their way into my chamber.

I strode over to the dresser, plucked the scarlet fabric from inside, and draped it across my wrist. The shade blazed as hot as the one he’d been wearing.

In the four kingdoms, the gift of a ribbon symbolized a person’s esteem for another. But this no longer seemed like a gift. It seemed like a tease, perhaps a conquest.

Like a jest.

* * *

As I headed down the corridor, my skirts fanned around my legs and brushed the floor. Ivy twined around pillars, creeping up the stone, the same way it did over the castle’s exterior. Alcoves exhibited stained glass windows that depicted the castle’s numerous gardens.

I found the right outlet and exited, picking my way across one of the greens, venturing a lengthy path toward the ruins of a tower. It used to be part of the stronghold centuries ago. Today, blooms shrouded the crumbled walls,

creating what the denizens considered an ancient garden.

People rarely came here, which made it perfect for secrecy. And I loved meeting him in this place. The timelessness of it.

One blink. Two blinks. Three.

“Psst,” came the familiar signal from behind. My conscience lifted, quelling the sliver of guilt I felt at being here. Rather than *psst* back—I was no longer a little girl—I turned toward the sound and tapped my foot in response. I doubted it reached his ears, no matter how finely tuned. There were just too few instances in which I used my feet in a jaunty manner. Or did anything thus.

“Minion,” I whispered.

“Master,” he whispered back.

“Minstrel.”

“Monarch.”

Fingers poked me in the ribs. I wheeled around again to find slender Eliot kneeling, a precious smile spanning his face before he bowed his head.

Pensive, I tried to grin. We have reunited in this manner since that magical and terrible day when we were twelve years old. Yet I worried that we could not remain like this forever, exploiting our ranks in idle amusement, as though they weren’t real.

“May I rise?” Eliot asked.

“You may,” I recited.

He got to his feet and pulled me into a hug. I welcomed his embrace, sank into it. That unforgettable market day from our childhood—and the days, weeks, months, and years of secret letters that followed—tethered us to one another, despite time and distance.

Kind Eliot. The sole reason I looked forward to visiting Whimtany.

My one true friend.

And a servant. A transgression.

Treat one another with kindness and dignity, but do not stray from your social class. Marry within your station and Season. Live and die there.

Titled with titled. Servant with servant. Tradesman with tradesman.

Peasant with peasant.

Sand with sand. Leaf with leaf. Snow with snow. Flower with flower.

The Seasons maintained that social standard. Our allied lands freed us from marriages of convenience for peace. If any of us found ourselves in dire straits and required aid, we negotiated in other ways. An age-old treaty saw to that.

Monarchs could wed as they chose and to whichever sex they wished, as the Queens of Winter had, so long as those choices reflected class. Casual romps between hierarchies weren't taken seriously, but anything beyond that, intimate friendships and so forth, was forbidden.

Of course people breached this rule behind closed doors. As a princess setting an example for her land, no one suspected me of being such a person.

In spite of that, I allowed myself this single indulgence, ignoring the ache that accompanied it. The shame for feeling shame where Eliot was concerned. I fought it at every turn, sometimes to the point where I resented him.

"Briar," he murmured into my shoulder.

"Eliot," I replied.

Our given names. Much better. Far worse.

I wanted to have a brother. If only he and I shared the same bloodline, lived in the same kingdom, we would not have to hide like this.

When he moved to pull back, I held him fast. "Not yet," I said.

"Aren't I the lucky one!" He complied, clasping me to him. "It's my private duty to keep the Princess of Mista sane amongst this goofy lot. How is this for a hug? I've been practicing. That is, I haven't been practicing on other princesses. Not that there are any others to practice with, and even if there were, they'd hit me if I touched them. Not that I would touch them, because well, maidens are a foul bunch. Except for you. What I mean is, it's been a long time, if you follow me, so I want to get the moment right. Is it right?"

Eliot clucked more than a hen. When we were younger, I'd sought to control his babbling by pinching his arm every time he digressed, but then I learned it would be easier to clear a moat with a ladle.

"It's unmatched," I answered, then realized with contrition that I hadn't

disputed his remark about keeping me composed while in the clutches of Spring. Eliot was more to me than a crutch.

“Not everything about Whimtany is goofy,” I conceded. “Only most of it.”

“You’re still difficult, aren’t you? You act like you’ve never been here before. It’s like you’re afraid the walls will devour you. They wouldn’t do that, I reckon. For one thing, they’re made of stone and glass, which don’t have teeth. For another, they’re covered in ivy, so—”

Before he went off on a tangent, I stepped back. “Let me see you properly.”

We surveyed each other’s appearances. He had grown as tall as a beanpole, whereas my legs had failed to stretch. Otherwise, he looked the same. Sunny locks. Big ears. Gangly and elegant in his musician’s garb. Not only was he a friend but also a minstrel who played the lute and sang. His ballads were a bit fanciful in their lyrics, with notions of courtly love and all the rest of that prattle, but nice.

“I approve,” I declared. “You would outshine a Royal any day.”

He beamed, then eyed the braid perched upon my head. “I’ll never understand Autumn. What do you mean, with this style? You’re a guest of Spring, you know. Girls wear their hair loose here.”

“I am not a girl.”

He laughed too loudly. I shushed him while trying not to laugh back, which was hard. I hadn’t heard his infectious giggles in a year, and I’d missed them. Eliot was one of those people who made others titter simply from listening to his mirth. It mattered not if the joke or comment were truly funny. I would make a wry comment, and he would find it uproarious, and soon I would be joining him.

We once guffawed for a full minute, as the castle bells tolled. I still remembered that.

The familiar scent of wood and rosemary that wafted from his skin mingled with new scents. I detected notes of amber and smoky vetiver, which didn’t come naturally from him. No, they came from someone else.

His blush. His swollen lips.

The way his eyes gleamed: incurably lovestruck.

“You have been wooed,” I blurted out, the revelation jumping off my tongue.

Eliot’s flush deepened. Bashful, he stared at his shoes, uncharacteristically mute. It was not romantic between us. Eliot preferred boys, and I preferred anything but romance. So why did this news churn my gut?

I probed, “Tell me about him, you goose.”

Eliot melted against a wall, arms akimbo. “I cannot do him justice. I’ll get it wrong.”

“You will not,” I argued.

“He inspires me. And when we perform—”

“He’s a musician?”

“I’m the musician. Poet’s more than that.”

Poet again. That brazenly dressed boy who’d been fondling a girl mere hours before feeding on Eliot’s mouth. It seemed many were besotted with this character, which could not bode well for my friend.

“How much more?” I questioned.

“Oh, don’t make me answer that,” Eliot begged. “I don’t want to spoil it. Because I will, won’t I, if I tell you? You’ll have to see for yourself at the banquet.”

My jaw unhinged. Since when did he not elaborate on his thoughts?

“Will I like him?” I asked, already knowing the answer. “Will I give my blessing?”

“Absolutely not.” He smoothed out his ensemble. “Pray, do I look beguiled? They say one does after an appropriate beguiling, but I haven’t glanced at my reflection to check. Does it make me look more muscular? I’ve heard love has that effect, but you can’t believe everything the cooks say. They’re drunk most of the time. Much of what they tell me is twaddle, which is downright disappointing.”

That was more like him. Nevertheless . . .

“Briar, don’t squint at me like that,” he pleaded with a woeful grin. “You’re sure to be the only one who doesn’t like him. Everyone—from

nobles, to gardeners, to artists—is at Poet's mercy, but don't fret. Your blessing won't be necessary. He's good to me, but he doesn't belong to me. He shares himself."

"Shares himself."

"A lot of himself. He makes no bones about that, which means I'm the fool's fool."

"The what's what?"

"Beguiled is my destiny. I only wish I had your willpower. Maybe you could teach me how to resist. Is that learnable?"

His gloom leapt out at me. This Poet person had seduced my friend, but the seducer did not return Eliot's affections. At my window, I had missed seeing the boy's face. But from his clothing and the lofty snap of his fingers, it did not take a genius to conclude he was devoted to none but himself.

I knew what it did to Eliot's spirit when someone hoodwinked him. During last year's peace talks, a repugnant squire had romanced my friend and then cast him aside without a second thought, as if Eliot had never meant anything to him at all.

Granted, Eliot tended to get carried away and had practically begun planning their nuptials after only a few kisses. His clinging ways had been off-putting to the squire.

Still, I'd yearned with the burning intensity of an inferno to punch that lout in the face for disregarding my friend so insensitively. In any case, the squire was long gone now, serving a baron's estate for reasons I couldn't care less about.

What I'd witnessed in the dahlia garden sat heavily on my shoulders. Eliot possessed an open, trusting soul. He lacked the armor he'd need later on, when the heartbreak would surely come.

I reached out and squeezed his hand. "You are invaluable, and someday, the perfect suitor will see that. Until then, if you're beguiled, it's because you choose to be. Feelings can be controlled; it's in your power to rise above them."

Eliot peeked between his curls. "Do you think so?"

I knew so. Or for his sake, I hoped so, because I feared seeing him hurt again.

How I wished everyone knew what Eliot meant to me. But although I hated keeping our friendship a secret, I did it willingly. He was my one exception to the rules that I lived by. Other than with him, I would not defy this world.

No one else was worth it. No one would ever come close.

3

Princess

In the great hall, guests moved about in boisterous fits and bursts. Green and pink daisies sprouted from the tables. Vines of more blooms snuck around the columns. The ceiling's glass dome offered a view of the night sky. The tune of a pan flute skipped its way through the chatter.

At the threshold, I gulped pellets of anxiety down my throat. Moisture beaded my palms, but my heart hid safely within my chest as it knocked, knocked, knocked.

So much Spring in one place. Nowhere to avoid it.

The ferret was new. I had never seen it here before. The rodent gave chase under the trestle tables, its furry body hopping around dozens of feet.

A pair of young courtiers kissed open-mouthed across their table, the tips of their tongues sliding against one another. I gaped at them. I had no idea mouths could kiss that way.

Just then, the weight of someone's gaze seized me. I pried my attention from the lusty display and scanned the hall, only to find the other guests absorbed in each other. The weight could be coming from anywhere. Its presence snuck up my neck like fingers, daring me to shiver.

"Her Royal Highness . . ."

A hall's worth of faces swerved in my direction. Thankfully, no one noticed how I'd been staring at the couple. No one except the source of that invisible weight.

A princess did not recoil.

A princess adapted wherever she went.

Thinking of that kiss, I scrunched my lips together. I stepped forward, and the bustle of activity resumed. The weight lifted.

The Silly Seven chattered to my left. Vale and Posy wove their fingers together and pecked one another's cheeks. Cadence ribbed them affectionately. The girls fed each other spoonfuls of strawberries in cream and

wore gowns of pansies and peonies, the short sleeves and off-the-shoulder necklines exposing their skin. Floral circlets topped their free-flowing tresses.

I patted the braid in my hair.

What did those girls talk about? Would they tell me if I asked them? Or would they lie because I was a princess, and they had no choice but to be cordial?

Perhaps the next time they stormed my chamber, I would shock them. I would tell them that I'd decided to quit princesshood, run away, learn to use a blade, and commit to a lifetime of robbing coaches for a noble cause. Or that I planned to join a band of gypsies. That I was set on becoming an outcast wanderer in the woods, sleeping in tents or wagons.

Me, a deviant in the forest. Ridiculous and wild. Muddy.

If I were to make such a proclamation, I would receive an unforgettable reaction. Instead of impressing the girls, I might terrify them, convince them that I'd lost my mind. And, well, they would be right.

I spotted the Royals on the dais. The Kings and Queens of the Seasons.

Silvia and Doria of Winter. The eldest of the monarchs. Spectacles, frothy white hair, and decades of regal authority creasing their faces.

Rhys and Giselle of Summer. A union of vitality. A strong husband in his mid-thirties and a wife ten years his junior. Rhys had a jungle for a mustache and Giselle a whistle-like voice—she constantly sounded surprised.

Basil and Fatima of Spring. Both six-and-twenty, they were a pudgy pair of monarchs who enjoyed finishing one another's sentences, laughing in the other's round face, and nuzzling their noses together. A jolly love match.

Avalea of Autumn. The widowed Royal.

The lonely sight of my mother at the end of the row clenched my heart. Of course she wanted me here with her. She had no one else. She'd been robbed of a husband from the time I was twelve.

My fault. Forever.

Privately, I craved home, where my thoughts had no time to detour and every bit of time for routine.

Publicly, I greeted the Royals and took my seat beside Mother, resigning

myself to suffer politely until midnight. Like the good girl I was. Like princesses did.

Visitors could be guaranteed two things at this banquet. The first: an overdose of Spring fare to rouse the taste buds. Apricots in fluted dishes. Asparagus and peas drenched in sauce. Pies bloated with Whimtany pork.

I chewed and observed. Scores of mouths talking, eating, and kissing.

The second pleasure: music. Eliot appeared, lute in hand. This was a minstrel's domain, where words tumbled out of him to his heart's content, and everyone listened. He once confided to me, while huddling in the ruins, that he should like to die singing.

I'd been jealous about that. I did not know how I wanted to die, what I wanted to be doing when it happened.

Nor did I wish to ponder death. My father had done enough of that thing called dying.

Eliot began to play, his fingers deftly plucking the strings. He sang like honey, thick and sweet and pouring over the hall. It was all I could do not to lean forward, prop my elbows on the table, and rest my chin in my hands—proper table manners be damned.

The song described a forbidden tryst between lovers of opposing social ranks. I paid less attention to the lyrics than to my friend's tenor.

When the song ended, I led the applause. This was our tradition, a detail camouflaged within the gaiety: my promise to trumpet him before anyone else did. He and I swapped a brief, conspiratorial look. I clapped and clapped and clapped.

Then I stopped.

Servants doused every mounted torch and candlestick, blanketing us in darkness. Twilight stole through the glass dome, illuminating the spot where Eliot had been, now replaced by a curtain of mist rising from two cauldrons set at opposite ends of the performance floor. Within the haze stood the outline of a masculine figure.

He bowed. His right arm angled toward the ground; his left raised to the ceiling, his pointer finger and thumb poised upward, while the other fingers

disappeared into his palm. His movements matched the same lithe ones from the garden.

Instantly, I knew.

From an unseen corner, the chords from Eliot's lute twined through the room again. The boy in the mist began to dance, slowly but without a sequence, his head thrown back. He became a wisp of smoke, writhing and disorderly.

The guests fell silent. I fell into a different sort of trap, one that overwhelmed me with a feverish restlessness. I've never moved that way, or witnessed anyone do so. I wondered what it took, what sacrifice the body made, in order to become the limitless thing his had turned into. I speculated if it were possible for a body to bend so far off its hinges that it snapped free and flew away.

As he twisted, I spotted the line of his jaw, the slope of his ear. Skin and sinew flashed in and out of the haze. Beneath my skirts, my knees pressed together.

Other physical things occurred under my dress as well. Private things that horrified and . . . thrilled me. In protest, I bit my lower lip and shifted in my seat. I used to be such a fervent girl, but then I'd paid for it. So never again.

He stopped. So did the music. It gave me the chance to remember that I disapproved of him out of loyalty to Eliot. My friend, who could not see past his enchantment to choose his lover wisely.

That boy. The wrong choice.

In the dome's rays, he pressed a finger to his lips. *Hush*, he might have said.

One of the servants, who must have been cued, threw him a small globe. A ball.

When the boy caught it, another round of music started, with Eliot's lute and the pan flutist joining forces, along with someone pounding a drum. To their rhythm, the stranger sent the globe careening down his arm. His arms swayed, cording together and sliding apart in rapid waves, casting an intricate path for the ball to trace. From palm to palm, elbow to elbow, shoulder to

shoulder.

He tossed the sphere sideways behind him. When the opposite hand captured it, one ball became two. As he juggled them, the pair multiplied into three balls. Then four, then five, then six. The boy pitched them in wayward directions, around his waist, under his legs. All this while dancing, pirouetting, rolling across the ground.

He caught the spheres with the flats of his bare toes, in the nape of his neck, in the dip of his lower back. He used his whole body.

It ended too soon. One by one, as they landed in his hands, he tossed his props out for the guests to catch. When the room settled down, the boy flicked his wrist, producing a thin candle. He blew on it, igniting the wick, the flame popping out of nowhere. The fog and his dexterous fingers must have kept us from noticing some pair of flint and steel, because there was no way he could have just—

The spectators gasped. The boy vaulted into a series of single-handed, acrobatic flips across the hall, carrying the burning taper with him, breaking through the mist, lashing at it like a whip.

Coming straight toward me.

My heart galloped. I veered, my back ramming into my chair. I did not realize the tablecloth suffocated in my death-grip until it was too late. I had unconsciously yanked on it, sending tankards toppling over.

The elastic boy landed on one hand and both knees. Not in front of me, as I'd anticipated, but in front of my mother, to whom he proffered the flickering candle.

"My fellow monarchs of the Seasons," King Basil of Spring boasted. "I give you Poet, the Court Jester of Whimtany."

Nobles recovered from their delighted shock and erupted into cheers, male and female knights pounded their knuckles onto the tables, and the Silly Seven squeaked like excited mice. The clamor made the ground rumble.

"Huzzah!" they shouted.

The boy lifted his head, revealing himself in the toasted glow of the room. And I released the tablecloth. I might have dropped my goblet of nectar, had I

been holding it.

I'd expected a pleasant face.

That was not what greeted me.

I saw full lips and a great deal of trouble. I saw vicious, green irises.

A long, black diamond pierced through one amused eye, slicing into his forehead and cheeks. A simpler thread of black lined the other. He was young, closer to my years, perhaps exceeding me by one or two.

Poet. A jester. A lovely one.

How did I not realize what he was the moment his limbs began to pivot?

It must have been the costume. He lacked the typical motley ensemble with flaps and a bell cap. Instead, he donned gray hose and a sleeveless shirt with ruffles trimmed in shimmering thread at the collar. His entire appearance defied tradition. No club or stick marked his vocation, and he wasn't bald like most jesters.

He ignored me, focusing on my mother, his arm extended to offer her the candle in a droll imitation of chivalry. With a genial laugh, she accepted the light and wound it into the nearest pillar.

As the guests raved, Poet rose to his feet, spread his arms wide, and gave a series of flamboyant bows to each table. His grin revealed a slightly crooked upper tooth, the incisor peeking out naughtily from the rest of his teeth. A blemish hidden within the frills.

Honestly, I had no cause to dislike him. Not when I scarcely knew him.

It was because of Eliot, I told myself. Absolutely because of Eliot, who stood in the corner with the other minstrels, his lovelorn gaze spilling all over Poet. Because this spectacle of a boy was using my friend.

One of the servants handed Poet a pouch. From it, he withdrew six more candles and distributed them to the monarchs, an offering of reverence. Using my mother's taper, they created their own flames, partially brightening the hall once more.

With a final bow, the jester turned away, excluding me from the gesture. I pretended not to care. I even went so far as to audibly harrumph.

I should have kept my mouth shut.

Poet paused mid-saunter, catching the sound in the air. He twirled around, literally twirled, and scanned the room as though suddenly remembering something important.

Hmm, that expression said. *I've neglected someone. Who could it be?*

He searched amidst the crowd. The Seven giggled up a Spring storm, while I resisted the urge to sink into my chair and disappear.

His gaze floated across the room, then latched onto me. It felt like that invisible weight from earlier.

My body sounded an internal alarm as endless pairs of eyes fixated on us. Refusing to cower, I raised my chin. Our audience watched as he strolled toward me, slipping a hand into the pouch. Petulant though it was, I would accept the stupid candle and then purposefully leave it unlit. It would send a message that I found his stunts lacking, unworthy of compliments.

My palm turned over for the taper. Poet dug through the pouch, then patted his shirt, then checked under his feet. He came up empty-handed. He shrugged at poor little me, the ribbons around his wrist flapping, and twisted away from my pathetic, outstretched hand. It hovered like a beggar, earning not a crumb, no greeting. A public judgment. A direct cut.

The room burst into chortles. He'd hooked and left me dangling.

Eliot, the traitor, pressed a fist to his mouth to conceal his chuckles. My mother offered me an entertained but conciliatory smile.

I contemplated the ribbon in my drawer. It could be used for many things besides expressing admiration for someone. To choke them, for example. To bind their wrists, cut off their circulation.

A pair of acrobats balancing atop large hoops rolled into the hall. At Poet's signal, they slid to the ground and proceeded to dance while spinning the hoops—over their heads, around their waists. A background act as the music continued and guests strayed, abandoning their meals in the pursuit of fun.

Poet quit the hall. As the time passed, I began to relax, thinking that was the last I'd see of him. Unfortunately, he returned less than an hour later. He was freshly dressed, having changed into a studded doublet, fitted rather than padded, and a scarf tied into multiple layers that trickled down his chest. His

hose pooled into boots folded over at the ankles.

The heads of every female turned, following the young jester's progress as he ambled through the crowd. At something Poet said, the Court Treasurer waved her handkerchief in the air and convulsed so hard with laughter that tears leaked into her wrinkles.

In the four Seasons, there existed two kinds of born fools: the mad fool and the simpleton. Both belonged to the Crown. The mad were deemed dangers to society and locked away in dungeons and oubliettes, within each castle and across the lands. Simpletons were forced into service in various ways, depending on the kingdom.

Spring used them for amusement. Basil and Fatima distributed them across their nation to traveling troupes or to nobles—the ones not here in residence—who favored that sort of entertainment at their estates. For that reason, there were no such fools living in Whimtany's stronghold.

But in Spring, there also existed a third kind of fool. A unique one: the jester.

A licensed fool, a product of training. Unlike born fools, jesters weren't owned by their sovereigns. They were high-ranking servants, specializing in the art of performance, candor and satire, and the turning of a phrase. As a profession, they journeyed with carnivals and fairs across Whimtany.

All except the Court Jester. The most prized of his craft, he resided at the castle, appointed to entertain the Crown—with the liberty to counsel and influence the monarchy.

I did not like it. A man should be a Royal's trusted advisor or an artisan. Not one and the same.

If the Court Jester did not favor someone, that person became the target of mockery. If a princess thought she would be exempt, she'd better think again.

Eliot had once mentioned to me in a letter that the previous jester died of a fever, shortly after the last peace talks. Apparently, Poet had replaced him.

My friend's playing faltered as his attention strayed to Poet, who propped himself casually on the edge of the Silly Seven's table and proceeded to flirt. That ferret I'd seen before slinked up his arm, perched on his shoulder, and

almost severed Questa's pinky when she attempted to pet it. Posy appeared to be pleading with Poet, simpering while he shook his head, stole a strawberry off Vale's plate, and popped it into his mouth. Chewing, he winked and left the girls gushing.

My knife skewered a slab of glazed ham. By some miracle, I'd witnessed the scene and still managed to keep my food down.

"Are you well?" Mother asked, eyeing me curiously.

"Yes," I gritted out.

"I'm told he plans to charm us with verse tomorrow. He seems to have quite an effect on his audience."

"Pass the salt, please."

"I see how your eyes dissect him."

"Him, who?"

"And your chin crinkles like parchment when you're riled, dearest. Don't allow a few harmless candles to do that. Laugh at it." She wiggled in her seat. "Here, I'll show you how to laugh."

I set down my napkin before she could do anything of the sort. "If you'll excuse me, I'm finished."

Mother's face fell. She stiffened in her chair. "Fine. Go."

After saying my good-byes to the Royals, I retired from the hall, making haste without so much as bidding Eliot a silent farewell. For as many residents that dwelled in a castle, it grew quiet at night. One had to strain to hear the clanking of armor or murmured conversation, distant as though tucked behind cupboards.

Torches slanted from the partitions, flames hopping into the air. I wandered, embarrassed and confused by my attitude toward a stranger, worried about my friend's heart, and feeling guilty over my rudeness to Mother.

At least fifteen minutes must have passed before I realized that I'd detoured into an unfamiliar part of the castle, a passage of glowing iron chandeliers and round mirrors framed in white blooms. If one stood at the right angle, one could see infinite reflections of oneself.

Studying my likeness, I sighed. Mother was right. My chin did crinkle when someone got on my nerves.

Remembering the jester's dancing style, I attempted a shimmy, then gave up. Bracing my hands on my hips, I shook my head and chided myself, "You jest, Briar."

"On the contrary, Princess. That's my job."

My eyes flew to the edge of the mirror. I froze as a male voice spoke.

"*She leaves her throne.*

She leaves her home.

At night, she roams.

The dark, her own.

Alas, Princess . . .

You're not alone."

4

Princess

Proof that I should not dance, not even by myself. In the mirror, I watched him materialize behind me. It was not that he appeared from the shadows so much as he stepped into the light. As if the room had waited for him, rather than him invading it.

First the balcony. Then the great hall. And now here.

I stood rooted in place, burning with mortification, caught unaware yet again. Surely, my face must have reddened into a radish.

Poet clasped his hands behind his back and crooked one leg, angling it behind the other, the toe pointed against the floor. A pose that, at any second, could melt into something uncouth and daring. A rascal who carried himself like a dancer.

His eyes roamed the length, width, and depth of me. Whatever conclusions he drew from there, the diamond painted over half his countenance seemed to obscure his thoughts. He tipped his chin, a small crease forming beside his mouth.

His rudeness knew no bounds if he thought it was acceptable to ridicule a princess in front of her peers and then trail her into the recesses of this complex. I linked my hands in front of me and leveled him with a glower. This boy needed to be reminded of his place, with whom he was dealing.

In a syrupy tone, he said, “Highness.”

“Sirrah,” I clipped, deliberately choosing to address him by his inferior status.

An answering grin wormed its way up his face, his crooked incisor poking out like a trick. At the sight of it, a thousand queer things happened in my chest.

He stalked forward. I recovered in time, jerking from the mirror to face him. The proximity magnified his height, introduced me to his scent. Rapture and wit. Amber and vetiver.

I sidestepped him, trying to put distance between us. But Poet continued to advance on me, matching each of my movements until we began to circle each other.

“Would you like me to show you how ’tis done?” he offered.

“How what is done?” I asked.

“How to twirl, twist, turn. You were off to an interesting start.”

“No, thank you.”

“Spoken like a pure-bred patrician. Thank me when I’m finished with you, sweeting. It would be my pleasure. Jester and Princess. Pretty eyes and prudent eyes. Our bodies going round and round.”

“I do not care for dancing.”

“Hark,” he sang in a low voice. “I hear rubbish.”

“And I do not appreciate being spied upon,” I snapped.

“Jesters don’t spy, Your Autumnness. They don’t need to, for they have nothing to hide, nothing to seek. And people give themselves away freely, for they are not as discreet as they think. Meanwhile, we jesters hear and see all, for that is our craft.”

“I know what you are doing. Spare me the comely words.”

“But I saved them just for you.”

“You’ve wasted the effort. However, if you’re suffocating for attention, I can name seven other maidens who would lap up your prose.”

“Mmm. I do so appreciate a girl’s company. Only seven, though? That’s offensive. Speaking of snooping,” he baited, “I take it you mean the fetching damsels who fawned and fussed from your window while you were watching me.”

My right foot tripped. I pictured myself landing flat on the ground, suctioned there like a starfish. The nimble jester reached out to break my fall, but I regained my balance before his fingers made contact with my elbow.

We continued to circle one another. Our features multiplied in the mirrors.

One revolution: my red crown of braids and his tousled brown bangs.

Two: my ruby belt and his ribboned bracelets.

Three: dexterity and tension.

Four: a coil wound tight.

“A princess does not spy,” I stated. “She observes.”

“And pray tell. What did you see?”

“I cannot recall. The landscape distracted me.”

“Which landscape? Mine or the countryside’s?” Eyes glinting, he cupped a hand to his mouth and whispered, “Be careful how you answer, Highness. I’m memorizing what you say, in case you’re wondering.”

“I am not.”

As though choreographed, he stopped. I floundered in my tracks, nettled that I’d allowed him to take the lead in the first place.

“By the by, that—” he circled his finger between us, “—was a dance.”

“It does not count. I was not concentrating.”

“Precisely. That’s the reason it worked.” He actually sounded friendly when he said, “My name’s Poet.”

“Why?” I asked, my tone accusatory.

He grinned. There was a pause in which he stared, and I waited.

Then I lost my patience. “The question was meant to be answered.”

“I’m sure it was.”

“I know who you are.”

“Everyone knows who I am,” he proclaimed with a dismissive wave. “The atrocity is that King Basil and Queen Fatima rarely announce me the right way at banquets. No blaring trumpet. No chariots.”

I burst into a half-laugh, half-sneer. “You’re a servant. You’re lucky that you warrant an introduction at all.”

I would try to forgive myself for that later. My breeding and conscience both should have known better than to belittle his position. It was unkind.

His gaze narrowed, bathed in hot auburn from the flames. His reply trampled over the spot where my apology should have been. “With pleasure and with skill—” he stole my hand and bent his head until his breath coasted across my knuckles, “—I am decidedly more than that.”

The touch provoked the strangest response, swooping me up on an ocean wave. Poet straightened, thrusting me ashore. “My, my. Have words forsaken

you, sweeting?”

I yanked my fingers away. “You cannot address me in that manner.”

“Perish the thought. But something more compatible, I agree: Sweet Thorn? ’Tis the best I can do on short notice.”

“Keep away from Eliot.”

Poet’s lashes flapped in surprise. I’d spoken too freely. To call a servant by his given name risked exposing my closeness to Eliot, but so be it, if it meant protecting him.

My foe recovered quickly. “Ah, Eliot. Maker of melodies, player of lutes and flutes, singer of destinies.” He quirked a brow. “Keep away from him, how?”

“He’s . . . my friend.”

“Found one, did you?”

In the decades to come, I would congratulate myself for standing tall in the slap-in-the-face of that remark. He’d been told about my aloofness and had decided to be nasty about it. Well, so what?

On the other hand, how dare he! Based on the way he peered at me, the hurt I felt must have revealed itself to him, creeping out somewhere between my clenched fists and quivering mouth. What he saw stole the mirth from his face.

“Your request was serious,” he said, bemused.

“Of course it was serious,” I hissed. “It does not matter how popular you are, or how many props you can juggle at once, or how many flips you can dizzy us with, or how mesmerized Eliot is by you, or that he’s aware of your promiscuous whims. You are a callous, arrogant rake who thinks he can do whatever he wants, with whomever he wants, and believes he’s uproarious because his words are made of gilt and whatnot.

“Eliot’s heart is priceless. He will not be privy to a meaningless seduction, or I will tell your sovereigns how you accosted me in this hallway. I will boot you to the dungeon myself, and for good measure, I will find my own candle and shove it down your throat. Mark my words.”

Poet tsked. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“Pardon?” I demanded.

“What an outburst from such a pinnacle of refinement. Have you heard of laughter? ’Twas merely a lark, excluding you from my wee favor at the banquet. If that insulted you—”

“I don’t care a fig about that. I only care that you leave my friend alone.”

“Impossible, since we work together.”

“And that will be the extent of it. You shall work with him, not fondle him. Are we understood?”

“As you like,” he acknowledged. “Except for one thing: I’ve not seduced the lovely Eliot.”

I balked. “I do not believe you.”

“’Tis all the same to me, Sweet Thorn.”

“Stop calling me that. I forbid it.”

“We were engaged to divert eight Royals. Our sorry minstrel was as jittery as a ripe cherry virgin on his wedding night. My jokes weren’t helping, so behold, I kissed him in order to calm his nerves. He tasted delicious, I shan’t lie, but it was hardly passionate.”

Primly, I shook off the terms *ripe* and *virgin*. I considered doing the same with *cherry*.

“Nerves,” I repeated. “You must be jesting.”

Poet set his palm on his chest. “Who, me?”

“Eliot has been strumming for the Royals since his youth. He does not get nervous.”

“He does when he’s performing alongside Whimtany’s Court Jester for the first time in front of the Royals. You’re all esteemed, and I’ve made quite the name for myself this past year. So many high expectations.” He mock-sighed. “Life is hard. But I assure you, during the kiss, I was not.”

“Hold your tongue!” I said, my cheeks blazing. “Evidently, jesters do not see everything, if you failed to notice Eliot’s response to you.”

“Evidently, you don’t know your friend, if you took whatever he’s told you to heart and assumed I’d done the devil to him. I’ve known our minstrel for nigh on a year. I could have told you that he exaggerates, ever the walking

love ballad.”

“Then you should have known that he would romanticize a kiss,” I parried, exasperated.

“A trifle kiss,” he corrected, then shrugged. “My mistake.”

That shrug. That flippant twitch of his body, like it was of no great consequence.

When I met Eliot in the hall before the banquet, I thought Poet had done fatally intimate things to my friend, had used him for pleasure. Doubt wriggled its way into my head. The notion of Eliot trotting from here to there because he had to perform for the Royals alongside the famed Poet was not far-fetched. Nor was the possibility that Eliot had misinterpreted the kiss and let his feelings dash away with him.

I knew Eliot. His emotions sucked him in from one instant to the next. The whole debacle with that squire proved it.

But I did not know Poet. I did not know who he was, only what he was—a jester—and what that made him capable of. He could be lying. He could be doing an excellent job of it.

Perhaps he had the power to read minds. No sooner had my thoughts surfaced than he took action, strolling toward me until my back hit the wall.

My senses both sharpened and blurred at the same time. The corridor beyond dimmed to pitch black, yet I managed to hear our exhalations flee down its path. My skirts rustled against his legs, yet I couldn’t recall exactly which gown I wore.

He chuckled. “A jester does not corner a girl. He glories her in the middle of the room, where she belongs.”

Linking my fingers with his, he returned us to our original position in the hallway’s center. Only this time, he tethered us together, clasping his soft hands to mine, stretching our arms out to the sides, and continuing the circle.

I mimicked his steps, too dumbfounded to resist.

“My fancy for both sexes isn’t a secret,” he said. “But a greedy mongrel, I am not. I have my own morals. One might say that I share myself selectively.”

He turned us in the opposite direction, his shoulders adjusting, revolving

seamlessly. “Hence, I don’t fuck lads or maidens who wear their ardor like the sun, open and shining all over the place. Taking advantage of innocents is what I call scheming, sordid lust.”

I ripped our hands apart and stood my ground. “You should not use vulgar language with me.”

“Where’s the folly in *fuck*? ’Tis a lovely word. I do have a taste for lovely words.”

“I do not trust you.”

“Why? Jesters don’t lie, and why should we try?”

“You disguise yourself in verse. You barely know me, though that didn’t stop you from scorning my character in public. That is untrustworthy.”

Another grin, more of that tooth. “The candles again. You don’t want to be in this kingdom, with these people, yet my jest made you feel left out. Oh, but I do believe you earned that. I’ve been told about you: the proper princess whom her Autumn subjects respect but don’t adore. As for the rest, I saw it with my own eyes. I see it as we speak, a righteous riot of freckles multiplied over and over within flats of glass.”

“Mirrors are mere surfaces. You do not know me.”

“Permit the fool to elaborate: *There once lived a princess made of impenetrable knots and impossible thorns. She was thin as a quill, if you will, with eyes like rain, for fear of pain*—nay, I shall cease the rhymes, for they don’t become you.

“How about a sugary dose of this: *The princess lived amongst leaves of copper and crimson. They flourished outside her tidy bedroom, where she stored her heart—steady, solitary, safe.*

“*But lo, at a sumptuous banquet in the Spring Kingdom, she watched a duet of lovers kissing. Their tongues flickered, flaunted, flourished. And the princess, with such sad yearning blistering beneath her gown, scowled and sighed: to dare, to dance, to do.”*

Tendrils of his breath stirred against my throat. My breasts swelled, the silk of my bodice sliding up and down his doublet.

Poet’s gaze was the weight I’d felt in the great hall, as I had stared at the

couple molding their mouths together. He'd seen me.

"There, there, I've made you flustered." He cocked his head. "So do I know you? Am I close?"

Unbidden, my fingers stole out to touch the bands at his wrist. I wanted to unravel them.

He snagged his wrist away. "'Tis not polite, touching what isn't yours. Was the ribbon I gave you not enough? Do you want more of me? Careful what you ask for."

Livid, I strangled my ruby skirts and shoved past him. I'd known for a while now that the scarlet ribbon had come from him. And I was smart enough to figure out its purpose: The ribbon marked me. It was his way of singling out the renowned, stuffy princess for entertainment.

Well, I would not give him the satisfaction of thinking I cared about his high jinks. Or that I could be marked, especially by a boy. A servant.

"Good night," he murmured. "Sweet Thorn."

I smashed to a halt. Digging my slipper heels into the floor, I glanced over my shoulder to where the jester lingered—where he blew me a hundred smug kisses.

5

Jester

Allow me this: I regret nothing.

She deserved what she got. She deserved what I gave.

Jesters don’t have to explain themselves, don’t have to bargain, don’t have to apologize.

Alas. I hadn’t begun to lament my every move, or to drown in every damn thing about her, because she hadn’t devoured me yet. Not at that time.

At the banquet, she could have laughed at my brilliance, and I would have been satisfied. I wouldn’t have dabbled in her precious moment by the mirrors.

Let me tell you what happened the next morning. As the rivulets of dawn streamed through my chamber window, as blankets swaddled my skin, as my psyche strayed and swirled . . .

The damn rumble of someone’s fist rapping on the door interrupted my beauty sleep. I rolled my naked splendor deeper into the bed, my fingers wiggling toward the offensive sound. “Be gone, little one.”

The abominable knocking grew louder. The iron voice attached to that knock grumbled, “If you please, Poet. The Crown has requested your audience for the peace talks.”

Face down, I squashed a pillow over the back of my head. One, the order meant I’d miss early training with the castle’s resident troupe, which I also oversaw, being their fellow player, their centerpiece, and their leader.

Two, the talks required the utmost attention, a problem considering my noggin—now that I’d been woken up—became immediately consumed by this kerfuffle involving Eliot. ’Twas a fine waste of a lovely sunrise to recall the steaming plate of horseshit I’d served myself yesterday.

Merrily, I favored girls, all succulent dew beneath their skirts. Verily, there were other times when I sampled with fervor a masculine mouth, a muscled weight pinned beneath me.

Granted, I was picky. I took care of myself, fancied myself cautious. I hardly pranced from one bed to the next without foresight and a keen understanding of my playmate.

I'd learned my lesson there once already. It would not happen again.

I liked Eliot, but until my pity-kiss, I hadn't mixed professionalism with pleasure. I knew plenty about what desire did to the complexion, knew plenty about the minstrel's doe-eyed notions. I'd walked away from him too fast last night, letting him take a flying leap to conclusions. I should have noticed the change after taking his lips for a jaunt.

Cursed kiss. That princess had been right.

I tossed the pillow from my head and whipped back around to face the ceiling, feathering my knuckles over my abdomen. Hmm. Princess Briar. A more intricate puzzle.

"Poet?" the guard repeated. "Be aware that I've been instructed to, er, *throw your bare dandy bum* over my shoulder if you delay."

The coverlet pooled around my waist as I sat up. "Is that right?" I queried.

"Or if you, ahem, *so much as pause to tidy your hair*."

That was uncalled for, to threaten my grooming habits.

Theatrics were my nature. Thus, I sighed loudly and dramatically. Sliding out of bed, I rotated my shoulders, then stretched the muscles of my arms over my head, loosening the kinks. In general, I loathed tension in the body.

The fur rug by the wardrobe tickled my feet as I debated what to wear. No way did I plan on showing myself without looking halfway primped.

In all variations, each kingdom had its colors. Pink and green for Spring, yellow and orange for Summer, red and brown for Autumn, blue and purple for Winter. Meanwhile, the universal dyes and threads of black, white, gray, silver, and gold stretched across the divide.

As a jester, I refused to restrict my attire to one Season or the other. I'd convinced my sovereigns that wearing the colors of all kingdoms enhanced my creativity. And I meant to cut a fine figure wherever I went, so I shunned the traditional jester's costume. Unfortunately, the other trained fools in this land preferred that absurdity of an outfit, claiming it distinguished their office.

Well, whatever they fancied, so long as I didn’t need to conform. Besides, I did enjoy looking best of them all, as the Court Jester should.

I dressed attentively, summarizing whether my jerkin hung off my frame to greatest effect. Inspecting the sleeves, my gaze strayed to the ribbons hugging my wrist. I grinned at them and thereupon took a butter knife to the chest.

Daily, I lived and breathed for that ache.

Willingly, I would die for it.

That princess had tried to touch the ribbons last night. My joints stiffened, physically reenacting the tragic instant when she’d reached out for the strands of cloth.

Pathetically, my reflexes had faltered, nearly letting her make contact. I should have moved away faster, for that part of my life would be touched by no one, especially not by a Royal.

Oh, I knew when I was being watched. I stayed vigilant of that, for I had to. She’d been at her window, surrounded by the Seven Lovelies at the time, her Autumn gaze spying me in the dahlia garden. My companion, the falconer’s niece, had confessed to a bet with her friends to corner me and reap a moment of pleasure.

Who was I to deprive the girl of coin? I’d done my best, suckling and leaving the blotchy proof on her skin.

Anyway, the princess. I’d repaid her for her nosiness later, watching from behind a curtain in the great hall as she navigated the atmosphere. For a Royal, she was a prickly thing, with needle-like diction, nary a smooth edge to her tongue, and a scarcely pretty face—and everyone knew a princess was supposed to be pretty. What a shame to squander rapturous red hair on a pale personality. Whatever the hell they put in the Royal bathwater in Mista, it had washed the spirit from her pores.

I’d heard enough about her from the many gossiping tongues in this castle. In fact, her reputation as a bramble had been giggled into my ears right up to the day before she arrived.

Wanting to see if that reputation was valid, I made her the first night’s jest.

The scarlet ribbon on her bed didn’t come from my wrist—those were too dear to bestow. On the contrary, I stocked an extra bundle of them for special occasions like the peace talks, whereby the strips of fabric became markers. I picked those who could be made an example of, not as a vicious attack but as a tease. Always, they laughed at themselves in the end, because my jokes were that good, that perceptive, that well placed.

The princess hadn’t laughed. That reputation encompassed her tenfold. More’s the pity.

One might say our paths crossed in the hall of mirrors. I’d been done with her by then. Seeking out the same person more than once got old quickly.

What a ripe scene as her silhouette tried to recreate my free-form dance. She’d done such a poor job that I teetered between flattered and irritated, and let no man say that Poet of Whimtany ever bypassed an opportunity to jest.

In my mind, I’d flirted with a few drafts of verse before choosing the right lines for her. My grand entrance had been worth it: the Royal’s eyebrows crashing into her hairline, that look of absolute befuddlement on her face.

Befuddlement. A nice, plump word, mayhap too generous for that trim creature of Autumn, that princess from the land of Could Not, Should Not, Would Not. She’d swallowed my verse and then struck back with judgment, threatening to tell my sovereigns that I’d cornered her.

As if I were replaceable. Funny that.

I could have warned her that provoking a skilled fool was a mistake, but where was the game in that? ’Twasn’t my style to wound, yet I hadn’t been able to stop myself. At first glance, her tight face, tight lips, and even tighter temper amused the troublemaker out of me.

Then it insulted the piss out of me. And no one insulted a jester and got away with it. If any Royal needed a slice of candor, it was that girl. She became the rare exception when my voice stabbed instead of tingled. It hit its mark, not quite a lark, but still a spark.

I blew the bangs from my forehead. All this mental prattling wore me out.

Bloody knock number three. “Sir?”

Ugh. *Sir* bored me. *Sir* belonged to men-at-arms, brawn and no brains. I

was not *Sir*, but *Poet*.

I dabbed a brush into a priceless vial of skin paint and then swiped it along my lower eyelids. The line of color extended to the edge, alongside my lashes. A mere thread of color there did wonders for enhancing—and disguising.

With a snap of my fingers, Tumble poked his furry face out from behind a drapery, his beady eyes alight with energy after snoozing for ten hours. He would last four before exhausting himself again. The ferret scurried across the floor and scaled his way onto my shoulder.

My head swiveled toward him. “Applause for your escapade, my friend. She received our token.”

The princess had kept her chamber door unlocked, allowing Tumble to slink in and deliver the red ribbon without detection. I’d taught my sidekick well.

He nipped at my finger, already getting restless. If not engaged soon, he would grow cranky.

Like another little person I knew.

Tumble squeaked. We quit the room, greeting the ox of a guard who paced outside and muttered complaints to himself. I made a joke, something too amateurish to savor. Not my best effort, but I had an excuse, for Tumble nibbled on my sleeve, stealing my concentration.

“Hey,” I scolded, shoving his face from the material. “None of that.”

Anyway, the guard’s frown dissolved into a snicker. For the price of a sloppy quip, I was forgiven for delaying. Sometimes, it was too easy.

* * *

In the circular throne room, stained glass petals cut through the heart of each window. In the center of the room, the Royals sat at a round table. Papers, illustrated tomes, inkwells, and flagons of mint water and untouched cider graced the wood surface.

The shrunken Queens of Winter studied me. The ruler of Autumn glanced down in discreet amusement. Two belly-fulls of laughter rolled from the mouths of my mountainous Spring sovereigns. The Queen of Summer fanned

herself whilst her husband beheaded me with his eyes.

They'd been discussing Lark's Day, the annual carnival that Spring hosted to celebrate the close of the peace talks. The revels would take place in a month, but preparations were well under way. As a grander gesture of unity, the Royals had discussed allowing Whimtany's servants and villagers to attend the event. A novelty, as it was usually exclusive to the monarchy, Spring's nobility, its performers, and its contributing artists.

The snooty Summer King had objected, then compromised that inferiors could attend the festival's final hour. And I'd said that was like being invited to the part of an orgy when everyone had to clean up.

And it hadn't impressed him.

I hadn't come up for air since my arrival. I'd blown open the room's double doors, late to the party, and sang my apologies, then proceeded to agree with certain wisdoms and slay others. Mock-quivering at hyperbolic concerns about certain bloodlines producing criminal rebellion, waving their double standards about the natural world in their faces.

Four hours hence, I'd just planted my backside on Queen Fatima's throne, hooked both legs over one arm, and linked my hands behind my head. I'd done this before, in an attempt to tease Her Majesty and alleviate one of her rare bad moods.

Fatima chortled but then cleared her throat. That meant I had one minute to get out of her chair. I used that minute to meditate, listening to the frantic scratch of Tumble's claws as he chased a runaway spool of thread across the floor.

"What is this? A Bohemian bazaar?" the Summer King barked, thrusting down his quill. "I've had enough. I will not share this room with a weasel."

"He's a ferret," I corrected. "Just ask him."

"Boy, I wasn't talking about the ferret."

Ah. How remarkable that he considered my presence a threat. I should have assumed the outburst wasn't about Tumble. Not when this monarch was known to keep and pamper seven pups, an aquarium of sharks, and a bratty chinchilla.

King Rhys reclaimed his quill and beat it against the table like a scepter. “I propose an amended draft stating who may attend these discussions and who may not.”

My head flopped toward him. “You don’t want me here because you can’t handle being made fun of, Your Majesty? Queer, as I’ve heard that kings can handle many things. War and famine, for example.”

“We forbid our heirs from these proceedings, yet he’s here.” The man whipped his hand toward me. “Why is that?”

Oh, please. I could tell them why. “’Tis because I’m prettier than your children.”

I’d swirled enough casual exaggeration into the comment to earn a round of chuckles.

Spring was the symbolic Season of renewal. Thus, it was the peace talks’ eternal host kingdom, which meant the Crown could invite whomever of their advisors they wished to this gathering. Aside from being their prized entertainer and manager of the court’s performance troupe, King Basil and Queen Fatima valued me as a confidant on issues great and small. Health, trade, village disputes, and peasant grievances.

Since my appointment, I’d become their darling, the only soul in the castle able to talk my sovereigns off ledges, to reason with Basil and Fatima, to approach the monarchs whenever petulance got the better of them.

They trusted me, relied on me. I needed that.

And come now. I hadn’t spent this entire morning vomiting humor. I’d supported fine arguments when they arose, and arose they had—just not consistently. The point lay in knowing the difference and using common sense.

And I was never wrong. Never ever.

Summer could yowl all he wanted about my attendance. The Spring Crown would be sure to let him know when they gave a shit.

“This is no place for jokes or *fools*.” King Rhys’s monsoon of a voice had risen another octave on that last note. “It’s a place of progress, lineage, and *standards*. We must pride ourselves on *refinement*. A draft revision will seal

it, ordain us with the inalienable right to *govern* without interference, so we might *focus*, or at the very least be spared a pounding head. To *anyone* who contests—" he pelted me with his gaze, "—the document will be indisputable."

"You know, in case you forget who's in charge," I clarified to the group. "I might become so incensed by the exclusion that I'll protest and rally artists, gardeners, and servants to my side. We'll steal chain mail and mallets from the armory, and loot villages. But so long as there's an indisputable piece of parchment, not to worry. My absence in these talks shall safeguard you from stress or from bursting a blood vessel. I tend to have that effect."

King Rhys squirmed. 'Twas his fault. If he wanted a verbal cock joust, I would respond with aplomb. I mean, really, he kept leaving himself open for it.

I gestured to his goblet of mint water with a dainty dab of my finger. "I would put some spirits in that."

"Make him stop," the King of Summer grumbled to Spring.

Basil waved me off. "Oh Poet, do lift your buttocks from my wife's chair before we have you flogged. And give your thoughts a rest. Have an apple," he suggested. "They're a gift from Autumn."

"You're too kind, Your Majesty." Hopping off the throne, I sidled toward the banquet table, flanked by rosy-cheeked pages and supplied with a frenzy of fruits, cheese, and smoked fish. Certain fare of the Seasons mixed only at a momentous time like this, allowing pears to copulate with blackberries, for example.

We limited trade to essential resources. Spring herbs, Summer ropes, Autumn grain—since they produced the greatest quantity and quality of it—and furs from Winter. Just to name a few.

With the exception of emergency aid, anything unimportant was excluded, like tree and flower seeds, fruits and most vegetables. The kingdoms also forbade their people from crossing borders or changing citizenship. As best we could, we lived equally but separately, determined to maintain the natural order of things. Because perish the thought of anything being "unnatural,"

whatever that meant.

Selecting a trio of apples, I juggled them for a lazy sixty seconds, then kept one and sent the others flying back into the pile. Flipping the eighth chair around—deprived of the late Autumn King—I pocketed my treat and straddled the seat.

The Autumn Queen, all hips and bosom like a marvelous pillow, pondered me earnestly. According to wagging tongues, the widow cherished her daughter. After the banquet, it had crossed my mind that Autumn might draw a bogus conclusion, assume that I'd singled out her offspring for more than a jest. To better the point, I wasn't known for being chivalrous.

There once lived a jester, too ravishing to ignore. Protective of her daughter's chastity, the Queen banned him, upon pain of public castration, from the Princess's maidenly presence.

As though I would pursue such a pointy, prissy conquest. Withal, bedding a princess was a dangerous, traitorous business in too many ways to count. I would never be that stupid.

No touching Royals, council members, or resident performers. Everyone else was fair game. That was my rule.

I nodded at Autumn's Queen, offering my silent gratitude for the apple. With a modest smile, she nodded back.

Well, well, well. I couldn't have been more wrong about her. Dare I say, she didn't have as many thorns up her arse as her daughter, who would have responded differently. The pulse in the princess's neck would have throbbed with disdain.

Thereupon, I imagined pressing my finger into the slant of that girl's throat. I imagined counting that sharp pulse, wondering how many beats it would take until her lips parted for air.

"Be reasonable, Summer," Queen Fatima chided, snapping me out of it. "Poet isn't just any fool."

King Rhys the Rotten huffed. "A trained fool is still a fool. He has no business in the peace talks. On that score, forget that Spring has an abundance of artists. Why Your Majesties have need of jesters, when you already own

simpletons like the rest of us, is beyond my imagination. Simpletons are real idiots. Better idiots. Surely, they must provide enough amusement."

Fucking condemnation. I dragged my palm down my face.

By better idiots, he meant chattel. The Seasons represented nature without fully accepting the natural world. A notion that disgusted me. They deemed simpletons and the inherently mad legal property of the Crown, viewing skewed minds as freak accidents of birth, thereby a disgrace. Their existence brought shame upon the people, who demanded to be distinguished from born fools.

So the Royals claimed and abused them, stripping them of rights. They shackled the crazed and made simpletons cater to the Seasons' needs, so long as it wasn't counter-productive, so long as they were capable and manageable.

Summer made them gut fish, string nets until their fingers bled, and toil as deckhands. Winter used them as hunting bait and science subjects. Autumn assigned them to fields and orchards, though doing the most basic jobs possible, like collecting bruised and rotten apples from the ground.

Spring used born fools as diversions. Basil and Fatima tossed them to traveling fairs and the estates of nobles whose tastes for entertainment leaned that way. Comprised of acrobats and dancers like myself, the castle's resident ensemble was the only one that didn't include simpletons.

However, I've witnessed their treatment and loathed it. Carnivals drugged them and then made them punch each other for sport. They were restrained and baited in the stocks. Oh, and they were forced to do pet tricks just so people could watch them fall.

My jaw locked. Someday, that could happen to . . .

Basil raised his finger. "We enjoy variety. Jesters are every performance art rolled into one person, with the additions of wit and wisdom. They can imitate a simpleton one hour and be a perceptive advisor the next. An acrobat at dawn, a bard at dusk. It's invaluable."

"It's excessive," King Rhys said.

"It's flattering," I clarified. "It's been my lifelong ambition to be excessive. For a king to call me that, oh boy! By the by, speaking of excess,

how are your pet sharks faring?”

Color suffused the man’s throat. He mashed his mouth together.

Then it happened. His whiskers twitched with reluctant mirth, inspiring him to raise his goblet in a pseudo-toast. “Cease, lad. You’ve made your point.”

Naturally, I had. For when had I ever failed to sway a person?

Last night, perhaps.

Mentally, I flung that thought out the window before it made me grumpy.

For better or worse, I could have gibed the King some more. Lucky for him, I felt merciful.

Until he opened his toad mouth yet again. “I might see a jester’s appeal to Spring. I grant, there’s a versatile elegance to their otherwise annoying breed. Not like simpletons. As profitable as they are for extra labor, they aren’t as malleable or appealing to behold as servants. If we had more room in the dungeons, I would lock them up with the mad when they’re not needed, underground where they can’t be seen or heard. Why, they can’t even cry respectably.”

Slowly, menacingly, I angled my face toward him. I’d trained myself in the craft of presentation, danced in front of my reflection, mastered expressions within a glass surface—I was intimately acquainted with the hallway of mirrors—so that my mind became attuned to what others saw, what I let them see. I felt when my irises darkened to a murderous shade.

Indeed. His declaration sounded a lot less barbaric than employing a trained fool dressed in lace. What was the word he prided his kingdom on? Refinement?

The rest of the company, who supported owning born fools, murmured their empathy with the Summer King. The only one who didn’t participate was Queen Avalea, who jotted down notes and kept her thoughts to herself.

This turned into a slippery moment when reacting viscerally would do spectacular harm. I should have licked my lips and sunk my teeth into the king.

The problem was I couldn’t trust myself to speak without giving myself

away. Not when the ribbons around my wrist clung to me for protection.

Basil and Fatima enjoyed their young jester, but behind the laughter, they ruled steady and solid, controlled me as much as I controlled them. They knew when to indulge me, and I knew when to back off. They gave me a voice, which I planned on using to my advantage someday.

Jesters sided with their rulers, not with themselves. Ultimately, they didn't pose power threats or have great ambitions beyond humor.

I was the exception to that rule. But for what I had in mind, I couldn't afford to take chances.

Not yet. I needed more time to win the Spring Crown over.

Whatever it took, I would not speak until the desire to verbally gag the Summer prick dwindled. I swung my head away to hide the mayhem, my gaze consuming the dust motes swimming in the window light. I latched onto a memory of tiny hands grasping at similar flecks, trying to catch them.

With that in mind, I moved on to safer pursuits—like shutting the hell up.

6

Jester

A verse. A riddle. A story of valor and bravery, knights and sprites.

Anger has a profound effect on a person's creativity. Looking back, I remember how it helped me reclaim my voice that night, at an intimate affair for the Royals and their peers. Only the minstrels and I had been summoned to engage them, my words cavorting into the sky, canvassed over the dahlia garden. As the centerpiece, I outdid myself . . .

"*In Summer,"* I narrated, *"the color yellow ripens, and the sun screams. And amidst the bones of Winter, every crystalline thing flashes, every sound is audible, tentative, and . . .,"* I cocked a brow at the nobles' children, *". . . ready to cast a magic spell."*

Gap-toothed mouths wreathed into smiles. I knew someone else who would have loved to hear this recital, amidst the pinks and greens of the garden. That someone would have loved the bubbles floating from the Court Physician's soapy wand—one of his newest inventions.

That someone would have loved to be here with me.

I suppressed the longing in order to focus. *"And in Autumn—"*

I'd meant to point at Queen Avalea. Really, I had.

But there stood her daughter, her wonderful glower cutting me off. She wore ivory and gold brocade, the gown divided down the center, from bodice to hem. Within the gap, the same material shone through, except the colors were reversed within the pattern. Gold trim encircled her scalloped sleeves. Impressive. Not the type of cloths that a Spring girl would flaunt, but in fine taste all the same. If she weren't careful in the future, she would eventually out-dress me.

Based on the way she fussed over the gown, plucking at the shoulders and fluttering her palm over her exposed collarbone, the garment wasn't her personal preference. The plunging neckline befitted Whimtany, but the coverage of skin everywhere else made me ponder what attractions existed

beneath the tight stitching.

Pity that she insisted on binding her hair. The braided bun, speckled with pearls, did her little justice.

With purpose, I let my gaze travel over her, carving through and running deep. Between us, just between us, I made it obvious, letting my thoughts be known.

She saw it and clamped her lips together. Fascinating. I'd never made someone dislike me this devotedly. The ivory, gold, and red of her—innocence and possibly fire—drew me in like a moth.

She was a bramble that had never been clipped of its thorns. A stiff taper that had never been lit, distorted—split wide apart.

I'd believed myself done with her, but I was a fickle being. How could I resist seeing where this challenge led? Besides, I'd grown bored with everyone else.

Nay. I blamed her. She made everyone boring.

"*And in Autumn,*" I repeated, pinning the princess to the grass, "*spices sprinkle the trees, whilst ladies interpret dreams by candlelight, the tapers illuminated for the long night.*" I swirled the next words in my mouth and hurled them at her. "*Melting into a lovely disaster.*"

Were it not for the pump of her throat, I'd have pegged the princess for a statue. But nay, I wasn't blind. I saw her discomfort and could have dined on it.

Pray, what was I digging for? I should be working to make her laugh, not loathe.

I brushed aside the moment and moved on. Spreading my arms, I fixed my attention on Basil and Fatima. "*And here in Spring, life stretches its limbs. We pile our plates high with flora and fauna. Artists and keepers thrive, and nobles have nymph-like behavior in mind.*

"*So go forth and frolic, sweetings, and praise our sovereigns for this revel. For the love of Whimtany, I bid you all a glittering welcome.*" I bowed. "*And a glittering adieu.*"

The guests toasted to our monarchs' health and explored the grounds. The

children attacked, crashing into my legs and begging me to tell them another story.

“Pleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleasepleeeeeease!”

“Dear me,” I lamented. “I’ve run out of tales for the night.”

“Noooooooooo,” they whined.

“But I have an alternative.” At the snap of my fingers, Tumble charged across the lawn, galloped around their legs, and scampered away. They gave chase, scattering across the gardens whilst their parents made haste to follow.

Spring greeted their guests. Summer joined a game of bowls.

Elderly Winter looked in desperate need of airing out, laboring down a walking path as if it would take a pilgrimage to reach the end. Withered Silvia sneezed, her body lurching with the sound. Shushing her, Doria dabbed at her wife’s nose with a handkerchief.

Autumn conversed with the Court Physician as he showed her how the bubble wand worked. And where there was Autumn, there should be her daughter.

Should be. Yet wasn’t. The she-hermit hadn’t wasted time in disappearing.

The Seven Lovelies danced like pixies on a mission to glamour. Two of them—Posy and Vale, if I recalled their names correctly—skipped into the bubble wand’s path. Cadence, the only one I knew intimately, caught my eye beneath her lashes, her features cut like a gem, the covetous cliffs of her cheekbones angled my way. She’d beckoned me like this on a prior occasion. The outcome had been pleasant, a romp between her lips, my hand between her legs.

She swayed her tits at me in an unspoken invitation. *Juggle these, if you please.*

My frustration could use a release. A tryst would massage away the tension of today’s meeting and whatever else simmered inside me of late, whatever frivolous instinct caused me to harass the princess not once, but twice.

I debated where to take Cadence for a repeat offense of our last time together, when a dulcet voice wrapped itself around my waist, hopeful and

clinging.

“Your speech was magnificent,” he said.

Eliot. Dammit.

He drizzled into my skin, seeped into my conscience. Because I couldn’t give him what he wanted, I had to fix this problem.

That didn’t make it any easier to turn and face him. He glowed at me, the eagerness to please splashed across his angelic face. If I opened my arms, he would fling himself into them.

Fie, all this from one chaste kiss? What the actual devil!

Curse me for not recognizing that hectic look of wonder earlier. I’d beheld it on Lord Peyton’s bride just before my head vanished under her skirts, and a week hence, Lord Peyton himself, and Lady Marigold, and the sculptor’s apprentice.

I couldn’t do it here, reject Eliot whilst bubbles swarmed all over the forsaken place.

I offered him my hand. “Walk with me.”

Eliot accepted it, his big ears flushing. I led him into a private section of the garden, into a crescent of shrubbery. The full moon glazed us in silver.

I’d brought the falconer’s niece here yesterday. Remembering that, I released Eliot. He probably thought I intended to finish what we started with the kiss. He couldn’t know that I did mean to finish it, but not in a frisky way.

I held his gaze. “Eliot—”

“Poet, do you think a melody would complement one of your poems? I was fixing to compose one, fiddling with ideas in my head, but . . . would that make it a song and not a poem anymore? And I’m not saying I’ll jot the tune down, but if I did, if you wanted . . . that is to say, if you agreed, would that mean the poem has died? I don’t want my lute to kill it, you see. Only make the poem nicer—not that it wasn’t nice before. But when does a poem stop being a poem? Can it be a song, too?” He dropped his head and spoke to my boots. “Can they blend together?”

If only he were truly referring to artistry. I treaded carefully. “That depends.”

“I’d surely like to do that for you,” he rushed ahead. “I mean, for the poem.”

Lovely Eliot. Mayhap if he weren’t as sweet, and I more lecherous, I might explore. I might corner him, silence him, and see what it did to our repertoire. He had the makings of a splendid kisser.

I had no doubt the kingdom would approve of us together. Lovers of equal skill, showpieces for this world to fawn over. He would be right for me, and I him—were my heart able to beat that way, to that rhythm.

A jester didn’t commit himself, nor lie about his feelings. As much as the prude princess liked to think she knew me, ruining Eliot’s pure soul wasn’t on my agenda.

Besides, my heart was spoken for. I had room there for only one love.

I’d been gazing at Eliot too long and with too much misdirected tenderness. I was sure of it, because he stood there, brightness and lightness, encouraged by what he saw.

“Eliot, sweeting,” I began.

“Poet. If a boy calls another boy ‘sweeting,’ is it the same as when he says it to a girl?”

“I call everyone my sweeting. I call everyone my lovely. I call everyone anything that I please, for they are all the same to me.”

“Oh.” He frowned rather cutely. “Right. What I meant—”

“Eliot.” I brushed his hair aside, stupidly thinking to comfort him. Even in the dimness, I saw the blood charging up his skin. It deterred me long enough for him to graze his pinky over mine and blink at my lips.

Wicked hell. I never said he wasn’t altogether enticing, or that I wore my professionalism like armor. He knew about me, yet he offered himself on a breathy enunciation, riding that current without concern. Fiendish, selfish me wondered if I’d misjudged his resilience. If I didn’t have to wound him after all and could make him feel good, humor him without hurting him—just for a brief turn, until his crush wore off.

“You must know . . .,” I tried again.

“Yes?” Eliot urged, still touching me.

I had to make this clear. “What happened last night—”

Royal footsteps crashed to a halt on the path. A disapproving heat scorched me in the back. I caught the red shock of her hair in my peripheral vision. She stood close by, watching from behind a shrub to my left.

My lips twitched. When I spied on her, it ruffled her thorns, but she could do whatever she wanted, eh?

I pulled back from Eliot and pressed a finger to my mouth. *Hush.*

Striding to the bush, I thrust my arms out and whipped the branches apart. She jumped back, scowling at me from between the gap.

“Good evening, Princess,” I said, then mouthed, *I’ve missed you*.

That got her going. Hiking her chin to the stars, she stepped over the greenery and onto the dirt lane. Eliot’s eyes bugged out at her. He bowed, his voice shifting into fake formality. “Your Highness.”

With a defeated look, she waved him off. “He knows about us, Eliot.”

The minstrel’s face bunched in confusion as he glanced between us. Come to think of it—and I couldn’t fathom why it took me this long to question it—how had this Royal come to befriend an inferior?

Eliot stared at the princess, beseeching her with a silent question that made her fidget, which I found oddly endearing. She cared about him, what he thought, how he felt.

Her eyes tripped over to me. I could guess why. She was deciding how much to tell of our encounter last night. Unsurprisingly, she intended to leave out the good parts.

“Poet was taking a stroll,” she said. “He saw us talking at the ruins before the banquet.”

Eliot blanched. If his eyes had been bulging earlier, they now vaulted from their sockets. “D-did you, um, hear what we said?” he asked me.

“No,” she blurted out. “He was too far away for that.”

Eliot didn’t listen to her. He gaped at me, terrified. I pretended to mull this over, relishing the way the princess squirmed, but not so much how the minstrel hyperventilated. So they met at the ancient gardens—the ruins. On a consistent basis, I gathered.

Whatever they'd said during that rendezvous must have been about me. Again, I could guess.

I'd mentioned this to her before: Jesters didn't lie.

I should have amended that: Not always.

And apparently, that's what she was counting on. She was hoping that I'd support her falsehood.

"I heard not a thing," I assured Eliot. "But a princess and a minstrel alone together? An intriguing sight that ensnared me."

"After we said good-bye, I saw him watching and explained," the princess flat-out fibbed. "I should have made something up, but I was caught off guard."

Eliot cupped her shoulder. "It's all right. We can trust Poet."

She placed her hand over his, unable to meet his gaze. Huh. Why did she feel the need to keep our real meeting from him? Nothing unseemly had happened.

Then again, our definitions of unseemly were leagues apart.

I flattened my palm onto my heart. "I won't tell a soul."

The minstrel dissolved into a smile. The princess scoffed.

"I'd like a word."

Of course she did. More than one word, surely.

At Eliot's hesitation, she spoke in a gentle tone. "We shan't be long. I merely wish to know what happened at the peace talks."

He relaxed, then burdened me with a look of yearning before leaving us. The Royal and I listened to a piper's song drifting from the main lawn.

She appraised me. I'd painted thin lines of gold and dark green tendrils around my eyes. Black and green checkers capped the shoulders and accented the cuffs of my black ankle-length coat. The fact that I wondered what she thought of my choices created a sour taste in my mouth.

Her gold dress shimmered, but her face did not. She looked violated, as though I'd deflowered her tidy world views and now sought to possess the rest of her. How hard would I have to smash into that barricade to break through it completely?

I had an itch to find out. Whereas Eliot squelched my vices, she stirred them to life. Whereas I'd wanted to make Eliot feel better, I wanted to make her feel worse.

"Poet," she said.

I winged my arms out to the sides. "At your service."

"You are despicable."

"Nonsense. You didn't give me time to be despicable."

"I warned you to leave him be."

"You shouldn't tell a jester what to do."

"I am a princess, and you are a servant," she declared. "I can make you do whatever I command."

"If you thought I was going to tear our friend's heart asunder in front of you, you're dumber than an ass. This is between Eliot and me. And here's another wild thought: He's not a child. You're not his keeper. What gives you the right?"

The princess blushed, swerving her gaze to the pink and green dahlia beds. "It was an accident. I didn't plan to find you here. I wanted some time to myself and . . . I didn't know what you were about, or what you would do to him, whether I would have to tackle you. I just . . . wanted to be sure." She faced me and bristled. "You brought that other girl here. The one you snapped your fingers at."

"I don't snap my fingers at ladies. I reserve that for my ferret. 'Tis the only sound Tumble responds to."

That stumped her. "Oh. I see."

"Clearly, you don't see."

"Whatever. For all I know, this is where you lure your consorts. This is your official lair of debauchery."

I barked out a laugh. "My what?"

"You were pawing at him."

"Out of compassion. And he was pawing at me as well."

"Even if I'm wrong about you, which I am betting against, I will not apologize for assuming. Eliot is too important, and everyone says you're a

trinket.”

To that, I could have made a dozen naughty responses. “Do they, now?” I ruminated. “So long as I shine, that is fine.”

She grunted. To her credit, I hadn’t foreseen the girl defending herself with such raw vulnerability. She and Eliot must know one another well. That made him a chink in her armor.

I had one of those, too. On behalf of mine, I realized that I wouldn’t react any differently than she, if I suspected a stranger of taking advantage.

“What do you even feel toward the people you jest?” she asked.

“I don’t,” I said.

“You seemed invested in it last night. With me.”

“That doesn’t make you special, Princess. I have a well-rounded history of targets. Why did it nag you so much? If you’d paid sharper attention, you’d have seen: The guests weren’t laughing *at* you. If you knew how to have fun, and if you were sure about yourself, you’d have laughed, too. You might have earned a few admirers. You could learn a thing from your mother. Seems you failed to inherit her charms.”

“I don’t care what your people think!” she snapped, her voice shaking like a leaf. “And I don’t care what you think, either. I have better things to do and not a pinch to be ashamed of. I am who I am. If that’s not enough, too bad. Judge me, if you wish. But show me respect.”

“For a girl who doesn’t care what Whimtany folk think of her, that’s a mighty thunderous response. So eager to rage, so without foundations.” I studied her. “Your eyes, how they shout at me.”

“The opinions of a jester are irrelevant, since I carry few expectations of their kind as it is.”

“My, my. You superior brat.”

“Tell me. Do you have family?”

That was unanticipated. And unwelcome.

“I have no relations in this castle,” I answered, cautious.

“Well, since I’ve been judicious in asking first, I may proceed to deduce the situation. You know what your problem is?”

My mouth twisted with mirth. This should be interesting.

“You have no one,” she said.

My smirk dropped like a drawbridge.

“The courtiers go on and on about you. Not only are you a trinket, but they tell me you’re alone in this kingdom. You have admirers galore but no relatives. No one who matters. No one who needs you. What’s more, you have no principles. That’s a sorry combination.”

“Now you’re being cruel,” I replied.

The princess had the decency to look ashamed. I closed the last inch of space between us, uninterested in acting cocky on this tourney field. I’d much rather look as offended as I felt.

“The Spring Crowns would disagree with you, seeing as my political and social observations matter a great deal to them,” I said.

“You advise them in order to puff yourself up, to regale yourself without having to feel the burden of accountability. You may be clever and forthright, but you don’t really care about the people any more than they care about you. Would you give your life for them? Because I would. For my subjects, I would. Can you say that about anyone?”

The ribbons tapped against my wrist, as if to remind me. As if I needed reminding.

Correcting her would make no difference. This Royal may be friends with a minstrel. She may be loyal to her people, but doubtless she had her limitations about who mattered in her world. At the day’s end, she was like the rest of them: ignorant.

My story, the *anyone* in it, wouldn’t count to her.

She took my silence as confirmation. “You can’t say it because you’re too busy mocking and ridiculing for sport. I have principles. I have a meaningful purpose because I take life seriously.”

I sneered. “Not to mention you inherited that purpose. How’s that serious life working for you? Is it a happy one?”

“It’s a responsible one. It’s honorable.”

“What exactly is dishonorable or immoral about laughing, dancing,

unwinding that ridiculous braid?" I tugged on a stray lock of her hair. "Are you cursed? Are you going to turn into a wolf if you throw caution to the wind? Are you going to hurt someone?"

"You made a fool of me."

"You make fools of fools," I said, adjusting my tone to sound ironic and objective, rather than hostile. "You Royals shackle the mad, labor the simpleton, and scorn both. You assume the right to abuse them. 'Tis fine to leash and drag around the lesser, unnatural beings, but when someone so much as plays a pinky-sized trick on you, then you have a tantrum. If you can't handle even that, then relinquish your entitlement to the throne so another poor soul can take up the gauntlet."

She paled. By nature, pun intended, Autumn was a benevolent nation. Though while it may be less vicious, that didn't pardon Mista. And she knew it.

The princess licked her lips, producing a moist sheen that snatched my attention. "If I couldn't handle the likes of you, I wouldn't be standing here."

Our argument thrived in this setting, with the crickets strumming and the pan flute swirling through the gardens. I'd promised myself that I would never lay my hands on a Royal, but in this nook of dahlias and pride, I changed my fucking mind.

"Oh, Sweet Thorn. That's because you're not standing close enough," I said, stroking my thumb down her arm.

She sucked in a breath—and then leaned in, brushing her sleeve against mine. Every whiff of Autumn, sturdy things and fallen things, chipped away at my confidence.

"How is this?" she challenged in a whisper.

Applause. Because sometime between last night's hall and this night's garden, she'd found her nerve. And I'd lost mine.

7

Princess

The vanity mirror tossed my reflection back at me. My bedgown hung off my body, the neckline riding down the knobs of my shoulders. The bun in my hair slouched against my neck.

A sheaf of parchment rested on the tabletop. I tapped the plume of my quill against my temple in thought, then dropped my arm. The nib leaked into the page, leaving a black stain. I had planned on using this time to reflect on the present state of Mista, to draft new ideas to further its well-being. A list of questions, concerns, comparisons, benefits and drawbacks, strengths and weaknesses, for Mother and me to examine later.

But my thoughts strayed, as they'd been doing since the garden revel three nights ago. The memory of confrontation. The clovers of his eyes and the paint twining around them, the design like an iron gate, closed off to strangers. A grin playing at the corners of his lips. Me wanting to reach over and dab that grin back into a frown.

Him stepping closer. And me responding in kind.

And then us breaking apart, returning to the main lawn separately so the guests wouldn't get the wrong impression. My attempt to converse with the Queens of Winter. My mother's gaze catching me glancing at Poet.

Eliot surrounded by the Silly Seven. Moving his lips, muttering the words to an old ballad—as he tended to do when in the grips of uncertainty—then peeking at Poet.

Poet glaring at me from across the lawn. Me fighting to remain placid.

I'd touched him. On purpose.

Never before had I pressed myself against someone in such a manner. I hadn't liked it.

In this world, women had power. We could inherit thrones without having to marry, or we could choose to join with someone.

Women could be knights or seamstresses. They could be warriors or

mothers—or both. They could be educated or not. Literate or not.

It was their choice. And at the same time, it wasn't.

Class still reigned. And despite that, I'd suffered the touch of a person beneath me. I'd felt puzzled, confident, dizzy, fierce. Peel away the princess and there lived a girl. Peel away the girl and one discovered a heart that either raced or stopped, depending on what a boy said or did. In spite of my power, he could disarm me, make me do things I wouldn't normally do. Absurd things.

I'd used brazen tactics to silence Poet: a soft voice, proximity. Why? What had gotten into me?

The sensations of being near him reemerged, and with them, the reluctant stirrings of curiosity. A straining sort of ache nestled low in my body, in a place I only allowed myself to consider in rare moments of helplessness and frustration. Of yearning.

Blinking, I let go of the quill. It thumped against the paper and rolled off the edge.

You make fools of fools.

His words had been even more potent than his physical presence. And he was right. The smudge of embarrassment that I'd felt during the banquet did not compare to how we let others be treated.

Others. That was also the problem, that we allowed ourselves to think of them as an *other*, not as one of us. I could fill pages contesting our manifestos about equality and humanity. Yet I didn't. I agreed with Poet, but letting him influence my writing discomforted me.

Father would have advised me to think without thinking, then write without musing. His guidance perplexed me, though I missed it so much. In my mind, I saw his face. But his voice—time had dissolved it, the way water swallowed droplets of blood.

Anguish swam at the corners of my eyes. *I wish you were here.*

The door creaked open. Mother swept into the room and paused behind me, having come to bid me goodnight. Was it that late already? I glanced at the candle on my vanity. Twelve bars marked into the wax indicated the

passage of each hour. Indeed, the flame had burned down to the next line.

“How is my dearest?” she asked.

“Dear,” I responded.

“You’ve been behaving in my absence? Staying away from suitors? Avoiding scandals?”

“Yes. Yes. Yes.”

“Then I should have raised you better,” she quipped, though a hint of truth dangled from her words. She stared at me for a long time in the vanity’s reflection. I feared that sometimes she saw Father’s face there, the life that I had taken from her. Being in Whimtany only smothered our relationship further.

I touched the Court Jester. I don’t trust him.

I miss Father. I miss Mista.

I miss you.

“Dearest.” She grasped the back of my seat. “I only want you to take joy in these days. You could make friends here. Or if there’s something you’d like to talk about . . .”

“I cannot figure out where to begin this analysis,” I said, gesturing at the blank parchment. It wasn’t entirely true. I knew where to begin. I just hadn’t been able to scribble down a thing.

Her features lifted. She moved to grab a chair from beside the fire. “Would you like my help?”

“I’m tired,” I said, stopping her. “Maybe tomorrow.”

“I see . . . very well, then. Tomorrow,” she murmured. “Don’t forget—”

“To blow out the candles,” I finished.

We traded awkward smiles. She reached out, her fingers smoothing my hair and adjusting my bun. I swore it felt like waking up and falling asleep. Like protection and loneliness.

A castle could be such a formal, ceremonial place. But with her, it softened into a home, with bits and pieces of comfort. Pillows and blankets. Steam from a pot of tea. A hairbrush.

I wondered what she would do if I grabbed a handkerchief from the table

and used it to smack her wrist, or if I stuck my tongue out at her, or uncapped my pot of tinted skin balm and smeared it across her chin, or grabbed my quill and wrote my secrets on the parchment for her to see. Actions I would have played at years ago.

Mother left. The Whimtany breeze whisked through the window cracks, flooding my nostrils. Rising, I shuffled toward the glass and opened the casement, inhaling a vista's worth of wildflowers.

Each kingdom had its Crown, its nobles, its knights, its servants, its physicians, its peasants, its livestock, and its harvesters. But the kingdoms also had different landscapes, mindsets, and specialties.

Humble, charitable, practical Autumn. The land of Mista, with its beet-red shutters, walnut-colored masonry, and flat towers. Our castle presiding over fields of corn and wheat, and orchards dripping with pears. The smell of apples and damp wool. The crunch of leaves. Builders, thatchers, farmers, and millers.

Introspective, stoic Winter. The land of Iradis. A white world. A blade-like stronghold surrounded by a frozen lake, the surface flipping the world upside down. The sunken dens, the libraries, the tapestries. Scholars, scribes, and hunters.

Tireless and temperamental Summer. The land of Perilyn. A fortress chiseled into a cliff by the sea. The cavernous call of peacocks, aquarium-lined corridors, and indoor waterfalls. Priceless shells and briny air. Outer marshes and swamps, with venomous reptiles. Fishermen and boatmen. Makers of nets, ropes, and sails.

Buoyantly glib Spring. The land of Whimtany. Its castle of ivy, white stone, and stained glass. Domed ceilings, circular turrets, and round chambers. The numerous Royal gardens: the dahlia beds where I spoke with Poet, the blooming ruins where I met Eliot, a coiling labyrinth, a checkered tulip lawn, an expanse of wisteria arbors, lazy lotus ponds, and too many others to list. Keepers of flora and fauna. All manner of artists.

These worlds also possessed their own natural cycles. Seasons within the Seasons.

Winter went through different stages in a year. Months of frost, then snow, then ice.

Summer arched from gloom, to sunshine, to a heat that glared down on people.

In Autumn, the trees burst with color for part of the year. During later months, the leaves dried up. After that, they fell, cracked and brittle. Then it started all over again. The land shed its coat and eventually grew it back.

Spring had its rain and clouds, then blue skies and budding fragrance, then growth as the land blossomed, and then another chill and an onslaught of weeds. Presently, it was blooming season in Whimtany. The open-ended gaiety of life. The wild moon of the unpredictable. The spiraling free fall. A time to lose control.

I thought of the scarlet ribbon the young jester had left me, marking me as his newest victim. Shutting the window, I stalked over to the wardrobe. I grabbed a chestnut wool dress, which clasped up the front, along with a matching cloak. The hood would shield my face from recognition during the night patrol.

From my dresser drawer, I retrieved his little token of affection. I should have dealt with this sooner.

* * *

I assumed that he claimed a room near the rest of the court's entertainers, close to Eliot. From there, it wasn't hard to locate the door belonging to Poet. The most ostentatious entrance of them all, it flourished in a separate hollow. It also boasted a plaque that read, *Court Jester of Whimtany*.

Beneath that, *Give me a rhyme, and I shall give you time*.

I rolled my eyes. Show off.

Did he have a real name? Did he wear those ribbons to bed?

Keeping the scarlet one would send the wrong message, give the fool leave to meddle with me. The moment he answered the door, I would drop it into his palm and go—with squared shoulders and definitely before he had the chance to open his mouth.

Leaning back, I swung my head left and right to check the corridor. It had

been a heart attack getting here, avoiding the guards. The aloof, virginal Princess of Mista loitering outside the charismatic Court Jester's door at night would not look good. Rumors were the enemy.

The knocker would echo too loudly. My knuckles tapped lightly on the wooden surface.

I waited, then tried once more.

Nothing.

Poet didn't seem like the type to be asleep yet. No light bled from under the door, nor any sound from the room. He might be out doing who knew what, carousing somewhere in this place or in the town's tavern, having charmed the sentinels into raising the portcullis and letting him through the gate. Maybe he'd taken Eliot with him, intent on doing more damage to my friend.

Every day at dusk, I'd wrangled a free moment out of my social obligations to meet Eliot at the flowering ruins. Of the many subjects we could have jumped into, he focused on only one. Rather than telling me how his family fared, or about his latest musical endeavors, he'd go on and on about Poet. He'd asked my advice while pacing the ancient garden's periphery.

Thus far, I had kept my answers neutral. I wanted to be wrong about Poet. He could have been telling the truth, that he'd planned on remedying the situation with Eliot before I'd interrupted them the other night.

But that had been three days ago. What had Poet been doing since then? If he didn't say something to Eliot soon, I would.

And if Poet could sneak into my quarters with the ribbon, I could do the same. Warning myself to be quick, I pushed past the door and stepped into his chamber, closing the partition behind me. The moon's glint from beyond the window made the place visible. A blue film cast across the floor and furniture.

I tarried. I have done many things in my life, but trespassing into someone's private room was not one of them.

A spacious, vain dwelling. Neatly kept, but a whirlwind of scent, color, and texture.

His possessions exceeded that of a servant's. An ornate wardrobe, a fluted plate of grapes, and a tented bathing tub. A standing mirror—how remarkable—and a table overflowing with vials and thin brushes. I tiptoed, uncapped the lids, and recognized the contents as the paints he used on his skin. An open trunk held props of his craft, like the balls he'd juggled, large rings, and clubs.

His bed. A pasture of green tones.

My hand rooted in my pouch and found the ribbon. Intending to place it on his pillow—a feathered pillow—I stopped beside the mattress. Warmth crept up my ears as I imagined him there, his bare chest exposed, his arm flopped over the edge. The sheets hanging low off his hips.

Which men and women have witnessed that sight?

A latch whined and clicked. I froze as the door shuddered. Then I dashed behind a changing screen, crouching low.

Footsteps glided into the chamber. The jester may live loudly, but he moved quietly.

Gulping, I peeked through a slit in the screen. Poet's profile appeared, his body clad in a long cape and what seemed to be a plain shirt and hose. And no artwork on his face, at least none that I could tell.

The scratch of claws alerted me to another presence. I glanced down and into the beady sockets of a varmint. The ferret, Tumble. He stared at me through the slit, debating whether to screech and warn its master or take my side and stay quiet.

There was no other option but to gape and pray the creature showed me mercy. That's how we stayed, trapped in a face-off as Poet rifled through his wardrobe.

Nice ferret, I mouthed. *Nicey, nicey.*

Poet's mascot canted its head. It shoved its nose past the divide and sniffed, its wiry whiskers twitching.

My eyes flitted back to the jester, who slipped his hands into a pair of braided leather gloves, then drove a flashing object into the scabbard on his belt. I struggled to identify the item, then wished I hadn't succeeded. Alarm and confusion collided.

Why did he carry a dagger?

He snapped his fingers. Tumble made the decision to pardon me. The animal twisted away, following Poet out of the chamber.

I lurched to my feet. The ribbon could wait.

I tracked him as he rounded corners and descended stairways, his cape flapping around his legs, the ferret at his heels. Once, twice, he turned this way and that to check the perimeter. I leapt out of sight. He continued, opting for vacant passages that were foreign to me.

Poet dissolved into a black tunnel. At the end, he came to a barred gate that he unlocked with a key. The gate groaned open and led him outdoors.

I counted to ten before emerging, bolting across the grass and ducking behind a stable within the lower town. We had secret corridors in Mista that would direct people out of the citadel during an invasion, but I marveled that a jester had access to Whimtany's defenses.

Amid the scents of barley and dung, horses grumbled. Poet guided one of the animals to the exit and spoke calmly to it, while Tumble climbed up the boy's frame and bounded into the saddlebag with a squeak. Balancing his weight on the stirrup, Poet swung his leg over the horse's snowy back, then urged it into a moderate gait out of the village.

He toted a weapon and had been skulking through the complex. The Crown trusted him. The four kingdoms lived in peace, but that did not guarantee an eternity of it. We had our share of lawbreakers and anarchists. Humans could be bitter or greedy, overcome by grievances or power lust.

Poet could be a spy for an unknown group of rebels. He could be dangerous.

First, I stole a hoof pick—the only portable and sharp item available—from the tack room. Then I stole one of the horses, a mare fit enough to catch up with the jester and the least antsy of my options. Whispering like my father taught me to, I hastened to saddle her. Thankfully, the mare relaxed. I might be a stuffy Royal, but I identified with these creatures, and they tended to respond. And I was a good rider.

I mounted and urged her forward. Keeping pace, I sighted Poet's white

steed ascending the wildflower hill ahead. At the crest, he bled into the floral forest. I'd been forced to travel through that woodland from Mista. While in Spring, I did my best to otherwise avoid that place until it was time to go home.

Somewhere in there, my father had died.

I did not remember where it happened. I was glad about that.

At the tree line, I wavered, then made the choice. Resigning myself, I secured Poet's ribbon to a bush, lest a search party needed to find me later.

He abandoned the main thoroughfare and crossed into the thicket. I kept far enough behind, but close enough to chase the horse's pearly glow. The woods thickened, twigs tangling. Anxiety soaked my palms. I had no plan. I had no idea where, or to whom, he was headed. Had I used my brain, I would have torn strips off my gown to mark the rest of the path. How stupid of me to forget that!

We kept on like this until I reckoned we neared the outlying villages of Whimtany—hamlets of more artists and animal keepers. However, in this dense area, we remained isolated from them. I glanced behind me, then twisted back around, only to jerk on the reins. Poet was gone.

We trotted farther into the depths before I stopped us again. The tension in my body made the mare nervous. She shifted uneasily from side to side, so I slid to the ground and glided my palm over her coat.

Nearby, a brook tumbled and nibbled at its bank. From somewhere above, an owl hooted. I might as well admit it. I'd lost the boy. It had to be midnight at this point. I would have to wait until morning in order to follow our trail home.

"Don't panic," I told myself and the horse. "We'll be fine."

"Hoooo. Hoooo," the bird called from an unseen perch.

"Oh, shut up," I hissed at it.

"Hoo-hoo-hoooooo!"

I paused. That was *so* not an owl.

A mean-spirited chuckle followed. A white steed trotted out of the shadows, sans its rider, and proceeded to chew on foliage. I reached for the

animal’s bridle.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” a slick voice cautioned. “He’s a skittish thing.”

Whipping around, my gaze connected with a pair of cutthroat eyes.

8

Jester

I’d had my share of uninvited visitors, usually to my chamber at late hours. My talents, and my influence over the Crown, had earned me both admiration and resentment. People had imposed themselves upon the Court Jester in many ways, offering intimacy or threats or bribes. But never had I been pursued like that, en route to secrecy.

And so there I was, hanging upside down, my legs hooked over a tree branch. The princess and me in starlight. We both kept weapons, but mine was fastened in its scabbard, and I hadn’t discovered hers yet. That would come shortly.

I wanted to do many things to her then. Some reasonable, some not. She’d followed me, stalked my privacy, had gotten too damn close before I had detected her presence, and I was feeling downright brutal about it.

Now take care. I enjoy wielding unlikely tools in jests. Throwing knives, for instance.

And I’d never left the castle without a dagger. Isolated routes. Deceptive nights. You know. But come, I’m not violent, no matter that she’d raised my hackles more times than I could juggle.

I recall feeling my jaw muscle tick. Out there, she could have gotten hurt, or lost, or ambushed by bandits—or another mile, and she could have seen what she shouldn’t.

Like her, had you suspected me of atrocious deeds? Malicious intent?

Pay attention, for I shall set things straight . . .

Her eyes widened the instant she rounded on me. The bun of her hair had gone savage, red wisps trembling around her shoulders. The vision tugged at a dormant spot in my chest. ’Twas best to ignore it.

Tumble sprang from the saddlebag to explore. I’d fed him earlier, so he couldn’t be hungry already. More likely, he sought out acorns to play with.

Grabbing the branch, I flipped right side up and landed nimbly on my feet.

I'd noticed the princess as we entered the woods, and far too late at that, for I should have heeded my interloper long before. Nevertheless, I still caught her.

"You're good," I admitted, then pointed to myself. "But you're not *this* good."

"You snuck off from the castle," she said. "Why?"

I clapped. "Well done. Keeping tabs on me past your bedtime, or perhaps it's a coincidence that you saw me. Either way, I'm here for no special reason. 'Tis a silvery night. A cause for delight—"

The tip of something sharp jabbed between my legs. Glancing down, I was treated to the sight of a hoof pick strategically aimed at my groin. I respected a female who could make an otherwise innocent object look deadly.

"Where are you going?" she demanded. "Who are you? And none of this *'tis a secret, 'tis a riddle* babble."

"Whatever you assume, give it up. I'm no traitor. I've no time in my busy schedule for treason."

"You are a wordsmith and therefore a liar. I know what your tongue is capable of."

And I knew an opportunity when I heard it. I let my voice drizzle down her skin. "Now, now. You haven't begun to learn what my tongue can do."

Her posture buckled, a minor shift that the lesser acute wouldn't recognize. Myself, I detected it as if the motions were my own.

She was scared and brave, and being here was reckless of her. She wrestled to keep her gaze aloft, her pulse tapping against her throat.

I could punish her for this, for pursuing truths that didn't belong to her. Yet dread and regret weren't the responses I wanted to extract from her. Nay, I wanted that heartbeat, that erratic button pounding in her neck, aching to burst through. I *wanted* it.

The fine hairs across my arms stiffened in protest. She'd come this far, which made her a threat. The last thing I could afford was a Royal's suspicion.

Taking advantage of her momentary shock, I swiped the hoof pick from her fingers and proceeded to spin a tale. "Occasionally, I have trouble

sleeping, so I fling myself into creative sojourns. The more distance I have, the more inspired I become, the better I rest." I handed the object back to her. "You see? My intentions are as impeccable as my wardrobe."

"How strange that you needed a horse from the lower town, when I'm sure the Crown would supply you from its stables. How bizarre that you would take a secret passageway instead of traversing the drawbridge. I'm sure you could have flirted with the guards and convinced them to let you out."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not about to embarrass myself and give the court fodder for gossip by flaunting my insomnia. Appearances matter. In any case, I'm trustworthy."

She lifted her free palm. "Then hand me your dagger."

Vexing girl. She'd been sniffing my tracks for a while.

"What for?" I asked. "Mayhap 'tis the jester who cannot trust the princess." When she made no reply, I snatched her chin between my thumb and forefinger. "I'm waiting."

"So am I. If you wish me to trust you: Hand. Me. The. Dagger."

"Sooooo extreme. It's merely for safeguarding my hide, not for skinning people. Though I'm impressed you noticed my weapon at all."

Beside her, Tumble scurried up the tree and along a branch, inciting an avalanche of stones. My hand shot out to capture one and then toss it to the Royal, which she caught in her outstretched grasp.

The moment presented important details that she hadn't noticed, but I had. One, the fact that she'd let go of her mare's bridle, allowing the horse to roam freely alongside mine. And two, a hunting trap—an aged model, from what I could tell of its shape—five feet from us.

A bad premonition crept up on me.

"I pay attention to things," she claimed. At which point, she whipped her arm out, pitched the wee rock off to the side, and sealed our cursed fate.

The stone thwacked against the hunting trap, causing its rusty hinges to bite, snapping shut with a ghastly howl that spooked the horses. With that, our rides reared, whinnied, and bolted into the night.

* * *

“Let us play a game,” I suggested.

“Don’t start,” the princess said, panting as we hiked beside the brook, with Tumble on the hunt ahead of us.

“You do realize that we’ve circled this area twice already.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“I’m bored,” I mock-whined, just to aggravate her further. She’d waylaid my evening, kept me from the one beloved thing that I anticipated all week, and gotten us stranded. Having my ears assaulted by her stale dialogue added insult to injury. And mud caked my favorite boots up to my fucking ankles.

Two hours later, and we were still searching for the horses. Had they been Royal mounts, we might have been able to accept defeat and whatever repercussions awaited us. Or we might have weaved a fine lie, one that explained our whereabouts—and being together in the first place, at this hour—and earned Basil and Fatima’s forgiveness.

However, those horses weren’t Royal ones. They belonged to peasants who needed them, who could be attached to them and might find only moderate comfort in our offers to pay for the animals.

Notwithstanding, our chances of recovering them were slim. I’d given up nigh on an hour ago, for it was too dark to follow their prints, and as terrified as the horses had been, they could push themselves up to three miles out of reach before the gallop claimed their energy.

The princess and I had a march back to the castle ahead of us. I’d need those hours to contemplate how to sweet-talk us out of this. Justifying why we’d plucked village steeds, and why we’d been out here together, would be tricky. Verily, I could strangle this girl and kick myself.

We’d decided to trail the brook, figuring the horses would seek water. Tumble stopped and whimpered at me from exertion. I plucked him off the ground and draped him over my shoulder, where he passed out.

“Indulge me, Sweet Thorn,” I said. “I shan’t take nay for an answer, not until we make our journey back or set up camp. Mind you, I vote for the latter.”

The princess turned on me, the hem of her gown grazing the dirt. “I will

not give up yet."

Up close, her forehead shimmered with sweat. She was disheveled and dazed with fatigue, unaccountably different from the figure that usually greeted me, and it made her look . . . natural . . . approachable. Lovely.

I appreciated her determination, however I required a fresh diversion. "We shall call a ceasefire. I shall ask you a series of questions, and you shall stimulate me with your own batch. The first person to fib loses. We're well-versed enough with each other for that."

Dubious, she crossed her arms, then uncrossed them, then crossed them again. "It's a distraction."

"You're a Royal. I'm a juggler. That makes us accustomed to multitasking. Go on, then." I wiggled my fingers. "Keep doing what you were doing."

With a sigh, she trudged through the undergrowth, her hips swaying and doing attractive things to her skirt. Her silence permitted me to start.

Why do I bother you? What are you afraid of?

"Why are you friends with Eliot?" I asked.

It was the least invasive question on my list. Still, she faltered. "That's none of your concern."

"*Me-me-meme-meme,*" I sang. "A paltry response."

"You haven't spoken to him yet," she accused over her shoulder.

"Regrettably so. I haven't been procrastinating, but I haven't been in a rush to reject Eliot, either. Plus, my sovereigns have kept me busy. There hasn't been a free moment since the dahlia garden, and that isn't an answer to my question. You're terrible at this game."

"Eliot expects nothing of me. When we're alone, I can be anyone with him. I can confess anything, and he'll understand me."

"Methinks that sounds more hypothetical than factual. Do you confess everything?"

She shrugged. Waiting for her to continue took a monumental amount of effort, but I didn't want to push it. More than I cared to admit, I wanted her to speak willingly.

“I just know he wouldn’t judge me. We met when we were twelve, at a market in the lower town. My parents—” She paused, regarding me with suspicion. I stared back candidly, inviting her in, and something in her eyes loosened and trembled.

’Twas common knowledge throughout the lands: The Princess of Autumn was eighteen, and her father had died six years ago. She lost him here, in Whimtany. However, that didn’t mean that I, or any other soul, knew everything about it.

“They were here for the peace talks,” she said. “And at a market in town, I came upon this group of children making fun of Eliot because he was trying to strum a lute for passersby, but the instrument was too large for his body. So I defended him. I clapped, the first applause he ever got.” She grinned. “I praised him and admonished the children for not appreciating fine music. I requested more songs from Eliot until he drew a crowd and got the King and Queen to notice him. The lute was too big, but he played with charm. He was offered a Royal apprenticeship. His family was so proud.”

Eliot’s family lived in an outlying village. He wrote to them every week.

“We had a wondrous time together, exploring the artists’ and keepers’ wares. It was astounding, keeping company with someone who didn’t see me as a princess but just a girl. Because I was there, a merchant let us try on her best costumes, which excited Eliot to no end. At another stall, we admired the bird cages and miniature ladybug habitats on display. I bought him a fruit pie, and he taught me how to master a chord. We stole a quart of cider from one of the booths, but it tasted vile.”

When she laughed, the sound crept into me. Without my realizing it, we’d drifted from the brook and veered east, a direction that I’d been intending to avoid with her.

She halted when I did. “When my father died that night—”

I made damn sure to keep my expression blank. He died the same night?

“—Eliot found me in the ruins hours later . . . the ancient garden, as your people call it. His apprenticeship was to begin the next day, and the Crown had already supplied him a room in the servants’ wing. I sent him a message,

and when he came to me, I told him I was going to be a new girl from then on, not the same one he met. And he said that was all right. He played me a song until I fell asleep in his lap. I'd saved him, and then he saved me.

"For the next six years, we wrote to each other, long letters every month. I would wear a disguise, sneak into Mista's lower town, and have them dispatched from there."

I moved nearer to her, pausing when she tensed in response. I wasn't used to feeling inadequate or unwanted. Worse, the vision of her curled up in the ruins—a child without a father—caught me by the throat.

There was something else. Rarely did I envy people, but the thought of Eliot winning her over, comforting her, brought out the competitive in me.

"What do you mean, 'a new girl'?" I asked, because it didn't sound all right to me. In fact, it sounded all sorts of wrong.

"I am a princess. I cannot afford to be myself."

"In that case, you could have at least gotten creative and made yourself into a unicorn. Everyone likes a unicorn."

"My turn," she announced, rounding on me. "How old are you?"

I posed, flexing my arms. "A strapping nineteen."

"Who apprenticed you?"

"Mostly I'm a prodigy."

"And your speech? Who educated you?"

I sidestepped that as well. "Myself. That's more questions than I got, Your Highness."

"Where do you come from?"

"You'll pardon me if I remain mysterious," I said mildly. "Not that I'm the mysterious type—men of the like are dull. Alas, my history is unimpressive, and I do prefer to impress."

She grimaced. "At someone else's expense."

Jolly. Back to criticizing my jests.

I groaned up at the petaled trees, careful not to let Tumble fall from my shoulder. "My spectators enjoy themselves. I make fair points. It might irritate people, but I ease the blow with laughter, and that brings a measure of

understanding. Is that not a noble accomplishment? Are those not principles, Highness? It's my craft to know what people need to hear, what they can handle." I glanced down at her. "Like I've said before, I'm a jester. I see everything."

Unfortunately, the princess had quit listening. Her face went ashen, her eyes widening as they fixated on a spot behind me. She pointed. "Do you see *that*?"

Peeved, I swung around. My joints locked at the sight of claws, bared fangs, and a pair of carnivorous, yellow irises aimed at us.

Oh. Shit.

9

Jester

Let me explain what we dealt with: a leenix. ’Twas a hulking forest cat, native to Spring, with the lethal grace of a panther and incisors born from hell. It possessed a bottomless appetite and an incomparable agility the likes of which my acrobatics had no prayer against.

In short, I’d met my match. I would have seized this opportunity—sightings of them were rare—to observe our predator’s movements if it weren’t planning to maul us.

And so a dangerous dance began . . .

The feline hissed, its ears perked, its gray fur bristling down its spine. It brooded on its haunches, itching to spring free off the invisible coils beneath its paws.

With measured steps, I moved in front of the princess, shielding her from the cat whilst setting my hand atop the hilt of my dagger. “Your Highness. If you turn back, you’ll be facing northwest.”

She knew what I intended. “No,” she rasped. “You cannot be serious.”

“Once I’m busy entertaining our distinguished guest, that’s the direction you’re going to flee. And I do mean, *flee*. Tumble will catch up to you. Follow him. He’ll guide you home.”

“Poet, no.”

Although the next few minutes were bound to hurt, I celebrated the tremble of my name on her lips. “Do not bring back help. If you do, I shall despise you for it. Indeed, my contempt for you will be legendary.”

She wouldn’t understand that, and she wasn’t going to obey, but I had to try. Hopefully, whatever damage this kitty did to me, I’d still be able to crawl another mile or so from here. I didn’t want to be anywhere near this spot when the cavalry arrived. It was too close to what mattered most.

I pictured a little pair of eyes, greener than mine. They would alight, waiting for me to arrive, unaware that I wasn’t coming.

Tumble sensed my body language and shocked awake.

The leenix had spotted us long before we'd spotted it.

I held its gaze. *Trick me, and I shall trick you back.*

None of this meant I wasn't scared. Down to the marrow of my bones, I was petrified, but I was also cranky. I had too much to live for to tolerate this hogwash.

I bowed to the fine specimen of a cat and then snapped my fingers. The moment shattered into glass shards. Tumble vaulted from my shoulder as the cat launched toward me with a savage growl, its claws lashing the air. I dove out of the leenix's path, rolled across the ground, and shot to my feet, whipping out the blade. The animal flew at me again, a liquid beam of gray.

It struck. I ducked.

It pounced. I spun.

It gave chase. I ran toward a tree, planted a foot on the trunk, and flung myself into a backflip over the creature's head. The cat was still scratching the bark when I landed behind it and took advantage, striking with the dagger and slitting a hind leg.

Yowling, it pivoted, the flat of its paw smacking my wrist. Its claws missed my flesh, but the force nearly wrenched my arm out of its socket and succeeded in knocking the weapon from my grasp, hurling it into the darkness.

A whistle trilled through the woods, distracting the cat. A flash of ferret darted between its legs. Tumble scrambled around its four paws, disorientating the animal and dodging its enraged swipes.

Another whistle. Pebbles thwacked against the leenix's skull, punctuated by a girl's commanding scream. "Hey!"

My foe wheeled around and swatted at chestnut skirts, but not before the princess used her hoof pick to stab it in the shoulder. It ended swiftly. Bleeding, the cat howled and hobbled off into the thicket.

I bent forward, clasping my thighs and wheezing as Tumble approached to check on me. Fie, I'd told that princess to leave with him. They could have gotten ripped to shreds!

Raising my head, I opened my mouth to flay the girl for her stupidity, but her piercing cries stopped me cold. The princess lay sprawled on the grass. Her body spasmed amidst the flowers, crimson seeping through her gown and pooling into the earth.

My heart stuttered. Swearing, I charged ahead, my knees slamming into the dirt beside her. In a thrice, the choice was stolen from me, for the gash upon her thigh wasn’t small. We needed help, and the only place to find it was the last place I wanted to take her. The place I’d been heading to all along.

10

Princess

The branches swam above me, twisting and gnarling. The trees wobbled in and out of my vision. Petals skimmed my ear. My eyes hooded with a terrible weight.

Beside me, exposed tree roots braided together. Massive and laced in pink moss. Familiar.

I tried to suck in air. I scraped at my throat and then realized the frantic mewls came from me.

A hand cupped my face. A velveteen timbre whispered for me to *breathe*, it's *all right*.

I clung to the voice, my lungs filling instantly. Perspiration and Spring, amber and vetiver, soil and animal.

Something sticky and moist coated my thigh. I must be in trouble. Or was I dreaming?

Where was Father's ghost? Was it here, forever roaming this place?

Where was Mother? I wanted her. I wanted to go home.

Alarmed eyes shone down on me, a startling color amidst the bleakness. Oh, it was Poet. Yes, and there had been a cat, a leenix. It had attacked the jester, and the jester had performed this flip thing to get out of harm's way, but it hadn't helped.

So I wounded the cat. I saved the day—the night.

Dizzy. Tired. Shaky.

Something squeaked in my other ear, sounding traumatized. A fuzzy head and a tiny wet nose nudged my chin.

The grass vanished beneath me. Suddenly I was hovering, my body dangling midair.

Poet carried me, one arm linked under my knees, the other across my back. His heartbeat drummed into my cheek, reminding me of when he danced in the great hall. I mused whether his pulse had sounded like this back

then, and I wondered what it sounded like whenever he looked at me.

Words bubbled from my lips. I mumbled something about him being talented, how much I hated him, and that I was sorry. I should have apologized to the leenix, too. It was only hungry. Would it survive?

My savior rested a finger on my mouth to shush me. He began to walk, his weight thudding against the ground.

I cried out. The pain stunned me into awareness, burning my limb where sharp claws had torn through me. My tears soaked Poet's shirt as he panted a rhyme into my temple. I listened while weeping. And after, he promised that we were *almost there, almost there* . . . where?

A window. A thatched roof. A cottage.

Poet rapped on the door. It flew open, revealing a face with skin made of burlap under silver hair. The old woman wore an apron and a turbulent expression that slackened with relief when she saw Poet. She waved him forward.

He hastened into the womb of the cottage. Tumble disappeared into a back room.

"Where have you been?" the woman hissed. "I'm not getting any younger to be worrying . . ."

I craned my head, blinking at everything, smelling herbs and woodsmoke. Colorful bands of material were tied into knots, forming cords that hung from the ceiling.

I caught bits and pieces of the woman's rant.

"Nicu was in hysterics . . ."

"It was a horror putting him to bed. Fought me tooth and nail . . ."

"Don't you go making us fret like that . . ."

Her gaze strayed to me, her wrinkles multiplying in concern. "Who's this?"

Poet spoke to her in a rush. He'd explain later and other blurry, indecipherable things. I moaned as he eased me into a chair.

The woman disappeared and returned with a basket. She rifled through it as she knelt at my feet, her movements hawkish, her arms like flapping wings.

She rolled up her sleeves, lifted my skirt up to my hips, unwrapped the material that had been torn from my gown to make a bandage—when had Poet done that?—and blood dribbled from the gash.

Orders were tossed at Poet. “Get me a cloth. Get another chair. Get out of my way.”

In the midst of delirium, the words *blood loss* and *infection* and *stitches* tolled in my head. I felt the color drain from my face and sweat bridge across my palms.

A bitty voice drifted into the fray. “Papa?”

To my left, a pixie appeared. A runty, elfin thing with an upturned nose and startlingly puffy eyes. He poked his head out from behind one of the curtains dividing the rooms. He blinked at the scene, his full lips mashed in a sleepy pout.

However, the instant he spotted me, he stumbled forward. His arms extended in my direction. “Oooooh,” he exhaled, gleeful.

Poet intercepted. He rushed over and scooped up the pixie . . . or rather, the boy who bore an alarming resemblance to a pixie. Not that such beings existed.

Seeing Poet, the child forgot about me and smothered the jester instead. He made an elated fuss, chattering with enthusiasm until Poet kissed his cheek and murmured, causing the child to sag as if he’d wiped himself out. The elf-like boy wound his limbs around Poet’s torso, his fingers digging into the jester’s back.

My eyes fluttered, recognizing the tattered ribbons tied around the boy’s wrist. Just like Poet’s.

The child had said *Papa*. Who did he mean? Who was *Papa*?

The woman mentioned a sleeping draught in the cupboard and how the boy wouldn’t hear a thing. On that note, she asked me, “It could help you, too. Do you have allergies?”

“Willow Dime,” I managed, listing the Spring herb that had almost killed me when I was three.

She traded a clammy look with Poet and shrugged. “Well, there goes

that.”

Poet carried the would-be pixie back to the other room. The woman spoke to me in gentle tones, but I suffered for ages until Poet returned. He produced a jug from a shelf and coaxed wine down my throat, which I shoved away after two foul gulps.

My breathing grew shallow when I saw the thread. The needle.

The tip of the needle.

“This is going to hurt, young miss,” the healer warned.

My head lolled up and down to indicate I understood her. I worried that if I tried to speak, it would come out as a groan. It was a moot point once she bound my arms and ankles to the chair, then gave me a wooden spoon to bite down on.

Poet sank behind my seat, rested his chin on my shoulder, and encircled my waist. Whether to hold me down or to comfort me, I wasn’t sure.

“Two frisky little ferrets walk into a tavern . . .,” he began into my ear.

The older woman pressed a cloth into the gash and cleaned it. I wailed between my teeth. And I wailed louder as the needle dug into my flesh, marveling how that elfin child could dream through the shrill sounds.

A tugging sensation. The woman’s bent head. Blood on her hands. Shivering. Throbbing.

I needed to move. I needed to get out of this chair. I hated this chair. This chair butchered me.

Another searing pain probed my leg. Another.

I arched into Poet. He restrained my hips and whispered another naughty joke, to which something akin to a laugh and a sob escaped me.

A blade swam inside my leg. A guttural noise flooded the room.

Right before I fainted.

11

Jester

To this day, I remember well her whimpers against my throat. Oh, how I remember.

You might imagine my surprise at how long she lasted. She'd taken the pain like a knight, laughed at my barbs like a tavern wench, and then swooned like a princess. A dandy relief, for each time she unleashed into the spoon's handle, I spurned kismet—a fine player in verse but not in reality.

The girl's eyes had vanished into the back of her head. That was it.

Old Jinny threaded the final stitch. At last, I carried the unconscious princess to my bed, tucking her in and nestling the blanket beneath her stubborn chin. She'd oft proven herself to be divinely unpredictable. So, because we were alone, I did something phenomenal. I knelt beside the slumbering Royal and stared at her. Truly stared at her.

And this was how I began to feel . . .

Like a fool. For all that I tinkered with people, I'd overlooked her exquisite profile and, most importantly, failed to appreciate her integrity. I hadn't foreseen the lengths to which she'd go to help an inferior. This stifling princess took a leenix hit in order to protect a jester—essentially a servant.

When she wasn't busy censuring my very existence, a tempestuous side emerged. Prickly as a bramble was she, yet she dreamed with color tinting her lips.

I sighed. As much as I loathed the princess's pain, I hadn't gotten to finish my last joke whilst Old Jinny mended her. A tragedy, since I'd fancied speaking into the Royal's ear, provoking chuckles between the tears.

It hadn't been a chore to comfort her. Indeed, it had been . . . a privilege. For a hiccup, her needing me felt just as splendid and dreadful as to be needed by Jinny and Nicu.

Nicu.

My heart swelled as I stood and looked upon him in his own pallet. His

toes stuck out from under the covers because his feet always got too hot. That knoll of messy hair forever smelled of powder, sunshine, and milk. I loved it all. I loved all of my son.

His chest rose and fell, the movements barely detectable. When he was a babe, that chest had consumed me with paranoia. I'd stay up all night to make sure he was breathing, placing a finger under his nostrils, reassured by those priceless wisps of air that hit my knuckles.

Presently, I hooked my arms beneath his legs and shoulders, and lifted. Putting him to bed whilst Jinny prepared the princess had been necessary, but now that she hogged the spare pallet, the one I used during my visits, 'twas best not to leave her with Nicu. I couldn't take the risk that he'd rouse and attack her with hugs, or scurry into bed with her, hoping to make a best friend of the princess and rip her stitches in his enthusiasm.

A pity, indeed. For they made a cute pair, gracing this shell of the cottage.

Balancing Nicu with one arm, I closed the curtain behind us and stepped into the front room. Tumble slumbered atop the mending basket, his body twisted around a sock. Jinny sat in her chair by the table, darning one of my shirts, her quick pace signaling that I'd charred her nerves to cinders tonight. She concentrated on the linen, closing up a tear and waiting as I swaddled my son into a mountain of coverlets by the hearth.

Nicu flopped over and mumbled in his sleep. I wiped his moist brow with my thumb and then, lacking my usual finesse, dropped into the seat across from the woman who'd been like a mother to me since I could crawl.

Jinny jerked her head toward Nicu. "He's yours, all right. Trying to charm the maidens the minute he sees them," she said, referring to the way he'd waddled toward the bleeding Royal in excitement before I intervened.

A helping of tea awaited me, with a dash of ginger that made me wince. It rekindled a memory of my eight-year-old self: that spice flaring on my tongue when Jinny forced me to drink a terrible amount of it, as punishment for using her cups to practice juggling after she'd told me not to.

"I deserve this," I drawled, raising the tea.

She spoke to the material in her hands. "You deserve fire pepper."

I set down the cup and pinched the bridge of my nose. “What the wicked hell is happening?”

“You tell me.”

“’Tis a long, inconvenient story.”

“You’re a master at those. Let’s hear it.”

“Sadly, I reached my crisis threshold hours ago. I’m tired and haven’t the energy to embellish. ’Twill be a disaster if I begin now.”

“Well, try,” she scolded. “And leave your fancy talk at the castle gate, young man.”

“I propose we delay the unpleasantries ’til the morrow, when we’ve rested and our bellies are full of nourishment.”

“Poet—”

I threw up my arms. “Why does that suggestion get a *Poet*?”

“You’re right. I’m too old to be using that featherbrained court name of yours anyway, Fen—”

My finger shot to my lips as my eyes swept toward the niche where the princess rested. I refused to have my real name trumpeted within spitting distance of her. The name was private and only for Jinny to utter.

“The girl waylaid me,” I defended, lowering my voice.

“But she isn’t just a girl, is she? I know a lady when I see one.”

“She’s a princess.”

Old Jinny swiveled her head toward me. “Well, your taste has gotten expensive,” she breathed, amazement and apprehension warring. “Do you mean she’s Briar of Mista?”

“Woe is me.”

Jinny may be tucked away in this floral haven, but she knew about the peace talks. Weeks ago, I’d listed the princess as the only Royal youth attending the spree.

Tracing my fingers around the rim of my cup, I toiled through a bland version of the events. “Under the delusion that I was up to no good, she embarked on a deranged quest to follow me, then spooked our horses, and then the leenix upstaged me. I told the princess to run, but she got in the way.”

She did that in abundance. Everything about her tended to get in the way.

On the other hand, if the princess wanted to turn alpha, very well. I had no quandary there. Most lads would glance down to make sure their bollocks hadn't fallen off by now, but neither my masculinity nor my confidence suffered. The jester jewels weren't going anywhere. It was the other vital organs, located in the upper regions of my body, that I'd begun to second guess.

"Saved your hide, did she?" Jinny translated. "Granted, I'll thank her heroism once I know the rest of her is harmless."

"It is. This clever fool declares there's no prejudice in that Royal's blood. Remember, I'm a marvelous papa. Hence, my fatherly intuition is intact, and it detects compassion."

"Hmm. I wonder if it's truly your fatherly intuition that vouches for her. From where I'm sitting, you're right splotchy."

That knowing twinkle of hers was the purest form of teasing. A protest teetered on my lips. I should have just let it out, or mocked, or joked, but that would have been the wise thing to do, and where that princess was concerned, I'd been on a destructive path since the welcome banquet.

Trusting the girl wasn't exactly smart. No matter that she rescued me, for a droplet of doubt still trickled through my mind, which I'd deal with once she awakened.

Jinny cut off whatever I could have said. "She can fight a gash, that's for sure. She lasted a while before keeling over."

"Precisely what I thought."

"Much better than you. The day you survive a splinter is the day I become a sorceress."

"Let's not exaggerate."

"Reminded me of when you were six."

I groaned. She loved to tell this story.

"We'd just returned from a fair," she said fondly. "You and your obsession with fairs, always watching the jesters, your little face glowing with awe."

"Not always," I reminded her, because fairs had their foul side as well.

“No, of course. But that day when we arrived home, you imitated those jesters for hours, twirling from rock to rock in the grass. And when you fell __”

“I *stumbled*.”

“—and scraped yourself raw, I never saw the like when I dabbed a wet cloth on your knees. You howled bloody murder.”

My elbow hit the table as I pointed at her. “That part never happened.”

“Go ahead. Deny it.”

“I’m changing the subject. My apologies for my tardiness.”

“You know better ’n to think I *don’t* know better. You gave us a fright, but don’t apologize. The only reason you’d ever stay away is if you were hurt or suspected trouble following you.”

I glanced at my son, wracked with guilt, a severely permanent emotion if there ever was one. “I’ll ask Nicu’s forgiveness in the morning.”

Setting my garment and her thread on the table, Jinny grabbed my hand. “You mind this: What happened was out of your control. You’d as soon battle a leenix army to be here.”

This was the tale that no soul at court knew: I had a son, a radiant son for whom I’d willingly rest my neck on the executioner’s block. His mother, a raven-haired spitfire, had been crossing the woods with her nomadic family when we met.

Wandering from their camp on that fateful dawn, she’d found me practicing handstands atop a fallen log. I had been bare-chested and cut a decent fifteen-year-old figure. Which was why the girl—seventeen, she’d boasted—had stayed to watch and then stayed for more after we’d fumbled past the introductions. We’d challenged one another to a balancing competition on that log. By the end of it, I had lost.

She’d cheated by hitching up her skirt and feasting her gaze on me so greedily, so cockily, that I’d known where things were headed. Naturally, my erection had agreed with her.

In that spirit, I’d found myself grasping that log for dear life whilst she’d straddled me and had begun to move. She’d walked me home later, sucked

me into another kiss, and never returned.

However, she was polite enough to leave me a token of her gratitude on Jinny's doorstep nine months later. Oh, the irony of history repeating itself.

Those green irises proved the babe was mine. He didn't know me yet, but he'd gurgled a laugh and extended a pair of chubby arms, demanding to be held. Henceforth, the little one owned me.

He made another noise, something that sounded like "Nicuuuuu" to my ears, so that's what I called him. I liked the idea of letting him name himself.

'Twas easy to miss the signs in the beginning, for infants did incomprehensible things and wept daily. They could be as temperamental and fussy as Nicu had been. However, his appearance—out of proportion features stemming from folktales—had immediately given me pause. In storybooks, he could have been an elf, with that wide grin, and the way his big eyes jumped from his face and his nose shrunk into it.

Mayhap that's why his mother left him to me—she'd known much sooner. Or mayhap she merely hadn't chosen to deny what it could mean, whilst I'd elected to ignore the issue, too anxious to do otherwise.

Lo, it wasn't until Nicu approached his second year that I'd noticed something singular about his behavior. My son had a giant heart. Yet I didn't realize how giant until we passed a peddler on the road, whom Nicu sprang to, tackling the shocked man's peg leg and spouting into conversation, asking if the stranger wanted to come home with us for supper and be everlasting friends.

That's how Tumble joined our family. I had to purchase my sidekick in order to pry Nicu from the man's limb.

I'd clung to a theory. Living far outside of the village had made my son thirsty for attention, just as I'd been growing up. Like his papa, he wasn't shy. At a festival, he'd once trotted out of my sight to greet strangers and sit on their laps without their permission. In fairs and carnivals, where dramatics abounded, he managed to blend in and evade suspicion, and his social aggression was excused because of his wee age—to a point. For his face had given shrewd people cause to look twice.

I might have predicted he'd outgrow his excitability, except I knew my son inside and out. My gut began to feel the permanence of it.

Jinny and I watched him carefully. As he became more extreme—mindless twaddle and inventive, fictional rants that surpassed his years, and utter devotion to strangers during walks along the trails between hamlets—our uncertainties took root. Who was to say Nicu wouldn't one day stumble into the arms of a villain? A kidnapper?

We ceased taking him on outings. It ensured that locals forgot about him entirely, as people did, engulfed in their own demons and raptures.

Enter the second act. For not only did Nicu hammer his friendliness into whomever he met, but he got lost easily and couldn't tell his bedroom from the kitchen. All manner of spaces, distances, and directions puzzled him.

Enter the third and final act, just shy of his third year. I asked him to fetch a bucket for Jinny, and he disappeared outside the cottage, then returned with one of our plump chickens instead.

"Here," he'd said, handing the animal to a bewildered Jinny.

The scene iced me with terror. It would take a dozen more occurrences like this to be fully certain, but already I knew. In the eyes of the four kingdoms, my son possessed a slanted mind.

We couldn't afford a physician, much less trust one to examine Nicu in secret. Turning in unknown "half-wits" to the Crown could amount to rewards.

Desperate for answers, I traveled to villages near and far to strike up hypothetical, random conversations with anyone skilled in the healing arts. Feigning nonchalance, I picked their brains and came up empty-handed. I couldn't find out what caused my son's ailment, what it was called, or what to do about it.

There was that saying: Keep your enemies close. A month following the chicken incident, destiny threw me in the monarchy's path, when I challenged a tumbler to an acrobatic match at a market. A knight of Whimtany viewed the spectacle and reported me to Basil and Fatima, who in turn summoned me to perform for them. Within days, I became the new Court Jester.

I straddled two worlds: public and secret. If my sovereigns knew about Nicu, he'd become their lawful property. So I spent my days making sure that never happened, dazzling the court, worming my way into their good graces, and earning more wages than I had a prayer of doing otherwise. My precarious job fed and clothed my family. I visited them every week and kept Jinny in supplies.

As long as Nicu remained here, he was safe. As long as I nudged the Crown's funny bone, privy to the intricacies of their reign, able to influence them, I had control.

In the castle, I lived a lavish life. In secret, I worried every day.

Nay, with every breath I drew.

I glanced at Jinny and said, "'Tisn't enough."

With her free hand, Old Jinny anchored my cheek. "No parent ever thinks what they do is enough. I'm a mother, too, aren't I?"

I relaxed into her palm. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Her eyes misted. "Oh yes, you do."

She insisted the unendurable but inevitable. The princess and I were to stay put until the threat of an infection passed and she could make the trek back. Not to mention, a rare misfortune brewed: a Spring storm smack in the middle of blooming season. Brilliant.

After Jinny retired, I snuggled with my son, his fingers crushing my shirt. Rest came and went, slipping through my fingers before I could catch it. The rainy dawn followed, hitting the roof. My poor muscles rebelled against the hard floor.

A little someone snickered. A little someone scrambled atop my torso and tugged on my earlobe. I pretended to be asleep and was rewarded with more ear tugs. Without opening my eyes, I seized Nicu by the ribcage. "Got you!"

My son peeped with glee. He spanned my body with his twig arms and legs, like the most pitiful human chain. "No, I've got you! You're my prisoner, Papa!"

"You have no idea, my love."

"I have lots of ideas. Wanna hear one? The rain likes me!"

“Shh.” My arms encircled his scanty waist. “I beseech thee. Say you forgive me for being late last night. I didn’t mean it.”

He cocked his head. “Late from what? Where did you go?”

Never mind. He didn’t remember, wasn’t pondering why we’d been degraded to the front room.

“Can we play now?” he asked. “Can I ride on your shoulders today?”

“Your wish is my command.”

“Yay. I saw a girl somewhere in the cottage, but she’s gone. She’s hanging upside down from a cloud that Jinny knitted in the grassy sky. The girl’s hair is the sun when it’s mad. Huzzah.”

I couldn’t deny my pride at his storytelling abilities. However nonsensical, they surpassed mine.

“Nay, she’s here,” I whispered. “She’s dreaming of flowers as tall as the trees.”

“Because that’s where she’s from,” he added. “She has petals for cheeks.”

“And thorns for ears.”

“No, she doesn’t.” Nicu’s head snapped to and fro. “I wanna see her!”

“Later. She’s hurt.”

“Mmm. She looked scared last night. Like: *hehhh, hehhh, hehhh*.” He made a face, his voice uncanny in its perfect imitation of the princess’s terror and rapid panting.

“A leenix came upon her. Remember what I once told you about them? They’re dangerous. They don’t want to be petted, so never try.”

“Leenix!” he chirped.

“Nicu. What did I just say?”

“I don’t know. Oh, I do.” He altered his voice to sound like me, the timbre accurate to the point of eerie. “*A leenix came upon her. Remember what I once told you about them? They’re dangerous. They don’t want to be petted, so never try*. I wanna play with Jinny’s biscuits.”

That meant he was hungry. “A leenix means bad tidings,” I stressed. “You shouldn’t touch one. Like with people, ay?”

“Stay away from people?” he asked in a small voice that cracked my

heart. “I, em . . .”

“Repeat our last talk,” I prompted.

“*If you see someone who isn’t Papa or Jinny, you must hide,”* he recited.

“Now remind me. What does hide mean?”

He tapped his fingers on my shoulder, tossing those marbles around in his head, because this was the hardest part for him. To Nicu, bounding into someone’s path might as well be “hide.” Running toward them might as well be “run away.”

Some days, it wasn’t easy with him. Raising him, hoping he would grasp what I tried to teach him, having to repeat myself oft whilst using the same words. Remembering to keep every object in the same spot, so that he wouldn’t confuse things, like a knife and a spoon, simply because one was left where the other should have been. Enduring his fits and flare-ups, his bouts of confusion and frustration, whenever I scolded him or he didn’t comprehend something. Bearing his weight as he climbed all over me, no matter what mood he caught me in, when I sometimes lacked the energy to keep up. Not being here for him every day, coping with remorse and too much love for one person to take . . . I confess to days when it tired me.

But always, Nicu’s precious traits, all the good of him, outweighed the rest. He was my everything, my musical little faerie, feisty and funny, bright and imaginative, loving and joyous. A treasure, not a trial.

“*Hide means no hugging, no talking, and—”* Nicu’s face withered in disappointment. “But the girl is people. I want her to be my friend.”

“Not until I say it’s safe, for I am the one who decides.”

“I know what’s safe.” Nicu burst into a tally of Whimtany forest critters and dwellers. “The copper fox, horned beetle, chipmunk, spotted mouse, caterpillar—”

“And the Nicu faerie,” I said, tickling his sides.

When he came up for air, he said, “I miss you when you’re late. I can’t wait.”

That rhymed. I rubbed my nose against his. “Well done.”

12

Princess

The storm woke me. The grumbling clouds cut short the dream I'd been having about ribbons and thread. I forced my lids open, my vision hazy as I tried to identify the bed I lay in and the walls surrounding me. Not my chamber in Mista. Nor the one in Whimtany's stronghold.

This space was the size of a peasant's quarters. A smaller pallet nestled in the corner, with a gnome hand puppet resting on the pillow. Curtains framed the box-shaped window. Raindrops splattered the glass, the rivulets blurring the view, which hinted at Whimtany sass trees, thick bark topped with fuchsia blooms.

The floral woods from last night, where I followed Poet. I remembered the horses abandoning us, tree roots and pink moss, the leenix clawing into my leg, and the young jester bringing me somewhere.

Here, to this cottage. And that silver-haired woman. The needle.

A coarse blanket cocooned my body and scratched against my chin. Muted voices sailed in from an unknown part of the home, interrupted by the peal of childish laughter.

The stranger and Poet.

And that elfin boy. The one whom I hadn't imagined after all.

The whiff of vegetables made my stomach growl. I should have been anxious about what happened last night, our whereabouts, and how long I'd been unconscious. I hadn't trusted Poet when he left the castle, but he'd done nothing to harm me. He'd stepped in front of the leenix, told me to run while he dealt with the creature, knowing it could mean his death.

He had warned me not to bring a rescue party back for him. Why?

This cottage must have been nearby if Poet was able to carry me. Was that the problem? Was this place too close for comfort? What didn't he want a cavalry to see?

I tried to sit up but winced from the tenderness in my thigh. Lifting the

blanket, I discovered the blood-speckled cloth around my leg. The older woman had been kind taking care of the wound.

And the child . . . none of this was what I'd expected when I set out after the jester. An elder and a stripling. Hardly mercenary companions. If any of them wanted to hurt me, they would have done so already. My rational mind concluded that I wasn't a prisoner, that they weren't going to use me as a bargaining chip for some nefarious cause.

A calmness enveloped me at the sight of my cloak hanging from a wall peg and the echoing sounds of a family within the cottage. I sat upright as the curtain filling the doorway shifted. A dot of a nose stuck through the gap, followed by a pair of short fingers grasping the material, and then the pixie boy's head popped inside. He had oval ears, a wide mouth, a scab on his wrist —strung with familiar ribbon bracelets—and the same clover irises as Poet.

We stared at each other. His gaze hopped all over me, his eyes eclipsing the rest of his face. The instant he noticed I was awake, he dashed to my side and began to sing.

"*You're Summer in my pocket,*
and Winter likes to snore,
Spring waits in a locket,
but Autumn is a bore . . ."

The words amounted to gibberish. Be that as it was, his tinkling voice rivaled Eliot's. When he finished, his bow—the final confirmation needed to glean who *Papa* was—knocked me from my trance. I clapped. It elated the boy.

"Where's my cuddle?" he asked. "Do I get a cuddle?"

Without waiting for my response, he flung himself at me. I gasped, my arms winding around him tentatively. "There, there. Easy now," I said.

Nonplussed, I pulled back and cocked my head. So did he. What a bold request he'd made, sweet but spoken with a ravenous edge to it. A frenzied sort of friendliness, even from one so young, that struck a chord.

The past remarks Poet had made in defense of born fools came back. Apprehension dawned something fierce. In addition to his face, lovely yet

fantastical, if he behaved like this in public, he would demand people's attention like a red flag. In doing so, they might take a closer look.

Could I be right? Or was I overreacting?

Something I'd done or said seemed to tame the boy. He relaxed his grip on my clothes but didn't move away. He blinked at me expectantly.

"You may have earned a hug, but I haven't," I said. "What shall we do about that?"

The boy contemplated. I grinned at him in encouragement.

Poet pushed aside the curtain. His eyes swept over us and settled on the child, and at once, the jester transformed. The look on his face bespoke of such tenderness that I'd never seen from him.

He must have registered my astonishment because, instead of introducing us, he tugged on the boy's ear. "Jinny's waiting for you. She wanted you to fetch her shawl from her room, remember?" He cupped one palm beside his mouth and said conspiratorially, "Follow the green ribbons. Quick now, and then she'll let you sit by the window. The rain is waiting for your audience."

Giggles bubbled from the child. He skipped off, chortling as Poet smacked his little backside on the way out.

The storm beat against the cottage with its fists, the wet sagging and sliding down the window panes as though desperate to get inside. I sat up straighter, arranging the blankets around my legs, feeling stupidly Royal as I did so.

Poet dragged a stool over to the bed and sat. He wore loose hose and a fresh shirt with the drawstrings undone, revealing a deep neckline. Threads of black lined the bottoms of his eyes—I had the strangest urge to smudge the color and make him appear haggard—and dark paint coated his short nails. Other than that, the simplicity of his appearance unsettled me.

His naked face. The modest clothing. Silly, but seeing him this way felt intimate, especially in this compact chamber, with no one else here.

He balanced a bread bowl of mashed broccoli soup. I wondered where the flour had come from. If from the castle and not a neighboring village, then it wouldn't be Whimtany grain. It would be from Mista, since Basil and Fatima

required the best, and the best came from Autumn's mills. I'd be able to tell from the taste.

Poet blew on the soup and held up a spoonful. "Open wide, Your Highness. Or are you picky? Come now, no need to scowl. 'Tis not as though you narrowly escaped an attempted leenix maiming."

I grabbed the bowl and spoon. "I can feed myself."

"Please do. I'm too pretty to be doing a thankless job."

"I did not mean . . ." Salvaging what was left of my manners, I set the bowl on my lap. "Following you into the forest was a harebrained idea. I was asking for trouble, so thank you for taking care of me. The soup smells wonderful."

"I made it."

I balked. "You?"

"I crushed the broccoli. I'll have you know, 'tis a crucial task," he declared. "In fairness, it is I who should be grateful. You and Tumble would have been safe if you'd listened to me and run, and whilst I wish you had, it's nice to be alive. Because of you, I'm in one piece, and my s . . ." He trailed off. "You must know, I wasn't thrilled about having my delicious face torn off. Oh, and it won't do the soup any good to stay in the bowl."

Poet possessed several types of wit. I was beginning to recognize the differences between them. Depending on the tilt of his mouth and the depth of his voice, he joked for amusement, or to mock, or to judge. Or to disguise certain truths.

I dabbed the spoon into the bowl and summoned the courage to ask, "How old is he?"

A crippling silence ensued. As a Royal, answers were handed to me on a platter at my command. I'd never had to humble myself and earn them.

I met Poet's leery countenance. "I will not utter a word to anyone. I swear it."

A princess did not give her word of honor rashly. I might as well have carved it into stone.

His eyes riveted on me, many things cluttered within that look. Seeing

him like this, defensive and vulnerable, dented all that I'd thought of him. The jester in peasant clothes, absently touching the ribbons at his wrists and devoted to a child. This whole time, I was wrong to assume. I did not know him at all.

For no lucid reason, I wanted his trust. Perhaps it was the Royal in me. Or maybe I understood what it was like to conceal myself from others. Or perhaps I could not explain it.

He waited a beat. "He's four."

"May I ask his name?"

Again, it took him a moment to answer. "Nicu."

"He has your eyes."

"Nature knows what's best."

Still vain as a peacock. We chuckled, but the laughter vanished quickly, like it had been sliced in half.

He stared out the window. I did the same while finishing my food.

"Delicate things and fierce things," he said, the shadows of raindrops dappling his face, candlelight brightening the rest of him.

"Nicu is . . ." I dared not finish, because this story belonged to him. I was a breath away from finding out the truth, but if I made the slightest mistake, I wouldn't.

He swerved his whole body toward me. "Here's a tale of a kindly child who loves making up songs, whispering to the rain, licking sugar off his pinky, and playing word games. He sees and speaks of this world in iridescence. His favorite color is 'happy orange,' he thinks dust motes are faeries, he'll eat anything so long as it doesn't have a filling, he adores animals and people, and he wouldn't harm a soul. What else about him matters?"

"I'm not as pigheaded as you think."

He listed his head, expecting me to repeat myself.

"Mother treats everyone with benevolence," I explained. "She and my father taught me to do the same."

This couldn't be news to Poet. Although the same social laws prevailed in

Mista, we acted less harshly toward born fools than the other kingdoms. It hardly excused us, but everyone knew Autumn was not violent toward anyone, except in matters of defense.

What Poet didn't know was that my parents also raised me without prejudice. Like them, I debated the injustice toward those we owned. However, we did it behind closed doors. We remained objective but stern in public, as other pressing matters took priority over changing that law. I groused about very few decisions Mother and Father had made. That was one of them.

"Princess," Poet deadpanned. "This is not a poem or a song. This is not negotiable. If there's any chance you'll betray my trust, indulge me now. I won't take this step lightly."

"I never take any steps lightly."

"Of course not. You would fall."

"Very funny."

"If what I tell you leaves this cottage, and it harms a hair on my son, I will retaliate. Wherever you stand, I will not hesitate."

"Was that rhyme intentional? I cannot tell."

"To say the least, I'm not in a rhyming mood."

"I don't believe that for a second, but I do believe your threats are born of love. Likewise, you'll have to believe I'm not a wretch. I agree to your terms, jester. Let us consider this a verbal pledge."

My reply unlocked his jaw. So it began.

Poet told me how his parents had abandoned him at a fair and about Old Jinny, the woman who stitched my leg. How she'd found Poet in a bassinet behind a tent, raised him in this cottage, and then helped raise Nicu after his mother had left the babe on their doorstep.

Poet clarified Nicu's condition. Not in detail but enough to grasp the situation.

A memory contorted Poet's face. "When Nicu was two, I took him to a festival for the first time. I'll never forget his look of wonder, so beautiful on him. And I-I glanced away—for a mere second. When I turned back, he'd

disappeared. I can still see it, the empty spot where my son should have been standing, this patch of grass shadowed by someone tipping back a tankard, and I loathe how long it took my goddamn legs to move, and then I was racing, running, raging. The fair stole him from me and wouldn't give him back, and everywhere I looked, he wasn't there. I killed my voice shouting his name, and I hated the sound of it, but I hated more the sound of him not answering. 'Twas the most terrifying morning of my life.

"Fairs are magnificent and deplorable. It's where I discovered my passion and my outrage, this place where tumblers bound and simpletons suffer. I made sure not to show Nicu the horrible parts, but as I searched for him, I saw what I've seen many times. Born fools forced to fight while spectators bet on them. An elderly man, who ranted to himself, being baited. A woman in the stocks being hit with rotten food by children who wanted to win a prize. I didn't know my son was like them yet, but I had an inkling. I imagined that fate befalling Nicu.

"Minutes later, I found him climbing onto an unsuspecting gypsy woman's lap. Furious doesn't begin to express . . . I yelled at my son, scared him. He recoiled because he didn't understand, because I was a prick papa, and I didn't have a clue what I was doing. Nicu wouldn't speak for the rest of the day, afraid that he'd make me angry again. I confess, I've been pushed near to my limits, but I've not raised my voice to him since. He's my heartbeat. He's my greatest achievement," Poet said. "He's mine."

His words grew fangs at the end, the implication hard to miss. Nicu was his. Not the Crown's.

Poet spoke plainly. "I couldn't mean this more, Your Highness. I won't let anyone take my son from me. Let no one say he's damaged, inferior, or unworthy because his mind bends in a different way. He doesn't deserve to be owned and ridiculed.

"The cardinal question is this: What is a fool? Are they madmen who mutilate their own flesh, those who see what isn't there, those whose minds drift in a fog? Some of the crazed are indeed violent and must be restrained, placed where they can't hurt others or themselves—but dungeons aren't the

solution. And those we call morons, imbeciles, half-wits, and simpletons don't deserve what they get. Unfortunately, we ignore the distinction, lumping everyone together as property because anything unnatural is unnatural. As the Seasons say.

"My opinion? A fool is a man who believes glory can be found at the tip of a sword instead of on the tip of his tongue. 'Tis a woman who judges with her eyes closed. 'Tis people who invent aberrations from speculation and rumors. 'Tis bred from ignorance. That is life's cruel trick.

"A wise man makes a legend. A dummy makes a shame. Being close to my sovereigns is a blessing and curse, you see, for I have influence there. If the Crown adores me, I'll convince them to change their law. I have no qualms with the Royals except for this one thing, and therefore, I have a thousand qualms with them. They want my stories, but not my son's, but someday I will force-feed it to them, for I'm the puppet who holds the strings."

I swallowed. His performance at the banquet had captivated me, but it did not compare to the reality of him. Questions abounded. The hows, whys, and whats of his upbringing.

"The puppet who holds the strings," I repeated, nodding. "You have power but no freedom."

"You live a half-lie, speak half-truths," he agreed.

"And though they want you to be honest, you cannot speak your mind. They don't want the real you. They want a leader who thinks as they do."

"You play a role."

"Otherwise, they'll punish you."

We traded glances. A significant amount of time passed, tempting me to say more, because it had felt good not to hold back.

I returned to the topic at hand. "Does Nicu know about his ailment?"

"Ah. It depends on the day. We've told him part of it, but not everything. Mostly, he finds it puzzling. Though he remembers every word of what we say, it eventually loses its meaning to him, and he goes back to being buoyantly unaware, and then we explain it to him again."

I thought about that and many other things. If I saw no means to challenge the law, I could not imagine a jester would succeed. Still, Poet was intelligent, persuasive, and passionate. A spark ignited in me that perhaps . . . perhaps together we could . . .

We could nothing. Not when I'd be leaving this kingdom at the month's end.

If he were a citizen of Mista, we might work together.

This wasn't Mista.

When my gaze slid to his ribbons, his mouth quirked. "Nicu made them for me—well, I helped without him knowing it. Tying knots on his own would be a difficulty. You might say I use them as tokens to mark my targets, as symbols of us against them."

Us against them. I cringed, unsure of my place within that statement.

"You'll notice them hanging from the cottage ceiling, for we use them to help give Nicu direction. It's been working so far."

I clasped Poet's arm. "The ribbon you left me. Poet, I tied it to a bush when I followed you. And our footprints. They could lead a search party here."

He tensed until I released him. "If they find the ribbon, it will draw them toward a main road, but they'll head full west after that, since more crimes are reported from there. That's how Whimtany patrols. By the time they quit there, we'll have returned to the castle, and a messenger will be dispatched to the unit.

"As for our treasonous tracks, the storm took care of them. We're southeast of the castle, so this area would be their last stop, out of routine as much as superstition. For I convinced the court these parts were haunted."

I peered at him. "How did you achieve that?"

"I'm Poet," he said, as if that explained everything.

"And monarchy aside, how do you know about official procedures?"

"I'm a glorious kisser."

I laughed out loud. "You are impossible."

"Am I?" His stare verged on explicit. Invasive, as though scouring my

mind, picking through all the disquieting thoughts I’d had about him.

Mindless for a distraction, I thrust the spoon into my mouth, only to remember that it was empty. I’d finished the soup.

The jester laughed. I whacked his knee with the spoon.

13

Princess

The rains continued throughout the day. I slept on and off, sedated anew by a steaming cup of herbal liquid that Jinny had brought me, but twitching about from the stinging pain of the leenix's claws—it managed to slash two claws into me, but at least not all four.

I floated between blackness and clarity. A masculine shape staring down at me from the curtained doorway. A hand sweeping fingers over my brow, murmuring a rhyme to quell my shuddering.

A dream of Mother and me in bed, whispering under a blanket. Another vision of Father snapping at me, and me running off into this forest, watching from a hiding spot as he searched frantically for me.

Boyish cackles. Nicu somewhere in the cottage.

Then quiet, the minutes passing. I awakened, staring at the vacant pallet across from me. Sweeping the blanket aside, I stood and hobbled to the doorway. Needing reassurance, a sense of my surroundings, I checked around the corner and saw them.

Poet and Nicu.

They slept on the floor of the main room, wrapped up in each other by the dying firelight. The child's head rested on his papa's shoulder while Poet breathed evenly into his son's hair. Both wore identical scrunched expressions. I practically tasted the sweetness of it.

It dawned on me that I'd been recovering in Nicu's room, the one he shared with his father. Which meant that I must be claiming Poet's bed. I would have woken them and insisted that they return to their rightful place, that I would be fine on the floor, but they looked so peaceful. I did not have the heart to disturb them. And something told me that Poet would have refused anyway. He was more selfless than I'd given him credit for.

I stumbled back to his pallet and dissolved into it. Then came images of the jester's painted eyes and us spinning wildly under a Spring moon, howling

at the night with a group of other figures. Then the two of us alone, reaching for each other, wanting, touching.

To dance, to dare, to do.

Jolting awake, I gasped into the sunlight. The clouds had broken into another day.

I arose and plucked at the remains of my gown, grimacing at the shredded material and smudges of dirt. I'd sweated and slept in it for two nights.

Two nights so far. Eliot would be pacing. Mother would be beside herself, wondering if she'd lost another loved one to Whimtany's forest.

My eyes screwed shut. We'd leave here soon enough, now that my leg was mending.

Opening my eyes, I surveyed the room. Someone had left me a gift folded on Nicu's pallet. A flax-colored frock with long sleeves that tied at the wrists and smelled of lavender. Sighing, I peeled off my own garment. I bathed with the cloth, soap, and basin of water that had also been left for me, threw myself into the garment, and laced up my boots.

Unwinding my braid and shaking out my hair, I thought of the Silly Seven in their floral circlets. I imagined myself greeting them like this, in my threadbare, leenix-scarred glory.

Refreshed, I tiptoed out of the room and got my first lucid glimpse of the cottage. A round table and two chairs by a hearth and cauldron. A cupboard holding a mortar and pestle, and jars of ground herbs, plants, and bark. Bundles of dried flowers and pots hanging in front of a window. A shelf of treats like honey and sugar, certainly supplied by Poet's wages.

Three cords of ribbons looped from the ceiling, each meant to guide Nicu to a different part of the cottage. Red for his room. Green for Jinny's room. Pink for the front room.

I walked outside. The mushroom-shaped cottage was secluded, tucked into a small clearing where a bubbling stream cut through the grass. Though the ground was still wet, warmth swam across my cheeks.

"You like berries?"

My head shifted toward the older woman. She had a voice that rose from

the earth, the way I'd imagine a root would sound if it could talk. Where most people let their words float away, her speech had a sturdy quality to it, closing around each word at the end.

She stood beside a pen, home to two hens and a stout pony, with a wagon stationed in the background. Her arm slung over an empty basket perched on her hip.

"Berries?" I asked.

"Bundleberries." She pumped her thumb toward a bush loaded with the rosy morsels, native to Whimtany. "A miracle, they are. Mixed with the right ingredients, they're good for baking, blood circulation, Nicu's tummy aches, warding off sleep depravity, and preventing an unwanted babe. Why, I wager they can do everything but reverse your age. What other fruit could you say that about?

"My Poet and Nicu love them. I'm not sure about you, so I'm asking before I set a berry biscuit on your plate. I've got a batch steaming and ready, if you like."

I'd feasted on the bread bowl and confirmed it was Mista grain, which Poet must have brought from Basil and Fatima's stores in the castle. We exported it from Autumn, and a few barrels had accompanied Mother and me on our journey here. The biscuits Jinny offered were likely of the same quality.

When my stomach grumbled in response, the woman beamed. "Sounds like a yes to me. Good morning, Your Highness."

"Oh . . . there's no need to call me that. Not after you wove a needle through my skin. Um, and good morning. My name is Briar."

"You sure?"

"Unless my parents have been lying to me."

"I meant, you sure about giving me leave with your name? It isn't proper, young Highness."

"I'm too tired for proper."

She shifted her basket to the opposite hip. "My boys call my Old Jinny. I take it curtsying isn't necessary? My bones can't take it."

I smiled at her. “I’m grateful to you for the stitches, and the food and clothes.”

“Don’t be silly. I’ve had that frock since I was your age. And the bit about your leg wasn’t no trouble. When Poet first came along, I had no money for a doctor. Now we have the coin but no healer we can trust with Nicu. I had to learn how to minister to my boys, and I had to learn fast.

“I’ve always kept to myself. Never had a mind to be around people, except when I went to the markets to trade herbs. I’m surrounded by medicines of the soil, so I’ve managed.” She wagged a finger at me. “You’re lucky you didn’t get infected. A hale one, you are. You’ll be walking finer than Poet by tomorrow.”

“Where is he?”

“Just missed him. He took Nicu and Tumble to pick me a batch of yarrow.”

I gestured to the berry bush. “May I help you?”

She frowned. “This work isn’t suited for a princess.”

“I’m not afraid of labor. In Mista, I take part in the harvest—”

“You work the fields?” she asked, taken aback.

“To rule the fields is to know them. Besides, I’d love something to do instead of sitting around. I’ve never gathered bundleberries before.”

“Then I’ll be the one to teach you after breakfast. Only, take care with your leg. Sit in the grass and gather at the bottom. I’ll mind the top of the bush.”

After I ate and washed the biscuit down with tea, Jinny demonstrated how to pluck the berries from just below the base of the stem. She went as far as to cover my hands with her wilted ones. “Let me show you.”

My fingers went rigid. “Oh, I-I’m fine.”

“You have to be gentle to keep them from popping and draining of juice, see. My mother taught me that it’s all in the sleight of hand. If we do it right, we’ll have the gift of sweetness.”

Her tone was reverent and grandmotherly, as though imparting a secret to a child. How long had it been since Mother and I shared such a moment?

How long since I allowed it?

I relaxed, giving in to Jinny's instruction. Once she released me, I found my rhythm. We worked in silence, moving from bush to bush, occasionally sampling the fruit. Although I remained seated, my muscles groaned and sweat beaded into patches across my frock. She did not pry or ask me questions about myself. It was surreal being someplace where no one could find me, instead of confined to a castle fraught with schedules and obligations, with eyes following me wherever I went, courtiers on my tail.

Jinny made a noise of bemusement. "Never thought I'd see a day when a princess got her fingernails caked. Never thought I'd see a day when Poet ripened for a girl, neither."

I jerked upright, knocking over my basket. "It's not that way between us."

She must know such a thing was not permitted anyway. A Royal and a servant could never be, even if we wanted it. Which neither of us did. Certainly not.

"We hate each other," I said. "He's allergic to me."

Jinny dumped a handful of berries into her basket. "I've known that boy since he was a wee thing. I raised him. Poet's a brash one, vain as can be, but he's good at heart. He worships his son, would sever his limbs to keep that child safe. He's careful there, always has been. If he hated you, he would have gotten you stitched and carried you like a sack of barley over his shoulder, back to the castle no matter the hour or how long it took, just so you wouldn't be around long enough to notice Nicu. But he kept you here. He told you about his sapling, and you've seen him for yourself."

Poet formally introduced me to Nicu yesterday, after our talk. Nicu had taken to calling me Girl.

"That tyke will hug the lungs out of strangers. He can list every herb in these parts, but ask him where to find them, and he won't know what you're talking about. Ask him where north is, and he'll point to your feet. Ask him where I sleep, and he won't be able to tell you. Poet trusts you knowing this. Respects you, even. Look at you, picking berries in the mud with me, saying I can call you by your name." Jinny's gaze probed me. "You're a Royal who

thinks differently about people. Am I right?”

Understanding what she really asked, I nodded.

She nodded back. “And don’t think I believe that drivel about you and Poet. You hate each other, you say? Hate is a miserable thing. That’s neither of you. He’s an active lad, born with a voice to spice tarts, but those tarts never made him blush. That isn’t hate, so have a care.”

I did not bother correcting her.

* * *

As I gathered the fruits, I watched him.

The jester propping his son in his lap, asking questions and listening to the child jabber.

The jester lifting and twirling the giddy child in the air, with Tumble scurrying about their feet.

The jester hefting Nicu from my hip each time the child interrupted my work and made a fuss over me. The jester flopping him over his shoulder, ignoring the boy’s tantrum and my assurances that it was fine, that I liked Nicu’s company.

The jester keeping a constant eye on his son, snatching Nicu into his arms when the jovial boy chased a wasp and got too close.

The jester filling a wooden tub with water, giving Nicu a bath, and reciting a poem to the child while drying his hair.

Poet utterly enamored with his son. And me utterly stricken by it.

By the late afternoon, I couldn’t take it any more and retreated to the stream. Water tumbled down the bank, licking the stones. The sun peeked through the trees, blotting the grass with dew drops of yellow. I had detested these woods for six years. I’d never trusted myself in them again.

Unexpectedly, something had changed. I had witnessed happiness here. The brave kind, the sort that I didn’t have anymore but missed. My chest pitied Poet and Nicu for the intolerance they had to endure. My heart envied how they could smile and laugh in spite of constant separation. My tight throat wanted to protect them. Most of all, my stomach worried about them. What could I do to help their plight? Did Poet even need my help?

What would happen if they got caught?

I removed my boots, sticking my feet into the chilly current. Goosebumps racing up my legs, I snatched a pebble from the ground, rolling it between my thumb and forefinger.

No, Poet did not need my help, since we were hardly friends. He hadn't confided in me out of closeness. I'd forced this situation on him. Were it up to him, I would have never set eyes on this cottage.

The knowledge blistered. The stream failed to soothe it.

The breeze carried his scent. Finally, I was learning how to detect his presence. Soon, I'd know how best to avoid him, or how to catch him before he caught me.

Rising and turning, I felt more acutely the material of my frock buffeting my thighs. Poet stood poised between two trees, the wildflowers brushing his feet, with traces of dirt on his toes. The wrinkled neckline of his shirt flapped against his skin.

Quiet Poet made an inconceivable Poet. His expression asked, *What are you thinking about?*

I hoped mine said, *Anything but you.*

I hadn't lied to Jinny. A chasm existed between him and me.

But I did lie to her. Stripped of finery, we could have been peasants, a boy and girl more interested in each other than in chores. I longed to draft a contract with myself, to stop my impressions of him from getting worse. Because they could only get worse.

To cover the silence, I tossed the pebble into the stream. It skipped along the surface and plunged. I snatched more and whisked them against the ripples, watching as they bounced and splashed. It had been forever since I played in a forest. Especially in this one.

On a whim, I tilted my head and held out a palm full of pebbles. "Afraid to test your skills against a Royal?"

Poet tamped down his surprise. "You make me sound like a juggling jackass."

"I assure you, you make a livelihood of that on your own."

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were toying with me. Who are you, and what you have done with the Autumn Princess?”

“She’s here, about to best you with relish.”

He took a pebble from my hand, flicked it above his head, and caught it behind his back with the opposite hand. “Perish the thought,” he said, then tossed the bit of rock. We watched as it plunked into the water with a dismal thud.

“Wow,” I joked.

“Hush,” he said.

He closed his eyes and whipped out his arm. The pebble pivoted, grazed the surface like a tease. After the fourth bump, it spun and dove. Poet whirled and stuck his tongue out at me, the action triggering my sportive side.

We competed, tossing rubble into the bank, the afternoon slipping by. The rolling pebbles, cascading water, and the wordless challenges to see who could master a better throw distracted us. Our shoulders brushing signaled that we’d ambled closer to each other. We flinched apart, casting one another accusing looks.

“I insist you tell me where learned your tricks,” I said. “You don’t grow up in isolation and miraculously learn how to read, pen verse, speak like a noble, juggle, and dance. To boot, don’t get me started on learning politics to the point of advising the monarchy after one year of servitude.”

He shrugged. “Fairs and festivals are in my blood. I have a love-hate relationship with them. My birth parents thought it a fine idea to dump me in a colorful place, and I became obsessed whilst growing up, having been lost and found in one. Mayhap I dragged Jinny to carnivals because I was searching for my parents, but I went home amazed by the sights and sounds—and haunted by them. I was torn, so I stayed away from the simpletons. I studied the performers, and . . . understood how they moved. I can’t explain it. I gave myself a host of bruises and injuries, but I replicated their movements until I could do them blindfolded.

“When I was old enough to venture out on my own, I did. Every week, I’d find the next attraction, the next gathering by walking there or sneaking rides

on wagons. I observed everyone. Jesters, acrobats, dancers. I charmed them into teaching me, and then at home, I practiced and experimented. When a petal twirled in the wind, I mimicked it, creating my own style. When I grew proficient enough, I became a performer. That's how I earned money to help Jinny.

"I listened to storytellers and musicians. I eavesdropped on the titled, soaking up their speech. Whatever I heard stuck to my mind. I don't know why or how, but lucky me."

Conscious of my leg, I gingerly plucked a stone from the grass. "You learned purely from listening to them?"

"Isn't that how we learn language to begin with? Stranger things have happened, Princess. Fair words and verse attracted me. I dedicated myself to them. It was intoxicating. Do you know what intoxicating means? It means fun."

"People cannot advance without tutors or books. Or experience. Or proper training."

"Don't be a snob. You've been doing so well, wearing your hair down and everything."

"I'm being pragmatic. I was bred in a castle. You're negating my studies."

"I'm saying there are other ways to be taught." He sounded insulted. "You can do anything if you're passionate about it and as fortunate, or sneaky, as I was. I learned my letters by stealing anything with writing on it—scrolls, announcements, discarded letters—and teaching myself. Oh, and I grew up amongst the common folk, who had plenty of opinions about the kingdom, laws, life, the monarchy. I digested what they had to say and fiddled with my own ideas. I discovered a knack for expressing those ideas through wit.

"After the Crown summoned me, I submerged myself deeper into the craft, for myself and for Nicu. Even before that, from the moment I saw what simpletons were made to do, I thought about how I could help them someday. Do I get to learn your secrets next?"

No, he did not. Not in these woods.

Though, I hesitated. "What would you care to know?"

However partial, my willingness caught him off guard. He opened his mouth but then closed it, changing his mind.

“Your favorite Season,” he said at last.

That made me chuckle. We continued our game of throwing pebbles and stones, dwelling on easier subjects that grew more meaningful just from speaking them aloud. We listed our favorite things, the rule being they had to be simple pleasures.

Me: the silhouettes of wheat stalks, the creak of carriage wheels, the feel of newly cleaned hands, a pretty brush, and droplets of ink. The scents of apples, campfires, and pine.

Him: the sound of wine sloshing into a goblet, gales of laughter, velvet against his palm, a tickle behind the knees, bathing in darkness, the color of blushing skin, and kisses.

We gossiped and swapped theories about court, comparing the traditions of Spring to Autumn.

He knew how to curl his tongue. I could wiggle my ears—and though I refused, he would not leave me be until I showed him. Unable to believe what I’d just done, I dropped my face into my hands, then lifted my head, realizing that I had been laughing out loud. I glanced at Poet and saw within those turbulent eyes the proof that I’d gotten carried away.

* * *

I won our pebble-throwing competition and milked it. Strolling back to the cottage, I recapped my best moves and his worst, as though we’d been in a jousting match. Poet tried to contest my point system. I accused him of being a sore loser.

The rest of the way, we lapsed into silence. I savored the unspoken truce we’d reached.

I liked this version of Poet. I think he liked this version of me.

I should have been reluctant, but I cared not. Swinging my arms at my sides, I hadn’t felt this carefree in ages, not even with Eliot.

Poet paused and stared at the cottage. Smoke puffed from the chimney, dissolving into the pink-orange sky and carrying the scent of supper.

“He deserves more than me,” Poet said.

I started. “That’s not true.”

“There’s nothing bad about Nicu. He’s spectacular, yet his ailment endangers him, and that’s my fault. For I’m the one who made him.”

I touched his sleeve, and his eyes snapped toward me. “You’ve told me what you believe a fool is. But there’s more. A fool is a man who sees his worth in a mirror, in the faces of a crowd, but is blind to it elsewhere. Where it most counts: in the eyes of those he loves and who love him. Don’t insult yourself that way.”

There was another reason that I vowed to keep his secret safe. I knew what it was like to be responsible for the fate of someone I loved. Just as well, I knew the bite of letting others down and owing them far more than I was able to give.

The difference was, Poet didn’t deserve that anguish. I admired his strength of will. He had the stomach to make the world laugh, when the world would laugh at his son. To say anything he wanted, while saying nothing of his life. To be the beloved fool, while his son remained the condemned one. To let everyone think he had no heart, that he possessed only humor.

More than being captured in his stare, I sought to catch him in mine. When Jinny had stitched me, I bled, screamed, and wept in front of Poet. I’d sprayed his face with spittle. He’d seen me delirious and clumsy, then entrusted his secrets to me.

Poet had seen me loud. And now I’d seen him quiet.

I considered the luxury of being honest and rash with someone. I must have been starved for it, because my title, my presence of mind, and years of decorum vanished when I said, “I’ve addressed the whole of my kingdom. I’ve reassured peasants and rallied knights with my mother. But with no one around, I managed to stay your tongue, and it feels just as remarkable. And, ugh . . . it is awful.”

“Appalling,” he said, by way of agreement. “Appalling is a better word.”

Nicu dashed outside, shattering our trance. “Papa!” he squeaked. “I ate my supper without you. Wanna see me dance? Look! You too, Girl!”

“Nicu,” Poet cautioned. “Not so fast—”

The child had barely come to a full stop. He flung himself into a spin, tilted like a cart off its traces, and crashed to the ground. Immediately, his face lifted to check our reactions.

Poet crossed his arms, a lighthearted gibe ready on his lips. But when the boy’s eyes shifted to me, I couldn’t help it. I knew the turmoil shone across my face like a bad omen.

Nicu burst into tears.

Grasping my skirt, I bolted toward him. I reached him before Poet had the chance, the weeping child spilling into my arms. I drew my thumbs across his sodden cheeks and lowered my gaze, persuading him to look at me.

“Come now,” I said. “My falls are much worse than yours. They’re sorry to behold.”

“Are you lying to me?” Nicu whimpered.

“Not in the least.”

He sniffled, fiddling with my hair and listening as I described a time when I’d been practicing dancing for a grand ball, only to topple into an Autumn tumbleweed. I made it sound funnier than it actually had been.

“I’m afraid to dance now,” I confessed.

“Why?” he asked.

“I don’t want to fall again and be embarrassed. But you?” I poked his belly. “You’re brave. You’ll get right back up and try again. It would be a shame not to, because even the birds have to risk crashing before they can fly. Even your Papa has fallen. He just won’t admit it.”

“Old Jinny will tell us about that, if we ask her,” he said, cupping his hands around his mouth.

“Then we shall,” I whispered.

The boy’s teary, lopsided grin undid me. I’d thought rendering Poet speechless had been a triumph, but I hadn’t known the half of it until I’d made Nicu smile.

“No conspiring, you two.” Poet approached us, playing along. “Just because I can’t fall as brilliantly, ’tis unfair to rib me about it.”

The boy giggled. “Girl told on you, Papa. You have no boots on and can’t walk straaaaaight.”

“Ouch. Take pity on my shortcomings, I beg of you.”

“Oops. Nope.”

“Well said, my love.” Poet held out his hand to Nicu. “’Tis the hour for your pillow.”

With the added promise of a bedtime story, Nicu peeled himself from me. I started to follow them as they headed inside, but halted when Poet tossed me a violent look over his shoulder.

Stay here, he mouthed.

It must have been the coddling that displeased him. The fall hadn’t been that bad, so Nicu might not have cried if I hadn’t encouraged him to. Or this had to do with his condition. Perhaps I’d said something wrong.

Poet returned eons later, closing the front door behind him and stalking toward me. I steeled myself for a lecture. Without a word, he seized my wrist and pulled me with him, not forcefully—not gently, either. He hastened us past the cottage, through the floral trees, out of sight and earshot.

“Now see here,” I bristled, attempting to yank my hand back. “I am not a beast of burden. I’m your superior. Let go!”

Without glancing back, he blithely flicked my arm out to the side. I straightened my sleeve and marched after him. We cleared the woods again and emerged into a meadow that dipped and cupped us in its palm. Since I’d forgotten my boots at the stream, mud browned my feet and stained the hem of Jinny’s frock.

Poet retreated another two steps. Swearing under his breath, he rounded on his heel and came back to me.

I sighed. “I meant no offense. I only thought of Nicu, but I know it wasn’t my place. I should have asked you first—”

He whisked a finger against my lips.

He grabbed my face.

And he kissed me.

His mouth claimed mine. An objection swelled and died in my throat,

silenced by the slant of Poet's head. His fingers wove through my hair, blazing a trail up my scalp. I grabbed his waist, intending to haul myself back, only to discover the manipulative effect of touch.

I shuddered, letting this happen, allowing *him* to happen. And oh, how I lost my way. And . . . my . . . goodness.

With a groan, he split my lips apart, about to take me fully into the heat of him. A threshold on which I caught the wet taste of Spring. Tremors racked my body, tearing me from my foundation—and hurling me to the ground.

I ripped away from him. My palm sliced the air, aiming for his cheek. The promise of a crack striking the treetops, Poet's head veering to the side, a furious mark branded upon his skin.

Of course his serpentine reflexes saw it coming. Not taking his gaze off me, he caught my wrist inches from his face.

He jerked me into him. "I didn't know you cared."

My breathing cut a path through me. I wheeled away, creating a divide between us. If I kept going and didn't stop, we would be separated by the expanse of woodland, then eventually by Whimtany's castle halls.

I made it as far as the meadow's border, where I gazed down at myself as if expecting to find a disaster. Remorse dashed up my neck, but whether from kissing him or trying to hit him, I had no idea. I couldn't pick through the sensations in order to tell which were right and wrong, which were me and which were him.

In the grass, Poet's shadow pooled with mine, submerging him into me, his shirt brushing against me from behind. It would be effortless for my head to loll back and find relief on his shoulder. To grant him permission, like every other admirer he'd seduced.

Poet reached around me. The pad of his thumb played across my quavering lips, then he used his fingers to tilt my chin, giving him access to my ear. His mouth played over the shell, a maneuver that coaxed the fight out of me.

"What are you doing?" I hissed.

"Everything," he answered, his voice gravel and silk over my skin.

He sunk his teeth into me. I sunk my nails into my palms.

He bit my lobe. I bit my lip.

“Sweet Thorn,” he murmured. “We both know better. We’re hypocrites who have ached for this.”

“I disagree.”

“The princess disagrees. The girl trapped within doesn’t.”

I whirled and shoved him. “How dare you presume to tell a Royal who she is! I don’t need you to dissect or fix me.”

“Where to start,” Poet sang. “I’m not talking to a Royal, I’m talking to a young woman, for that has a more charming ring to it. I’m not presuming, I’m provoking. I didn’t say you needed fixing. I’m denying you’re broken to begin with. Take a compliment, and be done with it. I’m famished, so if you’re not going to pucker up, supper shall have to play second fiddle.”

“Fix. Change. It doesn’t matter what you meant!” I stormed close enough for our noses to tap, pinching my thumb and forefinger together. “What you know is this much about carrying a kingdom, people’s lives, and centuries of ancestry on your shoulders.”

“Just to clarify, we were referring to a kiss. You haven’t received word that Mista is being invaded, correct?”

“Aren’t you the clever one—”

“But enough about me,” he boasted. “What I see is a girl with bandages on her leg, not a crown on her head. She defended the jester whom she deplores and befriended the child whom society expects her to shackle. She dances in front of mirrors. She cherishes a minstrel. That makes an authentic heart, and that’s what makes a leader. That’s what makes her stunning. Woe is the world, she’d rather let people believe her as cold as a block of marble.”

“You lead two lives, yet you have the gall to accuse me of pretending. You have no right!”

“My excuse is three feet tall and has my eyes. Pray, what’s yours?”

My excuse had my eyes, too. But he was dead.

“I’m not trying to change you,” Poet snapped. “I’m trying to unearth what’s already there. You’re the tragedy who doesn’t realize it.”

“Do not patronize me.”

“Please,” he flouted. “’Tis my craft to patronize everybody.”

It had been a long two days. My father drew his final breath in this forest. My mother had no idea where I was, or if I was safe. My best friend believed himself hopelessly in love with the boy with whom I’d just betrayed our friendship. I’d been led astray, sliced open by a cat, stitched by a stranger, serenaded by a child whose freedom depended on my silence, and been kissed —dear Autumn, my first kiss!—and criticized by a juggler.

With a battle cry, I launched at him. We careened into the mud. His height and dexterity would have bested my lack of both, were it not for my temper. Muck splattered our clothing as we rolled once, twice.

I landed on top of him, my fists pummeling his chest. “How’s that for reflexes, huh? Not so nimble and quick anymore, are you?”

Poet managed to lock my elbows behind my back. I writhed and squirmed.

“Your stitches,” he grunted.

Sanity returned. Though I didn’t feel pain or see blood, I’d neglected my injury.

Defeated, I collapsed. We lay there wheezing, his heartbeat drumming into my cheek. My fingers came to rest on his neck, a pulse point that quickened the moment I touched him.

Without his concession, I thumbed the spot. He gulped, gripping my waist, causing my hips to buck. Another mistake reared its ugly head, worse this time. Him beneath me, worn out, with nowhere to go. My knees and skirt spread around him.

I knew hardly anything of amorous physical pleasure, except for what I’d overheard spoken between courtiers. And in certain moments, I had wondered about all the things I was missing.

I met Poet’s hooded gaze. Our quarrel had done nothing to prevent this. We’d sapped ourselves of everything but curiosity. And need.

My mouth found his. His lips quivered, moist and steaming under mine, tasting of spice and rain. We sketched each other’s lips with more urgency,

my desire jumping in response. I unraveled like a ribbon, winding around him.

And in my weakness, I found power: the means to shut him up.

14

Jester

I have no grandiose words for it. Remembering those days, I cannot think straight.

The princess waking in my bed, trading smiles with my son, pulling secrets from my lips.

The princess working alongside Old Jinny in the dirt, unfazed by the prospect of gritty hands and feet.

The princess skipping pebbles, caring to know about me, refusing to let me know about her.

The princess comforting my son and, hence, beating the shit out of my heart.

The princess's wild weight straddling me, rousing my blood until I waved my wit farewell.

In my haven, the princess was no longer a princess. In my arms, she became Briar.

Briar fucking kissing me . . .

She melted, pouring herself all over me, stealing my breath, then my mouth. Her parted lips traced mine, unhurried but growing in confidence. Her breasts dragged across my chest and hardened me within seconds. I hoped she felt it.

Her hands grasped my collar as my hands destroyed her hair. A vine of lust curled up my spine, a dozen thorns pricking me sweetly. I was done for.

My turn.

With a growl, I went after her taste. My lips pried hers wider as I canted my head, pushing this further, my tongue stroking into her. I preened at her gasps, lapped at them. Those sounds, a rhapsodic strum of music as I licked through her.

I sat up and brought her with me, sealing our mouths together, her insides yielding for me. Retreating, I nibbled her lower lip, seeking to punish her for

this turn of events.

Again.

My kiss slammed back into her. She shattered, welcoming my greedy pulls at her mouth and tongue. And thus, between pants, all wicked hell broke loose.

15

Jester

I’m supposed to confess my sins, say ’twas a mistake, but I detest that word. You would think that I’d been having a dalliance with it, based on how oft I’d been hurling myself into stupidity’s waiting arms, attuned to minstrels and monarchs, to children who needed me and princesses who didn’t. However, I told you that jesters don’t spew apologies.

On the contrary, we make ourselves into brilliant fools. Ay, we make our folly flourish.

Secrets and sons are other matters. They’re excluded from that rule, because I say so.

I also say this: ’Twould be impossible to repent a muddy, maddening kiss that depletes lovers of air and intellect, a kiss that makes a mockery of reason.

Neither would it beget much of a tale if I had regretted having a taste of her, for remorse would have made life simple. For then I could have danced away with bruised lips, but with the divine trinity intact: my conscience, my cunning, and my cock.

Instead, I sat there, relishing her mouth. Which meant doom . . .

The second kiss had been her idea. She started it, so she ended it, rending her lips from mine and jolting off my lap. She toppled onto the grass, then staggered to her feet. To complete the drama, her hand shot to her mouth, *What Have I Done?* scrawled in pink across her face.

Oh, bother. Pressing my palms into the mud to stay their own damnable trembling, I waited until my blood cooled and another part of me deflated. It took an impressive while. I wasn’t used to feeling unsatisfied by the aftermath, never had to recover from it before.

Eventide descended, stalking its way into the meadow. That was how long we’d been kissing.

I picked through my mental reserves, scavenging for witticisms, none of them adequate. “You beast!” I fake-gasped.

The princess’s hand fell, her eyes narrowing to flint. I held out my fingers like a damsel. She played the hero, helping me to stand. Awkwardness trickled into the scene as we rid ourselves of the dirt, smacking at our clothes and combing through our hair whilst avoiding eye contact.

Mud streaked her wrist. As I wiped it with my sleeve, the princess went rigid. Her self-disgust was hard to miss—because at least one of us had to set the moral example. But for some absurd reason, I took umbrage.

“You’re messier than I,” I said.

Her shoulders slumped. “I do not care.”

There went the mortal remains of my ego. Because I was a prick, I couldn’t tell if I’d been trying to tickle or defile the mood, to get her to laugh or nettle her. Both options appealed to me.

We withdrew to the cottage, where Nicu slept with Tumble. Old Jinny kept quiet about our grimy state because she didn’t need to comment. She knew me. Therefore, she *knew*.

Dignity questionable—I read the princess’s mind—but head held high, she brooked the unspoken judgment as though receiving it from a row of monarchs. She knew that Jinny knew, and Jinny knew that she knew, and I knew that they both knew. And so fucking forth.

Jinny might have teased me last night, but she’d dedicated nineteen years to the role of my harshest critic. Her silver eyebrow, raised at me behind the princess’s back, ruled out any jokes. My cherished keeper didn’t approve of these escapades and would have verbally shaved my hide if she weren’t busy serving royalty a meal.

To the world, the princess masked herself well, but she could be impetuous when nature ran its course. And I happened to be irresistible. Jinny had a right to worry, so I put her at ease with a covert shake of my head.

That night, I slipped under the blanket with my son, sentencing myself to sleep deprivation. ’Twasn’t that bad. It gave me six lucid hours to listen to the melody of his sleep-talk.

And as the sun hooked onto the sky, its rays yawning over the land, I traveled to a neighboring village. There, I purchased and brought back a pony

—Jinny had one, but she needed it—to cart the royal bane of my existence home.

As usual, my looming departure caused an upheaval. I spent an hour trying to calm Nicu down. He threw a weepy fit, his heart flooding the cottage, my heart dangling from the end of a noose.

Nicu thought I spent my days earning coin at festivals. Someday, I would tell him the truth, but I found no need for it now. He wouldn't understand. I wasn't even sure he would later.

I said good-bye to my son, and my son wailed, and this was our lot every week, because our kingdom saw my boy as a crime of nature, and I served the kingdom heartily and hatefully. That was our story.

My jokes had no effect on Nicu this time. Why? Because the princess was leaving as well. My son cried that she couldn't go, because she was his friend, and he didn't want to lose her cuddles. She did the wrong thing, her gaze flickering to me in indecision, requesting guidance.

Nicu would not see her after today. Not if I had anything to do with it.

So what did this girl do to further confound me? She knelt before my child and achieved the impossible, quieting him with a balmy smile and a speech bred from . . . empathy.

"I miss my papa, too. But I have to be brave about it," she said. "And I think you can be brave. Let's try together. Then, before you know it, your papa will return. He has always done so, isn't that right?"

"Yes," Nicu hiccuped, fisting her sleeves and resting his profile in the crook of her neck.

"Then you are lucky," the princess admitted, her misty expression betraying her.

On the dusty floor, the princess let his tears and drool and snot drizzle down her skin. No one, not even my masterful self, had controlled my son so swiftly and with so little effort. The princess had magic. Her performance demanded my respect. My envy.

I wanted to kiss her again. I wanted to make a joke of it.

"Tell Girl a story, to take with her," I suggested, kneeling beside them.

Nicu perked up and dazzled us with nonsensical beauty. The princess embraced and thanked him, forcing herself to let go. I knew the feeling.

I kissed my son's face 'til Jinny hinted that I needed to leave before he started protesting again. I tightened the ribbons on his wrist. Just one more kiss, one more hug.

I left. For the thousandth time, I left him.

The forest consumed Nicu's face in the window, devouring the cottage from view. I guided the pony along, with Tumble in the saddlebag. My ramrod Royal sat grudgingly astride, complaining that she could walk.

"Go ahead. Deny me the chance to be a hero," I said.

She mumbled, "You don't need me for that."

She didn't elaborate. I didn't query, as I lacked the verbal stamina, for I'd had my fill of her.

At least she didn't whine about being blindfolded. My gut told me that she wouldn't divulge the cottage's location, but my gut had also enticed me to kiss her. And when it came to my son, I took no chances. I covered her eyes with a cloth and bound her hands.

We rode and walked, walked and rode. Between rests and our ride's slow gait, the journey took three times as long as it should have. 'Twas the kind of overripe Spring day, pregnant with the aromatic nausea of sweet peas, that felt like a sham.

I concentrated on the crunch of dead branches underfoot, a beetle feasting on the corpse of its mate, and the stench of the pony's coat penetrating my nostrils. The sun lurked through the trees like a warning, threatening to blind us at any moment.

Which it did when we reached the castle. My stage and my cage. It rose above the hills, the stone teeth of crenelations across the parapet walks, the open-mouthed drawbridge, the glass spires stabbing the sky, the ivy clinging to its round towers. A dozen flags whipped at the clouds.

I tallied perks like my opulent chamber, my wardrobe, and fine wine. Nothing compared to my son, but these comforts nonetheless blunted the pain. I needed a bath, a soul-deep stretch, and an audience. Mayhap a pair of

willing arms.

Not the princess's.

I untied her then. I still had the tunnel's gate key, affixed to my belt—I'd had a copy of the key forged when I first came to the castle, so that I could use it when I visited my family—but sneaking back in wasn't an option. Whimtany's stronghold loomed as we passed into the barbican, to the following cacophony: Horns shrieked, guards stampeded across the cobblestones to attend us, and a herd of servants cluttered the scene, swarming us like sheep.

Ushered to the throne room, the princess and I swapped glances. In the wild, we had puzzled together our story during the only moment in which we'd talked. Now our gazes locked for an instant. The floral woods, the cottage, the stream, the meadow, there and gone.

I nodded to her. *Let me do the lying*.

She looked away. Good girl.

Bad boy. I still wanted to kiss her.

Basil and Fatima heaved from their chairs and waddled toward the girl first, expressing their relief. Then they took my hands, beaming and bursting with questions.

I bowed and hatched a tale. The princess had journeyed from the complex to pay homage to her father in the forest, where he was known to have died. I saw her departure from a window and got nosy. The princess wished for privacy, thus leaving on foot and then borrowing a horse from the public stables in the lower town, intending to compensate the owner later. And I, looking for mischief, followed suit. Thereupon, we lost our horses and had our showdown with the leenix.

A woodland hermit found us, gave us shelter, and stitched the princess. And nay, the hermit didn't want to be thanked or receive a reward.

Her Highness impaled me with a look, smarting because I'd included the princess's deceased father in a lie, not to mention falsely citing her for instigating the events to begin with. Well, sorry. She knew that she'd have a better excuse to be out in the forest than I would. We had agreed on this

earlier.

To be honest, it wasn't my best effort. But the princess sported a bandage, so none questioned us on the particulars.

My ally lost her composure only when Avalea of Autumn flew into the room. The princess's posture faltered as her mother gathered her into a petrified embrace, clasping the back of the princess's head and babbling, "My girl, my girl."

Even as she held her mother, the princess also held herself back from grasping too tightly. Indeed, she'd had more difficulty saying good-bye to my son than greeting her own flesh and blood. How unfair of her.

The Queen enveloped me with her gratitude. The Spring Crown insisted upon a celebration feast, at nightfall tomorrow, allowing us to rest in the meantime. They led the princess and me in opposite directions, and thank Spring, and dammit. I thrust myself into a tub, into bed, and the next day, into better clothes.

We didn't see each other until the evening, when a note slipped beneath my door and her handwriting bled across the parchment. *The east tower catches the afterlight.*

Reading the message, I compressed my lips to withhold chuckles. If she intended to communicate this way, she'd need to whet her skills.

That particular tower smelled of cold wax and gave a wider berth than the others. Climbing the spiral staircase, I found her in a waterfall of satin, her neck roped in jewels, her hair confined to braids. Night fell through the arrow slits, the stars illuminating the steps and her fidgety fingers.

In my doublet and jerkin, and with black lining my eyes, I felt ready for her. Curving my hand beside my mouth, I lowered my voice to a baritone whisper, piggybacking her covert message. *"But the afterlight—"*

She spun around with a yelp, her back hitting the wall.

"*—won't catch us,"* I finished. "Say that three times fast, and I shall grant you a wish."

The princess sagged into the wall. "Reverting to your splendor, I see."

"Aren't we all."

“No. I don’t think I can see you the same way anymore.”

“I might have a similar problem regarding a certain Royal.” I laced my fingers behind me and paused on the stair below her. “I enjoy looking up to you like this. Do you enjoy looking down on me?”

“Is that a trick question?”

“Every question is a trick question.”

She stared at me through eyes that I longed to steal, so I might see what she saw. My warped self yearned to crush her against the stones and map the crease of her lips with my tongue.

“We are hardly alike,” she said, her words tiptoeing into the darkness.

“That is true here and false elsewhere.”

“I had a speech prepared.”

I snorted. “Speeches are an insult to intuition.”

“Among other things, they also show that we care enough to make an effort,” she rebuked. “Anything that matters takes time.”

I did a double take. She was right.

She checked the stairway. “Once more, I wanted to assure you that I’m trustworthy. I will keep all that I’ve learned to myself.”

“Ay, you will.”

Because whatever perplexing, emotional obstacles we confronted, they could not compare to Nicu’s plight. As he grew older, his problems would escalate, and the dumb-dumbs of this country would make him pay more dearly for being different than she and I ever would for sharing a measly kiss.

This near to her, I inhaled memories of the illicit meadow. Mayhap the kiss had snuck into her mind as well, but it would pass. It had to. For my son’s sake, I couldn’t afford to get on the Crown’s bad side. Being intimately acquainted with the Autumn Princess’s moans amounted to me shitting on their laws—fundamentals that I planned to attack someday.

“Have you seen Eliot?” she blurted out.

I quirked a brow. I hadn’t yet seen the lovely minstrel, because I’d been snoring ever since our return. “I shall get to that. I’ll set him aright.”

“You must have been missed,” she commented. “By many.”

Ah-ha. Her expression declared, *I've kissed you, but I won't be one of a dozen.*

I've indulged with others, done more with them than kiss. This princess may suspect that she wasn't special. Alas, what she failed to grasp was that none of my lovers had ever seen me plain. No one else had met my son.

On the other hand, she had me pegged. Surely, many had missed me. The walls and halls of Whimtany would be a dismal place otherwise.

It couldn't happen for her and me anyway. That was the point.

When I didn't deny her comment, the princess's expression toughened. "So you'll leave Eliot out of your flings. And you won't flaunt others in front of him. Otherwise, harm will come to those you . . . mislead."

"Funny," I said. "Here I thought we were talking about the minstrel."

"What happened with you—that was a moment of weakness. We'd been recovering from dire circumstances. It overwhelmed us. We sought a release from the trauma, but we're back now. We're above that. It didn't mean anything."

Only two words fit in my mouth. "Of course."

"Right," she clipped.

The aftereffects of this moment lingered, killing my appetite during the feast later, as the princess and I sat amongst nobility, her mother at her side and the Seven Lovelies at mine. I ignored her presence, as Her Highness ignored me.

Eliot watched us from the corner, where he strummed his lute. His devoted brown eyes hopped from her to me, drinking us in with relief.

Longing for a story, the Crown requested the tale of our disappearance. I obliged, becoming the jester they craved. Rising with a flourish to their applause, I sauntered to the head of the assembly, in my element, where I belonged. Daring a glimpse of her, I took a breath and a bow.

16

Princess

Father used to say that change took time, but he was wrong. It did not take any time at all to change me. The glimpse of a family. A beautiful tale. A child's tears. A confession. A wound. An honest opinion. A friend's betrayal. One parent's death and another's embrace. A touch—an instant slapping you with its light and jolting you back, shaken and blinking. Those quick moments were what changed people.

What took time was accepting the change.

Standing on my balcony, I thought about humor and recklessness, about fools and being a leader. I thought about Nicu's smile. I thought about Poet's ribbon, which I no longer had, because I'd left it in the woods, tied to a bush.

I dragged my fingers across my lips. I still felt the jester there.

* * *

Mother refused to leave my side. She kept encircling my waist or smoothing my hair. Each contact threatened me with tears to match the ones prickling her eyes.

She doted. She shooed the maid away and readied my bath herself.

Was I hungry? Would I like steamed plums in cream—my favorite? How was my leg? Would another pillow help?

Whenever I thought to brush her off, her eager face changed my mind. I was famished. My leg would survive. Yes, another pillow, please.

When I retired, she pulled a chair beside my bed.

"I am fine, Mother," I insisted.

"Oh, I know," she said, draping a fur over her seat. "I will stay for only a few minutes."

"Mother—"

"It's no trouble."

At dawn, I awakened to find her still there, slumped over. I allowed myself a private smile, chasing it away with a frown of disapproval once she

stirred.

* * *

I needed air. I needed my friend.

Eliot met me at the ruins. He rushed into the space, and we charged toward each other, crashing into a hug. As we became a sloppy lump of arms, he babbled a bucket-full of words into my shoulder. Imagining Poet and me lost to him had been sickening. Writing music in his head hadn't helped his green pallor. The monarchy had been in an uproar questioning everyone about our disappearance.

He asked how I fared and whether he was crushing me with his embrace. My heart thought, *I've had what you desire. I've tasted his tongue. I've had him wrapped around my body, and none of this was supposed to happen, and I cannot talk to you about it, and I'm sorry for stealing him from you, if only briefly.*

Please. Forgive me.

We burrowed into a corner on the grass, with our fingers entwined and our bodies crumpled together in a heap. My cheek took refuge against his sleeve, which had achieved a dreamy softness from years of repeated washing.

Eliot lifted the hem of my skirt, exposed my thigh, and whistled at my stitches. With anyone else, showing this much skin would have been indecent.

"How many times have I told you, you're not immortal?" he teased.

"It's merely a scratch. I'm more durable than the other princesses you know."

"And you weren't a bit scared."

"Not with the jester as my shield."

At the mention of Poet, Eliot scooted away to pick petals off a lupine. "He's ensnared you, too, hasn't he?"

I schooled my features. "I am not sure what you mean."

"You don't want to tell me what happened, so it must be the sorts of frights worthy of songs. He must have had time to influence you, if you're using jokes to hide stuff, but I can take it, believe me. You know I don't swoon easily, Briar. Well, except over all things Poet-sprinkled, but you don't

have to protect me from the gory details, because I'll survive them yet. Not that it won't bruise my soul to know the turmoil you went through, but you're my friend, and I want to know so I can valiantly comfort you. I mean, if anything else happened worth mentioning, I'll stomach it. I'm a big lad—well not big, but you follow me."

Remorse ate at my ribs. In our six years together, I've shared with him every possible truth.

I leaned back, gazed up at him, and tainted our friendship. "If there were more to say, I would. But there honestly isn't."

* * *

The castle had two training grounds. One for knights. One for performers.

I passed the latter with Mother during a morning walk, a rare moment of freedom for her. She ranted about something the Queen of Summer had said—I didn't know what, because I wasn't listening.

Whimtany's resident troupe practiced on the green. Twelve beautifully sculpted bodies and flashes of skin. They rotated staffs. They danced. They balanced on low beams and flipped with their graceful limbs extended.

Six women. Five men.

One Poet.

He dangled from a floral tree, using his arms to pull his body upward until his chin passed a branch, then brought himself down again. He did this repeatedly. Up and down. Down and up. His bare arms and torso flexed, ropes of muscles shaking with exertion, covered in a sheen of sweat.

On an exhale, he dropped to the ground and swiped a skin pouch from the grass. Uncorking it, he tipped his head back and drank, his throat pumping.

My mouth watered.

His abdomen bunched as he twisted and flung his arm in a wide arc, tossing the skin sideways over his head to another acrobat. He did this without warning, but the girl caught it without breaking her twirl. They both laughed.

He strode over to her, aimed his pointer finger to ground, and circled it. A silent request.

She winked at him and obediently executed another spin while he tilted his head and assessed the motions. Despite her saucy gesture, there wasn't anything flirtatious about the scene. Their expressions remained as concentrated as the rest of the troupe. They took their craft seriously.

He spoke to her, offering guidance, using his hands to describe a curvy movement. I couldn't say whether Mother was still talking. As we crossed into his line of vision, Poet became aware of me and tensed, his shoulder blades locking.

The crease of his spine. The waist that tapered and then rounded into a solid backside.

Anticipation flared. But he kept advising the girl, sparing me not a glance.

Not until the distance between us grew again.

We craned our heads over our shoulders, our eyes smoldering.

My damp, thickened breath. A thrust of heavy-lidded lightning. A deep-rooted, thigh-clenching ache in intimate places.

* * *

In the mornings, I interrogated Mother for recaps of the peace talks. In the evenings, my maid laced me into elegant gowns.

In between: throne room appearances to witness the Spring Crown hold court; a royal tour of the armory and a personal one of the kitchens, where I thanked the servants for their hospitality and acquainted myself with their names and smiles; festive meals adorned with Poet; private junctures with Eliot; the Silly Seven nudging me for details about spending three nights with Poet in the woods; a jousting tournament that Poet opened with a booming speech while standing in the center of the field.

Many evenings staring into space. Like now.

As a child, this life had taught me all the regal words I would need to rule. These days, I wondered about the honest words I'd never considered, the ones collecting in my throat.

I don't know. I'm scared.

Don't leave. Come back. Let me go.

I'm here if you need me. I can't give you what you need.

* * *

Poet reclined against a column. A nobleman set his hand on the ivy-entwined pillar and leaned in, his face sloped down toward the jester in invitation.

My footsteps slowed. I'd been on my way to the archives, intending to address a stack of letters from advisers in Mista, regarding inquiries of commerce and social disputes. Mother let me take charge of correspondence while she was busy.

I also planned to research historical doctrine concerning the treatment toward born fools, in the hopes of finding loopholes or any bit of information that Poet could use in his favor.

En route, I happened upon the scene. The nobleman lifted a finger, tucking a lock of Poet's hair behind his ear. The man looked beseechingly, lustfully, at the jester.

But Poet seemed distracted. He turned his head in thought. And he saw me.

A princess always showed restraint and propriety.

I turned, crossing into a random passage to get away from them. In the archives, I threw myself into my work, poring over news and questions from home. I did not think about him with that man, what they were doing, that Poet had assured me he wouldn't flaunt his trysts—for the sake of Eliot. It was none of my business.

My brows did not wrinkle. My chest did not hollow. My eyes did not burn.

I did not feel bereft of things I couldn't name. I did not feel disappointment or jealousy.

I couldn't. I could not let those things happen to me.

In the midst of writing a letter, my fingers blotted with black and my wrist aching, I startled as Tumble bounded onto my desk. His squeak echoed through the vault. Between his tiny incisors was a note, which he dropped beside my arm before galloping away.

Straightening on the bench, I unfolded the missive and scanned the

contents. Two words.

Nothing happened.

* * *

In the great hall, he played. He juggled coins, flinging them toward the ceiling, then eventually hurled them toward his spectators, making everyone gasp with delight as they tried to catch the golden pieces.

He strolled past a know-it-all duke who claimed to have eyes in the back of his skull. In a series of moves behind the nobleman, Poet switched the order of the man's cutlery. Effortless and quick, to the guests' hilarity but with his target none the wiser.

In Queen Fatima's opinion, a third goblet of wine was one too many for her husband. Poet convinced her to let the monarch drain four, to which King Basil nearly knighted the jester on the spot.

Another day, on the checkered tulip lawn, Poet performed acrobatics with his troupe. They pitched themselves into the air and tumbled across the ground.

And on another day, at the lotus ponds, he recited poetry. As he strolled across wooden bridges intersecting over the water, the words became satin on his tongue.

Poet's wardrobe knew no bounds. A whimsical replica of a crown made with contrasting cloth patterns instead of jewels. A hunter hat boasting a single feather. A high-necked doublet with a band of jester flaps sewn into the left sleeve and wrapping around his bicep. Fine hose and a loose belt hanging off his hips. A pair of fringed gloves.

He boasted layers of black and white paint across his temples, curling outward at the ends. Another time, sable brown covered his eyelids nearly to his brows, and beneath each eye, the color tapered into four points, like webbed fingers, ending in gold dots.

When I least expected it, he atoned for his first jest on me. I sat in a chair amidst the wisteria arbors, engaged in conversation with Mother and the Queens of Winter, when a hand flaunting a candle broke us apart. The jester presented the flickering taper he'd once denied me. The sincerity of his

gesture hushed the crowd.

My heart gave a violent kick. I accepted the gift, our fingers clashing, inviting murmurs and applause. I knew of seven particular jaws that dropped.

He inclined his head. Amplifying his voice for everyone to hear, he said, “Your Highness. This is overdue, for the leenix had no chance against such valor. It was an honor to be saved by Autumn. And so, I thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” sprang from my tongue. “I—rescue lads all the time.”

His mouth stretched into a grin. He nodded to Winter, then to my heedful mother, and pivoted on his heel.

Beneath my canopy at night, I replayed that moment of praise, which shoved the memory of our kiss back to the surface. If his lips could do that to mine, what could they do to the rest of me?

The question guided my fingers down my stomach and under my bedgown, where I slipped into an excruciating warmth that had my body blushing, my mouth parting, and my spine snapping off the mattress. My hand probed, searching deep for the answer.

* * *

For once, I could not help Eliot. I could not torment him with awful ballad lyrics to make him laugh, or cheer him up with pear cider brought from Autumn. I could not beg Poet to alter his feelings and make Eliot happy, however much I wanted to.

The jester had delayed for five days before breaking my best friend’s heart.

“I am sorry,” I said, then hazarded, “Do you wish to talk about it?”

We leaned against the wall in the ruins. Eliot shook his head, his back hunched as he stared with red-rimmed eyes at the grass. This fractured version of him, who I had never met, muttered that he wanted to be alone.

I did my best to stonewall the hurt I felt at being dismissed. Because part of me understood his unrequited affections.

* * *

In the underground hells, people lived in chains, instruments of torture stored within wielding distance. I wanted to see if the living conditions—if it

could be called living—of Spring's maddened fools differed from Autumn. It shamed me to realize that I had no idea.

Poet would know how each Season compared. He would have made an effort to know.

I got as far as the top of the stairway, which dug into the earth and disappeared into a pool of black. It wasn't the dark, nor the mucus-colored walls, nor the stench of urine and decay that had me gripping the banister. Rather, it was the solitary groan reaching out to me from those depths.

It was the feeble sound a person made when they were about to wilt. My father had produced that same noise when he died, when the Spring forest had gone still for the slightest moment, acknowledging his last breath. I'd tried to bury that moment under countless sunrises and sunsets.

Such a din was the reason I'd avoided the dungeons back in Autumn. I let Mother handle the gruesome affairs and averted my eyes as guilty prisoners met their seasonal maker on the scaffold. Dealing with those horrors would be forthcoming, but I hadn't planned to endure them until forced to.

Do not let that subdue you. Have courage.

You are tougher than you imagine. You can do this.

My impulse said so. Yet rationality slithered in, telling me I was not prepared for this.

Like a coward, I fled. Tail tucked, I bolted along hallways, pushed through doors, and rushed down a winding passage, not caring where I headed or who saw me. I knocked into a shoulder, ignored the startled exclamations of witnesses and "Your Highness?"

Accusations pricked my mind. The people's needs mattered more than my mousy timidity. If I couldn't face the grim, how could I be a ruler?

My stitches had been removed yesterday, so I grasped my skirts and sprinted without the burden of taxing my leg. Noontide drowned me in pale blue as I bolted through a gate, the partition flying wide—and nearly smacking Poet in the chest.

"What the fu—" He reeled away from disaster.

I crashed into an urn. The pot hit the ground and cracked open like an egg,

scattering chunks of ceramic. His hands lashed out, saving me from going down with the mess.

My shaky hand went to my navel. “Oh,” I trilled. “Oh, I-I’m . . . my apologies.”

His focus shifted between the urn and me. “No worries. Girls tend to throw themselves in my direction all the time.”

We stood in a courtyard overlooking an herb plot forty paces away. The shredded gauze of clouds sailed overhead. To our right, beneath an archway, water slid down three grades of flat rock and trickled into a shallow pool.

Poet’s eyes trained on me with concern. “Sweeting?”

“I’m fine.”

This topsy-turvy wasn’t like me, but that dungeon groan had triggered a skittish side. I had to compose myself. Maybe he saw that, because after scanning the courtyard, Poet guided me beneath the archway. Tucked away there, no one would see us. No one would see him ignore my protest, pull me close, and nestle my head against his throat. I told Poet what had happened, my lips on his tunic, my story against his pulse. The more I drained myself, the more I sunk into the gossamer of his embrace.

He caressed my ear, rubbing the lobe with the pad of his thumb. “It took me longer to brave those stairs than it took you. In my humble fool’s opinion, you don’t know your own strength. Fie, just look at what you did to the urn. Loutish princess.”

I let out an affronted laugh.

“Much better,” he intoned. “Humor has its merits, after all.”

Fresh agitation. My voice and fingers continued to quiver, no longer from sorrow but from something highly improper. “With you, I think one thing, then say and do another.”

“That’s called being human. You’re not alone there.”

Perhaps. Poet didn’t owe me a thing. Other than with Royals and lovelorn minstrels, he had a right to do as he pleased, with whomever he pleased. Yet, after I saw him with that amorous nobleman, the jester felt compelled to explain in a note that nothing untoward had occurred. Was that because of me

or because of my concern for Eliot’s feelings? Did I hope for the latter or for both?

Except for that incident, Poet hadn’t put his dalliances on display. Since rejecting my friend, he had refrained from batting eyes with anyone in public. He cared about Eliot. He cared about me, too.

I squirmed, disentangling myself from his arms. “Good day, jester. Thank you for your assistance.”

For the second time, I fled. Only this time, I did not run.

17

Princess

I couldn’t sleep. Moonlight speckled my coverlet as I twisted in frustration.

When my father was alive, he used to pluck me from my suite at night and take me exploring. His sweaty hand would cradle mine as we ghosted through the channels of Mista’s towers. We’d peek into the basket weavers’ workroom and investigate a repository brimming with relics of old. I’d play hiding games with him, believing us invincible, that no harm would ever come to our family.

It had been years since I’d explored a place. Never without Father.

I had scurried from Whimtany’s dungeon—this time. Perhaps I could pace my wits and seek out other uncharted spaces until . . . I sat up, refusing to analyze this. My feet hit the floor and strode across my chamber to the wardrobe. I wrestled into a claret cashmere gown, with a matching cape just in case I decided to seek fresh air, and let my craving for space guide me out the door, a small lantern in my grasp.

“May I help you, Your Highness?” asked an attentive voice.

I leapt around, my cape swinging. A young guard stood post at the hall’s entrance. Metal plates rode his shoulders. He looked to be made of rocks beneath his uniform.

By contrast, his obliging expression settled my nerves. When Father and I had romped through Mista at night, we’d done it candidly, because we owned those corridors. As Royals, we’d had the right. Demonstrating otherwise—a ducked chin, a hesitant gait—would have given people pause.

The world credited the Princess of Mista for being straitlaced. A girl with a reputation as pure as cream, a disposition as dry as flint, not a venturous bone in her body. I meant no ill will. Though, as a guest of Whimtany, it would look unsavory for me to take the same liberties as I would at home. It benefited me to supply the guard with a falsehood.

Managing a humble smile, I said, “I confess, you’ve caught me. It is rather childish, but I find myself unable to rest. I seek the company of my mother.”

“Shall I escort you?” he offered.

Blast. I had no excuse to decline. “Thank you, but if there’s one route I’ve memorized, it’s the one to my mother’s suite. If anything, so that I might avoid it when she’s cross with me. As for night prowlers, legend says that I’ve a face sharper than a sword. I need only to scowl, and the enemy shall sink to his knees in defeat. You wouldn’t deprive me of such a triumph, would you?”

A chuckle rumbled from his chest. Without further ado, he stepped aside. “Your Highness.”

Humor has its merits, after all.

Confidence bolstered, I glided past him, my footfalls quickening around the first bend. Bursting with energy, I gripped a column and looped myself around it, spilling into another hall and skittering to a halt. In one of the recesses, Posy and Vale sprung from their lip-lock, blood racing up their cheeks. Their eyes widened when they saw me.

“Princess,” they peeped, bobbing in unison.

“Oh, I beg your pardon,” I exclaimed. “I did not mean to—”

“Our apologies,” Vale said.

“I’m disturbing you.”

“Hardly,” Posy said without meaning it.

Their embrace had left their garments in shambles. They made a show of restoring themselves, fiddling with green hydrangea and pink rose petal skirts. I feigned interest in a stained glass representation of the castle’s checkered lawns, embedded into a nearby window. Goodness. I have witnessed their coy touches, but I had no idea it stretched beyond that.

They came from the same background and kingdom. They had no cause to hide their affections. I’d happened upon a mere interlude, not a scandalous union.

I inspected anew the shell in which they’d concealed themselves and wondered what it was like to dare thus. To meet someone there—in a different manner from the way I met Eliot—and fling myself into the shadows with

him.

“Are you lost, Your Highness?” Vale asked.

“No, I am . . .”

Typical Briar would imply that it was none of their concern. Typical Briar would not have been caught, because she’d be in her chamber, having never left.

My presence surprised them. And what had years of acquaintance taught us about one another? My efforts to know these girls had not exceeded the surface. Vale’s toasty brown skin and overbite. Posy’s diminutive nose and twitchy movements. Their blooming laughter and girlish friendships. Their foreheads haloed by floral circlets that eventually went lopsided due to a constant habit of canting their heads in chatter. Hardly an omniscient impression of who they were.

Perhaps it wasn’t the castle I needed to know better but its inhabitants. A belief that Mother had been trying to instill for eons. My responsibility.

I confessed, “I am exploring.”

Posy shuffled forward. “Truly?”

“You?” Vale added, her disbelief reflecting Posy’s.

“Me,” I answered. “Would you . . . that is . . .”

A princess did not babble. I folded my hands behind my back. “I would like some company, if you’d care to join me.”

I expected gaping. I predicted they would make their excuses and scuttle off to a place where they could properly laugh at me, or stutter their acceptance out of duty.

They did neither. They sprouted from their hiding place and eagerly looped their arms through mine. Relief cantered through me.

Our skirts flounced together, veils of color, as we embarked. Posy and Vale proved themselves knowledgeable companions, having acquainted themselves with the accessible spaces of Whimtany. The tailor’s room, where bolts of cloth and spools of thread flushed under the glow of my lantern. The perfumer’s laboratory, crammed with dried flowers, oils, and essences. The frosty wine cellar containing medleys of Spring drink, corked and sealed,

clinking when we touched them. Posy complained of stiff nipples while Vale looted a bottle for us to enjoy.

From what I'd seen wine do to otherwise sane people, it appealed to me as much as spit. But this was not my kingdom. Besides, the Silly Seven pounded their spirits and kept it down better than most knights. Tipsy or sober scarcely made a difference in their behavior.

They stole an opener, passing the wine back and forth. I declined more than a sip.

"I'm impressed, Your Highness," Cadence's voice intruded as she sidled into the cellar, startling us. She gestured around the area, then to Posy and Vale, then to the vessel in my hands. "To lower yourself to this level. I wouldn't have guessed."

That I would sneak into the depths of a wine cellar. That I would spend my precious hours with two of the Silly Seven. That my prim lips would take a drink.

I wouldn't have predicted it, either. Still, I did not care for the pseudo-respectful way she insinuated it. As the most flirtatious of the Seven, Cadence also proved herself the brashest. Perhaps she believed her long-legged, razor-cheekboned, orchid beauty could get away with having a serpent for a tongue.

"What a pleasant surprise," I said trimly, then quirked a brow, waiting for her to do as her station required.

She curtsied. Unhappily.

Posy and Vale beamed, heartened to see her. Apologetic as well, because as they spoke, it became apparent that Cadence had been roaming with them before they accidentally got separated. Instead of searching for her, the love pair had soaked up their moment and then joined me. They accompanied me and forgot their friend. Though sympathizing with Cadence, I couldn't help reveling in being chosen.

According to Cadence, she knew of Vale's fondness for this cellar. That's why she'd found us.

"We didn't mean to leave you," Posy said.

"You did what you had to do," Cadence answered.

Because I was a princess. They were obligated to like me.

Cadence's snide response spoiled my fantasy about being preferred company. If I wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt, she had officially talked me out of it. Now that she was here, it was only courtesy that forced me to invite her on our excursion.

In her language, that meant dominating the flock. "Lisette, Questa, Rhiannon, and Fae should come, too. We can't possibly do a thing without them." Her neck swanned as she slurped the remainder of the wine. "No one left behind. Wouldn't Your Esteemed Highness agree?"

"No, I would not," I replied. "This is not a getaway. It's a jaunt. Fae, Lisette, Questa, and Rhiannon—" deliberately, I listed them in alphabetical order "—will live to see another one. Also, that's too many people and will cause a racket."

Wisely, Cadence elected not to browbeat the issue. Though I would bet my coronation that she never so much as hunched over a chamber pot without her gang.

We took a random passage and wandered into the servants' wing, coming from an unfamiliar route that I'd never exercised, despite my having been to this place before.

My mind rioted at the prospect of loitering here. "Let's go. These are dull quarters."

Wine fattening their pupils with impulsiveness, the courtiers traded a look that scraped at my nerves, because it could mean only one thing. One person.

They hurried to Poet's chamber and knocked, chortling at his pretentious plaque. It dawned on me that they found him without having to search. They must have made a previous effort to find out where exactly he slept, a notion that penetrated a vile side of me.

I hustled after the girls. My hiss of "Not him" came too late.

The door flourished open. Poet materialized, plaguing me with impure thoughts. He wore a pair of bed hose that hung low off his waist, exposing the slope of his hipbones. I glowered at his chest sketched in the torchlight, at the hands he propped on either side of the frame.

Vale, Posy, and Cadence ogled him. Because I lingered apart from the courtiers, his attention settled on them first, an indentation digging into the corner of his lips. His fingers tapped against the doorway, his short nails glossy with onyx paint. “Well, well. Aren’t you three a trilogy.”

“Count again,” I advised.

His eyes swerved to me. They widened, then gleamed with elation. I wanted to tuck that expression in a box for safekeeping, to gaze at whenever I felt like it.

“We have a mission for you, jester,” I said.

“We’ve been searching the high seas for you,” Posy added.

“I’d expect nothing short of it,” he quipped, studying me. “What can I do for you lovelies that I haven’t done thus far?”

“I can name a few things,” Cadence purred.

The implication crawled across my ribcage. Their exchange belied previous rendezvous. Perhaps she’d even been a guest in his chamber before. It would explain the death look she’d given me when he offered me a candle at the wisteria arbors, not to mention her impertinent attitude tonight.

“The princess wishes to explore,” Vale announced.

“She’s developed a case of the naughties, has she?” Poet asked.

“I would not go that far,” I warned.

“We need a man to protect us from ghouls,” Cadence said.

“What ghouls?” another voice yawned.

I clenched my eyes shut. This could not be happening.

Eliot. He shuffled up to us, scratching through his mussed blond curls, blinking in drowsy astonishment at our group. He must have heard us.

“Br—Your Highness,” he said.

“Forgive us if we woke you,” I said, my mood in the gutter. He hadn’t spoken to me since Poet rejected him. Unaccustomed to his withdrawal, I had missed him and worried how he was faring.

Speaking of Poet, Eliot’s eyes darted his way and then plummeted into misery. Cadence noticed—everyone noticed the minstrel and jester watching one another warily. I swore, if she commented on it, the consequences would

involve my fists and a trip to the infirmary.

The web tightened before my eyes. Eliot in love with Poet, but thinking him in love with the Seven. Cadence in love with Poet, but thinking him in love with Eliot. Posy and Vale in love with each other and with Cadence. Me in love with nobody. And Poet in love with himself.

Despite Eliot overhearing us, the remote location of Poet's room put us at an advantage as we bickered. Posy and Vale nagged a queasy Eliot to come exploring with us. In turn, Eliot rambled excuses. Cadence ordered him to go to bed if he was going to be a ninny. I told her there was no need to be rude, to which Eliot told me—as briefly and formally as possible—that he did not need a defender, remembering to address me by rank at the last moment.

Defiant, he changed his mind and accepted the invitation. He and the floral trio piped over where to go next. I attempted to fence in the argument by shushing their overlapping whispers.

Poet snapped his fingers. Everyone stopped.

I hated him. I hated that he achieved what I could not. I hated that he hurt Eliot and indulged Cadence. I hated what he made me feel.

"Now, now. There's plenty of me to go around, but I believe the princess is in charge," he said. "Your Highness, fresh air shall do this whiny troop wonders. I propose we explore the fabled labyrinth. Would that please you?"

The kingdom's residents deluded themselves into believing the labyrinth's central well granted wishes to its visitors. It was also an attractive place to lose oneself. Poet seemed confident on how to get there without detection. I suspected he knew this castle more thoroughly than he let on. I wanted to see how much.

"Lead the way," I commanded.

"As you like," he said. "Allow me to dress first."

"Must you?" Cadence complained.

"Yes," Eliot and I snapped at her.

In under five minutes, Poet returned looking ridiculous. A charcoal leather vest, a purple shirt frilling out from underneath, high boots over amethyst hose, and a crescent of silver flecks at the corner of his right eye.

Additionally, the ribbon bracelets. Only I knew the truth of them. Like all my thoughts of him and Nicu, they thawed my defenses.

The jester inclined his head. I handed him the lantern, giving him leave to transport us. While Poet locked his chamber, I mouthed to Eliot that he should retrieve his lute. My bidding had the desired effect. He brightened, and my heart rejoiced.

As soon as Eliot reappeared from his own room with the instrument strapped to his back, Poet instructed our group to hold hands so that we formed a garland. Him at one end, me at the other. His request leached the surliness from us and spurred awkward chuckles that we had to tamp down. It proved difficult as he tugged us with him down the hall.

Princess. Courtiers. Minstrel. Jester.

Royal. Ladies. Servant. Rascal.

In a nondescript, compact walkway, Poet halted us. He ran his palm along the smooth wall. *"They say, as people will say, that Spring is a curious thing, for it has much to say. Take a chance, a second glance. And according to lore, you might find a door."* He craned his head at us and grinned like the devil. *"And who knows what more."*

He pressed his palm against the wall, revealing a hidden seam that swung inward. A secret passage. Down its stair shaft we went, tethered together, the lantern and Poet's voice shepherding the way. Free of witnesses, something contagious took over, snipping the ribbon of tension. At the landing and along a tunnel, we unleashed. We laughed and attempted to spook one another.

Farther into the unknown, our noises got louder. The courtiers and Poet howled into the burrows, hitting steep notes of joy.

We climbed another passage and burst aboveground at the nape of the labyrinth, a green and pink coiled maze that scrolled into the earth. Its location benefited us. Guards standing post along the parapet would not discover our clamor from this distance. Though Poet blew out the lantern and set it on the ground, just to be sure.

The first person to find the center would win a kiss of their choice. We scattered like mice, nocturnal and kicking up gravel. I thought of Nicu, who

would never be able to find his way out of here. I thought of Poet thinking of Nicu. I thought to rinse myself of history and tradition for this hour. I outran law, searching for *more*, for *different*. For someday.

This day. The glass-shard stars bit into the sky. I sprinted, my arms pumping, my skirts whisking around my legs. And I thought, *Hurry*.

Hurry to the center, hurry to that little girl I used to be. She's waiting.

Hurry. Find me.

He found me. I found him.

We swerved around the corners of parallel hedges. Our gazes slammed into each other, winded and breathless and a little bit ruined. We'd emerged on opposite bends of a wishing well that graced the labyrinth's center like the hub of a wheel.

From other lanes, we heard the courtiers' "Boo!" and Eliot's goofy yelp. I pictured him jumping a foot off the ground, spoiling those girls with chortles. They jostled him in what sounded like good-natured fun. My winsome heart relished his giggle, the sound unclogging my lungs. Renewing me.

With cautious steps, the jester and I prowled the well, a womb holding thousands of dreams. He raised his brows in a wicked inquiry. I shook my head in reply, my fingers drifting over the ledge.

"No kisses, no wishes," he rhymed across the well's depth.

"No winners, no losers," I agreed.

Posy arrived, tailed by Vale, then Eliot, then Cadence. Poet and I sacrificed our win and gave Posy the honors. At Vale's encouragement, Posy shocked Eliot by grabbing his face and kissing him. After the bashfulness leaked from his face, he responded, meeting her mouth with a blushing enthusiasm that astounded me. Carefree but ever devoted to boys, he relinquished her to Vale.

They tossed petals into the well and wished. Eliot for the luxury of growing old, Vale to know what snow felt like, Cadence to one day see Summer's ocean, and Posy for her expectant sister to birth a "normal" child.

She could have said "healthy," but like everyone in society, she had additional worries: conceiving a fool.

Poet's gaze remained neutral. He announced that his wish was too sacred to share.

I knew that wish. I'd met that child. The kind that Posy fretted over having as a nephew, lacking the heart to bear it. I did not blame her for that. Nor did I dwell on what the girls thought of born fools, whether or not the girls stood with the majority. At least, I did not dwell tonight.

They excused Poet, but they ganged up on me when I tried to skip my turn, too. I peered into the well's black pupil and issued a modest hope, that they would each get what they wanted.

Eliot grinned with affection, Poet with suspicion. Posy and Vale seemed moved by my gesture, while Cadence pruned her lips, all but calling me a showoff.

We sat around the well, our backs propped against the gritty stones, our legs fanning out. To my detriment and happiness, Poet and Eliot sat on either side of me. I kept them apart, as they boxed me in. Their nearness caused multiple sensations. A spurt of longing. A pang of guilt. I wriggled, unclear which boy produced which reaction, desperate not to lean in any particular direction.

Poet complicated the matter. Shrouded from view, his hand lingered by my knee, turning me into a star. A white-hot flash. Compelled, I slid my leg nearer, bumping his wrist. His fingers flexed with indecision and then covered me, holding on lest I bolt away—in Eliot's direction, out of the labyrinth, or into the sky. Who knew where, or how far, I would have to go to protect us from each other.

Sensual intoxication loosened my tongue. "Why are we different? What makes us thus?"

"The Seasons," Posy volunteered.

"And our ranks," Vale added.

"Obviously, that's not what Her Highness meant," Cadence said, surprising me.

"She meant beyond those things," Eliot said. "Titles and bloodlines, Seasons and breeding and whatnot didn't stop us from coming here. Not that

those things disappeared in this labyrinth, but if you follow me, she's speaking about laughing and *this*, sneaking out together, wanting to be here, making wishes and sitting as we are without a fuss—at least not yet. The night isn't over, but that it started in the first place—it doesn't seem we're different. That's what she means."

"You need to define *different* further, sweetings," Poet delivered. "Tastes, manners, looks, smarts. We're different for endless reasons, and therein lies the incandescence, the true harmony."

"For if we're different, there's more to learn," I summarized. "More to discover."

"More to cherish," Eliot finished.

While Poet's hand scorched my leg, bunching my skirt in his grasp, I flopped my head toward my friend. Eliot rested his brow against mine and smiled, unaware of the boundaries I straddled. His touch and the jester's touch were obscured in darkness from one another. Yet I smiled back, grateful for them both, giving myself equally to them. If only in this spot.

We helped one another to our feet. Eliot plucked a melody on his lute. The girls skipped around him, and then Vale and Posy flanked Poet, and Cadence challenged me into the maelstrom by yanking on my wrist.

More to discover. More to cherish.

The moon's reflection bathed my skin. I raised my arms and spun. Poet and I kept apart, but from the place where he twirled Cadence, he watched my ungainly movements. Fascination gripped his face as he stared at me, through me, into me. Hyperaware of my body outlined in a metallic sheen, I whirled faster, out of his reach and submerged within it, caring not if I tripped.

If I did fall, I would simply pick myself up.

18

Jester

Many things happened to us that night. Many things that I would have never foreseen . . .

She twirled, a prism of paleness and redness, lost in herself and in this maze. I took her in, mesmerized and memorizing. For at the stroke of dawn, she would change again, cast herself into an expensive Royal, depressing me with her reserve.

So be it. We had our parts to play.

Many found her wanting for looks. She had no beaus or admirers outside of crown chasers. In short, the people were blind, and she blinded them further. I wanted to pull her from the roots, expose her for who she truly was. When she didn't restrain herself, she still moved with a clunky lack of rhythm, but her awful coordination didn't matter, for the dancing made her happy, and that happiness made her the brightest thing in this garden. Enthralling girl.

Hypnotized me. Me, the jester, who did not get hypnotized by anyone. Cadence should have counted herself lucky that I didn't spin her into one of the hedges, so thoroughly did that leaf of Autumn captivate me. One more twist of her hips and I would have to scoop my tongue off the floor.

Eliot's playing tripped, just for a note, as his head swung from me to her. I needed to be more careful. Enduring his crestfallen face as I'd made my feelings clear, and his morose attitude since, had been an awkward torment for both of us. Having my attention linger on others would reopen the battle wound.

Yet. Still. Her.

Damn her. Now she had me thinking in fragments instead of my lyrical, liquid prose. That was where I drew the line. My voice would not be tampered with. She'd already done damage to the unruly regions below my waist by encouraging me to fondle her leg. I couldn't let her conquer all the

essential parts of me.

The Three Lovelies begged me for a treat. I sped through a lukewarm verse in which I projected them as characters, to their whooping delight. Along with children and Eliot, these charming creatures rounded out my most visceral audience. Whereas Nicu, Jinny, and the princess were favorites, for they were my toughest audience.

Flushed from moonbeams and rebellion, Her Highness clapped. As I bowed, I canted my head and thanked her with an impish grin. I loved what that did to her applause, how my attention snagged on her wrists.

The route to the castle proved tamer, the end of an era as we traveled a path back to rank and rules. The princess realized too late that she'd left her lantern behind, somewhere in the labyrinth. We felt our way through the tunnel and up the secret stairway, Vale and Posy whispering sweet nothings to each other, Eliot chattering to the princess whilst maintaining a formal front, and Cadence suctioning herself to my side.

"The evening is still young," she hinted. "And so are we."

"Hmm," I responded.

I'd been in her room before. She hoped for an encore.

I attuned myself to the princess's bated breath, knowing that she'd overheard Cadence proposition me. I needed to work off the tension—or for someone to release the tension from me with a few substantial tugs. Thusly, I might have accepted the lovely's offer, sending a lucid message to Autumn, reminding her what we agreed upon.

I might have if Eliot weren't there. The princess would have the emotional stamina to get over it, whereas the minstrel wouldn't.

I readied an excuse about needing my beauty sleep, but the guards newly stationed outside the hidden shaft spared me the chore. My hand gripped the secret wall panel as their voices drifted through the crack. I held my free palm behind me to the halt the group, who clammed up, freezing like deer caught in the scope of a crossbow. Angling my head and listening to the guards' banter, I estimated them to be around the corner.

Posy muffled a scandalized giggle. Whimtany boasted no curfews, but

seeing such an eclectic set frolicking together would ruffle feathers. Basil and Fatima would treat us to a lecture that would drag on for at least an hour and then blame me for the outing. For who else could talk this mishmash lot into misbehavior?

Also, the princess accompanied us. I didn't have to turn to know her eyes bulged from their sockets. Ladies-in-waiting were acceptable company but not the Crown's jester and minstrel. It would seem more suspect now that she'd spent three days—ample time to bond—in the wilderness with me. After this, her pristine reputation would walk a tightrope.

A fool's work was never done. I hand-signaled to my companions. I would distract the watch while they crept back to the chambers from whence they came.

I strutted into the hall, startling the lookout, a man—the same brute who had beckoned me the morning after the mirrored hall—and a woman. They jerked around, clasping the hilts of their swords.

"Ah. Good evening, friends," I charmed, gesturing to their armor. "You didn't have to get dressed up for me."

It worked. With a bit of subtle footwork and pleasantries, I got them to turn their backs on my companions, who poured out from behind the panel. They detached from the black slash of shadow and skulked down the corridor one by one. My Autumn princess was the last to go.

Wrapping up the repartee, I bade the guards a heroic night and left. The route to the princess's suite required she use one of two passages from the servants' wing, which meant she had to pass my chamber no matter which one she chose. This made little difference to me until I heard the guards from their post.

"What the—who was that?"

"Eh? What have you been drinking? That was Poet, you dolt."

"Not him. That other figure. They ran that way."

Wonderful. Catching up to the Royal, I stole her hand, drew her to my door, whipped it ajar, and wheeled her inside. Actually, I may have twirled her under my arm when I did it.

“Are you batty?” she asked. “What’s the meaning of—?”

“Hush,” I said, bolting the door and pressing my ear to the surface.

Either they suspected an intruder or someone pursuing me, or they merely needed to check the situation as per their duty. They hadn’t recognized her, but if they did, they’d want to know what she was doing in this section of the castle alone.

Or not alone. Guards in a peaceful kingdom could be entirely useless, but they weren’t morons. It would seem too much of a coincidence to find her shortly after they’d spoken with me. Either that, or I was being paranoid.

Boots pounded toward my chamber. The princess paled. Of all the places to get caught, in my rakish abode might be the worst.

“Come.” I snatched her fingers, hauling her across the room and onto my bed, where I started to bounce with vigor. I flapped my arms, imploring, “Don’t just squint at me. Jump.”

“You’ve lost your wits.”

“I’ll lose my testes if they find you here. Now jump and moan.”

“What?”

Clearing my throat, I demonstrated. A string of lusty groans, in tempo with the headboard rapping against the wall, amplified from my throat, loud enough for the guards to hear. They paused outside my chamber and gave a tentative knock. I mouthed to Her Highness, repeating my instructions. She did as asked, bobbing feebly on the mattress and cawing like a frustrated crow instead of replicating a female in the throes of passion.

Another knock. “Be gone,” I called.

“Um, Poet?”

I couldn’t have sprinted from my chat with the guards and directly into the arms of a woman that quickly, much less shoved my hose down far enough to get the job done, but I trusted they wouldn’t calculate those details. The point was that they believed I had company, likely with the person they thought they saw, likely a courtier. They wouldn’t ask me to admit them in this apparent state.

Ay, I could have just answered while the princess kept out of sight. This

charade could have been overly theatrical on my part.

“We’re searching the hall for a possible lurker who might have come this way,” the male guard said. “Did you happen to see anyone untoward?”

The bed springs hiccupped. I flailed my arms, instructing the princess to amplify herself. She purpled but bounced harder and yelped as though I’d fatally pinched her. Defeated, I dropped my head into my hands—bounding so high that the top of my skull thunked against the ceiling.

That’s when her yelps skittered into laughter. Slapping her palms over her mouth, she convulsed into hysterics, tears springing to her eyes at my expense. The scene became so comically atrocious that I burst into quiet hilarity with her.

Henceforth, she improved, guffawing and moaning in unison. Sensibly, she altered her voice.

“Well, er, keep your door locked. And let us know if you hear anything suspicious.”

“Ayyyyyy!” I howled.

They marched away, sniggering. We waited a full minute before collapsing onto the bed, keeling over and choking with mirth.

“You’re a terrible actress—”

“You’re a dreadful lover—”

Petulant, I pointed to my head. “Look what you did! I’m going to have a bump.”

“Serves you right. You should have s-seen your f-face.”

Exhausted, carefree, she flopped onto the pillows. I landed next to her, rubbing my sore noggin. Our chuckles ebbed, then faded altogether, swept up in realization. We were in my starlit room, fun-drunk and now alone. Even Tumble was gone, roaming the halls in search of critter mischief.

As we gazed at the ceiling, her fingers brushed mine. Neither of us pulled away, absently letting those small caresses slide through the precarious cracks. Her pinky rode my knuckles. My thumb stroked her wrist. We threaded, in and out, over and under. She found my stack of ribbon bracelets, and the hairs along my arms sprang to life, not to mention another appendage

below the waist.

“Life is not purely rational,” she whispered.

“Nor purely amusing or ironic,” I replied. “But we already knew that.”

“But we needed reminding.”

“At the well, you would have wished for something greedy if you’d been alone.”

“And you would have revealed your wish. And you would have said yes to Cadence if Eliot hadn’t been there.”

“True. She doesn’t hold a candle to you, but I can have her.”

“You trifle with me. She’s beautiful.”

“She’s typical,” I corrected. “You’re a thorn in my side. You’re also courageous, compassionate, loyal, and wholly striking. What’s more, brunettes are the soil, blondes the sun. You’re a redhead—every fiery, blooming thing in between. You’re sheer magnificence.”

My sidelong glance met her furrowed brows. “Why do you share yourself, when you’ve learned what can happen? Why do you do it?”

Irritated, I let her go. “Likewise, you’re unable to take a compliment.”

“Calling me a thorn in your side was a compliment?”

“I meant it affectionately. Indeed, a reckless coupling rewarded me with a son, yet I still parade myself like it can’t happen again. You think it’s a bad thing to be a casual wanton, but what else did you once tell me? That our kiss was meaningless?”

“I think you should stop doing what you do with people. It’s tawdry and beneath you. You should have learned your lesson. You’re a father. And you’re worth more than a half-hearted tryst.”

“Very wise, Your Highness. I should be setting my sights higher above my station. Mayhap the King of Summer will drop dead from stupidity, and I’ll have a chance to replace him. His wife is gorgeous.”

The princess was on her feet before I could prevent it. “Fine! That was invasive of me. I-I don’t know why I’m here.”

I’d hurt her.

She got halfway across the room, but I was faster, jumping in front of her

to block the exit. “A castle is a lonely place,” I said. “I’ve enjoyed myself with others, but not to the extent you believe. Ay, with some, mostly men. They’re safer. As for the rest, I’m cautious and creative. Bodies—hands and tongues—may work around the obvious, achieving heights while still partially dressed. Also, there are plenty of ways to know pleasure without it amounting to bumping hips. There’s rapture in restraint.”

Her exhalations quickened. “I refuse to be a conquest. You’ve had scores of visitors here.”

“They have their own chambers to welcome me. That’s not to say that I’ve been with anyone since our return, because I haven’t. Believe this: I’ve tried to accept intimate advances of late, to find someone tempting, and I’ve not succeeded. You saw me with a man, but my note made it clear that I didn’t take up his offer. Why, you wonder? That is easy. For the life of me, I can’t stop thinking about you. And I’ve never had anyone else in this room. I doubt that I ever will.”

Astonished, she examined the space anew, her eyes tripping across every item. Every pot of color, every textile. Flamboyance be damned, I coveted my privacy. Having this girl here peeled another layer from me. For devil’s sake, I shuffled my feet like a pathetic, antsy juvenile.

I begged like one, too. “Stay,” I said.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because I lack the strength not to.”

“Poet—”

“That face of yours. I’d like to twist it in a thousand ways, in the ink of this room. My body wants to tear your body apart, make you sing and sigh, to fill you with incoherent noises.” On a sweetly erotic impulse, I took her hand and kissed the inside of her palm. “Say you desire me as I desire you.”

She closed her eyes. “This is wrong.”

Because of my son, her minstrel, and the monarchs who reigned over this land. Most of all, every decision I made placed Nicu at the forefront. The more I shared with this girl, the more she would know about him.

But she already knew the crucial parts. She was a frigid princess, but she

was steadfast and did not look at my son the way others would. She cared about him, had broken rules for him with her silence. What we did here would not change that.

As for the rest, well, sorry. I cared not.

I moved nearer, pinning us, my pulse on hers. Her gaze held onto mine, anchored there. We waited until the other was ready to move, and move we did, our arms and hands reaching with a slow urgency. Unlike the riot of our first kiss, this one took its melting time. Her fingers skimmed my shoulders and then fastened at my nape, and my arm dared its way around her waist, my free hand climbing up the back of her head to lock her in place.

We tilted. Our lips whispered *this* and *there*, saying *hello* again, *I need you* again. A barely-kiss that ignited every hectic impulse. It took an immortal amount of willpower not to crush her to me, but how I loved the bow of her lower lip quivering when my tongue traced its shape.

No rush. It kept going like this, little pecks, a flick along the down of her lips, my teeth coming out to play. She responded like a virgin, a combination of innocence and intensity, and strangely, I felt like the one being seduced. She followed me without hesitation, curling herself into my body, whilst I groaned from the deep well of my throat.

We broke apart, changing the angles of our heads, and then panted back into each other. Now into a full-bodied kiss. Our chins slanted, our mouths sealing and splaying in unison. My tongue thrust her lips apart, stroking into a wet envelope of pleasure. As I swept into her, she sighed and gave in return, rubbing against me. All by themselves, my palms dragged down her back to cup her buttocks, the kiss mounting to the point of aggravation.

It didn’t feel gratifying, the kind of face-sucking of interludes past, the congratulatory conceit of a festive performance. I didn’t reap the rewards of an admirer.

It was more. This, a girl’s kiss, and bliss.

Quiet bliss, curious bliss. It dangled at the peaks of my toes and the ledges of my fingers.

I saw us with my eyes shut. Me taking and being taken, drawing my

tongue along the roof of her mouth, her moan shattering between my open lips and chipping at my heart.

Oh, there was that. That, and beyond.

It could have been rebellion, the dumb rush of the forbidden, except for the hitch in my chest, the pained pleats across my forehead. For this desire felt honest, difficult, this privilege temporary. It stripped away what I'd previously known of seduction. This was me, the jester. This was me, wanting her.

This was *wanting*.

Not breaking the kiss, we fumbled with the ties of my vest. As I shrugged it off, she pulled my shirt from the waistband of my hose, letting it hang around my hips, and then we unclasped her cape, and I pitched it to the floor. Our foreheads met. I stalked her to the bed, unfurled her onto the bed, poised above her on the bed. I braced myself on my palms, half my weight consuming her, my knees sly between hers.

She released a thin cord of breath, the remnants of our kiss a streak of condensation across her lips. I raked over the sight of this princess, her skirt spread over the coverlet, her jaw slackened, and the braids of her hair straining to be set free.

I leaned down and spoke against her mouth. "May I touch you, Princess?"

19

Princess

Yes, please. Touch me. Kiss me.

My pulse took on a hysterical rhythm, causing a ripple effect throughout the rest of my body. I'd never seen a boy from this angle, had never felt the width of his thighs within mine, his eyes blistering for me. I'd never experienced such a terrible joy. Such fear and excitement. Self-consciousness and boldness.

Poet, the Court Jester of Whimtany, had me in his bed. Many have known his skin, but I knew more about him than any of them did. I trusted the look he graced me with, the way his voice grew hoarse when he asked my permission, because we had too much to gamble. So much to give.

My delirious heart said this. Not my head. That had stopped working long ago.

Our breaths tapped the air. My senses latched onto the smell of amber and vetiver. The overwhelming heat of us. The silk coverlet shifting beneath my exposed calves.

I loathed the anticipation. Impatience must have wormed its way across my face, because he chuckled into my lips, his chest rumbling. Not wanting to miss it, I crept under his shirt to feel his torso, the brutal clench of his abdomen, his laughter on my palms. Over my lifelines.

My touch cut his humor short. That was the best part.

"I'm going to toy with you," he flirted, scorching my lip with his thumb.

Of course he would say that. "I demand an equal share."

"By all means, Your Highness." But then he grew serious. "I shall stop when you tell me to. You only need to say the word."

In answer, I slid my hands around to the dip in his back. Planting a swift kiss on my lips and saying, "That won't do," he reached behind and guided my trembling hands upon his backside. It flexed, and a tendril of heat curled through me.

“Hold on,” he joked.

Effortlessly, he made me laugh. The mirth drained my lingering shyness. After that, we stopped talking, ceased thinking this funny. We retreated into the safe tangle we made together, not uttering a word. Because words could be destructive.

He gave me another sensual kiss, then another, long and feverish. My knees steepled, trying to trap him, but the jester held himself aloft. I gripped his bottom forcefully, an entreaty for more.

Poet jolted. Encouraged, I used one of his moves against him and licked the seam of his mouth.

Victory. He fell over me, covering me with his dancer’s body. With a gasp, I yielded my lips under his. We grabbed each other’s faces, angling the kiss to deeper effect, our tongues writhing.

I should have been flustered by the hard ridge that pressed between my thighs. Instead, my head fogged. I shocked myself by arching into the tension of it, coils winding in too many places to heed.

He broke away and proceeded down my throat, his lips grazing the column. In the crook by my shoulder, he nuzzled, then sucked deeply. My head snapped back, my mouth gaping.

“Do you like this?” he asked. “Say it. You can tell me.”

No, I did not like it. It was bad.

“Yes,” I said.

The swells rising from my neckline came next. His lips tugged at my skin, whipping my blood into a frenzy. My heels dug into his legs, my nails destroyed his hair, and his fingers unbound my braid.

Not enough. I didn’t know what to do with myself. Every time he reached a new spot, I wanted him somewhere else.

Unabashed, I tasted him back. My lips found his ear and drew on the lobe. He hummed, and his hums escalated to growls once I increased the pressure. The more I figured him out, the more helpless he became.

He touched me then. His dexterous hands sparked my waist, tickled my inner thighs, fondled the sides of my breasts. I sought the mantel of his

shoulders and encircled his strong wrists. We made it into a game, swapping caresses.

With him, the world receded. We fell into another forbidden kiss. Weak, swollen mouths with plenty to say but less will to say it.

This happened. I had no excuse.

* * *

Seasons help us, it kept happening. From behind a curtain or a garden nook, his arm would shoot out as I paraded by, on my way to who knew where, and draw me into the shadows. He kissed me into oblivion. I kissed him into sincerity.

Bumps skimmed his arms when I ran my pinky along the waistband of his hose, yearning to move lower but afraid to. I loved wiping that wicked mouth clean of mockery and jokes. I enjoyed that my tongue and hands could do him this harm.

He was impulsive. I was calculative.

Whenever Poet wanted me, he used Tumble as a messenger. The ferret proved himself capable of navigating paths undetected, the jester's missives and my replies pinched between Tumble's incisors as he scurried to deliver them.

We were sneaky. In a mere week, we ransacked time. Every encounter was fraught with risk, every tiptoe a hurricane resounding in the halls. That made the quickness necessary. And that fueled us.

Sometimes, we didn't speak. Our bodies took over, with plenty to say.

Other times, I couldn't wait to share whatever new ideas or random thoughts I'd had that day, anticipating what he'd have to say, what he'd think about them.

Often, we bantered and had to cover one another's mouths to stifle the chuckles. Or he purred things that left me in tatters, like when he accompanied the seven monarchs and myself on a tour of the royal greenhouse. Hands behind his back, he skipped by each person and muttered comments that amused them, a ruse to make it seem like no strange occurrence when my turn came. I'd been drinking from a goblet when he

paused beside me. He leaned his chin over my shoulder and blew insolence into my ear. “Ten minutes hereafter, I shall have you moaning.”

I almost choked on the nectar. And *ten minutes hereafter*, ensconced in a shrouded hollow, my head slumped back as Poet sucked on the curve of my neck and palmed my mouth to quell the sounds I made.

The things two people could do together—it struck me dumb. Forbiddance prevented me from reaping advice from the Silly Seven, no matter that I’d bonded with Posy and Vale. Nor could I confide in Eliot or Mother, for obvious reasons.

One magical night, Poet taught me a dance move, lining up the front of his body with the rear of mine. I repaid him with objective feedback on an epic verse he’d been working on. Then we nestled face-to-face in his bed and spoke about the day, the people, ourselves. Frustration over my exclusion from the peace talks had gotten the better of me, and Poet listened, challenging my rant with sarcasm and frankness. I listened to his happy and humorous stories of raising Nicu. My favorite was how when the child first began to crawl he did it backwards.

Though the circumstances also held their share of darkness. The confessions gushed out, like Poet had grown sick of holding back. Worrying about his son’s fate wore Poet out. His features twisted as he admitted how petrifying it was, panicking about Nicu wandering beyond the cottage to where someone could discover him.

Sometimes, Poet wanted to scream. Once, he’d fled to the woods and unleashed there.

I kept thoughts of Mother and Father to myself. Not because I didn’t want to share, but because I suspected the jester would see through me. That he would see too much.

We entrusted and debated and mused. Then he rolled me over.

It had to be a violation of nature, these primitive sensations. I did not recognize myself. It was like waking up to nightfall instead of daybreak. With him, I turned into a nymph of the highest order.

At sunup, the trepidation, remorse, and exhaustion surfaced. Self-

assurances that I would contain myself from then on escaped me later when Poet got his hands on me. I wearied of glancing over my shoulder, yet my entire being screamed with other urges whenever we crossed paths. I would be with my mother or in the company of a dignitary. Poet would be striding toward me from the opposite end of the hall, trailing the Crown or flanked by his entourage of performers. Or the minstrels would accompany him, Eliot at his side.

As we passed, the jester and I would not glance, we would not acknowledge. Only our fingers gave us away, making contact. Igniting.

One day, it progressed. In an unmanned turret beneath the sunset sky, he pressed me against the wall, his fingers skipping over my ribcage. Modesty fled me. My need bared itself to his perceptive eyes, which simmered in response. He waited for me to change my mind, made sure that I meant it, and proceeded.

Holding my gaze, he unlaced me. The cumbersome chore had us panting until the dress loosened. That's when my sheepishness took over.

Poet nested my chin in one palm and braced my profile with the other. "I want to see your body. Let me into your lovely secrets, and I will honor them. I promise."

I believed him.

The gown's neckline fluttered down. The panels flapped apart. My breasts pushed from the fabric and into his hands. The air rushed at them, brushing the taut skin, hardening my nipples. Rather than disappointment, I saw reverence in his gaze. He palmed their weight, his thumbs circling wide and then narrowing to the centers, turning me into a quivering mess.

He cursed, and life exploded as he bent his head and kissed. My breast strained into the hot tug of his mouth, his tongue curling around the tip and then moving to other one, his mouth fastening around it. Hearing my feathery "Don't stop," he gathered me closer, keeping his promise.

* * *

In the great hall, the jester danced with daggers. He flipped them in his grip, upside down, right side up. He spun and, without pausing to properly

aim, his arm lashed out and executed a backhanded toss. The knife flew and struck a wooden target propped at the front of the room.

He jumped, his limbs scissoring the air. When he landed, another blade pierced the center.

The guests cheered. I squeezed my drink, stung by envy and pride. Others wanted him, but that jester was mine. For now.

At supper's end, Poet toured the room, then greeted me on the dais. Sweaty and flushed, he raised a tankard to me. Keeping my expression neutral, I inclined my head, and he took the invitation to move on.

"Wait a moment, Court Jester," I said, in the sudden mood to provoke.

He rotated. "Princess."

"Proper decorum requires that you bestow a few parting words first."

"And that would be?"

I played off my prissy reputation. "You haven't yet wished your superior a pleasant night."

Mockingly, he spread his arms. "Have a pleasant night."

"Wait a moment."

He rounded on me again. I chose this moment carefully, as everyone else preoccupied themselves with food and lively conversation. Yet I sensed the flicker of someone's attention on us, although there wasn't anything amiss about this exchange. Outwardly, I wasn't flirting as others did with him. The best course of action was to ride out the scene as if I had nothing to apologize for.

"Inferiors also bow to their sovereigns before departing."

Poet buckled and then turned.

"In addition—" my voice forced his fingers to clamp around the tankard's handle "—I should like inferiors to observe standard protocol and to acknowledge me as a princess: Your Highness, as is customary. I'm not mad in expecting you to address me thus."

His lips twitched, out of anger or amusement, I could not fathom. "Have a pleasant night, Your Highness," he said while simultaneously falling into another bow.

Hours later, I shut my chamber door, furious at my behavior. I could not run rampant like that again.

“Come here,” he said.

I whipped around. He arose from my bed, devoid of eye paint but still in his costume. The jester was in my room, looking as if he belonged here. This was getting out of hand. I had nudged, and he nudged back, but it could not go on this way. Surely, we would find ourselves in trouble.

“What are we doing?” I asked. “Are we fools?”

He had to push the word out. “Ay.”

I felt incredibly young and powerless. Until him, I’d never resented my station in life.

Poet curled his fingers and repeated, “Come. Here.”

I did not *come here*. I lunged.

He grabbed the backs of my thighs and lifted, hoisting me against him. I wrapped my limbs around his waist, clawing at him as his mouth snatched mine, because this had to end sometime. But perhaps I could mark him first.

Pillows jostled as he laid me on top of them. I remembered his muscled arms rippling as they whisked those daggers into the target board. The vision caused an embarrassing rush between my legs.

I moaned beneath him, bashful and eager as he moved with purpose. He pressed onto me, spanning my body. His touch slipped under my skirts and coasted up my legs slowly, giving me time to decide. I nodded, and the hem was hiked round my waist, coolness prickling my limbs.

I felt the heat of his hand even before it stole into the slit of my undergarments. He brushed through the curls and cupped me. I bit my lip, stunned by the confusion of sensations. As he kissed my cheek, he pressed harder onto that intimate spot.

“Feel that?” he rasped as my pulse fluttered against his wrist.

I whimpered, unable to answer him. Together, we concentrated on the steady drum coming from me, the slickness that welled there. Fully clothed, I couldn’t have felt more naked.

He asked again the question that started this all. May he touch me?

Yes. Right. There.

Poet obliged. But not as anticipated.

Not with his hand.

He kissed down my neck, my breasts, my stomach. He slithered off the bed and knelt. Somehow, my body drew its own conclusion about what was going to happen.

The dainty under-cloth slipped past my knees and ankles. Oh, his hands. They ran the length of my skin, sliding me to the mattress's edge. He kissed the leenix scar across my thigh.

Hooking my knees over his shoulders, the jester palmed and lifted my backside. His eyes drifted down to stare between my legs, making the ache worse, the spot wetter.

"There we go, Princess," he said. "So very open and pretty."

"Poet," I whispered. "Please."

He pressed a finger to his lip. *Hush.*

Or someone might hear us.

Then the flat of his tongue touched that place. It dragged up the crease, along the moisture, and found the swell. On a hum, he latched on.

I sprang apart, a shocked convulsion of cries lurching from my mouth. With each nudge of that tongue, rolling and flicking over me, I fisted the sheets. My hips bucked against his relentless mouth, my insides melting onto him. I bit into a pillow, fissures of pleasure cresting fast, heading toward a breaking point. He held me down. He consumed that tender knot of heat, plaguing me into a near swoon as my body lost control against his lips.

Hush.

Too late. I couldn't have obeyed if I'd tried.

20

Jester

Even in retrospect, I can taste her. I remember the feel of her body clenching and then going limp from the spasms. Her gaze, peach with delirium and hazy around the eyes, drifted over me in amazement. I'd rested my cheek on her shaky thighs, and ah, what bridges they made over my shoulders. What a magnificent place to be.

That sort of kneeling, I don't mind. Ever.

I could have stayed like that as long as she wanted. It elated me to discover that she was a loud minx, my tongue penetrating the impenetrable Royal and making her soar. I could have talked her into anything then. The feeling was mutual.

Tell me you want my breath.

Tell me your sighs are mine.

If she were a courtier, I would have kept her in my bed. I would have slept in the valley of her legs, my head on her navel, in a position to go another round once she recovered. We would have been naked by then. That week of lusting in slices, fully dressed, had been chaotic. I'd had no comprehension of anything that occurred outside of those snippets of time. With my brain half-crazed, half-stupid, who knew what addlepated counsel I'd offered the Crown at the peace talks.

As for entertainment, 'twas a wonder that I'd managed to strike that block of wood with my daggers during the banquet, flipping them in my hands without cleaving a pinky. I had been a wreck for days.

So the princess was not a courtier with the freedom to lounge in the nude with me. Though working around the barriers of clothing to achieve heights with her had its appeal. I'd dipped under her skirt and given her another sort of euphoria, then tucked her in, pecked her nose, and left.

In my chamber, I took care of the aftereffects, grasping that hellish, stiffened problem in my hand and granting it release. Then I cleaned myself

up and dropped face-first onto my bed.

Very well. I was destined for hell.

As I recall, that's what I'd been thinking at the time. That Royal thorn had slayed me to the besotted edge of lunacy.

I wanted to do things to make her happy. Tossing trite options like sonnets and flowers out the window, I seized on the one gesture—besides the physical—that I could offer. She'd harped to me about heirs and heiresses being banned from the peace talks. Tradition for tradition's sake.

I'd detected the blunted notes of bitterness in her voice, directed toward me for being permitted to join the talks. Not that I had apologized for it. Had she, or any previous offspring in history, ever tried to contest the matter? No, they hadn't. She hadn't. 'Twas a clear case of blind acceptance. She complained, but she tolerated it out of some loony notion of duty and respect.

In that case, tolerance wouldn't change a thing. So I did.

The next morn, I sailed into Basil and Fatima's suite unannounced—a privilege granted to no one else but me—and requested an audience. The subject matter was a dicey affair, for I couldn't show my true intent without rousing the speculation that I favored Her Royal Highness. I arrived on the pretense of discussing the Lark's Day carnival, plotting the discussion so that the topic unfolded by pseudo accident.

From there, my point of attack involved playing dumb and stacking a series of innocent questions at their feet. *Did a doctrine exist stating that Royal successors could not attend the peace talks until coronated? Did Spring not pride itself on also being an advanced kingdom? Did the mature Royals suppose they had nothing wise to offer, nothing that their youth wouldn't learn on their own?*

Would the Royals say these peace talks inspired their youth? In what capacity? Do tell!

'Tis a shame that Winter and Summer felt less compelled to bring their fledging heirs to Whimtany, is it not? One would think they considered it unimportant, that if their colts weren't allowed to at least view the talks, as part of their upbringing, why bother honoring the Spring Kingdom with their

presence at all?

However, Autumn brought its daughter. At least one Season understands the magnitude of these events. Too bad the others haven't set the same example.

It would show good will to reward Autumn for that sense of duty. It might influence the others next time, would it not? Though I'm afraid, I have no suggestions on the matter. What do I know of princesses?

I beg your pardon. Is tonight not the final meeting? The one dealing with the least vital matters? Not so heavy-handed as to keep sacred? I ponder whether there's a way to give it exemplary closure. Something in addition to the official speech. Something that doesn't change the tradition but adds to it. What could that be, oh knowledgeable Crowns?

Forget not that I'm a male. In the interim, I may have imagined the princess's face twisted in ecstasy whilst I sucked on her. I'd needed a visual to keep me motivated.

But I digress. It took two hours, three flagons of cider, and four of my wittiest puns to steer the Spring Crown. They drew the conclusion I'd hoped they would, and I praised their wisdom. What an excellent idea they had! However did they come up with it?

Lo, that was how the princess of Autumn was invited to participate in the final talk.

You would think this performance an exceptional measure of my affection for her, that this would be the start of a sublime day. Alas, it didn't play out that way . . .

She was in the archives again. When I'd had Tumble deliver that note to her after we returned from the forest, it had proved easy to pinpoint her. I'd heard of her spending quite some afternoons there. Notwithstanding, my ferret could find anyone.

Between rows of tall stacks, the princess rifled through a shelf of tomes and tubes. As I tiptoed behind her, my shadow broadening across the gold-leaf spines announced my presence. She straightened.

My arms slipped past her shoulders, my fingers plucking an encased

scroll. Low and lush, I said, “Read this one.”

She whispered, “Why?”

“It chronicles a forbidden love story.”

“Actually, it’s a Spring ordinance against excessive public drunkenness.”

“Pity. I feel so deceived by the fancy encasing.”

“That will teach you not to judge a scroll by its tube.”

“Ouch.” With a snicker, I set the item back on the shelf. “Turn around, so that I might greet you properly and deeply.”

“We will be caught.”

“Perish the thought,” I rhymed, grabbing her hips and walking her backward down the aisle.

The princess smacked my wrists, trying to admonish me into letting her go. Reaching a safe distance from the cataloger’s desk, behind the last row of archives, I spun her to face me, making a supreme effort to contain the pubescent smile threatening to spoil my roguish one. My arms swept around her middle and pulled her close. Pink splashed across her throat. I knew why. This was our first encounter since I left her bedroom last night.

I descended, intent on darkening the blush, and smoldered her with a thorough kiss. My tongue split her lips and dashed into her, mimicking an act that I’d been craving for eternity. Damnation.

The instant my mouth released hers, a puff of air blew from her swollen lips. “Poet,” she breathed.

Hoarse, I asked, “Ay, Your Highness?”

“I wish you did not have to call me that.”

“Ay, My Thorn?” I corrected.

“If someone sees, I will tell them you abducted me.”

“Be my guest. And what are you meddling in down here? Tell me or I shall continue to violate you. And nay, I’m not joking.”

“I-I was hoping to find documentation on the treatment of fools. Perhaps a particular record of the past that might help you, when you decide to approach the Crown. Something I might be able to use as well, if I propose that Mother also reconsider the law in Mista.”

I leaned back. “That’s what you’ve been doing?”

“During a few visits, whenever I have a free moment.”

I gazed at her, engulfed in a flood of warmth. She spoke as though this were an obvious step for her to take. She wanted to help, which I’d love more than anything. We stood in the heart of the mightiest weapon of all, a place of learning and knowledge, yet I’d poured through these archives before. I tried not to get my hopes up that she would find anything beyond the details of the law itself and soulless logs listing the names and ailments of each born fool who’d ever been swallowed whole by that law.

I asked if she’d made progress, causing her to frown in frustration. That cute expression testified that she wasn’t making as much headway as she’d wanted. She had a pile of chronicles yet to go through. In the meantime, she shared her ideas, solutions about how to treat the mad and possibilities for those like Nicu, who weren’t insane but needed special care.

For a few clandestine minutes, we whispered back and forth. I told her the points that I planned to make to the Crown, debating the strengths and drawbacks with her. Gleaning another Royal’s insights lifted my spirits.

My hand slid to her bottom, to that delectable spot where it met her thighs, and stroked. Suppressing a grin, she drew out my name, part chortle, part reproach. She squirmed in a good way, my words reaching the right places under her skirts. The sweet places.

“I could kiss you senseless,” I said.

“Don’t you dare. You’ll ruin my concentration.”

“On any other day, that would be my hope.” I lowered my voice. “Did you enjoy what I did to you?”

Another flush. “Very much. I’ve never felt so . . .”

“Neither have I.”

“I cannot believe we’re speaking of this in a place of antiquity.”

That made me chuckle. In a Utopian world, I would stay with her so we could investigate together. In this reality, jesters and princesses thrived separately.

Still, the desire to return her industrious efforts spurred me on. Of what

was to come, I felt budding excitement.

“Be studious, but spare some mental energy for tonight.” When the space between her brows bunched in puzzlement, I cradled her face and gave her one more kiss. “’Tis a surprise.”

Leaving her guessing, I wiggled my fingers and mouthed *’bye*. There was plenty to prepare for.

That evening, I dressed to slay. In a dramatic mood, I chose black and white from my wardrobe. I polished it off with a tendril of black around my eyelids and added four symbols—a blue flake of snow, a yellow grain of sand, a green stem, and a red leaf—to the corner of my left eye.

Second-guessing myself, I checked my appearance three times in the mirror. Perched on my vanity, Tumble inspected me with beady-eyed criticism.

“What?” I asked. “Does my masterpiece clash too much?”

The ferret squeaked.

“Certainly, but you try making the four kingdoms harmonize into one motif.”

He squeaked again.

“I know that I need to look extra fine for her, but if you’re set on complaining, I shall have to replace you. Condemnation, I’ve got a kingdom to charm, a monarchy to sway, a minstrel to soothe, a mother to provide for, a son to love, a princess to impress, and then I’ve got you, my friend.”

Irritated, Tumble snapped at the air.

“Calm down. I need five more minutes.”

Primping aside, we got to the throne room early. Ever the servant, I poured my own goblet of wine from the trestle table laden with refreshments. Ever the jester, I refused to wait for the Royals to assemble before drinking.

Mid-slosh, she entered the room with her mother. I glanced up, my tongue cleaving to the roof of my mouth. In a Spring green dress, she grew from a thorn to a whole landscape. Her hair, partially down, was tossed about, windswept into twists and threaded with a spectrum of tiny wildflowers. Her wide eyes, a clear sky.

Wicked hell. She had the glow of someone recently, and repeatedly, plucked.

Her jester did that. His tongue would do it a million times over, until his knees embedded into the floor.

She found me across the room and tried to remain placid, but it proved a chore. I saw the grin fighting to break through. Numerous moans had softened her mouth.

A wet splash on my wrist alerted me to the overflow of wine from my goblet. I'd been mentally stripping her and forgot the flagon tipped in my grasp, the burgundy pouring from its lip. My hand jerked the vessel upright. Shit.

I caught a flash of her teeth. They dug into her lip, containing her mirth.

Her mother saw my blunder, too.

As did the Spring King, who ribbed, "Gracious, Poet. Intoxication and clumsiness require you to drink the wine first."

"Very wise tip, Sire," I answered with a phony slur, to everyone's amusement.

The Royals were in prime spirits at this final assembly, eager to celebrate and then scatter. In addition to kinship, weeks of conference produced its share of animosity and hissy fits.

The princess's throat bobbed. Her anxious gaze flitted my way and received the most imperceptible of nods from me. *Beguile them, Your Highness.*

She nodded back. Henceforth, Autumn and I became invisible to one another. That was the impression we gave as the Royals took their seats. I leaned against a column, kicked Tumble's favorite thread spool across the floor for him to chase, and noted the princess's wistfulness as she settled into what used to have been her father's chair. An exquisite scene, her trading meaningful looks with her mother.

Basil and Fatima wiggled their dough-filled rumps to get comfortable, then the King slammed his paddle palms together. His peers jumped in unison, as they always did.

“I declare this the final gathering of Seasons,” he said. “And a novel occasion, for not only do we culminate these proceedings and go forth in peace once more, but we enhance tradition by having Autumn’s heiress as our guest. A new branch of custom that my Queen and I have proposed, and we Royals have agreed upon and hope to continue with the sum of our offspring for years to come. From this day forth, our children will be invited to attend the closure of the peace talks. Princess Briar, you are most welcome.”

To their applause, she beamed.

“A hasty gesture,” the Summer King grunted behind his flaccid whiskers, “but tolerable. My Queen and I will be pleased to have our son bred with this tradition. A misfortune that other proposals regarding appropriate attendants were denied this year.”

I rolled my eyes. A travesty for him, indeed. I’ve made him chortle with the rest of them, yet this hypocrite—this ignoramus who wouldn’t know a true fool if that fool pissed a puddle’s worth in the king’s tankard, much less if I flashed a mirror in front of his face—remained set on banning me from the talks.

“I must say,” Fatima’s rather spacious mouth bragged, “it behooved us to set such a precedent, but arguments were made in favor of it. It never entered our minds until a conference with our Poet, and somehow, the notion sprung into our heads.”

The Queen could have left me out of it, and things might have turned out differently. Because she didn’t, it snuffed the mood like a candle.

Well, now I had to look.

The princess’s smile vanished in a wisp of smoke. A number of noxious emotions followed, namely confusion, disappointment, and finally indignation. The muscles in her face ticked, trying to remain neutral, but I saw the accusation in her eyes. She thought she’d earned her seat here by being a seamless princess, when in essence I’d given it to her. It was I, not she, who made this happen.

Did she assume it a coincidence when I told her a surprise was coming and then, on the same day, an invitation to join the talks arrived at her door?

Apparently so. Or she understood this was the surprise—but hadn't realized until this second that I played a part in orchestrating it.

She snatched her goblet and drained the contents, her throat overextending itself. I'd offended plenty of times, but I'd never vexed a girl to the point where I lacked a creative means to fix it. My powers of perception had deserted me, since I should have predicted this upheaval, that the Crown would reveal the details of our little huddle.

From one topic to the next, the princess contributed her thoughts with confidence and objectivity. And with a private grudge.

She ignored me. To my comments alone, she remained stiff and dry—all kindling and no blaze. So I sent Tumble to her chair, to loosen her mood.

His Royal Fart of a Summer Majesty had been drinking with aplomb. On Tumble's way, the King took a break from his mead binge, toeing my ferret with his boot. Tumble immediately came back to me, his tail dragging.

Hands behind my back, I rounded the table, making points of my own, sprinkling in various commentary, mockery that should have riled her, reflections that should have drawn her attention. To my annoyance, the princess set her jaw and consulted her peers, miffed at me for trying.

"Moving on to the subject of fools," Basil announced.

My gaze snapped up, as did the princess's. Her eyes darted to me, questioning whether I expected this to be on the agenda.

Despite the collective cruelty, laws declaring born fools as Royal property and dictating their treatment were matters restricted to individual kingdom. They weren't unified concerns, like import and export routes, neutral territories, pirates and smugglers, the codes of war, or illegal immigration between Seasons.

So nay. To put it mildly, I hadn't anticipated this.

At the right opportunity, I had meant to worm new ideas about fools into Spring's mind, to slowly but surely win them over. However, here was a bounty of Royals at my disposal. The laws wouldn't change today, but I could strive for a beginning, to put a dent in their bigotry on a grander scale. Whether or not I fancied myself ready, I had to be.

At last, the princess and I shared a look. ’Twas a mutual look, forged from three days in a floral forest that declared this moment worthy of putting aside her wounded pride and my humor. We hadn’t planned for this, but we’d shared our ideas in the archives. That, and our ability to read one another, would have to suffice.

As a formality, Basil unrolled and recited from the Fool’s Decree. The document stated that while born fools remained blood relations to their families, they became the property of the Crown. They were to be used either for labor (if the tasks required little in the way of brains) or entertainment (if they were prone to clumsiness and comical ways), or to be kept as prisoners in dungeons (if they were violent or useless).

As the Spring King reiterated this, I envisioned my son belonging to the simpleton class of fools, to be harassed at carnivals whenever he lost direction.

Dropping the scroll on the table, Basil welcomed arguments regarding a new amendment to be added to the Decree. The Royals had been considering for some time the option of trading fools between kingdoms. As part of the exchange, the document said, “Fools, and all that they are, shall be bound to their new Season.”

I knew about this amendment and had hoped it wouldn’t see the light of day. Because each Season valued certain attributes in simpletons more than others, I bore no illusions that this gathering would sign the amendment, another way for the vultures to turn the born into easy pickings.

In Summer, child simpletons wove nets, working nonstop despite what it did to their hands. The clumsier a half-wit was, the more amusing and enticing to Spring. Thirsty for knowledge, Winter’s scientists valued sedate fools, and their scholars had been expressing an interest in researching simpletons’ varying behavior—so I’d heard from my sovereigns. And in spite of ordering far more kindly tasks, Autumn benefited most from the able-bodied.

As for the crazed fools, they rotted away in the Seasons’ prisons, problematic since the Royals needed those spaces for criminals—Summer

most of all, having the greatest number of evildoers. Sea breezes aside, humidity and mosquito bites tended to make its citizens irritable, and they were inherently a volatile lot anyway. Whoever deemed the ocean an invigorating place needed to reconsider the reality of crashing waves, sunburn, and sand wedged up into places no one should have it.

Although none of the monarchs wished to house or tolerate them, the insane would be included in the amendment, just in case an unforeseen change or opportunity arose. In the meantime, no doubt the Royals would be discussing alternatives of how to deal with the issue.

Rhys of Summer grumbled, though he'd be of more use to everyone stuffing his mustache in his mouth. "I propose a collective dumping ground for the batty and overly imbecilic," he said. "The ones who prove savage or impossible to utilize. We might establish an encampment on neutral soil, on one of the islands, perhaps. Like a leper colony."

My blood glimmered with hate. "Ignorance is more contagious than leprosy will ever be."

"Buffoonery is a hazard," Summer said. "The mad ones rant and rave and injure innocent people. If not useful, the naturally stupid are an annoyance and a burden. That in itself acts as a contagion. A bad case of fleas."

The princess countered, "If they're such a trial, why not leave them to their families?"

"And allow the mutants to freely litter our kingdoms? That would complicate the problem, not solve it. It's bad enough that we must stock the unmanageable ones when we lack the cell space."

"Ah," I pounced. "May I offer a tip, then?"

"Over my rotting corpse, you may."

"I would suggest getting rid of ugly people. Send them to this fantasy island of yours, since nobody wants them, either. That would provide extra room in the villages."

Rhys's head swelled to double its size. "I see your puny brain requires perspective. Why do we own idiots? Because they inhibit our citizens. One who doesn't have the wit to look after oneself is a waste of space. Families,

both rich and especially poor, cannot afford the shame or inconvenience of looking after a fool. As sovereigns, we are serving our people by shouldering the burden, working the able fools and leashing the rest. It's our duty to oversee the unnatural."

"That doesn't mean we have the right to treat them with cruelty," the princess blurted out.

The Royals stared at her: Since when did this become an issue of sympathy instead of practicality?

"You speak as though they're one of us, dear," Silvia of Winter said with concern.

King Rhys blew hot air. "You may come from the lenient land of Autumn, but don't be naïve, Your Highness. The mad are prone to explode at any moment. As for the silly, if they're good for labor or humor, at least then they have a purpose."

"Spring's standards for humor could be higher," I suggested. "If Whimtany needs slapstick, my kind can perform that to greater effect."

"And you cost more to do it."

"In other words, you're cheap. Or you think Spring is poor." I slithered between Basil and Fatima, draped my arms over the tops of their chairs, my hands dangling beside their heads, and leaned down. They regarded my words, their attention a crawl space through which I implanted an idea. "I didn't realize that was the widespread impression you wanted to give, Your Majesties. It's dawning on me: You may own them, but that any kingdom would rely this desperately on unpaid, lowbrow service is inconsistent with the quality of your wine."

"For the mad, I propose a physician's facility on neutral ground," the princess announced, an idea that we'd talked about in the archives.

King Rhys slapped his palm on the table. "An excellent idea. A fools' tower, where we can use them for medical research. Winter, your scientists will be pleased."

The princess bristled. "I meant a sanctuary. A tower for rehabilitation. If something is not right with the mind, it should be examined and cared for. In

addition to physicians from each kingdom, Winter might devote a batch of its scholars to the cause."

"You cannot fix quicksand. It's a perpetual hazard."

"We don't know that. From our individual thrones, we could hold court to determine what born fools suffer from and whether they pose a threat. If so, they will be sent to this place for healing or . . . stability."

"Good grief, we'd be attending to them more than the rest of our people!" King Rhys brayed. "And for no reason."

"Improvement of society comes to mind," I said, as though the prospect just came to me. "Royals consider themselves regal and forward-thinking. If that's true, your actions should reflect that. There's hardly dignity to be found by relying purely on dungeons, oubliettes, and drunken guards.

"Imagine this: If you have the talent to better comprehend the grips of insanity, the people will have unlimited faith in you. Think of the widespread awe. 'Twill establish that there's nothing the Seasons cannot accomplish. And what a legacy unto themselves!"

Avalea of Autumn twisted toward her daughter. In a reasonable voice that made me tense, the queen asked, "How many physicians would we sacrifice for this treatment, when so many of our other citizens need remedies on a daily basis? What manpower could we spare to build this tower? At whose expense? How much of our resources would go to it?"

The princess wavered. "Precisely. Those are details to be deliberated upon. And as to those who don't present a danger, they should belong to their families. It should be the relatives' decision what happens to their blood."

She glanced at me. On cue, I swooped in.

Pacing beside the length of their table, I tapped my chin. "I wonder. Far be it from me, but granting families that liberty would establish even more loyalty and devotion to their Crown. Everyone longs for the power of choice in his or her life, no matter how insignificant. And come, 'tis not as though relatives of half-wits will want to keep their burden."

I would. Most wouldn't. Nicu had a less taxing condition compared to others, so the devotion that I expressed wouldn't be uttered by every relative

of someone with a different mind. All the same, that didn't warrant giving them up to manacles. These were *people*, we were speaking of. The world needed to stop identifying what they called born fools as inhuman and worthless, as having only weaknesses, no strengths or souls of their own.

Though it was too soon to voice that point. The denizens of these kingdoms had livelihoods to think about. If they weren't involved in trades that already utilized their own blood-related fools with the Crown's permission, chances were slim that those families would be attached. In that case, artists, scholars, fishermen, and farmers across the kingdoms weren't likely to lose their appointed fool-tools.

Hideous as I found it, this wouldn't create a major shift or influence anyone's attitude, but at least relinquishing simpletons would be for the families to determine. That right would be instilled—a small beginning.

It would allow me to keep Nicu. That came first, before all else.

"It's a minor risk that creates the illusion of choice," I summarized. "The people won't have something taken from them, but rather be given the power to 'donate' it. Their love for the Crown will be further cemented."

"We'd be taking fools seriously," Silvia of Winter objected.

"And asking our people to do the same," Giselle of Summer said.

"This discussion is negating the entire amendment," her husband spat. "It's negating the entire Decree. That we've detoured this long is beyond disgraceful. Since when do freaks of nature deserve our compassion?"

Her Autumn Highness turned up her nose. "You could say that avalanches and floods are freaks of nature."

"We can't control the land's flaws, because they don't have beating hearts. Not being given that power is the great mystery of the Seasons themselves. Our society—*that* we can control." The Summer King stabbed his finger onto the table. "It's our duty."

"It's not our duty to abuse. It's our duty to assist."

"They are not normal!"

"Mother?" The princess swerved to Avalea of Autumn, imploring, "You and Father always said . . . You told me how we should try to . . . There are

some who can't be helped, but the ones who can be . . ."

The Queen rested her palm over her daughter's, voicing her fellow monarchs' next thought. "How would the people feel about this in any kingdom? Yes, they may appreciate the choice of what to do with their fool relatives—without creating a notable reduction in service. But if some families *did* choose to keep their simpleton relatives—for whatever reasons or beliefs they've kept hidden—there would be forced integration and social interaction in the towns. Those families would be accused of sullying their communities and being sympathizers, which could lead to embarrassment, tension, and aggression.

"Moreover, the people would see their rulers spend energy and reserves originally meant for them, in order to assist the mad instead, while also rejecting the possibility of widely supported trade. We would favor those viewed as defectives alongside those of sound mind who also require our aid. They would see it as an imbalance. A reduction of our support."

"But—"

"So how would they react to this change?"

"Precisely," seconded the Summer King.

Prejudice was a generations-old curse. How *would* the people react?

They would riot. That was how.

Serene Autumn, playful Spring, and placid Winter had their limits, their dark sides just like Summer.

Helpless, I watched the Queen's rebuttal mobilize my princess to the Royals' side of the throne room. "You're not only proposing a monumental social change, you're proposing to question people's beliefs, to challenge them and risk upheaval. You're asking them to make sacrifices and to doubt you. What you're suggesting could take decades to achieve peacefully."

"We don't have decades!" the princess shouted.

She meant that I didn't have decades. Nicu didn't.

It got so quiet that we could have heard a dust mote landing on the floor. The stunned expressions of her mother and everyone else extracted a blush from the girl. "That is, we don't need decades. But . . ." She cast her eyes

down. “Yes. It would take more time.”

My mouth snapped out of its paralysis. “By my estimation, there are two more hours for this meeting. Entertain us with ideas.”

Avalea narrowed her eyes. “This isn’t something to be decided in one sitting, Court Jester.”

That look sunk valleys-deep. It said, *Stay away from my daughter*.

She knew. She knew that I’d done everything to the princess, short of getting her with child. She knew as Jinny had known, as mothers did.

As fathers did, too.

“Autumn is right. It could take years alone to reach a unanimous plan on this matter,” Fatima agreed with reluctance, along with her husband.

“Assuming we all have the same goal, which we do not,” Rhys nagged. “The topic is moot.”

“Of course. I understand,” the princess mumbled. “It was untimely of me to suggest it.”

I felt her words in my fists, saw them in the hills straining from beyond the castle, leading to Jinny’s cottage, and in the shards of light that tore through the clouds.

An apology cracked the princess’s lips apart, trying to claw its way from her throat, but dear us, we were surrounded. We were on display and had made a display. A vicious corner of me relished seeing her mouth clamp shut, inwardly gagging on her own guilt.

Her remorse insulted us both, for that meant she’d accepted her blunder rather than rising above it and continuing to argue. I didn’t want her sorrowful eyes. I wanted a retraction.

Anger peppered my tongue. “I wouldn’t have anticipated you’d accept defeat easily, Your Highness. It’s not a Royal’s way. Rather disappointing.”

She hardened into a slab of marble. “It is not defeat. It’s diplomacy. If you were one of us, you would understand that.”

“True. I’m not one of you, and yet I’m here.”

“You’re here as a servant, along with the pages serving us drink. My mother is right. This is a gross undertaking, not to be pursued rashly.”

“When you choose to shackle a problem, you are not confronting it or being diplomatic. You’re telling the world that you’re not equipped to solve it in any other creative or intelligent way. You’re admitting that *you’re* the fool.”

“Poet!” Basil railed.

Poet, indeed. I’d gotten us into this and blamed myself for not thinking quick enough to shoot her down. I should have whipped up a word, a sentence, a damned cough when I had the chance, instead of letting her walk us right to the precipice—then turn us right back around. I should have known better than to hope the princess wouldn’t be swayed. Verbal parries with me did not compare to debating with Royal elders.

Betraying this most tender of subjects hadn’t been her intention. If the regret in her eyes was any indication, her instincts had played little part in this. Still, deliberate or not, her rationale made a choice and voiced it, jilting me in the process.

How idiotic to think we could band together. I should have relied on myself, as I’d been doing. I spent a year wheedling my way into Spring’s trust. I didn’t need her help.

Nay. I had wanted it. Disillusioned, moonstruck me had wanted her on my side.

No more, and never again. Once more, me against them.

I must have been picking the princess apart with my eyes, because heads banked from me to her. Under that horrendous mop of a mustache, the King of Summer sneered, taking black pleasure in watching my sovereigns reprimand me. The Queens of Winter blinked. Autumn’s Queen stared at the princess. Basil and Fatima festered in my direction. With a single verbal punch, I had offended every Royal at the table. My humor lost, I trod on thin ice. The princess and I both did, and to this company, over so pitiful a topic.

If I persisted, I would dig a deeper grave. My temper would flare and override my cunning. It would lead me to spit things I’d regret later, possibly whilst I spent a day in the dungeon cooling my heels. Best-case scenario, if I didn’t outright expose myself as a sympathizer.

We may not have rallied each figurehead, but we’d had Spring. We’d had

my sovereigns in our grasp, so fucking close.

Spring dismissed me from the throne room. The princess had the nerve to squeak out an objection, which her mother quelled by clasping the girl's wrist. Brilliant move, for my would-be lover had done me enough favors today.

Bowing my head, I took measured steps to the door. Outside, I thundered down the corridor toward her chamber, where I hid nearby. Two hours hence, she came.

Pausing in front of her door, she turned toward me at the same instant I turned away from her. I headed toward the first hidden panel available, thwacked my palm against it, and stepped inside. My pace forced her into a trot behind me. We cut into a tunnel and up a random stairway. I couldn't care less where it led. We spiraled high, our shoes beating the stones.

By the time we reached the top, to a single door, my joints burned. No matter, for I threw open the barrier and flung myself inside, shutting the door once she passed through. Ah, I thought, taking in our surroundings. The bell tower, encircled by gaping arches that overlooked Whimtany. In the middle, a fat instrument of song dangled, its girth promising a bloody death to one's eardrums if they happened to wander here on the hour.

"'Tis a wonder the Crown doesn't use this room for torture," I mused. "Punishment by a dozen gong-lashes. The effect of noise is underrated—not that I condone torture. The sight of blood makes me woozy."

"I realize you're angry," she said. "It's not as if I expected fools to come up for discussion."

"Did you already know how you felt about them? I'm told having a solid point of view in advance helps when you're taken off guard. By the by, I assume the Royals sanctioned the amendment and signed it. 'Tis splendid to know it's gone into immediate effect."

"A point of view needs backup, as in any debate! You could have cautioned me in the archives to prepare better. Perhaps I would have found something of substance had I known to look harder, but you threw me into this!"

"One, I've every faith that you did your best in the vault. I've tried myself

to unearth information that would help my plea, to no avail. That you didn't find anything isn't the problem. Two, I'm not privy to an advanced schedule of the peace talks' theatrics, though I'm flattered that you'd think this jester so high. Three, forgive this humble servant for thinking he was doing something special for you."

"I assumed you merely heard they were going to invite me—and *that* was the surprise. I didn't think you schemed them into it, but I should have. I should know you by now. Who are you to represent my business? Who are you to steer my fate? You undermined and mortified me!"

"Nay, I accomplished what you should have done for yourself," I hissed. "That's what this is about. You're smart and self-sufficient, but you let tradition cheat you. Mayhap that's why we couldn't find a damn thing in the archives: because when you cling to past ways and past documents, there's nothing *new* to say!" I smacked the bell's rim to enunciate my point. "You want things to change? Then change them!"

"It's complicated," she yelled back.

"So is having a son, but I manage."

"You're speaking about one child. I'm speaking about seven monarchs and the principles of four kingdoms. That's what I have against me."

"Against you?" I spat. "Plague. Natural disasters. Traitors and assassins. A broken treaty and an unexpected war with another Season. Brush up on your princess skills, because if Mama Autumn hasn't warned you yet, devastation is a monarch's responsibility. A seat at the peace talks and a failed debate with the Royals might be the least of your challenges. If you can't handle that, then at least fake your gratitude when a person cares enough about you to help."

"I care about you, too!"

In an instant, I stood in front of her. "Tell me, then. Tell me what I am to you."

By no means had I planned to question this, ever. I scarcely entertained the illusion that our world would accept our tryst, allowing it to extend into something meaningful. Yet in the midst of our quarrel, my mind demanded to know. However daft, my pulse hankered and hammered to know.

Naturally, the answer I wanted didn't come. Her eyes shimmered, a harrowing effect on my soul. Without noticing it, I'd let her too far into me.

"I'm Autumn. You're Spring," she said. "You're staying. I'm leaving."

"You're royalty. I'm not." My chuckle was spiteful. "It must have been titillating for you, having the Court Jester of Whimtany at your disposal, bringing your pretty-filthy secret to his knees. In so many ways."

She went crimson. "It was not like that! You are—"

"Of course while you were busy battering my heart to smithereens in the throne room, I would have appreciated you trying not to crush my agenda while you were at it."

"They're my elders and have reigned for decades. They've done it while maintaining a peaceful alliance. I had to consider their arguments."

"You fickle, submissive twit! I've spent a year buttering up Spring, but in a single bite you chewed up my efforts and spit them back out!"

"I hardly forced you to snarl at me in public. Poet, I believe in what you're doing. I'm on your side, but you're looking at this as a father. I have to look at this as a Royal. I can't shirk what my ancestors put in place."

"You mean the dead and buried ones? Those ancestors?"

"Stop talking down to me, Poet. I'm not a lost child who will never grasp the difference between left and right. I'm not Nicu!"

Dead silence. When I flung those daggers at the target in the great hall, the impact set the hilt to vibrating. Her words were those daggers. I was the marker. She hit my center, knocked me off balance. I stumbled back, one clumsy step, like a fool.

Like a fool.

If the bell were to wail, I wouldn't hear it. Her voice hacked through me enough. If I'd been livid before, 'twas nothing compared to this. This pain.

Stricken, she registered her mistake. Her brows winged into her forehead, her skin whitening in horror. "No," she pleaded. "No, Poet. I didn't mean . . ."

What she didn't mean was to cross that line. But she had. This, after treating my son with kindness, after tricking me into thinking her above them.

Panic pushed her toward me. "Poet, I'm sor—"

My palm snapped up, halting her. My mouth bunched in fury. I flapped my finger twice, making it clear. *Not another word.*

She could be sorry all she wanted. I was sure she would be, for losing a jester was like losing a pretty toy. Ay, she could be sorry, and so what? Sorry wasn't the whole story. When anger came out, drawing words like swords, so did the truth. So now I knew how she really felt.

Lost. That's what she thought of him.

I would concede: Sometimes the simplest words had the sharpest teeth.

Good riddance, for I stalked past her, leaving her behind. We were done. So very, finally done.

21

Princess

When my scribbled message to him went unanswered, desperation got the better of me. Claiming a headache to Mother, I declined a late celebratory meal with the Royals. I dallied in my chamber until the bell tolled the hour, the vibrations flooding the kingdom to announce supper. My chin trembled at the memory of that tower, of what I'd said there.

Sans a candle or lantern, I cracked my door open to see if any guards stood post outside, then crept from my wing and braved the route to the servants' quarters. His room was empty and dark. I longed for him so badly that I imposed myself on his bed, perching at the edge. I drew my legs into my chest and wrapped my arms around my knees. Curled into a ball, I dropped my head and waited.

He could be diverting the Royals while they supped. He might be keeping company with the one person it would pain me to see him with.

Soon enough, Mother might return to my chamber to check on me. If I didn't make it back in time, I would have to invent yet another excuse. I'd been shutting her out for ages. In playing allies—more than that—with the jester, I'd lied to her. To her and to others.

A princess did not wound people. She should not.

I'd found nothing of substance in the archives. I'd done Poet and Nicu no justice, and now the Seasons could trade born fools. I may not have signed the amendment, but my silence had contributed to its existence.

The door creaked. My head lifted. A sliver of firelight from the hall stretched across the floor, silhouetting his shadow. At the sight of me, he startled. He glanced behind into the corridor, then blinked back at me.

"Briar?" Eliot asked.

"Hello," I whimpered.

"What are you doing here?"

"I know. I'm sorry."

Hearing the crack in my voice, he sighed. Not the supportive reception I had hoped for. In the past, he would have dashed over to me, insisted upon knowing what was amiss and how he could help—as I would do for him without question. I'd assumed that he would welcome me, seeing my distress.

Instead, he hesitated. We never met in his room. I'd been here before, but briefly and on the pretext of requesting a song for an event, wanting to see where he slept, another way to be close to him. The tension lining his face had nothing to do with the scandal of me being here, when the piper who bunked with him could walk in at any second. His brusque tone hinted that I was trespassing for other reasons.

He crossed the floor and settled beside me. No arm around my shoulder, no hand squeezing mine or ruffling my hair. We hadn't seen one another since the labyrinth, yet something had shifted in my absence. When not with Mother, I had spent my secret hours with Poet, doing things that would crush Eliot were he to discover them. I had no right to be here. Horribly, self-indulgently, I had been neglecting my friend. I'd betrayed him.

But he didn't know that.

He regarded the lute propped in the corner. He must be pained that I'd taken this long to meet with him again. That would account for his uncharacteristic silence.

When we were fourteen, we wrote a song together. It was about horses ruling an animal kingdom. I wondered if he remembered the words. My contribution had been terrible, but he'd included the choppy lyrics anyway, because we were friends. That's what friends did.

My throat constricted. I would not cry.

"I was invited to the peace talks." I stared at my feet, realizing this was news to him. Not long ago, he would have been the first person to know that I'd been invited to the talks. "I wanted to make a good impression and make Mother proud. I tried to speak about something very important to . . . to me. But I ruined it. I sat there while they all stared at me. I failed people who depended on me, and I cannot undo that."

"I'm surprised you would tell me this," he said. "That is to say, I'm

surprised you value my opinion, being that you haven't asked for it these last weeks since your return from the forest. You're a busy girl, that is true. Busier than you used to be, whereas I'm a lowly minstrel."

I grabbed his precious hand. His long, musical fingers. "That's untrue."

He pulled away. "I'm just puzzled why you would confide in me now. Considering everything else you've kept from me."

The curtain slapped his windowsill. His words snatched the air from my lungs.

"I saw you," he said, his grimace daring me to deny it.

"Eliot, please. Let me explain."

"I saw you together. Last night, when you taunted him to bow and wish you a pleasant evening. Long before that, I had a feeling when you both came back from the woods, but I ignored the looks between you. I refused to believe you would do that to me. But for Season's sake, you loosened your braids and constantly seemed like you wanted to apologize to me for something. Your chin crinkles when you're rattled, Briar."

"We didn't mean for it to happen."

"We," he repeated, like I'd smeared the word on him and he was trying to wipe it off.

"Eliot—"

"At supper yesterday, I noticed how you favored one another. I followed him and watched him enter your chamber, and when you got there, I waited, but you didn't throw him out. The door wasn't locked." He gulped. "I saw the kiss."

Mortification singed my cheeks. In the great hall, I'd sensed someone observing us closely. I had teased Poet, then he'd stolen into my room, sank to his knees, and slipped his head under my skirts.

Havoc must have shown on my face. The sight of it crippled Eliot. "Whatever else you did, I don't want to know. After the kiss, I couldn't bear to watch any longer." He stood, putting his back to me. "You were my best friend, Briar."

I rose on jellied limbs. "I still am."

“Did you think of me? With Poet, did you once think about what this would do to me?”

“Yes. Yes, I did. Our friendship means everythi—”

“No, it doesn’t. You let him seduce you. You of all people, who wrinkles your nose at sonnets and would rather eat salt than dance. But no, you danced in the labyrinth. When I saw you like that, it was like seeing that twelve-year-old girl again, the lively one who made friends with me at a market, before her father died.

“I treasured the person you became, but you were never completely yourself, never completely happy. I knew that girl was inside you somewhere. I’ve begun to see glimpses of her, and it’s because of Poet.”

Yes and no. It was also because of me. Poet did not bring out anything that wasn’t already there. That girl had been buried within me, dormant beside my father, waiting to resurface.

“We didn’t . . . it was special with him. You know I would not take such a chance if it wasn’t.”

“Briar, I haven’t a clue what you’d do anymore.”

“Of course I thought about you, and Mother, and the whole world. But he became another type of world—for a little while,” I said. “It’s over now. It was not going to last.”

“Do you love him?”

“Not like I love you!”

“That’s obvious.”

“You’re my best friend!”

“I’m your only friend. And that’s not an answer.”

It was not. I recalled Poet’s sorrow when I’d withheld what he meant to me, then his collapse when I insulted Nicu. For an instant, in my deranged state, I’d abandoned myself and offended his beautiful son. I’d uttered words that I hadn’t meant, would never mean. I couldn’t punish myself enough for it.

I adored Nicu. I adored his father.

Based on the anguished clench of Eliot’s face, he guessed my feelings. He

wanted Poet, too. He didn't know about Poet's family, or that Poet loved to feel velvet on his palm, or that he was ticklish behind his knees, that he liked to take baths in the dark, or that he slept with a scrunched face—like his son.

My friend's affection might have been irrational, misguided, trussed up in romanticism. Or it might have been true and lucid. As performers, they'd developed their own bond. Eliot might have loved Poet from a different angle, but it was still love.

Over all these years, not for a second had I feared an interloper would jeopardize our friendship. For anyone to come between us, I'd assumed it would have to be a girl, and Eliot's preference eliminated that possibility.

I'd never counted on another boy.

But that didn't mean Eliot mattered any less to me. Whatever I felt for the jester made no difference there.

I choked, "If I have to make a choice, I will always choose you."

Eliot went to the door and held it open. "And what if I don't choose you?"

Memories of the ancient garden, our meeting spot, where we'd whisper and laugh together. Stolen moments that we used to unlace and wrap ourselves in. Now gone.

The agony of it. Us, no longer children. Him averting his gaze, as though my avowal repelled him. Me silently begging him to look my way. My minstrel silently begging me to leave.

My friend closing the door behind him when I did.

The latch clicking into place.

* * *

Lark's Day was an annual carnival that lauded the end of the peace talks. It began at midday and lasted into the night, spanning one of the wildflower hills beyond the castle.

In the past, custom restricted it to Royals, the nobility, and performers—those of the castle's resident troupe and Whimtany's traveling groups. But this year, the event welcomed all citizens, including servants and villagers.

The day supplied an array of diversions. Tumblers. Jugglers. Knife-throwers, ring-throwers, and flag-throwers. Competitions, tournaments, and

races. Mock-battles, theatrical acts, and puppeteers. Instruments of play, like blindfolds and batons.

Basil and Fatima anticipated the event with glee. As the designated Masters of Merry, the Crown elected someone to play the Fest Fool at the carnival. Attendants would order the Fool to perform whatever creative feat the attendants fancied, then judge the Fool with either praise or scrutiny.

The Fool could be anyone, from a scullery maid, to a simpleton or acrobat from one of the troupes, to a Royal. The Crown planned to consult with Poet —presently on trial for his behavior in the throne room—and debate over a list of candidates.

I'd managed to convince the Royals that his outburst during the final talk had done us no harm. Jesters were excitable after all, I'd claimed. And he hadn't offended us publicly, so making an example of him wasn't necessary.

However, Poet had been commanded to kneel before us and apologize the next day. He'd done so brilliantly and with a monumental amount of hidden scorn. Mostly he'd aimed it toward me, but at least his obedience had spared him a flogging.

Throughout the castle, people spoke about the delights they most looked forward to. They gossiped about who the Crown would choose as the Fest Fool. It was usually someone who'd brought recent attention to him or herself —either good or bad.

Three days before the event, workers began to set up the hill, erecting stages and ivy-strewn tents. Men made of lead and grit speared poles into the soil. Hammers thwacked wood.

As we did each year, Mother and I volunteered to help. Balancing atop ladders, we fastened a pair of streamers—a pink one and a green one—to the top of a tent. Connecting all the tents that way, the cloths would sway from one pavilion to the next across the carnival. A pretty web that one would be able to see from a distance.

Both Queens of Winter and the Silly Seven joined us. The elderly monarchs supervised the layout and arrangement of the tents. The Seven gathered into a circle, giggling and weaving more streamers.

My chest gave a violent tug. The colorful cords reminded me of Jinny's cottage, the ribbons dangling from the ceiling to guide Nicu.

Mother said something, shaking me out of my trance.

"Pardon?" I inquired, turning back to my work.

"I said, are you all right?"

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"You've untied and retied that garland several times."

I glanced down at my rope of green. "I'm a perfectionist."

"You're an overachiever." She knotted her pink cloth to the base of the tent's topper. "As a monarch, I'm proud. As a mother, I'm troubled."

"I am well."

I'd lost sleep. I'd dreamed about him, thought about him. I'd wracked my soul for ways to atone, to convince him that he mattered. I had searched for him in the halls. I had considered going to him, fighting harder, not taking no for an answer. I'd longed to prove myself to him.

Sometimes *him* was Eliot. Sometimes he was someone else.

I drew in tearful gusts of air through my nostrils. A princess did not suffer a broken heart in public.

Not unless the source of that broken heart made an unexpected appearance.

The wind sighed. The castle bell rang.

Often, he arrived in a cacophony of sound. As far as I was concerned, the noises warned me too late. I sensed his bitterness before I mustered the courage to search for it. My eyes drifted across pennants limp on the grass, sharp tools, and bearded faces.

I tripped over a pair of vicious, green irises. Poet stood beside a partially raised tent, with a trio of performers who stretched absently and joked with each other. His eyes slid over me with contempt, then slid away.

Toward Eliot.

My friend was one of the artisans in the group. His wary gaze crept from me to the jester. Aware of the rift between us, Eliot seized the opportunity, reaching out to touch Poet's arm. A prolonged stroke from shoulder to wrist.

A gesture meant to steal Poet's attention.

Their mutual ease proved that Eliot hadn't confronted Poet about me. But presently, Eliot said something, to which Poet glanced down at the minstrel's fingers and then up at him. Poet contemplated something within my friend's words. Whatever Eliot had told him, it was working.

Glutton for punishment, I watched them together. Every second their eyes remained locked, another one of my ribs cracked. I didn't know how to speak with this Eliot, or with this Poet, once affectionate and overflowing with wit. Now strangers who resented me to the point where I'd become invisible.

They could be together without consequences. They had that luxury, that freedom. I wasn't like them. I wasn't born to have any love that I wanted, not if it conflicted with my duty. My kingdom owned me. My desires were the people's desires. My joys were their joys. My grief, their grief. That was the cost of who I was, but for a few beautiful days, I'd forgotten that.

Poet and Eliot shared a laugh, unconcerned whether or not I saw it. Perhaps even hoping that I did. And it hurt so much.

"Young lady," Mother snapped. "Listen to me when I'm speaking to you."

I twisted to Mother and snapped back, "I'm *listening*."

"Don't use that tone on me."

"I was preoccupied for one moment. Am I not allowed that? I've been listening to you for eighteen years. Is it not enough?"

"Your eyes are shadowed. You've been sluggish. You pick at your food. You caused an uproar at the peace talks. You are far from well. You're upset, and you won't tell me why."

"It's my life. Let me breathe, for once."

"I am your mother and your Queen," she exclaimed. "You will remember that. If you insist on doing otherwise, then you are not your father's daughter. Get out of my sight."

The hammering and jovial conversations ceased. I blanched that she would bring Father into this, that she would use his memory to flay me. I tore down the ladder, aware of Poet's gaze. Within an hour, the talk would spread that Autumn had taken leave of its senses and quarreled in front of Winter, the

Silly Seven, the Court Jester, and a host of servants and artists. And I did not care.

As I passed the courtiers, Vale and Posy gave me sympathetic looks. Cadence lowered her voice and snickered, “Who needs a festival? Baiting a simpleton in the stocks can’t be more fun than this.”

Mother hadn’t heard her. Cadence made sure of that.

But I’d heard. So had Poet. His gaze shot toward Cadence.

A spasm of action. I whipped around, strode over to the wench, and smacked her clear across the face.

“Briar!” Mother shouted in dismay.

Cadence yelped and held her blazing cheek. Her clan of six stared, aghast.

“That was not funny,” I said through my teeth. “If you cannot say anything without due respect, then keep your big mouth shut.”

Ignoring Mother’s calls, I marched past Eliot and Poet. I hiked down the hill, through the lower town, and up the second hill to the castle. Finally crossing the dahlia garden path, which acted as a shortcut to my chamber, I flexed my hand. My skin burned from the contact with Cadence’s hateful sneer. It was a wonder that I could experience a jolt of satisfaction over what I did. It went against my principles. It defied how a Royal should conduct herself, especially the daughter of Autumn, known far and wide as a girl composed to a fault.

Being upset was hardly justification. By striking one of Spring’s ladies-in-waiting, I had disrespected Queen Fatima and dishonored my mother. I’d set a terrible example and would need to make amends before the court.

I couldn’t resist a smug grin.

A hand lashed out and yanked me into the nearest bush. I parted my lips to scream—until I noticed the silver hair and burlap skin. “Jinny,” I gasped.

The trembling woman clasped my elbows. “Princess. Oh, thank Seasons, it’s you.”

“What is—how did you get here?”

“I can’t find Poet. I searched, but I’ve never been here before. I got lost and . . . oh, Seasons.”

“He’s helping set up for Lark’s Day. What is amiss?”

Jinny groaned. “I should have guessed. I wasn’t thinking.”

No, she was not. She was panicking.

“It’s Nicu. I think it was the ribbons. The ribbons at the festival. He must have seen them, and—I-I don’t know.”

“Tell me what’s happened,” I said sternly.

“I think it was the ribbons. I hurried, I tried, but I was too late. They got to him.”

“Who got to him?” I demanded.

She crumbled in my arms. “The guards. The Crown. They have him. They took Nicu!”

22

Princess

Father had described to me what times of crises felt like. I'd been five and already curious about what to do when matters took turns for the worst. In a castle, I'd been exposed to things that other children hadn't, and my parents had vowed to be truthful to me. They'd treated me like a girl of age, even when I hadn't been one.

My father had said that oftentimes, he went numb in order to endure. His body ceased to function, all the resilience going straight to his head. The shock of calm helped him think clearly during the chaos. His mind became a sharper weapon.

"But what about ruling with your heart?" I'd asked.

"Love with your heart. Rule with your head," he had answered.

"But maybe my head and heart can help each other. They can work together. Is that not what they're for?"

Pensive, Father had stared at me. "Someday, if you find a way to use both, do advise me." He'd placed me on his shoulders and quipped, "In the meantime, your weight is much easier to bear."

My weight. The heft of a child had been easier to bear than that of a kingdom.

Whenever problems plagued Mista, I would watch Mother's head bow with indecision, then rise with resignation. Perhaps the numbness became a shield for her, like it had for Father.

And now for me. Before Jinny's words could snake into the pit of my stomach, the numbness swooped in like a bird and snatched it away.

A single thought looped in my mind.

They took Nicu.

They took him.

Nicu.

Sick with worry, Jinny had worn herself out. Hooking my arm around her

waist, I guided her into the castle and ordered a startled guard to help me. Registering her modest clothing and laborer's hands, the confused man scooped her up and followed me to my chamber. I sensed him itching to question me, to suggest we cart her to the physician. A mere peasant's swoon hardly warranted a trip to a princess's suite.

My glare ceased his objections. In my room, he laid Jinny on the bed. I dismissed him and summoned a maid.

Jinny made a fuss as I wrapped her in my coverlet. "I have to—we have to __"

"We will," I said. "We will get him back. First, tell me how you got here."

"Our pony and wagon. There are these herbs—they grow a ways from the cottage, in a patch off the main road. At our pace, it's a right trip there and back, but I've been suffering a pained head something severe. I told myself we'd be careful of strangers.

"I bundled Nicu into the cart so no one could see him, told him it was a game. I was busy gathering when he disappeared. He must have . . . he must have taken the road to the castle and seen the ribbons. He must have thought they were like the ones in our cottage. When I realized he was gone, I ran. I saw him at the drawbridge with the sentinels. They were taking him away."

A growl leapt from my throat. "Did they harm him?"

"Not a hair. He went with them willingly, probably thinking it was another game. Poet told him over and over not to pounce on strangers, but Nicu isn't a child that remembers everything he's told."

If Jinny had the wagon with her, it must be tethered wherever she left it. "A servant is coming. Don't say a word to her. You're ill. You don't know me. I'm simply being charitable to a stranger. How is your head now?"

"I can't feel a thing. I can't think about it."

"Once you've rested, go home. Poet and I will get Nicu, but someone needs to be there when we return him."

"You're saying an old woman is going to slow you down."

"I am. And I don't wish to risk you getting harmed. Can you make to the wagon?"

“Try and stop me,” she vowed.

The maid scampered in. I instructed her to look after Jinny. “If anyone enters—if my Mother enters—let her know that I found this woman in the garden. She’s here at my insistence. She will be fine with rest and drink. Allow her to leave once she’s recovered. Understand?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” the maid said, then set about pouring water and banking a fire.

“There’s no need to fret,” I assured Jinny.

Reluctantly, she did as I’d asked and rested. Exiting my chamber, I hastened down the hall.

Nicu could be cold. He could be hungry. He could be hurt.

I quickened my pace. I needed to see him and make sure he was all right before racing to Poet. There was no telling how the jester would react, or what he would do, when I told him what had happened. I couldn’t return to the hill yet, not without seeing what obstacles we faced, without knowing how his son fared, without that information to calm Poet down—to calm myself down.

The Court Physician’s door stood ajar. I spewed a lie to the man about needing a sleeping draught, trusting that the shadows under my eyes were suitable proof of my troubles. The man’s fingers lagged through cupboards laden with vials and tinctures. The glasses clinked, the noise pinching my patience. He moved slower than a sloth. I nearly shouted at him.

Armed with a tiny vessel of liquid, I left the room and headed for the dungeon, darting through corridors and down a familiar stairway glazed in phlegm-colored slime. Hiding the sleeping draught in my sleeve, I descended into the dank chill, undeterred by the slender, famished groans, the squeaking rats, the stench of vomit. A lone torch illuminated the guard, a potbellied man with mead breath and a thick rind of facial skin.

He rose from his crate. “Milady,” he blurted in astonishment.

Disregarding his improper form of address, I stepped around the corner from his post, my eyes scanning the dozens of cells that tapered into the darkness. Shadows of dirty rags and skeletal limbs. Manacles and chains

dragging over stone. Someone hacking. Someone whispering to himself.

The patter of small feet.

Nicu.

Recognizing me, he stumbled from the corner of his cell and clutched the bars, his hopeful face poking through the gap. His green eyes shone with terror and confusion, begging me to help him. To save him.

Each cubicle allowed scarcely enough space for one to extend one's arms. The guard hadn't squashed Nicu in with other prisoners, which seemed to be the case in majority of the cells, but how dare frivolous Whimtany behave so unmercifully. Regal Mista would never treat any child this way!

The numbness dissolved. My heart came back to life with a vengeance.

The guard hadn't even given Nicu a blanket.

Nicu whimpered. Behind the guard's back, I pressed my finger to my lips. *Hush.*

The boy bit his lower lip. At which point, I more than crossed the boundaries of my jurisdiction. I downright trampled over them. "I was informed that you held a child down here."

"The Crown's orders, milady. This urchin's a simpleton. He's to be shackled while His and Her Majesties make plans for him."

"He's hardly a physical threat. Surely there's a better place to detain him."

"The Crown's orders," the man and his jowls repeated.

"I wish to question him. Open the cell and leave us."

"Milady—"

My voice grew hot enough to incinerate him. "Stop addressing me as a noble. I am not a 'milady.' I am a Royal, the Princess of Mista, and an honored guest of Spring. In other words, 'Your Highness.' I suspect this child may very well be the smuggled property of Autumn. Your sovereigns have granted me leave to investigate the matter while my mother is otherwise occupied. Now I command you to *open the cell*!"

He fumbled with a ring of keys. Nicu scurried backward as the door winced on its hinges and swung wide. Another thorny look at the guard sent him away. Muttering, he returned to his post in the alcove.

I dashed into the cell and dropped to the floor. With a low cry, I spread my arms at the same time Nicu flung himself at me. His whole body quaked. His skin was ice, his fingers frosted over. I wanted to check him for bruises, signs that he'd been mishandled, but I couldn't let go. I rocked him from side to side, squeezing his waist and cupping the back of his head with my free hand.

He sniffled into my neck. "Girl."

"Yes, it's me. I'm here. It's all right now. It's all right."

"I want my papa."

"I will get him for you. I promise."

"I met a King and Queen, but they didn't want to be my friends. And the guard didn't want to play with me. He yelled mean things. He called me names."

Poet was going to kill the guard. I fantasized about it, too.

Jinny had said that Nicu went with the sentinels willingly. It did not take a genius to surmise why. He must have been thrilled to meet so many people, believing everything was fine. That assumption must have changed once they locked him in this awful place.

Nicu launched into a peculiar story. I managed to pick through it and puzzled together the facts: Jinny, the herbs she'd needed to gather, how he'd wandered off to explore. At the fringes of the woods, he'd seen the carnival ribbons in the distance. He'd thought of home and how he was supposed to follow the colors hanging from the ceiling. He'd been tired and wanted to sleep in his pallet, so he hurried toward the garlands, then got distracted by the wondrous sight of the castle, its towers vaulting skyward. Because he'd never seen anything like it, he'd changed his mind and skipped toward the stronghold.

Among a horde of citizens, the child hadn't known what to do with himself. He'd cavorted from one person to the next, bursting with hugs and questions. At the gate, the looming guards in their shiny armor made an impression. They were metal trees. Their poleaxes were giant toys.

Nicu had tried to climb up one of the men's legs. The man kicked him away, then got a good look at the boy's face. That, and a string of queer

comments, had gotten Nicu in trouble.

He wept in my arms, the tears slicing through his muck-stained cheeks. He didn't understand what was happening or why.

I didn't understand it. No one should.

When I called for the guard and ordered him to have milk, bread, and cheese brought to the cell, the portly man grunted. "He isn't right, Your Highness. Everyone knows a half-wit isn't right by nature. They can't fend for 'emselves. They grow up to be trouble what can't look out for their own. They're good for nothing, much less a Royal's mercy."

"Did I seek your counsel?" I snapped. "Bring me what I asked for. Now!"

Tossing Nicu a repellent look, the guard disappeared. Nicu watched him go, then asked, "What's a half-wit?"

I framed his face. "Listen to me, Nicu—"

"Is it a monster? Is it going to eat me like thunder? Thunder eats the grass."

"Nothing is going to happen to you. I swear it. Thunder won't eat you because you're a faerie. You have magic. Papa gave it to you."

Almost. He almost brightened, but then he jumped when a brittle creature two cells down shrieked, its paper voice ripping apart. Its owner repeated, "Alarm, alarm, alarm!"

Nicu shrunk into my chest. "Don't leave me. I'm scared."

"I'm not going anywhere," I promised.

"Papa goes."

"But he comes back. Because he loves you. More than anything else."

"Love is the sun. You have a yellow sun in your tummy, too, Girl. Like Papa and Jinny. It's glowing. Your hair is a red ribbon, and your brown dots —" he tapped the freckles on my nose "—are stains from the rain. If you leave me, there will never ever be colors again. They will die."

"No," I said. "You're all the color in this world, not me. You're Spring and Summer and Autumn and Winter. Your eyes are good luck clovers."

"I don't want to be colorful without you, Girl. You make me happy orange and Papa silly pink."

“My name is Briar.”

“Briar,” he repeated in a frightfully accurate imitation of my voice.

He stared up at me like I belonged to him, like he belonged to me. Like I made this dungeon safe.

I’d held back for so long, in spite of Father’s death, Mother’s disappointment, Eliot’s heartbreak, Poet’s everything. Nicu was the pin that burst me open. After weeks of them swelling behind my eyes, two bloated tears popped and rushed down my face.

He extended a finger and traced each wet path. “You’re raining.”

I’m crying because there’s not a thing I wouldn’t do for you.

Maybe this was how Mother felt about me. Unconditional. Absolute.

The solitary torchlight pulsed against the sooty walls. Our shadows formed a single body. I watched myself disappear into Nicu.

I loved this boy. I loved his father for making him.

A servant carrying a plate trailed behind the guard. Nicu devoured the food, his lips smacking.

While he bent his head, I uncorked the sleeping draught. “Can you eat and drink all the treats in the world, Nicu? Is there anything that makes your throat and lips burn, or makes you sick?”

With a full mouth, he answered, “When Jinny eats nuts, she gets a duck mouth.”

“Does anything do that to you?”

He shook his head. I dosed his milk with the vial’s contents and watched him gulp it down. Unclasping my wool cloak, I swaddled it around his shoulders and flopped the hood over his head. Within moments, he yawned. I guided him to a spot on the floor, sat against the wall, and gathered him onto my lap.

“Tell me a story,” I urged. “When you’re finished, Papa will be here.”

His head lolled against me, his ear pressed to my bodice. I covered his other ear to protect him from the maddened noises surrounding us. They bellowed and cackled and wept through the cage bars. They bumped into walls.

A tale leaked out of Nicu about anthills and half-wit guards, which made less and less sense as he drifted. At last, his words faded into sleep. When he next awoke, I prayed to Autumn this place would be nothing but a bad dream.

I laid him down carefully and noticed a red strap peeking from his pocket. A ribbon smudged with dirt, matching the one around his wrist.

The ribbon that I'd tied to a bush when I followed Poet. It had to be.

I had a terrible vision of Nicu finding it when he'd wandered from Jinny and ventured farther from the woods, expecting to see more ribbons, as he would have in the cottage. Then the carnival and its garlands had come into view. Then the castle.

Returning from the forest with Poet, my blindfold had prevented me from locating the ribbon. I'd forgotten about it altogether. If I hadn't, Nicu might not have ended up here. I hung my head, the possibility running its awful course.

I rolled the hood of my cloak into a pillow for him, tucked the material snug around him, and kissed his cheek. "I'm sorry," I whispered, my throat made of straw.

Using my sleeve, I rid myself of the evidence that I'd been crying. I stood, crossed a thousand leagues to the cell door, and bade the guard to let me out. I had to do this. The sooner I left, the sooner I would return prepared. If need be, I would reduce this pit to rubble.

23

Jester

I knew it by then. For she taught it to me by then.

Yet I was about to learn that lesson once again: A jester doesn't see everything that's coming . . .

Her fist rapped upon my door. Certainly, it came from her, for she had a particular knock. I heard the shape and weight of her hand in the sound. 'Twas an unprincess-like knock, brisk to the count of three, from a carefully wrought faerie tale. A tale of three lovely, tempting, cursed knocks. Whichever fool responded to them was doomed to great and terrible things.

I bent over in my chair and clasped the back of my neck, my elbows propped on my knees. I glowered at the floor, for I'd had plenty of great and terrible things to last me.

Each thunk—my chamber, my damned heart—was her. Each one the princess's face as she'd watched me leave the bell tower, as she'd watched me kneel in subordination to the Royals and apologize for something that I hadn't felt sorry about.

At the hill, she'd quarreled with her mother. How gutting.

Rage had colored her skin when she slapped Cadence. How magnificent.

How not enough. There was so much *not enough* that I lost direction from whence it came.

The princess could go on knocking. She wouldn't truly want me to receive her.

Not if she knew that I had company.

"Someone's calling for you," Eliot said from the seat across from mine.

"Ignore her," I muttered.

If it surprised him that I knew who it was, I didn't sense it. Based on the wounded way they'd looked at each other on the hill, he'd somehow found out about us. He hadn't said a thing to me, but he must have to her.

That accounted for his undivided attention today. It accounted for our

banter in front of her. We'd both wanted to punish the princess, yet it hadn't made me feel better. I doubted it made Eliot feel better.

I'd done it because of Nicu, not the peace talks. I'd been too harsh with her about the latter, but the former . . . I still couldn't get her words about him out of my mind.

Being with Eliot had distracted me, the hours with him passing quickly. After helping set up the carnival, we'd traveled back to the servants' wing. The minstrel had blushed when I asked to speak with him in private. He felt betrayed by the princess. The problem was, he blamed her and forgave me. I'd helped put a rift in their friendship and then sought to mend it.

Sitting opposite each other, I had barely begun to sway him when his knee tapped mine. "Poet, you seem troubled. If you're ailing, I-I want you to know that I'm your friend. I listen as much as I talk. It would be a pleasure to hear your woes—I mean, not a pleasure exactly. Not that it's a pleasure if you're lost in woe."

That had wheedled a rueful grin out of me. "I understood what you meant. My troubles don't matter. 'Tis you I want to talk about."

He'd leaned forward and stolen my hands in his. "I'm glad of it."

"Eliot, you shouldn't be. It's more complicated than you think."

"I care not." On an exhale, he'd lurched the rest of the way and pressed his lips to mine.

I'd froze. Stunned, I had waited him out, then had done something inexplicable. My hands drifted to his jaw and cradled it, molding our mouths together.

I'd been a tad vulnerable, weak with greed—I'd been well aware of that. However, it hadn't stopped me from inviting him to talk in my room instead of leading him someplace less suggestive. To thrill him had given me a genuine satisfaction that I hadn't enjoyed in days.

Always, it was calmer with the minstrel, softer and easier than with the princess. I'd wondered at the possibility of him and me. We suited one another in more seamless, acceptable ways.

I'd slanted and kissed him deeper. It had been sweet, how he moaned

against the edge of my tongue. If I'd let myself go with him, I might not have regretted it the way I regretted the commotion of her.

A pity, for I'd known that if I chose to explore this knee-tapping, lip-swelling thing with Eliot, it would have had the opposite effect of what I'd intended. It would have ended him and the princess.

Worse, it wouldn't have undone what I felt. His kiss had been a selfish comfort. We'd both known it. Hence, I'd pulled away to stare at his sad face. He'd known what I had been about to say, but he hadn't wanted to hear it. He'd wanted to keep pretending for a few hours.

Broken hearts made faults and fools of us all.

I didn't fancy myself a shallow male specimen. I'd been debating my reply, how to discourage the rest of him from advancing on me, when the knocks had come. That's when I'd bowed my head. Fate had spectacular timing.

"It's . . . it's important," Eliot said. "It sounds like it is."

Suddenly, it did. I lifted my head, listening as the knocks lost their controlled tempo and segued into desperation. Nay, *important* hadn't sent her here, *tragic* had. As much as I wanted the Royal to go away, something grieved her.

She needed me.

In seconds, I was at the door and staring down at her. Blue crescents descended beneath her lower lashes. Her breast pounded as though she'd been running all over the place. She pushed past me and flew into the room, unaware of Eliot.

I opened my mouth to warn her. "Your Highness—"

"Where were you?! I thought you were at the hill."

"I left. Your Highness—"

"Poet." She extended a hand, her palm on a dangerous course toward my chest, or toward that beating nuisance inside my chest. If her hand landed there, it would go through my skin and find what it was searching for. Then she would know that it belonged to her.

I flinched back with a hateful expression. She withdrew with a pained one.

It wasn’t that I’d forgotten the minstrel’s presence. Her presence was simply bigger.

“Poet,” she began again.

“I know my name. You don’t have to keep saying it. Just tell me what’s wrong and be done. The candles are melting, the hour is passing—”

She grabbed my face. “They have your son.”

Oh, I’d heard her right. I’d heard those words countless times and in countless ways, in nightmares and spoken from scores of mouths. From Jinny, from Nicu’s mother, from the dead Court Jester that I’d replaced, from simpletons in carnival troupes, from mad prisoners caged in cells, and from children.

Fear was an emotion that I’d learned most acutely. It had become a perverse second language from the moment I’d first seen my child.

I tilted my head. In my mind, this fear had been uttered by everyone but the princess. It actually took me several heartbeats to understand her. When I did, I bared my teeth. “I’m not amused, Princess.”

She shook her head, her eyes shimmering. “It’s not a jest.”

Nay. Quiet. Don’t howl.

This girl wouldn’t lie to me. She’d wounded me too oft and too surely to be capable of faking anything. I couldn’t fathom why I’d accused her of making a cruel joke.

Nay. Hush. Remember to hush.

It wasn’t a jest. Damn her, it wasn’t. I knew from her fingers clasping my cheeks, holding me steady lest I fly apart.

They were the Crown. They’d caught my son. They had him.

“Nicu,” I croaked.

“I’m sorry, Poet. I’m so sorry.”

My trembling hands flattened over hers. Every vile thing that passed through me, she soaked up, because I was about to be sick. The illness coiled through me like a ribbon.

My son was here. He was in this castle, away from his pallet. The princess had found out before I’d had the chance. I should have sensed it immediately.

If Nicu were in danger, my instincts should have told me that.

He was here. I hadn't realized it.

A scream began in my navel and surged up my neck, about to blast out of me. It alerted the princess, prompting her to whisper, "Hush."

I swallowed, forcing it down. The scream thrashed its arms and limbs in my chest.

"You have a son?"

The stunned voice tore her from me. She reeled back, her gaze landing on Eliot. The wide-eyed minstrel had risen from his seat.

The princess gaped at him, then at the entire scene—the dim candlelight, the chairs close to each other, Eliot's puzzled demeanor—then at me. Another stab of pain reflected there, for I'd once told her that I never brought others into this room. None but her.

Pardon this jester, who couldn't be bothered to care what she thought. Not at present.

She recovered quickly. "Eliot."

"But you can't have a son," he insisted. "You're Poet."

Poet, the Court Jester of Whimtany. Artist, acrobat, advisor. Lover of lovers. The Crown's sweeting. He couldn't have a child.

Apologetic, the princess glanced at me. It was too late, for the questions frothed in Eliot's head. How could somebody like me have a son? Why had he been "taken"?

Stalking to the vanity where I kept my paints, I braced my hands on the tabletop and bent over. The princess translated my silence as permission to explain my secret. We could only hope that Eliot's affections ensured a measure of trust—and that my rejection hadn't embittered him.

Behind me, their voices blurred. I stared at them in the mirror's reflection. "Where is he?"

Briar and Eliot turned toward me. She said, "They took him to a cell."

"Have you seen him? Did they hurt him?"

"He's unharmed, but—"

The back of my arm lashed out at the paint vials. They flew off the vanity

and crashed to the floor, bleeding glass and color across the stones.

The minstrel veered back. The princess moved in my direction.

“Don’t,” I said, halting her. “Get on with it.”

She explained about Jinny and the ribbons. The scarlet one that I’d bestowed on her, and which she’d tied to a bush when she followed me, had caught Nicu’s attention. He’d seen the carnival, then the castle and its swarm of people.

I’d taught him to follow those ribbons. Because of that, my love slept in a dungeon, whilst I stood five levels above him.

“We returned by the same path,” I bit out. “You should have retrieved the ribbon.”

“I was blindfolded,” she reminded me.

If only she hadn’t been. If only one of us had remembered during our return that it was there.

The princess informed me of the guard positioned at the top of the stairway, and the one stationed below, amongst the cells. I snapped my fingers, summoning Tumble from his pillow behind a drapery. The ferret awakened and galloped toward me, listening as I crouched beside him and gave direction, instructing him to check on my son.

Once the animal slipped through the door, I closed it again and thought about retreating to the window, or back to my chair, or . . . I fucking knew not. No corner of this room seemed right. My feet began to pace, my boots tracking pinks and greens, smearing reds and blacks.

“Maybe you could speak to the King and Queen,” Eliot suggested. “They treasure you. If you tell them, they might make an allowance.”

“No,” the princess protested. “He’s been hiding this for a year. Even if that didn’t offend them, they can’t make a public exception, and it doesn’t change the law. Nicu would belong to them in some capacity.” She turned to me. “Poet, don’t take that chance.”

“What, then?” Eliot asked.

I rounded on him, peering into his face for a crumb of deception. He blinked, baffled—and injured. I’d made no effort to disguise my skepticism,

nor was I the person he thought, nor had I confided in him as I had her. Were he a courtier, I would have expected envy or resentment or disgust.

My voice thawed. “I need your trust, Eliot. Please.”

His shoulders slumped. “You don’t have to ask,” he answered lamely.

I would have gotten on my knees and begged. Without hesitation, I would have knelt before anyone, if it came to that.

The princess said, “We have to break Nicu out of there.”

“Wait a minute.” Eliot swung toward her. “We have to *what*?”

“It’s our only choice.”

“You’re a Royal. Use your authority and make something up. Say he’s from Autumn.”

“I did that in order to see him, but it won’t get past my mother. She’ll know he’s not her property. She’ll *know* he’s of Spring.”

The means to determine an Autumn citizen from a Spring one stemmed from a person’s lack of documentation, ignorance of custom, and their personality—though not on the same scale, those of a special mind could be just as influenced by their Season as anyone.

My heart wept and raged. The new trade amendment offered another option.

“Then bargain for him,” I whispered.

The princess blanched. “Poet, Mista’s the same cage.”

“It’s the lesser of the two evils. It’s a wider cage—under your reign.”

“Under my mother’s reign.”

“She’s a tolerant woman from a mild-tempered land, and you’re her daughter.”

“You can’t,” she cried. “You can’t let him go like his mother did. You can’t do that!”

“In an escape, he could be struck by an arrow meant for me,” I spat. “Or if we don’t make it, he could be punished more severely. Negotiation is safer.”

“Temporarily, because if you do this, he’ll grow up thinking that he wasn’t worth fighting for. That could ruin him. He needs you!”

“The knights are expert shots,” Eliot pointed out. “If they aim for you,

they'll strike you, no one else. And Spring won't blame your son for an attempted escape. He's a stripling and a half-wit—in their eyes, I mean. They won't suspect him of being clever enough to have anything to do with it, which'll be the truth."

"Risking yourselves for me isn't worth it," I said.

"That's for us to decide," the princess said. "Even if you weren't worth it, Nicu is."

Tumble's squeaks pealed through the crack under the door, his claws scratching the wood from the other side. When I let him in, he scrambled across the floor, spun in a circle around our feet, and then zipped back and forth between us and the partition. We followed him to the entrance and eased it ajar, listening to a group of servant hens clucking gossip.

". . . they say the Seasons can trade the likes of 'em now."

"You sure the wee thing caught today isn't being kept by Spring? The Crown likes silly ones."

"I just came from the hill what's set up for Lark's Day. Overheard the Royals myself, I did. Summer's traded with Spring: two of their simpletons for the one tyke. Wee hands make good net weavers, I s'pose. He's being carted off tonight."

My fingers curled. The abominable Summer prick hadn't wasted time wanting my son. He'd beaten us to it.

Later, when he discovered that Nicu lacked the directional capacity to tie more than a simple ribbon—and only with someone's help—King Rhys would take his irritation out on my boy. We hadn't an hour to spare.

The princess's hand landed on mine. "I have a plan."

I whipped around and strode to my prop trunk. "As do I."

24

Jester

At sundown, we dressed in capes and soft shoes. The unlikely group of us —Tumble, Eliot, me, and the princess—each had our roles. Getting past every foe without being recognized left little to the imagination. Either we'd have to distract or immobilize our adversaries.

Her Highness and I stuck our heads around the corner, gauging our first obstacle: a guard posted by the stairwell. I searched his person for something worth prying from him.

A medallion. He wore it around his neck, a token tethered to an easily chewable thong. The strap's humble material led me to suspect the medallion of personal value. Perhaps something from his lady fair.

Silently, I hand-signaled to the princess and Tumble. The ferret burst forward, dashing up to the guard and scurrying up his frame.

"What the—," the man sputtered.

Tumble snatched the chain between his fangs and chomped. The strap broke, the medallion falling to the ground, to where the ferret leapt.

My sidekick scooped the token into his mouth and darted down the hall. The guard clunked after him. "Get back here, you varmint!"

As fast as the man proved to be, Tumble was faster, rounding pillars and sailing up banisters. His fuzzy tail disappeared into the passages, leading the guard toward the nearest turret.

Knowing Tumble's stamina, the distraction would give us ten minutes. More if he succeeded in reaching the turret's ledge and flinging the medallion over the side, and into the moat.

I led the way to the stairwell, attuned to the princess's sure footfalls. She moved without hesitation, making me grin in spite of myself. Earlier, she'd come here alone, to give my son food and her cloak. She had comforted him and put him to sleep, sparing him from having to endure another conscious minute of the dungeon. She'd disregarded what her peers would say if they

found out.

At the shaft's entrance, I ceased too abruptly for the princess, for she bounced into me. I reached back and grasped her hip to steady her. Her forehead fell against me, in between my shoulder blades, her breath seeping through my clothes. We took a moment to tolerate one another.

If something happens to me . . .

If anything happens to you . . .

I wondered how she would end those sentences. I knew how I would.

One squeeze of her hip, and I let go. The princess kept watch as I spiraled down into the veritable arsehole of the castle. The torchlight bled orange over the final steps.

I sauntered into the alcove. There, I greeted the second obstacle: a man-bear who rose from his perch, a grisly thicket of beard sagging from his jaw. I knew about the guards and their brawny preferences, which thrust toward both sexes. Even whilst he frowned at me, his body flexed, as if to make a good impression. I caught his flicker of interest, his appreciation of my shape and walk.

"Good evening, soldier," I purred.

"What brings you here, Jest—"

"I have a craving."

"State your business."

"My business is capitulation. My business is you."

Dumbfounded, the guard batted his lashes. "Beggin' your pardon?"

I smiled and prowled toward him, my gaze sliding up and down his frame with unbridled lust. "You know of my varying tastes. I've heard the guards talking about it. It must be a strain, wondering but not finding out, being stuck here by your lonesome, wanting for company. So much wanting."

"Stay back." He gripped his poleax, but his twitching groin had other ideas.

"Forgive me for daring to speak it, but you're magnificent."

"I said, stay where you are. Fraternizing while on duty is—"

"Is the Spring way," I provided. "Do you know how oft I've imagined a

strong man taking me prisoner? I cannot help myself any longer.” My finger trailed up his chest. “Do I not appeal to you? Because you appeal to me, my sweeting. You have no idea how a hairy man violates me in dreams.”

His eyes tripped to my mouth. “I h-have a job.”

I leaned in. “Who’s to know?”

Capitulation, indeed. He changed his mind swiftly. Eyes glazed, the man dropped his poleax. He grabbed and swung me around, pressing me into the wall. I let out a fake groan, to which he flashed his incisors. “You like playing captive, eh?”

Ugh. His grimy paws grappled for the laces of my hose.

“Wait,” I said, producing a corked skin from the inside of my cloak and running the tip over his mouth. “Let us make this more interesting.”

In good faith, I tipped the skin and drank, letting some of the mead drizzle down my chin for effect. The man watched. From prior experience, this move had enticed many a gentleman who’d relished the opportunity to taste alcohol wetting my lips.

The man-bear accepted the skin and guzzled with abandon. I gave him a wily, close-mouthed smile, fighting bile as he landed on his knees and focused on my groin—before going cross-eyed and flopping sideways onto the stones. I spit out the mead, tainted with the same sleeping draught the princess had used on Nicu. When I’d sought him out, the Court Physician had mused and mumbled something about potentially widespread insomnia.

From the smell of him, the guard had already been in his cups. When he awakened, hopefully he would believe he’d been snoozing on the job—it wouldn’t be the first time—and dreaming of me whilst an intruder had stolen into the dungeon. If not, I would spin my best words to convince him that I hadn’t been here at all.

Around the corner, prisoners cackled and made a ruckus, their chains scraping the floor. They couldn’t see what had happened in the alcove, but they’d heard the hints of a disturbance. I’d lowered my voice for this reason, having cut the guard off from identifying me within earshot.

My hose adjusted and restored to its former dignity, I stole the guard’s

keys and sprang over his limp body. I rushed to the row of cells, unconcerned by the other inhabitants, for the dark prevented them from seeing me. They sounded too far gone, either in madness or despair or weakness, to try anyway.

In one cell, I spotted a bundle on the floor. Cursing, I thrust each key into the lock. Of course it would be the last one that finally worked. Ripping the door wide, I vaulted inside and sank beside Nicu, drinking in his slumbering face and curled fists.

My hand brushed through his matted hair. “I’m here, my love. Papa’s here to take you home.”

“Mmmfff,” he mumbled.

I scooped him into my arms, propping him upright so that his head nestled into the crook of my neck. Inhaling his scent, I thought, *I’ve got you now*.

Holding my son, I turned to find the princess’s silhouette as she peeked at us from the alcove. Because I’d taken longer than expected, she must have come to see if I needed help. The angle hid her from everyone’s notice but mine. Oh, how longing could suffocate, for I admired her standing there with a small but solid stature, every bit the Royal and more than that. Far, far more.

In my tales and verse, I couldn’t have conjured a braver person. She knew nothing of fighting, nor did she have the physical strength for it. This land would condemn her for helping me, for believing in something that most people didn’t.

Still, she was here.

She searched the watchman for weapons, but all the fool wielded was the poleax, too tall and heavy for her to bother with. Fine, then. I had my share of hidden defenses if we needed them.

We fastened our hoods with ties, preventing them from blowing off our heads and revealing us during our flight. Dashing up the stairs and out of the pit, the princess predicted, “They’ll sound the alarm once the guard wakes up, or once the other one returns.”

“For a half-wit child?” I countered. “To them, Nicu’s not valuable enough to rouse the citadel and lower town.”

Checking that the hallway was clear, we skulked along the passage, then down another shaft leading to the tunnel that I'd oft taken to visit Jinny and Nicu. Alas, a hundred paces later, a muffled gong pierced the air. We stopped, our gazes shooting toward the ceiling, our feet arrested by the sound of the bell tower's merciless rings.

The princess leveled me with an I-told-you-so look. Well, I couldn't be right every time.

We ran. Within minutes, lookouts would be swarming this area. My legs pumped, my feet pounding over stone and gravel. My son's head jostled against my shoulder, so I cupped it, trying to keep it steady and praying that he wouldn't awaken.

At the fork, I veered east, skidding on my heels at the overlapping bellows and pulsing lights from an adjacent shaft. Spinning, I doubled-back and led the princess toward the alternate route curving west, which would dump us near the glazier's forge outside the citadel. From there, we'd have to squirrel across the lower town—past the bird keeper's cottage and the pavilion where butterflies were bred—to get to the stables.

We halted again, more lights and shouts clamoring in the foreground. Twisting, I saw bodies advancing from behind as well, about to surround us. I hissed, terror slicing through me.

'Twas that noise that roused my son. "Pa . . . pa . . .?"

My palm clamped over his lips. Frantic, my eyes darted around the area. A niche embedded into the passage would have been our only saving grace, but by the time I located it, they'd circled us, four guards drawing a circumference of spears and swords in our direction—mine and Nicu's. The princess, on the other hand, had vanished.

Whirling, I searched for her, afraid that she'd been captured. I clutched Nicu, whose chin swung to and fro over my shoulder, taking in the scene. He would have been elated by this attention, except that the guards' uniforms and features resembled those of the man-bear in the dungeon. It was enough to trigger the opposite of excitement. He dug his trembling fingers into me, burrowing closer whilst making tiny, terrified noises.

The men sneered at me, the cloaked viper who'd rattled these castle walls. The knots securing my hood would shield my face from them, no matter how I moved. And move, I would. But if I spoke, they would know who I was.

"You've led a merry chase, lad," one of the bastards snarled, dropping his torch into a wall bracket. "Now it's time to give up."

My nostrils flared. I clasped my son tighter and slowly shook my head.

"By order of the Crown, give us the boy!"

If you want him, you shall have to kill me first. Don't you know that?

In training, a jester learned this: to be aware of his props at all times. My right boot concealed a surprise, the scabbard at my hip another. Which one to use first? And how to defeat four guards with two weapons? And how to do so whilst holding my son? And without him seeing his father commit murder?

"We're going to play a game, like when I spin you at home," I whispered to Nicu. "Are you ready?"

"Uh-huh," he peeped.

"Close your eyes."

He smashed his face into my chest and squeezed me with all his might. I had muscles—nice ones, though not as gargantuan as those of my enemies. Therefore, I relied on other talents. Bowing my head, I gave them a one-armed performance.

Wheeling around so that my back shielded Nicu, I whipped the dagger from my hip. Lashing my arm backward, I sent the blade flying into the first guard's foot. With a holler, he dropped his sword, tripped into a wall, toppled to the ground, and went still from the impact.

The next one charged. A low, reverse-twirl dodged his spear, which I stole after the full revolution, my fingers pivoting it into a windmill. It cracked against the side of his skull, knocking him unconscious.

The third adversary caught me off guard—well, not hard to do with a child strapped to my chest. The man's sword rotated, caught my spear up in a wide arc, and sent it careening. Tucking Nicu close, I rolled and ripped another prop from my boot, then slashed behind the man's knee. It hampered but didn't stop him.

The rock did. It clouted him in the face, blood bursting from the well of his nose. Roaring, the dazed man pawed at the wound, just as another heavy rock slammed into the back of his head. His eyes rolled before he collapsed.

The fourth guard barreled toward me with a lion's roar, swinging two swords at once. Baffled from whence the rock came, I shot to my feet as he advanced. And then I dropped my second prop on instinct and punched the man in the face. His swords fell beside him on the ground.

Wheezing and patting my frightened son, I discovered the princess standing outside the tunnel's niche, another rock poised in her hand. In a stupor, she glanced between her makeshift weapon and the man she'd pummeled into unconsciousness.

"Pebble-tosser," I panted. "You neglected to tell me your aim was that good."

"I couldn't grab Nicu from you fast enough," she explained. "I thought, if I had a chance to distract them, or to do something . . ." She lifted the rock. "It was all I could find."

"Papa, are we home?" Nicu whimpered. "I want home. Pwwease."

She joined us and caressed Nicu's cheek. "We're going now."

We sprinted, taking the passage that we'd originally intended. Ripping my key from my belt, I thrust it into the lock and gave a violent twist, the gate groaning as I shoved it open. We bolted across the undergrowth, toward the town's stables where Eliot waited.

I'd borrowed horses from there so oft that I knew the groom and stablehand's routine. At about this hour, they would be placing bets at the tavern.

Eliot hopped in place, his ashen face testifying to how much of a delay that ambush in the tunnel had caused. He looked nigh about to swoon when he saw us. "If you're going to be late for any reason ever in this world, and I do mean *ever*, would you mind letting me know?" he griped as we struggled to catch our breaths. "Send a smoke signal or find a way to use telepathy—I care not. Seasons, I was at my wit's end."

"Now you know how I felt when you had a musical epiphany and went on

a desperate hunt for ink, instead of meeting me at the ruins," the princess remarked. "I paced for two hours, worried that something bad had happened."

Eliot grimaced. "I told you, the muse is a wayward mistress. The siren's call must be answered forthwith or it's lost forever. Poet, tell her."

"Two hours, Eliot," she repeated.

The pair of matching steeds he handled pulled my thoughts up short. Why the hell did he have two with him?

"You could be pursued to Jinny's," the princess explained. "You'll need someone to divert the masses in case they gain ground. I'm a good rider."

I wanted to argue, and I would have, and I should have. But Nicu quivered against me, so I rubbed his back and murmured into his ear until he sagged. Eliot watched in fascination.

Another gong of the bell tower and the cacophony of alarmed cottagers alerted us. I noted that both horses were of the same chestnut coat. Smart thinking.

"Be careful," Eliot begged us.

"And you," the princess replied, yanking him into a hug.

The minstrel reciprocated with abandon. Over her shoulder, he glanced at me and my son. I mouthed, *Thank you*.

The princess took one horse, Nicu and I on the other. We raced out of town, up the hill, and into the floral forest. My ride puffed off the main road, its weight beating at dirt and wildflowers, its mane slapping my face. As we plowed through branches, the moon flashed white at us between the foliage.

Another spark of terror flared at the shouts and whinnies of pursuit. My ears perked, detecting the numbers and speed, the furious rhythm of their mounts, the regal voices. These weren't watchmen. These were knights. Three of them.

I calculated their distance. They were gaining fast. Hooves bracing thousands of pounds punched the hard soil, a great, wild walloping sure to bruise the earth.

For devil's sake, this for one fool child who now belonged to Summer.

Nay, also for the criminal who'd stolen the child, I reminded myself.

Together, the princess and I dug our heels in and flew. With less weight to carry, she gained headway, the ties in her hood finally loosening, her red tresses flapping like ribbons around the trees. By Seasons, she could ride.

I tailed until she remembered that she couldn't navigate us to the cottage without my direction, and she slowed enough for me to reach her. She and I had had enough of a head start. Our pursuers hadn't spotted a pair of horses and realized there were two of us. They searched for a single offender clad in a dark cloak, mounted on a chestnut steed. The princess's skill on a horse surpassed mine; however, I knew the depth and breadth of these woods. I knew routes and corners that she and the knights didn't.

Not that it made a difference to me. I knew what had to be done.

With a sigh, I pulled on the reins.

The princess stalled beside me and trotted back and forth, both she and her ride impatient. "What are you doing?" she demanded.

"You're lighter. Therefore, you'll get to Jinny quicker."

Her eyes bulged. "The plan was for me—"

"That's the problem," I tried to joke. "A jester never listens to anyone's plan but his own."

"Poet, don't. If they catch you—"

"Then bury me here and make sure the headstone is very big. And expensive."

"No! This is supposed to be my sacrifice, not yours!"

Hearing the frenzy in her voice, Nicu began to cry, clawing at me as I pried him from my lap and handed him over to her. He wriggled and reached for me, screaming, "Papa! Papa!"

"I don't know the way," the princess cried. "You blindfolded me."

"Heed your lover. Go south—that way." I pointed through the darkness. "Then trail the first brook you find. Listen for the sounds of the water and keep to it. When you hit a rather phallic looking boulder—trust me, you won't miss it, even at night—veer east. No matter the obstructions, no matter how dense or narrow it gets, stay your course. You will get there."

"Please, don't. Don't, Poet."

Grabbing onto her nape, I pulled her close. “Briar. Shut up and go.”

My son wailed louder, scrambling for my cloak. I framed his cheeks and kissed his forehead.

Dear ones. Only ones.

I did my best, but I lost my way, for I’m not in your league. If this chase ends badly, and this tale ends worse, I might not see you again. So remember, try to remember, my heart is yours.

Be good and merry. Be loved elsewhere.

Ignoring their pleas, I swerved my horse around. Slamming through the brush and back onto the main thoroughfare, I howled into the canopy of petals. The knights heard me and came thrashing, poppies exploding in their path. Needle-like objects whizzed over my shoulder from behind, likely darts pumped with some sort of tranquilizer.

Leaning forward and urging my mount faster, we soared down the road. I wasn’t daft. I didn’t expect to outride the handsome knights of Spring. Except that growing up within this woodland, I possessed a keener eye.

A wind current rushed into my cape and tunic, the chill racing over my sweat-coated skin. I swerved off the road again and slipped into shadows and shrubbery, spurring my horse over a knoll and weaving around hedges. Deeper and deeper we went.

Those cursed knights kept coming. Though their pace did waver as I led them astray, circling the area twice, then snaking down another route crushed by nature. I sensed their hesitancy. Mayhap they were recalling previous fibs, rumors that I’d spread about ghouls lurking in certain parts of the forest. I had explained that to the princess when she’d fretted over a search party finding us at Jinny’s.

I could have worn the men out, tricked them into believing those rumors more keenly. Sadly, my steed huffed. The poor beast would tire any moment, driven beyond its limits.

Fie and fuck. Time to hide.

Balancing on the stirrups and scanning the trees, I stood upright, bent my limbs, and swung my arms. My hands hooked onto a branch overhead, and I

pitched myself up into the Whimtany Sass tree, a move that I'd perfected when the princess had followed me. Flipping over, I crouched on the branch while my horse vanished into the forest.

Moments later, the knights arrived, their green capes billowing. They cantered about, murmured to each other, then pointed and trailed my steed into the thicket. Watching and waiting from my perch, my face wrinkled into a frown. Only two of them had come and gone.

However, there should have been three.

25

Princess

We made it to Jinny’s cottage. Poor Nicu had passed out during the ride, caught between chattering and crying himself into exhaustion.

The older woman sobbed when she saw us. I didn’t tell her what had happened with Poet, but from the way she shrank into her chair by the fire, I think she knew. I promised her that everything would be all right and didn’t blame her for not believing me.

On the way back to the castle, dread curdled in my gut. Poet might need help, but he could be anywhere. And if he’d taken cover, I might foil his plans or give him away.

But what if he was injured?

As my ride galloped back the way we came, my gaze landed on something flashing in a cradle of wildflowers. I jerked on the reins, stopping us and taking a closer look at the object.

A silver blade. Poet’s dagger, the one he’d lost while fighting the leenix.

I jumped down and stalked toward the dagger. Sinking to my knees, I picked it up and hesitated. Did fate bring me to it, to say that I should go after him? Or to sidetrack me for another reason?

I glanced absently at a tree with exposed roots thatched in pink moss and braided into a knot—giant enough for a child to duck behind. A twelve-year-old child who’d run away from her father on a rainy night. A memory so fresh that it might have happened yesterday.

My memory. My mistake.

I knew those roots. I hadn’t recognized them the last time I was here, when the leenix wounded me, but I recognized them now.

Swaying on my knees, I choked the dagger. I gaped around me, at this very place where my father died, the life bleeding from his face and changing me forever.

I stared at every detail. I stared and stared.

Just stared.

Just. Stared.

Something in my peripheral whizzed through the air and pinched the side of my neck. The moss blurred, the forest tilted, and my eyelids dropped. And I stopped staring.

26

Princess

They dragged me before the court and shoved me to my knees. Dazed from the dart they'd shot me with, I blinked. Torches illuminated the stained glass windows of the throne room. I tilted my head, wondering how long it took glaziers to create windows like that and why I never pondered it before. What had it taken to construct this castle, or my castle for that matter?

Who precisely made the stair shafts of Mista's stronghold? What were the builders' names? How could I not know these things about my own home?

The bounds at my wrists chafed. Basil and Fatima stood on the dais, their faces tight with disbelief as they stared down at me. They'd made a spectacle of this moment. Courtiers surrounded me, including the Silly Seven, their faces bright with shock.

Even Eliot was here, his profile contorted, his skin green. At least they hadn't captured him, too.

The guards that Poet and I had battered stood in the foreground, bedraggled and seething.

The Royals arranged themselves in a semicircle. My mother's eyes flashed with dismay, yet she ignored my pleading glance. She would not speak up for me. I'd disgraced myself and dishonored her. I'd insulted Whimtany.

I was not sorry. I think they saw that.

"I say, Princess Briar," Basil lectured, his robe swishing around his feet. "Not for centuries has a Royal passed judgment on another Royal. I cannot believe I'm about to say this, but you've been accused of stealing the rightful property of Whimtany, of accosting the guards, and I can't begin to list the rest. What in Seasons got into you? Don't answer that yet," he said, turning to his wife. "Dearest, do help me. I've a headache."

"Your horse and cloak match the thief's description," Fatima said. "The dagger found in your hand matches the design of the ones used on the guards.

What's more, your recent behavior has been noted by many . . ."

People had seen me. The day I'd fled the dungeon, racing through the halls like a ghost had been on my tail, they'd seen me.

Posy, Vale, and Cadence confirmed that I'd initially been wandering the corridors on the night we snuck into the labyrinth, which had been unlike me, which the Royals interpreted as potentially malicious. The girls reluctantly verified that I'd eagerly taken part in the escapade to the labyrinth, another example of my recent change in behavior.

People in the castle had witnessed me slink here and there. Sometimes to the servants' wing, most times at night, when I'd met Poet.

During the peace talks, I'd failed to compose myself and had suggested fools be treated better. I'd gotten into a spat with the Court Jester.

I'd quarreled with Mother in public. I'd slapped Cadence for mocking fools. I'd gone to the dungeon and bullied the guard into letting me see Nicu.

Eliot tried to step in and say something in my defense. I shook my head at him.

"Do you deny any of this?" Queen Fatima asked.

"A princess does not deny anything," I said.

Murmurs. Grumbles. Coughs.

King Basil puckered his lips. "Those were your daggers?"

"Yes," I answered.

"You acted alone?"

"I did, Your Majesties."

"Take care, Briar of Autumn. That's twice you've lied."

"It was all me. That's not a lie."

He nodded at the guards standing post by the entrance. "Bring him."

Foreboding. No. No!

The double-doors whipped apart. Unlike me, Poet didn't wait for his armed escorts to push him. Also cuffed in irons, he paraded ahead of them and then swept to the floor, sliding gracefully across the polished surface on his knees, his arms spread as far as the chains allowed.

He coasted next to me, straightened his sleeves, and fake-whispered,

“Hello, my sweeting. I think we’ve been caught.”

“Stop that, both of you,” Basil growled. “Poet, I’m severely disappointed. You’ve betrayed us. Is this a massive prank derived for Lark’s Day?”

“’Tis not. I give you my word as a man who jests.”

“You can’t be serious!”

“Hardly ever. But that’s what you pay me for.”

Nervous chuckles echoed throughout the assembly.

“Pity for you,” His Majesty observed. “If you had taken your escape more seriously, you would have outrun our knights.”

“If you took humanity more seriously, I wouldn’t have had to try.”

The knights must have suspected two parties and split up when Poet had attempted to create a diversion. Though they must have also decided this late, because I’d succeeded in delivering Nicu to Jinny before being darted. Moreover, the knight who found me mightn’t have at all, had I not been distracted by memories of Father.

“This is an affront to the peace talks, Princess Briar,” Fatima chided. “What does Autumn have to say for itself?”

“Vilify her not, Your Majesties,” Poet said. “If she’s gone rogue, the fault is with me. Her lenient Autumn nature was no match for my Spring ways as I manipulated her into helping my cause. As for why I did it—not that you asked, but I have a tender spot for children and a grudge against Summer. The Season and its monarch annoy me, so I decided to milk his temper for all it’s worth. I’ll admit, he’s such an easy target that I got carried away.”

“You insufferable parasite!” King Rhys hollered.

“The princess was under my spell. And don’t each of you know what that’s like.”

I should have shut Poet up a while ago. I did not care to be painted as a girl swooning under his influence. Nor was I going to let him take the blame alone.

“The jester’s attempting to be heroic,” I said. “I was under no spell.”

Basil drew a labored breath, pained to pass judgment on his beloved fool. “You are both accused of conspiring to thievery of a simpleton.”

“One who belongs to Summer,” Rhys reminded us. “Tell me, Court Idiot, how would you like to die for stealing from a king?”

Poet cocked his head. “You’ll let me chose?”

“I shall let you chose.”

“Excellent. I’d prefer death by old age.”

More sniggers arose from the congregation. I could see that Poet’s joke alone tempted Basil and Fatima to forgive him, but despite their adoration for Poet, these monarchs had their limits.

Basil made it clear: If we wanted to avoid retribution, we would inform the Royals of Nicu’s whereabouts.

Poet and I held our tongues. They could do with us as they pleased, but we wouldn’t tell them. Unless they considered Nicu worth combing the land to its borders, he would stay safe.

Somber looks passed over Spring’s King and Queen. Poet’s deception had truly wounded them. And why not? They’d trusted his counsel. They must have felt like ninnies for it.

“Well, then,” Basil said. “Well.”

“The princess and the jester,” Summer sneered. “It seems you two became quite the intimate allies during your jaunt in the floral forest.”

Mother’s expression faltered. Eliot flinched. Staring ahead preventing me from checking the Seven’s reactions, but the others that I could see glared at us. They regarded Poet like a pest, me like a whore, both of us like traitors.

Spring’s meaning couldn’t be missed. The details stacked against us. The attention we’d paid one another over the past weeks—particularly during feasts—had pointed to the obvious.

They knew. We’d been fools to think they wouldn’t.

They led us to a tower reserved for Royal and high-ranking prisoners, tossing us into neighboring cells separated by rails. The cubicles had rushes on the floor and barred windows. The doors screeched closed behind us.

The moment the guard left, we flew at each other, pressing together through the barrier. My clamped wrists rested against his chest, and he framed my head as we breathed one another in.

“He’s safe?” Poet asked.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“I had the knights lost until I realized one was missing. I knew he’d gone after you. I tried to find you, but his dart found me first.”

“It found me, too.”

“The desperate, idiotic father in me neglected to retrieve my daggers before rushing from the tunnel. One problem is that I’ve used them in performances, which makes them recognizable. It might have helped not to leave evidence behind and have some means of defense. I hear that’s what smart people do. I failed incredibly well, if I say so myself.”

“Smart people make mistakes, too. I found your missing blade, from the night of the leenix. I was on the grass holding it. I couldn’t move. That’s how the knight caught me.”

“What a sentimental girl you are.”

I started crying. “My father died there.”

Poet tensed, then gently tugged me to the ground. Because he couldn’t wrap his arms around me, he slipped his hands through the bars and combed my hair with his fingers, then braided it over the front of my shoulder. When he finished, he tied it with one of his ribbons, then hooked his palms over my shoulders, pulling me closer to him.

Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes. “On the path back from Jinny’s, I found it. The spot where I watched him die. I never thought I’d find it again, and then there it was, just like that. I’d forgotten what it looked like. It’s strange how that happens, isn’t it? You forget how something looks, or smells or tastes or sounds.”

“Until it’s suddenly there again,” he agreed.

“Like it was never gone.”

“I’ve had that feeling a few times.”

For some reason, that consoled me. So I told him my story.

“Father and I liked to explore our castle when I was little,” I began. “He would wake me up and take me anywhere I wanted to go. We pretended to be wanderers. I led the way . . .”

My story continued in whispers.

Mother had often said that I possessed an adventurous, impulsive streak like Father. She'd predicted that I would grow up to be a daring girl, ready to take chances and dismiss social rules. As a child, I enjoyed being around every class of people even when it wasn't my duty.

Ever prone to fits and laughter, my emotions left a trail behind me. Often, I said *no* and asked *why*. I wept in Mother's arms and ran circles around Father's legs. I talked over them.

I was unpredictable, too vibrant for Autumn. I did not hold back with them or anyone. My parents would quip that a stork had lost its way and delivered me from Spring.

When I was twelve, we traveled to Whimtany, and there I met Eliot. I was so excited about making a new friend, I couldn't sleep for the thrill of it. So that same night, I tiptoed into my parents' adjoining chamber and bounced between them in bed, demanding they wake up and hear all about Eliot—at the time, I hadn't thought to keep my relationship with a minstrel secret, but it hadn't mattered, because I never got to tell my parents. Father's temper had been strained during the first peace talks meeting, in such a vile mood that he cut me off and barked at me to go to sleep. He'd not done such a thing before.

I cried and yelled in kind. I ran out of their suite, scrawny enough to get past the gate, down the castle hill, through town, and up into the woods. I ran forever.

Despite it being blooming season in Whimtany, it was storming, fat sheets of rain coming down. Father had searched the castle for me, the places we'd explored, then guessed that I'd vanished outdoors. He caught up to me on his horse. He knew I liked those woods.

But I'd ensconced myself behind a knot of exposed tree roots blanketed in pink moss. A pretty place to hide.

I thought to punish him, play with him, a grudge and a lark at the same time. I thought how sorry he would feel when he couldn't find me. How wonderful it would be when he finally did, because fathers were supposed to find their children. He was a king, as invincible and timeless as our home. My

very own stronghold.

The storm lashed, creating a mudslide down a neighboring slope. Father bounded off his horse and gave a shout, horrified I might have gotten swept up in the deluge.

My name. My name.

Briar!

I thought, what a gift when he saw me alive. What a happy gift I would give him by popping up behind him.

Many giant tragedies killed people. Battles, disease, poison.

One rarely considered the small things. We didn't watch out for them.

Charging toward the mudslide, his foot snagged beneath one of the tree's exposed roots. His head cracked against a rock when he fell.

I laughed. I thought it was a jest, or a silly, harmless fall. I thought he would get up, but he didn't. And I laughed at him.

Crawling over the roots and tottering toward him, I plopped to my knees. "I'm here, Papa! I tricked you!"

Liquid pooled from his skull and seeped into my nightdress. His dazed eyes found me and glinted with relief, then with distance, turning to fog.

I stopped giggling. When I did, he closed his eyes.

A brief loss of temper. A willful spirit. A trick.

The reckless girl I was lost her father because she'd been playing. She hadn't killed him, but she could have saved him. She wasn't fit to be a daughter, or anything else. Certainly not a princess.

So I changed. I folded myself up and stuck myself in a drawer. For six years, I spurned dancing and wandering and smiling. I had to, otherwise I'd revert and become someone unforgivable.

Mother and I shared the same dread of losing one another. That's why she kept me close, while I kept my distance.

"Has that worked?" Poet asked.

I traced an invisible pattern on his thigh. "It's backfired."

"You were a child. You didn't know better."

"I was foolish."

“You’re foolish now if you think it’s your fault.”

“If I hadn’t been that heedless girl—”

“If, if, if,” he said. “If many things.”

“I haven’t felt him near in a long time, but I felt him today. It was like I needed to be that girl again in order to recognize that spot. When I did, I felt proud, not guilty. Not sad.” I nestled into him as best I could. “I vowed that I wouldn’t tell you this.”

“We mere mortals all hide things.”

No matter what he said, it often sounded like a clue to something else. I stared at the fire-and-twilight painted floor. “Poet’s not your real name. Is it?”

After a moment of silence, he said, “Nay.”

“You won’t tell me.”

“’Tis embarrassing.”

I chuckled weakly, then swallowed. “Poet, I’m sorry. I’m sorry about what I said in the bell tower. It was . . . horrid and inexcusable, and I’m ashamed. Please believe that’s not how I feel about Nicu.”

Poet’s forehead fell against mine. “Thank you for that. What you said won’t be forgotten any time soon, but thank you.”

“I can’t forgive myself.”

“You shouldn’t, but I’ve dealt my share of blows. I blamed you for the peace talk’s folly. I could have tried to persuade the Royals without you, but I fixated on losing your support. I refused to listen to you or let you explain. It felt easier to hold something against you, to punish you. On the hill, I flaunted my friendship with Eliot. In my room, I let him kiss me—and I kissed him back.”

The confession jolted me. My best friend had tried to steal Poet. And Poet had let him try.

Not that Poet was mine to begin with. He never had been.

“Oh,” was all that came out, my voice too frayed at the edges to say more.

“Not *oh*,” he said. “I deserve worse than *oh*.”

The fact that I needed to ask, that there was a reason I should ask, was excruciating enough. “Do you have feelings for him?”

“Yes. Affectionate ones. If you didn’t exist, or if you were far away, then someday those feelings might grow. He and I could be right for each other, but I’ve not once been torn or doubted for whom my heart pumps, however futile.”

His words had wings. They lifted my spirit off the ground.

Nevertheless, I said, “So much of me doesn’t want you to care in that way.”

“Me, too. Sneaking from the castle to see my son, lying to the Crown, fighting those men, fleeing from the knights. They weren’t acts of bravery—they were just necessary. What we have here and now? This isn’t necessary. That’s why it’s brave. ’Tis the romantic in me, but I have a theory. Are you ready for it?”

“No. Yes.”

“The greatest courage a person can have is to love another, for there are only two outcomes. Either the love lasts, and our lives are compromised, or it doesn’t, and our lives are emptied. Either way, we suffer more than we celebrate. I’ve enjoyed suffering with you. We are a tale for campfires. That is all. That is everything.”

“It cannot end here.”

“’Tisn’t that bad. The princess and jester are finally allowed to be together without hiding it.”

“We’re in a tower.”

“Which means the hour is precious. If this is the only place it can happen, I’ll take it.”

“No,” I said. “I won’t let this go. I’d thought I could, but I cannot.”

A grin sprung into his voice. “Who knew I would be the sensible one tonight.”

“You’re a hypocrite is what you are. This isn’t the extent of us unless we let it be. Unless you don’t want me enough.”

“Perdition, it’s not about wanting. Oh ay, I’m afraid of never having more, never kissing you again, never being inside you, taking you the way my body’s been shrieking to for weeks. I’m afraid of that. From the beginning, I

desired you, and I'll keep desiring you until the Seasons fade. Alas, we don't get everything that we want. This is it."

What he said about being intimate with me eclipsed the rest of my argument. Today, too many emotions had swamped me, then been ripped from me. Endlessly, I took people for granted. I didn't want to take him for granted, too. I did not want to lose this.

My response took on a husky note. I wanted him to hear it, to do something about it. "Tell me about *this*. Take me there."

He spoke, his breath pushing against the side of my neck. "I'm kissing a girl."

"The girl is kissing you back," I whispered.

"We're naked and entwined. The girl's sitting on me, facing me, and I'm loving her."

I twisted at the same time he drew my chin up to his mouth. I saw parted lips and a sliver of his crooked tooth, like a quarter-moon. Those clover eyes danced over me.

His lips caressed mine. I let out an undignified gurgle.

"I'm loving her everywhere," he murmured. "I feel the grip of her knees on my waist. I'm watching her pitch upward, arching into me, her breasts pointed. She's digging into my shoulders as we let our hips go, her thighs catching me. I'm loving her . . . because I do, and have, and will."

My hands shook, with no place to land. "Poet."

"I love her," he said, capturing my mouth in a kiss. Through the rails, his tongue stroked into me, the way it had before within a different part of my body, the way the rest of him could not. I felt each long sweep. I loved it.

I loved him.

He was everything that hurt and emboldened me. He was my challenge and my comfort. Happiness. Fearlessness. Utterly out of my control. Yet safe, rooted to the ground.

Poet guided me onto the rushes. We lay there, reaching between the bars, me tracing his throat with my fingertips. Him tracing my mouth with words.

"*Steadfast sure girl, sweet noble thorn,*

how lovely-cruel you are.
My body's taut, my soul is worn,
from the lovely-cruel you are.
The highborn chose the lowest born,
'tis the lovely-cruel you are.
This trick unseen, this fated scorn,
of the lovely-cruel you are.
So when you leave, I shall us mourn,
the lovely-cruel we are."

27

Princess

The scent of apples curled through my nose. I woke, bleary-eyed. Poet slept facing me, emitting the cutest snore. Over the bars, our manacled hands were clasped between us.

I did not move. I simply stared, daring to wish for more than this.

It should have stunk up here, but the traces of Spring and Autumn overpowered the tower's putridness. My lungs drew in him—and someone else.

"We have a guest," he mumbled, his eyes closed.

I twisted around. Mother stood outside my cell, staring at us with a stony expression, her hands folded over her navel.

I staggered to my feet. I heard Poet do the same.

Mother lifted her arm. In response, a reed-thin guard with an angry scar digging into his jawline materialized behind her. He wrestled with the keys and unlocked the door.

"Come, Daughter," my mother said.

I flinched to hear her address me formally. She gazed at me as she would a stranger, for which I could not blame her. Not after seeing my wrists bound and my fingers entwined with a jester's.

Retreating a step, my shoulder knocked into the rails, prompting Poet to set his hands there. The picture we made did nothing to move her.

"Come," Mother repeated. "Now."

"No. Not without him."

"Do not test me, young lady. If necessary, I will have you dragged out."

Poet spoke in my ear. "I'd rather not come between you and yet another person. Family squabbles are a sensitive trigger for me."

I turned. "I won't leave you."

"As much as I love the sound of that, don't worry about me. Go and be a good daughter."

“I don’t want to be good. I want stay with you.”

“I’ve never heard a more splendid compliment.” He grinned, tender and sad. “I shall be fine, I promise you that.”

Our fingers brushed. The guard barreled inside, pulled us apart, and hauled me toward Mother.

“I will find a way to get you out of here,” I said over my shoulder to Poet.

Before I could catch his response, I was unceremoniously shoved down the stairway. I wouldn’t go unpunished by Spring or Autumn, but my punishment would be less severe than Poet’s. With that thought in mind, I jerked away from the guard and insisted I would cooperate. Mother gave him leave to unshackle and release me.

Two more escorts waited at the bottom. I followed them, marching ahead of Mother in a fury. The men stationed themselves outside my suite as she and I disappeared inside. Morning light blasted through the stained glass windows and in from the balcony.

The chamber door shut. Steeling myself, I whirled to face her. We regarded each other in silence.

Then that fragile string snapped. She surged toward me and crushed me to her. “Briar,” she choked.

The sorrowful sound broke me. My head landed on her shoulder, the tears rushing, soaking her gown. “Mother,” I sobbed.

She clutched me tighter. “Oh, Briar. Oh, my girl. Forgive me. I had to do it. I had to.”

I nodded. I knew why she’d done what she had, treating me frigidly for the world to see. For them, she had to play the Autumn Queen. But I would be lying if I said that I hadn’t doubted her for a second.

I’d missed the tenderness that I had been rejecting for years. I didn’t want to miss it anymore. I cried for it. I cried because I got to be here with my mother, while Poet didn’t get to be with Jinny and Nicu. I cried so very hard. Mother did, too.

“I hadn’t been informed of what happened until they caught you,” she said. “The knights could have harmed you, or you could have fallen from

your horse. Seasons, I want to strangle you!”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m so s-sorry, Mother.”

“I’m infuriated and exhausted from pleading your case to Spring. Trust me, I’ve a score to settle with you about it, but at the moment, I’m only grateful that you’re well.” She retrieved a handkerchief from the vanity, dabbed my eyes, and spoke calmly. “What happened, Briar?”

“I don’t know where to start.”

She wadded the cloth into a ball and coaxed me to the bed. We climbed in, the linens and down pillows caressing our cheeks. I told her everything. About befriending Eliot, desiring Poet, protecting Nicu, and returning to the place where Father died. Although I wept a few more times, blushed at other times, I refused to censor myself. I explained why I’d pushed Mother away. I told her that I loved her, which made her cry more, too. When we finished, we drifted into a watery, river type of calm.

Father had been my hero. Eliot had been my hero. Poet was my hero.

And I would become my own hero. This life left room for many champions, because I couldn’t imagine anyone needing only themselves.

However, I’d missed the signs about Mother. I did not remember her face after Father died, the things she said, how she’d coped without him or without me to mourn alongside her. Too gripped in my own grief, I hadn’t paid attention. I’d failed to recognize this heroine who had recovered and ruled. Quietly, she survived it all. My silent hero.

“I thought bringing you here would be helpful,” she admitted bleakly. “I thought facing the past each year would help us heal together, when it only scarred you more. It was wrong of me.”

“It was wrong of me to avoid you. If given a chance, I would have come with you anyway. I always wanted to see Eliot.”

“What about the jester? Did he coerce you? Did he seduce you?”

“I care about Poet.”

“It appeared a great deal more than that. The things you’ve done and said, you wouldn’t do for just anyone.”

“He’s a good person. He loves his son.”

Bringing up Nicu softened Mother a bit. “I encouraged you to embrace Spring, but I didn’t mean like this. He may be a doting father, but he’s also a rake. He’s an inferior and—”

“I know everything that makes us different, Mother. It doesn’t change how I feel.”

“It’s forbidden, Briar.”

“He makes me laugh. That shouldn’t be forbidden.”

Mother sighed. “You are as stubborn as your father. If I tell you to stay away from him, it will accomplish the opposite. As it is, you didn’t tell me your secrets.”

“I needed to keep secrets.”

“We must conceal things, yes. We must do things that pain us, especially within our station, but please stop hiding from me when we’re in private. You can talk to me. No matter what you do, I love you. I’m proud of you. More so now than ever.”

“Why?” I asked. “I disobeyed every written and unwritten law.”

“Laws don’t make people better, Briar. Mistakes do. Love does,” she said. “What you did—I can’t say that you handled it correctly, because you didn’t. You’ve made poor choices but also valiant ones. If you’re not passionate about anything, you can’t be an honest queen. A queen makes brave decisions, not merely cautious ones. You did what you believed was right. You sought to protect an innocent child from hate.

“None of us knows how to be a perfect ruler—we spend our lives learning how. But you’ve shown more spirit and determination these past days than I’ve ever seen. That’s why I’m not fretting about the queen you’ll become.” She swept my hair aside. “And I’ve suspected for a while about Poet.”

“What will they do to him?”

“They haven’t decided yet. They’ll summon you both before the court again and offer to be lenient if you tell them where Nicu is. If you refuse, you will be banned from Whimtany until your coronation.”

That could take ages. Decades in which I would not see Eliot, in which Mother would have to come here alone. We’d never set foot in Spring

together, because when I was crowned, she would be dead, if not mentally incapacitated.

My chest constricted. Mother could fight me over this, but she must understand being torn between one's heart and one's duty. It couldn't be helped. I would not give them Nicu.

"Briar." Mother cupped my face. "I hate to see this happen to you."

"What about Poet?" I asked.

She hesitated. "Spring won't execute him. But the jester's recrimination will be physical, if anything."

They'd string him in vines of Whimtany thorns and leave him in the square for hours. Or they'd gag him with fire pepper until his throat was charred and it felt like his tongue was melting off. Whatever it was, he would heal, but he wouldn't forget.

They wouldn't do permanent damage. Even if he lied to the Crown, they'd want to preserve his ability to talk and jest. Or . . . or maybe they *would* deform him, turn him into someone unrecognizable.

I felt ill.

They could continue to search for Nicu without our help. They might eventually find him, if Spring and Summer were persistent.

Short of panicking, I buried my face in the pillow and struggled to breathe. Mother rubbed the back of my neck, murmuring things that escaped me. Not that it mattered. I needed her touch, not her words.

Words. Written ones.

The Fool's Decree. Unbidden, the document popped into my head. Intuition sent my mind racing. I shook myself, recalling each line, searching for something. Just one thing.

"Fools, and all that they are, shall be bound to their new Season," I recited aloud. "Fools, and all that they are . . . bound to their new Season. Fools . . . and all that they are . . ."

And all that they are.

All that they are!

I shot upright. Blessed air returned to my lungs. Mother and Father were

sympathetic to born fools, but it hadn't been their era to challenge that. I wouldn't convince Mista overnight, much less the Royals. However, even great feats began with tentative steps. This mightn't be Mother's legacy, but perhaps it was destined to be mine.

"Mother." I scooted closer. "I need to discuss something with you."

Two hours later, we strode into the great hall together, where the Royals were breaking their fast. The guards flanked us, of course. Whimtany no longer wanted me out of its sight.

I wore silver, a universal color throughout the Seasons. The satin gown had short sleeves, a skirt that swam around my legs, and a chain belt. It felt akin to wearing pretty armor.

Rather than a sword, I had words. I had a revelation.

For all intents and purposes, the princess had a trick up her sleeve.

Basil and Rhys shot to their feet when we entered. The Queens set down their cutlery, glancing at one another in surprise. Mother had been expected, but I'd been banned from eating with them. That I'd disregarded this blazed across their faces.

Poet's sly artifice worked for him, whereas my tactics had a disruptive effect. I prayed that frazzling the Royals would give me an edge. They weren't prepared for negotiation.

Each of them appeared larger than usual. I felt six years younger.

"Queen Avalea, this is anarchy," King Basil said. "Your daughter belongs in her chamber. Can you not leash her for one day? For Season's sake—guards!"

I sank to my knees. Now was the time to show subservience.

My gaze lifted briefly to see Basil's hand shoot up, halting the guards. I forged ahead, speaking to the polished floor. "Your Majesties, I apologize. I regret showing you disrespect during this month of peace, especially after you honored me to participate. I'm most grateful for the invitation and remorseful to have caused the Seasons strain. Please, may I state my business?"

I'd been deliberately ambiguous, begging their pardon without actually referring to taking Nicu. I would never express regret for saving him. Not

even as a lie.

The Royals consulted one another in silence. The Spring King nodded and bade me to continue.

I rose and clasped my hands behind my back, concealing how they shook. Only Mother, who'd stationed herself behind me, saw that. "Forgive my intrusion, but I won't reveal the child's whereabouts. Neither will your jester."

"Then I shall eat your humiliation for breakfast," Rhys's mustache flapped.

"Autumn wants the boy. We'll trade you for him."

He barked with laughter. "This is preposterous. Negotiations take place in the throne room, between monarchs, not heirs."

Mother moved to stand beside me. Rhys peered at us. "You want that child awfully bad, as does your imbecile-loving jester. That alone is cause for me to refuse whatever Autumn has to offer. I'll hunt for the boy myself. I have no qualms about being spiteful. It's been a trying four weeks."

"You want Summer's cells purged of the mad? Very well. Mista will take a dozen souls off your hands. Send them to us."

Because we would treat them humanely, try to help them if we could, if it was possible. We would try.

The King looked skeptical. Tempted as well. Other than including the mad in the trade amendment as a precaution, the Royals hadn't actually decided how to rid the kingdoms' dungeons and oubliettes of them. Summer's especially, with its mercurial population and climate sparking more unlawful behavior than any other kingdom. For the price of Nicu, I'd just handed Rhys a chance for more wiggle space in one of Summer's prisons. Begrudging Poet and me wasn't more important to him.

I waited, my fingers trembling at the base of my spine.

Imploring. Hoping. Please.

Rhys mutely conferred with his wife and then puckered his lips. "Two dozen," he countered.

"Eighteen," I said.

"Twenty."

We could have been haggling over the price of eggs.

Although we did house the mad in dungeons, I'd convinced Mother to utilize an outlying settlement, an abandoned village a day's ride from our castle, where they could be managed fairly. Appointing guards and physicians, and employing willing peasants to oversee the place, would cause indignation. But the prospect of work and wages, with little depletion of resources, would appease our citizens.

I also reasoned that our people would welcome a greater separation between the mad and themselves, particularly if we argued the points of safety and more cell space for real fugitives. We were a calm land, but that didn't mean we lived free of ruffians.

What Mista would think when they found out I'd traded for my lover's son—and with Mother's blessing—was another matter. I'd have to endure the public scrutiny. It was going to happen anyway, and for those two boys, I would have done it a thousand times over.

Warning myself not to faint, I nodded. Another two hours later, the document was drawn up.

After signing it, Summer dropped the quill on the table, his fingers stained black. He wouldn't be satisfied until he'd jabbed a few parting words at me. "You may be allowed to snatch that child out of hiding now, but don't look so pleased. This doesn't change your own fate, or the jester's."

I crossed my arms. "That will prove difficult, seeing as Poet's now of Autumn."

The Royals blinked, shocked as I pricked them with a very sweet thorn. The trade amendment to the Fool's Decree stated—I quoted for them, lest they'd forgotten—"Fools, and all that they are, shall be bound to their new Season."

"All that they are" meant their families. Which meant that Poet was bound to Autumn, because Poet was the child's father.

At this news, Basil and Fatima whitened.

Rhys boiled to a shade of red. Scarlet red.

"Prove it," he demanded.

“Disprove it,” I volleyed.

No means existed to verify this. The Seasons relied on physical similarities and the divine acknowledgment of a monarch. To that, Mother chimed in and vouched for Nicu’s parentage, now that she’d just become his sovereign.

That aside, Poet’s actions alone proved he fathered Nicu, as did their striking green irises. In fact, it boggled me that the Crown hadn’t suspected it.

“*All that they are* pertains to a fool’s mind and body,” Rhys fumed.

“Their body is their blood. Their blood is their family,” I said. “In and of itself, that’s an irrefutable fact. Show me how it doesn’t apply to families.”

“That’s not what the Decree says!”

“But that’s how it reads.”

“She’s right,” Fatima admitted after a moment’s thought.

The monarchs looked dazed, chagrined to have missed this. It seemed even the most powerful could be foolish.

“We’ll need to reword the amendment,” Basil muttered. “We must accomplish that today. We can’t have the relatives of fools swapped across the Seasons. This isn’t about them.”

Precisely why I had the Royals include that citation in my negotiation with Summer. They would make whatever changes they needed to the Decree, but the signed and dated trade document between us would still apply to Poet.

In unison, the Royals turned to stare at me. A princess should wait to be excused by her elders.

I curtsied. “Your Majesties.”

Before Rhys thought of burning it, I grabbed the scroll and strutted away in a circle of silver. As I did, my straight face lifted into a smirk.

28

Princess

Whispers invaded my sleep. I flopped over, yelping as three faces poked between the draperies of my canopy. Vale, Posy, and . . . Cadence?

Vale sang, “Wakey, wakey.”

“Your Highness,” Posy finished.

Tired morning rays yawned through the room. I sat upright as my visitors swished aside the bed drapes and dropped onto the mattress, banding around me in cashmere dressing gowns.

Cautious, I held the blanket to my chest. According to the brushfire of news spreading through the lands, I had lost my sense and virtue. I’d become a sympathizer. I’d stolen Poet right from under Spring’s nose—they mightn’t worship him the same way anymore, but that didn’t mean the court celebrated his impending departure from Whimtany.

Who knew what these girls thought of me now?

“What do you want?” I asked.

“We have your clothes for the carnival today,” Posy said.

“The perfect roughspun,” Vale added, gesturing to a faded dress with a leather belt hanging from my changing screen, along with a circlet of weeds.

Lark’s Day. The carnival.

But no. The King and Queen certainly wouldn’t let me attend their merry event.

And why would these girls bring me such clothing? I did not understand . . . until I did.

The girls explained further. The Crown would have rather kept me away, however, that would have disrupted tradition, as every Royal in residence had to participate. In addition, Basil and Fatima had specific plans for me. Something they had every right to request. I’d not seen it coming, yet I couldn’t be too surprised.

That roughspun. That’s what Poet would see me in. Or would he see me at

all? He'd been released from the tower, protected by Autumn from a Spring reckoning, but Mother had advised me to pace myself, that I shouldn't see him so soon after. And I assumed Poet had similar thoughts, since I'd not heard from him, not even through a missive delivered by Tumble.

Mother had told me that Basil and Fatima had summoned him for a private interview, but Mother had no idea what transpired. While the Royals couldn't fault her for what I did, and in public she maintained the aura of a contrite, disciplinary queen, her peers nevertheless treated her dubiously.

The Silly Three wanted to deliver my attire themselves, apparently to ease the blow of what was to come. Though, I couldn't understand Cadence's sulky presence here.

"Why are you being nice to me?" I questioned.

"Don't get your hopes up," Cadence grunted. "None of us ever had a soft spot for born fools, but the boy is Poet's son, so we're shamelessly curious—"

"Awfully curious," Posy emphasized.

"—about what happened between you. We want the scandal."

"The tale," Vale corrected.

"The details," Cadence translated. "For one, I'd like to slap you as hard as you slapped me. You stole him from us, but there are plenty of alphas to go around. If he prefers you, then you can't be the stuffy Royal we thought you were—either that, or he did something magical to loosen your bodice. I can respect a princess who kisses a scoundrel and has the spine to hit me."

Posy and Vale blanched at her. I raised an eyebrow.

Cadence flipped her hair over her shoulder. "The last thing we expected was for you to rollick with us in the labyrinth or break the law. We misjudged you."

"A rebellious princess is fascinating," Vale acknowledged.

"Riveting," Posy said.

"Especially when she's ruined," Cadence added. "It sounds like the most foolish love story, you and him. It actually makes me tolerate you more."

"Listen to us. We sound like the shallowest of creatures," Posy rebuked.

"Well, she's human. She has passions and actually makes mistakes. We

weren’t sure before, were we?”

“It’s more than that,” Vale assured me. “In the labyrinth, we had fun with you.”

Posy scooted to the bed’s center and curled her legs beneath her. “We like you.”

Cadence shrugged. “After what you and Poet risked for that sapling . . . maybe we shouldn’t be quick to scorn simpletons. Maybe we should know more, if you’re willing to tell us what we haven’t considered before. Maybe you’ll convince us. What say you, Your Highness? Are you interested in liking us back?”

I wavered. Their fondness for Poet made them biased. Nevertheless, they were willing to hear me out, to learn differently. Cadence’s ugly words at the carnival hill still lingered in my mind, but I had to believe that people could change if given the chance. I *had* to believe that.

I’d also been thirsting for such moment, I realized. Having female companions lounge in my room without an obligation to do so. It would be nice to have allies left in Spring. Possibly friends.

I cleared my throat. “All right.”

In spite of everything, they hadn’t anticipated that. We glanced at one another, wondering what to do next—and then sputtered into laughter.

* * *

The girls helped me into the roughspun. After they wished me luck and left, I strayed to the balcony. My hands hooked over the rim, the stone cool against my palms. I recalled my first day here, when I stood in this spot, wishing to be home, unaware of what was about to happen.

In every Season, there existed grotesqueness and beauty. Wickedness and kindness. Hate and love. Pleasure and loss. Joy and regret.

Every place had its own castles and secret cottages. It had its alcoves and guarded halls. Its throne rooms and dungeons. Its happy orange colors and storms that ate grass.

Spring pained me, but that wasn’t all I’d felt here. It never really had been. Leaving would relieve and kill me, because I could not take everyone I

wanted along.

“You look like a fool,” he joked from behind, his musical voice easing my hold on the ledge.

“Many thanks,” I said with a dry chuckle.

Eliot moved to stand beside me, his lute strapped over his shoulder. He’d never been in my suite before. I’d called for him. A bold move, but at that point, I cared not.

We stared ahead. The makings of the carnival, with its colors and ribbons, sprouted from the rolling wildflower hill. The tents glittered like they’d been spun from magic.

We used to enjoy the Lark’s Day festival together. As a minstrel, Eliot played a regular part in it. A lengthy pause in his performance and the massive throng of bodies allowed us to spend a few hours by one another’s side, enjoying the sights without anyone questioning us. At some point, we’d find a clandestine opportunity to hold hands, my smooth fingers laced with his callused ones.

My eyes watered. A host of unspoken words filtered through the silence.

Have I lost you? Or am I close to losing you? Or will I lose you today, or tomorrow? Or did you slip through my fingers already, when I wasn’t looking?

“Eliot,” I said, the sob cracking from my lips.

“Briar,” he croaked.

We grabbed each other. He rubbed my back. I brushed through his curls.

“Forgive me,” I cried. “There is so much to say.”

“There always is,” he said.

“I’ve missed you. I’ve missed you so much.”

“Me, too. I was hurt, and that hasn’t gone away, so maybe it’s different between us now. But you mean everything to me. You do, Briar. I love him, and you love him, but that doesn’t mean we’ve unloved each other, does it? A friendship for the ages can survive this. Did what I just say make any sense? Because hugging you with this lute on my back is uncomfortable. I can’t talk clearly.”

“Maybe after a minute, you’ll grow accustomed to it. Eliot?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you remember when we were fourteen? That song we wrote?”

“The horse kingdom. Oh, that was awful. Your lyrics—”

“I know,” I spoke over his shoulder. “I did not say it then, but thank you for using them.”

“I still have the song.”

“You do?”

“What do you take me for?” he scolded. “You mean more to me than boys and, well, even music. You mean more to me than my lute. I won’t forget that, no matter how long we’re apart.”

It could be ages before my coronation, when I’d be welcomed back to Spring for the peace talks. In the meantime, the other heirs and heiresses would be permitted to join the talks’ closing meetings, to grow up with a glimpse of their futures. I would be excluded from that right.

And Mother would travel here by herself. And I would not get to see Eliot.

I leaned back and grasped his collar. “Then you’ll just have to come to me.”

“How?” he asked, flattening his hands over mine. “It isn’t possible. No one can travel between the Seasons without the Crown’s permission.”

“I’ve spoken with Mother. We’re planning to invite Spring to Autumn—not as often as the peace talks, but occasionally over the years. I’ll atone for my blunder by lavishing them with flattery, appealing to their cheery side, and urging them to bring their prized artists. For the sake of fealty and seeing Autumn grovel, they won’t decline attending, nor at seeing Poet perform again, nor showing off their renowned lute player if the opportunity arises.”

“You believe that?”

“I will make it happen,” I swore, my eyes stinging. “We will see each other again. Someday.”

“You’re dressed like a fool, but you sound like a Royal.”

“No.” Balancing on my tiptoes, I brushed his lips with mine. “I sound like

your friend.”

“That, most of all,” he whispered, smiling.

Our foreheads fell together. As our tears dried, I felt my face relax, no longer sharp or pinched. I exhaled, blowing part of myself into the wind, so that it would remain here with him.

By some miracle, the echoes of the carnival drifted to us. The laughter of two children pealing through the air. A tinkling, eternal sound. A melody caught in a net of time, which wouldn’t change—even while those children did. Even when they grew up.

* * *

The festivities began, spreading their arms to the hours ahead. Thousands of people from the castle, the lower town, and over one hundred villages arrived bright with energy.

Nobles and courtiers. Servants and peasants. Tradesmen and merchants. Keepers and artists.

I wondered if Poet had ever snuck from the woods to this festival as a child. He might have. He might have even bumped elbows with me in passing.

Aerial artists flew. Acrobats flipped on teetering boards. Contortionists held themselves in impossible positions, acting as bars for their partners to tumble across. There were storytellers and fortune-tellers, sword wielding lessons given by knights, a puppet show that Nicu would have enjoyed.

And sights he wouldn’t have enjoyed. Not far off, a simpleton lad of around twelve was being chased around a pen by pigs. He screamed as though they were monsters, perhaps because that’s what he truly thought he saw.

In another circle, two stocky women with features similar to Nicu’s scratched at each other while the people cheered. And sagging in the stocks, an elderly man looked puzzled by his surroundings while youths cranked their arms, ready to fire eggs at him.

Those scenes hurt more than my own humiliation, the crowd parting as I came through. Some gazed at me with sympathy, because I was still a Royal. Others behaved more callously, pelting me with disapproving looks.

Me, the Fest Fool.

And him. Escorted by a guard, Poet materialized from the opposite end of the crowd. He raised his eyes skyward and pouted. I saw why. They had dressed him in traditional jester's garb: dark green knee-length hose, stockings, and a motley colored jacket. Flaps hung around his neckline and wrists. His bell cap—made of petals to distinguish him from the other jesters, marking him as the Fest Fool—jingled as he walked.

Only two details bespoke his true tastes. A single black tear, rimmed in tiny green gems, that dangled from his left eye. And his fingernails glinting black.

Spring had found a way to scorn us publicly. Basil and Fatima had shifted the rules to their convenience, appointing more than one Fest Fool. How very Royal of them, I thought with sarcasm.

Poet winked at me. I mustered a smile.

Basil and Fatima made their introductory speech and raised their arms. Horns blared, and revelers erupted into gleeful shouts. With that, Poet and I belonged to the carnival, and to any noble or Royal in the mood to command or harass us. Since we'd dropped in favor, it was mostly the latter.

It went on and on. We would be stopped and ordered to fetch drinks or do tricks. They blindfolded him and me, then made us hunt for each other while a bunch of shouts misled us—or me, at least, since Poet found me swifter than they would have preferred.

They tethered my right leg to his left, forcing us to walk as one for an hour. I wasn't as graceful about it as the jester was.

One countess requested me to dance on a low-strung rope while dodging the staff she'd handed Poet, expecting him to prod me with it. When he refused, ignoring the stick, the noble poked me in the ribs herself. I stumbled off the rope.

Poet caught me and then ripped the staff from the countess's hand. His furious grip suggested he might have swept it under her feet and sent the woman landing onto her backside. Instead, he twirled the stick from hand to hand, across his shoulders and around his neck. A dizzying sight.

Satisfied, he thrust the staff back at her, the startled woman barely catching it in time. The spectacle earned impressed yet uneasy titters from onlookers. A trio of resident acrobats snorted, daring to look proud. In spite of Poet's transgressions, they of all people didn't relish seeing him reduced to this. They respected his artistry and leadership.

Poet's display became a silent warning: No matter what they made us do, we would not break. Be careful, because if he were so inclined, he could turn any jest on its head. It would backfire on the culprit and make that person the laughingstock.

Deny it all they hoped, he could dazzle them if he wanted to.

As the hours passed, people let their guard down. Drug-laced petals melted on their tongues, inspiring visions and glazed eyes. They twirled to lutes and drums. For all their prejudice against skewed minds, consuming those blooms proved hypocritical, but the revelers excused themselves because the effect was as temporary as spirits, not something intrinsic.

In his tent, the embittered Summer King requested us. He demanded a verse from Poet and ordered me to stand by and witness it. But as Poet began, King Rhys proceeded to ignore Poet and converse with Queen Giselle, talking loudly over the jester's words. The rest of the attendants followed suit.

A humbling tactic. None had ever ignored Poet before.

The Silly Seven stood nearby. Fae, Questa, Rhiannon, and Lisette giggled —like the majority, their admiration for Poet had dwindled. How easily one could rise to popularity, only to fall just as quickly off the pedestal.

Vale, Posy, and Cadence did not giggle. I fretted about causing a rift in the Seven's friendship, but I appreciated their support.

Mother had stayed away, as I'd pleaded with her to. She'd protested but then gave in, agreeing to remain in her tent, mingling with visitors. It was more than maintaining the pretense of being a repentant and disciplinary queen. It was also that I hadn't wanted her to see me ridiculed like this, even under the thin guise of celebration.

I'd done plenty to sour Mista's relations with Spring. Although I did not regret doing it for Poet and Nicu, I knew those relations had to be restored for

my kingdom’s sake. This degradation was a stepping stone of sorts.

If Summer’s disregard bothered Poet, he didn’t let it show. He started another verse, weaving a tale that made me into a warrior—I rather liked that—and exaggerated the Summer King into a farcical sovereign. A monarch who couldn’t see past his overgrown hedge of a mustache to read the fine print on the Fool’s Decree. I ducked my head, trying not to laugh.

So did others who’d begun to pay attention. Poet finished to applause that caught King Rhys’s attention and confused him.

Poet glanced my way. Loudly, I clapped. No criminal law prevented what I was about to do. There was a social law, but we’d already breached that. We’d had enough attention—and not enough.

Rules were meant to be upended today? We would oblige.

The people wanted two fools? We would give them two fools.

I strode over to Poet, grabbed his face, and kissed him.

29

Jester

Her kiss has always been quite the experience, as have my performances. However, combine the two and drop them in the midst of a festival, and ’tis a whole new marvel. Before the congregation, we gave those twits one more thing to talk about . . .

Exclamations of astonishment rippled from one person to the next. I stilled, then kissed her back, grinning into her lips. Our audience’s reception spurred us on as we wrapped ourselves around each other. Although not the best way to appease Spring, it befitted the occasion. The festival had intoxicated the people just enough for them to watch us with a smidgen of intrigue. Ah, such was the glibness of court life.

The Seven Lovelies wore a medley of reactions. Four of them gaped, while Vale, Posy, and Cadence whistled.

A primeval sound rushed out of King Rhys. It broke the princess and me apart.

“Any other requests, Your Majesty?” I asked, feigning innocence. “I could offer another verse, or my lovely companion and I could keep smooching, or perhaps you’d like us to surprise this merry company in other ways. Unless, of course, you’re sated and want us to—”

“Get out!” he barked.

“As you like,” we both said.

I bowed, the princess curtsied, and we left. Outside the tent, I ripped off that monstrosity of a bell cap and shoved it into the belly of a bush. There was nothing to be done about the tacky nightmare they’d dressed me in.

Soon, I realized. It will come off soon.

As daylight thrived in its final hours, crowds swarmed the grounds. ’Twas the hour when mind-slothing drink and petals, and flirtation and elation, set the people into a distracted tizzy. I knew the celebratory patterns of Whimtany. Too swept up in their inebriation, the throng had forgotten the

acrobats and simpletons. They'd forgotten themselves.

Us, too, for a little while. We fled the whirlwind of that place, the exquisite and the corrupt, unable to help or save those tormented at the carnival. Not today. Not yet. The knowledge burned us, made us reach for something good and hopeful to combat it. Something that everyone deserved to have.

Me and my princess vanished into the woodland, into the deep lung of Spring. Hands clasped, fingers entwined, we ran straight and sure into ourselves, our defiance, our desperation. We would return to the carnival, but not until the stars flashed and the moon crawled up the sky. Before then, we ran and ran and ran, fragments of gaiety and atrocity ebbing into wisps, and then gone. We ran from it all.

I'd been stripped of wit and words, she of inhibitions. We flew down a path, leading to that which we couldn't undo once it happened. And we *knew* it would happen. We would run ourselves out of breath, and then we would fall to the ground breathless, and push our bodies beyond their limits.

One afternoon. Only this one. Only one to savor.

Our hearts became violent things. They thrashed within us, because we wanted this, and we sprinted for it, blindly and clear-headed. It became a race. We tore apart, our legs and arms pumping. I sensed how badly she wanted to defeat me. Although my legs were longer, she took the lead—by a hair's width.

Did we know where to go? I did, aware of the forest's secret gems, but she didn't. Somehow, she got us there anyway.

Slowing, I snatched her hand. We read one another well, for she understood the challenge had ended, for we'd reached that special hideout I had in mind. 'Twas a bower shaped by a row of bent trees and their drooping flowers, creating an arched canopy of dangling blooms. Vines of them curtained the entrance. I whipped them apart and spun her inside.

No sooner did we skid to a halt, than we surrendered. At the same time she reached for me, I grabbed her. My lips took hers with a loving ferocity, parting them for my tongue, digging out a moan from her.

Jolting back, I framed her face in my hands. She did the same, and I couldn’t say whether this meant we were holding on, or letting go. That mystery would be solved later.

How many things tangled within me then: the ebb and flow of wonder, sorrow, anger, envy, and other secret sensations that needed keys or blank pages or a million hours to be identified.

Each one of her curves pressed against me, heat emanating from her tight little center, slaying and stiffening me to the point of agony. I would do whatever it took to make sure she didn’t leave this place without sighing and shouting.

I crushed her to me and sunk into her again. Afternoon sky leaked through the canopy and burned us. We fused, a collision of greedy lips and fingers. I kissed her under a hard beam of sun.

Whilst my mouth teased her lips swollen, my hands made quick work of the laces down her back. She rid me of that awful jacket lined in flaps, peeling it up my arms and over my head. We kicked off slippers and boots, then paused in a threadbare attempt to calm the hell down.

I stood before her in hose. Her palms rode up the muscles of my stomach, savoring them and shuddering me. She bent her head to kiss my chest. It rose and fell in a controlled frenzy as she traveled lower to flick my skin with her tongue. Ah, shit.

Provoked by what must have been a buckling male groan—I’d grown too disorientated, my knees too weak, to tell—she did it again, flattening her tongue over my blasted nipple like it was sugar from a spoon. She planted kisses from there to my neck, to beneath my jaw, and I wanted to shred her clothes and never look back.

Like the good lad that I wasn’t, I waited. I let her explore and circle my body.

Dancing behind, fingers down my spine.

She emerged in front of me, blushing cheeks and flashing eyes. She gripped the shoulders of her dress, the material trembling down her figure. My hands twitched, so I tamed them into fists. I wanted her to make the

choice, not seduce her into it.

The linen chemise went next, splashing around her toes, wiping out the last vestige of intelligent, gentlemanly thought. To another man, she was thinner than she ought to be, with straight hips and too pale skin. To me, she blazed with hills and slopes of freckles, creamy peaks and sunken treasures—so damnably pretty. So fair, this girl of Autumn.

My sharp lady. My Briar.

A dark freckle was tucked into the crook above her breast, the petal tip of that breast straining to be tasted.

She glanced from my eyes to my feet, in an unspoken request. Whatever she wished was my command. I curled my fingers, beckoning her to come closer. She did, allowing me to settle her hands on my hips. Together, we inched down the hose, revealing me to her. Endearingly, she averted her gaze, but I knew she wanted to peek.

After a moment, her eyes fluttered down. Her mouth parted at the hardness between us, hers for the taking. I released a gust of air. I wouldn't call myself behemothly endowed, but I was a satisfying specimen, so I've been complimented. Nevertheless, I'd feared whether she would like me bare.

I brushed my lips on hers. My mouth lingered there until her muscles slackened.

Floating down onto the grass, I guided her across my lap, her legs straddling my waist. We touched and stroked, hissed and whimpered. My lips danced everywhere, sucking the flesh of her neck, sliding across her shoulder. Bracing her lower spine, I arched her so far back that I could no longer see her face, my mouth covering one of her beautiful tits. My lips sealed around her, drawing noises from this incredible girl, sounds that hit the trees.

More. Louder.

Louder came when I found that soft knot between her legs. The instant I pressed a thumb against it, a shriek jumped out of her and landed in my heart. We'd switched places, her loving me out loud, me loving her steadily.

Using my fingers, I readied her for us. She wound herself around me, squeezing when it hurt, moaning when it felt good.

We hadn’t uttered a word yet. My mouth skimmed her wrists, where the irons had cut into her. Quietly, I spoke against her pulse and told her my name.

Not Poet. Not the Court Jester of Whimtany.

My real name.

She smiled. “Hello, sir.”

“Hello, sweeting.” I pushed a strand of hair from her temple. “How do you feel?”

“In love.”

I positioned her above me and cupped her face. “Then hold onto me. You’ll need it.”

Then. Oh, and then.

I rolled upward and stretched her. Briar grimaced in pain. My teeth sunk into my lower lip, her warm grip so glorious, overwhelming my self-control. ’Twas all I could do not to ruin this by lurching through the wetness.

Forcing myself to move carefully, I murmured reassurances. She held on like I’d told her to. Without breaking eye contact, she listened to my words. “I’m in you, Briar. I’ve imagined us this way. How I’ve longed to move inside *this*,” I said, punctuating the last word with a nudge of my waist between her thighs. “I’ve wanted you. I’ve amassed so much want that it’s emblazoned on me.”

That changed everything. My liquid voice and the tilt of my hips loosened the princess. Finally, her discomfort vanished. She began to writhe, sobs tumbling from her as she ground onto my lap.

My dancer’s body knew about rhythm and motion. She needed me longer, deeper.

“There’s more to be had,” I said. “Shall I give you the rest?”

“I . . . I can’t take it.”

“You can. I know it. I feel it.” I grasped her backside. “So now I’m going to fill you sweetly.”

I sank her fully onto me, relief and pleasure springing off our tongues. Watching her face, I stopped when my pelvis bumped into hers. Her eyes

sailed down to mine and anchored there. Face to face, skin on skin, level with one another. Like equals.

Clutching her hips, I helped with the pace, revolving us into one. Just as I was about to leave her completely, I rocked forward. Again. And again. And again. With every stroke, I pulled moans from both of us that scattered into the forest.

“Wait for it, love,” I gasped over her cries. “Stay with me.”

But we couldn’t anymore. It was impossible.

When I pushed us to the brink and could stand it no longer, I twisted her into the grass and balanced slightly on my knees, her limbs rising around me. Lifting my torso, I held her hands on either side of her head, my body riding through hers. The vision of her splayed under me, taking the weight of my thrusts, drove me to sheer madness. I thought I might die. Or I might just kill us both.

Her expression pleaded with me. *Finish this.*

Never finish this.

I fell forward, and we clung, charging at one another helplessly. Briar bowed off the ground, throwing her head back and coming undone in my arms.

My muscles shook as I chased after her, hitting the right spot, hurling myself over that precipice. I wanted to hear every wild thing we did to each other, hoping the whole world heard us, too.

For at last, we didn’t have to be silent.

30

Jester

My sweeting, this is where I've led us. In this blooming bower, I've been drifting and remembering this tale with you as my company. I don't know how this story ends, but 'tis time we find out . . .

The princess and I had been dozing. As the balmy light trickled over us, I drowsed in and out of her embrace, in and out of our tale. I stirred only when she did.

I'd been resting on top of Briar, my head in the valley of her breasts, her legs nestling me in. I craved more afternoons like this, fluid and everlasting. For another pair of lovers, belonging to Autumn should have guaranteed it. Living in the same kingdom should have closed the divide.

If only it were that simple.

Her fingers wound through my hair as she blinked down at me. "Hi," she whispered.

She couldn't know how happy and devastated that word made me. I yearned to knot that *Hi* into a ribbon and unravel it every day.

I crawled up her body and rolled over, taking her with me, her head on my shoulder, her locks a red mess across my chest. A fragrant mist of persimmons and sweat wafted from her naked skin.

She fingered the V of my hips. Damnation, how I liked that.

Matter of fact, I liked it so much that it was beginning to show, making her chuckle. I could do this forever, listen to that laugh, fall into her arms and take her again. There were at least half a dozen evil things I'd like to do to her.

Shyly, she touched me there. I sucked in a breath, my hips bucking.

"Briar," I ground out, setting my hand over hers. "If you keeping doing that—"

"I know," she said. "Let me have you."

The mere drape of her palm, her thumb skimming over my weak spots,

defeated me. I fell back into the grass, losing myself in her grasp. Molding my fingers around hers, I taught her pacing and pressure before dissolving completely. I lay there, panting and willfully at her mercy.

“You’re beautiful,” she said, kissing my chin.

Wicked. Hell.

I yanked Briar on top of me, my body rising through hers, slipping inside hers, stunning the air from her. Over and over, we went. She leaned forward, clutching my shoulders for balance as we soared, chanting nonsense.

I wanted her on every forsaken surface available. I wanted her above me like *now*, beneath me like *before*, in front of me like *someday*. I wanted her hair unruly and spilling down her freckled skin. I wanted to see her lovingly fucked by me. I wanted her padding through my chamber in nothing but my shirt, the sleeves dangling past her wrists, the hem billowing around her thighs.

I wanted her fast and slow. I wanted her crazed and tender. I wanted her in darkness and daylight. In her bed and in my bed.

But this patch of grass had to suffice. Moving in her, I lived the fantasy. I prolonged it with a harsh sigh and a hard snap of my hips, making sure she would feel me well into the night.

Afterward, we collapsed in a heaving fit, splayed and smiling.

Dusk descended, reminding us the carnival awaited. One by one, revelers would notice our absence, but there remained much to discuss, namely that she’d bargained me and my son to Autumn.

She had my gratitude for that. To an extent.

Once released from prison and questioned by the Crown, I’d hastened to Jinny and Nicu. Plagued by nightmares, my son hadn’t yet recovered from what happened. I’d held him and coaxed him to sleep, the enraged father in me plotting ways to make my former sovereigns bleed from their ears.

As much as I’d yearned to see Briar, the only reason I returned to the castle before our journey to Mista was that I’d been handpicked to be the Fest Fool. Which had robbed me of hours comforting Nicu and bidding Jinny farewell.

Although a fib that we were related by blood would enable her to come with us, her bones were too old to make the trip. The woman who'd raised me, whom I'd sworn not to abandon—as my parents did to me, as Nicu's mother did to him—would end her days alone. The knowledge had swamped me in grief. When I told her, I cried more than she did. She smiled bravely, holding my face and telling me to be well, to stay together and make a home for Nicu.

Intolerance existed on a quieter note in Mista. Nevertheless, it was still intolerance, and I would have to pry Nicu from the only place he'd known.

The sight of Briar's face brought me comfort. "I suppose I'm under your command now. But then, I've always been."

She rose on her elbow. "It was the only way."

I tapped her nose. "Indeed."

"And us?" she prompted.

Us. What of us?

Before I'd left the cottage yesterday, Jinny had handed me a vial. "Give this to Briar. She'll need it with you around. I'm not fixing to have another grandchild yet."

'Twas a concoction of bundleberries and other unpronounceable herbs meant to ward off children, effective when taken within two days of frisky activity. Ever the forward-thinker, I felt certain Briar planned to seek out a similar remedy later, mayhap from the Court Physician, or with the help of the Three Lovelies. However, receiving it from Jinny would be less mortifying for Briar.

I'd given no indication I would be taking the princess's clothes off in the near future. But Jinny had a gift for knowing better.

Whether this princess and her jester would be making a habit of it was the question. Each Season possessed a means of prevention. Would we need a similar concoction again? Frequently?

Seasons no longer tore us asunder, leaving a thousand other conflicts to go. She was royalty. I was the butt of a joke, a trinket to be presented at feasts.

Pain rippled through me. I balanced myself beside her, wanting to take the

words back even as I spoke them. “I shall be your Court Jester. I’ll entertain and advise, as befits my station. On some fateful day, I shall watch you marry an archetypal prince with perfect teeth and table manners, and over buckets of drink, I’ll mock the wedding guests.”

Denial clambered across her face. “In the bell tower, you asked what you meant to me.”

“I merely wanted to know. I wasn’t counting on it for more, however much I wished to. You were the one who reminded me of our differences.”

“And then I changed my mind.”

“Sneaking into alcoves under the cover of night? Speaking in riddles to communicate, or using Tumble to send missives? Slipping into your chamber and leaving before dawn? Romance is so labor intensive, don’t you agree?”

“Be serious for one moment!” she snapped. “I don’t want to conceal what we share. Not again, and not in my kingdom. It may take years, but someday the people will accept it.”

“We’ll have enough to ease them into with our grand plans for born fools,” I countered. “Pushing those limits will leave scant room for much else.”

“Like you said, a princess has harsher things to deal with. They don’t have to celebrate us, but if I prove myself as a Royal, they will respect my choice.”

“*Once upon a time, a princess and a jester fell in love,”* I narrated. “*They waited a lifetime to have their kingdom’s blessing, the jester watching and waiting as the princess grew into her role. Soon enough, her days became busier, filled with new faces and obligations. She met princes and noblemen, debated with them at table, partook in courtly love. She received her peers and her subjects, with less and less time to idle in the arms of a jester. By the time they realized they’d grown apart, the feast had grown cold.”*

“That won’t happen,” she said.

“’Tis how these stories end, as they aren’t truly stories.”

“I know you don’t want to be a king.”

“Good Seasons, nay.”

“Fine. It isn’t the wise or right solution anyway, but Mother rules without

a husband. Queens can be leaders on their own."

That wasn't unheard of in our history. Ever since the Seasons were united a century ago, power and peace hadn't required alliances. Standards, on the other hand, were quite welcome.

"You're willing to forsake a king in favor of a servant lover," I summarized. "A lowborn, orphaned jester with a bastard fool of a son. There couldn't be a worse combination to toss the people."

"I don't see either of you that way."

"I know, but 'tis how the rest of the world sees us."

"Not forever. And I shall name an heir when the day comes. I don't have to give birth to one. I'll be married to Mista and loving you."

I swallowed. "That's not enough."

"What?" she asked, recoiling as though I'd slapped her.

I snatched her wrists. "Listen to me, Briar."

"Don't! After everything that's happened, I offer you my heart. I offer to rule without a king so that I can be with you, and that's your reply? That I'm —that we're not enough?"

My own sadness reflected in her eyes. Trying to explain this away felt wrong. And yet: "It won't be enough for either of us."

"I make my own decisions. I chose this. Why does that not suffice? I kissed you in that tent. The four kingdoms know about us."

"We are performers, you and I. With artistry and resilience, we will undo the impression we've made, until the world reduces it to a brief, impassioned tryst that has ended. Nobles will court you, and you will let them—for appearances' sake to begin with. But soon, you shall have suitors in earnest, handsome bucks with golden hair and golden pockets—even their snot will be priceless. You will gain the approval of your people, who hope for a pristine match. You won't be able to resist that.

"We'll bicker about how little time you have for us, how each smile you share with another man was just a facade. You will resent me for questioning it, and I will resent you for scowling at every maiden and lad who bats their lashes at me. You'll hate that I haven't ceased flirting and teasing, although

you know it’s my craft. I’ll crave the luxury of holding your hand in the halls and climbing into your bed without having to wear a disguise and scale a wall. We’ll quarrel, misinterpret actions and words, go days and then weeks without having a moment alone together. We’ll say the wrong things and react stubbornly. Interludes will become fraught with tension and pettiness.”

I drove the blade in. “And Nicu will see it happen.”

Briar pressed a fist to her mouth and twisted away. The sight was hell on earth. I wished she would stop me from ruining this, but she couldn’t, and I couldn’t let her.

“He’ll be heartbroken, wanting you for a mother and wondering why he doesn’t get to see you. I will be heartbroken, knowing that I can’t explain it in a way he’ll understand. While I’m juggling for you or bowing at your feet—both of which I’ll enjoy—I’ll also want to shake you, yell at you, touch you. I’ll want to do naked things to you. With each sunrise, I will feel you slipping away, word by word, look by look. I can’t take that. Don’t make it our future.”

She surged to her feet. Shaking up a storm, she threw on her chemise and rounded on me. “Get dressed.”

Well, well. Her first order.

“If it pleases you, Your Highness.”

“It does not please me. I would like to keep you bare, but then I won’t be able to say what I have to say. Get dressed, Poet.”

I stood and slipped into my horrible clothes. Finished, I spread my arms.

She puffed and squared her shoulders. Uh-oh.

“You’re a coward,” she said. “You said if I wanted things to change, I should change them. You said I shouldn’t cling to past ways. You told me that you loved me.”

“Ay. I did say that.”

“And you said loving is bravery. We have the chance to become something different, yet you insist upon tucking tail. Well, I won’t let you. You might beautify your words, but I *stand by* mine. If I make a vow, I do not break it. My will is as strong as my promise, and if you don’t know that by

now, then you don’t know me!”

My eyes prickled. “Briar—”

But I shut up when she knelt before me. “Give me your hand.”

Mesmerized, I placed it in hers, gob-smacked as she spoke. “I swear I won’t abandon either of you. Nicu will have my adoration every morning. He will have me at his bedside every night. I will sit with him. I will listen to his stories. I will tie ribbons all over the castle. I will hold his hand in the halls and bring him to table, so that he may see his father woo the great hall. I won’t let anyone harm him. I’m his. I’m yours, Poet. You come first, because you’re my family. As are my mother and my father and Eliot—you are my family.

“I’m not ashamed to love you, and I will fight to love you both with everything I am, and I won’t hide it—I have pretended long enough. I’m not afraid of Mista’s judgment. What’s more, this isn’t merely for us, it’s for the people. Someday we’ll make a difference together, be a finer kingdom for it, and show them that no other match could have existed for me than with you. We will show them a new kind of union.” She sucked up air. “All right?”

When her day came, she would make an inspiring queen. Lucky for me, I would be there to witness it, privileged to advise and then admire her from the back of the room.

Transfixed, I stared down at her. The worst reply in history wavered on my tongue, but I thought back to something Jinny had said in the cottage.

“You tell me,” she’d said. “Now that nobody can hear you but Old Jinny. Without your fancy clothes and thoughts, you tell me, now that it’s just us.”

“I can’t love her,” I’d whispered, although it was too late for that.

Jinny had studied me with weathered eyes. The scents of herbs and woodsmoke had clung to her shawl, the first gift I’d purchased for her from my wages as a jester. “Remember when I told you that you’d know what to do without me? It’s time you found that out. If not, what will that teach Nicu?”

What would it teach him about love and freedom and principles? About himself? Most days in our world, betwixt courts and peasants, in and out of castles, there existed wisdom in restraint, for it granted power. Other days, it

stripped us of our soul. For what we thought of as safe could oft be a greater danger than to live, to try, to dare.

For such an adept person, I'd proven remarkably stupid. If Briar wanted me, she wanted my son. None would want us the way she did. None would want her the way we could. To deny this was to deny our worth.

That would be lying.

Sinking to one knee and leveling myself with Briar, I twisted her hand so that I could kiss her knuckles and give her my answer.

31

Princess

I took a deep, wheat breath. Crisp air held the scents of golden stalks and sweet corn. Resting my back against the tree trunk, I watched the sky. It was a gray afternoon in Mista, a pause between what has been and what will be done. There was something private about a gray sky. I grasped it with both hands, savoring it before the rest of the day claimed me.

We'd harvested grain at sunrise. I loved the land's give and take. The quiet labor. The silhouettes of the gatherers. Me amongst them, my muscles aching.

It used to make the people uncomfortable to work by my side, especially when I'd returned from Spring with unexpected companions three years ago. But they'd grown accustomed to my presence. They'd begun talking to me about their lives, voicing their concerns and hopes. It still proved difficult for them to trust in me, but slowly the soil had begun to loosen.

I'd never felt truer to myself. Perhaps that drew them in, when they hadn't expected it to. I did not look or act like Mother, but I had set about proving my own worth. A bit of placid Winter, a shard of fiery Summer, a startling amount of playful Spring, and a heart full of Autumn. I walked straight but relaxed, laughed while setting a regal example, occasionally danced and dared. I'd broken a mold. The people and I were learning together.

The harvest was my personal endeavor. Mother had other pressing responsibilities. Poet had his own tasks, aside from the fact that he refused to wear roughspun.

My breath reached down into my navel. At the sound of giggles, I let it go.

A few feet away, Nicu dove into a colorful mountain of leaves that he'd built, creating an explosion around him. He covered himself with them and snuggled in because of the outdoor chill, and because he liked being enveloped. At night, he would follow the ribbons, sneak into my chamber, and climb into my bed. Just like his papa.

Nicu would wiggle between Poet and me, stringing us together. I would gather Nicu to my side, smelling milk and rain in his hair.

Later, I'd awaken to find his papa propped on his elbow, admiring us. They both kept rooms next to mine, but they would come to me at some point. Poet would get there earlier, for reasons other than sleep. Then he would leave at dawn to train.

Nicu sneezed, causing more leaves to scatter. He snorted when he laughed.

From the beginning, it had been painful, with the denizens of Autumn regarding Nicu as they did every born fool, eyeing him with suspicion and condescension. It had confused him, how they'd spurned his friendliness, balked at his obscure chatter.

The court's disapproval of the jester and his son had been constant. We hadn't flaunted our family, but we hadn't hidden it, either. We'd stayed humble but proud. Anyone who pulled me or Mother to the side, or so much as sneered, had received a stern lecture.

Sometimes, I'd felt weightless and invincible. Other times, guilt, uncertainty, resentment, and dread brought me to my knees. Then Poet's hand would take mine, or I'd see Nicu grin, and I would find the strength to rise again.

Yes, there had been ire because of my choices, my loves, and mostly, my intentions toward the born. That first year, there had been a riot in the dead of night. And I'd blamed myself. I was selfish and a fool, I'd thought. And I'd thrown myself into the chaos, and amidst flaming thatched roofs in the lower town, I had knelt before my people, staying quiet until they noticed my presence.

And Poet, having lowered himself beside me, kept silent as I spoke, convincing everyone to stop, thrusting a mirror before them, showing them what we'd let Autumn become. And the next day, the people and its rulers cleaned up the mess together, and then moved forth.

There could be another lapse in Mista's nature. A riot could happen again. We knew that, but we would do our best to prevent it.

So far, Poet and I had endured. Beyond our fights. Beyond the days when we'd given one another the silent treatment, then had forgiven each other. Shouting matches and tears, kisses and sarcasm, grimaces and chuckles. We'd lasted because of those things.

Eventually, the public objections had ceased. Autumn's court and citizens had stopped hoping that I would grow out of my "infatuation," or that Mother would put her foot down. I knew the people still looked down on Poet and me privately, but I'd given them reasons to concentrate more on my abilities than on who I loved. Poet had given them reasons to welcome having a jester. Both things, a novelty.

Each day, I did what I could, for this kingdom and my family.

Raising Nicu could be strenuous at times. I would succumb to moments when I had to leave the room in order to contain myself, to keep from snapping when he refused to listen, or to scold myself when I'd fail to explain things the right way. Or I would be too tired to speak, to do more than hug him.

Poet had his moments of weakness, too. When one of us needed a pause, the other took over. And the happy moments surpassed the obstacles. Nicu was spirited and creative and affectionate, teaching us as much as we taught him.

Though less frequently, we still had to defend Nicu to others. People allowing their children to approach him was ever a rarity, and it broke our hearts to see his forlorn expression. He was used to being alone, but he was not used to rejection.

But today was a good day. For the first time, he'd made a friend. A servant girl whose mother worked in the kitchens. A girl whom Nicu called Prettiness.

She had knocked on my chamber door, wanting to deliver a piece of cake that she'd baked with her mother. She'd met Nicu during the one time he'd gotten lost, despite the garlands of ribbon strewn throughout the castle—a nightmarish morning for Poet, Mother, and me.

The girl and a guard had escorted Nicu back to his room. She didn't like it

when he said that no one wanted to be his friend. She knew what it was like to be judged for something that wasn't her fault. Her class, and his ailment, led to today. They reminded me of my friendship with Eliot, except they blushed instead of elbowed each other.

After the harvest, I'd bathed and changed to take Nicu on our daily outing. Always, I kept my schedule clear for this. I would take him exploring, as Father had with me. To the orchards north of the castle. Or to the eastern corn fields. Or to the western wheat fields. Or we would stroll through the southern lower town, clustered amidst trees bursting with ruby and topaz leaves—like the one I presently sat under, near the village mill.

The cottagers and farmers paid us little attention. The tension had somewhat worn off. I owned my choices without shame, and that had earned a tentative degree of respect. After three years, it was a start.

The guard who'd been escorting us stood nearby. He let out a grumble, alerting me that our precious recess was over.

"It's time for your rest," I said.

"Ughhh," Nicu whined. "The leaves will be angry."

"Brilliant attempt, but it will not work with me." I knew his tricks, as I knew his papa's. "The sooner you sleep, the sooner you may see your friend again."

Nicu sprang to his feet. I rose with him and dusted off my skirts. The top of the gown was cream, scooping along my neck, the short sleeves capping my upper arms and leaving my shoulders and arms bare. Gauzy amber, cut to resemble layers of leaves, made up the skirt. My hair fell unbound and unruly.

Mother would take a pause from her day to rouse Nicu from his rest later. She'd grown so attached to him that this had become a routine.

We walked back to the castle. Red shutters and brown masonry.

It had taken Nicu a while to grasp that this wasn't Spring, despite the change in view and climate. He knew the textures, sounds, and smells were different, but he hadn't comprehended why.

Once he had, he'd exclaimed, "But the stars are the same!"

He was right. They were.

He’d recovered from his fear of guards. He’d stopped expecting Jinny to materialize around each corner. He knew the names of every type of apple and could list the animals in Mista without pause. He thought the leaves were newborn jewels.

At the East Gate—the Crown’s private entrance—he gasped. “Mama, look!”

My chest hitched. I looked, though not to where he indicated. I stared down at him.

He’d called me Mama.

Nicu glanced up at me as if nothing happened, though my expression was plain for him to see. “Are you going to rain?”

Was I going to cry?

A lump wedged in my throat. “Not today.”

He pointed again. “Look.”

At seven, he’d become a bossy tyke. Chuckling, I saw the scarlet ribbon tied around one of the gate’s bars. Having a feeling what this meant, I dismissed our guard. Collecting the ribbon with one hand and clasping Nicu’s fingers with the other, I beamed. “Come on.”

Squealing, I led him into the courtyard, where we discovered another tie affixed to a pot of cattails. We grabbed it and kept going, racing past startled servants and nobles. We played the game, following the trail of scarlet through the castle. Ribbons attached to a hay bale, a bushel of pears, a pumpkin stem, an unlit candle, a bench, and the great hall’s double doors.

Bursting through them, we found him. The hall shone with wax tapers for tonight’s banquet, when our jester would joke and dance for Mista.

For me. With me.

His body was draped across my chair on the dais, his legs hanging off one arm, his head propped on the other. “You’re late,” he said to the ceiling.

“And you jest,” I said.

“’Tis my job, Princess.”

He sat upright, inviting his son to jump on him. “I win!” Nicu boasted. “I made a friend, Papa!”

Poet quirked a brow at me. I nodded in confirmation.

“Tell me the tale,” Poet said.

“Nope,” Nicu chirped. He gave his papa a love bite on the arm and hopped to the floor, spotting Tumble rolling like a log across the stones.

Keeping one for myself, I gave Nicu the rest of the ribbons for him and the ferret to play with. Nicu crawled on all fours, making them into an aimless trail for Tumble throughout the hall.

Poet stood and spread his arms. “Is that all I get?” he asked, but Nicu and the ferret were already lost in their own world.

“Get used to it,” I remarked. “He’s preoccupied. Her name is Prettiness.”

“That’s our boy.”

I saw Poet’s relief at this news. I shared in it.

Dressed early for the evening, he wore an ankle-length coat of crimson velvet, the cuffs rolled the way he liked them, with dark brown hose tucked into his boots. The sight of him still had the ability to rob me of air.

I held up the lone ribbon. “You cannot do anything simply, can you?”

“Perish the thought.” He sauntered my way. “Would you say you’re fond of me?”

“Yes,” I laughed. “A thousand times, yes.”

“In that case.” With reverence, he tied the red length of material around my wrist, as though it were a ring. His fingers brushed my skin, sparking heat beneath my dress. No one melted me as he did.

No offering could have made me prouder to accept.

Poet made himself essential to Mista, without my having to intervene. He charmed citizens and dignitaries, advised me, taught novices to perform, and oversaw “born fools,” as the world insisted on calling them.

The Seasons still traded them. Autumn participated only to collect the souls we were capable of providing for. We kept up Royal relations while offering better treatment. No ridicule. No taunts or making sport of them. We gave them trade skills if possible and paid them in ways that the other kingdoms didn’t: good lodging, plenty of food, and physicians’ care.

We kept the mad in an isolated village, guarded but with humane

conditions and doctors. It was far more complicated, and sometimes we misjudged a person's capacity. Overestimated. Underestimated. Improving on that would take a lifetime of work.

Poet and I were a force to be reckoned with. With Mother's approval, we made public speeches throughout the kingdom, presenting stories and truths, urging our audience to reconsider the sanctity of the Seasons—our collective faith in the divine mystery of nature. We spoke to every peasant, every tradesman, and every noble. We listened to them, debated with them. We learned, and we educated.

Mother had been right. Change would take longer than we hoped, and more hardships lay ahead. Father used to say everything began with a seed.

Someday, Spring would welcome me again. I would take my seat in the peace talks. And Autumn would contest the Fool's Decree.

And someday, hopefully the Seasons would join one another in that regard. We'd have a greater chance together than apart. We each had something to contribute.

Until then, Poet and I had to move slowly, find a balance, set the example. Year by year—a juggling act, my jester liked to say.

"Speaking of tales, you haven't asked why I led you here," Poet said.

"Jesters do not wait to be asked. And princesses never ask, they command," I replied.

"I thought of a story—actually I've had it in my mind for ages, but I'd not considered it again until recently. Bits and pieces have oft come to mind, but not the larger scope. I've realized there's more to the tale now. I'd like your approval to recite it for tonight's revelry." He leaned in and whispered, "A warning: Some parts aren't fit for a child's ears."

"I would not fret." I tilted my chin to where Nicu had curled onto Mother's chair and fallen asleep, while Tumble chewed on the end of a table runner. The ribbons were scattered everywhere.

Poet and I had been mindlessly touching each other this whole time. But with our boy resting, Poet took advantage of the moment. With a wicked growl, he jerked me into him.

In his face, I saw a hundred expressions. I'd collected them since the moment we arrived in Mista. Hesitation and homesickness. Worry and frustration. Impatience with me, impatience to have me. Determination in the throne room. Private humor from across the great hall. Mischief as he teased me.

He infuriated and pushed me. He made me laugh.

He made love to me. In my bed. In his bed. On my desk. Against the wall.

Angry and hectic, we would rush into each other, our limbs pounding away. Other times, it was patient and sweet, slow and long. Our mouths would graze together, tongues pressed but not moving, while our hips rocked. Endless torture. Exquisite depth.

He'd taken me in countless ways. I'd made him surrender on a shout, attuned to each part of him. Every sound, every taste.

He snatched my lips in a spine-tingling kiss. I clasped him to me, parting under him.

He released my mouth on a groan. "Briar," he prompted.

"Hmm…," I breathed against his cheek. "Oh, yes. How does this story begin?"

"Allow me, Your Highness."

Taking my hand, he escorted me to my chair beside a dreaming Nicu and then lit a single candle. He really was incapable of doing things simply, I thought with fondness.

Flicking his wrist, he bowed and flashed a grin. "It begins with a ribbon."

Epilogue

Jester

As you see, the tale didn’t end in that Spring forest. It went on, and will go on if I have anything to say about it. You know, I oft have something to say.

I am not the same fool who started this story. I’m still wickedly pretty, ever a glittering thing, but also whole. I’m of a new Season, new Crown, new purpose. I’m a spectacular papa for the world to see. I’m a lover to only one.

To many, my name is Poet. To others, it’s something else.

I daresay, I’m improving with age. ’Tis mostly your doing. You’ve bested me. You’ve overcome me in a splendid way. My silver tongue has lost the battle of wills.

You’ve changed, too, my love. My Briar.

The first time I danced through our tale for you, you’d been sleeping beside me in that woodland bower. Thus, I’d replayed the story quietly in my mind, a rehearsal of sorts. And tonight, it shall be revealed to many. But you’ll always be the one who knew it, and heard it, before they did.

I could promise to withhold privileged details, keeping them purely between us. With our Autumn audience, I could promise to be humble and discreet, to restrain myself from bragging.

But you don’t fear the truth.

And I’m not that good of a liar.

* * *

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To my family, nearby and across the ocean, for more patience and understanding than I deserve. I would storm a castle for any one of you. *Waves and love*

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And always to my readers. Your messages and reviews motivate me like nothing else. I love hearing from each one of you. Thank you for opening this book and, most importantly, for turning the pages.

Until next time, sweetings . . .

Contributors

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About Natalia

My kindergarten teacher told my mom than I stared out the window too much, daydreaming instead of paying attention in class. It's true. Eventually I learned to focus more in school (and to love it), but the daydreaming never stopped. So after earning my master's in creative writing and spending a bunch of fun years as a magazine editor, I became a storyteller. Last year, I published my first book, *Touch*.

I'm really into opposites attracting and romances between characters from different worlds. I like to dream up settings that are real yet mystical. I love when raw angst collides with lyrical beauty, sweetness escalates to hotness. And I definitely love treading the line between YA and NA.

I'm also a total fool for first-kiss scenes, fanfiction, libraries, and starry nights.

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Endnotes

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